



### **Omani & Texan English: Common Threads**

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#### **Abstract**

While seemingly dissimilar, Omani and Texan English (TXE) share common threads of non-standardization in terms of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and discourse. These areas are highlighted to help teachers show students how to either side step these stigmatizing characteristics of OE (Omani English) or embrace them as a show of solidarity.

Key words: World Englishes, Omani English, identity, solidarity, non-standardization

#### **Primary & Secondary Purposes**

The primary purpose of this paper is to help establish and gain acceptance of Omani English as a variety of World English in much the same way that Texan English is established and accepted as a variety of Southern American English. A secondary purpose is to highlight the social, economic and cultural implications of speaking a non-standardized dialect of English so that teachers can better inform their students about making a choice between showing solidarity within their own speech communities and finding acceptance within the standardized community of English speakers.

#### **One Major Assumption**

The Sultanate of Oman (where I've been teaching for the last four years) has its own variety of World English called Omani English (OE). The major assumption behind this paper (and supported in scholarly research) is that once non-standardized forms of English become acceptable in a particular place with a certain group of people who share similar traits, a new world English is born (Wierzbicka 2006; Kachru 1984; Upton 2010). OE, as one might surmise,

is distinctly different from my own variety of Texan English (TXE) in terms of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and discourse.

## Pronunciation

### Texas Vowel Movements

In Texas, everything is bigger and longer, vowels included. Vowel movements are drawn out like long and slow like a lazy summer afternoon in Texas. *Dog*, for example is often pronounced in Texas as [dawg] with an up-gliding diphthong as noted by Tillery & Bailey (2005) in their article, *Do you speak American?* Their report on this southern variety of English takes heed of how the off-glide of /ai/ in words like *ride* /rajd/ and *right* /rajt/ make these words in Texas sound more like [raijd] and [raijt] respectively. The off-gliding /ai/ is but the tip of the vocalic longhorn so to speak.

In the Lone Star State, the tense/lax distinction of vowels before /l/ is disappearing. For example, *pool* /pul/ and *pull* /pʊl/ are now homophones. *Feel/fill* /fi:l/ & /fi:l/ and *sale/sell* /se:l/ & /se:l/ are *fixing to* join the ranks of homophony as well (more about *fixing to* in the section on grammar). *Caught* /kawt/ & *cot* /kat/ are but another example of vowel merging that is characteristic of TXE as are *pen* /pen/ & *pin* /pɪn/ which are both now pronounced identically (Bailey & Tillery, 2005).

Our tendency to linger over our vowels and lax what should be tense has sometimes been interpreted as slowness of thought by those outside of this particular speech community – as if slow talking means slow thinking. The slow rate of speech and the lingering over vowels are two reasons why TXE is considered to be a non-standard variety of English with all the negative concomitant repercussions (Nero, 2004). To sidestep the social stigma of speaking a non-standard variety of English, native Texans such as myself often become (out of economic and professional necessity) bi-dialectal – one dialect for home and another for the office (Schumann, 1974).

### Very Consonantal

As far as the rendering of consonants is concerned, Texan cadence is distinctive there as well. The alveolar approximant /r/ for example, in words like *forty* /fɔ:ti/ and *four* /fɔ:r/ often drop-off the phonetic map and reappear in words you wouldn't normally expect to see them like in *warsh* [warʃ] (Labov, W., Ash, S., Boberg, C. 2006) This dropping of the *r*'s is, according to Schonmweitz's (2001) article on gender and pronunciation in the American South, known as a constricted post-vocalic /r/ and is yet another nonstandard phonological feature of TXE that separates us from Standard Speakers of English.

### OE Vowels: A Trinity

In Oman, on the other hand, the vowels are neither longer nor bigger. Most of the time, they're just not there at all (in writing, that is). This is because in Arabic, there are essentially three short vowels – *damma* /u/, *fatha* /a/ and *kasra* /e/ and three long versions of the same. These short vowels are not even part of the actual Arabic alphabet and are only written in early literacy development stages. Nevertheless, there is one 'pure' vowel, *alif* (ل) and two semi-vowels *wow* (و) and *ya* (ي) (word initially, they are semi-vowels and between consonants, they are long vowels) that do manifest themselves in the orthography of the language and as such continue to be written after early literacy.

