Standard Englishes: What do American undergraduates think?

ANGELA KARSTADT

A survey of attitudes to other people's English among students at a university in the United States

[The following project report is reproduced, with minor adaptations, from *Studies in Mid-Atlantic English*, edited by Marko Modiano, a collection of papers published by Högskolan I Gävle, Sweden: see p. 47.]

ATTITUDES toward varieties of English as used in European contexts reflect changing viewpoints among their speakers (see Westergren Axelsson; Söderlund & Modiano; and Mobärg; see also Mobärg 1998). In this paper, I focus on the multifaceted attitudes toward varieties of English held by American undergraduate students in one department of English in the United States. I focus on *perceptions* of varieties of English, particularly on viewpoints of standard and acceptable spoken varieties of English.[1] The wider aim of this project – described here in its early pilot stages – is to identify to what extent American undergraduates accept regional, national, and international varieties of English. A guiding question is whether American undergraduate students expand their view of which varieties of English are standard as the students gain more exposure to varieties that are not their own.

Last spring at Indiana University–Bloomington, I designed a questionnaire to elicit attitudes about spoken varieties of English in America. A copy of my questionnaire is included in the appendix to this paper. One goal of this pilot study is to identify the varieties of English that Indiana students view as useful for success in the context of a large university. I surveyed students enrolled in two courses to test preliminarily the extent to which undergraduate classmates attending the same university and enrolled in two courses in the Department of English would have unified viewpoints on linguistic variants that are acceptable and standard. In addition, I wanted to find out what variety (or varieties) of English the respondents would advise a Swedish foreign exchange student to acquire for use at Indiana University, for the viewpoints expressed on the questionnaires may show how willing American students may be to accept or to accommodate to varieties of English that are not their own. Such attitudes may be useful for Swedish exchange students to consider as they think about linguistic integration into future host communities in academic settings.[1]

The paper is organized as follows: First, I outline some factors relevant to shaping attitudes toward language, especially in adolescence and young adulthood. Next, I describe the methods I used to collect the data, in addition to some of the preliminary results that emerged. In the conclusion, I point to possible connections to other sociolinguistic research and suggest some areas for further research.

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Respondents' hometowns, from age 4 to 13[2]

1

Course	In-state	Out-of-state *Indiana*	International	
E304	10		7	1
W131	6		5	3
Totals:	16/32 (50%)		12/32 (37.5%)	4/32 (12.5%)

The sociolinguistic backdrop

The research literature in sociolinguistics relating to young persons is quite extensive, and much of it has investigated young persons' expanding stylistic variation. Early research on the development and change of an individual's stylistic repertoire pinpointed the vernacular as an important concept for linguistic research. Labov (1972a) emphasized its importance in his *Vernacular Principle*, defining it as "the style which is most regular in its structure and in its relation to the evolution of the language … in which the minimum attention is paid to speech" (112).[2]

Chambers (1995:158–159) points to three formative periods for an individual's stylistic variation: *childhood,* when "the vernacular develops under the influence of family and friends"; *adolescence*, when the young person is attuned to the vernacular norms of the peer group, and when the peer network takes prominence over family; and *young adulthood*, when many young people increase their use of standard forms.

Empirical research has corroborated one of Labov's hypotheses that adolescence is instrumental in the development of the vernacular (Labov 1972b). Research has documented convincingly that adolescents are keenly aware of group norms around them; see for example Cheshire (1982) and Milroy (1987). Speech norms of peer groups are especially strong during the teenage years, reinforced by network ties that are *local* in their orientation; furthermore, the norms enforced by the adolescent networks have the capacity to override the potentially standardizing influences of teachers, parents, and other adults.

Certainly, students are exposed to national norms in school, but Wolfram & Schilling-Estes wager that "[t]here is a good chance that the speech of a student's peers will pre-empt other considerations in the formative years of dialect development, regardless of what took place in school prior to this time" (1998: 295). They go on to say that, "In most cases, this heightened personal awareness of the uses of standard English in the broader marketplace does not take place until early adulthood" (295). If we look at many of the same young people five or so years down the road, in many cases they have moved from their local neighborhoods to attend a college or university. It is also highly likely this move has taken them across county, state, region, or even international lines.

