

British English and American English: History and Differences

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: December 06, 2018

Accepted: December 20, 2018

Published: January 31, 2019

Volume:2

Issue: 1

DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2019.2.1.14x

KEYWORDS

British English, American English, vocabulary, spelling, differences, dialects, semantic, history, varieties, language

ABSTRACT

The research discusses the history of both British English and American English. The main goal is to find how far the history of American English is originated in British English. The research also sheds light on the historical factors beyond the linguistic differences between British English and American English. However, these differences are restricted to vocabulary and spelling in order to give them more depth in analysis. The study comes up with several interesting findings. Among these findings is the fact that American English is basically an outcome of Elizabethan English which the English settlers brought with them as they came to the North American Continent in the sixteenth century. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the main effect on American English resulted from British English on that time, there were many other resources that impacted it throughout time, such as American Indian Pidgin English, French, and Spanish and recent immigration of other various peoples like the Italian, Chinese and German to the United States. Moreover, with the passage of time, American English influenced British English and enriched its vocabulary, especially in the case of "Americanism."

1- INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Problem

This research is interested in the history of British English and American English. Its main concern is to examine the history of American English in order to find how far it is historically-rooted in British English or distinct from it. In addition, there is an analysis of the differences between British English and American English in terms of vocabulary and spelling. The purpose here is to see how the two main national varieties of English, British and American, differ in these linguistic aspects and expose the historical factors beyond this difference.

1.2 Objectives

As stated above, the general purpose of this paper is to provide a historical analysis of both British English and American English and explain the differences between them in vocabulary and spelling. However, the objectives of this research can be described specifically as:

- a- To trace the origins and development of British English and American English historically
- b- To examine how British English shaped and affected the history and development of American English
- c- To explain historically the nature of differences in both British English and American English regarding vocabulary and spelling
- d- To identify how far the linguistic variation in American English, represented here by vocabulary and spelling, is historically-rooted in British English or independent from it
- e- Finally, the overall purpose of this paper is to examine how far American English history as a language is a product of British English influence or of other influences rather than British English.

1.3 Rationale

Language is a broad area of knowledge, and when it comes to the history of the English Language, there are

too many things to deal with and write about. Nonetheless, when I started thinking what to write about in this field, one of the topics which I liked to deal with was dialects. This topic appealed to me because dialects are significant in showing the type of language growth and development throughout history. But I felt that dialects in general is a broad subject and thus there is a need to limit it. Therefore, I decided to write about British English and American English as the two main dialects of the English Language. Furthermore, there are many interesting points which I found while I decided to write about this topic. I believe that we, as non-native speakers of English, often tend to think about English as one language that is uniform and unified. In other words, we usually tend to ignore the fact that it has many dialects and varieties which are categorized under its umbrella. Hence, I wanted to investigate the two main dialects of English, British and American, and see how far their history is similar or distinct from each other. I also aimed at building some knowledge about the differences that exist between them. For these reasons, I intended to write about American English and British English and the differences between them.

1.4 Delimitations

As mentioned earlier, this research paper aims at providing a historical analysis of British English and American English and explaining the differences between them historically. On the whole, the history of the English Language originally starts with the history of English in Britain. But as the purpose of this paper is essentially to investigate how far the history of American English is originated in British English, the focus will be on the history of American English in relation to British English and other sources of influence. In addition, the standard varieties of both British English and American English are the two versions which will be used in order to illustrate the

types of differences between American English and British English. The reason for this is that both British English and American English include many varieties where the differences or linguistic aspects would be difficult and time-consuming to trace and explain historically.

Hence, it is Standard British English, which is referred to as Received Pronunciation (RP), and General American (GA) that are meant in this study when dealing with the differences between British English and American English. These standard varieties are sufficient for the purpose of this research, as they both characterize most linguistic features of the various national varieties of both British and American English. Furthermore, the discussion of the differences between British English and American English is limited here to vocabulary and spelling. In fact, there are other differences between British and American English, as in syntax and phonology. However, it would be more adequate to focus only on vocabulary and spelling differences to give them more depth in analysis in terms of history and nature, especially with the fact that American English vocabulary tend to have its own characteristics and identity which distinguish it, to some extent, from that of British English.

