

On Further Advancement of Linguistic Americanization: A View from the Phrasal Level

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Abstract

Today, there are many regional varieties of the English language, especially in the parts that were once under the strong influence of Britain and America. Although it has developed its own traits, each regional variety shows a tendency to follow either British English or American English. The purpose of this paper is to examine short-term diachronic changes between the two mainstream varieties and the other regional varieties by comparing the data ten years ago and the recent one. It will be demonstrated that the patterns have shifted and linguistic Americanization is underway.

1. Introduction

Today, the English language is spoken all over the world; however, not necessarily exactly the same English language is spoken. There are many regional varieties, especially in the parts that were once under the strong influence of Britain and America (their colonies in many cases). Since each of them has developed its own traits, they are regarded as distinct varieties, rather than one single English language spoken in different areas, and now they are sometimes lumped as "World Englishes" (see, e.g., Crystal 2003, Kachru et al. 2006, Jenkins 2009 and McArthur et al. 2018 among many others).

It is well-known, apart from the unique characteristics it has developed, that each regional variety shows a tendency to follow either British English or American English owing to their historical background. That is, each variety shows more similarity to one of the two mainstream varieties than the other. Lindquist (2009) surveyed such similarity patterns seen among nine English varieties by investigating the frequencies of two idiomatic pairs (*cut a long story short* vs. *make a long story short*; *have green fingers* vs. *have a green thumb*) in which the first expression in each pair is regarded as more favored in British English while the second one in American English.

Since almost ten years have passed since Lindquist's survey, it is of interest to see whether the patterns have changed or remained the same over the past years. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to examine short-term diachronic changes between the two mainstream varieties and the other regional varieties by comparing the data ten years ago and the recent one collected by the same method. It will be demonstrated that the patterns have shifted and, to put it plainly, (further) linguistic Americanization is underway (see Fuchs 2017 for a concise summary of preceding studies on this topic).

The rest of the paper will proceed as follows. In section 2, the data collected ten years ago in 2008 by Lindquist will be presented. In section 3, the data recently collected using the same method as in Lindquist (2009) will be shown and discussed. In section 4, longer-term diachronic data by Google Books Ngram Viewer will be provided to deepen the observations made in the preceding sections. In section 5, two recent studies will be reviewed in relation to the current study. Some concluding remarks will be offered in section 6.

2. Survey in 2008

In this section, the patterns seen among several World Englishes ten years ago will be shown through the data Lindquist collected in 2008.

2.1 Method

As pointed out in section one, each regional variety of English is known to show similarities to one of the two mainstream varieties, British English or American English. In order to see which regional variety follows which mainstream variety, Lindquist (2009: 96) investigated the frequencies of two pairs of synonymous idioms (*cut a long story short vs. make a long story short; have green fingers vs. have a green thumb*) by searching Google. Before presenting his data, two details are in order, the English varieties surveyed and the method for data collection.

Examined in his survey were the varieties spoken in the following nine regions: Britain (UK), America (EDU), South Africa (ZA), India (IN), Philippines (PH), Hong Kong (HK), New Zealand (NZ), Australia (AU), and Canada (CA). The abbreviations in the parentheses are the Internet top-level domain codes that were used for Google search¹. Some regions have their own complicated history with Britain and America; therefore, it is sometimes difficult to determine which region is more influenced by which of the two, Britain or America. Roughly, however, the following simplified relations are assumed for convenience sake: the regional varieties that have stronger ties with Britain are South Africa (ZA), India (IN), Hong Kong (HK), New Zealand (NZ) and Australia (AU) while the ones with stronger ties with America are Philippines (PH) and Canada (CA).

For his survey, as mentioned above, Lindquist used Google as a corpus. The total number of words in a Google search is unknown so that it is difficult to analyze the data statistically. It is possible, however, to examine the number of hits on Google in terms of the frequency ratio. Given the fact that the two idioms in each pair are synonymous, they can roughly be said to be in complementary distribution. It is presumable that when a speaker (or writer) chooses an idiomatic expression to describe a situation, one variant in each pair (e.g. the *cut* variant) is necessarily chosen over the other (e.g. the *make* variant). Thus, by comparing the percentages between the two variants in each pair, it can be observed which variety follows which mainstream variety.

