

# The English Language

—some questions and answers—

David Lehner

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to discuss certain questions relating to the English language. The questions all deal with certain features of the development of English as it is used in the present day. It is the opinion of this writer that they represent some of the 'basics' of what every teacher of English should know about the language that (s)he is engaged in teaching. The questions are as follows :

1. What exactly is Middle English and how does it affect the English language as we know it today ?
2. How did the spelling system of Modern English develop ?
3. How did the English Renaissance affect the development of the English language ?
4. How would a teacher respond to a Japanese student's worry that the Japanese language is being downgraded by its borrowing from English ?
5. What are the differences between British and American English and how did they come about ?

It is hoped that the answers given to these questions will impart to the reader a stronger, very necessary, understanding of some of the realities of the Modern English language.

### **What exactly is Middle English and how does it affect the English language as we know it today ?**

First of all, the term Middle English (ME) is used in scholarly writing to indicate a more or less arbitrary period in the evolution of the English language from its earliest beginnings up to the present day. It is generally considered to cover the years from 1100 to about 1500—give or take 50 years either way. This period is characterized by sweeping changes that were more momentous and extensive than any before or after. These changes were by no means started in this time frame but are rather a continuation of trends that had already begun during the late Old English Period. So fundamental were the changes of this transitional period that numerous scholars have commented in a similar way about them : "The changes that occurred during this transitional, or 'Middle', period may be noted in every aspect of the language : in its sounds, in the meanings of its words, and in the

nature of its word stock, where many Old English words were replaced by French ones,” (Pyles and Algeo, pg. 136). And “The changes of this period affected English in both its grammar and its vocabulary... Those in grammar reduced English from a highly inflected language to an extremely analytic one. Those in vocabulary involved a loss of a large part of the Old English word stock and the addition of thousands of words from French and Latin.” (Baugh, pg. 189).

In order to understand this period, it is necessary to comment a little on the historical events that took place just prior to 1100 in England. In 1066, William the Conqueror came to England in force to lay claim to the throne. His victory over Harold and the Anglo-Saxons dealt a heavy blow to the country. There was a great deal of French influence in England after that time—both in culture and language. Here we will deal with the latter only.<sup>13</sup>

In the main, the linguistic consequences of the Conquest were mainly seen in additions to the word stock, although it can also be said that there was some influence in the realm of idioms in Middle English as well. It has been estimated that over 10,000 French words found their way into English during this time and about 75% are still in current use. These borrowings came from many areas: government and administration, ecclesiastics, military, fashion, food, social life, art, learning, and medicine. Any attempt to list borrowings from this era is restricted by a lack of space. Therefore, please see Baugh pgs. 202–209 for a rather extensive overview.

These borrowings from French also had a great impact upon the English spelling system. Please see Pyles and Algeo pgs. 139–141 for a complete explanation. In addition, there was also much borrowing from Latin as well. English certainly continued to borrow during this time period and many of the original Old English vocabulary items were subsequently replaced. Therefore, this period is important from a vocabulary point of view in that many of the words that people use today were, originally, not true English words. Were one to trace many of the commonly used words of today back to their inception, certainly surprise would be the result as they came from other languages—most notably, French and Latin.

Another major area of change during the Middle English period was to be seen in the area of grammar. These changes are not directly attributed to the Norman influence. “But the decay of inflections and the confusion of forms that constitute the really significant development in Middle English grammar are the result of the Norman Conquest only in so far as that event brought about conditions favorable to such changes”. (Baugh, pg. 200). In short, the Conquest pushed the use of French into the upper classes and left English the language of the masses. Consequently this made it much easier for these changes to continue unchecked. It is to a discussion of exactly what some of these changes were that we shall now turn.

It has certainly been widely noted that languages are known to borrow vocabulary but not

grammar from other tongues. Therefore, as noted above, the changes in the grammatical system of English that came during the Middle English period were extensions of changes that had already started before this time: they were not related to direct contact with the French language, although surely, certain idioms and syntactic usages in that period are the result of such contact. Grammatical alterations that occurred during the Middle English period are numerous and greatly reflect the way that modern English grammar is today. Space does not allow for complete discussion of these changes and therefore, here, we will have to satisfy ourselves with a general description. However, the reader is directed to Baugh pgs. 190–199 and Pyles and Algeo Pgs. 145 to 163 for a complete explanation of these events.

