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## **THE PLACE OF AMERICAN ENGLISH IN EUROPEAN EDUCATION\*\***

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The aim of this paper is to provide arguments in favor of adopting a new approach to teaching English in the European context regarding American and British English as the most prominent varieties of this language. American English has already become dominant in international communication and has made a significant impact both on British English and on non-native English used in Europe as a lingua franca. Many learners of English are exposed to two varieties – to British English in educational settings, primarily through language learning materials, and to American English in many other situations, such as international communication, business, through media and social networks etc. Consequently, many non-native speakers use an amalgam of these two varieties, which is uncommon among native speakers. Linguists have noted the emergence of Euro-English, a relatively heterogeneous variety typical of European speakers, which is based on both British and American English, but contains features of various European languages. In order to make a more unified standard in teaching English as a foreign language, the author proposes switching to American English as the more dominant variety, but without neglecting British English.

**Key words:** American English, British English, Europe, English as a foreign language.

British and American English grew apart a long time ago and are now easily distinguishable varieties of the same language. Although certain differences started to appear very early, even before the United States became independent, mutual intelligibility has never been at stake. According to a paper by Longmore about the development of American English, “[t]he full array of British dialects mingled to form distinctly American varieties of English” (Longmore 2007: 517), which became evident in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. Dialect-wise, English was more diverse in its home country than in the New World since the English dialects spoken there created a more or less unique whole. The English spoken in America became susceptible to new words from indigenous languages (e.g. *raccoon*, *skunk*, *totem*, *tepee*, *moccasin*, *chipmunk* etc.) and started to adopt new lexis denoting animals, plants, objects and concepts unknown

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in Europe. Many of these words became an integral part of the emerging variety, and were codified in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Noah Webster's dictionaries, although his linguistic achievements date from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Webster was also a pioneer of certain spelling innovations and among the first lexicographers who included slang in his dictionaries.

The two countries gained prominent places on the global stage, which resulted in the spread of English. Great Britain used to be the leading maritime and colonial power, which increased the number of English speakers. It had colonies in America, in the Caribbean, in Africa, Asia, in the Pacific and a few other places. Although English spread to other continents, British power started to wane in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while the United States, another English-speaking superpower, was in the ascendant. After World War II, the influence of the United States of America started to increase dramatically, while at the same time, its film industry and music had already become very popular. The film industry, which promoted a new lifestyle, emerged as a global trendsetter, and various genres of American music gained popularity in many countries. The political power of the US became an important factor in promoting the American variety of English. Backed by American technological advances, the use of American-made computers, and the Internet, American English gradually started to dominate the linguistic scene.

Latin America, South Korea, Japan and the Philippines are already traditional strongholds of American English, while Africa, parts of Asia and India have long been using British English. Europe is somewhere in between, but according to available data which will be cited later, the shift towards American English is evident. The numbers of L1 English speakers are quite telling: according to the 2022 issue of *Ethnologue*, the number of L1 speakers of English in the UK is 56,600,000, and there are 257,000,000 in the United States (<https://www.ethnologue.com/language/eng>). Although the numbers of native speakers in other English-speaking countries are not small, it is obvious that American native speakers outnumber their British counterparts.

British English is still the dominant variety in education in many European countries where English is taught as a foreign language. Many European English teachers were taught British English, some of them spent some time in the UK, and many textbooks are written either by native speakers of British English, or by non-natives whose primary variety of English is British.

Europe is a multilingual continent, and English is commonly used as a lingua franca among Europeans who do not share a common language. The only indigenous native speakers of English in Europe live in the UK and Ireland. Irish and British varieties are virtually indistinguishable in formal contexts (Hickey 2012: 102) if written, but the spoken variety used in Ireland is different and has a relatively small number of speakers. Apart from these two countries, English is official in Malta and is widely used in Cyprus. Both Malta and Cyprus adhere to the British standard. The rest of European speakers of English do not have a national standard for the use of English and are likely to use the variety they learned as a part of formal (or informal) education.

Due to the dominance of American English media, movies, series and music, it can be concluded that an average European learner of English has long been exposed to American English in many situations, while British has retained its position in the classroom. Being exposed to both varieties is beneficial because it allows learners to understand the differences, to expand their vocabulary and to get a wider picture of how English works.

