

## AMERICAN ENGLISH AND BRITISH ENGLISH

### Introduction

- American English acquired international significance after World War II, when the United States assumed a more global role and political, economic and technological developments promoted U.S. influence worldwide. American English asserts a dominant influence on "world English" (cf. British English) largely due to the following:
  1. Population: U.S. vs U.K. (SAE/SBE ca 70% vs 17% of all native English)
  2. Wealth of the U.S. vs the U.K. economy, & influences
  3. Magnitude of higher education in America vs the U.K.
  4. Magnitude of the publishing industry in America
  5. Magnitude of mass media and media technology influence on a worldwide scale
  6. Appeal of American popular culture on language & habits
  7. International political and economic position of the U.S.
- American and British English are both "variants" of the English Language, more similar than different, especially with "educated" or "scientific" English. Most divergence is due to differences in national history and national cultural development, varying regional and local idioms and colloquialisms, and media/advertising influences.
- While there are certainly many more varieties of English, American and British English are the two varieties that are taught in most ESL/EFL programs. Generally, it is agreed that no one version is "correct" however, there are certainly preferences in use. The most important rule of thumb is to try to be consistent in your usage. If you decide that you want to use American English spellings then be consistent in your spelling (i.e. The color of the orange is also its flavour – color is American spelling and flavour is British), this is of course not always easy – or possible. The following guide is meant to point out the principal differences between these two varieties of English.

### Grammar

#### ➤ *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.

For example: *I've lost my key. Can you help me look for it?*

In American English this is also possible: *I lost my key. Can you help me look for it?*

In British English the above would be considered incorrect. However, 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:**

- *I've just had lunch*
- *I've already seen that film*

#### **American English:**

- *I just had lunch or I've just had lunch.*
- *I've already seen that film or I already saw that*

- *Have you finished your homework yet?*      *film.*  
 – *Have your finished your homework yet? or Did you finish your homework yet?*

### 5 **Past Simple/Past Participles**

The following verbs have two acceptable forms of the past simple/past participle in both American and British 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 to American English.

Burn	burnt <i>or</i> burned
Dream	dreamt <i>or</i> dreamed
Lean	leant <i>or</i> leaned
Learn	learnt <i>or</i> learned
Smell	smelt <i>or</i> smelled
Spell	spelt <i>or</i> spelled
Spill	spilt <i>or</i> spilled
Spoil	spoilt <i>or</i> spoiled

### 5 **Possession**

There are two forms to express possession in English. *Have* or *Have got*

*Do you have a car?*

*Have you got a car?*

*He hasn't got any friends.*

*He doesn't have any friends.*

*She has a beautiful new home.*

*She's got a beautiful new home.*

While both forms are correct (and accepted in both British and American English), *have got* (*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* (*do you have, he doesn't have etc.*)

### 5 **The Verb Get**

The past participle of the verb *get* is *gotten* in American English.

*He's gotten much better at playing tennis.*

British English: *He's got much better at playing tennis.*

### 5 **Prepositions**

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

<b>American English:</b>	<b>British English:</b>
<i>on the weekend</i>	<i>at the weekend</i>
<i>on a team</i>	<i>in a team</i>
<i>please write me soon</i>	<i>please write <b>to</b> me soon</i>

## Vocabulary

- 5 Probably the major differences between British and American English lies in the choice of vocabulary. Some words mean different things in the two varieties, for example:

*Mean*: (American English) – angry, bad humored, (British English) – not generous, tight

*Pants*: (American English) – trousers, (British English) – underwear

- 5 There are many more examples (too many for me to list here). If there is a difference in usage, your dictionary will note the different meanings in its definition of the term. Many vocabulary items are also used in one form and not in the other. One of the best examples of this is the terminology used for automobiles.

**American English:**    hood        trunk        truck

**British English:**     bonnet     boot        lorry

Once again, your dictionary should list whether the term is used in British English or American English.

## Spelling

- 5 There is a large class of words in British English that end in “-our”. There is a tendency for writers of American English to spell those words with the ending “-or”. The abridged definitions and etymology provided below suggest that the British spelling is closest to the Middle English form of the word, whereas the American spelling is closest to its Latin ancestor.

