

A Corpus of American and British English: A Case Study of Slang
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ABSTRACT

This article is set against the background of linguistic Globalisation and its diffusion through the media. The mass media allow for linguistic shifts taking place in American English to spread to other World Englishes, as a result of an increasing trend towards colloquialisation, Americanisation and a more democratic model of (power) relationships. The present paper focuses on a corpus-based study that analyses the frequency of use of a series of American slang expressions. The study takes as a basis chiefly audiovisual corpora in parallel to which real linguistic data (drawn from a survey on slang) are examined. Results provide evidence of the so called Americanisation of other World Englishes, among them, British English, and that this influence can be observed in both written and audiovisual corpora.

KEYWORDS: Americanization, American and British English, audiovisual corpora, Corpus Linguistics, language learning, Linguistic Globalisation, slang, World Englishes.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 CONTEXT

The latest decades have witnessed a shift in most areas of life, both nationally and regionally/locally, and above all in the international panorama, towards globalisation. The aftermath of the Second World War has been considered by some as a historical period marking the beginning of a new era. It is during the aftermath of World War II, then, that a series of profound changes have come to occur. These changes have taken place on several planes, but they have chiefly affected culture -as well as society and language. In a few words, the military, political, economic and technological power of the United States has caused their culture to somehow impose internationally all over the world. Technology has no doubt played a key role in the worldwide diffusion of American culture. This is what we commonly refer to as Globalisation. Further, this geographical and sociocultural phenomenon also materialises on the level of language. The English language, and more specifically, the American variety of English, exerts a great deal of influence on other languages all over the world, as well as on other varieties of the same language. This linguistic globalisation has various sides to it. The same phenomenon that, on the one hand, is helping the world to come together as a tool for communication, has somehow contributed, on the other hand, to the extinction of minor languages and their respective cultures. However, the same phenomenon has had the opposite effect. Interest in minor languages and cultures has gathered momentum, so that an increasing number of studies centre on minority or endangered languages.

The standpoint that we will adhere to is David Crystal's general "Functionalist Approach" (Crystal 2003). This approach basically regards English as the *lingua franca* on the grounds that it fulfils a communicative function internationally. According to Crystal, English is currently the language of communication worldwide because of the political, economic and military power of the United States, arguing that any other language in the same situation could have fulfilled the same role.

The linguistic influence of American English¹ is increasingly noticeable in the mass media. English has become the international vehicle for communication. It is the language used in broadcasting, then, as well as the language mostly used in the recording and cinematographic industries (Crystal 2003). Further, education and knowledge rely, in no small measure, on English. The internet itself is a medium in which a great deal of content is transmitted through English, and which allows access to a great deal of information and resources. It is worth emphasising the role that learning has come to play in current society. Since we live in a society where widespread literacy is almost achieved in first-world countries, lifelong learning seems to have acquired a higher status. As a matter of fact, in a rapidly changing society we need to constantly update our knowledge and supplement our training (skills), which we are expected to put into practice in the working environment.

As far as languages are concerned, the positive effects of (linguistic) globalisation go to show in this respect. Firstly, globalisation has somewhat created, or at least increased, the need to use (and ideally master) one or several foreign languages, due to the ongoing exchanges and flow of information going on globally. Secondly, at the

¹ Henceforth "AmE".

same time globalisation has made it easier to travel abroad in order to learn a language or improve one's foreign language skills. In addition, technology puts a wide array of tools at the learners' disposal, so all that is required in order to achieve (relatively) successful learning is a computer and a connection to the internet.

There is an increasing number of language learners depending on audiovisual material, which is a guaranteed source of speech input, even if the language that we find in cinematographic and television productions is not authentic discourse. These constitute, at the end of the day, very much as novels or drama, fictional linguistic creations; in other words, representations of the way in which (writers or scriptwriters think) speakers express themselves.

Television series are, in any case, a highly recommendable resource when learning a language. They provide students or learners in general with a rich source of input. This genre presents the advantage that there usually is plenty of material (one or several seasons). In addition to that, a longer duration (if compared with films, for instance) guarantees putting at the viewers' disposal enough material for them to forge both a consistent accent and a consistent use of vocabulary and structures, the way they are used -above all with regard to lexicon- in a specific geographical variety of English (e.g. British and AmE). Audiovisual productions, and especially perhaps TV productions, then, for some of the above-mentioned reasons, can be and actually are used as a tool for Foreign Language or Second Language Learning.

It is worth bringing up the consideration that learners who opt for American series, on the one hand, will learn this particular variety of English. It might be reasonable to assume that there might be a majority of learners who are more familiar with shows coming from the United States than with television productions from other countries and therefore representing other varieties of English, such as British English². This assumption rests on the affluence of contemporary American TV productions, encompassing a wide range of genres and subjects. It will be very likely, then, that American TV shows play a significant role in language learning or the language acquisition process of many a language learner.

