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Research Interests: learner language, corpus linguistics, English varieties

# **LITHUANIAN LEARNERS' ENGLISH: BRITISH OR AMERICAN?**

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*Two varieties of English, British English and American English, “have a special status as the two principal national varieties of the language” (Algeo 2006, p.1) and are typically used as models for English in a foreign language situation (Trudgill & Hannah 2008). The dominant status of British English in the context of European educational system has been challenged by American English. Previously published studies on the topic of European learners’ preferences and consistent use of one variety yield contradictory results (cf. Larsson 2012, Alftberg 2009). The present paper aims at analysing the preferred variety of English used by Lithuanian students. The data was taken from two Lithuanian subcorpora of the International Corpus of Learner English (LICLE-VU and LICLE-VDU), two Lithuanian parts of the Corpus of Academic Learner English (CALE-SUM-LIT and CALE-RPA-LIT), the corpus of essays of first-year students of English Philology at Vilnius University (AFK1), and a questionnaire completed by 124 students of the Institute of Foreign Languages at Vilnius University. Using quantitative methods, an attempt was made to define the preferred variety based on students’ overt choice as well as their choice of spelling norms and lexical items. The questionnaire was extended to include a task on the use of prepositions. The results of the pilot study provide insights into Lithuanian learners’ use of the two English varieties.*

**KEY WORDS:** learner corpora, varieties of English, spelling, prepositions.

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## **Introduction**

Traditionally, the English used in the European context was British English because “[t]he English language is inextricably associated with England” (Fisher 2001, p. 59). Is this the prevailing position in students’ minds nowadays? The globalisation of English has led to ideas that there is no need for non-native learners to emulate one variety; therefore, does the importance to speak about varieties of English remain? These questions gave a stimulus for the present pilot study.

Among a plethora of English varieties, the two most important and influential are British and American English. The latter traces its origin to the colonisation of America in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Its status has gradually changed from colonial to independent (cf. Hosseinzadeh *et al.* 2015). The relationship between these two varieties, however, has been complicated. Traditionally, American English was seen as a less educated and less prestigious variety of

the English language. Though Britain's long established publishing traditions of educational materials play an important role in granting the dominant position of British English, the spread of American English due to films, international business or science (cf. Tottie 2002), new media and social networking (Kongsuwannakul 2011) have made the scale to move towards American English. In 1996, Marko Modiano claimed that people not only borrowed American English lexical expressions, but they tended to adopt American English spelling norms as well. Almost twenty years later, Maia Kutateladze (2014) reported an increasing acceptability of American English in the context of international business. Daniela Popescu (2011), however, in her study on the influence of American English on British English, questions the general dominance of the former variety claiming that it "is becoming a minority dialect of world English". Despite the different attitudes towards the status of the varieties under investigation, divergence between British and American English can still be observed. There is no consensus among scholars which area of language witnesses the greatest differences, though. While Naghmeh Mirzaie Hosseinzadeh *et al.* claim that "the differences in terms of vocabulary, grammar, or spelling are small compared with phonetic differences" (2015, p. 647), Bin Zhang & Zhaofeng Jiang state that "[t]he differences are mainly shown in the usage of prepositions, auxiliary verbs, articles, pronouns, adjectives and adverbs, and tense and subjunctive mood" (2008, p. 69). Similarly, John Algeo (2006) indicates a multitude of grammatical differences and Tom McArthur (1992, p. 970) asserts that "the most obtrusive differences between present-day American and British documents are their spellings". This paper concentrates on spelling norms putting minor attention to lexical and grammatical, namely prepositional choices.

