

Rupkatha Journal

On Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities

An Online Open Access Journal
ISSN 0975-2935
www.rupkatha.com

Volume V, Number 3, 2013

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Indexing and abstracting

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A Comparative Analysis of Lexical Variation in American and British English with special reference to few selected words

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Abstract

The main focus of the present paper is to find out the lexical variations of US and British English and how they constantly influence each other. In spite of several research findings question still arise like who 'owned' and set the 'correct rules' for the English language. Is it the different forces operating in the UK and the USA influencing the emerging concept of a Standard English? (David Crystal, 2003). The present study will be delving into these complex issues. The main reason for choosing this subject is that more references to immigration in the US and its influence onto the development of language made me explore the main issues.

[**Keywords:** American and British English, lexical variations, early American English, Dialects, Linguistic Nationalism, Spelling Reform, interlingual false friends]

Introduction

British and American English are the reference norms for English as spoken, written and taught all over the world. Although most dialects of English used in the former British Empire outside North America and Australia are to various extents, based on British English, most of the countries concerned have developed their own unique dialects, particularly with respect to pronunciation, idioms and vocabulary. Chief among other English dialects are Canadian English, Australian English, which rank third and fourth in the number of native speakers (Kerry Maxwell and Lindsay Clanfield). The main focus of the present study is to find out the lexical variations of US and British English and how they constantly influence each other.

Much research has already been done on US and British English Spelling differences, differences in grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, accents etc. by numerous authors starting from Noah Webster in the 18th century to authors of the present decade like D. Barton who in an article "Potentially confusing and embarrassing Differences between American and British English"ⁱ commented:

"I realize that perhaps a lifetime of watching American Television and a half hour speech are not adequate preparation for appreciating and coping with the differences between American and British speech".

Whereas Noah Webster in the 18th century had reflected:

“No great change should be made at once, nor should any change be made which violates established principles, creates great inconvenience, or obliterates the radicals of the language. But gradual changes to accommodate the written and spoken language especially when they purify words from corruptions, improve the regular analogies of a language and illustrate, etymology, are not only proper, but indispensable.”

A brief history of inflow of immigrants and early American English.

Beginning with the English settlement of Jamestown in 1607 and the landing of the Puritans in Massachusetts in 1620, the English language is established in America along with Dutch, German, French and other tongues. The greatest linguistic influence results from this first period of immigration and the establishment of the settlements of the original thirteen colonies. New England was first settled by English speakers between 1620-1640. After the puritans settle in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1620, a second settlement centre is established in 1635 in the Lower Connecticut River Valley (on the western side of the river). Even today, the Connecticut River is an important regional dialect boundary, separating the *r-less dialect* of Boston from the more *r-ful* dialects in western New England. Religious dissenters from the Massachusetts Bay Colony found the Rhode Island Colony in 1638, and the Narragansett Bay area forms another distinctive dialect subregion.ⁱⁱⁱ

The inflow of immigrants from other areas too was then a continuous process with Dutch settling in New York in 1614, (but the colony was seized by British in 1664) figuratively around 10,000 Dutch settlers were living there; Welsh, Scots-Irish, Germans and a mix of English settling in Pennsylvania, and more of Scots-Irish immigrants settling extensively in the Appalachians. Among the South Atlantic States, it was Virginia which attracted a variety of social outcasts-criminals, royalists, indentured servants and the Puritans from England; religious and political refugees from France (Huguenots/ Calvinists) and inland, Scots-Irish and Germans. (Frederick Jackson Turner: 1997)

Dialects

The two settlements one in Virginia, to the South and the other to the North in present day New England had different linguistic consequences. The southern colonists came mainly from England's 'West country' and Somerset and Gloucestershire and brought with them its characteristic accent, with its 'Zummer zet' voicing of *s* sounds and the *r* strongly pronounced after vowels. Echoes of this accent is still heard in speech communities of some of the isolated valleys and islands in the area, such as Tangier Island in Chesapeake Bay. These are called 'Tidewater accents' and have changed with time though but not too rapidly as accents elsewhere in the country due to isolation of the speakers.^{iv}

By contrast, many of the Plymouth colonists came from countries in the east of England – in particular, Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire, Essex, Kent and London and with some from the Midlands, and few from further afield. The eastern accents were rather different notably, (lacking an *r* after vowels, as in present day Received Pronunciation (RP) – and they proved to be the dominant influence in this area. The tendency of not pronouncing the *r* is still a feature of the speech of people from New England.