2.2 Results and discussions

2.2.1 *Cut vs. Make*

One of the two pairs of idioms that Lindquist used for the survey was the pair *cut a long story short* and *make a long story short*. According to Longman Idioms Dictionary (1998), the former is described as British and the latter as American. Therefore, first, it is expected that the *cut* variant is found more in British English and the *make* variant in American English in Google search. Second, it is also expected that the *cut* variant is found more in the varieties that have stronger ties with Britain such as South Africa (ZA), India (IN), Hong Kong (HK), New Zealand (NZ), Australia (AU) while the *make* variant is more frequent in the ones with stronger ties with America such as Philippines (PH) and Canada (CA). Table 1 is the data Lindquist obtained.

Table 1. (Lindquist 2008: 96; percentages added)

Idiom	EDU	CA	UK	AU	NZ	ZA	IN	HK	PH
<i>cut a long story short</i>	918 (10%)	1710 (12%)	46700 (88%)	11700 (70%)	1910 (84%)	2080 (60%)	3170 (36%)	151 (57%)	113 (30%)

¹ The search method employed in this survey is as follows. The exact match method was used, in which the target phrase is surrounded by double quotation marks, and each search domain was specified by the "site:" operator in the Google search window.

<i>make a long story short</i>	8100 (90%)	12200 (88%)	6280 (12%)	4900 (30%)	372 (16%)	1380 (40%)	5540 (64%)	115 (43%)	266 (70%)
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Note: edu = American academic, ca = Canada, uk = United Kingdom, au = Australia, nz = New Zealand, za = South Africa, in = India, hk = Hong Kong, ph = Philippines. For each regional variety, the figure for the dominating variant is marked in boldface.

Source: From Google searches, 31 July 2008

The result was a mixed one. As shown in Table 1, the *cut* variant and the *make* variant are more strongly favored in British English (UK) and American English (EDU), respectively. Thus, the first expectation is born out. However, it is noticed that the distribution is not "all or nothing." Even in British English, for example, a sizable number of the *make* variant, which is deemed as American, are found (12%). Also, the *cut* variant is found in American English as well (10%). This means that the degree of ratios could become a matter of discussion (i.e. the degree of Britishness or Americanness).

Regarding the second expectation, it is more or less born out, but a somewhat unexpected result was also obtained. Among the five varieties (AU, NZ, ZA, IN and HK), which have a strong association with Britain, India (IN) shows a pattern similar to that of American English rather than British English contrary to the expectation. This suggests that Americanization had already been underway in India. Besides, Lindquist points out that, in terms of the ratio between two idiomatic variants, Philippine English (PH) does not seem to be influenced by American English as much as one might imagine.

2.2.2 *Fingers vs. Thumb*

The other pair used for the survey is the variants *have green fingers* and *have a green thumb*. The former is regarded as British and the latter American (Longman Idioms Dictionary 1998). Therefore, again, there are two expectations. First, the *fingers* variant should be found more in British English while the *thumb* variant more in American English. Second, the *fingers* variant should be used more often in the five varieties (ZA, IN, HK, NZ, and AU), which have stronger ties with Britain, while the *thumb* variant in the other two varieties (CA and PH), which have stronger ties with America. Table 2 shows the results.

Table 2. (Lindquist 2008: 96; percentages added)

Idiom	EDU	CA	UK	AU	NZ	ZA	IN	HK	PH
<i>have green fingers</i>	7 (1%)	9 (1%)	1450 (65%)	67 (9%)	105 (87%)	30 (65%)	5 (45%)	2 (18%)	1 (14%)
<i>have a green thumb</i>	1010 (99%)	1590 (99%)	767 (35%)	717 (91%)	16 (13%)	16 (35%)	6 (55%)	9 (82%)	6 (86%)

Source: From Google searches, 31 July 2008

The first expectation is born out. As shown in Table 2, the *fingers* variant and the *thumb* variant are more strongly favored in British English and American English, respectively. Thus, a difference between British English and American English is once again confirmed.