This is the recent experience of the respondents who completed the questionnaire in the present study. With the exception of one of the 32 respondents, all had moved from their childhood homes to attend Indiana University–Bloomington. Panel 1 summarizes hometown information.

The questionnaires were distributed to students in two classes in the Department of English during summer session in 2000.[3] The course designation E304 (see Figure 1) refers to a 300-level literature course, "Literatures in English, 1900 to the present," whose enrollees were English majors (or English minors) at the junior or senior level. The W131 course designation refers to a 100-level writing intensive course which is a requirement for most first-year students.

In the personal background section of the questionnaire, students reported their hometowns when they were young, age 4 to 13. I asked students to report information from this particular time period because – as mentioned above – the pre-adolescent and adolescent years are thought to be extremely crucial in the formation of vernacular varieties (see Labov 1972b; Labov nd.). If Labov's analysis is correct (that adolescence is the chief point in life when the vernacular is most regular and systematic), then it may follow that young adulthood is a time of linguistic transition and remodeling. In connection with his discussion of the vernacular

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across the life-span, Labov was quick to point out, "But it is still an open question how much the basic vernacular system changes in the course of a lifetime" (1972b:258). Decades after Labov's pioneering remarks about changes in the vernacular over the course of a lifetime, Wolfram & Schilling-Estes write, "Unfortunately, we do not have exhaustive research data on the ideal conditions under which a standard variety is acquired as a second dialect.... We also do not have solid research data on the optimal age for learning another dialect" (1998:294).[4]

For most students, freshman year at a college or university likely involves a reassessment and possibly remodeling of their English after exposure to other varieties spoken by new roommates and friends. Alongside the formal-education exposure and the standardizing influences that young adults receive in the classroom, the early university years are likely to bring abrupt contact with new social and regional varieties of English, not to mention contacts with international exchange students. Thus, another way to consider the formative years of dialect development of an individual is to view the young adult years as involving *varieties in contact*.[5]

Description and results of the questionnaire study

Options in spoken English: syntactic and lexical variables

The thirty-two undergraduate respondents received a questionnaire organized in four parts. First, they were asked to state preferences for synonymous syntactic and lexical options drawn from English English, Standard American English, and regionally- and socially-marked variants of American English. I consulted Trudgill & Hannah, *International English* (1994, 3rd edn); Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, *American English* (1998), specifically their appendix "An inventory of socially diagnostic structures"; and Wolfram (1991) *Dialects and American English*. In addition, I canvassed some of my Indiana colleagues to help identify other variants which they believe are regionally diagnostic, but not necessarily nonstandard; a few of these features are included in Part I of the survey, and include such verb complement structures as "The dog wants out," "Do you want out?" and "The paper needs rewritten" (see also Murray & Simon 1999).[6]

Sample questionnaire items from Part I 2

Give your opinion on the sentences given below. For each sentence, write
1 if you think it sounds acceptable and standard
2 if you are unsure or undecided about how it sounds
3 if the sentence sounds unacceptable

1. ___I shall tell you later.
___I will tell you later.
___I will tell you later on.

9. ___We have done an analysis of what we do and what we might could do.
___We have done an analysis of what we do and what we might be able to do.

15. ___As far as videos go, what are your favorites?
___As far as videos are concerned, what are your preferences?
___When it comes to videos, what are your favorites?
___With, like, videos, what are your favorites?

Panel 2 displays a sample of the 50 syntactic and lexical patterns that students evaluated in Part I of the questionnaire. Items in (1) and (9) contain options for verb phrasing that are drawn, for example, from English English "I shall tell you later" (1a) and from the regionally-marked double modal construction "might could" in (9a). Examples under item (15) gave students a range of stylistic options for introducing new topics.

