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978-0-521-18396-3 - One Language, Two Grammars?: Differences between British and American English

Edited by Gunter Rohdenburg and Julia Schluter

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Introduction

GÜNTER ROHDENBURG AND JULIA SCHLÜTER

Differences between British and American English: One language, two grammars?

In 1789, not long after the American Declaration of Independence, Noah Webster still had reason to believe that British and American English (BrE and AmE) would in the long run drift apart, just like other Germanic dialects that have evolved into the modern languages Dutch, Danish, Swedish, German, etc.: ‘several circumstances render a future separation of the American tongue from the English, necessary and unavoidable’ (Webster 1789: 22). More than 200 years later, these expectations have not been confirmed, and there are at present no signs that this will happen even in the distant future. In their discussion of the question ‘Two languages or one?’, Marckwardt and Quirk (1964: 9–13) thus conclude that what we refer to as BrE and AmE should still be considered as one and the same language.

However, at many levels of description, British–American contrasts are widely recognized. Thus, in the phonological domain, the British Received Pronunciation and General American differ markedly. Lexical oppositions are notorious and provide the material for numerous cross-varietal vocabulary lists and dictionaries. At the pragmatic level, British and American habits are (at least impressionistically) known to vary to a considerable extent. In stark contrast, with regard to the title question of the present volume, most linguists would probably be inclined to reply that British and American of course share the same grammar (for a recent statement to this effect, see Mair 2007a: 98). After all, many would subscribe to the truism according to which ‘accent divides, and syntax unites’ (for a discussion, see again Mair 2007a). This is the point of departure for the present book.

Setting the scene: Why another book?

This volume rests on the recognition, expressed most clearly in Chapter 18 by Gunnel Tottie, that BrE and AmE grammar differ in many more ways than have so far been discovered and that much work remains to be done in the domain of an empirically founded contrastive study of the two major

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national varieties. While phonological, orthographic and lexical differences as well as issues in second language teaching have received considerable attention in the literature, contrasts in the grammar of BrE and AmE have so far been largely ignored.¹ To some extent, this oversight is doubtless due to the widespread view that there is nothing to say about grammatical differences simply because they are negligible, if they exist at all (e.g. Marckwardt and Quirk 1964: 14–17, Huddleston and Pullum 2005: 2). Another likely reason behind the inadequate coverage of grammatical differences is the fact that until recently the empirical basis for contrastive studies was simply insufficient. Yet, there is reason to believe that as the level of observational delicacy increases, we are bound to find a growing number of contrasts between the two standard varieties.

The methodological obstacles that have until recently hampered such an enterprise have been eliminated thanks to the availability of large computerized corpora. There is, of course, the quartet consisting of LOB, Brown, FLOB and Frown, which contain one million words each of BrE and AmE from the early 1960s and 1990s, respectively. These have frequently been marshalled for earlier studies of British–American contrasts and are also used in the present volume. A large-scale corpus construction project involving varieties of English from all around the world is the International Corpus of English (ICE), whose individual components comprise one million words of running text. There is also the ARCHER project, which provides parallel coverage of BrE and AmE from the mid eighteenth century onwards. But beyond these relatively small corpora, we now have access to larger databases of contemporary as well as earlier forms of English, of which only very few can be mentioned here. For one thing, the yearly editions of major national and regional newspapers now regularly available on CD-ROM provide a database that by far exceeds the size of modern megacorpora. For another, the collections of historical prose compiled by Chadwyck-Healey/ProQuest (ECF, NCF, EPD, EAF, AD), comprising upwards of 10 million words each, afford the possibility of analysing even low-frequency phenomena from a diachronic perspective. Recent editions of many standard dictionaries also come with searchable CD-ROMs that can be put to use for studies on word-formation and the lexicon (e.g. COLLINS 5, COD 10, NODE 2000, AHD 4, MW II, NHD, EWED 2001).²

This is not to say that the present situation is satisfactory in all respects: matching corpora like LOB, Brown, FLOB and Frown afford interesting comparisons, but are limited to one million words per corpus. The same is true of ICE-GB and ICE-US, the latter of which is still under construction. The completion of the *American National Corpus* (ANC), which is projected

¹ For another statement deploring this state of affairs, see Algeo (2006: 2).

