

A Study of the Differences between British English and American English

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Abstract: Most English-speaking people are unaware of the vast differences between British English and American English. This article is designed to enlighten the reader and the learners of English language on these differences and briefly explain how these differences should not constitute a hindrance to communication.

As a matter of fact, this article is intended to show a number of main areas of differences between British English and American English in order to help learners of English with tips and strategies to overcome their fears in practicing this foreign language.

The language that Americans and British share is spoken differently in the two locations, but understandable by both groups of speakers. Therefore, it also needs to be understood by all hearers regardless of the version used. In other words, English language learners are encouraged to make efforts toward understanding either of these two accents, i.e. British English and American English, and thus eliminate their fears according to which American English is more difficult than British English or the other way round.

Keywords: British English, American English, dialect, language varieties, accent, learners.

Résumé: La plupart des locutaires de l'anglais ne sont pas conscients des grandes différences entre l'Anglais Britannique et l'Anglais Américain. Cet article est conçu pour éclairer le lecteur et les apprenants de cette langue sur ces différences et expliquer brièvement comment ces différences ne devraient pas constituer un obstacle à la communication.

En effet, cet article est destiné à montrer quelques domaines principaux de différences entre l'anglais britannique et l'anglais américain afin d'aider les apprenants de l'anglais avec des conseils et des stratégies pour surmonter leurs peurs dans la pratique de cette langue étrangère.

La langue que les Américains et les Britanniques partagent est parlée différemment dans les deux endroits, mais compréhensible par les deux groupes de locuteurs. Par conséquent, cette langue doit également être comprise par tous les auditeurs, quelle que soit la version utilisée. En d'autres termes, les apprenants de langue anglaise sont encouragés à travers cet article à fournir des efforts pour comprendre l'un ou l'autre de ces deux accents, c'est-à-dire l'anglais britannique et l'anglais américain, et ainsi éliminer leurs craintes d'après lesquelles l'anglais américain est plus difficile que l'anglais britannique ou inversement.

Mots-clés: Anglais britannique, anglais américain, dialecte, variétés linguistiques, accent, apprenants.

1. Introduction

This scientific article has the following objectives:

- Develop knowledge and skills on the two main and most famous varieties of English language known as British English and American English, which are taught in most ESL/EFL programs.
- Enable the reader to understand and explain why it is generally believed that none of the two accents/versions is the most "correct"; that it is rather about people's preferences in use, the most important thing being consistency in one's usage choice.
- Help learners of English to examine the way British English and American English are used (speaking, writing, spelling, vocabulary, grammar, etc.), and find out their differences in all language skills such as pronunciation, stress, intonation, and rhythm.
- Suggest pedagogical actions to address a number of challenges encountered by non-native learners of either of the two versions, focusing on communication which is the most important thing to bear in mind.

2. General considerations on British English and American English

The two concepts "British English" and "American English" simply refer to mean the way English language is used in Great Britain and in the United States of America respectively. Due to the many differences that occur in these two branches of the English language, many people, especially learners of English as a foreign language, think that there are two "Englishes". They often say that American English is more difficult

than British English, or British English is more difficult than American English. Others even say that American English is “sweeter” than British English, etc.

As a matter of fact, while there are certainly many more varieties of English, American English and British English are the most used and taught in most ESL/EFL programs. Generally, linguists agree that none of the two versions is more correct than the other, or more difficult than the other, or easier than the other, etc. It is simply a matter of personal preferences in the usage of one or the other. The most important rule of thumb is to try to be consistent in your usage. If you prefer using American English spellings, then you should be consistent in all the other language aspects involved therein, i.e. spelling, pronunciation, intonation, supra-segmental features, vocabulary, grammar, etc.

