

**COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE
VARIABILITY IN TELEVISION SERIES
BY MEANS OF DIGITAL HUMANITIES**

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Introduction

Contemporary linguists assume that there is no single variant of the English language. Instead, there are several regional varieties of English, each having its own peculiar traits. This research's aim is to demonstrate the differences and similarities between British and American variants of English with respect to the vocabulary. The research examines the scripts of two TV series based on the House of Cards novels by British writer sir Michael Dobbs. The methods employed are the ones of Digital Humanities – the field of study where a computer is used to analyze the text and its structure. The lists of the most common words in both scripts are compared and contrasted; the

phraseological units, e.g. phrase verbs and idioms, are looked upon. The findings of the research highlight that, although British and American variants of English are diverse in many ways, their vocabularies do not differ dramatically. The research also demonstrates that nowadays Digital Humanities methods have become vital for linguistic analysis.

Digital Humanities as a method of linguistic research

The history of humanities differs greatly from one of the natural sciences. During the first scientific revolution (16-18th centuries) natural sciences have acquired a new method of mathematical analysis, which has completely changed the notion of science ever since. Any modern science, practical as well as theoretical, is built upon computation.

The humanities have long suffered because of the lack of precise mathematical method. Being extremely subjective, the humanities' scholars were unable either to verify or to refute the results of their colleagues on any objective criteria. Such subjects as linguistics, philology, literary studies, history, etc. were based solely on the author's opinion.

The early attempts to formalize humanitarian research appeared in the 19th century. In 1887, American scholar Thomas Mendenhall has proposed a method of identifying the authorship of a text through the analysis of the word length used by various authors. The idea that different writers tend to use words of similar length was first suggested by British scientist Augustus de Morgan in 1851 [1]. Although Mendenhall did some research based on his method [2], the compilation of text statistics by hand was an extremely tiresome task, while the counters were prone to errors.

Until the advent of high-speed digital computers in the 1950s, Digital Humanities methods were largely obscured. Soon after computers came into general use, the first projects of computational text analysis emerged. In 1949 Rev. Roberto Busa, jointly with IBM Co. launched what is considered to be the

first ever project on computational linguistics. Through IBM punch card machinery Busa was able to compile a full concordance, or an alphabetical arrangement of the principal words contained in a book [3], of the works of St Thomas Aquinas [4].

Busa's concordance is considered to be the first project of Digital Humanities. However, a real digital computer was not used for it. The first usage of such computer for literary studies was the Bible concordance by J. W. Ellison, compiled in 1957 by UNIVAC computer [5].

Thus, Digital Humanities launched a rapidly growing armoury of methods for every sphere of research. The first Literary Data Processing Conference was organized in 1964 [6], the first magazine, *Computers and the Humanities*, was published in 1966 [7]. Digital Humanities soon outgrew the field of literary studies, and the first non-literary project, an interactive model of international relations, was developed in 1976 [8].

Nowadays Digital Humanities are used in a multitude of disciplines, from linguistics and literary studies to history to geography, etc. With the advent of personal computers in the 1980s and the Internet in 1990s, digital research has gone worldwide, from old-fashioned research institutions to private scholars. This, in turn, has increased computational research in humanitarian sphere both qualitatively and quantitatively.

Television series as a field of analysis

Contemporary mass culture exists in a wide variety of forms and genres. Arguably, we are exposed today to more forms of culture than any previous generation. Why should a researcher pay attention to such phenomenon as television series?

The notion of a serial product of culture has emerged as early as 18th century [9]. Fiction of different volume and quality was published in magazines and newspapers. Such renowned authors as Dickens, Twain, and Chernyshevsky

published their works in the serial form [10]. In the 1910s a concept of movie series appeared, featuring as many as ten series; and in 1920s first radio series were broadcasted [11].

Television emerged from the experimental stage to practice in the late 1930s but its development was halted by World War II. After the war, regular broadcasts commenced both in the USA and Europe. *Faraway Hill* is believed to be the first TV series ever broadcasted, starting on October 1, 1946 [12].

