

## Lecture 14 The Spread of the English Language

The middle and especially the end of the 18th century witnessed a general interest in British civilization, especially in its politics and social customs, and English was to play an increasingly important role in international affairs. The British had spread their language around the globe and English was now the language of economic and political relations. As a result, it acquired great influence, and began bequeathing vast numbers of words to other languages. In fact, of all European languages, English now borrowed least while lending most; it had gone from word borrower to word lender. This gave a real boost to the prestige of English on its continent of origin. Later the British and the Americans would show they had the determination and the means to spread their language—and their goods of trade—far and wide.

### Contemporary English

Compared to other languages, contemporary English may appear something of a hybrid, given all its non-genetic pairings (*eye/ocular*, *mind/mental*, *mouth/oral*, *nose/nasal*, *sun/solar*, etc.), but this rather shows its tremendous flexibility. Its immense vocabulary is officially estimated at over 500,000 words, most likely closer to a million. Today, English presents fewer noticeable variations in spelling and stress. Nonetheless, written American English tends to have a more rigid grammar and syntax, but is more tolerant in its use of neologisms. This could be a result of the United States' colonial role in the late 19th century, when it arrived in Southeast Asia (the Philippines), then in the Caribbean (Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, etc.), and after World War II in vast stretches of the Pacific. Since then, the United States has played a predominant role in the spread of English because of its political, military, economic, and cultural power. Despite minor variations, English is easily understood everywhere in the world.

With the exception of varieties of English spoken in the Maritimes, there are almost no regional variants of English in Canada. What regional peculiarities do exist are usually derived from occupations typical of the region or province, and are not a genuine internal variant of English. This is the case for *highrigger*, a word used in forestry in British Columbia to designate someone who works in tree tops, while in the Prairies, the verb *sodbust* is a farming term.

However, there do exist non-geographical variations, which is why researchers have become increasingly interested in variations that would help to identify Canadian English. For example, it has been shown that the differences in spoken English between women and men appear far greater than previously thought. Researchers are attempting to verify a widespread hypothesis that women, faced with a choice between regular English and divergent forms, are far more likely than men to choose standard English. Moreover, a study conducted in Ottawa has shown the relationship between certain language habits and the speaker's social class. Two similar studies (in Toronto and Vancouver) showed that the "rising inflection" (vowels) peculiar to Canadians is becoming increasingly uncommon in young people. In other words, Canadian English is changing.

The situation is somewhat different in the Maritimes. The English of this region of Eastern Canada has more in common with the language spoken in southwest England than with the one spoken by Loyalists who once settled in Ontario. But the distinct nature of Maritime English stems in particular from the influence of Scottish and, to a lesser degree, Irish. Even at that, Maritime English presents few variations from the standard norm when compared to varieties found in other anglophone countries; moreover, it is almost never found in cities. This variety of English does, however, present many fascinating characteristics. It contains expressions current in Scotland, such as *stormstayed* (kept home by a storm), and Ireland (*clart*: "bad housekeeper"). Other words come from the Micmac (*pung*: "horse-pulled sleigh"), Acadians (*aboiteau*: "dike with sluices"), and Loyalists (*double runner*, different kinds of sleighs). It is also not surprising that some words are related to fishing: *fiddler* ("small salmon"), *flake* ("drying platform"), *lolly* ("soft ice"). Finally, the distinctive pronunciation of words such as *aunt*, *calm*, *vase*, and *wash* in the Maritimes constitutes something of a genuine regional accent. The situation in Newfoundland differs even more: its variety of English has its roots in the English of southwest England and Ireland .

After almost 400 years of separation from the homeland, Newfoundland English has acquired a regional character very different from current Canadian English. Nevertheless, in cities, everyone tends to speak a kind of standard Canadian English. As with Canadian French, one of the major causes of the standardization of English has surely been an increase in education, but the development of electronic media and international communications has also contributed to narrowing the gap between varieties of English. However, it took state intervention—especially by the Canadian federal and Ontario governments—to foster the collective identity of English-language Canadians.

#### The Internationalization of English

The internationalization of national economies and the expansion into outside markets have created the need for common international languages, and English has benefited the most, along with French, Russian, Spanish, and Chinese. Songs, movies, and scientific research continue to spread English, as do communications and information technology. But it is especially from Latin and Greek that Anglo-American continues to draw for the scientific and technical vocabulary vital to the greater scientific and economic communities.

