

## THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN AMERICA

*The article covers the history of establishment and the specifics of functioning of today's American English in its relation to the British.*

**Key words:** *American English, language, new words, combinations of words, Americanisms, Archaisms, spelling, dialect groups, pronunciation, grammar, the official language.*

There are about twice as many speakers of American English as of other varieties of English, and four times as many as speakers of British English. The leading position of the US in world affairs is partly responsible for this. Americanisms have also been spread through advertising, tourism, telecommunications and the cinema.

As a result, forms of English used in Britain, Australia, etc. have become less distinct. But there remain many differences in idiom and vocabulary, especially between British and American English. For most people, however, the most distinctive feature of American English is its accent.

Let's look back to the development of American English. British people who went to the US in the 17<sup>th</sup> century spoke a variety of dialects. The New Englanders in the North, as well as the Virginians in the South, spoke the language of Shakespeare and Milton. It was the London dialect which in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in Britain was the model language for cultured Englishmen and was accepted as standard English. But in America standard English suffered a change: new words were added for food, plants, animals, etc. not found in Britain, many were taken from the Indian languages of Native Americans. The Puritan communities in the North differed in character from Virginia, whereto men went for profit; the former consisted towns with a form of self-government, Virginia – of plantations worked by slaves. This distinction led to the development of various American dialects (by a dialect we mean the words, phrases and accents of the colloquial speech in a certain locality – I.J.). In the search for intermediate means of expression for new experiences and occupations, the language of the Americans in each locality branched away from the standard British English. We must also remember that during the 17<sup>th</sup> century there was practically little contact between the colonies. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century there were sixteen dialects in America [1, p.15].

The language of Dutch and French settlers, and the huge numbers of immigrants entering the US in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, also contributed to the development of American English. Inventions such as electric lighting, the typewriter, telephone and television added numbers of words to the language and these, with the inventions, soon spread to Britain [2, p.15].

The new words and combinations of words which have appeared in American English and have not been accepted in Britain are called – *Americanisms*.

The word *Americanism* was invented by Dr. John Witherspoon in the paper published in the *Pennsylvania Journal and Weekly Advertiser* of May 9, 1781. There he defined it as “an use of phrases or terms or a combination 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". His definition, of course, does not mention the fact that the "use of phrases or terms or a construction of sentences" may be at first characteristic of American usage and subsequently pass over into British usage or even become the common property of the entire English-speaking world [3, c.23].

According to Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture, "*Americanism* – a word, phrase, speech sound etc, of English as spoken in America, especially in the US" [4, p.35]. The definition of the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, "a word or phrase used in American English but not in standard English in Britain" [5, p.35]. These definitions do not include words or expressions used in America with meanings different from those they bear in England. We can say the same about words with older meaning that have been retained in the US or words that exist in both varieties of the language but are much more applicable to American life and hence more widely used and understood in the US than in the UK [3, c.23].

Examination of the literature and the documentary records of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries show that Old English and Middle English words, which survived in American English, can be divided into three types:

1. The names of plants and animals which were unfamiliar to the immigrants, and they either borrowed the Indian names, or invented names of their own. Some of the English inventions are: *bull-frog*, a very large species of frog which makes a noise like the bellowing of a bull – *індійська тигрова жаба* (укр.); *canvas-back*, a duck with grey-and-white mottled back feathers – *нирок* (укр.); *live-oak*, an evergreen tree – *віргінський дуб* (укр.); such combinations as *frontiersman* – *колоніст* (укр.) came in, and *frontier-country*, which meant lands seized from Indians but not yet fully conquered – *країна, що розвивається* (укр.); *back-country*, lands far from the Indians. Later it was used for lands far from centres – *відсталий сільськогосподарський район на околиці штату* (укр.).

Among the borrowed Indian words we find *moose* – the North-American elk – *американський лось* (укр.); *raccoon* – the North-American small carnivorous animal with a bushy tail and grayish-brown fur – *єнот* (укр.); *possum* (from *opossum*) – a small animal with dark grey fur and a long tail capable of grasping things. It has a pouch, or bag, to carry its young. It lives in the trees – *сумчастий пацюк* (укр.). Many other words came in as the pioneers gained familiarity with Indian life: *pone* – a cake made of maize flour – *кукурудзяний здобний коржик* (укр.); *moccasins* – deerskin shoes – *туфлі-мокасини* (укр.); *squaw* – Indian woman – *індіанка* (укр.); *tomahawk* – a weapon that looks like an axe – *томагавк* (укр.). It is sometimes made with a hollow handle so that it can be used as a pipe for smoking.

