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ACCENT MATTERS: POLISH EFL STUDENTS' PREFERENCES FOR BRITISH VS. AMERICAN ENGLISH IN TRANSLATION PRACTICE

In Polish classrooms where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL), learners are routinely exposed to two prestige accents: Received Pronunciation (RP), typically associated with British English, and General American (GA). These accents are presented through textbooks, listening exercises, and teacher modeling, but often without explicit reflection on their sociolinguistic value or contextual appropriateness. While EFL instruction tends to prioritize grammatical accuracy and phonetic intelligibility, practical language use, such as translation tasks, requires learners to make real-world lexical and stylistic decisions that reflect deeper preferences, associations, and attitudes.

One such decision arises when translating culturally embedded vocabulary or spelling variants. For instance, translating the Polish word *"winda"* may prompt the student to choose between *"lift"* (RP) and *"elevator"* (GA). This lexical bifurcation is not merely a matter of linguistic correctness but rather a sociolinguistic act shaped by media exposure, perceived prestige, identity, and contextual awareness. Against this backdrop, the present study investigates which accent variant Polish EFL students prefer in translation tasks, what attitudinal dimensions inform these preferences, and whether the use of one variant over another has any measurable impact on translation accuracy.

Theoretical Background and Previous Research

The study is grounded in two foundational frameworks that illuminate the complexity of learner attitudes and global English variation. First, Kachru's influential World Englishes model [6] challenges the notion of a single "standard" English by introducing a tripartite classification: the inner circle (native-speaker contexts like the UK and USA), the outer circle (post-colonial contexts like India), and the expanding circle (EFL settings like Poland). This model legitimizes diverse Englishes and invites an understanding of RP and GA not as superior forms but as sociolinguistic options with context-specific salience.

Second, Gardner's socio-educational theory of language learning [3] emphasizes that motivation and identity are integral to the acquisition process. According to this model, learners are more inclined to adopt a variety they perceive as prestigious, intelligible, or personally appealing. This theory has been expanded by Bernaus and Gardner [2], who observed that teacher encouragement, media influence, and peer interaction all shape students' motivational orientation toward specific language models.

In terms of pronunciation and accent perception, Derwing and Munro [4] have demonstrated that attitudes toward accents significantly influence learners' willingness to engage with certain forms of input and output. Complementing this, Jenkins [5] argues for an English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) perspective, proposing that accent diversity is inevitable, and that intelligibility should take precedence over conformity to native norms. However, when students face translation tasks, the stakes shift. Lexical items such as *"flat"* versus *"apartment"* or *"tyre"* versus *"tire"* are not simply matters of pronunciation—they require the translator to navigate cultural resonances, intended audience, and register. Yet, despite the centrality of such decisions, research has rarely explored how Polish EFL learners make these choices in translation practice.

Translation theorists such as House [7] and Venuti [10] have emphasized the need to evaluate translation quality through both formal equivalence and cultural adaptation, but have not discussed accent-based lexical divergence. Munday's comprehensive overview of translation theory [8] similarly acknowledges the semantic-pragmatic challenges in translation but does not address the nuanced issue of accent-influenced vocabulary selection. This study, therefore, fills a notable gap by focusing on how variant preferences—RP vs. GA—affect lexical choices and learner reasoning in translation.

Methodology

The study employs a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, combining quantitative analysis of translation tasks with qualitative insights from focus-group interviews. Seventy advanced EFL undergraduates from two Warsaw-based universities (ages 20–24) participated, all of whom had received at least four years of tertiary-level English instruction. In the first phase, participants completed a translation task comprising three 200-word passages originally written in Polish. Each passage contained several embedded lexical items with variant-specific forms (e.g., *lorry / truck*, *programme / program*, *colour / color*). Students were free to choose either the RP or GA form in each case. Their translations were then independently assessed by two qualified raters, who coded the variant usage and evaluated translation accuracy (inter-rater reliability $\kappa = 0.88$).

Immediately after completing the translation task, participants were asked to complete a 15-item Likert-scale questionnaire designed to measure their attitudes toward RP and GA. The questionnaire assessed four dimensions: perceived prestige, intelligibility, modernity, and personal affinity—dimensions aligned with Gardner's model of integrative and instrumental motivation [3]. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, and paired-sample t-tests were used to analyze the relationship between attitudes and lexical choices.

In the second phase, sixteen participants (eight with strong GA preferences and eight favoring RP) were invited to participate in semi-structured focus group interviews. Thematic prompts addressed issues such as media exposure (e.g., YouTube vs. BBC), imagined audiences (e.g., blog readers vs. academic examiners), and classroom expectations. Interview transcripts were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-step method of thematic coding [1], allowing for rich, inductively derived insights.

Results and Interpretation

The findings reveal a clear trend in favor of General American lexical choices. Across all translations, GA variants accounted for 64% of selections. The preference for American forms was especially pronounced in technology-related or informal contexts, where 78% of participants selected GA words such as *elevator* over *lift*. In contrast, RP variants were favored (58%) in contexts with academic or cultural overtones, as in the translation of *programme* in an educational setting.

Attitudinal data revealed that GA was rated highest in modernity (M = 4.2) and media familiarity (M = 4.0), whereas RP scored highest in perceived prestige (M = 4.1) and correctness (M = 4.0). Pearson correlations ($r \geq 0.43$, $p < .01$) confirmed strong relationships between these attitudinal ratings and actual variant choices during translation. These findings corroborate Gardner's assertion that attitudes shape linguistic behavior [3] and further support Jenkins' claim that accent selection often reflects learners' global orientation and media landscape [5].

Interestingly, a paired-samples t-test showed no significant difference in translation accuracy when students used non-preferred variants ($t(69) = 1.02$, $p = 0.31$), indicating that

variant selection is a stylistic and sociolinguistic choice rather than a reflection of linguistic competence. These finding echoes Venuti's argument that stylistic decisions are culturally embedded rather than strictly rule-governed [10].

The qualitative interviews yielded three dominant themes. First, students expressed a strong emotional connection to GA, often citing daily exposure to Netflix shows, Instagram influencers, and American pop music as shaping their internal language models. Second, RP was viewed as the more "correct" or academic option, often associated with textbooks, exams, and formal writing assignments. Finally, students demonstrated a high degree of contextual sensitivity, as many reported switching between General American (GA) and Received Pronunciation (RP) depending on the imagined audience or genre. For instance, an *apartment* was used for translating a casual blog post, while a *flat* was preferred in a simulated academic abstract.

Pedagogical Implications

The results suggest that Polish EFL learners can make informed, context-sensitive accent choices, even in the absence of explicit instructional guidance. This points to the pedagogical value of integrating accent awareness into translation and writing courses. Teaching materials should label lexical items with variant markers (e.g., [RP], [GA]) and provide contextual notes to foster metalinguistic reflection. Furthermore, teacher training programs should emphasize accent diversity and prepare instructors to model and explain both variants authentically, moving beyond the implicit privileging of Received Pronunciation (RP) in coursebooks.

Conclusion

Accent preference in translation is not a superficial or stylistic detail—it reflects a deeper set of learner attitudes, sociocultural affiliations, and strategic judgments. This study demonstrates that Polish EFL students do not passively adopt textbook norms; instead, they engage critically with accent choices, basing them on context, perceived prestige, and media influence. The absence of accuracy penalties for using non-preferred variants further underscores that translation quality is not diminished by accent variation. Instead of enforcing uniform standards, language educators should equip students to navigate the sociolinguistic richness of English in its global forms.

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