

Language and culture in the USA in the 19th century: eye-witness accounts

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Paper received 31.07.15; Accepted for publication 04.08.15.

Abstract. American English in the 19th century had reflected dramatic changes in all aspects of the USA social life – from technological progress and Westward Expansion to political correctness and regional differences. The language in America had gone a long way from fledgling Colonial form to well-developed International one that since then has had a strong influence on other varieties of English.

Keywords: *American English, political correctness, regional differences, social progress*

The 19th century has been the formative period in developing American society, American identity, and American language. Westward Expansion and influence of the Frontier, technological and social progress, slavery and its abolition, the Civil War and Reconstruction – all these milestone events, with their expression in the language, shaped up American psyche. In the beginning of the 19th c., the USA was undeveloped agricultural country on the Eastern Seaboard, by the end of the century, it became a heavyweight superpower.

The National period of American English, with all its traditional signatures developed, replaced the Colonial, foundational one after the Revolution, and by the end of the 19th c., gave way to the International period, with the growing influence of AE on the worldwide English. The present paper elaborates on cultural changes in the 19th c. reflected in AE through the eye-witness accounts of English and American literati, which serve as material for the study. The methodology includes methods of descriptive analysis and discourse analysis.

In the first decade of the century J. Davis gives some evidence of American character differences: “*The New Jersey Man is distinguished by his provincial dialect, and seldom enlarges his mind; the Virginian is remarkable for his colloquial happiness, loses no opportunity of knowledge, and delights to shew his wit at the expence of his neighbor.*” [1, p. 367]. N. Webster is concerned about the spelling of geography names, especially those borrowed from Indian and French languages: “*...we have a right to control the usage and introduce a regular orthography.*” [2, p. 132], such strange-sounding names “*should be written with letters adapted to express their true found in our own language.*” [ib.].

T. Ashe describes an American store of that time: “*These storekeepers are obliged to keep every article that the farmer and manufacturer may want. Each of their shops exhibits a complete medley... a needle and an anchor, a tin pot and a large copper boiler, a ring-dial and a clock, a check frock and a muslin gown, a glass of whiskey and a barrel of brandy.*” [3, p. 108]. There are other cultural signatures related to the time: “*The great part of this land being obtained by Congress from the Indians by an imposition is known by the name of "Congress Lands."*” [ib., p. 202]; *chopping* ‘the practice of cutting out some part of dollar due to lack of change’: “*to chop out of the dollar one quarter, to cut out her charge of one shilling and threepence for my breakfast, and ninepence for my horse.*” [ib., p. 144]; *rough-and-tumble* ‘no-holds-barred fight’ [ib., p. 225]. J. Lambert

elaborates on some old American customs of that time: *to bundle* ‘to sleep in one’s clothes in bed with a person of opposite sexes’ [4, p. 29] in New England; or humorous classification of drinks in Virginia: “*A gum-tickler is a gill of spirits, generally rum, taken fasting. A phlegm-cutter is a double dose just before breakfast. An antifogmatic is a similar dram before dinner. A gall-breaker is about half a pint of ardent spirits.*” [ib., p. 299].

The politics had already come into its own after F. Cuming, who explains the terms *ticket* [5, p. 83], *Federal, Democratic Republican* [ib., p. 71]. There are other traces of the spirit of time: *squatters* ‘those who settle on land illegally’ [ib., p. 117], *backwoodsmen, frontier* [ib., p. 138], *Boston tea-party* [ib., p. 220], *grant* ‘grant of lands’ [ib., p. 259], *seasoning* ‘a fever suffered during the first year of living in the country’ [ib., p. 321].

In the second decade, language differences among US regions are reported by W. Mead, who claimed that “*The English language is spoken with more purity in New-England than in any other part of America.*” [6, p. 44]. This is explained by great number of English ancestors, contrary to the middle states, with natives of Ireland, Germany, and France who mix their languages with English. In the south, the corruption of the language “*proceeds in a great measure*” [ib.].

