The Relative Intelligibility of British and American English

by J. Donald Bowen and Don Porter

American teachers of English overseas are frequently confronted with the claim that American English is more difficult to understand than British English. This opinion is understandable given the extensive British experience in English teaching around the world. British English (BE) will often be more familiar and by that reason alone should be easier to understand. There is also the undoubted prestige of BE that contributes to its value on the world market.

But is BE *inherently* clearer and more intelligible than AE? The opposite opinion has been voiced, by British as well as other speakers of English, including non-native-speakers, citing complexities of phonological structure and of stress patterns that could very well make BE comparatively harder to comprehend.

The relative intelligibility of AE and BE needs investigation and discussion. The question can be put to test by developing an examination with a central oral component, voicing it separately in standard British and standard American English, and giving both versions of the test to numerous categories of subjects (native/non-native, students of English who have had pedagogical contact with teachers that are British/American, or students whose teachers studied with British or American speakers).

The present paper offers data that attempt to confirm or modify the claim of greater clarity for BE. We have utilized as our instrument to evaluate the alleged dialect contrast a test developed by one of the present authors, designated the "Integrative Grammar Test," or IGT (Bowen, 1976). It is a test given orally (on tape) with a brief student response in written form. The task is to identify and write down the second word in each recorded sentence. Answers are thus simple and the test is efficient, presenting an item each six or seven seconds, so a hundred-item test can be administered in about thirteen minutes (plus about four minutes for initial test instructions). The test has a successful research history; data from seven hundred administrations have posted a validity coefficient of .866 when compared to the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency, with a reliability coefficient of .968 on test-retest data.

METHOD

Identical forms of the IGT were voiced separately in British 'Received Pronunciation' and Standard American Pronunciation. Interpretations were recorded at the same level of formality and were comparable in speed and pacing, loudness, and general clarity.

Each subject included in the present study took the test twice--once in each voicing. Comparable groups were matched, or groups were divided into random halves, with one half taking the American version first, the other the British version first. This procedure allows us to compute group mean scores separately for the performance of dialect[1] groups and sequence groups.

The results are given in Table 1. Eleven groups of subjects are listed, reporting 259 administrations yielding two scores for each subject; 126 took the American and 133 the British voicing first.

The table lists the groups, the major dialect of their training, whether they are native speakers of English or not, the date they were tested, the number of examinees, and mean scores for the British and American forms of the IGT (corrected for sequence) and for the sequence order (corrected for dialect).

Table 1. Data Summary[2]

Group	Dialect of Training	English Status	Date Tested	Combined Performance Data N	AM	BR	1st	2nd	Correlations by Group AM1-BR2	BR1-AM2
ITEP 79	BE	NNS	6-79	31	39.3	40.0	35.5	43.7	.92	.90
ITEP 80	BE	NNS	6-80	23	44.3	39.1	37.7	45.6	.96	.95
ITEP 81	BE	NNS	6.81	33	48.3	46.9	43.0	52.2	.87	.98
Northrup	AE	NNS	7-78	32	20.2	19.2	17.4	22.0	.80	.82
Reading	BE	NNS	6-81	12	30.0	27.0	25.3	31.8	.99	.64
CUECOS	BE	NNS	6-81	31	14.2	12.5	11.9	14.8	.87	.87
WELC	BE	NNS	7-81	11	24.3	20.2	19.1	25.4	.33	.78
LSL HH-H	BE	NNS	7-81	12	13.4	11.3	11.3	13.5	.69	.90
Misc Teen & Adult	BE	NS	7-81	14	89.0	89.4	85.2	93.2	.77	.71
UCLA Grad Students	AE	NS	2-82	13	93.2	89.2	88.6	93.8	.55	.24
UCLA ESL Students	AE	NNS	4-82	47	39.1	34.7	33.1	40.7	.95	.91

SUBJECTS

The groups tested include: ITEP (Italian Teachers of English Program)--groups of about thirty-five secondary and middle school English teachers sent to UCLA for special summer training courses from 1979 to 1982; Northrup, a university sponsored by a well-known aviation technology corporation, whose students can be considered semi-academic; Reading University, England; CUECOS (Cardiff University English Centre for Overseas Students)–a program that includes short-term and vacation students; WELC (Windsor English Language Centre)–a commercial language school, as is LSL HHH (Language Studies Limited, Heath House, Hampstead). The British native speakers are an ad hoc group gathered mainly from Slough, a small city west of London. The UCLA graduate students are enrolled in a postgraduate program in TESL. The students in the UCLA ESL group are at the high intermediate level, the highest level of instruction required of foreign students entering the university with a language deficiency.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There are several notable features of these scores to call attention to:

1. There is considerable diversity in the mean scores, ranging from 11.3 points for the lowest group to 93.8 for the highest. This reflects the diversity of the subjects examined, who range from students in advanced academic standing to casual students in commercial language schools.

