

Speaking the American and British Tongues¹

Salonee Priya

Visiting Scholar, Linguistic Empowerment Cell, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

ABSTRACT

Though English has become a global language with every nation having its own form and characteristic feature, British English and American English are still held with reverence. They often form a model for World Englishes to follow. The colonial rule of the British Empire spread British English to Commonwealth countries whereas it is through its vast economy and market reach that American English has given its flavor to the world. The article points out at the phonological, morphological, syntactic as well as semantic variations in these popular yet divergent forms of English.

English Giants

With globalization bringing in the world much closer, English has emerged as the global language. There are variant flavours and hues of global English spread across the world but the norms for reference are still British and American English. British colonial rule led to the spread of British English and non-native speakers of English still owe allegiance to British English. English from the Commonwealth nations has its own distinct varieties and flavors; yet most of them are based on the standard British English. American English has spread because of America's hold on business and market. World market is no longer defined by geographical boundaries and as globalization has also brought in business outsourcing, learning the tongues of the business giants has become inevitable. British colonies of the past, India, Nigeria, Malaysia, Singapore and

Brunei follow the British English model. Though Britain did leave its colonial legacy in the Caribbean and also in Canada this competes with the economic, geographical and cultural relation that they share with America. As a result their English is a blend of the two.

Before World War II, there was a British dominance on the English language and most of the English teaching curriculum across the world followed the British English as their model. The gain of economic power by the USA since 1945 led to a shift and Britain no longer held the complete ownership of the English language. Many non-Commonwealth countries followed American English as their model.

Though the language of both America and Britain are English but there is a huge difference between the two. George Bernard Shaw commented, "two countries divided by a common language". Things are however

¹ At the very outset the author would like to state that throughout the article British spellings are used except for the portions where American English is denoted.

not the same today. Global communication has bridged much diversity and the two are mutually intelligible today.

British English: Standing Tall

British English has always been conceived as the pristine and pure form of English and has been looked upon as a benchmark which represents Standard English. English teaching curricula are often based on British English and spelling trends till recently i.e. before the advent of computers, strictly adhered to the British English conventions.

Though British English reflects a lot of diversity in its spoken form; it more or less runs a thread of uniformity in its written manifestation across different regions and provinces. The considerable degree of variation in the spoken English in Britain is because of its long history of language evolution in the midst of its isolated population. The variations and differences in the British dialects are not just among the countries in the United Kingdom – i.e. Scotland, Wales, England or Northern Ireland; differences are also rampant within the provinces. People belonging to different socio-economic strata in any particular region also speak differently. Received Pronunciation or RP English which is spoken amongst the educated people of the south-east England is regarded as the benchmark. Purists and grammarians have not allowed the standard southern dialect of English to grow with the tendency to

preserve and conserve the established. It is termed as “proper English”, “BBC English” or “the Queen’s English”. Coined by AJ Ellis in 1869, Received Pronunciation gained currency only after Daniel Jones adopted it in his second edition of *English Pronouncing Dictionary* in 1924. The origin of RP can be traced back to the 19th century British Public Schools and Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. RP English was eulogized as a broadcaster’s choice with Lord Reith, the first GM at BBC adopting it in 1922 as the standard. It is spoken by merely 2% of the people in UK as per a recent estimate.

BBC English does not restrict to RP English any longer.² The BBC presenters are no longer strictly confining their speech to RP English and are often seen carrying a variety of other accents and dialects; pointing to the decreasing popularity and prevalence of this standard form of English.

In the process of spreading to other parts of the world, British English has also taken words from other languages of the world. During its colonial rule, many loan words have crept into it and its vocabulary has truly been enriched. Among various other languages, Latin has been one of the first and most consistent languages that English has borrowed its loan words from. In English, there are more than 300 words that have seeped and survived in their original Latin form. Words like *actor*, *labour* and *elevator* are a few examples.

² <http://www.bl.uk/learning/langlit/sounds/case-studies/received-pronunciation/>

American English: Spreading Roots

It was way back in 1600s that a permanent English speaking colony came up in North America. Their English was however very different from the English language spoken in The British Isles. American English has inherited a lot from other languages and has both historical and contemporary influences. Black English, Yiddish and Spanish have massively left their imprint on American English. It also has a massive repertoire of loan words, euphemisms and jargons. *Jukebox*, *cookie*, *macaroni*, *bogus*, and *geisha* are words from African American, Dutch, Italian, African and Japanese languages. The acceptance of American and British English as two distinct units was first proposed in “The American Spelling Book” in the year 1786, soon after America gained independence (1776) from the British rule.

Americans have many forms of speech and different accents too. Californians sound different from New Yorkers who sound different from people from Texas who further sound different from people belonging to Boston and South Carolina. Despite all these differences American English remains relatively uniform when compared to the differences that feature in England.