Some new educational terms, different from those in Britain, are given at that time by J. Duncan: *salutatory, valedictory* [7, p. 140], *sophomore* [ib., p. 134], *curriculum*: “*The 'curriculum,' as it is termed at Glasgow, includes Latin, Greek, Logic.*” [ib., p. 155]. New American cultural notions are elaborated on, as well: “*A compound of milk, raw eggs, spirits and sugar, violently agitated by a stirrer which is twirled round between the hands. [=eggnog].*” [ib., p. 20]; “*American Dearborn, or one horse waggon is a very low and light carriage upon four wheels, containing a movable seat upon wooden springs which holds two.*” [ib., 2, p. 21]; “*Sleighs are in general open above, and have cross seats, capable of accommodating eight or ten persons.*” [ib., p. 290]; “*The most useful of American inventions is the saw-gin, a machine for clearing the fibres of cotton wool from the seeds.*” [ib., p. 342]. F. Hodgson is concerned about roughness of the language: “*Indelicate and profane language is less common in the Eastern States than with us, equally prevalent in the Middle, and far more so in the southern Atlantic States; but it prevails to an awful degree on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico.*” [8, p. 259].

American regional differences were already established by 1820s, after the account of A. Singleton, as the lex-

emes to conduct 'behave', scrawls 'faggots' used in New England. On Virginian speech the author writes: "*The Virginians use clever for intelligent. What they call chamber, is the room where the madam sleeps, and is usually below stairs; and what we call afternoon, they call evening, making no quarter divisions of the day.*" [9, p. 81]. In another abstract the author writes: "*What flat lands are in New-England called intervalles, the Western planters call bottoms, or prairies; and the Southern, natural meadows, or savannahs. The intervalles between pine tracts and the savannahs, are called hammocks.*" [ib., p. 111].

In the third decade, A. Royall claims that "*The dialect of Washington... is the most correct and pure of any part of the United States.*" [10, p. 58], while those of Boston and New York are "*wretchedly defective*" [ib., p. 156], and English of West Virginia is "*mangled and mutilated*" [ib., p. 44]. The growing regional differences in the USA are reported also by J. Cooper in 1828, who writes that the pronunciation of Boston, New York, Baltimore, and Philadelphia "*vary in many things, and a practised ear may tell a native of either of these places, from a native of any one of the others, by some little peculiarity of speech.*" [11, p. 125]. The author proceeds further by comparing the New England speech with those of middle states and the South [ib., pp. 131-134]. J. Cooper joins N. Webster in stressing that "*...an entirely different standard for the language must be established in the United States, from that which governs so absolutely in England.*" [ib., p. 125]. In the late 1820s, J. Stuart was surprised by a number of foreigners on the streets of New York, the prevailing French speech in New Orleans [12, p. 235], and growing Dutch population on the coast of New Jersey [ib., p. 28].

Another English writer B. Hall gives quite gloomy predictions on future of English in the USA: "*...the countries [=Britain and the USA] respectively may be writing not for each other at all, but for themselves exclusively, and thus, virtually using two different languages.*" [13, pp. 45-48]. The author relates his famous encounter with N. Webster who was frank about new developing American standard: "*...it is quite impossible to stop the progress of language--it is like the course of the Mississippi, the motion of which, at times, is scarcely perceptible; yet even then it possesses a momentum quite irresistible... Words and expressions will be forced into use, in spite of all the exertions of all the writers in the world.*" [ib., p. 203]. Divergence of AE from British English is reported also by J. Boardman, who was struck by a number of foreign names and inscriptions, along with '*new names for old things*'. Moreover, the author states that "*novelty of these and hundred other terms*" different "*from those used for the same things in England*" is embarrassing. He adds that "*the free use of new verbs, varied usages of epithets, together with the peculiar pronunciation of certain words*" is the obstacle to communication "*nearly equal to that experienced in speaking a foreign tongue.*" [14, p. 16].

F. Trollope's book made a splash on the both sides of the Atlantic. The author's bias against American speech crystallizes in the following: "*I very seldom during my whole stay in the country heard a sentence elegantly turned, and correctly pronounced from the lips of an*

American. There is always something either in the expression or the accent that jars the feelings and shocks the taste." [15, p. 56]. This biased view was supported by other English literati. T. Hamilton criticized the language he heard: "*I deem it something of a duty to express the natural feeling of an Englishman, at finding the language of Shakspeare and Milton thus gratuitously degraded. Unless the present progress of change be arrested, there can be no doubt that, in another century, the dialect of the Americans will become utterly unintelligible to an Englishman.*" [16, p. 230]. E. Abdy joins in the chorus: "*Their [=English & Americans] common language is the chief impediment in the way of a mutual understanding. That which seems to bind them together, serves too often to dissever them.*" [17, p. 18]. The suit was followed by F. Marryat: "*... it is remarkable how very debased the language has become in a short period in America ...*" [18, p. 146]. The author also mentions some nascent financial terms in the 1840s: *shin plaster* 'paper currency issued after the depression of 1837' – "*Dealers, in general, give out their own bank-notes, or as they are called here, shin plasters*"; *shave* 'discount on a note or premium' – "*Then here's a ticket, and give me two shaves in return*" [ib., p. 18], *blowup* 'business failure, bankruptcy' – "*...the commercial history of these last fifty years... is always attended with a periodical blow up*" [ib.].