2. The mean scores show a range that is comparable to previous administrations of

the test in that native speakers score in the eighties and nineties and non-native speakers are spread, presumably on the basis of their competence in English, in groups with mean scores ranging from 11.3 to 46.9. The performance of native speakers is clearly distinguished by much higher scores than non-native speakers normally achieve.

3. For all groups it is noted that variation in dialect scores is smaller than the variation in sequence scores. This seems to indicate that relatively little importance is attached to dialect differences, but that subjects learn rapidly and achieve substantially better scores with test experience. Variation in dialect scores ranges from .4 to 5.2 points, with a mean range of 2.5. On the other hand, there is a consistent gain for sequence ranging from 2.2 to 9.2 points with a mean range of 6.5, almost three times greater than the mean range for dialect variation.

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4. Coefficients of correlation between performance on the two versions of the test are very high: mostly in the .80 to .90 range for the non-native speakers, though somewhat lower for the native speakers, whose lower correlations in large part are due to the limited spread between the maximum and minimum performance in these native-speaker groups.

The conclusion one draws from these data is that dialect variation is relatively unimportant in the testing situation: one can expect a similar score whether the test is given by an American voice or a British voice. Native speakers usually do a little better in their own dialect than they do in the other dialect. However, the difference for British speakers is a very small four-tenths of a point. It will be noted, however, that non-native subjects overall tend to score better on the American-voiced test, a result which we will address later in this paper.

Comparison of British and American Responses

It is instructive to look at the differences in British and American performance, which we have done by means of an evaluation of the individual items in the two sets of test scores.[3]

Most interesting for our purposes are items that one dialect group, American or British native speakers, finds more demanding than does the other.

Some of the British-voiced items are more difficult than the same items when American-voiced. A conspicuous example is:

What's been done to improve this class?

In BE *been* is pronounced /biyn/, making it similar to *being,* pronounced informally /biyən/, which would require the auxiliary verb *is* instead of the intended *has* (*What has been done . . .* vs *What is being done . . .*). Interestingly, the American voice is here more accurately interpreted by subjects from either dialect!

Another item involves a postvocalic *r*-sound that in British is a centering glide. With this substitution American *Heard 'er come in just a few minutes ago* is pronounced in British English *Hudda come in . . .*--with the result that the American listener is confused.

Was their other car really a Rolls Royce pronounced by a British voice proves difficult for both American and British subjects.

Apparently six *r*'s in one short sentence, some of which are retained, some glided, creates complexity that leads to confusion.

Another item *So they're always gossiping over the back fence* involves an introductory adverbial connector, easily overlooked when doing the test task of identifying the second word, which also includes a linking *r*. This combination seems to be difficult for a British subject listening to an AE voice.

In another item there are three *r*'s voiced in sequence: *Clair 'r Ralph will come, but Bill can't.* This proves to be difficult whenever BE is involved, either as the voicing for the test or as the dialect of the subject.

But not all the harder items are associated with BE. Voicing proves troublesome for American subjects in one item: *When sh' we plan to finish* the project? Americans hear the same form of *shall* that British speakers do (in either dialect), but interpret *should,* no doubt due to their preference for this form.

Another item that favors BE is: *Whaddaya got left to do before you can go home?* The internal schwa in *whaddaya* is consistently (and correctly) interpreted *have* by British speakers who are on familiar terms with the expression *have got.* Almost half of the American subjects, however, realign this as if it were *Whaddaya have left to do . . .* or maybe even *Whaddaya hafta do before . . .*, and the internal /ə/ is incorrectly interpreted as *do.*

Two other items have an intonation feature which renders them more difficult for American subjects listening to the British voicing. The two sentences are: *How'd 'e ever be able to come even if he wanted to?* and *How'll 'e ever get this job done by five o'clock?* In the AE voicing the initial *how* in both sentences is given a strong stress and is pronounced on pitch level three. In the BE version the *how* gets a weak or at most a mid stress and pronounced on pitch level one. This has the effect of obscuring the expression for the American listener, though not for the British:

How'd 'e ever be able to come . . . in AE is realized as

How'd 'e ever be able to come . . . in BE.

