Università di Firenze Dipartimento di Formazione, Lingue, Intercultura, Letterature e Psicologia a.a. 2019-20 Corso di Laurea magistrale 37 in Lingue e Letterature moderne europee e americane

Laboratorio di Lingua e Traduzione inglese

“Characteristics and Varieties of North American English” John Gilbert

**Handout 3: English in the Americas. Historical development of standard NAm English**

**English in the Americas**

in 2019: ca. 247m L1 English; ca. 400m L1 Spanish (ca. 58m in USA); ca. 204m L1 Portuguese; ca. 8m L1 French/French creole

**2 major areas in the Americas** where English is spoken

1. **Caribbean area** – ca. 20 political units w/ English as official language

- West Indies: Jamaica, the Lesser Antilles (Barbados, Grenada, Trinidad & Tobago), also Guyana (S.America), Belize (C. America)

- also a few peripheral areas:

- creole-speaking sections along Atlantic Coast of Central America

- Caribbean English: a language continuum model <——>

- a **continuum** is a spectrum of language forms between 2 extremes, but w/ only small, incremental differences moving from one point on the continuum to the next

- extreme creole <——> Standard BE (or Caribbean/Jamaican standard?)

- most of population speak English creoles

- at one extreme (lowest socio-economic & educational level of society) creole forms of English, at other extreme is Standard English in its West Indian form

- creole usually characterized by a morphological simplification of colonial lan- guage: e.g. “No Woman, No Cry” (Bob Marley)

- educated **Caribbean English** usage oriented towards BrE

- Creole-Standard English continuum <——> exists in CaribE but not in NAE

2. **the U.S.A. & English-speaking Canada**

- largest single English-speaking area in world

- US & Canadian English = NAE (ENL = ca. 85% US & 2/3 Canadian pop.)

- despite numerous BE features to be found in CanE, only a subgroup of the Northern variety of NAE

- far fewer regional varieties than in Britain

- more dialects in England than anywhere else in English-speaking world - England: people w/ a common heritage, living together in small area for over 1,000 years; with a huge variety of accents

- only ca. 5% of ENL speakers use RP as normal accent (Trudgill, Hannah, 1985)

- upper social classes

- but many others imitate it (idealized RP)

- U.S.A like Australia, general conformity of speech compared to Britain

- N. America: great mix of backgrounds, living together for a relatively short period over a vast area; with few varieties

- ca. 2/3rds of U.S. pop. living on 80% of territory & speaking w/ same accent

- perhaps only 2 dialects: Gullah and New Foundland (& perhaps Afro-AmE)

- importance of **continuum v. container model/paradigm**

- also for Stand. NAE v. varieties

**Historical development of standard North American English**

**over 400 years of English in North America**

NAE developed very much like Englishes of Australia, N. Zealand & S. Africa did much later

- originated considerably earlier

- over period of more than 400 years, about twice as long as most other Englishes

- USA 1st Br colony to achieve independence (“Revolutionary War” 1775-1783)

history of development of English and all its varieties in N.America based on:

- **English dialect contact** (“koinéization”)

- **language contact**

**1607 Jamestown, Virginia** 1st permanent English colony in N.America

* but **no standard form of English until mid to late 1700s**
* English colonists in 1600s and early 1700s spoke dialects & varieties of English

- English arrived in N.Am w/ great dialectal differences representing regional divi- sions & social stratification in Br Isles

- during migration, language change is generated by social factors outside formal structure of language

- importance of immigrant influence on NAE

- language contact & interlanguage (ESL & EFL speakers)

- importance of ports: e.g. N.Y.C., New Orleans

- according to 1st U.S. census in 1790:

- 3 out of 5 in USA not of English origins

- diversity among English speakers

- 2 out of 5 not even from English-speaking backgrounds

- multilingual reality

**koinéization**

- **koine:** a common language, *lingua franca*

English dialect contact

* three processes in operation:

1) **mixing**

2) **leveling** (pronunciation extremes)

3) **simplification** (grammatical & other linguistic features)

* all NA varieties of English different from & with only partial similarities to BE dialects/varieties spoken today or in colonial period

- little or nothing to link NAE regional varieties to geographic districts of England

- less mixing meant less koinéization

- more retention of original source area language traits

- e.g. early settlements of New England, the South, Appalachia (“Scotch-Irish”), also Canadian Maritime Provinces

- **Southern** & **New England** regions produced most distinctive geographical varieties

- they share certain linguistic features with each other but not w/ Midland region which lies between them

- most important is non-rhoticity (as in southern England), also “yod dropping” /j/

- but generally NAE linguistic homogeneity (both at a national & regional level) vs BE dialectal diversity

- left no greatly divergent local or class dialects (as in Australia, New Zealand)

- process of homogenization

- population moved from East to West, pushing “the frontier” westwards

- no geographic locus of standard NAE

- tendency towards greater standardization in NAE

- w/ major influences from ethnic groups

**language contact**

* **substrate languages**

- less culturally “prestigious”: Native American & West/Central African languages

- compared to other Postcolonial Englishes (PCEs), NAmE has had relatively limited linguistic influence from **indigenous peoples** due to brutal genocide

- Native Am lexical contributions for toponymy, flora, fauna

*-* fauna: *raccoon, opossum, moose, skunk, terrapin, woodchuck, chipmunk, caribou, menhaden, muskellunge*

- flora: *hickory, catalpa, pecan, catawaba, persimmon, sequoia, squash*

- also *canoe, moccasin, tomahawk, wigwam, teepee, squaw, wampum*

- loan translations: *war dance, warpath, pipe of peace, Great Spirit, paleface, medi- cine man, big chief, bury the hatchet*

- West African languages: *gumbo* (okra stew)*, okra, pinders* & *goobers* (peanuts), *cooter*

(type of turtle)*, buckra* (disparaging term for "white man," esp. a poor one)*, yam*

* **adstrate languages**

- cultures of “equal status/prestige”

- English competed w/ Spanish, French, Dutch & German in different parts of NAm - multilingual situation in early NAm

- special contact varieties developed w/ competing languages

- mutual borrowing between languages of roughly equal prestige in colonial NA

- Spanish very important adstrate language

- French in North (e.g. Maine) & west of English colonies

- Dutch in New York (ex-New Amsterdam) & New Jersey

- German (especially early Pennsylvania)

- toponyms often borrowed from Native American & adstrate languages (e.g. Dutch, French, Spanish)