

The future of the english language

Daniela POPESCU

PhD university lecturer, Constantin Brâncuși University in Târgu Jiu

Abstract: Linguists and language teachers know that change is part of any living language. Each generation of speakers of a language brings its own new words (neologisms) and language styles. Interaction with people from other areas, whether or not they speak the same first language, also means language change. A new ethnic restaurant in a town brings new food vocabulary. Developments in technology, new inventions, as well as new industrial processes, they all add vocabulary.

Key words: change, English, influence, world language

The English language does not have the equivalent of ‘l’Académie Française’, which serves as the authority for the French language (and which, so far, has not proved to be fully successful in forcing French usage to be as ‘l’Académie’ thinks is proper). The BBC is no longer a bastion of British Received Pronunciation, as its newscasters display a wide range of dialects and accents. American English has always been based on how people speak, not how they should speak. Reference to an English dictionary means referring to what is commonly in use by the large body of English speakers. What this means is that English has few official, overt constraints on change.

The influence of American English on British English is a fairly difficult matter and one cannot operate with a certain dichotomy due to a multitude of factors: on the one hand, British English is the most conservative variety of English and native speakers of it are reluctant to other English varieties; on the other hand, the technological revolution contributes to the tendency of simplifying English, as seen in American English, but this new English differs both from American English and British English and is considered to be an international, World English. Only at this level one may state that there is a certain influence of American English on British English, but this influence is a global one, as the interfaces of the programming systems are user-friendly and the purpose of this World English is to facilitate communication between individuals of different nationalities, ages, sexes, and levels of education.

The uncertain equilibrium between globalisation and multiculturalism is another factor that makes it difficult to state a certain influence, since the human race acknowledges that the post-capitalist tendency to uniformize all the levels of existence needs to be counterbalanced with the conscience of each individual's identity. From this point of view, language may be the next factor to enter the battlefield between globalisation and multiculturalism, of course, on the latter's part. Until now, history, sports, food, clothes, and habits are considered to be ways to maintain a people's uniqueness, but language may be the next strongest force in the help of preserving a nation's individuality.

Another important factor in favour of the American English influence on British English is the mass society ideology specific to consumerism and post-capitalism: in an era of kitsch industry, the ‘tyranny of the masses’ as Tocqueville (Democracy in America (1835/40) named consumerism is revealed also in language use and, as kitsch is universal, mass-products and global advertising are a sure way for the uniformization of the language, especially the English language, in favour of the American English, as the United States detain leadership on post-capitalist products, from leisure and entertainment to clothes, and from Coca-Cola to Windows.

At the opposite pole, the socio-cultural hierarchy also contributes to the maintenance of strong borders between the two varieties of English, as educated people, and, why not, educators (as ‘teachers’) feel keen on one or another of the two varieties and try to distinguish themselves through their spoken English. Once someone has started to learn a variety of English, that person shall try to preserve the particularities of it in order to be consequent and to make a good impression.

This is an interesting time for English, linguistically speaking. Exposure on the Internet and via mass media to a range of varieties of English, the allure of the culture of cyberspace, and greater awareness

of dominance issues all contribute to a change in what 'English' is. With the growth of information flowing towards multiple directions, perhaps even Americans could become better at understanding forms of English different from their own.

America has had a continuous existence separately from Britain for over 350 years. In that time, with all the changes that have taken place in the way societies are organized and the way they live, the kind of work they do, the way they are governed, there is no wonder that some differences in language have come about between the two countries. Surprisingly enough, these differences are quite slight.

Despite the three thousand miles' distance between America and Britain, they have never really lost sight of a common standard of English. This must have been enormously helped by several factors. First, the fact that there was a political link between the two countries. Second, the common literary tradition, the common reading material, actually caused the language on both sides of the Atlantic to make whatever changes it was making in parallel. When America was settled, all speakers of English said [re:zn] for 'reason' and [de:l] for 'deal' and this pronunciation was still common in both countries in the early 18th century. Yet today both British and American speakers have the [i:] pronunciation: [ri:zn] and [di:l].

Last, the earliest lexicographers, the early dictionary editors in the US came from New England. Pronunciations in the earliest editions of Webster's dictionary reflect a New England pronunciation and Americans have always respected the authority of the dictionary.

What is the present situation of the English language? It seems to be at a transitional point between two worlds. The old world is one where a tiny number of rules, selected and defined by prescriptive grammarians, totally conditioned people's sense of acceptable 'standard' usage, so that all other usages – informal speech, regional dialect – were considered to be inferior or corrupt, and excluded from serious consideration.

But when a major national institution like the BBC gives diversity its blessing, something very significant has happened. A totally new world comes into play, one where informal and nonstandard usage is achieving a new presence and respectability within society, reminiscent of that found in Middle English when dialect variation in literature was widespread and uncontentious.

However, it is to be noticed that apart from a few minor local variations, written English is virtually the same around the world. At the spoken level only there are varieties that are mutually unintelligible.

The question which arises at this point of the analysis is whether American English is now the dominant version of English. It depends on what size of the problem is on focus. If the first-language speakers of English (the mother-tongue speakers) are to be taken into consideration, it has to be said that there are around 400 million, and 230 million live in the United States. So, more than half the native speakers do speak American English (Crystal's interview online at www.spotlight-online).

On the other hand, 1,5 billion people speak English throughout the world, including those who speak it as a second language in countries like Ghana, Nigeria and Singapore, and those who speak it as a foreign language in 120-odd countries, including Austria, Germany and Switzerland (Crystal's interview online at www.spotlight-online). So for every native speaker, there are three non-native speakers who speak English with a whole variety of accents and dialects. American English is therefore 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 would be the situation of the Internet. It used to be 100 percent English, but nowadays it is down to something like 75 percent and falling fast. Probably in a couple of years' time, it will be down to about 50 percent. It remains to be seen.

