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Three Types of Attitude Towards American and British English

1. Comments and pronouncements on the two major variants of English by non-linguists can make interesting reading. Such sources critically read may shed some light on the native speaker's attitude to his own variant and towards the other one which somebody labelled "the alien mother tongue". Understanding and interpreting these, often irrational statements, helps to uncover certain features which make part of the native speaker's "communicative competence" and thus they fall within the scope of sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and practical language study.

Linguists have often made use of laymen's opinions about language as illustrations of the gap existing between such statements and the current linguistic thought about identical issues. Bloomfield called such pronouncements "secondary responses to language" when stated unopposed and "tertiary responses" when authors of such pronouncements defended their opinions against queries by linguists. He also described the highly emotional way in which these statements are delivered with lots of irony. But he added: "It is only in recent years that I have learned to observe these secondary and tertiary responses in anything like a systematic manner and I confess that I cannot explain them — that is correlate them with anything else. The explanation will doubtless be a matter of psychology and sociology" (Bloomfield 1944). And indeed such opinions could not possibly be accommodated by the rigidly delimited Bloomfieldian linguistics. Laymen's opinions frequently stated in terms of likes and dislikes, good and bad, could hardly find much favour with the "liberal humanist tradition" of American anthropological linguistics insisting on equality of languages and on general avoidance of value judgements (Hymes 1974). By the extension of this idea linguists ignored spontaneous

outbursts about the English language and its variants labelling such comments as prejudice if containing disparaging remarks, and otherwise finding them irrelevant.¹

Such pronouncements on language obtain a more adequate treatment and interpretation by the discipline of sociolinguistics which, naturally, without condoning prejudice, describes this level of behaviour, searching for its underlying social facts and for universal features in them.

Behaviour towards language Fishman, for instance, envisages as a subdivision of the study of "Language Maintenance and Language Shift" and encourages the study of such behaviour: "We know all too little about language oriented attitudes and emotions (running the gamut from language loyalty — of which language nationalism is only one expression—to language antipathy — of which conscious language abandonment is only one expression) . . . The features of language that are considered attractive or unattractive, proper or improper, distinctive or commonplace, have largely remained unstudied" (Fishman 1974, p. 1728). In spite of that some evidence and some data have been gathered by sociolinguists, some general patterns of behaviour emerge and certain generalizations can be made concerning the attitudes towards variants of a language applicable in the case of British and American English.

The interest of linguists and philologists in this problem centers round the establishment of differences, explanation of their occurrence and history and the direction of influence. As distinguished from many non-linguists, British linguists admit that the "center of gravity" for English has been for decades in America and consequently they accept the fact that the direction of influence should run West-East showing no intention to intervene in a purist sense. They also speculate on the most effective channel through which Americanisms penetrate British English and seem to find it sooner in the printed word than in the television or cinema. Americanisms in the agency news are passed into the British papers unnoticed by sub-editors blunted by overexposure to the AE. and are absorbed by readers in an otherwise normal British English context. Americanisms in television broadcasts and in films are registered pronounced in AE manner and in the American context of situation and thus less readily internalized subconsciously. And it is lexical items which penetrate unnoticed, as grammatical or syntactical features stand out prominently.

Against this realistic, rational and professional approach to the differences between BE and AE and their mutual influ-

¹ A notable exception are the articles on this matter by Randolph Quirk, cf. Bibliography.

ence stand the non-linguists' statements on the same matter. They are highly personal, emotional, sometimes irrational but "the absence or presence of a kernel of truth (or verifiability itself) is entirely unrelated to the mobilizing powers of such views" (Fishman 1974, 1728). In the following pages we shall briefly review some fifteen such opinions.

2. The opinions under review have been elicited within a short period of time, they have been expressed as comments on the same piece of writing, they have been given by Britons and Americans well-versed in both variants and all of them people making professional use of language as journalists, authors, academics and editors. Thus the articles considered represent a collection of statements by a well-defined group of native speakers, a group in a speech community known to sociolinguists, and generally, to be normally "language conscious".