Other features of the language of 17th century England has their correlates in modern American speech, such as the short, ‘flat’ *a* vowel in such words as *dance*, where RP developed the ‘long’ *a*. British English also came to pronounce such words as *not* with lip- rounding, where as in the USA the earlier unrounded vowel (found as *nat* in Chaucer, for example) remained. Americans generally pronounce *either and neither* with [i] vowel (as in ‘*bean*’), while in England the pronunciation has followed the pattern of the vowel shift to the diphthong [ai], as in “*fight*”. Several older words or meanings became part of the US standard, such as *mad* ‘angry’ and *fall* ‘autumn’, as well as many dialect words; *scallion* ‘spring onion’, for example originally from northern England, is commonly used throughout the USA. A phrase such as *I guess*, which is often condemned as an Americanism by British purists, can in fact be traced back to Middle English.

General American used to be thought of as most of the Western half of the country and refers to a dialect characterized by the retention of *r*, “flat *a*” and an unrounded vowel in *hot*. This is a kind of “idealized” dialect (broadcast English) generally thought of as “Standard”. (Mc David, R. I., 1980)

From the above discussion on dialects it is evident that new shiploads of immigrants in the 17th century brought an increasing variety of linguistic backgrounds. And people speaking very different kinds of English thus found themselves living alongside each other, as the ‘middle’ Atlantic areas (New York, in particular) became the focus of settlement. As a consequence, the sharp divisions between regional dialects gradually began to blur.

In the 18th century, there was a vast wave of immigration from Northern Ireland. By the time independence was declared (1776), no less than one in seven of the colonial population was Scots-Irish. By the time of the first census, in 1790, the population of the country was around 4 million, most of them living along the Atlantic coast. Again, a century later, after opening up of the west, the population numbered over 50 millions, spreading throughout the continent. The accent which emerged can now be heard all over the so called Sunbelt (from Virginia to Southern California), and is the accent most commonly associated with present day American speech.^v (Leonard, I. & Parment, R. 1971)

US history is one of immigration though, the American identity is doomed to change in case immigration control (Migration Control Policy), most importantly the border control are neglected as hypothesized by many scholars. Yet there are arguments in support of free migration in the US, the idea behind that is “assimilating new wave of

immigrants will lead to greater prosperity for the nation” and historical success lends such a support. (Frederick Jackson Turner: 1997)

Now, ‘immigration control policy’ and arguments in favour or against the issue is yet another significant area of research and has a keen relation with American English accents and dialects but the present study focuses on a discussion on ‘American Identity’ and the independent American English, free from British influence of the immigrants, and the comparison between the two.^{vi}

Linguistic Nationalism

As perception of the country (US) as a nation separate from England grew, so too did the perception of language differences. In January 1774, an anonymous writer (Possibly John Adams) issued a proposal in the **Royal American Magazine** for a national academy (Crystal David, 2003). In this context some relevant lines from his proposal which talks of perfecting the English language in America (18th century English) are highlighted:

“The English language has been greatly improved in Britain within a century, but its highest perfection..... is perhaps reserved for this land of light and freedom.... I beg leave to propose a plan for perfecting the English language in America, thro’ every future period of its existence should be formed, consisting of members in each university and seminary, who shall be stiled **Fellows of the American Society of Language** ... And that the society annually publish some observations upon the language... enrich and refine it, until perfection stops their progress and ends their labour.”

