SALIENT FEATURES OF SPOKEN AMERICAN ENGLISH

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Abstract

Although British English is a target language that is mostly taught and learnt in Europe, American English is naturally acquired by those who watch movies and use modern technologies for improving their English. Since learners and users of English are commonly exposed to spoken American English, the goal of the study is to classify the main features of it in order to help non-native speakers become aware of the salient features of American English in spoken mode. The study is based on the excerpts taken from contemporary literary prose written in American English and the focus is put on spoken American English. This research will allow of searching for specific features that might be discovered in characters' speeches; however, it will not support seeking segmental and supra-segmental features, salient characteristics related to phonology. The written form of characters' speeches has a significant impact on recognising the main features of spoken mode as it is possible to thoroughly analyse particular items checking them against some criteria. The excerpts taken from more than 100 pages are expected to provide enough material for drawing a number of conclusions that will enable users of English to become familiar with spoken American English from a variety of perspectives.

Keywords: *spoken American English, salient features, authentic materials, speeches of characters*

1. INTRODUCTION

Although English is used as an international language, it seems to be reasonable to teach one of the varieties to provide language learners with a consistent approach to language study. The decision as to which variety to teach depends on a number of factors, such as the local cultural context, the examination learners are expected to sit, the textbooks used at schools and the teachers' own varieties as their preferences can significantly influence learners' choices and the intensity of their use. Two varieties are commonly discussed and analysed due to their popularity and clearly distinguished features: British and American.

In general, linguists argue for a common language, emphasising that there are not many differences between standard British and standard American English, pointing out that Britons and Americans commonly understand each other [1]. The differences are minimised to the way how the words are pronounced as well as the word choice. However, linguists who are not syntacticians as Pullum, would not dismiss pronunciation or vocabulary so easily [2].

The most significant difference that every learner of English can recognise in the initial stages of its learning is different pronunciation in British and American English. Cambridge and Oxford dictionaries systematically present both standards in pronunciation, using transcription symbols supported by sounds. The most famous dictionary of American English, the Merriam-Webster presents only American pronunciation, using symbols that are different from British ones. However, the inventory of British and Northern American phonemes are not the focus of this study.

It is important to emphasise that this study is consequent upon an analysis of the direct speeches of the characters that move the story along. The book related to crime fiction is chosen purposefully as such pieces of literary prose include dialogues that serve a plot function and move the plot forward. Therefore, this kind of fiction does not contain lengthy informative speeches as they are broken up with actions. Being provided with transcriptions of these speeches would surely enrich the quality of this analysis, yet the aim of this study it not to provide readers with the number of hesitators used in the filled pauses such as *uh* and *um*, which are American English transcriptions for British English transcriptions *er* and *erm* [3].

In this respect, due to the written source used for an analysis, the main aspects of spoken language have become the basis for further discussion and evaluation of the excerpts. Although qualitative analyses are reasonable in this context, some data will be commented on from the qualitative perspective in order to emphasise the occurrence of those aspects the frequency of which was significant or served for an analysis in depth.

With regard to the source, the study aims at lexical items and grammatical patterns in a narrow sense of linguistics and major aspects typical for spoken language in a broader sense. The absence of a particular grammatical feature is not proof that such a feature does not exist in spoken American English. It does not only occur in the pages that were used for excerpting. Since the aim is not to distinguish between the mentioned main varieties of English, it was important not to take into account typical orthographic features of American English as they differ from those used in British English and to thoroughly stick to salient characteristics of spoken utterances.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study is viewed as an attempt of a non-native speaker to investigate those features that are significant for spoken American English. The chosen framework of research is based on an array of ideas presented in the book called *Exploring Spoken English*, written by Carter and McCarthy [4], in which they presented data drawn from a research project named the Cambridge-Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English (CANCODE). The database for the CANCODE project consists of five million words taken from everyday English speech to enable the study of spoken discourse. Although this database refers to spoken British, the concept serves as a framework for analysing the excerpts taken from contemporary literary prose; however, the variety of English in which the excerpts are taken from crime fiction is American English.

