

Exploring Grammatical Colloquialisation in Non-Native English

Xinyue Yao (Renmin University of China, China) and Peter Collins
(University of New South Wales, Australia)

Colloquialisation, a process by which "writing becomes more like speech", has been identified as a powerful discourse-pragmatic mechanism driving grammatical change in English. To this day, the study of colloquialisation has been largely restricted to native English varieties, in particular British and American English (BrE and AmE). Until recently, possible manifestations of colloquialisation in non-native English varieties have not been investigated in detail. This gap has been partially addressed in a 2014 issue of the *Journal of English Linguistics* compiled by Noël, Van der Auwera and Van Rooy. Focusing on expressions of modality in English, the contributions to this issue examine convergences and divergences between Philippine English (PhilE) and its historical input variety, AmE (Collins et al. 2014), and between Black South African English and its native counterpart in the same contact setting (Van Rooy & Wasserman 2014). Further extending our understanding of the evolution of non-native English is the volume edited by Collins (2015), which presents diachronic analyses of several non-native varieties. However, as far as colloquialisation is concerned, the results of existing studies are very mixed and far from conclusive as they focus on the changing patterns of use of only a handful of grammatical features.

In this paper we further discuss the role of colloquialisation in non-native English by reporting the findings of a comprehensive, comparative corpus-based study of PhilE and AmE in the second half of the 20th century. We measure colloquialisation by employing a data-driven approach and relying on the term "colloquiality", which we use to refer to a combination of the degree of preference for linguistic features more typical of speech ("colloquial features"), and the degree of dispreference for linguistic features more typical of writing ("anti-colloquial features"). Our data consist of corpus texts sampled from the following corpora: (1) the Philippine and American components of the International Corpus of English (ICE-Phil and ICE-US); (2) the Santa Barbara Corpus of spoken American English (SBC); (3) the Brown Corpus, and (4) its Philippine counterpart, Phil-Brown. Together the sampled texts represent two time periods, the 1960s and the 1990s, and a wide range of spoken and written registers. Based on such data, we derived an operationalised measure of colloquiality, itself a summary of 18 colloquial features and 8 anti-colloquial features, by conducting ANOVAs for 87 (lexico-)grammatical features that have been shown by existing studies to be implicated in the general speech-writing divide.

To compare degrees of colloquialisation in PhilE and AmE, we applied our measure of colloquiality to a diachronic, parallel corpus of PhilE and AmE. As a

subsection of our entire dataset, this corpus consists of three written registers with distinct situational characteristics, press editorials, learned writing and fiction. An analysis of colloquiality reveals several noteworthy patterns. Regarding register variation, we find that the three registers are not drastically different in their use of colloquial features. Rather, the most remarkable difference on a global level lies in the frequencies of anti-colloquial features, which indicate overall lexical diversity and informational richness.

Regarding diachronic variation, evidence for colloquialisation is register-differentiated. There are considerable increases in the colloquiality scores of PhilE press editorials and AmE fiction over the 30-year period, whereas learned writing does not show remarkable changes irrespective of variety. We argue that the distinction drawn by Hundt & Mair (1999) between “agile” and “uptight” registers is particularly useful for interpreting the diachronic findings. Popular registers which are driven by the need to cater to a large readership tend to be open towards stylistic innovations, whereas specialised registers are less receptive to change with their small and stable audiences. Differences in the nature of the intended audience account not only for the different findings for the two popular registers and learned writing, but also for the contrast between the rapid colloquialisation of PhilE press editorials and the stability of PhilE fiction of the same time period. Importantly, we find that the evolution of PhilE registers cannot be explained by a simple process involving emulation of AmE. We argue that this is inevitable given the unique sociohistorical circumstances in which PhilE has evolved. PhilE’s colonial history imparts to it an elitist character, placing it in a hierarchical relationship with the local languages. The patterns uncovered in this study lend support to the general observation made in previous research that PhilE is less colloquial than AmE. However, there is no convincing evidence for PhilE proclaimed “monostylisticism” (Gonzalez 2004), a tendency to transform features characteristic of formal written English to less formal registers, since stylistic differentiation in PhilE is fairly marked is on the whole.

References

- Collins, P. (Ed.) (2015a). *Grammatical Change in English World-wide*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Collins, P, A. M. Borlongan & X. Yao. (2014). Modality in Philippine English: A Diachronic Study. *Journal of English Linguistics*, 42(1), 68–88.
- Gonzalez, A. (2004). The social dimensions of Philippine English. *World Englishes*, 23(1), 7–16.
- Hundt, M. & C. Mair. (1998). Agile and Uptight Genres. The Corpus-Based Approach to Language Change in Progress. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, 4(2), 221-242.
- Van Rooy, B. & . Wasserman. (2014). Do the modals of Black and White South African English converge? *Journal of English Linguistics*, 42(1), 51–67.