

Chapter 9

American English

1. American English and British English:

American English and British English may be generally considered to comprise the two main branches of contemporary English. They are not identical but differ from each other for the following reasons:

(a) In any language there are forces making for homogeneity, but geographical extension and people living in places far from each other lead to diversity. Take any couple with as nearly as possible identical speech, isolate them from each other and the speech of their descendants will invariably both alter and diverge increasingly from generation to generation. Language tends to change and it tends to change differently in different places. These are the two iron laws in the life of language generally.

(b) The character of the population differs, and does so even apart from the very great non-British element in the American population; the early English emigrants to America were not a cross-section of the English population of the 17th Century, socially, educationally, or geographically.

(c) The natural environment and hence the natural conditions of life in England and in America were and are different.

(d) The artificial environment-social, educational, economic, political-was and is different.

2. Points and examples of differences:

American English and British English differ from each other in pronunciation, idiom, vocabulary and spelling:

(a) Pronunciation:

The low front vowel /æ/ occurs in American English in some words where British English has the low central vowel /a/, e.g.

	<i>American</i>	<i>British</i>
Glass	/glæs/	/glas/
Half	/hæf/	/haf/
path	/pæθ/	/paθ/

Some words which have the vowel /i/ in American English occur in British English with /ay/:

Fertile	/fertil/	/fartayl/
Missile	/misəl/	/misayl/

However, the reverse occurs in such words as antisemitic:

/aentaysemitik/	/aentisemitik/
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In British English initial /r-/, as in red, is a voiced alveolar fricative, medial /-r-/, as in very is a flap produced by one tap of the tip of the tongue against the alveolar ridge; but American /r/ is a retroflex semi-vowel, and not a fricative or a flap.

When /r/ is in final position, or post voalic, it is usually not pronounced by speakers of British English and by speakers of English in the Eastern parts of the United States:

Part /pa : t/ partner /pa : tənə/

Words which have two or more syllables following the primary stress / ˈ / usually have tertiary stress / ˞ / in American English, but weak stress in British English, e.g.:

dictionary /dɪkʃənəri/ - /dɪkʃənri/

(four syllables)

(three syllables)

library /lɪbrəri/ - /laɪbeəri/

secondary /sekəndəri/ - /sekənədri/

Some words which have /uw/ in American English occur in British English with /yuw/, e.g.:

student /stuwdənt/ - /styudənt/

new /nuw/ - /nyuw/

(b) Idioms:

A striking example of the difference in idioms between American English and British English is the British subtle but effortless distinctions between shall and will and should and would compared to the American tendency to use the one in the place of the other. An American generally uses "I will", for the future tense, whereas, speakers of standard English use "I shall" for the future, and "I will" for emphasis.

Most other differences in idioms appear mainly in familiar conversation, and hence are seldom exemplified in writing except in such contexts as the dialogue of novels and plays, though now and then they arise in colloquies between Englishmen and Americans brought face to face yet such

differences in idiom never provoke misunderstanding and seldom even much notice. Following are a few examples:

American

British

Ididn't ask; should I have?

Ididn't ask; should I have done?

a week from Tuesday.

a Tuesday week.

His membership in the society.

His membership of the society.

He doesn't have a telephone

He is not on a telephone

(c) Vocabulary:

Differences in vocabulary are numerous, and Americanisms fall into two groups:

a) Americanisms peculiar to America, constantly growing in number and making their way into the vocabulary of English, e.g. : okay, cafeteria, movies and hotdogs.

b) Americanisms derived from new applications and combinations of old words which are either native to English or very ancient borrowings. This group of words is smaller than one is likely to think; for apparent instances of American coinages are really American survivals -words or meanings once used everywhere but later dropped in England and continued in America. The American use of "clerk" for what an Englishman usually calls "a shop assistant" exemplifies this instance. In American English clerk is a shop-assistant, (e.g. : a shoe-clerk sells, fits and receives money). In British English a clerk is a person employed to keep accounts; a person who works in an office.

The many striking peculiarities of the American vocabulary are explicable as results of the ways in which life in America

differs from life in England. The first English settlers' adaptation of their language to the new surroundings is reflected in American meanings of corn, robin, and creek.

New political institutions have produced new political terms, e.g.:

<i>American</i>	<i>British</i>
Congress	Parliament
Congressmen	M.P.'s
Secretary of State	Foreign Secretary

The terms "barrister" (a person entitled to practise as advocate in superior courts), and solicitor (a member of the branch of the legal profession chiefly concerned with advising clients and preparing their cases), are absent from the American legal language, lawyer and attorney are the only expressions in use.