Some results for syntactic and lexical variants

The numerical ratings given by the students were then averaged for the two courses (E304 and W131); later, I sub-divided the responses to check for patterns that may be linked to gender. Average scores for the syntactic and lexical variants could range from 1.00 (full acceptance) to 3.00 (complete rejection). Panel 3 presents the rank ordering of groups (sub-divided into course and gender) according to the acceptance rates that were given to the options in Part I. On the whole, students gave fairly similar responses to the syntactic and lexical options,

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Inter-subject agreement: Distribution by course (age) and gender 3

course/gender	# constructions rated 1.00*	# constructions rated 1.5 or lower
E304 females	12 (24%)	29 (58%)
W131 males	11 (22%)	27 (54%)
W131 females	10 (20%)	29 (58%)
E304 males	4 (8%)	24 (48%)

Note: *Constructions that won full approval from all members in each group.

Inter-subject agreement regarding unacceptable options 4

course/gender	# constructions rated 3.00*	# constructions rated 2.5 or higher*
E304 females	3	7 (14%)
W131 males	2	6 (12%)
E304 males	1	7 (14%)
E304 females	Ø	8 (16%)

Note: *Constructions were rated as unacceptable by all members in each group.

but an exception that warrants further research was the tendency for older male students (in E304) to be less likely to give their approval to variants.

In particular, Panel 3 shows that the older female students unanimously accepted the greatest number of options. They were closely followed by the younger males and the younger females. As a group, the older males seemed less reluctant to accept constructions as standard and acceptable; the older males gave unanimous support to only 4 constructions. As the right-hand column in Panel 3 suggests, the approval rating given by the male students in the 300-level class was about 10% lower than the approval rating of the female students.

Next, I examined inter-subject agreement concerning the variants that the students ranked as *unacceptable* constructions. Panel 4 shows the distribution, which indicates that the groups responded almost identically. One interpretation is that the students share the viewpoints about unacceptable items, even though they do not share identical viewpoints on standard and acceptable items. The older males were not more likely to reject options. In this case, it was the younger female students (in W131) who unanimously rejected the highest numbers of constructions (3). This compares with zero [Ø] options completely rejected by the older female students. Because the quantitative differences among groups are tiny, I am reluctant to draw many conclusions based on Panel 4 relating to age and gender.

My sample population is rather limited, but to return to the results presented in Figure 3, the trends in the pilot study point to this distribution: Younger males rated many synonymous options as standard and acceptable. Meanwhile, male students who have advanced two or more years in their studies have a narrowed range of constructions which they are willing to stamp with their approval. They place more options in the *unsure* or *undecided* category. We could propose two mitigating factors to help account for this pattern: accumulated educational exposure at the university level, and age, which may in turn lead students to suspend their judgment. Female students in the two groups responded fairly similarly. Even if older female students accepted slightly more options than the younger female students, the differences are very slight.

Advice for Swedish students

The second portion of the questionnaire showed two identical maps of the United States

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Essay question: Advice about English

5

The situation Imagine that your housemate, roommate or friend is a Swedish exchange student at IU–B who wants to become very fluent in English. Your friend says that there are so many different kinds of English: British English, Canadian English, Australian and New Zealand English – to name a few – and of course many types of American English. With all these choices, how can a person choose which one to learn? Which type of English would help a foreign student get along best at IU–B and succeed in a business career in the US?

Advice to your friend What do you recommend? Should your friend focus on a specific kind of English? Which one and why? Would your advice be the same if your friend is planning on a business career with many international contacts in English?

and asked students to identify geographical regions in America where they believe the most standard and least standard varieties of American English are spoken.[7] Students were then asked on the questionnaire to give some advice to a Swedish exchange student coming to study at Indiana University – Bloomington. The question appears in Panel 5. Here I decided not to pose the question "*What is standard English?*", but instead asked them to recommend the variety of English which would best prepare a Swedish exchange student to succeed at IU-B. My aim in asking this more contextualized question was to encourage students to share their observations based on their university experiences.

