

The History of English in Australia

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Abstract

This paper traces the development of Australian English and describes some of its distinctive features. Australian English diverged from British English in the late 18th century when the first British colony was established in New South Wales. During its history, Australian English has also been influenced by Irish English and American English, and these influences are reflected in some aspects of its grammar and the pronunciation or spelling of certain words. However, Australian English today is not merely a linguistic mixture from British, Irish, and American English; it has also acquired characteristics of its own. Particularly, this paper describes the phonological and lexical characteristics of Australian English. I focus on the phonological features of three different varieties of Australian English (Broad, General, and Cultivated Australian English) and compare them to British Received Pronunciation. I also report on the numerous Aboriginal words borrowed into Australian English.

Introduction

English is now a global language spoken by people throughout the world. According to statistics, English is spoken by 375 million people as their first language, another 375 million people as a second language, and 750 million people as a foreign language (Shaw, 2003, p. 8). Spoken by so many people in the world, English has already developed into a language with multiple varieties, especially the distinctive varieties developed in those countries and regions which used to be colonized by the British Empire like the United States, Australia, New Zealand, India, and Singapore. In this paper, I would like to discuss how English was transported to and developed in Australia.

Australian English has been influenced by three major forces. First, the study of external history shows the historical background of Indigenous Australians and early explorations of Australia before the advent of the British people. Even though this part of history did not directly relate to the arrival of English in Australia, the early explorations paved the way for British people to further discover the new continent and bring English to Australia. Second, the arrival of British people was the beginning of English influence; English gradually dominated many Aboriginal languages until it became the only significant language in Australia. Lastly, I would like to describe phonological and lexical characteristics of Australian English in terms of its phonological features in three different varieties of Australian English comparing it to Received

Pronunciation, and the characteristics in terms of the influx of aboriginal loanwords as well.

Historical Background

Indigenous Australians and Early Explorations

The name "Australia" is derived from the Latin *Terra Australis Incognita* which means "an unknown land of the south" dating back to Roman times (Turner, 1966, p. 1). Before the arrival of European settlers, Australia had already been inhabited by Indigenous Australians including Torres Strait Islanders and Aboriginal people. Torres Strait Islanders mainly live in Torres Strait Islands which is made up of numerous small islands between Australia and New Guinea, while Aboriginal people live in mainland Australia and Tasmania. Now only about 2.4% of the population is Indigenous Australians according to the statistics from Australian Bureau of Statistics (Shaw, 2003, p. 101). The decrease in the indigenous population is a result of many factors such as European epidemic diseases that killed many Indigenous people during the early years of British colonization and the growing number of immigrants who have gradually outnumbered the Indigenous population (Jamison, 2007, p. 1).

It is believed that the ancestors of Indigenous Australians moved to Australia between 40,000 to 70,000 years ago from a heterogeneous source population or by multiple migrations of smaller groups (Jami-

son, 2007, p. 1), but it is not very sure where exactly they were from. Some Indigenous clans might have migrated to Australia through Southeast Asia, and others might have come from Africa. At that time, the customs of Indigenous Australians were different from region to region. For example, Torres Strait Islanders were skilled farmers and herdsmen, cultivating a variety of crops including sugar cane, taro, and sweet potatoes, as well as husbanding pigs and cassowaries. In contrast, most Aboriginal people who lived in the mainland were hunter-gathers; they did not cultivate crops and lacked domesticated animals. In addition to farmers and hunter-gatherers, the Indigenous Australians who lived along rivers were expert fishermen. In this way, the Indigenous Australians were self-sufficient and seldom had contact with people outside the continent until the early 17th century when it was discovered by European expeditions.

There are some traditions regarding the first European expedition to reach Australia, but the first recorded European contact with Australia was in March 1606 when Dutch explorer Willem Janszoon reached the west coast of Cape York Peninsula. On November 18, 1605, he sailed from Bantam (a city in Indonesia) to the coast of western New Guinea. After several months' sailing, he reached the Gulf of Carpentaria and made landfall at the western shore of Cape York Peninsula in Queensland, near the present town of Weipa. At that time, Willem Janszoon did not realize that he reached a corner of a new continent, but thought it was a part of New Guinea. His experience on the land might have been unpleasant as he commented that "there was no good to be done there" (Turner, 1966, p. 1).

Later in the same year, the Spanish explorer Luis Vaez de Torres found the strait that separates the continent of Australia from the island of New Guinea, which was not discovered by Willem Janszoon. This strait was later named after Torres. European explorers and traders continued their expeditions to Australia. Among them, another Dutch explorer, Abel

Tasman, in 1642 discovered the islands of Tasmania and named them *Islands of Van Diemen's Land* after the name of his sponsor, the governor of the Dutch East India Company. However, later people preferred to call this group of islands *Tasmania* in order to remember its discoverer (Turner, 1966, p. 2). Since the coastlines of Australia at that time were mostly charted by Dutch explorers, the name *New Holland* was adopted to refer to the Australian continent after it was first applied by Abel Tasman.