2.1. Words and their meanings

Sense relationships: The meaning of a word can only be understood and learnt in terms of its relationship with other words in the language. In both British and American English, we can identify the relationship between words: we know for example that “revolting” can be synonymous to “disgusting” in certain contexts. “Sharp” is the antonym for “blunt” in certain contexts. There are several examples of conceptual synonyms, but it is rarely the case that two words will be synonymous in every occasion. If they were, there would be little need to have both words in the language. So, when we use the term synonymy, we are actually talking about practical synonymy, and the following examples illustrate how synonymy may differ:

Flat=apartment, kid=child, skinny=thin, conceal=hide (as a transitive verb but hide may also be intransitive; thus different grammar). As long as this difference is highlighted, the use of synonyms is often a quick and efficient way of explaining unknown words.

As far language learning is concerned in this context of British and American English, sense relations are of paramount importance: in class, grouping terms together by synonymy, hyponymy, antonymy, and other types of relations will help to give coherence in the lesson. Besides, they will help address the confusion by certain non-native learners who think that some American terms are absolutely synonyms of some British ones. These relations are also variable as a means of presentation and testing and can provide a useful framework for the learner to understand semantic boundaries: to see where the meaning overlaps and learner’s limits in the use of a certain item, without knowing whether it is an American term or a British one. They are also useful in terms of organization as a form of word “storage” for the students’ period. They finally help us to make reductions about unknown items, especially their British or American origins. The examples here below show how vital sense relations are in contextual guesswork; the underlined word is supposed to be unknown to the non-native learner: *The village had most of the usual amenities: a swimming pool, a gym, a pub, library, post office, village hall, medical center, and schools).*

2.2. American social dialects

American social dialects are different ways of speaking used by people who may live in the same region of the country. Some of the ways that social dialects may differ from one another are in the choice of pronouns, contractions, and verbs.

The paragraphs below are examples of how two people from the same region of the United States might say the same thing. Let’s read the paragraphs and see how they differ.

Paragraph A: *John and I are going to the movie today. John said that it doesn’t matter what’s playing, since he isn’t particular about movies. We brought some candy to eat in the theater. We should have a good time.*

Paragraph B: *Me and John are going to the movie today. John said that it don’t matter what’s playing, since he ain’t particular about movies. We brung some candy to eat in the theater. We should have a good time.*

If we study the underlined words in each of the two paragraphs above, we would answer the following questions:

- Which words show a difference in the choice of pronouns?
- Which words show a difference in the choice of contractions?
- Which words show the difference in the choice of verbs?

Each paragraph above is an example of a social dialect. If we re-read paragraphs A and B again and more carefully, we will find out that paragraph A is an example of a special social dialect called standard dialect. Because this dialect is so widely used on television, in business, and in books and newspapers, teachers encourage students to use it in schools. This makes us distinguish what we have learnt, what are the social dialects, what is meant by standard dialect, why is standard dialect the one that is taught in schools, etc.

In order to help learners of English develop their knowledge and skills vis-à-vis the two varieties (British and American English), the teacher can give them the following evaluation exercises for discussion:

- Explain what a social dialect is. See if you can think of some examples of the differences among social dialects in your area of the country.
- What is standard dialect? If someone doesn't speak standard dialect, why should they try to learn to speak it? Explain your answer.
- Which group of sentences below contains examples of standard dialect? Which group contains examples of other social dialects? What are the differences between the pairs of sentences?
 1. He doesn't have money. She isn't here. Tom and I called. He did it himself. He taught me a song.
 2. He don't have money. She ain't here. Me and Tom called. He did it hisself. He learned me a song.

The teacher can also give to the students the following additional self-evaluation exercise: *Listen to someone speaking in standard dialect, like a newscaster on radio or television. See if you hear any differences between the verbs, pronouns, and contractions he/she uses and the ones you would use to say the same things. Then you can answer the following question: Are there any differences between your social dialect and standard dialect, and, if so, what are they?*

3. Principal areas of differences between British English and American English and their didactic implications

The following guide is meant to point out the principal areas of differences between these two varieties of English.

3.1. Grammar

3.1.1. The use of the present perfect

In British English, the present perfect is used to express an action that has occurred in the recent past that has an effect on the present moment.

