



A study of American English, power, and identity: Formulation, dissemination, and language as power



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Abstract



Language is closely linked to power, ideologies, and national interests. Language operates as a cultural instrument that is neither neutral nor transparent, and is used by communities to construct identity and legitimize dominance. The evolution and international spread of American English clearly illustrate this relationship. Due to initial opposition to British rule, American English was defined by a culture of independence, nationalism, and self-reliance. Between 1860 and 1900, the United States became economically powerful, gaining political influence that translated into military strength and technological innovation, thereby enabling its language to spread worldwide. In addition to becoming a tool of global communication, American English has rapidly evolved into a mechanism of soft power and cultural hegemony. Given the rapid pace of cultural globalization, understanding how it contributes to linguistic homogenization and shapes how people communicate and perceive themselves has become increasingly important. This study investigates the relationship between power and language in American English. The sociopolitical forces that have shaped American English are also examined. The study further explores the processes through which American English has become popular nationally and internationally.

Keywords

American English; dissemination; power; soft power;

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1 Introduction

American English is a broad form of English that plays a major role on the world stage. Its development owes much to the United States' distinctive sociocultural characteristics and geopolitical history over the past approximately two centuries. In the seventeenth century, the British brought English to North America, where it was immediately influenced by indigenous languages, African languages, and those of later immigrant groups. As a result of ongoing interaction among diverse language communities, English adopted new phonological, lexical, and syntactic elements, which gradually set it apart from its British origins and drove the linguistic evolution of the American nation (Jacquemet, 2005).

As the United States grew economically, militarily, and geographically, particularly after the Civil War, so did American English. As the population became increasingly diverse, communication emerged as a key way to connect with others. Similarly, it became an expression of the nation's identity. By the end of the 19th century, the United States emerged as a prominent global power, and this impact increased with victories in both World Wars. The influence of American English, a cultural conduit and soft-power tool, was felt well beyond the United States' borders. The study investigates the connection between language and power, maps the historical and sociopolitical factors that led to the emergence of American English, and dissects the processes that facilitated its expansion within the United States and its spread worldwide. This draws attention to the power dynamics underlying language use in order to encourage a more equitable approach to linguistic diversity, especially during a period in which globalization is increasingly prioritizing American English over minority languages (Stivers, 2010).

2 The Relationship Between Language and Power

Dahl (1957), explained that power can be understood as the capacity to pursue collective or individual goals by mobilizing resources and exercising authority to influence others' actions. This definition encompasses both overt coercion and more subtle forms of influence, making it particularly relevant for examining language as a vehicle of power. Joseph Nye's distinction between "hard" and "soft" power (Nye & Power, 2004) offers a useful framework for understanding the role of language in shaping global relations. Hard power relies on coercion, military strength, and economic leverage, whereas soft power is rooted in cultural appeal, political ideals, and the perceived legitimacy of a nation's actions.

Language operates at the *core* of soft power because it embodies culture, transmits values, and frames thought. Humboldt's (1988) assertion that every language contains a unique worldview underscores how linguistic structures influence cognition and shape how communities interpret the world. Similarly, Palmer observed that learning or adopting a language entails a deeper cultural commitment, involving the internalization of values, norms, and culturally specific modes of reasoning (Palmer, 1976). Because language functions as a vehicle for ideology, it becomes a contested space where identity, influence, and authority are negotiated. Shen's (2001) study of linguistic oppression demonstrates that it is subtle and powerful. As much as physical coercion governs social relations, norms of legitimacy, prestige, and cultural capital, linguistic hegemony typically works quietly and often unobtrusively. Some earlier scholars have assumed that language is a neutral medium without meaning or value. We now understand modern sociolinguistics as active in the transmission of values. Language is a social practice known for shaping and being shaped by power. This influences the nature of social realities, legitimates ideologies, and contributes to the creation or maintenance of social hierarchies.

The example of American English is especially enlightening within this theoretical framework. The American English language is the language of the world's dominant global power. Moreover, it marks a turning point in global linguistic evolution. Its development and spread throughout history have reflected larger struggles over national identity, cultural independence, and global influence. The conception of American English and its global allure owes a great deal to politics and power (Amirbek & Ydyrys, 2014).