² For full bibliographical details of the databases and dictionaries mentioned here, see the reference section at the end of the book.

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as a counterpart to the *British National Corpus* (BNC), will be an important addition to the array of corpora available for linguistic study. Collections of newspapers and fictional writings obviously represent only two genres of written English out of many. Moreover, it has been shown by Mair (2007a) that the written standards of BrE and AmE manifest a strong pull towards convergence; in contrast, spoken data tend to exhibit a maximum of divergences. Larger spoken corpora would therefore allow us to discern even more areas where the two varieties diverge. A further innovative source of data which is practically unlimited in size is, of course, the internet. However, the use of the world wide web entails many imponderable risks that researchers have to control for.³

Whatever the reasons, to date there exists no booklength treatment of grammatical differences between BrE and AmE (with the exception of John Algeo's recent book in the same series; see below). The most comprehensive comparisons of British and American grammar available so far are represented by individual book chapters or articles in scholarly journals, rarely exceeding thirty pages in length, which list observations of likely divergences (see Strevens 1972: 44–53, Algeo 1988a, Bauer 2002: 46–59, Tottie 2002a: 146–78, 2002c, Trudgill and Hannah 2002: 55–79). The chapter on grammatical structure in volume VI of the *Cambridge History of the English Language: English in North America* (Butters 2001: 325–39), covering a disappointing 15 pages, is illustrative of the stagnant state of research in this area.⁴ The greater part of these surveys, though highly suggestive, have never been subjected to empirical scrutiny and the degree to which they differentiate between the varieties has never been quantified. However, it is self-evident that British–American divergences will typically be of a gradual rather than absolute nature (see also Algeo 2006: 2).

The few empirical analyses there are tend to be highly restricted in their selection of objects for study, often limiting themselves to high-frequency phenomena, and are generally based on relatively small corpora (which may be part of the reason for their restrictedness). The very useful pioneering survey by Johansson (1980) deserves special mention here. Collective volumes such as those edited by Modiano (2002) and Lindquist, Klintborg, Levin and Estling (1998) only devote a small share of their contributions to quantitative contrastive studies of standard BrE and AmE. Not directly relevant to the topic of the present book are the volume edited by Schneider (1996), the contribution to the *Handbook of Varieties of English* by Murray and Simon (2004) and the authored book by Walt Wolfram and Natalie Schilling-Estes (2005), since all of them pervasively focus on various kinds of historical and present-day non-standard varieties of AmE.

³ For some pioneering work in this area, see the volume edited by Hundt, Biewer and Nesselhauf (2007).

⁴ For a pertinent review, see Tottie (2004a).

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The recent monograph by John Algeo (2006) has done a lot to improve on the situation just outlined. It provides a compendium of lexical, phraseological and grammatical contrasts between the two varieties studied, which is complementary to the present volume in many respects. Arranged in alphabetical order, his book can serve as a reference work providing a plethora of basic, partly quantified insights into distributional differences, which forms an excellent point of departure for more detailed analyses taking account of relevant grammatical subcategorizations.

There is thus still a lack of in-depth, empirically based studies of standard BrE and AmE grammar in contrast. What is equally at a premium are attempts to account for variety-specific tendencies that are based on system-inherent orientations going beyond speculative extralinguistic accounts such as those proposed in Kövecses (2000). The present book seeks to close this lacuna by studying examples from the whole spectrum of grammatical choices, thereby unearthing British–American contrasts in all domains of English grammar. In contrast to Algeo’s monograph, it focuses on the relationships between immediately competing grammatical alternatives. It contains systematic studies of contextual restrictions bearing on the variants under consideration and traces their historical evolutions. The topics covered comprise some of the better known contrasts, which are set on a wider empirical basis than has been possible until recently, as well as a variety of innovative themes that have so far received little or no attention.

