

**A Comparative Analysis of Standard American English and British English**  
**with respect to the Auxiliary Verbs**

Andrea Muru

Texas Tech University

**1. Introduction**

Within any given language variations exist due to differences in geographical locations, social class, economic class, age and level of education. These variations lead to differences in phonology, grammar and word choice and typically define a dialect. The subject of this paper is the comparative analysis of two English dialects, Standard American English and British English. These two dialects represent the standard variety of language from their respective countries. Standard languages are generally those spoken by members of the upper middle class, used within formal arenas, the language taught in schools and generally have some relationship to the accepted writing style of the language; however, ideas regarding what constitutes a standard language are constantly changing. Advances in technology and power shifts in the global political arena have impacted what constitutes a standard language. Languages, even standard dialects, are constantly changing. The influence of Standard American English (SAE) has affected British English (BritEng) which was once thought of as the standard dialect of English (Bex, 173). American influence on British English is apparent when analyzing Modern British English. Modern British English has a strong base in BritEng but has incorporated elements of SAE. This paper specifically looks at the variations in the use of auxiliary verbs in these two standard dialects.

## 2. Comparison between SAE and BritEng with respect to the auxiliary verbs

Auxiliary verbs have four distinctive properties independent of lexical verbs: negation, inversion, code and emphasis. Negation, as its name implies, refers to the use of an auxiliary verb in negating the meaning of a sentence. Inversion refers to the inversion of the auxiliary verb and the subject which typically results in the formation of an interrogative sentence. Code refers to the ability of an auxiliary verb to stand in place of part of a verb phrase; “the remainder of its semantic content being recoverable from the context” (Huddleston, 93). “Emphasis means emphasis on the auxiliary realized by heavy stress” (Huddleston, 93). The following examples illustrate the different properties of auxiliary verbs.

### Auxiliary Verbs

- |      |                                                             |                   |
|------|-------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| i.   | He has seen it.                                             | Original Sentence |
| ii.  | He has not seen it                                          | Negation          |
| iii. | Has he seen it?                                             | Inversion         |
| iv.  | He has seen it and I have too.                              | Code              |
| v.   | They don't think he's seen it<br>but he <b>HAS</b> seen it. | Emphasis          |
- (Huddleston, 93)

Auxiliary verbs have various functions within the syntax and can express aspect and modality.

SAE and BritEng differ in the frequency, use and meaning of different auxiliary verbs. Modal verbs exist as a sub-class of auxiliary verbs. In BritEng ‘shall’ and ‘shan’t’

are typically used; however, SAE uses the verbs ‘will’, ‘should’ and ‘won’t’ are used. The following examples illustrate these differences.

| BritEng |                          | SAE  |                          |
|---------|--------------------------|------|--------------------------|
| i.      | I shall tell you later.  | i.   | I will tell you later.   |
| ii.     | Shall I drink this       | ii.  | Should I drink this now? |
| iii.    | I shan’t be able to come | iii. | I won’t be able to come. |

(Trudgill, 60)

‘Shall’ is almost never seen in SAE except in some formal documents. ‘Shan’t’ is extremely rare in SAE but may also appear in formal documents. ‘Will’ typically replaces ‘shall’ and the negative form ‘shan’t’ is replaced with ‘won’t’. Traditionally, BritEng examples are absent in SAE but as BritEng changes the strong influences of SAE are affecting modal verb word choice; thus, the examples listed under SAE can also be seen within the BritEng dialect.

SAE and BritEng also differ in the meanings attached to certain auxiliary verbs. Typically, the modal auxiliary ‘should’ expresses obligation and uncertainty. This meaning is common to both SAE and BritEng; however, BritEng differs from SAE in that it also expresses a hypothetical sense. The hypothetical sense requires that the subject is first person and contains a conditional clause. In BritEng, we see the hypothetical sense expressed in the following example:

“I should enjoy living here *if I could afford to do so.*” I would enjoy living here *if I could afford to do so*”( Trudgill, 60).

The hypothetical sense is absent from the ‘should’ of SAE; thus, ‘would’ as opposed to ‘should’ is used to express hypothetical sense.