Let us now say a few words about British English and learners' exposure to it. The language used in textbooks, and consequently by teachers and students, is commonly restricted, which means that it is adapted for classroom use. Restricted language is justified in foreign language teaching, but it does have certain downsides. It is focused on typical examples of language use and often excludes idiomatic expressions, colloquialisms, slang, words and expressions which are considered to be politically incorrect and other elements of real-life English. Textbooks thus usually focus on "pure" language and often neglect its real-life use.

Just like in the past, there are still many dialects and accents of British English. In fact, there are not so many people who strictly adhere to the standard known as Received Pronunciation (RP) in their everyday lives, while learners are typically exposed to RP in many European classrooms. It does not mean they will not understand a native speaker from the UK whose English is close to RP, but listening to a speaker from Yorkshire or Scotland who use the local dialect might be a problem. Learner's speech can often be affected by RP, and a native speaker might perceive it as bookish or old-fashioned. Since teaching a dialect would be both impractical and hardly possible, teaching standard British English is a reasonable solution. Unfortunately, it is accompanied by a modest share of media content in the same variety.

Apart from having various dialects and accents, British English is also prone to adopting Americanisms. American English started to make its way into British a long time ago and is now a major donor of vocabulary. Baker (2017: 237) compares the openness of British and American English to words that come from the opposite variety across the ocean and concludes that British English seems to be more prone to adopting words coined by American speakers than vice versa. Foster (1955: 328-329) informs us that the influence of American English on standard British was already visible way back in the 1950s, and observes that many British speakers became familiar with American expressions in the 1920s, when the advent of sound film brought the American variety closer to common people in Britain. An article published twenty years after Foster's confirms that the process of adopting Americanisms can be described as smooth and natural: Crystal (1975: 60) noticed that certain words, such as those whose occurrence is more normal in the US than in Britain (e.g. *hi*, *can* [of fruit], *French fries*) or those felt like Americanisms but frequently used in the UK (e.g. *coke* or *OK*) were likely to lose their Americanness. Since the cited text was written about half a century ago, we can say that his prediction was correct. After another twenty years, a new article by Modiano confirmed that the same trend continued. The author observed that there was "substantial evidence that people in Britain are borrowing American lexical items, as well as adopting AmE spelling conventions" (Modiano 1996: 207), which is obviously the case today. Of course, the phenomenon of Americanisms in British English became obvious to linguists and lay persons alike. An interesting article published by the BBC (<https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-14201796>) brings us a list of Americanisms which some British speakers dislike. The list includes words and expressions like *least worst option*, *touch base*, *shopping cart*, *bangs* (= fringes of hair), *ridiculousity*, *my bad*, *normalcy*, *to hike* (of prices), *deliverable*, etc. Although we cannot endorse negative attitudes towards any lexeme, the article proves that many Americanisms have become frequent in British English.

The influx of Americanisms in British English is obvious, just like the fact that the spoken variety is constantly changing. The spoken variety is likely to become more Americanized, primarily in its vocabulary, and according to the papers cited in the previous paragraph, certain spelling conventions from American English might also become more frequent. The grammar and pronunciation seem to be unaffected by American English, and it is still too early to say that they are likely to change due to the ongoing Americanization. However, it is possible to conclude that the two varieties

are likely to lose certain differences and that the differences between them will become less obvious.

Since the amount of linguistic input in class is usually smaller than the input received from various media, which are dominated by American English, it can be assumed that an average learner is likely to be more exposed to the more frequent variety, although British English is still present. Still, a mixture of varieties could create an input which will affect learners' English.

The mixture of varieties seems to have an interesting effect: many linguists have noted the development of Euro-English, "an independent variety of English in Continental Europe" (Mollin 2006: 1), a hybridized variety of English (McArthur 2003: 57) which is often associated with the EU and its institutions, but can also refer to the English spoken by common Europeans. Although the administrative language of the EU is based on British English, it contains many elements which result from language contact and is not a native variety. It is therefore possible to conclude that British English is *officially* dominant in Europe, although real life and findings cited below prove that this is not the case. Besides, the number of European learners who will become future professionals and will have to be specialized in this variety is negligible.