It has been argued somewhere else (Battistella 2005) that the language used in television productions might influence the way that native flesh-and-blood speakers use the language. We will rely on this hypothesis and will just mention that we can perhaps extrapolate this idea all the more to language learning in non-native speakers, of English, in this case.

1.2 APPROACH AND HYPOTHESIS

The use of corpora as a tool to carry out significant analysis of stretches of language, or alternatively (or simultaneously) of larger texts, can be both simple and resourceful. There is no need to say that there is a huge body of research on this topic in the literature. In this essay we will focus on a particular area of language, analysing a specific lexicon domain by means of corpora. We will also analyse, in some measure, the main characteristics of our corpora and will examine some of the potential applications that *Wordsmith Tools* offers when working with corpora.

² Henceforth "BrE".

We mentioned earlier the increasing and ubiquitous presence of AmE, which also exerts and influence on other World Englishes, as is the case with BrE, especially in younger speakers of English, who have been exposed to the former variety for some time now, unlike older British speakers of English, as suggested by Trudgill and Hannah (1993:45). We undertook research in the field of corpus linguistics, taking as a basis for our analysis transcripts of situation comedies and focusing on British and chiefly American slang, results being subsequently compared with data from a survey. It is worth stressing, in this respect, that since AmE is very likely to be influential above all on speakers of younger generations, our study focuses on the age range that these younger generations encompass (i.e. speakers in their late teens, twenties and early thirties). At the same time, the texts making up the corpus on which we depended somewhat aim at mirroring the language usage of newer generations (the characters featured in the ten sitcoms included in the corpus are pretty young, just as most of the informants who took the survey).

We set out from the hypothesis that both AmE and BrE are represented in fictional texts (sitcoms) and that the influence of AmE has also made some inroads (not only into real speech but also) into language representation in such (British) fictional texts. We intended to compile a general corpus of sitcoms divided into two smaller sub-corpora, each consisting of five situation comedies: a corpus of British sitcoms, on the one hand, and another one of American shows, on the other. The idea was to create wordlists displaying the most commonly occurring slang terms, firstly in the corpus as a whole, and secondly, in each of the two smaller sub-corpora. We aimed to try and gauge the extent to which the use of slang terms in the corpus of sitcoms (that is, the fictional representation) correlated to the real usage of the same terms by native speakers. For that purpose, we conducted a survey on slang, completed by native speakers of English from different nationalities. Furthermore, we also intended to compare the frequency rates of slang terms in both the British and American survey groups -there was an additional third group of other nationalities with which to compare results from the other two groups- so as to somehow measure the extent of Americanisation that the British survey population presented. The data drawn from the corpus analysis were examined in parallel to data ensuing from the survey on slang. The survey population totalled 140 speakers of English, coming from different linguistic, sociocultural and geographical backgrounds, somewhat ensuring varied and unbiased results -results would depend, ultimately on serendipity, rather than being caused by the fact that respondents belonged to a particular social class or came from a specific region or local area.

2 The Corpus of American and British Sitcoms

As suggested before, transcripts from ten TV series were compiled and made into two separate sub-corpora: one consisting of five American TV series and another one made up of the transcripts of five British sitcoms. At the same time, the two sub-corpora were fused into a larger corpus, consisting of a total of ten sitcoms and containing some 500,000 words. All three corpora were created by means of the software *Wordsmith Tools*, through which wordlists were created (frequency,

alphabetical and statistics lists). It was through these wordlists that the corpora were accessed and on the basis of which queries were generated.

2.1 Topical Unity of Sitcoms

The situation comedies included in the home-made corpus are topic-related. They deal with groups of young people and how they interact in different settings, covering relationships among friends, co-workers, and family, as well as romance, couple relationships and partying.

As a whole, most series feature characters in their late teens, twenties and thirties, which might be considered as the age range where slang is probably used the most -as an in-group identification³ device and as a means to differentiate from other social and age groups (Dalzell and Victor 2008a: ix). Accordingly, this is approximately the age range of most informants taking the survey.

2.2 Characteristics of the Corpus

As a whole, the general corpus of sitcoms consisted of two sets or sub-corpora representing two different varieties of English. The two sub-corpora presented pretty similar characteristics in terms of running time and (sample) size, on the one hand, and density (number of tokens, types and STTR⁴), on the other hand.

2.2.1 Keywords

2.2.1.1 Keywords in the Corpus of Sitcoms

An aspect of the corpus that is worth pointing out is keywords. *Wordsmith Tools* allows users to find out which words are most frequently used in a given text or set of texts, by contrast to a reference corpus. Similarly, this set of tools can also be deployed in order to find out the most frequently occurring words or elements belonging to a particular category or word-class, e.g. most commonly occurring common nouns/proper nouns / verbs / modals, etc.

Needless to say that keyness may throw some light on diverse matters. An obvious but nonetheless interesting application is that it provides information on the “aboutness” or subject-matter of a text. Another possible application is a comparison of how texts devised by writers/scriptwriters speaking different varieties of the same language diverge from each other in terms of linguistic usage.

