A CONTRASTIVE STUDY OF DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AMERICAN ENGLISH AND BRITISH ENGLISH

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ESL teachers in Thailand are often faced with the task of explaining to their Thai students why some English words are pronounced one way by some English native speakers but another way by others. Again, ESL teachers are sometimes asked to sort out confusion regarding the *"correct spelling"* of certain English words. In fact, such differences as observed by ESL students only scratch the surface of the differences between what is known as *"British English"* and *"American English"*.

Two approaches to the topic of *"British English vs. American English"* are possible. One approach interprets the differences between the two as being so extreme that they can be regarded as two different languages : an *"American language"* vs. an *"English language"*. This rather extreme view, however, is unacceptable except perhaps to a few ultra-nationalists on both sides of the Atlantic. Besides, the fact that there is relatively little difficulty in communicating between British people and Americans makes this extreme approach rather impractical. The other extreme approach (that there are no essential differences between the two), however, is just as indefensible. In fact, there are differences as can be observed in everyday usage. Consequently, in this paper, I propose that a *"milder interpretation"* be used : that *"British English"* and *"American English"* are the one and same language but with distinct differences in several areas of the language.

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From the start, the reader must be wary as to the comparison of *"British English"* with *"American English"*. How can we make such comparisons when American English itself has so many versions (Southern dialect, New England dialect, etc.) British English also has several versions (Queens English, Cockney dialect, etc.) However, for our present purposes of comparison, I shall use the General American dialect as being representative of American English and Received Standard English as being representative of British English

Differences Between British and American Usage of the Lexicon

We are here dealing with "current usage." Perhaps the subject of education is a good starting point for a comparison of British English with American English. Most Americans would be confused by the British usage of the term "public school". In England, it is equivalent of the American "private boarding school". The "American public school", on the other hand, is the British "board school". The American "elementary school", however, is known in England as a "prep school". English classes are called "forms" whereas American classes are called "grades" (the English sixth form is equivalent to the American twelfth grade.)

At the university level, the academic hierarchy is classified differently in the United Kingdom and in America. In the UK, the starting position is usually "tutor, senior tutor, lecturer, senior lecturer, reader, professor (full). In America, on the other hand, the starting position is normally "teaching assistant (TA), lecturer, assistant professor, associate professor, and full professor".

In the area of assesment, different terms are used for essentially the same things. In America, a short exam is known as a "quizz" whereas in the UK, this is called a "test". The word "exam", however, appears to have the same meaning on both sides of the Atlantic.

Another area of difference in usage of the lexicon is the area of transportation. This area is rich with examples of linguistic differences between "British English" and "American English". For example, the American word "truck" is equivalent to the British word "lorry". The British "freight train" is equivalent to the American "goods train". A British "goods train" is the same as the American "freight train". A British "railway" is the equivalent of "railroad" in America. Similarly, the British businessman rides the "underground" or "tube" in contrast to his US counterpart who rides on the "subway".

The lexical area of motoring is another area rich with differences in usage of the lexicon. The American family fills up his car with "gas" while the British family fills up the car with "petrol". In America, the front part of the car is known as the "hood" but the same thing is called a "bonnet" in England. (In fact, the word "hood" in the UK refers to the "top" of a convertible car.) The American "muffler" is equivalent to the British "silencer".

The American "oil-pan" is a "sump" in England. An American "gear shift" is equivalent to the British "gear-lever". "High gear" is the American term for "top gear" in the UK. (Hence, the British motoring TV program called "Top Gear".)

Apart from the areas of differences in usage mentioned above, there are also miscellaneous lexical differences. In some cases, different words are used for the same things. In other cases, the same words are used in "British English" and "American English" but have different meanings. In America, for example, "an elevator" serves an "apartment" in contrast to the UK where a "lift" serves a "flat". An American "hobo" is similar to the British "tramp". An American "undershirt" is the American equivalent of the British "singlet" or "vest". An American "business suit" is the equivalent of the British "lounge suit". These examples demonstrate that "British English" and "American English" usage of the lexicon are often different.

