

## Module II. Lecture 14

### Variants and Dialects of the English language

#### Plan

1. General Characteristics of the English language in different parts of the English-speaking world
2. British and American English
3. Local dialects in the British Isles
4. Local dialects in the USA

#### **1. General Characteristics of the English language in different parts of the English-speaking world**

It is natural that the English language is not used with uniformity in the British Isles and in Australia, in the USA and in New Zealand, in Canada and in India, etc. The English language also has some peculiarities in Wales, Scotland, in other parts of the British Isles and America. Is the nature of these varieties the same?

Modern linguistics distinguishes territorial variants of a national language and local dialects. Variants of a language are regional varieties of a standard literary language characterized by some minor peculiarities in the sound system, vocabulary and grammar and by their own literary norms. Dialects are varieties of a language used as a means of oral communication in small localities, they are set off (more or less sharply) from other varieties by some distinctive features of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary.

Close inspection of the varieties mentioned above reveals that they are essentially different in character. It is not difficult to establish that the varieties spoken in small areas are local dialects. The status of the other varieties is more difficult to establish. It is over half a century already that the nature of the two main variants of the English language, British and American (Br and AE) has been discussed. Some American linguists, H. L. Mencken for one, speak of two separate languages with a steady flood of linguistic influence first (up to about 1914) from Britain to America, and since then from America to the British Isles. They even proclaim that the American influence on British English is so powerful that there will come a time when the American standard will be established in Britain. Other linguists regard the language of the USA as a dialect of English. Still more questionable is the position of Australian English (AuE) and Canadian English (CnE).

The differences between the English language as spoken in Britain, the USA, Australia and Canada are immediately noticeable in the field of phonetics.

However these distinctions are confined to the articulatory and acoustic characteristics of some phonemes, to some differences in the use of others and to the differences in the rhythm and intonation of speech. The few phonemes characteristic of American pronunciation and alien to British literary norms can as a rule be observed in British dialects.

The variations in vocabulary, to be considered below, are not very numerous. Most of them are divergences in the semantic structure of words and in their usage.

The dissimilarities in grammar like AE gotten, proven for BE got, proved are scarce. For the most part these dissimilarities consist in the preference of this or that grammatical category or form to some others. For example, the preference of Past Indefinite to Present Perfect, the formation of the Future Tense with will as the only auxiliary verb for all persons, and some others. Recent investigations have also shown that the Present Continuous form in the meaning of Future is used twice as frequently in BE as in the American, Canadian and Australian variants; infinitive constructions are used more rarely in AE than in BE and AuE and passive constructions are, on the contrary, more frequent in America than in Britain and in Australia.

Since BE, AE and AuE have essentially the same grammar system, phonetic system and vocabulary, they cannot be regarded as different languages. Nor can they be referred to local dialects; because they serve all spheres of verbal communication in society, within their territorial area they have dialectal differences of their own; besides they differ far less than local dialects (e.g. far less than the dialects of Dewsbury and Howden, two English towns in Yorkshire some forty miles apart). Another consideration is that AE has its own literary norm and AuE is developing one. Thus we must speak of three variants of the English national language having different accepted literary standards, one spoken in the British Isles, another spoken in the USA, the third in Australia. As to CnE, its peculiarities began to attract linguistic attention only some 20 years ago. The fragmentary nature of the observation available makes it impossible to determine its status.

## **2. British and American English**

British and American English are two main variants of English. Besides them there are Canadian, Australian, Indian, New Zealand and other variants. They have some peculiarities in pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary, but they are easily used for communication between people living in these countries. As far as the American English is concerned, some scientists /H.N. Menken, for example/ tried to prove that there is a separate American language. In 1919 H.N. Menken published a book called «The American Language». But most scientists, American ones including, criticized his point of view because differences between the two variants are not systematic.

American English begins its history at the beginning of the 17-th century when first English-speaking settlers began to settle on the Atlantic coast of the American continent. The language which they brought from England was the language spoken in England during the reign of Elizabeth the First. In the earliest period the task of Englishmen was to find names for places, animals, plants, customs which they came across on the American continent. They took some of names from languages spoken by the local population - Indians, such as “chipmuck” /an American squirrel/, “igloo” /Escimo dome-shaped hut/, «skunk» / a black and white striped animal with a bushy tail/, «squaw» / an Indian woman/, »wigwam» /an American Indian tent made of skins and bark/ etc.

