

American English in Europe

DAVID CRYSTAL

American is understood
(sign in a London shop
window)

Kippers sur toast
Fried egg avec chips
(menu in a Le Havre café
window)

The language of popular reactions to linguistic borrowing is itself worthy of study. Its tone is largely pejorative; its style metaphorical and dramatic; and this is nowhere more violently in evidence than in the case of the influence of English – particularly American English – upon the languages of Europe. Newspaper reports, television programmes, even learned papers refer to the phenomenon in terms of ‘invasion’, ‘sixth column’ and ‘infiltration’, the English vocabulary ‘ousting’ and ‘strangling’ the native word-stock. A recent attack on foreign influences on Spanish in the paper *ABC de Madrid* by Salvador de Madariaga is headed *El castellano en peligro de muerte* (‘Spanish in danger of death’). A British paper complains about the American ‘barbarization of the Queen’s English’, adding (ironically) that we should ‘preserve the tongue that Shakespeare spoke’. *Parlez-vous franglais?* is the title of a polemic against the influence of English on French, in which the author inveighs against ‘anglomanie’, ‘anglofolie’ and ‘américanolâtrie’.¹

As H.L. Mencken shows very clearly in the opening chapters of his classic *The American Language*,² Americanisms have been reviled almost as long as America. What is less well-known is the extent of the struggle by American authors to get free from their own feelings of inferiority about their distinctive English. Only after the emphasis placed upon it by such writers as Noah Webster did one find an attitude of pride which led to the development of the expression Mencken used as the title of his book, and which was so fiercely supported by Finley Peter Dunne’s Chicago-Irish barman, Mr Dooley: ‘When we Americans are through with the English language, it will look as if it had been run over by a musical comedy!’

Yet despite its history, the impact of American English on the languages of Europe (as opposed to on British English) is a largely twentieth century phenomenon. In 1921, the anthropologist-linguist Edward Sapir, in his influential book *Language*, was of the opinion that the influence of English upon other languages was negligible. Nowadays it is perhaps the most obvious feature of the European linguistic scene. But it is difficult to generalise. The influence of one language upon another is no constant thing, and reflects very much the mutual influence of societies upon each other, and in particular their political policies. As Mencken says (p.31), 'This war upon Americanisms naturally has its pitched battles and its rest periods between. These rest periods tend to coincide with the times when it is politic, on grounds remote from the philological, to treat the Yankee barbarian with a certain amount of politeness'. Linguistic purists tend to forget this elementary point of language principle, that language does not exist in a vacuum, but reflects a particular social context and set of cultural values, and that attitudes to language normally reduce to attitudes towards the social realities underlying them. It will undoubtedly be the case, then, that many of the attitudes we encounter towards American English in Europe, while voiced as attitudes towards the language, will be the surface reflection of deeper (and sometimes unconsciously held) attitudes towards the American way of life as a whole. A South American teacher once wrote that in his country optimists teach their students British English, pessimists American English. But this is a statement about politics, not applied linguistics.

To establish the facts about American English, however, is by no means easy. To begin with, one has to pierce a web of stereotyped views which obscure the situation. To many purists, anything that they consider 'wrong' with their language may be ascribed to American influence. There is, for instance, a traditional view that sentences in English ought not to be ended with prepositions, and that to do so is to fall a victim to Americanisation. But whether a sentence should end with a preposition or not is a question of style, not American influence: it was in fact raised as a problem by John Dryden and his contemporaries, who were trying to relate norms of English grammar to those found in Latin – and this was less than a generation after the Pilgrim Fathers landed! It is nothing to do with specifically American English at all, and the topic has in its time been as controversial in the United States as it has in England.

More important than this is the methodological difficulty of distinguishing American from other kinds of English, especially British. How can one be sure that a word borrowed by French, let us say, was borrowed from America directly, and not borrowed from

England (which earlier might have borrowed it from America)? In the absence of detailed etymological study of many of the words involved, it is usually difficult to be sure whether one is talking about British or American influence; and indeed most of the publications on the subject fail to make any such distinction, but talk generally about 'anglicisms' or 'English loan-words', without any further claims about provenance (as in Blancquaert, 1964). The same point applies to the influence of any one language upon another, of course (for example, how many of the loans in Italian have come direct from England, and not via France? cf. Rando, 1969), but it is particularly crucial for the study of English, where currently large numbers of words are involved, and the assumption about Americanisation is so loudly and fiercely voiced (as in Etiemble, 1964).