2. Archaisms (archaism – a word or phrase that is no longer in general use [4, p.53]). These are words and combinations of words that were out of use in England in the 18<sup>th</sup> century but have survived in America. Some of the archaisms are: *I guess* instead of 'I suppose so' – '*Я вважаю*' (укр.); *clever* – good – *розумник* (укр.); *fall* – autumn – *осінь* (укр.); *flapjack* – a small flat cake – *млиничик* (укр.); etc. Some archaic forms of verbs are still used in the United States, such as the past participle of "get" – *gotten* instead of "got"; *stricken* instead of "struck". An archaic feature of the American pronunciation is the sound [æ] instead of [ɑ:] in such words as: glass, class, dance, etc.

3. Words made up by Negro slaves and words borrowed from European languages other than English. Every year new immigrants came to America. The non-English settlers introduced

words from Dutch, such as *boss* – працедавець (укр.), *cookie* – печиво (укр.), *Yankee* – американець, який мешкав в одному з північних штатів (укр.); from the French: *prairie* – степ (укр.), *bureau* – бюро, управління, відділ (укр.); many words came in from German and Spanish, the latter words were widely used in the south-west of North America [1, p.15-17].

A decisive step towards the development of a single national language was the formation of the United States as a result of the American Revolution (1775-1783). But so many European languages went into the melting-pot that in the first decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century some American literary men noticed that American English was becoming almost unintelligible to the average Englishman. Moreover new words connected with the administration of the country had been introduced, such as *congress* – конгрес (укр.), *senate* – сенат (укр.), *president* – президент (укр.) and others, which were used in America alone. What worried the philologists was that a great number of simple English words began to have a different meaning in America and were misleading. Thus the word *corn* did not mean grain but maize – кукурудза (укр.); *lumber* meant timber – пиломатеріали (укр.); *rock* any kind of stone – будь-який вид каміння (укр.); *sick* meant to be ill – хворіти (укр.); *baggage* – luggage – багаж (укр.); *dress* – frock – плаття (укр.); *store* – shop – магазин (укр.); *druggist* – chemist – фармацевт (укр.); *buffalo* – bison – американський зубр (укр.); etc. Attempts were made to “purify” the language but life was changing so rapidly that this proved impossible. Instead there appeared a new and vigorous American slang. The words were bold and lawless and they even penetrated into Britain over the Atlantic. In 1828 Noah Webster, a progressive-minded man, published an “American Dictionary of the English Language” into which he introduced all the new words and phrases that reflected life in America [1, p.17].

After the American Civil War of 1861-1865, the abolition of slavery and the unification of the country, literary norms for the English language of the nation began to be established. America’s writers refused to accept British English blindly: Fenimore Cooper, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, O. Henry and Jack London used the vivid language of the people. America now has its norms for punctuation, spelling and syntax; and the language of the United States called the American variant of the English language [1, p.17].

In written English, spelling shows whether the writer is American or British. Americans use *-or* instead of *-our* in words like *color* and *flavor*, and *-er* instead of *-re* in words like *center*. Other variants include *-x-* for *-ct-* (*connexion*) and *-l-* for *-ll-* (*traveler*). British people consider such spelling to be wrong. American spelling which may be used in British English includes using *-z-* instead of *-s-* in words like *realize*, and writing the past tense of some verbs with *-ed* instead of *-t*, e.g. *learned*, *dreamed* [2, p.15].

There are various differences in grammar and idioms. For instance, *gotten*, an old form of the past participle of *get*, is often used in American English in the sense of ‘received’, e.g. ‘I’ve gotten 16 Christmas cards so far.’ Americans say ‘He’s in the hospital’ while British people say ‘He’s in hospital’. The subjunctive is also common in American English, e.g. ‘They insisted that she remain behind’ [2, p.15].

Several features of pronunciation contribute to the American accent. Any ‘r’ is usually pronounced, e.g. [ka:rd], dinner [‘dinər]. A ‘t’ between vowels may be flapped (= pronounced like a ‘d’), so that *latter* sounds like *ladder*. The vowel [æ] rather than [ɑ:] is used in words like *path*, *cot* and *caught* are usually both pronounced [ka:t], and ‘o’ as in *go* ([gou]) is more rounded than in Britain. *Tune* is pronounced [tu:n] not [tju:n]. Stress patterns and syllable length are

often also different, as in *laboratory* ([læbrɛtɔːri], *BrE* [læˈbɔrətɹi]) and *missile* ([ˈmisl], *BrE* [ˈmisail]) [2, p.15].

Americans tend to use very direct language, and polite forms which occur in British English, such as ‘Would you mind if I...’ or ‘I’m afraid that ...’ sound formal and unnatural to them [2, p.15].