With the advance of global English, students have started questioning the importance of following the norms of spelling alongside the need for varietal consistency. The mixture of several language varieties hardly ever impedes understanding. With the rise of the status of English as lingua franca, even native speakers sometimes deviate from the correct language use (Snuviškienė 2008). Is this, however, the standard to be followed by students who pursue a degree in linguistics or philology? An educated person has to learn to respect the language they use. On 19 July 2010, the University of Chicago published an article "*Foreign Accents Make Speakers Seem less Truthful to Listeners, Research Shows*", which claims that people who speak with an accent are seen as less trustworthy. Similarly, James D. Wells reports on the importance of "writing with consistent convention" (2013, p. 9) and claims that "serious care in language usage gives confidence in the reader that the author has given serious care to the subject and wants to do his best to clearly impart his message. Spelling is an obvious indicator of this care" (2013, p. 2–3). Though students could be allowed to choose the variety of English they prefer, it is important they do it consistently and not to suit their needs, since "consistency is a hallmark of good spelling" (Scott 2004, p. 161) and "Yes. Spelling counts" (Lahey 2013).

In the paradigm of foreign language studies, successful acquisition of a language is seen as approximation to the target language norms (cf. Ferguson 2006). The present study, therefore, tries to examine how the accuracy in spelling, the choice of lexical items

or prepositions are observed by Lithuanian learners of English, all of whom are university students.

The studies of learner groups with a different mother tongue background have been carried out on the topic of the use of the two varieties of English (Swedish: Ann-Kristin Alftberg (2009), Emma Hanson (2010), Tove Larsson (2012), Christian Lindell (2014); Thai: Kongsuwannakul (2011)). There is no consensus, however, among the authors studying learners' usage even with the same mother tongue background. While Alftberg (2009) found the prevalence of American English norms, the study by Larsson (2012) reports statistically significant dominance of British English. One more aspect of research interest encountered in linguistic literature concerns the learners' preferences and attitudes towards the English language (cf. Nwaila 1990, Sybing 2014). The present pilot study aims to answer the following questions:

- Which variety of the two most widely used is preferred by Lithuanian learners of English?
- Which variety is more often used in Lithuanian learners' writing?
- Are Lithuanian learners aware which language variety they use?

## Data and method

The collecting process of data for the present study was two-fold. One part of the data was received from a questionnaire completed by 124 students of three different study programmes at the Institute of Foreign Languages at Vilnius University (Table 1). The only third-year student who answered the questionnaire failed to indicate the study programme. This lack of information is marked by question marks in the table.

Table 1. Overview of students who completed the questionnaire

	First year	Second year	Third year	Total
English-French	23	19	?	42
English-Russian	8	15	?	23
English-Spanish	34	24	?	58
Total	65	58	1	124

The questionnaire asked to indicate the preferred variety of English as well as the variety the students used. In order to check whether students' preferences corresponded with their real use of the language, the questionnaire comprised three tasks. In Task 1, students were asked to complete eight words, which have different spelling in British and American English, presented in sentences. Task 2 asked to translate eight words which could have different lexical realisation or different spelling in British and American English. In Task 3, students were asked to choose the appropriate prepositions in five phrases.

The second part of the data was extracted from the following corpora representing Lithuanian English at university level (Table 2):

- The AFK1 corpus (compiled by Rita Juknevičienė) consists of essays written by first-year students of English Philology at Vilnius University.
- Two Lithuanian subcorpora of the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE) were compiled at Vilnius University (LICLE-VU) and Vytautas Magnus University (LICLE-VDU). The subcorpora consist of argumentative and literary essays written by third and fourth-year students of English Philology.
- Two subcorpora – summaries (CALE-SUM-LIT) and research papers (CALE-RPA-LIT) – of the Lithuanian part of the Corpus of Academic Learner English (CALE) consist of two types of texts written by students at Vilnius University.

Table 2. **The overview of the corpora used in the present study**

	AFK1	LICLE-VU	LICLE-VDU	CALE-SUM-LIT	CALE-RPA-LIT
Number of texts	98	304	115	88	23
Number of word tokens	38,410	177,564	65,755	19,754	359,078

AntConc3.4.3w (Anthony 2014) software was used for a quantitative analysis of words with systemic (cf. Scott 2004, p. 155) spelling differences in British and American English (Tottie 2002, p. 10–12, Larsson 2012, p. 131, Venezky 2001, p. 353) (Table 3).