The similarities between the American spelling and the Latin Ancestors may seem significant, but is probably not. Most likely the spelling is just a simplification of the British spelling.

*Colour* in British English is spelled *Color* in American English

Main Entry: col·or

Etymology: Middle English *colour*, from Old French, from Latin *color*

Date: 13th century

- a) a phenomenon of light (as red, brown, pink, or gray) or visual perception that enables one to differentiate otherwise identical objects
- b) the aspect of objects and light sources that may be described in terms of hue, lightness, and saturation for objects and hue, brightness, and saturation for light sources
- c) a hue as contrasted with black, white, or gray

*Honour* in British English is spelled *Honor* in American English

Main Entry: hon·or

Etymology: Middle English, from Old French *honor*, from Latin *honor*, *honor*

Date: 13th century

- a) good name or public esteem
- b) a showing of usually merited respect

*Humour* in British English is spelled *Humor* in American English

Main Entry: hu·mor

Etymology: Middle English *humour*, from Middle French *humeur*, from Medieval Latin & Latin; Medieval Latin *humor*, from Latin *humor*, *umor* moisture; akin to Old Norse *vokr* damp, Latin *humEre* to be moist, and perhaps to Greek *hygros* wet

Date: 14th century

- a) that quality which appeals to a sense of the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous

- b) the mental faculty of discovering, expressing, or appreciating the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous
- c) something that is or is designed to be comical or amusing

*Labour* in British English is spelled *Labor* in American English

Main Entry: la·bor

Etymology: Middle English, from Middle French, from Latin *labor*; perhaps akin to Latin *labare* to totter, *labi* to slip

Date: 14th century

- a) expenditure of physical or mental effort especially when difficult or compulsory
  - b) (1) human activity that provides the goods or services in an economy (2) : the services performed by workers for wages as distinguished from those rendered by entrepreneurs for profits
  - c) the physical activities involved in giving birth; *also* : the period of such labor
- There is another class of words in British English that end in *-re*. There is a tendency for writers of American English to spell those words with the ending *-er*. The abridged definitions and etymology provided below suggest that the British spelling is least removed from both the Middle English spelling and the Latin word from which it is derived.

It would seem that the following words were once pronounced with a final consonant cluster, /tr/, and a vowel (schwa). But after the pronunciation changed to /t/ + (schwa) + /r/, the British English spelling did not change, but when the language was carried to the Americas, the spelling changed to be more consonance with the pronunciation.

*Theatre* in British English is spelled *Theater* in American English

(Note: It is sometimes spelled *Theatre* in AE, most often in the south of the United States)

Main Entry: the·ater

Etymology: Middle English *theatre*, from Middle French, from Latin *theatrum*, from Greek *theatron*, from *theasthai* to view, from *thea* act of seeing; akin to Greek *thauma* miracle

Date: 14th century

- a) an outdoor structure for dramatic performances or spectacles in ancient Greece and Rome
- b) a building for dramatic performances
- c) a building or area for showing motion pictures

*Centre* in British English is spelled *Center* in American English

Main Entry: cen·ter

Etymology: Middle English *centre*, from Middle French, from Latin *centrum*, from Greek *kentron* sharp point, center of a circle, from *kentein* to prick; probably akin to Old High German *hantag* pointed

Date: 14th century

- a) the point around which a circle or sphere is described; *broadly* : a point that is related to a geometrical figure in such a way that for any point on the figure there is another point on the figure such that a straight line joining the two points is bisected by the original point -- called also *center of symmetry*
  - b) the center of the circle inscribed in a regular polygon
- Many words in British English ending in “*-ise*” are spelled with “*-ize*” in American English. Analysis of a limited set indicates that this class of words originates from French. The British English spelling is most similar to the French. The /z/ sound would become an /s/ sound if the British spelling were pronounced consistent with American phonological rules. Therefore, the “*-ise*” ending probably became “*-ize*” to aid in homogeneity of the language.