Variations in Pronunciation Between British Received Pronunciation and General American Prounciation

In looking at differences in pronunciation, one has to keep in mind the following factors. Firstly, both *"British English"* and *"American English"* originally were the same (common origin). Secondly, there are "variants" in pronunciation in both British English and "American English". In the area of pronunciation then, there is little of British pronunciation that can be legitimately regarded as being completely foreign to the American car. The opposite case is also true. Therefore, it is a fact that a Southern Englishman is more likely to have greater difficulty understanding his Scottish neighbors than in understanding his American counterpart. However, keeping these factors in mind, it is still possible to point out some of the more glaring differences between "British" pronunciation and "American" pronunciation. For practical purposes, I have categorized such differences into the following : differences in the pronunciation of certain words common to both British English and American English ; differences in the usage of "intonation" ; and, differences in the usage of "stress".

Differences in the Pronunciation of Certain Words Common to Both American English and British English.

/ae/ digraph vs /a/ category

There are about six hundred commonly used words which in English all go back to an /ae/ digraph pronunciation during Shakespeare's time. Of these, there are about one hundred and fifty words like *'dance'* where today, we find the variation in pronunciation between /ae/ and /a/. In the other four hundred and fifty, the /ae/ pronunciation is common to both British English and American English in such words as "cats,bats,rats, etc." Therefore, we find the same pronunciation in words such as *'cap, sand, bad.'*

American		**British**
/ naesti /	nasty	/ nasti /
/ aeft ɔ /	after	/ aft ɔ /
/ daens /	dance	/ dans /
/ igzaemp ɔ l /	example	/ igzamp ɔ l /
/ braes /	brass	/ bras /

/ r / vs / r-less / category /

In the dialects of English, it is possible to separate such dialects into the two main types, namely, "r pronouncing" dialects (which would include most of the American dialects) and "r-less pronouncing" dialects (British English and American New England dialect).

When comparing British English with American English, one of the most evident differences in pronunciation concerns the presence or absence of the voiced apico-alveolar retroflex semi-vowel sound as represented phonetically by / r /. This is evident in the following examples.

American		**British**
/ bar /	bar	/ ba /
/ skar /	scar	/ ska /
/ kart /	cart	/ kat /
/ b ɔ rt /	bert	/ b ɔ t /

Note that in the "r-less" dialects, the absence of the " r " is consistent not only for "final r" but also in the case of a "preconsonantal r". This is not to say that " r " is never used in British English. Certainly, it occurs initially, in words such as **radio, radiator** and medially between two syllables in words such as **borrow, tomorrow,** but does not occur finally or preconsonantal as seen in the above examples.

/ ɔ r / vs / ʌ r / category

Another observable difference in pronunciation between British English and American English occurs in the following / o r / vs / r / examples.

American		**British**
/ h ɔ rI /	hurry	/ hʌ rI /
/ w ɔ il /	worry	/ wʌ rI /
/ h ɔ rId /	hurried	/ h ʌrId /
/ Θ ɔ r ɔ /	thorough	/ Θ ʌ r ɔ /

Apart form the above differences, there are the following "miscellaneous" differences.

American		**British**
/ kl ɑ rk /	clerk	/ klak /
/ t ə me tou /	tomato	/ t ɔ matou /
/ nevju /	nephew	/ nefyu /
/ liutɛn ɔ nt /	liutenant	/ lɛftɛn ɔ nt /
/ skɛ ǰual /	schedule	/ šɛdual /
/ zi /	"letter z"	/ zed /

There are numerous other examples of similar pronunciation differences. For more details, the reader is advised to refer to an excellent comparison of British and American prounciation in **J. Windsor Lewis's, A Concise Pronouncing Dictionary of British and American English, (1972).**

Turning now to differences in supra-segmentals, namely, the different usage of stress in American and British English, there are also obvious pronunciation differences.

Differences in the Usage of Stress Between British English and American English

Actually, such stress differences between the two dialects are few. Two types of differences do exist, however, those involving worlds like **secretary, dictionary, stationary, territory,** and those involving "compound words". The first type is illustrated as follows.

American		British
/ˋsɛkrəˌtaeri/	secretary	/ˈsekrətri/
/ˈdɪkšəˌnaeri/	dictionary	/ˈdɪkšənəri/
/ˈarbɪˌtraeri/	arbitrary	/ˈarbɪtrəri/

Some Differences in Intonation

Intonation patterns cover whole sentences. Both dialects (American English and British English) have the same intonation pitch levels, namely, extra high, mid (normal pitch), and, low. However, in the actual usage (distribution) of pitch over the length of a sentence or utterance, there are distinct differences between the two. Three such examples are given below.

American	British
1.a. My name is John.	1.b. My name is John.
2.a. Are you quite sure?	2.b. Are you quite sure?
3.a. Will you pass the salt please?	3.b. Will you pass the salt please?

