

American English, in a very broad perspective

Gunnel Tottie. 2002. *An Introduction to American English*.
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REVIEW ARTICLE BY JOHAN ELSNESS

In this very welcome new publication Gunnel Tottie sets out to present the American variety of the English language on its own terms, as she says. She reacts against what she sees as the prevailing tendency in textbooks intended for foreign learners: to take British English as the starting-point for the description of English, sometimes noting particular American forms and constructions, in so far as they are noted at all, as a kind of aberration. Tottie starts from the other end: her concern is with American English, but she makes frequent comparison with British English, which is the variety that many, perhaps most, of her potential readers will be most familiar with. In Tottie's new book there are no listings of 'Americanisms'. Instead she uses the term 'Briticism' to designate forms and constructions which occur in British but not in American English.

In many ways the strong position of British, at the expense of American, English is an anomalous situation. After all, the population of America – the United States, that is – is many times the size of the British population, and speakers of American English correspondingly more numerous. Today the United States is the one and only undisputed superpower. For a long time now America has definitely been a more powerful country than Britain, in political, economic and military terms. American popular culture dominates the world as no other culture has ever done: people around the globe watch American television, go to see American films, listen to American pop music, put on American jeans, eat American hamburgers. And yet it is

probably still true that most of the people who struggle to learn English as a foreign language are trained in the British variety.

There are some pretty obvious reasons for this. Even though the American media predominance is now a worldwide fact, it is also true that British popular culture makes itself felt, on a global scale, to a much larger extent than that of any other European country. British television is being watched in all corners of the world much more than, say, German or French television. A lot of the pop music that people everywhere – young and not so young – hum and dance to is distinctly British rather than American, as are many of the leading pop groups – young and not so young. MTV (Music Television, for the uninitiated) has long had its own European branch, with presenters of various sorts definitely speaking British rather than American English, even though their accents may be pretty far removed from the RP still dominant in European English teaching.

There also seem to be very different publishing traditions in Britain and the United States in the field of language teaching material. English teaching, especially at the fairly elementary level, is big international business. Somewhat surprisingly, perhaps, America still has not discovered this market to the extent that many of the leading British publishing houses have. As anyone who has had a chance to compare American and British academic bookshops firsthand will have noticed, British ones have a lot more to offer, also in the field of practical English teaching and learning. It is striking that in this field there will usually be a strong British presence even in American bookshops. And even though many dictionaries and introductory grammar books will now make a point of including American as well as British expressions, British publications still tend to concentrate on British English, as one might expect. To some extent this is a reflection of the stronger position of the British variety of the language in the teaching of English. No doubt it also helps to perpetuate that position.

In this respect, however, a lot has changed only in the course of the past decade or so. Several Standard English dictionaries published in Britain now deal with American as well as British English. These include the *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* by John Wells from 1990, and also the latest (15th) edition of the *English Pro-*

nouncing Dictionary dating back to Daniel Jones. Both of these consistently give American as well as British pronunciations. And if one looks up a well-known American/British lexical pair like *sidewalk/pavement* in the 9th edition of the Concise Oxford Dictionary, one finds that it does the decent thing and characterises *sidewalk* as North American, meaning 'pedestrian path at the side of a road; a pavement'; while, conversely, the first sense of *pavement* is described as British and defined as 'a paved path for pedestrians at the side of and a little higher than a road', another sense being characterised as North American, meaning 'roadway'.

This is in fact better than the treatment of *sidewalk* in one of the innumerable modern American dictionaries exploiting the name Webster in its title, the *Random House Webster's College Dictionary*. Here this word is simply defined as 'a usually paved walk at the side of a roadway', with no geographical restrictions being indicated. On the other hand, the same dictionary not only distinguishes between American and British in its treatment of *pavement* but even introduces a noteworthy subdivision of American English: one sense of this word is said to be current in the Atlantic States (of the United States, that is) *and* Britain and defined simply as 'sidewalk'.