Since then, TV series grew in popularity. However, their complexity remained rather low and their audience was supposed to consist mainly of housewives and children, thus plots were mostly flat and made of clichés. The first change to this situation happened in the 1960s, when more elaborate and sophisticated series, such as *Doctor Who* and *Star Trek*, were first broadcasted. The overall quality of TV series grew steadily until the end of the 20th century.

The major breakthrough happened in the late 2000s, as high-speed Internet access became available. The audience now was able to choose the content and the best time to watch it, without the necessity to comply with a TV broadcaster. Simultaneously, an important cultural shift happened – TV series has become the most consumable product of mass media, uniting the entertaining properties of a movie with the plot simplicity of "pulp fiction" literature.

High-quality TV series have formed a new model of mass culture consumption, transforming the previous mass culture product of a quantified emotion, such as a movie or a book, into the new product of continuous emotion. Not only have the TV series themselves become extremely popular, they have also persuaded other forms of culture to follow the same model, resulting in the advent of sequel and prequel movies.

Thus, a study of TV series may lead to new understanding of human culture in such aspects as emotions, the perception of reality, acceptance and intolerance, and, as this research tries to demonstrate, language and its use.

History of English language in Northern America

The history of English language in America begins in the early 17th century with the rise of British colonies of Jamestown and Plymouth [13]. The colonies existed for almost two hundred years. By the time of the War of Independence, two opposite tendencies persisted in American society. The first one was to maintain an English identity, the other one was to separate from all things British.

Back then the differences between two variants of English were not relevant since there was no one standard form of language. Neither spelling nor speech of the era was consistent on either side of the Atlantic. If phonetic inconsistency can easily be understood, the written (and specially printed) text differences are to be explained. They are partly attributed to the lack of language standard and partly to the printing method of that time – manual typesetting was monotonous, laborious, and prone to errors [14].

The first discussion of two variants of English may be represented as an argument between two celebrated lexicographers, a British Dr. Samuel Johnson, and an American Noah Webster. Both are considered to be the first modern lexicographers. While Johnson's dictionary was first published in 1755 [15], Webster's one was printed in 1828 [16].

A fierce conservative, Johnson was bitterly opposed to any change, including the separation of British colonies. He commenced his work in 1746 and over the course of nine years managed to collect a vast corpus of English utterances – primarily from the authors such as Shakespeare, Milton, and Swift. Johnson's, of course, was not the first attempt to gather a dictionary of English language, but it was the first one to systematically analyze a wide variety of

sources [17]. Johnson's position might be viewed as a compromise between descriptive and prescriptive approaches to language analysis since his attempt to establish a standard of English was based on real-life language usage examples.

Webster, on the other hand, was a strong proponent of American independence. In 1789, he wrote: "As an independent nation, our honor requires us to have, a system of our own, *in language* as well as government". That year he proposed a consistent reform of English language, which was based on the principles of analogy, etymology, reason, and usage. Webster's first dictionary was published in 1806 by the name "Compendious Dictionary of the English Language". However, he worked for another twenty years to produce a new, radically different "An American Dictionary of the English Language". Webster introduced more than 5000 of the new words in his dictionary, forming the watershed between the British and the American English.

Thus, Webster's dictionary challenged the authority of Johnson's (as well as the one of his literary posterity) to establish a standard of English language.

Meanwhile, the division between British and American English grew. There were several reasons for this. The most obvious one is the usual evolution of two variants as of separate languages. The other reason to be noted is technological progress. During the 19th century, new technologies evolved more rapid than ever before. The common practice among the scientists and engineers around the world was to use ancient languages as Greek or Latin for the naming of new inventions. This practice can be easily seen in such words as telegraph (two Greek roots) [18], radio (a Latin root) [19], or automobile (a Greek and a Latin root) [20]. However, some words originated in English itself, rather than in Greek or Latin, thus differing in British and American variants. (British *factory* and *lorry* [21][22] against American *plant* and *truck* [23][24]).