From a comparison of American and British intonation, we can deduce the following. Firstly, British intonation of sentences tend to reach a high tone either at the beginning or soon after, and then, the tone (pitch) descends gradually until the final juncture. American intonation, on the other hand, maintains a fairly level (constant) pitch or intonation throughout the sentence until just towards the end. However, a word of caution is advisable here. We are dealing with generalities. Not everyone has the same intonation pattern in all the various possible occurrences.

Syntactic Differences between British English and American English

Differences in the grammatical usage of the educated American and that of his British counterpart are relatively few and, in some cases, so subtle that they are rarely noticed by the speakers themselves. However, differences do exist as can be seen in the following examples.

Usage of the Definite Article (the)

Americans often omit the usage of the definite article "the" in cases where it would be considered as being essential by British English speakers. Compare the following examples.

American

1. " day after tomorrow"
2. "do not talk to driver while car is in motion"
3. "substitution of iron. for wood hastened the decline of the sailing vessel"

British

1. "the day after tomorrow"
2. "do not talk to the driver while the car is in motion" (sign in bus)
3. "the substitution of iron for wood hastened the decline of the sailng vessel"

Notice that, in general, there is a tendency in American English to omit either the definite or the indefinite article where the omission does not result in any ambiguity or misunderstanding.

Usage of the Indefinite Articles (a / an)

Even in the usage of indefinite articles, there are variations in usage. Consequently, Americans say "a half dozen eggs" and "a half hour" in contrast to British English speakers who say "half a dozen eggs" and "half an hour".

Pluralization of Nouns

There is a tendency in American English to add the plural marker (s) to several nouns which do not take it in British English.

American	**British**
accommodations	accommodation
candies	candy
cramps	cramp

Conjugation of Certain Verbs

In the conjugation of certain verbs, forms now obsolete in British English are still used

fairly commonly in American English. Note the following differences in American and British conjugation of the same verbs.

American	British
dive, dove, diven	dive, dived, dived
get, got, gotten	get, got, got
prove, proved, proven	prove, proved,proved
strike, struck, stricken	strike, struck, struck (meaning "to hit", not "to stop work")

Deletion of the Verb "to be" After Certain Verbs

After the word, "order", and a few other other, americans tend to delete the verb form "to be" which is used in such instances by speakers of British English.

American

1.a. "the work on the boats had progressed so far that it was ordered completed.

2.a. "as soon his ballot was ordered"

British

1.b. "the work on the boats had progressed so far that it was orderd to be completed"

2.b. "as soon as his ballot was to be ordered.

Usage of Adverbs

There is also a tendency for Americans to use adverbs in certain cases where they are omitted by speakers of British English.

American	British
beat up	beat
close or shut down	close or shut
figure out	figure
test out	test
watch out	watch

Note that the above usage of adverbs is quite distinct from the American idioms such as **"turn down** (reject), **pass up** (decline), **slip up** (err)."

Differences in the Usage of Some Prepositions

In the choice of prepositions in certain connections with idioms, there are some differences between American and British usage.

American	British
"to name for"	"to name after"
"the worst accident in years"	"the worst accident for years"
"five minutes after three"	"five minutes past three"
"the man on the street"	"the man in the street"
"all there is to it"	"all there is about it"
"on the train"	"in the train"
"ten fifty (telling time)"	"ten to eleven"
"seven forty-five"	"quarter to eight"

Differences in Some Question Forms

Generally speaking, speakers of British English prefer the inverted form. Consequently, in dealing with questions concerning time or ownership, the following variations exist between American English and British English.

American	British
Does he have a car?	Has he a car?
Do you have the time?	Have you the time?
or	
What time is it?	

Differences in Usage of the Auxiliaries "Shall" and "will" in British English and American English

It has long been recognized by many educated English speakers that ***'will'*** is used with the 2nd and 3rd persons and that ***'shall'*** is used with the 1st person. Nevertheless, in a study of the usage of ***'will'*** and ***'shall'*** by the American structuralist Charles Fries, the following fact regarding the "actual" usage emerged.

The Distribution of "will" and "shall" in Current Usage

	American		British	
	will	**shall**	**will**	**shall**
2nd person	96%	4%	96%	4%
3rd person	95%	5%	89%	11%
1st person	86%	14%	29%	71%

From the above data, it is evident that American and British speakers have little or no difference in the usage of both "will" and "shall" regarding the 2nd and 3rd persons.