British English was a contender, being recommended in almost 20% of the responses.[8] One student suggested that the Swede emulate the pronunciation of BBC journalists.[9] More than half (ca. 60%) of the students, however, made reference to a variety of American English. As one might expect from students studying at a Midwestern university, several write-in votes were cast for a so-called neutral Midwest dialect (see also Hartley & Preston 1999). The student quoted in Passage 1 expresses this view about Midwestern English, but he also identified varieties to avoid in American English.

Passage 1

> "I would recommend that my friend try to incorporate a type of English with as few extreme drawls or nasalities as possible. The southern thing is kind of cute, but it seems strange sounding in a foreigner. I believe the same is true with the east coast (Massachusetts) kind of nasal, Kennedy-esque English. It just doesn't work well for a foreigner. Of course I am bias[ed] having lived here (Midwest) all my life, but it seems like we have the most sterile accents." (W131–1)

Some students, however, pointed to cities where major American companies have their headquarters. See, for example, excerpt (2) taken from the questionnaire of a 300-level student who wrote:

Passage 2

> "The kind of English that is spoken in Indianapolis, Chicago, and New York because these areas contain a great deal of international contacts in business." (E304–6)

Approximately a third of the students gave advice that was very benign and almost comforting in its acceptance. A recurrent theme in these answers was a generous approach ("*I'm sure any person will be fine*"), as in Passage 3. The caveat in this category, however, was that the Swedish student should learn *strong grammar*, which was not linked to a location. Passage 4 echoes this viewpoint.

Passage 3

> "Overall, the best would be to have strong grammar, clear pronunciation, good vocabulary and knowledge, and I'm sure any person would be fine." (W131–5)

Passage 4

> "My advice would be to not focus on a specific type of English because at a large university like IUB, there are many types of English spoken.… For a business career with many international contacts in English, I recommend a more grammatically correct form of English than what is commonly heard & used." (E304–9)

There is strong indication from answers elicited in this section of a great deal of flexibility among these American respondents. Most students gave some advice, but the flexible attitudes written here suggest that Swedish exchange students would not be expected to learn a localized variety of Indiana English –

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even though, as I presented in Karstadt (2000), the respondents have very high regard for the English spoken in Indiana.

Conclusion

What could the attitudes of undergraduates mean for Swedish exchange students? While the advice varied – ranging from "BBC English," to a neutral type of Midwest American English, to a "correct" English based on the grammar handbooks (see above) – one reasonable inference from the responses is that a Swedish student would not be expected to master one specific variety of English, at least with respect to the conditions that I stipulated when I posed the question (i.e. getting along well at IU-B and succeeding in business in the United States). The American students had open views about which variety of English the Swede should strive to learn: in cases where the Indiana students recommended one or more varieties, they generally went on to say that there are many types of English at IU-B, and the student should strive "to speak in a manner that could be understood by anyone who speaks English fluently" (E304–9).

Attitudes toward language varieties might not be typically viewed as constituting formal linguistic study, and may even seem far afield from language pedagogy. *Folk metalinguistics* is a term Preston has used to describe perceptual dialectology (1989: xii), but he also goes on to argue strongly that perceptions must be accounted for in educational planning:

A great deal of money and energy is spent trying to bring about effective, standard language use in both non-native and nonstandard speakers. To be ignorant of how the non-linguistic community characterizes linguistic facts is to hamper our own usefulness in talking with that very community about the subjects we know most about (Preston 1989: xi–xii).

Some directions for further research

The results described above are drawn from the beginning phase of a project. More insights could be gained from having a larger sample size of undergraduate respondents and in turn from surveying some adolescents to identify the syntactic and lexical features which are most likely to emerge under the standardizing influences accompanying young adulthood (see especially Chambers 1995 and Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 1998). In future phases of this research, I also hope to canvass the opinions of Swedish undergraduate students. One possibility with this additional data is to begin to track the extent to which students on both sides of the Atlantic have similar opinions about usage of specific grammatical constructions. Recent sociolinguistic research has looked at evidence to determine whether many varieties of English around the world are becoming more similar – that is, converging. Trudgill (1998:31), for example, argues that there is good evidence for convergence when it comes to lexical items, but the evidence at the grammatical level is somewhat mixed.

