Varieties of American English

S. Gramley, WS 2009-10
An American Koiné
Leveling or Koinéization

Early remarks by visitors to American from Great Britain pointed out the relatively unified nature of American English.

Note the words of James Fenimore Cooper: "...the language of the country, instead of becoming more divided into provincial dialects, is becoming, not only more assimilated to itself as a whole, but more assimilated to a standard which sound general principles, and the best authorities among our old writers, would justify. The distinctions in speech between New England and New York, or Pennsylvania or any other state, were far greater twenty years ago than they are now." (quoted in Baugh / Cable: 352)
Why is this so?

Cooper went on to explain this in the following way: "When one reflects on the immense surface of country that we occupy, the general accuracy, in pronunciation and in the use of words, is quite astonishing. This resemblance in speech can only be ascribed to the great diffusion of intelligence, and to the inexhaustible activity of the population, which, in a manner, destroys space" (quoted in Baugh / Cable: 351).

Perhaps more to the point:

Dr. Witherspoon, the president of Princeton University, remarked about the common people that "being much more unsettled, and moving frequently from place to place, they are not so liable to local peculiariarities either in accent or phraseology" (ibid.).
As Isaac Candler put it after visiting the U.S. in 1822 and 1823: "The United States having been peopled from different parts of England and Ireland, the peculiarities of the various districts have in a great measure ceased. As far as pronunciation is concerned, the mass of people speak better English, than the mass of people in England. ... The common pronunciation approximates to that of the well educated class of London and its vicinity" (Baugh / Cable: 351).

This is the principle of leveling or koinéization, which is the result of a number of varieties tending toward forms which are less marked in nature.
The term is derived from the Greek word *koiné* – meaning 'common'.

It refers to the variety of Greek, which became lingua franca (common language) in the Hellenistic period (Thomson in Siegel: 5)
Koinés may have quite different functions:

• **Petyt** defines *koiné* as “a form of speech shared by people of different vernaculars” (Siegel: 5)

• **Fasold** describes *koinés* as “trade language” (ibid.)

• According to **Hartmann and Stork**, a *koiné* is “a spoken dialect which becomes the common standard language for a politically unified region” (ibid.)
Koiné vs. Pidgin

**Koiné**

- less drastic level of language simplification
- “never structurally discontinuous from their linguistic parents” (Gamghir in Bubenik 9); hence, always mutually intelligible with them
- refers to free social interactions between speakers (Bubenik 9)
- results from a prolonged contact between speakers (Bubenik 9)

**Pidgin**

- larger degree of formal simplicity
- variety of two mutually unintelligible linguistic parents
- refers to restricted social interaction
- results from the immediate and practical need of communication (Bubenik 9)
- prolonged contact is possible
Types of koinés

**immigrant koinés** – the language of immigrants due to migrating dialect speakers of a common tongue come into contact in a new territory (Longmore 517), e.g. Italian-American or Spanish koinés in Latin American

**regional koinés** – regional lingua francas or standard languages due for example to industrial migration, e.g. the Liverpool area in England or in the English North in general (Wales 2002: 57-65)
Trudgill recognizes three processes in koinéization:

1. mixing  
2. leveling  
3. simplification  

To this may be added

4. reallocation

**New Interdialect**
The result of contact between a vernaculars and the standard language (or between various vernaculars) is a koiné.
Mixing

a variety of lexical items from several dialects for the “same” thing (bucket vs. pail; skillet vs. spider vs. frying pan; grill vs. barbeque)

or

a series of alternative pronunciations for the “same” word (tomato as /təmeɪdəʊ/ vs. /təmædəʊ/ vs. /təmaːdəʊ/

Initially all of these co-exist next to one another. When one form is finally selected, what is the determining factor?
**Leveling**

Choice according to the variant which is the least marked

Marking as
• unusual or minority forms
  • present in the largest number of varieties
  • present in the speech of the largest number of users

Marking as
• unnatural or peripheral (e.g. /huː-/ vs. /juː-/ in *humor*)

Marking as
• regionally marked (Southern *skillet* vs. Northern *frying pan*)
• socially marked (*my wife* vs. *the Missus* vs. *my better half* vs. *my spouse*)
Simplification

- impoverishment
- reduced lexical and morphological inventory
- greater regularity (less markedness)
- more lexical and morphological transparency
Reallocation

- regional variation becomes stylistic variation

- High dialects are formal; Low ones informal (High and Low in the sense of diglossia)
Koinéization

The use of a stabilized koiné may be extended to other domains – an extended koiné. The koiné can become the first language of the community, or nativized koiné (the Greek koine) (Siegel 7).
“Some sociolinguists believe that variants found in the majority of contributing dialects are those most likely to be retained. Others argue either that the variants used by the largest number of individual speakers become part of a koine or that demographical, social, cultural, occupational, and political factors—the social traits and status of various speakers and groups—outweigh linguistic factors in determining which elements compose a koine.” (Longmore 527)
Koinéization

