

Chapter Eight

RECEPTION OF BRITISH AND AMERICAN ENGLISH BY POLISH STUDENTS*

The main question asked in Krzanowska [1985] concerned possible differences in understanding British and American English by Polish students of English¹. It was assumed that British English, for historical and other reasons, is the variety Polish learners are mainly exposed to. Although the situation may have slightly changed recently, British English remains a predominant variety, which is reflected in the orientation of English teaching materials published in Poland and in the preparation of future teachers of English. Thus, it was hypothesized that Polish students of English would have greater difficulties in understanding American English (AE) than British English (BE).

Two hypotheses were put forward: the null hypothesis H_0 and the alternative hypothesis H_1 . H_0 assumes that there are no differences in the understanding of the two varieties by the students, while H_1 assumes the opposite, that there are significant differences. The null hypothesis was subjected to a statistical analysis where the χ^2 test was employed.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The subjects in the study were 30 female students of the second year of the Institute of English Studies of the Jagiel-

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¹ This paper presents results of the research done by L. Krzanowska [1985] and P. Miernik [1989] for their M. A. theses, under the supervision of the first author of this chapter.

lonian University. Best and worst students were excluded. The subjects were tested in aural reception of BE and AE by means of two kinds of tests -- vocabulary and phonetic tests.

The vocabulary test consisted of 15 pairs of British and American synonymous words, chosen from Lawendowski and Pankhurst [1975]. They were as follows:

BE	AE
1. junction	intersection
2. anorak	parka
3. bonnet	hood
4. blinds	shades
5. public conveniences	restrooms
6. drawing pins	thumb tacks
7. tap	faucet
8. rubbish	garbage
9. jug	pitcher
10. press studs	snaps
11. larder	pantry
12. nappy	diaper
13. bowler hat	derby
14. truncheon	club
15. flyover	overpass
16. lift	elevator
17. boot	trunk
18. mate	buddy
19. diversion	detour
20. waistcoat	vest
21. braces	suspenders
22. lorry	truck
23. draughts	checkers
24. subway	underpass
25. quilt	comforter
26. sledge	sled
27. tights	pantie hose
28. skirting board	base board
29. chemist's	drugstore
30. off-licence	liquor store

The items were recorded by educated native speakers -- the Bri-

tish items by a British speaker and the American items by an American speaker. Each item was uttered twice by the speakers. The students' recognition of British and American vocabulary was tested by means of a multiple choice test.

The phonetic test consisted of 64 test words presented in 30 sentences, recorded in the British and American phonetic realization. The words were chosen from Janicki [1977]. Their distinctive phonetic features distinguish AE from BE. The students were supposed to translate each sentence into Polish. The sentences were as follows. Only the underlined words were assessed.

1. He loaded the car and was ready to start.
2. He glanced at the advertisements but he didn't find the one he had been looking for.
3. Mary likes fast driving.
4. 'Don't grab all the fruit at once!' said Mother.
5. In summer there are many beetles in the grass.
6. Steve is interested in writing novels: he writes two pages every day.
7. 'Put the kettle on!', said Mother.
8. She'll pass the test if it is easy.
9. People in this country are very hostile to strangers.
10. 'Maybe we'll find her at another station', he said.
11. The cups I got yesterday are fragile. I've already broken one.
12. He told her she shouldn't worry.
13. How much do you want for this bottle?
14. 'Don't nod your head', said Father.
15. The soil in this country is fertile.
16. He wanted to spend his leisure in the mountains.
17. She is a very subtle little girl.
18. The pot you bought for your aunt has some cracks at the bottom.
19. He broke a bottle of coke yesterday.
20. He was fitter before he became fatter.
21. He has been a clerk for more than twenty years now.
22. Although he used a lever, he failed to move it.
23. He gave me only a half of the sum; George got the rest.
24. He can't box very well.
25. Everybody knows how important letters are in our lives.

26. I want *neither* of them.
27. The woman was *shot* in the street.
28. 'You *won't* get in: it's *locked*', said Mary.
29. All students must conform to the *schedule*.
30. The fishing *rod* he uses is very heavy.

The order of presentation of the test items was chosen so that the subjects had equal chances to score in both tests at the same level. The whole group of subjects was divided into two subgroups: A and B. Group A was exposed to 15 BE vocabulary items followed by 15 items from the phonetic test read by the American speaker. Later group A heard the remaining 15 items from the phonetic test read by the British speaker followed by 15 AE vocabulary items. Group B was exposed first to 15 items from the phonetic test in the American realization, then to 15 BE vocabulary items followed by 15 AE vocabulary items and 15 phonetic items in the British realization.