With regard to the above-mentioned project, it was possible to record lectures, discussions, meetings, which are typical for more formal settings with the use of modern technologies. Therefore, speakers knowing that they were recorded were given opportunities for planning or rehearsing in advance [4]. Similarly, the effect of planning and rewriting affect characters' speeches as they seem to be planned and rewritten by an author. However, these constraints could not discourage any researchers who want to discover or verify the issues in which they are involved in linguistics. The aim of the writer is to imitate a conversation between the characters, which helps them move the plot forward.

2.1. Materials

As mentioned above, the source used in the study is crime fiction called *Girl Missing*, written by Tess Gerritsen [5]. It was her stunning first thriller, which she considers her 'bridge' novel, a moment in time when she was poised to step from one genre into the next [5]. Crime fiction belongs to the genres of fiction in which imaginary events and people are described and the plot-based story is moved forward by both actions and dialogues. The characters that appear in the story are people from different social classes and this kind of fiction thus offers not only informal language, but also substandard language, which is commonly used to characterise the character's social and/or educational background.

In terms of an analysis, one hundred pages from the book were chosen for detailed reading, during which features and aspects of spoken American English were focused on. The book was chosen on purpose owing to the fact that it had been read before and the familiarity with the story and the main characters governed the selection of the text. The second reading of 100 pages initiated the first excerpting, which was partially influenced by the previously mentioned book written by Carter and McCarthy [4]. The third reading was based on a thorough examination of the pages, extending the excerpting of salient features used in the speeches of characters, focusing on as many aspects as possible. It is necessary to mention that the language used in the narration was impressive and helped reveal a lot of aspects of American English, but these aspects were skipped as the study deals with the direct speech of the characters.

2.2. Methods

The methods used in the study refer to excerpting samples from a book written in American English, taking into account a previously mentioned framework. Although qualitative aspects were a main purpose for excerpting, quantitative data will be analysed and the frequency of the occurrence of some aspects will be highlighted, with particular comments. After the first reading, the whole book was expected to be excerpted, yet the second reading of the first 100 pages that were investigated with the aim to address a topic and to find out how much material useful for studying American English can be provided for those whose mother tongue is different from a target language showed that the aspects of spoken language had started to be repeated and excerpting the rest of the book would not have accumulated more evidence in relation to the study. The process of excerpting referred to the speeches of characters in view of the fact that they were expected to represent spoken English. Although inner speech occurs in our minds and can resemble spoken language, the narrator's inner speech was excluded since spoken language is commonly influenced by the factors that are typical for sound performance, in which we usually expect receivers of our messages.

With respect to achieving new information, some commonly known features of spoken language were not taken into consideration such as contractions (both reduced enclitic forms of the verb and of the negative particle) or repetitions at points where the need to keep talking is based on the need to keep the conversation moving forward. According to Biber et al., a type-token ration in the conversation is lower than in other texts, which means that conversation is spontaneously produced, with little time for planning and choosing vocabulary, therefore repetition is characteristic of spoken language [3]. The speakers commonly do not have time to exploit the repertoire of words they master. However, the writer has more time to formulate the ideas carefully and repetitions are not expected to occur so frequently.

The study is also not focused on a very high frequency of pronouns typical for conversations due to sharing the context in which the participants of a conversation share situational knowledge. This pronoun reference related to the reliance on context results in reduction. However, reduction will be discussed from other perspectives, in both grammatical as well as lexical sections.

Unlike real speech, the samples taken from their written forms lack some important features of spoken language such as phonetic and prosodic information. Therefore, it seems to be reasonable not to attribute too much certainty to the conclusions reached on the basis of excerpts as well as to be careful in the interpretations made on the basis of written evidence.

3. DATA ANALYSIS

Analysing the chosen text (100 pages), some general features typical for spoken English appeared to be commented on in terms of grammar. In this context, it is important to mention that the clause is usually treated as the fundamental structural unit of grammar. In conversational language, this unit does not always exist. In realistic conversation, the voice of the speakers allows of recognising whether the sentence starts or ends due to falling intonation or pause in the stream of speech. The clauses are difficult to be recognised in spoken language and smaller units consisting of single words or phrases bear the meaning of the message.