Table 3. **Words with systemic differences analysed in the present study**

	BrE spelling	AmE spelling	
Group 1	-our	-or	behavio(u)r, colo(u)r, favo(u)r, flavo(u)r, harbo(u)r, hono(u)r, humo(u)r, labo(u)r, neighbo(u)r, rumo(u)r
Group 2	-re	-er	theatre/-er, centre/-er, metre/-er
Group 3	-ence	-ense	defence/-ense, offence/-ense, licence/-ense
Group 4	-is-	-iz-	organise/-ize, analyse/-yze, -isation/-ization
Group 5	-logue	-log	dialogue/-log, monologue/-log
Group 6	-ll-	-l-	travell*/-l*, cancell*/-l*

Using quantitative methods an attempt was made to define the preferred variety based on students' overt choice as well as on their actual language usage. Since the corpora differ in size, normalised frequency per 100,000 words was calculated.

## Results and discussion

The findings of the present study provide evidence that the majority of Lithuanian learners (92 per cent) overtly express preference for one of the two major varieties of the English language. This is in contrast with the tendencies observed among Swedish learners of English (Hansson 2010). Lithuanian learners' preference towards British and American English is distributed almost equally, 46.8 and 45.2 per cent respectively. The tendency,

however, changes depending on the year of study. First year students prefer American English – 53.9 per cent compared to 43.1 per cent of those who prefer British English, while the tendency among second year students is reversed: 50 per cent prefer British and only 36.2 give preference to American English. These tendencies are consistent with the findings of past studies by Alftberg (2009) and Larsson (2012), which reported the dominance of American English at a lower educational level and British English at a higher level. Examining the correlation between students' preferences and study programmes, it was found that the English-Russian study programme was the only one where the students consistently preferred British English. The results of the questionnaire, however, can be seen as tentative only and should be tested with a larger sample of students.

The questionnaire also asked students to indicate which variety they used. The results show that 68.5 per cent of students think that they use one of the two varieties: British English was chosen 1.3 times more often than American English, i.e. 38.7 per cent and 29.8 per cent of the total number of students respectively. 31.5 per cent of respondents indicated that they used both varieties.

Real usage, however, is different from the one perceived by the students. 64.6 per cent of all the answers were given in British while only 29.4 – in American English, i.e. British English was used 2.2 times more often than American. The discrepancy of results between students' perception and their usage could be a result of several factors. Among the plausible explanations for the findings could be the lack of students' competence to differentiate between the two varieties as there is not enough attention given in the educational process of the English language in Lithuania. For example, in the assessment criteria of *English Language Contest 2014 (Forms 10–11)*, under the heading of spelling, it is indicated that both British and American spelling varieties are accepted but there is no requirement to be consistent in their use.

So far this paper has focused on some general findings. The following part will briefly overview the results of each separate task of the questionnaire. In the first task, students were asked to complete words. British spelling prevailed, being used 2.7 times more often than American. In the second task, where, while performing translations, learners had to make vocabulary choice or write a word without any spelling prompt, the ratio between British and American English use diminished to 2.4. The smallest divergence between the uses of the two varieties was observed in the third task, where students were asked to choose prepositions. The ratio in this task went down to 1.4.

It is worth mentioning that not a single student used one variety consistently, which is consistent with the findings by Christian Lindell (2014). Performing the first task, however, there were 17 – and the third task four – students who used British English only. The active use of vocabulary or spelling proved to pose the biggest problems when trying to retain consistency. With the advances in computer technologies, people have started to rely on computers more heavily. The responsibility for accuracy has been shifted from individual learners to a spell checker function on one's computer. The fact that this attitude is supported by some university teachers (information gathered during a private conversation),

could also have an impact on students' awareness. While this could be the case, the present paper tried to look at different sources of Lithuanian students' writing: the questionnaire as well as several corpora. Some texts for the corpora under investigation were submitted via electronic means, thus, they could have been subjected to the influence of the spell checker function. Other texts were written as assignments during the class when students had to rely exclusively on their own knowledge. Figure 1 presents normalised frequencies in the Lithuanian learners' English corpora under investigation.

