

Made In America



The Pilgrims who would forge a new dialect of English in the USA

By Raymond Barrett

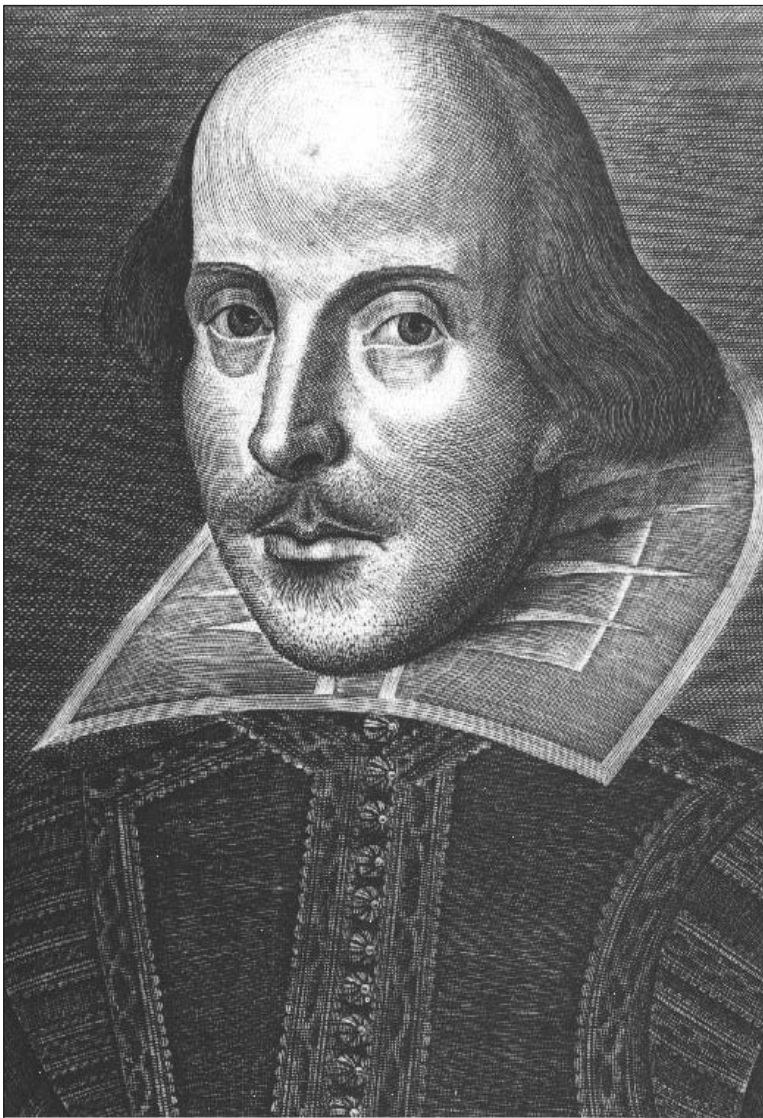
George Bernard Shaw, the famous Irish playwright, once wrote that the USA and the UK were “two countries divided by a common language.” Even when fighting together as allies, there have been instances whereby Shaw’s prophetic words have rung through. When the US military called in support from British troops during the Battle of Fallujah, there were reports that soldiers from both countries had difficulty communicating with each other on their radios due to differences in their accents.

Take a journey across the Atlantic for example. When getting out of a taxi outside Heathrow Airport, be sure to remind the driver to *open the boot* so as not to forget one’s luggage. Six hours later, when you hit the ground at JFK, the cabbie will automatically *pop the trunk* so you can put your bags inside for the ride to your hotel. If you manage to cross the pond from London to New York with falling foul of the US immigration service, it’s not simply the physical landscape around you that changes; you also enter a brave new lexical world where it wise to tread carefully.

The most simplistic explanation of the difference between American and British English can be explained in the following way: the first English settlers on the east coast of New World were confronted by an array of new wildlife and geographical structures that they simply had not encountered before and thus had no words to describe; so they had two choices, adopt the native American Indian word or make up their own.

In Bill Bryson’s book *Made in America*, the best-selling travel writer points out that the present day states of Massachusetts and Virginia were the location of the first settle-

*“And who in time knows whither we may vent
The treasure of our tongue, to what strange shores”*



William Shakespeare: inventor of over a 1000 words.

ments and thus by the first few decades of the 1600s, the Indian tribes of those regions had given to the English language words such as *moccasin*, *moose* and *hickory*. He also points out that the Indian word *naiack*, meaning corner or a point gave rise to the American expression in *that neck of the woods*. However, the very fact that the pilgrims even made it across the Atlantic at all suggests they had a certain amount of initiative, so whenever gaps appeared in their lexicography they invented their own, often by combining existing words together, conjuring new constructions such as *egg-plant*, *rattlesnake* and *frostbite*.

Other differences are often traced to the fact that American English has retained certain regional characteristics of 17th century English that have fallen out of favour with the British themselves over time. Thus some of the most quintessentially ‘American’ of words are in fact, fine examples of Shakespearian English that have over time being neglected or discarded by his own countrymen. Fall, (instead of autumn) bug, junk and closet are but a few of examples of linguistic preservation the US can claim responsibility for.

The English broadcaster and writer Melvyn Bragg traced the development of his mother tongue in a book entitled *The Adventure of English*, and he described the high hopes that people such as Samuel Daniel, the court poet of the time, had for the language in 1599, the era when the navy of Queen Elizabeth I ruled the waves.

“And who in time knows whither we may vent

The treasure of our tongue, to what strange shores

This gain of our best glory shall be sent,

T’intrich unknowing nations with our store?”

At the beginning of the 17th century, no one could have imagined the effect that these new American colonies would have on the English language. Furthermore, the contretemps that occurred between the two countries from 1775 to 1783 proved to be a defining moment for both nations and the rest of the world. After the Revolutionary War, when the former colony took its first steps to super-cede Britain as the world’s pre-imminent military power, American English began to assume a stronger position in the international arena. Though the USA and UK have stopped facing each other on the battlefield over the last century, the war over who will control and dictate the future of their shared language is as fierce and bloody as any civil war.

In the 21st century, Daniel’s vision has become a reality and English has acquired the dubious honour of being the lingua franca of a globalised world. However, much to the chagrin of many a John Bull, it is the American version of the language that seems set to dominate the world in the coming future. One example of the slow encroachment of American preferences is the word billion, with the British equivalent *milliard* now almost obsolete. While India still uses the Queen’s English, the saturation of the global media infrastructure with American produced films, music and television seems to suggest that the next hundred years in the biography of the English language will have a *flavor* and *color* all of its own.