

Major Differences Between American and British English in Business Communication

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Abstract

The article is an attempt to illustrate the difference between American and British English partly and to show the impact of deviations on business communication. It provides the differences in pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation and exhibits the misunderstanding the deviations in these aspects of language may cause in business cooperation. The main idea of the article is to illustrate the linguistic distinctions which will have an effect on business cooperation. The article also explains the reasons of deviations between American and British English, speaks about the original form of English, the development of differences and the future of English. And finally the article speaks about the future of English and process called globalization which determines fate of linguistic differences between American and British English.

Keywords: American English, British English, business communication, grammar, pronunciation, punctuation, spelling, vocabulary

*“England and America are two countries
separated by a common language”
George Bernard Shaw*

Introduction

English is assumed to be lingua franca for majority of people in the world. That is necessitated by the on-going processes - this is globalization what makes world smaller. Globalization is the process that implies communication between the people of different origin in order to cooperate and share experience. The process would fail without the existence and knowledge of a language which would enable successful collaboration. Due to that, English is widely used. However, variations of English exist. Among them are American and British English.

The cradle of English Language is Great Britain, its development and strengthening caused the spread of the language not only on the island but on the continent as well. British colonies on the continent inherited English as their mother language. However, Americans were always inclined to deviate from the original form of English and they even had an attempt to neglect English as a national language. These tendencies had their historical and nationalistic reasons. Different reality on the continent, different landscape, climate and meeting with Native Americans had their impact on the language and stimulated the creation or establishment of new words, forms and phrases in the language. American Revolution and aspiration towards the affirmation of a new national identity raised not only the language variation issues but also its substitution with

some other language. (Carlo, 2013)

Major Differences Between American and British English

Language is not the only distinction between these two countries. Separate lives over 200 years formed difference in cultural and social aspects. Language is not just the description of the world but it is reflection of culture and social attitude towards the existing circumstances as well. It is the mean to report our thoughts, feelings and relationship.

Both these countries had their own fate so it is really interesting to what extent these to variations of English – American and British English differ from one another. According to statistics, the difference is 1% at present but it continuous growing. (Tirban, Precup-Stiegelbauer, & Patrauta, 2012)

As mentioned above, globalization stimulates close relationship between the people of different background and interest. The reason of the communication is business issues mainly. Due to that, proper language usage is required in order to avoid misunderstanding in business. However it is quite hard to say which form of English is proper nowadays. Despite the fact the British English is the root for the American English, variations of American English is becoming more and more accept-

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able for Britons and other people. The reason is “*the impact of show business and economic and political influence of United States around the world*”. (Benedikt)

So what are the main differences that can lead to misunderstanding? The first thing you encounter in British and American English is difference in pronunciation. Zdenek Benedikt gives clear explanation of main differences in **pronunciation**.

“Br [a:] before -f, -s, -S, m, n is pronounced [æ] (ask, after, half, path, chance, plant, sample)

Br [o] in words such as not, block, cross, stop, college, doctor, comedy is pronounced [ɑ:]

Br [i] in timid, America is often pronounced [ə]

Br [a] in but, hurry is pronounced closer to [ə]

AmE does not leave out the r-sounds in better, perceive, bird, here, poor

Br [ju:] after consonants d, t, n is pronounced [u:], eg. duty, tune, new

Br [t] betw. a vowel and a voiced consonant or vowels is pron. more like [d] latter, putting

BrE reduces the secondary stress more than AmE, eg. secretary, secondary, necessary

Suffix -ile is pronounced [-əl] in AmE and [-ail] in BrE, eg. agile, fertile, hostile, mobile

The British diphthong [əu] is replaced by [ou], which does not exist in BrE at all, eg. Oh, no!” (Benedikt)

According to him voiced and non-voiced r’s are not clear distinction between two varieties as there are some places in both countries where r’s are either sounded or not sounded in contrast to the dominant variety of English at a place.

The other major distinction is noticeable in the usage of **grammar** in both variations.

a) Subject verb agreement.

