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## Syntactical and Morphological Differences in British and American English

Sardar Fayyaz ul Hassan

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### Abstract

This article discusses morphological and syntactic differences in British and American English. It aims at discussing the differences from an evaluative point of view. It is an invitation to the researchers to view and work on American English differently rather than going by the general conception of simplification. Language has always been authentic and strong source of identification. The same is true to the American English.

### 1. Introduction

Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary (7<sup>th</sup> edition, p.829) defines language as "the system of communication in speech and writing that is used by people of a particular country or area". Language is innate in human beings (Chomsky, 1957), and it is considered next to food. As it is difficult to point out what kind of food is more important? Indian, Chinese or American etc, same is with language. However, politically and scientifically dominating nations influence the world with their languages. No doubt that social and political strength gives currency to a language or a variety of any language both at national and international level. It

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was the time when George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) characterized England and America as two nations divided by common language (wikipedia2011), and it could be true even now. However, American language called American English (AE) obviously sounds in a different way. Bough C. Albert and Cable Thomas (1981:130) show the initial and onward reaction to the emergence of American English:

From the time that differences in the vocabulary and idiom of Americans began to be noticed they began the subject of comment and soon of controversy. In the beginning English comment was uniformly adverse, at least as far back as the utterance of Dr. Johnson, and to a large extent it still is today. Often American were accused of corrupting the English Language by introducing new and unfamiliar words, whereas they were in fact only continuing to employ terms familiar in the seventeenth century which had become obsolete in England. When the injustice of this attitude was perceived, Americans began to defend their use of English and, with a growing sense of their position among nations, to demand parity for their speech with the English of England. Over this difference of point of view a controversy was carried on through most of the nineteenth century and can hardly be said to have died down completely at the present day.

British English (UK English) is a collective term for the forms of English language spoken in the British aisles. According to Norbert Schmitt (2006), "It has been spoken for 1,500 years in Britain, and there have been different dialects from the start."P.180. When British use, it refers to the written Standard English and the Scottish regional variations. The inhabitants of these aisles do not use the term often, although they do refer to the Scottish English, Welsh English, and Irish English and so many dialects thereof. The broader use of the term covers the language spoken throughout the United Kingdom including standard and non standard, formal and informal, at all times, in all regions, at all social levels.

American English is a diverse form of English because "in America, the inhabitants were of such diverse origins and moved around and mixed so much as the country grew that no one dialect dominated, and the various dialects of English that they spoke seem to have blended together into a comparatively uniform new one". Norbert Schmitt (2006:177).

American English is used mostly in the United States of American. It is US official's and the language of media. Canadian English falls out of the definition of American English although

the pronunciation is similar to that in the United States. Historically, American English seems establishing its roots when the first wave of English-speaking immigrants was settled in North American in 17<sup>th</sup> century. By the time till now it has been used as a tool of communication in the United States.

## 2. Focus of This Paper

After this short background the striking differences between British English (BE) and American English (AE) are discussed keeping in view the areas, mentioned above.

This research focuses on the striking differences between British English (BE) and American English. The special focus is on the gap in the field of morphology and its outcome. The popular claim is that the Americans have gone for simplification. But we should also keep in view the aspects of complication and identification as well.

## 3. Differences in British and American English

### 3.1 Resultative Past and Present Perfect

To express resultative past British use Present Perfect. Americans have two options. They use Present Perfect or Simple Past.

**BE:** Mohsin isn't at home. He has gone shopping.

**AE:** Mohsin isn't at home. He went shopping. **OR** He has gone shopping.

### 3.2. Recent Past

To express recent past with *just* British use present perfect. Americans use the simple past or present perfect (Michael Swan 1995:41).

**BE:** He has just finished the lunch.

**AE:** He has just finished the lunch. **OR**

He just finished the lunch.

