

O. Bashkatov,
scientific supervisor – candidate of philology, ass. prof. S.V. Dorda,
Ukrainian Academy of Banking of NBU

ABOUT SOME ASPECTS OF AMERICAN ENGLISH

Among the thousands of different languages in the world there is only one that can claim to be a more or less universal language – English. It is estimated that the number of mother-tongue speakers is now over 300 million, of whom some 200 million live in the United States and some 50 million in the United Kingdom.

In addition to the number of mother-tongue speakers there are estimated to be between 500 to 700 million people who use English as a foreign language, making the total number of speakers nearly one-fourth of the world's population. Among the different variants of English the two best-known are American English and British English. It has even been suggested that American English should be called American Language with the argument that “the American form of the English language was plainly departing from the parent stem, and it seemed likely that the differences between American and English would go on increasing” (Mencken in Marckwardt).

This would suggest a much greater degree of mutual unintelligibility between American English and British English than there actually is, and this theory has not been accepted by other linguists. An American and a Briton may sometimes not understand each other without some effort, but they will understand one another. But several differences between the two do exist. This paper will focus on how American English came to be different from British English.

The Origin of American English in the Colonial Period

The English language first came to America with the colonists in the 17th century. The early settlers did not arrive with just one English language; there undoubtedly were several different dialects represented and they obviously had to cope with a general lack of uniformity of speech. It is also obvious that the changes that produced the two varieties of English in question, happened on both sides of the colonisation. British English changed after the emigrants left their homeland and American English after the colonists settled on the continent. In those days it was very difficult for an immigrant in America to be in contact with people left behind in the old country and therefore the changes in language on either side did not transfer to the other.

Life in America, in a totally new environment, was different from the earlier life of the settlers – and language had to evolve because of the necessity to talk about new things, qualities, operations, concepts and ideas. There were features of colonial and frontier life that did not have an expression in the language; they encountered new plants, fish and animals and found themselves among tribes of indigenous peoples who spoke strange languages, wore strange clothing, prepared strange foods and maintained tribal customs quite different from anything they had previously encountered. Even landscapes were different from the English countryside. Names had to be provided for all these unfamiliar aspects of their new life.

Borrowing from the Indians, French, Spanish, Dutch, Germans and Africans

One simple way of creating new names was borrowing them – often from the native Indian languages. Many of the original Indian words contained sounds and had linguistic features that do not occur in English; therefore the words often changed considerably both in form and meaning in the borrowing process. For instance such words as hickory, pecan, chipmunk, squaw and racoon are American Indian borrowings. The spheres of life represented by these borrowings show that the largest number of Indian loan words are connected with the Indian institutions and civilization. In these cases it was obviously easier to borrow the Indian term than to create a new one out of English elements. It was equally obvious that these terms were not transferred to British English, since these domains were not present in Britain.

From the early days of colonisation America became the melting pot of different nationalities and cultures. As these cultures came in contact with one another, they also affected the language. Sources for word loans to American English were, besides the Indian languages, all the other languages that were present in the immigration. In the westward expansion of their territory, the English-speaking emigrants soon came into contact with the French – at the end of the 18th century the French held virtually all the strategic posts along St. Lawrence and Mississippi and a number of vital points on the shores of the Great Lakes as well. Words borrowed from French include such as chowder, praline, prairie, bureau, cent and dime. (Actually some of the French borrowings would be reborrowings, since English borrowed extensively from Norman French in the period beginning after 1066.)

In the course of the borrowing process, the French words were not as violently distorted in form and pronunciation as were the American Indian terms; even though the spelling may have been considerably altered at times, a radical change in pronunciation is not implied. However, the changes of meaning reflected in the French borrowings are at times more complex than those of the Amerindians, partly because so many of the words represent a second borrowing of the same term.

American English also borrowed from Spanish. Moving southward toward the Gulf of Mexico and westward toward the Rockies, the Anglo-Saxon settlers encountered permanent and substantial Spanish colonies. Words borrowed from Spanish include poncho, bronco, sombrero, canyon, enchilada, taco and tequila. It is obvious that the largest groups of borrowings from the Spanish reflects the hacienda culture, which typified the Spanish colonial occupation and the ranching and mining economy which developed out of it.

Contacts with the Dutch colonialists were established in the 17th century. The industrious Dutch burgers and powerful patroons became a part of the English colonial empire in the late 17th century. However, Dutch sailors had been in contact with the colonialists long before that. The borrowings from Dutch into American English include such words as cole slaw, cookie, waffle, sleigh, boss,

Yankee and Santa Claus. Some of the words borrowed from Dutch are wholly or in part translations rather than direct appropriations

The German migrations to America started also in the late 17th century and the borrowings from German include such words as delicatessen, hamburger, pretzel, beer garden and Christmas tree. It seems the contacts between the German and English-speaking immigrants have been to a large extent cultural, since a large portion of the borrowings from German concentrate on food terms and pleasant but commonplace social contacts.

One must not forget another big group of different kind of “immigrants” that influenced the American English – the slaves who were transported from Africa. Such words as gumbo, jazz, voodoo, okra and chigger are Africanisms. It has also been pointed out that many Black American expressions like “be with it”, “do your thing” and “[to] bad mouth [someone]” are word-for-word translations of phrases widely used in West African languages.

These are just a few examples of loan words; there are also many more languages, representing smaller groups of immigrants, that have also made contributions to the American English vocabulary. All have done their part to make American English what it is today.

Дана стаття присвячена розгляду проблеми походження та запозичення слів в американський англійський. Вона містить приклади основних течій запозичення, тобто слова та вирази з мов, що безпосередньо впливали на становлення американського англійського, а також приклади слів, що формувалися на власному ґрунті. Дана стаття підтверджує думку, що маючи спільне джерело походження американський та британський англійський мають суттєві розбіжності.

Literature

1. Crystal, David. The English Language. – London: Penguin Books, 1990.
2. Ferguson, Charles A., and Shirley Brice Heath, eds. Language in the USA. – New York: Cambridge U.P., 1982.
3. Marckwardt, Albert H. American English. Rev. J.L. Dillard. – New York: Oxford U.P., 2nd edition, 1980.
4. www.cftech.com.
5. www.uta.fi.