In British English collective nouns (e.g. family, jury, government, team) can be followed by a singular or plural verb depending on whether the group is thought of as one idea, or as many individuals. However, in American English collective nouns are always followed by the plural verb:

Br E: Government has adopted a law on Animal Protection

Am E: Government have adopted a law on Animal Protection

b) Use of delexical verbs – have and take: British English normally use “have” in phrases such as: have a bath, have a rest, have a nap and so on. Whereas, American English replaces have with take in those phrases and they often use: take a bath, take a rest or take a nap. (Maxwell & Clandfield, 2010)

c) A form of past tense and past participle.

Some verbs which are irregular in British English are used as regular one in American version: e.g. learnt/learned; burnt/ burned, dreamt/dreamed.

Another peculiarity is the usage of certain forms of past

participle in American English: e.g. got/gotten, shrunk/shrunk-en, bought/boughten. (Tirban, Precup-Stiegelbauer, & Patrauta, 2012)

d) Use of present perfect

American English, unlike British English, use past simple instead of present perfect in order to express the action began in the past and still going on in the present.

Am E: Did you do your homework yet?

Br E: Have you done your homework yet?

e) Use of preposition

American English tends to replace preposition “at” with “on” in some time expressions and with “in” in front of universities and some other institutions: e.g. at the weekend/on the weekend, at school/ in school.

Difference in **vocabulary** can be traced to the 17th century when new settlers arrived on the continent. The need of the expression of new reality made create new words or adapt the existing vocabulary to it. The other factor that deepened the process was the great will of Americans to be different and at least original if not unique. The distance, slow means of communication and different lifestyle had their impact indeed.

Scott gives the classification of vocabulary and semantic distinction. The first thing is that some expressions demonstrate difference in style, connotation and frequency that influences their usage. For example mail means to send a letter or any other thing. In American English it is very common word while in British it is less common and informal.

Second thing is that some expressions in spite of the fact that they carry the meaning shared by both versions, they also carry some other additional meaning characteristic of either American or British English. For instance the shared meaning of leader is someone who commands, directs or leads. However, leader has an additional meaning in British English that is main editorial.

The third point is that some expressions have completely different meaning. That point was the reason of “misunderstanding during the Second World War, when a simple word “to table”, used by Winston Churchill, caused “a long and even acrimonious argument” between the British and the American. In British English the word means “to suggest formally in a meeting something that you would like everyone to discuss”, while in American English it has exactly the opposite meaning, that is, “to delay dealing with something such as a proposal until a future time”. *It is even believed that the representatives of the two nations resorted to an “interpreter” during the war, to avoid further misunderstandings of this kind.*” (Tirban, Precup-Stiegelbauer, & Patrauta, 2012)

And the last point is that shared meaning is conveyed by entirely different expression. For example: ongoing business is expressed by trade in American English, while custom is proper word in British English. (Scott, Differences in American and British Vocabulary: Implications for International Business Communication, 2000)

Here are some differences between British and American financial terminology, provided by Essberger, to illustrate the evident differences.

British	American
<i>authorised share capital</i>	<i>authorized capital stock</i>
<i>bonus or capitalisation issue</i>	<i>stock dividend or stock split</i>
<i>company</i>	<i>corporation</i>
<i>creditors</i>	<i>accounts payable</i>
<i>current account</i>	<i>checking account</i>
<i>Memorandum of Association</i>	<i>Certificate of Incorporation</i>
<i>merchant bank</i>	<i>investment bank</i>
<i>property</i>	<i>real estate</i>
<i>retail price index (RPI)</i>	<i>consumer price index (CPI)</i>
<i>share</i>	<i>stock</i>
<i>trade union</i>	<i>labor union</i>
<i>unit trusts</i>	<i>mutual funds</i>

Business communication requires much written documentations. However, **spelling** is not the untouched area. Difference in spelling has its long history as well. According to Scott clear divergence between American and British spelling rules occurred in the 19th century when Noah Webster, a distinguished linguist, published *American Spelling Book in 1788* and *An American Dictionary of the English Language in 1828*, where he presented simplified American spelling style.

“The changes he had made (although many of the suggested changes have never been respected and were never used) reflected the practical/pragmatical and anti-elitist spirit of the American public.” (Benedikt)

Scott classifies spelling differences into two groups: these are systematic spelling differences and nonsystematic.

Systematic differences are:

Am E “or” vs. Br E “our”: e.g color/colour; favorite/favourite.

