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Contemporary English—a challenge for non-native speakers

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Abstract

The paper focuses on contemporary American English and its challenge for those who are exposed to it as non-native users. Due to globalisation, the two main varieties of English (British and American) are becoming closer than they used to be as native speakers of both communicate directly and influence their varieties significantly. The traditional differences between British English and American English are less meaningful, however, English nowadays develops rapidly. The focus of research is based on current trends in both grammar and vocabulary, analysing contemporary American literary prose as many new words and new ways of using grammar in British English come from American English due to the influence of American popular culture and media. Contemporary literary prose is a valuable material of natural written and spoken language. The selected samples of the language are discussed and systemised with an aim to generalise some trends typical for contemporary English.

Keywords: Contemporary English, vocabulary, grammar, informal language.

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1. Introduction

English has become the language of international communication and the majority of English speakers are multilingual people who have learnt English in order to communicate with other multilingual speakers. There are many varieties of English and English language teachers have a problem to choose the proper variety for their learners. In the last two decades, English has been given many attributes such as World English or lingua franca English varieties. Nevertheless, British English and American English are considered as the main traditional varieties of English—native varieties spoken by native speakers. On the other hand, there are nativised varieties of English (Kirkpatrick, 2012), which are not a concern of our study. Despite the fact that there is an interest in courses in World English varieties and the number of multilingual and multicultural English language teachers make up the overwhelming majority of all the teachers teaching English worldwide, in the educational systems of Europe, British English or American English are still a primary goal of primary and secondary language education. In this context, ELT teachers should be aware of the fact that English as any other language develops due to changes in societies and communities, and the language they acquired during their university studies now functions differently, being enriched by productive processes in forming new vocabulary and certain more frequently used grammatical patterns.

There are several ways of being exposed to language, but one of the most accessible is reading contemporary literature. From the vocabulary perspective, technical texts are an enormous resource of new words and newly developed expressions. However, due to the goal of our research concerning general English development, the focus is based on the analysis of contemporary literary prose, both the speech of the narrator (standard written and spoken language) and that of characters (standard, colloquial, substandard and slang language). From the very beginning of our study, both varieties of English (British and American) tended to be taken into account. Having read *The Silkworm* by Robert Galbraith and *The Quickie* by James Patterson and Michael Ledwidge, the size of this article allowed us to focus only on the analysis of one of them, and the choice ended on the latter one due to the language used in the book. James Patterson is considered the world's bestselling thriller writer, a fine writer with a good ear for dialogue and pacing, and his books are a good example of contemporary American English, therefore, we decided to analyse it in this study. It is necessary to emphasise that the goal of this study is not to focus on differences between British English and American English. These differences are the most significant in vocabulary and there are American dictionaries of several hundred pages, while differences in pronunciation and grammar might be summarised in several tens of points. Nevertheless, some words seemed to be so specific or attractive that they will be discussed later. Spoken language seems to be the most different and the higher level of standard language, the fewer differences between British and American English (Peprnik, 1982). As literary prose contains spoken language, it was not possible to disregard challenging items.

2. Typical features of English

Typical features of English are considered flexibility, openness and simplicity. While the former ones refer to vocabulary more significantly, the latter concerns grammar. Non-native speakers should become aware of the fact that the language develops very quickly and they should be exposed to it quite frequently through any media in order to be prepared how the language is used accurately, appropriately and naturally.

2.1. Typical features of English vocabulary

As far as flexibility is concerned, a typical feature of English words is that a word being one part of speech can become another part of speech, e.g., *round* as a noun, adjective, adverb, etc. Chosen literary prose, *The Quickie* contains many sentences in which expressions of one part of speech, e.g., cold eyes (a noun phrase) has become a new part of speech—*He cold-eyed me* (p. 296). Conversion (the process of coining new words in a different part of speech without adding any derivative elements) presents one of the characteristic features of modern English. It is a predominant method of English verb-derivation—*Let there be some explanation, Paul. Something I can stomach* (p. 356).

The second feature related to openness means that English is open to borrowings from any language and that new-native based words are not under the process of being developed in order to replace the borrowings. The words borrowed from other languages are usually written in the form taken from the original language, their pronunciation is frequently assimilated to English sounds. One of the samples is a French word *cul-de-sac*, which originally meant the street that is closed in one end and has the same meaning in British English, which is on the contrary with a preferable American expression *a dead end*. In American English, the word is used more figuratively in the meaning of a new win situation—*I had just enough time to tuck my head between his shoulder blades before we screamed up the hill of my cul-de-sac like a bottle rocket* (p. 30). The nature of semantic change is usually based on similarity of the meaning (metaphor) or contiguity of meaning (metonymy). The above-mentioned meaning seems to be derived from the fact that one referent resembles the other (similarity of the meaning).