3.1 Clausal and non-clausal units

The clause as the core unit of grammar commonly consists of two parts: a subject and a predicate. However, non-clausal material occurs in conversation as it develops in cooperation between the participants [3]. In conversation, speakers can use a wide range of non-clausal material such as response words, interjections, greetings, apologies, etc. They refer to the message that is not integrated in clauses and occur in conversation when the speakers share the same context, for example, *A word, please* [5: 32]. As mentioned, they can appear in the form of answers to direct questions, for example, '*So, are you from the city?' asked Dietz. 'A native. And you?'* [5: 47]. These sentences are automatically underlined once they are typed in the computer programmes as they are not typical for written mode.

One of the features of spoken language concerns unfinished sentences. Once speakers recognise that the listeners can develop the message themselves, they do not finish their sentences, for example, *You can wait there until the police…..* [5: 25] or *Unless you're sure it's something new, I can't see getting distracted…..* [5: 41]. The list of unfinished sentences is comprised of 9 sentences, in which the missing information was graphically shown as a dash. According to Biber et al., this dash is used as marking a pause and this pause can occur at the beginning or end of a grammatical unit [3].

In everyday informal speech, ellipsis can occur as enough information is provided for the purposes of communication due to the immediate situation and it is not important to express some items explicitly [6]. The omitted (ellipted) elements are recoverable from the linguistic or situational context. According to Biber et al., commonly omitted elements are unstressed function words such as pronouns, auxiliaries, both subject and auxiliary, etc. [3]. However, sometimes it is not transparent what exactly has been omitted and in these cases ellipsis can merge with non-clausal material. The excerpted material contains 37 samples, in which all three types of situational ellipsis are represented. The frequency of their distribution is shown in Table 1.

Ellipted	**%**	**Samples**
Pronoun	54.05	*Ratchet shook his head. 'Didn't find one'* [5: 18].
Auxiliary	32.43	*'How you been, Papa Earl?'* [5: 78].
Subject and auxiliary	13.52	*'Been on that beat for years'* [5: 34].

Table 1. The distribution of three types of situational ellipsis

Substitution also refers to the familiarity with the content of a complement clause and the pro-forms *so* or *not* can be used to substitute for the entire clause, for example, *'Don't know any Mauve. What about me?' He smiled. 'I don't think so'* [5: 39]. This simplification of grammatical structures is based on the reduction of the number of words uttered, by reliance of implicit meaning or reference [3].

Conversation embraces another type of reliance on situational reference through the use of deixis, for example, *'I've done that'* [5: 31]. The excerpts referring to deixis include the most common ones such as *this, that, these, those, here, there, then, now*, etc., for example, *'Or my friend here' – she nodded at Adam – 'gets nasty'* [5: 88] as they enable to point backwards and forwards in a text and also outside the text, to a wider extra-textual context [4].

Other grammatical features represented in the excerpted samples embrace delexical verbs such as *to do a favor, to take a breath* or *to have a go*, e.g. *'You' re free to have a go at my cellar, but leave me a few bottles, will you?'* [5: 63] and tag questions. The use of tag questions is represented by 11 samples. It is common for conversation that declarative statements are expanded by a string of words that consist of an auxiliary verb and a pronoun, mostly in the reverse of that occurring in the main clause, for example, *'You don't get embarrassed in front of your servants, do you?'* [5: 68]. Two positive clauses are represented only by one example – *'Yeah, got good 'n' guilty, did she?* [5: 77].

Analysing the utterances in the word order perspective, some words or phrases are placed to the front position in the clause as they are given extra prominence. In the sentence *Into the wilds of Marine I go* [5: 32], a focus or emphasis falls on the fronted element. The excerpted text contains three samples in the speeches of characters.

In the pages excerpted for the purposes of this study, the speeches of characters comprise 8 samples that refer to the use of the past simple instead of the present perfect. According to Swan [7], the past simple is commonly used in American English to give news, for example, *You just caught me* [5: 46], *I just did* [5: 105]*, I don't think it ever worked* [5: 76].

Another salient feature of grammar which was found in the speeches of characters is the use of adjectives in front of other adjectives in the role of intensifiers, which are commonly adverbs in

British English, for example, *'Oh, she's real pretty'* [5: 80] or *'Those bones of his,' she murmured. 'Ache him real bad. He's in a foul mood…'* [5: 77].