The opinions were invited by the journal *Encounter* as comments on an extended review of a glossary of BE and AE differences prepared by a non-linguist Norman W. Schur.² The review itself has been written by Ian Ball, an Australian, working in America for *The Daily Telegraph* and it had been published in the same journal.³

The review is a mixture of author's experiences of British and American language differences in his work, of sub-editors' reactions to Americanisms in his reports, and of praise for Schur's well informed compendium. Ball tells us about British sub-editors' reluctance to accept even such Americanisms as *disc-jockey* in the late 50's as the style-sheets of British papers required renderings like "wireless gramophone-records programme commentator", and how this situation is changing. He sometimes dramatizes the differences supporting this view with examples from registers like that of the terms for the car parts or even more remote semantic fields familiar only to groups of speakers. He even suggests that the differences in vocabulary warrant the necessity to look at AE and BE as two separate languages. The situation, according to him, justifies the compilation of glossaries like the one by Schur which he welcomes.

His review served as an introduction to the "Symposium" of comments which followed in the two subsequent issues of *Encounter* (January and February of 1975, further J. and F.) under the title "Amerenglish, a symposium" and "Aspects of Amerenglish" and to which fifteen people, as mentioned before, contributed shorter or longer articles. Eight of the commenta-

² British Self-Taught: with Comments in American; cf. Bibliography

³ cf. Bibliography.

tors were British, five were Americans, there was one with the dual, British and American, citizenship and one Australian working in Britain.⁴

All the contributions are free-ranging comments which do not lend themselves to an analysis a sociolinguist might apply to a well prepared enquiry. The comments range rather wide and many details raised will not be dealt with here. But after a careful look at the contributions they may be grouped into 3 sections according to the attitudes toward BE and AE expressed. The sections may be conveniently labelled (echoing some characteristic statements) as:

- i. "Americanisms and Anglicisms are minor and adjustable matters";
- ii. AE and BE should be kept separate;
- iii. "America will be the death of English".

i. *Americanisms and Anglicisms are minor and adjustable matters*

The first group would consist of about 8 contributors: Kingsley Amis, William Buckley Jr., Robert Conquest, John Crosby, Constantine FitzGibbon, Max Lerner, and perhaps Leo Rosten and Jan Morris, all of them familiar names to those who follow the British press and periodicals. According to what they say there is no reason to speak about AE and BE as of two languages. They base their views on the amount of differences existing between them and on mutual intelligibility. "... English-English, American-English, and any native speaker's-English are not distinct languages but variants of a single language, variants much more closely related to one another than the dialects of at least three continental languages" (Amis, F. p. 41). Admitting the term language for AE and BE respectively would signal a rift which the members of this group do not want. The term variant, as sociolinguists have pointed out (Fishman 1974 p. 1638) is more objective and unemotional. The terms language and dialect will crop up again in this discussion usefully manipulated reckoning with their emotional and hierarchical character.

⁴ Nationality and occupation of the contributors to the Symposium on Amerenglish: Kingsley Amis, author, British; William Buckley, Jr., editor, American; Hugh Brogan, don, British; Patric Brogan, correspondent, British; Robert Conquest, poet, historian, dual national; Patrick Cosgrave, editor, British; John Crosby, journalist, American; D. J. Enright, editor, British; Constantine FitzGibbon, author, American; Clive James, critic, Australian; Max Lerner professor, American; Jan Morris, author, British; Ian Robinson, don, British; Leo Rosten, author, American; Honor Tracy, author, British.

Ian Ball's insistence on the great differences between AE and BE is, as we said, rejected by the members of this group as "Americanisms and Anglicisms properly speaking, are... very minor and adjustable matter" (Conquest, J. p. 54). Glossaries ostentatiously prepared to help the speakers of either variant are unnecessary and mostly artificial.

How horrifying is to be told that there is a 474-page book called *British Self-Taught*. One knows these compilations, and how they have to pad out the tiny amount of worthwhile material, with for example, non-existent rhyming-slang. (Conquest, J. p. 54)

Keeping the items of two close variants of one language apart in everyday communication when one is exposed to both requires special effort (Weinreich, 1963) which normally to be nearly successful must be supported by some ulterior motive. If such does not exist the situation results in mixing the items as the following quotation confirms.