The results seen among regional varieties were, however, somewhat unexpected. Among the above five varieties (AU, NZ, ZA, IN and HK), which are expected to follow the British English pattern, only two, New Zealand (NZ) and South Africa (ZA), showed the pattern similar to that of British English and the remaining three varieties (AU, IN, and HK) showed similarity to American English. It seems that, in addition to India (IN), which showed the behavior contrary to the expectation in the *cut-make* pair above, Americanization had been underway

also in the two regions (AU and HK). Two more observations can be made. One is that New Zealand (NZ), which favors *fingers* by 87%, is "more British" than British English (UK), which does so by 65%. The other observation is that, as is pointed out by Lindquist, American and Canadian English strongly disfavor the *fingers* variant (just 1%).

2.3 Summary

The observations on the Lindquist's data collected in 2008 can be summarized as follows. First, the demarcation line between British English and American English can still be clearly seen as long as the two pairs of idioms are concerned. Second, in some varieties, linguistic Americanization was already making its way ten years ago.

3. Survey in 2018

Ten years have passed since the Lindquist's survey in 2008, so it is of interest to see whether there has been any difference in the trends over the past ten years. Recently, I investigated the same idiom pairs as used in Lindquist's research in Google. Each pair will be discussed below in order.

3.1 Results and discussions

3.1.1 *Cut vs. Make*

Regarding the *cut-make* pair in the Lindquist's 2008 survey, four varieties (AU, NZ, ZA and HK) followed the British English pattern in which the *cut* variant outweighs the *make* variant, while three varieties (CA, IN and PH) showed the American English pattern, which has the opposite frequency pattern. Table 3 is the result of the current survey in 2018.

Table 3.

Idiom	EDU	CA	UK	AU	NZ	ZA	IN	HK	PH
<i>cut a long story short</i>	2510 (17%)	7490 (11%)	71700 (50%)	21800 (33%)	5040 (26%)	5320 (54%)	5360 (34%)	1160 (26%)	1380 (14%)
<i>make a long story short</i>	12000 (83%)	61400 (89%)	71300 (50%)	43300 (67%)	14200 (74%)	4460 (46%)	10200 (66%)	3270 (74%)	8560 (86%)

Source: From Google searches, 7 September 2018

A surprising result was obtained. As shown in Table 3, six varieties (CA, IN, PH, AU, NZ, and HK) exhibit the American English pattern. Only one variety, South Africa (ZA), retains the British English pattern. What is interesting is that even in the two varieties, UK and ZA, which shows the British English pattern, the two variants are being used with almost equal frequency (almost a ratio 1:1). It can further be pointed out that, given 54% for *cut*, ZA is now "more British" than British English (UK) in which *cut* is 50%. These findings strongly suggest that Americanization has been underway in all the varieties, including British English. This change in British English implies that it could become useless in the near future to use this idiom pair to distinguish British English and American English. It might be worth noting in passing that American English has been slightly Britishized (10 % to 17 % for *cut*).

3.1.2 *Fingers vs. Thumb*

Even more surprising findings were obtained concerning the other *fingers-thumb* pair. Table 4 shows the results.

Table 4.

Idiom	EDU	CA	UK	AU	NZ	ZA	IN	HK	PH
<i>have green fingers</i>	110 (4%)	2360 (1%)	9210 (4%)	3270 (2%)	1390 (3%)	1190 (57%)	407 (10%)	134 (20%)	6 (0%)
<i>have a green thumb</i>	2790 (96%)	158000 (99%)	235000 (96%)	158000 (98%)	50600 (97%)	911 (43%)	3530 (90%)	546 (80%)	20600 (100%)

Source: From Google searches, 7 September 2018

In the 2008 survey, two varieties (NZ and ZA) followed British English and five varieties (CA, AU, IN, HK, and PH) followed American English. In the current survey, however, six regional varieties (CA, AU, IN, PH, NZ, and HK) and British English (UK) follow the American English pattern. Out of the nine varieties examined, only one variety, South Africa (ZA), has retained the British English pattern observed ten years ago, which British English itself does not seem to retain any longer. In this pair, American English and British English show the same percentage, 4%, for *fingers*.