As far as lexical keywords are concerned, these may prove revealing concerning subject-matter considerations. Among content keywords, noun keywords clearly referred to people and some of the “roles” they play, mostly indicating close relationships and conveying a relaxed, colloquial tone (*guys, mom, girlfriend, dude*; also in some contexts *man*). Some of these terms of address may actually be considered as slang. The “aboutness” of the collection of transcripts in the corpus seemed pretty obvious just by having a look at the first ten noun keywords: close

³ It has been argued that slang might be used to identify with a particular style or attitude rather than with a (social or racial) group per se. Cf. Eble 1996: 119.

⁴ STTR stands for “Standardised Type/Token Ratio” Cf. Scott 2006.

relationships: family (e.g. *mom* and *baby*), friends and fun (e.g. *guys*, *girlfriend*, *guys* and *dude*), couples and romance (*love*, *sex*, *wedding*, *baby*⁵). Cf. Table 1 below.

Table 1. Content words: nouns^{6*}

NOUNS

DUDE	BABY
GIRLFRIEND	FUN
GUY/S	LOVE*
MAN	SEX
MOM	WEDDING

2.2.1.2 Keywords in the Two Subcorpora of Sitcoms

The corpus of situation comedies obviously contains some internal variation at different levels, but this difference can be observed especially well on the level of lexis through the application “Keywords list”. Below there is a set of keywords ensuing from a comparison of the wordlist of American situation comedies and that of the British sitcoms. The focus has especially been placed on content words. Attention has only been paid to nouns and adjectives, which were somewhat revealing of the way these British and American sitcoms differ in terms of both content and language use.

Various implications might be derived from the keywords lists below. As regards the sub-corpus of American sitcoms, the first nouns featured in the keywords list refer to people, settings and events. The terms on the left-hand column apply to people, and are very often used as address forms. *Apartment*, *party* and *Thanksgiving* provide information on the setting, both spatial and temporal. Cultural implications might also arise (e.g. traditional American festivity). Furthermore, *apartments* might be settings more commonly alluded to in the US, versus *flats* in the UK.⁷

Table 2. Content keywords in the sub-corpora of American and British sitcoms

AMERICAN TRANSCRIPTS		BRITISH TRANSCRIPTS	
FIRST TEN CONTENT KEYWORDS			
DUDE	APARTMENT	BLOKE	BLOODY
GUY/S	AWESOME	MATE	BRILLIANT
HONEY	CRAZY	MEN	JESUS
KID	PARTY	MUM	LOVELY
MOM	THANKSGIVING	PUB	SHIT

⁵ In the initially slangy acceptance of the word: ‘a sweetheart, a girlfriend US, 1839’; also ‘used as a friendly term of address US, 1921.’ Dalzell and Victor (2008b: 22).

⁶ * indicates that the lexical item in question might function as a different word-class other than the group within which it is included, but the predominant word-class it realises (within the corpus) seems to be the one to which it has been allotted. Nouns can also work as verbs (*love* mostly works as a noun in the corpus of sitcoms).

⁷ *Flat* appears on the list of British keywords, even if it does not appear among the first ten keywords.

By studying the keywords in specific American TV series, part of the typically American lexicon is bound to come up, which might be particularly interesting for language teaching purposes. At the very least, keywords might prove to be indicators of differing frequencies of use between the two main varieties of English, or rather of how these differences apply in this particular genre and in this specific set of sitcoms.

With regard to adjectives, *awesome* and *crazy* appear to be much more frequently used in the set of American series. The former is typically American, whereas the high frequency of occurrence of the latter perhaps makes up for a commoner use of other terms in BrE (e.g. *mad*).

Noun and adjective keywords in the British sitcoms also refer to people: BrE *mum* vs. AmE *mom* above; *mate* and *bloke*, also typically British; and *men*, which is more neutral but perhaps compensates for the use of other forms of addressing or referring to males in AmE, namely *guy* and *dude*. There is but one noun alluding to setting: *pub*, which might be regarded as a preferred choice in Britain over *bar*.

Bloody, *brilliant* and *lovely* are pejorative and positively evaluating adjectives, especially used in BrE, whereas expletives *Jesus* and *shit* seem to wend their way into the set of British sitcoms considerably more often than in the sub-corpus of AmE.

The use of linguistic items in AmE and BrE could further be examined by comparing other lexical items appearing in the keywords list. These lists would also come in handy in order to find out whether a particular word is noticeably more used in either of the two corpora, or in either of these two varieties of English in a specific genre.

Ultimately, attention could be drawn to the whole bulk of keywords peculiar to one of the two sub-corpora involved, with the result that many a characteristically American or British word would wend its way into the variety it belongs to or with which it is most often associated (e.g. some words that figure prominently in the keywords list of British sitcoms and American sitcoms, respectively, are: BrE *fucking*, *flat*, *bollocks*; and AmE *totally*, *prom*, *cab*). The opposite phenomenon might also appear, that is, that words that are most often associated with a specific variety of English (AmE) find their way into a different variety (BrE). That is the case of some of the expressions included in the questionnaire on slang. If we contrast the wordlist of the corpus of British sitcoms with that of the 1999 *BNC Sampler*, *guy/s*, *dude*, and *guess* are among the items on the list of keywords. The three of them are originally American slang, somehow revealing a certain degree of Americanisation in the set of British transcripts.

