The Sociolinguistics of Present-day British and American English

WS 2014/15, Campus Essen
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**Standard**

A variety of a language which, due to historical circumstance, e.g. by being the language of the capital or that used in literature and/or religion, has become the lead variety in a country. As a result of this, the standard may be expanded due to the increase in function which it experiences. Countries often have a term for their standard. In England there are various terms such as *The Queen’s English*, *Oxford English*, *BBC English*, *Received Pronunciation*. Only the last of these finds favour with linguists.

**Standard English**

A reference to a supranational form of written English which is normally used in printing, in various documents of an official nature and which is taught to foreigners. Spoken standard English is not a single form of the language but is represented by the supraregional varieties in different anglophone countries and regions. The notion of standard English has been viewed critically by a number of linguists who see in it a disguised form of prescriptivism and discrimination. Furthermore, standard English has been viewed as an anglocentric development which led inevitably to Received Pronunciation.
Standardisation

A process during which a variety becomes the standard in a country. This generally lasts some centuries and is furthered by external developments such as the rise in prestige of a capital city and the speech of the leading class there; this is the process of ‘selection’. Varieties typically become independent of their regional roots on standardisation as has happened with RECEIVED PRONUNCIATION and are often fixed in orthography and grammar, this is the process of ‘codification’. The steps involved in standardisation were explicitly formulated by Einar Haugen in the early 1960s and can be given in tabular form as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Function</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Society</td>
<td>Selection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Codification</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Criteria for standard languages after Einar Haugen
American English
American English

A collective term for varieties of English spoken in the United States, perhaps excluding vernacular forms in Hawai‘i. It encompasses native speaker varieties and includes ethnic varieties such as AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH and first language CHICANO ENGLISH. Historically, American English has its roots in the English of early seventeenth-century settlers on the eastern coast. First-language English emigrants who arrived in the following century, notably the Ulster Scots are also taken to have had a formative influence on American English and their speech has a direct continuation in Appalachian English. Still later emigration groups, e.g. southern Irish of the nineteenth century are not assumed to have influenced mainstream American English apart from donating a few words. The larger numbers of other European nationalities which emigrated to the United States throughout its history, e.g. Germans, Scandinavians, Dutch, French, Poles and Italians along with Jews from various countries, did not play a decisive role in the emerging profile of American English.
The European history of North America begins with the discovery of Central America by Christopher Columbus in 1492 when he landed on the Bahamas. Various parts of the coast of North America were discovered at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Between 1584 and 1586 Sir Walter Raleigh began his attempts to colonise North Carolina (then part of ‘Virginia’ named after Queen Elizabeth I), including the first unsuccessful settlement on ROANOKE ISLAND. British colonisation continued in the following years with the firm establishment of British rule at the beginning of the seventeenth century (Jamestown, Virginia 1607; Plymouth, New England, 1620; The Massachusetts Bay Colony (at the site of later Boston, 1630). Some other European countries were also directly involved in the conquest of America: the French in Canada but also the Dutch in New York (the city, founded in 1625, was called New Amsterdam until 1664).
Among the earliest states were those of the historical area of New England (not the name of a present-day state): Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Rhode Island (Maine was later formed from northern Massachusetts and Vermont from an area between east New York state and west New Hampshire). New York state occupied an inland area immediately west of New England. Immediately south of New England were the four middle states of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Maryland and Delaware. The remaining states belonged to the South: Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia. This group formed the original THIRTEEN COLONIES.

The eighteenth century saw the emigration of approximately a quarter of a million Ulster Scots from the north of Ireland to the colonies. These often settled in frontier regions, such as western Pennsylvania and further south in the inland mountainous regions of the colonies, founding varieties later recognisable as APPALACHIAN ENGLISH.
In 1776 the Thirteen Colonies declared independence in a military struggle against England. British rule ended after a disorganised and uncoordinated campaign against the rebellious Americans in 1777 which led to the Treaty of Paris (1783) conceding American sovereignty over the entire territory from the Great Lakes in the north down to Florida in the south. After independence the United States consolidated territories inland from the Atlantic coast and in 1803 purchased over two million sq km in central North America from the French for 15m dollars, see the LOUISIANA PURCHASE.