Several interesting observations can be made. New Zealand (NZ) shows the most considerable change, which is beyond our imagination. In 2008, 87% favored *fingers*, but in 2018 just 3% does so. NZ was "more British" than British English in 2008 (see 2.2.2), but now NZ (97% for *thumb*) is "more American" than American English (96% for *thumb*). As a matter of fact, there are three more varieties, CA (99%), AU (98%) and PH (100% after rounding up), which are "more American" than American English. Besides, the same change in American English as mentioned in the last part in the previous section is observed here again. American English, which used *fingers* by 1% in 2008 but uses it by 4% in 2018, has been somewhat "Britishized" over the past ten years.

Probably the most critical finding is that it is highly likely that this idiom pair has lost its linguistic status to demarcate British English and American English, although it could possibly be used to distinguish South African English from the other varieties.

3.2 Summary

The comparison between Lindquist's survey in 2008 and the current one in 2018 can be summarized as follows. In both idiom pairs, linguistic Americanization was observed among the regional varieties of English, including British English, although it had been seen to some extent in some regional varieties already in the 2008 data (India, Australia, and Honk Kong). As long as the second pair, *fingers-thumb*, is concerned, it seems difficult to maintain the demarcation between British English and American English.

One additional note is in order. What is interesting is that some decrease in the percentages is observed in American English. The percentages changed from 10% to 17% for *cut* and from 1% to 4% for *fingers*, respectively, both of which are deemed British. It suggests that some "deamericanization" (or "Britishization") has happened in American English. It implies that linguistic change is not always unidirectional. We can catch a glimpse into a dynamic aspect of the linguistic ecology.

4. A survey on the historical distribution

In this section, longer term historical distributions of the four variants (two idiom pairs) will be examined to see whether their historical distributions before Lindquist's survey in 2008 had been what we expect for them.

4.1 Google Books Ngram Viewer²

According to the dictionary used for reference (Longman Idiom Dictionary), the *cut* and *fingers* variants are

² <http://books.google.com/ngrams>

deemed as British English and the *make* and *thumb* variants American English. It is expected that one of the two variants is consistently used more frequently over the other in history regarding each of British English and American English. The demarcation in the dictionary is made based on the usage or frequency at the time it is compiled. That is, there is no guarantee that the four idiomatic variants in question have historically been used as consistently as one might expect.

Now, it is possible to see how the frequency of expression has changed (or stayed the same) historically by using Google Books Ngram Viewer (GBNV hereafter) launched in 2008. GBNV is an online search engine that graphically displays the frequencies (per million words) of the search strings delimited by comma. It uses a yearly count of n-grams found in sources printed (i.e., books) between 1500 and 2008. It was surveyed by using GBNV whether the four expressions in question have historically been used with the expected pattern throughout history.

Before examining the data, the following two things should be made clear. First, it needs to be noted that although the two types of data we use in this study, results of the Internet searches (Google) and GBNV, are both available through the Internet, the media types are different. While the former data, which we referred to in the previous sections, is from a large aggregation of texts in miscellaneous websites on the Internet, the latter data from GBNV is that of scanned texts in published books. Second, the default smoothing value three was used to create all the graphs below.

4.2 *Make* vs. *Cut*

Figure 1 shows the historical frequencies of the two variants in American English. It can be seen that in American English, the *make* variant always outnumbers the *cut* variant throughout the period during which data is available. This suggests that in American English, the *make* variant has been favored over the *cut* variant also in terms of history and it is reasonable to assume that this frequency balance between the two expressions is a pattern characteristic to American English in terms of long-term diachronic perspective as well. That is, the expected historical distribution was found for American English. On the other hand, however, in British English, this is not true.



Figure 1. (American English; Smoothing 3)

Figure 2 shows the frequency patterns of the two expressions in British English. In British English, unlike American English, there is a historical twist regarding the frequencies of the two expressions. As seen in Figure 2, first, the *make* variant outnumbered the *cut* variant from the earliest available year to around 1920, but it peaked around 1930 and decreased afterward. Around 1930, *cut* outweighed *make* and the same trend went on. On the one hand, some might question whether it is reasonable, given the historical twist, to use the distribution of this idiom pair as a characteristic trait of British English; on the other hand, however, it is true that the *cut* variant has outweighed the *make* variant in British English since the 1930s. Although the change in the frequency of the two

variants in the history of British English is intriguing, this is a topic for another investigation.

