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A Synchronic Note on Early American English*

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The purpose of this paper was to take an in-depth look at early American English around the 17th and 18th century when immigrants from different European countries started to move into the New World. The paper attempted to describe early American English in relation to the process of immigration and settlement from a historical perspective. With a focus on major features of early American English such as uniformity, archaism and richness of lexicon, the paper tried to answer the questions such as how settlement influenced the formation and distribution of regional dialects across the continent, why immigrants tended to show a preference for a uniform way of speaking rather than choosing a variety of regional dialects for communication, and what role foreign languages played in the development of early American English. The overall findings based on the answers to these questions showed how American English went through a variety of processes and changes at the early stages of its development to become a national language later. The paper concluded with some remarks about the implications of the findings for EFL learning and the direction of future research on early American English.

[early American English/development of English/history of English]

I. INTRODUCTION

It is well-known that the history of America is the history of immigration. Immigrations began with the English who fled from the religious persecution at the beginning of the 17th century, and have continued to the present era by people around the world who pursue a better life and seek to realize what is called 'American dream.' The present-day American English (henceforth AE) language was separated from British

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English (henceforth BE) language, and was brought to America together with British immigrants in the early 17th century (Cho, 1984). As Pyles and Alegeo (1982) pointed out, the first immigrants "isolated from their mother country tend to be conservative, linguistically as well as in other ways, and continued to speak as they had done in England" (p. 214) though their language underwent changes gradually. This indicates that though AE language stems from BE language, and shares much similarity with it, there are also many notable differences between the two in a variety of aspects of language. These differences can be understood by the fact that, once separated from BE language, early AE language adapted itself to a new environment, experienced a number of strange, radical changes and processes unlike BE language, and developed an independent language system of its own.

Despite plenty of literature on either the English language in general or a comparison between AE and BE languages from both diachronic and synchronic perspectives in particular (e.g., Campbell, 1959, cited in Lee, 2004; Kim, 2004; Kim, 2007; Lee, 2006; McIntyre, 2008; Moon, 2005; Pyles & Algeo, 1982; Svartvik, 2006), there have been relatively fewer studies which treated early AE as language in its own right, and examined it as a focus of investigation. Consequently, little information is available about AE language in the New World around the early 17th and 18th century when a settlement began in Jamestown, Virginia in 1607, and the Congress ratified the Federal Constitution in 1787 (Carver, 1992). The period from the 17th through the 18th century is considered of primary importance for a foundation of America in that the full-scale immigration from England and other countries in Europe started, and America took shape as a unified nation. The American society during this period was not well organized politically and economically, and needless to say, early AE language was also linguistically flexible and underwent drastic changes and restructuring. So it would be interesting to take an in-depth look at early AE language in the New World which was gradually ready to take shape as a national language. The purpose of the present paper was to examine early AE language from the 17th through 18th century mainly from a historical viewpoint. To this end, the first part of the paper outlines the overall settlement process of immigrations in relation to the spread of early AE language to the main parts of America while the second part deals with major features of early AE language such as uniformity, archaism, richness of lexicon, and development of early AE language into a unified national language. The paper concludes with some implications for EFL learning and further research on early AE language.

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II. SETTLEMENT OF ENGLISH IN THE NEW WORLD

Most people think that early AE language which took root in America is a pure BE language of Elizabethan times. This, however, is not the case in a strict sense. The process of settlement of the English language into America is not as simple as people imagine. When the Mayflower arrived in the New World, accurately speaking, the language they brought cannot be considered to be a pure Elizabethan BE language. Before reaching the New World, the Pilgrim group in Mayflower at first went to Amsterdam in 1607, and further moved to Leyden in 1609 in Holland, which naturally led the group to come into contact with Dutch, and become accustomed to the Dutch way of life (Dillard, 1985). Since the Pilgrims changed their names and signatures into a Dutch form, they were also linguistically assimilated to Dutch to some extent in a relatively short period of time (Dillard, 1985). When they realized that their identity as a religious group looking for freedom of religion and language would be lost permanently by a constant assimilation to Dutch society, they decided to leave for the New World in 1620. In light of the fact that language plays a crucial role in uniting people together and strengthening social bonds among them in a given society, the Pilgrims' worry and concern over a loss of their language and hope for religious freedom due mainly to the assimilation to Dutch seemed timely right and appropriate for their pursuit to seek for the New World. In this sense, the Pilgrims' residence in Holland for more than ten years right before heading to the New World is sure to have had a considerable effect on their English language in various ways, which means that the English language brought to America in the early 17th century was not a pure Elizabethan BE language, but rather a mixture of two different languages, BE and Dutch.

