

The structural differences between British and American English

----Dr. Sangeeta Sharma

Today many English varieties are spoken around the world. But the two most dominant varieties are British English and American English as these are the two varieties which are the reference norms for English spoken, written and taught around the world. Commonwealth nations prefer the British English, while Japan and the Philippines use the American English.

It is a well-known fact that British and American English differ substantially in their pronunciation and vocabulary, but differences in their grammar and structures have largely been underestimated. In fact, Rohdenburg and Schlüter believe that as these two regional variations of language are characterized with a different grammar, they affect the functioning of their structures also.

In 1789, not long after the American Declaration of Independence, Noah Webster still had reason to believe that British and American English (BrE and AmE) would in the long run drift apart, just like other Germanic dialects that have evolved into the modern languages Dutch, Danish, Swedish, German, etc.: ‘several circumstances render a future separation of the American tongue from the English, necessary and unavoidable’ (Webster 1789:22). More than 200 years later, these expectations have not been confirmed, and there are at present no signs that this will happen even in the distant future. In their discussion of the question ‘Two languages or one’, Marckwardt and Quirk (1964:9-13) thus conclude that what we refer to as BrE and AmE should still be considered as one and the same language.

However, at many levels of description, British- American contrasts are widely recognized. Thus in the phonological domain, the British Received Pronunciation and General American differ markedly. Lexical oppositions are notorious and provide the material for numerous cross-varietal vocabulary lists and dictionaries.¹

Until not so long ago, American English was considered less educated, less cultured and less beautiful than British English. Teachers in many European countries were not

allowed to have an American accent and high-school students who returned from a year in the United States were sometimes punished with low grades by conservative teachers. This attitude seems mostly to have disappeared even if there are still traces of it.

Another reason for the predominance of British English is simply one of the publishing traditions: Britain has a long tradition of producing textbooks and dictionaries and of marketing them all over the world, whereas there have been relatively few American textbooks or dictionaries written for audiences worldwide.

The result is a curious situation: The majority of the world's native speakers of English are Americans, about 240 million people. They make up the majority of the 400 million native speakers, compared with about 57 million speakers in Britain. They speak English with American pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. Much more American than British English is heard in films and on television, and more American English is used in international business, computing and science.²

Delimiting what is American English is a difficult problem, however, American English, through films and other kinds of media and popular culture, and through business and computerization, is currently having a strong impact on British English as well as on other varieties. What was an Americanism yesterday may well be perfectly normal BrE today, not only in the area of vocabulary but also in language use and grammar.

In spite of Britons- as well as Australians and other speakers of English – rapidly taking over Americanisms as part of their own usage, Americanisms are not adopted wholesale. British English is still distinctly British, in pronunciation as well as in vocabulary.

Secondly, if you want to communicate with Americans, it is generally best to use American English. Many Americans are unfamiliar with British English usage as they rarely watch British films or travel to England. British people are more likely to understand American words and expressions, because of American movies, television, and other types of influence.³

At the pragmatic level, British and American habits are (at least impressionistically) known to vary to a considerable extent. While phonological, orthographic and lexical differences as well as issues in second language teaching have received considerable attention in literature, contrasts in the structures of BrE and AmE have so far been largely ignored. To some extent, this oversight is due to the widespread view that there is nothing to say about structural differences simply as they are negligible, if they exist at all. Another likely reason behind the inadequate coverage of structural differences is the fact that until recently the empirical basis for contrastive studies was simply insufficient.

Some of the outstanding structural differences in AmE and BrE are given below:

Agreement rules

Verb agreement with collective nouns:

One difference concerns agreement rules between verb and subjects that are collective nouns (family, staff, team, committee) or the names of sports teams (Cleveland, Manchester), or companies, organizations and institutions (Lipton, Ford, CNN, the government).

In AmE, all these require a singular verb (i) The federal government is considering, ii) The team has won, while BrE allows a singular or plural verb (i) Manchester is/are ahead by one ,ii) Staff was/were invited).

The following clauses (from the British National Corpus) would not normally occur in AmE :

- i) Once ITV realize the BBC are going ahead;
- ii) CNN never say we made a mistake ...; The dead man's family are in shock;

The AmE subject-verb agreement pattern is determined by the *singular or plural form* of the noun rather than by its sense.

About the Anaheim Angels baseball team, AmE says:

Anaheim *has* won but The Angels *have* won.

Note: British publications increasingly use the ‘AmE pattern.