‘Use(d) to’ is an auxiliary verb that transforms a sentence into a question through inversion or assists in its negation. These auxiliary verb functions are unique to BritEng: ‘use(d) to’, within SAE, is limited to a lexical verb. The functions of ‘use(d) to’ are illustrated in the following examples:

Examples:

He used to go there.                      sample sentence

i. Used he to go there?                  auxiliary

ii. Did he use to go there?              lexical

iii. He used not to go there.            auxiliary

iv. He didn’t use to go there.          lexical

Examples i and iii show properties unique to auxiliary verbs. In the first example ‘used’ and ‘he’ are inverted; thus, forming a question. In the third example, ‘used’, by assisting in the negation of the original sentence, displays another property of auxiliary verbs. Examples ii and iv show ‘used’ as a lexical verb. BritEng allows ‘use(d)’ to be utilized as either an auxiliary or lexical verb whereas SAE limits ‘use(d)’ to a lexical verb.

Variation in the syntactical use of certain verbs as both auxiliaries and lexical verbs in BritEng as opposed to being only lexical in SAE is quite common. As was the case with the verb ‘use(d) to’ the verbs ‘need’ and ‘dare’ function as both lexical and

auxiliary verbs in BritEng and solely as lexical verbs within SAE. However, in the case of the two verbs ‘dare’ and ‘need’ there are some exceptions. ‘Need’ and ‘dare’ can function as auxiliaries within standard idiomatic phrases. For example:

Need I say more?

Persons under 18 need not apply.

I dare say....

The above examples show the verbs ‘need’ and ‘dare’ functioning as auxiliary verbs; however, outside of these standard idiomatic phrases these two verbs remain classified solely as lexical verbs. ‘Need’ and ‘dare’ as auxiliary verbs are seen mainly in BritEng.

Examples:

BritEng:       Need you be so rude?       (auxiliary)

SAE/BritEng: Do you need to be so rude? (lexical verb)

BritEng:       You needn’t be so rude?       (auxiliary)

SAE/BritEng You don’t need to be so rude? (lexical verb)

BritEng:       Dare I tell the truth?       (auxiliary)

SAE/BritEng Do I dare (to) tell the truth? (lexical verb)

(Trudgill, 62)

In the first example ‘need’ is working as an auxiliary and is utilizing the inversion property. ‘Dare’ also displays this property by inverting itself with the subject ‘I’. ‘Need’

also assists in the negation of the sentence in the third example. The properties displayed by ‘need’ and ‘dare’ in BritEng are displayed by the auxiliary verb ‘do’ in SAE.

Thus far the differences in the grammatical function and preference of auxiliary verbs have been demonstrated in SAE and BritEng. Auxiliary verbs can also be used to indicate different meanings. This can be seen in the different uses of ‘have’ and ‘do have’ in SAE and BritEng to indicate possession. The following dialogue maybe confusing to a speaker of SAE who would equate “Have you any fresh bread?” and “Do you have fresh bread?”

(1) Q: Have you any fresh bread?

A: No, I haven’t.

(2) Q: Do you have fresh bread?

A: Yes, but we’re already sold it all today.

In BritEng, “Have you any fresh bread?” asks whether the subject ‘you’ possesses ‘fresh bread’ at the present moment. ‘Do you have any bread?’ asks if you ever have any bread. It is interesting to note that have seems to be taken on properties of both a lexical and auxiliary verb. In SAE the auxiliary verb ‘do’ takes on this role. This can be seen in the equivalent SAE sentence: “Do you have any fresh bread?” In sentences that contain no other auxiliary verb ‘do’ is used. The sentence ‘You have fresh bread’ contains only one verbal element ‘have’. So in SAE ‘do’ is added to the beginning of the sentence to form a question. This idea of “do-support” is also seen when negating the sense of a sentence.

For example, if we were to analyze the sentence ‘She writes well’ we can clearly see only one verbal element ‘writes’. If we wanted to convey a negative sense in this sentence the addition of the auxiliary verb ‘do’ would be necessary to form a grammatical sentence. ‘She doesn’t write well’ is grammatically correct whereas ‘She writes not well’ is not.

### **3. Conclusion**

Standard American English and British English differ in frequency of use, meaning, and function of their auxiliary verbs. The dynamic nature of language can be seen in analyzing these two dialects. Many auxiliary and lexical verbs found in both Standard American English and British English have similar functions; however, there are variations in the functions of auxiliary verbs limited to British English only. As both languages evolve, the idea of what constitutes Standard American English and British English will also need to evolve.

## References

- Bex, Tony, and Richard J. Watts, eds. Standard English: The Widening Debate. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Burns, Anne, and Caroline Coffin, eds. Analysing English in a Global Context. New York: Routledge, 2001.
- Huddleston, Rodney, and Geoffrey K. Pullum. The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Trudgill, Peter, and Jean Hannah. International English. 3rd ed. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Wolfram, Walt, and Donna Christian. Dialects and Education: Issues and Answers. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents, 1989.