The Arrival of British People and British Colonization

As we have seen, early explorers played a significant role in discovering parts of Australia and making this continent known to the world, but it was British explorers who further discovered Australia and influenced the land and its people. The first British explorer who came to Australia was William Dampier. William Dampier was also the first person to circle around the world twice. In 1688 during his first circumnavigation, he visited the northwestern coast of Australia and mapped that part of Australia (Turner, 1966, p. 2). It was not until 1770 that another British explorer, Captain James Cook, came to the eastern coast of Australia and landed in Botany Bay near Sydney. The name of this bay was given by James Cook because of the varieties of plants found in that place by the scientists Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander, Cook's companions (Turner, 1966, p. 185). Later in the year James Cook sailed northwards along the east coastline. Finding that the east coast line was very inviting, he claimed it for the British King and named it New South Wales on August 22, 1770 after Wales (Turner, 1966, p. 189).

With the claim of New South Wales for the British Empire, more and more British people moved or were transported to the new land. The first group of British settlers was mostly composed of convicts who were transported to Australia as punishment. This helped solve the problem of overcrowded prisons that occurred in Britain when it lost its American colonies after the American War of Independence.

On January 26, 1788, the first fleet of 11 ships with marines and convicts commanded by Captain Arthur Phillip landed at Sydney Cove on the southern shore of Port Jackson, the location of present day Sydney (Shaw, 2003, p. 101). This date later became the Australia's national day, Australia Day. After establishing the penal settlement at Port Jackson, the New South Wales became the first British colony in Australia. Later, other colonies were claimed and established in the order of Tasmania, Western Australia, South Australia, New Zealand, Victoria, Queensland, and Northern Territory in less than a century.

Undoubtedly, the establishment of these colonies accelerated the population growth in Australia. We can draw this conclusion from the population of the transported convicts in those years, as it is mentioned by Shaw (2003) "the convict system operated from 1788 to 1840 and in all some 130,000 prisoners were transported" (p. 7). The convicts would be assigned to either build roads or work as servants for the free settlers upon their arrival in a penal colony. However, their situation was not unchangeable, many convicts got tickets-of-leave based on their good performance, which allowed them a certain degree of freedom; others finished their sentences and became free settlers. As the convicts got freedom, they began spreading out into the country for suitable land for farming and lived in the country forever.

Another impetus for the population growth was the first gold rush in the 1850s, which brought many people from Great Britain, Ireland, Europe, North America, and China to Australia (Shaw, 2003, p. 101). Unfortunately, the colonization and the growing number of immigrants threatened the population of Indigenous Australians from the outset. As it is mentioned by Jamison (2007), during the time of the first British colonists, European epidemic diseases such as chickenpox, smallpox, influenza and measles killed many Indigenous Australians as they neither had any knowledge about the diseases nor knew how to prevent and

cure them; while another consequence was that Indigenous Australians were deprived of their lands by the colonists. Loss of traditional lands, food sources and water sources was fatal for the Indigenous Australians. In addition to disease, violence was widespread, and the indigenous population was dramatically reduced (p. 1). As English speaking people gradually took the place of the Indigenous population, the English language was destined to replace the Indigenous languages as well as mentioned above, according to Shaw, there were about 200 different Indigenous languages (p. 101).

The Origin and Development of Australian English

Australian English began to diverge from British English soon after the establishment of the first British colony in New South Wales. As the convicts who settled in Australia at that time were mostly from large cities of Britain, especially Cockney speakers from London, the first generation of Australians spoke English with a strong Cockney influence both in accent and vocabulary (Horvath, 1985, p. 29). From this we can say that Australian English was close to British English, but it might not be true to say that Australian English and British English were the same as both languages have been subject to change since the early settlement. Furthermore, Australian English has also been influenced by other varieties of English during its history.

Since many Australians are descendants of Irish people, the influence of Irish English is common in Australian English. Horvath (1985) wrote that one of the influences of Irish English is that some Australians pronounce the name of the letter *H* as /*hæitʃ*/ rather than /*æitʃ*/; other influences of Irish English include the non-standard plural of *you* as *younes*, use of the word *me* to replace *my*, and epenthesis of schwa in such words as *film* /*filəm*/ (p. 39).