3 The Survey on Slang

To begin with, it might be worth emphasising the fact that, within the scope of the present study, the term *slang* should be considered quite generally, as an *umbrella term*. The expressions that were included under the category of *slang* (and put to the test in a questionnaire) are not necessarily slang terms any more. Some of them have already entered the stock of lexicon in general use. A number of them are currently regarded as quite informal, colloquial, or, some items might even be thought of as vulgar language. What they all have in common is that they first appeared in the domain of slang, even if most of the terms have grown to be part of the stock of general usage or of colloquial language in current standard English.

With respect to the survey on slang that we undertook, we will provide a short depiction of what the survey consisted in, as well as a general characterisation of the survey population.

A series of 27 slang expressions were extracted from the corpus of American and British TV series, on the basis that they presented a relatively high frequency rate in the corpus. As mentioned previously, we aimed to gauge the extent to which Americanisation was reflected both in the corpus of sitcoms and in a sample of native speakers of English. To that purpose, we selected expressions or terms mostly of American origin. The opposite phenomenon was also represented, since a couple of expressions of British origin were also included. The latter expressions were included, likewise, on the basis that they appeared with a high frequency rate not only in BrE but also in AmE.

3.1 Population Sample

A total number of 140 native speakers of English completed the survey. Several variables were taken into account when analysing the results of the survey, namely nationality, age and gender.

Overall, 8 different nationalities registered participation in the survey, namely, American, Australian, British, Canadian, Indian, Irish, Mexican and New Zealander. The inclusion of respondents from countries other than the US or the UK mainly rested on the possibility of further exploring the influence of AmE on other World Englishes. Respondents were roughly equally distributed across the two main nationality groups, British and American (with 51 and 57 respondents, respectively), whereas the group “Other” was a bit more reduced in number (32).

Concerning age, respondents were sorted into 5 groups, to wit, teens, 20's, 30's, 40's and 50 or over. The survey group displayed an average age of 26.7 years old. Respondents were, for the most part, then, in their twenties and early thirties, since it was intended to measure the extent to which especially young speakers make use of American slang terms. It is only natural that young British speakers should use this type of linguistic item more frequently than elderly speakers, given that the former have been widely exposed to American linguistic input from a very early age—unlike senior speakers.

As for the proportion of males and female respondents, it was, as a whole, fairly equally distributed across the two categories, although it varied within each nationality and age group.

3.2 The Questionnaire

The questionnaire aimed to gauge both input and output frequency rates of the 27 expressions proposed. The questionnaire consisted in a list of 27 expressions of slang, selected on the basis that they displayed a relatively high frequency rate in the corpus of sitcoms. Expressions were presented within context. An example for each of them was provided and it was made clear that respondents were expected to give a rough estimate of the frequency with which they both heard and used the enumerated expressions in the sense conveyed in the examples provided. At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were invited to provide additional comments.

Three frequency rates were established when providing an estimate of the frequency of use of expressions, to wit, (I hear/use expression X) (1) always/ a lot, (2) sometimes, and (3) hardly ever / never. In our analysis, we contrasted individually the frequency rates yielded by the survey with the data drawn from the corpus.

3.3 Overall Evaluation of Slang Expressions

In this section we will focus exclusively on data concerning output. We will therefore pay attention mainly to frequency rates concerning the use of slang expressions by the survey population. The reason for this mainly rests on the fact that frequency of input, although displaying a much more noticeable degree of Americanisation (in the case of both the British survey population and that of the group of other nationalities), was often due to the influence of mass media. The former set of data (output), however, reflects more realistically linguistic usage on the part of the native English speakers taking the survey. Tables 3, 4 and 5 below display output data drawn from the survey. This estimate was carried out by assigning a specific value to the percentages standing for frequencies (1) “always/a lot” and (2) “sometimes”. With respect to frequency “always/a lot”, the percentages resulting from an analysis of the data drawn from the survey were multiplied by 3; percentages under the label “sometimes” were multiplied by 2, while percentages in column (3) “hardly ever/never” were not considered for evaluation, since they represented absence of use. Results were added up and divided by 3, so as to function on a scale of 100%.

As a whole, most of the expressions featured in the survey are of American origin, with the exception of three of them, which were first recorded in UK English. Such exceptions are: *play it cool*, *screw* and *chat up*.

Where a given slang term conveyed several senses (polysemy or homonymy), attention was drawn to one specific sense, arising in a specific variety of English, as was the case with *screw* (which conveys several senses emerging in different geographical locations, and can function as various word categories).

Concerning expression 15, *play it cool*, its frequency of use is very similarly distributed across nationality groups, regardless of its geographical origin, ranging from 31.23% to 32.73%.