A few years later (September 5, 1780) John Adams wrote to the president of congress from Amsterdam proposing that Congress establish an “American Academy for correcting, improving and ascertaining the English language.”^{vii}

As a result of this inner strife for gaining American identity, the word Americanism has come into existence since after the Revolution to refer disparagingly to words or usages of supposed American origin. John Witherspoon, first president of Princeton University (then known as the college of New Jersey), coined the term:

“By Americanism, I understand an use of the phrases or terms, or a construction of sentences, even among persons of rank and education, different from the use of the same terms or phrases, or the construction of similar sentences in great Britain.” He makes it clear that British term and usages are not worse in themselves, but simply to adhere to what is American and not of English growth, this **identity** is required.^{viii}

Among the usages identified by Witherspoon as “Americanisms” are the use of **either** to refer to “one or the other of two”, **notify** to mean “inform”; **fellow countryman**, which he regarded a redundancy; **mad**, as “a metaphor for angry”.

Spelling Reform

It is at this point of time Noah Webster brought forth his contribution *Dissertations on the, English Language* in 1789, where he proposed institution of an 'American standard'. To him 'it was partly a matter-of honour' as an independent nation... to have a system of our own, in language as well as govt; it was partly a matter of common sense, because in England 'the taste of her writers is already corrupted and her language on the decline'; and it was partly a matter of practicality, England being at 'too great a distance to be our model'. This national or 'federal' language was inevitable, because the exploration of the new continent would bring many new words into the language, which Britain, would not share; but it also needed fostering. Spelling reform, he concluded, would be a major step in that direction.^{ix}

Although Webster went through a period in which he advocated radical reform, the position he finally adopted was a fairly moderate one. In the Preface to his first lexicographical venture, *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language* (1806), he writes:

"No great change should be made at once, nor should any change be made which violates established principles, creates great inconvenience, or obliterates the radicals of the language. But gradual changes to accommodate the written to the spoken language... are not only proper, but indispensable."

Webster's Dictionary received a mixed reception especially in matters of spelling and usage; but the work was crucial in giving to US English an identity and status comparable to that given to the British English Lexicon by Dr. Johnson.^x

Justification of the need for the present study vis-a-vis analysis of the existing hypothesis

Coming back to speech after a discussion on 'spelling reform' one question that automatically comes up at this point is: *When did Americans stop 'talking British'?* (Metcalf, A. 2000). The split-off point is the mid 18th century. Research says American English started going its own course around the time of the Revolutionary War. Here also, exceptions are found. As people of New York and the coastal South had maintained contact with the "Old World", and hence adopted some later British innovations.

Again, if the split-off point is the mid 18th century, i.e., when US achieved independence (1776), the questions arise:

- *Who 'owned' and set the 'correct rules' for the English Language?*
- *Is it the different forces operating in the UK and the USA influencing the emerging concept of a Standard English?*

The differences are perhaps first officially promoted in the spelling conventions proposed by Noah Webster in *The American Spelling Book* (1786) and subsequently adopted in his later work, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828). These publications achieved enormous success and were the major steps towards scholarly acceptance that British English and American English were becoming distinct entities. (Pro English: 2008)

If we move away from the formal written English in the direction of the informal spoken language, the differences between regional varieties dramatically increase. Though in the case of American and British English the variation is considerable, no accurate estimate is there for the number of points of contrast. There are two chief reasons behind this:

- Recent decades have seen a major increase in the amount of influence the two models have had on each other, especially American on British. The influence of US films and television had led to a considerable passive understanding of much American English vocabulary in Britain, and some of this has turned into active use, especially among younger people. The reverse pattern is less obvious. British films and TV programmes are seen sufficiently often in the USA to mean that a growth in awareness of UK vocabulary should not be discounted. What were originally fairly clear patterns of lexical differentiation have been obscured by borrowing on a world wide scale.
- Much research has already been done on regional dialect of both countries and much is yet to be done. Several findings are bringing to light huge amount of lexical distinctiveness.^{xi} Few examples of these distinctions are as follows :