Compare the Arabic vowels that are actually written and the unseen (but omnipresent) vocalic trinity of *damma*, *fatha* and *kasra* with the twelve simple vowels and the eight diphthongs in Texan English and you begin to get an idea of how a speaker of Omani English could be stigmatized for their lack of vowel variety. This vacuity of vowels in their pronunciation is often interpreted by addressees (and speakers) as boredom. In other words, Omani speakers of English tend to use only the vowels from their first language (Arabic) in their second language (English). To a native speaker of English whose stock of vowels is much more varied, using the same three vowels all the time can sound like boredom. Maybe this is why my students often tell me, 'Teacher, I feel boring.' So as Texans are ostracized for our long vowel movements so are Omanis for their dearth of vowel variety.

The most salient pronunciation feature of Omani English is also the most distinguishable phonological characteristic of Gulf Arabic - the lack of a distinction between *j* & *g* (/dʒ/ and /g/). Job, for example, is often pronounced and spelled *gob* [gob]. College can become *collej* [kalig] and technology, *technoljy* [teknaɲgi]. /dʒ/ and /g/ are used interchangeably as if they are allophones of the same phoneme. It is not uncommon to hear from Omani students, 'Teacher, I want a jood gob.'

Another phonological factor stacked against the speakers of Omani English is the absence of the voiced/voiceless distinction that exists in Texan English (as well as with most other varieties of English). Because this distinction is phonemic in English, i.e., meaning hinges on upon it (think of the difference between *pat* and *bat*); it is one of the first features of Omani English that distinguishes a speaker as such. This often results in a pronunciation issue; instead of asking for a Pepsi, a *Bebsi* is ordered. The predominantly Indian service industry has little trouble working their way around this, however and they have actually left their own indelible mark on Omani food, culture and grammar even that will be addressed in subsequent sections. The point is that given the nature of daily interactions in Oman in English (Omani and Indian predominantly) there is simply no communicative need to distinguish between /p/ and /b/. Thus, the non-standard remains. Furthermore, as /b/ is phonetically very similar to /p/, Westerners have little difficulty in meeting the communicative needs, i.e., the desire to understand and to be understood, of OE speakers in terms of being empathetic, if not sometimes chuckling interlocutors.

## Grammar

### Grammatical Curiosities

Grammatically speaking, TXE and OE both have non-standard forms. Take for example the quasi-modal in Texas English, *fixin*, as in 'I can't shoot the breeze right now, 'cause I'm *fixin*' to go see a man about a horse' (meaning I can't talk right now, I've got to pee). *Fixin*' is a quasi-modal in that with most modal verbs, the verb that follows is always in the base form. *Fixin*', on the other hand, always selects an infinitive as its constituent. What qualifies *fixin*' for modal status is that it expresses the mood of imminent possibility.

While there is no exact Omani equivalent of *fixin*, there are plenty of examples of non-standard forms that are acceptable in the everyday parlance of the Sultanate (many of them the result of sustained contact with Indian workers and Indian English teachers). If, as a second language learner, your linguistic role model, your teacher speaks a certain type of English, for example, Indian English then your English will

more than likely develop speech characteristics similar to the teachers' example. In Omani English, for example, instead of using the past tense to speak of past events, the present tense is used in conjunction with a time marker, as in 'Yesterday I am in Salalah.' I've even heard native speakers of English resort to this kind of linguistic simplification (myself included) to make themselves understood when speaking to Omanis (Brulhart, 1986).

Omani speakers of English often find (as speakers of Indian English do) the stative verbs of TXE to be as stiff as the brim of Stetson cowboy hat. Verbs that do not take the present continuous are stiff in that they stay within certain tenses and aren't as flexible as other verbs that can take any verbal permutation. In OE, this lackadaisical view towards stative verbs is manifested in a grammatical tendency to tack on *-ing* to verbs which normally don't allow such suffixing. *Knowing, liking, loving, wanting* and *hating* are often heard (and seen in student papers) to be as much more progressive states than as we hear and see them in Texas.

While this certainly might strike you as grammatical abomination, we are in Texas, guilty of similar crimes. Take for example our use of multiple modals as in 'I can't go today but I *might could* go tomorrow.' While technically incorrect, it is effective in expressing the dubiousness at one's ability to act in a certain way in a given situation. The perfective 'done' of TXE as in 'I done did it yesterday' ain't much to be proud of neither (although it is colorful and fun to use for emphatic purposes).