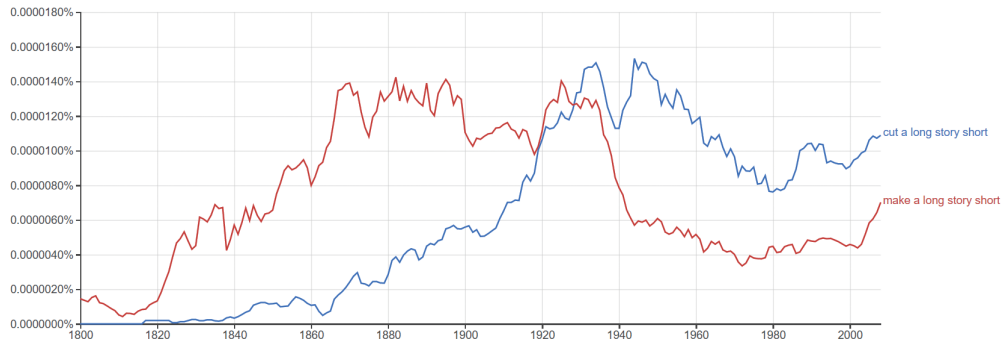


Figure 2. (British English; Smoothing 3)

It might, however, be worth noting in passing that in OED, the expression *cut a long story short* cannot be found in the entire dictionary. Regarding the other one *make a long story short*, four matches in two entries are found. It does seem that both Longman Idioms Dictionary (1998), which was used for the previous sections about the past ten years, and OED neatly reflect the change in the trend seen in Figure 2.

In sum, given the twist in the British English data, the overall picture regarding the *cut-make* pair is less straightforward than it might look at first sight. Although it does not invalidate what we found and discussed in the previous section, it seems necessary to take a closer look at the *make-cut* pair.

4.3 Fingers vs. Thumb

Now, let us turn to the other *fingers-thumb* pair. Figure 3 shows the output of American English. As shown in the graph, the trends in the two varieties are steady, and almost always the *thumb* variant has outweighed the *fingers* variant since the expressions emerged around the 1930s. The American English's overwhelming preference for the *thumb* variant, which was observed in both Lindquist's and our studies, is also confirmed by this graph.



Figure 3. (American English; Smoothing 3)

Figure 4 indicates the historical changes of the two variants' frequencies in British English. The *fingers* variant consistently outweighs the *thumb* variant until around the 1990s, but after that they competed for a short period and *fingers* gained more popularity than *thumb* again until 2008, which matches what Lidquist found in 2008.



Figure 4. (British English; Smoothing 3)

As seen in the four graphs, while basically the same patterns as in the previous sections were found for American English, British English shows more complex changes in frequency regarding the two variants in each idiom pair. It seems to indicate that the direction of influence has largely been unidirectional from America to England rather than bidirectional as long as these two idiom pairs are concerned at least. It is of interest to see whether the same phenomena can be observed regarding other synonymous idioms. This issue is another intriguing topic which could be usefully explored in further research.

5. Previous studies on linguistic Americanization

In this section, among many others, two recent studies on linguistic Americanization will be reviewed and discussed in relation to the current study.

5.1 Gonçalves et al. (2018)

Gonçalves et al. (2018) investigated Americanization seen in world-wide varieties of English in terms of spelling and vocabulary using Twitter and Google Books. First, they analyzed the Twitter data with geography information to see which vocabulary is used, the British word (e.g., *railway*) or the American word (e.g., *railroad*). They found that, with three exceptions out of 30 countries, all the countries use American vocabulary more or less. Regarding spelling, only seven countries, out of 30 countries, follow the British style. They also investigated diachronic changes using Google Books. Since around 1828 when Noah Webster's first American English dictionary appeared, the American style spelling and vocabulary have gained popularity to date. The last 20 years have seen a rather drastic increase of the American spelling and vocabulary even among the books published in the UK.

