

THE MAJOR DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BRITISH AND AMERICAN ENGLISH IN WRITTEN AND ORAL COMMUNICATION

Assistant Prof. Dr. Narcisa TIRBAN,
Assistant Prof. Dr. Laura Rebeca PRECUP-STIEGELBAUER,
Prof. Dr. Teodor PATRAUTA,
“Vasile Goldis” Western University of Arad

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to emphasize the major differences between British and American English both in written and oral communication. Moreover, this research is intended to increase everybody's interest in studying one or another, and to be aware which English they speak and how correctly or incorrectly they speak it, depending on the purpose of their uttering. As English has become more than a trend nowadays it proved to be very interesting the analysis of what type of English we speak, what type of English we hear around us, in movies, while listening to music or even while chatting online.

Keywords: English, British, American, difference, study, language.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, English is probably the most frequently spoken language in the world, either as an official language, or as a foreign language. Speaking English has become more than a trend, more than a fashion. Relative fluency in English is getting more and more to be a must when it comes to communicating with people belonging to other nations or applying for a job. But the question is: what kind of English do we speak? For English is not at all a homogenous language.

2. Major Differences

There are lots of different varieties of English, spoken in different parts of the world, such as Australian English, South African English, Indian English and so on. However, two varieties of English are considered to be the most influential and widespread of all: Commonwealth English, generally known as British English, mainly spoken on the territory of Great Britain, and American English, the language spoken in the U.S.A. British English is also spoken across the former colonies of the British Empire (Commonwealth), including parts of Africa (Egypt and South Africa), Asia (Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Thailand), as well as in Malta, Australia, New Zealand and Ireland, while American English is widely used in much of the East Asia (Japan, South Korea Taiwan and the Philippines), the Americas (excluding the former British colonies of Jamaica, Canada and the Bahamas) and Africa (Liberia).

A more special case is Canada, where British English is used in spelling, but pronunciation and vocabulary are closer to American English. Among the international organizations, the World Bank, and the Organization of American States tend to use the American form, while other groups and organizations, such as the International Olympic Committee, NATO and the World Trade Organization use British English. As we can see,

both British and American English are more or less equally spread throughout the world. Anyway, the main object of this work is not to establish the winner of a alleged competition between these two variants of English, but to explain the various differences that there are between them, differences that often lead to confusions, some hilarious, other extremely serious. For instance, there was a case of misunderstanding during the Second World War, when, according to Winston Churchill, a simple word, “to table”, caused “a long and even acrimonious argument” between the British and the American. To the former, the word means “to suggest formally in a meeting something that you would like everyone to discuss”, while for the latter, it has exactly the opposite meaning, that is, “to delay dealing with something such as a proposal until a future time”. It is even believed that the representatives of the two nations resorted to an “interpreter” during the war, to avoid further misunderstandings of this kind.

Of course, it seems at least strange to us, foreign speakers of English, that two peoples speaking the same language can come this. Or are we talking about *two* languages? Are the differences between British and American English that great? Well, if we were to quote G.B. Shaw, we could say that “England and America are two countries separated by a common language”. As paradoxical as this statement might seem, it describes an obvious truth.

Considering the fact that, for more than 200 years, the two countries have lived separate lives, it is natural that there are significant differences in what concerns not only the language, but also the cultural and social aspects, between the British and the Americans. The English colonists who arrived on today’s territory of the USA, back in the 17th century, had to adapt to the new circumstances, their subsequent evolution was determined by them. They came across a huge area of land, a new type of climate, very different from the one they were accustomed to; moreover, they encountered groups of people they had never before come in contact with, the Native American tribes. Its evolution was also influenced by the fact that, throughout its history, the USA was home to immigrants of a great variety. All this time, the British Isles had their own fate, the language and the habits suffered some transformations, too. But to what extent are British and American English different from one another? Statistics show that the difference has reached 1% and is constantly growing. Nevertheless, it seems that mass-media, the Internet, and the globalization phenomenon somehow tend to reduce the regional variation.