Going beyond an adequate description of the differences, this volume also explores potential explanations. For this purpose, the historical dimension of the contrasts, completely neglected so far, is assigned the important place that it deserves in most of the contributions to this volume. Many also refer to common stereotypes about the character of BrE or AmE and critically assess the explanatory force of popular ascriptions such as the ‘colonial lag’, the leading role of AmE in the context of world English, the ‘typically British’ predilection for formal and conservative structures and the ‘typically American’ pull towards simplicity, directness and informality.

Overarching insights: What to expect?

Above and beyond the detailed findings contained in each of the following chapters, the data-driven approach just described affords some novel insights that are all the more apparent when the present book is viewed as a whole. A few suggestive results are anticipated here to give an idea of what to expect from the following chapters. The first three concern the diachronic dimension and link up the relative speed of evolution of the two varieties with external circumstances.

- The longstanding popular concept of a ‘colonial lag’ characterizing the state of the so-called extraterritorial Englishes is replaced with a much

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more differentiated typology introduced in the stage-setting Chapter 1. The comparison of the historical evolutions undergone by the two national varieties yields a complex scenario of diachronic patterns. The subject reverberates through many of the other chapters that jointly reveal the ‘colonial lag’ concept to be a myth not adequate to account for the full range of facts. When seen from a diachronic perspective, quite a few differences that have traditionally been adduced in support of this view turn out to be post-colonial revivals rather than colonial conservatisms (e.g. Chapters 1, 5, 6, 13, 14, 15 and 19).

- Many of the chapters have a bearing on the popular view, examined in Algeo (2001), according to which the relationship between the two major national varieties has undergone a reversal of the direction of influence in that AmE has for some time been a derivative variety, imitative of the more prestigious variety spoken in the homeland, before it emancipated itself, developed its own character and, more recently, became the centre of gravity of linguistic change in English world wide. While the phenomena investigated in Chapters 2 and 12 support this common impression, Chapters 5, 7 and 19 provide surprising examples of ongoing changes with BrE in the lead and AmE following suit.
- As mentioned above, at different times, linguists have held contrary opinions as to whether BrE and AmE would drift apart or not. While it is unlikely – thanks to modern mass communication and travel – that the intercomprehensibility of the two will ultimately be at risk, we may ask to what extent we can observe divergences and convergences between the two national standards. This amounts to testing the validity of the truism according to which ‘accent divides, and syntax unites’ (see again Mair 2007a: 97). Chapter 19, in particular, will draft a more differentiated picture of cases in which grammatical innovations in one variety stand a good chance of being adopted into the other variety (convergence) and cases where one of the varieties undergoes change without affecting the other (divergence).

Four generalizations about British–American differences in the domain of grammar remain confined to system-internal, intrinsic tendencies.

- A promising generalization concerns the greater tolerance and inclination of AmE towards structures characteristic of spoken colloquial usage, recently described by Mair (1998: 153–4). Chapters 2, 4, 5, 8 and 19 provide further evidence in support of this trend. Where standard AmE is promoting a change, quite a few regional differences can be made out: comparative analyses of newspaper data reveal that California functions as a trendsetter, while the variety spoken on the East Coast exhibits a more conservative character (see Chapter 19).
- Another hypothesis that is supported by many of the chapters in this volume holds that AmE grammar exhibits a comparatively stronger pull

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in the direction of regular grammatical patterns. Novel findings indicate that this is true not only of morphological paradigms (see Chapters 1, 3, 5 and 19), but also of syntactic structures (see Chapters 4, 5, 7 and 10).

- From the insights afforded in particular by Chapters 4, 6, 10 and 19, we can derive the generalization that AmE in some respects tends to be more explicit than BrE, which is less prone to mark certain grammatical functions. This is especially true of structures that involve a considerable degree of processing complexity: here, AmE tends to add clarifying material or to choose easier-to-process constructions, while BrE leaves a greater processing load for the reader/hearer. In a few cases, this translates into AmE being more analytic than BrE.
- An innovative insight to the effect that AmE shows a more marked tendency to dispense with function words that are semantically redundant and grammatically omissible is expressed in Chapters 8 and 10. This trend towards grammatical economy ties together an array of otherwise unrelated phenomena in the complementation system and awaits further study.

