*As a universal language, English provides the opportunities for people from different countries to communicate conveniently. As language is changeable, English also develops constantly and produces many kinds of varieties among which, British English and American English are the two important ones. They have great differences in vocabulary, pronunciation grammar, and other aspects.*

*There is an old saying that America and Britain are “two nations divided by a common language.”*

*No one knows exactly who said this, but it reflects the way many Brits feel about American English. My British friend still tells me, “You don’t speak English. You speak American.”*

*But are American and British English really so different?*

**Vocabulary**

The most noticeable difference between American and British English is vocabulary. There are hundreds of everyday words that are different. For example, Brits call the front of a car the bonnet, while Americans call it the hood.

Americans go on vacation, while Brits go on holidays, or hols.

New Yorkers live in apartments; Londoners live in flats.

There are far more examples than we can talk about here. Fortunately, most Americans and Brits can usually guess the meaning through the context of a sentence.

***Transport***

Many differences between American and British English are related to transport vocabulary. Whereas in British people take a ‘couch’, Americans say they would take a ‘bus’; Americans take ‘subways’, whereas in Great Britain this means of transport is called an ‘underground’. Americans would go by train or ‘railroad’, which is the American equivalent of the British term ‘railway’. ‘Baggage car’, ‘cafè car’, ‘one-way ticket’,’ round.-trip ticket’, ‘railroad’ are the American equivalents of ‘baggage van’, ‘buffet car’, ‘single ticket’, ‘return ticket’, and ‘railway carriage’ in British. Other vehicle differences are the American ‘motorcycle’, ‘station wagon’, and ‘truck’ against the British ‘motorbike’, ‘estate (car)’, and ‘lorry’. Reminding that British people also drive on the opposite side to Americans, in the UK, the term ‘outside lane’ refers to the higher speed passing lane closest to the centre of the road, while the term ‘inside lane’ refers to the lane closer to the edge. In American English these terms have the opposite meaning.

***Shopping***

Going shopping might be quite confusing in the two countries if some lexical differences are unknown. First of all, the nouns ‘shop’ and ‘store’ are used somewhat differently in American and British English. In general, Americans use ‘store’ the way British use 'shop’. Most British ‘shops’ would be called ‘stores’ in the US where the noun ‘shop’ is more often used to mean a small retail establishment, such as an ‘antique shop’ or a ‘gift shop’. British go to the ‘chemist’s’, while Americans go to a 68 Scotto di Carlo, G. ‘drugstore’ or a ‘pharmacy’, where they can buy medicines and other items, such as body care products, stationary, and cigarettes.

***Food***

Recipes demonstrate how many differences in food and cooking terminology there are. For instance, a British ‘biscuit’ is an American ‘cookie’, and American ‘biscuit’ is a British ‘scone’. Also some fruit and vegetables terms are different, such as the American ‘eggplants’ and ‘blueberries’ which in British are ‘aubergines’ and ‘bilberries’. Furthermore, American and British use the same words for most categories of meat as beef, pork, and lamb; the differences are for specific meat dishes, as the MED explains:

For example, what the British call a joint (a large piece of meat, such as a leg of lamb or loin of pork, cooked in an oven and eaten with potatoes and other vegetables) is known as a roast in the U.S. Most Americans would be shocked to hear that the Sunday joint is a British family tradition. To Americans, a joint is not something that people roast, but something that they smoke: a marijuana cigarette.

Some others are ‘chop’, ‘ground meat’, and ‘tenderloin steak’ which in British are called ‘cutlet’, ‘minced meat’, and ‘fillet steak’. As regards seafood, what Americans call ‘shrimp’ are ‘prawns’ in Britain; other examples are the American ‘canned tuna’, ‘crawfish’, and ‘fish sticks’ that for the British are ‘tinned tuna’, ‘crayfish’, and ‘fish fingers’.

***Numbers***

Americans are more likely to read numbers like 1,456 as ‘fourteen fifty-six’ instead of ‘one thousand, four hundred and fifty-six’, unless they are referring to years. Also monetary vocabulary is often said differently. For amounts over the dollar, an American would say both dollars and cents or drop both denominations as in ‘three twenty’ or ‘three dollars and twenty cents’ for $3.20. In Great Britain the form ‘three pounds twenty’ is the most heard.