Although the speeches of characters might have been reformulated by the author of the book, they can provide some evidence in relation to informal grammar such as two negatives in the sentence *'I don't go runnin' for no one'* [5: 77], the absence of the third person singular, e.g. '*She don't want to be found'* [5: 80], the use of *ain't*, e.g. *'You ain't never gonna find her 'less she comes to you'* [5: 81] and the use of informal *gonna* or *gotta*, for example, *'Anything you want round here, gotta go through Jonah'* [5: 82]. Focusing on the words such as *runnin'*, *ain't* or *gonna* and *gotta*, it can be concluded that these semi-standardised 'informal spellings' are governed by conventions referring to words whose actual pronunciation is not standard.

3.2 The words in reference to their functions

The number of the excerpts related to words, taken from one hundred pages, was divided into three groups according to their main functions: lexical items, function words and inserts that are mostly represented in conversation as they are used to express emotional and interactional meanings.

The main carriers of meaning in a text are lexical words, which are usually stressed in speech. Examining the samples, the focus was put on the words, which are typical for American English such as *I guess* in the meaning 'I think', *athlete* for 'sportsman or sportswoman', *vacation* for 'holiday', for example, *'For years it was Berto, but I guess he's gone'* [5: 85]. Focusing on the word-formation processes, American English seems to be very flexible as the excerpts grants a sufficient amount of samples that confirm this assumption. One of the processes that are to be mentioned is conversion, one of the principal word-formation processes, for example, *'It goes haywire on us, shoots up, then bottoms out'* [5: 48]. While the online Cambridge Dictionary labels the word *bottom* as a noun in British English and as a noun and an adjective for American English [8], the online Merriam-Webster Dictionary introduces the word *bottom* as a transitive as well as intransitive verb, the latter meaning 'to reach the bottom' [9]. However, the expression in the mentioned sentence is based on its form as a phrasal verb, meaning 'to reach a lowest or worst point before beginning to rise or improve'. Other excerpts refer to other expressions that were not entries in the British dictionaries, but only in American ones, for example, the word *tuxedoed* as an adjective in the expression *a tuxedoed shoulder* [5: 66]. This is an example of other derivational processes.

One of the features of spoken English is the use of multi-word verbs, the umbrella term for phrasal verbs, prepositional verbs and phrasal-prepositional verbs. The excerpted pages contained 44 multi-word verbs, out of which the phrasal verb *show up* was used four times. After consulting all of them in both dictionaries, it is possible to conclude that only three of them are used especially in American English, out of which only one (tie off) was not mentioned in the British dictionary at all. Three phrasal verbs typical only for American informal conversation are *tie off* (to close sth with thread), *reel sb in* (get control of sb) or *crank out something* (to produce something in large amounts), for example, *'These pharmaceutical whizzes out there crank out drugs like new shoes'* [5: 50].

Focusing directly on the phrasal verb *show up*, it was possible to discover that it is usually used in the meaning 'to arrive for a gathering or event' or 'to appear or be seen' for the US usage, while this phrasal verb was defined in the meaning 'to arrive somewhere in order to join a group of people, especially late or unexpectedly' for British English [8]. The Merriam-Webster presents more meaning such as 'to become involved with others and make an active contribution' or 'to provide help and support for someone'. The extra meaning in the US dictionary was 'to be plainly evident' [9].

Idiomatic expressions used in spoken American English were represented by the phrases with their figurative meaning such as *to ring a bell, to be in the dark, walk off the job, to go by* shortened from *to go by the name of*, etc. While the first two are used in both varieties, the third one used in the sentence *'She had a screaming match with her supervisor. Then she walked off the job'* [5: 67] is defined only in the online Merriam-Webster dictionary [9]. The last one was consulted in the online Free Dictionary [10].

According to Carter and Carthy, fixed expressions are defined as words that are prefabricated and the patterns are used routinely, for example, *a fact of life, as sweet as, face to face, to take somebody at his word.* These expressions were found in the speeches of characters and were used to maintain relationships and reinforce shared knowledge. They can be viewed as references to common cultural understandings [4].

