Grammatical Differences in National Standards of English

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Abstract: English is a world-wide language, while it is not all the same in English-speaking countries. This paper analyzes the difference of English among several English-speaking countries from the viewpoints of grammar.

Key words: grammatical differences national English

English is the most important language of the world. Even at a time when such a statement is taken as a long-standing truism, it is perhaps worthwhile to glance briefly at the basis on which it is made. There are, after all, thousands of different languages in the world, and it is in the nature of language that each one seems uniquely important to those who speak it as their native language --- that is, their first (normally sole) tongue: the language they acquired at their mother's knee. But there are more objective standards of relative importance.

English is spoken as a native language by nearly three hundreds million people: in the United States, Britain, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the Caribbean and South Africa, without mentioning smaller countries or smaller pockets of native English speakers (for example in Rhodesia and Kenya). By foreign language we mean a language as used by someone for communication across frontiers or with people who are not his countrymen: listening to broadcasts, reading books or newspapers, commerce or travel, for example. No language is more widely studied or used as a foreign language than English. In the field of English grammar, an important development is research on grammars for spoken as well as written language (Larsen-Freeman, 2003).

1. Standard English

If Standard English is not therefore a language, an accent, a style or a register, then of course we are obliged to say what it actually is. The answer is, as at least most British sociolinguists are agreed, that Standard English is a dialect. As we saw above, Standard English is simply one variety of English among many. It is a sub-variety of English. Sub-varieties of languages are usually referred to as dialects, and languages are often described as consisting of dialects. As a named dialect, like Cockney, or Scouse, or Yorkshire, it is entirely normal that we should spell the name of the Standard English dialect with capital letters. Standard English is however of course an unusual dialect in a number of ways. It is for example by far the most important dialect in the English-speaking world from a social, intellectual and cultural point of view; and it does not have an associated accent.

First, the distinction between Standard English and other dialects is not arbitrary or a matter of slicing up a continuum at some point of our own choice, although as we have seen there are some difficulties. This is inherent in the nature of standardizations itself. There is really no continuum linking Standard English to other dialects because the codification that forms a crucial part of the standardizations process results in a situation where, in

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most cases, a feature is either standard or it is not.

Secondly, unlike other dialects, Standard English is a purely social dialect. Because of its unusual history and its extreme sociological importance, it is no longer a geographical dialect, even if we can tell that its origins were originally in the southeast of England. It is true that, in the English-speaking world as a whole, it comes in a number of different forms, so that we can talk, if we wish to for some particular purpose, of Scottish Standard English, or American Standard English, or English Standard English.

Historically, we can say that Standard English was selected (though of course, unlike many other languages, not by any overt or conscious decision) as the variety to become the standard variety precisely because it was the variety associated with the social group with the highest degree of power, wealth and prestige. Subsequent developments have reinforced its social character: the fact that it has been employed as the dialect of an education to which pupils, especially in earlier centuries, have had differential access depending on their social class background.

So far we have not discussed grammar. When, however, it comes to discussing what are the linguistic differences between Standard English and the nonstandard dialects, it is obvious from our discussion above that they cannot be phonological, and that they do not appear to be lexical either (though see below). It therefore follows that Standard English is a social dialect which is distinguished from other dialects of the language by its grammatical forms. Standard English of course has most of its grammatical features in common with the other dialects.

In grammar and vocabulary, Standard English presents somewhat less of a monolithic character, but even so the world-wide agreement is extraordinary and --- as has been suggested earlier --- seems actually to be increasing under the impact of closer world communication and the spread of identical material and non-material culture. Furthermore, many experts suggest ways of understanding grammar (Bygate et al, 1994; Davis & Rinvolucri, 1995; Ur, 1988). The uniformity is especially close in neutral or formal styles of written English on subject matter not of obviously localized interest: in such circumstances one can frequently go on for page after page without encountering a feature which would identify the English as belonging to one of the national standards.

2. National Standards of English

2.1 Grammatical differences between British and American English

What we are calling national standards should be seen as distinct from the Standard English which we have been discussing and which we should think of as being "supra-national", embracing what is common to all. Again, as with orthography, there are two national standards that are overwhelmingly predominant both in the number of distinctive usages and in the degree to which these distinctions are "institutionalized" : American English and British English.

Rutherford (1987) suggests an optimal approach of understanding the general principles of grammar (e.g., how to modify basic word order) rather than focusing on structure-specific rules. Grammatical differences between British and American English are minimal. Perhaps the main one is the American use of the past tense while British English would use the present perfect tense. An American might ask, "Did you collect your ticket yet?" while a British person would ask, "Have you collected your ticket yet?"

The present subjunctive is used more in American English than in British English, for example, "He proposed that she remain in charge". A British person would be more likely to use "He proposed that she should

remain in charge".

A few verbs are different: American English has "snuck" while British English has "sneaked", and "dove" while British English has "dived". And everybody knows about "gotten", which for most senses of "get" is an alternative to "got" as the past participle of "get" in American English, although its use is criticized by some Americans.

In British English the general personal pronoun "one" is used, by the upper classes and educated people, as in this example: One doesn't like to interfere. After all, one wouldn't like to be accused of exceeding one's brief. American English would start with "one" in the same way, but would follow it with "he" and possessive "his".

Americans say "Do you have...?" while many British people say "Have you got...?" And there are a few differences in the use of prepositions. American English has "different than" and "meet with" where British English has "different from" and simply "meet (someone)".

