

Oi me layde!  
'Ow 'bout a bit 'o th' bubbly  
fo' yo' pleasa?



*British v “American” English:  
Understanding the differences  
between our English and of our  
parents’ across the pond.*

Lindsey Bertrand

English 100

Final Draft

The way people use language may seem to be basically the same from person to person, or place to place. The way we were taught to read, speak, and spell is almost universal. One has to learn small, basic words first. Those build up to become sentences. The older we get, we become better at speaking, writing, spelling, and communicating. We also become better at interpreting things we read. In writing, there are many ways a piece can be interpreted. For example,

I put on a jumper and raced to catch a lift. Once outside, I discovered it was dark and I was feeling mad. "I should have brought a torch," I thought. At the underground I bought a return ticket. "How am I going to get a rise from my boss?" I wondered.

Let us take a look at this passage. There are a few words that do not quite make sense. Why would the narrator use these words in such a way? What these key adjectives, nouns, and verbs mean in "British" shed some light on the passage's true meaning. A 'jumper' in British is sweater. A lift is an elevator. Mad is mad; this is the only non-questionable word in the passage. A torch means a flashlight, and underground is the subway. A return ticket is a round trip ticket, and finally, rise means raise. If we were to re-read this paragraph using the British definitions of the questionable words, it would make perfect sense. All our knowledge can be thrown out the window, though, when going to another country, especially one whose language we don't speak. Then why are the British so hard to understand? Don't they speak English like we do? How has the English language come to be so different, yet essentially the same at its core? The differences between British and "American" are sometimes subtle, other times glaringly obvious. There are many differences in British English and "American" English, American referring specifically to the United States. Some possible reasons for the dramatic shift in what is known as "American" English and British English are due to spelling, pronunciation, and vocabulary.

The first major difference between the two is spelling. This can be seen in the spelling of words like color/colour, center/centre, and civilization/ civilisation. Other words exist as well, such as defence/ defense, licence/ license; gaol, mould, moult, manoeuvre, encyclopaedia/ jail, mold, molt, maneuver, encyclopedia. Some changes in spelling might have occurred because the letters that changed sound almost exactly like the ones in the original spelling. The sounds a z,c, and s make, for example, are virtually the same when whispered or mumbled. To produce the 'z' sound, you use your teeth and the back of your tongue and vocal chords. It is usually made using more force than

the other two letters, thus when whispering, little force is used. The 's' is made the same way, but without use of the chords. The 'c' is the same as the 's', although the airflow is cut short. This could explain why civilization is spelled the way it is in Britain.

Another possible reason for the difference is because America wanted her own identity. Why? Maybe the pilgrims wanted to be different. The pilgrims, after all, were British Puritans who wanted freedom from their harsh mistress country. Is it possible that the new pilgrims wanted as much change as possible to differentiate herself from 'mother'? Yes, this is the case. Most of these differences in American spelling can be pinned on a single individual—Noah Webster. Webster believed that a distinct American language would help merge the 13 colonies into one nation. Webster also wanted to show that the region spoke a different dialect from Britain. His dictionary contained many spellings differing from the standard. Many of these changes were initiated unilaterally. Webster also argued for many "simplifications" to the idiomatic spelling of the period. Somewhat ironically, many, although not all, of his simplifications fell into common usage alongside the original versions, resulting in a situation even more confused than before. (Alego 142 and [http://riverdeep.net/current/2001/03/032001\\_language.jhtml](http://riverdeep.net/current/2001/03/032001_language.jhtml)).

Men of the fifteenth century also influenced spelling. "The death of Chaucer marks a turning point in the internal history of English, especially its pronunciation and spelling, for during this period the language underwent greater, more important phonological (sound) changes..." (Alego 156) but the spelling stayed the same. Printers based their spelling norm on not on the current pronunciation but on its usage in medieval manuscripts. (Alego 156) This means that despite the change in vowel pronunciation, the graphic representation stayed the same. "Consequently, the phonological value of many letters of the alphabet changed drastically." (Alego 156) Some examples of this are highlighted in the next section. So then, one major difference between American and British is the spelling.

