

TUJAMSS

Tansian University Journal of Arts, Management
& Social Sciences

Vol. 1, No.1, October, 2014

THE EARLY TUSSLE FOR LINGUISTIC SUPREMACY BETWEEN THE BRITISH ENGLISH AND THE AMERICAN ENGLISH. A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

By

ATTABOR, OCHEJA THEOPHILUS

Department of English and Literary Studies,

Kogi State University

E-mail: attabor2013@gmail.com,

Phone: 08037849871

Abstract

*The paper is a historical overview of linguistic antecedents between Britain and America in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries in which the American English (words and expressions) fell under heavy criticism by some notable British lexicographers and grammarians. This criticism led to rebuttals by the American leaders, lexicographers and grammarians. This trans-Atlantic linguistic relationship between Britain and America came about by exploration and colonization. The difference that is found in American English, in **pronunciation and spelling convention**, is a usual feature when languages come into contact. The paper concludes that even though English is a language whose cultural centre of gravity is in London, it now grows from many roots.*

INTRODUCTION

The phrase the “American language” otherwise known as the American English was first coined in 1802 at the United States Congress after a much heated debate on the language the North America should adopt as an independent country. Baugh and Cable (2002) explained that the English language was brought to America by colonists from England who settled along the Atlantic seaboard in the seventeenth century. Burchfield (1985) once remarked that over the centuries, the movement of clans and tribes of people has led to a mixture of linguistic patterns, resulting in “a vast array of diverse patterns which are not even intersecting or decussated but crossed and interlocking by structured diversity” (p.134). To him this structured diversity could be the type of crop produced when a blind god

sprinkles seeds at random on a field. It is arguable that the movement of the Forefathers who founded Plymouth Colony has contributed immensely to the linguistic differences between America and Britain when contact was made between them and the Native Americans.

Historical events usually have linguistic as well as political and social results, and this trans-Atlantic linguistic relationship between Britain and America is not an exception. However, the focus of this paper is on the linguistic implication which resulted in tussles for supremacy as early as the 18th century. In 1922, William B. Cairns, an associate professor of American Literature published a book for the University of Wisconsin Studies in Language and Literature (Number 14) which was titled 'British Criticisms of American Writings, 1815-1833 A Contribution to the Study of Anglo-American Literary Relationships. It was a continuation of his monograph on British Criticisms of American Writings, 1783-1815. It was the first of its kind in which he discussed the attitude of Great Britain toward the intellectual life of America as well as various obnoxious comments in periodicals and opinions of individual writers on American Literary life. It was from him we first learned that 'General comments in British periodicals on American customs, American education, and American literature ranged from the extremes of panegyric to the most bigoted condemnation' (Cairns, 1922, p. 20).

For instance, long before Samuel Johnson published his dictionary in 1755, words such as loon, skunk, squaw, and moccasin which were of the American Indian origin were well established in American written English, but Johnson did not recognize any of such words in his dictionary. However, there was another great British lexicographer of the eighteenth century named Nathan Bailey who recognized some American words in his dictionary-The Universal Etymological English Dictionary (1721). Amongst the words of America he recognized in his dictionary was loon. Bailey's recognition of American words is an instance of Cairns' '...extremes of panegyrics...' while Johnson's denial of American words is an instance of Cairns' '...most bigoted condemnation'. 'Dr Johnson, like other English lexicographers and grammarians of the time, did not visit America, and his comments on America, and on the English used in North America, fell far short of the subtlety with which he applied his mind to many other subjects that he knew from personal experience' (Burchfield, 1985, p. 36).

BRITISH CRITICISM OF THE AMERICAN USE OF ENGLISH

Since the 17th century when some groups of British immigrants arrived on American soil, the British have been criticising the American variety of the English language and usage and this can best be described as a kind of tussle for linguistic supremacy. This situation was so odious to the Americans that it incurred a lot of reactions by some notable writers of the 18th century such as Noah Webster and H.L. Mencken. What is the nature of this criticism? When Samuel Johnson reviewed

Lewis Evans's General Map and Account of the Middle British Colonies in America in 1756, he made this comment: 'This treatise [is] written with such elegance as the subject admits tho' not without some mixture of the American dialect, a tract of corruption to which every language widely diffused must always be exposed' (Burchfield, 1985, p.36).

Other British reviewers' and critics complained about the presence of distinctive American words and senses in publications from North America. This is true of a reviewer in the Critical Review, writing of an American clergyman, Charles Chauncy's *The Benevolence of the Deity* (1784)

The style of this treatise is, in general, clear and unaffected, though not elegant. We meet with some uncouth words; such as bestowment, exertment, lengthy, enlargedness, preparedness; which we cannot account for on any other supposition than that of their being current in America. (Burchfield, 1985, p. 37)

What kind of diffusion and corruption was Samuel Johnson referring to in the first quote which the British English itself had not undergone? The British English had passed through harsher linguistic conditions to attain the status it enjoys today. It has borrowed from no fewer than 350 languages of the world, making it a diffused and corrupt language in terms of data from other languages or not being homogeneous as imagined. 'The number of tribes that came to Britain is not known, nor their composition, except in broad terms. What is known is that they fell into four main linguistic groups with different varieties of English known as Northumbrian, Mercian, West Saxon and Kentish', Burchfield, 1985, p. 10).

