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Difference between British English and American English

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Abstract: The English language has tremendous national variants. The English spoken in one country differs with that of another. It is in this line that we perceive a huge difference between British English and American English. British English is the form of English used in the United Kingdom, it includes all English dialects used in the United Kingdom, and American English is the form of English used in the United States, it includes all English dialects used in the United States. They differ with each other in both spoken and written forms. By the end of this paper, the learner will be able to learn the differences in terms of grammar, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, etc.

Keywords: *Vocabularies, Spelling difference, Affixes, Pronunciation*

Vocabulary

American & British English sometimes have different words for the same things, and sometimes the same words have different meanings. Here is a list of differences:

American	**British**	**American**	**British**
Apartment	Flat	Argument	Row
Carriage/coach	Pram	Bathroom	Loo
Can	Tin	Cookie	Biscuit
Diaper	Nappy	Elevator	Lift
Erasure	Rubber	Flash-light	Torch
Fies	Chips	Gas	Petrol
Guy	Chap	Highway	Motorway
Truck	Lorry	Lawyer	Solicitor

Spelling Differences

In the early 18th century, English spelling was not standardized. Differences became noticeable after the publishing of influential dictionaries. Today's British English spellings follow, for the most part, those of Samuel Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), whereas many American English spellings follow Noah Webster's *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828). Most words ending in an unstressed *-our* in British English (e.g. *colour*, *flavour*, *harbour*, *honour*, *humour*, *labour*, *neighbour*, *rumour*) end in *-or* in American English (*color, flavor*, *harbo*r, *honor*, *humor*, *labor*, *neighbor*, *rumor*).

Derivatives and inflected forms

In derivatives and inflected forms of the *-our/or* words, British usage depends on the nature of the suffix used. The *u* is kept before English suffixes that are freely attachable to English words (for example in *the neighbourhood*, *humourless* and *savoury*) and suffixes of Greek or Latin origin that have been naturalized (for example in *favourite*, *honourable* and *behaviourism*). However, before Latin suffixes that are not freely attachable to English words, the *u* may be dropped, for example in *honorary*, *honorific*, *vigorous*, *humorous*, and *invigorate*; may be either dropped or kept, for example in *colo(u)ration* and *colourise (*alt. *colorize)*; or may be kept, for example in *colourist*. In American usage, derivatives and inflected forms are built by simply adding the suffix in all cases (for example, *favorite*, *savory* etc.) since the *u* is absent to begin with.

Suffixes *-re, -er*

In British English, some words end with a consonant followed by *–re*, and in American English, most of these words have the ending *-er*. The difference is most common for words ending *-bre* or *-tre*: British spellings *calibre*, *centre*, *fibre*, *goitre*, *litre*, *lustre*, *manoeuvre*, *metre*, and *titre* all have *-er* in American spelling. Most English words that today use *-er* were spelt *-re* at one time or another. In American English, almost all of these have become *-er*, while in British English only some of them have. The latter include *chapter*, *December*, *disaster*, *enter*, *filter*, *letter*, *member*, *minister*, *monster*, *November*, *number*, *October*, *oyster*, *perimeter*,

Suffixes *-ise, -ize* (*-isation, -ization*)

American spelling avoids *-ise* endings in words like *organize, realize* and *recognize* British spelling mostly uses *-ise,* while *-ize* is also used (*organize* / *organize, realize* / *realize, recognize* / *recognize*): the ratio between *-ise* and *-ize* stands at 3:2 in the British National Corpus. Worldwide, *-ize* endings prevail in scientific writing and are commonly used by many international organizations, such as the UNO, WHO, ICAO and IOS. The European Union switched from *-ize* to *-ise* some years ago in its English language publications, meaning that *–ize* spellings are found in older legislative acts and *-ise* spellings in more recent ones.