In short, the fluctuations in grammar included a sweeping reduction in inflections which was responsible for, "... a structural change of the greatest importance." (Pyles and Algeo pg. 153). To be considered in the area of change are various alterations in pronunciation that took place at this time. Although the consonant sounds remained fairly stable, there were a few changes. For example, the Old English consonant clusters of hl, hn, and hr, were simplified to l, n, and r, respectively.<sup>2)</sup> The vowels in Middle English also underwent some modifications and there were changes in diphthongs, as well.<sup>3)</sup> In addition, very important quantitative changes took place in the length of vowels. These changes are too numerous and complicated to give full justice to in this short paper as both long and short vowels were affected by lengthening and shortening trends related to stress. However, "As far as the structure of English is concerned, the most significant of all developments in the language occurred with the Middle English falling together of a, o, and u with e in unstressed syllables, all ultimately becoming [ə]..." (Pyles and Algeo, pg. 152). This leveling trend had already started in the end of the Old English period. There was even a later loss of schwa in final syllables.

Because of the merging of unstressed vowels into a single sound, English inflectional forms became greatly reduced and this caused structural changes of paramount importance. With respect to the adjective Baugh notes, "Partly as a result of the sound changes... partly through the extensive working of analogy, the form of the nominative singular was early extended to all cases of the singular, and that of the nominative plural to all cases of the plural, both in the strong and weak declensions." (pg. 192).

Old English had been a language where gender markers had played a prominent role. As a result of the leveling mentioned above came a loss of grammatical gender in Middle English. It can readily be seen that masculine, feminine and neuter grammatical markers were gradually eliminated. (See Pyles and Algeo pgs. 154–155 and Baugh, pgs. 199–200, for a complete discussion on this subject).

Nouns lost their Old English inflections, "During the Middle English period... practically all nouns were reduced to two forms, just as Modern English—one without -s used as a general non-

genitive singular form, and one with -s used as a genitive singular and general plural form.” (Pyles and Algeo, pg. 156). Prior to these changes the noun system had been a very complicated one. “For example, in the first singular declension the forms *mūð*, *mūðes*, *mūðe*, *mūð* in the singular, and *mūðas*, *mūða*, *mūðum*, *mūðas*, in the plural...” (Baugh, pg. 190), illustrate the complicated, multi-formed nature of noun formation in Old English.

With respect to pronouns it can be noted that “Only the pronouns retained, and still do retain, a considerable degree of the complexity that characterized them in Old English.” (Pyles and Algeo, pg. 156). These words have preserved distinctive subject and object cases but have eliminated an Old English form called the “dual number”—which was used only when referring to two people. (More than two people were referred to using a different form altogether). Demonstrative, interrogative, and relative pronouns also underwent changes and the reader is encouraged to check Pyles and Algeo pgs. 158–159 as well as Baugh, pgs. 192–194 for an in-depth study.

The verb forms continued (as they do today) to be classified into strong and weak distinctions although the vowels of endings were gradually reduced.<sup>4)</sup> In addition, the word order of Middle English stabilized and remains much the same as that of today.

From the above, it is quite obvious that Middle English represents a period of sweeping changes in the grammar, vocabulary, spelling and word order of Old English and surely reflects the way that Modern English has evolved. It is an area that lends itself to sound study as the changes noted are found documented extensively in the writings of that period. Without a knowledge of Middle English it is very difficult to understand the structure and nature of the English language today.

### **How did the spelling system of Modern English develop ?**

It can surely be said with much confidence that the English spelling system is extremely unique. Unfortunately, this uniqueness has been a major cause of a great many problems for the native English speaker, to say nothing about second language learners. Writing is merely a way of recording speech in all languages. In English, however, there is a very apparent lack of correlation between pronunciations of words and their orthographic representations. Undoubtedly, the best system would be one which entails simplicity with consistency. In this respect, English manifests one of the most complicated systems imaginable. As it is an alphabet, ideally, the same sound should always be represented by the same letter. Regretfully, such is not the case in English. For example, Baugh notes, “In English the vowel sound in ‘believe’, ‘receive’, ‘leave’, ‘machine’, ‘be’, ‘see’, is in each case represented by a different spelling. Conversely the symbol ‘a’ in ‘father’, ‘hate’, ‘hat’, and many other words has nearly a score of values. The situation is even more confusing in our treatment of consonants. We have fourteen spellings for the sound ‘sh’: ‘shoe’, ‘sugar’, ‘issue’, ‘mansion’, ‘mis-

sion', 'nation', 'suspicion', 'ocean', 'nauseous', 'conscious', 'chaperon', 'schist', 'fuchsia', 'pshaw.'" (Baugh, pgs. 12-13). All of these examples attest to a blatant disregard of conformity within the English spelling system. How can we account for this lack of systematization? The answer is a very complicated one that we shall deal with in the next section.