The early immigrations into the New World began along the Atlantic seaboard which extended to the north, Maine and to the south, Georgia, and all together, thirteen colonies were formed (Baugh & Thomas, 1978). These colonies were divided into three major parts such as New England, the Middle Atlantic States, and the South Atlantic States, each of which played an important role in developing regional cultures and dialects (Carver, 1992). The immigrants who arrived at New England settled around Massachusetts Bay, Hartford and Connecticut area while some of them moved to seek cheaper lands, greater freedom and better fortune, and built communities in Maine, Rhode Island and New Hampshire. Since water ways in these regions were important for trade, transportation, and communication, settlers here were eager to create or include many new words and expressions which were related to sea, fishing and maritime trade into their vocabulary (Carver, 1992).

As compared to New England, which was settled mostly by English immigrants, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania in the Middle Atlantic States were formed mainly

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by Europeans like Dutch and German (Baugh & Thomas, 1978). Though New York was occupied by Dutch people in 1614, they were small in number, and a large number of English immigrants from New England and Connecticut began to settle after the Revolutionary War. New York was divided into three sections such as New York City, the Yankee region and Dutch area, and was developed as a center for a merchant trade. While New Jersey was settled by English immigrants, Pennsylvania which had abundant farmland, and was liberal and open to any religion was occupied by a variety of different ethnic groups like English Quakers, Welsh, Scotch-Irish, and German (Baugh & Thomas, 1978). In particular, German immigrants who settled in the southeastern part of Pennsylvania used their own dialects spoken at Rheinish Palatinate in Germany without being assimilated to English, and made the homogeneous community of their own (Baugh & Thomas, 1978). Their language was called 'Pennsylvanian Dutch,' and is still used by descendants to the present. So early AE language could not have a chance to take root in these regions, and instead, various regional dialects mixed with Dutch, French, German, and Scotch-Irish were spoken for everyday communication.

Meanwhile, the South Atlantic states started to be settled from Virginia. Beginning with the settlement in Jamestown, Virginia in 1607, immigrants mainly from England moved to the South, i.e., North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia. Georgia was the last colony established in the mainland of America, and was originally settled by English refugees who were jailed for nonpayment of debts while South Carolina was taken by French Huguenots and later by English immigrants (Frisinger, 1974; Hook, 1975). It was the largest mainland importer of African slaves for plantation, and had as many slaves as white men at the early of the 17th century. Here is where early AE language came into contact with African languages, and borrowed many words from them.

It is clear that the early settlement in the New World took place in the extensive regions along the Atlantic seaboard, and the homelands of immigrants were a variety of European countries including Holland, Germany, France, Ireland, and Spain, not to mention England. In spite of such a variety in L1 backgrounds of immigrants in the New World, no foreign language was able to become a main communicative tool other than English throughout the continent. In addition, though some languages like Dutch and German were used in specific parts of New York and Pennsylvania, they did not play a major role in creating a wide range of diverse dialects of English, and instead, a few manageable regional dialects were spoken in most colonies. That being said, what can be inferred here is a high possibility of the uniform and homogeneous use of convergent dialects of English across much of America during early periods of immigration. This point was made clear by Bryson (1990), who stated "It was natural to suppose that the existence of these linguistic pockets would lead the United States to deteriorate into a variety of regional tongues, rather as in Europe, or at the very least result in widely

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divergent dialects of English, each heavily influenced by its prevailing immigrant group. But of course nothing of the sort happened. In fact, the very opposite was the case. Instead of becoming more divergent, people over the bulk of the American mainland continued to evince a more or less uniform speech" (p. 169). According to Bryson (1990), one primary reason for maintaining uniform speech across the New World despite the influence of various European prevailing immigrant groups lies in "social pressures and the desire for a common national identity (p. 169)" among most of the early immigrants who were determined to "settle on a single way of speaking" (p. 169). So immigrant groups across the New World were believed to assimilate easily to regional dialects of English which they encountered, and to have little difficulty using them for communication. In other words, though early AE language was represented by various regional dialects throughout the New World, these regional dialects seemed to show a considerable degree of uniformity and conformity which were conducive to communication for immigrants with different L1s.

