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Varieties of English

Checklist of features

English is spoken today on all five continents as a result of colonial expansion in the last four centuries or so. The colonial era is now definitely over but its consequences are only too clearly to be seen in the presence of English as an official and often native language in many of the former colonies along with more or less strongly diverging varieties which arose in particular socio-political conditions, so-called pidgins which in some cases later developed into creoles. Another legacy of colonialism is where English fulfils the function of a lingua franca. Many countries, like Nigeria, use English as a *lingua franca* (a general means of communication) since there are many different and mutually unintelligible languages and a need for a supra-regional means of communication.

English has also come to play a central role as an international language. There are a number of reasons for this, of which the economic status of the United States is certainly one of the most important nowadays. Internal reasons for the success of English in the international arena can also be given: a little bit of English goes a long way as the grammar is largely analytic in type so that it is suitable for those groups who do not wish to expend great effort on learning a foreign language.

Present-day geographical distribution English is spoken on all five continents. With regard to numbers of speakers it is only exceeded by Chinese (in its various forms) and Spanish. But in terms of geographical spread it stands at the top of the league. The distribution is a direct consequence of English colonial policy, starting in Ireland in the late 12th century and continuing well into the 19th century, reaching its peak at the end of the reign of Queen Victoria and embodied in the saying 'the sun never sets on the British Empire'. For the present overview the varieties of English in the modern world are divided into four geographical groups as follows.

British Isles	America
England	United States (with African American English)
Wales	Canada
Ireland	The Caribbean

Africa	Asia, Pacific
West Africa	South- and South-East Asia
East Africa	Australia and New Zealand
South Africa	The Pacific islands



The two main groups are Britain and America. For each there are standard forms of English which are used as yardsticks for comparing other varieties of the respective areas.

In Britain the standard is called Received Pronunciation. The term stems from Daniel Jones at the beginning of the present century and refers to the pronunciation of English which is accepted - that is, received - in English society. BBC English, Oxford English, Queen's English (formerly King's English) are alternative terms which are not favoured by linguists as they are imprecise or simply incorrect.

In America there is a standard which is referred to by any of a number of titles, General American and Network American English being the two most common. There is a geographical area where this English is spoken and it is defined negatively as the rest of the United States outside of New England (the north east) and the South. General American is spoken by the majority of Americans, including many in the North-East and South and thus contrasts strongly with Received Pronunciation which is a prestige sociolect spoken by only a few percent of all the British. The southern United States occupy a unique position as the English characteristic of this area is found typically among the African American sections of the community. These are the descendents of the slaves originally imported into the Caribbean area, chiefly by the English from the 16th century onwards. Their English is quite different from that of the rest of the United States and has far more in common with that of the various Anglophone Caribbean islands.

Those varieties of English which are spoken outside of Britain and America are variously referred to as overseas or extraterritorial varieties. A recent practice is to use the term Englishes (a plural created by linguists) which covers a multitude of forms. The label *English World-Wide* (the name of an academic journal dedicated to this area) is used to refer to English in its global context and to research on it, most of which has been concerned with implicitly comparing it to mainland varieties of Britain and America and then with trying to determine its own linguistic profile. Extraterritorial varieties are not just different from mainland varieties because of their geographical distance from the original homeland but also because in many cases a type of suspension has occurred vis à vis changes in point of origin, i.e. in many respects the overseas varieties appear remarkably unchanged to those from the European mainland. This phenomenon is known as *colonial lag*. It is a term which should not be overworked but a temperate use of the term is appropriate and it can be cited as one of the features accounting for the relative standardness of overseas varieties, such as Australian or New Zealand English with regards to British forms of English.

The varieties of English both in Europe and overseas tend to show variation in certain key features, for instance special verbal structures to express aspectual distinctions are common to nearly all varieties in the developing world. Pronunciation and morphology features can equally be classified according to frequency of variation in non-standard forms of the language. To facilitate orientation in this sphere a table of those features is offered below which typically vary among both mainland and extraterritorial forms of English. Note that the variation in the area of lexis (vocabulary) tends to be restricted to two types. The first is the presence of archaic words no longer found in mainland Britain, e.g. the use of *bold* in the sense of misbehaved or *wench* as a non-derogative term for woman. The second type contains flora and fauna words. Obviously those speakers of English who moved to new environments were liable to borrow words from indigenous languages for phenomena in nature which they did not know from Europe, thus Australian English has *koala*, *kangaroo*, New Zealand English *kiwi*, etc.



Checklist of non-standard features of English

In the development of the language English has shown variation with a number of features on different linguistic levels. In those cases where the variation has been between dialects and/or sociolects and the arising standard the features in question have become indicators of non-standardness. Consciousness of this is frequently present with speakers and it forms part of what is sometimes called 'panlectal' knowledge of language, i.e. part of the awareness of inherent variation in a language which people acquire with their particular variety of the language in question. In English the indicators of non-standardness are chiefly phonological but there are also morphological and syntactical features, the most salient of which are indicated below. The standard referred to here is Received Pronunciation and the variation applies chiefly to forms of British English.

Phonology

- 1) Presence of syllable-final /r/ *card* /kɑ:ɹd/
- 2) Lack of initial /h-/ *happy* /æpi/
- 3) Glottalisation of /t/ *bottle* /bɒʔl/
- 4) No lowering of /ʊ/ *but* /bʊt/
- 5) Short /a/ before /f, s, θ/ *bath* /bɑθ/
- 6) Use of /ɹ/ *which* /wɪtʃ/
- 7) Alveolarisation of /ŋ/ *walking* /wɔ:kŋ/
- 8) Yod deletion in /ju:/ *news* /nu:z/ *tune* /tu:n/
- 9) No lexical distribution of /æ/ and /ɑ:/ *grand* /grand/, *cancel* /kɑ(:)ns/
- 10) Short vowel distinction before /r/ *fern* /fɛɹŋ/ # *burn* /bɹɹŋ/
- 11) Unshifted long /u:/: *town* /tu:n/

Morphology

- 1) Contraction of *am* + *not*: *amn't* or *aren't* and of *is* + *not*: *isn't* or *ain't*
- 2) Use of /i:/ for /ai/ with possessive pronoun *my*
- 3) Use of demonstrative pronouns for possessive pronouns: *them boys*
- 4) A distinctive form for the second person plural: *ye, yez, youse*
- 5) Use of objective forms for subject, e.g. *us* for *we*, *her* for *she*
- 6) Unmarked adverbs (deletion of final /i:/): *He's awful busy these days*
- 7) Differences between weak and strong verbs
- 8) Zero marking for plurals, often with numerals: *He's been here five year now*

Syntax

- 1) Use of past participle as preterite: *I done the work, I seen him*
- 2) Verbal -s outside third person singular: *The boys plays football.*
- 2) Narrative present with generalised -s: *I hops out of the car and finds him lying on the ground*
- 3) Additional aspectual distinctions such as the habitual: *He does be working all night.* Perfective with participle after object: *He has the book read*
- 4) Double or multiple negation: *They don't do nothing for nobody*
- 5) Use of *for* with infinitives: *He went out for to get some milk*
- 6) Deletion of copula and/or auxiliary: *She a farmer's daughter, He gone home*
- 7) Zero subject in relative clauses: *There's a man wants to see you*
- 8) *Never* as past tense negative: *I never done the work (= I didn't do...)*
- 9) Lack of negative attraction: *Anyone wasn't interested in linguistics*
- 10) Passive with *get*: *His car got stolen last week*
- 11) Different use of prepositions, e.g. *on* to express relevance: *They broke the glass on me*
- 12) Overuse of the definite article: *He asked the both of them*