Since the mid-19th century, the importance of English in the world has continued to grow . The decline of the British Empire was not a setback for English—Great Britain simply handed the torch off to the United States. English is not an international language in the way that French, Spanish, Arabic, or Russian are; it is a genuine world language, a super-language above all others! It is the medium of science and technology, medicine, computer science, finance, and international trade. English appears to be continually evolving toward a kind of borderless standardization, yet without abandoning its national, regional, and social variants. English has adapted by taking diversified local forms.

The future remains possible some day for the English language to fragment and break down into dialects, insofar as the final result of territorial expansion is always implosion. The more a language is spoken over a vast territory, the more it tends to diversify and fragment. Here are a few possible scenarios:

1. English will continue to retain (over many centuries) its present status as world medium in international, economic, and scientific relations.
2. Alliances among large language families—such as francophones, hispanophones, lusophones, arabophones, etc—will limit the expansion of English. Such a scenario implies the vigorous political intervention of all governments and organizations concerned. Would nationalist countries undertake such international struggles?
3. New technologies, especially the Internet, will allow languages to develop freely. However, it is almost certain that only a few languages—including English—would benefit from such an advantage.

Whatever the scenario, English must perish some day. As with Phoenician, Greek, or Latin, English will surely be replaced by another language, although it is impossible to know which one, let alone when exactly this will occur. What is certain is that an important international language does not die out quickly, especially in written form; sometimes it continues to be used for many centuries after the last speakers have disappeared, as in the case of Greek and Latin. As for knowing if English will dialectify, this is unlikely to happen soon, as technological discoveries such as radio, telephone, television, the Internet, and others have halted linguistic fragmentation. On the contrary, standardization of the English language—spoken and especially written—is increasing, albeit certain local forms continue to coexist. In short, it is very difficult to predict the future!

### **Similarities Between English and French**

From a historical linguistics viewpoint, especially in comparing English to other Germanic languages such as German, Dutch, or Danish, English is obviously much more Romanized due to the influence of French and Latin, which played a big role in the evolution of the language. Moreover, French was greatly Germanized by Francisque during the Romance era, contrary to the other Romance languages (Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, etc.). In other words, English is to Germanic languages what French is to Latin languages: languages influenced by another genetically different one. If English remains a distinct language among Germanic languages, the same can surely be said for French among Romance languages.

Moreover, throughout its history, English (following the example of French) has drawn heavily from Latin and Greek for the new words it has needed. It also inherited spelling irregularities from French. In addition, linguists estimate that roughly 60% of English words come from both French and Latin, while French owes English only 3% to 5% of its vocabulary. Yet English and French share more than 3,200 words. For instance, *abandon*, *bizarre*, *fiancé*, *important*, *moustache*, *objection*, and *troglydite* have exactly the same spelling and meaning, while other words are close cousins: *mushroom* (< F *mousseron*), *laundry* (< F *lavandier*), *powder* (< F

poudre), *school* (< F *escole*: *école*), etc. All of this explains in part certain stunning resemblances between the two languages.

Linguist Henriette Walter, in *L'aventure des mots français venus d'ailleurs* (Paris: éditions Robert Laffont, 1997, p. 177), is eloquent on the subject of the shared history of English and French, which remain "old travelling companions." In fact for nine centuries, their relationship has been "intimate" and their exchanges unbalanced, advantageous at first for French, then today for English. Between the 11th and the 18th centuries, French bequeathed thousands of words to English. This was reversed in the mid-18th century, when English words nourished the French language. From the mid-20th century, the process increased significantly, this time in the United States. In other words, French and English have always been "mutual borrowers." In the end, we can say the two official languages of Canada certainly share similarities they have inherited from the shared history of France and Great Britain.

### **Questions for Lecture 14**

1. What role modern English plays in international affairs?
2. How the British had spread their language around the globe and English was now the language of economic and political relations?"
3. How it acquired great influence, and began bequeathing vast numbers of words to other languages?
4. . How English borrowed least while lending most?
5. Role of British and the Americans which have determination and the means to spread their language—and their goods of trade—far and wide?