J. Pickering, being a professional farmer, reported American ways with the corresponding lexis: *span* (of horses) [19, p. 65], *flat* 'flat land' [ib., p. 68], *box* 'the body of a wagon' [ib., p. 87], *scraper* 'two-handed scoop for excavation drawn by horses' [ib., p. 104], *paring bee* 'apple paring', *Jersey wagon* 'light wagon' [ib., p. 109], *turn out* 'to put the land out of cultivation' [ib., p. 110], *camp out* 'spend night outdoors' [ib., p. 130]. The author describes *bees*: "*Almost every thing here is done by bees... which are a kind of merry-making, when sometimes dancing and rustic plays are carried on at the close.*" [ib., p. 109]. One of the first complaints about American slang came from C. Latrobe: "*...quite as incomprehensible to an Englishman as the gipsy lingo... forms the common mode of communication in some parts of the country... there are few ranks of society in which a certain degree of this base coin is not current.*" [20, p. 319]. Some old American country customs are described by G. Mellen: *quilting bees* [21, p. 456], *bird shoot* 'to destroy the birds most mischievous to crops' [ib., p. 455], *goose pulling* or *gander pulling* [ib.] used to be a cruel sport when a goose is penned, soaped, greased, tied to a limb, and the horsemen at full gallop had to snatch at the neck of the fowl.

T. Power writes about rapid social progress in the USA. His first journey in September 1833 from New York to Philadelphia by steam-boat and railway, with cars drawn by horses, took five hours and a half. But in October of the same year he did the same distance by locomotive in two hours. "*In 1833, the journey from Augusta, Georgia, to New York was an affair of eleven or twelve days; it is now [=1835] performed in three. Steam and railroad are, in fact, annihilating time and space in this country.*" [22, p. 344]. The German influence in Philadelphia is described by the author, as well: "*Germans, who, although most earnest in enriching the country by their labour, yet cling with strange tenacity to the customs and*

language of "Fader-land... many of these men, yet speaking no word of English, are of the third generation. They have German magistrates, an interpreter in courts when they act as jurors, German newspapers." [ib., p. 84].

T. Grattam mocks at the nascent political correctness in America: 'filagree phrase and silken term precise of attempted and affected fine speaking' shocked the author back in the 1840s. He sees here "underbred affectation – ordinary minds are always afraid of homely words". Among the author's examples are *garments* for 'clothes', *mansion* for 'house', *vehicle* for 'carriage', *domestics* for 'servants', *the atmosphere* for 'the air', *where did you worship?* for 'what church were you at?', *I opine* for 'I think', *an incorrigible inebriate* for 'drunken fellow', *corsets* for 'stays', *elastics* for 'garters', *hose* for 'stockings', *limbs* for 'legs', *white meat* for 'chicken breast', *dark meat* for 'poultry legs', *rooster* for 'cock', *helps* for 'servants' [23, p. 55]. Another author of that decade, M. Houstoun, through all her critical remarks about American language, still concedes: "If at a public table you pick up some stray words of an American's conversation, you will generally find in them both strength and spirit, and originality. On the other hand, if you happen to fall in with a prosy, tiresome talker, dwelling heavily on trifles with the dull monotony of a small mind, a hundred to one the man is an Englishman." [24, p. 222].

In the 1850s, many English travelers were impressed by development of American railroads. Their remarks range from sarcastic to appreciative. Thus W. Chambers describes a railroad car: "The object which in exterior appearance most nearly resembles an American railway-car, is one of those houses on wheels which accompanies travelling shows and menageries. The car is nothing more than a long wooden box, painted yellow, with a roundish shaped roof; a door at each end; and a row of windows at each side." [25, p. 334].

