Università di Firenze Dipartimento di Formazione, Lingue, Intercultura, Letterature e Psicologia

L-11 Corso di Studio in Lingue, Letterature e Studi Interculturali III anno Lingua Inglese 3 (6 cfu)

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**Unit 3: Differences in British and North American English**

* no great differences between BrE & NAmE (except pronunciation):
* remarkable the small extent to which various standard Englishes differ from each other in **vocabulary, grammar & orthography/spelling**

- most important differences (after pronunciation?): frequency index of individual words, syntactic constructions, expressions, co-occurrences (collocations & combinatory preferences), preferences, conventions & habits: “the way things are said”

- also true for generational differences

* differences mainly in **pronunciation**

- **consonant system**

- fairly the same in all present day varieties with exception of the **rhotic /r/**

- same **24 consonant phonemes** in both GenAm & RP

- **non-rhotic accent:** in RP (also New England, NYC, parts of U.S. South, Black AmE, Australia & New Zealand, South African), **/r/** is **only pronounced be**

**fore a vowel**

- does not pronounce /**r**/ before a consonant or pause/at the end of a word (unless next word begins with a vowel)

- **rhotic accent** in NAE (also IrishE, ScottishE, parts of SW England) /**r**/ is **pronounced** in **all positions** in a word, & it changes quality of vowel that

comes before it

- so words like  *car, turn, offer* sound very different

- in NAE **post-nasal /t/**: e.g. *winter* -> *winner, intercity* -> *inner-city, twenty*

- in NAE **intervocalic /t̬/**:e.g. “matter” /‘mæ **t̬**ər/ (almost /d/)

- in NAE “yod **/j/** dropping”: *new* /nju:/ -> /nu:/ *due, dew, not do, tune, nude, tube,*

*tumor*

- **vowel system**

- most **vowels** pronounced a little differently in BrE & NAmE

- GenAm & RP have a different number of vowel phonemes (minimal unit of speech):

- **RP** has **20 phonemes**

- **NAE** (“**Gen Am”)** has 16 phonemes

- missing **/**ɒ**/** (instead has /ɑ:/ or /ɔ:/)

- e.g. *pot, lot, got, odd, palm*

- no centring/centering diphthongs (due to rhotic accent)

- missing RP phonemes: **/ɪ**ə**/, /e**ə**/, /ʊ**ə**/**

- GenAm has combinations: /ɪr/, /er/, /ʊr/

- e.g. *here/lear, hair/lair, lure*

- ***“bath”* words** (NAE /æ/; BE /a:/): *can’t, aunt, castle, fast, glass, staff, after, pass*

- *“No”* BE /əʊ/ NAE /oʊ/

- NAE vowels more nasalized

- stressed vowels often lengthened more in NAE than BE so British think Americans “**drawl**” (strascicare) & NAms think British pronunciation is “**clipped**” (parole tagliate)

- maybe one of English’s greatest assets is no 1-to-1 relation between sound (substantial variance in varieties of English) & symbol/spelling (codified in 18th c)

- accommodates differences in pronunciation

- **lexical differences**: estimated 4,000 words used differently in common speech

- w/ few exceptions create no problems in comprehension

- many scholars estimate more than a million words in English (probably language w/ most lexis)

- Webster’s Dictionary: 470,00 words; Oxford 20-volume Dictionary: ca. 600,000 words

- ENL speaker uses 20-30,000 words

* few **grammar differences**

- NAE simple past or present perfect v. BE present perfect w/ adverbs of frequency: *I already ate//I’ve already eaten.*

- verbs like *suggest, demand, require, insist* or *It is important/essential/necessary that…):* NAE subjunctive v. BE *should* or simple present*:* *I suggest that he study.//I suggest that he should study/studies.*

- NAE *to get/got/gotten* (*for to receive, become, etc.)*//BE *got*

*- some verb forms* NAE regular *smelled, burned, learned, spelled, spoiled, spilled;* BE regular but more often irregular: *smelt, burnt, learnt, spelt, spoilt, spilt*

- NAE irregular verbs *fit, fit, fit (also quit, wet);* BE regular

- NAE use of preposition *like* instead of conjunction *as* for comparisons: *Do it like I do it.*

- different uses of prepositions & adverbs w/ phrasal verbs: NAE *do something over,* BE *do something again;* NAE *fill out/in a form,* BE *fill in;* NAE *protest something,* BE *protest against something*

- after *seem, appear, feel, look, sound* in BE there can be a noun; in NAE use *like* or *to be*

- for the future BE can use *shall* as well as *will* for the 1st person

- for the conditional BE can use *should* as well as *would* for the 1st person

- BE can use *do* to refer to an action already mentioned: *We don’t study as often as we should (do). You should call her. I already have (done).*

- BE possible to say: *I will do, I might do, I can do.* NAE *I will, I might, I can.*

- in BE collective nouns can usually take a singular or a plural verb, in NAE only singular: *The government was/were unpopular.*

- dates: NAE April 25, 1945 (April 25th, 1945); BE 25 April 1945 (the 25th of April)

- NAE *around;* BE *round/around*

- NAE *different from/than;* BE *different from/to*

- NAE *on the weekend/weekends;* BE *at the weekend/weekends*

- time: NAE 10 *minutes past/after midnight;* BE *10 minutes past midnight*

- time: NAE *quarter to/of eleven;* BE *quarter to eleven*

* very minor **spelling differences** basically the same system
  + Noah Webster’s *A Dictionary of American English* (1828)

- NAE *color, theater, realize, traveler*; BE *colour, theatre, realise or realize, traveller*

- also NAE/BE: *(bank) check/cheque; jewelry/jewellery; pajamas/pyjamas; program/ programme; specialty/speciality; tire/tyre*

* very minor **punctuation differences**:

- terminology: NAE *period, quotation marks;* BE *full stop, inverted commas* or *quota-*

*tion marks*

- Titles: in NAE *Mr., Ms.,* *Mrs., Dr.*, etc. all have periods. No periods in BE

- Time: NAE 12:00 o’clock; BE 12.00 o’clock.

- Quotations: NAE uses double quotation marks for quotations, and single quotation marks for a quotation inside a quotation. NAE also puts periods & commas that are not part of the quotation inside the quotation marks. BE does the opposite. For all other punctuation, in NAE & BE if the punctuation is not part of the quotation, it goes

outside the quotation marks.

* unmistakable **16th** & **early 17th c** characteristics still evident in NAE

- NAE uses great number of words, expressions & pronunciations familiar in Elizabethan

English (e.g. Shakespeare) but which have died out in BrE or are being reintroduced from NAE

- *sick, maybe, gotten,* pronunciations of *“bath”* words, some subjunctive forms

- When a speech-community expands geographically, there is a tendency for the peripheral areas, although innovative in vocabulary, to be the most conservative linguistically, while otherwise the original homeland of the language tends to be the most innovative area

- somewhat true for NAm & Br English

- e.g. great majority of new words introduced into English over last 2 centuries from NAE to BrE