

# American English Standardization

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# Outline

- background information
- the standardization model
- standardization model & AmE
- Noah Webster
- (a) definition of standard English
- AmE and its distinctiveness

# Background

- Language variety determined:
  - socially
  - regionally
  - age, gender
- Variation in:
  - vocabulary
  - grammar
  - transmission (pronunciation or writing)

# Background

- Language standard as
  - part of social etiquette
  - a social marker

# Background

- no statement in the Constitution about official language(s)

BUT there is a variety perceived as being “standard”

- Language planning:
  - No central institution (e.g. academy)
  - Conducted by “experts”

# The Standardization Model (Haugen)

- four stages:
  - selection
  - acceptance
  - expansion/elaboration
  - codification

	<i>Form</i>	<i>Function</i>
<i>Society</i>	Selection	Acceptance
<i>Language</i>	Codification	Elaboration

Table 1 (from Haugen 1972: 110)

# Haugen's Chart & AmE

- after 1783: strong feeling towards linguistic independence from GB
  - new linguistic role-model: the speech of well-educated New England yeomanry

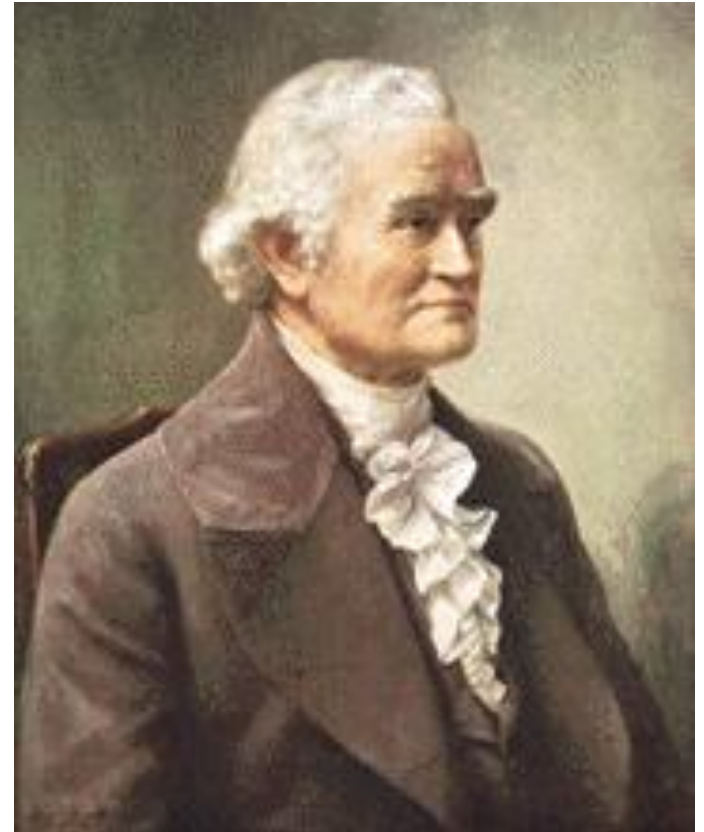
**=> selection**

- promotion of AmE
  - Noah Webster's works
  - creation of pronunciation manuals

**=> acceptance, elaboration, codification**

# Noah Webster (1758-1843)

- lexicographer, grammarian, teacher, lecturer, journalist
- most famous works:
  - *A Grammatical Institute of The English Language* (1783-85)
  - *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828)





# Noah Webster (1758-1843)

- *"As an independent nation, our honor requires us to have a system of our own, in language as well as government. Great Britain, whose children we are, and whose language we speak, should no longer be **our** standard; for the taste of her writers is already corrupted, and her language on the decline."*  
(Webster, 1789)

→ strong belief in cultural independence of the United States and in speech and language uniformity

# Noah Webster (1758-1843)

- A standard is needed because

*"...A sameness of pronunciation is of considerable consequence in a political view; for provincial accents are disagreeable to strangers and sometimes have an unhappy effect upon the social affections. (...) Thus small differences in pronunciation at first excite ridicule--a habit of laughing at the singularities of strangers is followed by disrespect--and without respect friendship is a name, and social intercourse a mere ceremony." (Webster, 1789)*

- Webster's approach to a standard:
  - a language variety is NOT the standard just because a particular class of people uses it
  - sole criteria for the establishment of a standard:
    - language structure and the principle of analogy
    - "general practice of the nation"

# Webster's Influence

- In
  - a) pronunciation
    - the Spelling Book used in schools
  - b) spelling
    - majority of the distinctively American spellings
    - some innovations accepted in Britain

# Spelling

- Spelling reform

- **Simplification**

*deletion of double letters* (see also reflection of pronunciation)

waggon → wagon; cancelled → canceled

ae → e

aesthetic → esthetic, encyclopaedia → encyclopedia

oe → e

manoeuvre → maneuver, foetal → fetal

# Spelling

## – Regularization

our → or

favour → favor, rumour → rumor, colour → color,  
saviour → savior, behaviour → behavior, honour → honor

re → er

theatre → theater, centre → center, metre → meter

ce → se

licence → license, defence → defense, offence → offense

# Spelling

## – derivational uniformity

### noun-verb

practice- practice, cf. practical (Am) vs. practise (verb) vs.  
practice (noun) (Br)

### noun - adjective

defensive – defense(Am) vs. defence

### vb+e+ment → e is deleted

judgement → judgment, abridgement → abridgment  
acknowledgement → acknowledgment

# Spelling

- reflection of pronunciation

**s/z** → **z**

civilise(Br) → civilize,

**gh** simplified

night → nite, through → thru

# Spelling

- **stress indication** (doubling a letter)

enrolment → enróllment (Am), fulfil → fulfíll, skilful → skíllful,  
travel → tráveling, rebel → rebélling; instalment  
→ instállment

- **pronunciation spellings**

light → lite, ,want to → wanna(?)