The colonisation of North America proceeded from east to west (for both Canada and the United States). The western states were settled in the nineteenth century, first by pioneers then by farmers and other settlers. The Gold Rush of 1848 led to the rise of California as a unit within the United States (just as the 1858 gold rush in British Columbia put it on the map that year, later joining the Canadian confederation in 1871). The last of the states to be founded were those in the region immediately east of the Rocky Mountains such as Wyoming (1890) and Utah (1896) and the more southerly states such as Arizona (1912) and Oklahoma (1907). Further territorial extensions were achieved by the annexation of land from Mexico (with the Peace of Guadalupe in 1848), with the purchase of Alaska from Russia in 1867 and with an American presence on Hawai‘i from 1878 onwards.
The development of the states in the nineteenth century suffered a setback with the Civil War of 1861-65, ostensibly caused by the refusal of the southern states to abolish slavery, which they claimed was necessary for their plantation economy, and their attendant temporary secession from the Union.

Today the United States consists of a federation of 48 contiguous states along with Alaska and Hawai‘i (to give 50). It has an area of 9.3 million sq km and a population of over 300m. The ethnic composition is approximately 87% white (including about 10% Hispanics in increasing numbers), and 11% African Americans. The capital is Washington, District of Columbia (on the border of Maryland and Virginia). English is de facto the official language of the USA but it does not have this status in the federal constitution.

Various immigrant groups have differentially retained their original languages, e.g. Italians and Jews (Yiddish). Immigrants vary greatly in the degree of language maintenance they exhibit, e.g. small groups like the Estonians show a high degree while the Ukrainians and the Irish have little or none. Of more recent origin are the many immigrants from Asian countries, for instance the Chinese, Japanese and Korean populations, especially on the west coast. The largest ethnic group in the present-day United States are the Latinos (Hispanics), chiefly in the south-west, now in excess of 35m.
General American (English)