One can notice the usage of a high percentage of slangs in American speech. Slang is part of colloquial English and there are many forms of it in American English. Americans speak at a rate of about 120 words per minute. Right from the colonial times, there has been a strong tendency to

reduce complex terms and concepts into abbreviations and acronyms in American English. Acronyms are very common in American English. The stress within acronyms is almost always on the last letter. For e.g. *UCLA*, *MTV*, *IRS*, *NBA*, *USC*, *US*, *ESL*, *PC*, *NFL* etc.

Why be bothered to say extraordinary when you can get away with strawdiny?

[Irish playwright St. John Ervine, quoted by H.L. Mencken (1948, p. 39)]

American English adheres to this formula and it deletes syllables massively. American English has reduced syllables in tri-syllabic words like *camera*, *evening*, *marriage* etc. and they have become two syllable words in American English. It was America’s unorthodox approach of not sticking to rules and precedence which resulted in America manufacturing new locutions. Americans like to take their language as they go along and don’t want to be restricted or held back by prescriptive grammarians.

Common Language: Uncommon Variation

There are three basic factors which make American English different from the British English. American English is different from British English in sound, sentence construction i.e., syntax as well as semantics. American English spells the words as they are pronounced whereas there is no one to one manifestation of sound and spelling in British English. George Bernard Shaw’s famous example of *fish* being spelled as *ghoti* elaborates on the same issue.

There are certain vowel shifts in American English. The R.P. /ɒ/ as in words like *dog*, *doctor*, *Bob* etc. becomes /ɑ:/, the R.P. /ɪ/ as in words like *laughter*, *fast*, *pass* etc. becomes /æ/, and the R.P. /ʊ/ as in words like *about*, *now*, *how* etc. becomes /ə +/.

The American 'r' is very different from the British. 'r' is not a simple consonant in the American language. American English has two 'r's. It differentiates between them on the basis of their placement in a word – final or non final. When it occurs in the word initial or medial position it is pronounced as *ruh*. When it occurs in the word final position, it is a combination of schwa and 'r'.

The manner in which the Americans pronounce /r/ when placed after a vowel as in words like *purse*, *better*, *tart*, *heart*, *part* or *north* is very similar to the pronunciation which was prevalent in England in the 17th century. In Received Pronunciation /r/ does not occur in word final positions, except when a word starting with a vowel immediately follows it.

There are apparent differences in the usage of syntactic categories between British and American English. In order to denote an action which has taken place in the immediate past, the use of present perfect tense is obligatory in British English whereas in American English it is an optional usage and is often inter-changed with simple past.

For eg

I've lost my purse. (British English)

I've lost my purse. / I lost my purse.
(American English)

Have or *have got* are the two ways to express possession in both American and British English. However, *have got* is more preferred in British English whereas the popular form in American English is *have*.

American English uses *gotten* as the past participle form of the verb *get*; whereas British English uses *got*. There are many verbs which have two acceptable forms to denote simple past/past participle. The more regular form like *burned*, *spoiled*, *dreamed* etc. are popular in American English whereas the irregular forms like *burnt*, *spoilt*, *dreamt* etc. are prevalent in the British English. British and American English also differ in their usage of Prepositions.

Eg.,

(American English)

I will see you on the weekend.

Write me soon.

I was selected on the team.

(British English)

I will see you at the weekend.

Write to me soon.

I was selected in the team.

There is also a difference in the use of articles in British and American English. British English uses *half an hour*, *half a dozen* whereas in American English it is *a half hour* or *a half dozen*.

In both American and British English words are spelt differently. Some general differences between the two are in the case of words ending in *-our/-or* and *-ise/-ize*. We have *color, humor* and *flavor* in American English whereas it is *colour, humour* and *flavour* in its British counterpart. The Americans do *recognize* their basic English characteristic features and *patronize* them and even a British English speaker does not fail to *recognise* and *patronise* his form of English.

Besides these glaring differences in pronunciation, grammar and spelling, American English and British English differ mainly in their choice of words. Some words though used in both varieties mean very different things. Eg., *mean* has a very different connotation in American English. It means an *angry* and *bad humored* person whereas its British meaning is *not generous* and *tight fisted*.

There are certain semantic differences between British and American English. Whereas it is *canteen, flat, lift* and *toilet* in British English; it is *cafeteria, apartment, elevator* and *washroom* in American English. Annexure I lists out some of the basic words in both forms of English.

American and British English differ in writing too. There are some very basic differences in the Punctuation pattern. The Americans use double quotation marks and there is a use of single quotation mark only when there are quotes within quotes; whereas it is vice-versa with British English. British English often retain hyphens in

compound words like *man-made, tree-like*; whereas in American English hyphenation is not used for words like *manmade, treelike* etc. British English prefers to have a gap or space in *per cent, any one*; whereas American English runs these together without any space – *percent, anyone* etc. American English follows the system of month, date and year while writing an abbreviated date whereas British stick to date, month and year. Eg., 6 July, 2008 would be 6-7-2008 in British English and the same date would be 7-6-2008 in American English.

Culture leaves its indelible mark on the language. Language is not just speech, words and meaning. It carries a lot of cultural connotation. This defines the pragmatics of the language usage. The degree of frankness among the British makes their English sharper. It is mainly because of the reflection of their culture, society and behavioural norms.