One student in the 100-level course wrote: "All over the world nowadays the differences between the kind of English spoken or written is fast diminishing" (W131–8). Further investigation will be needed to test whether her impression holds true for syntactic and lexical features. ■

Notes

1 At present, no systematic attempt has been made to check whether the respondents in the study use the linguistic features which they identify as standard.

2 Following the lead of Labov's questionnaire (see Labov *et al.*, no date), I asked students to report their hometown(s) when they were 4–13 years of age.

3 Special thanks go to colleagues in the Department of English, Indiana University–Bloomington: to John Woodcock and Brent Moberly for their valuable help in constructing the questionnaire, and to Steve Watt and Harold Zimmerman, who helped me gather my data.

4 In relation to dialect acquisition processes, however, it can be added that Escure (1997) is an investigation of second dialect acquisition in Belize and China. In particular, Escure has investigated syntactic and pragmatic strategies that accompany second dialect acquisition.

5 The idea "varieties in contact" is modeled after the phrase "languages in contact," and could profit from some of the theoretical models in language contact, including the central notion of "developmental continua – dynamic levels or stages which are not separated from each other by clear boundaries" (Escure 1997:2).

6 In future stages of this project, I hope to expand my discussion of regionally-marked forms. For the present, I refer the reader to Wolfram & Schilling-Estes' discussion of Regional Standard English, in particular where they write, "On most speaking occasions, Regional Standard English is more pertinent

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The questionnaire for the Indiana Survey 'Varieties of spoken English'

[In some sections the original spaces for replies are not shown]

1 Options in spoken English

At IU, you are likely to hear different ways of expressing the same idea.
Give your opinion on the sentences given below. For each sentence, write
1 if you think it sounds **acceptable** and **standard**
2 if you are **unsure** or **undecided** about how it sounds
3 if the sentence sounds **unacceptable**

___I shall tell you later.
___I will tell you later.
___I will tell you later on.

___I should enjoy living here if I could afford to do so.
___I would enjoy living here if I could afford to do so.
___I would enjoy living here if I could afford to do it.

___Need you be so rude?
___Do you need to be so rude?
___Do you have to be so rude?

___The dog wants to go out.
___The dog wants out.

___We're having a party this weekend. Why don't you come over?
___We're having a party this weekend. Why don't you come round?
___We're having a party this weekend. Why don't you come?

___Has the mailman been yet?
___Has the mailman been here yet?

___Did you go to the market with them yesterday? – No I'd already been.
___Did you go to the market with them yesterday? – No I'd already been there.

___So long as you're happy, we'll stay.
___As long as you're happy, we'll stay.

than SAE [Standard American English], although the notion of regional standard English certainly receives much less public attention (1998:283).

7 Results and analysis of the students' attitudes toward geographical regions in the US were presented in Karstadt (2000) and will be a topic for further exploration.

8 Interestingly, one student in the 100-level course recommended "European English" and gave this response: "If my friend had an international career I would probably suggest European English as a background. From my experience it seems that European English is the universal starting place where each progressive dialect evolved." (W131-7) This student reported in the background section that he had recently returned from studying abroad in Vienna, so it may be possible that his reference to European English should be interpreted as a variety to be differentiated from British English.

9 Yet as Donald MacQueen has pointed out (personal communication October 7, 2000), the so-called BBC pronunciation is not uniform.

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___We have done an analysis of what we do and what we might could do.
___We have done an analysis of what we do and what we might be able to do.

___He liketa broke his neck when he fell off his bike.
___He almost broke his neck when he fell off his bike.
___He nearly risked breaking his neck when he fell off his bike.