2.2. Typical features of English grammar

Grammar is becoming more and more simplified as English is influenced by many other languages, and immigrants to North America have influenced English significantly. A similar process can be recognised in the last three decades due to two processes: globalisation and English becoming a lingua franca in Asia and Europe.

During its historical development, English lost its endings and developed a system of various forms of tenses related to two aspects: progressive and perfective. The system of tenses is simplified in American English, mainly the use of the past simple instead of the present perfect simple, often with *already* and *yet* (Carter, McCarthy, Mark, O'Keele, 2011). The loss of endings is remarkably seen in the subjunctive used predominantly in American English after certain verbs and adverbs with the meaning of recommendation, suggestion, demand, urgency or necessity—*What do you say? That be OK?* (p. 342).

What is definitely related to current trends in English grammar is the acceptance of some structures, which are not appropriate for written language, but natural for spoken one. In informal speech, it is common to use ellipsis, which means not to mention something that is obvious to all participants—*'You get through?' I called down* (p. 288). A speaker encoded an assumption about what can be understood from the situation without being said.

3. Current trends in English vocabulary and grammar

In our research, we focused on the language used in the detective story *The Quickie*, written by Patterson and Ledwidge (2008). Analysing both the speech patterns of the narrator and the characters, a great deal of informal English was recognisable, for example, *And to answer your first question, yes, obviously I'm nuts* (p. 165). As well as many formal words, informal words are also

used differently in both varieties, for example, the expression *buddy*. While in British English, it is an informal expression that means a friend, in American spoken language *buddy* can be used in the meaning of a partner who does an activity with another person so they can help each other—*'You see either of our buddies, Mark or Vince', Trahan advised,….* (p. 167).

The analysis of the word stock confirmed Ferdinand de Saussure's opinion related to the conventionality of the naming units. From the perspective of both English main varieties, some words are accepted by the members of the British community differently from those of the American community—*It took five minutes of nonvirtual cutting and pasting in the last stall of the ladies' room to tape over every incident of my cell number on the LUDs with Scott's home number* (p. 135). The sentence above contains two expressions, conventionally accepted by Americans—a cell number and a stall having their equivalents in British English (a mobile number and a toilet cubicle). There were many examples of the conventionality of naming units, e.g., *When I was able to concentrate again, I lifted my head up and squinted at the face of the shadowed figure who was standing with an unnerving stillness behind the blinding flashlight* (p. 289), used in British English as torchlight.

Some words imitate natural sounds and noises, and are influenced by the extra-lingual reality, e.g., *tsk* as an exclamation used to 'represent the sound made by the tongue while disapproving something' (OALD, 2005, p. 1647). This sound was used as a verb in the sentence—*He tsked after a few seconds, snapped it shut* (p. 163). In modern English, these interjectional and onomatopoetic words flexibly change their part of speech for another one.

As far as grammar is concerned, it was possible to recognise the language typical for spoken English, with acceptable sentence headers (a type of fronting) and tails (right dislocation), unfinished utterances, ellipses either structural, textual or situational. As an example concerning situational ellipsis has been mentioned, the book contained other types of ellipses as well, for example, structural ellipsis—'*The ultrasound showed everything was fine', I said* (p. 306), in which the optional use of *that* does not affect the comprehension of the utterance.

3.1. Vocabulary

One of the principal processes of adding new words to the vocabulary is without doubt compounding. Contemporary English is overfilled by hyphenated expressions that might consist of more words than three or four. Comparing both analysed literary texts visually, it might be concluded that hyphenated expressions are more frequently used in American English. *I decided to leave the lights off and crack open a dusty case of calla-lily-scented candles from the front-ball closet* (p. 19). Analysing the example, it is necessary to emphasise that these hyphenated expressions are mostly adjectives in their pre-modifying role. Compounding as one of the principal word-formation processes belongs to the most productive and many words in the English word-stock were added to the English vocabulary—*It was life-threatening* (p. 35)—as an adjective in the meaning of 'that is likely to kill somebody' (OALD, 2005, p. 888). What seems to be more specific in contemporary English is that the number of the words hyphenated together seems to be endless, for example, *We'd been one of those sickening, best-friend married couples. The let´s-die-at-the-exact-same-movement Romeo-and-Juliet soul mates* (p. 12).

