

AMERICAN ENGLISH VS. BRITISH ENGLISH: PRINCIPAL DIFFERENCES AND THE CONFUSIONS

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INTRODUCTION

British English (BE) and American English (AE) are variants of the English Language. 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, spelling and pronunciation. As these two variants are being used interchangeably and extensively in Malaysia, these differences have caused confusions among students and lecturers. Students tend to think that one version is better than the other. It takes some time for the lecturers to persuade their students that the difference between the two is largely lexical, and that they should use the one, which they find easier and be consistent in their use. As lecturers often encounter problems in pointing out these differences to their students in their teaching, this paper offers a guide to point out the principal differences between these two varieties of English. It is hoped that further information concerning these areas will help ease the confusions in the classroom teaching and learning instructions

WHICH IS A BETTER VARIETY, AMERICAN ENGLISH (AE) OR BRITISH ENGLISH (BE)?

While there are certainly many more varieties of English, American and British English are the two varieties that are taught in most ESL/EFL programmes. Generally, it is agreed that no one version is "correct". However, there are certainly preferences in use. American English gains more popularity than British English globally due to several undisputable reasons.

American English acquired international significance after World War II, when the United States assumed a more global role. The political, economic and technological developments have 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 70% vs. 17% of all native English).
2. Wealth of the U.S. vs. the U.K. economy and 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 worldwide
6. Appeal of American popular culture on language and habits
7. International political and economic position of the U.S

THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AMERICAN ENGLISH AND BRITISH ENGLISH

This paper will highlight only principal differences of both varieties like grammar, vocabulary and spelling. However, other differences like pronunciation, euphemistic references etc. will be given as appendices for reference. The following guide is meant to point out these differences between these two varieties of English to help overcome confusions among lecturers and students.

GRAMMAR

i. 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 affect the present moment. For example:

I've lost my key. Can you help me look for it?

In American English the following 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
Have you finished your
homework yet?

American English:

I just had lunch / I've just had lunch
I already saw that film.
Have your finished your homework yet?
Or Did you finish your homework yet?

ii. Possession

There are two forms to express possession in English. **Have** or **Have got** is used. 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.)** Examples are as follows:

American English

Do you have a car?

He hasn't got any friends.

She has a beautiful new home.
home.

British English

Have you got a car?

He doesn't have any friends.

She's got a beautiful new

iii. The Verb Get

The Past Participle of the verb **get** is **gotten** in American English. Example:

American English

He's gotten much better at playing tennis.

British English

He's got much better at playing

iv. Prepositions

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

American English

on the weekend

on a team

please write me soon

British English

at the weekend

in a team

please write to me soon

v. 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 and the regular form is more common to American English.

Verbs	irregular (BE)	Regular (AE)
Burn	Burnt	burned
Dream	dreamt	dreamed
Lean	leant	leaned
Learn	learnt	learned
Smell	smelt	smelled
Spell	spelt	spelled
Spill	spilt	spilled
Spoil	spoilt	spoiled

VOCABULARY

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 humoured,
(British English) – not generous, tight fisted

Rubber:

(American English) – condom
(British English) – tool used to erase pencil markings

There are many more examples (Appendix A). If there is a difference in usage, the 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

SPELLING

The best way to make sure that we are being consistent in our spelling is to use the spell check on our word processor (if we are using the computer) and choose which variety of English we would like. Here are the principal differences in spelling between British and American English.

Spelling	British	American
• Final l is always doubled after one vowel in stressed and unstressed syllables in British English but usually only in stressed syllables in American English.	rebel > rebelled travel > travelled	rebel > rebeled travel > traveled
• Some words end in -tre in British English and -ter in American English.	centre theatre	center theater
• Some words end in -ogue in British English and -og in American English.	analogue catalogue	analog catalog

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|--|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some words end in -our in British English and -or in American English. | colour
labour | color
labor |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some verbs end in -ize or -ise in British English but only in -ize in American English. | realise,
harmonise
organise | realize
harmonize
organize |

CONCLUSION

As there exist differences between these two varieties, the most important rule of thumb is to try to be consistent in our usage. If we decide that we want to use American English spellings then be consistent in our spelling. For example: The **color** of the orange is also its **flavour** – **color** is the American spelling and **flavour** is British. So there is no consistency here. The sentence should be written like this: The **color** of the orange is also its **flavor** (AE) or like this in BE: The **colour** of the orange is also its **flavour**. This is of course not always easy or possible unless there is constant and consistent practice in both varieties. It is hoped that this guideline is able to provide solutions for the lecturers and students when confronted with confusions pertaining to these two variants of the English language.

REFERENCES

- Available at <URL: http://writing.englishclub.com/spelling_ukus.htm> [Assessed on 12 April 2003]
- Available at <URL: <http://www.hintsandthings.co.uk/library/words5.htm>> [Assessed on 28 May 2003]
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