

Deciphering Linguistic Stereotypes in Polandball Comics: A Qualitative Analysis of 'Engrish' and Cultural Representation

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Abstract: Polandball, or Countryballs, are online user-generated comics about geopolitical satire, with countries personified in spherical characters. One of the most important aspects of Countryball memes is the non-standard English, or “Engrish”, used in the conversations between characters. This research delves into the “Engrish” phenomena by collecting and qualitatively examining 200+ comics in the subreddit r/polandball, proposing plausible causes of the phenomena, and raising concerns regarding the implications of the exhibited linguistic stereotypes. The investigation figures out that the language choice in Polandball comics on Reddit generally ranged between serious cultural misunderstanding and code-switching of English with another language. It is concluded that the linguistic stylizations of non-standard English in Polandball comics might be rooted in certain cultural and racial stereotypes and might further reinforce these biased cross-cultural perceptions. The research shed light on the long-ignored African-American Vernacular English appropriation in Polandball comics, and extensively enumerated and identified the most recent “Engrish” stylizations in Polandball comics.

Keywords: Polandball Comics, Mock Language, Engrish, Linguistic Stereotypes, African-American Vernacular English (AAVE)

1. Introduction

In today's era of digital communication, memes serve as platforms for grassroots socio-political criticism and commentary. They are effective tools for advocacy and subversion with the possibilities to change public opinion [1]. “Polandball”, originated in 2009 on the /int/ board on a German forum Krautchan, also known as “countryball”, refers to an internet meme that is manifested in the large number of webcomics where countries are personified as spherical characters dressed in the respective country's national flag [2]. It is a perfect example of such views since these comics poke fun at contemporary and historical international relationships and geopolitical issues and demonstrate national and cultural stereotypes with unique language uses. There are multiple online platforms where Polandball comics can be seen, and Facebook and Reddit are the two platforms with the most notable community-based user-generated Polandball comics.

From Polandballs to the Shiba-Inu Doge memes, “Broken English”, or in a more general way, non-standard English is a common phenomenon on social media, but there are some nuances regarding the context in which the broken English speech occurs, the analysis of which falls within the realm of sociolinguistics [3]. “Broken English” could be non-native English usage, stylistic multi-

cultural blending, code-switching, or simply typographical errors; besides that, often the “broken English” is done on purpose, for a variety of intentions. Sometimes, rather than being the result of ignorance, non-standard English used by the youth is intended to convey certain rhetorical effects, corresponding to historical rhetorical figures. Such effects include sounding cute, humorous, ambiguous, playful, or childlike [4]. On other occasions, “broken English” is part of the mockery of someone’s speech. This mockery ranges from a direct assault or violence toward a specific group (e.g., online antisemitic extremist community’s use of Mock Jewish English) to parodic construction of identity (e.g., Malaysian comedian Ng and Uncle Roger’s construction of Asian identity) [5, 6].

The use of broken English and linguistic stereotypes, known as “Engrish”, had always been an indispensable part of the Polandball memes. This close association between Countryballs and “Engrish” has a history as long as the Polandball meme. The Countryball phenomenon originated in 2009 on Krautchan, as the result of user FALCO’s mocking of Polish poster Wojak’s Polish-influenced English. Following this, the Polandball meme-creators developed their twist of English to index the stereotype, with FALCO himself being an early contributor to some “Engrish” patterns and rules [2].

The related literature about Polandball often focuses on either discourse (e.g., geographical imagination) or community-building (e.g., analyzing the community’s ludic normativity or identity) [7, 8, 9]. These “Countryballs” interact with each other in often “broken English”. Even though the majority of the relevant literature was based on the study of the Facebook Polandball creator community, this paper would put its emphasis on Reddit’s Polandball community, specifically, the Reddit/r/polandball subreddit [8, 9].

This paper aims to systematically identify, enumerate, and categorize the characteristics and linguistic stereotypes exhibited in Countryball characters’ non-standard English conversations and dialogues in the comics produced in the Reddit r/polandball community, filling in the research gap by accessing 200+ newest-posted comics during the period Dec. 4th, 2023 to Dec 9th, 2023, reflecting the most up-to-date trends in Polandball “Engrish” stylization. This research also includes insights into African American Vernacular English (AAVE) usage in countryball memes and the masculine nature of Countryballs, which was long neglected. Also, exploring the language appropriation and stereotypes aspects, possible explanations would be raised in this paper to account for the underlying intention of the “broken English” usage in the Countryballs meme.