According to Quirk et al. (1972), there is a tendency to write compounds in American English as one word or separate, while in British English hyphenated. Some studies related to compounding (Beresova, 2011; 2015) show that hyphenated compound adjectives occur in American English more frequently than in British English. Analysing the words in American contemporary literary prose, we

are likely to conclude that hyphenated expressions enabled the writer to develop a lot of new expressions on a particular purpose.

As the principal processes of forming words are completed by minor processes, the expressions which might attract a non-native reader were mostly those formed by shortening. The chosen literary text proved the tendency towards shortening either in the use of clipped words, acronyms and initialisms. Some of the initialism became popular through American TV shows, such as ER—*Some ER doctor is sewing Scott's stitches right at this moment* (p. 57), the others were easily comprehensible without any previous knowledge or experience, such as NYPD (New York Police Department)—*The gold badge I'd been given when the NYPD promoted me to detective* (p. 58). Checking it on the internet, we can conclude that it stands for *New York City Police Department* and therefore it can be sometimes abbreviated as NYCPD. Some of the abbreviations were related to a specialist field, such as CPR standing for cardiopulmonary resuscitation, which is a lifesaving technique useful in many emergencies, related to first aid—*My father had to give me CPR until they defibrillated me* (p. 62). Some were guessed from the context, for example, ME for medical examiner—*'Maybe more, but we're still waiting on the ME so we can roll him'* (p. 72).

Some samples of conversion—*I watched as even the commissioner, standing beside the ME offices' hearse, cupped a hand over his eyes* (p. 91) need deeper analysis from both diachronic and synchronic approaches to find out how the words of different parts of speech have become identical and which one is primary and which one is derived.

Writers of literary prose usually play with the language and some expressions in the mentioned book like comparisons might have been newly developed by the writer as they could not be found in the dictionaries, for example, *My boy Scotty, he was Freddy Krueger with a badge, more twisted than a pretzel* (p. 295). While searching for them on the internet, we could find out that these expressions had mostly been cited from the analysed book—*My heart floated like the bubbles in my glass* (p. 276). Similes are easy to understand and are usually used in informal language—*As he stepped out of the van, one thought pounded through me like a sledgehammer* (p. 301).

Some expressions were fully incorporated into newly developed rhyming sayings such as the expression *the rat race* used in the sentence *'The family that quits the rat race together…', I said. 'Stays together', Paul said ….* (p. 312).

Many words were culturally connotated and those non-native speakers who could not experience American culture might not fully comprehend the text, for example, *Every hammerhead, blue, sandtiger, maybe even a great white or two, will be all over you like a bum on a bologna sandwich* (p. 296). Some expressions were specific to American culture—*It was my baby shower* (p. 323). A baby shower means a party at which a woman who is going to have a baby is given presents. Some expressions related to American culture had to be searched for on the internet—*'My daughter Caroline's fourth birthday is today and I have to make a Dora the Explorer cake or the world will end', Veronika said, staring into my eyes* (p. 361) as non-native speakers do not know that Dora the Explorer is an American educational animated TV series, which centres around a Hispanic American girl named Dora who travels, and therefore she is called Dora the Explorer. As there are many action figures and playsets available in the markets, children love cakes topped by the figure of this girl.

Some general meaning expressions have specific meanings in North American English such as *a shoulder* in the meaning of 'an area of ground at the side of a road where vehicles can stop in an emergency' (OALD, 2005, p.1409) in the sentence *He slapped me across the face before he lifted me up and threw me into the passenger seat then steered the van back on to the shoulder* (p. 303).

The book contains hundreds of colloquial and slang expressions, which needs an extra study and deep analysis of those that penetrated into British English from American English and are used naturally without recognising their origin. A completely new meaning of the expression found in the crime novel was *a conman* having its original meaning as 'a man who tricks others into giving him money, etc.' (OALD, 2005, p. 321), which did not match the co-text—*I sat there, staring at my incredible conman of a husband. What an amazing liar he was* (p. 383) and the plot context. In this case, it is necessary to be an experienced target language reader who appreciates implicit as well as explicit meanings and is able to interpret highly colloquial literary works.