Still, the main division between British and American tongues of that time is understood in the context of loanwords. With the expansion of British Empire,

British English borrowed words from local languages, such as Indian *curry* or Australian *kangaroo* [25][26]. At the same time, American English took words from many different tongues including:

- Indian. Native tongues provided English primarily with words for describing the unique species of American nature, such as *raccoon* [27];
- French. The French were among the first settlers to the New World, owning vast Louisiana territory (purchased by the USA in 1803 and divided into 15 US states and 2 Canadian provinces) [28];
- German. German immigrants were more than numerous in the first half of the 19th century (in 1860 the estimated number of Germans in the US was 1.3 million) [29].

Other influences were caused by Spanish and Yiddish.

By 1870, American English was independent of the British language standard. Moreover, several regional dialects evolved within American English [30]. After the Civil War, territorial expansion pushed dialect boundaries further. However, American dialects are not discussed here due to the complexity of the subject.

In the late 19th and throughout the 20th century, aforementioned processes continued. Starting from the same point, American and British variants of English developed separately – that is why such word as Germanic-loaned *fall* is used in the American English, while British English prefers French-loaned *autumn* [31][32]. American English was the first dialect, which evolved so independently from the original version. In phonetical structure, spelling, vocabulary, grammar, and syntax American English have acquired a vast number of peculiarities.

Outline of differences between American and British variants of English

The first and best known difference between two variants is pronunciation. Sounds with different pronunciation are well known and classified:

- British English is non-rhotic, which means that the sound ‘r’ is not pronounced before a consonant or at the end of a word. However, it was rhotic before late 1800s. Since division between the two variants happened in 1600s, American English remained more rhotic;
- In British English ‘t’ is usually pronounced clearly, while in American English it can be pronounced like a ‘d’ or disappear. When the ‘t’ occurs between two vowel sounds, it is often pronounced as ‘d’. The ‘t’ in American variant tends to disappear after nasal sounds like ‘m’, ‘n’, and ‘ng’;
- Since the 18th century ‘a’ in British English has changed from flat to broad (flat ‘a’ as in *man*, broad ‘a’ as in *father*). This change affected words where ‘a’ appeared before ‘f’, ‘sk’, ‘sp’, ‘st’, ‘ss’, ‘th’, and ‘n’ followed by certain consonants. As with ‘r’, the division between variants happened earlier, and American English still enjoys flat ‘a’. However, this distinct feature affects less than 250 words used daily;
- The pronunciation of the o is also different. In Britain, ‘o’ is open and pronounced with the rounded lips and the tongue at the back of the mouth. In America, it has lost its roundness and has mostly become a sound very similar to the ‘a’ in *father*. This is an example of a general American tendency towards the neutralization of vowel sounds, while England vowels tend to retain their sharpness;
- The ‘u’ is pronounced identically on both sides of the Atlantic, i.e. with an imaginary ‘y’ inserted before it. In the US, however, the usual pronunciation is without the ‘y’ sound.

These differences are complemented by a list of words, which are pronounced differently in the two variants but do not follow any solid rule. However, the number of these words is little and the variations in pronunciation can be understood as random language alterations [33].

Spelling inconsistencies of two variants of English are as notorious as pronunciation ones. It was already mentioned that spelling differences were the basis of a conflict between Johnson and Webster. Since then, British and American English have adopted different systems of word spelling which permit to distinguish writers from corresponding countries.

Suffixes

Suffixes loaned from the French, such as -our (-eur in the French) and -tre are common in British English. American English has substituted them for -or and -ter respectively.

The suffix -ise of British English corresponds to -ize of American English. However, there are no definitive criteria for the distinction. Some Britons believe that such words as *apologise* or *legalise* could be spelled as *apologize* and *legalize*, while others denounce this spelling. Furthermore, there are words that are spelled with -ize in both variants (*seize*) as well as some words which can be written both with -ise and -ize in both variants (*advertise/advertise*).