I have adopted wireless because it has a lovely antique sound, and my wife, who is British, says radio — so there you are. (Crosby, J. p. 53)

The examples radio: wireless are not too illustrative since both co-exist in BE but that is probably what happens with lots of other items in identical situations. The members of this group would find nothing strange in it.

Spelling differences must cause problems to authors preparing a text for the publisher from the other variant area. Therefore one can understand Ian Ball's preoccupation with the problem as he has gone through such an experience. He writes:

It involves far more than just dropping the 'u' from such words as *harbour*, *colour* and *neighbour* and reversing the last two letters in such words as *centre* and *spectre*... What gave me the most trouble was the double/single 'l' situation. It sometimes seemed that I was spending, as much time trotting back and forth between my typewriter and the big black Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary on a side table to see how many 'l's Americans would like to see in specific words, as I was writing the book itself. (Ball, 1974 p. 60)

But in spite of his casual approach and in spite of his decision to write a book in AE in the first place, Ian Ball became emotionally involved over at least one detail:

When the copy-editors for example changed my *saleable* into *salable* to conform with Webster's first choice, I raised

such a fuss that they humoured me by restoring the 'e'. To my eye *salable* does not stand as an acceptable alternative to *saleable*. (Ball, 1974. p. 60)

That details in spelling can arouse emotion is well known to sociolinguists particularly those involved in reforms of orthography and in developing scripts (Fishman 1974, p. 1749). It is also a practical matter as in Ball's case. Still in our first group the insistence on irrelevance of the differences brings about the following statement on spelling:

"As for spelling to which Mr Ball devoted such exhaustive and no doubt exhausting attention, I can only say that I care not a fig nor a good God damn. If a reader fails to follow my meanings when I write either 'color' or 'colour', I would just as soon he did not try to read my books at all". (FitzGibbon, J. p. 53)

The statement confirms its author's firm belief in the primarily communicational function of written language.

Genuine misunderstandings between speakers of the two variants, according to this group of contributors' is exceedingly rare.

"We all have our comic horror stories of such: my favourite concerns the Englishman who, told by his American hostess that she was going to wash up, asked in front of her husband if he might help her". (Amis, F. p. 41)

But although Amis quotes the name of the person involved in this particular misunderstanding he would probably agree with those who think most such stories carefully engineered to produce comic effect. (Quirk 1972, p. 27).

William Buckley Jr. emphasises the fact that the long essay by Ball "fails, I fear, to do much more than document what we all know. I mean by that not that all of us knew the two forms in every given case. . . but that no one was surprised that often there are two forms". (Buckley, F. p 44)

Here we find further evidence for the easiness of communication between the speakers of the two variants and explanations why misunderstandings practically do not occur.

The differences quoted by Ball do not impress Max Lerner from the communication point of view although he uses the term "two languages".

"Most of the snags and pratfalls he cites seem to me picaresque matters. The rest express differences of national character and experience which we would do well to study as such". (Lerner, F. p. 44)

Leo Rosten, a popular author on language, adds to Ball's and Schur's lists of differences, but he does it casually without implying that they cause problems.

It seems that the following passage sums up the attitude of this group towards the two variants:

"But for Chrissake — that's 'Christ's sake' in American, — chaps, has anybody ever gone away from the shop — meaning 'store', youse guys — empty handed through ignorance of some one of these local variants?". (Amis, F. p. 41)

In other words the break-down in communication, the genuine misunderstandings are the measure by which the authors belonging to this group estimate the distance between BE and AE. They envisage the language as primarily the carrier of meanings. The characteristics belonging to the carrier itself do not concern them at all.

