English as a lingua franca in the English-speaking Americas

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Abstract

This paper surveys several accounts of language evolution and change in the history of English in the Americas, outlining the main interpretive approaches. While the conventional interpretations involving founder effects and extra-linguistic influences were undoubtedly important, they are found to be insufficient. It is argued that features from other language varieties (adstratal, substratal influence) should not be seen as merely piecemeal additions by (or due to contact with) bilingual speakers, but as evidence of speech communities made up of many (perhaps a majority) bilingual and multilingual speakers — in other words, a lingua franca environment — where features (words, morphemes, syntagms) may be selected that fit both immediate communicative needs and the speakers' repertoires of experiences and abilities. Further studies are called for that explore to what degree linguistic change may have been motivated by the need to communicate in a multilingual ecology where there is not full shared competence in English (or in any other language).

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1.Introduction

The distinct character of Englishes in the Americas is commonly explained in part by founder effects (i.e. the varieties that were brought by the first English speakers), and in part by extra-linguistic influences (e.g. mobility of speakers, the establishment of states and the perceived need for linguistic standardisation and reform, the possibilities arising from new technologies, etc.) that shaped its progress across the region (Algeo 1991; Wolfram 1971; etc.).

Yet English in the Americas was not simply transplanted. It came (in a confusion of regional forms) to ecologies that already included other dialects, and later welcomed still more. And it has continued to develop in such ecologies, whether in the planation colonies of the Caribbean or in the settler colonies of eastern North America, with continuous immigration, through most stages of its history. At present, for English in the USA, Anglo-Canada, and other English-dominant locales, a potent and dynamic multilingual environment persists, even if it is less visible in some of the contexts that most readily come to mind (e.g., media, business, government).

The intention of this paper, through a survey of commentaries on the evolution of English in the Americas together an assembly of attested instances of distinct features, is to make a preliminary attempt at painting a picture of English in the Americas that includes findings from dialectology, creole studies, and applied linguistics. The approach is broad, disparate, and diachronic (drawing upon but not dwelling on many of the rigorous studies that have produced coherent synchronic descriptions specific dialects at certain times). Although synchronic approaches are essential in order to understand the systematicity and the choices represented in language practices (e.g. the range of verbal forms available, or the genre choices), and in former times these were too much neglected (cf. Saussure's charges against the philologists of the 19th century), recent voices in linguistics suggest that prioritising synchronic descriptions overly represents 'a language' as a unified coordinated entity when it is not really more than an emergent collection of features that imperfectly work together (Ellis & Larsen-Freeman 2006; McWhorter 2003; Mufwene 2008; etc.). The objective here is to grasp something about the web of dialects that grew in and with the development of the English-speaking Americas, by taking a long and wide view, appraising the interpretations and explanations that have been given to account for a variety of features observed at different stages.

2. Reconstructivist approaches to English in the Americas

The traditional approach to dialectology, like that of the wider filed of historical linguistics, is one of reconstruction. Like the branches of the language-family trees (Indo-European, etc.) "speech communities [were] assumed to be monolingual" (Dillard 1980: 2), and the understanding was that the characteristics of later dialects could be traced back to their "parent". An early American dialectologist, Hans Kurath, stated explicitly: "The dialect differences in the pronunciation of educated Americans from various sections of the country have their origin largely in the British regional differences in the pronunciation of standard English"

(cited in Underwood 1980: 74).

Even if today most would view this as an overly simplistic conception, these reconstructions were grounded in substantial evidence. Wolfram & Schilling-Estes (2016) cite some of the traces of regional British dialects of past centuries that are found in present-day speech practices in the United States. Phonological, lexical, and some syntactic features of south English dialects are prevalent in Virginia and in New England in the early 17th century, and those of north Midland (e.g., Quaker) dialects were evident in the Philadelphia area in the later 17th century. The differences between middle American English and the earlier Southern and New England dialects widened when the Philadelphia area became the entry point for great numbers of immigrants of lower social stature from Scotland and Scots-Irish in the early 18th century, who carried their distinct practices to the Appalachian region and beyond to the Midwest.