The Americanization of Australian English began during the first gold rush in 1850s by introducing many mining terms from American English into Australian English like *bar*, which means sand bank,

and *gold hunter* (Ramson, 1966, p148). With the increasing powers of United States in the world's politics, economy and technology, there has been an increasing importation of American English into Australia both in written and spoken forms, such as in books and magazines, computer software, world wide web, and in television programs. This influences Australian English both in pronunciation and spelling. For example, according to Shaw (2003), some Australian words have similar word stress as in American English like *harass* with the stress on the second syllable. Another phonological feature of American English that influences Australian English is the use of the flap, that is to say the consonant /t/ is voiced and pronounced as /d/ between a vowel and an unstressed syllable (p. 102). As to the spelling of Australian English, it basically follows the British way, but now it is also common to find words with American spelling like *color*, *labor*, and *program*. Australian people also use many British and American English words interchangeably like *pants/trousers*, *lift/elevator*, and *zed/zee* (Shaw, 2003, pp. 102, 104).

Hence, Australian English has already developed into a variety of English in its own right (Shaw, 2003, p. 102). It is not merely a linguistic mixture from British, Irish, and American English, but it has also acquired characteristics of its own. As Ramson (1966) says "Australian English is something new and unique, which has served its connections with the mother tongue and which has, from the first, developed along lines peculiar to itself" (p. 6). According to my understanding, one of the unique characteristics of Australian English is the flash language, the jargon of thieves originating among the convicts. At that time, the convicts invented many words that reflect the early prison life in Australia, such as *new chum*, originally referring to a new fellow prisoner, *old hand*, indicating an old convict, and *swag*, originally meaning the loot of a thief (Turner, 1966, p. 10). Even though the origin of these words is not the kind of thing that Australian people feel proud of, they are considered as unique Australian words. In the words of Shaw

(2003) "these words have survived as cultural key words in Australia" (p. 102).

In order to have better knowledge of what makes Australian English unique, I would like to discuss the different varieties of Australian English through comparison of the phonological features between the different varieties and Received Pronunciation; it is also worth mentioning the influence of aboriginal languages, especially many aboriginal words borrowed in Australian English.

Variation in Australian English

Pronunciation

There are three main varieties of Australian English based on variations in accent: Broad, General and Cultivated Australian English. Broad Australian is the oldest variation derived from the first generation of native-born Australians who were descendants of the convicts. The other two varieties developed later. Cultivated Australian, which is also called Educated Australian, may have its origin among the upper-class colonists, and it is the one which is closest to British Received Pronunciation; while General Australian is developed as a compromise between the other two varieties and it is spoken by most Australians now.

It is mentioned in Ramson (1970) that there are no geographical and cultural factors that influence a person in choosing a certain variety because speakers of each of the main varieties can be found anywhere within the same city or town, the same school, and even the same family; individuals simply choose the variety that suits them (p. 20). Shaw (2003) described a study done by Mitchell in 1960 to investigate Australian accents. About 7,000 students were chosen from 327 secondary schools of all types in different places of Australia. The result about the distribution of the three varieties was as follows: Broad speakers 34%, General speakers 55%, and Cultivated speakers 11% (p. 103).

According to Horvath (1985), the different varieties of Australian English are differentiated primarily by six vowel phonemes represented in words like *flee*, *face*,

goose, *goat*, *price*, and *mouth* (p. 12), as well as some other vowels and consonants. Within the limit of this paper, I will only compare the pronunciations of the six vowel pho-

nemes in three varieties of Australian English and in British Received Pronunciation (Table 1).

Table 1

Six Vowel Phonemes in Three Varieties of Australian English in Comparison with British Received Pronunciation

Examples	Broad AusE	General AusE	Cultivated AusE	RP
<i>fleece</i>	əːl	ə l	ɪi	iː
<i>face</i>	ʌːl	ʌ l	ɛ l or e l	e l
<i>goose</i>	əːʊ	əʊ	ʊʊ	uː
<i>goat</i>	ʌːʊ	ʌʊ	oʊ	əʊ
<i>price</i>	oːl	o l	a l	a l
<i>mouth</i>	æːʊ	æʊ	aʊ	aʊ

Note. Adapted from Shaw, 2003, p. 105

From the different vowel transcriptions of the six words illustrated in Table 1, we can see that Broad Australian and General Australian are similar in terms of vowel sounds; their only difference is the diphthong length. Cultivated Australian approximates Received Pronunciation, but there are still some differences. For example, Cultivated speakers tend to use diphthongs to take the place of monophthongs in Received Pronunciation like *fleece* /fliːs/ in stead of /fliːs/ and *goose* /gʊːz/ in stead of /gʊːz/. The differences between Cultivated Australian and the other two varieties mainly depend on the first vowel target. Compared to Cultivated Australian, Broad and General Australian normally have a lower starting point and greater range from the lower position to a higher position, for example, to produce *fleece*, speakers start from the vowel /ə/ in the mid central position and then glide towards the high front target /i/; whereas in Cultivated Australian, the word has a simple glide from /ɪ/ to /i/ since both of the target vowels are in the same range of high front position.

