

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ENGLISH NATIONAL LANGUAGE AND BRITISH LOCAL DIALECTS

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Abstract: Speaking about the lexical distinctions between the territorial variants, of the English language it is necessary to point out that from the point of view of their modern currency in different parts of the English-speaking world all lexical units may be divided into general English, those common to all the variants and locally-marked, those specific to present-day usage in one of the variants and not found in the others.

Key words: Dialects, language, pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary, language, learning, modern, phonetics.

The differences between the English language as spoken in Britain, the USA, Australia and Canada are immediately noticeable in the field of phonetics. However these distinctions are confined to the articulatory-acoustics characteristics of some phonemes, to some differences in the use of others and to the differences in the rhythm and intonation of speech. The few phonemes characteristic of American pronunciation and alien to British literary norms can as a rule is observed in British dialects.

The variations in vocabulary, to be considered below, are not very numerous. Most of them are divergences in the semantic structure of words and in their usage.

Modern linguistics distinguishes territorial variants of a national language and local dialects. Variants of a language are regional varieties of a standard literary language characterized by some minor peculiarities in the sound system, vocabulary and by their own literary norms. Dialects are varieties of a language used as a means of oral communication in small localities, they are set off (more or

less sharply) from other varieties by some distinctive features of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary.

When speaking about the territorial lexical divergences it is not sufficient to bring into comparison separate words, it is necessary to compare lexico-semantic groups of words or synonymic sets, to study the relations within these groups and sets, because on the one hand a different number of members in a lexico-semantic group is connected with a different semantic structure of its members, on the other hand even insignificant modifications in the semantic structure of a word bring about tangible difference in the structure of the lexico-semantic group to which the word belongs.

The local dialects in Britain are sharply declining in importance at the present time; they are being obliterated by the literary language. This process is two-fold. On the one hand, lexical units of the literary language enter local dialects, ousting some of their words and expressions. On the other hand, dialectal words penetrate into the national literary language. Many frequent words of common use are dialectal in origin, such as *girl*, *one*, *raid*, *glamour*, etc. Some words from dialects are used as technical terms or professionalisms in the literary language, e.g. the Scotch *cuddy*—"ass" is used in the meaning of jack-screw and *lug*—"ear" in the meaning of handle.

Dialect peculiarities (phonetic, grammatical, but mainly lexical) modify in varying degrees the language spoken in different parts of Britain. These speech-forms are called regional variants of the national language and they are gradually replacing the old local dialects. It should be noted that the word *dialect* is used in two meanings nowadays: to denote the old dialects which are now dying away, and to denote the regional variants, i.e. a literary standard with some features from local dialects.

The most marked difference between dialects and regional variants in the field of phonetics lies in the fact that dialects possess phonemic distinctions, while regional variants are characterized by phonetic distinctions. In matters of

vocabulary and grammar the difference is in the greater number and greater diversity of local peculiarities in the dialects as compared with the regional variants.

The English language in the United States is characterized by relative uniformity throughout the country. One can travel three thousand miles without encountering any but the slightest dialect differences. Nevertheless, regional variations in speech undoubtedly exist and they have been observed and recorded by a number of investigators.

The following three major belts of dialects have so far been identified, each with its own characteristic features: Northern Midland and Southern, Midland being in turn divided into North Midland and South Midland.

The differences in pronunciation between American dialects are most apparent, but they seldom interfere with understanding. Distinctions in grammar are scarce. The differences in vocabulary are rather numerous, but they are easy to pick up. Cf., e.g., Eastern New England sour-milk cheese. Inland Northern Dutch cheese, New York City pot cheese for Standard American cottage cheese.

The American linguist O. F. Emerson maintains that American English had not had time to break up into widely diverse dialects and he believes that in the course of time the American dialects might finally become nearly as distinct as the dialects in Britain. He is certainly greatly mistaken. In modern times dialect divergence cannot increase. On the contrary, in the United States, as elsewhere, the national language is tending to wipe out the dialect distinctions and to become still more uniform.

Comparison of the dialect differences in the British Isles and in the USA reveals that not only are they less numerous and far less marked in the USA, but that the very nature of the local distinctions is different. What is usually known as American dialects is closer in nature to regional variants of the literary language. The problem of discriminating between literary and dialect speech patterns in the

USA is much more complicated than in Britain. Many American linguists point out that American English differs from British English in having no one locality whose speech patterns have come to be recognized as the model for the rest of the country.

The main lexical differences between the variants are caused by the lack of equivalent lexical units in one of them, divergences in the semantic structures of polysemantic words and peculiarities of usage of some words on different territories.

The so-called local dialects in the British Isles and in the USA are used only by the rural population and only for the purposes of oral communication. In both variants local distinctions are more marked in pronunciation, less conspicuous in vocabulary and insignificant in grammar.

The British local dialects can be traced back to Old English dialects. Numerous and distinct, they are characterized by phonemic and structural peculiarities. The local dialects are being gradually replaced by regional variants of the literary language i. e., by a literary standard with a proportion of local dialect features.

Local variations in the USA are relatively small. What is called by tradition American dialects is closer in nature to regional variants of the national literary language.

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