2. A Linguistic Analysis of “Engrish”

According to the Reddit r/polandball community guideline for comic creators, “Engrish” is the general term for a variety of “broken English” spoken by non-English-speaking countryballs [10]. Some linguistic features of “Engrish” represent a general lack of proficiency in English (as these features are shared among all non-Anglophone countries but not the English-speaking ones), whereas some of the linguistic features are specific to a specific language, language group, or culture so that all countryball characters that fall under that category would adopt the same protocol of “Engrishing” in their speech. It is also worth noting that it is a common practice in Countryball comics to use well-perceived or understandable counterparts in a Countryball character’s mother tongue, with no regard to the grammatical agreement, to replace the first-person pronoun (e.g., “Jeg” in Norwegian, “Je” in French, “Ich” in German, etc.), copulas (e.g., “es” in Spanish, “est” in French, “ist” and “bin” in German), geographical names (e.g., “Valkanía” in Greek for “Balkan”, and “Litwa” in Polish for “Lithuania”), and, sometimes swearing (e.g., “cyka” in Ukrainian and Russian, “kurwa” in Polish).

2.1. General “Broken English” Markers

2.1.1. Unconventional Orthography

The non-standard spelling of English words can be found throughout r/polandball’s comics, as an important aspect of “Engrish”, in various ways, such as letter switching (e.g., “yuo” for you, “yuor” for your, “liek” for like, and “frist” for first), eye dialect (mostly consonant devoicing of labial consonants, e.g., “gib” or “gif” for give, “hab” or “haf” for have), and clipping (e.g. Poland shortened into “polan”, Indonesia shortened into “Indon”, “homosex” for homosexuals, “giv” for give, “lov” for love, and “forgiv” for forgive). Sometimes, portmanteau or neologism words are coined (e.g. “Germoney” for German and money, “homogay” to stand for LGBTQ+, and “someclay” for “someone” as “clay” refers to country or territory). Also, the suffix “-ing” is inserted in or appended to any words that bear no semantic nor syntactic implications (e.g., “also**ing**” for “also”, “NATO membership**ings**” for NATO membership, “the work**inger**’s party” for “the workers’ party”, “I am not sure that I can beat**ings** Russia”). As “-ings” and “-ing”, suffix “-s” or “-es” can also be added to any word in any part of speech (e.g., “Ors alsoing they votes on nexts archduid”, “Est ofs religionis and smarts class”, “Maybes yuo should try this?”, “We alsoes hates Chink”, and “Where weres us?”).

2.1.2. Morphological and Syntactic Derivations of Standard English

One of the most predominant ones is the misuse of the preposition “of”, which appears in random parts of the sentence and causes interruption to create a sense of “broken English” (e.g., “ok I is of go back home to Israel”, “Of really?”, and “We are of best friends”). Another preposition “into”, is widely misused as a verb (e.g., “Esta session is into conclude”, “Then I will into secret attack”) and then overgeneralized as an unnecessary word plugged in front of the verb (e.g. “How kan ich into help...”). As mentioned before, the affix “-ing” or “-ings” is applied in various contexts for different intents, ranging from a nominalizer (e.g., “...to attract investings to Eastern Poland”) to a meaningless suffix appended to verbs (e.g., “I hating life, always häs”, “Jeg knews they meetings here”, and “eu feelings much better”). The “-ing” suffixed verb, preceded by the preposition “of”, constitutes an imperative (e.g., “Of showings me then” meaning “Show me then”). The grammatical and syntactic markers of “Engrish” include the incorrect subject-verb agreement (e.g., “I **is** learnink Ruski”, “It **make** me cry,” and “Non, it **are** moya”), incorrect use of quantifiers (e.g., “Oh you think you are **many** special?”), the disregard of reminiscent case distinction in Modern English (e.g., “YUO NO TO HAVE CLAIM ON CLAY OF **MY**” and “Face **mine** justics power!”), the superfluous misuse of copula verbs (e.g., “Like Russia **is** do”, “Je **suis** think this perfect”, “Turkey **ist** nein haben taken zhe crazy pill”, and “I **is** make best instruction”), and the omission of the subject (e.g., “Now [**I**] am really make yuo pay for be Nazi), auxiliary verb (e.g., “I zhink I [**will**] keeps this little emirate as a pet”, “[**I**] [**do**] NOT WANT TO”), linking verb (e.g., “ROSSIYA [**IS**] STRONK” and “Wo think today [**is**] cloudy”), conjunctions (e.g., “You could have told me [**that**] it’s a children’s choir!”), articles (e.g., “Yuo getting [**the**] little mountain clay” and “then I will into [**a**] secret attack”), negatives (e.g., “Nein” in German, “Non” in French), prepositions (e.g., “I am forgiv you [**for**] everythink”), plurals (e.g., “Flower[s] haben many polen”) or the indirect object (e.g., “Please of gib [**me**] monie”). Lastly, sometimes English is corrupted by the substitution of “have” with “am”, such as “I **am** a stab wound” and “I **am** many cold and freeze”.

