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Investigating American and British English Language Variation among Kufa University EFL Learners

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the variation of English language among English students. The study sample consists of two groups. The first group consists of 105 (male and female) students, fourth-year advanced Iraqi learners studying EFL at the Department of English at three faculties (Faculty of Arts, Faculty of Languages, and Faculty of Education) at the University of Kufa for the academic year 2023/2024. This group includes (35) students selected from the faculties mentioned above. The second group is a recording of (20) fourth-year students who have a degree of fluency in English and learned English in Iraq. A statistical analysis is employed to find students' most preferred language variety. The questionnaire data were analyzed using various statistical methods, including percentages and mean. The findings revealed that the students slightly prefer British English to American English.

Keywords: English language variation, American variety, British variety, Dialect, Idiolect, Sociolinguistics.

1-Introduction

Linguistics has expanded dramatically in the past few decades. Its studies and contributions are now of interest to psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, teachers, philosophers, speech therapists, and numerous others who have realized the importance of language and its crucial influence on their lives and work. In this regard, Sociolinguistics is a subfield of linguistics that examines the characteristics of a language that incorporate social and contextual elements in its analysis. One property that falls within this category is variation (Downes, 1998, p. 9-16). The study of language variety and change is the core of the sociolinguistics enterprise (Chamber & Trudgill, 2004)

Variety is perceived as having a wide range of 'ways of speaking' of the same language. As a sociolinguistic phenomenon, language variation may rely upon various components. From one perspective, language can shift as indicated by the event where the speech occurs. It also depends on the relation between the two sides of the conversation and its context. Specific purposes in particular contexts may also be associated with different language varieties. Conversely, language variations can be distinguished based on the speaker's geographical and social context. Language variation in a particular geographical location is called "regional

variety" or "regional dialect". On the other hand, "social variation" or "social dialect" refers to language variation influenced by social variables.

Halliday (1978, p. 21) states that language should translate our experience and show our interest in the speaker and a specific situation. The individuals of a particular society have to cooperate as members and take a role in communication, which will lead to expressing emotional sentiments, making judgments, and so on. All of these actions are done through language. Halliday (1984, p. 5) also states that "language is used, from an early stage, to regulate the behaviour of others." Similarly, Rommetveit (1979, p. 137) argues that "we create and present a picture of ourselves through our language use, indicate our attitude, regulate our interpersonal relationship and social attachments to groups to establish social bands". In this way, language is the tool that society (social group) uses to convey feelings, thoughts, and desires by employing it to create images. Furthermore, the most essential function of language is to be used socially and communicatively. These characteristics and functions of language guarantee that each individual has "language or idiolect" but with a specific form, relying upon particular factors, for example, the place of birth, occupation, social class, and situation.

2-Language and Society

Various ethnic groups use and employ language differently. This means that a group can create different methods of communication that are appropriate to their way of life. This phenomenon leads Holmes (2001, p. 333) to find culture as "positive politeness on solidarity-oriented culture value involvement with others". Also, Wardhaugh (1992, p. 217) proposes culture as "whatever a person must know to function in a particular society". It infers that the way of life of a specific culture comprises whatever one needs to know or have confidence into work adequately for the members of the society. At the point when societies impart to one another, they become familiar with others' norms of thought and behaviour. Language variety occurs in society because of some social factors and context. Holmes (2001, p. 6) expresses that "variety refers to any set of linguistic forms which patterns according to social factors". He also states that variety is a sociolinguistic phrase referring to language within a specific situation. These comments suggest linguistic variation consists of etymological structures used within specific social contexts.

3-Language variation

All languages in the world have different varieties of them. These varieties can range from the standard and formal to the informal and colloquial. In this respect, linguistics distinguishes between language and dialect which is problematic theoretical issue. In this regard, sociolinguistics attempts to discover an answer to such a problem and uses numerous methods for recognizing it. Wardhaugh (2006, p. 25) defined language as "is used to refer either to a single linguistic norm or to a group of related norms, and dialect refers to one of the norms". This definition indicates that, as Hudson (1996, p. 32) says, "a language is larger than a dialect". Dialects are considered to be a sub-branch of a specific language. English has many Dialects, for example, Cockney, Yorkshire ...etc. • Speakers may misunderstand the standard and non-standard variety of the language, which is a common one. Non-standard variation is frequently called Dialect, in which people who speak it are viewed as inferior to the speaker of the formal Variety.

The English language varies on individual, national, and global levels. English is considered the language of international communication and is gaining worldwide status. This status is because Great Britain and the United States have been politically, economically, and militarily powerful for the past two centuries. English is used worldwide in science, business, sport... etc. Crystal (2003, p. 59) states that English received its world status due to "the expansion of British colonial power [...] and the emergence of the United States as the leading economic power of the twentieth century".

