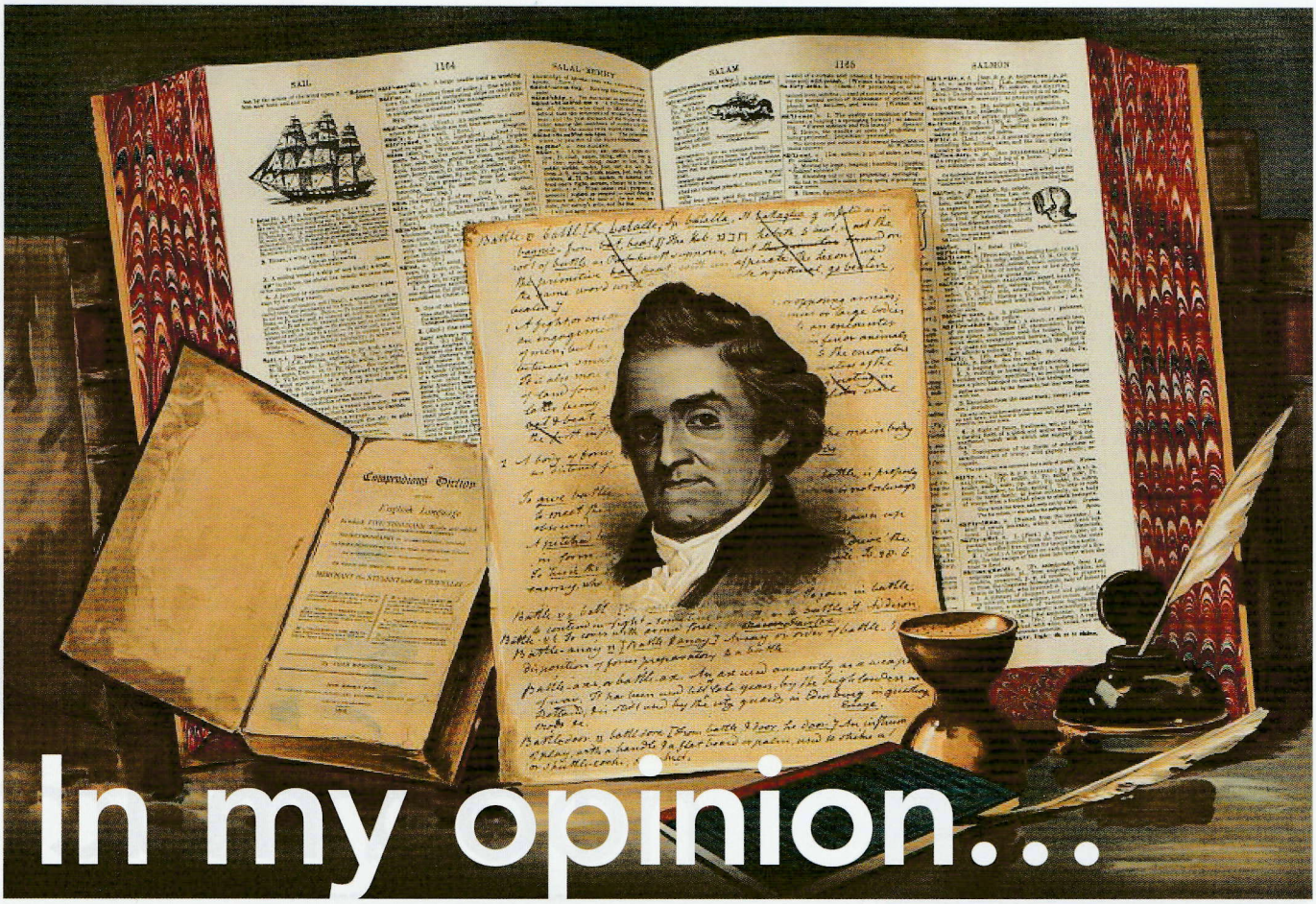

In my opinion...

It's high time Brits buried the hatchet and accepted American English

CAROLINA CASADO PARRAS

In Spanish schools a few years ago, British English (BrE) was king. Then the internet and popular culture brought American English (AmE) to the foreground and the anglophone landscape took a colourful turn. By the time I graduated with a BA in English in 2005, I had been exposed to both variants, and when I started to teach English as a foreign language, I realised how useful knowing both was – but also how challenging to stick to one.