3.2. Grammar

In spite of stress and intonation, repetition, using stronger words and adding other words, there are other grammatical changes in English which helps emphasise words or parts of sentences. One of the most common is changing the order of subject and object (the passive) when the emphasis moves from who did it to what happened. Other grammatical changes concern fronting, cleft sentences, introductory it and there and nominalisation. All of these grammatical changes occurred in the mentioned book, for example, fronting in which an adverbial phrase was moved to position before the subject—*Inside were conference rooms, several flat-screen TVs, a well-stocked weight room* (p. 282).

The language of the book was full of patterns concerning emphasis and our interest focused on nominalisation. According to Vachek, Hladky, Krojzlova (1990), nominal tendencies are characteristic for English because the nominal predication plays a more important part in English as it can make a sentence shorter (packing a lot of information into a noun phrase), leaving the rest of the sentence free to add new information, e.g., *I did a headstand as the van sprang forward, then a belly flop as it dropped back down with a hard bounce* (p. 300). While many languages dispense with the use of the finite verb form in actional predications, in English the nominal predication is frequent—*'Paul, you're under arrest'* (p. 385). Other grammatical structures, which play a role of a condenser, are participles either –ing participles, e.g., *Approaching a rusted tin wall at the rear of the junkyard, I hear a loud metal screech* (p. 170) or –ed participles, e.g., *I heard its contents being dumped on to the table as I scanned the room for another exit* (p. 175) or participles that can condense a complex sentence in which the subject of the dependent clause is not identical with that of the main clause—*And if what brother Mark said about Scott being involved with them was true, then hell, maybe even he had it coming* (p. 308).

According to Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, Finegan (1999), more negative forms may occur in the same clause to express a single negative meaning, but this is usually found in casual speech, socially stigmatised. In the book, two negative forms were in the language of a drug dealer—*Because he never did nothing without some twisted reason, believe me* (p. 295). In general, the negative form is used where a non-assertive form would occur in writing or careful speech. In the example above, the meaning is affirmative in this context.

Colloquial language behaves differently and is not grammatically correct which also indicates the social status of the speaker—'*You getting the picture now? You feeling me?'*—in the meaning that the man asks the police officer if she understands what he plans to do with her.

According to Biber et al. (1999), the combination *have + gotten* rarely occurs in British English, however, the preference in American English is very strong as many occurrences of *have got* in American English have a meaning equivalent to *have* as a lexical verb, rather than *get* in the perfect aspect. *Have gotten* has a perfective meaning in American English—*Our wedding song. Could it have gotten any more disgustingly perfect?* (p. 276).

In one part of our research referring to grammatical structures, it was not possible to disregard some features typical for American English. Reinhart (1999) stated, 'In formal English, a group of verbs and adjectives that are used to recommend, suggest, request, demand, express urgency or necessity etc., are commonly followed by a that clause with the bare infinitive as its verb' (p. 104). Most grammarians call this the no subject-verb concord subjunctive, which is distinguished into two forms: the present subjunctive and the past subjunctive. The bare-infinitive forms are present subjunctive forms. As it was mentioned beforehand and proved by corpus findings (Biber et al., 1999), subjunctive forms are more common in conversation and very common in fiction and news as post-predicate that-clauses—*'…when this loud, drunken moron storms in and demands that the Patriots game be put on'* (p. 368). In British English this grammatical structure includes should—*should be put on*. The adjectival predicate *be sure* is relatively common (Biber et al., 1999) and takes post-predicate that clauses. The adjective *sure* expresses necessity—*'The Lord', Mike said, 'He sure do work in mysterious ways'* (p. 309).

According to Biber et al. (1999), relative clauses with *that* are about twice as frequent in AmE conversation as in BrE conversation. In our American contemporary text, this feature was clearly recognisable, for example, *The thought that somebody else could possibly get hurt out there made me almost physically sick* (p. 90) or *…haunting tenor that would have made Ronan Tynan jealous* (p. (91).

While in British spoken English *go* is used with *and* plus another verb to show purpose, in American English the *and* is left out—*Go talk to her* (p. 317).

The range of valency patterns with *get* matches the exceptional range of meanings the verb can have. In case of monotransitive SV + complement clause, *get to do sth* can also express to have the opportunity to do sth—*I never got to hear him finish his sentence* (p. 303). As far as copular SVP pattern with an adjective as predicative is concerned, *get* belongs to four common copular verbs, most frequently used in conversation, and relatively common in fiction (Biber et al., 1999), for example, *'I'm guessing you'll think you're going to get lucky—a passing boat or plane will spot you, pick you up'* (p. 296) or *'… since I got pregnant'* (p. 224).