Without considering the numerous dialects existing within the two nations, the differences are set between the standard forms of British and American English. These distinctive features belong especially to the following domains: spelling, semantics, grammar, and pronunciation.

2.1. Spelling

There are many spelling differences between the two varieties. The most important and frequent are the following:

<i>American English</i>	<i>British English</i>
-or	-our
color	colour
flavor	flavour
honor	honour

favorite	favourite
<i>-ter</i>	<i>-tre</i>
center	centre
theater	theatre
specter	spectre
luster	luster
<i>-nse</i>	<i>-nce</i>
pretense	pretence
defense	defence
offense	offence
<i>-ll</i>	<i>-l</i>
<i>skillful</i>	<i>skilful</i>
fulfill	fulfil
installment	instalment
<i>-e</i>	<i>-ae/-oe</i>
anemic	anaemic
anesthetize	anaesthetize
ameba	amoeba
<i>-in/-im</i>	<i>-en/-em</i>
to inclose	to enclose
to insure	to ensure
inquiry	enquiry
In American English, <i>-e</i> , <i>-ue</i> , <i>-me</i> are dropped at the end of nouns:	
envelop	envelope
catalog	catalogue
program	programme

There are also some individual words which the Americans spell differently from the British:

<i>American English</i>	<i>British English</i>
jail	gaol
curb	kerb
pajamas	pyjamas
gray	grey
maneuver	manoeuvre
draft	draught

2.2. Semantics (meaning of words)

There are objects that have one name in American English, and a completely different one in British. For example:

<i>American English</i>	<i>British English</i>	<i>American English</i>	<i>British English</i>
car battery	accumulator	windshield	windscreen
cell phone	mobile phone	trainers	sneakers
gas	petrol	to fire	to sack
faucet	tap	windshield	windscreen

garbage can	dustbin	vacation	holiday
eggplant	aubergine	candy	sweets

There are also cases when the same word is used in both varieties, but can have a completely different meaning. For example:

football	<i>American meaning</i>	<i>British meaning</i>
	a game played with an egg-shaped ball that the players can kick or throw	a game played with a round ball that the players kick
bathroom	a toilet a room with a bath in it	
chips	thin flat pieces of potato, fried and eaten hot	long thin pieces of potato, fried and eaten hot

2.3. Grammar

Basically, these kinds of differences refer to tense formation, subject-verb agreement and the use of present perfect.

a) Form of past tense and past participle

In American English, the **-ed** form is used with some verbs that in British English are irregular, such as *to learn* (*learned* in American, *learnt* in British), *to dream* (*dreamed/dreamt*), *to spell* (*spelled/spelt*) etc.

Other verbs, regular in British English, are used in the American variant with irregular forms. For example, verbs like *to light*, *to forecast*, *to knit*, tend to receive, at past tense and present participle, the irregular forms *lit*, *forecast*, *knit*, instead of *lighted*, *forecasted*, *knitted*. However, this is not a general rule, because these irregular forms are also encountered in British English.

Another peculiar aspect in American English is the use of certain forms of past participle, such as *gotten*, *proven*, *shrunk*, *boughten*, which are considered very old-fashioned, or simply not used by British speakers.

b) Subject-verb agreement

In British English, collective nouns (e.g. *team*, *police*, *army*, *audience*, *staff*, *company*, *government* etc.) are often followed by a plural verb, while in American English, these are always followed by a singular. For instance:

Br E: Manchester have won the match.

Am E: Manchester has won the match.

c) Use of the present perfect

When referring to an action which has begun in the past, but is going on in the present, speakers of British English use the present perfect, while Americans tend to use the past simple tense. For example:

Br E and Am E: John has already finished his work.

Am: John already finished his work.