A. Marjoribanks reports on heavy traffic in New York back in 1854: "The crowd of omnibuses constantly passing along Broadway is astonishing, amounting to no less than 500, so that you often have to wait ten minutes before you are able to cross the street. The driver has the entire charge of the machine; he drives, opens and shuts, or "fixes" the door, takes the money; exhorts the passengers to be "smart," all by himself; yet he never quits the box." [26, p. 307]. The author also gives his readers a quick crash course on American politics of that time: "There are two parties in America, the whigs, and the democrats, who are occasionally styled the locofocos, a nickname given to them by the whigs. The whigs correspond to the old tory or conservative party in Great Britain, and are occasionally called "federalists," by the democrats. The democrats are the go-a-head party. The aim of the federal party is to strengthen the central authority; whilst the aim of the democratic party is to increase the power of the citizens in the separate State legislatures." [ib., p. 422].

I. Bird describes various bees, as *logging-bee*, *thrashing-bee*, *quilting-bee*, *apple-bee*, *shelling bee* [27, p. 206]. Political parties in the decade before the Civil War are mentioned as well: *Whigs*, *Democrats*, *Know-nothings*, *Freesoilers*, *Fusionists*, *Hunkers*, *Woolly-heads*, *Dough-faces*, *Hard-shells*, *Soft-shells*, *Silver-greys*. *Whigs* was a party opposed to Andrew Jackson principles, *Democrats* –

old Democratic-Republican party, *Know-nothing party* – the one in 1852-55 that opposed the influence of foreigners and Catholic church, *Free-Soil party* – an abolitionist party in 1848-1854, *Fusionists* – those who join the tickets of other parties, *Hunkers* were Conservative Democrats, *Wholly-heads* was a faction of the old Whig party, *Dough-faces* – Northerners who did not oppose slavery in the South, *Hard-shells & Soft-shells* – more and less conservative factions of the New York Democratic party in 1852-1860, *Silver-grays* – conservative members of the Whig party.

The author gives evidence of considerable cultural and language differences in the USA by 1855: "I saw less difference between Edinburgh and Boston, than between Boston and Chicago; the dark-haired Celts of Scotland, and the stirring artisans of our manufacturing cities, have more in common than the descendants of the Puritans in New England, and the reckless, lawless inhabitants of the newly-settled territories west of the Mississippi." [ib., p. 321]. The description of Cincinnati shows the rapid urbanization in America: "Cincinnati in 1800 was a wooden village of 750 inhabitants; it is now a substantially-built brick town, containing 200,000 people, and thousands of fresh settlers are added every year." [ib., p. 119].

F. Olmstead gives a thorough account of economy of slave states in the pre-War period. The author describes the old practices of 'dipping' the turpentine from the box wherein it flows from a tree [28, p. 342] and 'chopping' soil preparing it for cultivation [ib., p. 470], ways of watering rice-fields (*sprout-flow* and *point-flow*) [ib., p. 471], along with different qualities of rice: *best head rice*, *best prime rice*, *broken rice*, *chits* or *small*, *flour* or *douse* [ib., p. 477]. Sugar-cane culture is also elaborated on with corresponding vocabulary, as *mattress* 'heap of stalks' [ib., p. 665]. C. Mackay presents the names of hooligans in the late 1850s: *Bowery boys*, *spiggots*, *high-binders*, *rowdies* in New York, *swipers* in Washington, *dead rabbits* in Philadelphia, *plug-uglies*, *rose-buds*, *blood-tubs* in Baltimore [29, p. 105]. The author also describes some obsolete political terms of the parties: *soft-shell* 'liberal Baptist', *hard-shell* 'orthodox Baptist', *Know Nothing* 'a secret short-lived political party in 1852-55', *locofoco* 'a member of Democratic party in New York state' [ib., p. 109].

Some commentaries on manners and speech of Americans from different regions are given by B. Taylor. So, the New-Englander's language is "...marked with a certain precision, betraying a consciousness of or at least belief in, its accuracy." [30, p. 389]. The New Yorker's language "...is not so carefully chosen, but his voice has more variety of modulation." [ib.]. The voice of a Philadelphian is thin and sharp [ib., p. 390], and that of a Southerner 'betrays' him, because, as a child, he was in touch with African-Americans [ib., p. 391]. The Westerner man has "an expansive use of adjectives in his talk" [ib., p. 392], and his speech is marked by "...the use of peculiar words and phrases rather than any distinctive peculiarity of accent." [ib.].