There are similarities and differences between their research and the current one. They are similar in both utilizing data from the Internet, although the types of data are not exactly the same since they specifically use Twitter data. The biggest difference is the scope of the investigation. While they surveyed thirty countries, nine countries were examined in the current study.

5.2 Fuchs (2017)

Fuchs (2017) analyzed the Philippine English. The Philippines was once an American colony and, as a natural consequence, Philippine English is well-known to be under the American English influence from the beginning. Given this fact, some might wonder whether it can be a valid question whether Philippine English has been Americanized or not. Fuchs claims that the British English influence is still seen and the notion of Americanization is valid for the Philippine English as well. He carried out a diachronic comparison using the data from two corpora, Phil-Brown corpus for the 1960s and ICE-PHI corpus for 1990s. He investigated 17 pairs of synonyms such as

lorry/truck and *film/movie* and 11 spelling differences such as *-ise/-ize* in verbs and *-isation/-ization* in nouns. The result was that British spellings and lexis were found in the 1960s corpus to some degree; however, in almost all cases, the ratio of the British pattern diminished in the 1990s corpus.

In Fuchs (2017), he specifically analyzed only Philippine English, so the type of inquiry is different from the current study. His findings, however, coincide with the tendency we found. In our data, the Philippine English had already shown the American English pattern (70% for *make* and 86% for *thumb*) in 2008 and the ratio changes to 86% for *make* and 100% for *thumb* in 2018. That is, (further) Americanization of the Philippine English he found is also backed up in the current study as well.

5.3 Comparison with the current study

Both Gonçalves et al. (2018) and Fuchs (2017) analyze the data in terms of vocabulary and spelling. That is, what both studies investigate is lexical and sub-lexical level. The current survey, which is based on Lindquist (2009), is an investigation in terms of phrasal level. Therefore, they complement each other in terms of linguistic level. It was demonstrated in the current study that investigation at the phrasal level, both synchronic and diachronic, can provide another area of inquiry worth paying more attention to.

6. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, it was shown that regional varieties of English, World Englishes, have been changing and the American English pattern is becoming more dominant over the British English pattern. The overall results obtained were something we had more or less anticipated: with almost no exceptions, Americanization was found in all the regions surveyed (exceptions: Hong Kong in the *fingers-thumb* pair and America in both pairs). Given the fact that global political, economic and cultural dominance for the rest of the world has shifted from the UK to the US and it is still continuing in the present, many of them should come as no surprise. There were some unexpected findings as well, however.

There were two significant findings worth mentioning again. One is the degree of changes. Among others, for example, New Zealand, which had been “more British” than British English in the 2008 survey, turned out to be “more American” than American English in the 2018 survey regarding the *fingers-thumb* pair (see 3.1.2). The other is the change in British English. American English and British English had still shown clear contrasts in the 2008 survey, so the demarcation between American English and British English was clear as long as the two idiom pairs were concerned. The difference, however, has been blurred due to the significant shifts in British English toward the American English pattern especially that there was almost no difference between American English and British English in frequency regarding the *fingers-thumb* pair in the 2018 survey. This suggests that this idiom pair cannot be used to distinguish American English and British English any longer.

A longer-term data of the two idiom pairs were also examined through Google Books Ngram Viewer. While American English showed the expected discrepancies between the two variants in each pair throughout the data available, British English showed interesting twists in frequency, which needs to be further investigated in future research.

This paper needs to be concluded with cautionary remarks. It has been pointed out by many researchers, including Lindquist (2009), that using Google for academic purposes has many unsolved problems (see Kilgarriff 2007 for known problems with using Google and possible solutions; also see Penchenick et al. 2015 for problems and limitations Google Books Ngram Viewer has). The results of the survey based on them, obviously including this survey itself, could be undermined accordingly. However, in order to create hypotheses and test them, the gigantic scale of Google is appealing, and it is still considered worth exploring. As long as researchers are aware of its pitfalls, it should be useful as a tool to explore what has not been explored.

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受理日 2019年11月13日