The difficulty of drawing any consistent distinction can be easily illustrated by listing the words labelled thus in the dictionaries. For example, Giraud et al (1971) distinguish 'americanisms' from 'anglicisms' in their French dictionary. (They also cite a category of 'anglo-americanisms', but give only one example, *poster*!) Apart from this, their lists are:

americanisms:

acculturation, action painting, american way of life, black capitalism, body stocking, boom, brainstorming, building disease, col-blanc, drive-in, drugstore, drugstoriser, musical, play-boy, popart, pop music, reconversion, soul, yippie, zoom

anglicisms:

attaché-case, badge, be-in, best-seller, birth control, boom (sense 2), brain power, check-up, club-house, cool, doping, dressing-room, engineering, establishment, feed-back, flower power, flash, gadget, gap, happening, hardware, has been, house-organ, impulse goods, incentives, jamesbonderie, jet, lay out, leadership, Living Theatre, management, marketing, mass media, merchandising, new-look, new thing, non-stop, package (deal, etc.), panel, patchwork, performance, planning, play-back, remake, rewriting, show, skin-head, smog, software, spot, standing, stress, take off, thriller, timing, togetherness, underground, VIP, workshop

It is impossible to see from these lists what criteria have been used to place, say, *musical* in one category and *flower power* in the other; and perhaps as a result of this problem, most dictionaries, while they often have a label available for marking Americanisms as such, hardly ever use it (as in Harrap's 1970 *French-English Dictionary of Slang and Colloquialisms*).

Having made these cautionary points about the definition of Americanism, it is possible to sidestep the etymological question to a certain extent by adopting a working definition which contains a psycholinguistic principle. By an Americanism, I understand a linguistic usage whose American origins are capable of demonstration (by the usual etymological techniques) and are *still generally recognised in the popular mind*. Thus there is nothing psychologically American any longer for most British people about such words as *briefcase* or *bingo* (listed by Mencken as American), whereas there is generally an active association for such words as *vacation* and *apartment*. On this basis, it is possible to classify Americanisms into five broad categories.

1. Usages where the American term is unused in Britain (it may or may not be understood), though the phenomenon referred to is shared by both, e.g. *sidewalk*, *diaper*.
2. Usages where the term is familiar, but its sense differs in Britain (again, it may or may not be understood), though the phenomenon is shared by both, e.g. *billion*, *block*, *biscuit*, *gas* (= petrol), *trunk* (of a car).
3. Usages where the term or sense refers to an American 'institution' (in the broadest sense, including geographical, political, botanical, etc. phenomena) and could be used in Britain, but only when referring to that institution, e.g. *baseball*, *senator*, *alumnus*, *dollar*.
4. Usages where term, sense and phenomenon are shared, but the occurrence is more normal in the United States than in Britain e.g. *hi*, *can* (of fruit), *French Fries*, *low gear*.
5. Usages where there are still definite overtones of American origin, but there is no obvious difference in frequency of use between Britain and the United States, e.g. *coke* (= coca-cola), *O.K.*

Items will of course shift from one category to another as time passes, and only categories 1-3 provide really clear cases of Americanisms. But even if we restrict ourselves to these usages, there remain a number of unanswered questions to complicate further our discussion of this topic. In particular, it is by no means obvious how many there are, or whether American-British linguistic differences are increasing or diminishing. Most of the published lists of differences are small, and tend to concentrate on certain central topics, e.g. terms belonging to education, cars, foodstuffs. In a radio discussion made jointly for the BBC and the Voice of America a few years ago, Albert Marckwardt and Randolph Quirk took the view

that the sum total of these differences was in fact quite small, and was moreover diminishing.³ Certainly, there is a strong tendency for the American usage to become widely known in England, for obvious reasons to do with the general influence of the popular media; but it should also be pointed out that certain areas of Anglo-American difference have never really been studied, so that currently available lists are certainly underestimates. In particular, there have been few studies of the more colloquial styles of speech, including the idioms and sociolinguistically restricted expressions (as in 'There you go', said by a waitress to a customer at the beginning of a meal); and when one considers the rapid development of new urban dialects, American Negro English, and so on, it seems clear that any claim about the present state of Americanisms is premature. One recent study accumulated some 5,000 British-American lexical differences with little difficulty.