*Realise* in British English is spelled *Realize* in American English

Main Entry: re-al-ize

Etymology: French *réaliser*, from Middle French *realiser*, from *real* real

Date: circa 1611

- a) to bring into concrete existence : <finally *realized* her goal>
- b) to cause to seem real : make appear real <a book in which the characters are carefully *realized*>

*Colorise* in British English is spelled *Colorize* in American English

Main Entry: col-or-ize

Date: 1979

- a) to add color to (a black-and-white film) by means of a computer

*Paralyse* in British English is spelled *Paralyze* in American English

Main Entry: par-a-lyze

Etymology: French *paralyser*, back-formation from *paralysie* paralysis, from Latin *paralysis*

Date: 1804

- a) to affect with paralysis
- b) to make powerless or ineffective

- Other words that are not spelled the same in British English and American English include: Tyre/Tire, Programme/Program, and Pyjama/Pajama.

*Tyre* in British English is spelled *Tire* in American English

Main Entry: tire

Etymology: Middle English, probably from *tire* (head dress)

Date: 15th century

- a) a metal hoop forming the tread of a wheel
- b) a rubber cushion that fits around a wheel (as of an automobile) and usually contains compressed air

The American English spelling is closest to the Middle English ancestor. The British English spelling seems to be an unexplainable aberration.

*Programme* in British English is spelled *Program* in American English

Main Entry: pro-gram

Etymology: French *programme* agenda, public notice, from Greek *programma*, from *prographein* to write before, from *pro-* before + *graphein* to write

Date: 1633

1. [Late Latin *programma*, from Greek] : a public notice
2. a: a brief usually printed outline of the order to be followed, of the features to be presented, and the persons participating (as in a public performance)  
b: the performance of a program; *especially* : a performance broadcast on radio or television
3. a plan or system under which action may be taken toward a goal

The American English spelling is obviously a direct simplification of the British English spelling, which is, in turn, spelled identically to the French word for agenda: "*programme*".

*Pyjama* in British English is spelled *Pajama* in American English

Main Entry: pa-ja-ma

Etymology: Hindi *pAjAma*, from Persian *pA* leg + *jAma* garment

Date: 1883

The American English and British English spellings differ only on the second character, which probably results from a difference in pronunciation of the first vowel sound in the words.

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.

## **Pronunciation**

- British Received Pronunciation (RP), the usual speech of educated people living in London and southeastern England, is one of the many forms of standard speech. Other pronunciations, although not standard, are entirely acceptable in their own right on conversational levels.
- The chief differences between British Received Pronunciation, as defined above and a variety of American English, such as Inland Northern are in the pronunciation of certain individual vowels and diphthongs. Inland Northern American vowels sometimes have semiconsonantal final glides. Aside from the final glides, this American dialect shows four divergences from British English:
  1. the words *cod*, *box*, *dock*, *hot*, and *not* are pronounced with a short (or half-long) low front sound as in British "bard" shortened;
  2. words such as *bud*, *but*, *cut*, and *rung* are pronounced with a central vowel as in the unstressed final syllable of "sofa";
  3. before the fricative sounds *s*, *f*, and (the last of these is the *th* sound in "thin") the long low back vowel *a*, as in British "bath," is pronounced as a short front vowel *a*, as in British "bad";
  4. high back vowels following the alveolar sounds *t* and *d* and the nasal sound *n* in words such as *tulips*, *dew*, and *news* are pronounced without a glide as in British English; indeed, the words sound like the British "two lips," "do," and "nooze" in "snooze." (In several American dialects, however, these glides do occur.)
- The 24 consonant sounds comprise six stops (plosives): *p*, *b*, *t*, *d*, *k*, *g*; the fricatives *f*, *v*, (as in "thin"), [eth] (as in "then"), *s*, *z*, (as in "ship"), (as in "pleasure"), and *h*; two affricatives: *tʃ* (as in "church") and *dʒ* (as the *j* in "jam"); the nasals *m*, *n*, (the sound that occurs at the end of words such as "young"); the lateral *l*; the vibrant or retroflex *r*; and the semivowels *j* (often spelled *y*) and *w*. These remain fairly stable, but Inland Northern American differs from British English in two respects:
  1. *r* following vowels is preserved in words such as "[car](#)," "[offer](#)," "[guitar](#)," "[turn](#)," and "[far](#)," whereas it is lost in British ("[car](#)," "[offer](#)," "[guitar](#)," "[turn](#)," and "[far](#)");
  2. *t* between vowels is voiced, so that "metal" and "matter" sound very much like British "medal" and "madder," although the pronunciation of this *t* is softer and less aspirated, or breathy, than the *d* of British English.
- Like Russian, English is a strongly stressed language. Four degrees of stress may be differentiated: primary, secondary, tertiary, and weak, which may be indicated, respectively, by acute (´), circumflex (ˆ), and grave accent marks and by the breve (˘). Thus, "Têll mè the trúth" (the whole truth, and nothing but the truth) may be contrasted with "Têll mé the trúth" (whatever you may tell other people); "bláck bîrd" (any bird black in colour) may be contrasted with "bláckbird" (that particular bird *Turdus merula*). The verbs "permít" and