The Old English period had its own spellings and letters to represent its sound system. A number of symbols, that are no longer used today, were present in its orthography.<sup>5)</sup> In addition, the stress in Old English generally followed the rule in all other Germanic languages—namely, in words of more than one syllable, the stress was usually on the first one. The effect of this was far-reaching in the development of the English language: "Because of it, the vowels of final syllables began to be reduced to a uniform sound as early as the tenth century, as not infrequent interchanges of one letter for another in the texts indicate". (Pyles and Algeo, pg. 109). In short, there were a number of ways of spelling that did not really reflect the actual pronunciation. English was neither phonetic nor fixed. This trend continued on and in the Middle English period the spelling system was in a very confused state. "... Middle English texts are not written in a nationally standardized spelling system, and a great amount of orthographic variation can be found between texts written at the same date but in different geographical regions and for different audiences. If any standards of spelling existed, they were regional and not national." (Jones, pg. 45).

Along with the Norman Conquest in 1066 had come a great influx of French language and cultural influence. Norman scribes carried over French writing habits that greatly affected their spelling of a language that they knew only imperfectly. For example, the French gave us the 'th' representation for the Old English symbols *ð*, and *þ*. In all actuality, English should have perhaps kept one of them.

With time, attempts were made to make the spelling system more systematic and many scholars tried to implement the idea of 'correct' spelling. This resulted in the insertion of some letters into words where they were not pronounced because the corresponding word in Latin contained it: e.g. the 'b' in words like 'debt' or 'doubt' spelled in Latin as 'debitum' and 'dubitare' respectively. There was also variability among writers, according to education and temperament, and some scholars used their own spelling systems in an unsystematic way. However, it wasn't complete chaos at that time: "... it is clear from the letters of such a man as John Chamberlain... that the average man of education in Shakespeare's day did not spell by mere whim or caprice, but had formed a fairly constant spelling habit," (Baugh, pg. 251).

Another major factor in the development of the English spelling system had to do with the Great Vowel Shift that was going on from the time of Chaucer to the time of Shakespeare.<sup>6)</sup> The effects of these changes within the vowel system of English (the cause of which is open to debate even today) were extensive and coincided with the introduction of the printing press. The mass circulation of

written material just at the time of this shift wracked heavily upon the spelling system of English. Printers themselves took advantage of the looseness of English spelling for convenience sake and employed a number of variable spellings for words at that time. The results of such a practice are only too clear.

The simplification of consonant clusters such as 'gnat', 'knee', and 'thumb', as well as the loss of the velar fricative and the reduction of vowels in unstressed syllables to /ə/, also affected the spelling system making it even more complex. In addition, English continued to borrow words from other languages but unlike most other tongues kept the foreign spellings and pronunciations. There were also learned and pseudo-learned re-spellings where scholars checked the original languages and spelled words according to etymology. Also, Webster attempted to give American spellings to English words in order to give America a distinction of its own from British spellings. This caused confusion as well within English spelling and even native speakers have to think carefully when spelling certain words.

The inconsistencies within the English spelling system did not go unnoticed. "That the problem of bringing about greater agreement in the writing of English is one the importance of which was recognized in the sixteenth century is apparent from the attempts made to draw up rules and devise new systems." (Baugh, pg. 252). Suggestions to discard the old system and respell the language phonetically with the use of additional symbols where needed, were made. Such attempts were not met with great favor although they have continued up to the present day. (See Baugh pgs. 250-257 for an in-depth description of these attempts).

From the above, it is clear that the English spelling system of today resulted from a number of complicated and far-reaching factors. That it is unique, no one can doubt. However, the complications inherent within the English writing system have caused a great amount of consternation among the scholars of times past and continue even today. Whether or not changes could 'remedy' the inconsistencies of the system is a question that will probably never be answered. English speakers have learned to love the way they spell their own language, and despite the complications, seem reluctant to accept any changes in orthography.