Schneider (2010) has divided the typical trajectory of a transplanted language into five stages: i) foundation (the introduction of certain dialects to a new ecology), ii) exonormative stabilisation (whereby a dominant dialect or *koiné*[1] is established, with some admixture), iii) nativisation (an explosion of creativity, through admixture and innovation, as the dialect becomes distinct from its antecedents), iv) endonormative stabilisation (whereby the dialect coalesces around its own norm), and v) differentiation (when variation into multiple dialects begins to be discerned). The reconstructive tradition puts the focus on the foundation stage, and thus on the dialects that preceded the transplanting. In doing so it ignores the multilingual reality that is present (in most cases) throughout all stages and that becomes even more relevant at the later stages of exonormative stabilisation and nativisation, when the dialect begins to settle on some of the most widely adopted features from dialects of English and other languages. The multilingual dimension in American linguistic history was accounted for in studies of *creoles*, the varieties of European languages that emerged in colonies around the Atlantic and later around the world. However, these were treated separately, as results of abnormal multilingual contact.

3.Recent approaches to English in the Americas

More recently there is acknowledgement of at least four trends that complicate the picture of English in the Americas, and, in accordance with this complexity, there has been much more willingness on the part of researchers to widen their view over what were previously considered separate sub-fields.

3.1. Dialect mixing and levelling/koinéisation

Read (1933/1980), in his examination of contemporary British views of American speech, found that what struck British observers most was the relative uniformity of speech patterns throughout the colonies. One William Eddis in 1770 wrote:

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1. A koiné, on the model of the most widespread Greek vernacular around the eastern Mediterranean in the last centuries before the Common Era, is a restructuring or blend of several dialects that accompanies the dominance and wider use of one of the dialects.

The colonists are composed of adventurers, not only from every district of Great Britain and Ireland, but from almost every other European government. […] Is it not, therefore, reasonable to suppose, that the English language must be greatly corrupted by such a strange admixture of various nations? The reverse, however, is true. The language of the immediate descendants of such a promiscuous ancestry is perfectly uniform, and unadulterated; nor has it borrowed any provincial, or national accent, from its British or foreign parentage. (cited in Read 1933/1980: 21)

For educated and well-travelled people in the 18th century, when 'national' languages in Europe were still struggling to extend their influence beyond the capital, the degree of dialect mixing that had taken place in the United States was unexpected, especially when it was known that most colonies had been settled by groups from clearly defined regions of the mother country. The founder effects were indeed still present, and their speech patterns had been overlaid with many colourful variants (a certain Richard Parkinson characterised the New England dialect as "extremely vulgar and profane," even among preachers, with "the word damned … a very familiar phrase" (Read 1933/1980: 25) but overall, there had been much more levelling of dialects than in England, a country with greater wealth, better roads, and thus, presumably, more travel (aside from the initial move to the colonies, the colonists in the Americas were not highly mobile). At present, among scholars, there is growing acknowledgement of one potential factor behind this difference, and that is the presence of speakers of other languages. Foster points out the neglect of this factor in traditional approaches: "Writers on the subject of Americanisms have usually made little of the fact that in the past millions of Americans have had a foreign language as their mother-tongue." (1968: 8). With English being the dominant language in North America after the decline of Dutch and French power, these speakers of other languages were bi- or multilingual. In addition, speakers of the less mutually intelligible regional accents of English would naturally feel the need to be proficient in the more levelled koiné that was developing. As Mufwene notes, "situations where speakers have a choice between two or more languages/dialects … lead to mixing" (2001: 18–19). If most participants in a speech community have a choice between linguistic features (words or patterns), the competition produces eventual winners; in contrast, in the monolingual case, when most of the population speak only one dialect, that dialect, unlevelled by koinéisation, wins by default.

3.2. Bonding with features from atypical sources

Here I will use the term bonding instead of admixture, which is more common in the literature, in order to clearly distinguish between code-mixing or translanguaging (where different dialects are used in an interaction) and a language practice that has had features from jargons or other languages joined or bonded with it, such that those features, though they may still appear foreign, now make up part of the language practice (in the sense that *rendezvous* is bonded to English). Admixture was expected (if not always tolerated) by linguists and laypeople who followed the reconstructivist tradition; bonding was not so readily admitted, however, in those traditional descriptions.