Regarding expression no. 17, *screw*, in spite of the fact that it first appeared as BrE slang (meaning *fuck off*), it seems to be more frequently used in the group of AmE than in the other two nationality groups, and especially by comparison with BrE (AmE: 69% vs. BrE: 51.6%).

In the case of no. 27, *chat up*, as could be anticipated, this linguistic item is much more frequent in BrE than in the other two nationality groups. It is the least frequently used in AmE, whereas its frequency of use in the group “Other” almost doubles the percentage found in AmE (30.2% vs. 15.8%).

The rest of the expressions extracted from the questionnaire arose in the American variety of English. Some of these linguistic items remain typically American. Others, as will be seen, have become more entrenched in other varieties of English than in AmE, either in BrE or in other World Englishes.

3.3.1 Chiefly American Expressions

As expected, there were a few expressions whose usage proved to be prominently American. These expressions tended to be used with a very high frequency in the group “Other”, as well, although significantly less used in BrE. Very occasionally, there was a considerable difference between frequency rates in the American group and in the nationality group “Other”. That is the case, for instance, of expressions 3 and 21, *totally* and *screw up* (and of expression 17, *screw*, of British origin, already commented on).

In the case of the former, *totally*, its usage is by far more common in AmE than in the other two nationality groups. Its percentage doubles only too well the percentage representing BrE, and it almost doubles the figure for the group of other nationalities, which is only slightly higher than the frequency rate of BrE (AmE 53.8% vs. BrE 22.83% and Other 27.1%, respectively). The latter term, *screw up*, seems to be very frequently used in the American survey group, while its frequency of use in the other two nationality groups is lower, although the difference between percentages in the American survey group and the other two is not a striking one, in this case. Percentages representing BrE and other nationalities are still considerably high, with BrE in third position (AmE: 78.3%; Other: 66.63%; and BrE: 63.43%).

Quite a few expressions of American origin seemed to be used so much in the group of other World Englishes as they were in AmE. In such cases, the frequency of use recorded for the group “Other” is akin to that of AmE. This phenomenon applies to expressions: *cool* (no. 1), *you guys* (4), *dude* (5), *bullshit* (9), *big deal* (12) and *hang out* (13). The difference separating frequency rates in the American survey group from the group of other nationalities is more noticeable in the case of *you guys* and *hang out*, where there is a difference of approximately 10%. In the case of the other linguistic items, the frequency gap does not really seem to be a substantial one (ranging from 0.5% to 2%).

It is worth pointing out that there was a gap between the frequency of use of these expressions in the American survey group and in the British population. Occasionally, such a gap was not very significant, as happened to be the case with *cool* and *bullshit*. These two linguistic items were used as frequently in AmE as in other World Englishes as a whole, except in BrE, whose usage was 10% lower. Frequency gaps widen when it comes to other expressions, such as *you guys* and *dude*, which roughly present a 20% gap (*you guys*: AmE at 84.76% vs. BrE at 64.06%; *dude*: AmE at 53.2% and BrE at 34.63%); *big deal*, with a difference of about 15% (AmE at 89.46% and BrE at 75.83%); and *hang out*, which presents a difference of over 30% (AmE at 92.36% and BrE at 59.5%).

Finally, the case of (no. 19) *piiss off* might be an interesting one because it is (together with *play it cool*, already commented on, since it is of UK origin) the only case of a typically American expression (holding the highest frequency rate in AmE) closely followed by the British survey group and only slightly less frequently used in other varieties of World Englishes (AmE at 81.3%, BrE at 77.73% and “Other” at 72.83%). At any rate, all three nationality groups displayed very similar frequency rates.

On the other hand, a considerable number of expressions were used more often by respondents from varieties of English other than AmE. This trend might be subdivided into two tendencies. There is, on one hand, a group of expressions respondents from

the survey group of other nationalities seemed to be more familiar with than American informants themselves. These expressions are used, all the same, with a very high frequency rate by American respondents, and not so frequently by British respondents. On the other hand, British informants affirmed that they used a series of expressions significantly more often than respondents from either of the other two groups.

3.3.2 Expressions Esp. Frequent in Other World Englishes

With regard to expressions that were most frequently used by respondents belonging to the group “Other”, a set of linguistic items ought to be enumerated: expressions *buddy* (7), *babe* (8), *check out* (16), *high five* (20), *hottie* (23), and *awesome* (24). The frequency gap separating the group “Other” from AmE might be a petty one, as is the case with *check out* and *awesome*, where there is a difference of approximately 1% and 2%, respectively. Percentages of frequency of use of these two expressions in the British survey group are substantially lower, ranging from 20 to almost 25%.