### **How did the English Renaissance affect the development of the English language ?**

The English Renaissance from 1500-1650 had far-reaching consequences upon the development of the English language. Certainly, it could be argued that English had also been changing since its birth in the Old English period through the Middle English period. However, the changes exemplified in the Early Modern Period were of a different character than those of earlier times and are reflected in dissimilar ways. These changes were brought about by a number of factors which

included such things as: "... the printing press, the rapid spread of popular education, the increased communication and means of communication, and the growth of what may be called social awareness". (Baugh, pg. 240).

In order to discuss the changes that occurred in the English language during the Early Modern Period, it will be necessary to consider each of the factors mentioned above as well as some other situations of the time. It is to that discussion that we shall now turn.<sup>7)</sup>

The introduction of the printing press to England by William Caxton in about 1476 had a deep influence upon the English language. This created a powerful, moving force for the creation of a standard language as it provided a way of spreading languages throughout England and, indeed, the rest of Europe. The printing press caused a great and sudden increase in the number of books published in English as can be seen from the fact that, "... in England over 20,000 titles in English had appeared by 1640, ranging from mere pamphlets to massive folios." (Baugh, pg. 241). Perhaps more important was the fact that it was possible for the first time to reproduce a book in thousands of copies.

Literacy was becoming much more widespread because of an increase in education. It is considered that in Shakespeare's London, not less than one third and probably as many as one half of the people could read. The tradesman class was steadily growing and these prosperous people had the money and the time to obtain a good education as is exemplified by an increase in the number of schools, the output of a writer like Defoe and the rise in popularity of the novel. (Taken from Baugh. Ch. 8).

Another important factor in the development of English as a reflection of these times comes from the rapid progress made in commerce, transportation and communication methods. With the increase in the exchange of commodities came a stimulation in language. Vocabulary enrichment as a result of these factors is a common characteristic of the Early Modern Period. Things were changing at a much faster rate than ever before and this affected the English language in ways that we will see later.

A growth in social awareness also came about during this period. Class distinctions were starting to weaken a little and a standard language was coming into being as a result. Movement upward through the social classes made it more important for the average man to pay heed to standards in grammar, spelling and pronunciation.

The above forces played an important part in the development of the English language in both radical (promoting change) and conservative (preserving the existing status) ways. "... the printing press, the reading habit, and all forms of communication are favorable to the spread of ideas and stimulating to the growth of the vocabulary, while these same agencies, together with social consciousness... work actively towards the promotion and maintenance of a standard, especially in grammar and usage. They operate both singly and in combination." (Baugh, pg. 243). Therefore, it

is not surprising that the majority of changes in language during this period are to be found in vocabulary, with few grammatical alterations. A reversal from the trend of the Middle English period.

By the end of the Middle English Period, English had passed through the effects of the Norman Conquest, which had established a foreign tongue as the dominant language of the ruling class, leaving English the vernacular of the masses. After this time, English, like most other important European languages was faced with three problems: "(1) recognition in the fields where Latin had for centuries been supreme, (2) the establishment of a uniform orthography, and (3) the enrichment of the vocabulary so that it would be adequate to meet the demands that would be made upon its wider use." (Baugh, pgs. 243-244).

With respect to the first problem listed in the above paragraph, it must be noted that Latin had, for centuries, been the language of learning and even acted as a sort of lingua franca among European scholars. Other languages were considered inferior in expressive means and many scholars expressed fear that the study of classical languages would suffer if the vernaculars were given too much credence. Also, there were those who held that disputes in theology and discussions in medicine were best left to the educated and not extended to the world of the common man. Against this view were humanist champions who defended the use of the vernaculars in such areas. In England, this latter group had such representatives as Elyot, Ascham, Wilson, Puttenham, and Mulcaster. Each voiced arguments and with the support of the masses (i.e. popular support) English became a language used for the expression of various academic concepts. The demand for translations of great Greek and Latin works was tremendous and this helped to stimulate vast publications. English slowly won recognition as a language of serious thought. Indeed, the people were slowly gaining a self-esteem about their own language and "They seem to have grown tired of being told that English was crude and barbarous." (Baugh, pg. 249).

The problem of orthography has already been dealt with in a previous essay so it is not necessary to go into detail here about that. However, it should be noted that at this time, education, the printing press, social mobility and vocabulary borrowing made the creation of a standard spelling system important. Attempts were made to regularize the way words were orthographically represented and as time went on, attempts were made to "improve" the spelling system as well.