While things are emphatically done in Texas, nothing gets done in Oman. Things are made. Pilots make landings. Women make shopping and drivers make accidents. This is because the auxiliary verb 'do' as it exists in English, does not exist in Arabic. This is why it's so rare to hear it used in Omani English even among Western educated Omani academics.

OE has not only done away with the extremely helpful 'do', it has also gotten rid of the beguiling and antiquated noun classification scheme known as count and non-count nouns. Furniture, luggage, water, rice, information, pretty much *anythings* and *everythings* that used to be uncountable is now countable, even *childrens*. Advertisements, store signs and the local news

networks provide evidence of the widespread acceptance of this linguistic variation within the OE community.

## Vocabulary

### Culinary Lexicon

As far as vocabulary is concerned, Omani English and Texas English both share distinctive features that reflect how they see the world (and their respective influences). In OE, the language is peppered with, not surprisingly, Arabic and Indian words. In TXE, the lexicon is spiced up with Spanish words.

Spanish has influenced the lexicon of Texas English in much the same way that Hindi has influenced Omani English, especially in the realm of food. If not for the Mexicans, you wouldn't hear such things as *frijoles*, *enchiladas*, *quesadillas* and *tacos* rolling around on the tongues of so many hungry *Tejanos*.

In Oman, on the other hand, it's all about the Indian influence on the tongues of Omanis. *Parrota*, *dahl*, *biryani* and *masala dosa* are widely heard (and eaten) across the Gulf countries. In fact, you could rightly say that Indian food is the Mexican food of Arabia – cheap, fast and easy to come by in much the same way that Indian labor is here and Mexican there.

The Arabic phrase *insh'allah* (God willing) is the Middle Eastern mentality with which most Western foreigners develop a love/hate relationship. We hate it when we realize that it's often used as a 'get out of jail free' card and love it when we see that we can use it in the same way – to 'pre-soften' the blow to our interlocutor that we just might not do what we're say we're going to do (if God isn't willing, that is).

Just as everyone in Oman soon finds out what *insh'allah* can mean so do we in Texas know what the Spanish word *mañana* means. *Mañana* is the Mexican equivalent of *insh'allah*. Literally it means tomorrow and that's often exactly what it means but it can be used in much the same way as *insh'allah* – to postpone something for tomorrow (or until the person forgets) that you'd rather not do at all.

### Discourse

#### Public Discourse

Discourse in Texas sounds much like the way we talk – country. The speech normally reserved for intimates often finds its way into public spheres, especially in small town Texas newspapers according to Barbara Johnstone's research, *Sounding Country in Urbanizing Texas: Private Speech in Public Discourse* (1998).

Johnstone found news articles in small town Texas to be moralistic, evaluative and sprinkled with speech more characteristic of spontaneous storytelling than objective journalism. In other words, the story was told much in the same way that it would be on somebody's front porch over a glass of iced tea. While public discourse in Texas differs in this respect from American mainstream media, what's consistent is the underlying assumption that the newspaper is a healthy place for airing concerns and criticisms, something conspicuously absent in OE.

In Oman, public discourse is all about accumulating *wasta* (influence) and building family stature. In this case, the country of Oman is analogous to a family with Sultan Qaboos as the father figure. That's why they'd just as soon shoot themselves in the foot as criticize their motherland of Oman in a public sphere such as the newspaper.

Rampant self-censorship and front-page headlines detailing the list of countries HM (His Majesty) Sultan Qaboos has sent 'cables' or greetings to are typical fare in the *Times of Oman*. Small wonder the letters to the editor are chock full of outraged Omanis who see any sort of criticism levied by foreigners as a personal insult. Public discourse is just not the place for trying to implement change – it's a place for solidifying what's most important in Oman – family honor.

### **Conclusion**

Two varieties of world Englishes, Omani and Texan English, have been compared and contrasted along pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and discourse lines. While seemingly dissimilar, the two offshoots have more in common than one would expect. The social, economic and cultural implications of speaking a non-standardized dialect of English have been highlighted so that teachers can better inform their students about making a choice between showing solidarity within their own speech communities and finding acceptance within the standardized community of English speakers. An essential part of our duty as Teachers of English as a Foreign Language is making our students aware that our identity and the way others perceive us of is shaped almost entirely by language.

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