Collective nouns: Nouns like "team" and "company" that describe multiple people are often used with the plural form of a verb in British English, and with the singular form in American. British "the team are concerned"; American "the team is concerned".

Differences in nouns are the same in both their plural and singular forms, such as the word "sheep". In American English "shrimp" is such a word but with British English the plural of "shrimp" is "shrimps". ("Shrimps" is occasionally heard in the southern U.S., but is otherwise rare, although used colloquially when used pejoratively to refer to small people). Besides, the present perfect operates to frame a habitual present-tense narrative (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999).

In names of American rivers, the word "river" usually comes after the name (e.g., Colorado River), whereas for British rivers it comes before (as in River Thames).

Singular attributives in one country may be plural in the other, and vice versa. For example, Britain has a "drugs problem" while the United States has a "drug problem".

The United States and Britain have been separate political entities for two centuries; for generations, thousands of books have been appearing annually; there is a long tradition of publishing descriptions of both AE and BE. These are important factors in establishing and institutionalizing the two national standards, and in the relative absence of such conditions other national standards are both less distinct and less institutionalized.

2.2 Grammatical differences of English in other countries

(1) British English is a collective term for the forms of English spoken in the British Isles. In particular, when used by other English speakers, it often refers to the written Standard English and the pronunciation known as Received Pronunciation (RP); the term is often used to make a distinction from American English. In such context the written form is sometimes called International English, since few other English-speaking countries have adopted the changes in spelling introduced by nineteenth century US lexicographers.

It should be noted that the people who live in the British Isles do not use the term often; however, they do refer to Scottish English, Welsh English and Irish English (though never English English!), and dialects thereof. This article deals with British English in the stricter sense.

(2) Scottish English (also known as Scottish Standard English) is the form of the English language used in Scotland.

The standard spelling and grammar are generally the same as in British English, however, there are some unique characteristics, many of which originate from the country's two other languages, Gaelic and Scots.

One of the more notable differences between Scottish and British English concerns the use of the past

participle in place of the verbal infinitive in phrases such as "the children need fed" (cf. "the children need feeding" in British English). Scottish English also makes common use of the word "outwith", meaning "outside of", and "wee", meaning "small". "Correct" is often preferred to "right" meaning morally right or just, as opposed to just factually accurate.

The adjective "depute" (pronounced /depp-yoot/) is used instead of "deputy". When the London-based satirical magazine Private Eye ridiculed the use of this term in a newspaper advertisement in 2003, it was inundated with complaints from Scottish readers, who pointed out that this was correct usage. The term "proven" (pronounced as /pro-ven/, not /proo-ven/), as opposed to "proved", is correctly used in a legal context (Scottish courts may hand down a verdict of "Not Proven" instead of "Not Guilty").

There are some similarities in pronunciation between Scottish English, American English, and Canadian English, notably the tendency to pronounce final "r's".

(3) Indian English is a catch-all phrase for the dialects or varieties of English spoken widely in India and the Indian subcontinent in general. Due to British colonialism that saw an English-speaking presence in India for over two hundred years, a distinctly South Asian brand of English was born.

Variations in the pronunciation of several phonemes are affected by the regional tongues (see Languages of India) across the subcontinent, the greatest distinction being that between South India and Sri Lanka on the one hand and the north of the subcontinent (including Pakistan, North India and Bangladesh) on the other. Several idiomatic forms crossing over from Indian literary and vernacular language also have made their way into the English of the masses. In spite of India's diversity, however, there is indeed a general homogeneity in syntax and vocabulary that can be found among speakers across South Asia. It will be found that excellent English bearing less regional grammatical peculiarities is spoken in upper-class families (commonly referred to, in India, as "Westernised"), though even among them hints of a uniquely Indian flavor (particularly in a so-called "Indianised" British accent) are typically retained.

(4) New Zealand English is the dialect of English spoken in New Zealand.

New Zealand English is close to Australian English in pronunciation. Possibly the only difference between New Zealand and British spelling is in the ending "-ise" or "-ize". New Zealanders use the "-ise" ending exclusively, whereas Britons use either ending, and some British dictionaries and style manuals prefer the "-ize" ending.

Many local everyday words are not English at all, being traditional Maori language names for local flora, fauna, and the natural environment, and some other Maori words have made their way into the vernacular.

In 1998, Oxford University Press produced a *Dictionary of New Zealand English* that it claimed was based on over 40 years of research. This research started with Harry Orsman's 1951 thesis and continued with his publishing this dictionary as the editor. To assist with and maintain this work, the New Zealand Dictionary Centre was founded in 1997.

(5) South African English is the dialect of English spoken in South Africa and surrounding countries, notably Namibia and Zimbabwe.

South African English is not unified in its pronunciation: this can be attributed to the fact that English is the mother tongue for only 40% of the white inhabitants (the remainder mostly having Afrikaans as their mother tongue) and only a tiny minority of black inhabitants of the region. The dialect can be, however, identified by many loanwords mostly from Afrikaans but increasingly also from Zulu and other African languages. Some of these words, like "trek", have seeped into general English usage.

Traditionally, white South Africans have spoken South African English, but a distinct Indian South African

form of English has long existed, and an equally distinctive black South African English is developing very rapidly. Convergence between these sub-dialects can be observed but it is a slow process.

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