The last methodological clarification concerns the notion of 'usages', in the above classification. So far, the examples have all been of vocabulary. But if we look at American English as a whole, and ask in what respects it might influence another language, then clearly other aspects of language structure need to be considered, not simply vocabulary. As an initial step, four main kinds of linguistic influence can be distinguished: pronunciation, orthography, grammar, and vocabulary. The last is by far the most common process, but the others ought not to be ignored. American influence might thus be demonstrated in European languages if the forms used showed a clearly American usage under any of these headings. For example, if a language borrowed a phrase in which the verb *gotten* appeared, an American source would be immediately apparent, as the British equivalent is *got*. In this way, we could argue for the use of specifically American pronunciations, or spellings (as in *center* instead of *centre*). There are clear examples in vocabulary. In Spanish, the term for 'government', traditionally *Gobierno*, is often replaced by *Administración*, which is evidently American in origin. Likewise, in Norwegian, *truck*, *gasspedal*, *senator*, *convertible*, and *derby* (hat) have all been cited. *Pedala gasa* turns up for 'accelerator' in Serbo-Croatian. *Drugstore* is widely known. And many of the items listed below display American origin in the clear senses of categories 1-3 above.

But not all of them. When one looks dispassionately at the question of American English influence in Europe, bearing this methodological discussion in mind, it does seem possible to make some headway in the task of distinguishing Americanisms from English loans in general. However, when popular attitudes to these loans are taken into account, the distinction becomes blurred, and

indeed is regularly ignored in the foreign press. Most of Europe identifies English as American English, and the criticisms reflect this assumption. It therefore seems important to take the stereotype into account in presenting any analysis of the situation, and as a result the classification below contains examples of English loan-words from both American and British sources, the point being that, whatever the etymological reality, it is quite possible to find any of them – even *pub* – being referred to as an Americanism from time to time.

It is not difficult to classify English loan-words in Europe: the categories will obviously reflect the areas of greatest cultural influence. One may dispute the actual headings used, and sometimes it is difficult to decide into which category an item should go; but some such classification is essential, as the various categories attract different degrees of comment. Sporting terms, for example, are generally assimilated with little comment, whereas some of the consumer terms below have attracted fierce opposition. The examples within each category have all been taken from a real context of use in one of the main languages of Europe; but most of the items are common to all. The spellings given are as in English: they do not reflect the orthographic changes which often apply when a language makes a loan-word conform to its spelling-rules, e.g. *boxing* becoming *boksing* in Norwegian, *goal* becoming *gowl* in Spanish, *whisky* become *güisqui* in Maltese.

1. Sport, including general terms for events, results, standards, etc., as well as items belonging to particular events: *comeback*, *semi-final*, *walkover*; *forward*, *offside*; *deuce*, *volley*; *knockout*, *clinch*; *photo-finish*, *jockey*; *bobsleigh*, *baseball*; *go-kart*, *goalie*.

2. Tourism, transport, geography, etc.: *picnic*, *sightseeing*, *hitchhike*, *stewardess*, *travellers cheques*; *stop*, *motel*, *taxi*, *runway*, *crash-landing*, *agency*, *antifreeze*, *jeep*, *scooter*, *clutch*, *defroster*, *fullspeed*, *joy-riding*; *navy*, *tanker*; *canyon*, *coyote*.

3. Politics, commerce, industry, etc.: *senator*, *briefing*, *goodwill*, *new deal*, *pressure group*; *big business*, *marketing*, *boom*, *top secret*, *lockout*, *sit-down-strike*; *sterling*, *dollar*, *cent*.

4. Culture, entertainment, and the mass media in general: *musical*, *jam session*, *blues*, *boogie woogie*, *top twenty*, *juke-box*, *hi-fi*; *cowboy*, *happy ending*, *Western*, *vista-vision*; *Miss Sweden* (etc.), *pimp*, *striptease*, *brain(s)trust*, *polish*, *show*; *group*, *yeah-yeah-yeah*.