One World, One Language

Language undergoes change and evolution; it is not static. With the world coming closer, even British English and American English no longer stand apart. Though America and Britain are separated by an ocean and it has been over 200 years that they are politically separate identities; yet the English spoken at both the places are mutually intelligible. Both being variants of English, they are more similar than different. Though there are differences, they are not enough to make the two forms mutually unintelligible.

There is a lot of give and take between the two. There have been changes in both the American and the British forms of English in all directions. Both are gaining foothold in each other's territories. American English still uses many older varieties of English which have disappeared even in England.

Some words from American English have already become a part of British English. Words like *movie*, *apartment* and *semester* which are very much American are becoming popular in British English. Due to the vast American market in the field of scientific publications, even authors and publishers from Britain have begun using American English spellings. The two forms no longer stand in opposition to each other. Though allegiance to their originality is there they

have no qualms in accepting the other form.

Both American and British English flourish side by side in Canadian English. Whereas it is British English in all official correspondences by an order of 1890; the newspapers are splashed with American English spelling and even the same is taught by most of the public schools in Canada. In Australia too, though the official documents follow the British English spelling, various American forms are seeping in fast.

Who knows in distant future we can see a form which combines the two. Canadian English already does so; may be it is not far off when American and British English will combine to become one. We are prepared to taste the flavour – to use a language which is neither American nor British, yet both at the same time.

Annexure I

Semantic Differences between British and American English

British	American
Flat	Apartment
Dialing Code	Area Code
Cash Point	Automatic Teller Machine (ATM)
Concession	Discount
Pub	Bar
Toilet	Bathroom/Washroom
Note	Bill
Coach	Bus
Engaged Tone	Busy Signal
Canteen	Cafeteria
Town Centre	Downtown
Pharmacy, Chemist	Drug Store
Lift	Elevator

Junction	Exit
Ground Floor	First Floor
Torch	Flashlight
Traineeship	Internship
Autumn	Fall
University	College
Holiday	Vacation
Curriculum Vitae	Résumé
Ill	Sick
Bonnet	Hood
Boot	Trunk
Lorry	Truck
Return (ticket)	Round trip
Petrol	Gas (gasoline)
Main Road	Highway
Motorway	Freeway
Underground	Subway
Subway	Underpass
Pavement	Sidewalk
Car Park	Parking lot
Biscuits	Cookies
Sweets	Candy
Chips	French fries
Crisps	Chips
Fortnight	Two weeks
Tap	Faucet
Dust Bin	Trashcan
Trousers	Pants
Waist Coat	Vest
Trainers	Sneakers
Wardrobe	Closet
Term	Semester
Rubber	Eraser

Source: Compiled by the author from http://www.skillsheets.com/docs/SkillSheets_aanvulling_E8.pdf
<http://www.ielts help.co.kr>

References

- Chomsky, N. and Halle, M. (1968) *The Sound Pattern of English*. NY: Harper and Row.
- Gaskell, M.G. and Marslen-Wilson, W.D. (1998) Mechanisms of phonological inference in speech perception. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance*, 24, 380-396.
- Goldsmith, J. (1990) *Autosegmental and Metrical Phonology*. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers.
- Henry Sweet: A New English Grammar, Logical and Historical, 2 parts; Oxford, 1900-03, part i, p. 224.
- Hockett, C. (1965) *A Manual of Phonology*. IJAL Monograph.
- Jakobson, R. and Halle, M. (1968) Phonology in relation to phonetics. In Malberg, B. (ed.) *Manual of Phonetics*. Amsterdam: North Holland (pp. 411-449).
- Johnson, K. (1997a) Speech perception without speaker normalization. In Johnson, K. and Mullennix, J.W. (eds.) *Talker Variability in Speech Processing*. NY: Academic Press (pp. 145-166).
- Johnson, K., Ladefoged, P. and Lindau, M. (1993) Individual differences in vowel production. *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, 94, 701-714.
- Kenyon, J.S. and Knott, T.A. (1944) *A Pronouncing Dictionary of American English*. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster
- Kirby, T., (2007-03-28), "Are regional dialects dying out, and should we care if they are?", *The Independent*, http://news.independent.co.uk/uk/this_britain/article2398845.ece
- Knott, T.A. (1935) How the dictionary determines what pronunciations to use. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 21, 1-10.
- Lavoie, L. (2002) Some influences on the realization of for and four in American English. *Journal of the International Phonetic Association*, 32, 175-202.
- Manuel, S.Y. (1991) Recovery of "deleted" schwa. *PERILUS XIV: Papers from the Symposium on Current Phonetic Research Paradigms for Speech Motor Control*. Institute of Linguistics, University of Stockholm (pp. 115-118).
- Mencken, H., L., 2000, *The American Language: An Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States*.
- Pattee, F. L., 1916, *A History of American Literature Since 1870*; New York, 1916
- Wang, W.S-Y. (1977) (ed.) *The Lexicon in Phonological Change*. The Hague: Mouton.