A standard language is something of a Holy Grail to those whom Milroy and Milroy call “the public guardians of usage.” Historically viewed as a single, fixed measure of “correct” usage, a Standard English has remained elusive; despite continual recommendations of grammar, phonology and word choice, the guardians of usage have found that “their detailed recommendations go largely unheeded.” Conformity to a single language standard among English speakers is a daunting prospect, given the wide variety of regional dialects and usage habits that have persisted for hundreds of years. Many linguists therefore believe that standardization is an ideology, and that a truly standard language is impossible to achieve. However, as a working definition, Milroy and Milroy refer to a standard language as “an abstract set of norms to which actual usage may conform to a greater or lesser extent.”

When it comes to establishing this elusive Standard English, those in authority have tended to take two different approaches. One school of thought advocates the authority of language usage in constructing the rules of usage, or grammar. That is, the main purpose of a grammar is to describe how the language is used. This school of thought, called descriptivism, recognizes the constant change that occurs in English, and seeks merely to categorize words according to their most widely accepted and current use. A second school of thought, prescriptivism, has at its core a mistrust of widespread usage as an authority. Prescriptivists advocate the establishment of an official language authority that mandates, or prescribes, the “correct” usage; they tend to form grammars based on the authority of classical, “pure” languages like Latin and Greek, rather than the Germanic patterns of usage upon which everyday English is based.
Historically, the most fervent and successful efforts at forming an English standard have been put forth by prescriptivists, particularly those in the eighteenth century. Men like John Dryden decried the lack of order and consistency in the use of English and called for the setting of an authoritative standard: “…we have yet no prosodia, not so much as a tolerable dictionary, or a grammar, so that our language is in a manner barbarous.” The goals of Dryden and his like-minded contemporaries included not only codifying English by creating a grammar and a dictionary, but also settling disputed points of usage and pointing out common “errors.” They hoped to achieve these goals through the founding of an English Academy, which would serve to purify the language and protect it from foreign invasions and various “careless” usages. The Royal Society, a group of learned men—including Dryden—who met to discuss matters of science, briefly expressed interest in the standardization of English, but ultimately did not evolve into an Academy. In spite of this, support for an Academy continued to grow, reaching its height in 1912 with Jonathan Swift’s *Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue*. Interest waned, however, when the death of the Queen halted plans that were in place for an Academy at the royal court. Continual dissention between members of the court quashed any hope that the plans would be reinstated; at the same time, a movement objecting to the authoritarianism of an Academy began to gain popularity. As a result, the Academy failed to materialize, and standardization of the language fell to individual grammarians.

Efforts by American grammarians—most notably Noah Webster—were, like those of the British, largely prescriptive, although motives for standardization were somewhat different. Both wished to purify the language; in his *Dissertations*, Webster advocated the use of a vocabulary relatively free of French and Latin borrowings, saying, “…when a nation has a language which is competent to all their purposes of communicating ideas, they will not embrace new words and
phrases.” However, rather than protecting the language from the “barbaric” usages that so consumed the British, Americans like Webster were most chiefly concerned with creating an American language that would unify the newly independent states and separate them from the influence of England.

Webster appealed to the sense of nationalism sparked by the Revolution and the War of 1812 when arguing for a standard American language: “A national language is a band of national union. Every engine should be employed to render the people of this country national.” Webster believed that American English was more pure than British English, and destined to form into an entirely new language “as different from the future language of England, as the modern Dutch, Danish, and Swedish are from the German.” A nominal descriptivist, Webster advocated using common American language characteristics to construct a grammar that would “show …what a language is, not how it ought to be.” He eschewed looking to British usage as a guide, seeing it as a corrupting influence. Others, like dictionary compiler Joseph Worcester, disagreed strongly with Webster’s separatist attitude, preferring to follow the example of “the best models,” which for Worcester was the English of London. Another critic, in an anonymous essay, went so far as to call Webster’s distinction between British and American English “petty and puerile,” and “…totally out of place in relation to science.”

Apart from establishing a language system independent from that of the British, Webster’s efforts at language reform were primarily phonological. Ostensibly unconcerned with the “careless barbarisms” that so consumed British grammarians, Webster instead focused on preventing the huge dialectal differences so common in British English by “correcting” American pronunciation and reforming American spelling. The two were inseparable, Webster believed, because “In this country, where the people resort chiefly to books for rules of
pronunciation, a false notation of sounds operates as a deception and misleads the inquirer.” Unlike the British reformers, Webster sought to achieve his linguistic goals through nationwide, uniform education rather than the establishment of an Academy, and wrote several textbooks to that effect.

The standardization efforts of both the American and British “guardians of the language” often fell flat, due in part to the rather autocratic prescriptivism of the most vocal of them. A prevailing sense of personal liberty among the citizens of both countries created a natural resistance to rigid linguistic guidelines, particularly when it came to spoken English. The pursuit of a standard language saw some success—mainly in spelling and some conventions of written English—but by and large did little to erase dialectal differences or to halt changes and new usages in the spoken language.