As the Renaissance was a time of increased activity in almost every field, the enrichment of the vocabulary was of vital importance. In fact, "It would have been strange if the spirit of inquiry and experiment that led to the discovery of America, the reform of the church, the Copernican theory, and the revolution of thought in many fields should have left only language untouched." (Baugh, pg. 258). Surely, English was inadequate in the expression of numerous new ideas. The translations that started

to appear in great numbers at this time must have convinced men that this was true. Translators were often put into the situation of wanting to borrow words from other languages in order to enrich their own tongue. As a result, Latin words came into English in great numbers even though it could be argued that there already existed a word in English for the concept and the borrowing was merely based on one man's idea that the Latin term offered better expression. Words were also borrowed from other languages like Greek, French, Spanish and Italian as well at this time.

Of course, not every one agreed with this idea of using borrowed words. There were arguments, fully in the spirit of the times, on both sides. Some condemned the use of "Inkhorn" terms<sup>8)</sup>; while others defended borrowing. There were permanent additions, adaptations, reintroductions and new meanings, rejected words, reinforcement through French, and words from the Romance languages, to mention only a few of the changes going on at this time.

England under the Tudor Kings was a place undergoing fast change. The discovery of the new world created avenues for new vocabulary exchanges and stimulated new interest in exploration and the unknown. It was a period that saw new learning ideas which demanded expression in the language in the form of standardized spellings, grammar and the first dictionaries. Protestantism shifted the emphasis of salvation from the church to the individual and, in so doing, promoted the idea of worldly success being proof from God that one was destined to inherit the "pearly gates of heaven." This also had an affect on expression and vocabulary.

By the end of the English Renaissance period a conscious interest in the English language and attention to its problems had manifested itself. Books and pamphlets now existed that attempted to defend the language against criticisms. English was forever to be the language of education for the youth of the country and there were even books written about the proper pronunciation of English. "Along with this regard for English as an object of pride and cultivation went the desire to improve it in various ways, particularly to enlarge its vocabulary and to regulate its spelling." (Baugh, pg. 302). These things point to a never before held idea about the English language: that it is worthy of serious consideration.

Another point to be considered here is the fact that it is a time when the notion of a "modern standard" comes into full force. The Great Vowel shift had brought pronunciation measurably within the range of that existing today. The printing press and efforts at spelling reform have resulted in a language that offers little difficulty to the modern reader. The vocabulary added at that time has basically survived until today.

English in the Renaissance would seem to have been more elastic than it is today. Men felt freer to do with it what they would. "Words had not always distributed themselves into rigid grammatical categories. Adjectives appear as adverbs, or nouns, or verbs, nouns for verbs, in fact, any part of

speech as almost any other part.” (Baugh, pg. 303). The language represented vigor and adventure, not unlike the spirits of the men at that time.

**How would a teacher respond to a Japanese student’s worry that the Japanese language is being downgraded by its borrowing from English ?**

This is a very interesting question and one that has been considered at various times by this writer since coming to Japan. Having always considered English to be very “pure”, that is, a tongue that hadn’t borrowed so many words itself, this writer was quite surprised to discover the tremendous amount of borrowing that the English language has done and even continues to do at the present. By taking the borrowing practices of English as a model one can perhaps offer consolation to the student who considers Japanese to be degraded by its borrowing from English. The position of this writer is that borrowing among languages is a natural phenomenon and that it isn’t really something that is harmful to a language. It could perhaps be said with assurance that all languages have been known to borrow and in this regard English has certainly done more than any other.

English, a member of the Germanic family of languages, has been borrowing extensively since it came into existence about 1,500 years ago. Chronologically it could be said that English has borrowed some words from Celtic (although to be sure, mainly in the form of place names) ; from Latin, during the time when England was a colony of the empire ; from Old Norse at the time of the Viking invasions from about the 8th century A.D. ; from French-especially Norman French, after the Norman Conquest. There have been four periods of Latin borrowing, extensive borrowings from French, both-Norman and Central, borrowings from Greek (directly, as well as through Latin), from other Romance languages-Italian, Spanish and Portuguese. Indian languages, African languages, South American languages, Russian, Chinese, and even Japanese have offered vocabulary items for English use. It is not possible to offer an exhaustive list of borrowings for the reader here. Literally, thousands of vocabulary items have been borrowed and this trend is still continuing. The reader is, however, invited to see Baugh pgs. 200-221 for an extensive list of examples of words borrowed from French, to say nothing of other languages.