Besides Englishmen, settlers from other countries came to America, and English-speaking settlers mixed with them and borrowed some words from their languages, e.g. from French the words «bureau»/a writing desk/, «cache» /a hiding place for treasure, provision/, «depot’ / a store-house/, «pumpkin»/a plant bearing large edible fruit/. From Spanish such words as: “adobe” / unburnt sun-dried brick/, “bananza” /prosperity/, “cockroach” /a beetle-like insect/, “lasso” / a noosed rope for catching cattle/ were borrowed.

Present-day New York stems from the Dutch colony New Amsterdam, and Dutch also influenced English. Such words as: «boss», «dope», «sleigh» were borrowed. The second period of American English history begins in the 19-th century. Immigrants continued to come from Europe to America. When large groups of immigrants from the same country came to America some of their words were borrowed into English. Italians brought with them a style of cooking which became widely spread and such words as: «pizza», «spaghetti» came into English. From the great number of German-speaking settlers the following words were borrowed into English: «delicatessen», «lager», «hamburger», «noodle», «schnitzel» and many others.

During the second period of American English history there appeared quite a number of words and word-groups which were formed in the language due to the new political system, liberation of America from the British colonialism, its independence. The following lexical units appeared due to these events: the United States of America, assembly, caucus, congress, Senate, congressman, President, senator, precinct, Vice-President and many others. Besides these political terms many other words were coined in American English in the 19-th century: to antagonize, to demoralize, influential, department store, telegram, telephone and many others.

There are some differences between British and American English in the usage of prepositions, such as prepositions with dates, days of the week BE requires «on» / I start my holiday on Friday/, in American English there is no preposition / I start my vacation Friday/. In BE we use «by day», «by night»/»at night», in AE the corresponding forms are «days» and «nights». In BE we say «at home», in AE - «home» is used. In BE we say «a quarter to five», in AE «a quarter of five». In BE we say «in the street», in AE - «on the street». In BE we say «to chat to somebody», in AE «to chat with somebody». In BE we say «different to something», in AE - «different from something».

There are also units of vocabulary which are different while denoting the same notions, e.g. BE - «trousers», AE -«pants»; in BE «pants» are «труссы» which in AE is «shorts». While in BE «shorts» are outwear. This can lead to misunderstanding.

There are some differences in names of places:						
BE		AE		BE		AE
passage		hall		cross-roads		intersection
pillar	box	mail-box	the	cinema	the	movies
studio,		bed-sitter		one-room		apartment
flyover		overpass		zebra		crossing
pavement		sidewalk	tube,	underground		subway
tram		streetcar		flat		apartment
surgery		doctor's	office	lift		elevator

Some names of useful objects:						
BE		AE		BE		AE
biro		ballpoint		rubber		eraser
tap		faucet		torch		flashlight
parcel		package	elastic	rubber		band
carrier bag	shopping bag	reel of cotton	spool of thread			

Some words connected with food:						
BE		AE		BE		AE
tin		can		sweets		candy
sweet	biscuit	cookie	dry	biscuit		crackers
sweet	dessert		chips	French		fries
minced		meat		ground		beef

Some words denoting personal items:						
BE		AE		BE		AE
fringe	bangs/of	hair/	turn-	ups		cuffs
tights		pantyhose		mackintosh		raincoat
ladder	run/in	a	stocking/	braces		suspenders
poloneck	turtleneck	waistcoat	vest			

Some words denoting people:						
BE		AE		BE		AE
barrister,		lawyer,	staff	/university/		faculty
post-graduate		graduate	chap,	fellow		guy
caretaker		janitor		constable		patrolman
shop-assistant		shop-person		bobby		cop

If we speak about cars there are also some differences:

BE		AE		BE		AE
boot		trunk		bumpers		fenders

a car, an auto, to hire a car to rent a car

Differences in the organization of education lead to different terms. BE «public school» is in fact a private school. It is a fee-paying school not controlled by the local education authorities. AE «public school» is a free local authority

school. BE «elementary school» is AE «grade school» BE «secondary school» is AE «high school». In BE « a pupil leaves a secondary school», in AE «a student graduates from a high school» In BE you can graduate from a university or college of education, graduating entails getting a degree.