The contributors in this group are probably the closest to the linguists and philologists working in the above mentioned liberal tradition and are characterized by one of them as that part of the Anglo-American public opinion which "has always been thoroughly practical: seeing a genuinely common language and seizing the advantages that lay in this. Such opinion has always sensibly tended away from separatism... has looked for ways of sharing dictionaries, grammars, scientific documentation and of course literature (including especially literary, oral and filmed works)" (Quirk 1972, p. 23)

But we should immediately add that except Kingsley Amis and Jan Morris (if we interpret her epigram correctly)⁵ all other contributors are Americans. Most British contributors belong to the other two groups which we are going to deal with presently.

ii. *British English and American English should be kept separate*

The three members of this group share the opinion that the differences between BE and AE are important but their respective attitudes to the variants differ considerably. They range from emphasizing the importance of the differences for stylistic and evocative reasons (mainly of literary kind), to priggish and irrational insistence on the greater importance of BE, and to a bitter and suspicious rejection of Americanisms allegedly being imposed on the British by some obscure powers.

If our first group consists of contributors to whom language serves primarily as a carrier of meanings, this second group is

⁵ *Across the sea the electric message hums:
Asses is donkeys — Arses is bums.*

highly aware of and sensitive to the characteristics of the medium itself. Their comments imply that "Language itself is the content, a referent for loyalties and animosities..." (Fishman 1974, p. 1632).

Clive James confesses of liking both American slang and American jargon, but he warns against mixing up the two variants indiscriminately in certain situations.

It is interesting that the writers who churn out schlock TV series like *The Pathfinders* not only absorb current American showbiz usages but transfer them to the past, so that you hear wartime RAF types solemnly asking: 'You know something?' and pronouncing themselves to be in 'deep trouble'. (James, F. p. 44)

This constraint on the usage of variants has added to the range of the discussion because it has concerned so far straightforward communication only.

A totally different view of the problem is taken by Ian Robinson, who has a reputation for polemical writing on the use of language. For him there is a conspiracy of forcing Americanisms "upon people who won't speak American". The conspirators are the BBC which favours *truck to lorry*, the supermarkets (!) putting *canned food* on their notices although everybody says *tins*, officials who use *transportation* (in spite of the fact that it means exile to the antepodean colonies; but see COD) for transport, publishers bringing out an English author's book in American spelling.

According to this contributor the interference from American English results in the loss of certain useful meanings of constructions and individual words. The difference between *Do you have?* and *Have you got?* is being dropped, *home* in the language of British house-agents and political propaganda is used for *house* and "How can you in English buy a home any more than love or Killarney? You can buy a house and hope to make your home there" (Robinson, J. p. 51). But the main culprit, according to Robinson, is the ruling élite who "are so unsure of their own language (i. e. themselves) that they have a vague feeling that all is up with our life and everybody else's must be better. . . In its minor way English adoption of Americanisms is our usual establishment of chaos or institutionalization of anarchy." (Robinson, J. p. 51)

Robinson does not make secrets of his emotional attitude towards AE and Americanisms in BE. He mentions that there are Americanisms that 'annoy' him and others that he 'hates'.

Such strong emotional attitude towards another variant of one's language and the importance given to its symbolic function seems to be rare nowadays among educated persons in the

English speaking world at least as it appears in writing. Casual teasing remarks without bitterness are more typical for this circle of native speakers (Quirk 1972 p. 22). However when discussing variants in general some of Robinson's views are rather typical for certain groups of language-conscious native speakers. His ideas of forcing words from the variant A upon the speakers of the variant B by some obscure organized powers, when actually they may be penetrating through close cultural and economic ties (usually from the more vital variant with a greater number of speakers), appears to occur as a general phenomenon in such situations which sociolinguistic research will have to investigate as perhaps one of the universal features in such contexts.

Representative of another line, of those who put the American variant "in its place" by manipulating rather naïvely certain linguistic concepts, is certainly the contribution by the novelist Honor Tracy.