Also, the lack of balance in the international standing of the two varieties should not be exaggerated. Outside Europe, not least in Japan and other countries of the Far East, American English now seems to be enjoying a status at least equal to that of the British variety, but then the American influence has long been strong along the whole of the Pacific rim, while Britain must appear correspondingly distant.

There is no denying, however, that on the whole the British variety of English enjoys a position relative to that of American English which is clearly out of proportion to the relative size and political, economic and cultural importance of Britain compared with the United States.

In some measure this difference is observable even within these two countries. Americans themselves often seem to look upon British English as more prestigious, more educated, even more 'correct', than their own variety of the language. But then Americans generally do not seem overly interested in their own language. The English

language tends to be seen as a means of communication, and only that, and to receive scant attention as a worthy object of study. This attitude is reflected even in academic circles and institutions: English departments in American universities, if they have one, usually devote themselves to modern literature, cultural studies, and possibly Old and Middle English. Modern English language 'programs', if offered at all, are often distinctly applied and practical, consisting largely of guidance for essay writing. And the linguistics departments of American universities tend to be so theoretically bent that little or no attention can be directed towards the study of how the English language is actually used by its speakers and writers, let alone how the two major varieties of the language may differ in speech and writing. These things tend to play a more important part in European universities, both in Britain and in the non-native speaking countries outside; even in the latter not only English language teaching but also English language research is often given higher priority than at many American academic institutions.

It should not be overlooked, however, that there is a long and strong tradition of language involvement in the United States. This goes back all the way to the birth of the new nation towards the end of the 18th century. Indeed, at that time there seems to have been a strong feeling that the United States ought to distance and liberate herself from Britain also in the field of language. Benjamin Franklin urged spelling reform, and even wanted to introduce a new alphabet, putting out his *Scheme for a New Alphabet and a Reformed Mode of Spelling* in 1768. Noah Webster was somewhat more cautious, but when he published his famous – and enormously influential – 'spelling book' in 1783, he wrote in the preface that he intended the book 'to promote the honour and prosperity of the confederated republics of America', and that 'For America in her infancy to adopt the present maxims of the old world, would be to stamp the wrinkles of decrepid age upon the bloom of youth ...'. (Webster is quoted from Baugh and Cable 2002: 367-368.) In his *Dissertations on the English language* from 1789 Webster says 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, should no longer be *our* standard; for the taste

of her writers is already corrupted, and her language on the decline.' And in a letter written in 1817 Webster predicted that in the course of time one would see 'a language in North America, as different from the future language of England, as the Modern Dutch, Danish and Swedish are from the German, or from one another.'

Webster's linguistic patriotism mellowed in the years that followed, however, as the independent status of the new nation became more firmly established, and possibly also as the result of his spending a year in England. By the time he put out his big *American Dictionary* in 1828, he had come round to the view that 'although the body of language is the same as in England, and it is desirable to perpetuate that sameness, yet some differences must exist.'

As is well known, Webster himself was the chief source of many of the spelling differences between American and British English that still exist, and even of some spellings that have been adopted in British English (such as *logic* and *music* without a final 'k'). He was also very conscious of the significance of the spoken word: both his spelling book and his dictionary give firm guidance in matters of pronunciation as well. He rejected 'corrupt' British pronunciations like /'fɒrɪd/ (*forehead*) and /'wesɪt/ (*waistcoat*). Even in matters of pronunciation Webster's influence has been considerable, although this influence is more difficult to measure than that on orthography.

A century after Webster American linguistic patriotism reached a new climax with the publication of H.L. Mencken's *The American Language*, whose first edition in 1919 coincided with America's successful emergence from the First World War as an undisputed member of the company of big powers. As the title suggests, Mencken, like the early Webster, insisted on the language of America being a separate language, rather than an English dialect. Mencken also followed Webster, however, in moderating his views over the years, with every successive edition of *The American Language*, but both the title and Mencken's fundamental view of the superiority of things American in general, and the American language in particular, remained unaltered.