On the other hand, one could understand the angle from which the British concept of diffusion and corruption about the American version of English was coming from, perhaps of the American English as a dialect or variety of the British English. However, no holds barred that a former colony should not advance technologically, economically and even linguistically. Walcott (1983) once said: 'This is my ocean, but is speaking another language, since its accent changes around different islands' (p. 48) Undoubtedly, the British English is the ocean referred to in this case while the American version of English is the 'another language'. America is one of the islands upon which original British accent changes. This is to confirm that the geographical dispersal of the native speakers of a given language, after a lapse of time can inevitably lead to separation of local speech patterns from those of the mother tongue like the case of Latin in the early Middle Ages given rise to some European languages known today as French, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese. It is possible for the American English to become the all talked about global language to the dismay of the British. Crystal (2003) commented on one of the features of a global language: '...international dominance is not solely the result of military might. It

may take a militarily powerful nation to establish a language, but it takes an economically powerful one to maintain and expand it' (p.10)

The British, perhaps, may stand in awe of the economic strength of their former colony. Under no circumstances could the American English be any homogeneous with the British English in both grammar and pronunciation because while one is spoken at home, the other is spoken outside the British isle making homogeneity hard to achieve as a result of environmental factors. The media too served as a means of generating embers of linguistic taunt. Undoubtedly, dailies serve as a force for stoking these embers into linguistic conflagration between two linguistically intelligible countries such as Britain and the U.S. Notable amongst them was The Punch which wrote "if the pure well of English must remain undefiled no Yankee should be allowed henceforth to throw mud into it" (McCrum *et al.* 1992, p. 225). These and many more comments led to reactions by the Americans.

Come to think of it, English was first brought to the North Sea coasts of England in the 5th and 6th centuries A.D, by seafaring people from Denmark and the north-western coasts of present-day Germany and the Netherlands. The invaders spoke a cluster of related dialects falling within the Germanic branch of the Indo-European language family. The language of the invaders metamorphosed into a distinct form of language different from the continental Germanic languages, and by 1066 A.D. had developed into what we call Old English or Anglo-Saxon, filtering down to the present day English.

ESSENTIALS BY THE AMERICANS

In reaction to strictures passed by the British on American English, the Americans are safe in the knowledge that the emergence of a variant of the English language called American English is a good development for them because of its tendency either to outface or outshine British English following technological and economic development of the U.S. Apart from that, time is another factor which changes the status of a language. It was against this background that the early settlers of America saw in the American form of English, a kind of seed whose tendency to germinate is not despicable. They saw the early stage of American English as a mustard seed, very small and insignificant, which will metamorphose into an imposing giant structure like the oak tree in the forest. This is evident today in computer English.

These were leaders like John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and a host of others who actually realised that America and Britain are poles apart in their language and government and that even though ineluctable circumstances had lured America to Britain historically, linguistic detachment from Britain in spelling, grammar and phonology was possible and only through it could America foster new ideas that could lead to national development. Thomas Jefferson is quoted to say:

There are so many differences between us and the England, of soil, climate, culture, productions, laws, religion and government, that we must be left far more behind the march of circumstances, were we to hold ourselves rigorously to their standard.....Judicious neology can alone give strength and copiousness to language, and enable it to be the vehicle of new ideas (McCrum et al, 1992, p. 227).

In the midst of burning flame of linguistic nationalism, there were several suggestions to replace the English language with other languages of the world like Hebrew, Greek and French in order to taunt and taint the English language. However, John Adam, the second American President would rather consider this decision unnecessary. He felt; in his prophesy, that with time, other languages of the world would be pale in comparison to the English language and that the best thing to do was exploiting the English language in order to project American course. His prophesy has come through. The English language has wider speakers today than expected; and the American English has safely secured a place in Kachru's (1985) Inner circle.

Noah Webster (1758-1843) was the famous American linguistic separatist of the 18th century whose diatribe in his 1789 Dissertations on the English Language betrayed his inner most mind. This is in consonance with the fact that words gather emotional undertones as old stones gather moss.