The second difference is in pronunciation. The major influencer in pronunciation was the Great Vowel Shift. The Shift began in the 1500's in Britain. The future pilgrims were only exposed to it for about 100 years; a very small amount of time in the evolution of language. While the Shift continued in Britain until it finally stopped in the 1800's, it was frozen at its current state within the pilgrims. In America, we pronounce our vowels as "a", "eee", "eye", "ooh", and "u". In Britain, the vowel pronunciation, as well as almost every other country in the world, pronounces their vowels as "aah", "aye", "eeee", "o"(shortened), and "ooo". This could explain many of the differences in pronunciation between the two countries, specifically in the area of vowels. Because the Great Vowel Shift effected the pronunciation of all five vowels, as well as the two middle vowels,  $\varepsilon$  (pronounced like the *ea* combination in 'great') and  $\upsilon$  (pronounced *aw*), this is a good assumption. First, the [i] and [u] were diphthongized; that is, instead of the [i] being pronounced as eye, the pitch was

lowered to [aɪ] to sound like the [i] in *ride* and in [əɪ] to sound like the 'oy' *boy*. The [u], pronounced like *ooooo*, shifted to an [aʊ], to sound like *house*. As a result of this first stage, the [i] and [u] did not exist on their own. Second, the middle vowels ε, ɔ, [e], and [o] were shifted a step up to replace the lost vowels. The final change was the vowel [a] to æ, which sounds like the 'a' in *bat*. This letter then underwent another shift through the ε sound to the [e]. So, what does all this mean? These changes in pronunciation dramatically changed the way people spoke, leading to different words, and the elimination of others. *Riden* was pronounced with a long [i] sound. The common spelling of this pronunciation is *ridden*. The former word is not recognized as a word anymore, because the Shift affected long vowels. Those long vowels were shortened. The æ, called ash, did not exist anymore, either. Words containing this vowel, such as æg (egg), were condensed to either an 'a' or an 'e' as the vowel. *Child* was pronounced *cheeld*, the [i] was long. The spelling was the same then as now. After the shift, we now have *child* being pronounced the current way. Words that were used by Chaucer in his famous *Canterbury Tales* demonstrate this point further. Chaucer uses rhyming words which do not rhyme in Modern English. The following examples are typical:

| <u>Chaucer</u> | <u>Modern Words</u> |
|----------------|---------------------|
| heeth, breeth  | heath, breath       |
| ye, melodye    | eye, melody         |
| loude, koude   | loud, could         |
| post, cost     | post, cost          |

<http://asstudents.unco.edu/faculty/tbredehoff/UNCclasses/ENG419/GVS.html>

Therefore, the pronunciation of thousands of words after the Shift is now different.

Pronunciation can also be a way for people to identify themselves, in America or in Britain. When someone from Louisiana meets someone from New York, both automatically know where the other is from. When the puritians came to America, they already had a dialect that was very different from that of other British. They brought this accent with them, and remnants of it remain today in New York and Boston, especially. Why is this important, though? Accent is just a part of our identity here in America, is it not the same in Britain? Not exactly. "Pronunciation can be used to distinguish social class and social status. In Britain, where class structure is strong, people are more acute to vowel enunciation and, often unconsciously, preserve many pronunciations that would otherwise be unnecessary. Pronunciation of vowels also distinguishes meaning in words, but sometimes the pronunciation is unnecessary. Thus, in America, where nonessentials are more readily dropped, vowels are not always as sharp in Britain." (<http://www.peak.org/~jeremy/dictionary/chapters/pronunciation.php>) A few examples for clarification are as follows. The letter 'r' is pronounced in Britain only if it precedes a consonant, whereas in America it is pronounced all the time. An odd twist to this is that the British, as well as New Yorkers and Bostonians, add the 'r' to words that end with 'a'. For example, they both say 'idea' as 'ideer', but pronounce 'chair' as 'chiair'. Next, the words 'can' and 'can't' are virtually identical when spoken in Britain. Furthermore, words that end in '-

duce', like 'reduce', are pronounced in a relaxed way in America, meaning the 'u' is said 'oooo'. In Britain there is a hint of a 'j' sound, making the pronunciation 'rejuce'. Americans have a tendency to reduce words by omitting the pronunciation of certain letters, as in the words 'facts' and 'fax'. Similarly, in Britain some letters are also omitted, as in 'secretary' pronounced 'secretry' and 'transportation' becoming 'transport'. Pronunciation is the second distinguishing difference between British English and American English.

The final difference between the two English languages are in the area of vocabulary and idiom. An idiom is an expression with its own grammatical structure. For example, when getting off the New York subway, one should "Watch your step," but when disembarking from the London underground, a recording warns, "Mind the gap." Other idioms that have arose in America are, "big as all outdoors", "cool as a cucumber", "wouldn't touch it with a ten foot pole", and "three sheets to the wind". These arose in America after the colonization. Newer idioms are, "son of a gun", "in back of", "I guess", and "okay", though okay is spelled literally "OK" in Britain. An idiom that both countries use is "Mind your P's and Q's." Many probably wonder where this phrase came from, and what exactly it means. Two possible theories exist. One is that the letters 'p' and 'q' looked very similar in early printers. The men writing texts were frequently reminded to "Mind their P's and Q's"; be careful your using the right letter. Another possibility is that early bars in Britain sold ale by the pint or quart. Bartenders kept running tabs on chalkboards behind the bar so patrons knew what their total was. If the bartender was marking too many drinks to one tab, the patron would then tell the bartender to "Mind the P's and Q's."