Let us have a look through the following example: **I've lost my key, can you help me look for it?** In American English, the following is also possible: **I lost my key, can you help me look for it?**

In British English, the above American example would be considered incorrect. Yet, both forms are generally accepted in standard American English.

Other differences involving the use of the present perfect in British English and simple past in American English include **already, just** and **yet**.

British English	American English
I've just had lunch	I just had lunch, OR I've just had lunch
I've already seen that film	I've already seen that film OR I already saw that film
Have you finished your homework yet?	Have you finished your homework yet? OR Did you finish your homework yet?

3.1.2. Past simple/Past Participle

The following verbs have two acceptable forms of the past simple/past participle in both British English and American English. However, the irregular form is generally more common in British English (the first form of the two) and the regular form is more common in American English.

INFINITIVE	BRITISH ENGLISH	AMERICAN ENGLISH
Burn	burnt	Burnt OR burned
Dream	dreamt	Dreamt OR dreamed
Lean	Leant	Leant OR leaned
Learn	Learnt	Learnt OR learned
Smell	Smelt	Smelt OR smelled
Spell	Spelt	Spelt OR spelled
Spill	Spilt	Spilt OR spilled
Spoil	Spoilt	Spoilt OR spoiled

3.1.3. Possession cases with "Have" and "Have got"

There are two forms to express possession or ownership in English: **Have** or **Have got**: **Do you have a car? / Have you got a car/? He doesn't have any friends / He hasn't got any friends, She has a beautiful new home / She has got a beautiful new home.**

While both forms are correct (and accepted in both British and American English), the "Have got" form (have you got, he hasn't got, etc.) is generally the preferred form in British English, while most speakers of American English employ the "Have" form (do you have, he doesn't have etc.).

3.1.4. The Verb Get

The past participle of the verb get is gotten in American English. Example: He's gotten much better at playing tennis. British English - He's got much better at playing tennis.

3.1.5. Prepositions

There are also a few differences in preposition use including the following:

BRITISH ENGLISH	AMERICAN ENGLISH
At the weekend	On the weekend
In a team	On a team
Please write to me soon	Please write me soon
English is different from French	English is different than French

3.2. Vocabulary

Many vocabulary items are used in one form and not in the other. That is, two different words, one in British English and the other in American English, may sometimes mean the same thing. These two words may sometimes be synonymous, but not in all cases. Yet still, some words mean different things in the two varieties.

BRITISH ENGLISH	AMERICAN ENGLISH
An airport porter	A skycap
A trolley	A baggage cart
To hire a car	To rent a car
A taxi rank	A cab stand/ taxi stand
The ground floor (the floor of a building level with the ground)	The first floor
The first floor	The second floor
The second floor	The third floor
The third floor (and so forth)	The fourth floor (and so forth)
Reception	Front desk
Receptionist	Front desk clerk
Cot	Crib
Communicating door	Connecting door
Tariff	Rate
Tap	Faucet
Not generous, tight fisted	Angry, bad humored
Bonnet	Hood
Boot	Trunk
Lorry	Truck
Taxi	Cab
Lift	Elevator

Rubber	Eraser – rubber
Flat	Apartment
Torch	Flashlight
Chips	French fries
Dynamo	Generator
Paraffin	Kerosene
Engine	Motor
Toilet	Rest room
Term	Semester
Shop	Store
Pharmacy	Drugstore
Braces	Suspenders
Holiday	Vacation
Wash your hands	Wash up
Garden	Yard
Vest	Undershirt
Lorry	Truck
Cooker	Stove
Gym shoes. Tennis shoes	Sneakers
Ironmonger	Hardware
Spanner	Wrench

3.3. Spelling

Some general differences between British and American spellings:

* Words ending in -or (American) = our (British). Examples: honor – honour, color - colour, humor - humour, flavor - flavour, Savior – Saviour, Behavior – Behaviour, etc.