However, the 20th century also saw the development of a more sober and more scholarly tradition in the study of the English language in America, by Americans. *The English Language in America* by George P. Krapp, which appeared in 1925, belongs in this tradition. Comparison with Mencken's title is instructive. The successful journal *American Speech* has been published from about the same time. And it should not be forgotten that the American Dialect Society had been founded as early as in 1889.

In 1958 Albert H. Marckwardt published his *American English*. The title is an indication of what has since definitely become the prevailing attitude, at least in academic circles: American and British are seen as two different (but equal) varieties of the one, English, language. That is very much the view adopted by both sides in a series of radio conversations about the English language produced jointly by the Voice of America and the BBC a few years later, between Marckwardt and his English professor colleague Randolph Quirk (subsequently published in book form as Marckwardt and Quirk 1964). Here the two professors converse in a very gentlemanly manner about what they insist is one and the same language, emphasising that the differences are fewer and less significant than they had often been made out to be.

1958 also saw the appearance of a grammar of American English by someone who was to have a profound influence on the further study of both American and British English, and on language studies generally: *The Structure of American English* by W. Nelson Francis, who died earlier this year, after a very full life dedicated especially to the study of the English language. The most important of his many contributions towards that end was the Brown Corpus, which he compiled in the early 1960s, along with another professor at Brown University, Henry Kuçera. The Brown Corpus is made up of a wide variety of American texts, all having appeared in print in the United States in 1961, totalling what at the time was seen as a very impressive 1 million words. It marked the beginning of a new era in the description and study of the English language. Especially after the compilation of a close British English equivalent (LOB: the London – Oslo/Bergen Corpus) had been brought to completion in Norway some years later, under the direction of Professor Stig Jo-

hansson, this put a fantastic new tool for the comparison of American and British English in our hands.

The years which have passed since the appearance of the Brown Corpus in the 1960s have seen a true revolution in office technology, a revolution which has done more to advance language studies than most other arts subjects. Language scholars in general, but especially those concentrating on the study of the English language, can now benefit from the desk-top availability of a large variety of electronic corpora, some of them hundreds of times the size of Brown and LOB.

This has resulted in an enormous proliferation of studies dealing with differences large and small between American and British English, as witness the very full Bibliography appearing at the back of Tottie (2002). Quite likely this has contributed further to the acknowledgement that American and British are equal varieties of the same language. A notable publication where this attitude is taken to its logical conclusion is the major new grammar of the English language by Biber et al. (1999), which consistently gives parallel corpus findings for American and British English. From the American side numerous contributions to the study of American/British differences had already been made by John Algeo, who has often concentrated on lexical points but even looked into some of the most notable grammatical differences (see e.g. Algeo 1988 and 1992). Many of the studies made of American/English differences up to the early 1980s are included in the references of Peters and Swan (1983).

And now there is Tottie (2002). Tottie approaches the topic of American English with a broader sweep than probably any writer has done before. Yes, there are the expected chapters on vocabulary and grammar, on spelling and pronunciation, but Tottie's new book contains a lot more. For instance, there is a separate chapter on American history, and one on government. The full list of chapter headings says a lot about how comprehensive this book is: 1 'Writing It and Saying It', 2 'American History for Language Students', 3 'Running America: Government and Education', 4 'Life and Language in the United States', 5 'American English Vocabulary: A Systematic View', 6 '*Caught Out* or *Caught Off Base*? Metaphors in American English', 7 'The Grammar of American English', 8 'Using English

in the United States', 9 'Varieties of American English', and 10 'Language Politics in the United States: English and Other Languages'.

Tottie adopts this very wide approach to the study of American English because, in her own words, she is 'convinced that it is impossible to use any natural language without a good knowledge of the culture and the social life that it both reflects and shapes.' (p. 5) So true. And yet it is very rare indeed to find all these various aspects of language usage treated in one and the same book, if it has ever happened at such an advanced level. Tottie (2002) will be particularly useful for students – and teachers, not least – with a pretty sound grounding in British English who want to know more about the American variety. It does not presuppose any very sophisticated knowledge of modern linguistics, and so should appeal to a wide audience, certainly not limited to professional language experts.

