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DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AMERICAN AND BRITISH ENGLISH

*«England and America are two countries
separated by a common language»
George Bernard Shaw*

The English language was first introduced to the Americas by British colonization, beginning in 1607 in Jamestown, Virginia. Similarly, the language spread to numerous other parts of the world as a result of British trade and colonization elsewhere and the spread of the former British Empire, which, by 1921, held sway over a population of 470–570 million people, approximately a quarter of the world's population at that time.

Over the past 400 years the form of the language used in the Americas—especially in the United States—and that used in the United Kingdom have diverged in a few minor ways, leading to the versions now occasionally referred 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 [1].

As the most-spoken second language on the planet, English has to be flexible. While there are certainly many more varieties of English, American English and British English are the two varieties that are taught in most educational programs. Generally, it is agreed that no one version is "correct" however, there are certainly preferences in use.

The three major differences between between American and British English are:

Pronunciation – differences in both vowel and consonants, as well as stress and intonation

Vocabulary – differences in nouns and verbs, especially phrasal verb usage and the names of specific tools or items

Spelling – differences are generally found in certain prefix and suffix forms

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, 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.

Written forms of British and American English as found in newspapers and

textbooks vary little in their essential features, with only occasional noticeable differences in comparable media (comparing American newspapers with British newspapers, for example). This kind of formal English, particularly written English, is often called "standard English".

The spoken forms of British English vary considerably, reflecting a long history of dialect development amid isolated populations. In the United Kingdom, dialects, word use and accents vary not only between England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, but also within them. *Received Pronunciation* (RP) refers to a way of pronouncing standard English that is actually used by about two percent of the UK population. It remains the accent upon which dictionary pronunciation guides are based, and for teaching English as a foreign language. It is referred to colloquially as "the Queen's English", "Oxford English" and "BBC English", although by no means do all graduates of the university speak with such an accent and the BBC no longer requires it or uses it exclusively. The present monarch uses a hyperlect of the Queen's English [2].

Regional dialects in the United States typically reflect some elements of the language of the main immigrant groups in any particular region of the country, especially in terms of pronunciation and vernacular vocabulary. Scholars have mapped at least four major regional variations of spoken American English: Northern, Southern, Midland, and Western. After the American Civil War, the settlement of the western territories by migrants from the east led to dialect mixing and levelling, so that regional dialects are most strongly differentiated in the eastern parts of the country that were settled earlier. Localized dialects also exist with quite distinct variations, such as in Southern Appalachia, Boston and the New York City area.

British and American English are the reference norms for English as spoken, written, and taught in the rest of the world, excluding countries where English is spoken natively such as Australia, Canada, Ireland and New Zealand. In many former British Empire countries where English is not spoken natively, British English forms are closely followed, alongside numerous AmE usages which have become widespread throughout the English-speaking world. Conversely, in many countries historically influenced by the United States where English is not spoken natively, American English forms are closely followed. Many of these countries, while retaining strong BrE or AmE influences, have developed their own unique dialects, which include Indian English and Philippine English. [3]

Chief among other native English dialects are Canadian English and Australian English, which rank third and fourth in the number of native speakers. For the most part, Canadian English, while featuring numerous British forms alongside indigenous Canadianisms, shares vocabulary, phonology and syntax with American English, leading many to recognize *North American English* as an organic grouping of dialects. Australian English likewise shares many American and British English usages alongside plentiful features unique to Australia, and retains a significantly higher degree of distinctiveness from both the larger varieties than does Canadian English. South African English, New Zealand English and the Hiberno-English of Ireland are also distinctive and rank fifth, sixth and seventh in the number of native speakers.

So, despite there are a number of differences in both form of English, it is still one language which we all should learn and improve more and more. When you are learning English as a foreign language, it is important to understand these differences. Mixing the two varieties will make your English sound strange and unnatural so it is best to choose just one and use it all the time. There is no «better» or «worse» form of English and both Britain and American have their advantages depending on how and where you intend to use the language.

REFERENCES

1. Chapman, James A. Grammar and Composition IV – 2002.
2. A Dictionary of Modern English Usage (Oxford Language Classics Series). Oxford Press – 2003.
3. New Oxford Dictionary of English – 1999.