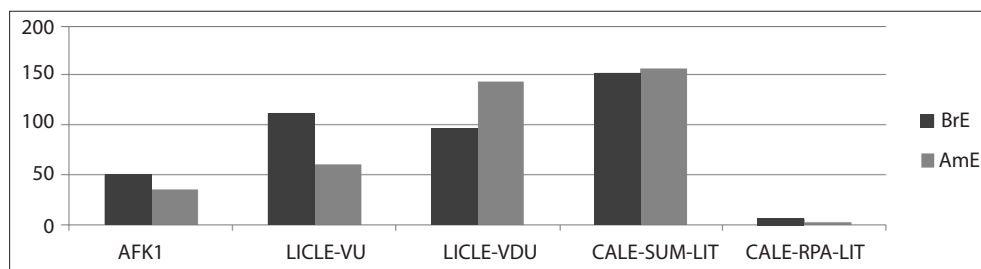


Figure 1. Normalised frequency of British and American English word tokens in the corpora of Lithuanian learners' English

The two corpora consisting of texts written by students of English Philology, AFK1 and LICLE-VU show preference for British English. The tendency for it to increase during the study process is in consistency with the findings of the questionnaire. The observed differences between the two subcorpora of the LICLE, however, could signal a strong influence of the educational environment. Its importance could be illustrated by CALE-RPA-LIT. Though the students who completed the questionnaire and submitted their research papers for the subcorpus were different, both groups are students of the Institute of Foreign Languages and show similar tendencies in varietal preferences of English.

The present paper attempted to analyse six groups of systemic spelling differences in Lithuanian learners' written English. The results are presented in Figure 2.

While it can be seen that there is no consistency in making general varietal choices, the significant differences can be observed in two groups only, namely in Group 1 and

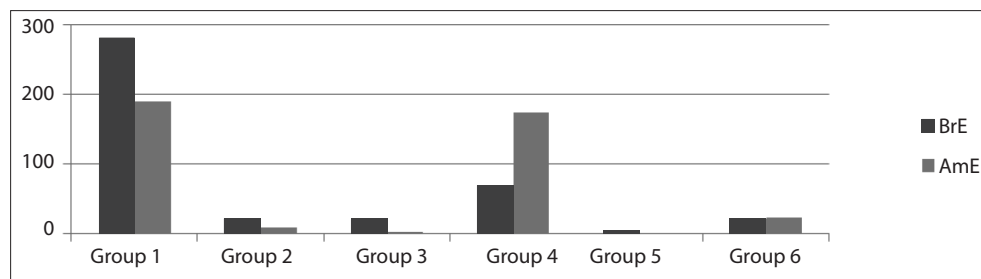


Figure 2. Normalised frequency of British and American English word tokens in spelling groups in the corpora of Lithuanian learners' English

Group 4. The former includes words with – our/-or and can be indicative of students' conscious choice, as they are certainly aware of these differences between the varieties. The interpretation of the results of Group 4, which deals with -is-/ -iz- spelling, could be more problematic. Though dictionaries indicate the spelling of such words as British or American, “*English Style Guide. A handbook for authors and translators in the European Commission*” while advising to follow standard British usage, states that “[b]oth spellings are correct” and the rule to use -is- “is to be followed for the sake of consistency in EU texts” (2015, p. 4).

The tasks in the questionnaire contained some words belonging to four out of six spelling groups under the study. Figure 3 demonstrates contrasting preferences in the corpora and the questionnaire for Group 4 and Group 6, when in the former, the dominance was of American and in the latter – British English spelling. Group 1 and Group 2, on the other hand, indicate the following of British English spelling norms in both sources.

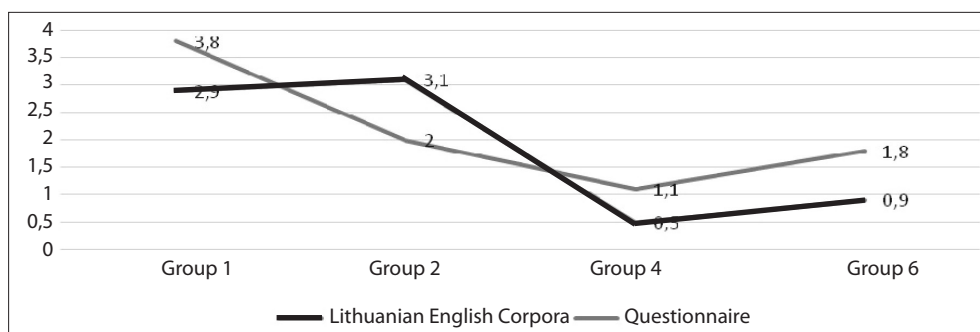


Figure 3. The ratio of British to American English spelling across spelling groups in the corpora and questionnaire

Figures 4-9 show varietal spelling distribution in the spelling groups among the corpora under investigation.