5. People and behaviour: *fair play*, *snob*, *smart*, *ladylike*, *sexy*, *sex appeal*, *crazy*, *cool*; *gangster*, *mob*, *hold-up*; *baby*, *nigger*, *grand old*

man, *cowboy*, *boy scout*, *freelance*, *reporter*, *stand-in*; *doping*, *drugs*, *hash*, *snow*.

6. Consumer society: *jumper*, *make-up*, *nylon*, *derby*; *barkeeper*, *bartender*, *bootlegger*, *smoking*, *grillroom*, *pub*, *snackbar*, *long drink*, *coca cola*, *coke*, *juice*, *cocktail*, *sweet* (wine), *bacon*, *hamburger*, *kingsize*, *ketchup*, *hickory*, *aspirin*; *air conditioner*, *penthouse*, *WC*; *pickup*, *tape*, *LP*; *camera*, *film*, *poker*, *scrabble*; *shopping center*, *supermarket*, *self-service*, *drive-in*; *kleenex*, *Christmas card*; *bestseller*, *lay-out*, *science fiction*, *thriller*, *royalties*; *bulldozer*, *excavator*, *pipeline*.

7. Miscellaneous: *alright*, *OK*, *up-to-date*, *weekend*, *fifty-fifty*.

The influence of English upon grammar is more difficult to trace. It is as a rule uncommon to see loans of any syntactic complexity being introduced into a language, unless they are quotations taken as wholes, or stereotyped expressions (such as *All rights reserved*). The most complex syntactic expressions illustrated above have been compound noun phrases, for example *shopping centre*, *show business*, *angry young man*, *pin-up girl* (all used in Dutch, for instance), or the examples listed at the beginning of this paper from French, to which might be added *eye-liner avec eye-shadow*. An interesting grammatical feature is to see whether a loan-word's inflections accompany it into the foreign language. According to Zandvoort (1967), English verbs in Dutch usually adapt to the Dutch verb inflections (e.g. *fixen*, *relaxen*), whereas nouns often keep their English plurals, as in *drink:drinks* (for Dutch *drank*, pl. *dranken*). German sometimes takes over the English -s (as in *callgirl:callgirls*), sometimes imposes its own pluralization rules (as when nouns in -er stay unchanged in the plural, e.g. *Teenager*, pl. *Teenager*), and sometimes allow both (Carstensen, 1965, cites both *Skilifts* and *Skilifte*, for example). There also seem to be different preferences for loan-words of different classes from language to language – for example, French seems to borrow more -ing forms than other languages (*smoking*, *camping*, *parking*). Italian goes in a great deal for blends using its own system of affixes, e.g. *weekendista*, *pongista* (from 'ping-pong'), *newyorkese*, and the remarkable *cocacolonizzare*, based on 'colonize' (see Klajn, 1972: p.98).

Occasionally, too, it is possible to see more general syntactic pressures operating on the basic grammatical rules of the language, and affecting word order, ellipsis, and other processes. In Spanish, for instance, translations of book-titles from English often show the influence of English syntax: for example, the standard form of 'A study of . . .' would be *Estudio sobre . . .*; but one will often see the

indefinite article used, thus: *Un estudio sobre . . .* Zandvoort (1967) cites a number of instances affecting Dutch. In Dutch, one can use adjectives as nouns more freely than in English, for example, 'the sick man' would normally be *de zieke*; but constructions of the type *de zieke man* are also found, when prompted by some specific equivalent in English (as in the phrase 'the sick man of Europe'). Again, the standard equivalent for 'Waiting for Godot' would be *In afwachting van Godot*; but it has emerged as *Wachten op Godot*. Formulae are also affected; in Spanish a standard invitation might say *El señor X y señora*; but one often nowadays sees *El señor y la señora X*, under the influence of English word order. The process of anglicization of word order, inflection, etc. seems to have been taken to extremes in Yiddish, a Jewish language originating in Germany, and originally displaying many of the features of that language, but now incorporating a great deal of American expression (especially in those dialects used in the United States). Feinsilver (1970) sees this as an inevitable linguistic process, and in fact predicts the change of Judaeo-German to Judaeo-English – and when one considers some of her examples, it seems that that day is not far off (e.g. *Vy you dunt taket a nap? Di baby sleepet already.*).

