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COMPARISON BETWEEN AMERICAN & BRITISH ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to emphasize the major comparison between British and American English both in written and oral communication. Moreover, this research is intended to increase everybody's interest in studying one or another, and to be aware which English they speak and how correctly or incorrectly they speak it, depending on the purpose of their uttering. As English has become more than a trend nowadays it proved to be very interesting the analysis of what type of English we speak, what type of English we hear around us, in movies, while listening to music or even while chatting online. Today, the most practiced and observed English formats are the British means the UK and American means the US forms; these are followed in various countries. Both are two different dialects which differ in ascent and spelling formats, especially in their grammar versions. Hence, these are deep literature concepts within themselves.

INTRODUCTION

The English language was first introduced to the Americans by British colonization, beginning in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. 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

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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.

This divergence between American English and British English has provided opportunities for humorous comment, e.g., George Bernard Shaw has a character say that the United States and United Kingdom are "two countries divided by a common language"; and Oscar Wilde that "We have really everything in common with America nowadays, except, of course, the language" (*The Canterville Ghost*, 1888). Henry Sweet incorrectly predicted in 1877 that within a century American English, Australian English and British English would be mutually unintelligible (*A Handbook of Phonetics*). It may be the case that increased worldwide communication through radio, television, the Internet and globalization has reduced the tendency towards regional variation. This can result either in some variations becoming extinct (for instance, the wireless, being progressively superseded by the radio) or in the acceptance of wide variations as "perfectly good English" everywhere.

Although spoken American and British English are usually mutually intelligible, there are occasional differences which might cause embarrassment—for example, in American English a rubber is usually interpreted as a condom rather than an eraser;^[3] and a British fanny refers to the female pubic area, while the American fanny refers to an ass (US) or an arse (UK).

WORD DERIVATION AND COMPOUNDS:

- ✦ American forward, toward, rightward. In both dialects distribution varies somewhat: afterwards, towards, and backwards are not unusual in America; while in Britain forward is common, and standard in phrasal verbs such as look forward to. The forms with -s may be used as adverbs (or preposition towards) but rarely as adjectives: in Britain as in America, one says "an upward motion". The Oxford English Dictionary in 1897 suggested a semantic distinction for adverbs, with -wards having a more definite directional sense than -ward; subsequent authorities such as Fowler have disputed this contention.
- ✦ AmE freely adds the suffix -s to day, night, evening, weekend, Monday, etc. to form adverbs denoting repeated or customary action: I used to stay out evenings; the library is closed 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. Amer. colloq." in constructions such as to sleep nights, but to work nights is standard in BrE).
- ✦ In BrE, the agentive -er suffix is commonly attached to football AmE usually uses football player. Where the sport's name is usable as a verb, the suffixation is standard in both dialects: for example, golfer, bowler (in Ten-pin bowling and in Lawn Bowls), and shooter. AmE appears sometimes to use the BrE form in baller as slang for a basketball player, as in the video game NBA Ballers. However, this is derived from slang use of to ball as a verb meaning to play basketball.
- ✦ English writers everywhere occasionally (and from time immemorial) make new compound words from common phrases; for example, health care is now being replaced by healthcare on both sides of the Atlantic. 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

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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.

✦ Singular attributives in one country may be plural in the other, and vice versa. For example the UK has a drugs problem, while the United States has a drug problem (although the singular usage is also commonly heard in the UK); Americans read the sports section of a newspaper; the British are more likely to read the sport section. However, BrE maths is singular, just as AmE math is: both are abbreviations of mathematics.

✦ Some British English words come from French roots, while American English finds its words from other places, e.g. AmE eggplant and zucchini are aubergine and courgette in BrE.

✦ Similarly, American English has occasionally replaced more traditional English words with their Spanish counterparts. This is especially common in regions historically affected by Spanish colonialism (such as the American Southwest and Florida) as well as other areas that have since experienced strong Hispanic migration (such as urban centers). Examples of these include grocery markets' preference in the U.S. for Spanish names such as cilantro and manzanilla over coriander and chamomile respectively.

