

**ASSESSMENT OF THE DIFFERENCES IN UNITED STATES  
AND UNITED KINGDOM ENGLISH**

**Jimmy T. JOHN, *Ph.D***  
Department of Linguistics and Language  
University of Illinois at Chicago  
Northern Illinois,  
United States

**AND**

**Aniekan NYARKS, *Ph.D***  
English Department  
Akwa Ibom State University

**ABSTRACT**

*The article is an attempt to illustrate the difference between American and British English. It provides the differences in grammar, vocabulary, spelling and semantic levels as well as word derivation and compounds in both languages. The article also explains that language is not the only distinction between these two countries. It is more than just a description of the world; it is a reflection of culture and social attitudes toward current circumstances. It means reporting our thoughts, feelings, and relationships. It is on this basis that the paper concluded that although there are many differences in detailed aspects in the usage of British and American English, they are similar to each other in most aspects. It was recommended among others that American and British English are very useful in our daily speeches and so should be appreciated and utilized based on the place one finds him/herself or the country which adopts it.*

**KEYWORDS:** American English, British English, grammar, spelling, vocabulary and Semantic differences

**Introduction**

Globally, English is probably the most frequently spoken language, 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 becoming more and more of a must when it comes to communicating with people belonging to other nations or applying for a job (Tirban, Precup-Stiegelbauer and Patrauta, 2017). But the question is: what kind of English do we speak? English is not at all a homogenous language. Due to that,

English is widely used. However, variations of English exist; among them are American and British English.

The English language was introduced to the Americans by the advent of British colonialism, notably in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. The language was also extended to several other countries in the world as a result of British migration and colonisation and the growth of the old British Empire, which, by 1921, encompassed 470–570 million people, almost a quarter of the world's population. Written forms of British and American English as seen in newspapers and textbooks vary little in their core elements, with only rare, noticeable variances (Ferguson, Finegan, Heath & Rickford, 2004). Over the past 400 years, the forms of the language used by Americans (especially in the United States) and that used in the United Kingdom have diverged in a few minor ways, leading to the versions Shaw (2017) occasionally refers to as American English and British English.

Differences between the two include pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary (lexis), spelling, punctuation, idioms, and formatting of dates and numbers, although the differences in written and most spoken grammar structure tend to be much less than those of other aspects of the language in terms of mutual intelligibility. A small number of words have completely different meanings in the two versions or are even unknown or not used in one of the versions. One particular contribution towards formalizing these differences came from Noah Webster, who wrote the first American dictionary (published 1828) with the intention of showing that people in the United States spoke a different dialect from Britain, much like a regional accent (Sokolowski, 2015).

### **The Major Differences between American and British English**

Language is not the only distinction between these two countries. Separate lives over 200 years have formed differences in cultural and social aspects. It is also more than just a description of the world; it is a reflection of culture and social attitudes toward current circumstances. It means reporting our thoughts, feelings, and relationships (Kutateladze, 2014). Both of these countries had their own fates, so it's fascinating to see how these variations of English (American and British English) differ from one another. According to statistics, the difference is 1% at present, but it continues to grow (Tirban et al., 2012).

#### **1. Word Derivation and Compounds**

- Directional suffix — ward(s): British forwards, towards, rightwards, etc.; American forward, toward, rightward. In both varieties,

distribution varies somewhat: afterwards, towards, and backwards are not unusual in America; while in the United Kingdom, upward and rightward are the more common options, as is forward, which is standard in phrasal verbs such as "look forward to" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2018). The forms ending in -s may be used as adverbs (or prepositions towards) but rarely as adjectives.

- American English (AmE) freely adds suffix "s" to; day, night, evening, weekend, Monday, etc. to form adverbs denoting repeated or customary action: I used to stay out in the evenings; the library is closed on Saturdays. This usage has its roots in Old English, but many of these constructions are now regarded as American (for example, the OED labels nights "now chiefly N. American colloquial" in constructions such as to sleep nights, but to work nights, which is standard in British English) (Wikipedia, 2020).
- In British English (BrE), the agentive "er" suffix is commonly attached to football (also cricket; often netball; occasionally basketball and volleyball). AmE usually uses football player. For sports whose names are usable as verbs, the suffixation is standard in both varieties; for example, golfer, bowler (in ten-pin bowling and in lawn bowls), and shooter. AmE appears to use the BrE form in baller as slang for a basketball player on occasion.
- English writers everywhere occasionally make new compound words from common phrases; for example, health care is now being replaced by healthcare. However, AmE has made certain words in this fashion that are still treated as phrases in BrE.
- In compound nouns of the form <verb><noun>, sometimes AmE prefers the bare infinitive where BrE favours the gerund. Examples include (AmE first): *jump rope/skipping rope; racecar/racing car; rowboat/rowing boat; sailboat/sailing boat; file cabinet/filing cabinet; dial tone/dialling tone; drainboard/draining board.*