III. CHARACTERISTICS OF EARLY AMERICAN ENGLISH

1. Uniformity

Unlike most languages in a normal cycle of language development and change, early AE language had to be cut off from its mother tongue, and be moved to an entirely new environment. In an effort to take root and adapt itself to such a new environment successfully, early AE language showed several unique and idiosyncratic characteristics of its own. The first characteristic is uniformity in speech across regional dialects which made it possible for settlers with various L1s and from differing areas of the New World to have easy communication (Frisinger, 1974). After mass immigration of early settlers from England and European nations, many settlers continued to move to other areas of the continent to search for more freedom of religion, more fortune and better life conditions. It can be assumed that due to different regional dialects spoken in various states, there may have been a high occurrence of serious communication problems between early settlers and new immigrants who moved from one community to another. As Bryson (1990) suggested, however, the possibility of the occurrence of such communication problems must have been low though there were some areas in which instead of English, Dutch, German and French were spoken for everyday interaction. One main reason for the low occurrence of communication difficulties can be found in uniformity across regional dialects which resulted from simplification of language code

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and conformity of pronunciation, and contributed greatly to an easy, smooth transmission of message in communication.

According to Dillard (1985) and Carver (1992), the characteristic of uniformity in early AE language is explained by the notion of 'leveling' which refers to the mitigation or even obliteration of linguistic distinction, and took place in the early 18th century. Carver (1992) claimed that 'leveling process' started with immigrations into the New World, and continued to operate up to the 20th century with the help of urbanization and invention of powerful mass media though there was a time when the degree of intensity of leveling was weak during the 18th and 19th century in which geographic cultures and pride of individual states reached climax. Though it is still unclear why leveling occurred in the early periods of AE language, one plausible explanation can be found in ease and simplicity of language use. As an example, in the case that as time passes, strong verbs tend to be changed into weak verbs, or that two words for naming a single object compete against each other, and one word wins a victory over the other, these linguistic changes are understood by speech simplification that leads to ease and convenience of language use, and facilitation of child language acquisition. Similarly, immigrants' desire or preference for gradual modification of complex, lengthy language forms and expressions led to the decreasing of the degree of complexity of early AE language, which in turn helped to reduce linguistic differences among regional dialects, and resulted in the uniformity across them (Dillard, 1985). Consequently, the increase in uniformity among regional dialects must have made great contributions to communication among settlers speaking different dialects of early AE language. Hence, it can be said that speech modification motivated for easier and simpler use of language resulted in 'leveling' which was conducive to the convergence of regional dialects, enabled immigrants in different areas to communicate with little difficulty, and ultimately, laid a cornerstone to build early AE language into a national language after the Revolutionary War (Carver, 1992).

Another factor that helped trigger uniformity in speech is immigrants' strong desire for achieving a social, cultural and political unity in the middle of constant flooding of immigration into the New World (Bryson, 1990). Such a high motivation of early immigrants for a national unity was believed to assume a significant role in uniting them together to fight against the permanent regionalism of language.

2. Archaism

The second characteristic of early AE language is archaism. It is well-known that the Pilgrims separated from their homeland tended to live naïve, conservative lives in many ways in the New World. Such was also the case to their speech behavior in that "the

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English spoken in America at present has retained a good many characteristics of earlier BE that do not survive in contemporary BE" (Pyles & Algeo, 1982, p. 214). In light of a cycle of language, i.e., generation, development, change, and extinction, the fact that AE language keeps many archaic features is abnormal, and should be understood from its unique historical background. The way in which AE language was separated from BE language, and was placed into the New World can be compared to the transplantation of a tree. If small branches are cut off, and transplanted to another place, they definitely need certain periods of adaptation to take root in a new environment and have nutritive systems of their own. It is also likely that during the adaptation period growth is delayed or suspended temporarily. The same is true to the early AE language which was isolated from a mother tongue, and transplanted to the New World. It must have undergone the period of adaptation during which development or change of language stopped for the time being, and instead, preservation of old forms or features occurred. Baugh and Thomas (1978) made this point clear, suggesting that in cultural history isolated communities tend to preserve old customs and beliefs, and language of a new country is more conservative than the same language which remains in the old habitat. In the same vein, Bryson (1990) expressed his concern over the effects of physical isolation of language on its development, stating that "Occasionally physical isolation, as with the Cajuns in Louisiana or the Gullah speakers on the Sea Islands off the East Coast, enabled people to be more resistant to change. It has often been said that if you want to hear what the speech of Elizabethan England sounded like, you should go to the hills of Appalachia or the Ozarks, where you can find isolated communities of people still speaking the English of Shakespeare (p. 169-170)." Therefore, it seems obvious that a separation of early AE language from its mother tongue and a transplantation of it into the New World had important influence on keeping archaic forms and features in it, and as a result, made it distinct from BE language that has undergone a normal cycle of language development and change. Nonetheless, it appears that though archaism is a unique, notable feature of early AE language, it has not become a barrier to communication between British and American people up to the present in any serious way.