Comparison of Native and Non-native Responses

It is instructive to compare native and non-native performance. For a sample comparison we have selected the combined British-American native speaker groups (N=27) and the ITEP-79 group (N=31). These native speakers, British and American, are typical of native performance, with a weighted mean score of 86.8 on their first test, which compares to 91.0 for seventy-nine tests of native speakers between 1974 and 1976. The ITEP-79 subjects (N=31) scored 35.5 on their first test, 4.2 points over the average performance (31.3) for 1200 widely spread non-natives tested between 1974 and 1976.

To address one of the objectives of our study, to see if non-native speakers would reflect an affinity to the native-speaker dialect with which they were trained, coefficients of correlation between test scores for the British-American native-speaker group and the ITEP 79 scores were calculated. Surprisingly, the various correlations all failed to show a meaningful relationship. Looking at the BE-voiced tests (line b. and line d. of Table 2) we see that the correlations with British voicing are .384 and .266. The correlations with American voicing (lines a. and c.) are .311 and .457. All of these correlations are too low to have any significance.

Table 2. Correlations for Native & Non-Native Speaker Performance on IGT

	r
a. Am subjects AE voicing	.311
b. Am subjects BE voicing	.384
c. Br subjects AE voicing	.457
d. Br subjects BE voicing	.266

Comparison of Dialect Intelligibility

There is one important question that has not yet been answered. Table 1 shows that while the scores are close, the test in AE yields overall higher scores than the test in BE for all groups except the British native speakers, where BE surpasses AE by a skimpy .4 of a point, and the ITEP-79 group, where BE is ahead by a still narrow .7 of a point. The other six groups, where exposure to BE has been primary, still score higher on the AE test, by a weighted difference of 2.9 in favor of AE (31.4 minus 28.5).

It is interesting to speculate on what may account for this difference, since at first glance it makes no sense for AE to outperform BE here, especially when the American-influenced non-native groups post an average of 3 points better on the AE test and the native-speaking Americans an average of 4 points. Following are explanations we have thought of, though of course not all are equally attractive:

1. Our sample was not sufficiently large or unbiased.

2. British and American English are both too widely available to prevent research contamination.

3. The recordings of our instrument were not equivalent in clarity.

4. There is not enough difference between BE and AE to show up consistently in performance scores, perhaps because listeners adapt to dialect differences very readily, at whatever level of performance.

5. There is too much spread within groups.

6. Comparing groups without affinity for each other possibly introduces too many vague influences that we don't understand.

7. Or just maybe AE is more readily interpretable than BE, though we can cite no phonological evidence to support this hypothesis. For every complicating factor in one dialect we can cite a commensurate complication in the other. For example, where AE has /vízhənèriy/ and /míshənèriy/, BE has the reduced forms /vízhənriy/ and /míshənriy/. But on the other hand, where British English pronounces /ǽjàyl/ and /dàyvə́rsətiy/, American English pronounces /ǽjəl/ and /dəvə́rsətiy/, flapping the /t/ in *diversity* for good measure. For every advantage one dialect offers there seems to be a trade-off somewhere in the other.

CONCLUSION

It should be borne in mind, of course, that the test task in this investigation was highly constrained, and that only two speakers were involved, one for each pronunciation. This latter point suggests that further investigations might profitably be undertaken with a variety of speakers for each pronunciation, and comparing the relative intelligibilities of different varieties of British and American pronunciations. But for now, the findings presented here, suggesting greater intelligibility of AE, at least for certain groups on certain tasks, is provocative.

NOTES

1. While we use the term 'dialect' to describe the British and American differences treated in this paper, a case could be made for referring to these forms as 'accents' or even 'pronunciation,' since the differences are quite limited. However, the term dialect is frequently used to designate language variants that are limited in scope, and we follow that usage.

2. *Ed. note: Tables have been abbreviated to meet* TESL Reporter *production requirements. Performance data (means and standard deviations) by groups are available from the authors.*

3. *Item analysis data on all fifty IGT items are available from the authors.*

REFERENCE

Bowen, J. Donald. 1976. Current research on an integrative test of English grammar. *RELC Journal* 7 (2):30-37.