Several circumstances render a future separation of the American tongue from the English necessary and unavoidable....Numerous local causes, such as a new country, new associations of people new combinations of ideas in arts and science, and some intercourse with tribes wholly unknown in Europe, will introduce new words into American tongue. These causes will produce, in a course of time a language in North America, as different from the future language of England, as the modern Dutch, Danish and Swedish are from the German, or from one another.. (McCrum et al, 1992, P.231)

Webster's linguistic loyalty and patriotism began a process of fermentation when Britain (the colonial master) was at war with the American colonies and at that time school books which were traditionally imported from London were in paucity of supply. Before then, he had changed career from law to teaching in order to eke out a living. In his ingenuity, he regarded London schoolbooks as substandard in many aspects of language. Therefore he seized the opportunity between 1783-1785 to bridge the gap of supply by publishing three elementary books on English notably a speller, a grammar and a reader in order to usher in uniformity and accuracy of pronunciation into schools. And with the publication of his first Dictionary in 1806, his aim, if we are to psychoanalyse, was to standardise the American English and also let his compatriots see reasons why they should be detached from English literary model. In his words,

There is nothing which, in my opinion, so debases the genius and character of my country men, as the implicit confidence they place in English authors, and their unhesitating submission to their opinions, their derision, and their frowns. But I trust the time will come, when the English will be convinced that the intellectual faculties of their descendants have not degenerated in America; and that we can contend with them in letters, with as much success as the ocean (Baugh & Cable, 2002, p. 347).

As earlier stated that words gather emotional undertones as old stones gather moss, I am wont to conclude that Noah Webster was moved, perhaps by the emotional undertones, thirteen years earlier in Thomas Paine's incendiary *Common Sense*, January 10, 1776. Thomas Paine was an Anglo-American political philosopher and writer whose 50 page pamphlet *Common Sense* stimulated immensely the American Revolution of (1775-1785). Suffice it to say that Noah Webster could not have been inspired by the 18th century essayist, Charles Inglis who felt that reconciliation with Britain will bring peace and prosperity, imagine, at a time when North America was in dire need of independence. Webster is reputed for the presentation, in his works, of the otherness of the American English from its British counterpart. Word forms such as color, wagon, defense, fiber, tire for tyre, etc are owed to him.

In another development, Webster's aim, according to Crystal (2002) was to show the way the language was developing independently in America. 'Our honour requires us to have a system of our own, in languages as well as in government. Great Britain, whose children we are, should no longer be our standard; for the taste of our writers is already corrupted, and her language on the decline' (p.249).

CONCLUSION

The English language was not spoken in America before the movement of clans and tribes of British to America in the late fifteenth century. When people move, they do so with their languages and same is true of British immigration to America. In my own opinion, differences found in American English, in **pronunciation** and **spelling** convention is a usual feature when languages come in contact. The British should know that whatever form the American English appears today, it will not be called French or whatsit, but it is still the English language. Therefore it does little good to cut off ones nose to spite ones face since the English language was bequeathed to the Americans by the British Colonists. Had the Americans adopted Hebrew, French or Greek as the American national language as suggested by some elements in the Congress, then little would have remained of British English especially after the World War I because it was the effort of the American controlled IMF and the World Bank in assisting war wrecked countries of the world that the English language also got its wider spread across the globe. Besides, the American variety of English arose as America grows in terms of power.

In recent times, this global power that America assumes has been reinforced by the emergence of English as a language of the internet, a modern form of information technology. America is reputed to be behind the force of communication that has promoted English. The computer becomes symbolically a teacher of the English language. Finally, there is no doubt that English is a language whose centre of gravity is in London, but exploration and colonization took its pollen to other parts of the world including America (Attabor, 2013). These other parts of the world represent female flowers on which pollination took place. For that reason, I agree with the saying that 'English, no longer an English language, now grows from many roots' (Rushdie, 1982, p. 8).

References

- Attabor, O.T. (2013) The Cross-Pollination Hypothesis of the English Language Variety Ona: Journal of English Language and Literature. Vol. 1, 2013, p.160-168.
- Baugh, A.C. & Cable T. (2002). A History of the English Language (5th edition) Routledge.
- Burchfield, R. (1985). The English Language. USA, Oxford University Press.
- Cairns, W. (1922). British Criticisms of American Writings, 1815-1833; A Contribution to the Study of Anglo American Literary Relationships. <http://archive.org/details/britishcriticism00cairala> (Accessed February 14, 2013)
- Crystal, D. (2002). The English Language: A Guided Tour of the Language. (2nd edition) New York: Penguin Group.
- Crystal, D. (2003). English as a Global Language. (2nd Edition) Cambridge: University Press.
- Crystal, D. (2004). The Stories of English. London: Penguin.
- Paine, T. 1776. Common Sense. http://www.calhum.org/files/uploads/program_related/TD-Thomas-Paine-Common-Sense.pdf (Accessed February 14, 2013)
- McCrum Robert, et al. (2002). The Story of English. (New & Rev Ed) London: Faber and Faber.
- Rushdie, S. (1982, July, 3). The Empire Writes Back With A Vengeance. The Times, 8.