The number of errors was counted for each student in each test. Then the numbers were added in a given kind of test. The total number of errors made by all the students in the BE vocabulary test was compared with the total number of errors made by all the students in the AE vocabulary test. Similarly the total number of correct answers given by all the students in the BE vocabulary test was compared with the total number of correct answers given by all the students in the AE vocabulary test. The same procedure was applied to the phonetic test.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS OF EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS

The χ^2 test was used in this study since our data are frequency counts. The results of the vocabulary test are presented in Table 1.

We have a two-way 2×2 table and the d.f. is 1. So we use the following χ^2 formula with Yates correction [Hatch and Farhady, 1982].

$$\chi^2 = \frac{N (|ad - bc| - \frac{N}{2})^2}{(a + b)(c + d)(a + c)(b + d)}$$

Table 1

Results of the vocabulary test

	BE	AE	Total
Errors	188 ^a	248 ^b	436 ^{a + b}
Correct	262 ^c	202 ^d	464 ^{c + d}
Total	450 ^{a + c}	450 ^{b + d}	900 ^{a + b + c + d = N}

We put our data into the formula:

$$\chi^2 = \frac{900 \left(\left| 188 \times 202 - 248 \times 262 \right| - \frac{900}{2} \right)^2}{436 \times 464 \times 450 \times 450} = 16.55$$

$$p \leq .0001$$

The difference between the number of errors in the BE and AE vocabulary tests was found to be highly significant. Consequently the null hypothesis had to be rejected and the alternative hypothesis accepted. We could conclude that there were significant differences in understanding BE vocabulary and AE vocabulary in favour of BE vocabulary.

The results of the phonetic test are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Results of the phonetic test

	BE	AE	Total
Errors	130 ^a	261 ^b	391 ^{a + b}
Correct	830 ^c	699 ^d	1529 ^{c + d}
Total	960 ^{a + c}	960 ^{b + d}	1920 ^{a + b + c + d = N}

We use the same statistical analysis as in the vocabulary test. We put our data into the formula:

$$\chi^2 = \frac{1920 \left(\left| 130 \times 699 - 261 \times 830 \right| - \frac{1920}{2} \right)^2}{391 \times 1529 \times 960 \times 960} = 55.95$$

$$p \leq .00001$$

The difference between the number of errors in the BE and AE phonetic tests was found to be even more highly significant than in the case of the vocabulary tests. The null hypothesis had to be rejected and the alternative hypothesis accepted. We concluded that there were highly significant differences in understanding BE phonetic and AE phonetics in favour of BE phonetics.

L. Krzanowska did her research with a group of second year students of English. We wondered what effect, if any, English studies could have on understanding American English as compared with British English.

Thus the study was replicated by P. Miernik with fourth year students of English. The following words in the vocabulary test were omitted as was suggested by a native AE speaker.

BE	AE
blinds	shades
tap	faucet
bowler hat	derby
quilt	comforter
tights	pantie hose
press studs	snaps

They were replaced by the following pairs:

BE	AE
torch	flash light
silencer	muffler
quid	buck
windscreen	windshIELD
hire purchase	instalment plan
dummy	pacifier

The phonetic test remained unaltered.

The experimental procedure was exactly the same as in the first study. The subjects were 28 fourth year students of English (both female and male). The same hypotheses were put forward, although it was also hypothesized that more advanced students of English would not have as much difficulty in understanding AE as their less advanced counterparts.

The causal factors could be both a general higher level of proficiency in English and special practice in AE students of English receive during their course of studies.

The χ^2 test was used in the second study in the same way as in the first one.

The results of the vocabulary test are presented in Table 3².

Table 3

Results of the vocabulary test (replicated)

	BE	AE	Total
Errors	126 ^a	144 ^b	270 ^{a + b}
Correct	294 ^c	276 ^d	570 ^{c + d}
Total	420 ^{a + c}	420 ^{b + d}	840 ^{a + b + c + d = N}

We use the same χ^2 formula with Yates' correction as in the first study. We put our data into the formula:

$$Y = \frac{840 \left(\left| 1126 \times 276 - 144 \times 294 \right| - \frac{840}{2} \right)^2}{270 \times 570 \times 420 \times 420}$$

$$= 1.97$$

Since the critical value of χ^2 at $p \leq .05$ with 1 degree of freedom is 3.84, we cannot reject the null hypothesis this time.

The difference in understanding BE and AE, at least as far as vocabulary is concerned, seems to have disappeared by the time students have reached the fourth year.

Further research is obviously necessary but the second study indicates that English studies may have a significant influence on the understanding of American English by Polish students.

² In the phonetic test in the second study the rate with which the AE speaker spoke was slower than the rate of the BE speaker. In consequence the results of the phonetic test do not seem to be fully reliable and are not presented in this paper.