

BA III – OPT. ENG. – SEM VI – PAPER XII (MODERN ENGLISH STRUCTURE)

VARIETIES and DIALECTS OF ENGLISH

Introduction

English is spoken today on all five continents as a result of colonial expansion in the last four centuries or so. Between 1.5 billion and 2 billion people across the planet speak English. Between 375,000 and 400,000 people are native English speakers. English is spoken on all five continents. With regard to numbers of speakers it is only exceeded by Chinese and Spanish. But in terms of geographical spread it stands at the top of the league. The distribution is a direct consequence of English colonial policy. Since the colonial era, English language has become so widespread, it is no surprise that different varieties of English have arisen. The colonial era is now definitely over but its consequences are only too clearly to be seen in the presence of English as an official and often native language in many of the former colonies along with more or less strongly diverging varieties which arose in particular socio-political conditions, so-called pidgins which in some cases later developed into creoles. Another legacy of colonialism is where English fulfils the function of a *lingua franca*. Many countries in Africa, like Nigeria, use English as a *lingua franca* (a general means of communication) since there are many different and mutually unintelligible languages and a need for a supra-regional means of communication.

Varieties of English

There are many varieties of English spoken in the world. The oldest variety of English is British English, spoken in the United Kingdom. Approximately 60 million people are native British English speakers. The variety of English with the largest number of native speakers is American English, with 225 million native speakers. The other major varieties of English are Canadian English, Australian English, New Zealand English, South African English and **Indian English**. Some linguists also recognize another classification of a variety of English known as World English. All varieties of English share the same basic tenets of the language, but certain words, phrases or linguistic constructs may differ. For instance, in British English, one says “I’m going to hospital”. In American English one says “I’m going to the hospital”. In British English one may say he is going to the cinema, in American English one says he is going to the movies, and in South African English, the phrase is going to the bioscope.

In Britain, the standard is called Received Pronunciation. The term stems from Daniel Jones at the beginning of the present century and refers to the pronunciation of English which is accepted - that is, received - in English society. BBC English, Oxford English, Queen’s English (formerly King’s English) are alternative terms which are not favoured by linguists as they are imprecise or simply incorrect.

In America there is a standard which is referred to by any of a number of titles such as **General American** and **Network American English**. General American is spoken by the majority of Americans, including many in the North-East and South. It contrasts strongly with Received Pronunciation. The southern United States occupy a unique position as the English characteristic of this area is found typically among the African American sections of the community. These are the descendants of the slaves originally imported into the Caribbean area, chiefly by the English from the 16th century onwards. Their English is quite different from that of the rest of the United States and has far more in common with that of the various Anglophone Caribbean islands.

Those varieties of English which are spoken outside of Britain and America are variously referred to as **overseas or extraterritorial varieties**. A recent practice is to use the term **Englishes** which covers a multitude of forms. The label *English World-Wide* is used to refer to English in its global context.

Extraterritorial varieties are not just different from mainland varieties because of their geographical distance from the original homeland but also because in many cases a type of suspension has occurred vis à vis changes in point of origin, i.e. in many respects the overseas varieties appear remarkably unchanged to those from the European mainland. This phenomenon is known as *colonial lag*. It can be cited as one of the features accounting for the relative standards of overseas varieties, such as Australian or New Zealand English with regards to British forms of English.

Varieties of English may be further divided into dialects such as Anglo-Cornish or Welsh English in Great Britain, Gullah or Gulf Southern in the United States and Bengali English and Southern Indian English in India. Whatever the variety or dialect, English speakers the world over may communicate with each other, with only occasional gaps in understanding.

Dialects of English

Dialects are linguistic varieties which may differ in pronunciation, vocabulary, spelling and grammar. Dialects can be defined as "*sub-forms of languages*." English speakers from different countries and regions use a variety of different accents (systems of pronunciation), as well as various localized words and grammatical constructions; many different dialects can be identified based on these factors. Dialects can be classified at broader or narrower levels: within a broad national or regional dialect, various more localized sub-dialects can be identified, and so on. The combination of differences in pronunciation and use of local words may make some English dialects almost unintelligible to speakers from other regions.

The major native dialects of English are often divided by linguists into three general categories: the British Isles dialects, those of North America, and those of Australasia. Dialects can be associated not only with place, but also with particular social groups. Within a given English-speaking country, there will often be a form of the language considered to be Standard English – the Standard Englishes of different countries differ, and can themselves be considered dialects. Standard English is often associated with the more educated layers of society.

British and American English are the reference norms for English as spoken, written, and taught in the rest of the world, excluding countries where English is spoken natively such as Australia, Canada, Ireland and New Zealand. In many former British Empire countries where English is not spoken natively, British English forms are closely followed, alongside numerous AmE usages which have become widespread throughout the English-speaking world. Conversely, in many countries historically influenced by the United States where English is not spoken natively, American English forms are closely followed. Many of these countries, while retaining strong BrE or AmE influences, have developed their own unique dialects, which include Indian English and Philippine English.

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