2.4 Pronunciation

There are some pronunciation rules which are different in British and American English. The most important of all are those concerning stress, some vowel sounds, the voiced *t* and vowels followed by an 'r'.

a) Stress

American and British speakers have different ways of emphasizing a certain syllable when they utter certain words of two syllables, such as:

<i>word</i>	<i>British English</i>	<i>American English</i>
ballet	[ˈbæleɪ]	[bæˈleɪ]
debris	[ˈdebrɪ:]	[dəˈbrɪ]

Similar differences can be encountered in words like *garage*, *gourmet*, *paté*, *chalet* etc.

In words with more than two syllables, Americans tend to emphasize the end. For example:

<i>word</i>	<i>British English</i>	<i>American English</i>
secretary	[ˈsekrətəri]	[ˈsekrətəri]
preparatory	[prɪpærətəri]	[prɪpærətəri]

Other words that stick to this rule are *conservatory*, *inflammatory*, *territory* etc; an interesting case is the word *laboratory*, which is pronounced [ləˈbɒr(ə)tri] in British and [ləbrətɔ:ri] in American English. Another distinguishing element for American English is the reduction of syllables in words ending in *-ile*, such as *mobile*, *missile*, *docile* etc. For example:

<i>word</i>	<i>British English</i>	<i>American English</i>
hostile	[ˈhɒstail]	[ˈhɑ:stl]
fragile	[ˈfrædʒaɪl]	[ˈfrædʒl]

b) The vowel sounds [ɑ:] and [æ]

The British [ɑ:] is pronounced [æ] in American English before fricatives (f, s, θ), nasals (m, n, ŋ) and the consonant *l* followed by another consonant. For example:

<i>word</i>	<i>British English</i>	<i>American English</i>
dance	[dɑ:ns]	[dæns]
after	[ˈɑ:ftə]	[ˈæftər]
can't	[kɑ:nt]	[kænt]

c) The sounds [ju:] and [u:]

There are some words in which Britons say [ju:] and Americans say [u:]. For example:

<i>word</i>	<i>British English</i>	<i>American English</i>
tune	[tju:n]	[tu:n]
tulip	[ˈtju:lɪp]	[ˈtu:lɪp]

d) Vowel sounds [ɒ] and [ɑ]

Americans usually pronounce an open *o* before the *p*, *t*, *k* and *l* consonants, instead of the British darker sound. For example:

<i>word</i>	<i>British English</i>	<i>American English</i>
hot	[hɒt]	[hɑ:t]

body	[ˈbɒdi]	[ˈbɑːdi]
problem	[ˈprɒbləm]	[ˈprɑːbləm]

e) The voiced *t*

This is also an American invention; it is a *t* that sounds very much like *d*. It is heard when it occurs between two vowels (e.g. *better*, *butter*, *letter*, *matter* etc), between a voiced vowel and a consonant (e.g. *plenty*, *winter*, *bounty*, *painted*, *quantity* etc), or between two unstressed syllables

f) Vowels followed by [r]

These are called rhotic or r-coloured; the [r] is not pronounced in British English, but many American speakers pronounce it. For example:

<i>word</i>	<i>British English</i>	<i>American English</i>
poor	[puə]	[puər]
here	[hiə]	[hi(ə)r]
dirt	[dɜːt]	[dɜrt]

3. Conclusions

On the whole, these would be the main differences between British and American English; as expected, there are others, as well, but they are subject to future research.

On the other hand, however different these two varieties might seem, there is only one English language, which is presently spoken by more than a third of the world's population. Choosing what variant to speak remains a matter of preference, but a good speaker of English should know how to juggle with both or at least should know how to recognize them. Perhaps, at a certain time in the future, the differences will be erased and we will all speak one single language. That common language might as well be English; for the time being, English is a universal language that helps communication between peoples become easier. American or British, what difference does it make?

Bibliography

- Peter Strevens, *British and American English*, Collier-Macmillan, 1972
 Margaret Moore, *Understanding British English*, Citadel Press, 1989
 Colleen Cotter (Editor), Sally Steward, 2nd Edition, Lonely Planet USA
 Phrasebook: *Understanding Americans & Their Culture*, Lonely Planet, August, 2001
 Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2002