

**CONTEMPORARY
AMERICAN ENGLISH**

*PHONETICS, PHONOLOGY,
MORPHOLOGY*

COSTIN-VALENTIN OANCEA

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**EDITURA UNIVERSITARĂ
București**

Colecția FILOLOGIE

Referenți științifici: Prof. univ. dr. Andrei AVRAM (Universitatea din București)
Prof. univ. dr. Diana HORNOIU (Universitatea „Ovidius”
din Constanța)

Redactor: Gheorghe Iovan
Tehnoredactor: Ameluța Vișan
Coperta: Monica Balaban

Editură recunoscută de Consiliul Național al Cercetării Științifice (C.N.C.S.) și
inclusă de Consiliul Național de Atestare a Titlurilor, Diplomelor și Certificatelor
Universitare (C.N.A.T.D.C.U.) în categoria editurilor de prestigiu recunoscut.

Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naționale a României

OANCEA, COSTIN VALENTIN

**Contemporary American English phonetics,
phonology, morphology** / Costin-Valentin Oancea. -
București : Editura Universitară, 2022

Conține bibliografie

ISBN 978-606-28-1467-0

811.111

DOI: (Digital Object Identifier): 10.5682/9786062814670

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Editura Universitară

Editor: Vasile Muscalu

B-dul. N. Bălcescu nr. 27-33, Sector 1, București

Tel.: 021 – 315.32.47

www.editurauniversitara.ro

e-mail: redactia@editurauniversitara.ro

Distribuție: tel.: 021.315.32.47/ 0745 200 718/ 0745 200 357

comenzi@editurauniversitara.ro

www.editurauniversitara.ro

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book was written for my students and for anyone who is interested in American English. It is meant to get students acquainted with the fascinating areas of phonetics, phonology and morphology. The book is structured into five chapters. The first one introduces students to the factors that have contributed to the emergence and development of American English. In the second chapter students get acquainted with different concepts used in linguistics: *word*, *lexeme*, *function word*, *lexical word*, *parts of a sentence* and *English as an SVO language*, and they discover the difference between language, linguistics and grammar. The subsequent chapters tackle three branches of linguistics: *phonetics*, *phonology* and *morphology*. Some of the most important aspects are highlighted and presented in what I hope is an accessible and easy-to-understand way. Each chapter is followed by some ‘study questions’ meant to check the theoretical aspects discussed.

This book is also a humble token of gratitude to my professors who taught me linguistics and made me fall in love with the English language. I owe a great debt of appreciation to my first professor of linguistics, Diana Hornoiu (*Ovidius University of Constanța*), who has taught me morphology and pragmatics, who has believed in me and has constantly encouraged me from my 1st year as an undergraduate student. Professor Hornoiu has given me the opportunity to teach linguistics and for this I am forever grateful. I am equally indebted to Professor Andrei Avram (*University of Bucharest*),

my PhD supervisor, who has been my role model and to whom I wholeheartedly thank for his constant support, guidance and mentorship.

I have been supported, encouraged, inspired and tolerated by my wife, Cristina. Thank you for sharing your ideas with me, for reading the book and for your insightful comments. I also have to thank my son, David, for “allowing me” to spend time writing this book and for witnessing the miracle of acquiring language first-hand.

I am grateful to my colleagues from the Department of Modern Languages and Communication Sciences, at Ovidius University of Constanta for their friendship, support and kind words.

Thank you, mom and dad, for everything! This book is dedicated to you.

And last, but not least, not in any way, to all my students who constantly remind me of the beauty and intricacies of the English language, for their compelling questions, intellectual curiosity and inquisitiveness in the best of sense. I hope all of you will find something useful in this book.

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CHAPTER 1

VARIETIES OF ENGLISH: THE ORIGIN OF AMERICAN ENGLISH

In this chapter you will:

- Learn about the development of American English;
- Discover the difference between *accent* and *dialect*;
- Find out what standard and nonstandard English is;

1.1. The Background of American English

The relationship between Britain and America is a very special one, and the most important thing that they have in common is the language. Is this statement accurate? The special relationship between Britain and America started on 4 May 1607, when Jamestown was established as the first permanent English settlement in what was known at that time as the New World, a term used to refer to the Americas. In September 1620 a ship containing more than one hundred immigrants left Plymouth having as final destination America. The name of that ship was the *Mayflower*. They landed on Plymouth Rock, New England in 1620 and the settlers were members of a religious cult known as Puritans.