Despite the attempt to find unifying principles behind the differences between BrE and AmE grammar, the strong focus on empirical detail ensures that the studies in this volume avoid sweeping generalizations. As a result, the overall trends mentioned above are carefully delimited and exceptions are paid due attention. Thus, BrE as well as AmE may in certain cases revert to irregular morphological forms (see Chapters 1, 3 and 5) or to grammatically marked structures typical of formal styles such as postpositions (see Chapter 6) and the subjunctive mode (see Chapters 13, 14, 15 and 19).

In addition to documenting synchronic and diachronic contrasts between the two varieties, an important number of contributions also demonstrate that the grammars of BrE and AmE are subject to the same functionally motivated tendencies. Among them are phonological preferences (see Chapter 5), processing preferences such as manifestations of constructional complexity (see Chapters 4, 6, 8, 10, 11 and 19), the avoidance of repetitions (see Chapters 8, 11 and 19) and extraction hierarchies (Chapter 11). By virtue of this multifactorial approach to grammatical variation, it is possible to factor out differences that are dependent on system-internal (e.g. structural and stylistic) effects and thus to isolate statistical differences that are genuinely due to intervarietal contrasts between BrE and AmE. It is only when variability gives way to stable states in one variety or the other that system-internal tendencies are neutralized.

As a rule, but not always, the differences between the two varieties are of a gradual kind. The quantitative analysis of corpora allows us to uncover a number of hitherto unnoticed differences in the functional load carried by identical structures. Relevant findings are described in Chapters 4, 8, 9, 15, 18 and 19, indicating, for instance, that AmE uses fewer comparatives and (obligatorily) reflexive verbs, selects different strategies for the modification

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of noun phrases, rarely expresses the requirement of anonymity as a *condition*, has strikingly few uses of *try* with a subordinate verb, and uses tag questions to a more limited extent than BrE. Such results are unexpected as well as challenging in that they raise more wide-ranging questions as to whether pragmatic needs in both varieties are indeed identical.

Structure and contents: Where to find what?

The structure of this volume presents a progression from lexical and grammatical morphology to word order and syntactic relations, with due attention paid to the grammar–phonology and grammar–pragmatics interfaces. The individual case studies provided in the central part (Chapters 2 to 17) are rounded off by two programmatic overview chapters (Chapter 1 and Chapter 18) that open the discussion and wrap it up. The final contribution (Chapter 19) constitutes an outlook that points to directions for future research.

The book sets out from the stage-setting Chapter 1 by Marianne Hundt. The author demonstrates that long-term diachronic changes in BrE and AmE cannot be reduced to the fairly simple dichotomy of ‘colonial lag’ vs. ‘colonial innovation’. Very often, what looks like a conservative feature in present-day AmE is actually an instance of post-colonial revival. Hundt draws up an alternative typology of differential change in BrE and AmE which distinguishes as many as six different scenarios and suggests that one of them, namely regressive divergence, may be the most frequent type of development.

Chapter 2 by Peter Erdmann deals with contrasts in lexical morphology and concentrates on the use of compound verbs such as *to baby-sit*, *to highlight* and *to pinpoint*. The most striking difference between the varieties lies in the greater productivity of these verbs in AmE. Further contrasts can be found in the orthography, stress pattern and semantics of compound verbs: BrE prefers hyphenated forms, while AmE favours solid spellings. A number of compound verbs in AmE have the main stress on their first element while BrE keeps it on the second or has variable stress. Finally, the lexical meanings of individual compound verbs are shown to differ along a scale of semantic distinctions.