The existing gap is sometimes slightly wider, as in the case with *high five* and *buddy*, where it is of approximately 4% and 6%, respectively. Ultimately, this frequency gap is at most of over 10% in the case of *babe* and *hottie*. This might indicate a leaning in other varieties of English towards adopting AmE expressions and implementing them to their everyday usage stock. The fact that these expressions are taken from AmE and have become established in other varieties of World English seems evident, according to the survey data. What is arguable, but very likely, is that American linguistic trends are sometimes carried even further in these other varieties of English. That is, even if these expressions are not so much in vogue in AmE, they may still maintain such a status in other varieties.

Frequency gaps between the percentages displayed in the British survey group and the group of other nationalities are significantly higher in the case of these items, ranging from almost 10% (in the case of *high five*, with BrE at 37.2% and “Other” at 46.83%) and about 17%-22% (*babe*, BrE 24.83% and “Other” 41.7%; and *hottie*, BrE 24.8% and “Other” 46.83%) to over 30% (*buddy*, BrE 14.36% and “Other” 45.86%).

3.3.3 Expressions Esp. Frequent in “BrE”

There are a series of expressions that happened to be most frequently used in the British group, and more or less equally used by respondents of the other two survey groups. At the same time, there is a specific case, that of *wicked*, which presents its highest frequency rate in BrE (36.6%) but is closely followed by the group “Other” (32.26%), AmE lagging behind at 21.06%⁸.

A clear case of linguistic item most commonly used in (and perhaps most typically associated with) BrE is expression no. 6 *fantastic*. The frequency of use of this particular adjective in BrE is 64.73%, whereas in AmE it is slightly lower: 53.2% and in other World Englishes it is even lower: 46.86%. It presents, nonetheless, a relatively high frequency of use in all three nationality groups. Something similar applies in the

⁸ The linguistic item *chat up* falls into the same category as *wicked*, commented on above, according to frequency of use across nationality groups (albeit not according to variety of origin, which is why they are mentioned in different sections).

case of *guts* (BrE 61.46% vs. AmE 49.73% and “Other” 48.96%) and with phrasal verb *split up* (with BrE frequency rate at 71.86%, vs. AmE at 57.3% and other varieties at 53.16%).

The remaining linguistic types occur only slightly more frequently in the British group than in the other two nationality groups. AmE takes up position number 2 and “Other” occupies position number 3. There is a frequency gap of about 7% when it comes to expressions 2 and 18: *fucking* (BrE: 50.3% vs. AmE: 43.83%) and *chill out* (BrE: 74.53% vs. AmE: 67.86%); and even a smaller frequency gap with respect to expressions 14, 22 and 26: *pucker* (which was actually only used by 1 British respondent and by none at all in the other two survey groups: BrE: 1.3%), *pain in the arse/ass* (BrE: 68.% vs. AmE: 65.46%) and *oddball* (BrE: 20.9% vs. AmE: 17.53%).

3.3.4 Main Trends Represented in The Survey

Generally speaking, then, three overall trends seemed to emerge in our analysis of the expressions included in the survey. By no means do we suggest that these tendencies necessarily apply in contexts outside the survey the present study relies on. However, it might be possible that the data drawn from this study could be pointing in the direction in which the English language is evolving in the international panorama.

Firstly, it comes as no surprise that certain linguistic items having US origin should remain typically American, having, all the same, a substantial presence in the group of other varieties of English.

Secondly, it is likely that, as suggested by the data drawn from the survey, some American expressions have become as common in “Other” varieties of English as they are in AmE, being slightly less used in the British group. Occasionally, some of these have become even more entrenched in the group of other varieties of World Englishes than among American respondents themselves.

Last but not least, some expressions first recorded in AmE having extended to BrE have become more frequently used in the latter variety than in the former. There usually exists a (more or less) significant frequency gap between BrE and the equivalent figure in the survey group “Other.”

As far as expressions of British origin are concerned, we might regard their presence in other varieties of English as a minor influence. The expressions of British origin included in the questionnaire displayed low or low-medium frequency rates in other varieties of English, with the exception of *screw*, which was considerably frequently used, since it presented a frequency rate of over 50% in all three varieties.

3.3.5 Most and Least Frequently Occurring Expressions

It would be worth drawing attention to the fact that some expressions are widely used, whereas others we have considered as not frequent enough, by comparison with the data drawn from our corpus of sitcoms. It is also worth remembering that inclusion of expressions in the survey was based on frequency of occurrence in the corpus.

We have considered as very frequently occurring expressions those that displayed in all three nationality groups a frequency rate of 50% or over. Such is the case of the following linguistic items: (1) *cool*, (4) *you guys*, (9) *bullshit*, (10) *split up*, (12) *big deal*,

(13) *hang out*, (16) *check out*, (17) *screw*, (18) *chill out*, (19) *piss off*, (21) *screw up*, (22) *pain in the ass/arse* and (24) *awesome*.