There are numerous commentaries and attested cases of English in America being infused with linguistic features from atypical sources (professional jargon, etc.) that do not usually exert an influence on the speech of the wider public. One of these sources was nautical jargon. As until mid 1800s "shipbuilding and seafaring were the chief occupations of the coast towns of New England", and as through westward

development and the chaos of the US Civil War the population moved away from the sea, so the "nautical language was carried to the interior" (Chase 1942/1980: 102). In this way, to an extent not seen in, for example, inland British dialects, "many of the forms assumed to have come from British regional dialects may actually have reflected the influence of sailors" Dillard (1980: 5). In the case of the word *railway*, originally a "keel laid on parallel timbers inclined towards the water" (Chase 1942/1980: 104), its use for the iron and steel railroads built for steam locomotives is a case of normal semantic shift, using existing words for new technologies. However, for the word *truck*, a main use until the 18th century being "wheeled carriages for a ship's guns", its shift to denoting drawn and later motorised carts took place mainly in the Americas, possibly because no other established term was available.

English in the early Americas also had much more occasion that English of the homeland to borrow words from indigenous or (non-English) European cultures. Wolfram & Schilling-Estes (2016) cite numerous examples, among which are: *maize* (from Caribbean languages, later replaced by the English generic term *corn*); *raccoon* (Powhatan) & *canyon* (Spanish), both of which denoted things first found in America. A more intriguing case is the word *boss* (Dutch), perhaps indicative of the significant influence of the culture spreading from Dutch immigrants in New Amsterdam/York: its widespread adoption suggests that an established term for master of labourers was, rather oddly, lacking. Yet this would be an unremarkable state of affairs in locales where there was no dominant English dialect, or where a significant percentage of the population was not made up of native English speakers.

In the same vein, *caucus* (possibly deriving from a Powhatan word meaning counselor or elder, although there is a competing theory of a Graeco-Latin origin) denoted a concept (a conference to discuss a political matter) that would not be new to the American colonists, so its selection by the speech community must be explained, either by the lack of a common term in a linguistically heterogeneous community or by the desire to attach special or novel significance to the political meetings being referred to.

3.3. Bonding with 'foreign' syntactic patterns

In many locales in the colonial (and present) Americas, it is known, by quite exact records, that a large proportion of the population has been non-English-speaking and also, often, made up of speakers from a set of related (though mutually unintelligible) languages. These are commonly grouped under the term *creole*, although Mufwene (2001) argues convincingly that for many, if not most, vernaculars of English in the Americas these conditions are more or less true [2]. In these locales the bonding into the developing dialect is not only of words (of which there would be relatively few held in common by the speakers of various languages that could be heard with sufficient frequency), but also of syntactic patterns. In the case of

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2. The term *creole* is not well defined. Since the 18th century the word has been used (especially in Romance languages) to denote the vernaculars that developed from European languages in the Atlantic colonies (Arends 1994; Mufwene 2001). In the late 20th century a theory of creoles (as deriving from pidgins) developed (Hall 1966; Bickerton 1981; defended in McWhorter 2005), giving the term a specific linguistic meaning. Mufwene, however, with the support of current historical linguists (e.g. Campbell 2013: Ch. 12), argues against this theory and insists that the term has only a socio-historical, or even ethnic, meaning, and that what makes them worth marking as a group of languages is the sociohistorical conditions of their development (Mufwene 2001) - namely, as I have explained in the main text.

dialects emerging in colonies with a large population of west African slaves, this might be a pattern that their languages had in common (such as the serial verb construction in the Guyanese creole Sranan reported in McWhorter (2003): *bai wan oso gi en mati* (buy one house give it mate)), or, in fact, a pattern in the mix of English dialects which bore some affinity to a latent African feature (e.g. the generic/non-emphatic use of dəz (does) in Gullah — *he dəz come often* — that resembles both a periphrastic pattern in Kwa languages of West Africa and a similar pattern in many regional dialects of Britain and Ireland (Mufwene 2001)).