"English, let us be clear about it, is the language of the English people. American usage of it, often racy, vivid, pungent, is a dialect... Ian Ball quotes H. L. Mencken to the effect that the reverse is true because the Americans are the more numerous. This is democracy run mad, on a level of the assertion that 'x million people can't be wrong' whereas of course they can be and usually are. (Tracy, J. p. 52)

Since the linguistically superordinate term language, in H. Tracy's opinion, belongs obviously to BE, and only the term dialect to AE, all the other relations between the two idioms should presumably be so hierarchically ordered including the decision as to what is right or wrong, the latter two categories being apparently always clear. Assuming all the time the possibility of telling people what to use and what to avoid in language, she would be prepared to accept some Americanisms under special provisions. In order to qualify as acceptable the word should be better (ice-box for refrigerator), it should fill a gap (commuter) or it ought to be tangy (sourpuss). Otherwise she admits having problems of "how to keep my blood pressure down or to bite back sudden rude oaths in public places" when Amerenglish crops up in an English publication. She offers a list of some dozen items of what she calls her "bêtes noires" including some derivatives (burglarised, probabilitywise), some examples of conversion (to proposition), some register restricted phrases (improve one's image) and the inevitable American use of the adverb *hopefully* (They told me that he would hopefully come, but regretfully he did not). The implication, of course, is typical, namely, that English has already got words with the same meaning and that the mentioned neologisms, or the diffe-

rence in the syntactic-semantic use, are totally unnecessary. But H. Tracy is not only bothered with American vocabulary items. Without producing evidence she has complaints against, presumably, syntax as well:

"The headmistress of my school was fond of telling us that inaccuracy of language led to sloppiness of thought. Perhaps she was right, perhaps it is the other way round, but both are present in force today, powerfully encouraged by the transatlantic example. Americans no longer seem to know how sentences should be put together, and while their vocabulary may enrich, their construction increasingly blunts and coarsens.

This is by no means to say that the fault is theirs alone. In our schools now, Latin is so little and English so badly taught that the young have no chance of learning correct and seemly usage". (Tracy, J. p. 52)

This kind of a statement could probably be taken as typical and found in many languages when given by an elderly person, except that, besides blaming poor teaching at school, the British can put some blame on America as well. The following sentence by H. Tracy seems to confirm a generalization made by sociolinguists for similar situations: "And it is possible too that languages, like other growths, lose their vigour with time" (*Ib.*). Namely, an amount of interference from a different language (and presumably from a different variant) is perceived by purists as imperfection in language.

The kind of self-righteousness in judging what is and what is not acceptable, the idea of idioms being superior and inferior, the suspicion towards the processes in other variants are all characteristic for laymen's debates about two variants of a language (or two similar languages). In such situations there seems to be among the élite — the typical group of language-conscious people in a community who look at the idiom as a symbol of "owngroupness" — a desire for confirmation of "the uniqueness and independence of the linguistic system or at least of some variety within the system" (Fishman 1974 p. 1639). Hence Mencken's insistence on the term "American language" and H. Tracy's "reminding" the Americanis that what they speak is actually a "dialect".

The debates about the variants in the Anglo-American case have nowadays no immediate political implications as they used to have in the early days of the Republic and in which Noah Webster took a prominent part. In some other instances underlying such debates is the idea that if an area's idiom is not more than a dialect "this may become part of a rationale for political subservience as well" (Fishman 1974, p. 1640).

Linguistic separatism expressed so openly has been limited in our "sample" to the two British contributors. We have seen

that the third member of this group had a different approach and different reasons for his plea to keep the variants separate.

iii. *"America will be the death of English"*

The views taken by the third group of contributors are very different from those entertained by the members of the first group but have a lot in common with the views of the second group. They are linked to the latter group by their belief that the processes they notice in the language are mainly harmful and that English is being destroyed. Their views, on the other hand, differ from those of the contributors to the second group because they do not attack *openly* the penetration of Americanisms into BE. However, the implications from what they say, bring them very close indeed.

One of the contributors who admits using Americanisms with the purpose of expressing particular meanings is worried by the general decay, of what he calls Mandarin English "which is the standard means of communication between the educated of Britain, America, Australia and elsewhere". Now this type of English is rapidly collapsing because of the "inability of notionally educated people even to achieve meaning let alone express it". To substantiate this accusation the contributor quotes a few words from allegedly a Harvard source: "remitted the statute to subsidiary validity as against contrary local practice". Without going into the analysis of the example which obviously belongs to the register of some special discipline, and in its context would probably sound differently, the point to notice here is that the example comes from America. To be fair to the author one should say that he admits that this way of using language is not only an American vice. But that is also a typical view this group of contributors take. "There is mud in the Thames too"... (H. Brogan, J. p. 51) but still America leads the way in the process.