Standard American English and Standard British English are two of the numerous linguistic variations of the language. Different variations of the English language can be observed in various countries worldwide, as well as within individual countries where it is commonly used

3-1 American English and British English

American and British standard variations are considered ideal versions of English, though they are rarely used in everyday conversation. The Sociolinguistics point of view is "the idea of a spoken standardized language [is] a hypothetical construct" (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 57). These two variations are used in textbooks and formal situations. Giles and Coupland (1991, p. p.83) claimed that "[a] standard variety is the one that is most often associated with high socioeconomic status, power and media usage in a particular community". Both native and non-native speakers speak an English dialect. Moreover, English learners also use dialects where English is taught as a second or foreign language (ESL/ EFL) (Kachru, 2006, pp. 10-11; Owens 2012, p. 31).

American English is the English variety that is used in the United States. This version includes different dialects people use inside and outside the United States. It is used abroad as a native language or as a second language. Other factors, like the entertainment and media field, led to the expansion of this version. Svartvik and Leech (2006, p.60) states that more than 66% of English native speakers in the world live in the United States; "with four times as many native speakers as British English" (Svartvik and Leech, 2006, p. 152).

British English, on the other hand, is the English Variation that is used in the United Kingdom and other dialects used inside and outside the UK. Different former British colonies known as "commonwealth" use one of the British dialects, such as ESL or EFL.

The Differences between the two varieties can be seen in using different spelling, sentence structures, vocabulary, and elocution Madeira (2015).

4- Research Methodology

In this study, there are (2) groups of participants. The first group includes (105) fourth-stage advanced Iraqi learners studying EFL at the Department of English at three Faculties (Faculty of Arts, Faculty of Languages, and Faculty of Education) at the University of Kufa. This group included (35) students selected from the faculties mentioned above. They received their education in an Arabic-speaking environment. Every student volunteered to complete the questionnaire. Before distributing the questionnaire to the students, a detailed explanation of its aim was provided. The participants were informed that the questionnaire would be filled anonymously and that their honesty in responding would be valued. Students were urged to seek the researcher's assistance in comprehending specific aspects.

To ensure the validity of the questionnaire, it was sent to a committee of jurors who were requested to express their approval, suggest modifications, or recommend any additional items to be included in the questionnaire format. It is important to mention that the questionnaire is universally recognised as valid by all experts, indicating unanimous agreement.

N	Name	Faculty
1	Professor Dr. Ahmed Shakir AlKilabi	Faculty of Languages\University of Kufa
2	Asst. Prof. Dr. Hussein Dhahi	Faculty of Languages\University of Kufa
3	Asst. Prof. Dr. Musaab Alkhuzai	Faculty of Languages\University of Kufa
4	Asst. Lect. Dr. Raaid Alkhuzai	Faculty of Arts\ University of Kufa

The second group comprises (20) fourth-year students with a degree of fluency in English and learned English in Iraq. The group is composed of (8) males and (12) females. The selected Students have a degree of fluency in English and learned their language inside Iraq. The students were asked to talk about random topics to show

the type of accents they use. Also, they were asked about the reason behind selecting this particular variety. The researcher recorded their speech and then analysed it.

4-1 The Research Instrument

The instrument used in this questionnaire is a 5-point Likert Scale, ranging from ‘Strongly Agree’ to ‘Strongly Disagree’. To investigate the student orientation toward a specific English language variety, a different-item questionnaire was constructed by the researcher and distributed to the study participants to form the main instrument of the research. The questionnaire form is divided into (2) parts: items (1-7), which focus on American English, and items (8-12), which include statements that focus on British English.

4-2 Data analysis

The data is gathered and organized based on the specified objectives and relevant factors. Data entering, editing, and coding tasks have been performed utilizing computer technologies. The data were analyzed using a computer program, SPSS 23.0. The scale below was used in the questionnaire to study the level of agreement or disagreement based on the following criteria:

Mean Range	Interpretation
3.60 – 5.00	Disagreement
2.60 – 3.59	Neutral
1.00 – 2.59	Agreement

4-3 Results and Discussion

4-3-1 The questionnaire

4-3-1-1 American English

Table (1) American English statements with their means, S.D, and the average answer

American English	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Mean	S.D	Average answer
	N	N	N	N	N			
	%	%	%	%	%			
I think that American English is better than British English	15	29	14	35	12	3.00	1.286	Neutral
	14.3	27.6	13.3	33.3	11.4			
I prefer American English because it is modern	30	27	19	21	8	2.52	1.302	Agreement
	28.6	25.7	18.1	20	7.6			
I prefer American English because it is more common worldwide than British English.	27	27	22	20	9	2.59	1.291	Neutral
	25.7	25.7	21	19	8.6			
I prefer American English because it is simpler and humbler than British English.	19	30	12	33	10	2.86	1.31	Neutral
	18.1	28.6	11.4	31.4	9.5			
I prefer American								