Am E “er” vs. Br E “re”: e.g center/centre; meter/metre.

Am E “ze” vs. Br E “se”: e.g analyze/analyse; criticize/criticise.

Am E “ize” vs. Br E “ise”: e.g apologize/apologise; globalize/globalise.

Am E “e” vs. Br E “oe”: e.g estrogen/ oestrogen; fetus/ foetus

Am E “e” vs. Br E “ae”: e.g esthete/aesthete

Am E “ll” vs. Br E “l”: e.g enroll/ enroll; skillful/skilful

Am E “og” vs. Br E “ogue”: e.g dialog/dialogue; catalog/catalogue.

Am E “en” vs. Br E “in”: e.g enquire/inquire; enclose/inclose.

Nonsystematic spelling differences apply to a very few groups of words which can be used in business related documents. The examples show American spelling followed by the British one: check/cheque (banking document), curb/kerb (of a street), draft/draught, jail/gaol, jewelry/jewellery, plow/plough, specialty/speciality, story/storey (of a building), sulfur/sulphur, tire/tyre (of a vehicle). (Scott, American and British Business-Related Spelling Differences, 2004)

It should be mentioned that American spelling style is less accepted in the UK than vice versa. However, spelling of technological terminology is the exception.

The modern fast means of communication reveal one more difference between American and British English this is punctuation.

The first big difference is quotation marks. Americans tend to use double quotation marks as a primary quotes and single ones within the primary quotes. However, the British style is the complete opposition. As for the commas and periods, Americans place them inside the quotation marks even when they are not part of the quote. British English place them outside. In both styles, question marks and exclamation points are placed inside the quotation marks if they belong to the quotation.

Am E “If left unchecked, climate change will increase the likelihood of severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts for people and ecosystems,” the report said.

Br E ‘If left unchecked, climate change will increase the likelihood of severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts for people and ecosystems’, the report said.

Another thing is salutation, in American English commas are used after the salutation in an informal letter and co-

lon in a business letters. However, salutations in British English are always followed by commas despite the letter style. (British English vs. American English: What's the Big Difference?)

Abbreviations are also written differently. American English uses periods with abbreviations, while British English omits them. e.g. Am E Ph.D/Mr./Mrs./Ms. vs Br E PhD/Mr/Mrs/Ms.

The biggest difference is using dates. For example 10.3.2005 means October 3, 2005 while in British English it is March 10, 2005. To avoid the misunderstanding The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) has established the YYYY-MM-DD format, in which October 3, 2005, would be written 2005-10-03. (British versus American style)

Difference between American and British English is not just two variation of the language important only for the USA and the UK. The advancement of technology, development of communication means and globalization of business require a language which will enable the people of different background communicate with each other in a clear, simple and concise way. According to the research conducted by Scott and Green in 1992, 70% of respondents from 100 largest companies from the USA and the UK declared that knowledge of differences in every aspects of language were critically important, very important or important. (Scott, American and British Business-Related Spelling Differences, 2004) As English is a lingua franca for international business, it varieties should be taken into consideration. Choosing the variant to use is a matter of preference. Among the international organizations, the World Bank, and the organization of American States tend to use the American form of English, while other organizations: the International Olympic Committee, NATO and the World Trade Organization use British English. However, it should be mentioned that American English is becoming more and more acceptable for international business due to USA's influence on global economy. The other tendency is assumed to be indistinction of deviations and future of English is probably its clearance from non-similar units because of people's aspiration towards integration and reciprocal comprehensibility.

In the end I would like to present the dialogue of business people to show the exhibit the distinction between American and British English more clearly.

Br E. "Yes, it is a pity that Ian's in queer street."

"Too much hire purchase was the problem, wasn't it?"

"Yes, and too many purchases of bespoke clothes and other things."

"And now his personal and business current accounts are badly overdrawn?"

"Precisely. He's been forced to retain a solicitor, and his position as commercial traveller is in jeopardy"

Am E 'Yes, it is unfortunate that Ian's seriously in debt.'

'Was too much installment buying the problem?'

'Yes, and too many purchases of custom-made clothes and

other things'

'And now his personal and business checking accounts are badly overdrawn?'

'Precisely. He's been forced to hire a lawyer, and his job as a traveling salesman is in jeopardy.'

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