Punctuation

There are tremendous differences in punctuations in British and American versions of English. For instance:

1.4.1. Full stops and periods in abbreviations

Americans tend to write *Mr., Mrs., St., Dr.*; the British will most often write *Mr, Mrs, St, Dr,* following the rule that a full stop/period is used only when the last letter of the abbreviation is not the last letter of the complete word. This kind of abbreviation is known as a *contraction* in the UK. The use of full stops/periods after most abbreviations can also be found in the UK, although publications generally tend to eschew the use of American punctuation. Unit symbols such as *kg* and *Hz* are never punctuated.

Restrictive and non-restrictive modifiers

In American English, restrictive and non-restrictive modifying phrases require different words and sentence structures. In particular, a non-restrictive modifying phrase must be set off by commas, and it generally uses "which" as its pronoun. A restrictive modifying phrase, by contrast, is not set off by commas, and uses the pronoun "that". An example of the first in American English is: "The dog, which bit the man, was brown". In that sentence the phrase "which bit the man" is non-restrictive: it is merely providing background information about a dog whose identity is otherwise not in question. The contrasting sentence in American English would be: "The dog that bit the man was brown". In this sentence, the phrase "that bit the man" is restrictive: it tells the reader that, of several dogs that might have bitten the man, the actual biter was brown. Interchanging the two structures is

grammatically incorrect in American English because they have different meanings.

British English, by contrast, generally does not require its writers to construct sentences in a manner that distinguishes between the restrictive and non-restrictive forms of modifiers. Thus, a writer of British English might write: "The dog which bit the man was brown". In this sentence, it is ambiguous whether the phrase "which bit the man" is serving to identify a particular dog among several candidates or just to provide background information about a dog whose identity is otherwise not in doubt. The reader must try to infer the distinction from context or from his own knowledge.

Quotation Marks

Americans begin their quotations with double quotation marks (") and use single quotation marks (') for quotations within quotations. BrE usage varies, with some authoritative sources such as *The Economist* and *The Times* recommending the same usage as in the US, whereas other authoritative sources, such as *The King's English*, recommend single quotation marks. In journals and newspapers, quotation mark double/single use depends on the individual publication's house style.

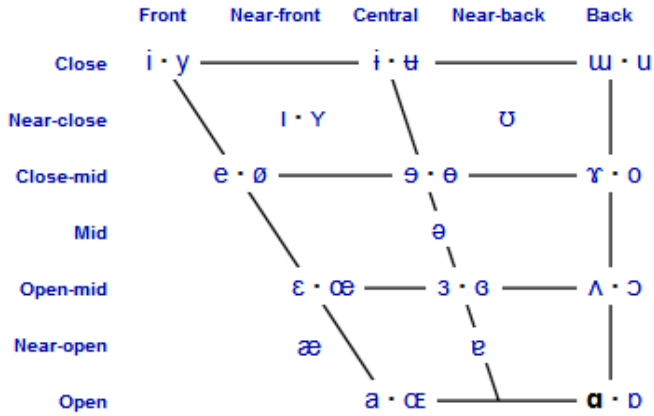
Accent in Pronunciation

The British accent was created by a mixture of the Midland and Southern dialects of the Middle Ages. There are many sub-dialects and varying accents under British English. American English was not so strongly influenced by the accent as Australia or New Zealand, for example – the Americas broke away from British control much earlier and were distanced from direct speakers of the language as a result. British English = non-rhotic, and American English = rhotic. This means that "R" is only pronounced in British English when it is immediately followed by a vowel sound. "R" in British English is either not pronounced or replaced with a schwa. American English has fewer vowel distinctions before intervocalic "R" sounds. This means that, in American English –

merry, *marry*, and *Mary* often sound the same
mirror rhymes with *nearer*
furry rhymes with *hurry*

Vowels in Pronunciation:

British English has three open back vowels while American English has only two (or even one). Most American English speakers use the same vowel for "short O" as for "broad A" – *father* and *bother* often rhyme. The following chart will give an idea of the differences between British and American English:



The other differences between vowel pronunciations as follows:

British English = "broad A"

American English = "short A"

(in most words when A is followed by N followed by another consonant, or "S, "F," or "TH" – like a *plant, pass, laugh*). British English has a distinct length difference between "short" and "long" vowels – the long vowels begin diphthongs. American English often loses the distinction between unstressed /ɪ/ and /ə/ (as in *roses* and *Rosa's*); in British English, it is maintained because of the non-rhotic nature of the language (in order to make words like *batted* and *battered* sound distinctly different). American English experiences a yod-dropping after all alveolar consonants (i.e. /ju:/); British English speakers always retain /j/ after /n/ (i.e. new in British English is /nju:/ but in American English it is /nu:/), retain or coalesce it after /t/ and /d/ (i.e. due in British English is /dju:/ but in American English it is /du:/).

Affixes in Pronunciation

In the pronunciation of **-ary, -ery, -ory, -bury, -berry, -mony** when the syllable before these affixes is stressed, American and British English pronounce these endings in a similar way: /əri/; and it is

unstressed, American English uses a full vowel rather than a schwa while British English retains the reduced vowel or elides it completely. For instance: “military” – American: /'mɪlɪtɛriː/ and British: /'mɪlɪtəriː/ or /'mɪlɪtriː/.

Exceptions, in which the full vowel is used in American English even though the preceding syllable is stressed: *library, primary, rosemary*. In pronunciation of ***–berry*** American English usually always uses a full vowel /bɛriː/; British English uses a full vowel after an unstressed syllable and a reduced one after a stressed syllable /bəriː/ or /briː/. For example: strawberry British: /'strɔːbəriː/ American: /'strɔbɛri/

In pronunciation of Adverbs: **-arily, -erily or -orily B**ritish English speakers follow the American practice of shifting the stress to the antepenultimate syllable (i.e. *militarily* is /ˌmɪlɪ'tɛrɪliː/ not /'mɪlɪtrɪliː/). And when words end in an unstressed “-ile,” British English speakers pronounce them with a full vowel: /aɪl/ while American speakers pronounce them with either a reduced vowel /ɪl/ or a syllabic /l/ (i.e. in British English, “fertile” rhymes with “fur tile” – in American English, it would rhyme with “turtle”). This also applies to words like **mobile, fragile, sterile, missile, versatile, etc**. The examples of exceptions to this difference are **reptile, exile, turnstile, senile**, etc.

Stress in pronunciation

There are words borrowed from French that feature stress differences; it first syllable in American and last syllable in British English, for instance: *address, mustache, cigarette, magazine*. And it is American 1st-syllable; British 2nd-syllable in *liaison, Renaissance*; and American 2nd-syllable; British last-syllable in *New Orleans***.** Most two-syllable verbs that end in *–ate* have first syllable stress in American English and second-syllable stress in British English (i.e. *castrate, locate*) Derived adjectives with the ending *-atory* differ in both dialects; for British English, the stress shifts to –at whereas American English will stress the same syllable as the corresponding –ate verb (i.e. *regulatory, celebratory, laboratory*).

Grammar

The differences between the use of grammar in British and American English can be noticed in terms of the parts of speech:

Nouns

In British English, collective nouns can take either singular or plural verb forms, depending on whether the emphasis is on the body or the members within it. i.e."A committee was appointed" and " The committee were unable to agree."

Pronouns

British English and American English use different pronouns to repeat the indefinite pronoun "one". British English uses "one", for example, "One cannot succeed unless one tries hard", while American English uses "he", for example, "One cannot succeed unless he tries hard".

Other examples are as follows:

One should learn to take care of oneself. (BrE
One should learn to take care of himself. (AmE)
One can't be too careful, can one? (BrE)
One can't be too careful, can he? (AmE

Verbs

In terms of Morphology it is "-ed" in American English and "-t" in British English i.e. learned/learnt, dreamed/dreamt**.** British English rarely use "gotten;" instead, "got" is much more common. Past participles often vary: i.e. saw – American: sawed; British: sawn. In terms of tenses British English employs the present perfect to talk about a recent event (i.e. "I've already eaten," "I've just arrived home".) And in terms of auxiliaries British English often uses "shall" and "shan't" and American English uses "will" and "won't".