A British university student takes three years known as the first, the second and the third years. An American student takes four years, known as freshman, sophomore, junior and senior years. While studying a British student takes main and subsidiary subjects. An American student majors in a subject and also takes electives. A British student specializes in one main subject, with one subsidiary to get his honors degree. An American student earns credits for successfully completing a number of courses in studies, and has to reach the total of 36 credits to receive a degree.

The reform in the English spelling for American English was introduced by the famous American lexicographer Noah Webster who published his first dictionary in 1806. Those of his proposals which were adopted in the English spelling are as follows:

a) the deletion of the letter «u» in words ending in «our», e.g. honor, favor;  
 b) the deletion of the second consonant in words with double consonants, e.g. traveler, wagon,

c) the replacement of «re» by «er» in words of French origin, e.g. theater, center,  
 d) the deletion of unpronounced endings in words of Romanic origin, e.g. catalog, program,

e) the replacement of «ce» by «se» in words of Romanic origin, e.g. defense, offense,

d) deletion of unpronounced endings in native words, e.g. tho, thro.

In American English we have r-colored fully articulated vowels, in the combinations: ar, er, ir, or, ur, our etc. In BE the sound / / corresponds to the AE /ʌ/, e.g. «not». In BE before fricatives and combinations with fricatives «a» is pronounced as /a:/, in AE it is pronounced / / e.g. class, dance, answer, fast etc.

There are some differences in the position of the stress:

BE	AE	BE	AE
add`ress	ad`ress	la`boratory	`laboratory
re`cess	`recess	re`search	`research
in`quiry	`inquiry	ex`cess	`excess

Some words in BE and AE have different pronunciation, e.g.

BE	AE	BE	AE
/ˈfju:tail/	/ˈfju:t	l/	/ˈdousail / /dos l/
/kla:k/	/kl	rk/	/ˈfig / /figyer/
/`le3	/ /	li:3	r/ /lefˈten nt/ /lu:tenant/
/nai	/	/ni:	r/ /shedju:l/ /skedyu:l/

But these differences in pronunciation do not prevent Englishmen and American from communicating with each other easily and cannot serve as a proof that British and American are different languages.

Words can be classified according to the period of their life in the language. The number of new words in a language is always larger than the number of words

which come out of active usage. Accordingly we can have archaisms that is words which have come out of active usage, and neologisms, that is words which have recently appeared in the language.

### **3. Local dialects in the British Isles**

English, in various dialects, is the most widely spoken language of the United Kingdom, but a number of regional and migrant languages are also spoken. Regional indigenous languages are Scots and Ulster Scots and the Celtic languages, Irish, Scottish Gaelic, Welsh and, as a revived language with few speakers, Cornish. British Sign Language is also used. There are also many languages spoken by immigrants who arrived recently to the United Kingdom, mainly within inner city areas; these languages are mainly from continental Europe and South Asia.

The official language of the United Kingdom is English. Additionally, Welsh is a de jure official language in Wales. Welsh is spoken by 538,300 people in Wales according to the 2021 census. Approximately 124,000 people speak Irish in Northern Ireland, which is an official language in Northern Ireland alongside English.

English is a West Germanic language brought around the 5th century CE to the east coast of what is now England by Germanic-speaking immigrants from around present-day northern Germany, who came to be known as the Anglo-Saxons. The fusion of these settlers' dialects became what is now termed Old English: the word English is derived from the name of the Angles. English soon displaced the previously predominant British Celtic and British Latin throughout most of England. It spread into what was to become south-east Scotland under the influence of the English medieval kingdom of Northumbria. Following the economic, political, military, scientific, cultural, and colonial influence of Great Britain and the United Kingdom from the 18th century, via the British Empire, and of the United States since the mid-20th century, it has been widely dispersed around the world, and become the leading language of international discourse.

Many English words are based on roots from Latin, because Latin in some form was the lingua franca of the Christian Church and of European intellectual life. The language was further influenced by the Old Norse language, with Viking invasions in the 8th and 9th centuries. The Norman conquest of England in the 11th century gave rise to heavy borrowings from Norman French, and vocabulary and spelling conventions began to give what had now become Middle English the superficial appearance of a close relationship with Romance languages. The Great Vowel Shift that began in the south of England in the 15th century is one of the historical events marking the separation of Middle and Modern English.