Spoken English embraces the words that are used 'to avoid precise reference and to hedge statements so that they are neither too assertive nor too direct' [6]. The excerpted samples (23) provide a good representation of those mentioned in the grammar-reference books. The expressions such as *kind of, sort of, thing* or *stuff* support the definition mentioned above. They enable the characters to refer vaguely to those pieces of information in the speeches the listeners of which were aware of the meaning and understood what was meant, for example, *'Or maybe there's a whole ton of the stuff sitting in some pusher's warehouse'* [5: 44] or *'It was sort of a personal matter for Mr. Quantrell'* [5: 34].

Focusing a particular attention on some specific words, it can be concluded that informal words were explained differently in British and American dictionaries. In the online Cambridge dictionary, the word *dude* was defined as mainly US slang in the meaning 'man' or as form of address while in its American section it was presented as 'any man, or one who comes from a city and dresses in a stylish way' [8]. However, the online Merriam-Webster dictionary offers several definitions, with one for its informal meaning as 'fellow, guy' [9]. Another example refers to the word *chick* as 'girl or woman', which was defined as informal for both varieties of English in the online Cambridge dictionary [8]; however, the online Merriam-Webster emphasises that it can be sometimes offensive [9]. The same refers to the expression *goddam* used in both varieties to emphasise something, however, it was only the online American dictionary, which labels the word as sometimes offensive [9].

The expression *chop* in the sentence *'Your car, lady, she's chop'* [5: 89] was derived from the Wikipedia explanation referring to the expression chop shops that are often linked to car-theft rings as part of a broader organised crime enterprise in the meaning that once a car is chop, it means that it was stolen, disassembled and its parts were sold [11].

Two expressions were labelled as mainly US informal such as *honcho* (a person who is in charge of an organisation, or in an important position in it) and *dump* in the phrase *dump questions* meaning stupid occurring in the sentences *'The big man,' said Kat, 'is like a – a head honcho'* [5: 85] and *The doctor sighed. 'I'll skip the dump questions'* [5: 94].

Another example refers to the word *crank,* which was defined in the American section of the online Cambridge dictionary as 'a person who has strange ideas and behaves in strange ways' [8], while the online Merriam-Webster defines the word as an adjective 'of, relating to, or being a bad-tempered or annoyingly eccentric person' [9] providing an example crank calls, which was used in the book as well *'I'd just changed my phone number – I was getting crank calls – so I wrote my new number in a matchbook and gave it to her'* [5: 67].

Informal English contains words that are shortened, either through the processes of clipping or abbreviating. The number of such words has reached 40 and two words were the most frequently used. The first one concerns the word *lab,* which is generally considered informal in both varieties. The text contains clipped words such as *ex, vic, tox, doc, intro, etc.* However, the second one referring to abbreviating *OD* was labelled as mainly US slang in the meaning 'overdose' as a noun and for both varieties as a verb. The abbreviation *ME* is defined in the Cambridge Dictionary as an illness called 'myalgic encephalomyelitis' [8], while in US English it can stand for 'Maine' or 'Medical Examiner' [9]. The latter was the meaning in which these initialisms were used in the book.

According to Biber et al., function words serve two major roles. The first refers to indicating relationships between lexical words or larger units, while the second does to indicating the way in which a lexical word or larger unit is to be interpreted. The number of lexical words and function words is considered more equal in the conversation than in other registers as the low frequency of nouns is compensated by a high frequency of pronouns contrasting a high frequency of lexical verbs as well as auxiliaries and adverbial particles [3].

As regards function words in spoken American English, it was possible to find out some examples concerning the use of prepositions such as *on the street*, the use of indefinite articles *a half hour* or *in a hospital* that are in contrast with British English. However, the speeches of characters did not contain anything specific in relation to spoken mode that was not possible to notice in the speech of a narrator. Some specific items were typical for both varieties of English and it was not important to focus on them from this study perspective.

The inserts are typical for spoken language where they are marked off by intonation and pauses. In writing, the inserts are indicated by punctuation marks. They play an important role in conversation and the excerpted text provides us with a variety of forms. These forms include most categories, mentioned by Biber et al., except hesitators, commonly expressed by *uh* and *um* in the American transcriptions of the sounds typical for filled pauses [3].

