



A Review on the Origin and Development of American English

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Abstract: American English emerged and developed from British English in 17th century, but American English today is no longer just a variant language from Britain. Behind the development of American English, there are some social and political factors that boost English of America. This paper aims to review the origin and development of American English from political and social perspectives and based on these, this paper also reveals the features of American English and its differences with British English. Through the review on the origin and development of American English, the foreign language learners can know more about American English, so that they can learn English better.

Key words: American English, origin, development, social and political factors, features, differences

Introduction

English is one of more than five thousand languages all over the world. It has a history of one thousand five hundred years of development. As a major variant of English, American English becomes a more and more popularly accepted language by modern people. Throughout the history of American English, it is not difficult to find that American English is not only a regional variant of British English, it also a cultural variant as a joint result of political and social factors. And in the course of its development, American English has absorbed many useful components of many other Europe languages successively, forming a unique language. From its birth to the present day, American English has gotten through a period of nearly four hundred years, and becomes a global language. American English is now the most influential language in the world. The international lingua franca has a direct impact on the development of global politics, economy, language and culture, and the evolution of American English has caused widespread concern all over the world ^[1]. Therefore, a better understanding of American English can help foreign language learners learn English more effectively. This paper discusses the features and its differences with British English based on the review on the origin and development of American English. The thesis mainly focuses on four parts dealing with the origin of American English, its

development, its main features and its differences with British English.

The Origin of American English

American English emerged and developed from British English of 17th century. When the settlers from British brought English to the enormous country that was to become the United States, they encountered physical conditions that were often radically different from anything they had witnessed before. The old language could not meet their need, so they created many new words to name unfamiliar plants and animals and many other things. With the time flying, their language changed a lot, and gradually formed the unique American English. Its origin has a close relationship with the history of immigrant, and it can be roughly divided into three periods ^[2]. The first period starts from 1607 to 1787. At the beginning, John Smith and his companions founded James Town in Virginia. And then in 1620, the Mayflower ship set sail from Plymouth, Devon, England, taking all the English Pilgrims to the New World. In this period, although American English and British English didn't have much differences, it started to have its own features. The second period starts from 1787 to 1861, the Civil War period. At that time, a large number of immigrants from Ireland and Germany settled in Pennsylvania and the mid-west of America. In this period, American English absorbed a lot of components from German and Irish. The third period starts from 1865 to now.

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A large number of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe and Asia began to come to America, and they all made influence to the development of American English. After the second World War, American English became the most widely spoken English variant, and in the early 19th century, American English took root and began to influence British English^[3].

The Exploration of the Development of American English from a Political Perspective

Behind the development of American English, there are some political boosting factors related to the colonists' independence, American power growth, American political system and its political activities^[4].

First is the colonists' independence. Before independence in 1783, American English is always discriminated. People at that time, all regarded British English as standard English. But latter, immigrants together struggle against the harsh living environment, the tariffs imposed by Britain and the ultimate control of the country. All these finally give birth to the national consciousness. In the field of language, the patriotic enthusiasm reflected in the clamor for the admitted that American English is standard English. Noah Webster says that: "American people not only have the right to use new words, but also have the obligation to reform this language, in order to adapt to the new geographical and political environment." And after his first created "American English", the American English has widely developed and spread.

Second is the American power growth. The rapid development of agriculture, mining, and industry began to heal the wounds of the civil war. Economic strength increased the United States' status in the international political stage. At that time, thousands of inventions are created. The science and technology inventions, the improvement of production and transportation, and the new system and new ways of life all need the new expression ways. Therefore, these factors accelerate the development of American English. Due to the strong comprehensive national strength and political influence, American English has become a standard English and used as international communicating language by most countries^[5].

Third, The United States is the world's first federal bourgeois republic, and its regime organization form is the presidential system; and its political system is the separation of powers and with the combination of checks and balances; and its political party system is the two-party system; and the President of the United States is the heads of state and government^[6]. Therefore, in order to describe the special political phenomenon in the United States, in the process of the development of American English, many new political words appeared, which have not appeared in British English^[7]. For example, there are some words from the political system, like *presidency*, *federalism*, *republicanism*,

bipartisanship, *federalists*, *assembly*, *Congress*, *senate* and so on.

Fourth, it is political activities. Election is the American people's most important activities in the political life. So many words about the election are created. For example: *cross-filling primary*, *presidential primary*, an *Electoral College*, the *straight ticket voting*, the *swing voter* and so on. And in the United States, politicians often make speeches, so many words about these activities are created. For example: *whistle-stop*, *stump speech*, *barnstorm*, *sound bite* and so on.