2.1.3. Telegraphic Speech

The best example of this is “GIB EU MEMBER JOIN” as shown in Figure 1, which can be translated to “Give me the EU membership to allow me to join”.

GIB EU MEMBER JOIN!!

SWEDEN FINLAND NO NATO GO FUCK!!

**I EAT GREEK
THROAT
OUT OF
THROAT!!**



**I FLOOD SHIT
EUROPE OF
REFUGEE THE
SYRIAN KIND!**

BLACK SEA ALL OF ME!

**TURKIYE NOT
TURKEY! FUCK!!!!**



**Ach nein! Turkey ist nein haben
taken zhe krazy pill fur kure his
krazy today...**

**Vhy ist mein job fur
maken Turk eat Krazy
Pill...gottverdammt...**

Turk yuo are take zhe krazy pill now...ja?

NOT WANT TO!

Yuo must!

fine



Figure 1: Telegraphic Speech of German Ball [11].

2.2. Language Interference

2.2.1. General Romance Language

The structure of “for + to do (verb infinitive)”, which is not a conventional usage in standard English, is observed in the “Engrish” speech of countryballs of Romance-language speaking countries. E.g., “For to make up for being Nazi” and “This is perfect for to make attract investings”. When generalized to other language groups, “to” here can sometimes be omitted (e.g., “fur use,” and “fur kure” in Germany Ball’s speech) Another feature that can be observed in Countryball comics is the postpositive adjective that follows the noun it modifies, e.g. “Racist Anonymous”, “friend good”, and “clay rightful” (rightful territory). However, this reversed order of words is sometimes

overgeneralized to other non-Romance language-speaking countries and other grammatical structures, such as Eastern Bloc countries collectively saying “Yes Rossya stronk very” (the modifier “very” follows after “strong”) and Poland ball saying “You ever listen song to of ‘Purple Rain’?” (“listen to [the] song” becomes “listen [the] song to”).

2.2.2. Spanish

The letter “ñ” in Spanish is appropriated in an unsystematic manner, e.g., “Presideñial electionñ”. Sometimes, the unique feature of Spanish punctuation, such as the inverted question mark “¿”, is implemented in the respective context. Also, compared with the speech of other countryballs, a lot more words are borrowed from Spanish to create a sense of “Spanglish”, such as “totalmente”, “mundo”, “nunca”, “pero”, “país”, and “volverás”, which render it inscrutable for those who are not speaking or systematically learning any Romance languages.

2.2.3. Portuguese

The Portuguese cognate of the English word “independent”, or “independente”, is morphologically similar to its English counterpart and is used in Portugal Ball’s speech in replacement of “independent”, e.g. “Ah, eu feelings much better, much more independente”. However, this is overgeneralized as a rule of appending “-e” to words ending with a closed syllable structure, e.g. “São sade... I cry for you.” The letter “ã” is used to stylize the “Engrish” as it is not found in English, e.g., “So disgustings looking nãõ.”

2.2.4. Italian

Due to the Italian’s predominantly open syllable structure, almost all words having consonant-final morphology are followed by a vowel “-a” in Countryball comic orthography of Italian-speaking countryball’s speech, e.g., “Io will not accept-a unless you charge other nations that do the same or worse, like-a the Gran Bretagna.”

2.2.5. Russian

Since the velar nasal [ŋ] sound is not naturally found in standard Russian pronunciation, the coda “ng” for [ŋ] sound is represented as “nk”, such as “Iearnink”, “everythink”, and “stronk”. The orthography of English words in Russian-speaking balls’ speech is motivated by the transliteration from the Cyrillic alphabet, e.g., “Kompyuter” for “computer”, and “kulture” for “culture”. The lack of labiovelar approximant /w/ in Russian aligns with the observation that the English phoneme /w/ is approximated to “v”, such as “vhant” for “want”. Similarly, due to Russia’s absence of voiceless dental fricative [θ] and voiced dental fricative [ð], “think” sometimes becomes “zhink” and “this” sometimes becomes “dis”.