Modiano (2017: 320) is of the opinion that Euro-English is likely to become a variety in its own right in post-Brexit Europe and that "Europeans may well debate the pros and cons of the two major systems without being influenced by 'native speakers' of either variety, and here, it is conceivable that the American English spelling system may be deemed more utilitarian. That some 70 per cent of 'native speakers' use this spelling convention, which dominates the Internet, further strengthens the argument to implement it for Europe as well", and adds that "[w]e see clearly a decline in the use of the British standard, and an upswing in an acceptance of the use of features associated with American English". In an earlier paper, Modiano (1996: 210) states reasons why Europeans tend to rely on American English: apart from being exposed to American English, non-native speakers need to understand and to be understood, and American English is more suitable due to the relative uniformity of its vocabulary and pronunciation, while British English often contains traces of regional accents or dialects. Many non-native speakers, Europeans in particular, are exposed to American English just like their interlocutors, and are likely to use words like *truck*, *sneakers*, *apartment* etc. instead of *lorry*, *trainers* or *flat*. American pronunciation of the *r* sound appears more natural to non-native speakers, while many of them will say /dæns/ and /kænt/ instead of using the British long /ɑ:/ in *dance* and *can't*. American spelling can

even be more enticing, especially in words like *center*, *color* or *dialog*, which are more easily remembered than *centre*, *colour* and *dialogue*. There are also differences in grammar which learners might find easier, such as *Do you have...?* vs. *Have you got...?*, *burned* or *dreamed* vs. *burnt* and *dreamt*, *I just wrote a letter* vs. *I have just written a letter*, etc. Apart from the papers we have mentioned so far, there is a recent study (Gonçalves et al. 2018: 9) based on a corpus of tweets written all over the world which shows that both American spelling and vocabulary are dominant in Europe, which also makes it clear that American English has gained ground in the Old Continent.

Although British and American English share the same grammar, there are slight differences in the way in which the speakers of these two varieties use certain forms. For example, American speakers rarely use *shall* when talking about the future, but use the older form *gotten* as the participle of *get*. The verb *to have* is used differently: when denoting possession, a British speaker is likely to say *I have/'ve got a car*, while an American speaker will say *I have a car*. When used to denote obligation, this verb is again accompanied by *got* in British English, e.g. *I have got to work* vs. American *I have to work*, although *got* is not absent from American English in this sense. The present perfect is used in American English less frequently, and the simple past can be used for an action that happened a moment ago, e.g. *I just wrote a letter* (= I have just finished writing it; British: *I have just written a letter*) or to denote an action or state whose effect is still present, like in *I lost my job* (= I am now unemployed; British: *I have lost my job*). Although the more complex forms are not unknown to learners of English, they are more likely to use the simpler ones.

Due to the fact that English is a lingua franca, there are linguists who advocate the necessity of creating and/or using a supranational or amalgamated variety in international communication. Crystal (2003: 113) discusses the possibility of creating a uniform World Standard English and observes that American English has made considerable progress in that direction. Modiano (1996: 207) goes a step further and argues that Mid-Atlantic, as an artificial and supranational variety which neutralizes the differences in the pronunciation and includes both British and American vocabulary, should become the educational standard and replace British English. There are also related concepts such as International English, Global English, World English and the like, which are based on the opinion that English should be standardized in one way or another in order to facilitate international communication. In spite of several attempts to promote these ideas and to put them into action, little has been done so

far and nothing suggests that a global variety of English will come up in the foreseeable future. Although many spheres of life require standards, it is difficult to reach consensus in the case of English. Due to numerous reasons, English is no longer just a national language; it is a means of international communication, and the majority of English speakers are not its native speakers. It would be extremely difficult to create a single non-native variety, to impose it on both native and non-native speakers and to retrain teachers, translators, interpreters and other language professionals. Many countries where English is taught as a foreign language have opted for the most feasible solution – to adhere to one standard for educational purposes, while explaining the particularities of the other. Regardless of the importance of American English, British English should by no means be neglected as it is widely used or is the basis of standards in many countries where English is used in administration or any other major sphere of communication.

Let us now say a few words about the purpose of teaching and learning English in Serbia. Many Serbian people who frequently use English, e.g. in business, when they travel or are in any other situation which involves interaction with foreigners, communicate with non-native speakers of English, just like many other Europeans. Those who decide to emigrate to an English-speaking country are more likely to move to the US or Canada, whose varieties are very similar, although Canadian English retains certain British forms in spelling. Since exposure to English and its American variety is roughly the same as in other European countries, it is clear that everything that has been said about continental Europe holds true for Serbia. Another contributing factor to exposure to American English in Serbia is the fact that foreign-language programs and movies are almost never dubbed unless they are intended for children, and viewers are exposed to the original soundtrack. Needless to say, foreign-language content is largely in English. Unfortunately, there are no reliable data about the percentage of American contents, although it is obvious that American English is dominant.