In spelling and pronunciation, it is usually difficult to see the results of English influence, as the borrowed forms rapidly assimilate to the native language patterns. Consonants and vowels get altered to their nearest values in the native language (e.g. *club* sounds more like 'clop' in Dutch), and new rhythms and intonations take over, so that words are often split up differently from English (Zandvoort cites *folk-lore* becoming *fol-klore* in Dutch). The written form is more resistant to change, but as we have already seen, many words come to be used in the orthographic patterns of the new language. This is only to be expected. European languages are on the whole more 'phonetic' than English – that is, they have a more regular sound-spelling correspondence: words like *sightseeing* would provide major reading difficulties, and they often undergo regularisation and simplification as a result. There are nonetheless types of word which tend not to change – proper names, for instance (e.g. *Lenin* is often seen in Spanish, though the normal rules require *Llenin*). As a result, it is often easier to see Anglo-American influence on a European language than to hear it.

Now that we have looked at the main processes involved in the exercise of English influence abroad, we may return to the central cultural questions. What accounts for the explosion of English loan-words in modern Europe? And how can one explain the ferocity of the objections illustrated at the beginning of this chapter? Let it be said once and for all that there would be no loan-words at issue at

all if some section of the societies involved did not will it. There can be no superimposed plot, with language. Controlled attempts to neologise, to change linguistic habits in the mass, have always failed, as the history of the European Academies of language has shown. So who wants Americanisms? What is their function? No complete analysis has ever been made, but as one reads the relevant studies, it is clear that they have no single, simple purpose.

The obvious reason for their existence, of course, is to point to the universal interest of certain features of the American way of life – sport, music, and so on – which produce a set of values considered to be modern, fashionable, and desirable among the younger, trend-setting generations of European society. To that extent, the criticisms made are as much directed at these values, and the phenomena themselves (pop music and the accompanying behaviour) by people for whom these values do not appeal, as at the language itself. Depending on your point of view, therefore, English loans can be either a good or a bad thing. If you are pro-American, or pro-British, then they will be seen to have a positive role to play in facilitating contact, mutual understanding, and so forth. If you are antipathetic, or anxious to preserve a strong sense of cultural identity for each of the European groups, then English loans will tend to be opposed.

This reasoning accounts for much of the emphasis, perhaps, but it is too much of a simplification to explain everything. Within the general division of opinion referred to, there are more subtle linguistic forces at work shaping popular attitudes to English loans. For one thing, not all loan-words are considered equally good or bad. Most people accept the inevitability of English words being introduced whenever a new term or sense is formed and there are no native equivalents. There is no point in trying to coin an Anglo-Saxon translation of *sputnik* in English, and likewise, when one is faced with a mass of technical or scientific neologisms, or of words expressing notions wholly restricted to America or Britain, objections normally do not arise. The opposition comes when English words are used unnecessarily, in the view of the European speaker, or where his native language is forced out of its normal syntax and idiom. By 'unnecessarily' here, one means cases where the native language already 'has a word for it', or where one could easily have been constructed out of native elements. Lorenzo (1966: 66), for example, objects to words that 'supplant perfectly healthy Spanish words' – for example, replacing *fabrica* by *planta* (for 'factory'), or *en realidad* by *actualmente* (for 'actually'): this for him is 'the object of proper condemnation'. Likewise, Zandvoort (1967) instances the replacement of *maretak* by *mistletoe* in Dutch. It is

cases like these which attract the majority of criticisms, and lead to the violent vocabulary of the opening paragraph of this chapter.⁴

But there are other reasons accounting for the various strengths of criticism which one can observe around Europe. Regardless of one's overall attitude towards the United States, internal factors in a country have a definite role to play in determining whether a country will treat the question with relative equanimity or with ferocity. Doubtless it is a question of personalities as much as anything else. One influential writer (such as Etiemble in France) or group (such as the Society for Pure English in England earlier this century) can promote a national feeling. Without Manuel Criado de Val's weekly programme on Spanish television devoted to language problems, in which the influence of English is regularly criticised, there would be much less noticeable controversy in Spain on this topic. Lorenzo (1966) in fact considers television to be such a significant influence on Spanish attitudes in this respect that he devotes a separate appendix to it. But in addition to this, one might say with some certainty that countries in which a guardian of the purity of the language, in the form of an Academy, is strong, are obviously going to be more articulate in their opposition to loan-words (particularly of the 'unnecessary' kind) than countries where no such institutions exist. Again, countries where there is a low level of teaching about the native language are likely to find a low sensitivity among people towards the kind of language being used and the kind they would like to see.