A term for a non-regional accent of English in the UNITED STATES and regarded as a quasi-standard of pronunciation in that country. The basis for this was traditionally the speech of the INLAND NORTH (roughly the band in the north of the United States from the north-west of New York state across to east Wisconsin, including the southern Lower Peninsula of Michigan). In recent decades, however, the speech of this region has become marked by the NORTHERN CITIES SHIFT. General American has been used as a baseline for many investigations and descriptions of American English, e.g. by Kenyon and Knott (1944 [5.1]), Chomsky and Halle (1968 [5.1]), but has been criticised as having no inherent claim to preference over other varieties in the United States.
The traditional dialect regions of the United States are the following. 1) The North-East with Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Vermont and Maine (the New England area, see above); 2) The Inland North consisting of up-state New York, northern Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, eastern Wisconsin and most of Michigan, this area enclosing the migration routes into the region of the Great Lakes in the nineteenth century, especially after the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825; 3) The North Midland, stretching from Pennsylvania across to Southern Illinois; 4) The South Midland, a band lying south of this, approximately from Maryland across to eastern Oklahoma; 5) The South encompassing all the states from Virginia through North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia to Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana across to eastern Texas. A separate MIDLAND region is usually assumed (Montgomery 2004; it is posited in the ATLAS OF NORTH AMERICAN ENGLISH, see Chapter 20) and consists of an intersection of Lower North and Upper South in the classification offered by Carver (1987) but not generally accepted now. The five divisions just given encompass the eastern half of the present-day United States. The western half, all the states west of a line from Texas to North Dakota do not show comparable dialect differentiation, probably because the entire west was settled at a much later stage. Nonetheless, the following areas can be recognised: 1) Upper Midwest (Minnesota, northern Iowa and western Wisconsin); 2) South-West (New Mexico, Arizona, southern California, Nevada, Utah and Colorado); 3) West, the region from the Midwest, extending through the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific coast.
United States inhabitants are highly mobile and internal migration has been responsible for the spread of features, e.g. the Southern rural form *fixin’ to* as in *She’s fixin’ to go to church now* has recently spread from rural to urban areas in Oklahoma in the face of migration into the state (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 2006: 30-31 [5.1]). The following remarks refer to broadly supraregional speech in the United States, what is often termed ‘General American (English)’. For speakers across the United States this is a non-regional accent though it may have evolved from Midwest accents or at least is closest to the accents of this area. Vernaculars of the Inland North are clearly distinguished from General American by their participation in the NORTHERN CITIES SHIFT. There are different registers of supraregional speech in the USA forming a continuum from most to least colloquial. Certain features are present in colloquial registers, e.g. QUOTATIVE *LIKE*, which do not occur in higher registers.
Pronunciation 1) Presence of non-prevocalic /r/ (absent in southern vernaculars and recessively in the north-east). 2) Tensing of /&(l/ IN PRE-NASAL POSITION, frequently with nasalisation of the vowel. 3) Intervocalic /t/ commonly realised as a tap [f]. 4) Frequent unrounding of /ə/ to [α, a] making items of the LOT lexical set sound very different from English English. 5) No retraction of low vowels before voiceless fricatives or nasals, e.g. grass, dance both with [æː] or [ɛː / ɛə] in the latter word by pre-nasal tensing. 6) Absence of T-glottalisation and H-dropping. 7) Word stress patterns can be different from English English, e.g. a'dult : 'adult, 'direct : di'rect, 'address : ad'dress : 'inquiry : in'quiry.
Grammar 1) Increased use of unmarked adverbs. He’s awful tall. That’s real funny. I near crashed the truck. 2) Use of do for questions and negative sentences is more common than in England (equivalents given in brackets). Did he have a chance to do it? (Had he a chance to do it?). Do you have you enough money? No, I don’t (No, I haven’t). He doesn’t have a driving licence, sure he doesn’t? (hasn’t he?). 3) A large number of phrasal verbs with different meanings from English English: hold off (= restrain); figure out (= understand); check out (= leave); get through (= finish); count in (= include); stop by (= visit briefly). 4) Differences among prepositions: aside from (= besides); in back of (= behind); for (= after), e.g. The school was named for him. on (= in), e.g. I live on George Street. in (= into), e.g. He ran in the kitchen. than (= from), e.g. She is different than her sister. through (= from ... to) Monday through Friday. 5) Lack of prepositions with expressions of time and the verb write: I met him (on) Tuesday. I wrote (to) her last week. 7) Pronominal usage allowing ‘he’ after ‘one’: One never does what he should. One always deceives himself.
Vocabulary Some American vocabulary reflects older English usage, e.g. mail for post (compare Royal Mail in England with the older form), fall for autumn (a French loan), though this probably is the case in only a minority of forms. In the following the first word corresponds to American, the second to British usage, but note that the American words are often found in English English as well: apartment / flat; trash can / dustbin; attorney / solicitor, barrister; baby buggy / pram; bartender / barman; bug / insect; bus / coach; cab / taxi; candy / sweets; check / bill; chips / (potato) crisps; preacher / clergyman; clerk / shop assistant; coed / female student; store / shop; corporation / company; diaper / nappy; dishpan / washing-up basin; eraser / rubber; corn / maize; drugstore / chemist’s; dumb / silly; elevator / lift; fall / autumn; first floor / ground floor; gas station / petrol station; first name / Christian name; flash-light / torch; French fries / chips; freshman / first year student; garbage / rubbish; grade / gradient; jelly / jam; liquor / spirits; highway patrolmen / mobile police; high school / secondary school; hood / bonnet; kerosene / paraffin; lumber / timber; mail / post; movie / film, picture; movies / cinema, pictures; muffler / silencer; doctor’s office / surgery; pacifier / dummy; parking lot / car park; penitentiary / prison; period / full stop; pitcher / jug; realtor / estate agent; roadster / two seater; roomer / lodger; section / district; sedan / saloon; quarter / term; sidewalk / pavement; sophomore / second year student; slingshot / catapult; highway / motorway; streetcar / tram; subway / underground; suspenders / braces; taffy / toffee; truck / lorry; trunk / boot; turtleneck / poloneck; undershirt / vest; vacation / holidays; weather bureau / met office; school / college; ride / drive; rise / raise; cookie / biscuit; faucet / tap.
Word formation This is an innovative sphere of American English, though it is not always possible to state whether a new form derives solely from American usage, cf. the use of derivational suffixes: -ster: gangster, oldster; -ician: beautician, cosmetician; -ee: escapee, returnee; -ette: roomette; drum-majorette; -ite: socialite, sub-urbanite; -ize; to winterize, to itemize, to fictionalize. Conversion as a word formational process is widespread as in English English. a bug - to bug; resource - to resource; commercial (adj.) commercial (noun); hike (verb) - hike (noun). There are also frequent instances of back-formation, e.g. jelly > to jell; enthusiasm > to enthuse; bachelor > to bach. In the sphere of computing American English is virtually the only source of new English terms, e.g. flatscreen, central processing unit, hard disk, USB flash drive, solid-state drive, compact disc, graphics card, mainboard, broadband, cloud computing.
American English, influence on English in England

Throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century there has been a pervasive infiltration of American words into English in England, the more general of which co-exist with their British counterparts. Some of these words are part of passive knowledge among speakers of English in England, e.g. *gas* ‘petrol’, while others are indeed used, e.g. *movie* ‘film’. The former group often consists of words which have a different meaning or a different semantic range in English in England, this blocking the adoption of the American meaning, e.g. *trailer* ‘caravan’ only means (with reference to vehicles) ‘articulated attachment to a car for transporting goods, material, etc.’ in English English.
The following examples consist of the American word followed by the traditional British word: movie / film; mental / insane; can / tin; garbage / rubbish; gas / petrol; mad / angry; filling station / garage; elevator / lift; reel / spool; trailer / caravan; I guess / I think; truck / lorry; lumber / timber; French fries / chips. In some cases the American term has successfully ousted the British one as in the case of radio for wireless. Certain prepositional verbs have become part of English English without users realising their origin: to put sth. over; to get sth. across; to stand up to; to go back on. A few imports from American English have occurred without their being an exact English equivalent already, e.g. okay (nineteenth century, of uncertain origin), phoney (possibly of Irish origin in the United States).
American English, spelling

The spelling of American English has been a concern since the late eighteenth century when Noah Webster, the father of American lexicography, brought out his *Dissertations on the English Language* (1789) in which he suggested separating American from British English. Certain spelling changes proposed by Webster are older forms, such as -er for -re (cf. *theater*) or -or for -our (cf. *honour*) and not all of Webster’s suggestions became part of American English spelling, e.g. his proposal that one write *oo* for *ou* in words like *soup* and *group*. In general, American English has single instances of sonorants in past forms of verbs, e.g. *traveled, labeled, occurred*, as well as single letters in many spellings of neo-classical formations in English, e.g. *program* (British *programme*), though *diagram* is the spelling in both British and American English. Shorter forms of words are also preferred, e.g. *dialog* for *dialogue* and spellings in -nse are found for -nce in British English, e.g. *defense, offense, license*. *F* can replace *ph*, e.g. *sulfur* versus *sulphur*, while *f* or *w* can correspond to *gh*, e.g. *draft* versus *draught* and *plow* versus *plough*, and *in-* equates to *en-* in *inquiry* (British *enquiry/inquiry*) and *inclosure* (British *enclosure*).
British English
**British English**

A commonly found term for English in England and often used indiscriminately for English spoken throughout the island of Britain. The difficulty is that there is no common variety of English across England, Wales and Scotland, especially because the latter shows varieties, along the continuum of Scottish Standard English to Scots, which are very different from forms to the south in England. The term ‘British English’ is often used in contrast to American English. In this sense the reference is to non-vernacular, relatively ‘standard’ varieties in southern England, especially in their written form. See ENGLISH ENGLISH, IRISH ENGLISH, SCOTTISH ENGLISH, SCOTS, WELSH ENGLISH.

**British Isles**

A geographical term used to refer to the two main islands of Britain and Ireland along with smaller ones such as the Isle of Man, the Orkney and Shetland Islands, etc.
London

The largest city and capital of the United Kingdom situated in the South-East of England on the Thames before its estuary into the North Sea. It consists of two ceremonial counties (a type with a Lord Lieutenant, a representative of the monarch): 1) the City of London (just over a square mile) and 2) since 1965, Greater London with 32 boroughs (total area: 1,572 sq km). London has a population of well over 8m. A settlement at the site of London is recorded for Roman Britain (first four centuries CE). It gained substantially in status with the Norman invasion of 1066 after which it became the capital of the country (replacing Winchester). London has since been the seat of the court, government and most major public bodies, including legal institutions, but not of the Church of England whose centre is Canterbury in Kent. London has always been the printing centre of England, dominating the book and newspaper market.
The speech of London and the HOME COUNTIES came to be seen as the lead variety from the sixteenth century onwards. However, there is a local dialect spoken in London, COCKNEY, which did not feed into the standard which was codified in the eighteenth century. Instead it was middle- and upper-class usage which became increasingly less regionally bound and favoured in elite schools and in public usage in general. This nineteenth century pronunciation standard has its continuation in RECEIVED PRONUNCIATION and in a much diluted form in ESTUARY ENGLISH.