The presence of 'foreign' syntactic features is also seen in many non-creole dialects, supporting the contention that the significance of "creole" is more sociohistorical than structural. Wolfram & Schilling-Este (2016) cite the examples of *get down from the car* in dialects in Louisiana (from French *descendre de la voiture*), and *you all* and *yinz*, in the Southern US and western Pennsylvania, respectively (both from Scots-Irish *you ones*), as well as other examples from Dutch and Spanish.

3.4. Adaptation of features

Hancock, reporting on the Gullah dialect of Afro-Seminole Texans, notes another common characteristic of English dialects that have evolved in creole-like ecologies, that is, the adaptation of English-sourced features to subtly or radically different functions. In the example below, the English word *done* is adapted to mark the perfective aspect.

And I had a picture, but I don't know — always when I pack əm in my billfold, but I guess I done tear əm up.

Here the pattern of perfect participle done with verb is not borrowed from a dialect of any of the speakers, but the English-sourced word done is selected due to its salience in repeated utterances, and given a function (expressing the state of an action completed) for which a need was felt but for which no form had been settled upon by the speech community.

4. English as lingua franca in a multilingual ecology

Led by observations of the sort that I have briefly sampled above, Dillard has called for an understanding of English in America that takes account of not merely *bi*-lingual but *multi*lingual ecologies which therefore demand *lingue franche* (1980: 4). Dillard has a conception of the term *lingua franca* that is different from the one widely used, but not erroneous — a makeshift practice for bridging a divide, not an existing practice whose use diminishes or obviates such a divide. This idea, rather than confusing the discussion, leads to the possibility of a more satisfactory dual conception of what it means for English in the Americas to be a case of English as a *lingua franca*: one the one hand, of English being used (in the past and present) as a *lingua franca* in the Americas, and on the other, of American practices of English continually arising out of the *lingue franche* that serve as bridges between the common vernaculars of various settings, one of those vernaculars often being a form of English. These dual conceptions need not be seen as competing but as complementary — English as pre-existing but continually being modified by its users translanguaging in multilingual ecologies — as a special case of the general trend asserted by Nida and Fehderau (1970), that

"the pressures of multilingualism throughout the world... most certainly give rise to many more developments in the direction of koiné forms of languages" (1970: 154).

Mufwene (1991, 2001, 2008) proposes a model of dialect restructuring that accounts for the emergence of both so-called "creoles" and other transplanted dialects. As the colonial period precipitated a great increase in language contact around the Atlantic — first in the ports of the colonising countries where sailors, settlers, and servants assembled from many regions; then in the course of contact with Americans, from whom words labelling the local environment and customs were learned; then through the trade of slaves from Africa, each of whom brought a mix of languages, reflecting the passage from home region to slave-trading port to colony — there resulted a diverse mix of linguistic repertoires that was likely unprecedented: diverse within individuals (each with robust or spare proficiencies in the dialects they had encountered), diverse in the compositions of groups that were thrown together (Europeans, Americans, and Africans, and varieties of each), and diverse in that each ship, plantation, or colony comprised a unique mix of these repertoires. Mufwene (2001) uses the term *feature pool* to describe the set union of these individual repertoires, and *lexifier*, the common term in creole studies, for the target language of the colony. We do not know how many of what sort of hybrid ways of speaking emerged in these colonies, and in the early years there were likely many (Arends 1994), but for the language practices that came to be known as European creoles, by definition the European lexifier was preferred and its features most often selected. However, which lexifier features (from among dialectal variants) were preferred, and which features from other languages were selected to replace or to augment the prevenient features, depended on their fitness to the particular linguistic ecology of the colony, which naturally changed over time. Fitness might be influenced by several factors: congruence to the existing or emerging language practice or to another widely shared linguistic system, frequency in the immediate language habits (e.g., for early colonies, nautical terms), salience of the feature when compared to other candidate features (e.g., as shown above, from a feature pool including *I've eaten. I'm done.*, the *done* is selected more often than the clitics *'ve* and *-en*, giving forms like *I done* eat.), and transparency in function and meaning (e.g., in the preceding example, the 'perfect' aspect of the utternace) (Mufwene 2001).