Grammatical morphology is at issue in Chapter 3 by Magnus Levin. The author explores the variation between regular and irregular preterite and past participle forms of the type *burned/burnt*, *dreamed/dreamt* and *learned/learnt*. While AmE with many verbs strongly prefers regular *-ed* forms, usage in BrE is highly variable, and affected by several constraints (e.g. punctual as opposed to durative aspect, the preterite as opposed to the perfect and speech as opposed to writing). Since the regularization of these forms has progressed considerably further in AmE than in BrE, Levin discusses at some length the question of which functional factors motivate the preservation of the competing *-t* and *-ed* forms in BrE.

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On the borderline between grammatical morphology and syntax, Chapter 4 by Britta Mondorf investigates the choice of synthetic and analytic comparatives with a set of forty-nine adjectives. A twofold contrast emerges. Firstly, AmE can be shown to employ a larger overall proportion of analytic comparative forms than BrE. Secondly, AmE uses a lower number of comparatives (synthetic plus analytic). Considering that the adjectives included in the study tend to occur in contexts involving processing difficulties, Mondorf explains the use of (more explicit) analytic forms as a compensatory strategy by which an increased processing load can be mitigated. Arguably, AmE is more sensitive to complexity effects than BrE, a property which it shares with informal styles.

Chapter 5 by Julia Schlüter focuses on the interface between phonology and grammar. It explores the ways in which a phonological preference, the Principle of Rhythmic Alternation, influences grammatical choices in BrE and AmE. The phenomena considered are the variation between two pairs of weak past participles (*lighted* vs. *lit*, *knitted* vs. *knit*) and the transition of the degree modifier *quite* from post- to pre-determiner position. Historical and present-day data show that the principle determines the distribution of the variants in both varieties. The intervarectal differences are due to the fact that BrE and AmE occupy different positions on the trajectories of diachronic change, which are not necessarily conditioned by either ‘colonial lag’, regularization or colloquialization.

As the first of two chapters dealing with word order, Chapter 6 by Eva Berlage explores the influence of functional constraints on the distribution and historical evolution of pre- and postpositional *notwithstanding* in BrE and AmE. While prepositional *notwithstanding* generally constitutes the majority option in present-day BrE, AmE clearly prefers the postpositional variant. The study suggests that the AmE preference for postpositional *notwithstanding* should be interpreted as an instance of post-colonial (extraterritorial) revival. Furthermore, Berlage demonstrates that the distribution of postpositional *notwithstanding* is largely accounted for by the Complexity Principle, whose effects are neutralized with increasingly complex nominal expressions, which tend to require the more explicit prepositional option.

Another special case of word-order contrasts is discussed by David Denison in Chapter 7. Focusing on the case of the verb *substitute*, he shows that usage has always involved several possible subcategorizations: besides the standard pattern (*substitute* NEW for OLD), a *replace*-like usage (*substitute* OLD with NEW) arose in the twentieth century. Recent British usage seems to favour a hitherto-unnoticed variant (*substitute* OLD for NEW). Accounting for this argument reversal, Denison argues that among Exchange verbs *substitute* is unique in the ordering of its arguments. It is therefore prone to confusion and analogical change, especially since iconicity would suggest the sequence old–new rather than new–old.

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In Chapter 8, Günter Rohdenburg deals with a subtype of verb complements, namely reflexives. He demonstrates that the longstanding tendency for reflexive verb uses (e.g. *to wash o.s.*) to be replaced by non-reflexive uses (e.g. *to wash*) continues unabated in both national varieties. Intervarietal contrasts arise from the fact that in AmE this trend is accelerated by virtue of two tendencies: for one, verbs with variable reflexive marking (e.g. *to commit (o.s.) to s.th.*) tend to give up the reflexive pronoun more rapidly; for another, verbs that have obligatory reflexive marking (e.g. *to busy o.s.*) are used less often. The analyses identify a number of additional contextual constraints determining the choice between the two competing options.

The study by Douglas Biber, Jack Grieve and Gina Ibarra-Shea (Chapter 9) investigates diachronic trends in the structure of noun phrases in BrE and AmE by quantifying differences in the functional load of pre- and postmodification structures. Generally, noun phrases in both varieties have become more densely informational and syntactically complex. AmE turns out to be in the lead of several recent changes (the reduction of premodifying attributive adjectives, the expansion of premodifying nouns, the decrease of postmodifying *of*-phrases, the increase of other prepositional phrases and *that*-relative clauses). The authors argue that an alternative, equally innovative strategy of condensing information into compact syntactic forms is the use of complex predicative expressions, which is particularly typical of BrE.

