(Un)separated by a common language?

M. LYNNE MURPHY

Are American/British differences unimportant?

Interest in the differences between English in Britain (or more especially England) and the United States supports a small industry, of which I am a small part. But there are those who argue that the differences are so negligible that they are not worth investigating. One of these is University of Edinburgh Professor of General Linguistics Geoffrey Pullum, who wrote a post on the topic for the Lingua Franca blog of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Pullum (2014) concluded:

> Looked at seriously, the tiny differences between standard American and standard British English are trivial, barely even worth mentioning.

Pullum was motivated to make this argument for good reasons. He was fighting the exaggeration of the differences and pointing out that Britons and Americans generally understand each other well in spite of whatever differences there are. But at the same time, Pullum's argument rests on oversimplifications, just like the claims that he hopes to counter.

Pullum's post starts with an anecdote about a woman in Edinburgh who confidently informed him that 'Americans don't use adverbs'. As an American linguist living in England, I have met that woman's intellectual clone many times and indeed her claim is plainly silly. Americans use plenty of adverbs. There are at least four adverbs in this American-authored paragraph (more if we count the negation marker *not*, adverbial phrases and the ones in italicized examples). I doubt that anyone would have found my prose to be particularly 'British' because of those adverbs. Even if you hear an American saying *It's real good*, you have found an American using an adverb, since *real* in that sentence has functioned as an adverb by modifying the degree of an adjective. It is just not an adverb that ends in the expected *-ly*.

Still, British English speakers make many exaggerated claims about American English, as do Americans on the subject of British English. The exaggerations are understandable (or at least explainable), in that they are rooted in well-known cognitive biases. For instance, we have a bias toward noticing things that are unusual or novel. So if someone communicates a familiar meaning in an unfamiliar phrasing, it throws off your language processing. You stop to notice it. If they phrase their meaning in a way that you would also phrase it, then you will go about your normal business, i.e. mining the phrasing for information, then deleting the actual wording from your short-term memory. You will not later be able to reliably recall how the typically-phrased information was worded. But if you are a British English speaker who hears five Americans say *real good*, then that experience will be noticed and filed in your mind as 'American English'. You may not remember



M. LYNNE MURPHY is a lexicologist and Reader in Linguistics at the University of Sussex. Her books include Semantic Relations and the Lexicon *(Cambridge UP, 2003) and* Lexical Meaning *(Cambridge UP, 2010). Since 2006, she has written the* Separated by a Common Language *blog and currently holds a National Endowment for the Humanities Public Scholar grant for the preparation of a popular-audience book on the relationships between British and American English. Email: m.l.murphy@sussex.ac.uk*

doi:10.1017/S0266078415000619

 © 2016 Cambridge University Press

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078415000619 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the 45,392 earlier times when you heard Americans say *really good*, because it did not set off your linguistic alarm bells. Linguistic differences stand out and linguistic similarities don't stick with us, and thus people arrive at false conclusions like 'Americans don't use adverbs'. The false conclusions are also fed by confirmation bias. If we start out believing that Americans and Britons speak differently, we will more readily notice the evidence that supports that belief, rather than noticing the commonalities that contradict that belief.

Another cognitive bias means that we tend to lump all the speakers from another place together. This is called the *out-group homogeneity effect* (Jones et al., 1981), by which we tend to recognize the variety within the groups we belong to, but not in the groups we do not belong to. So you are much more likely to hear an exasperated woman say 'Men! they're all the same!' than to hear an exasperated man say 'Men! We're all the same!' In the same way, Americans rarely think of Americans as 'all the same', but some think of 'the English' or even 'the British' as linguistically homogenous group, and the British do the same about Americans. For instance, more than one English person has told me that 'there aren't different accents in America', in spite of the fact that they had been exposed to different accents on television series like *The Wire, The Sopranos, Frasier* and *Fargo*. Meanwhile, Britons often express amazement that many Americans are very bad at telling British accents apart from each other, or indeed from Australian or South African English accents.

All this heightened attention to differences at the national level means that sometimes we forget that language play is prevalent in both countries. If an American makes a play on words or an intentional error, for example, to feign incapacity, a British hearer might assume that the joke was just the American way of saying the played-upon idiom. In contrast, if we hear such odd uses of language from people whom we believe to speak 'the same English' as us, we are more likely to conclude that the oddity was linguistic creativity or human error. This missing-out happened to an editor who had believed that Americans spell *cemetery* as *sematary* because he had seen the spelling in the title of the Stephen King novel, *Pet Sematary*. He had missed the point that the spelling was supposed to reflect a child's writing of the word (JD, 2008). Our biases lead us to think '*those people's* English usage is different from mine' rather than '*that person* has used English in an unexpected way'.