Koineization typically takes at least three generations by which point native-born speakers are often communicating in “a relatively unified and distinctive dialect.” (Siegel in Longmore: 527)

“In-migrating adults accommodate to the dialects that they encounter even as they remain oriented toward their home regions’ dialects” (Longmore: 527)

- Second- and third-generation native-born speakers are central to the linguistic focusing. They contribute most heavily to the emergence of a compromise dialect. They experience the diminishing repertoire of linguistic variants of dialects in contact. These are the generations during which koinés first appear (Longmore: 527)
Koinéization

• Koinéization - may refer to unplanned and unconscious processes aimed at stabilization of the language. “Speakers develop koines, largely unconsciously, in response to historically specific, demographical, psychosocial, socioeconomic, cultural, or political circumstances that make dialect melding advantageous” (Longmore: 522).

• Koinéization can be a conscious process of language planning – koiné can be “a deliberately sought sublimation of the constituent dialects rather than an accidental merger” (Pei in Siegel: 7)

• Criteria: efficiency, rationality, commonality (Ray in Haugen: 16)
Development of an American Standard

• American English is a relatively homogeneous language (orthography, pronunciation)
• Uniformity dates back to the colonial times
• "The once-isolated English regional dialects met and had to speak to one another." (Boorstin: 274)
• Linguistic uniformity can be regarded both as a cause of national identity and as a result of the quest for national identity and unity.
Development of an American Standard

• 18\textsuperscript{th} century America: a linguistic melting pot: Yorkshire, Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex, London, Hampshire, and Kent; Irish, Germans, Italians, Spanish, Mexican, and Chinese added to the melting pot in the 19\textsuperscript{th} and 20\textsuperscript{th} century

• Only few borrowings during the colonial period (although English could have borrowed extensively from French, Spanish, and German)
Development of an American Standard

• Most additions to the English language were borrowed from
  (a) Indian languages
  (b) new combinations of English words to cope with the new environment

• Most borrowings from French, German, Spanish, Italian, and Yiddish all date back to the 19th and 20th century
Development of an American Standard

American linguistic uniformity can be characterized by two major traits:

(1) geographic: without barriers of regional dialect

(2) social: without barriers of caste and class
Development of an American Standard

The people of the United States, spread over three million square miles, speak only one language. There is more difference between the speech of Naples and Milan, or of Canterbury and Yorkshire, or of a Welsh coal miner and an Oxford undergraduate, or of a Provencal peasant and a Paris lawyer than there is between the language of Maine and California, or between the speech of a factory-worker and a college president in the United States. (Boorstin: 272)
Development of an American Standard

American English during the 17\textsuperscript{th} and 18\textsuperscript{th} century was conceived of as being the "better" English:

"In England, almost every county is distinguished by a peculiar dialect; even different habits, and different modes of thinking, evidently discriminate inhabitants, whose local situation is not far remote; but in Maryland, and throughout adjacent provinces, it is worthy of observation, that a striking similarity of speech universally prevails; and it is strictly true, that the pronunciation of the generality of the people has an accuracy and elegance, that cannot fail of gratifying the most judicious ear ... The language of the immediate descendants of such a promiscuous ancestry is perfectly uniform, and unadulterated - nor has it borrowed any provincial, or national accent, from its British or foreign parentage."

(William Eddis, cited in Boorstin: 274)
Development of an American Standard

Benjamin Franklin complained about new words/new usages such as the word *notice* and *advocate* (formerly only used as nouns) and above all "the most awkward and abominable of the three" the use of *progress* as a verb (cited in Boorstin: 278)

A widespread notion of the time: "The first step of an American entering upon a literary career was to pretend to be an Englishman, in order that he might win the approval, not of Englishmen, but of his own countrymen." (cited in Boorstin: 279)
Development of an American Standard

"[Literary people in 18th century America] expressed an excessive enthusiasm for the standard language of England. Perhaps this was a characteristically colonial phenomenon – people still insecure in their new culture trying to reassure themselves by showing that they could be even more proper than the people back home. They were like the country cousin who overdresses when he comes to the big city." (Boorstin: 277)
Development of an American Standard

Noah Webster (1758-1843)
American lexicographer: Webster tried to modify spelling and pronunciation to expurgate the English language from other influences
"In the few instances in which I write words a little differently from the present usage I do not innovate, but reject innovation." (cited in Boorstin: 281)
Published the *American Spelling Book* (1789)
Development of an American Standard

- Spelling bees became more and more popular during the 18th century.

- American English has a tendency to spelling pronunciation.

- In fact, American spelling pronunciation is conservative.
Regionalization

• possibly always present, but not noticeable in comparison to the regional diversity in Britain

• possibly a later development, due to
  • language contact
  • relative regional demographic stability
  • regional koinéization
Bibliography


Homework reading:

“Pidgin and Creole English” Gramley (Nov. 2009)