**Spelling differences**

There are hundreds of minor spelling differences between British and American English. You can thank American **lexicographer** Noah Webster for this. You might recognize Webster’s name from the dictionary that carries his name.

Noah Webster, an author, politician, and teacher, started an effort to reform English spelling in the late 1700s.

He was frustrated by the **inconsistencies**in English spelling. Webster wanted to spell words the way they sounded. Spelling reform was also a way for America to show its independence from England.

You can see Webster’s legacy in the American spelling of words like color (from colour), honor (from honour), and labor (from labour). Webster dropped the letter u from these words to make the spelling match the pronunciation.

Other Webster ideas failed, like a proposal to spell women as wimmen. Since Webster’s death in 1843, attempts to change spelling rules in American English have

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| --- | --- |
| **American English** | **British English** |
| color | colour |
| behavior | behaviour |
| theater | theatre |
| meter | metre |
| organize | organise |
| traveled | travelled |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **British English** | **American English** |
| -oe-/-ae- (e.g. anaemia, encyclopaedia) | -e- (e.g. anemia, encyclopedia) |
| -t (e.g. burnt, dreamt, leapt) | -ed (e.g. burned, dreamed, leaped) |
| -ence (e.g. defence, offence, licence) | -ense (defense, offense, license) |
| -ell- (e.g. cancelled, jeweller, marvellous) | -el- (e.g. canceled, jeweler, marvelous) |
| -ise (e.g. appetiser, familiarise, organise) | -ize (e.g. appetizer, familiarize, organize) |
| -l- (e.g. enrol, fulfil, skilful) | -ll- (e.g. enroll, fulfill, skillfull) |
| -ogue (e.g. analogue, monologue, catalogue) | -og (e.g. analog, monolog, catalog)  \*Note that American English also recognizes words spelled with –ogue |
| -ou (e.g. colour, behaviour, mould) | -o (e.g. color, behavior, mold) |
| -re (e.g. metre, fibre, centre) | -er (e.g. meter, fiber, center) |

***Auxiliary verbs***

Another grammar difference between American and British English relates to auxiliary verbs. **Auxiliary verbs**, also known as helping verbs, are verbs that help form a grammatical function. They “help” the main verb by adding information about time, **modality** and voice.

Let’s look at the auxiliary verb shall. Brits sometimes use shall to express the future.

For example, “I shall go home now.” Americans know what shall means, but rarely use it in conversation. It seems very formal. Americans would probably use “I will go home now.”

In question form, a Brit might say, “Shall we go now?” while an American would probably say, “Should we go now?”

When Americans want to express a lack of obligation, they use the helping verb do with negative not followed by need. “You do not need to come to work today.” Brits drop the helping verb and contract not. “You needn’t come to work today.”

***Past tense verbs***

You will also find some small differences with past forms of irregular verbs.

The past tense of learn in American English is learned. British English has the option of learned or learnt. The same rule applies to dreamed and dreamt, burned and burnt, leaned and leant.

Americans tend to use the –ed ending; Brits tend to use the -t ending.

In the past participle form, Americans tend to use the –en ending for some irregular verbs. For example, an American might say, “I have never gotten caught” whereas a Brit would say, “I have never got caught.” Americans use both got and gotten in the past participle. Brits only use got.

Don’t worry too much about these small differences in the past forms of irregular verbs. People in both countries can easily understand both ways, although Brits tend to think of the American way as incorrect.

***Tag questions***

A tag question is a grammatical form that turns a statement into a question. For example, “The whole situation is unfortunate, isn’t it?” or, “You don’t like him, do you?”

The tag includes a pronoun and its matching form of the verb be, have or do. Tag questions encourage people to respond and agree with the speaker. Americans use tag questions, too, but less often than Brits. You can learn more about tag questions on a previous episode of Everyday Grammar.

**Conclusion**

While American and British English show some differences in vocabulary related to shopping and other common activities, all evidence suggests that the two varieties of the language are moving closer together. The movement is mostly eastward. Each year, more words that were once exclusively American are found in the spoken and written language of both Britain and the U.S.

* British: How are you ? American: How you doing ?
* In Britain people say “I was sat” or “I was stood” while in American English they would say “I was sitting” or “I was standing”
* UK: The train will arrive in precisely fifteen minutes' time. US: The train will arrive in approximately fifteen minutes.
* American: You like it. British: You fancy it.
* The American postal service delivers the mail. The British mail service delivers the post.