Where vocabulary is concerned, areas of technology that developed before the colonies, for example, sailing, the differences in vocabulary are minor because the new settlers brought that language with them. "It was inevitable, however, that its subsequent development should diverge somewhat from that of British English, that a number of words...lost in British English should survive in American English and, conversely, that American English should lose certain features of earlier British English which have been retained in England." (Pyles, 4) Another example, "yield" (used in street signs), is referred to as "give way". In Britain, though, the give-way sign should be treated as a stop sign, not as we use it. A humorous vocabulary difference is between the words used when referring to "men". Here, the word "guy" is used when referring to any male, most times regardless of age. In Britain, the word "bloke" is used. The reasoning for this is humorous. A famous British conspirator was Guy Fawkes. In 1605, he tried to blow up the King and Parliament. Unsuccessful, the British burned him at the stake. The British celebrate the burning ([etymonline.com](http://etymonline.com)). In the beginning years of America, there was a strong anit-British sentiment. Knowing this history, Americans began referring to every man as a guy. Perhaps just another way to show the British that they are a separate country and did not want to have anything to do with them.

Also inevitable was our invention of new words. This may be surprising to some. One may ask, why would anyone need to invent words? The outdoors is basically the same here as in Britain, and the pilgrims already had those words,

right? This is not exactly the case. The new words were borrowed from adaptations of old words, or they invented entirely new ones to describe the topography, flora, and fauna that was unfamiliar. (Pyles 4) For example, there are no canyons in Britain; this word had to be created after the pilgrims saw them. Other words created by the colonists were *backwoods* and *underbrush*. These words were created by using compound English words; the woods out back became 'backwoods'. Some terms that were created here that are used to describe the flora, fauna, and wildlife are *raccoon* (derived from the Indian name) and *catalpa* (from the Muskogean tribe). (Alego 204) "Otherwise, they relied on their imagination: *Johnny-jump-up* was inspired by a crude kind of fancy, and *sweet potato*...was a New World food." (Alego 205) Conversley, topographical terms used in Britain that had to be abandoned in America are dell, fen, heath, moor, and spinney. Even with these minor vocabulary differences, technologies that developed throughout the nineteenth century show the greatest change. During the Industrial Revolution, engineers in both countries were inventing new products. Since there was no standard regarding this area of technology, and because the inventors were not sharing terms with each other, different words are used to describe the same things. (Davies 2) For example, the vocabulary for rail and automotive transportation varies significantly: a car has a hood versus a bonnet, a trunk/ boot, petrol/ gas, motorways/ freeways, coach/ long distance bus. "By the twentieth century, though, differences in vocabulary concerning modern technologies, like aviation and computers, again became minor due largely to the World Wars and America's dominant entertainment industry". ([http://riverdeep.net/current/2001/03/032001\\_language.jhtml](http://riverdeep.net/current/2001/03/032001_language.jhtml)) The differences between vocabulary and idioms are the final difference between American and British.

Language is a beautiful thing. It's complexities and power give strength to even the weakest of us. While all languages developed from a single, father language, they have changed to distinguish one nationality from another. Mastering language is the hardest thing we must do as infants. The older we get, though, the better we become at speaking, writing, and communicating. Often times, language has the power to bring people together. English is the most recognizable language in the world, and its influence is growing. So are the structure, words, and meanings. Language is not our enemy. Speaking and writing correctly make us stronger and bring us together. So, we mus' n' b'lieve all th'ts said. Wh'n y' go t' gi' ch' hat, please bring m' mine. Le's go. Would'n' stay if' could. Keep on writin' t'll y' c'n do 't right.

## Works Cited

Alego, John. The Origins and Development of the English Language. Fifth Edition. Boston, 2004.

Davies, Christopher. Divided By A Common Language. Mayflower Press, January 22, 1998.

Harper, Douglas. Online Etymological Dictionary. (Online)  
Available <http://www.etymonline.com>

Pyles, Thomas. Words and Ways of American English. New York, Random House, 1952.

[http://riverdeep.net/current/2001/03/032001\\_language.jhtml](http://riverdeep.net/current/2001/03/032001_language.jhtml)

<http://www.peak.org/~jeremy/dictionary/chapters/pronunciation.php>