If educated speakers of English cannot achieve or express meaning, they are also guilty of intellectual laziness, and another contributor (who is all for the use of selected Americanisms) is worried about the way "the British have fallen prey to thought-saving fashions — question-begging catchwords, month-old clichés, trendy formulae. Vulgarities was always with us, of course, and stereotypes. The difference now is that those you would expect to resist them are welcoming them — at any rate going along with them." (Enright, J. p. 55).

We find yet another approach to the variants (not unknown in the literature about the problem cf. Quirk 1972 p 19) that of ostentatious disregard for them or of belittling their importance.

This is explained by saying that giving too much importance to them would attract our minds away "from the shameful abuse of meaning which increasingly marks the use of the language in this island". Watching AE will presumably blunt our notions of correctness. To that effect this contributor paraphrases the words of Lord Shaftesbury: "Their existence (ie Americans) and their habits of speech baffle judgement, disturb faith and leave us uncertain as to the character of right and wrong" (Cosgrave, F. p. 42). Consequently, the British should look after their own language and let "the adapters of the English language" like Americans, Australians Canadians and Hondurans do what they will.

The list of the "abuse of meaning" that this contributor offers includes: *contemptuous* for *contemptible*, *irony* for *satyre*, and, of course, the new use of *hopefully*. But the above paraphrase of Lord Shaftesbury, the inclusion of *hopefully*, and the general attitude towards the variant leads one to the conclusion that above the picture of English in decay the shadow of AE influence looms large.

The contributor who leaves no doubt as to the source of corruption of English is Patrick Brogan. He bases his conclusions on his experience in America. In the letters he obtains from his children's school in Washington D. C. he finds spelling mistakes (except for accept) and unacceptable grammar (I want for my child to attend summer school for English). It is not only the schools, but the Americans in general, he thinks, treat their language badly:

"The sentence 'I will take my exams hopefully tomorrow' no longer means that the speaker hopes to pass but that he hopes to reach the examination room.

The destruction of that adverb began on this side of the Atlantic, but the English joined in without a moment of hesitation". (Brogan, F. p. 45)

The origin of some, in the opinion of this author, destructive new forms is also to be found in America and they have now reached England. Such are: *articulate* for say, *relocate* for move, but also (without a gloss given by the contributor) *to input*, *to craft*, *to hone*. Similarly destructive should be the derivatives: *violative* from violate, *supportive* from support, *dismissive* from dismiss etc.

Anyone who uses such words or phrases has obviously no sense of the English language and cannot be brought to understand the fact. (Brogan, F. p. 46)

The blame for this is put on the badness of both American English education. This contributor agrees with a Mr Newman,

the School Superintendent for the District of Columbia, who wrote that owing to the poor quality of teaching "America will be the death of English".

The contributors belonging to this third group, and particularly the last one, continue a tradition which has been in evidence from the times of Dr Johnson who saw the process of corruption in the "American dialect" (Quirk, 1972 p. 14). All contributors in this group are British.

3. The comments reviewed above indicate that the topic about the differences between the two major variants of English and about the interference attracts considerable attention among this special group of native speakers and that a whole spectrum of attitudes towards the language can be established.

If the statements by the British contributors are compared with some of those from the earlier centuries quoted e. g. by Quirk, one can see that the British are less sure of their variant to be the norm for English and that the deviation from it marks sloppiness and provincialism. However, even such overtones are not quite absent (e. g. H. Tracy).

The feature that has emerged very clearly is that interference does not worry the American contributors at all. The reasons are easy to be found if we remember the direction of influence. But it is also characteristic that they do not complain about "unnecessary" neologisms, derivations etc. and there is no mention of the collapse of the English language. Thus it has been easy to place them into our first group.

It is the British contributors who want to keep English pure, who want it to remain the supreme type of English and who are deeply worried about its "decadence". Hence a protective attitude towards British English, very much in evidence in the present century (Quirk 1972 p. 19) can be said to be going strong among this group of native speakers.

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