2- LITERATURE REVIEW

There are many books which deal with the history of British English and American English and the differences between them. However, there are two books which are among the most interesting and helpful resources to this paper. One of them is *British English and American English*, by Peter Strevens (1972). Strevens presents the basic facts about English as a worldwide language. Then he presents the basic data about British English and American English history. Above all, Strevens discusses the differences

between these varieties of English in various aspects such as grammar, vocabulary and spelling. Hence, this book is helpful and correlated to this study, especially with the fact that Strevens introduces the historical facts in this book together with the linguistic aspects in a stimulating mode.

Another resource which is basically associated to this study is Millward's (1996), entitled *A Biography of the English Language*. In this book Millward provides all that information about the English Language history from its beginning until recent British English and American English. The most beneficial chapters in this book for this paper are the chapters where Millward discusses the main three periods in the history of the English Language. In addition, there is the chapter in which he deals with English in England and the United States, discussing the main differences between them in the various linguistic aspects. This chapter is the last one in the book, and it is entitled (*English Around the World*).

3- METHODOLOGY

This research is based on the description of British English and American English historically. In order to attain depth in presenting the historical data required, there is a use of chronology wherever necessary. In addition, the paper is analytical when it comes to the history of the main factors and incidents that contributed to the development and growth of British English and American English. Finally, a basic method which is worthy of following in such a paper is comparison and contrast, mainly when the differences between British and American English in vocabulary and spelling are concerned.

4- FINDINGS

After dealing with the basic history of British English and the overall history of American English in order to identify how the first affected the other historically, the following points regarding this issue have been found:

a-The English spoken nowadays in the United States of America, which is referred to as American English, is originally a development of Elizabethan English the early settlers from the British Isles brought with them when they came to the North American Continent in the sixteenth century.

b-Before the English settlers came to the New World or North America and meantime, there were many sources that affected the development of early American English. These sources include Basque, Iberian and Indian American Pidgin English.

c-Throughout its history, American English was shaped and affected by British English. Yet, as a matter of fact, there are many other sources which left an impact on American English. These sources include American Indian English, French, Spanish, and Dutch and recent immigration of other various peoples as Italian, Chinese and German to the United States.

d-The main influence of immigration on American English seems to be in the area of vocabulary and borrowings.

e-The internal history of English in the British Isles, the passage of time, and the interrelations between British English and American English had a role in their history, and thus eventually created the distinction between them as the two main native dialects of the English Language.

f-During their history, British English was an original source for the history of American English. Nonetheless, with the passage of time, American English influenced British English and enriched its vocabulary, especially in the case of "Americanism."

5- DISCUSSION

5.1 History of British English and American English

English is a worldwide language nowadays. For instance, it is the language of international air controllers, and it is the medium of at least 80 percent of the information stored in computers around the world. Moreover, scholars from every nation publish in English in order to reach the widest possible audience (Millward, 1996).

Furthermore, English is widely used as a first language in every continent, and it is widely used as a second language in the Spanish-speaking countries of central and South America. It is considered the first language for a big portion of the United States, the British Isles (including Ireland) and also for other countries throughout the world like Canada, Australia, New Zealand...and so on.

However, English is one language spoken with many dialects. But first, we need to define what is meant by the term "dialect." C.M. Millward defines a dialect as "a variety of language distinguished from other varieties in such aspects as pronunciation, grammar, lexicon and semantics." (1996, p 348) Millward uses the word "dialect" to refer to regional variation, and he suggests that regional dialects are only one of many types of linguistic variation. Similarly, this term is defined in *New Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus of the English language* as "a form of a language distinguished from other forms of the same language by pronunciation, grammar or vocabulary. It may be regional, social or occupational." (1992) Also the word "dialect" may be used to refer to a regional form of a language, especially as distinguished from the standard or literary language. In addition, the term dialect may be used to refer to a language in relation to the family to which it belongs.

Accordingly, British English and American English are considered the two main native dialects of the English language. Millward (1996) states that Dialects of English can be divided into two main types, native dialects and non-native dialects. Non-native dialects of English include Indian English, Hawaiian English, African English...and so on. In relation to this, Peter Strevens (1972) suggests that the variations within English can be grouped into two main families of varieties, a British and an American family. These families differ in detail, but they also contain many similarities. The American English family includes the English spoken as a native language in the United States and Canada. On the other hand, the British English spoken as a native language includes the English in the British Isles, West Indies, Australia, New Zealand, Rhodesia and South Africa.