Perhaps it is pronunciation that is the best place to observe archaism in early AE language. During Shakespeare's time when immigration into the New World started, /a/ which occurred before consonants such as 'f, sk, sp, st, ss, n' was pronounced as a flat /a/ ([æ]) in both BE and AE languages (Reed, 1967). However, /a/ in words such as 'laugh, ask, clasp, fast, grass, dance' was still pronounced as a flat /a/ in AE language, but it was changed into a broad /a/ ([a:]) in BE language at the end of the 18th century. Actually, a flat /a/ has been preserved in most parts of America these days. Another example of archaism in pronunciation is /r/. In Shakespeare's time /r/ was pronounced as [r] in contexts (Reed, 1967). Such is still the case to AE language while /r/ in BE language was

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dropped in most positions except for before vowels. Thus /r/ in words like ‘lord, burst, girl’ was dropped and pronounced as [lɔ:d], [bɔ:st], and [gɔ:l] in BE language whereas it has been kept and pronounced as [lɔ:rd], [bɔ:rst], and [gɔ:rl] in AE language.

3. Richness of Lexicon

The third characteristic of early AE language is lexicon which is rich in new words and borrowings (Bryson, 1990; Cho, 1984; Hook, 1975). As Bryson (1990) claimed, the fact that “what most immediately sets English apart from other languages is the richness of its vocabulary” (p. 13) seems to be attributed to the rich lexicon of early AE language. Though this characteristic is not in line with the second one, archaism, it is true that indeed, early AE language added a large number of new words to lexicon, and extended its vocabulary enormously. In general, there are three major ways in which settlers in the New World made their lexicon plentiful and extensive (Hook, 1975). First, upon arriving at the continent, they were faced with strange, great landscape and many unfamiliar forms of nature that they had never experienced. To express them, settlers were active in coining words, or applying existing words to different situations. Newly created words at this time are ‘bluff, foothill, notch, gap, mudhen, gartersnake, bullfrog, groundhog, and bluejay,’ among others. Second, settlers borrowed numerous words from American Indian tribes which represent animals, plants, foods or features of Indian life. English words taken from Indians include ‘totem, opossum, squash, pone, powwow, wigwam and tomahawk,’ among others. Third, settlers did not hesitate to borrow words from foreign languages such as French, Dutch and German. Loanwords from French include ‘portage, voyageur, cache, chowder and caribou’ while words like ‘Brooklyn, flushing, harlem, staten and cookie’ were from Dutch. There were also German loanwords like ‘noodle, pretzel, smearcase and sauerkraut.’ Apart from the loanwords from the aforementioned countries, early AE language also received words from African and Spanish languages. So it is obvious that due mainly to word coinage, borrowed words from American Indians, and loanwords from foreign languages, early AE language was able to enlarge its lexicon, and increase expressive power to a great extent.

4. Early American English taking Shape as a National Language

It is said that early AE language paved the way for developing into a national language. As mentioned earlier, until the Revolutionary War, immigrants from England and other European countries gathered together to settle in various regions of the New World, and had little difficulty communicating with one another because of the considerable degree of uniformity in speech created by ‘leveling’ across much of the continent. However, as

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compared to the Pre-Revolutionary War in which settlers depended heavily on England and other nations in Europe for almost everything including daily commodities, after the Revolutionary War that brought political and economic independence from England, most colonists in America came to hate anything relevant to the dependence on the old worlds, and thought about their own country (Hook, 1975; Walker, 1938). In other words, a national consciousness was growing among settlers, and especially, the issue of a national language was a very sensitive and important one. No one was more interested than Noah Webster in establishing early AE language as a national language. Noah Webster, a schoolmaster, attempted to make a standard AE language distinctive and independent from BE language. A cursory look at his 'Dissertation on the English Language' gives a quick, full understanding of why and how much he longed for a linguistic independence of early AE language from BE language (Machan & Scott, 1992). Webster argued for a clear, strong need for a national language, claiming that "As an independent nation, our honor requires us to have a system of our own, in language as well as government. Great Britain, whose children we are, and whose language we speak, should no longer be our standard: for the taste of her writers is already corrupted, and her language on the decline" (Webster, 1789, p. 20, cited in Machan & Scott, 1992).