All these biases, plus public fascination with the perceived differences, leads to a fair amount of 'folk linguistics' on the subject. Many of the available resources on British-American differences are written by hobbyists, not trained linguists or lexicographers, and sometimes it shows. For example, the 240-page glossary *Understanding British English* (Moore, 1989) was written by an Arizonan who watched British television, read British and Australian books, and took two vacations in the UK where she acquired some British pen-pals. The book's listing of British English vocabulary thus contains Australianisms, some misapprehensions of meaning, quite a few questionable part-of-speech judgements, and a few words that are perfectly good American English (but apparently not used by Moore). Laurie Bauer's (1992) review of it, while praising Moore's enthusiasm, notes entries for word combinations (like *nice wash* and *deviation signal*) that cannot be considered to be 'British English', except that a British individual may have once put those two words next to each other. Despite its errors, the book was apparently successful enough that it warranted a second edition (Moore, 1997).

So Pullum is right. People make wildly inaccurate claims about British and American Englishes and the general public accepts those claims because they confirm our biases towards differences. But those points should not lead to the conclusion that the differences that exist are 'barely even worth mentioning'. There are two problems with that conclusion: (1) Pullum has grossly understated the differences, and (2) well-communicated, responsible research about the differences can help counteract the problem of overstatement and false beliefs.

Starting with the understatement, Pullum dismisses most British-American differences as 'nothing more than pronunciation' or 'merely differences in word choice'. Pullum is primarily a syntactician, and his grammatical biases might be showing through here; most non-syntacticians would not dismiss pronunciation or vocabulary so lightly. On the pronunciation front, he is right that there is probably as much variation in pronunciation within either country as between them. Thus, it is unhelpful and inaccurate to speak of 'the British accent' or 'the American accent'. The flapped /t/ between vowels in American dialects is the best example of a pronunciation found throughout one country but not in the other, but it is hard to think of other examples of transatlantic difference that are not limited just to some dialects within the nations.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078415000619 Published online by Cambridge University Press

However, before concluding that transatlantic pronunciation differences are not interesting, we should acknowledge that an accent's typical pronunciation of vowels and consonants is not the whole pronunciation story. For example, US and UK English speakers generally pronounce different numbers of sounds in *herb* and mostly use different first vowels in *shone, yog(h)urt, pasta* and *migraine*. The nations also typically differ in several stress patterns, for example those occurring in certain French loanwords (e.g. UK *ballet* versus US *ballet*) and in four-syllable Latin-derived nouns like *capillary, corollary*, and increasingly (due to change in Britain) *controversy* (US stresses the first syllable, UK the second). I could go on. The number of differences is not tiny and they do occasionally hamper communication. One study of Americans' accent perception found that for the American subjects 'British speech was considered less intelligible and aroused more discomfort' than speech in a more familiar accent (Stewart et al., 1985: 103). That sounds like hampered communication to me.[1]

On the vocabulary front, Pullum claims the differences are 'mostly nouns'. I can see why a syntactician might be dismissive of nouns. They are 'just' names, easily replaced one for the other, having little or no effect on the grammar. But they certainly have an effect on comprehensibility, especially when the same noun has different meanings in the two countries, such as *pants* ('underwear' in UK, 'trousers' in US) or *suspenders* (used to hold up trousers in US, but to hold up stockings in UK). Even when we use the same nouns to ostensibly talk about the same thing, there are differences in how far the meanings extend or how they are structured. For example, prototypical sandwiches are the same in both countries, but the boundaries of *sandwich* in American English encompass a range of things that British English needs different words for (see Murphy, 2014).

It is also (to borrow a word from Pullum) trivial to claim that the differences are 'mostly nouns', since English vocabulary in general is mostly nouns. The number of British-American noun differences is difficult to determine because of the sampling bias in lexicographical sources. British dictionaries under-represent American language and often do not mark British-only vocabulary as British-only. The converse is true of American dictionaries. Some guides to American and British differences over-represent nouns because they organize the information into nominal categories like 'Jobs and Professions' and 'Vehicles' (Hargraves, 2003) and 'Groceries Known by Different Names' (Davies, 2005). A quick sampling of every 25th page of two alphabetical dictionaries of British-American differences gives 67% nouns among 253 words (discounting Australianisms) in Moore (1997) and 82% of the 150 words sampled in Moss (1991). This is not all that different from what we find in English more generally. In the English version of the online lexical database WordNet, 76% of the content-words included are nouns (Princeton, 2006). British and American differ in nouns because English vocabulary is primarily populated by nouns.