<u>Br E</u>	<u>Am E</u>
pillar box	mail box
post	mail
lead / li:d/ -	leash
rubbish	garbage
autumn	fall
aerial	antenna
bank note	bill
barrister	lawyer
bill (restaurant)	check
biscuit	cookie
bonnet (car)	hood
chips	french fries
cooker	stove

crossroads	intersection
curtains	drapes
dustbin	garbage can
engine	motor
film	movie
flat	apartment
football	soccer
garden	yard
handbag	purse
holiday	vacation
jumper	sweater
lift	elevator
to let	to rent
lorry	truck
metro, underground tube	subway
nappy	diaper
pavement	sidewalk
petrol	gas, gasoline
post	mail
post code	zip code
queue	line
railway	railroad
solicitor	attorney
Spelling	
Br E	Am E
colour	color
favourite	favorite
honour	honor
vigour	vigor
analyse	analyze
criticise	criticize

memorise	memorize
enrolment	enrollment
fulfil	fulfill
skilful	skillful
centre	center
metre	meter
theatre	theater
analogue	analog
catalogue	catalog
dialogue	dialog
jewellery	jewelry
draught	draft
pyjamas	pajamas
plough	plow
programme	program

Idioms

A number of English idioms that have essentially the same meaning show lexical differences between the British and the American version, for instance:

Br E	Am E
touchwood	knock on wood
throw a spanner	throw a (monkey) wrench
sweep under the carpet	sweep under the rug
not touch something with a bargepole	not touch something with a ten-foot pole
skeleton in the cupboard	skeleton in the closet
a home from home	a home away from home
blow one's trumpet	blow one's horn

In some cases the “American” variant is also used in Br E, or vice versa.

The existence of interlingual false friends

The main cause for the differences between both varieties of English can be explained through the theories of language change. The English language has ‘landed’ in America

with the first British settlers and from that moment onwards the language had the need to adapt to its new environment and respond to the new people's needs. Changes began to be perceived from the very beginning of the American history which marked a different evolution of both varieties. Thus, the language of immigrants and the geographical distance between Britain and America also determined the evolution of the language. Hence, American English preserved some words (**gotten**) that died out in Britain, and Americans coined new words for new inventions and social changes (for instance, in the automobile industry.) The separate sociocultural development and history of both countries have undoubtedly given way to the different meanings of these intra lingual false friends.

Implications for teaching

The two varieties of English most widely found in print and taught around the world are British and American. Hence it is important for teachers to be aware of the major differences between the two. While lexical differences are easily noticed, a knowledge of grammatical and phonological differences can be useful not only for teachers to be aware of, but also to be able to deal with while they teach.

While writing for international exams, or writing English in general, it is important for a teacher to instruct students that they stick to any one variety (UK spelling or grammar /US spelling or grammar) through a whole piece of writing.

An American English coursebook will be different from British English coursebook with respect to grammar, spelling, phrases / idioms etc. An American student may find it odd to have 'at the weekend' written in a lesson, as s/he is used to hearing 'on the weekend' in America. The teacher's duty here is to accept either of these expressions from his/her student and point out the **difference**. An important point to make is that **different** doesn't mean wrong. Students must be told that no language or regional variety of language is inherently better or worse than another. They are just different. Students are often biased in their English usage. While it may be true for that particular individual, there is no evidence to suggest that one variety is easier to learn or understand than the other.

Conclusion

The American and British varieties have influenced each other over the years, especially now that we are in the era of the Internet and in the era of globalisation. English became an influential language, not primarily because of the number of people who spoke it, rather because of the power of the British Empire, which controlled large parts of the world. Conversely, since today the British Empire no longer exists, the significance of the English language comes from global influences. Nowadays, the fact that English plays a major role in business, science, politics and economics ensures its continued presence in the world.

Furthermore, the phenomenon of “soft globalization” expresses the dominance of English (particularly US English) culture, through the standard use of consumer items such as blue jeans and Coca Cola.