Webster dedicated himself to publishing books and dictionaries which were related to spelling and pronunciation to establish American usage and pronunciation of its own along with the adaptation of different spellings from BE language. For instance, he used words in the left as standard in the following pairs: 'honor, color / honour, colour; traveler, wagon / traveller, waggon; fiber, center / fibre, centre, and defense, offense / defence, offence,' among others (Machan & Scott, 1992). It should be noted that though the difference between these words in spelling is often unnoticed, and even overlooked due to their permissibility and usability in both languages, Webster's dedication to early AE language which was divided into various regional dialects played a central role in enlightening early Americans on the fact that there was a necessity and urgency for Americans to have a unified national language.

To summarize, early AE language brought to the New World by the Pilgrims around the 17th century was not a homogeneous Elizabethan BE language, but rather was a mixture with European languages, particularly Dutch. As immigrants began to settle in various areas of the New World, regional dialects of English were used from place to place for communication. Fortunately, due largely to unique, noticeable features of early AE language such as uniformity created by 'leveling' among dialects and archaism in pronunciation, early Americans experienced little difficulty of communication in their interactions, and gradually laid the solid foundation for America to take shape as an independent nation. Meanwhile, as settlers struggled to make themselves familiarized to a new environment, and extended their territory, the lexicon of early AE language

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became rich and plentiful through coining new words and adding borrowings from foreign languages such as Dutch, French, German, and Indians, which resulted in an enormous increase in expressive power of the AE language. Most important, thanks to both Americans' self-consciousness of a national language after the Revolutionary War and Webster's constant, valuable dedication, early AE language was able to build up a strong foundation for a unified national language and a world language later.

IV. CONCLUSION

The purpose of the paper was to take an in-depth look at AE language around the early 17th and 18th century when immigration began flooding into the New World, and America started to take shape as an independent nation. To this end, the paper looked into several important features of early AE language mainly from a historical point of view. That is, it examined whether early AE language was a pure Elizabethan BE language when it was transplanted into the continent, how settlements proceeded throughout the New World in relation to the formation and distribution of regional dialects, and what effect foreign languages, if any, had on the development of early AE language. The overall findings indicated that early AE language went through dramatic, unique experiences independently from its mother tongue, and became a cornerstone to develop into a national language. The findings also provided explanations of why immigrants with various L1 backgrounds showed a strong preference for a uniform way of speaking and archaic forms in everyday interaction rather than permanently sticking to diverse regional dialects for communication. It was shown that due mainly to a continuous exploitation toward the West during the early stages of settlement, settlers were unlikely to stay at one place long enough to create and maintain their own dialect in the region. Even in the case in which there existed different dialects among settlers with various L1 backgrounds, settlers were easy to mix with one another to become socially cooperative members of one community, which led to a gradual disappearance of differences in dialects, and facilitated the emergence of one common, unified language for communication (Cho, 1984).

The characteristics of early AE language play a significant role in distinguishing AE language from BE language. The fact that the early AE language preserved many archaic sounds makes great differences between the two languages in pronunciation including stress, rhythm and intonation. Another area causing the difference between the two languages is vocabulary. Given the geographical, social, cultural, economic and political peculiarities between the two nations in everyday life, it is highly likely that people in each nation have developed and maintained a considerable number of vocabulary items

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suitable only to their own society (Cho, 1984). It is needless to say that the differences in pronunciation and lexicon often result in misunderstandings among native speakers of English, and cause communication problems for L2 learners. Speaking of English education in Korea, both teachers and students have tended to show a strong preference for North American English (Shim, 2002). A work by Davis (2007) makes this point clear, indicating that Korean learners were reluctant to learn Australian-based pragmatic routines due to their high preference for North American English. It is correct to say that the bias toward North American style in instruction seems to prevent students from being exposed to other varieties of the English language, and even to cause students to form negative attitudes toward them. In light of a growing interest in 'World Englishes' as a communication tool in this globalized world (Jenkins, 2006), there is a clear, definite need for the increasing of our students' exposure to major types of English such as British and Australian styles, and for the enhancement of their sensitivity to them for successful global communication.

Though the overall findings of the study offered some general, interesting descriptions of early AE language, they did not seem to provide a whole picture of it since they were the results mainly from a historical perspective. Thus in future research it would be desirable to take a dual (i.e., synchronic and diachronic) approach to the study of early AE language in which language is examined with a focus on a specific phenomenon at a given point in time, and at the same time, is viewed to find its significance and relation to others across the domain of history.

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