3 Factors of Power for American English at its Creative Stage

The development of American English is best regarded as a register of the political and cultural quest for independence in the United States. In the seventeenth century, the English first came to North America with the British, but the gradual emergence of an American variety was neither automatic nor incidental. It was not created in isolation but was part of a larger process of resistance to the colonial powers, national assertion, and cultural autonomy. In 1620, when the Puritans landed in Plymouth, they brought with them a variety of British English that rapidly altered as the environment changed. Through interactions with Indigenous languages, borrowings from European immigrant dialects, and special frontier conditions, a new variety of English, labeled “*English in North America*” or “*Colonial English*,” emerged. These changes and shifts are reflected in the manner in which the colonies developed.

After the American Revolution, a push for linguistic independence gained momentum as a central symbolic endeavor linked to the nation's political aspirations. Language, widely seen as a key marker of identity, became increasingly viewed as a fundamental aspect of a country's independence. In 1781, Witherspoon suggested that Americans should abandon British pronunciation habits and establish their own unique pronunciation guidelines (Witherspoon, 1781). Rush echoed this sentiment, advocating for a linguistic model grounded in the speech of ordinary Americans and reflecting the egalitarian ideals of the republic (Rush, 1798). These calls for linguistic distinction were more than just superficial; they signified a deliberate rejection of British cultural influence.

Webster (1789), emerged as a central figure in linguistic nation-building. His 1789 Dissertations on the English Language laid the ideological groundwork for a distinctly American linguistic identity, asserting that a sovereign nation required its own language and cultural forms. His monumental American Dictionary of the English Language (1828) institutionalized American spelling conventions and codified American vocabulary (Webster, 1828). Many historians have described Webster's dictionary as a cultural counterpart to the political independence won decades earlier—“*the last shot of the American War of Independence*.” Webster realized that language and national consciousness were closely related. He thought that American English could be used in patriotism, social bonding, and forming a national identity. His work standardized American linguistic practice and carved out a vision of cultural self-confidence for a young nation. Henry Louis Mencken continued Webster's intellectual journey at the beginning of the 20th century. His magnum opus, 'The American Language' (1919), offers a thorough examination of American linguistic innovation and is a notably democratic and innovative work that highlights significant variations between British and American usage. Mencken (1919), argued that American English had developed into a fully developed and autonomous variety of English just as the United States emerged as a world power after World War I. His scholarship demonstrated that Americans were emerging as a cultural force and, more importantly, that they sought to supplant the British Empire.

The rise of American political and economic hegemony reinforced the global recognition of American English as an independent linguistic standard by the mid-twentieth century. This period consolidated the ideological shift from colonial dependency to cultural leadership, completing the historical arc that positioned the United States—and its language—as central actors in global communication (Syufi et al., 2019).

4 The Power Factors of American English During Dissemination

The global dissemination of American English reflects a careful interplay among national strategy, cultural influence, economic power, and political authority. As a component of national language policy, language popularization involves intentional efforts to extend a dominant language's reach and prestige for political and cultural advantage. Aitchison's (2001), observation that linguistic success is primarily tied to the influence of its speakers, not to inherent qualities of the language itself, is exemplified by the trajectory of American English. Its ascendancy corresponds closely to the expansion of American geopolitical power, technological innovation, and global cultural influence since the late nineteenth century. The use of American English did not arise solely through natural linguistic evolution. Diffusion occurs in a context comprising policies,

ideologies, institutions, and culture. As the United States positioned itself as a world superpower, its language became a significant medium through which it could fashion international norms and project its national identity.

A. Domestic Expansion and Institutionalization of American English

In the United States, the expansion of American English was intertwined with nation-building projects and assimilationist ideology. The westward movement that followed the American Revolution brought English-speaking settlers into contact—and conflict—with indigenous populations whose languages had flourished for centuries. When Europeans first arrived, North America contained thousands of indigenous languages, including over 300 north of Mexico (Li, 1983). Yet within a few centuries, the majority had become endangered or extinct. The overwhelming loss of language was due to military invasion, forced movement, education, and ideological delegitimization. Political leaders propagated the theory that linguistic uniformity was essential for national integration. As Jay (1787), put it, a nation must have a shared language, religion, and customs. Most people believe that English helped promote a model of social and cultural development. Indigenous languages were referred to as impediments to progress, which caused policies to suppress these languages.