2.2.6. German

Likely influenced by the model equivalent “können” for “can” in German, the “c” in “can” is almost always substituted with “k”. This substitution of /k/-sounding “c” by “k” can occur elsewhere, such as “kure” for “cure” and “kulture”. By the same token with Russian, /w/, [θ], and [ð] are approximated to German phonemes, as evident in “they” changed into “zhey”, and “when” changed into “vhen”. The umlaut “ü” and “ö” are also used to stylize German-speaking Ball’s speech, such as “für” (equivalent of “for” in German).

2.2.7. General Nordic Languages

Nordic languages influence the “Engrish” spoken by Nordic countryballs’ speech in the substitution of English letters with those that are not found in English, such as “ø”, “ö”, and “ä”, e.g., “cräp”, “nöw”, “spöted”, and “Øh”.

2.2.8. Mandarin

“Chinglish” is mocked by the substitution of the letter “l” with the letter “r”, e.g., “peopre”, “onry”, “behord”. However, this is a misunderstanding of Mandarin phonology, as the phoneme /l/ is present in Mandarin. This phenomenon probably arises from conflating different East Asian languages and their phonetic characteristics, since Japanese is the language that lacks the /l/ phoneme.

2.3. Discussion

The stylization of English used in Polandball comics could be seen as a mixture of linguistic stereotyping and simple code-switching. This is evident in the fact that, on multiple occasions, the Spanish-influenced English used in the Spain Ball’s speech showcases the creators’ proficiency and vocabulary knowledge in Spanish, while on the other hand, the mocked “Chinglish” was the result of misunderstood and conflating of East Asian languages.

The language stereotyping part in Polandball, though adding distinctiveness and humor to the characters, might induce complex ramifications, such as perpetuating certain stereotypes about the language proficiency of non-native English speakers in general and cultural biases about certain non-English speaking countries. The portrayal of non-English-speaking countryballs may inadvertently and implicitly suggest a lack of sophistication or even intelligence, reinforcing linguistic prejudice and influencing cross-cultural perceptions. Despite all this, from the community-building perspective, this use of non-standard English could also be seen as the Polandball community’s collective rejection or deconstruction of “political correctness”.

Last but not least, the Polandball community’s mere perception of non-standard English as being ludic or not as serious could be questionable, in terms of Anglo-centralism or American-centralism. Instead, in opposition to the centralists, some would assert that English is becoming the world’s lingua franca, and the sole purpose of English is to communicate – rejecting the notion of American English or British RP being “standard English” versus non-native speaker’s “non-standard English”.

3. The USA Ball and African American Vernacular English

The comics created in the r/polandball community that involve the character of a USA Ball sometimes feature orthographic stylizations of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), though it is important to note that many features of AAVE are shared among various dialects of American English, especially the southern ones due to its long history in the South.

3.1. Stylizations

Phonologically, these AAVE-related stylizations include the orthographical realization of gerunds as in <in> for <ing> (e.g., I have drought all the **fuckin’** time!), the monophthongization of /aɪ/ to /a:/ (e.g., Ayee how **ma** favorite homies!), and the deletion of post-vocalic /ɪ/ in orthographical representation (e.g., He just ain’t free enough for **yo’** pizza). The lexical aspects include the use of the word “ain’t” (e.g. I **ain’t** got time for them), “y’all” (e.g., **Y’all** call that a wound?), “dawg”, “lit” (e.g., Damn **dawg** this Chinese propaganda has been getting **LIT** lately!), “bro” (e.g. I got an idea **bro!**) “dope” (e.g., That shit was **dope**), “homie” (e.g., My brother and **homie**), and “fam” (e.g., No problem **fam**. But you owe me one.) (see Figure 2). Some AAVE-associated nonstandard orthography

can also be found among Countryball comics, such as “Prolly” for “probably” and “sumthin” for “something” (e.g. **Prolly** imbues it with Celtic magic or **sumthin**...). From a morphosyntactic view, there is the copula absence (e.g. The fucking **you doin’** here?) and the completive done (e.g. Ah **done** ate some of Texas’ Hellfare chili!). Besides, sometimes double negation is observed to be used in single-negation propositions, e.g. I **don’t got no** medicine.



Figure 2: Language Feature of USA Ball [12].