The Exploration of the Development of American English from a Social Perspective

Language changes as a result of social change. The formation and development of American English has a close relationship with the social development of United States. Since the 20th century, the American economy has rapidly developed, and at the same time, it's science and technology that have gained huge success. All these contributions provide a condition for the development of American English^[8]. These social factors are mainly reflected in three aspects.

First is economy and trade. It is an indisputable fact that America is the first trading power all over the world. The vast majority of countries in the world have trade relations with America, and even some regions and countries that originally occupied by Britain have become America's trading partners. This contributes a lot to the development of American English.

Second is computers and Internet. The American's computer industry is second to none both in hardware and software in the world. The famous American Internet giants Microsoft, Bell, American on line, Yahoo are all household names all over the world. As we all know, at the bringing, computer and the Internet are mostly in English, especially the extensive use of American English, which has played a pivotal role in the spread of American English. When you work on the computer for word processing, you are demand that you can only use American English spelling and grammar, or you would see wrong warnings. This causes the development of American English.

Third is the mass media. American mass media has played a huge role to the dissemination and popularization of American English. The radio and television networks transmitted around each corner of the world. For example, the American popular magazine *Reader's Digest* has become a household name all over the world. This also promotes the development of American English. And after world War II, the focus of American language promotion policy shifted from domestic to international promotion by mass media. By strengthening foreign language education and promoting American English in an all-round and multi-channel way, it effectively promoted the internationalization of American English^[9].

The Main Features of American English

From its birth to the present day, American English has gone through a period of nearly four hundred years, its growth being mainly characterized by the process from small to big, weak to strong ^[10]. Throughout the development history of American English, from the linguistics and lexicology, American English has the following main features.

First is the retention of Old English. It retained some language features that are now no longer exist in the British English. Compared to the standard London accent, American English has a lot of ancient characteristics ^[10]. For example, the use of “*I guess*”, used as “*I think*”, “*I believe*”, “*I guess you are wrong*”. This usage is widely used in Britain in 17th century, but now is no longer exist in British English. However, American English kept this usage. Another example is the word “*railroad*” used as “*railway*”. In the 18th century, Britain only had wooden rails as transportation word, so they used the word “*railroad*”, but in 19th century, it is replaced by “*railway*”. However, American English retained this word. The third example is the word “*fall*”, which originated from the phrase “*the fall of leaves*”, but the standard British English replaced this word with “*autumn*” since Geoffery Chaucer’s period. But American English also retained this word.

Second is great creativity. Due to the living conditions of the American continent, Americans developed a lively personality. American English is rich in imagination, full of vitality, and doesn’t have hierarchy. For example, it created many new words that not exist before, such as : “*pizzazz*” used to describe a person who has excitably attractive personality; and other new word created by the early settlers, like “*bellhop*, *debunk*, *blurb*, *cahoots*, *sky scrape* and many scientific words like *black hole*, *Cinerama*, *duplication* and *spacewalk*”. Another example is the free use of affix, or the use of blending and back formation to create new words. Such as: “*smog*, *medicare* and *brunch*”. And in America, the government and religious parties are not the most important things. It is the self and the individual that deserve the most respect and attention. The concept of self-dependence can be seen everywhere in language, and languages and words related to “*me*, *self* and *ego*” can also be found everywhere ^[11].

Third is the absorption of multinational language. Since the American nation is known as “the melting pot”, American English also has the characteristics of the melting pot. Americans has absorbed a large number of other ethnic groups’ language when they contact with peoples of those groups ^[12]. First, it has absorbed Indian. Americans learned a lot new things when they contacted with Indians, so that they enriched their own language and culture ^[13]. For example, the word like “*moose*, *skunk*, *wigwam*, *sachem*, *chipmunk*, *raccoon*, *opossum*, *squash*, *wampum*, *tomahawk*”, and so on. Second, it has absorbed Dutch. Dutch settlers once