One of the many attractive features of this publication is that it contains copious suggestions for further study. At the end of each chapter there is a list of recommended reading, and in some cases also of relevant websites, for example of websites containing corpora that may be used to look more closely into points of American/British differences. This new book should therefore be very useful also in a classroom situation, at university and other advanced levels, with plenty of ideas for students to pursue.

The first chapter following the introduction, 'Writing It and Saying It', contains the expected listings of words that are spelt or pronounced differently in the two varieties. It is difficult to get excited by such listings, but they are a necessity in a book of this kind. Any such presentation runs the risk of making the differences out to be more clear-cut than they really are. Tottie avoids most of these risks, noting for example that 'grey' (the colour, or lack of it) as well as 'gray' are found in American English, while only the former is common in British English. She might also have noted, for example, that 'check' is common nowadays even in British English, and indeed the only accepted spelling in several uses. Merely to be told that 'cheque' is the British equivalent of American 'check' is misleading in these days when the use of chequebooks seems to be rapidly declining

on both sides of the Atlantic, while both Americans and Europeans seem as intent as ever on checking in many other contexts.

Besides these and a vast number of other individual spelling differences, all the well-known, more systematic differences are noted, many of them dating back to Noah Webster: thus *-or* vs. *-our* (*colo(u)r*, *hono(u)r*); *-er* vs. *-re* (*theatreltheatre*, *center|centre*); single vs. double 'l' before endings (*marvel(l)ous*, *travel(l)ed*); and many more.

In her listing of words which are pronounced differently in American versus British English Tottie again takes care to include alternative forms in either variety. Here, too, she might have been even more inclusive. For instance, the pronunciation of 'garage' with the stress on the final syllable seems to be pretty widespread in (RP) British as well as in American English, while 'm(o)ustache' appears to be common with the stress on the final syllable even in American English.

Of course, Tottie also deals with the more systematic pronunciation differences between American and British English. Chief among these is the American tendency to pronounce the letter 'r' no matter what its position is in the word, as was the case in earlier English, when present spelling conventions were settled, and still is in lots of British accents other than RP. Most Americans say /kɑːˈt/ (*cart*) and /kɑː/ (*car*), where RP has /kɑːt/ and /kɑː/, except when the latter word is immediately followed by the vowel sound of another word. That is what is meant by saying that General American is *rhotic* (after the Greek letter 'rho', corresponding to Latin 'r'), while RP is non-rhotic.

Again there is plenty of variation, however: not only are many British dialects still rhotic; what may not be so well known is that there is also a great deal of variation within American English. Quite a few Americans actually have a non-rhotic accent. In her chapter on varieties of American English (ch. 9) Tottie states without further ado that this is true of the speech of Eastern New England, which is a vast area, including Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Maine, New Hampshire, and parts of Vermont and Connecticut. The real picture seems to be quite a bit more varied, as visitors to that part of the United States may have noticed. According to Wells (1982: 520-

522), Eastern New England has never been wholly non-rhotic, and has become even less so in the course of the 20th century.

One of the interesting features of Tottie's introduction to American English is the inclusion of separate chapters on topics usually dealt with in civilisation rather than language studies. At the beginning of the history chapter Tottie restates her view that it 'is impossible to understand any natural language without knowing something about the country or countries where it is spoken and the living conditions that prevail there. This includes a knowledge of geography, history, government and education.' (p. 25) True to her convictions, Tottie sets out to provide her reader with a suitable introduction to each of these topics as they relate to American English. The result is that this book has a history chapter almost as long (28 pages) as the grammar chapter (33 pages), and a further chapter on government and education. Throughout, a lot of the attention is focused on words and expressions which were coined in, or affected by, the various historical and other settings dealt with, many of these words and expressions still being peculiar to the American variety of the English language.

