BABEŞ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY IN CLUJ-NAPOCA FACULTY OF LETTERS

INFLUENCE OF AMERICAN ENGLISH ON BRITISH ENGLISH

- summary -

SCIENTIFIC ADVISER: Prof. dr. Ştefan Oltean

PhD Candidate:

Daniela Popescu

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= language expansion, language history, varieties of language, language features, American English, British English, lexical influence =

C. Summary

Chapter One: Introduction

Although linguists admit that the change in the British English language comes, nowadays, from the American continent, there are some questions that constantly trouble the minds of those interested: how great this influence is, what areas of vocabulary it affects, whether this influence is perceived as a kind of corruption or it is a normal change, and what predictions could be made for the future of the English language in the given circumstances.

Consequently, we state that this thesis is an attempt to find answers to all the above questions, given our interest in the two main varieties of the English language, British English and American English.

Then we draw the layout of the thesis and, in the literature review section, we perform a short analysis of the main theoretical concepts dealt with: variety, dialect, accent, register, and style.

Chapter Two: Geographical, Social and Functional Varieties of the English Language – Phonetic and Lexical Characteristics

The second chapter begins with a short history of the English language expansion, followed by a detailed description of the geographical, social, and functional varieties of the English language.

In the geographical varieties section, varieties of English worldwide are described, beginning in the United Kingdom and continuing on the American continent, then in Australia and New Zealand, Asia and the Pacific, ending on the African Continent. The last varieties on focus are hybrid languages, the pidgins and creoles based on the English language.

In the United Kingdom, British English is described first, with careful attention paid to Received Pronunciation (RP), the basis for comparison between varieties of English spoken worldwide. Then Irish, Scottish and Welsh English are analysed from both phonetic and lexical points of view.

On the American Continent, we point out the features of American English. Canadian English comes next, followed by Caribbean English, especially Hawaiian and Jamaican English.

English in Australia and New Zealand, together with English in the Fiji Islands are described in sub-chapter 2.2.3.

In Asia the varieties of English which present differences and similarities of phonetic and lexical kind are Indian English, with its neighbours Pakistani, Chinese, and Sri Lankan English.

English as it is spoken in the Pacific area is represented by Philippine, Singapore, Malaysian, Papua New Guinean, and Japanese English.

On the African continent, four varieties of English are described: South African English, West African English (with its most representative varieties, Cameroon and Nigerian English), East African English (with Kenyan, Tanzanian and Ugandan English), and North African English (with Egyptian English).

Social varieties of the English language are on focus next: first, types of social dialects, namely cultivated speech, common speech, and uneducated speech, followed by Standard English, slang, and world-standard and non-standard varieties of the English language.

The last section deals with ethnic varieties of English: Hispanic Americans, namely Cubans, Puerto Ricans and Chicanos (or Mexican Americans), Black English, Gullah,¹ African-American English, or Jewish English.

Functional varieties of the English language close chapter two of the thesis. The headings are formal versus informal, written versus spoken language, and occupational varieties of English. In this last section, the focus is on scientific English, journalese, technical jargons (namely computerese), and other occupational varieties of English: religious English, legal and business English, sea-speak, the jargon of American truck drivers, the language of government, medicine, advertising, broadcasting, and domestic varieties (for example the language of recipes, instruction leaflets, or knitting patterns).

¹ The language of the black people in South Carolina and the Sea Islands.

Chapter Three: Features of American English - Pronunciation, Spelling, Vocabulary, and Grammar

The main sections of the third chapter are: foreword, a short history of the making of American English (divided into three periods² whose dates correspond to political and social events with important consequences for the language); and the features of American English (pronunciation, spelling, grammar, and vocabulary).

The study of the pronunciation of American English focuses on the main aspects of phonetics and phonology: phonemes, patterns of pronunciation, different pronunciations for individual words, stress, intonation, and rhythm.

The specific features of spelling are based on a summary of the early attempts made over the years in order to simplify orthography. The principles involved in the reformation of spelling - simplification, derivational uniformity, regularization, reflection of pronunciation - together with specific features of spelling, are next listed and exemplified.

The vocabulary section begins with the ways of vocabulary enrichment. Then, a practical aspect of the research – improvement of communication – is brought forward by selected vocabulary differences between British and American English: same words, different or additional meanings in one variety; same concept, different terms or expressions (and here the differences belong to the most common fields of everyday vocabulary, namely traffic, food, and education); and idiom differences and usage.

The last section of the chapter deals with American English grammar. The differences between British and American English Grammar are not significant and belong to the following categories: verb, concord, tag questions, noun, pronoun, article, preposition, adverb, collocations, and word order.