sought hegemony in North America in the history, and later a large number of Dutch people settled in the United States. So various life terms entered into American English. For example, “*Cole slaw*, *cookie*, *cruller*, *pot cheese*” and so on. Many social terms also entered into American English, such as “*boss*, *patron*, *Yankee*” and so on. Third, it has absorbed German. Today, German-American is one of the largest ethnic groups in the United States, and it is estimated that every four Americans is a German. Quite a number of German cultures have become the general characteristics of American life. Beef sausage, hamburgers and beer have become the essential things in the Americans life. And these are the German improvisational creation in the United States. In the long intercourse of American English and German, there are many German words dissolved into American English. For example, “*beer soup*, *hex*, *zinc*” and so on. It is estimated that there are about 60 words in this type. Fourth, it has absorbed French. Although French settlers in North America has a vast territory, but due to less permanent residents, they do not have great influence on American English like German, but the shadow of French also exist. For example, words like “*caribou*, *pumpkin*, *voyager*, *cent*” and so on. The last, it has absorbed Spanish. Spain had more than 200 years of colonial control in North America, during which, a lot of Spanish has dissolved in American English. For example, words like “*alfalfa*, *marijuana*, *jerk*, *conch*” and so on.

The Differences between American English and British English

Although American English emerged and developed from British English, American English today is no longer just a variant language from Britain ^[14]. With the development of the society, American English and British English gradually formed their own characteristics. They have differences in vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar.

First, American English and British English have the same meaning, but different spelling. American English and British English have a lot of words that have the same meaning, but different spelling. Here, we will only list the most common below.

Table 1

| American English | British English |
|------------------|-----------------|
| elevator | lift |
| check | bill |
| apartment | flat |
| candy | sweets |
| center | centre |
| cab | taxi |
| chief | head |

Second is the different pronunciations. In some words, the letter “r” between two vowels has different pronunciation in American English and British English. For example, in British English, it pronounces as [ər], while in American English it pronounces as [r], such as “*daring, material, period, insurance*” and so on. In addition, we all know that there are a large number of loanwords in English, but in British English, those loanwords are not Englishized (not pronounced according to English standard). While, in American English, those loanwords are Englishized. For example, “*lieutenant*” pronounced as [lefˈtenənt] in British English, and pronounced as [luˈtenənt] in American English. There are other words have this feature, like “*clerk, schedule, advertisement*”.

Third is the different speed and intonation. According to some statistics, American and British people speak in different speed, British send 220 syllables per minute on average, while the American send between 150 and 175 syllables per minute. American English give a person the sense with gentle stretch and imposingly thick manner, while British English makes the person feel the cadence is ups and downs. In conclusion, British and American people have obvious differences from the pronunciation of some words to their speed, rhythm, tone and some habits.

Fourth is the different grammar. The differences in grammar are not so many as we think, we just see one of the longest and obvious difference that is the difference on the usage of some common verbs. For example, the verb “*get*”. In British English, it has only one past participle “*got*”, but in American English, it has two “*got* and *gotten*”. Meanwhile, it has different usage in American English and British English. “*gotten*” only used to express the meaning like “*become*” “*acquired*” or “*received*” in American English. When one wants to express the meaning of “*possess*”, they use “*got*” in both American English and British English. For example, Lucille has *got* (*possessed*) no social sense. Another verb is “*have*”. In British English, it usually uses “*Have* you any children” or “*Have* you got any children”; while in American English, it always uses “*Do* you *have* any children” [15].

However, because of the wide spread of American English, we sometimes can hear British says “*Do* you *have* a pencil-sharpener (*Have* you got one just now)? Another example is different tense. They have little difference in tense. In British English, it uses the present perfect tense to refer to the past that is not long before now and uncertain, like “*I have just seen your brother, I have already eaten*”; while in American English, it usually uses the simple past tense to refer to the past that is not long before now and uncertain, like “*I just saw your brother, I already eat*”.

The last example is the different usage of articles. In British English, there are some phrases that use definite articles, like “*all the morning/afternoon/evening/night, all week/ month/ spring/ year*”; while in American English, “*the*” is usually not used, like “*all night, all summer*” and so on. Another

word “*half*” has different position in American English and British English. For example, in British English, it used in this way “*half an hour, half a kilo*”; while in American English, it used in this way “*a half hour, a half kilo*”. In a word, we can say, “the American English and British English have the same mother, but just brothers with different appearance.”

Conclusion

American English is the most widespread language in the world, and is becoming a global language. American English emerged and developed from British English, but today it is no longer just a simple variant language from Britain. Form the review of the origin and development of American English, this paper found that American English developed as a unique language as a result of political and social factors, which lead to the its characteristics in economic, culture, politics, science and technology. And based these, this paper also reveals the difference between American English and British English in vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. Through the above analysis, the author hopes that it can let foreign language learners know more about American English and learn it more effectively.

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