### 3.3. Present perfect with *already, yet, never, ever*

The British use the Present Perfect tense with *already, yet, never, ever*, etc, for an action in a period of time up to present. Americans use either the Simple Past or Present Perfect.

**BE:** She has eaten the dinner already.

Alina hasn't come yet.

Have you ever read American literature?

**AE:** She ate the dinner already. **OR**

Khalid didn't come yet. **OR**

Khalid hasn't come yet.

Did you ever go to America? **OR**

Have you ever gone to American?

I never read the American literature. **OR**

I have never read the American literature.

It can be inferred from the differences stated above that the Americans have an additional source to express.

### 3.4. Expressing Future with *will/shall*

According to Norbert Schmitt (2006), to express future, the British use *will or shall* in the first person. Americans rarely use *shall*.

**BE:** I shall never forget you.

**AE:** I will never forget you.

The British use 'shall' to make offers. The Americans use 'should' to do so.

**BE:** Shall I give you a pen?

**AE:** Should I give you a pen?

### 3.5. The use of ‘needn’t to’ or ‘don’t need to’

The British use ‘needn’t to’ or ‘don’t need to’ but in American English the usual form is ‘don’t need to’.

**BE:** You needn’t come again. **OR**

You don’t need to come again.

**AE:** You don’t need to come again.

### 3.6. The use of *should* after *demand insist* and *recommend*

The British often use *should* after *demand, insist* and *recommend*. Americans rarely use *should*.

**BE:** *He insisted that he should see his father.* **OR** He insisted that he see his father.

**AE:** He insisted he see his father.

### 3.7. The use of Group Nouns

Norbert Schmitt & Richard Marsden (2006), write that group nouns such as "government", takes either a singular or plural verb in BE depending on speakers’ notion of reference. These nouns normally have a singular verb in AE (p.192). Other group nouns are *family, team, committee, etc.*

**BE:** The committee meets / meet next Monday.

Pakistan team is going to win the match.

**AE:** The committee meets / meet next Monday

### 3.8. Telephone Conversation

While conversing on the telephone both Americans and British say “This is .....” to say *who they are* but the usage is different when they ask *who the other person is*.

**BE:** Hello is that Ali?

Who is that?

**AE:** Hello, is this Ali?

Who is this?

### 3.9. 'Who' and 'Whom'

The Americans prefer to use *who* rather than *whom*.

**BE:** Whom do you want to see?

**AE:** Who do you want to see?

### 3.10. The Use of Prepositions

The following grid from Norbert Schmitt (2006:191) shows the difference in the use of prepositions.

British English	American English
..... Live <i>in</i> Main street	..... Live <i>on</i> Main street
..... Fill <i>in</i> a form	..... Fill out a form
.....check up <i>on</i> something...	.....check <i>out</i> something...
..... <i>at</i> the weekend	..... <i>on</i> the weekend
Britons are <i>in</i> two minds about something.	Americans are <i>of</i> two minds about something.
Britons can cater <i>for</i> all tastes.	American can cater <i>to</i> all tastes.
Ten minutes past seven	Ten minutes past / after seven
Five minutes to seven	Five minutes to / of seven
Friday to Sunday .....	Friday through Sunday
Different from / to	Different from / than.....
Ten minutes past seven	Ten minutes past / after seven
Five minutes to seven	Five minutes to / of seven

### 3.11. The Use of Regular and Irregular Verbs

The verbs burs, dream, learn, smell, spell, spill and spoil have both regular and irregular forms. The British commonly prefer irregular forms whereas Americans prefer regular forms.

**BE:** dream ..... Dreamt

**AE:** dream ..... dreamed

In British English, the verb *dive* is a regular verb. In American English it is an irregular verb.

**BE:** dive ..... dived ..... dived

**AE:** dive ..... dove ..... dived

### 3.12. The Choice of Spellings

The web page, [www.studyenglishtoday.net/british-american-spelling.html](http://www.studyenglishtoday.net/british-american-spelling.html), authored and designed by M.Boyanova (2011), gives appropriate examples and the researcher has used some of the examples to support the claim, made below in 1, 2 and 3.