Most English textbooks and the accompanying materials approved for use in primary and secondary education by the Serbian Ministry of Education are written in British English. This means that there is a difference between classroom English and the English learners are exposed to, just as is the case in other European countries, as stated by Modiano (1996: 210). Although teachers often state the differences between British and American varieties and generally tolerate the use of American English or even use it themselves, learners sometimes inadvertently mix the two

varieties and can produce utterances like *I like dancing* /'dænsɪŋ/ (American pronunciation) and *football* (a British word which refers to association football; AmE *football* refers to a game similar to rugby). Sentences like this, which mix British and American use, are not so common in the two major native varieties, but are usually not frowned upon by teachers. In fact, many other non-native speakers combine the American pronunciation of *dance*, which is quite frequent, and the British meaning of *football*, which is the same in many languages and is usually similar to the English form (e.g. German *Fußball*, Serbian *fudbal*, Spanish *fútbol*, French *football*, Polish *futbol*, etc.). Simultaneous exposure to both varieties is beneficial for the learners because they can easily expand their knowledge of English, but knowledge and use are not the same, and the evidence we have offered can clearly show that one of the effects of exposing learners to two varieties can result in their amalgamated version.

It is possible to say that American English has gained ground among Serbian speakers of English, too. According to a study conducted among 50 Serbian EFL teachers (Grubor and Hinić 2011: 304), 52% of the participants stated they had been taught British English at school or university. Although the sample was small, the results show that American English among Serbian teachers is not an exception. The study was conducted in 2011, and it is possible to assume that the number of teachers who use American English is even higher today. According to another study (Čubrović and Bjelaković 2020a: 110), which was conducted among 60 potential EFL teachers at the Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade, 65% of them said they preferred using American English. A complementary study by the same authors (Čubrović and Bjelaković 2020b: 149), focused on the pronunciation differences between the two varieties conducted among 88 future and/or potential EFL teachers (Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade), also shows that American English is the preferred model.

Having described the presence of English in Europe and in Serbia, it is now possible to summarize the whole situation and to offer certain guidelines both for teaching English as a foreign language and for the selection of textbooks and other resources.

First of all, Europeans are exposed to both British and American varieties of English, the former being present mostly in classrooms and EU documentation, while the latter is commonly found in the media, business, informal communication and similar situations in everyday life, with an increasing presence of American English in educational settings. Apart from the papers mentioned above, reports from several

European countries (Granger et al. 2020) show that many classrooms are already shifting to American English. Although it is early to say that Europeans have developed a uniform Euro-variety of English, not just because non-native speakers usually retain certain features of their L1 when speaking a foreign language, it is possible to observe that the vocabulary use tends to rely on American English and that the pronunciation is more or less close to American.

The question of using the American or British standard in teaching should be based on a systematic analysis of needs and resources. The information and data cited in this paper show that American English is increasingly present in Europe, that its use in educational settings is increasing, that it has made a strong impact on British English, and consequently, on numerous non-native speakers of English. American English is here to stay and is likely to become even more dominant in the near future.

In terms of human resources, non-native teachers can gradually shift to American English, or at least focus on the differences between the two varieties. Of course, this shift should be accompanied by appropriate in-service training and other relevant activities.

The existing textbooks can be adapted to learners' needs if necessary, while textbooks written in American English could be used more widely. It would also be useful to introduce more textbooks written in American English, while typically British words and expressions should be covered, too, and writing of new textbooks should also be encouraged.

Adaptation of textbooks should be followed by certain modifications in teaching. For example, when teaching vocabulary, words like *truck*, *sneakers* or *chips* (= crunchy slices of potato eaten as a snack) should be taught as the primary words for the corresponding concepts. It would also be useful to rethink the concept of grammar and pay more attention to the simplifications that are already quite common in American English, such as *I just wrote a letter* (= I have just finished writing it) and similar structures which we mentioned earlier. Consequently, language tests should not be rigid and should provide more room for Americanisms.

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