It is in the 1st person that differences in usage emerge. Americans tend to use "will" with the 1st person whereas British speakers tend to use "shall". The difference in usage, therefore, is one of distribution and not form, since both use "will" and "shall", differing only in the frequency of usage of one or the other.

The last type of difference between British English and American English is in the area of spelling differences.

Spelling Differences

"-er / -re" category

Some English words derived from French words (a different category from such words as writer, header, New Yorker, where the "-er" is a suffix) are spelled differently in American English and British English. The former uses "-er" on most occasions. The latter always uses "-re".

American	**British**
caliber	calibre
center	centre
theater / re	theatre
somber	sombre

Note that there are exceptions regarding usage of the "-er / -re" category. Therefore, after the letter "c", both American English and Brisith English use "-re" as in the words **acre, massacre, wiseacre,** and so on.

Both Americans and Britishers prefer **cadre, macabre, timbre** (tone quality, not wood as in **timber,** as used in both countries). A rather interesting usage in spelling occurs in the word "meter", where "-er" is used in both British English and American English (a device for measuring). However, if it is the metric system of measurement, then it is **metre** in England but **meter** in the US. Also, in the example above concerning **theatre / theater,** both versions are used in American English whereas in British English, only the **re** version is acceptable.

"-or / -our" category

In the English language, there are some nouns ending in **-r.** These are derived form Latin nouns having the nominative **-or.** In British English, such nouns are spelled with **-our** whereas in the US, **-or** is used.

American	**British**
color	colour
fervor	fervour
honor	honour
labor	labour
rigor	rigour
favor	favour

Here again, there are exceptions for this category. Thus, Americans use **- our** in two words regularly (despite their tendency to use = **or** instead of **-our)** : **glamour** and **saviour.**

"- c / - s" category

In this category, Britishers prefer to use **-c** whereas Americans prefer to use **-s** for the following words.

American	British
defense	defence
offense	offence
pretense	pretence
vise (a tool)	vice (a tool)

Nevertheless, where suffixes are used, both American English and British English use the following forms : **defensive, offensive, pretension.**

Moreover, in cases where a word is used either as a noun or as a verb, the tendency is as follows. British English spells the verb with **-s** (license) and the noun with **-c** (licence). American English, however, often varies. In the case of the noun, Americans use **-c** more often than **s.** In the case of the verb, however, it uses one letter just as often as the other.

"- ction / - xion" category

This differentiation involves nouns derived from Latin verbs. This category involves a mixture of sorts. Some are spelled both ways in either the US or the UK. Others are spelled only one way. Generally speaking, however, American English uses **-ction** whereas British English use **-xion.**

American	British
deflection	deflexion
connection	connexion
inflection	inflexion

However, note that the word 'direction', is spelled one way only in both the US and the UK.

"- e / - ae and - o / oe" categories

Only a few examples are relevant here. Often, the two kinds of digraphs, **-ae** and **-oe** are used in British English. In America, the one letter variant **-e** is generally preferrend.

American	British
anesthetic	anaesthetic
anemia	enaemia
fetus	foetus
esophagus	oesophagus
hemoglobin	haemoglobin

"single – l / double – ll" category

According to the Webster dictionary, words ending in – ll usually "drop one **–l** when adding a prefix. This is the usual practice both sides of the Atlantic. However, American English does have the one **–l** spelling existing side by side with the double **–ll.** British English, on the other hand, prefers the one **–l** spelling as in the following examples.

American	British
distil / distill	distil
instal / install	instal

"Miscellaneous Category"

The few remaining differences are illustrated by such examples as **check** vs **cheque** (American vs British), **tire** vs **tyre, rime** vs **rhyme.**

The comparisons of American English with British English in the areas of pronunciation, usage of the lexicon, syntax (grammar), and spelling as presented above are by no means exhaustive. The interested reader is encouraged to pursue further studies in this area in other articles and texts available (refer to bibliography).

I would like to conclude this article on some comparisons between British English and American English with a word of caution. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, British English and American English are, essentially, the one and the same language, the latter being an "off – shoot" of the former. As a result (and as to be expected), the segmental sounds of the two dialects are essentially the same. Only the supra – segmentals (stress, intonation, etc) differ in some areas. This is equally true of the written language.

Most are essentially the same. Equally true is the area of the lexicon and grammar. In conclusion then, the fact that an American has little trouble making himself understood in an English society (and vice – versa) says something about these two dialects (or languages) which no scholar in this field should ignore. □■

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