

GUNNEL TOTTIE. **An Introduction to American English.** 2002. Oxford: Blackwell. Pp. xx, 293.

According to the two well-known endorsers of the book on the back cover (Jean Aitchison of Oxford University and Peter Trudgill of Fribourg University), this is a good treatise. To a large extent, I would agree with them. To the former, the sections dealing with American culture are useful, while the latter stresses the significance of the material on the interface between American English and American society. My own point of view is critical of much of the nonlinguistic matter included as not really germane to the major subject at hand, even though I am a firm believer that there is a strong relationship between language and culture (see further below).

Let me begin with the term "American English." The author endeavors to make a case that Canadian and Caribbean English are varieties of American English: "Logically of course, Canadian English and the varieties spoken in and around the Caribbean are also varieties of American English, but I have not included any of those varieties, for several reasons" (p. 2). I do not agree with this point of view -- the designation "American English" can only refer to the English spoken in the United States of America, or a US possession or territory (such as Puerto Rico, American Samoa, or the US Virgin Islands). It certainly does not refer to Canadian English or the English of Jamaica, Saint Lucia, or Saint Maarten.

Let me next take up the matter of "Standard American English" or "Network English" -- the main topic of this volume, according to the author (p. 3). The only problem with these designations is that it is impossible to say precisely what they are or are not, or even if they exist. Even the author points out, after all, that some news anchors on American national TV have "traces of regional accents, e.g. Peter Jennings (Canadian) and Dan Rather (Southern)" (p. 23, note 2).

Chapters 2 and 3 deal with American history and government and are not germane to the

theme of the work (pp. 25-68). Also, reading about faculty members at a university (pp. 66-67) is not relevant for “An Introduction to American English.” The same may be said concerning material on “junior” colleges – a term which is largely obsolete today anyway (p. 67). Incidentally, some of the information given is arcane; e.g. that former university male students are known as alumni, whereas females are known as alumnae. In my experience, alumni is by far the more common term for both sexes (ibid.).

Chapter 4, “Life and Language in the United States” (pp. 69-92), has too much information which is irrelevant to the task at hand. Why does a book purporting to be on American English discuss all the US legal holidays? Does a linguist seeking knowledge of American English need to know about Martin Luther King Day? Even many American citizens know little or nothing at all of this holiday, which the author tells us falls on the third Monday of January. Further, the material on cuisine, while interesting, could have also been eliminated (pp. 71-76). Even here, I disagree with some of the interconnected linguistic facts; e.g. “Various Jewish restaurants [are known] as delis” (p. 72), and “English muffins are not muffins” (p. 73). Many delicatessens display nothing Jewish, and for me (a native speaker from California), English muffins are certainly muffins, just as a slice of bread may be white, rye, pumpernickel, or whole wheat, etc.

The material on American English includes a discussion of vocabulary (Chapter 5, pp. 93-129), metaphors (Chapter 6, pp. 130-145), grammar (Chapter 7, pp. 146-178), colloquialisms (Chapter 8, entitled “Using English in the United States,” pp. 179-205), and varieties (Chapter 9, pp. 206-231). The last chapter is also tangential – on language politics (English and other languages, pp. 232-246).

Finally, let me mention the matter of political correctness (pp. 203-204). Using “vertically challenged” for “short” or “woperson” for “woman” (p. 203) is, in my view, extremely rare, and

endorsing this coinage, as the author does, is wrought with nonscientific underpinnings. She naively asserts: "We may laugh at this kind of joke, but it is important to remember that language not only contributes to shaping our view of the world but often determines our attitudes and opinions. If we want to change negative stereotypes we need to show respect for other people in our use of words as well as in our actions" (p. 204).

The tome contains a glossary of linguistic terminology (pp. 255-259), but terms such as "bilingual" are hardly necessary. There are very few typographical errors in the publication. One such is the word "language" with a final w (p. 197).

ALAN S. KAYE
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