To be more precise, it is these two main native dialects of English, namely British English and American English, which this paper aims at investigating their history in order to determine how American English was affected historically by British English. As far as the differences between these two main dialects of English are concerned, the standard national varieties of them will be used to examine the nature of the differences and explain them historically. These varieties or dialects are Standard British English (SBE), which is referred to as Received Pronunciation (RP), and General American (GA).

5.1.1 History of British English

As a matter of fact, the history of the English Language has its main parts within the history of English in the British Isles. On the whole, the history of the English Language is a history of English in both sides of the Atlantic, Britain and the United States. In

the other words, the history of English is a history of both British English and American English. However, we need to start by dealing with the point where the language started from, the British Isles. Dennis Freeborn et al (1986) suggest that the history of the English Language is basically the history of English in England which starts when this language was brought to the British Isles in the first half of the fifth century AD by settlers called “Angles” from across the North Sea. The inhabitants of the British Isles were called “Britons” who spoke dialects of Celtic, whereas the Angle or (Anglo-Saxon) spoke dialects of a language family called West Germanic. In time, the country became known as “Englaland,” Angle-land, and the language as “Englisc.” The language of this early period, up to 1100 or 1150, is referred to as “Old English.”

The second part in the history of the English Language in England is called the “Middle English” period, which started about 1100 and lasted to 1500. During that period, the language witnessed the Norman French invasion, where French was the native language of a minority, but with an influence in all aspects, since the French controlled all the political, economic and cultural life in England. (Millward, 1996) Accordingly, English was still spoken in England at that time, but there was a kind of a decline of French afterwards. Millward states that: “French remained the official language of England until well into the second half of the fourteenth century, but two events of that century sealed its fate and guaranteed the resurgence of English. The first of these events was the Black Death...The second event that assured the resurgence of English in England was the Hundred Years War (1337-1453).” (1996, p 144-145)

The next period in the history of the English Language is referred to as the “Early Modern English” period which lasted from 1500-1800. This period witnessed many events such as the cultural, political and technological influences, the introduction of printing, the English Renaissance, exploration and colonization and the American Revolution. These incidents and influences had an impact on the development of the English Language. The final part in the history of the English Language started from 1800 and lasted to the present. This period is often called the “Present-Day English” period, and during this period recent British English and American English developed.

One significant aspect in the history of English in England is very essential to the history of the English Language on the whole and to the history of American English specifically. As the British started exploration and colonization of different parts of the world, they brought their language with them. This contributed to the spread and growth of English as a first language for many peoples and countries. In relation to this, the exploration of the English for the American Continent, and later on its colonization brought English to the United States.

At this stage, it would be sufficient to stop dealing with the history of British English and move to deal with the history of American English. For the time being, what has been mentioned is sufficient our purpose. Other significant aspects in the history of British English will be referred to whenever they are necessary to show their impact on American English or their relation to it. This is meant in order to identify how American English history is really influenced by that of British English.

5.1.2 History of American English

The history of the English Language in the United States actually begins with the English which was transferred by the English settlers who came from the British Isles to the New World- North American Continent- which was later known as the United States. J.L. Dillard believes that English came to North America and what may be called the United States as a part of the general movement of European Languages and their spread to all parts of the world, and specifically to the new American continent. He further elaborates: "The type of English spoken during the period of exploration and colonization was important to the history of American English..." (1992, p 1)

Based on this, although there are other factors and influences which affected the language in the United States before the settlement of the immigrants from the British Isles, which will be discussed later, the language which those British immigrants from the British Isles brought with them laid the foundation for the beginning and development of what may be called early American English. By this, we mean Elizabethan English which was spoken in the British Isles during the time when the new settlers came to North America. Strevens (1972) argues that there was much variety in the Elizabethan English which was brought by the English settlers who came from the British Isles into the new American continent. Strevens also suggests that "a similar mixed population taken from the same place in Britain at the present time would possess between them a much uniform sample of English than did the early settlers." (p27)