Chapter Four: Lexical Influence of American English on British English

Chapter four focuses on the lexical influence of American English on British English. The information is gathered under the headings: American English versus

² The Colonial, the National, and the International period.

British English; what an Americanism is; lexical influence of American English on British English; and extent of the influence of American English on British English.

The sub-chapter 'Lexical Influence of American English on British English' is of most importance and begins by revealing the factors that favoured the influence of American English on 'world English':

- America's population and wealth;
- America's magnitude of higher education and of publishing industry;
- the appeal of America's popular culture on language and habits;
- America's international, political, and economical position.

The data gathered as a result of our research prove a twofold influence of American English on British English: on one hand, on the everyday vocabulary, namely food, clothes, family and home, entertainment and free-time activities, conversational words and phrases, expressions and euphemisms.

On the other hand, in the case of the functional varieties, the American influence is present in the fields of computing, journalism, broadcasting (cinema, television and theatre; wireless and music), advertising and sales, politics and economics, travelling and transport.³

The findings of the sub-chapter 'Extent of Influence of American English on British English' have been grouped under several headings. The first one (Influence of American English on British English – fact or fiction?!) definitely proves, with relevant examples, that there is a twofold influence of American English on British English: on the everyday vocabulary and on the vocabulary of functional varieties.

The reasons for this situation are listed next. Among the most important ones are:

- the great appreciation of the status of American institutions and a readiness to adopt American practices;
- the adoption of American inventions designed to relieve people of some everyday inconvenience: the passenger elevator, the escalator, the telephone, the phonograph, the air-brake, the cash register, the electric light, the fountain-pen, the linotype, the box camera, the pneumatic tire, the adding machine, the revolving door, the safety pin, the typewriter;
- o the speeding up of ocean voyages between England and America;

³ All figures are represented through graphs, diagrams or tables which are inserted in the thesis body or annexed in the special section at the end of the thesis.

• America's fastest growing economy.

The result was a political, educational, economic, or artistic international gathering during which American words or phrases passed into the traditional standard of British English.

After establishing that the influence of American English on British English is a real fact, our concern was to show how significant this influence really is (subchapter 'Debt of British English to American English'). The study was based on the 247 words and phrases whose date of entry into the British English vocabulary is definitely specified. Consequently, we found that British English began to welcome Americanisms as early as the 17^{th} century – 1 term, followed by another one in the 18^{th} century, 63 in the 19^{th} century, 178 in the 20^{th} and only 4 in our century.

All these figures demonstrate that the influence of American English on British English is not very significant at the level of the entire Standard English vocabulary inventory, especially if the following fact is taken into consideration: out of the 600,000 definitions included in 'The Oxford English Dictionary', second edition, about 30 percent only are native English, 40 percent French, and 15 percent Latin. A simple addition shows that it remains a percentage of 15 percent for all other influences from other Germanic or Roman languages <u>and</u> American English.

Finally, in the 'Influence of American English on British English – Corruption or Normal Change?!' section, we were interested in finding out if this influence of American English on British English threatens in any way the future of the English language in the United Kingdom.

The distribution of American words and phrases according to everyday and functional varieties vocabularies shows that the greatest number (480 versus 313) belongs to the latter one.

This is a statistics which shouldn't worry anyone as chances that words and phrases specific to this domain to pass to and remain in the basic word stock are very little. Furthermore, vocabulary of functional varieties is the norm for certain categories of people, whose number is relatively small in comparison to the mass of common people having nothing or very little in common with them.

The concern, if any, should come from the 313 words and phrases of everyday vocabulary. And again the concern is useless as this is a small number compared to the total number of words and phrases in the British vocabulary basic stock.

Extending the analysis on the specific domains of everyday vocabulary, we underline the fact that the greatest influence is in the first place in the 'people, behaviour and social position' section, with 94 entries, and second in the 'euphemisms, idioms and conversational words and phrases' one, with 78 entries, followed third by the 'sport' and 'consumer society' ones, with 35 entries each. 'Family and home' and 'clothes and accessories' have 20 entries each. Finally, the least affected domain is 'entertainment', with only 8 entries.

Further on, the concern diminishes even more if we think that the complete adoption of a foreignism can be proved by the derivatives it produces. Thus, the research reveals a number of only 12 Americanisms which gave British English such terms, most of them belonging to the sphere of computing, which is perfectly justified by the place computers and everything related to them occupy in people's lives nowadays.

All these figures add to our conclusion that most of the American influence on British English is a matter of fashion which springs out of people's desire to admire something or somebody that seems better, more powerful, and even more attractive. And one must not forget that fashions come and go and rarely leave behind something that is not of good quality and thus is bound to be adopted by everybody.

