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Vocabulary – British vs. American English

Is British English better than American English?

Note: These notes accompany podcast no.29 in the series 'Purland on ELT'.

Introduction: make no mistake – British English (BrE) and American English (AmE) are two different languages!

- George Bernard Shaw said: 'England and America are two countries separated by a common language'. I say: 'England and America are two countries separated by two different languages'.
- The differences are deep-rooted not superficial.
- It's not just a few words that mean the same, e.g. pavement/[sidewalk](#).
- I can't teach American English; I would need some training. I would feel like a non-native teacher teaching BrE.
- For me AmE is a deviation from Standard English.
- English native speakers learn AmE almost from birth due to the prevalence of US culture in our media.
- English native speakers can feel like BrE is the original and the best, and that AmE is a version; they have an adjective ('American' English), while we don't (English)! This is a false and unnecessarily jingoistic argument.
- American English has more native speakers, but British English has more speakers worldwide: there are 231 million English speakers in the United States, yet only 60 million in the UK. Approximately 330 to 360 million people speak English as their first language in 6 countries: USA, UK, Canada, Australia, Ireland, and New Zealand. Estimates that include second language speakers vary greatly, from 470 million to more than 1 billion:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English-speaking_world
- However, Indian English is based on BrE, with 125 million speakers:
<http://www.immihelp.com/newcomer/indian-english-american-english-language-dictionary.html>
English is one of the two official languages of the Union Government of India.
- Where is English spoken around the world?
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_English-speaking_population

So what are the differences?

1. The vocabulary is different:

- Words with equivalents, e.g. pavement/[sidewalk](#), lift/[elevator](#), rubbish/[garbage](#), jam/[jelly](#), motorway/[freeway](#), etc. Learn lists. (See the following worksheets: [american-english-1-ires9.pdf](#), [american-english-2-ires10.pdf](#), [comparing-british-english-and-american-english-spellings.pdf](#))
- Some old English words were retained in AmE but lost in BrE, e.g. [fall](#) (autumn is from the French 'automne'), [faucet](#), [diaper](#), [candy](#), etc.
- AmE has different idioms = a whole different vocabulary: I know what they mean, but I would not use them:
 1. [What the heck...?](#)
 2. [Sit tight. I'll be right back.](#)
 3. [Let me fix you a drink.](#)
 4. [We cool?](#)
 5. [Pardon me?](#)

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- See also this list of idioms where words are different:
http://www.lostinthepond.com/2013/02/british-english-vs-american-english_4388.html#.WU6ZVHHTXDc
- AmE has different slang words (e.g. **dude**) and swear words (see Urban Dictionary).
- AmE has the tendency to use nouns as verbs, e.g. **to vacation**.
- AmE vocab is more influential – worldwide TV/cinema/music influence.
- However, AmE gave world English many new words from a new continent, including from Native American languages, that we wouldn't have had in English without AmE, e.g. **moose**, **raccoon**, **corn**, **barbecue**, **squash**: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_English

2. The spelling has been reformed:

- Noah Webster's dictionary: 'The first large American dictionary, An American Dictionary of the English Language, known as Webster's Dictionary, was written by Noah Webster in 1828, codifying several of these spellings.' https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_English
- The removal of 'unnecessary' vowel letters, e.g. colour > **color**, blonde > **blond**, cheque > **check**, etc. (See the worksheet: comparing-british-english-and-american-english-spellings.pdf)
- It makes more sense than the British spelling system, which really needs reform.

3. The grammar is different:

- The general disappearance of perfect tenses, e.g. **I just got home** = I've just got home / **I just got home when the phone rang** = I had just got home when the phone rang (two different times) **I bin** = I have been.
- The disappearance of function words, especially auxiliary verbs, e.g. Are you going out? > **You going out?** Also, lack of perfect tenses and more use of elision, e.g. should have > **shoulda**, would have > **woulda**, could have > **coulda**, kind of > **kinda**; also no prepositions before days: **We met Saturday for a drink**.
- The rejection of question tags; use of **right?** or **OK?** instead = more direct language.
- Other grammatical differences: e.g. **I'm lovin' it!** (use of state verbs, which is incorrect in BrE).

4. The punctuation is different:

- The tendency to use double speech marks “ ” instead of single ones ‘ ’.
- The Oxford comma (a comma after the final item in a list) is more often used than in BrE.

5. But above all... the pronunciation is different:

- More use of elision, e.g. **Whaddaya want?** This can be harder for non-native speakers to understand than BrE, because the words are not individually pronounced.
- More use of contractions: absence of t: **godda**, **wodda**, **wanna**.
- Short vowel sounds instead of long, e.g. **cot** = caught
- Different vowel sounds substituted e.g. a for o: **Dag** = Dog
- Less use of the schwa sound – more strong vowels pronounced in weak syllables; AmE native speakers can be just as confused as other nationalities by our reliance on uh sounds! Without schwa sounds AmE can sound over pronounced = patronising:

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I bought a banana... = [A Ba Da Ba Na Na...](#)

- Use of rolled r sound, which is not in BrE Standard Pronunciation.
- Less use of glottal stops: I got the hot dog you wanted. = [A Ga Tha Ha Da Gya Wa Ned.](#)
- More use of d than t sound, e.g. the word 'bottle': [Ba dl](#) (AmE) but [Bo_ uhl](#) (BrE).
- In AmE word and sentence stress is lighter and less distinct. It plays less of a role in providing the meaning in a sentence, compared with BrE.
- In AmE the y sound is sometimes missing in certain words, e.g. new > [Noo](#), and particularly in words with 'tu-', such as duty > [Doo tii](#), tube > [Toob](#), and attitude > [A di Tood](#), and so on.
- There are fewer distinct accents than in BrE, e.g. New York, Texas, Chicago, Florida, California. AmE pronunciation is more homogenised.

Conclusion:

People can get angry defending their language! Which one is 'correct' = you are asking the wrong question! We can know and use both – it depends where you are and what you are doing:

- On a Cambridge certificate course like FCE or CAE both are acceptable:
'How does all of this affect a learner of English who is thinking of taking a Cambridge English exam? As an examiner, I can reassure you that both British and American English are equally acceptable in the Writing and Speaking tests...'
<http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/learning-english/parents-and-children/information-for-parents/tips-and-advice/005-british-and-american-english/>
- For a teacher, using an AmE word or phrase can stick out like a sore thumb on a BrE course and look like an error when used in a spoken class or written assignment.
- It is so important to know what you are signing up for/investing in: ask the language school or teacher what kind of English you will use – BrE or AmE – and tell them which is important to you and why.
- There are specific course books for AmE. In many cases there is a BrE version and an AmE version. How different are they?
- English native speakers may not see the problem because we take it for granted that we understand both languages very well; but don't waste your time learning one or the other, if you don't need to!
- Don't be offended or upset if your teacher picks you up on your use of AmE in a BrE class or school (or vice versa); you are learning the language you need in that place or for a specific purpose, e.g. if you are studying for the IELTS test to get into a British university – use BrE!
- AmE does not stop me enjoying my favourite American authors like John Irving and F. Scott Fitzgerald, nor my favourite British authors like E. M. Forster and Charlotte Brontë. It doesn't spoil my enjoyment of American films or music. It is important that I know and appreciate both languages.
- An interesting Daily Mail article concludes: *'Long may our two versions of it [English] continue to feed off each other.'*
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2329939/TOM-UTLEY-Listen-folks-British-snob-confession-make-Americans-speak-better-English--brainer.html#ixzz4kwLHyFbl>