In relation to this, Millward (1996) suggests that it would be difficult to account for the origins of all the regional dialects of the United States from the time of the earliest English settlements, since immigrants

came from different parts of Great Britain and thus the speech of the areas of America was a dialectal mixture of Early Modern English. So, basically, the settlers who came to the North American Continent around the sixteenth century from Britain brought their English with them, which was diverse and with many dialectal differences. This mainly contributed to the influence upon the English Language which became spoken in the New World. Furthermore, before the English settlers came from Britain into the New World, or at least meantime, there were other factors or sources which played a role in the language spoken by the inhabitants of North American Continent. Dillard (1992), in his book *A History of American English* discusses these sources and shows their impact on early American English. One of these sources is Basque, a language which the settlers brought with them to the New World. Basque affected the language in early North America mainly in the field of vocabulary through "maritime" forms of language.

Another early source which affected the language in America in its early beginnings is Indian Pidgin English and Iberian. Dillard elaborates on this: "It was surely a maritime variety — if not a pidgin — that the first Indians to have real contacts with them spoke to the Puritans in 1621." (1992, p 9) Then, the Englishmen who came to the New World depended upon the Indians for many basic survival techniques, such as acquiring food, which forced them into certain cultural compromises, including the linguistic ones. Another source which contributed to the shape of language in early North America is the Pidgin English which was brought to the New World in the seventeenth century from West Africa through slaves. In addition, American Indian Pidgin English spread rapidly and played a role in this regard. Moreover, there are other elements which had a role in the history

of English in the United States or American English. Millward (1996) suggests that there are other elements, origins and factors that affected the growth of English in the United States other than the English origins of England. He considers that “because not only the language, but also the dominant cultural patterns of the United States today are based on English models, we tend to forget that the English were not the first Europeans to make permanent settlements in North America.”(p350) For instance, the Spanish were in Texas almost a century before the Jamestown settlement. Both the Spanish and the French had colonies in South Carolina in the sixteenth century.

Similarly, Strevens (1972) argues that American English has had various influences since Elizabethan times. First, there is American Indian influence. In the earliest “colonial” period there was a need to find names for talking about places, plants, animals and customs which existed in America but had no equivalent in Britain. Thus, there was a process of borrowing new words and expressions from American Indian English Continent such as “hook, igloo, kayak, tomahawk, skunk and totem.”

There was also the French influence on American English. In addition, as a result of the cultural contact, there was also the Spanish influence, partly because Spain occupied large areas of North America. Spanish words such as “bonanza, Creole, plaza, sierra and sombrero” were borrowed from Spanish into American English. Furthermore, the Dutch presence in the North American Continent contributed to the borrowing of words as “boss, dumb, Santa Clause and sleigh. “Accordingly, these influences on American English came as a result of the contacts with foreign language communities, which may be considered as a

result of forced and voluntary immigration. Besides, we see here that most of the foreign influences on American English are on lexicon or vocabulary. There are no foreign influences on other aspects of American English, such as phonology and syntax. American English seems to have retained the basic threads of language which the English brought to the North American Continent, though it had borrowed words from other sources.

Other elements of influence on American English came from African, Italian, Chinese and German immigrants. The influences here were also on vocabulary. Anyway, the process of immigration continued until the twentieth century to the United States. Meantime, this had a role in affecting the vocabulary and lending American English new words and expressions. Millward (1996) believes in the importance of immigration influence on American English in the nineteenth century and recent times. He states that: “Still more recently, political and economic problems in their homelands have led to large numbers of immigrants from Central and South America, the Caribbean, and southeast Asia. With few exceptions, all of these immigrants have adopted English almost immediately, and their children born in this country have been native speakers of English. Nonetheless, they have left their mark on American English, even if this influence is only imperfectly understood.” (p351)

5.2 Differences between British English and American English

5.2.1 How British English and American English Became Different

Generally speaking, English is one world-wide language with two main national dialects, British English and American English. However, this does not eliminate the fact that there are some differences between British English and American English,

whether they may be significant or slight. But before dealing with the nature of these differences, there is a need first to determine how these dialects became different.