* Words ending in -ize (American) -ise (British). Examples: recognize - recognise, patronize – patronise, harmonize – harmonise, immunize – immunise, etc.

* Words ending in -er (American) = re (British). Examples: Theater – Theatre, kilometer = kilometre, thermometer = thermometre, meter = metre, liter = litre, center – centre, etc.

* Words ending in -m (American) = mme (British) Examples: program = programme, kilogram = kilogramme, telegram = telegramme, etc.

* Words ending in -log (American) = -ogue (British): Examples: dialog – dialogue, catalog – catalogue, monolog – monologue, etc.

* American English spelling sometimes does not double the consonant at the end of a word, while British English spelling does, especially when the consonant is the 'l' lateral sound. For example: travel, traveller, travelling (British) and travel, traveler, traveling (American).

The best way to make sure that you are being consistent in your spelling is to use the spell check on your word processor (if you are using the computer of course) and choose which variety of English you would like. As you can see, there are really very few differences between standard British English and standard American English. However, the largest difference is probably that of the choice of vocabulary and pronunciation.

3.4. Pronunciation, stress, intonation and other important facts

3.4.1. Pronunciation:

/m/, /n/, /nt/, /nasal sounds in American English tend to be more palatal than dental, the American /r/ sound is very clear and even allows a lot of linking and intrusive in all cases of two words whereby the first one ends with the letter ‘r’ or a vowel and the second word starts with a vowel. Example: Her own house, their ink, our only Savior and Lord, Africa and Asia, Media in Africa, etc.

As to the consonants /t/ and /d/, they tend to resemble /r/ or dental/palatal weak sound /d/.

In a number of words in which BBC pronunciation has /a:/, General American has the front open /æ/ vowel.

	BBC pronunciation	General American
<i>class</i>	klɑ:s	klæs
<i>last</i>	lɑ:st	læst
<i>ask</i>	a:sk	æsk
<i>answer</i>	a:nʌ	ænsər
<i>laugh</i>	lɑ:f	læf
<i>advance</i>	ə'dvɑ:ns	'ædvæns
<i>can't</i>	kɑ:nt	kænt

The long back mid rounded vowel /ɔ: / which in BBC English occurs in words such as *thought*, *walk*, *law* is usually open and less rounded in GA. In fact, the General American vowels in the open back area are characterized by a considerable amount of variation. Some Americans pronounce the above words with a vowel quality which is lower than the BBC vowel but is still characterized by a certain amount of lip-rounding.

	BBC pronunciation	General American
<i>thought</i>	θɔ:t	θɑ:t
<i>caught</i>	kɔ:t	kɑ:t
<i>daughter</i>	dɔ:tə	dɑ:tər
<i>author</i>	ɔ:θə	ɑ:θər
<i>walk</i>	wɔ:k	wɑ:k

All GA vowels are characterized by r-colouring when they are followed by the letter *r* in the spelling.

	BBC pronunciation	General American
<i>car</i>	ka:	ka:r
<i>park</i>	pa:k	pa:rk
<i>start</i>	sta:t	sta:rt
<i>more</i>	mɔ:	mɔ:r
<i>course</i>	kɔ:s	kɔ:rs

This r-colouring is particularly noticeable in the case of the mid central vowels /t/ and /d/ as in *bird*, *nurse*, or in the last syllable of *another*.

Consonants: The consonantal systems of BBC pronunciation and General American do not differ considerably. The overall number of consonant phonemes in the two standard accents is the same. The differences concern their phonetic realization and their distribution.

One of the most typical features of GA concerns the realization of /t/ between vowels. In this position, both in individual words and across word boundaries, /t/ is pronounced as a quick tap and is accompanied by voicing, so that it sounds almost like a /d/-r.

