Supplementary Reading: Chapter 8
Standard English is Not a Style

There is considerable confusion in the minds of many concerning the relationship between Standard English and the vocabulary associated with formal varieties of the English language. We characterize styles as varieties of language viewed from the point of view of formality. Styles are varieties of language which can be placed on a continuum ranging from very formal to very informal. Formal styles are employed in social situations which are formal, and informal styles are employed in social situations which are informal. Speakers are able to influence and change the degree of formality of a social situation by manipulation of stylistic choice. The repertoire of styles available to individual speakers will be a reflection of their social experiences and education.

Stylistic differences in English are most obvious at the level of lexis. Consider the differences between:

Father was exceedingly fatigued subsequent to his extensive peregrination.

Dad was very tired after his lengthy journey.

The old man was bloody knackered after his long trip.

We can accept that these three sentences have more or less the same referential meaning, and thus differ only in style – and that the stylistic differences are indicated by lexical choice. It is also clear that native speakers are very sensitive to the fact that stylistic variation constitutes a cline: some of the words here, such as was or his are stylistically neutral; others range in formality from the ridiculously formal peregrination through very formal fatigued to intermediate tired to informal trip to very informal knackered and tabooed informal bloody. It will be observed that, as is often the case, the most informal or “slang” words are regionally restricted, being in this case unknown or unusual in North American English. It will also be observed that there are no strict co-occurrence restrictions here as there are in some languages – one can say long journey and lengthy trip just as well as lengthy journey and long trip. Formality in English is, however, by no means confined to lexis. Grammatical constructions vary as between informal and formal English. It is often claimed, for instance, that the passive voice is more frequent in formal than in informal styles. Phonology is also highly sensitive to style.

I would like to assert that our sentence The old man was bloody knackered after his long trip is clearly and unambiguously Standard English. To assert otherwise – that swear words like bloody and very informal words like knackered are not Standard English – would get us into a very difficult situation. Does a Standard English speaker suddenly switch out of Standard English as soon as they start swearing? Are Standard English speakers not allowed to use slang without switching into some nonstandard variety? My contention is that Standard English is no different from any other (nonstandard) variety of
the language. Speakers of Standard English have a full range of styles open to them, just as
speakers of other varieties do, and can swear and use slang just like anybody else. The most
logical position we can adopt on this is as follows: The old man was bloody knackered after
his long trip is a Standard English sentence, couched in a very informal style. It is true that,
in most English-speaking societies there is a tendency – a social convention perhaps – for
Standard English to dominate in relatively formal social situations, but there is no necessary
connection here, and we are therefore justified in asserting the theoretical independence of
the parameter standard-nonstandard from the parameter formal-informal. Stylistic switching
occurs within dialects and not between them.

(Source: http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/dick/SEtrudgill.htm, slightly simplified)