VOCABULARY:

Lists of words having different meanings in American and British English, Glossary of American terms not widely used in the United Kingdom, and Glossary of British terms not widely used in the United States.

OVERVIEW OF LEXICAL DIFFERENCES:

Though the influence of cross-culture media has done much to familiarize BrE and AmE speakers with each other's regional words and terms, many words are still recognized as part of a single form of English. Though the use of a British word would be acceptable in AmE (and vice versa), most listeners would recognize the word as coming from the other form of English and treat it much the same as a word borrowed from any other language.

WORDS AND PHRASES THAT HAVE THEIR ORIGINS IN BrE:

Most speakers of AmE are aware of some BrE terms, although they may not usually use them or may be confused as to whether someone intends the American or British meaning (such as for biscuit). It is usually very easy to guess what some words, such as "driving licence", mean. However, use of many other British words such as naff (slang but commonly used to mean "not very good") are unheard of in American English.

WORDS AND PHRASES THAT HAVE THEIR ORIGINS IN AmE:

Speakers of BrE are likely to understand most common AmE terms, examples such as "sidewalk" (pavement), "gas (gasoline/petrol)", "counterclockwise" (anticlockwise) or "elevator (lift)", without any problem, thanks in part to considerable exposure to American popular culture and literature. Certain terms that are heard less frequently, especially those likely to be absent or rare in American popular culture, e.g., "copacetic (satisfactory)", are unlikely to be understood by most BrE speakers.

DIVERGENCE:

Words and phrases with different meanings:

Words such as bill and biscuit are used regularly in both AmE and BrE but mean different things in each form. In AmE a bill is usually paper money (as in "dollar bill") though it can mean the same as in BrE, an invoice (as in "the repair bill was £250"). In AmE a biscuit (from the French twice baked as in biscotto) is what in BrE is called a scone and a biscuit in BrE is in AmE a cookie (from the Dutch 'little cake.' As chronicled by Winston Churchill, the opposite meanings of the verb to table created a misunderstanding during a meeting of the Allied forces; in BrE to table an item on an agenda means to open it up for discussion whereas in AmE, it means to remove it from discussion, or at times, to suspend or delay discussion.

The word "football" in BrE refers to Association football, also known as soccer. In AmE, "football" means American football. The standard AmE term "soccer", a contraction of "association (football)", is of British origin, derived from the formalization of different codes of football in the 19th century, and was a fairly unremarkable usage (possibly marked for class) in BrE until relatively recently; it has lately become perceived incorrectly as an Americanism.[citation needed] In international (i.e. non-American) context, particularly in sports news outside English-speaking North America, American (or US branches of foreign) news agencies also use "football" to mean "soccer", especially in direct quotes.

Similarly, the word "hockey" in BrE refers to field hockey and in AmE, "hockey" means ice hockey.

OTHER AMBIGUITY (complex cases)

Words with completely different meanings are relatively few; most of the time there are either (1) words with one or more shared meanings and one or more meanings unique to one variety (for example, bathroom and toilet) or (2) words the meanings of which are actually common to both BrE and AmE but that show differences in frequency, connotation or denotation (for example, smart, clever, mad).

Some differences in usage and/or meaning can cause confusion or embarrassment. For example the word fanny is a slang word for vulva in BrE but means buttocks in AmE—the AmE phrase fanny pack is bum bag in BrE. In AmE the word pissed means being annoyed whereas in BrE it is a coarse word for being drunk (in both varieties, pissed off means irritated).

Similarly, in AmE the word pants is the common word for the BrE trousers and knickers refers to a variety of half-length trousers (though most AmE users would use the term "shorts" rather than knickers), while the majority of BrE speakers would understand pants to mean underpants and knickers to mean female underpants.