	BBC pronunciation	General American
<i>atom</i>	ætəm	æt/d/rəm
<i>city</i>	s ^h ti	s ^h t/d/r/i
<i>writer</i>	raɪtə	raɪt/d/rər

3.4.2. Stress:

Sometimes there are considerable differences between American English and British English in word stress and sentence stress. Sometimes, a certain word may carry a stress on its first syllable in American English and on the first syllable in British English. But it is worth mentioning that such a difference does not affect the meaning of the word. The issue is only that people with the British accent tend to think that those with American accent have made a pronunciation error because of lack of knowledge (because they are not aware of such slight difference).

Examples:

Research (American English) = Research (British English)

Advance (American English) = Advance (British English)

Progress (both verb and noun - American English) = Progress (verb - but progress-noun in British English).

3.4.3. Intonation:

As to the intonation, as one of the suppra-segmental features, there is not much different between the American intonation and the British one. The main types of intonation that exist are the same in both varieties, including:

- (1) Flat intonation: horizontal intonation: found in simple affirmations and statements and informal orders/commands. Examples: I am here today, That is my hobby, Let us go home now, etc.
- (2) Rising intonation: going up: found YES/ NO questions. Examples: Are you a student? Is that your sister? Are you happy with your program? Etc.
- (3) Falling intonation: Falling down: found in information questions, i.e. questions starting with WHAT, WHERE, WHEN, WHICH, and HOW. Examples: Where do you live? What's your name? How do you go to work? Which of the two is your pen? How long have you been here? When will you graduate? Etc.

3.4.4. Other important facts:

- There is a lot of nasalization in American English than in British English. Especially when it comes to words that have the following dental sounds generated from the following consonants and diphthongs: internal, international, mine, sent, interim, dental, curriculum, forum, addendum, etc.
- There is another important feature in American English whereby the dental consonant sound /t/ and /d/ are perceived as long and vibrating /r/sound whereas in British English this sound is perceived as strong /t/ and /d/ voiceless sounds. Examples: potatoes, Peter, butter, fatter, bitter, petty, pretty, etc.
- **Punctuation: American punctuation vs. British punctuation**
 - ✓ Another important grammatical distinction is the use of punctuation between American and British English. If an American were to pick up a book in a London bookstore, they may be surprised by the inverted use of quotation marks. In the United States, double quotation marks are used for initial quotations, and single quotation marks are used when there is another quote inside of a quote. In Great Britain, however, the exact opposite is true. There is also the use of a comma in British English and a colon in American English for letter salutations. Examples: Dear Sir, (British English) and Dear Sir: (American English).
 - ✓ There are even more differences in how American and British punctuate quotations. British place commas and periods outside of quotation marks while Americans place them inside. And British English does not add a period to abbreviations that Americans would write as "Mr., Mrs., Dr., Prof."
- **American date writing vs. British date writing:** Another example is how Americans and British write dates. Americans write dates as month-day-year. For example: February 10, 2022, or 2/10/2022. In Great Britain however, they write dates as day-month-year. Example: 10 February 2022, or 10/2/2022.

4. Conclusion and Pedagogical Actions

English is spoken in many countries throughout the world, with different variations due to social and cultural milieus. The two main varieties known as British English and American English are the ones that cause challenges to non-native learners of English. Some of them gratuitously suggest that American English is the most difficult, yet some others believe and declare that the British version is the most difficult.

All these beliefs and declarations are due to the fact that non-native learners think the version they are most used to (familiar with) is easier than the other. Nevertheless, in most ways the English language used is the same in all countries where it is used, regardless of how it is spoken, written, sung, signed, etc. In other words, English is one language; there are not many “Englishes”. It is simply a matter of different ways in its use.

Teachers of English should emphasize this issue and encourage their students/ pupils, and any other language learners to feel comfortable with this noble international language, which is now being used by very many countries in the world.

However, teachers and learners should also be aware of the fact that there are some differences according to the way each country uses it, as detailed in this piece of work.

In a nutshell therefore, British English and American English are not different languages. They are indeed one language, used through different accents and undergoing different changes and variations due to culture and milieus, differences as detailed in the specific areas developed in the second chapter of this article.

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