

American English vs. British English

“We have really everything in common with America nowadays except, of course, language.”
Oscar Wilde, Irish dramatist, novelist & poet (1854-1900) in *The Canterville Ghost* (1882)

In this seminar you will:

- practise reading comprehension
- learn about differences in the use of vocabulary and grammar between American and British English
- practise listening skills
- practise creative writing based on vocabulary from an online Illustrated infographic dictionary
- work with an authentic video of your choice and recognize differences between American and British English

Reading: Why Isn't “American” a Language?

1 Why does American English take such liberties with our common tongue? On the other hand, why has it not taken *more* liberties? English speakers first started colonising America more than 400 years ago. Since then, American English has been evolving, influenced by other languages, culture and technology. It starts with the identities of the first American English speakers. Four hundred years ago, the colonies were particularly attractive to people who were strongly opposed to the Church of England or couldn't make a living there – they were not the cream of society. The earliest American linguistic landscape was strongly influenced by dialects of the sort that even today are not highly esteemed by the rich. But they were still British, at first. *The accent has changed more in British English than in much of American.*

2 Then British English started changing in ways American didn't. The ‘proper’ English of the early 1600s would sound to us like a cross between the English spoken in Cornwall and Dallas; the accent has changed more in British English than in much of American. Even at the time of the American Revolution, educated speech in England fully pronounced “r” in all places, and King George III probably said *after*, *ask* and *glass* the same as George Washington did: with the same *a* as in *hat* and *fat*. The ‘ah’ pronunciation was considered low-class in England until after the Revolution.

3 Along with pronunciation, word use in the two countries began to differ. Bill Bryson, in *Made in America: An Informal History of the English Language in the United States*, lists a number of words the English have left in the dustbin but Americans have kept using, including *cabin*, *bug*, *hog*, *junk*, *trash* and *chore*. American uses of *gotten* as a past participle of *get*, *fall* to mean *autumn*, *mad* to mean *angry*, and *sick* to mean more generally *ill*, came from England but fell out of favour in the native land.

4 American English changed too: a new landscape, new animals and new people including immigrants influenced American English. Words such as *prairie* and *bureau* came from French, *pretzel* came from German, *canyon* and *coyote* came from Spanish; *boss* and *waffle* came from Dutch; the indigenous cultures contributed *moose*, *skunk*, *pecan*, *squash* and *toboggan*. Some things were named with new compounds: *rattlesnake*, *bluegrass*, *sidewalk*, *skyscraper* and *drugstore*. Words for things invented after American independence have often differed on opposite sides of the Atlantic: does your car have a *boot* and *bonnet* or a *hood* and *trunk*?

5 The biggest differences are, of course, the spellings. Webster promoted many spelling reforms. Some did not catch on: no one spells *bread* as *bred*, *give* as *giv*, *mean* as *meen*, *speak* as *speke*, *character* as *karacter*, or *ache* as *ake*. A few were inconsistently used in America and England before Webster, and his endorsement helped them to be standard in America and, consequently, rejected in England – notably the shift of words such as *colour* to *color* and of words such as *naturalise* to *naturalize*. Others for which Webster's dictionaries were the prime vector include changing *centre* to *center*, *defence* to *defense*, *connexion* to *connection*, and *chequer* to *checker* and *masque* to *mask*. His removal of the *k* in

words such as *magick*, *musick*, and *logick* even came to be the standard in England. For that matter, while many Brits are quick to denounce Americanisms where they see them (even ones that, as we have seen, came from England first), quite a few words of American invention have been adopted into British English, including *belittle*, *blizzard*, *cafeteria*, *cocktail*, *talented*, *reliable* and *influential*.

6 The commerce of words, as of goods and culture, has continued apace across the Atlantic. Traffic between the colonies and in particular, London, has always helped keep American from diverging more. London remained the centre of English culture as the American colonies developed, and Americans with money and connections regularly crossed the Atlantic. The areas of the US where more distinctive dialects of English are spoken are well away from the halls of power, and their speech is typically stigmatised in the general culture. New York and other money cities – and the great universities – have maintained versions of English not so different from the educated British standard.

Adapted from Harbeck, James, Why Isn't "American" a Language?, 15 July 2015, viewed on 1.8.2016 at <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20150715-why-isnt-american-a-language>

Task 1 – After reading the above text, find the roughly paraphrased expressions in the text above.

