

Kelli Jarvoja

Anne Bello

ENGLWRIT 111

3 May 2022

Is It Wrong Not to Speak Standard American English?

As we were a group of smart college students, one day my teammate was giving out the candies called smarties and the second someone said “smarties” my Canadian friends started an argument that the “smarties” are actually “rockets” and one of my Canadian teammates goes: “Kelli since you don't have a name for them you have to be on the Canadian side and call them rockets instead of smarties”. That was when I realized that I may speak English well but regardless of how good I speak it, it will never be my language.

Last summer in mid August when it was time to start thinking about fitting my whole Estonian life into luggage I was sitting in my room at home and I pictured myself in an American college dormitory room speaking standard American English with my friends like Americans usually do. The very first day I arrived in America with all of my American hopes and dreams was in late August because apparently all the international students were expected to arrive early. Soon I realized that it was only the international students who arrived early which meant that I had already disproved my expectations on the very first day because there were no American students to be seen at that time.

So the first conversations that I had on campus were all with Canadian people. Never before had I heard Canadian English spoken. I really did not notice any difference between the English that I had heard back home and their English at first. In September when all the American students moved into their dorms and I finally heard the standard American English I

soon realized that they are not the same. The way that my Canadian friends said “house” or “bag” sounded way different from my American friends. I always found the Canadian English way more clear and understandable when I was still transitioning to English, mainly because Canadians were speaking a little bit slower than Americans but I still have not figured out if it was intentional or not.

A few days later in September my Australian teammate arrived on campus. I do not remember the first conversation that I had with her but I certainly remember that I did not understand 90% of the words that she was saying and it really felt like she was not speaking English. I have had a hard time understanding the Americans speak fast and not pronouncing words correctly but when Ellie the Australian started talking fast I realized that American English might even not be too bad. It did not take me too long to get used to understanding the English spoken in my friend group that includes 3 Canadians, an Australian and 5 Americans from different parts of the country. But the thing that took me a long time was figuring out how I was supposed to speak English.

Barbara Mellix once wrote about using her own English: “We felt foolish, embarrassed, somehow diminished because we were ashamed to be our real selves” (260). That will always remind me how embarrassed I was to speak my own English at first. It was always the accent that got in the way and watching hours of YouTube videos of how to sound American unfortunately did not help. The only thing that did help was real life practice. Just having conversations with friends and strangers made it easier to learn to sound more American. Although one day I was having a conversation with a girl in my chemistry class and she said: “I think the first exam was pretty easy” and I replied: “You reckon?” The surprise on her face after

me saying it told me that it clearly was not very American. The phrase “you reckon” was excessively used by Ellie the Australian and I had picked it up and made it part of my language.

Since I speak English as my second language it always left me wondering if the reason why I pick up words from different English dialects is because I am still transitioning to English or does it work the same way for people who speak English as their first language. That’s why I decided to ask Ellie.

Me: “Have you noticed any changes in your speech since you moved to the US?”

Ellie: “I haven't noticed any drastic changes to my speech patterns. However, I have found that certain words or phrases I would say frequently at home have not been as prominent in my speaking since being here. I think that it is purely due to the fact that I am surrounded by people that speak in a very different way to what i am used to.”

Me: “When you go back home do you think people will notice that or are you able to code - switch?”

Ellie: “Since moving to the US, on the phone to people from home I do find myself speaking differently. Even if these are just random words and phrases, the way I speak does change when I am speaking to people from Australia.”

Me: “Are there any words or phrases that you didn’t use before but have started to use now due to the influence of the English spoken here?”

Ellie: “I wouldn't say I haven't started using any specific American words or phrases, just because the setting I am in has many different cultures and ways of speaking, nothing has stuck.”

The chat that I had with Ellie made me realize that there is still a noticeable influence of language used in everyday life around you but it doesn't have to affect your own language. And there is actually nothing wrong with using your own language. Mellix has written about using

standard American English: “ the language was not ours it was something from the outside us, something we used for special occasions” (261). Symbolizing how she had to switch between Black English and Standard American english. That makes me think about how this statement has changed tremendously through time and unlike Mellix I have noticed that I actually do not have to choose between the languages you speak. People have started to like the cultural diversities and from my own experience I have noticed that people actually want you to use your own language. It does not matter if I call the Smarties Rockets because either way is right.

Works Cited

Mellix, Barbara. "From Outside, In." *The Georgia Review*. Vol.41. No. 2. Summer 1987. PP 258 - 267.

Porter, Ellie. Personal interview. 23 April 2022.