There are no universally accepted criteria for distinguishing languages from dialects, although a number of paradigms exist, which give sometimes contradictory results. The distinction is therefore a subjective one, dependent on the user's frame of reference. Scottish

Gaelic and Irish are generally viewed as being languages in their own right rather than dialects of a single tongue, but they are sometimes mutually intelligible to a limited degree – especially between southern dialects of Scottish and northern dialects of Irish (programs in these two forms of Gaelic are broadcast respectively on BBC Radio nan Gàidheal and RTÉ Raidió na Gaeltachta), but the relationship between Scots and English is less clear, since there is usually partial mutual intelligibility.

Since there is a very high level of mutual intelligibility between contemporary speakers of Scots in Scotland and in Ulster (Ulster Scots), and a common written form was current well into the 20th century, the two varieties have usually been considered as dialects of a single tongue rather than languages in their own right; the written forms have diverged in the 21st century. The government of the United Kingdom "recognizes that Scots and Ulster Scots meet the Charter's definition of a regional or minority language". Whether this implies recognition of one regional or minority language or two is a question of interpretation. Ulster Scots is defined in legislation (The North/South Co-operation (Implementation Bodies) Northern Ireland Order 1999) as: the variety of the Scots language which has traditionally been used in parts of Northern Ireland and in Donegal in Ireland.

While in continental Europe closely related languages and dialects may get official recognition and support, in the UK there is a tendency to view closely related vernaculars as a single language. Even British Sign Language is mistakenly thought of as a form of 'English' by some, rather than as a language in its own right, with a distinct grammar and vocabulary. The boundaries are not always clear cut, which makes it hard to estimate numbers of speakers.

#### **4. Local dialects in the USA**

The English language in the United States is characterized by relative uniformity throughout the country. One can travel three thousand miles without encountering any but the slightest dialect differences. Nevertheless, regional variations in speech undoubtedly exist and they have been observed and recorded by a number of investigators.

The following three major belts of dialects have so far been identified, each with its own characteristic features: Northern, Midland and Southern, Midland being in turn divided into North Midland and South Midland.

The differences in pronunciation between American dialects are most apparent, but they seldom interfere with understanding. Distinctions in grammar are scarce. The differences in vocabulary are rather numerous, but they are easy to pick up. E.g. Eastern New England - sour-milk cheese, Inland Northern Dutch - cheese, New York City - pot cheese, Standard American - cottage cheese.

The American linguist O. F. Emerson maintains that American English had not had time to break up into widely diverse dialects and he believes that in the course of time the American dialects might finally become nearly as distinct as the

dialects in Britain. He is certainly greatly mistaken. In modern times dialect divergence cannot increase. On the contrary, in the United States, as elsewhere, the national language is tending to wipe out the dialect distinctions and to become still more uniform.

Comparison of the dialect differences in the British Isles and in the USA reveals that not only are they less numerous and far less marked in the USA, but that the very nature of the local distinctions is different. What is usually known as American dialects is closer in nature to regional variants of the literary language. The problem of discriminating between literary and dialect speech patterns in the USA is much more complicated than in Britain. Many American linguists point out that American English differs from British English in having no one locality whose speech patterns have come to be recognized as the model for the rest of the country.

### *Questions for discussion*

1. What dialects of the English language do you know?
2. What are the positions of Australian and Canadian English in the world?
3. What are the main peculiarities of British and American English?
4. Characterize the local dialects in the British Isles
5. Characterize the local dialects in the USA

### *References*

1. Wakelin, Martyn Francis (2008). *Discovering English Dialects*. Oxford: Shire Publications. p. 4. ISBN 978-0-7478-0176-4.
2. Crystal, David. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, Cambridge University Press, 2003
3. Filppula, Markku; Klemola, Juhani; Sharma, Devyani, eds. (2013-12-16). "The Oxford Handbook of World Englishes". *Oxford Handbooks Online*. doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199777716.001.0001.
4. Daniel Schreier, Peter Trudgill. *The Lesser-Known Varieties of English: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press, Mar 4, 2010 pg. 10
5. Hickey, Raymond (2014). *A Dictionary of Varieties of English*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell. ISBN 978-0-470-65641-9.
6. Hickey, Raymond, ed. (2010). *Varieties of English in Writing. The Written Word as Linguistic Evidence*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. ISBN 978-90-272-4901-2.