Pullum deems grammatical differences linguistically interesting, and cites four of them: (1) use of day names with (UK) and without (US) the preposition *on* (*We saw her [on] Tuesday*); (2) American use of simple present (*saw*) in places where British requires the present perfect (*have seen*); (3) British use of *do* as a pro-predicate where it would be strange in American English (*Will you see her? We should [do]*); and (4) American use of *in the hospital* versus British *in hospital.* (There are further descriptions of all of these at Murphy 2006–.) Pullum writes '[i]f pressed hard I might be able to find two or three more such slight divergences'. I take this as disingenuous. Surely Pullum knows that there are whole books devoted to the grammatical differences between British and American English, most notably John Algeo's *British or American English?* (2006). The grammatical differences only rarely compromise understanding, but then again, it is not clear that we need much grammar for communication. I can text my partner with *Guests here. Get milk?* with full confidence he would understand my message despite the lack of grammatical-function words. We might therefore be prone to conclude that grammar matters *less* than pronunciation and vocabulary, which affect understanding more often. We have not even touched here on the orthographic differences, stylistic differences, or the greater communicative-pragmatic differences, like how politeness is accomplished using language. The differences are sometimes obvious, but always nuanced.

Any dialectal differences tell stories about our history and raise questions about our future language. Differences at the national US-UK level are particularly interesting because of the high rate of contact between the varieties and because of what those varieties mean beyond their two countries - any English textbook has to take a stand on whether it will spell *colo(u)r* with the *u* and whether it will give instruction on how to ask for *the toilet* or for *the bathroom*. So, I conclude, contra Pullum, that while British-American differences are not as overwhelmingly different as, say, the differences

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078415000619 Published online by Cambridge University Press

between Swahili and Japanese, they are still numerous, interesting and worth investigating.

We can never really know when our words mean the same as others'. We can only assume that we have successfully communicated when our utterances result in unsurprising (to us) outcomes. It is possible that because we use the same words, speakers of different Englishes believe they understand each other to a greater extent than we really do. The following articles in this series will explore this in more detail, looking at differences in meaning in seemingly shared words (like *sandwich* and *twang*) and differences in uses of 'polite' words like *please* and *thanks*. But before those, the next article will ask: does it even make sense to talk of *British English* and *American English*? In the meantime, if you are curious about some of the differences mentioned in passing here, most are explored in greater detail on the Separated by a Common Language blog (Murphy, 2006–).

Note

1 I am grateful to Lauren Hall-Lew for feedback on a previous draft of the pronunciation discussion.

References

Algeo, J. 2006. *British or American English?: A Handbook of Word and Grammar Patterns*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bauer, L. 1992. Review: 'British and American lexical differences.' *Understanding British English* by M. E. Moore.' *American Speech* 67:2, 213–15.

Davies, C. 2005. *Divided by a Common Language: A guide to British and American English*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.

Hargraves, O. 2003. *Mighty Fine Words and Smashing Expressions: Making sense of transatlantic English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

JD. 2008. 'Pet Sematary. I mean cemetery. Or do I?' *The Engine Room* [blog], 14 April. Online at <http://engineroomblog.blogspot.co.uk/2008/04/pet-sematary-i-mean-cemetery-or-do-i.html> (Accessed September 30, 2015).

Jones, E. E., G. C. Wood, and G. A. Quattrone. 1981. 'Perceived variability of personal characteristics in in-groups and out-groups: The role of knowledge and evaluation.' *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 7 (3), 523–28.

Moore, M. E. 1989. *Understanding British English*. New York: Citadel Press.

—. 1997. *Understanding British English*, revised and updated edn. Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press.

Moss, N. 1991. *British/American Language Dictionary*, updated edn. Lincolnwood, IL: Passport Books.

Murphy, M. L. ('Lynneguist'). 2006–. *Separated by a Common Language* [blog]. Online at <http://separatedbyacommonlanguage.blogspot.co.uk> (Accessed September 30, 2015).

—. ('Lynneguist'). 2014. 'Sandwiches, more particularly bacon sandwiches.' *Separated by a Common Language* [blog], 28 May. Online at <http://separatedbyacommonlanguage.blogspot.co.uk/2014/05/sandwiches-more-particularly-bacon.html> (Accessed September 30, 2015).

Princeton University. 2006. 'wnstats: WordNet 3.0 database statistics'. WordNet 3.0 Reference Manual. Online at <http://wordnet.princeton.edu/wordnet/man/wnstats.7WN.html> (Accessed September 30, 2015).

Pullum, G. K. 2014. 'Undivided by a Common Language'. Lingua Franca (blog), *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 17 March. Online at <http://chronicle.com/blogs/linguafranca/2014/03/17/undivided-by-a-common-language/> (Accessed September 30, 2015).

Stewart, M. A., E. B. Ryan, and H. Giles. 1985. 'Accent and social class effects on status and solidarity evaluations.' *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 11, 98–105.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078415000619 Published online by Cambridge University Press