Words of Greek origin, containing -oe- letter group, are usually spelled with just -e- by the Americans (*encyclopedia/encyclopaedia*). Similarly, -ae-combination of British English is spelled -a- in America (*anemia/anaemia*).

Several disyllabic verbs stressed on the second syllable are written with a single -l in Britain but with -ll in America (*fulfil/fulfill*). In American spelling, when suffix like -ing, -ed, or -er is added to a word, the final consonant is doubled only if the stress falls on the second syllable of the root word (*to patrol* gives *patrolling* and *patrolled*, but *to travel* becomes *traveling* and *traveler*).

Other variations also include additional or different letters in a word, the most notable case being American *aluminum* versus British *aluminium*.

The last thing to be pointed out here is the difference of hyphenation and spacing in compound words. Generally, American English tends to drop the hyphen much faster than British English (*bookkeeper/book-keeper*) [34].

The irregularities of British and American English grammar are not too grave to cause miscommunication among the speakers. However, they are considerably greater than the irregularities inside either British or American English alone.

Verbs

A number of verbs can be either regular or irregular in the Past Simple. In American English, the regular form is usually preferred and in British English the irregular. The verbs *fit*, *quit* and *wet* are regular in British English, but irregular in American.

Tenses

In American English, Past Simple and Present Perfect tenses are often interchangeable where only the Present Perfect can be used in British English. When an action in the past has a result now, the Present Perfect is employed. The same is true with words *just*, *already*, *yet*, *ever* and *never* when referring to a period of time that continues until now.

Auxiliary and modal verbs

In British English, *shall* can be substituted for *will* with pronouns ‘I’ and ‘we’, indicating the future, while in American English it is unusual.

In both variants of English, it is possible to use *can* and *could* with verbs of perception, but this is much more common in British English.

In subjunctive constructions, for example after verbs like *suggest*, *recommend*, *demand*, *insist*, etc., *should* is more often used in British English than in American English.

In British English, but not American, *do* can be used alone as a substitute verb after an auxiliary verb.

Certain adverbs, such as *sometimes*, *always*, *never*, *often*, *definitely*, *certainly*, are usually placed between auxiliary and other verbs. But if it is necessary to emphasize the auxiliary verb, most mid-position adverbs are put

before it. In British English, this second construction is always emphatic, while in American English the adverb is frequently placed before the auxiliary, even when there is no intent to emphasize.

In British English, collective nouns can take either a singular or a plural verb. In American English, such nouns usually take a singular verb. The same is true of certain proper nouns like the names of countries or companies [35].

Research

This research required such material, which, being dedicated to one topic, would be produced in both American and British versions. There hardly was any better example than *House of Cards* TV series.

British politician and writer Michael Dobbs wrote a series of three novels named *House of Cards* (1989), *To Play the King* (1992), and *The Final Cut* (1994). These novels took a closer look on Francis Urquhart, ruthless British politician, struggling for the post of Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. The novels gained much success becoming best-sellers [36].

In 1990, BBC filmed a mini-series based on *House of Cards*, the first novel of the trilogy. The series, bearing the same name as the novel, consisted of four episodes, ninety minutes each. In 1993, *To Play the King* was filmed in the same style, followed by *The Final Cut* in 1995. Similarly to books, TV series was extremely successful with the British audience [37].

Almost twenty years later, in 2013, American company *Netflix* has acquired rights to screen an American version of *House of Cards*. Unlike its British counterpart, the new series was just loosely based on the original book trilogy, changing the place of action to the USA and even renaming the characters. The plot has evolved as well.

As for now, five seasons of American *House of Cards* were produced, with the sixth season premiere planned for 2018 autumn. The series was an even bigger success if compared to the British original, winning seven *Primetime*

Emmy Awards, two *Golden Globes* awards and a multitude of other decorations [38].