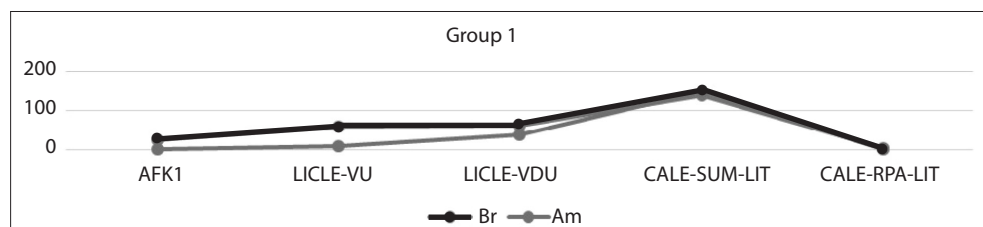


Figure 4. Normalised frequency of British and American English word tokens in Group 1 in the corpora of Lithuanian learners' English

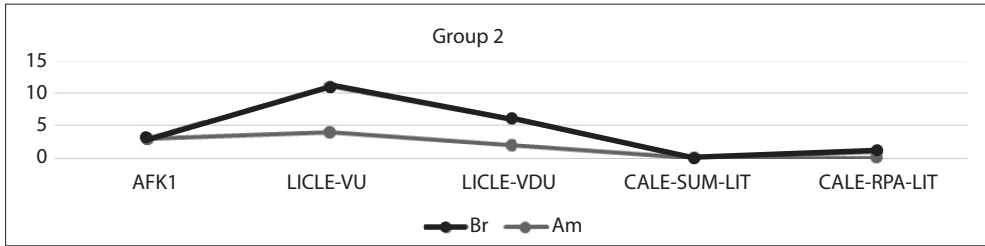


Figure 5. Normalised frequency of British and American English word tokens in Group 2 in the corpora of Lithuanian learners' English

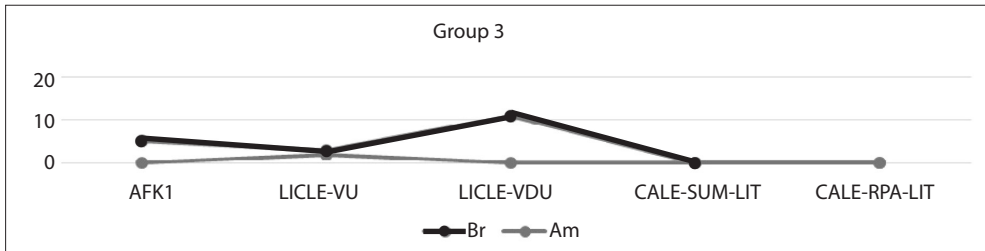


Figure 6. Normalised frequency of British and American English word tokens in Group 3 in the corpora of Lithuanian learners' English

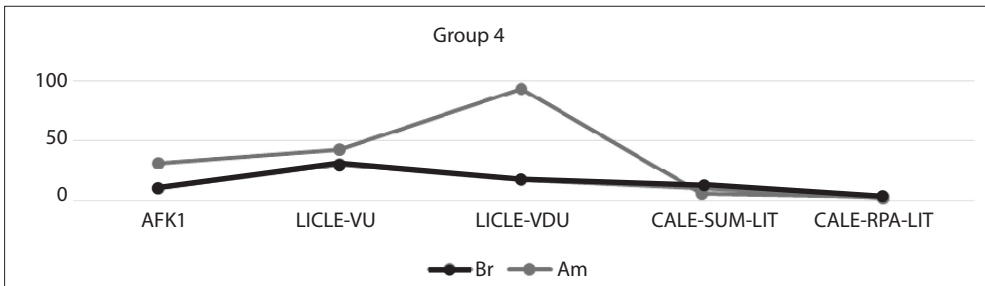


Figure 7. Normalised frequency of British and American English word tokens in Group 4 in the corpora of Lithuanian learners' English