Chapter 10 by Günter Rohdenburg describes a series of British–American contrasts in the area of nominal (and prepositional) complementation. It is found that with most types of constructions, AmE favours the less explicit or simpler variant over its more complex alternative using a variety of prepositions. Thus, where the increase of prepositionless constructions is concerned, AmE is typically further advanced than BrE, promoting more vigorously, for instance, the use of direct objects after verbs and directly linked complements after the adjective *due*. By contrast, with processes reversing this direction of change, AmE is more likely to preserve the simpler and less explicit alternative much better than BrE. Intriguingly, there is one notable exception to the general formula, which involves the marking of a negative orientation by means of *from* in complex argument structures. In addition, it is shown that the distribution of the options involved tends to be subject to the same range of contextual constraints in both national varieties.

Turning to the domain of sentential complements, Chapter 11 by Uwe Vosberg focuses on a small number of verbs in transitional stages of linguistic change (mainly) within the past two centuries. Vosberg explores differences between BrE and AmE in the distribution of non-finite complements (*to*-infinitives and *-ing* forms). It turns out that very often BrE and AmE are not affected by these tendencies to the same extent, but that, compared to BrE, the development in AmE is accelerated in some areas and delayed in

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others. In addition, Vosberg investigates three extra-semantic factors determining the choice of complement options: the *horror aequi* Principle, the Complexity Principle and extraction hierarchies.

Chapter 12 by Johan Elsness revisits a well-known British–American divergence in the use of the tenses, viz. the rivalry between the present perfect and the preterite. Reversing the longstanding process by which the present perfect continuously extended its range of application until well into the Modern English period, there is strong evidence that the present perfect has now started to decline and that the preterite is gaining ground once more. Elsness shows that the changeover has gone further in AmE than in BrE and explores possible explanations. What is frequently quoted as an example of ‘colonial lag’ thus turns out to be a revival with AmE in the lead.

The next three chapters all focus on the use of the subjunctive in English, its motivations and the contexts in which it occurs. While the subjunctive had been on the decline since Old English times, corpus-based studies have now proved that the striking appearance of mandative subjunctives in present-day AmE is a revival rather than a ‘colonial lag’. The subjunctive presumably attracts so much attention from linguists because the re-emergence of such a formal and old-fashioned feature seems unexpected in a variety that is usually characterized as receptive of innovations and colloquialisms. Moreover, the fact that *not*-negation in connection with subjunctives is regularly realized without *do*-support is a curio in its own right.

In his Chapter 13, Göran Kjellmer thus addresses the questions of, firstly, why the evolution of the subjunctive was reversed at a particular time, and secondly, what gave rise to the unexpected word order specific to negated subjunctives. The account he proposes involves an interplay of language-internal factors (remnants of the subjunctive, lexical and structural ambiguities, omissible auxiliaries), variety-specific factors (AmE avoidance of *should*) and sociolinguistic factors (contact with speakers of other European languages in the States).

William Crawford’s Chapter 14 provides a comprehensive account of the current state of the mandative subjunctive by identifying the range of nouns, verbs and adjectives that ‘trigger’ its potential use. A distinction is made between ‘strong’ triggers, i.e. those lexical items that are frequently associated with a modally marked verb form, and ‘weak’ triggers, i.e. those where the mandative sense is often absent or only implied. The study elucidates British–American contrasts in the trigger strength of individual lexemes and word classes. A central finding is that the stronger the trigger, the more likely it is that BrE and AmE will pattern similarly regarding the choice of mode, and the weaker the trigger, the less likely BrE and AmE will pattern alike.

Chapter 15 by Julia Schlüter fills a blank in previous research on the subjunctive by investigating the selection of the modes in conditional clauses introduced by *on (the) condition*. Establishing a parallel with the mandative