The “Indian boarding school” system described by Child (1998), exemplifies linguistic domination as a form of cultural violence. Children were taken away from their families by force, forbidden from speaking their native tongues, and subjected to English-only education intended to break ties with their cultural heritage. This system produced long-term generational trauma and contributed significantly to the collapse of Indigenous linguistic ecosystems. Beyond formal coercion, English also expanded locally through everyday structures of economic opportunity, political participation, and education. In a rapidly industrializing society, English became synonymous with social mobility and civic belonging, thereby compelling linguistic assimilation even among groups nominally free to maintain their own languages.

The English Officialization Movement began to take shape in the early 1980s. Presented as a practical measure to ensure communication efficiency, the movement sought to legally enshrine English as the official language of individual states. Thirty-one US states enacted legislation (Zhang, 2017), which led to the institutionalization of monolingual ideologies prioritizing English over linguistic diversity. Although not ratified at the federal level, the movement reflected and reinforced longstanding cultural narratives that equated English with national identity, civic virtue, and cultural legitimacy.

B. International Expansion of American English and Global Power

After World War II, when the United States rose to superpower status, American English spread internationally at an accelerated pace. Its language entered the realm of international governance, economic development, scientific communication, and popular culture. American English evolved from a national vernacular to an international linguistic standard. The Bretton Woods system politically tied American power to international financial institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank. English was routinely used in these organizations, confirming that it functions as a dominant language of governance. On a global scale, American English became a highly significant tool for propagating ideas. The USA also exported financial assistance and a development model to Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America through the Marshall Plan in 1947 and the Point Four Program in 1949. These initiatives disseminated American procedural practices, technology, and educational systems—incorporating the English language. In many areas, knowledge of the English language has increasingly become a requirement for a job, modernization, and economic participation. In this way, the global dissemination of American norms is intensified. In order to promote its interests, the U.S. used soft power through the education system and media. According to Li (1983), the enrollment of international students in the United States exploded during the twentieth century. Hence, American universities have become global hubs of knowledge production. These learners later emerged as political leaders, cultural influencers, and educators in their home countries and as a further extension of American English in their respective countries.

The dominance of U.S. media—Hollywood films, television networks, music industries, and later digital platforms—created a global cultural environment saturated with American English. Media consumption

became one of the most potent vehicles of linguistic and cultural transfer, shaping global youth culture and reinforcing the association of English with modernity, creativity, and cosmopolitan identity. Organizations such as the Ford Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, and the Peace Corps have institutionalized American cultural and linguistic outreach. As Hagège (2009) notes, these efforts framed American language and values as pathways to progress, thereby embedding American English within the educational, scientific, and ideological infrastructures of developing nations. In the post-Cold War era, the rise of the information economy intensified these processes. As American technological corporations expanded worldwide, digital platforms, scientific databases, and internet communication increasingly adopted English as the default language. American English thus became a structural component of globalization, shaping patterns of communication, access to knowledge, and cultural production across the globe.

5 Conclusion

The transformation of English from an island-based vernacular to a global lingua franca reflects centuries of political, economic, and cultural expansion by the United Kingdom and, later, the United States. English has long served as a cultural asset and a tool for ideological influence, yielding economic benefits and molding global cultural and political perspectives. Bourdieu's (1991) argument that every language derives its authority from a system of symbolic power that is legitimized by political frameworks is strikingly exemplified in the current preeminence of American English. The worldwide use and prominence of American English can have far-reaching repercussions for linguistic justice, cultural sovereignty, and the ultimate future of minorities. Globalization offers individuals from diverse backgrounds the opportunity to interact with one another; however, it has simultaneously led to an unprecedented level of homogenization of languages. Hagège (2000), that the uniformity of language hampers the capacity of people and societies to speak creatively and autonomously. Further, ideas that are developed locally and derived from local cultures shape forms of expression that are often difficult to fully articulate in another language. The loss of any language is a loss of a communicative tool and perspective, a repository of knowledge, and an irreplaceable component of human ingenuity. Although American English will continue to dominate in the future, societies must ensure this does not happen at the cost of dynamism. Introducing policies that support bilingual education, assist in the revitalization of minority languages, and recognize the rights of their associated linguistic communities is crucial for maintaining fragile cultural equilibrium. Retaining general and particular languages is not an act of retrogression or nostalgia but rather represents an effort to imbue human culture with a living mechanism for stabilization. In the end, having a critical awareness and understanding of the spread of American English, accompanied by sensitivity to different cultures, can promote a more equitable global linguistic environment in which the advantages of international communication are balanced with the preservation of the world's diverse linguistic heritage.

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