As far as the history chapter is concerned, it goes without saying that, even though the United States has a shorter history than many other countries, a historical introduction in the space of 28 pages will have to concentrate on the main events and trends. In the view of the present writer, Tottie does a better job with the early stages of American history than she does with the more recent ones. To some extent this is connected with the general challenge that historians face in giving a balanced, objective account of past events: the more recent the events, the greater the temptation to let the account be coloured by one's own political and ideological standpoint.

Tottie starts off by giving a vivid and engaging presentation of America in colonial times, and not least of the momentous events of the American Revolution towards the end of the 18th century. With the Declaration of Independence and the signing of the American Constitution by the thirteen former English colonies these were developments that were to have a profound impact on the further development not only of America herself but also on that of many

other parts of the world, Europe in particular. Tottie gives the reader a strong impression of the tremendous energy which the new nation thus demonstrated, and which further resulted in the rapid economic and territorial expansion of the 19th century. Parts of the Declaration of Independence are reproduced, in a full-page box, and maps set out the dates when the various territories were acquired which were eventually to span the continent, and the dates when the various states achieved their statehood.

The darker sides of the young nation, especially slavery and the drift towards civil war, also receive their due attention. As is made very clear by Tottie, the Civil War (1861-1865) did not solve all of America's problems. She dwells on the problems that continued to beset the country, focusing on race relations and urban poverty. It is all very well that a book of this kind does not fall into the trap of painting an overly positive picture of the country with which it is concerned, but some readers will feel that in parts of her historical presentation Tottie overcompensates by devoting too much of her attention to the problems, to the neglect of some of the more positive developments in American history. The 50 years from the American Civil War to the First World War was after all a period which established the United States as a world power, as the result not least of a continuing, and indeed accelerating, economic development. That economic development certainly had its less palatable side as well, but it is also a further manifestation of the tremendous energy which the United States had demonstrated from the outset.

This aspect of American history gets short shrift in Tottie's account. There are no Rockefellers or Carnegies in her version of American history. True, her section on America 'After the Civil War' (which is the final section of the historical chapter!) does include a short subsection entitled 'Industrial and financial expansion; immigration' but that is confined to a very brief account of the building of railways and some rather summary immigration statistics. Tottie hastens on to deal with 'Social problems and labor relations' and 'The women's movement'. A reader of the latter half of Tottie's account of American history might be excused for wondering what it really was that made America great (in at least one sense

of that word), to the extent that Tottie and many other people feel that the American variety of the English language deserves more attention. Whatever it was that made America great – and, yes, admired by so many people around the globe – it can hardly be said to have been her handling of race relations.

One final note on the historical chapter: in a section on 'Religious movements and Fundamentalism' Tottie offers what amounts to a rather sensational redefinition of Christianity. Apparently eager to distance herself from Fundamentalists of all stripes she describes Fundamentalist Christians as people who not only refuse to accept Darwinian theories of evolution but who still believe in the virgin birth of Jesus and his bodily resurrection (pp. 46-47)! According to the final part of this definition, mainstream Christians of most denominations will end up as Fundamentalists, which is hardly in agreement with the standard use of that term.

Other than that, church and religious activities constitute an area of American life which is conspicuous by its absence in Tottie (2002), in spite of the fact that Americans are often said to be more religious than many other people. It is certainly true that church attendance is much higher than in most European countries, and that organised religion enters into the lives of many Americans in numerous other ways. Yet this is a field of life, and a field of language, which Tottie hardly touches upon.

If there is a close link between American history and many vocabulary items which are peculiar to American English, the link between language and culture is no less striking in the area covered by the next chapter: government and education. In this chapter Tottie gives a very full presentation both of the American political system, so different from that of Britain and many other countries, and of American education, from kindergarten to university. We are introduced to the federal system of government, and learn what levels American schools are divided into, and what grades (rather than marks) are used. The US Constitution is dealt with in some detail, as are some of the Amendments. In the course of this description a welter of terms are introduced and explained. We are reminded that a public school in America is very different from one in Britain, and that the

faculty of an American university is not at all the same as in Britain and other European countries. More subtle differences between American and British English are also explained, such as the nuances distinguishing between the use of 'government' and 'administration'.