Strevens (1972) argues that there are three aspects which affected Elizabethan English and resulted in the emergence of the two main national varieties of the English Language, British and American English. First, the passage of time and the social history of the British Isles caused a change in British English. Second, English as spoken and written in America acquired a character of its own reflecting the growth and history of the American community. Third, the interaction and relations between Britain and America changed, which also affected the story of English. Even though, Thomas Pyles (1993) believes that there is no essential difference between English in the United States and that of Britain. He comments on this by saying: "The English Language in all its national varieties throughout the world is remarkably uniform. There are, to be sure, differences between national varieties, just as there are variations with the similarities. English is unmistakably one language, with two major national varieties: British and American." (p 212)

Anyhow, I believe that there are a group of differences between British and American English. Although some of them may look insignificant or slight, at the least they seem to characterize the variety which they belong to, whether British or American. These differences lie in more than one linguistic area. They can be found in the field of phonology, especially of vowels and intonation. There are also differences in vocabulary and semantics. In addition, there are also differences in morphology and syntax, but they are actually less than the other differences.

For the sake of clarity and depth in analysis, vocabulary and spelling differences between British English and American English will only be dealt with in what follows. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the differences will be discussed in relation to the standard versions of language in both British and American English, (SBE) and (GA). These two standard dialects are sufficient as they include most of the characteristics and linguistic aspects which are found in most regional and national dialects.

5.2.2 Differences in Lexicon / Vocabulary

Lexicon or vocabulary is a central linguistic area where there are noticeable differences between British English and American English. Millward (1996) suggests that the three main semantic areas where there are differences between British English and American English are food, clothing and transportation. He further illustrates the divergence between these dialects through saying: "Historically, this is because new food and new ways of processing and cooking food have arisen since the separation of the two nations. The vagaries of fashion have caused divergence in the vocabulary of clothing. The many differences in the terminology of transportation result from the fact that the railroad (British "railway") and motorcar industries developed after the separation of the United States and Great Britain." (p374)

Therefore, we see that the historical separation of England and the United States contributed to the discrepancy or independent quality of vocabulary in British English and American English, at least in the areas of food, clothing and transportation items. The following tables show some examples regarding the differences in vocabulary between British English and American English.

Food	
British English	American English
biscuits	cookies or crackers
chips	French fries
crisps	potato chips
jelly	jello
mince	hamburger

Clothing	
British English	American English
pants	underpants
overall	smock
knickers	women's underpants
trainers	running shoes
waistcoat	vest

Transportation	
British English	American English
high street	main street
caravan	trailer
motorway	turnpike
roundabout	traffic circle

But what about the other types of differences in vocabulary in British English and American English? How far can they be explained historically? Pyles (1993) suggests that there is a variety of usage for vocabulary items in both British English and American English. In other words, some words are there in both varieties of English, but they are used in different contexts by people in the United States and Britain. A good example is the word “mad,” which is mostly American, while “angry” is British. Even though, Americans use “angry” in formal contexts, often under the impression that “mad” as a synonym is incorrect. On the other hand, many speakers of British English use “mad” “in the sense of being “angry,” as it was usually used in Old English, meaning

“dissatisfied” with a certain aspect, not, for example, “crazy.”

As far as the differences in word choice in British and American English are concerned, Millward (1996) believes that they can be complicated, as in the case of “sick and ill.” On the contrary, Pyles (1993) disagrees. He believes that the differences in the use of other words in everyday speech are not very numerous or very significant. Randolph Quirk illustrates this matter as he says: “The long and imposing lists of so-called distinctively British and American words and usages are 75 percent misleading; it turns out either that both the words so neatly separated are used in one or the other country or that both are used in slightly different contexts or in different proportions.”(Qtd. in Pyles', p 217)

Then, it would be worthy to mention how American English affected the language in England. One source which brought this effect is the process of “Americanism. “This means that whenever the American felt a need for new words to describe new things or express new ideas, they innovated new words, expressions and made coinages. This process provided a source for American English growth, at least in the field of vocabulary. It also enriched British English with words which became used afterwards. Among the usages identified as Americanism are the following words: either (to refer to one or the other of two), notify (to mean “inform”) and mad (as a metaphor for “angry”).

In this context, Pyles (1993) suggests that many words have been introduced to British English from American English mainly beginning in the nineteenth century, while beforehand it is the English in Britain that gave many words to American English. Other

words which are categorized within the process of “Americanism” include also “backwoods, belittle, blizzard, caucus, swamp, cafeteria, cocktail and egghead.”

