

## AMERICAN ENGLISH AND THE TAG OF COLONIAL LAG

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The Colonists who went across the Atlantic in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century obviously spoke various dialects of the then current language of Great Britain. Unmindful of the finer aspects of life, they were busy with the sterner realities, establishing homes and eking out subsistence. Most of them seemed to have read little except the Bible and biblical commentaries (Mencken, 1936). Bliss Percy (cited in Mencken, 1936) wrote that one could find hardly any allusion to Shakespeare and Milton in the American native literature of that time. He further wrote:

“The Harvard College Library in 1723 had nothing of Addison, Steele, Bolingbroke, Dryden, Pope and Swift.”

So, we see that the Colonists had no intimate association with other English people back home and their literature. Naturally, they lost step with the changes taking place in the language in England. And the changes, no doubt, were taking place on a large scale, since there was a movement in England during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century to standardize the language. Samuel Johnson, the main exponent:

“... permitted himself to read the death-warrants of many archaisms that were not really archaisms at all.”

(Mencken, 1936)

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The Colonists, being cut off, preserved in their speech words, pronunciations and forms brought from England which had become obsolete in the old country. In some cases, they retained the older meanings of words in which a specific semantic change occurred. This is how 'Colonial lag',

" ... that in a transplanted civilization, certain features which it originally possessed remain static over a period of time."

(Marckwardt, 1958)

became an easily discernible attribute of the American English.

Mencken (1936) is of the opinion that for the Colonists King James' Bible was a 'written guide' and they remained faithful to the sacred text in the face of any English linguistic reform. So, when 'fashionable prudery' in England ordered the abandonment of 'sick' for 'ill', the Colonists refused to follow because 'sick' was both in the New and Old Testament. He gives a list of words and phrases which similarly survived from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century English. They are now exclusively American and considered obsolete in England. In Dr. Dunlison's essay 'Americanism', published in the Literary Journal of the University of Virginia, 1829, included in Mathews (1931), there is a list of the words (Americanisms) which were formerly common in Great Britain and used by the best writers. On this basis, Dr. Dunlison asserts that it is good English (i.e. used by great writers). He further states:

" ... although ancient, we would not designate by the terms; for, if fashion induces the people of Great Britain to neglect them, we have the right to oppose the fashion and to retain them. They are English words."

Now, to illustrate this archaic element, I shall start with the vocabulary. According to Mathews (1931), 'bug' at an early time was used to mean an insect. The word still retains the same meaning in the United States but, in England, it denotes a bedbug, chinch. Marckwardt (1958) has briefly outlined the history of quite a few words from this particular viewpoint. According to him, 'loan' used as a transitive verb is an Americanism. British usage prefers 'lend'. The verbal form of 'loan' originated in England in the year 1200. In America, loan was used in this form around 1729, and all of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) citations for the 18<sup>th</sup> Century are drawn from American sources. During the subsequent period, the American writers continued using this word in this form, and the 1864 edition of Webster recorded it for the first time. The word 'andiron' was used in England from 1300 on. However, late in the Sixteenth Century, the same article was called 'firedogs' and continued to be so called to the present day. In 1826, Scott used both the words together, 'the andirons or dogs'. Subsequent quotations in the OED are American. The term 'druggist' replaced the older 'apothecary' in the early 17<sup>th</sup> Century in England, and also spread to Scotland and the American Colonies. The term was used for a retail seller of medical drugs until the first half of the Eighteenth Century. About 1750, in England, the term 'chemist' was used instead, and sometimes both chemist and druggist were written in combination. In America and Scotland, the older term, druggist, remained in use.

Some archaic words in American English can still be found in regional dialects in Britain. The word 'shoat' which means 'a young weaned pig', continued to be a standard British English word from the early Fifteenth Century to the early Eighteenth Century. However, the citations appearing for the late Eighteenth

and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries show the word being used in Norfolk and Wiltshire respectively. The word was carried to America and has been in use there till present. The word 'deck' for a pack of cards, was commonly used in England in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century; its use survives in England only in the northern dialects, but it is commonly used in America. 'Cater-cornered', a normal term in the United States, is cited only for Shropshire and Leicestershire. 'Squirt' used as a personal appellation and 'pond' for a natural and not an artificial body of water, are cited respectively for Cheshire and Surrey. 'Polliwog', meaning 'tadpole', was commonly used in the whole of England until the mid-17<sup>th</sup> Century; since then, the word has been confined to the East Anglian and northern countries, although it is widely used in America.

