

Marko Modiano, *A Mid-Atlantic Handbook: American and British English*. Studentlitteratur: Lund, 1996. 150 pp. ISBN: 91-44-61451-9; paper; SKK 186.

Being divided by a common language is something that might well be relished on both sides of the Atlantic as good-hearted chauvinism. Yet, for those on the chalk-face teaching English to non-native speakers, the joy of lexical, phonetic and grammatical difference amounts to a practical inhibition. It is this problem that *A Mid-Atlantic Handbook* addresses. The aim is to point up the differences between American English (AmE) and British English (BrE), and the argument is that the resulting confusions can be avoided, at least to some extent, by identifying a Mid-Atlantic standard. The beneficiary, the book cover informs, will be the 'freshman college student,' one wishing to be comprehensible to the greatest number of people. While the aims are largely achieved in the terms Modiano sets for himself ('No effort has been made to include *all* of the significant differences between AmE and BrE,' (6)), the argument may not entirely go off with a bang in all

quarters. Or should it be go over with a bang (see 137)? Whatever the case, in respect to his underlying argument, Modiano has entered into an ancient and venerable controversy.

Firstly, it should be remarked that the Handbook is a clear and accessible study, easy on the eye and with a useful index. Five chapters titled respectively, Pronunciation, Vocabulary, Spelling, *Grammar*, Punctuation and Style, and Expressions and Proverbs, plus a brief section on traditional weights and measures differences, give the freshman a very clear idea of the difficulties the English learner will encounter in the effort to attain maximum understanding. In the, by any standard, baffling area of English spellings, the freshman will note that BrE eschews *z* in favour of *s*, eschews *favor* in favour of *favour*, and prefers the theatre to the theater. It may have helped him to know that much of this is a result of Latinate, chiefly French, influences on BrE in the Middle Ages and, perhaps ironically, a more Germanicised base to the linguistic gallimaufry that became AmE. Philology, however, is not in the Handbook's brief. The freshman will also have noted the BrE obsession with hyphens and commas, though I suspect that the comma-free address on letter headings is already an established international restraint. How the freshman is going to decide on the merits of BrE *knelt* – AmE *kneeled* –, or AmE *gotten* – BrE *got* – (125), is a tough one: in this case, the freshman might suspect that both dialects continue to court archaisms for reasons that are entirely idiosyncratic. Left to himself, of course, the freshman may run into several problems if he accepts fully Modiano's observations, particularly if he were then to seek linguistic amelioration in British society. For example, if he starts worrying that his failure to fit in at a British educational institution will incline that institution to rusticate him, which the Handbook cross-references with *expel*, then he'll probably be at either Oxford or Cambridge, seeing as only viewers of the BBC's Oxford sleuth series *Inspector Morse* would otherwise understand the basis of his anxiety. Similarly, if goes about on a moving staircase, (instead of an escalator), enters into a drawing room (instead of a living room), and offers to remunerate (instead of pay), folk will wonder less what country he's from and more what century. There is, unfortunately, a fair bit of this marring the usefulness of Modiano's vocabulary lists (23-106). Some, like BrE *mother* company for AmE *subsidiary*, are plain wrong (though some might find the corollary fitting); others misleading (do BrE speakers still refer to World War I as *The Great War*?); several are tendentious or, as noted above, very much out of date. What's more, if the aspiring freshman goes around in ordinary English society using the childish colloquialism *ta* ('...Mid-Atlantic English at its best...') (12) as opposed to what he believes to be an AmE standard *thank you*, he'll not only be wrong but foolish to boot. However, if he reads the Handbook aright, this simply isn't going to happen. Indeed, from his knowledge of the weird, outmoded, and eccentric nature of BrE, as gleaned from the Handbook, it's highly unlikely that he'll give BrE a second thought. This, seemingly, is Modiano's underlying message. Thus:

When it comes to the standard variety in the US, however, when spoken at a moderate speed and with careful diction, most of the features of AmE fall within the parameters of what can be called Mid-Atlantic English. This is because AmE is so widespread internationally. Most second language speakers of English are familiar with AmE, find

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it easy to understand, and do not commonly associate it with the US when they hear it spoken by second language speakers. For this reason, I have concentrated on the attributes of BrE when discussing features of the language which should be avoided with (sic) speaking Mid-Atlantic English. In comparison to BrE, there are few features of AmE which cause misunderstanding in an international context, partly because of the large number of native speakers of AmE, and also because of the massive spread of the variety throughout the world via the media. (13-14)

On the subject of media exposure, and considering the global popularity of the BBC World Service, statistical evidence for the relative penetration of the two dialects would be difficult to quantify, although the penetration of the American news channel CNN is almost certainly ascendent. Yet what is really clear here is that AmE is tantamount to Mid-Atlantic English and all the apparent virtues of this standard, whereas BrE isn't. It is this edge of argument that places Modiano's claims for Mid-Atlantic-speak in a venerable tradition of linguistic squabbles that no doubt raise hackles from Tunbridge Wells to Tallahassee. The squabble, at turns bitter and barmy, notably among the English, concerns class, power and privilege. Ironic it is then, for example, that Modiano recommends AmE *napkin* over BrE *sewiette*, when forty years ago Nancy Mitford was telling us that *napkin* is U and *sewiette* non-U. Ironic, too, that BrE in the *Handbook* is characterised by the Received Pronunciation dialect long *a:* and considered less internationally intelligible than the AmE *a* (compare *a:nt* with *ant*, for example), when the reality is that RP is largely eclipsed in British media phonology by estuary varieties and other accent forms in which the short *a* is characteristic. In actuality, pronunciation-wise at least, BrE really hasn't got a standard. It's a form of special pleading to suggest it has. However, the circumstance that Modiano's argument points to is that the accent/dialect debate is now hovering Mid-Atlantic. What's more, it is not just the equivocal English middle-classes who await the outcome but freshmen world-wide.

In short, then, *A Mid-Atlantic Handbook* is in the tradition of prescriptive grammars, a *lingua franca* ideal for English language learners. And there can be no doubt that educators would welcome a global standard just as much as they fear the the long awaited fragmentation of international English into mutually unintelligible dialects. Trouble is, language will have its say no matter what braces attempt to regulate it. The *Handbook* will need regular servicing if it intends to keep up and give a fair picture of linguistic developments both sides of the divide. Yet one suspects that this is not the thinking, that somewhere at the back of things is the old nagging engine of the old squabble: privilege, status, resentment. In this regard, one could slightly misquote George Bernard Shaw and recall that 'It is impossible for an English speaker to open his mouth, without making some other English speaker despise him.'

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