Regional differences of American speech had manifested themselves by the 1860s, as another author, T. Nichols elaborates on Southern, Eastern, and Western speech. Thus the Western idioms of that time are *a gone 'coon*, *to get into an everlasting fix*, *a story smells rather*

tall, to sink into one's feelings like a snagged boat into the Mississippi, a person is as cross as a bear with two cubs and a sore tail, to walk through a fence, to be like a falling tree through a cobweb, to go the whole hog, dust me wide open." [31, p. 386].

In the penultimate decade of the century, T. Hudson's description of the lexis related to railroad shows its development and importance in American life: "There is another mode of getting your baggage conveyed and that is by the "express," an institution which takes in hand your packages, giving you a brass "check" for each, in exchange for which you recover your belongings at the baggage-office at the depot." [32, p. 38]. In California, the author was surprised to know the "... homeliness of the Anglo-Saxon language. Nothing save the inscriptions upon the signboards... indicated that we were in an English-speaking country." [ib., p. 182].

In the last decade of the century, R. Kipling did not pull his punches in criticizing American English: "They delude themselves into the belief that they talk English—the English—and I have already been pitted for speaking with "an English accent." The man who pitted me spoke the language of thieves. And they all do...But the American has no language. He is dialect, slang, provincialism, accent." [33].

H. Gratton's account shows quite developed character of American speech by the end of the 19th c. Political machinery of wheeling and dealing is explained in such terms, as *the Boss* [34, p. 186], *to be no slouch*, *to have a pull*, *to be paralyzed* 'surprised', *cut no ice* [ib., p. 190], *heeler* [ib., p. 198], *graft* [ib., p. 190], etc. American slang is called "a peculiar second language". H. Gratton thinks that it goes back to the professional actors on the stage and then imitated by "leaders in all towns" [ib., p. 118]. Among the author's examples are: *Ah, there* (salutation), *come off!* (difference of opinion), *what's on?*, *Hunki dori*, *peach* "great", *rough*, *hoodlum* [ib., p. 121], *to get a move on*, *toppy*, *jim dandy* [ib., p. 120]. H. Gratton describes political correctness: "As the Americans are all equal, there are no servants among them. The poor are as good as the "boss," and won't be called servants. You read in the papers, "A young lady wishes a position to take care of children; salary, \$30." "A saleslady wants position." "A

lady (good scrubber) will go out by the day; \$2." When you meet these "ladies," they are from the peasant class—untidy, insolent, often dissipated in the sense of drink." [ib., p. 292]. Another author, M. O'Rell follows the suit, adding his sarcasm to the matter: "The employees (I must be careful not to say "servants") of the Pennsylvania Railroad" [35, p. 83], "The cold, icy air fell on my legs, or (to use a more proper expression, as I am writing in Philadelphia) on my lower limbs" [ib., p. 266], "At eleven o'clock I went to bed, or, to use a more proper expression for my Philadelphia readers, I retired" [ib., p. 300].

American scholar B. Mathews justly observed that by the end of the 19th c. there was no need to plead for America English, since "the cause is won". The author reasonable states that there is no such thing as a single standard of language, nor does somewhere exist "a sublimated English language, perfect and impeccable" [36]. Part of the B. Mathews' work is dedicated to the growing literary independence of the USA. He compares the books published by Messrs. Harper & Brothers in the years 1861, 1871, 1881, and 1891: in 1871 there were 57 books are published, 36 by British authors and 20 by American authors, while in 1891 among 76 books published 27 were British and 41 American [ib.].

W. Archer rounds up with a convincing coda, stressing the unique position of the English language. It is a living organisms, not "no mere historic monument, like Westminster Abbey, to be religiously preserved as a relic of the past." [37, p. 215]. The author is certain that English "has gained, and is gaining" by its expansion in America, expressing the varied human experience by vocabulary or idioms. And greater variety of 'dialects' and 'vernacular variations' only add up to its vitality, "to promote the abundance, suppleness, and nicety of adaptation of the language as a literary instrument. America has enormously enriched the language, not only with new words, but with apt and luminous colloquial metaphors" [ib., 214].

Summing up, it is seen how considerable changes in social environment of the USA in the 19th century are reflected in American English and have correspondingly caused the development of its essential characteristics.

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