

STUDY OF AMERICAN AND BRITISH ENGLISH

WALKE ISHWAR BHAYYA

RESEARCH SCHOLAR, DEPT. OF EDUCATION
CMJ UNIVERSITY, SHILLONG, MEGHALAYA

INTRODUCTION

American English, also known as **United States English** or **U.S. English**, is a set of dialects of the English language used mostly in the United States. Approximately two thirds of native speakers of English live in the United States.

English is the most common language in the United States. Though the U.S. federal government has no official language, English is considered the de facto language of the United States due to its widespread use. English has been given official status by 30 of the 50 state governments.

The use of English in the United States was inherited from British colonization. The first wave of English-speaking settlers arrived in North America in the 17th century. During that time, there were also speakers in North America of Spanish, French, Dutch, German, Norwegian, Swedish, Scots, Welsh, Irish, Scottish Gaelic, Finnish, Russian (Alaska) and numerous Native American languages.

PHONOLOGY

In many ways, compared to English, North American English is conservative in its phonology. Some distinctive accents can be found on the East Coast (for example, in Eastern New England and New York City), partly because these areas were in contact with England, and imitated prestigious varieties of English at a time when those varieties were undergoing changes. In addition, many speech communities on the East Coast have existed in their present locations longer than others. The interior of the United States, however, was settled by people from all regions of the existing United States and, therefore, developed a far more generic linguistic pattern.

Most North American speech is rhotic, as English was in most places in the 17th century. Rhoticity was further supported by Hiberno-English and Scottish English as well as the fact most regions of England at this time also had rhotic accents. In most varieties of North American English, the sound corresponding to the letter r is a retroflex [ɹ] or alveolar approximant [ɹ] rather than a trill or a tap. The loss of syllable-final r in North America is confined mostly to the accents of eastern New England, New York City and surrounding areas, South Philadelphia, and the coastal portions of the South. In rural tidewater Virginia

and eastern New England, 'r' is non-rhotic in accented (such as "bird", "work", "first", "birthday") as well as unaccented syllables, although this is declining among the younger generation of speakers. Dropping of syllable-final r sometimes happens in natively rhotic dialects if r is located in unaccented syllables or words and the next syllable or word begins in a consonant. In England, the lost r was often changed into [ə] (schwa), giving rise to a new class of falling diphthongs. Furthermore, the er sound of **fur** or **butter**, is realized in AmE as a monophthongal r-colored vowel (stressed [ɜː] or unstressed [ɚ] as represented in the IPA). This does not happen in the non-rhotic varieties of North American speech.

Some other British English changes in which most North American dialects do not participate:

- The shift of /æ/ to /ɑ/ (the so-called "broad A") before /f/, /s/, /θ/, /ð/, /z/, /v/ alone or preceded by a homorganic nasal. This is the difference between the British Received Pronunciation and American pronunciation of **bath** and **dance**. In the United States, only eastern New England speakers took up this modification, although even there it is becoming increasingly rare.
- The realization of intervocalic /t/ as a glottal stop [ʔ] (as in [bʔəl] for **bottle**). This change is not universal for British English and is not considered a feature of Received Pronunciation. This is not a property of most North American dialects. Newfoundland English is a notable exception.

On the other hand, North American English has undergone some sound changes not found in Britain, especially not in its standard varieties. Many of these are instances of phonemic differentiation and include:

- The merger of /ɑ/ and /ɒ/, making **father** and **brother** rhyme. This change is nearly universal in North American English, occurring almost everywhere except for parts of eastern New England, hence the Boston accent.
- The merger of /ɒ/ and /ɔ/. This is the so-called cot-caught merger, where **cot** and **caught** are homophones. This change has occurred in eastern New England, in Pittsburgh and surrounding areas, and from the Great Plains westward.
- For speakers who do not merge **caught** and **cot**: The replacement of the cot vowel with the caught vowel before voiceless fricatives (as in **cloth**, **off** [which is found in some old-fashioned varieties of RP]), as well as before /ŋ/ (as in **strong**, **long**), usually in **gone**, often in **on**, and irregularly before /g/ (**log**, **hog**, **dog**, **fog** [which is not found in British English at all]).
- The replacement of the lot vowel with the strut vowel in most utterances of the words **was**, **of**, **from**, **what** and in many utterances of the words **everybody**, **nobody**, **somebody**, **anybody**; the word **because** has either /ʌ/ or /ɔ/; **want** has normally /ɔ/ or /ɑ/, sometimes /ʌ/.