English because it is more natural than British English.	16	26	20	30	10	2.92	1.256	Neutral
	15.7	25.5	19.9	29.4	9.8			
I prefer American English because it is used in most of the movies, shows, and video clips we watch	39	32	12	16	6	2.22	1.256	Agreement
	37.1	30.5	11.4	15.2	5.7			
I like the abbreviation that occurs in American English.	25	26	28	15	5	2.48	1.173	Agreement
	25.3	26.3	28.3	15.2	5.1			
Total	171	197	127	170	60	2.65	0.85	Neutral
	23.5	27.1	17.5	23.4	8.2			

Table (1), which focused on American language preference, shows a significant result: the students have a neutral average answer toward the statements. Moreover, this indicates that the student did not entirely prefer the American English Variety at a mean of 2.65 and a standard deviation of 0.85. Notably, there is a division in the answer to the first statement, which shows a neutral average answer, which indicates that nearly half of the students on the sample test preferred American English. Furthermore, the students agreed that they feel that American English is modern as one reason to choose this variety. Comparatively, the students disagree significantly on preferring American English as it is more common worldwide. Similarly, the table shows a neutral response to the assumption that American English is more straightforward and humbler. Additionally, the result shows a natural reaction to the idea that American English is more realistic than British English. Nevertheless, there is a slightly strong agreement on the assumptions of preferring American English as it is used in most of the movies, shows, and video clips and for the abbreviation that occurs in American English.

4-3-1-2 British English

Table (1) American English statements with their means, S.D, and the average answer

British English	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Mean	S.D	Average answer
	N	N	N	N	N			
	%	%	%	%	%			
British English is more honourable than American English.	23	23	30	19	10	2.71	1.261	Neutral
	21.9	21.9	28.6	18.1	9.5			
British English is easier to understand than American English.	32	19	13	27	9	2.62	1.405	Neutral
	30.5	18.1	12.4	25.7	8.9			
British English because it is suitable for EFL teaching and learning	31	34	21	15	3	2.28	1.127	Agreement
	29.8	32.7	20.2	14.4	2.9			
I prefer British English because	25	21	24	24	9	2.72	1.302	Neutral
	24.3	20.4	23.3	23.3	8.7			

most of the teachers use it.								
I prefer British English because it is more correct than American English.	27	18	18	32	10	2.81	1.366	Neutral
	25.7	17.1	17.1	30.5	9.5			
British English is more learnable than American English.	20	30	18	25	10	2.76	1.287	Neutral
	19.4	29.1	17.5	24.3	9.7			
British English is more suitable for educational settings than American English.	39	22	23	12	8	2.31	1.293	Agreement
	37.5	21.2	22.1	11.5	7.7			
Total	197	167	147	154	59	2.59	0.922	Agreement
	27.2	24.3	20.3	21.2	8.1			

Table (2) investigates the students' preference for British English. As the tables show, the students tend to agree on preferring British English at a mean of 2.59 and a standard deviation of 0.922. The statistical analysis shows that the students are expected to be honourable on the assumption that British English is more honorable and easier to understand. However, they agreed that British English suits English foreign teaching and learning. Furthermore, the students did not entirely agree as they showed neutral average answers on the assumption that British English is preferable because English teachers use it, it is more correct than American English, and it is more learnable than American English. At the same time, they show an agreement on the idea that British English is more suitable for educational settings.

4-3-2 Analyzing the Corpus of Participants' Speech

Regarding the interviews, the analysis has shown the following:

1. Females employed more active listening devices (yeah, mmm, oh, etc.) than males.
2. Most of the study sample used American abbreviations such as (yeah, yes, wanna, want to, warer, water, beautiful, beautiful ...and so on). Using such kinds of abbreviations shows the attitude of these students to adopt American English.
3. Students showed their enjoyment in learning this language. Females expressed their plans to be teachers in the future. Male understudies would like to land other various positions in different fields like like interpretation or working in organizations, ...etc.
4. The recorded speech demonstrates that speakers show high status for the male gender. They use (he) when they speak about individual people. Also, they use them by talking about (cars or dogs).
5. Most students preferred American English as they learned it through American Music and Movies.

5- Conclusions

1. It was found through the statistical analysis that the students tend to prefer British English, as shown in the study on the questionnaire. The mean of the answers in British English reached 2.59, indicating total agreement with the researcher's assumptions.
2. The sample study showed a neutral total response to the statements regarding American English in the questionnaire at a mean of 2.65.

3. The assumption "I prefer American English because it is used in most of the movies, shows, and video clips we watch" has the most agreement by the students at mean reaching 2.22.
4. The corpus of the study preferred American English because that is the reason for improving their language in general.
5. The statement " I think that American English is better than British English" has the highest mean at 3.00.

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