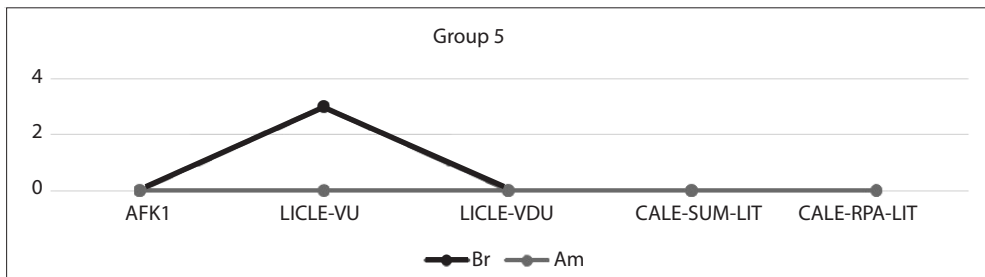


Figure 8. Normalised frequency of British and American English word tokens in Group 5 in the corpora of Lithuanian learners' English



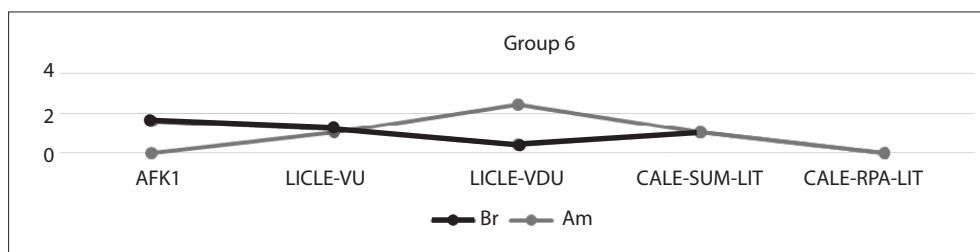


Figure 9. Normalised frequency of British and American English word tokens in Group 6 in the corpora of Lithuanian learners' English

The results indicate the biggest divergence in the LICLE-VDU corpus. Though general results show the prevalence of American spelling, in the first three groups of this corpus, British English spelling dominates. Group 5 stands out from the rest of the groups. There were no words belonging to it found in the corpora, with the only exception of LICLE-VU. Interestingly, all the encountered instances of Group 5 manifest British English. The prevalence of American English in LICLE-VDU is, therefore, determined by Groups 4 and 6.

## Conclusions

The present quantitative study was designed to define the preferred variety of English among Lithuanian learners and to check the learners' awareness of the English language varieties. The results show that the overt expression of preferences is distributed almost equally among British and American English, with insignificant dominance of the former. The results of language use, however, are not homogenous. Though they indicate tendencies for a stronger position of British English in the majority of data sources under investigation, possible educational influences are observed. The current data highlights the need to enhance learners' awareness on the topic of the study since there were a number of discrepancies between the students' ideas of which variety they used and their language usage.

The major limitation of this pilot study is a small sample size of respondents. The results, therefore, should be treated as tentative and seen as a platform for future research.

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### **Lina Bikeliėnė**

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*Research Interests: learner language, corpus linguistics, English varieties*

### **LITHUANIAN LEARNERS' ENGLISH: BRITISH OR AMERICAN?**

#### **Summary**

The aim of the research was to examine Lithuanian learners' conscious and subconscious preference for one of the two major varieties of the English language: British and American.

Three aspects – spelling, the choice of lexical items, and prepositions – were selected for the study. The data on these aspects as well as on Lithuanian learners' overt preference and explicit choice of the variety were obtained from a questionnaire completed by 124 students of all the study programmes at the Institute of Foreign Languages.

Since spelling is believed to be the most indicative of varietal differences, it was seen as the key aspect of the present research. Six systemic spelling groups were analysed in five corpora of Lithuanian learners' English: AFK1, LICLE-VU, LICLE-VDU, CALE-SUM-LIT and CALE-RPA-LIT.