- Vowel merger before intervocalic /ɪ/. Which vowels are affected varies between dialects. One such change is the laxing of /e/, /i/ and /u/ to /ɛ/, /ɪ/ and /ʊ/ before /ɪ/, causing pronunciations like [pɛɪ], [pɪɪ] and [pjʊɪ] for pair, peer and pure. The resulting sound [ʊɪ] is often further reduced to [ɜ], especially after palatals, so that cure, pure, mature and sure rhyme with fir.
- Dropping of /j/ after alveolar consonants so that new, duke, Tuesday, suit, resume, lute are pronounced /nu/, /duk/, /tuzdeɪ/, /sut/, /ɪzʊm/, /lut/.
- æ-tensing in environments that vary widely from accent to accent; for example, for many speakers, /æ/ is approximately realized as [eə] before nasal consonants. In some accents, particularly those from Philadelphia to New York City, [æ] and [eə] can even contrast sometimes, as in Yes, I **can** [kæn] vs. tin **can** [keən].
- The flapping of intervocalic /t/ and /d/ to alveolar tap [ɾ] before unstressed vowels (as in butter, party) and syllabic /l/ (bottle), as well as at the end of a word or morpheme before any vowel (what else, whatever). Thus, for most speakers, pairs such as ladder/latter, metal/medal, and coating/coding are pronounced the same. For many speakers, this merger is incomplete and does not occur after /aɪ/; these speakers tend to pronounce writer with [əɪ] and rider with [aɪ]. This is a form of Canadian raising but, unlike more extreme forms of that process, does not affect /aʊ/. In some areas and idiolects, a phonemic distinction between what elsewhere become homophones through this process is maintained by vowel lengthening in the vowel preceding the formerly voiced consonant, e.g., [læ:ɾɪ] for "ladder" as opposed to [læɾɪ] for "latter".
- Both intervocalic /nt/ and /n/ may be realized as [ŋ] or [r], rarely making winter and winner homophones. Most areas in which /nt/ is reduced to /n/, it is accompanied further by nasalization of simple post-vocalic /n/, so that V/nt/ and V/n/ remain phonemically distinct. In such cases, the preceding vowel becomes nasalized, and is followed in cases where the former /nt/ was present, by a distinct /n/. This stop- absorption by the preceding nasal /n/ does not occur when the second syllable is stressed, as in entail.
- The pin-pen merger, by which [ɛ] is raised to [ɪ] before nasal consonants, making pairs like pen/pin homophonous. This merger originated in Southern American English but is now also sometimes found in parts of the Midwest and West as well, especially in people with roots in the mountainous areas of the Southeastern United States.

Some mergers found in most varieties of both American and British English include:

- The merger of the vowels /ɔ/ and /o/ before 'r', making pairs like horse/hoarse, corps/core, for/four, morning/mourning, etc. homophones.
- The wine-whine merger making pairs like wine/whine, wet/whet, Wales/whales, wear/where, etc. homophones, in most cases eliminating /ɹ/, the voiceless labiovelar fricative. Many older varieties of southern and western AmE still keep these distinct, but the merger appears to be spreading.

AMERICAN AND BRITISH ENGLISH DIFFERENCES

American English and British English (BrE) differ at the levels of phonology, phonetics, vocabulary, and, to a lesser extent, grammar and orthography. The first large American dictionary, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, was written by Noah Webster in 1828; Webster intended to show that the United States, which was a relatively new country at the time, spoke a different dialect from that of Britain.

Differences in grammar are relatively minor, and normally do not affect mutual intelligibility; these include, but are not limited to: different use of some verbal auxiliaries; formal (rather than notional) agreement with collective nouns; different preferences for the past forms of a few verbs (e.g. AmE/BrE: learned/learnt, burned/burnt, and in sneak, dive, get); different prepositions and adverbs in certain contexts (e.g. AmE in school, BrE at school); and whether or not a definite article is used, in very few cases (AmE to the hospital, BrE to hospital). Often, these differences are a matter of relative preferences rather than absolute rules, and most are not stable, since the two varieties are constantly influencing each other.

Differences in orthography are also trivial. Some of the forms that now serve to distinguish American from British spelling (color for colour, center for centre, traveler for traveller, etc.) were introduced by Noah Webster himself; others are due to spelling tendencies in Britain from the 17th century until the present day (e.g. -ise for -ize, although the Oxford English Dictionary still prefers the -ize ending) and cases favored by the francophile tastes of 19th century Victorian England, which had little effect on AmE (e.g. programme for program, manoeuvre for maneuver, skilful for skillful, cheque for check, etc.).

The most noticeable differences between AmE and BrE are at the levels of pronunciation and vocabulary.

While written AmE is standardized across the country, there are several recognizable variations in the spoken language, both in pronunciation and in vernacular vocabulary. General American is the name given to any American accent that is relatively free of noticeable regional influences.

This is one of a series of articles about the differences between **American English** and **British English**, which, for the purposes of these articles, are defined as follows:

- **American English (AmE)** is the form of English used in the United States. It includes all English dialects used within the United States of America.
- **British English (BrE)** is the form of English used in the United Kingdom. It includes all English dialects used within the United Kingdom.

Written forms of American and British English as found in newspapers and textbooks vary little in their essential features, with only occasional noticeable differences in comparable media (comparing American newspapers to British newspapers, for example). This kind of

formal English, particularly written English, is often called 'standard English'. An unofficial standard for spoken American English has also developed, as a result of mass media and geographic and social mobility. It is typically referred to as 'standard spoken American English' (SSAE) or 'General American English' (GenAm or GAE), and broadly describes the English typically heard from network newscasters, commonly referred to as non-regional diction, although local newscasters tend toward more parochial forms of speech. Despite this unofficial standard, regional variations of American English have not only persisted but have actually intensified, according to linguist William Labov.

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