The major task of this research is to determine whether there is any noticeable difference between British and American variants of English language. Since the methods used to conduct the research were those of Digital Humanities, two collections of texts of sufficient volume were required. Thus, two corpora were gathered, further referred to as corpus A (American variant) and corpus B (British variant).

The first part of the research was conducted on the overall statistics of corpora, represented in Table 1.

	Corpus A	Corpus B
Total number of words	331942	67289
Ditto, of sentences	54769	11444
Average word length	4.19	4.20
Average sentence length	6.06	5.87
Total number of nouns	46271	9455
Ditto, of verbs	91918	8332
Ditto, of adjectives	13839	4335

Table 1. The general statistics of two corpuses.

Note 1: since the corpora vary considerably in volume, further data for comparison is represented in percentage rather than in absolute numbers.

The table demonstrates that in preliminary characteristics – average word and sentence length – two variants of English are very close. Despite many words differing in these two variants, the average length of a word remains the same. This proves that the overall body of vocabulary did not change.

This idea was further demonstrated by the next stage of the research – the compilation of the frequency lists for most used words in corpuses A and B. The list is given in Table 2.

	Corpus A	Corpus B
1	Have	What
2	What	Have
3	Can	All
4	My	My
5	If	Yes
6	Know	Can
7	President	Know
8	Just	Think
9	All	Very
10	Well	As

Table 2. Frequency list for 10 most used words of each corpus.

Note 2: a stop list of function words, such as “I”, “is”, “to”, etc. was used to exclude them from the frequency list, since these words occur the most in both variants and do not give the opportunity to examine the meaningful words. The full stop list is provided in Appendix 1.

Table 2 clearly demonstrates the similarity between the American and British variants of English. Not only 6 of 10 words match in both lists, but the word “my” ranks the same in both American and British versions.

It is worth noting that, despite the similarity between the plots of two television series, the only word concerned with politics – “President” – occurs in the most frequent words of corpus A.

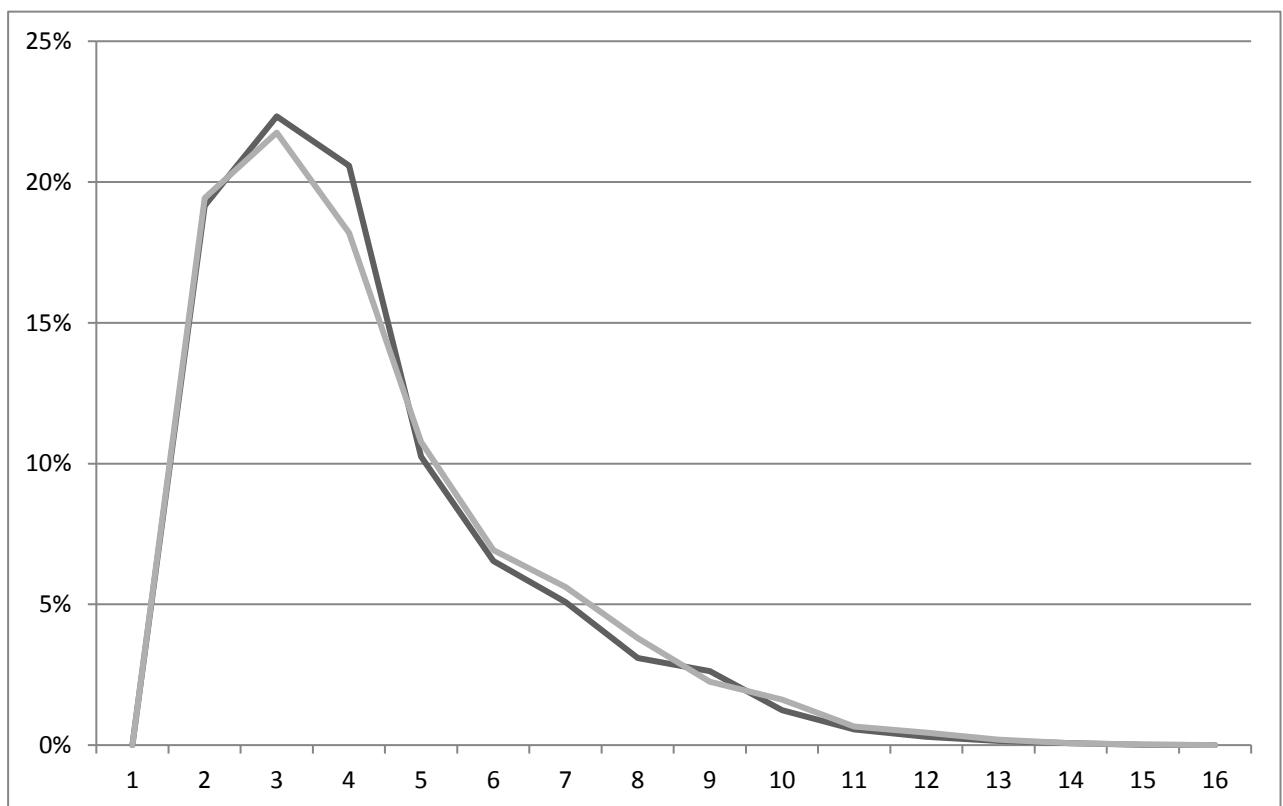
The third step of research was the compilation of a list where the length of words was compared to the frequency of their use. The results are presented in Table 3 and Graph 1.