Ellipsis in Conversation

Ellipsis is the technical term for the kind of grammatical shortening that results from omission of certain structures. In sentences like the following, AmE shows twice as much mid-sentence ellipsis of the auxiliary verb as BrE (Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English, hereafter called LG)

When you coming back? (compare *When are you coming back?*)

How you doing? (compare *How are you doing?*)

Generally, however, AmE shows less ellipsis than BrE. It less often omits the combined subject and auxiliary, as in *Want it?* (compare *Do you want it?*) *Like it?*, and *Wanna clear a crowded room?* And less often omits the combined subject and main verb, as in *Serious?* (Compare *Are you serious?*) and *Too early for you?* (compare *Is it too early for you?*) It also shows half as much initial ellipsis and final ellipsis as BrE (LG 1108), as in these examples (all taken from a “Judge Judy” television broadcast):

Yes, no question about it. (compare *Yes, there’s no question about it.*)

Sorry. (compare *I’m sorry.*)

Did you press any charges? I tried to. (compare *I tried to press charges.*)

Auxiliaries in questions and replies

In questions and replies, AmE shows an overwhelming preference for question forms that start with ‘do’ especially in conversation and fiction:

Do you have any novels about horses?

By contrast, in conversation BrE prefers:

Have you got any novels about horses? (This kind of usage is uncommon in AmE)

And in fiction:

Have you any novels about horses? (LG 216)

Relative Clauses and the relative pronouns ‘which’ and ‘that’

In certain structures, relative pronouns can be omitted, as you can see by comparing *Are those books that you lost?* with *Are those the books you lost?* Sometimes when the relative pronoun is expressed, either *which* or *that* may be grammatical: *the books that you lost or the books which you lost.*

AmE shows a somewhat stronger preference for introducing such relative clauses (called restrictive or defining relative clauses) with *that* rather than *which*, while BrE shows a stronger preference for *which*.

Note: In news writing, *that* is 50 percent more frequent in AmE and in conversation twice as frequent as in BrE (LG 616)⁴

A World view

The present-day world status of English is primarily the result of two factors: the expansion of British colonial power, which peaked towards the end of the nineteenth century, and the emergence of the United States as the leading economic power of the twentieth century. It is the latter factor which continues to explain the world position of the English language today (much to the discomfiture of some in Britain who find the loss of historical linguistic pre-eminence unpalatable). The USA has nearly 70 percent of all English mother tongue speakers in the world (excluding creole varieties). Such dominance, with its political/economic pinnings, currently gives America a controlling interest in the way the language is likely to develop.

How then may we summarize this complex situation? The US linguist Braj Kachru has suggested that we think of the spread of English around the world as three concentric circles, representing different ways in which the language has been acquired and is currently used. Although not all countries fit neatly into this model, it has been widely regarded as a helpful approach.

The three ‘circles’ of English

The *inner circle* refers to the traditional bases of English, where it is the primary language: it includes the USA, UK, Ireland, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

The *outer or extended circle* involves the earlier phases of the spread of English in non-native settings, where the language has become part of a country's chief institutions, and plays an important 'second language' role in a multilingual setting: it includes Singapore, India, Malawi and over fifty other territories.

The *expanding or extending circle* includes those nations which recognize the importance of English as an international language, though they do not have a history of colonization by members of the inner circle, nor have they given English any special administrative status. It includes China, Japan, Greece, Poland and (as the name of this circle suggests) a steadily increasing number of other states. In these areas, English is taught as a foreign language. (The term 'expanding' reflects its origins in the 1980s: today, with English recognized virtually everywhere, a tense change to expanded circle would better reflect the contemporary scene.)

There are some seventy-five territories in which English has held or continues to hold a special place, as a member of either the inner or the outer circles.⁵

It is important to recall that to have a 'special place' can mean various things. Sometimes English is an official or joint official language of a state, its status being defined by law, as in the case of India, Ireland or Canada. Sometimes it may be the sole or dominant language for historical reasons (but without official status), as in the case of the USA or the UK. In a few instances, English has lost its official status that it once held, though it still might be playing an important role in the community. In other cases, its standing might not be very certain while coexisting with other local languages in a relationship which changes with time and social function. But in all cases, it can be argued, the population is living in an environment in which the English language is routinely in evidence, publicly accessible in varying degrees, and part of the nation's recent or present identity.

References

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- 4) Finegan, Edward and Rickford, John R. (eds.), *Language in the USA Themes for the Twenty-first Century*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 27-29.
- 5) Crystal, David, *English as a Global Language*, Second Edition, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 59-60

Bio:

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