3.2. A Hypothesis: the Potential Root of AAVE-Appropriation in USA Ball Comics

The sheer amount of AAVE presence in USA Ball comics elicits an interesting question: How can AAVE represent the American tongue in the Reddit Polandball community? It is argued that the USA Ball is usually portrayed as a “loud” and sometimes rude character. It is instructed that every artist of Countryballs memes should draw a pair of sunglasses on the USA Ball, symbolizing coolness [2]. Therefore, it is a reasonable assumption that the usage of AAVE is a method to emphasize the “loud” and “cool” personality of the USA Ball.

3.3. Black Positivity, Coolness, Toughness, and Masculinity

An intertextual analysis of AAVE-featured social media posts on Twitter observes that Mock AAVE often annexes certain positive qualities, such as toughness and coolness, that are associated with Black culture and the Black-related R&B or hip-hop culture. This is evident in that Mock AAVE is mostly used in superficial or lighthearted blogs, such as boasting, friendship, partying, and physical appearance [13]. A potential explanation for this phenomenon of social media “AAVE positivity” is further explored in research that analyzes branded tweets that linguistically appropriate AAVE-featured slang. This paper coined the notion of “corporate cool” to refer to corporations’ adoption of AAVE features for their social-media advertisement and the establishment of their “trendy” and “cool” image. The practice of AAVE appropriation in social media branding provides comfort for white audiences and may even strengthen racial stereotypes by appropriating AAVE in a controlled manner, i.e., keeping distance from serious issues faced by the Black community, such as rates of incarceration, poverty, and police brutality [14].

3.4. Other Explanations

Combining the literature about AAVE appropriation and the nature of the Polandball community, the following are two candidate explanations for AAVE usage in USA Ball comics.

3.4.1. Exceptional Masculinity of USA Ball

With this “black toughness” public perception, influencers can appropriate AAVE to index their personas. The establishment of USA-ball’s loudness persona could be paralleled with some non-LGBTQ+ male influencers’ usage of AAVE to index masculinity and toughness, as USA Ball is often portrayed as a powerful character due to its perceived “military zeal” (e.g. the perceived desire for oil) and historical and contemporary significance in the global geopolitical landscape [15]. For the masculinity aspect, although all countryballs are default-gendered males (e.g. balls calling each other “sons”, “bros” and “fathers”, and the use of bowknot or nekomimi cat ears as a special marker of non-male gendered balls), the USA ball exhibits more behaviors that align with masculinity ideologies or expectations, such as obsession with guns, belligerence, and rudeness (e.g. the use of offensive words) [16, 17, 18].

3.4.2. The Comedic Nature of Countryball Comics

According to the r/polandball community guidelines of “How to Engrish” in Countryballs comics, if a country has an Anglophone-majority population, the respective ball ought to speak standard English. However, if “a country has a creole, pidgin, or dialect that would be funnier than English,” things are up to the artists’ choice [10]. The U.S., in this case, falls into this “up-to-the-artist-choice” category for its widespread use of AAVE. Following this logic, AAVE usage in Countryballs comics intends to create humor or a comedic effect. This concurs with the observation that the appropriation of AAVE in humorous contexts on social media often involves non-Black users adopting AAVE features to appear relatable or lighthearted [13, 15]. Therefore, it could be deduced that the AAVE being featured in USA Ball speeches may be associated with the ludic atmosphere of the community.

4. Conclusion

In a nutshell, this paper qualitatively examined the phenomena, proposed plausible explanations, and depicted the potential ramifications of non-standard English usage and stylizations in Reddit’s Polandball comics. From the African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) appropriations in USA Ball’s speech to the “Engrish” used for non-English speaking country’s characters, the language choice in Reddit’s Polandball comics is most closely associated with creating a comedic effect, reflecting the ludic nature of Polandball comics. From the sociolinguistic perspective, this use of non-standard English, despite appearing to be parodic, might stem from and even further perpetuate the ingrained racial or cultural stereotypes. Overall, this research not only pioneered the study of the AAVE appropriation phenomenon in Reddit’s Polandball community, but also extensively collected, identified, and categorized the state-of-the-art linguistic stereotypes and stylizations of Polandball’s non-standard English. In the future, the Polandball community on Reddit will remain a high value of research, as the source of sociolinguistic and anthropological discovery. For example, quantitative instead of qualitative research could be conducted to draw more solid and supported conclusions about the “lingua franca” of Polandball comics. The gender issue could also be discussed in the context of Polandball and other geopolitical satire online communities, with the question about whether and why the characters are by default males still unanswered.

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