The borrowing of English words by Japanese is not the first instance of that language adopting linguistically. Part of the writing system of Japanese comes directly from China and there are certainly large numbers of Chinese compounds at work in the language today. It would seem that vocabulary borrowing is a natural thing and it is advised that the student not be too upset about it. English borrowed in order to meet various needs of the times and Japanese is only doing the same. Perhaps some of the prescriptivist type people feel that the language is somehow being degraded. However, it is arguable that the words they are so zealously guarding are not really “pure” word

stock, but may even be themselves cases of earlier borrowings, long since forgotten. It may also be, as was the case with English, that although the native language may be capable of creating a new word to meet a new concept, sometimes it is more logical to use a term that comes from another tongue. This would seem to be especially true today because of the extensive trade, travel and international relationships at work.

In the case of English, borrowed vocabulary have added extensively to the betterment of the language in this writer's opinion. Indeed, a plethora of vocabulary items have come in virtually every aspect of life. Most native speakers of English aren't aware to what extent their language has borrowed-as most of it occurred so long ago. However, to them it is still English! In the same manner, the borrowed words from English into Japanese are still Japanese property in the strictest sense. The Japanese people are the ones using them for their own communication.

Take it from a native speaker of the greatest word borrowing language in the world: borrowed words will certainly not change Japanese into another language; nor degrade it in any way. The words that the Japanese need to keep they will. The ones that they don't require for communication will be discarded. English didn't lose anything through its borrowing practices as far as this writer is concerned. Despite the exhaustive changes in the vocabulary, English is still very much English and Japanese will suffer nothing more or less.

### **What are the differences between British and American English and how did they come about?**

It must be noted at the outset that the differences between British and American English are not major. To be sure, there do exist some differences in pronunciation, spelling, idioms, word choice, and to a very small degree, grammar as well. However, these differences are so slight that they are virtually inconsequential. In what manner do these differences manifest themselves and how did they come about? It is to this discussion that we shall now turn.

American English came about as a result of colonial expansion in the 17th century. Therefore, the language that was first spoken in America was the same as that spoken in parts of Britain at that time. As a result, if people criticize American English as being inferior to British English, they are in essence criticizing the English spoken in England at the time of the revolution. People isolated by circumstance or geography are noted as being conservative and in this respect, American English is more conservative than British English (a fact that surprises many). The retention of "gotten" in American English is an example of this conservatism. It is no longer used in Great Britain. On the other hand, American English has lost some things as well-mostly vocabulary items. For example, fortnight, copse, dell, waistcoat, etc.

Generally speaking, American English is a development of seventeenth-century British English.

Therefore, except for vocabulary differences-which largely came about as a result of needing new words to fit new things in a new environment, there are few characteristics of New World English that are not traceable to the British Isles. "The differences between the two national varieties are not many and not very great." (Pyles and Algeo, pg. 216).

Let's take a look at some of the vocabulary choice differences that exist between American and British English. For the most part, vocabulary and usage are rather consistent and words in both national dialects can readily be understood by people on both sides of the Atlantic. We could list rather extensive comparisons of vocabulary terms here but space dose not allow and the reader could easily find enough of such listings to satisfy himself in books written by Baugh or Pyles and Algeo (see appendix). Therefore, a few examples will have to suffice: American "mad" and British "angry"; American "package" and British "parcel"; American "stairway" and British "staircase", etc., are all examples of word comparisons that are essentially the same in meaning and are frequently used in both countries.

There are, however, some genuine examples of word choice differences, although even here, most of them do not cause any real consternation on either side. British people usually say "coach" for American "bus", "pram" for "baby carriage", "petrol" for "gas" and etc. In some instances, an American may have a little trouble understanding (initially) the British equivalent term. However, most well-read, educated Americans are familiar with the British terms and even those who aren't will soon understand the meaning. An English observer of American speech put it quite well: "The long and imposing lists of so-called distinctively British and American words and usages are 75 percent misleading; it turns out either that both the words so neatly seperated are used in one or the other country, or that both are found in both countries but are used in slightly different contexts or in different proportions." (Quoted from Pyles and Algeo, pg. 218). In fact, there seems to have been a rather constant infiltration of British word stock by American vocabulary items. This may be due to the rather recent American ascendancy in commercial, technical, and political prestige within the world today. However, there is also evidence that this trend started a long time ago. (See Pyles and Algeo, pgs. 218-220).