Sometimes the confusion is more subtle. In AmE the word quite used as a qualifier is usually a reinforcement: for example, "I'm quite hungry" means "I'm very hungry". In BrE quite (which is much more common in conversation) may have this meaning, as in "quite right" or "quite mad", but it more commonly means "somewhat", so that in BrE "I'm quite hungry" can mean "I'm somewhat hungry". This divergence of use can lead to misunderstanding.

FREQUENCY:

✦ In the UK the word whilst is historically acceptable as a conjunction (as an alternative to while,

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especially prevalent in some dialects). In AmE only while is used in both contexts. Other conjunctions with the -st ending are also found even in AmE as much as in BrE, despite being old-fashioned or an affection. Whilst tends to appear in non-temporal senses, as when used to point up a contrast.

✦ In the UK usually the term fall meaning "autumn" is obsolete. Although found often from Elizabethan literature to Victorian literature, continued understanding of the word is usually ascribed to its continued use in America.

✦ In the UK the term period for a full stop is not used; in AmE the term full stop is rarely, if ever, used for the punctuation mark. For example, Tony Blair said, "Terrorism is wrong, full stop", whereas in AmE, "Terrorism is wrong, period." The use of the interjection: period to mean "and nothing else; end of discussion" is beginning to be used in colloquial British English, though sometimes without conscious reference to punctuation.

HOLIDAY GREETINGS:

It is increasingly common for Americans to say "Happy holidays", referring to all, or at least multiple, winter holidays (Christmas, Hanukkah, Winter solstice, Kwanzaa, etc.) especially when the subject's religious observances are not known; the phrase is rarely heard in the UK. In Britain, the phrases "holiday season" and "holiday period" refer to the period in the summer when most people take time off from work, and travel; AmE does not use holiday in this sense, instead using vacation for recreational excursions.

IDIOSYNCRATIC DIFFERENCES:

Figures of speech

Both BrE and AmE use the expression "I couldn't care less" to mean the speaker does not care at all. Many Americans use "I could care less" to mean the same thing. This variant is frequently derided as sloppy, as the literal meaning of the words is that the speaker does care to some extent.

In both areas, saying, "I don't mind" often means, "I'm not annoyed" (for example, by someone's smoking), while "I don't care" often means, "The matter is trivial or boring". However, in answering a question such as "Tea or coffee?", if either alternative is equally acceptable an American may answer, "I don't care", while a British person may answer, "I don't mind". Either sounds odd to the other.

EQUIVALENT IDIOMS:

A number of English idioms that have essentially the same meaning show lexical differences between the British and the American version; for instance:

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BRITISH ENGLISH	AMERICAN ENGLISH
not touch something with a bargepole	not touch something with a ten-foot pole
sweep under the carpet	sweep under the rug
touch wood	knock on wood
see the wood for the trees	see the forest for the trees
put a spanner in the works	throw a (monkey) wrench (into a situation)
put (or stick) your oar in but it won't make a ha'porth of difference to put your two penn'orth (or tuppence worth) in	to put your two cents (or two cents' worth) in
skeleton in the cupboard	skeleton in the closet
a home from home	a home away from home
blow one's own trumpet	blow (or toot) one's own horn
a drop in the ocean	a drop in the bucket, a spit in the ocean
flogging a dead horse	beating a dead horse
haven't (got) a clue	don't have a clue or have no clue (the British forms are also acceptable)
couldn't care less	could care less or couldn't care less
a new lease of life	a new lease on life
lie of the land	lay of the land
take it with a pinch of salt	take it with a grain of salt
a storm in a teacup	a tempest in a teapot

STYLE:

Use of that and which in restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses:

Usually, a non-restrictive relative clause (also called non-defining or supplementary) is one that contains information that is supplementary, i.e. does not change the meaning of the rest of the sentence, while a restrictive relative clause (also called defining or integrated) is, one which contains information essential to the meaning of the sentence, effectively limiting the modified noun phrase to a subset that is defined by the relative clause. An example of a restrictive clause is "The dog that bit the