___They watch a lot of videos anymore.
___They frequently watch videos.
___They watch a lot of videos nowadays.

___The paper needs rewriting.
___The paper needs some rewriting.
___The paper needs rewritten.
___The paper needs to be rewritten.

___We doctored the sickness ourselves.
___We treated the sickness ourselves.
___We treated the illness ourselves.

___The person that I was describing for you is here.
___The person who I was describing for you is here.
___The person whom I was describing for you is here.

___As far as videos go, what are your favorites?
___As far as videos are concerned, what are your preferences?
___When it comes to videos, what are your favorites?
___With, like, videos, what are your favorites?

___When the customer went to pay the bill, they saw that it had already been paid.
___When the customer went to pay the bill, she saw that it had already been paid.

___Do you want out?
___Do you want to go out?
___Would you like to go outside?

___Do you want me to renew your library books for you?
___Do you want that I renew your library books for you?
___Do you want for me to renew your library books for you?

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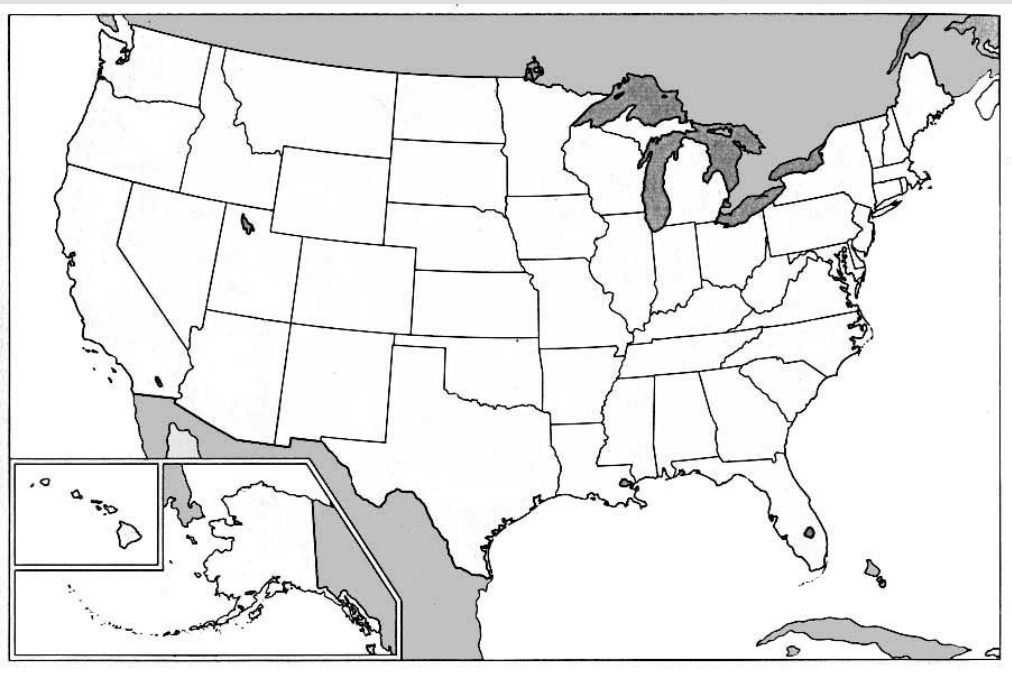
2 Types of American English

[Only one of the two US maps in the questionnaire is reproduced here.]

A On the map, mark the area(s) where you believe standard American English is spoken. Also, please label the area(s) with name(s) for this type(s) of English.



B On the same map, mark the area(s) where you think the least standard American English is spoken. Also, please label the area(s) with name(s) for this type(s) of English.

3 Advice about English

The situation

Imagine that your housemate, roommate or friend is a Swedish exchange student at IU—B who wants to become very fluent in English. Your friend says that there are so many different kinds of English: British English, Canadian English, Australian and New Zealand English—to name a few—and of course many types of American English. With all these choices, how can a person choose which one to learn? Which type of English would help a foreign student get along best at IU—B and succeed in a business career in the US?