As far as grammar is concerned, the differences between American and British English are just as inconsequential as those discussed above with respect to vocabulary. For example, the British are much more likely than Americans to use a plural verb form such as "the public are", "the French Governemnt are", etc., whereas in American English the singular "is" would have to be used. Certainly, there are no problems in understanding the meanings implied here. Other examples of differences include, British "live in a street" as compared to American "on"; British "get in a train" and American "get on", etc.

As is natural when two dialects are separated by physical distance and slightly different customs, idiom usage varies between Britain and America. Such differences do not really cause great problems, however, as people on either side quickly pick up the meanings through context or simple explanation. No examples of such idioms will be given here because of space, but please see Pyles and Algeo pgs. 222-223 for examples of such differences between the two dialects.

Pronunciation differences between American and British English are again, really unimportant. Rarely do they cause any communication problems unless one is listening to a nonstandard dialect within each respective country—for example, rural, American Southern or British Cockney. Note that even here though, if both parties want to communicate they can. Again, the reader is directed to Pyles and Algeo pgs. 225-229 for a complete discussion of the essential differences. Intonational patterns and tempo are also generally different between the two national dialects in requests and questions. However, the problems they raise as far as understanding is concerned are very slight. Pronunciation differences can most probably be tracked back to regional dialect distinctions and represent the way the language is orally reproduced. Exactly why people speak one way or another is open to speculation. Suffice to say that although there are differences in pronunciation between all dialects of the same language, in essence all are still the same tongue.

Finally, there is the issue of spelling differences between the two national dialects. As with the above, the differences here are minor and do not cause any problems of real magnitude. For example, British “cheque”, “cyder”, “cypher”, “gaol”, “kerb” and “tyre” are understood in America, just as are the American equivalents “check”, “cider”, “cipher”, “jail”, “curb”, and “tire”, understood in Britain. Noah Webster was responsible for most of the American variants in spelling as he was quite the American patriot and felt that American English should have its own distinct orthographic representations. For example, he excised u from a group of words spelled in his time -our. e.g. “armour” (British) and “armor” (American). He also instigated the use of -er for words spelled in British English as -re. For example, “centre” and “center”. Webster again was responsible for the American practice of using -se instead of British -ce. Note “defense” and “defence”. Other examples could be cited here, but the foregoing should be sufficient to give the reader an idea of what the spelling differences entail. Again, to reiterate, they represent very little difference and certainly no problems for understanding.

We could also discuss such issues as variation within the national dialects themselves—e.g. regional differences, ethnic and social dialects as well as individual stylistic variations. Regrettably, however, space does not allow for such a discussion. (Please see Pyles and Algeo, pgs. 231-236 for details concerning these areas). These differences, while certainly real, do not cause problems of any real magnitude as people within the countries still understand each other.

From the above it should be quite clear that, essentially, differences between American and British English are very slight. As dialectal brothers, they share far too many features to create acute communication problems. Indeed, the interrelationships between them are so deep that any reference to problems in communication seems trivial.

### NOTES

- 1) For an in-depth look at the Conquest itself and the other areas of English culture affected, see Baugh, pgs. 127-150 and Partridge, pgs. 146-167.
- 2) See Pyles and Algeo pgs. 146-147 for more examples of this kind.
- 3) Pyles and Algeo pgs. 147-149 discuss vowel and diphthong changes in fine detail.
- 4) See Baugh pg. 68 for a discussion of strong and weak verbs.
- 5) For example, æ, ƿ, ð. See Pyles and Algeo pgs. 107-108 for an explanation of these symbols and others.
- 6) See Baugh pgs. 287-290 and Pyles and Algeo pgs. 172-178 for a description of the changes entailed in this phenomenon.
- 7) Most of what follows is taken from Baugh pgs. 240-303 as well as from class notes and handouts.
- 8) The term "inkhorn" was used by some people in a degrading manner to refer to the use of "leaned" words. See Baugh pgs. 260-264 for discussion.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baugh, Albert, C. "A History of the English Language" Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd. London 1957.
- Jones, Charles. "An Introduction to Middle English" Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc. New York. 1972.
- Partridge, A.C. "A Companion to Old and Middle English Studies" Andre Deutsch Ltd. London 1982.
- Pyles, Thomas and Algeo, John. "The Origins and Development of the English Language" Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc. New York 1982.
- Trevelyan, G.M. "A Shortened History of England" Penguin 1942.