Table 3. Most frequently occurring expressions (50% or over in all groups)

EXPRESSION	AMERICAN	BRITISH	OTHER
1. COOL	85.97%	76.43%	85.4%
4. YOU GUYS	84.76%	64.06%	74.96%
9. BULLSHIT	64.9%	54.9%	64.56%
10. SPLIT UP	57.3%	71.86%	53.16%
12. BIG DEAL	89.46%	75.83%	88.56%
13. HANG OUT	92.36%	59.5%	82.06%
16. CHECK OUT	81.26%	62.7%	82.26%
17. SCREW	69%	51.6%	57.3%
18. CHILL OUT	67.86%	74.53%	63.53%
19. PISS OFF	81.3%	77.73%	72.83%
21. SCREW UP	78.3%	63.43%	66.63%
22. PAIN IN THE ASS	65.46%	68%	60.43%
24. AWESOME	80.73%	56.2%	82.3%

We have considered as not sufficiently frequently occurring, as compared with the data drawn from our corpus of sitcoms, all expressions that presented a percentage of use of or below 50% in all three nationality groups. Some linguistic terms were relatively frequently used, with a frequency rate below 50%. That was the case of expressions (7) *buddy*, (8) *babe*, (20) *high five* and (23) *hottie*. Some other expressions displayed a frequency rate below 40%, namely (11) *wicked* and (15) *play it cool*. Finally, a set of expressions presented even lower frequency rates, to wit, (26) *oddball*: -30%; and (14) *pucker*: -10%.

Table 4. Least frequently occurring expressions

EXPRESSION	AMERICAN	BRITISH	OTHER
-50% IN 3 GROUPS			
7. BUDDY	39.16%	14.36%	45.86%
8. BABE	30.96%	24.83%	41.7%
20. HIGH FIVE	42.6%	37.2%	46.83%
23. HOTTIE	35.06%	24.8%	46.83%
-40% IN 3 GROUPS			
11. WICKED	21.06%	36.6%	32.26%
15. PLAY IT COOL	32.73%	32.6%	31.23%
-30% IN 3 GROUPS			
26. ODDBALL	17.53%	20.9%	10.4%
-10% IN 3 GROUPS			
14. PUCKER	0%	1.3%	0%

We can draw the conclusion that the appearance of these linguistic items (with a low frequency rate) in the set of transcripts making up the corpora did not match the results obtained by means of the survey. This clash was most noticeable in the case of expression (14) *pucker*, whose repeated occurrence in the corpus does not seem to reflect a realistic usage of this expression. It otherwise seems to depend, in this case, on serendipity, a.k.a. sheer coincidence⁹.

Table 5. Frequently occurring expressions

EXPRESSION	AMERICAN	BRITISH	OTHER
2. FUCKING	43.83%	50.3%	42.7%
3. TOTALLY	53.8%	22.83%	27.1%
5. DUDE	53.2%	34.63%	51.03%
6. FANTASTIC	53.2%	64.73%	46.86%
25. GUTS	49.73%	61.46%	48.96%
27. CHAT UP	15.8%	66.63%	30.2%

⁹ *Pucker* appeared not in just one but in several sitcoms.

A third group of expressions could be sorted under the category “frequently occurring expressions”. Unlike “very frequently occurring” expressions, the former do not display a percentage of 50 or over in all three nationality groups, but they do in at least one of them. They are, therefore, not widely used among the survey population, but only within one nationality group (or two at the most), as was the case with: (2) *fucking*, (3) *totally*, (5) *dude*, (6) *fantastic*, (25) *guts* and (27) *chat up*.

It should also be pointed out that the diverse expressions with the highest frequency rates of use in the three nationality groups are not necessarily the ones that emerged the most recently. Language terms in vogue do not actually seem to depend on a matter of time, but one possible explanation for this is that every now and then there is an expression that either drops out of use or comes to be decreasingly used, and because of fortuitous circumstances there is a revival that brings it back to life. This is often one of the ways terms having appeared at earlier stages in the language come to re-enter the living lexicon.

Some of the 13 most commonly used expressions enumerated above trace back to the nineteenth century, namely *you guys*, and *hang out*. A couple of expressions date back to the World War I period (*bullshit*), and to the 1930's (*pain in the ass/arse* and *piss off*). A considerable number of linguistic items trace back to the 1940's, to wit, *screw up*, *split up*, *screw*, *big deal*, and *cool*. Finally, some others were first recorded in a more recent period: in the 1950's (*check out*), in the 1970's (*awesome*) and in the 1980's (*chill out*).

4 Conclusions

In the first section we have established the context against which the present article should be understood, mentioning the phenomenon of Globalisation as well as emphasising the importance of the different tools used for lifelong learning. Among the latter, we have pointed out the resourcefulness provided by both audiovisual productions and corpora. It was further mentioned that audiovisual productions may have an influence on both language learners and native speakers of a language. An analysis of a specific corpus of American and British sitcoms was put forth so as to try to evaluate the extent to which (a set of) television shows might reflect realistically the way flesh-and-blood speakers make use of slang -which might have an influence on language learner usage. Furthermore, there is also the hypothesis, put forth by Battistella (2005), that television productions, whether realistic or unrealistic representations of discourse, might exert an influence -whether stronger or weaker- on native speakers' language use.