## 2. Spelling Differences

In a few cases, essentially the same word has a different spelling which reflects a different pronunciation. For example, American English uses simplified spelling, such as analyze while British English uses analyse. According to Tirban et al. (2012), there are many spelling differences between the two varieties; the most important and frequent are the following:

American English

*-or*

color

flavor

honor

favorite

behavior

neighbor

labor

*-ter*

center

theater

specter

luster

*-se*

pretense

defense

offense

practise

license

*-ll*

skillfull

fullfill

installment

*-e*

anemic

anesthetize

gynecology

ameba

estrogen

fetal

British English

*-our*

colour

flavour

honour

favourite

behaviour

neighbour

labour

*-tre*

centre

theatre

spectre

luster

*-ce*

pretence

defence

offence

practice

licence

*-l*

skilful

fulfill

instalment

*-ae/-oe*

anaemic

anaesthize

gynaecology

amoeba

oestrogen

foetal

<i>-in/-im</i>	<i>-en/-em</i>
to inclose	to enclose
to insure	to ensure
inquiry	enquiry
In American English, -e, -ue, -me are dropped at the end of nouns:	
envelop	envelope
catalog	catalogue
program	programme

### 3. Vocabulary Differences

The British who settled in America in the 17th century had no, or very little, contact with the population in Britain and hence the differences in the two varieties started to emerge. Many settlers came from other regions in the world; for example, from Germany, France, Spain, Netherlands, and the Scandinavian countries (Hansson, 2010). The settlers' languages principally left their marks in the form of new words. Furthermore, the Industrial Revolution, and consequently a great need for new vocabulary, came after the emigration to America. By then, the USA was no longer conforming to the British standard and new words and new inventions thus received different names in the two countries. Even though, the communication between Britain and the USA has increased markedly in recent decades, different lexis for new concepts are still coined in the two countries (Davies, 2007). In practice, the border between grammar and vocabulary is arbitrary.

Ashari (2020) and Maxwell and Clandfield (2010) differences in vocabulary in British and American English

<b>American</b>	<b>British</b>
airplane	aeroplane
mail	post
period	full stop ( <i>punctuation</i> )
Cookie	biscuit
Attorney	barrister
second floor	first floor
first floor	ground floor

trapezoid	trapezium
soccer	football
movies	cinema
donut	doughnut
driver's license	driving license
yogurt	yoghurt
pajamas	pyjamas
gray	grey
corn	maize
Bathrobe	dressing gown
sidewalk	pavement
Chief Executive Officer (CEO)	Managing Director (MD)
cell phone	mobile phone
vacation	holiday
principal	headmaster, headmistress, headteacher
buck (slang for a dollar)	quid (slang for multiple pounds)

Ashari's (2020) similarities between British and American English Vocabulary

<b>American</b>	<b>British</b>
Chocolate	Chocolate
Dessert	Dessert
Sandwich	Sandwich
Sausage	Sausage
Gym Shoes	Gym Shoes
Crossroad	Crossroad
Traffic Jam	Traffic Jam
Clock	Clock
Accelerator	Accelerator

#### 4. Grammatical Differences

This part will be dealing with grammar as a description of the structure of the English language taking into account the differences in the usage of verbs, tenses, prepositions, adjectives and adverbs in both British and American English.

##### *Verbs*

In British English, the past tense of “get” is “got”, while American English usually use its past participle “gotten”. For example,

- A. John has got much better during the last week. (BrE)
- B. John has gotten much better during the last week. (AmE)

According to Zhang (2008), the custom that British English usually uses “got” while American English “gotten” can quickly tell the nationality of the speaker.

Another example is “have”. British English usually uses “Have you any children?” or “Have you got any children?” while Americans commonly express the same meaning with “Do you have any children?” For examples, according to Zhang (2008), the following are the examples:

- C. How many brothers do you have? (AmE)
- D. How many brothers have you? (BrE)
- E. You don’t have much room here. (AmE)
- F. You haven’t (got) much room here. (BrE)

##### *Prepositions*

Differences between British and American English in prepositions are shown in the following two aspects: (1) different use of prepositions in the construction of phrases; (2) when using phrases, one will use a preposition while the other will omit it. For example:

- A. Your daughter’s name stands first in the list. (BrE)
- B. Your daughter’s name stands first on the list. (AmE)
- C. These dresses are in a sale. (BrE)
- E. These dresses are on sale. (AmE)
- F. He will come here at a quarter to three. (BrE, AmE)

- G. He will come here at a quarter before /of / till three. (AmE)  
(Zhang, 2008)

Similarly, “five past nine” can be expressed in American English by “five after nine” or “nine five”. In front of “weekend” and “Christmas”, British English uses “at” or “over”, while American English adopts “over” or “on”.