General American English (GAE) is the dialect that is closest to being a standard. It is especially common in the Midwest but is used in many parts of the USA. The associated Midwestern accent is spoken across most of the northern states, and by many people elsewhere.

The main dialect groups are the Northern, the Coastal Southern, the Midland, from which GAE is derived, and the Western. The main differences between them are in accent, but some words restricted to particular dialects because the item they refer to is not found elsewhere: *grits*, for example, is eaten mainly in the South and is considered to be a Southern word.

Northern dialects spread west from New York and Boston. New England has its own accent, though many people there have a Midwestern accent. The old, rich families of Boston speak with a distinctive Bostonian accent which is similar to Britain’s RP (Received Pronunciation, or RP for short, is the instantly recognisable accent often described as ‘typically British’, not dialect, since all RP speakers speak Standard English. In other words, they avoid non-standard grammatical constructions and localized vocabulary characteristics of regional dialects. RP is also regionally non-specific, that is it does not contain any clues about a speaker’s geographic background. But it does reveal a great deal about their social and/or educational background [6]). Received Pronunciation is used by middle class and upper class people from all over the UK, especially in the south of England, and it is the form of pronunciation shown in British dictionaries, RP was traditionally the accent that was most respected, and it was also the accent used by most people on radio and television, especially by people who read the news or weather forecast and people who introduced programmes. For this reason it is sometimes called ‘BBC English’. [4, p.1177]).

Due to functioning of RP British pronunciation is described as “clipped” if it is spoken with a tight mouth, or “plummy” if it sounds as though the speaker had a plum in his or her mouth. The vowel sounds of RP are distinctive, for example the [æ] in *sat*, sounds more like [e] in *set*, the short [ɔ] in *cost* sounds like the long [ɔ:] in *for*, and *for*; and *really* and *rarely* sound the same. As a result of RP British pronunciation has developed long, back [ɑ:] in closed position as it sounds in *answer*, *ask*, *dance*, *can’t etc* [3, c.29].

Midland dialects developed after settlers moved west from Philadelphia. Both Midland and Western dialect contain features from the Northern and Southern groups. There are increasing differences within the Western group, as south-western dialects have been influenced by Mexican Spanish.

The Southern dialects are most distinctive. They contain old words no longer used in other American dialects, e.g. *kinfolk* for ‘relatives’ and *hand* for ‘farmworker’. French, Spanish and Native-American language also contributed to Southern dialects. Since black slaves were taken mainly to the South and most African Americans still live there, Black English and Southern dialects have much in common. The accent is a southern drawl which even foreigners recognize. An ‘r’ at the end of a word is often omitted, so that *door* is pronounced [doo], and diphthongs are replaced with simple vowels, so that *hide* is pronounced [ha:d]. Some people use *y’all* as a plural form of ‘you’. This is more common in speech than in writing.

Southern dialects and accents are often thought by other Americans to be inferior. Black English and Cajun English (a member of the people in the US state of Louisiana who are descended from French Canadians called Acadians. They moved to Louisiana after British forced them in 1755 to leave Acadia (Nova Scotia) in Canada. They speak a form of French, and are known for their lively music and hot, spicy food [2, p.84].) may also be less acceptable. Both varieties are restricted to particular ethnic or social groups, and the attitude probably reflects more general feelings about those groups [2, p.15].

In the multilingual contact situations of the 16<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> centuries there was a *mélange* of languages; therefore it is quite problematic now to distill words of pure Spanish, Indian or French origin. For a long time English helped to unite immigrants who had come from many countries. Now, Hispanic immigrants, especially in south-western states, want to continue to use their own language, and many Americans are afraid that this will divide the country. The Hispanic population is growing and will reach 80 million by 2050.

This situation led to the founding of the ‘English Only Movement’, which wants to make English the official language of the US. It is mainly supported by two organizations, English First and US English. An English Language Amendment to the American Constitution was introduced in Congress in 1981, but its members have never voted on it. However, 21 states have passed their own official English Only laws [2, p.177]. Supporters believe that this will help keep states and people together, and that money spent on printing forms, etc. in both English and Spanish would be better spent on teaching the immigrants English. Others think that an official language is unnecessary. They argue that children of immigrants, and *their* children, will want to speak English anyway, and that a common language does not always lead to social harmony [2, p.15].

## LITERATURE

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### **АНГЛІЙСЬКА МОВА В АМЕРИЦІ**

*Стаття висвітлює історію становлення і специфіку сьогоденного функціонування американського варіанта англійської мови у його зіставленні з британським.*

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### **АНГЛИЙСКИЙ ЯЗЫК В АМЕРИКЕ**

*Статья освещает историю становления и специфику сегодняшнего функционирования американского варианта английского языка в его сопоставлении с британским вариантом.*