Marckwardt (1958) notes that there are many words which have retained their older, relatively neutral significance in America, while they were later used pejoratively in England. For example, the use of the word 'bloody' in 'Pygmalion' by Shaw, was quite neutral in America, but in England, it was regarded as indecent, with overtones of blasphemy. The same is also true of the word 'stomach'; its use in ordinary speech was considered indecent in Britain, but there was nothing pejorative about it in America. On the other hand, there are some examples of amelioration. Some words attained positive connotations with the passage of time in England, but retained the older, negative meanings in America. Marckwardt (1958) exemplifies this with the word 'nasty' which, in its original sense, meant 'foul, filthy, dirty'. Today, in Britain, the word means 'that which is somewhat unpleasant'. But in America, the word is used in its earlier meaning.

Retaining the older meanings of words is not the only form of Colonial lag regarding vocabulary. In fact, the English simply discontinued using certain senses of words which are still employed in America. 'Fall' for 'Autumn' is a good example.

Quoting some authorities like Thornton Halliwell and Gepp, Mencken (1936) gives a list of words and phrases, 'many of them now exclusively American', which survive from the English of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. Among nouns, he notes 'fox-fire', 'flap-jack', 'jeans', 'molasses', 'shoat', 'beef' (for the live animal), 'cord-wood', 'bub', 'home-spun', 'andiron', 'bay-window', 'cesspool', 'clodhopper', 'cross-purposes', 'greenhorn', 'loop-hole', 'ragamuffin', 'trash', 'stock' (for cattle), 'offal', 'din', 'muss' (as Shakespeare used it), 'chump', 'heft', etc. Among adjectives, 'homely' was used in its American sense of plain-featured by Shakespeare and Milton. Other such survivors are 'burly', 'cater-cornered', 'deft', 'copious', 'scant', etc. Among the verbs retained are, to 'whittle', to 'wilt', and to 'approbate'. To 'guess', as used now in America, can be found in Shakespeare.

Archaic elements are quite markedly discernible in American pronunciation also. Two vowel sounds, /ae/ and /a:/, for example, in 'path', 'dance', 'fast' and 'bath', show the difference very clearly. In British English (Br. E), these words are pronounced with /a:/, while in American English (Am. E), with /ae/. Most authorities are of the opinion that words like 'path', 'dance' and 'fast' etc. were pronounced in English of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century as now in America. There is no agreement over how and when this broad /a:/ sound developed in England (Marckwardt, 1958). However, according to Jespersen (1909), the first indication of it was in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. The important point is that AmE. Has retained the earlier pronunciation feature,

while RP in Britain has undergone a change. The /r/ sound, as in 'word' and 'turn', is very conspicuous in this regard. In the beginning, these words had the vowel indicated by their present spelling, followed by consonantal r. So, 'word' was pronounced as /w>rd/ and 'turn' as /t^rn/. By Shakespeare's time, various vowels had started to coalesce, with the following r to produce a vowel sound, somewhat like /3:/ (Marckwardt, 1958). It is the inverted position of the tongue while pronouncing that gives the sound its r-like quality. It seems, with the passage of time, the vowel /3:/, as in err, was pronounced in southern England with the tongue less inverted until, by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, the r-sound was almost completely lost. The same happened with post-vocalic /r/, as in 'farm' and 'car', etc. In his 'Pronouncing Dictionary' of 1791, Walker writes:

"... in England, and particularly in London, the r in bar, bard, card, regard, etc. is pronounced so much in the throat as to be little more than the middle or Italian a, lengthened into baa, baad, cad, regaad."

He adds that, in London:

"... it is sometimes entirely sunk."

(cited in Marckwardt, 1958)

So we see that the r sound, which is almost lost in England, has been retained in America, which can only be termed 'Colonial lag'. However, it is important to mention that some English dialects yet retain /r/. In the accents of the southwest of England, some lexical items occur with non-prevocalic /r/ where no /r/ would be expected. In southwestern English cities like Southampton and Portsmouth, words such as 'banana', 'America' are pronounced with final /r/ (phonotactic /r/). In

some other dialects /r/ is retained in the same way as in American English (Trudgill, 1986).

Another example of 'Colonial lag' is that the /ʌ/ vowel of RP found in 'cup' or 'bum' is more open than the corresponding American vowel sound which is more like /a:/. During the last 500 years, this sound has developed from one which was like the present stressed English vowel /u/ as in 'put'. So it is clear that, in British English, the sound has undergone a radical change and the American variety preserves an intermediate stage.

Similarly, the RP /ɒ/ sound, as in 'pot', 'God', 'stock', 'hot', etc. is unrounded /a/ in American English. In the British sound, there is more rounding of lips. The comedies of the Restoration period suggest unrounded pronunciations of this vowel sound in these words, e.g. 'Gad' (Marckwardt, 1958). Again, we find that American English seems to retain a two- or three-hundred year's old feature of British English.