"recórd" (henceforth only primary stresses are marked) may be contrasted with their corresponding nouns "pérmit" and "récord." A feeling for antepenultimate (third syllable from the end) primary stress, revealed in such five-syllable words as equanímy, longitúdinal, notoríety, oportúny, parsimónious, pertinácity, and vegetárian, causes stress to shift when extra syllables are added, as in "histórical," a derivative of "hístory" and "theatricálicity," a derivative of "theátrical." Vowel qualities are also changed here and in such word groups as périod, períódical, periodícity; phótograph, photógraphy, photográphical. French stress may be sustained in many borrowed words; e.g., bizárre, crítique, duréss, hotél, prestíge, and techníque.

- 5 Pitch, or musical tone, determined by the rate of vibration of the vocal cords, may be level, falling, rising, or falling-rising. In counting "one," "two," "three," "four," one naturally gives level pitch to each of these cardinal numerals. But if a person says "I want two, not one," he naturally gives "two" falling pitch and "one" falling-rising. In the question "One?" rising pitch is used. Word tone is called pitch, and sentence tone is referred to as intonation. The end-of-sentence cadence is important for meaning, and it therefore varies least. Three main end-of-sentence intonations can be distinguished: falling, rising, and falling-rising. Falling intonation is used in completed statements, direct commands, and sometimes in general questions unanswerable by "yes" or "no"; e.g., "I have nothing to add." "Keep to the right." "Who told you that?" Rising intonation is frequently used in open-ended statements made with some reservation, in polite requests, and in particular questions answerable by "yes" or "no": "I have nothing more to say at the moment." "Let me know how you get on." "Are you sure?" The third type of end-of-sentence intonation, first falling and then rising pitch, is used in sentences that imply concessions or contrasts: "Some people do like them" (but others do not). "Don't say I didn't warn you" (because that is just what I'm now doing). Intonation is on the whole less singsong in American than in British English, and there is a narrower range of pitch. American speech may seem more monotonous but at the same time may sometimes be clearer and more readily intelligible.
- 5 British Received Pronunciation and American Inland Northern show several divergences:
  1. After some vowels American has a semiconsonantal glide.
  2. The vowel in "cod," "box," and "dock" is pronounced like "aw" in British and a sound similar to "ah" in American.
  3. The vowel in "but," "cut," and "rung," is central in American but is fronted in British.
  4. The vowels in the American "bath" and "bad" and in the British "bad" are all pronounced the same, but the vowel in the British "bath" is pronounced like "ah," since it is before one of the fricatives s, f, or th (as in "thin").
  5. When a high back vowel is preceded by t, d, or n in British, a glide: /j/ is inserted between them ("enthusiastic," "duty," "tune," "new," "illuminate"); in American the glide is omitted ("enthusiastic," "duty," "tune," "new," "illuminate").

## Questions and Discussions

1. What are the main reasons for the differences between British English and American English?
2. What aspects of the mentioned differences do you think need to be carefully considered?
3. Find some more examples of the differences in addition to the above.