Number of letters in a word	Corpus A		Corpus B	
2	63614	19,16%	13075	19,43%
3	74126	22,33%	14638	21,75%
4	68299	20,58%	12238	18,19%

5	34016	10,25%	7244	10,77%
6	21697	6,54%	4660	6,93%
7	16874	5,08%	3780	5,62%
8	10252	3,09%	2554	3,80%
9	8721	2,63%	1515	2,25%
10	4096	1,23%	1088	1,62%
11	1837	0,55%	446	0,66%
12	964	0,29%	299	0,44%
13	501	0,15%	130	0,19%
14	228	0,07%	44	0,07%
15	51	0,02%	12	0,02%
16	19	0,01%	3	0,00%

Table 3. The word length-to-frequency ratios comparison.

Note 3: one-letter words were not included in the list as they would mostly be the article “a”. A higher number of three-letter words is due to the large amount of the article “the”, which, unfortunately, cannot be removed with present methods of research.



Graph 1. The word length-to-frequency ratios comparison.

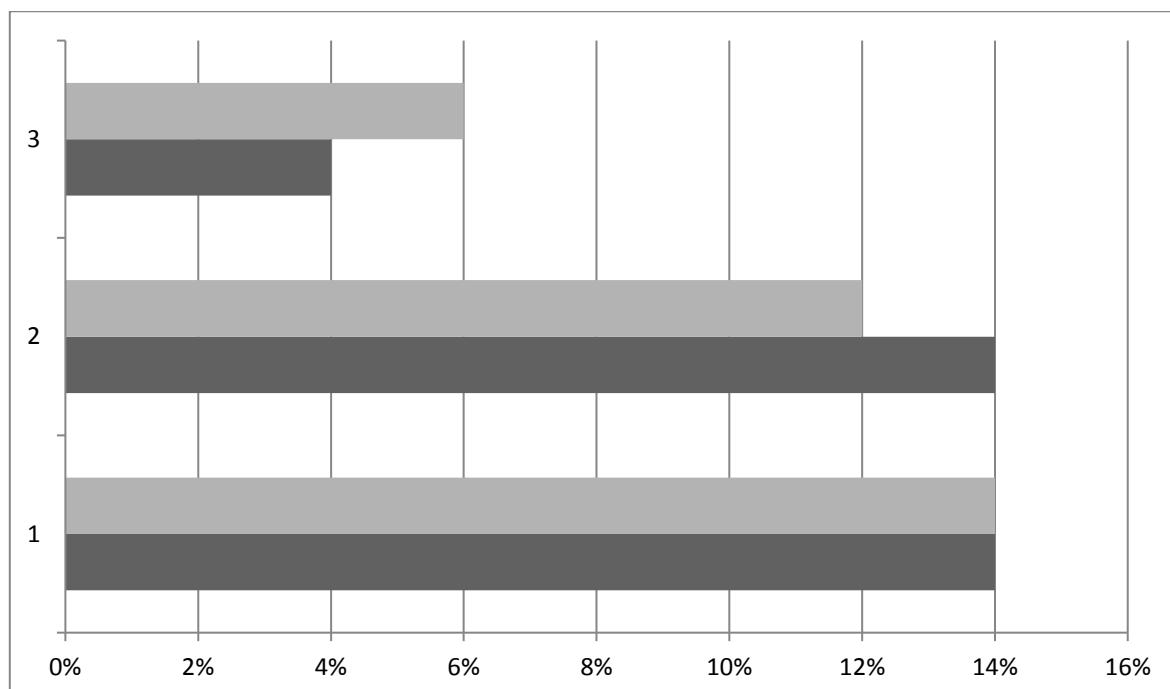
Black curve – corpus A; gray curve – corpus B.