Section two consisted in a brief description of the corpus (and the two sub-corpora) of sitcoms, together with an analysis of its main features by means of the software *Wordsmith Tools*. It was observed how an analysis of the corpus reveals different data about the kind of language used, touching on issues such as subject-matter and keywords.

Regarding the former, we saw that most words appearing on the keywords list were somewhat revealing of the topics dealt with in the corpus of situation comedies. Content keywords were, in a way, representative of the kind of relationships displayed in the situation comedies. In general terms, it was colloquial terms of address that

appeared the most, all of which indicated close relationships. Some slang expressions appeared among the first 10 noun and adjective keywords. As a matter of fact, a number of the expressions featured in the survey appeared among the words on the keywords list.

When comparing the two corpora of American and British sitcoms, differences were observed in terms of purely linguistic matters. Both corpora featured as keywords a number of informal terms of address, which were different in each case. Cultural matters also cropped up (events, settings and other considerations such as expletives).

Finally, it was also pointed out that a corpus-based study could prove useful when trying to identify the keywords of either variety in a particular domain, or simply upon spotting differences of language usage (in terms of frequency) between the two varieties (e.g. slang terms). Ultimately, it was the case that American expressions happened to appear among the keywords of the set of British transcripts, when compared to a reference corpus, providing just a small piece of evidence that Americanisation is actually beginning to be noticeable in some contexts.

The third and final section focused on the survey on slang and the ensuing survey data. We provided a short depiction of the survey population and of the questionnaire. Attention was drawn to the different slang expressions included in the survey, focusing on their respective data. We went on to mention the main trends drawn from the survey. We concluded, on the one hand, that corpus data did not always match the survey data. Therefore, data extracted from the corpus not always reflected realistically the way slang expressions are used, or at least the way they were used by our survey population. In the case of almost 50% of expressions (13 expressions), however, data ensuing from the survey seemed to suggest a noticeable degree of Americanisation, somehow backing up the data drawn from our corpus, since all of the expressions included in the survey presented a relatively high frequency of occurrence. With regard to results corresponding to the couple of slang expressions of British origin included in the survey, in a way survey data confirmed the trend found in the corpus, namely, that these expressions also made their way into the language used by the American survey group. Occasionally (in the case of *screw*) frequency rates were higher in the group of AmE than in the British survey population, thus somehow suggesting a two-way traffic of linguistic influence between these two varieties of English, albeit there is no doubt as to which of the two are the major and the minor influence. Further, among the remaining expressions, some 20% (5 expressions) proved to be used, in no small measure, by respondents from at least one (or even two) nationality groups. In other words, most often than not (about 70%) corpus and survey data did match.

On the other hand, and very much in keeping with the issue discussed in the previous paragraphs, there is evidence that some American linguistic trends are (and have been now over a meaningful period of time) extending to other varieties of English (Crystal 2003, Svartvik and Leech 2006, Swan 2002, Trudgill and Hannah 1993). Our hypothesis, somewhat based on Trudgill and Hannah (1993: 45), was that American linguistic drives are spreading to other varieties of English worldwide, especially among new generations, due to their diffusion through the media. We focused on situation comedies, whose broadcasting is liable to exert a considerable influence on the way speakers use language (particularly slang) in real life. At the same time, TV shows aim at mirroring, if just to some extent and in a conventionalised fashion, the way actual speakers of English speak. As a matter of fact, as suggested above, linguistic

representation of slang in situation comedies might not always constitute quite an accurate rendering of actual language use. Tying in with the notion that AmE slang has spread, and is spreading, to other varieties, three main general tendencies were cited as accounting for the linguistic phenomena tested out in the questionnaire. It must be pointed out, nonetheless, in contrast to the “cut-off” and exclusive character of the categories or trends described above, that differences in terms of output frequency rates across the three survey groups sometimes were not that clear-cut. In spite of that, three patterns seem to appear throughout the set of linguistic expressions, all the same. In general lines, either expressions appeared to be typically American, or they seemed to have extended to and turned out to be more frequently used in either the group of other varieties or in that of BrE. In these varieties, a given slang expression is no longer perceived, we might venture to say, as typically American. In fact, several respondents seemed to conceive of them (as they stated in the comment section) either as their own (especially in the case of younger generations) or as more of a World Standard English usage, but not marked out as American, in any case.

To wrap up, we can conclude that the corpus of sitcoms was taken as a more or less realistic representation of AmE and BrE (slang) that we took as a basis in order to carry out a survey on slang. On the one hand, the corpus proved useful upon trying to identify differences between the two varieties of English, as well as in spotting signs of Americanisation. On the other hand, the survey provided some evidence that the Americanisation displayed in the corpus was a somewhat realistic representation of the way flesh-and-blood speakers of English use their mother tongue. It is also worth stressing that audiovisual productions might exert an influence on viewers, both on native speakers of English (as a medium contributing to linguistic globalisation and the Americanisation of World Englishes) and on non-native speakers who make use of this type of material as part of their language learning resources.

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