Then there are more insidious reasons. For example, a correspondent from Spain once argued as follows: 'the press has been used for many years now to hide rather than to inform, for political reasons, and the style of many articles on current affairs is almost incomprehensible even for educated people. The less educated public is therefore likely to regard irregularities in grammatical construction (or foreign loan-words) as something in the same class as the larger number of things that they do not fully understand'. On a different tack, Norman Eliason thinks that:

'the low status accorded American English is due in part to the prejudice against it more or less actively fostered in the schools. Much of this prejudice is a direct consequence of using as the basis of instruction Received Standard, that is, the kind of English which is the birthright of a limited and diminishing class of Englishmen exemplified by Sir Anthony Eden or which is acquired in public schools like Eton.'⁵

And lastly, one might illustrate the widely-held view that English

words give a 'snob value' to the 'upper middle-class' foreigner's use of his language, and criticism thus varies in proportion to the survival of such a class in European society. (This must be similar, one supposes, to the larding of one's own speech with expressions such as *élan*, *joie de vivre*, *sine qua non*, etc.) This is something which has been claimed by Gooch (1971) in relation to Spanish; and also by a Danish commentator in the Norwegian *Morgenbladet* (28 October 1960), who argued: 'the exaggerated use of English words, where Norwegian words are just as good, seems snobbish . . . and it leads to ludicrous situations where people are compelled to use words which they can neither pronounce nor understand'.

But not everyone is critical. The market researchers, for example, have had a great deal to say about the merits of English loans. It was reported in the Norwegian paper *Aftenposten* (25 October 1960), for example, that a Finnish firm sent out some coffee for the home market in tins with a Finnish text. Sales were poor. The firm then had new labels made with a text in English on the same tins, and sales rocketed. Again, Zandvoort (1967) reports on a case where the leader of a youth club in a Dutch town obtained a considerable increase in the active interest of the boys once he had given his club an English name. This kind of association of ideas is of course quite universal – witness in English the use of French for names of restaurants, night-clubs, and so on – but it is certainly a major process in the impact of English abroad.

Who, then, can claim the credit, or (depending on the point of view) take the responsibility for the English invasion? According to the Norwegian paper *Dagbladet* (30 January 1960), 'journalists at the news agencies bear the chief responsibility for the ruination of our language', and it cites examples of English proper-names for geographical areas being used instead of those already available in Norwegian, e.g. *Jutland* for *Jylland*. Certainly the influence of the major international news agencies, such as API and Reuters, should not be underestimated here, as a large proportion of the items in the European press comes via these agencies, and translation standards bend before deadlines. But it is not as simple as this. Some papers, such as *Der Spiegel*, seem to go out of their way to use American expressions; for others, the opposite is the case. To discover why would involve us in an excursus into the sociology of journalism. But there are in any case other factors, which do not involve the press at all. For example, it has been argued that a main source of influence is the specialist (especially the student) abroad, who, having learned a specialism with all its accompanying vocabulary and slang, returns to his native country to find no equivalents for this knowledge, and introduces the English terms as needed – a tendency to be discerned

as much in television production as in biochemistry. Or again, it is said that there are more English loans used in countries that have had a high and relatively regular rate of emigration to the United States. Some also claim that English has gained favour, especially since the Second World War, in some countries as a less pernicious alternative to being swamped by German. Norman Eliason, in almost jingoistic vein,⁶ considers the direct influence of Americans in Europe – in particular the G.I. – to be particularly significant.

Even from this brief survey, it should be clear that the influence of American English on European languages is a complex phenomenon, and one which can hardly be studied separately from a vast array of cultural, national and political factors. But there are no grounds here for an Anglo-American linguistic chauvinism. With increased commitment by Britain to Europe, large-scale borrowings *from* the main European languages are inevitable, and have already begun.⁷ Randolph Quirk made the point succinctly, in a 1970 conference in Luxembourg sponsored by the London Institute of Linguists: 'where anxious purists in France have been deploring *Franglais* in recent years, we shall perhaps hear retired colonels in Britain complain of the 'Fringlish' or 'Engleutsch' which is drowning the native wood notes wild'. Fifty years ago, recalling Sapir, the influence of English in Europe had hardly been noticed either.