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man was brown." An example of a non-restrictive clause is "The dog, which bit the man, was brown." In the former "that bit the man" identifies which dog the statement is about. In the latter, "which bit the man" provides supplementary information about a known dog. A non-restrictive relative clause is typically set off by commas, whereas a restrictive relative clause is not, but this is not a rule that is universally observed. In speech, this is also reflected in the intonation. Writers commonly use which to introduce a non-restrictive clause, and that to introduce a restrictive clause. That is rarely used to introduce a non-restrictive relative clause in prose. Which and that are both commonly used to introduce a restrictive clause; a study in 1977 reported that about 75 percent of occurrences of which were in restrictive clauses.

H. W. Fowler, in *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* of 1926 followed others in suggesting that it would be preferable to use which as the non-restrictive (what he calls non-defining) pronoun and that as the restrictive (what he calls defining) pronoun, but he also stated that this rule was observed neither by most writers nor by the best writers. He implied that his suggested usage was more common in American English. Fowler notes that his recommended usage presents problems, in particular that that must be the first word of the clause, which means, for instance, that which cannot be replaced by that when it immediately follows a preposition (e.g. "the basic unit from which matter is constructed") though this would not prevent a stranded preposition (e.g. "the basic unit that matter is constructed from").

Style guides by American prescriptivists, such as Bryan Garner, typically insist, for stylistic reasons, that that be used for restrictive relative clauses and which be used for non-restrictive clauses, referring to the use of which in restrictive clauses as a "mistake". According to the 2015 edition of Fowler's *Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, "In AmE which is "not usually used in restrictive clauses, and that fact is then interpreted as the absolute rule that only that may introduce a restrictive clause", whereas in BrE "either that or which may be used in restrictive clauses", but many British people "believe that that is obligatory".

WRITING:

Spelling:

Before the early 18th century English spelling was not standardized. Different standards became noticeable after the publishing of influential dictionaries. For the most part current BrE spellings follow those of Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), while AmE spellings follow those of Noah Webster's *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828). In Britain, the influences of those who preferred the French spellings of certain words proved decisive. In many cases AmE spelling deviated from mainstream British spelling; on the other hand it has also often retained older forms. Many of the now characteristic AmE spellings were popularized, although often not created, by Noah Webster. Webster chose already-existing alternative spellings "on such grounds as simplicity, analogy or etymology". Webster did attempt to introduce some reformed spellings, as did the Simplified Spelling Board in the early 20th century, but most were not adopted. Later spelling changes in the UK had little effect on present-day US spelling, and vice versa.

PUNCTUATION:

Full stops and periods in abbreviations:

There have been some trends of transatlantic difference in use of periods in some abbreviations. These are discussed at Abbreviation § Periods (full stops) and spaces. Unit symbols such as kg and Hz are never punctuated.

PARENTHESES/BRACKETS:

In British English, "()" marks are often referred to as brackets, whereas "[]" are called square brackets and "{}" are called curly brackets. In formal British English and in American English "()" marks are parentheses (singular: parenthesis), "[]" are called brackets or square brackets, and "{}" can be called either curly brackets or curly braces. In both countries, standard usage is to place punctuation outside the parenthesis, unless the entire sentence is contained within them:

✦ "I am going to the store (if it is still open)."

✦ In the case of a parenthetical expression which is itself a complete sentence, the final punctuation may be placed inside the parenthesis, particularly if not a period:

✦ "I am going to the store (Is it still open?)"

✦ "I am going to the store (I hope it's still open!)"

CONCLUSION

This paper denotes the main comparison between British and American English as expected, there are others, as well, but they are subject to future research. On the other hand, however different these two varieties might seem, there is only one English language, which is presently spoken by more than a third of the world's population. Choosing what variant to speak remains a matter of preference, but a good speaker of English should know how to juggle with both or at least should know how to recognize them. Perhaps, at a certain time in the future, the differences will be erased and we will all speak one single language. That common language might as well be English; for the time being, English is a universal language that helps communication between peoples become easier.

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