1. The British write double ‘l’ in an unstressed syllable before a suffix begging with a vowel, American don’t do so.

**BE:** signal ..... Signalling / signalled

quarrel .....quarrelling / quarrelled

**AE:** signal ..... Signaling / signaled

quarrel .....quarreling / quarrelled

2. The true example of simplification in American English is of spelling changes. These changes are in accordance with the sound of the words. The words ending in, *-our*, *-tre*, *-logue*, and *-ise* in British English end in *-or*, *-ter*, *-log*, and *-ize* respectively in American English. The grid given below reflects this record.

<b>British English</b>	<b>American English</b>
Labour, colour, honour, neighbour, harbour, etc	<i>Labor, color, honor, neighbor, harbor, flavor, etc</i>
Centre, theatre, metre, millimetre, etc.	<i>Center, theater, meter, millimeter, etc.</i>
Catalogue, dialogue, monologue, etc.	<i>Catelog, dialog, monolog, etc.</i>
Realise, analyse, apologise, normalise, specialise, etc.	<i>Realize, analyze, apologize, normalize, specialize, etc.</i>

3. There are more examples of spelling differences.

<b>British English</b>	<b>American English</b>
Cheque	Check
Defence	Defense
Jeweller	Jeweler
Nickle	Nickel
Programme	Program
Skilful / Skillful	Skillful
Storey	Story
Traveller	Traveler
Tyre	Tire

### 3.13. Simplification and Complications in Spellings

The claim of simplification is not without complications. For instance, there are a lot of words that require the application of the formula “spell in accordance with sound” such as *knob, cough, vague, raise*, etc. But these continue to be exceptions so far. Some of the simplifications are resulting in semantic ambiguity.

**BE:** This is a check.

This is a cheque.

**AE:** This is a check. (Test)

This is a check. (A piece of booklet used to withdraw money).

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Both the above given sentences in BE give clear meaning on their own. But in American English due to the change of spelling (cheque..... check) the sentences are ambiguous. This ambiguity can be removed only by providing additional context.

Another source of simplification opted by Americans is that the words are spelt as they are in BE: but they are pronounced differently. The following examples have been taken from Michael Swan (1995), Sardar (2008) & Norbert Schmitt (2006) to support this idea:

Word	BE	AE
Colonel	/'kɜ:nl/	/'kʊlɒnəl/ or /'kɜ:rnəl/
Duty	/'dju:tɪ/	/'du:tɪ/
Illuminate	/'lju:mɪneɪt/	/'lu:mɪneɪt/
Lieutenant	/leɪ'tenənt/	/lu:'tenənt/
Missile	/'mɪsaɪl/	/'mɪsəl/
New	/'nju:/	/'nu:/
Occasion	/ə'keɪʒn/	/ə'keɪdʒn/
Pleasure	/'pleɪʒə(r)/	/'pledʒər/
Student	/'stju:d(ə)nt/	/'stu:dənt/
Schedule	/'ʃedju:l/	/'skedʒu:l
Tomato	/tə'ma:təʊ/	/tə'meɪtəʊ/
Tune	/'tju:n/	/'tu:n/

These words indicate different variations. One of these variations seems a permanent one as the sound /j/ looks to disappear. Another striking variation is the change of sound produced by the occurrence of the letter 'a'. The British will pronounce it as /a:/ while Americans will pronounce it as /æ/. There is a large list of such words. Some of them are *glass, pass, class, fast, chance, commander, etc.*

There are certain words that have the same spelling but the sound differs due to the change of stress. Norbert Schmitt & Richard Marsden (2006:186) records the following examples:

<b>Word</b>	<b>BE</b>	<b>AE</b>
Military	/mílitrɪ /	/mílətèri/
Arbitrary	/á:bitrɪ/	/ árɒtrèri/
Cemetery	/sémətri/	/sémətéri/
Testimony	/téstəməni/	/téstəmáuni/

Michael Swan (1995:42), Norbert Schmitt (2006:189), Sardar (2008:248), and (<http://www.englishclub.com> .2011) also present a large range of differences in the choice of words and expressions:

<b>BE</b>	<b>AE</b>
Anti-clockwise	counter-clockwise
Aeroplane	Airplane
Antenna	Ariel
Angry	Mad
Anywhere	Anywhere / Anyplace
Autumn	Fall / Autumn
Barrister / Solicitor	Attorney / lawyer
Bill (in a restaurant)	Check / bill
Boot (of a car)	Trunk
Bonnet (on a car)	Hood
Biscuit	Cookie / cracker
Camping stove	Camp stove
Cash dispenser	Cash machine / ATM
Cashier	Teller
Check in desk	Check in counter
Chips	French-fries
Cot	Crib

Cotton wool	Absorbent cotton
Counter foil / check stub	Check stub
Crossroads	Intersections
Crisps	Chips / potato chips
Dialling code	Area code
Doctor's surgery	Doctor's office
Dustman	Garbage collector
Dustbin	Garbage can / trashcan
Dynamo	Generator
Engaged (phone)	Busy
Film	Movie / film
Flat / apartment	Apartment
Flat tyre / puncture	Flat tire
Football	Soccer
Fortnight / two weeks	Two weeks
Gear box	Transmission
Gear lever (on a car)	Gear shift
Get – got – got	Get – got – gotten
Ground floor – first floor	First floor – second floor
Handbag	Pocket book / purse/ handbag
Hoarding	Billboard
Holiday / holidays	Vacation / vacations
Hotel reception	Front desk
Jug	pitcher
Keeping fit	keep in shape
Lift	Elevator
Mad	Crazy
Main road / motorway	Highway / freeway
Maize / sweet corn	corn
Mean	Stingy
Nappy	Diaper
Notice	Sign

Notice board	Bulletin board
Pavement / footpath	Sidewalk
Paying in	making a deposit
Petrol	Gas / gasoline
Pony trekking	Horse back riding
Post	Mail
Practice (N) / Practise (V)	practice (N / V)
Purse	Coin / purse
Railway	Railroad
Return / return journey	Round trip
Rubber / eraser	Eraser
Rubbish	Garbage / trash
Ruck sack / back bag	Backpack
Seaside	Beach
Silencer	Muffler
Skipping rope	jump rope
Spanner	Wrench
Steward	flight attendant
Sweet	candy
Tap (indoor)	Faucet / tap
Tap (outdoors)	Spigot / faucet
Taxi	Cab / taxi
Timetable	Schedule / timetable
Torch	Flashlight
Trailer	Cart
Trainers	Sneakers
Tramlines (Tennis)	Sidelines
Trolley	Cart
Trousers	Pants / trouser
Truck call	Long-distance call
Underground	Subway
Van / lorry	Truck

Windscreen (on a car)

Windshield

Zip

Zipper

#### 4. Conclusion

This description of differences doesn't mean that there aren't any more differences. A huge difference is there in the areas of pronunciation, stress and intonation pattern. In fact Americans thought of casting off the language of their colonial masters after the war of independence. Practically, it didn't happen for them as English was the mother tongue of the majority of the people. In spite of all this, this feeling of pride or identification made the Americans develop their English through slight and sometimes significant variations in all the areas of language.

The closer look at this variation reveals the reality that sometimes it is resulting in simplification and sometimes in complication with reference to British English. In real sense, it is recognized all over the world that American English has gained currency after the World War II. All this is due to the continued political, social and economic domination since then. The clear image of American English is also shown by this fact that the English spoken in Canada, Puerto Rico, Philippines and American Samoa is categorized as a deviation from American English rather than British English.

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