The reason why there will not be a taking over by American English has to do with why people use language. They might sometimes think that the only purpose of language is to communicate information, to express ideas in an intelligible way. But there is another reason for language: to express people's social and personal identity. Dialects and accents have grown up over time for that precise reason. If people want to show that they belong to a particular social group, then all they have to do is talk in the same way, and differently from everyone else.

The language is in a constant state of multidimensional motion. There is no predictable direction for the changes that are taking place. They are just changes which cannot and should not be classified into good or bad. However, they might go one way or another, depending on the factors that come into play.

The books of new words, published from time to time, show the hazardous future of neologisms very well. Take that one edited by John Ayto in 1989, the ‘Longman Register of New Words’. It contained about 1200 new words or meanings which had been used in various United Kingdom spoken or written sources between 1986 and 1988 – words like chatline, cashless and chocoholic. How many of them have become a permanent part of English? It is too soon to say, though already several seem very dated: do people still say cyberphobic? Do they still chicken-dance? Did cluster suicide ever catch on?

In an article written for the ‘International Journal of Lexicography’ in 1993, ‘Desuetude among English words’, John Algeo studied 3,565 words which had been recorded as newly entering the language between 1944 and 1976. He found that as many as 58 percent of them were not recorded in dictionaries a generation later, and must thus be presumed to have fallen out of use. As he says: ‘Successful coinages are the exception; unsuccessful ones the rule, because the human impulse to creative playfulness produces more words than a society can sustain.’ (In Boenig & Davis, Manuscript, narrative, lexicon: essays on literary and cultural transmission, 2000, p. 222)

Yes, American English will continue to influence British, Australian, and all other varieties of English – at least, as long as the USA rules the economic and military waves. And it is expected to see a steady trickle of American words, idioms, pronunciations and spellings into these varieties. But it will remain a trickle, because while the British want to be able to talk intelligibly with Americans, they do not actually want to be Americans. In the contest between identity and intelligibility, identity always wins.

What really happens today is that there can be noticeable change in the vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar of the English language even in the course of a single generation. American words and idioms pass relatively unnoticed into the British vocabulary because the phonetic structure is quite familiar. One easily sees that Japanese hara-kiri is an alien intruder in the language because of its unusual formation, whereas on the face of it there could be no reason to suppose that such American importations as cagey or room-mate have not been part of the British vocabulary for centuries, so they easily slip into everyday use and are not felt to be strangers.

According to Quirk the 20th century brought about a tendency towards neutralizing the differences between the two varieties of the English language, American English and British English.

What the whole world witnesses today is an increasing unification of English towards the status of a world language. This is bound to upset the confident predictions that were made early in the 19th century of the almost inevitable split up of English.

Today it is not a matter of British English versus American English; it is one of British English and American English. The English-speaking peoples speak in many voices and in many places. Their affairs certainly have long since ceased to be limited to Britain and America; they are continuing to look to Britain and America not to Britain or America for a language which may help them conduct their affairs in the world. The sphere of English now is the world.

This is because English has some kind of special administrative status in over seventy countries. Then, in a different way, English achieves a special role when it is made a priority in a country’s foreign-language teaching policy; it has no official status, but it is nonetheless the foreign language which children are most likely to encounter when they arrive in school, and the one most available to adults in further education.

Communication in the worlds of business and education is expected to be conducted in English. The whole world witnesses an increasing reliance on the concept of a ‘working language’, as an alternative to expensive and often impracticable multi-way translation facilities, with English more likely to be the mutually accessible language than any other.

The last years of the 20th century saw an unprecedented interest in the topic of global English, articulated at both popular and academic levels, and a discernible step forward in the generality with which the phenomenon was discussed. To the media of the time, the global spread of English was an established and straightforward fact. ‘English Rules’ (‘The Globe and Mail’, Toronto, 12 July 1997) was just one of

many newspaper headlines presenting to the world an uncomplicated scenario that took for granted the universality of the language spread, the speed with which it had happened, and the likelihood of its continuation.

The truth is that nobody can control a language like English, which is spoken by so many people in so many places. In fifty or eighty years' time, the English language could contain within itself large areas of contact-influenced vocabulary, borrowed not necessarily from American English, but from such languages as Malay or Chinese.

The history of the English language has proved that there is a huge amount of variation in modern Standard English. But what might happen to it as it becomes global? What is sure is that it will not stay uniform. Predictions are towards a diglossic language – one with two quite different standards, one for everyday communication, and one for formal, especially written, communication.

As all linguists agree, languages in general are altered to accommodate the expressive needs of their speakers, who, in their turn, adapt to changes in their social environment. In this sense, the term linguistic corruption is void of meaning.

One could argue that the survival of a language is determined by the success or failure of the particular discourse advocating it in an overarching power struggle. This is true, but in this case the debate is no longer about language, but about whether particular social changes are desirable and whether people wish to do something to prevent them or simply accept them.

The issue here is the impact that globalization has or could have on language diversity, as concerns might be raised about language extinction. However, where does protecting a means of cultural expression turn into an effort to halt the inevitable on grounds of nostalgia or linguistic puritanism? In this case, the concern is closer to the latter.

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.

Our belief, based on the statistics we have accomplished, is that in the beginning this kind of influence was much greater than common people could realize, but then, with the passing of time, those words and phrases are filtered and everything that is useless or 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.

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