English being spoken by so many, leads to unification of the people and allows worldwide communication. As a result, this common language fosters exchange and therefore globalization (Kim Bauer, Anna Spiess, Tabea Stossel, Nora Wetzel – ‘People and the English language’). In fact, British English has adopted many American uses into everyday language and, some British terms are used in America. This can be justified by the influence of TV programmes, the Hollywood industry and the information and communication technologies. For this reason, it may be seen that interlingual false friends^{xii} may not exist for long. It is likely that the meanings of these words will one day merge, turning them into equivalent terms as a result of the different processes of semantic and language change. In the first quarter of the 21st century, there is evidence that these words have different meanings in both varieties. The mutual influence of both varieties on each other, and particularly, the ‘Americanisation’ of British English is not restricted to the lexical component of the language; in fact, the influence of American English also affects English syntax to lesser extent, as is the case of modal auxiliaries (Leech 2003), and these interlingual false friends are not exclusive of different varieties of English. They can also be perceived in different varieties of Spanish, such as Latin-American Spanish and Iberian Spanish (e.g. *concha* or *coger* have completely different meanings in both varieties of the language).

It is necessary to bear in mind that the existence of these semantic differences has implications in language teaching and learning. Teachers and students must know that there are particular items which have different meanings in both varieties and that they must be careful and act in accordance with the context of situation and with the variety of English that they are using and / or learning.

Notes

- i. Maxwell Kerry and Clanfield Lindsay, Article on “Differences in British and American English Grammar”, 2000. Retrieved from www.onestopenglish.com.
- ii. Borton D; Article on “Potentially Confusing and Embarrassing Difference between American and British English.” Retrieved from <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Barton-UK-USwords.html>
- iii. Tujjieziki angllescima (2009). “How has immigration into The United States influenced the Language?” Retrieved from <http://www.ukm.uni-mb.si/UserFiles>
- iv. “Immigration to the United States”, Wikipedia. Retrieved from – http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immigration_to_the_United_States.
- v. The **accent** of West Virginia, North Carolina, most of Kentucky and Tennessee is characterized by - post - vocalic **r** is retained in this variety; the diphthong in “right” and “bye” is often pronounced more like the vowel in “father”. South Carolina, Virginia and

Piedmont have an accent characterized by loss of **r** finally and before consonants; the unrounded vowel (as in “**father**”) in “**top**” and “**hot**”, flat in “**grass**”, “**dance**” and “**path**”. Final consonant cluster reduction occurs in words like “**last**” and “**kept**” (i.e., these are pronounced something like “**lass**” and “**kep**”).

- vi. Bryan Caplan, “The Efficient, Egalitarian, Libertarian, Utilitarian Way to Double World GDP” http://econlog.econlib.org/archives/2011/08/the_efficient_e.html. August 20, 2011, EconLog.
- vii. The American (English) language. Retrieved from <http://wiz.cath.vt.edu/mosser/Helmond/America.html>
- viii. Alan A Metcalf, *How we talk: American regional English today* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), 2000.
- ix. “Minority Ethnic English”, <<http://www.bl.uk/learning/langlit/sounds/case-studies/minority-ethnic>>
- x. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_and_British_English_spelling_differences.
- xi. “How accents influence the immigration debate”, *Washington Post*. Retrieved from www.washingtonpost.com/.../how-accent-influence-immigration-debate

Much research has been done on regional dialect of both UK & US and much is yet to be done. Several findings are bringing to light huge amount of lexical distinctiveness. Few examples of these distinctions are discussed above already.

- xii. **Interlingual false friends:** The metaphorical phrase *false friends* is frequently used in the field of linguistics in order to indicate the existence of some lexical items in two languages which are similar in form but different in meaning. (Hill 1982; Prado 2001; Dominguez & Nerlich 2002; Shlesinger and Malkiel 2005). They are called false friends because they appear to be easy to grasp, learn and understand at first sight but unfortunately for non-native speakers, the words’ formal appearance is not really indicative of their true meaning.

E.g. – German ‘**gift**’ means ‘**poison**’
English ‘**gift**’ means ‘**present**’
English ‘**rope**’ means ‘**string**’
Spanish ‘**ropa**’ means ‘**clothing**’

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