5.2.3 Differences in Spelling

There are many differences in the spelling of both British English and American English. The major spelling differences between the two main national varieties of English can be illustrated with the following aspects:

1- (o) versus (ou)

American spelling prefers (o) before (r) and (l) in words, while British prefers (ou). For instance, in American English we find “honor, favor and molt” whereas in British English we find “honour, favour and moult.” According to Richard Vensky (2001), this contrast in spelling between British English and American English is dated to the American Revolution, and particularly to the spelling reform lead by the American linguist Noah Webster.

2- (-re) versus (-er)

While American English prefers final (er) in final positions in words as “center, fiber, and meter,” British English prefers (-re) in the end of such words. Thus, we find “centre, fibre and metre” in British English.

3-Doubling final consonants

There is a difference between British English and American English spelling in the handling of final (l) before suffixes. Before (ment) and (ful), American English spelling doubles or keeps a doubled (l) as in “enrollment, fulfillment, skillful and willful.” On the other hand, the British prefer to double a final (l), even if the final syllable is not stressed, while Americans generally double a final consonant only, as in

“traveling” and “marvelous” versus British “travelling” and “marvellous.”

However, there are many more types of differences in spelling between British English and American English, especially with the fact that American English spelling tends to be unsettled, while the British tends to be more conservative. The above mentioned examples are meant to give an idea about the nature of spelling differences between British English and American English. But it is more significant now to deal with some of the historical factors which paved the way to such differences in spelling.

First, Strevens (1972) argues that not all the differences in spelling between British English and American English are a result of American innovation or policy, although some are. In fact, some of these differences arose from the fact that original common source of both American English and British English, Elizabethan English, allowed greater variation in spelling than is allowed today. Strevens also adds that sometimes the alternative which eventually became standardized in America was different from the preferred alternative in British English.

Second, Venzky (2001) as well as Strevens (1972) suggest that there is another factor which initiated the discrepancy in spelling between British and American English. This factor includes the spelling reform movements and attempts to establish modified alphabets, such as those lead by Noah Webster in America, and to some extent by Samuel Johnson in Britain.

Additionally, another factor which had a role in the differences between British English and American English is the spelling of “Americanisms,” such as

“raccoon, Wisconsin, and Pittsburgh. “These words are shared throughout the English-speaking world. Basically, they originated in America, but their spellings changed over time as a result of American orthographic manipulations.

and(Venzky-2001)]

6- CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have tried to give a historical account of British English and American English as the two main native dialects of the English Language. The main purpose has been to see how far American English is historically-rooted in British English and illuminate the other influences that shaped it throughout its history. In addition, I have tried to discuss the nature of the differences between British English and American English in vocabulary and spelling purposefully, with a little more focus on the historical factors beyond these differences.

According to what has been presented, we can notice that American English basically developed from early British English, specifically “Elizabethan English.” As a result, British English was a main source and background for the emergence and evolution of American English. Even though, American English was affected and shaped also, to some extent, by other foreign influences that came through immigration to the United States of various people and the cultural contact with them. Furthermore, both American and British English affected each other and contributed to the linguistic growth found in both dialects, mainly in the case of vocabulary and spelling, as this study has shown.

As far as the differences between British English and American English are concerned, although they share the same sources and items used in the linguistic

domains of vocabulary and spelling, there seem to be many differences in terms of these areas in both varieties of English. In other words, there are a number of noticeable differences between British and American English, at least in these fields. However, I believe that these differences are not so fundamental to the extent that makes them result in a big discrepancy between British and American English linguistically. In fact, they reflect the tendencies and special historical circumstances which lead to their evolution rather than make or characterize two distinct versions of lexicon and spelling within the central native dialects of the English Language, namely, British English and American English.

However, I believe that the history of British English and American English is a significant and enticing field of study, especially when it comes to the interrelations between them historically and linguistically. This is enhanced by the fact that they represent the two basic models for the world-wide English Language spoken worldwide. Furthermore, I feel that the differences between British and American English in the other linguistic areas, such as syntax and phonology, are worthy of examination in order to investigate how they may be similar or distinct.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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