American English: No written standard before the 20th century?

Christian Mair (Freiburg)

Abstract

In the terminology of Schneider’s (2007) “Dynamic Model”, North American varieties of English look back on a history of at least 250 years of nativisation and endonormative stabilisation. This can be easily established from studies of pronunciation and the lexicon. By comparison, the consolidation of a written norm, as defined through orthography and the standardisation of a small number of variable grammatical usages, is a much more recent phenomenon, culminating only in the 20th century. The recent completion of B-Brown, the 1930s American member of the Brown family of matching corpora, the expansion of the ARCHER corpus (ARCHER 3.2), the release of the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA), and the availability of a number of further digital language resources (e.g. Google Books / Ngram Viewer) have afforded new opportunities for the study of this topic. Going through part of the consensus catalogue of orthographic and morphosyntactic variables dividing (written) British and American Standard usage today (e.g., got / gotten, prevent sb (from) doing sth, help (to) do sth, etc.), the paper shows that practically none of these robust present-day contrasts was firmly in place by the end of the 19th century. The consolidation of a globally recognised and influential standard of written American English is thus a very recent, essentially 20th-century, language-historical development. Today, English presents itself as a pluricentric language whose two globally relevant standards are (a) still diverging further in terms of accent, (b) show some convergence (on American norms) in the lexicon and phraseology, but (c) have essentially remained united by the same Late Modern English grammar. This has important implications for research on standardisation in the newer and emerging postcolonial standards and for a more refined understanding of the assumed “Americanisation” of other varieties of English.

The presentation will address the advantages and limitations of working in a closely controlled “small corpora” environment in the age of big data, arguing for the continued usefulness of combining philology and technology, the detailed study of the individual example and the statistical profiling of large masses of text, the carefully compiled small database and the vast mega-corpus.