The history of North American settlement is a very intricate one. It is a continent sometimes referred to as a melting pot of peoples and their languages and cultures.

Spanish plays an important role as it is spoken by a large minority and recent waves of immigration especially from Asia have resulted in the languages and cultures of these regions being spoken in large urban areas. Every metropolis has a neighbourhood called *Chinatown*, thus showing the cultural diversity found within the United States of America. Notwithstanding this cultural diversity, American English is the *lingua franca*, meaning that all official work is carried out in American English. This is also the language taught in schools and the language used for daily interactions. When compared to British English, American English has more native speakers and it is “rapidly becoming the dominant form of English in non-native countries other perhaps than those of Western Europe” (Algeo, 2006: 1).

At the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century, Britain had an empire that contained almost a quarter of the world’s land surface. It was said that the sun never set on the British empire. In order to understand how such a small and rather isolated west European island was able to conquer, colonise and control so many territories, we must look at three important factors: *trade*, *war* and *exploration* (Collier and Marriott, 2002: 3). There are two important stages to the development and growth of the British Empire and to the spread of the English language:

- (i) **The old colonial system.** Starting from 1750 and up to the middle of the nineteenth century, the most important reason for consolidating power and building an empire was to improve trade. The British wanted to, and succeeded in setting up colonies in the Americas and Asia with the aim of providing goods such as tobacco, sugar and cotton.

The colonies were also the perfect place for the British to market their products. However, during this period, the American Revolution (1765-1783) took place and the American Patriots in the Thirteen Colonies managed to defeat the British in the American Revolutionary War, with the help of France. As a result, they gained their independence from Great Britain and established the United States of America on the 4th of July 1776.

- (ii) **The ‘new imperialism’.** Towards the end of the nineteenth century the empire was popular with the British citizens. Slavery, which had played an important part of the British Empire was abolished and different British colonies wanted to gain their independence or some form of self-government. India, for example, which was the jewel of the British Empire, gained its independence on August, 15, 1947. On June, 15, 1947, the British House of Commons adopted the Indian Independence Act, also known as the *Mountbatten Plan*, which divided India into two dominions, India and Pakistan. Each dominion became independent on August, 15 that year.

Despite the rather acrimonious path to independence, the relationship between the United Kingdom and The United States of America has been special and friendly ever since. They have been allies in a number of major conflicts that have shaken up the world: The First and Second World Wars, the Cold War, the Gulf War, the Iraq War and the Afghanistan War, and both countries are part of NATO. The United

Kingdom has also been one of the founding members of the European Union. However, at the referendum organised in June 2016, 52% voted in favour of leaving the European Union. The United Kingdom officially left the European Union on January 31st, 2020.

Returning to the question, “How did English started being used in America?”, Dillard (1996: 1) writes that English arrived to North America with the first English-speaking group in 1497, during an expedition led by John Cabot under a patent from King Henry VII. English, therefore, came to America as a contact language, and this is the salient feature of its early history. There are many hypotheses as to how English has evolved in The New World, from the prominence of Basque (Bakker, 1989), to different pidgins that were created as a result of language contact between the European settlers and the Native Americans¹: Pidgin English (Dillard, 1985; Avram, 2005), American Indian Pidgin English (Angogo and Hancock, 1980), etc., each contributing to the development of American English as we know it today.

Bailey (2012: 4) writes that English arrived to America and began to settle in at the pinnacle of Elizabethan England. In 1643, in London, Roger Williams published *A Key into the Language of America*, an important reference book, describing the language that he heard from Native Americans in Rhode Island. He also acknowledged that other varieties of that language were employed in different parts of the continent.

¹ A detailed description of Native North American Languages is found in Mithun (2001).

*Guaiacum*² was the first word of American origin to enter the English language. Other words borrowed from Caribbean languages, and still used today, include: *chocolate*, *canoe*, *iguana*, *tobacco*, *tomato*. Other words such as *openayk* (a type of potato) and *sacquenummener* (cranberry) have been lost. The word *hurricane*, from the Carib word *huracan*, first entered Spanish, Portuguese, French and Dutch. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the modern English form of the word was settled around 1650.

