

# American lessons

Is American English taking over the world? *David Crystal* explains why there is still a place for the British dialect

It's 2050, and you've just arrived in London from Washington. You take a cab to your hotel. "Gee, buddy," says your driver, "I gotta stop for some gas and clean that windshield." He looks British. His car is British. He's driving on the left-hand side of the road. But he sounds American. "Where are you from?", you ask him. "Born in Whitechapel," he replies – and, if you listen hard, you can just make out the hint of a Cockney accent, beneath his mid-Atlantic drawl.

Is this a likely scenario? Is British English really changing so much? And is American English going to be so influential in the next century that we will all end up speaking like Bill Clinton?

The way English has emerged as a global lingua franca has been truly remarkable. Who could have predicted such an outcome in 1066, when its very existence was under threat after the successful French invasion? Even by the time of Queen Elizabeth I there were scarcely five million mother-tongue speakers, and hardly anyone used English outside the British Isles. But by the reign of Queen Elizabeth II, this figure had grown to over 250 million, with four-fifths of the speakers living outside Britain.

What has been the role of America in all this? By the end of the 19th century, the USA had overtaken Britain as the world's fastest growing economy, and its immigration rate had no parallel. In 1900 the US population was just over 75 million, and this total had doubled by 1950. Today, over 225 million American citizens speak English as a mother tongue, and that fact alone makes the USA easily the

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English world leader. It is, after all, four times the number who speak English in Britain.

When people talk about the growing influence of English in the world, therefore, they're usually talking about American English. This has been reinforced by the way the USA has repeatedly emerged as the dominant economic and cultural force in world communications. Look at these examples:

- ★ English was the first language to be transmitted by radio, in 1906, from the USA.
- ★ The English-language dominance of the film industry has its roots in the USA.
- ★ Modern popular music is predominantly in English, and it all started with Thomas Edison's phonograph – in the USA.

★ By the Seventies, almost all of the world's leading advertising agencies were US-owned.

★ The official lingua franca of air traffic control is English, an early decision of the International Civil Aviation Organisation – established in 1944 in Chicago.

★ English is the chief language of the Internet – originally developed in the late Sixties in the USA.

Not surprisingly, then, US English has been a major influence on other languages and dialects. English words have flooded into their vocabularies, especially to do with sport, commerce, culture, entertainment, politics and the consumer society. Here's a random selection of 20 items, all seen in shops, ads or newspapers in European cities this year: goalie, knockout, photo finish, hitchhike, traveller's check, marketing, runway, motel, briefing, top twenty, Miss (as in Miss Sweden), striptease, sexy, hamburger, disk, drive-in, cocktail, make-up, juice, no way.

The Italians have a word for this kind of massive cultural influence: *cocacolonizzare*, to "coca-cola colonize". The Spanish have devoted a television series to complaints about it. And the French have tried to ban it. In France it's now illegal to use an English word in official publications if a native French word already exists. So, le weekend, le smoking, and le computer are out – though the French seem to be honouring the law more in the breach than in the observance.

American English is likely to influence the speech of our taxi-driver in the same way. And in recent years, it has been noticeable how many American words have come into

British English, how some British spellings and pronunciations have begun to follow the American norm, and even how aspects of British English grammar have moved in a US direction.

★ Words: we've heard baggage for luggage, can for tin, elevator for lift, eraser for rubber, French fries for chips, intermission for interval, vacation for holiday, and ass as a politer form of arse.

★ Spellings: we've read disk for disc, programme for program, encyclopedia for encyclopaedia, draftsman for draughtsman, jail for gaol, and pajamas for pyjamas.

★ Pronunciations: we've heard schedule beginning with a sk- rather than a sh-, anti- pronounced to rhyme with tie rather than tea, and ate sounding like eight rather than et; we've also heard people putting the stress on the first part of a word, as in *magazine* for *magazine*, *research* for *research*, and *weekend* for *weekend*.

★ Grammar: we've heard, in informal speech, I just ate instead of I've just eaten, real good for really good, living



on Smith Street for living in Smith Street, five after eight for five past eight, and Monday through Friday for Monday to Friday inclusive.

Idioms also show American influence to be growing. Some years ago I went for breakfast in a New York City diner and asked the waitress for eggs. "How do you like your eggs?", she said. My British English background hadn't prepared me for such a question, and I could only stammer, "cooked". She looked at me as if I was some kind of nut, then reeled off a set of phrases which at the time I could barely understand, such as "once over lightly" and "sunny side up". Today I know what all these idioms mean, and can order my eggs as well as anyone from Brooklyn.

These examples will be familiar to many in Britain, but do they sound the death knell for British English? I think not. There are hundreds of rules making up English grammar, but only a tiny number have been affected. The pronunciation of a few individual words is changing, but there is no general shift. And even if we added up all the words which have come into British English from the USA in the past few years, I doubt whether we would reach more than a few hundred – a small number when seen alongside the tens of thousands of words which the two dialects have in common. There are hundreds of Americanisms which are still not known in the UK, such as out of left field and other baseball idioms. And there are just as many words which remain a distinctively British puzzle to US tourists, such as mudguard, solicitor, spanner, chips, nappy, boot (of a car), play a straight bat and the other idioms of cricket.

Why will there be no US takeover? The reason is to do with why we use language. People sometimes think that the only purpose of language is to communicate informa-

tion: to express ideas in an intelligible way. But there's another reason for language, and that is to express our social and personal identity. Dialects and accents have grown up over time for that reason. If people want to show that they belong to a particular social group, then all they have to do is talk in the same way, and differently from everyone else.

Moreover, linguistic identity is something people are prepared to fight and die for. There have been hunger strikes to the death in support of a language. Political movements to save local languages are known all over the world – look at Canada, Belgium, and India. The case for making a language official in a country can lead to emotional debate. There are even cases of people committing suicide when, following a move to another part of a country, they have found themselves unable to cope with ridicule of their accent.

So, yes, American English will continue to influence British, Australian, and all other dialects of English – at least as long as the USA rules the economic and military waves. And I'd expect to see a steady trickle of American words, idioms, pronunciations and spellings into these dialects. But it will remain a trickle, because while the British want to be able to talk intelligibly with Americans, they don't actually want to be Americans. In the contest between identity and intelligibility, identity always wins. Our Whitechapel taxi-driver will be filling up with petrol and cleaning his windscreen for a good while yet. ■

David Crystal is author of the *Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the English Language*.

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