- **unsystematic differences**

pyjama vs pajama

programme vs program

jewellery vs jewelry

tyre vs tire



# What is "Standard" English?

- Definition by *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (1993):

"*Standard English: the English that with respect to **spelling**, grammar, **pronunciation** and vocabulary is substantially uniform though not devoid of **regional differences**, that is well established by usage in the formal and informal speech and writing **of the educated**, and that is widely recognized as acceptable wherever English is spoken and understood.*"

# What is "Standard" English?

- Definition in *The Columbia Guide to Standard American English* (1999)

“Standard American English usage is linguistic good manners, sensitively and accurately matched to the context – to listeners, or readers, to situation, and to purpose “

# AmE and its distinctiveness

- Br English as reference
- Use of Sociolects  
(eg. Native American or Latino)
- For comparison : register
  - spoken registers
  - written registers

# Vocabulary

- Standard word in a variety → equivalent standard word in another, e.g. in talk about motor vehicles :

(BrE) *boot, bonnet, petrol, spanner, lorry*

(AmE) *trunk, hood, gas, wrench, truck*

- Standard words in both varieties, but different usage:

e.g. *vacation/ maybe* (AmE) vs. *holiday/ perhaps* (BrE)

# Vocabulary(Br.vs Am)

- wash cloth=flannel
- diaper= nappy
- pants= trousers
- apartment= flat
- sidewalk= pavement
- trash can= dustbin
- busy signal= engaged
- pay raise= pay rise
- band aid= plaster
- sweater= jumper
- sneakers= trainer
- flashlight= torch
- fired= sacked
- laid off= made redundant
- tailor made= bespoke

Note that the level of style may differ within these pairs.

# Vocabulary

- Borrowings from Spanish:

*(beef) jerky, mesa, pronto, rodeo, salsa, tequila, siesta,...*

- Borrowings from Native Americans:

*mocassin, terrapin, squaw, powwow, wigwam, raccoon, skunk, sequoia, squash.*

# Pronunciation

- Intervocalic /t/ and /d/ (flapping t)  
*metal, bitter, matter*
- Postvocalic /r/ (rhoticity)  
*car, sure, card, beard, motor, later*
- Loss of post-nasal /t/  
*winter vs. winner*
- non-occurrence of /j/ after dental and alveolar consonants:  
*tune, due, dew, sue*

# Pronunciation

- Initial /h/ omitted

*herb, herbal, (some AmE dialects: humor, human)*

- Wh-words

In southern dialects of AmE:

*when, which, where* → hwen, hwich, hwere

- Monophthongize the diphthong

*tie, pie; soy, boy; cow, now; (south: 'tah' = tie; 'taw' = toy;)*



# Pronunciation

- Vowel mergers (different regional distribution)  
*pit = pet* → the vowel sounds are merged preceding  
nasals eg. *pin/ pen (pin)*  
*him/ hem (him)*
- Stress patterns and vowel reduction:  
*library, secretary*  
→ reduction of vowels to schwa (in BrE)

# Grammar and sentence structure

- Agreement rules between the verb and subjects that are:
    - collective nouns(*family, team, committee*),
    - names of sport teams (*Manchester*)
    - Companies, organizations, institutions (*CNN, Ford*)
- AmE- The federal government **is** considering...
- BrE- The dead man's family **are** in shock..

# Grammar

- Auxiliaries in questions and replies:

***do*** and ***have***

Do you have any novels about horses?

vs.

Have you got any novels about horses?

# Parts of speech

## Past tense and past participle of ***get***

In AmE *got*= simple past for *became* or *arrived*.

– Both *got*/*gotten* → past participle, but

The president's efforts have *gotten* high marks (AmE, *Newsweek*)

No amount of NATO pressure would *have got* it even on to paper. (BrE, *Economist*)

# Grammar

- More frequent omission of *to* in AmE before the infinitive after: *come, go, help* (and other verbs)
  - You wanna go get some water? (*Los Angeles Times*)
  - Proceeds will help establish a wetlands protection fund.
  - ...you'll already know where to go **to** buy your uniform. (*Daily Telegraph*)
  - ...what this study will help you **to** establish is...

# Grammar

- Modals *must, will, better, got to* are less frequent in AmE →  
*going to* = '*gonna*' and *have to* = '*hafta*'  
*shall* has practically vanished in AmE
- Compound nouns
  - forms of nouns in compounds  
*drug policy* (AmE) vs *drugs policy* (BrE)  
but: *war crimes policy* in both

# Grammar

- Use of simple past with adverbs that require the use of the present perfect.

BrE     I have already seen him.

AmE   I already saw him. (alongside the perfect)

- The mandative subjunctive

eg. It is important that you **be** on time for the presentation.

# Conclusion

- Language is fluid, in continuous development
- The concept of 'Standard' is rather unrealistic; it is only an ideal
- Spoken standardized language can only be understood as an abstraction



Thank you for your attention!!

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