Preservation of secondary stress, as in 'sécondáry', 'dictionáry', 'necessáry', 'secretáry', etc. is another archaic feature in Am.E. Br.E. has a tendency to more vowel reduction in the third syllable of these words, e.g. in 'Birmingham' or 'matrimony'. The presence of secondary stress in such words in the pronunciation of Shakespeare is shown by the prosody of Hamlet's line, 'Customary suits of solemn black' (quoted in Marckwardt, 1958). This secondary stress retained by Am.E. was abandoned in England around the late 18<sup>th</sup>/early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In words like 'fertile', 'missile' and 'hostile', the final unstressed <ile> as / / is typical of Am.E., which retains an old feature. In RP, it is /ail/ which is a recent British development. /ɔ:/ for RP /ɒ/ as in 'cough', 'cross', 'off' and 'cloth', and /æt/ for RP /a:/ as in 'clerk', 'Derby', etc., show that Am.E. has

preserved features of the language which were subsequently changed in Br.E.

Differences in the pronunciation of individual words, irrespective of a whole class of sounds (discussed above), show that Am.E. seems to stick to older pronunciations. For example Americans pronounce 'schedule' with sk, which is an older British pronunciation. The present pronunciation with sh was adopted in Britain during the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Marckwardt, 1958).

Some syntactic and morphological aspects of Am.E. also show a tendency towards older elements. Am.E. uses strong verbs where Standard English uses weak ones. The American variety has an additional past participle form 'gotten' for the verb 'got', which is not used in Br.E. these days, with the exception of the Tyneside dialect. This form was used in England before the mid- or late-17<sup>th</sup> Century (Marckwardt, 1958), but Americans employ it today also.

Another difference is the most common use of plural verbs and plural pronouns of reference with collective nouns like 'government' etc. in the Br.E. The same is true of the teams. Hence, 'England have won the match against Australia'. But Am.E. has retained the old practice and uses collectives the way they were used in Shakespeare's time (Marckwardt, 1958).

In Am.E., the typical use of simple past for indefinite anterior, particularly with yet, e.g. 'Did you eat yet?', could be an Irish influence, or could be simply archaic. Again, the use of Be + en for resultative intransitive is interesting. For the Br.E. 'he has been dead for ten years', an American would say, 'he's ten years dead'. This is Irish English influence retained till now – an archaic element. In Standard English, only one modal could be used, i.e. 'I might/could do it', but in Am.E., two modals



could be used together, i.e. 'I might could do it'. This could be Scottish influence retained, or simply archaic in both dialects.

Marckwardt (1958) is of the opinion that 'Colonial lag' is not confined only to language; Americans have retained some other elements of cultural heritage also which may not be found in Britain today. He maintains that, although Puritanism as a religious faith is no more, it yet exists all over the American nation as a moral force, giving an idea that life is a most serious business and current morality is the touchstone to judge everything. Another point he mentions is that Kentucky and West Virginia mountains bloody feuds are, in fact, the continuation of feuds and rivalries of Scottish culture which found their mention in many ballads and chronicles. American patchwork quilt patterns with old English designs is another archaic element preserved. Marckwardt (1958) also mentions folk ballads and folk music of their ancestors of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, kept alive by American women who sang them on different occasions.

However, it seems very pertinent to mention that Am.E. is not only nostalgic and composed only of the old English of Great Britain, its mixing and marrying of other languages from around the world is a well known phenomenon. And it is not a matter of the past only; it is true even today. In fact, this language is very assimilative and inventive and Americans have proved their superior imaginativeness in meeting their linguistic emergencies. Marckwardt (1958) and Mencken (1936) give detailed accounts of borrowing of Am.E. from various sources and give lists of words which might be considered part of the current vocabulary of a large number of speakers of Am.E. The words borrowed from American Indians include the names of the plants of fruits, e.g. catalpa, squash, hickory, etc.; foods, e.g. succotash; animals,

e.g. moose, raccoon and woodchuck, etc.: Amer-Indian culture, e.g. maniton, pot latch, etc., and some miscellaneous terms. Marckwardt (1958) thinks that all these loan words are nouns, which show that borrowing is of superficial type and mingling of the culture is only casual, rather than intimate.

They have briefly traced the history of French borrowings. Food words include 'Sazarac', (Pie) a la mode, 'Praline', etc.; exploration and travel terms are 'carry-all', 'portage', 'voyageur', etc.; coinage words mentioned are 'cent', 'dime' and 'mill'; plants and animals are 'pumpkin', 'gopher', 'caribon', etc.; furniture and building words include 'bureau', 'depot', and 'shanty'. There are quite a few words under the heading of miscellaneous. Words 'prairie' and 'portage' are also very commonly used French borrowings.