Some readers will not like everything they read, as for instance in a passage on the political parties in the United States. These are described as follows: 'Very roughly speaking, the Republican Party is now the party of conservative, often well-educated, well-to-do people, and the Democratic Party is the party that represents the interests of the masses, the less well-educated, lower income groups, women, and ethnic and other minorities' (p. 59). Obviously, in a very brief introduction like this one will have to simplify, but this is an oversimplification so gross as to be pretty worthless. Democrats would certainly have reason to rejoice if they really were the party of women – half the electorate – in addition to all those other groups. This description further belies the interesting fact some of the best educated of all Americans (university – and college – professors not excepted!) now vote Democratic more heavily than almost any other group.

And what does Tottie really mean by saying, in a comment on primary elections, that the presidential candidates 'must first be *endorsed* (publicly approved) by labor unions, professional associations, etc.' (p. 60)? Does she want to tell us that the unions have a veto on the selection on presidential candidates in the United States?

The concentration on vocabulary becomes even more predominant in the next chapter, that on 'Life and Language in the United States'. Here one will find most of the terms one may possibly need to communicate sensibly about holidays, eating, shopping and paying, living quarters, what to wear, getting around, and even place names and personal names. There is a very useful figure explaining the rather bewildering terms used for weights and measures in the US and Britain, where for good measure (and sometimes bad measurement) the same terms are sometimes used but with different meanings. Thus, we are reminded that a US gallon is not the same as a British gallon (3.785 and 4.546 litres, respectively!). Hence – and this is something a European visitor needs to note – a US pint is not that same as a British pint, since in both cases a pint is 1/8 gal-

lon. So everything is not big in America. The chapter on life and language contains a wealth of practical language information of this kind, explained in the right cultural context (although I think I know of a better – and more accurate – way of converting between Fahrenheit and centigrade – personal communication recommended).

Then Tottie turns to linguistics proper, in the chapter entitled 'American English Vocabulary: A Systematic View'. In this chapter she discusses American vocabulary according to a number of linguistic criteria. Differences between American and British English are classified into four types, according as a word has basically the same meaning, differing in style, connotation or frequency only, or whether it has developed more clearly distinct meanings, or even is used only in one variety. A lot of the attention in this chapter is focused on the formation of new words. On the basis of figures from Algeo and Algeo (1991) Tottie demonstrates that loanwords account for only a very small fraction of the new words making their way into American English during the fifty years from 1941 to 1991. In fact, a clear majority (68 per cent, to be exact) of these new words are the result of combining words already existent in the language (*car pool, pre-owned*), although the figures one arrives at here will obviously be highly dependent on the exact definition of the term 'word' that is adopted. Slang gets a separate subsection, although Tottie is eager to dismiss the idea that slang is a particularly American concept, or that slang is more common in American English than in other languages and dialects.

Even in this chapter the practical concerns of the language student are well taken care of: there is a useful subsection at the beginning of the chapter addressing the question 'How can we find out about differences between American and British English?' – where the answer refers the reader to corpora and dictionaries – and an equally useful listing of some of the relevant dictionaries and corpora at the end.

In the chapter on metaphors Tottie observes that the use of metaphors is nature- and culture-specific (p. 132). Hence it is not surprising to find that metaphors to do with money and business are particularly common in American English, described by Tottie as 'the land of free enterprise, the home of capitalism'. Apparently,

speakers of all varieties of English may now say things like 'Do you buy that?' or 'I'll buy that.', but generally expressions involving buying and selling seem to be used metaphorically to a larger extent in America than in other countries. The dollar itself makes frequent appearances in metaphorical expressions: 'You look like a million dollars.' is an unmistakable compliment. Sadly, metaphors involving shooting and the use of guns are also very common in American English, for the same sort of reason. 'A shotgun wedding' is one resulting from parental pressure because the bride is pregnant, an expression said to derive from the times when the groom might have been shot by the girl's father if he did not make an honest woman of her (p. 142) (whenever those times may have been). In this as in the other chapters innumerable words and expressions are introduced and explained, in the sense that the historical/cultural background for their adoption in American English is described.