In 1585-86, the British astronomer, ethnographer and mathematician Thomas Harriot led an expedition to Roanoke Island and two years later, in 1588, he published the reports of his travels which revealed a thorough understanding of the cultural practices of the people he came into contact with in Virginia. Harriot also compiled a phonetic alphabet under the title *An universall Alphabet conteyning six & thirty letters...first devised upon occasion to seeke for fit letters to expresse the Virginian speche* (Bailey, 2012:17; Salmon 1996: 151). The colonization process began shortly after Harriot's return to England.

On July 4th 1776, the Continental Congress adopted the *Declaration of Independence*. The thirteen American colonies severed their political connections to Great Britain and declared themselves an independent nation. Following the Revolution, one of the most notable American lexicographers, Noah Webster, laid the foundation for an ideological American English. In July 1788, he established an organization known as the *Philological Society of New York*. One year later, in 1789,

² Etymologically, the word comes from the Taino language spoken in the Bahamas and is described as a tropical plant and the medicine obtained from its resin (Bailey, 2004: 4).

he made the following prediction regarding the future of American English:

Several circumstances render a future separation of the American tongue from the English necessary and unavoidable... Numerous local causes, such as a new country, new associations of people, new combinations of ideas in arts and science, and some intercourse with tribes wholly unknown in Europe, will introduce new words into the American tongue. These causes will produce, in a course of time, a language in North America, as different from the future language of England, as the modern Dutch, Danish and Swedish are from German, or from one another.

(quoted in McCrum et al., 1986: 241)

In 1919, H. L. Mencken in his seminal work *The American Language* noted that it was appropriate to deem American English a distinct language, namely the *American Language*. Webster, in the preface to his dictionary (1806) wrote that:

In fifty years from this time, the American English will be spoken by more people, than all the other dialects of the language, and in one hundred and thirty years, by more people than any other language on the globe, not excepting the Chinese.

(quoted in Kövecses, 2000: 7)

The predictions that Noah Webster made were considered to be bold and the second one proved to be true. Nowadays, American English is extremely popular and successful, spoken by hundreds of millions of people and its influence is on an ascending curve. In writing this dictionary, Webster's ambition was to establish American English as a national language (Lieber, 2022: 62).

English still remains the dominant language in the United Kingdom and the United States of America. British speakers have no problem in understanding American speakers, therefore, one might say that American English and British English are *mutually intelligible*, and it would make sense to deem them as two varieties of the same language. An important aspect which should be taken into consideration is the fact that each variety has its own dialects and that there is variation within each of the two varieties. Since this book focuses on contemporary American English, British dialects will not be discussed. American English has a variety of pronunciations and dialects and the North American Accent is sometimes described as “a legacy of the sounds of English used in 17th-century England” (Gould and Rankin, 2014: 243).

In an attempt to account for the differences between American English and British English, Hundt (2009: 13) and Schlüter (2009: 110) use the term “colonial lag” to emphasize that American English evolved at a much slower pace compared to British English. One of the main factors that have contributed to this is the “spatial separation from the British homeland.” Schlüter further writes that this generalization unifies not only several phonological features that distinguish American English from British English, but also many morphological and syntactic features. This debunks the myths that “Americans are ruining the English language” (see also Algeo 1998, Murphy 2018) and leads to the conclusion that American English represents an older state of the language in many respects³.

The next section discusses the concepts of “accent” and “dialect” and focuses on regional, social and ethnic dialects found across the United States of America.

³ For a more detailed discussion, see also Görlach (1987) and Hundt (2009).