1. ordinary people who may have disagreed with the predominant religion
2. a way of speaking thought to be uneducated and in poor manner
3. not used anymore by the Brits
4. native tribes or communities
5. main impulse or stimulus
6. ready to judge quickly
7. made fun of or laughed at by the majority

Task 2 – Match the words from the text:

- | | |
|------------------|----------------------|
| 1. fall | pavement |
| 2. sick | disparage (put down) |
| 3. garbage | canteen |
| 4. junk | boot (automobile) |
| 5. sidewalk | trash |
| 6. drugstore | bonnet (automobile) |
| 7. toboggan/sled | ill |
| 8. trunk (car) | pharmacy |
| 9. hood (car) | angry |
| 10. cafeteria | autumn |
| 11. blizzard | sleigh / sledge |
| 12. belittle | storm |
| 13. mad | stuff / things |

Comprehension Questions

1. What ideas do you find interesting in the above text?
2. What aspect of history did you find surprising?
3. How did Webster's original dictionary affect the English language(s)?

Task 3 – Think of as many expressions or aspects of language (e.g. grammar) that you consider particularly British or particularly American. Brainstorm with a partner to build a mind-map.

British English

American English

Task 3a – Creative Writing – Look at the link below (*Illustrated Differences between American and British English*) and choose 5-10 interesting words. Using these, write a short story (80-100 words) that uses only British or American English. The story may be funny, absurd, realistic or poetic. In the next lesson, you will exchange your stories with a partner who will find the American or British equivalents. Your text should be computer-typed, double-spaced and run through a British or American spell-checker.

Illustrated Infographic Shows 63 Differences between American and British English; viewed on 27.3.2017 at <http://mymodernmet.com/grammarcheck-english-infographic>

Grammar – Main Grammatical Differences

British English

and

American English

- In American English, the past simple is used more than in British English: For example, it is used instead of the present perfect when there is not a specific time reference and with the adverbs **just**, **already**, **yet**, **ever** and **never** (unlike in British English).

Has he arrived yet?

I have never tried Thai food.

Did he arrive yet?

I never *tried* Thai food.

- The single and double quotation marks are used inversely (see answer key for more details).

'Have you seen Jane?' – 'Yes, I've seen her.'

"Did you see Jane?" – "Yes, I saw her."

- The form **have got** / **haven't got** is not used very often in American English.

Have you got a pet?

I haven't got many friends here.

Do you have a pet?

I don't have many friends here.

- Question tags in American English are used differently and not as often as in British.

You're 16, aren't you?

Don't be late, will you?

You're 16, right?

Don't be late, ok?

- The verb **need**, often used in British English as a semi-modal, is always used as an ordinary verb in American English.

You needn't wait for me.

You don't need to wait for me.

- In American English, it is more common to use the modal **should**, rather than **shall**.

What shall we do tonight?

Shall I go now?

What should we do tonight?

Should I go now?

- Collective nouns such as **family**, **team** and **government**, which in British English can be singular or plural, are always singular in American.

John's family *is/are* leaving tomorrow.

John's family *is* leaving tomorrow.

British English

and

American English

- The past participle of **get** is **got** in British English and **gotten** in American.

Your Spanish has *got* much better.

Your Spanish has *gotten* much better.

- In American English, the verb **take** is used instead of **have** in expressions such as **take/have a bath / shower / break**

I *have* a shower every morning.

I *take* a shower every morning.

- Americans use the forms **go get, go see...**, while English people say **go and get, go and see..**

Go *and* get the newspaper, please.

Go get the newspaper, please.

- In **colloquial** American, some adverbs ending in **-ly** lose the suffix when they precede an adjective

She's really **crazy**.

She's **real** crazy.

- In American English, the verb **help** is not followed by **to**

Can you help me to do my homework?

Can you help me ~~to~~ do my homework?

Adapted from Finnie et al. (2010); TOP Grammar, *Helbling Languages*, p. 358.

- In American English, **titles** use periods, while in British English the fullstops are omitted.

Mr, Mrs, Ms, Dr

Mr., Mrs., Ms., Dr.

- British usage omits the apostrophe in the plural form of **dates**, whereas the American practice more often includes it. The British style is gaining ground in America, however.

the 1980s

the 1980's

Day/Month/Year

Month/Day/Year

- British usage dictates a period between the hours and minutes when writing the **time**, while American usage dictates a colon

10.30

10:30

Viewed on 2.8.2016 and adapted from <http://www.thepunctuationguide.com/british-versus-american-style.html>

Task 4 – Find an authentic text or video and try to recognize some of the above differences.

Task 5 – Listen to the talk show excerpt in Americans Don't Understand English at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5wSw3IWRJa0> viewed on 8.9.2017 (stop at 2:33)

1. Which nationality uses more specific language?
2. What is the main point the speaker is making?
3. Why did the Americans change to using the word "sidewalk"?
4. What other 4 examples does the comedian describe?
5. Can you think of any other examples from your experience?