The words still common in American English which may be traced to the Spanish origin are many. Marckwardt (1958) has listed them under ten different headings. Some of them are: 'alfalfa', 'barracuda' (plants; 'chigjer, cockroach (animals); 'Chile Con Carne', 'tortilla' (food and drink); 'plaza', 'cafeteria' (building); 'ranch', 'buckaroo' (ranch life); 'poncho' (clothing); Most adoptions from the Spanish reflect the hacienda culture which typified the Spanish Colonial occupation and the ranching and mining economies. Although most of the borrowings are nouns, there are other sorts of words which also demonstrate an influence somewhat deeper than the casual, substantive level.

About Dutch borrowings, Marckwardt writes:

"... they form a part of the most intimate fabric of the language and are in much more general use than either the Spanish or the French loan words."

Some of the words are 'cookie', 'waffle' (food); 'sleigh', 'span' (transportation); 'hay-barrack' (farm and building); 'boss', 'patroon', 'Yankee' (social classification); 'dope', 'dumb' (stupid); Santa Claus (miscellaneous).

The German borrowings came into American English mostly during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Marckwardt (1958) lists about fifty words, e.g. 'hock beer', 'delicatessen', 'hamburger', 'noodle', 'semester', 'seminar', 'bum' and 'loafer', etc.

Am.E. borrows words from other immigrants also. Terms like 'goober' (peanut); 'voodoo' and 'hoodoo' came into the American language through African slaves. Some Swedish, Italian and Chinese words like 'skijor', 'Pizzeria' and 'Chowmein' respectively, can be found in Am.E. There are Yiddish words like 'schmaltz' (excessive sentimentality); 'schlep' (to drag); 'schlock' (rubbish) (Trudgill and Hannah, 1982).

American English is highly inventive. To make sharp and acute angles of expression, Americans have coined numerous new words. Mathews (1931) includes an article 'South-Western Slang' in his book and comments that an examination of it shows that a fair number of the terms dealt with are not slang, but interesting words that may be termed 'westernisms'. For example, in Texas, you never have things in your house, or baggage on your journey, but 'tricks'. A Texan never has a great quantity of anything; he has 'scads', 'swads' or 'oodles' of it. 'Quirt' is a kind of whip used for horses. A 'flea-bitten' colour is one dotted with minute specks of white and black.

Trudgill and Hannah (1982) are of the opinion that American derivational suffixes are highly 'productive'. They mention two verb-forming affixes to elaborate the point:

- “- ify, as in citify, humidify, uglify  
 - ize, as in burglarize, decimalize, hospitalize,  
 slenderize, traumatize, vacationize.”

Similarly, certain noun endings are highly ‘productive’ in Am.E. (Trudgill and Hannah, 1982), e.g.

- cian : beautician (hairdresser)
- ee : draftee, standee, interviewee, divorcee
- ery : eatery, bootery, winery
- ster : teamster, gamester.

For many concepts or things, Americans have manufactured words different from the ones used in Br.E. For example, in Am.E. ‘emcee’, ‘faucet’, ‘somophore’ are **used** respectively for ‘compere’, ‘tap’ and ‘second year student’ (Trudgill and Hannah, 1982). In fact, there is quite a long list of such words in Trudgill and Hannah (1982). Am.E. has its own motoring terms, e.g. ‘hood’ and ‘truck’ are used for the British words ‘bonnet’ and ‘boot’ respectively. Similarly, Americans have their own railway terms, ‘railroad’, ‘freight’ and ‘engineer’ for the Br.E. equivalents ‘railway’, ‘goods’ and ‘engine driver’ respectively. Am.E. has many new compound words like ‘moon-buggy’, ‘space-shuttle’ and ‘disk-drive’. Americans have numerous new verbs, e.g. to ‘auto’, to ‘jell’, to ‘phone’, to ‘taxi’, to ‘typewrite’, etc. Mencken (1936) calls it the process of back-formation. Some verbs are nouns unchanged, e.g. to ‘author’, to ‘service’, to ‘debut’, etc.

To sum up, the existence of the colonial lag can be easily discerned in the American language, and other cultural aspects of life. However, it would not be fair to describe American civilization as purely Colonial (Marckwardt, 1958). Without doubt, the Am.E. is highly inventive. Numerous innovations are evident, particularly in the vocabulary. There is much coinage

for various items and concepts. New words have been coined for the old British equivalents. Americans have made high-sounding, mouth-filling phrases, have done elliptical compounding and 'back-formation', and employed the tumid and turgid in vocabulary. So, in order to maintain a balance, one can say that it is only to 'some' extent that the term Colonial lag applies to American English.

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