This conclusion is sustained by the study on the characteristics of the borrowings: out of the 793 Americanisms listed in the thesis, at least 40 can be classified as unnecessary. The greatest number (20), is in the field of everyday vocabulary, followed by travelling and transport (10), broadcasting (5), politics and economics (2), journalism (2), and advertising and sales (1 only).

Another interesting fact is that out of the 793 words and phrases, 81 have long existed in British English, but have acquired new meanings under the American influence. 7 terms belong to everyday vocabulary, 6 to computing, 36 to journalism, 11 to broadcasting, 1 to advertising and sales, 16 to politics and economics, and 4 to travelling and transport.

Then again out of the 793 terms, 17 are revivals of old words and phrases due to American influence. Most of them belong to the field of travelling and transport (7), followed by everyday vocabulary and journalistic terms (4 terms each), and finally political and economic terms (2 terms each).

This leads to the conclusion that in this last case the American influence on British English cannot be regarded as a matter of fashion anymore, but as a matter of necessity. The problem of the lack of appropriate terms for different fields of activity was solved by extension of meaning or revival of terms already at hand in British English vocabulary.

So far, we established that the influence of American English on British English is not a matter of corruption, but of normal change, whether it is or not dictated by fashion or necessity.

Chapter Five: Conclusion and Further Development

The conclusions are drawn in the fifth and last chapter. The summary of the findings comes first, focusing on the fact that British English has been influenced by American English since the 17th century. Our research shows that this influence has been present in different fields of activity. In order to provide a detailed view of the Americanisms that entered the British English vocabulary, we classified the 793 words and phrases under two headings: everyday vocabulary (480 terms) and functional varieties (313 terms).

In the case of functional varieties, the American influence is present in the areas of computing (10 percent), journalism (15 percent), broadcasting (24 percent), advertising and sales (5 percent), politics and economics (24 percent), and travelling and transport (22 percent).

Further on, the words and phrases in the broadcasting area have been grouped as belonging to two areas: film, TV, radio and theatre (83 percent), and music (17 percent).

Then, in the vocabulary of advertising and sales, the percentage is 64 percent in advertising proper versus 36 percent in commerce.

Politics rules in the vocabulary of politics and economics, with a percentage of 80, while economics gathers the smaller part, 20 percent.

90 percent of the vocabulary of travelling and transport belongs to tourism, while 10 percent only belongs to geography and weather.

The conclusions in the 'Further Development' section are that, despite their continuous existence separately, America and Britain have never really lost sight of a common standard of English, because of their political link, the common literary tradition, the common reading material, and the fact that the earliest lexicographers, the early dictionary editors in the United States came from New England.

At present, the English language situates itself at a transitional point between two worlds:

- the old world where all other usages than standard informal speech, regional dialect – were considered to be inferior or corrupt, and thus excluded from serious consideration, and
- the new world where informal and nonstandard usage is achieving a new presence and respectability within society.

American English is increasingly becoming a minority dialect of world English, and, although it has exercised a greater influence on world English than any other variety, it seems to slowly lose its status as the dominant version. A good example in this direction is the situation of the Internet. According to Mr. David Crystal,⁴ the Internet used to be 100 percent English, but nowadays it is down to something like 75 percent, and falling fast. It remains to be seen what happens in a few years' time.

The reason why there will definitely not be a taking over by American English is that people use language not only to communicate, but also to express their social and personal identity.

The language is in a constant state of multidimensional motion. And unfortunately, there is no predictable direction for the changes that are taking place. Maybe American English will continue to influence other varieties of English. But it will remain a trickle, because while the British want to be able to talk intelligibly with Americans, they do not actually want <u>to be</u> Americans! In the contest between identity and intelligibility, identity wins.

In our opinion the whole world witnesses the increasing unification of English towards the status of a <u>world language</u>, as English has some kind of special administrative status in over seventy countries, it achieves a special role when it is made a priority in a country's foreign-language teaching policy, and communication in the worlds of business and education is expected to be conducted in English.

The answer to the question which arises in this case - what might happen to modern Standard English as it becomes global? – is that predictions are made towards

⁴ Crystal, David, Language and the Internet, 2001, p. 37

a diglossic language – one with two quite different standards: one standard for everyday communication and another one for formal, especially written, communication.

The final conclusion is that the influence of American English on British English was much greater in the beginning, but nowadays words and phrases are filtered and everything useless, pompous, or simply fashion is to be eliminated. The more necessary an item proves to be, the more quickly it will be absorbed into the language and it will accommodate in such a manner that will not be perceived as an intruder anymore.

British English will probably continue to be influenced by American English, especially as long as this influence is manifest in fields of activity where the lack of appropriate words and phrases demands it.

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