It can be clearly perceived that the curves of the graph are very close to each other, as well as the frequencies when represented in percentage. Thus, it may be concluded with certainty that there is no considerable difference between British and American variants of English when the distribution of word frequencies is analyzed.

The fourth stage of the research dealt with parts of speech. Both corpora were automatically tagged for parts of speech, and then the results of tagging were analyzed statistically. The data is presented in Table 4 and Graph 2.

	Corpus A		Corpus B	
Total number of nouns	46271	14%	9455	14%
Ditto, of verbs	45681	14%	8332	12%
Ditto, of adjectives	13839	4%	4335	6%

Table 4. The comparison of parts of speech used in two corpora.



Graph 2. The comparison of parts of speech used in two corpora.

1) Nouns; 2) Verbs; 3) Adjectives.
Black – corpus A; gray – corpus B.

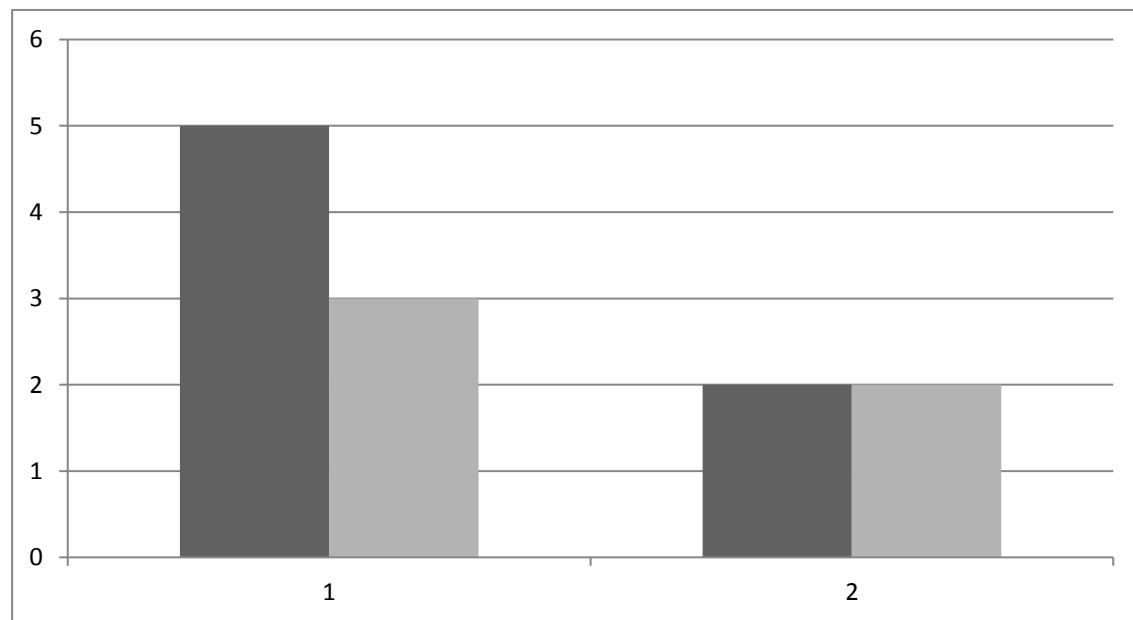
As in previous cases, the data demonstrate the remarkable similarity between two variants of English.