The different pronunciations of the six vowel sounds are the key concerns in classifying Australian English into three different varieties. This kind of phonological distinction in Australian English is one of the features that English speakers might need to know. To further understand Australian English, I want to focus on the influence of Aboriginal languages in Australian English, especially Aboriginal loan words.

The Influx of Aboriginal Loanwords

In the early years, Indigenous Australians belonged to 200 cultural and linguistic groups (Shaw, 2003, p. 101). Today, as mentioned by Shaw Indigenous Australians constitute only 2.4% of the country's population and 90% of their languages are facing death. Nevertheless, their languages contributed to the development of Australian English. This is especially reflected in numerous aboriginal words borrowed into Australian English. Many of them such as *kangaroo*, *koala*, and *boomerang*, have already become a part of English and are widely used by English speakers around the world.

Aboriginal loan words can be divided into

three main categories as shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Three Main Categories of Aboriginal Loan Words

Fauna	Flora	Aboriginal culture
<i>dingo</i>	<i>bungalow</i>	<i>boomerang</i>
<i>kangaroo</i>	<i>bunya bunya</i>	<i>corroboree</i>
<i>koala</i>	<i>karri</i>	<i>bumpy</i>
<i>wallaby</i>	<i>nardoo</i>	<i>kipper</i>

Most of the Aboriginal words were picked up by the early British explorers around the area of New South Wales, especially at Port Jackson as this area was the place where Captain James Cook first visited in 1770. Further, in 1788 Captain Arthur Phillip brought the convicts to New South Wales and established the first penal colony at Port Jackson.

At that time, when English-speaking people settled in the new continent, they were astonished by the landscape, unique fauna and flora, and the locals' way of life, all of which were markedly different from anything that they had experienced in their country. It is thus not surprising that they borrowed a large number of words denoting animals, plants, and aboriginal cultural artifacts, particularly those having to do with aboriginal weapons, dwellings, ceremonies and people. According to Ramson (1966), the first aboriginal word to be used in English was *kangaroo*, which was borrowed by Cook and his party in 1770 (p. 100). The novelty of the big leaping animal with four legs sighted by Cook and his party brought the word into immediate use, but at that time, the Indigenous people seemed to use this word to refer to all animals except dogs (p. 100).

After the continent was formally settled by British people, more Aboriginal words were incorporated into English. As they adapted to life on the new continent, the settlers learned many Aboriginal names of plants for food. For example, the settlers

found that the cone of *bunya bunya* was highly prized by the local people because of its good nutrition; the settlers also learned that the seeds of *nardoo* were used to grind rough flour to make cakes (p. 115). Among loan words reflecting aboriginal culture, *corroboree* is one of the words still in popular use. Originally this word referred to a kind of festival among the indigenous people with singing and dancing, but now it is used in colloquial speech meaning a social gathering or a noisy party (p. 129).

From the above examples, we can see that the settlers borrowed Aboriginal words in order to adapt themselves to the new environment and new life. According to a statistics in Shaw (2003), there were some 400 borrowings from the Aboriginal languages in the late 18th century when Australia was settled by British people (p. 106). Admittedly, not all of the words are used today, but those which remain in use have already become a part of Australian English and have even enriched the lexicon of English as an international language.

Conclusion

In summary, from the early explorations and settlement of British people, English language was solidly planted in Australia. In just over two hundred years, the language has gradually evolved and developed under the influences of other languages and social variants. Today, Australian English can certainly be described as a variety of English in its own right just like many other varieties

of English in the world such as British English, American English, and South African English. As mentioned by Shaw (2007), Australian English is being used increasingly in ESL/EFL teaching, especially in East and Southeast Asia, where Australia has important social and economic influences. Similar to British English and American English, which have been codified in dictionaries, Australian English has also been codified in some major dictionaries such as *Macquarie Dictionary*, a dictionary of Australian English (p. 101). From this, we can see the significant

position of Australian English in the world and English teachers and learners cannot ignore the existence of this variety. As an example, since many Australian tourists come to Tibet every year, teachers can introduce some phonological features of Australian English to their students who are training to become tour guide so that they can better understand the variety of English spoken by their clients. Knowledge of different varieties of English can thus expand the horizons of language teaching and learning.

References

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Appendix
Early Explorations and British Colonization in Australia



Note. Adapted from <http://www.aus-emaps.com>