In the more common aspects of daily life, the differences are innumerable. Following are a few examples:

<i>American</i>	<i>British</i>
Fall	Autumn
Mail box	Pillar box (letter box)
Sidewalk	Pavement
Delivery	Post
Radio	Wireless
Movies	Cinema, pictures
Baggage-car	Luggage-van
ticket-office	Booking - office

(d) Spelling:

Spellings peculiar to America or at any rate first commonly used there are, for the most part, results of the efforts of Noah

Webster (1758 - 1843) who, through his dictionaries and spelling-books has had, probably, more influence on the spelling of English in America than any other single person. What is really most remarkable about Webster is this attempt to simplify and “phoneticize” English spelling. In 1789, in Dissertations on the English language, Webster proposed a thoroughgoing and more or less consistent reform involving spellings as giv, breſt, ſpeek, proov, and karakter. Webster’s mark on the American spelling of today is best seen in:

- er for - re as in center (centre);
- or for our as in color (colour);
- favor (favour), and honor (honour);

and other spellings such as program for programme and tire and thru for tyre and through, respectively.

3. The Settlement history of America:

It is possible to divide the settlement history of America into three periods:

a- From 1607 to 1790 the date of the first census which stated that four million people lived in the “colonial” area which mainly extended along the Atlantic-sea coast. Ninety per cent of these had come from the British Isles.

b- From 1790 to 1860. During this period settlement shifted from primarily English to one which had non-English group elements in it. In 1848 the potatoe crop failed in Ireland and as a result many Irish people moved to America. As a result of an abortive attempt to convert Germany to some kind of democracy,

many Germans moved to America. By 1860 the second tier of states west of the Mississippi were founded and the number of inhabitants reached 41 million.

c- From 1860 to the present time, different kinds of migrations have taken place, the main ones coming from South and South - East Europe.

4. The Language of the Early Settlers:

Since the early settlers spoke and wrote the English language as it was currently used in England in the 17th Century, the linguistic processes which operated to produce the differences between American and British English which exist today must either have taken place in American English after the early settlers settled in America or have occurred in British English after the emigrants had left their homeland.

The early settlers spoke Elizabethan English which naturally sounded somewhat different from Modern English. For example, many words which are pronounced with the vowel sound /iy/ as in meat, had at the time of the earliest settlement in America, the quality of the present-day English /ey/as in mate.

Furthermore, the stress patterns of Shakespeare's English were not absolutely identical with those of Modern English. For example, there is evidence that in such a tri-syllabic word as "characher'd" the stress had not yet shifted to the first syllable. In many two-syllable words which now stress the first, at that time had the stress on the second; many derivatives in - able had a stress, at least secondary in value, on the suffix.

Although Elizabethan English had in general developed most of the inflections which are used in present-day English - the noun plurals, the object from them in the plural pronoun, the past tense and past participle forms of the weak verb - a few interesting earlier features still remained. For example, there existed the double forms of the pronoun of address: thou and ye or you.

It is also known that at that time spelling was not yet standardized and the process of standard codification took place after the two speech areas, England and America, were already separated. It is, therefore, safe to deduce that it is more than possible that the processes of standardizing the spelling system might not work out in the same way in both places.

Since the earliest settlers used Elizabethan English which differs in many respects from present-day English, it is easy to find an acceptable explanation of the beginning of the divergence in the two main streams of the English language. It remains to be seen how, and through what means, this divergence developed throughout the course of the intervening centuries. The earliest settlers encountered plants and animals which were new to them. The land was inhabited by tribes of indigenous people who spoke strange languages, wore strange clothes and had strange customs. Even the landscape was quite different from the nearly tailored English countryside. Consequently names had to be provided for all these aspects of their new life.

5- The American - Indian Element:

The most important source of the new names needed had to be the languages of the native inhabitants of the country. It is

estimated that about million Indians lived in what is called now the United States and they spoke something like 350 languages belonging to some twenty-five families. Among the principal families of Indian languages were the Algonquian, the Iroquoian, the Muskogian, and the Uto-Astecan, and each with its own subdivisions. Individual languages of these families furnished most of the American - Indian words which were borrowed by the earliest settlers. Following is a sample list of American-Indian loan words:

a) Names of trees, plants and fruits:

tamarack (a tree like fir)

squash (a fruit used as a vegetable)

pecan (thin - shell nut)

hickory (a preparation of pounded kernels)

b) Names of foods:

pemmican (grease-oil).

pone (a maize - cake)

hominy (a food prepared by removing the hulls from kernels of maize).

c) Names of animals:

cayuse (pony)

moose (a deer of immense size)

muskart (a water rat)

woodchuck (fisher - weasel)

raccoon (an animal like a small bear)

d) Amerindian Culture:

maniton (a spirit)

powwow (a prophet)

totem (tribal mark or badge)

mackinaw (a big turtle)

moccasin (a type of shoes)

wampum (shell - currency)

hogan (dwelling built of earth)

tepee (a lodge : conical in shape)

wigwam (a house)

Loan - words from the American - Indian languages underwent considerable changes in the borrowing process. Changes were generally in the direction of simplification and shortening. For example, the word squash appears to have been shortened through a phonetic process, from askutasquash, the raccoon from raughroughcums, and the word hickory from pawcohiccorn.