During the research, it was suggested that the prevalence of adjectives in British English demonstrates that this variant is more sophisticated and elaborate than the American one. A similar statement was discussed in another study [39]. However, the difference of mere 2% between British and American variants of English does not allow us to consider this idea feasible on this stage of the research.

The final part of the research was devoted to the analysis of articles in two variants of English language. The statistics on two corpora is presented in Table 5 and Graph 3.

	Corpus A		Corpus B	
“THE”	18102	5%	2269	3%
“A”	7420	2%	1484	2%

Table 5. The statistics of article use in two corpora.



Graph 3. The statistics of article use in two corpora.
1) “THE”; 2) “A”.
Black – corpus A; gray – corpus B.

Previous research suggested that American English gave preference to "the" article, while British English avoided it in many cases [40]. This research seems to prove the idea. However, similar to the parts-of-speech problem, the percentage is too low to decide whether this is a tendency or a statistical anomaly. Further research on a larger corpus of texts may clear this point. As for now, we restrain ourselves from any conclusion.

Conclusion

In this research, we have tackled the problem of digital methodology to be used in linguistic studies. We have analyzed the history and the general contemporary state of Digital Humanities, provided an outline of the American variant of English language history, searched for a theoretical basis for the research while studying the results of non-digital research in this particular area. Finally, we conducted an extensive practical analysis of two linguistic corpora.

From results described in the research chapter, we can conclude that there is no considerable difference between the vocabularies of British and American variants of English language in any of the examined aspects. Some results leave room for discussion; however, there is no way to determine the correctness of any hypothesis other than further research.

We have also clearly demonstrated that Digital Humanities methods are quite applicable to the problems of language variability studies. We consider this to be extremely important for further research.

We fully realize the drawbacks of our work and do not consider it to finalize every argument. Moreover, these results cannot and should not be applied to the whole body of English language, since we have analyzed a unique genre of TV series, which involve highly prescribed spoken utterances, thus uniting the vocabulary of a literary work with the expressive methods of a movie.

We see several directions for further investigation. Firstly, these corpora could be enlarged as to include various TV series produced in America and Britain. This would allow us to study the questions of this research but on a much larger basis. Secondly, we believe that a corpus TV series of each county can be compared to a corpus of other texts. In this case, we believe that many interesting results could be obtained from the comparison of TV series scripts to both spoken and written corpus. Then, the comparison of British and American TV series can be conducted once more, demonstrating the influence of either spoken or written form of language.

We also believe that a comparison between British and other dialects of English could be done, with TV series and other texts from such countries as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, etc.

Finally, we would like to point out that Digital Humanities methods have made this research possible. As we mentioned in the first chapter, numerical analysis of text was almost impossible before the advent of high-speed electronic computers. This research was conducted rapidly and efficiently only because we had such powerful instruments at our disposal. We would like to note that in a quickly-changing world of today, the olden methods of humanitarian research have become almost completely outdated. Modern scholars should not ignore the instrument of such power and versatility, lying just under their hands.

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Appendix A

Stoplist of words used during the frequency analysis of corpuses A and B.

you	on	re	ll	were
we	s	are	will	with at
they	t	is	shall	about
he	your	and	do	get
she	his	of	don	so
it	her	that	me	
a	no	this	for	
the	not	mine	but	
to	am	their	be	
in	m	our	was	