Adjectives and Adverbs

In non-formal American English, adjectives can be used as adverbs, for example, "a real good meal". However, in British English and formal American English, only adverbs can be used, "a really good meal". In American English, adverbs can be used more freely in respect of position. They can either be placed in front of auxiliary verbs or behind them, while the meaning of the sentences remains the same. For example, we can either say "They never will agree to it" or "They well never agree to it". For another example, "You probably could have done it yourself" means the same as "You could probably have done it yourself". However, in British English, adverbs are usually placed behind the first auxiliary verb. For example:

They will never agree to it.

You could always have called us first

In British English, the adverbs "yet" and "already" cannot be used in past tense and can only be used in the past perfect tense. However, in American English, they can be used both in past tense and past perfect tense. Let us see the following examples.

I haven't bought one yet. (BrE, AmE)

I didn't buy one yet. (AmE)

Have you read it already? (BrE, AmE)

Did you read it already? (AmE)

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. Let us first review the different use of prepositions.

Your daughter's name stands first in the list. (BrE)

Your daughter's name stands first on the list. (AmE)

Difference in Articles

Most phrases of British English have articles, while those of American English does not have. The "the" in the standard expressions in British English "all the afternoon", "all the winter", "all the week", "this time of the year", etc. are usually omitted in American English. For example:

The swimming pools are open all summer.

I'll be here all afternoon.

He has been gone all week.

British English will use articles in front of "sickness", "river" and etc., while American English does not. For example, British English expresses in the form of "the measles", "the mumps", "the flu", "the Niagara Falls" and "the Black Creek", while American English says "measles", "mumps", "flu", "Niagara Falls" and "Black Creek".

However, there are exceptions. In some expressions, British English does not use articles, while American English does.

Go into hospital (BrE)

Go into the hospital (AmE)

In hospital (BrE)

In the hospital (AmE)

At university (BrE)

At the university (AmE)

British English and American English are different from each other in the use of “a” or “an” with “half”. In British English, “a” follows “half”, for example, “half a dozen”, “half an hour”, “half a mile”, and “half a pound”. In American English, “a” is put in front of “half”, for example, “a half dozen”, “a half hour”, “a half mile” and “a half pound”.

Socio-Cultural Difference

There is remarkable socio-cultural difference between British English and American English. A British English speaker may get a cultural shock with that of American English and vice versa. These cultural differences are reflected in requesting, thanking, apologizing, complementing and greeting; here are differences:

a. Requesting: Americans use English in a very polite way and in an indirect speech, while in British English the request if rather informal, direct and polite. For instance:

   AmE: One time I was teaching in a school and a student was making a request of me.

   BrE. A student requested me when I was teaching in a school.

b. Thanking: There are differences in the British and American way of thinking. Generally the phrase "thank you" is used in British English whereas the word or phrase "thanks" or "thank you very much" is used in American English.

c. Apologizing: The difference in British and American use of English is also seen. The words “sorry” and “excuse me” is generally used by British English Speakers to intimates for very small things. But the American English users do use the words of apology with near and dear ones in general talk.

d. Complementing: In American English “Hi, How are you” is a form of greeting and not a question. It is very similar to British “Hello” and “good morning”.

e. Complementing: The American complements more than British people, and they used much stronger terms, i.e. adjectives like "great".

Conclusion

Although there are many differences in detailed aspects of the use of daily British and American English, they are similar to each other in

most of the aspects. Therefore, they shall only be considered as different forms of the same language rather than two different languages. In addition, we cannot say which one is better or advanced. Any judgment or opinion that "British English is better or worse than American English" is biased.

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