According to Biber et al, discourse markers are words that are loosely attached to the clause and facilitate the ongoing interaction. They include inserts classified in a number of categories such as interjections, greetings, attention signals, response elicitors, the politeness marker *please*, apologies, expletives, etc. [3]. The total number of discourse markers identified in the chosen pages exceeded 100 and several more might have been found, reading the text for the fourth time. In compliance with Biber et al.'s classification, the most represented groups were responses (e.g. yeah, okay, etc.), for example, *'Okay, Vince. Who is he?'* [5: 32] or response elicitors, for example, *'He's from Homicide, right?* [5: 26] and discourse markers (right, well, etc.).

Well is an adverb, used in conversation as a discourse marker. It can indicate several aspects and is commonly used in a cluster with other words. In the chosen sample, it is used with *oh* in response to a situation, meaning resignation *'You shouldn't be down here,' he said. 'Not at this time of night. It's not safe.' 'Oh, well.' Isabel glanced around in disbelief at the tired army of people waiting on the benches and she clutched her wrap more tightly around her shoulders* [5: 101]. It can also signal that something surprising is about to be said, for example, *'Well,' said the doctor, tying off the first stitch. 'You two lead exciting life'* [5: 95].

According to Carter and McCarthy, discourse markers can be defined as phrases that are commonly used to mark boundaries between one topic and the next, once people converse. They are used to indicate whether the speaker opens or closes as well as wants to continue in his/her speech [4]. The excerpted samples contain the use of *you know* indicating that the speaker checks understanding and tries to keep the listener involved, for example, *'He's upstairs, you know,' she said. 'In the ICU'* [5: 98].

The discourse is organised and therefore the use of discourse markers enables speakers to manage opening or temporarily closing topics, launching or concluding, re-opening previously closed conversations. In the following sample, *anyway* was used to indicate that the main character signals that she wants the topic to come to an end – *He laughed. 'I'm not sure I'd want any of my relatives here.' 'Didn't matter to her. She didn't know where she was, anyway'* [5: 47].

The discourse marker *so* is commonly used as a connecting or summarising marker [6]. The excerpted samples provide us with both meanings: connecting in the sample *'For years, it was Berto, but I guess, he's gone. So now it's a guy called Jonah'* [5: 85] and summarising in the sample *'So there's a question of murder'* [5: 26].

4. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis presented in this article is not based on transcriptions of real speeches, which are included in the corpus materials and serve for particular studies, for example, emphasising a distinctive grammar of spoken language, operating differently from that of the written language. The presented study is based on an analysis of the speeches of characters taken from contemporary literary prose, written in American English. However, it is important to emphasise that the writer had enough time to reformulate the utterances, thus this set of samples do not contain typical features of

conversational language recorded deliberately and in the situations that the participants of the conversation are not prepared beforehand.

This analysis was based on thorough searching for proper explanations, using different reference materials. All the comments referring to specific features of spoken language are based on materials available on the internet, checked in the officially printed grammar-reference books. This way of analysis is time-consuming as each excerpt is expected to be checked against at least two dictionaries. This approach has revealed that the online Cambridge Dictionary distinguishes between the two main varieties, however, the online Merriam-Webster deals with American English. On the other hand, the latter allows of justifying or refining the explanations found in other sources labelled as US mainly or US only.

Although native speakers living in different English-speaking countries understand each other, in terms of two main varieties, it used to be said that two countries were divided by a common language. However, it became a necessity to compile the dictionary of American English by Noah Webster, who could distinguish the differences between the formally brought language from the British Isles and that used in the USA, influenced by the languages of other immigrants speaking Spanish, French, Dutch, German as well as Central European languages.

In general, English is specific for its centrifugal and centripetal tendencies. In majority of the world continents, national varieties of English have emerged; however, the processes of levelling and diffusion are reducing the local diversity and certain linguistic features are being spread due to the development of communication such as the internet and the rise of mass media. In contrast with those efforts of separating British and American English, nowadays the trends are towards influencing each other, which is more recognisable in vocabulary. Some aspects that used to be considered American English were originally brought to the country by speakers of British English and can be recognised in less formal forms of the language. During the 20th century, the economic supremacy of the USA enabled American English to become the language of trade and international communication. Selling their products of cinematography and written words influenced the users of British English

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