- H. At the weekend / Christmas (BrE)  
I. Over the weekend / Christmas (BrE, AmE)  
J. On the weekend / Christmas (AmE)

### ***Tense***

There are differences in the use of tense in British and American English. When expressing the event that just happened, British English usually uses past perfect tense, such as “I’ve just seen your brother” and “I’ve already eaten.” However, American English adopts past tense, such as “I just saw your brother” and “I already ate.” Other examples may include:

- A. Now I know what it is! I’ve forgotten my husband. (BrE)  
B. Now I know what it is! I forgot my husband. (AmE)  
C. It’s been a long time since we met last. (BrE)  
D. It is a long time since we met last. (AmE)  
E. He went home after he had finished his work. (BrE)  
F. He went home after he finished his work. (AmE)

### ***Noun***

#### *Differences in forms*

<b>BrE</b>	<b>AmE</b>
Candidature	Candidacy
centenary	centennial
cookery (book)	cook (book)
racialist, racialism	racist, racism
Sparking plug	Spark plug
transport	transportation



*Same Word, Different Meanings*

The same word expresses different meanings in British and American English. Generally speaking, there are two types. The first one is to add meanings. When Americans want to express a new thing or object, it seems to them that the most convenient method is to add a new meaning to one existing word.

Word	AmE	BrE
Bill	Bank note	A demand for payment of a debt
Guy	Fellow, any person	A ridiculous figure
Pressman	An operator of a printing office	A newspaper man

**5. Semantic Differences**

The human language consists of sounds that they do not have a meaning, but they can be combined with other sounds to create a word that has full meaning. According to Jacobson (2009) “*language without meaning is meaningless*”. Mervill (2000) in Safaa (2014) commented by saying “*surely all this is not without meaning*”. Thus, semantics is the study that deals with meaning of words. According to Safaa (2014), there are objects that have one name in American English, and a completely different one in British. For example:

AmE	BrE
Car battery	Accumulator
Cell phone	Mobile phone
Gas	Petrol
Garbage can	Dustbin
Eggplant	Aubergine
Trainers	Seakers
To fire	To sack
Vacation	Holiday
Candy	Sweets

## Difference Related to Cultural Values

British and American English have a number of differences which relate to the different cultural values of the two countries. For example, British English contains a number of frequently used metaphors relating to football ('scoring an own goal') and cricket ('a sticky wicket'), while American English uses metaphors relating to baseball ('in the ball park') (Enago Blog, 2015). The two versions of the language also have certain tendencies which are worth bearing in mind. These are not absolute, since individual writers have their own styles which may incorporate aspects of both British and American tendencies. However, in general:

- British English tends to react more slowly to new words and phrases than American English. American English enthusiastically adopts new usages, some of which later pass into general use (e.g. corporate citizen, social performance), and some die out after a short period in fashion (e.g. synergy).
- British English has a slight tendency to vagueness and ponderous diction. American English (at its best) tends to be more direct and vivid.
- American English tends to be slangier than British English.
- Both American and British English are keen on euphemisms. In British English, these are often used for humorous purposes (e.g. to be economical with the truth) or to smooth over something unpleasant. In American English they may be used for prudish reasons (thus lavatory becomes restroom or bathroom), to make something mundane sound important (thus ratcatcher becomes rodent operative), or to cover up the truth of something unpleasant (thus civilian deaths in war become collateral damage) (Enago Blog, 2015).

## Conclusion

British and American English have variants of English as a whole; the differences do not only affect the vocabulary; but also other levels like grammar, spelling, semantics and levels. Although there are many differences in detailed aspects in the usage of British and American English, they are similar to each other in most aspects. However, these varieties can only be considered as different forms of the same language, rather than two different languages. In addition, it can be said that one is better or more

advanced. Any judgment or opinion that "British English is better or worse than American English" is biased.

### **Recommendations**

1. American and British English are very useful in our daily speeches and so should be appreciated and utilized based on the place one finds him/herself or the country which adopts it.
2. A deeper study should be carried out in order to give a broader knowledge of the various words of difference in the two major languages.

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