The forms of some American - Indian (Amerindian) loan words were changed not as a result of a phonetic process but of a psychological process. This is peculiarly well illustrated by the word woodchuck which seems to have had its origin in a word appearing variously as wuchak, otchak, odjig, meaning “fisher” or “weasel”. It was, at any rate, the name of an animal, which bore some association with the words, and presumably to give a semblance of reason to this strange combination of sounds, the

English-speaking-settlers converted the first syllable into wood. This type of modification arising from a popular or unlearned effort to resolve a strange or unusual word into understandable elements, is called “folk or popular etymology”.

Besides the various Amerindian influences, American English reflects the other non-English cultures which the settlers met in their conquest of the Continent and which were brought along with emigrants who came later from various parts of Europe and other continents. These include the French, Spanish, Dutch, German, Swedish, Italian, Chinese and African cultures.

6. The French Elements:

The French borrowings include words pertaining to exploration, travel and certain features of landscape, food, coinage, furniture and building:

a) Exploration and travel:

bateau

carry-all

voyageur

portage

b) Features of landscape:

chutte

crevasse

levée

prairie

rapids

c) food:

brioche

praline

sazarac

chowder

d) Coinage:

cent

dime

mill

e) furniture and building:

bureau

depot

shanty

In the course of the borrowing process, the French words were modified though not drastically distorted in pronunciation and form as were the American-Indian words. The most outstanding modification is to stress the first syllable, or at any rate to shift the stress found, as evidenced in *bureau* (and not *buréau*), and *dépot* (and not *depót*). The process of “folk - etymology” was also here at work, and its outstanding example is the term *carryall* from the French word carriole.

7. The Spanish Element:

As the English - speaking settlers moved southward toward the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific, they encountered Spanish

colonization and culture. Following are examples of Spanish words still common in American English. They are classified according to the aspects of life and fields of activity they represent:

a) Plants and animals:

alfalfa
mosquito
armadillo
barracuda
cockroach

b) Ranch life:

ranch
rodeo
lasso
stampede

d) Food and drink:

tequila
tortila
tomato
barbecue
chocolate

e) Building:

cafeteria
patio
plaza

f) Clothing:

serape

sombrero

poncho

g) Legal and Penal:

calaboose

desoerado

vigilantes

h) Miscellaneous:

fiesta

pronto

rumba

tornado

savvy (v.)

vamoose (v.)

canyon

cannibal

As is generally true with borrowings from any of the Romance languages, English tends to shift the stress forward as, for example, in cányon from canón, and cánibal from cabibál.

Some borrowings from Spanish were modified through the process of folk-etymology. The most outstanding example is the words cockroach from Spanish word cucaracha.

8. The Dutch Element:

Of all the languages which have made a significant contribution to American English vocabulary, Dutch has been the most influential, since borrowings from Dutch are much more in general use than Spanish or French loan words.

Following is a sample list of the words in American English which are of Dutch origin or show other evidences of Dutch influence:

a) Food:

cole slaw

cookie

pit

Waffle

b) Farms and building:

stoop (proch)

hay barrack

c) Transportation:

caboose (cook room on ship)

sleigh

span (of horses)

d) Social classification:

boss

patroon

Yankee

e) Miscellaneous:

boodle

dope

dumb (stupid)

Santa Claus

spook (a ghost)

Since Dutch is more closely related to English than any of the other languages which have had a significant contribution to American vocabulary, there are fewer changes in form and pronunciation in the Dutch borrowings than in these borrowings from other languages. “Santa Claus”, developed from the Dutch sinterklass, a somewhat collapsed form of Sant Nikolaas. However, since American English of the late 18th Century did not have the /a/ vowel of father, the /o/ vowel, as in the word long, developed as the closest approximation. This is also true of boss from Dutch baas.

9. The German Element:

The German migrations to America consist of three or four major waves that took place between 1683 and early 20th Century. The Germans constitute the largest body of non-English speaking stock in the United States.

Following is a sample - list of words in American English which are of German origin or show some aspects of German influence:

beer soup

frankfurter

hamburger

liverwurst

noddle

pretzel

sauerkraut

semester

Christmas tree

bum

loafer

ouch

phooey

American English also has a number of compounds which are translations from German, e.g.:

rainworm	from Regenwurm
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cookbook	from kochbuch
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back country	from Hinterland
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10- Other Elements:

Other immigrant stocks have also enriched American English but not in such quantity. From the various African languages spoken by Negroes come such terms as:

gumbo

goober

buckra

voodoo

hoador

In addition, languages as widely varied as Swedish, Italian and Chinese have all made some contributions to the American vocabulary. From Swedish came the words:

skijor

smogasbord

From Italian came:

spaghetti

ravioli

minestrone

pizza

From Chinese came:

chew

chospsuey

fanter

joss

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