For Mufwene, this process of competition and selection does not make unnecessary explanations based on common natural processes, but augments such explanations in environments where numerous sub-dialects and idiolects (each with their own histories of change) co-exist in a population, a condition which he would say is universal. Mufwene's theory imagines competition and selection, among features that likely have been affected by common natural processes of language change, happening at the grain of the individual or small interacting group, and so he insists, as do Blommaert and Backus (2012), that the conception of diversity should not stop at the "languages" a participant can use, but that it must include the sub-dialects, idiolects, and even individual experiences through which a participant may bring in features that may be selected in the emerging variety (Mufwene 2001:12).

Such a model — of selection from feature pools fed from repertoires of individual experiences — goes a long way to explaining why multilingual environments might have the effect of catalysing the process

of dialect levelling while at the same time being susceptible to considerable bonding of features from other sources and adaptation of features. In locales (ports, plantations, etc.) that are relatively uniform in dialect (a dominant regional variety of English and few non-English speakers), most objects, processes, relationships, etc. will have their established names, and these will likely be adopted; but in places where the mix of linguistic features is diverse (English speakers perhaps a minority, and using different dialects), there will naturally be fewer common and established terms, and the likelihood will be higher that terms and speech patterns from different dialects, and from non-English sources, take hold throughout the community [3]. The model also explains the bonding of syntactic patterns, but not so much of words, from languages or language families that are spoken by a large proportion of the population and therefore contribute heavily to the feature pool. Further, this understanding is in congruence with the idea that the multilingual reality of creoles is not so much different from the general colonial-period or immigrant-nation settings of the Americas.

5. Implications for research focusing on English user-learner perspectives

The milieu for much that is examined in applied linguistics in present-day North America is, to a comparable extent, multilingual. The ecologies and processes described above mirror the multilingual realities of the user-learners (users while learners) in the English-speaking Americas today. That is, they are coming out of diverse life trajectories (Blommaert & Backus 2012), and have as a consequence rich repertoires of linguistic resources ready to be deployed. And this multilinguality is not only part of their backgrounds; they have to operate in multiple languages in their present lives, so that various language practices, in various dialects, modes, and genres, are continually available for enriching — or threatening to confuse — their meaning-making. As Dillard observes, "the most disadvantaged ... segment of the American population seems to have had ... multilingual proficiency" (1980: 3) Although learners of English as a "Second" (usually third or fourth) Language are multilingual, the monolingual bias (treating only lack of proficiency in English, and not lack of proficiency in other languages, as a personal deficit) must still be contested in the scholarly community and among the general public (Pavlenko & Norton 2007).

The characteristics and trends that are attested in a range of transplanted English dialects in the Americas are generally better explained with a default assumption or null-hypothesis of a multilingual environment (which in some cases may be minimally multilingual) than with an assumption of groups of

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3. Mufwene suggests, as a rough expression of the factors involved in language contact and restructuring, the following: "the nature of the diverse dialects of English brought over by the British colonists, the coexistence of English speakers in the colonies with speakers of other languages, the demographic proportions of speakers of the language varieties in contact during the critical periods of the development of new English varieties, the kinds of social contacts between the different social and ethnic groups during the formative stages of the new varieties, the structural features of the varieties that were actually in contact, the rate of immigrations after the (original) formative stages, the origins of the new immigrants, their social status (which may be correlated with prestige or lack thereof), their proportions relative to the preceding populations, and the patterns of integration within the extant populations" (2001: 82–83). Such a "restructuring equation" can result in outputs of "AAE [African American English], WAEV [White American English Vernacular], and other varieties of English in the USA" (2001: 82).

monolingual speakers bringing their dialects to the new world. Much evidence has been presented, in quite early scholarship (Dillard 1980; Foster 1968; Read 1937) that the (officially or nominally) English-speaking Americas were and are in fact multilingual. Similarly, in degree if not in the particular configurations, the present surroundings of participants in the speech communities of the English-speaking Americas are multilingual. The multilingual nature of the early and present "English-speaking" Americas is not so much contested as a monolingual ecology is wrongly assumed. However, in recent research, in a wide range of contexts and sub-disciplines of linguistic and applied linguistic investigation (dialectology, creole studies, language acquisition, literacy, etc.), it is acknowledged that there is a multilingual ecology that was and is highly relevant.

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