The questionnaire- and corpora-based research revealed an insignificant preference of British English norms. The overtly expressed preference for British English correlates with the year of study. This finding is consistent with the studies that reported on direct correlation between the language level and the preference for British English. The questionnaire revealed the tendency to use British English even when it was not the students' choice. The conflicting results of the students' ideas of which variety they use and real usage are indicative of the lack of learners' awareness concerning varietal differences. This can also be supported by the fact that there was not a single respondent whose use of the norms characteristic of one variety was consistent.

The corpora-derived data highlighted possible institutionally-induced differences since LICLE-VU and LICLE-VDU revealed the opposite tendencies, the former favouring British, while the latter – American spelling. The analysis of separate spelling groups, however, indicated inconsistent choice of varietal norms among them.

The scope of the present research was limited in terms of the number of respondents and the size of the questionnaire. The results, therefore, should be treated as tentative and should be tested on a larger sample of respondents.

**KEY WORDS:** learner corpora, varieties of English, spelling, prepositions.

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*Moksliniai interesai: besimokančiųjų kalba, tekstynų lingvistika, anglų kalbos variantai*

**LIETUVIŲ STUDENTŲ ANGLŲ KALBA: BRITŲ AR AMERIKIEČIŲ VARIANTAS?****Santrauka**

Šio tyrimo tikslas – ištirti sąmoningą ir nesąmoningą lietuvių studentų pasirinkimą vartoti vieną iš dviejų pagrindinių anglų kalbos variantų: britų ir amerikiečių. Tyrimui buvo pasirinkti trys aspektai: rašyba ir leksinių vienetų bei prielinksnių vartojimas. Duomenys šių aspektų ir lietuvių studentų anglų kalbos varianto pasirinkimo tyrimui buvo gauti iš 124 studentų, studijuojančių skirtingose Vilniaus universiteto Užsienio kalbų instituto vykdomose programose, užpildytų klausimynų.

Dėl vyraujančios nuomonės, kad anglų kalbos variantų skirtumus geriausiai gali atspindėti rašybos normų laikymasis, pagrindinis dėmesys buvo skirtas rašybos tyrimui. Šešios sisteminės rašybos gupės buvo išanalizuotos penkiuose lietuvių studentų anglų kalbos tekstynuose. Tris iš jų sudarė rašiniai, parašyti anglų filologijos studentų, studijuojančių Vilniaus (AFK1 ir LICLE-VU) ir Vytauto Didžiojo (LICLE-VDU) universitetuose. Kitus du tekstynus sudarė Vilniaus universiteto Užsienio kalbų instituto lingvistinių programų studentų santraukos (CALE-SUM-LIT) ir kursiniai darbai (CALE-RPA-LIT).

Klausimynu ir studentų tekstynais pagrįstas tyrimas atskleidė, kad lietuvių studentai nežymiai teikia pirmenybę britų anglų kalbos normoms, tačiau statistiškai reikšmingas skirtumas tarp požiūrio į anglų kalbos variantus nebuvo nustatytas. Išryškėjęs skirtumas tarp studentų įsivaizduojamo ir realaus anglų kalbos variantų vartojimo gali žymėti nepakankamą studentų suvokimą apie studijuojamos kalbos variantus. Šią prielaidą sustiprina faktas, kad nebuvo nei vieno klausimyną pildžiusio studento, kuris būtų nuosekliai laikęsis vienam kalbos variantui būdingų normų. Tirtų tekstynų duomenys išryškino galimus su mokymo institucijomis susijusius skirtumus. Bendri LICLE-VU ir LICLE-VDU rezultatai atspindi priešingas tendencijas, tačiau atskirų rašybos grupių analizė rodo nenuoseklų normų laikymąsi.

Dėl tyrimui naudotos mažos tiriamųjų imties ir klausimyno apimties, rezultatai turėtų būti traktuojami kaip preliminarūs.

REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI: studentų tekstynai, anglų kalbos variantai, rašyba.

Įteikta 2015 metų liepos 15 d.