London is an ethnically and racially mixed city which has had much immigration from regions of England throughout its history and after World War II from former colonies (e.g. Jamaica, India, Pakistan) and most recently from new East European members of the European Union. It would thus be difficult to speak of ‘London English’ as a single coherent variety. Rather the capital is marked by several (first-language) varieties on a cline from Cockney to Received Pronunciation often determined by what part of the city people live in. Many people of diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds are speakers of second-language varieties of English in London.
Received Pronunciation

The socially prestigious accent of English in Britain. Its roots lie in the speech of London in the early modern period but it became a sociolect, and hence non-regional, in the course of the nineteenth century and was nurtured and furthered by private schools, traditional universities, the higher military and clergy and came to be used generally in public life in England. It is spoken by only a small percentage of the British population but has high status and is used as a reference accent, in the descriptions of English pronunciation, e.g. by Daniel Jones and A. C. Gimson, and is often the variety of English English taught to foreigners. In Britain the standard is called Received Pronunciation (RP). The term was coined by Daniel Jones at the beginning of the twentieth century and refers to the pronunciation of English which is accepted – that is, ‘received’ – in English society. BBC English, Oxford English, Queen’s English are alternative terms which are not favoured by linguists as they are imprecise or incorrect.
Cockney

The urban dialect of LONDON, covering a range of vernacular varieties. The name derives from ‘cocks’ egg’, i.e. something impossible, a self-debunking term used by Londoners for their own speech. Cockney developed separately from the precursor varieties of RP which had their origin in the late medieval English of the capital. In the early modern period these varieties became a closely-knit set of prestigious sociolects used in official quarters and in the educational system. Cockney continued many changes which have their roots in late Middle English, for instance it has carried the GREAT VOWEL SHIFT further than RP. Cockney is also known for RHYMING SLANG. See ESTUARY ENGLISH, RECEIVED PRONUNCIATION.

Phonology 1) H-dropping, e.g. hand [ænd], 2) TH-fronting, e.g. think [fɪŋk], 3) MOUTH-monophthongisation, e.g. town [tɛ:n], 4) intervocalic T-glottalling, e.g. pity ['pɪʔi:], and final T-glottalling, e.g. cut [kʌʔ] 5) vocalisation of preconsonantal, final /l/, e.g. spilt [spiʔt], 5) variable HAPPY-tensing, e.g. pretty ['prɪʔi:], 7) yod coalescence in stressed syllables, e.g. tune [tʃu:n], 8) diphthong shifts in FACE, PRICE, GOAT, e.g. [fæis] (RP: [feis]), [prɔis] (RP: [prais]), [ɡəʊt] (RP: [ɡəʊt]).
**Estuary English**

A term, invented by the teacher David Rosewarne and first used in 1984 in a newspaper article, which has since been taken up by academics and the general public (Coggle 1993: 24-35 [2.3]). It is a label for varieties of English intermediate between RECEIVED PRONUNCIATION and COCKNEY. The term is intended to highlight the fact that many NON-VERNACULAR inhabitants of London and the Home Counties move on a cline between the two varieties just mentioned, especially as RP is not necessarily viewed positively in all circles in present-day Britain. The estuary referred to is that of the River Thames and the popularity of the term has certainly to do with the alliteration of the two words of which it consists. The features generally associated with Estuary English can be shown in two tables, one demonstrating its difference to Cockney and one illustrating its difference to RP.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estuary English / RP</th>
<th>Cockney</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>no H-dropping</td>
<td>H-dropping, e.g. hand [ænd]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no TH-fronting</td>
<td>TH-fronting, e.g. think [fiŋk]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no MOUTH- monophthong</td>
<td>MOUTH-monophthong, e.g. town [tœn]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no intervocalic T-glottalling</td>
<td>intervocalic T-glottalling, e.g. pity [prɪˈi]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estuary English / Cockney</th>
<th>Received Pronunciation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>variable HAPPY-tensing, e.g. pretty [prəti]</td>
<td>no HAPPY-tensing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vocalisation of preconsonantal, final /l/, e.g. help [heʊp]</td>
<td>no vocalisation of preconsonantal, final /l/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>final T-glottalling, e.g. cut [kʌt]</td>
<td>no final T-glottalling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yod coalescence in stressed syllables, e.g. tune [tʃu:n]</td>
<td>no yod coalescence in stressed syllables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some diphthong shift in FACE, PRICE, GOAT, e.g. [faɪs], [praɪs], [ɡoʊt]</td>
<td>no such diphthong shift</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>