4. Conclusion

In general, shortening expresses the trend of modern English towards monosyllabism, and thus it is a process in which a part of the original word is taken away. Shortening of spoken words (clipping) is based on a reduction of a word to a shorter form, omitting one or more syllables—*I parked at a hydrant, feeling like I was in a trance as I watched Paul get out of the Jag, carrying the Tiffany bag* (p. 357). Clipped words are typical for colloquial speech, although some of them are now used without any stylistic colouring (Kvetko, 2009).

Mentioned before, we did not want to focus on the differences between British English and American English, however, as non-native speakers education in European context, many expressions evoked a feeling of differences, mostly in spelling, e. g., *toward* (BrE towards), *tidbit* (BrE titbit), *gray* (BrE grey) or words like *cell phone* (BrE mobile). It was surprising to find out that some colloquial expressions are written or used differently by some American writers—*'Be back in a jiff, honey'* (p. 301) compared with British *jiffy* as an informal expression for a moment, and the fixed phrase *in a jiffy* (OALD, 2005, p. 831), which means very soon. *Jiffy* is used in American English as well.

Studying the position of English adjectives in English morphology, the position of adjectives standing behind the noun is considered as the remnants of French influence. Apart from fixed expressions, commonly used such as Attorney General, the analysed literary text provided expressions such as *a woman scorned* in *There's no better informant than a woman scorned* (p. 164),

which means that this pattern is still in use. American English is full of colloquial expressions (*baby on board* in the meaning of being pregnant in the plot context)—*Back home I checked my answering machine, the poured myself a glass of wine to calm my shot nerves. Then I remembered the baby on board* (p. 216) and fixed expressions such as *spill your guts* in the meaning of telling somebody everything you know because you are upset—*If there was anyone who I could—and—should—spill my guts to, it was him* (p. 213). On the other hand, some British expressions (*leave it out*) have their counterparts in American English (*leave it alone*)—*'Leave it alone, partner', I said* (p. 213).

Hyphenated adjectives were numerous—I had just enough strength to toss the questionable orange-speckled bedspread into the corner of my three-hundred-dollar-a-night closet before I passed out (p. 338). Some of these expressions are difficult to be translated into other languages and require the whole clauses to make a sense 'I'm investigating a hit-and-run accident' (p. 361).

To conclude, it is necessary to generalise some tendencies typical for contemporary English. In the 1960s–1980s, it was more natural to post-modify the noun by of-constructions. The expressions like the learning of languages was replaced by language learning and the structures in which several expressions pre-modify the noun are very frequent, for example, *his post-retirement exercise routine consisted of riding the subway here to the last stop* (p. 334). These constructions are mostly translated into other languages through post-modifying phrases, for example, *Monticiano itself was housed in a repurposed nineteenth-century firehouse* (p. 277). What is more, they usually need more words or even a clause while being translated into other languages, for example, *'Sorry', I said to my thoroughly disturbed female executive neighbor, who was on the phone* (p. 345).

While some idioms are still used in English—*'I know I'm being a pain in the neck',* I said (p. 351) in the meaning of being very annoying, contemporary English is enriched by many idioms used once in a film or a book and later accepted by native users. These expressions are usually not incorporated in the official dictionaries and are to be found only in urban dictionaries—*I tell her I want a paternity test, I want to talk to my lawyer, but she says to calm down, she's not going to boil any rabbits* (p. 374) in the meaning of describing the actions of an obsessed deranged person when he/she is not returned their affections.

Nominal tendencies and condensation in English sentences are not related to only specialised texts, but contemporary literary prose provided enough evidence about its strength. Apart from other grammatical structures (-ing and –ed participles), the English infinitive functions as a condenser mainly in final clauses—*It was going to be incredibly hard to get used to not being a cop* (p. 314). The number of sentences related to nominal trends and those concerning all types of ellipses can allow us to conclude that despite the fact that grammar is more stable and does not change rapidly, the changes are continuous, balanced and systematic.

This article is unlikely to cover all the specificities related to contemporary English. The fundamental idea was to support the idea of extensive reading in a target language making ELT professionals focus primarily on those language items which attract them, while being exposed to contemporary English, as they are likely to enrich the use of natural English in diverse areas of human life and society.

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