Last year, I attended Susie Dent's David Crystal Lecture about AmE and my passion for the subject was stirred anew. She argued that Americans are not debasing a sometimes idolised 'original' version of English, as this has never existed. A quick look at the history of Britain proves her argument: Britons, Romans, Anglo-Saxons, Vikings, French all enriched English and contributed to its inconsistent spelling and pronunciation systems.

Apparently, the British fixation with spelling has been a way to honour the island's rich past. Comparatively, the US is in its infancy and Americans, to whom that sort of romanticism was alien, opted for a more logical approach. While other nations focused on revolutionary inventions, the Americans put all their efforts into developing conveniences to make everyday life easier. This didn't take long to seep into language, with lexical choices such as 'sidewalk' for 'pavement' and 'washcloth' for 'flannel' showing a genuine appreciation for clarity and transparency.

The first overt criticism of AmE harks back to 1735, when British visitor Francis Moore referred to it as "barbarous English". Then came the cultural and literary awakening of 19th-century America, when AmE went through a transformation that the British despised. True, there are times when we could do without the American logic: isn't 'horseback riding' overkill? However, there are many cases in which it is difficult to rebut the American choice. Why write 'paediatric' and 'manoeuvre' when 'pediatric' and 'maneuver' better reflect the pronunciation? Why use 'black pudding' when 'black sausage' removes any thought of desserts provoked by the British term?

A SENSE OF HONOUR

'Noah Webster, The Schoolmaster of the Republic', 1886 print by Root & Tinker. For Webster, a distinct English lexis was vital for American honour

Let's not forget that culture and language inseparably define a nation. It is only natural that Americans wanted to distinguish themselves from their colonisers, and language was a powerful weapon to get started. As American lexicographer Noah Webster declared: "Our honor requires us to have a system of our own, in language as well as government." Hence his efforts to compile various dictionaries, still in common use.

Loaning and borrowing between cultures are beneficial, and language has always been at the crossroads of these exchanges. What many British people do not realise is that this is a two-way road, and a good number of the expressions they use originated in the New World. The Pilgrims and their offspring had to name new realities, including animals, food and topographical features. In the words of Thomas Jefferson: "The new circumstances under which we are placed, call for new

words, new phrases, and for the transfer of old words to new objects."

A recurrent solution was to borrow from the indigenous languages, often using spellings based on how the words were heard (e.g. 'raccoon' from Virginia Algonquian *ärähkun*), many undergoing different spellings until becoming standardised. They also borrowed from indigenous customs, thus we bury the hatchet because the Native Americans buried their weapons as a symbol of peace.

The American love for simplicity is illustrated by word chopping ('gentlemen' > 'gents'), construction simplification (orientate > orient) and verbing, which was inaugurated with 'to scalp' as early as 1693. It is verbing that the British seem to hate most about AmE, yet England has also been known to make use of this practice. 'To hospitalize' was first recorded in London, while in the early 1900s, W H Hoover (credited with Spangler's invention of the vacuum cleaner) saw the British turn his surname into a verb.

But what about the similarities? Today, all Englishes face similar issues, one of which is political correctness. According to the American author Bill Bryson, the aim is "to make language less wounding or demeaning to those whose sex, race, physical condition or circumstances leave them vulnerable to the raw power of acceptance of words". Examples include the replacement of 'chairman' with 'chairperson' and the new use of 'they' as a non-binary pronoun.

Nowadays, digital globalisation and immigration have mostly replaced colonialism. English continues to evolve thanks to the languages it co-exists with in the places it is spoken. In addition, as a lingua franca, it is being shaped by non-native speakers.

In an attempt to preserve their linguistic heritage, purists in Britain have, for generations, made a pet hate of AmE, even as their country adopts Americanisms such as 'you guys' (ubiquitous these days). How about we bury the hatchet and toast the similarities that make it possible to bridge an ocean and communicate with each other despite spelling, pronunciation and word choice?

TL **Carolina Casado Parras MCIL CL is a freelance translator and founder of VibrantWords Translations.**