At the beginning of the grammar chapter Tottie notes that there are far fewer grammatical differences between American and British English than vocabulary differences. This is explained by the fact that while the vocabulary of a language has to change and adapt in order to handle new phenomena and new circumstances, the grammar does not need to change in the same way to reflect a changing reality. Even so, there are more than enough grammatical differences to fill the 33 pages set aside for this topic in Tottie's new book. It is not always obvious where the line of division between vocabulary – or lexis – and grammar should be drawn, and some of the points made by Tottie in this chapter are definitely of the lexicogrammatical kind, i.e. they refer to individual lexical items – words, in most cases – and their grammatical behaviour rather than to wholesale grammatical categories.

The more obvious grammatical differences are not all that numerous. Some of the most notable ones concern article usage, especially with nouns denoting institutions (*hospital, university*), where Americans are more likely to use the definite article: 'She had to go to *the* hospital.', which Americans can easily say even if she went there to be admitted as a patient; the behaviour of so-called collective nouns (*government, family*), especially as regards the choice be-

tween singular and plural verbs, Americans sticking more strictly to grammatical concord, using singular verbs; the use of the so-called mandative subjunctive, which is more common in the American variety ('She insisted that Joan do it.'). while British speakers are more likely to use a modal construction ('She insisted that Joan should do it.').; and the choice between the present perfect and the preterite verb forms, the preterite being (even) more frequent in American English (cf. 'Alexia already paid.' vs. 'Alexia has already paid.').

These, and many more, grammatical differences are reviewed. Since so many differences are to be taken up in a fairly short chapter, the treatment will of necessity have to be rather summary in most cases. Sometimes one wishes that Tottie had offered a little more detail about some of the major grammatical differences, and rather saved some of the space she devotes to some of the other points. For example, one may question whether many potential readers of this book really need to be reminded quite so laboriously of the basic rules of negation and interrogation operating in English; most of them probably know already that neither American nor British English can have *'He boughtn't a car.' or *'Buys he a home?'. On the other hand, the present writer would particularly have liked to see a somewhat more thorough treatment of the opposition between the present perfect and the preterite. Here the difference between American and British usage is certainly not limited to constructions with adverbs of the set *ever, never, already, just, yet*, but we are not told much about these further differences (as one is, for instance, in Elsness 1990 and 1997).

In the next chapter Tottie moves from grammar to what can be broadly termed pragmatics, largely concentrating on appropriate language usage in various spoken contexts in the US: on what is proper linguistic behaviour on the telephone, in shops and restaurants, etc. etc. Linguistic politeness, the desire not to cause offence by choosing the wrong word or phrase, is one of her main concerns, as evidenced throughout this book. In this particular chapter she devotes a lot of attention to answering the question how to avoid offending ethnic and sexual minorities, and above all to need to avoid what is nowadays called sexist language. (Tottie herself ad-

dresses the question of excessive political correctness on pp. 203-204. It is reassuring to be told that she dismisses the idea of replacing 'history' with 'herstory'!

The chapter on varieties of American English deals with both regional and social dialects, and above all with ethnic varieties – mostly Black English, or, as Tottie prefers to call it: African American Vernacular English (AAVE) – which are actually allotted more space than traditional regional dialects.

In the final chapter Tottie reminds us that, although English is the predominant language of the United States, it is not the only one: there are several hundred other languages still in use in the US today, many of them Native American languages, some of them immigrant languages, Spanish being predominant among these. She further introduces the reader to current language-political issues in the United States, particularly to what is often referred to as the 'English only' debate.

It is commonly acknowledged that languages cannot be studied or learnt in isolation from the cultures in which they are spoken. What are rather more rare are publications taking the full consequences of this realisation. Tottie's new book is a splendid demonstration that it can be done. It will prove a very useful tool for people wishing to improve their competence in the American variety of the English language. There ought to be many of those people.

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