The situation

Imagine that your housemate, roommate or friend is a Swedish exchange student at IU—B who wants to become very fluent in English. Your friend says that there are so many different kinds of English: British English, Canadian English, Australian and New Zealand English—to name a few—and of course many types of American English. With all these choices, how can a person choose which one to learn? Which type of English would help a foreign student get along best at IU—B and succeed in a business career in the US?

Your advice to your friend

What do you recommend? Should your friend focus on a specific kind of English? Which one and why? Would your advice be the same if your friend is planning on a business career with many international contacts in English?

4 Please take a moment to share some background information.

a) Are you: ___male ___female

b) Where did you live between the ages of 4–13?
If there was more than one city or town,

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please list all of them.

c) When you were younger, what four towns and cities did you visit most often? List them in order of frequency.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

d) Have you ever been an exchange student or traveled internationally? Where and when?

e) Do you watch foreign films and/or foreign television shows & broadcasts?

f) Do you listen to music recorded in other countries?

g) If you answered yes to either of the two questions above, please describe the type of entertainment and note the country (or countries) of origin.

_____

_____

Studying a Mid-Atlantic European English

On 15 August 2000, a one-day symposium entitled 'Studies in Mid-Atlantic English' was held at Gävle University in Sweden, attended by language scholars from various Swedish universities and the University of Zurich in Switzerland. Marko Modiano, the editor of a book of the proceedings with the same title (from which the preceding paper by Angela Karstadt has been taken), is an American domiciled in Sweden who has in recent times contributed to ET. In the introduction he notes:

Studies of the coexistence of American English and British English in the speech and writing of native as well as non-native speakers can reveal much about language contact and about how new varieties of language evolve. Thus, the findings presented here can be seen as stepping stones which lead to a better understanding of the development of a distinct [mainland] European variety of the tongue, or what is referred to in the literature as Euro-English or Mid-Atlantic English.

…[O]ur focus for the most part was on the linguistic and sociolinguistic dimensions of contact between American English and British English, and in some cases, on what this means in applied linguistics terms. …It would seem that the traditional practice of promoting British English as the educational standard is losing ground in both Sweden and mainland Europe. One early sign that the British English standard is on the decline was the official sanctioning of American English or British English in the school curriculum which took place in Sweden in the early 1990s. Previously British English was the sole norm.

While there was an understanding that the two varieties were to be kept apart, a form of 'separate but equal policy', American English was commonly marginalized when language teaching and learning practices were discussed… The group gathered in Gävle, however, seemed to be in agreement that Americanization processes are making traditional views of English in Europe problematical. While British English is still the first choice for many students, the goal of near-native proficiency in British English is becoming increasingly unrealistic. The vast majority of foreign-language speakers of English in the EU have a pluralistic understanding of the language. What we are finding, in simplified terms, is a great deal of mixing. That is to say, Europeans are using features of both American English and British English.

The papers and writers (excluding Angela Karstadt) are: 'Mid-Atlantic Grammar: The Theoretical Challenge', Thomas Lavelle; 'Non-Categorical Differences Between American and British English: Some Corpus Evidence', Gunnel Tottie; 'Mid-Atlantic Agreement', Magnus Levin; 'Prepositional Variation in British and American English', Maria Estling Vannestål; 'Relativization in Formal Spoken American English', Christer Geisler and Christine Johansson; 'Relative Frequency of Certain American Expressions in American and British Newspapers from 1993 and 1999', Donald MacQueen; 'RP or GA? On Swedish School Students' Choice of English Pronunciation', Mats Mobärg; '"Refined" or "Relaxed" English Pronunciation: Usage and Attitudes Among Swedish University Students', Margareta W. Axelsson; 'Swedish Upper Secondary School Students and their Attitudes Towards AmE, BrE and Mid-Atlantic English', Marie Söderlund and Mark Modiano.

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