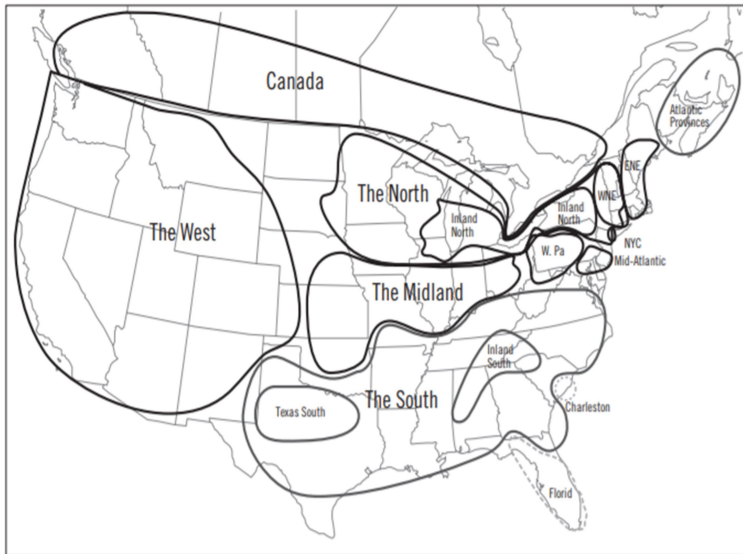
1.2. Accents and dialects

We are all aware of the language differences that exist in our society and the pressure that society puts on the way language is used. Everyone has nowadays some understanding of the term “dialect”⁴. The way in which this concept is used in linguistics, however, is different from its popular definition. A language has several dialects, which means that if we speak a language, it means that we actually speak a dialect of that language. Dialects cannot be evaluated or categorized into “good” or “bad”, because there are no ‘good/bad’ dialects. *Dialect* depicts a language variety that is used by a group of people. There are certain social factors that influence the way in which a particular dialect is used, from geographic location to notions such as ‘cultural identity’ (Wolfram and Schilling, 2016: 2).

The term “dialect” is used to refer to features of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, namely to varieties that are grammatically, phonologically, and even lexically different from other varieties (Chambers and Trudgill, 2004: 3). If two speakers say *I done it yesterday at noon/I did it yesterday at noon*, then it can be said that they are speaking different dialects. The term “accent” is used only to describe aspects of pronunciation that identify where a speaker is from (geographically and socially).

⁴ The first Harry Potter book (*Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*) was published in the UK on the 26th of June 1997. The American edition was published a year later, on the 1st of September 1998, under a different title: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, because the American editors deemed the word ‘philosopher’ to be too archaic for the American audience. Other lexical changes were also made. This shows, apart from the lexical differences between the two varieties, the cultural gap between the two countries.

Despite regional and social differences, many speakers of different dialects of English are mutually intelligible, meaning that they understand each other, even though at times occasional difficulties might arise. Dialects can also be seen as subdivisions of a language. For instance, we can talk of the Bavarian dialect of German, the Birmingham dialect of English, the Andalusian dialect of Spanish, Parisian French, etc. Thus, the difference between language and dialect is that a language contains one or many dialects, all of which are more or less mutually intelligible to other native speakers of that language.



Map 1. Dialect areas of the United States, based on telephone survey data (from Labov, Ash, and Boberg 2005)

The above map reveals the dialect areas found within the United States of America, based on a telephone survey conducted by Labov, Ash and Boberg in 2005.

The first important work on regional dialect variation in America began in 1930 when the **Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada** (LAUSC) was launched and began by training the fieldworkers. Given the enormous geographical spread in North America and the rather recent settlement history of several regions west of the Atlantic seaboard, the survey area had to be divided into several regions. Each region was treated as an individual, self-contained project. This effort was subsequently maintained in the 1960s through a national survey which materialized into the **Dictionary of American Regional English** (Cassidy and Hall 1985, 1991, 1996, 2002, 2012, 2013). It is considered to be the “premier reference work on regional American English dialectology” (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, 2005: 2).

Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2005: 2) further note that the traditional divisions in the United States mirror the differences first established in Colonial America by settlers from different parts of the British Isles. These differences were found in early cultural hubs like Boston, Charleston, Philadelphia and Richmond and later spread outward as English speakers moved inland. This initial dialect division seems to still hold, as it was revealed by William Labov and his team at the University of Pennsylvania (2005), based on an extensive telephone survey of dialect pronunciation throughout the United States (see Map 1). One of the unexpected findings revealed by Labov and his team was that the major dialects of the United States are becoming more different from one another instead of more similar.

Linguists like Boberg (2015: 229), for instance, considers the label “American English” as “less than ideal”, since what some consider “American English” is also spoken by many Canadians, who do not see themselves as American. Boberg further argues that the English used by most Canadians