

## **A STUDY OF BRITISH AND AMERICAN ENGLISH FOR CHINESE STUDENTS**

**Sunny Ifeanyi Odinye**

Department of Igbo, African & Asian Studies  
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka  
ifeanyiodinye@gmail.com

### **ABSTRACT**

The English language developed on the British Isles and spread all over the world to all continents through British colonization and conquest. English became a world language, one of the most widely spoken languages in the world. This spread of English, however, means that there now exist a number of English varieties around the world (Barber, 2000:236). English is unmistakably one language, with two major national varieties: British and American (Pyles and Algeo, 1993:212). British and American English are the reference norms for English as spoken, written, and taught in the rest of the world. Differences between the two include pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary (lexis), spelling, punctuation, idioms, and formalities of dates and numbers. In this work, the emphasis is only on the differences between British and American English in the areas of spelling and vocabulary. The learning of English in China has a long history and probably began in association with the Canton trade. From 1978 on, English teaching has been stressed a lot because China has developed the race to communicate with the world. The government made a policy that all the students from primary school to university are to learn English. The objective of this work is to help the Chinese students learning English understand the differences between British and American English.

### **INTRODUCTION**

English is a West Germanic language that originated from Anglo-Frisian dialects brought to Britain in the fifth to seventh centuries by Germanic invaders and settlers from what is now northwest Germany and the Netherlands. The Old English of the Anglo-Saxon era developed into Middle English, the language as spoken between the Norman Conquest and the late 15<sup>th</sup> century. A significant influence on the shaping of Middle English came from contact with the North Germanic languages spoken by the Scandinavians who conquered and colonized parts of Britain during the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. Early Modern English is dated from around 1500. Modern English was in place by the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. The English language came to be exported to other parts of the world through British colonization, and is now the dominant language in Britain and Ireland, the United States and Canada, Australia, New Zealand and many smaller former colonies, as well as being widely spoken in India, parts of Africa, and elsewhere. Partially thanks to the United States influence, English has taken on the status of a global lingua franca (Wikipedia online).

The English language has had a remarkable history. When we first caught sight of it in historical records, it is the speech of some non-too-civilized tribes on the continent of Europe along the North Sea. Of course, it had a still earlier history, going back perhaps to somewhere in Eastern Europe or Western Asia, and long before that to origins we can only speculate about. From those murky and undistinguished beginnings, English has become the most

widespread language in the world, used by more peoples for more purposes than any other language on Earth (Algeo, 2010:1)

English is unmistakably one language, with two major national varieties: British and American (Pyles and Algeo, 1993:212). British and American English are the reference norms for English as spoken, written, and taught in the rest of the world, excluding countries where English is spoken natively such as Australia, Canada, Ireland and New Zealand. In many former British Empire countries where English is not spoken natively, British English forms are closely followed, alongside numerous American English usages which have become widespread throughout the Anglosphere. Conversely, in many countries historically influenced by the United States where English is not spoken natively, American English forms are closely followed.

Over the past 400 years the form of English used in the United States and in the United Kingdom have diverged in a few minor ways, leading to the versions now occasionally referred to as American English and British English. Differences between the two include pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary (lexis), spelling, punctuation, idioms, and formalities of dates and numbers. In this work, the emphasis is only on the differences between British and American English in the areas of spelling and vocabulary. Most of the differences in vocabulary between British and American English are in connection with concepts originality from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, when new words were coined independently. It is not a straightforward matter to classify differences of vocabulary. David Crystal identifies some of the problems of classification (Crystal, 2003). According to Trudgill and Hannah (1994:89), the most noticeable differences between American English and British English are found in vocabulary. The differences are due to new objects and experiences in North America, cultural and technological developments, and influences from other languages.

Before the early 18<sup>th</sup> century English spelling was not standardized. Different standards became noticeable after the publishing of influential dictionaries. For the most parts current British spellings follow those of Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), while American spellings follow those of Noah Webster's *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828). Many of the differences between American and British English date back to a time when spelling was not widely standardized. For instance, some spellings seen as "American" today were once commonly used in Britain, and vice versa. A "British standard" began to emerge following the 1755 publication of influential dictionaries such as Samuel Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language*, and an "American standard" started following the work of Noah Webster, and in particular his *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (Scragg, 1974).

John Hurt Fisher (2001:59) noticed that "the separation of the American nation from England after 1776 is schizophrenic, characterized on the one hand by violent rejection of English tyranny, as it was regarded by the American revolutionaries and on the other by acute nostalgia for their English culture. American and British cultures are fundamentally different in their histories, economies, environments, and social organizations. Although spoken American and British English are generally mutually intelligible, there are enough differences to cause misunderstandings or confusion in communication.

## **WORLD ENGLISH**

The English language has shifted from being a language that was primarily used to serve native speakers' intra-national and communal purposes to becoming an international medium in lingua franca communication (Jenkins, 2003b; Kirkpatrick, 2007). Its phenomenal spread implies that it serves as a communicative tool not only for native-to-native or native-to-non-native interactions but also for meaningful interactions among non-native speakers (Crystal, 1997; Graddol, 2007). Due to its geographical reach, English has come to be learned as a second language or spoken by large number of people. According to Graddol (2007), approximately two billion people are said to have English knowledge. Statistics from various sources also show that the number of non-native speakers has significantly outnumbered that of native speakers (Kirkpatrick, 2007). In the light of this, several scholars have argued that English becomes a denationalized language (Kachru, 1992; Widdowson, 1994) in which it is not anymore tied to native speakers in terms of linguistic usage. Widdowson (1994:385) asserts that:

The very fact that English is an international means that no nation can have custody over it. ...it is a matter of considerable pride and satisfaction for native speakers of English that their language is an international to the extent that it is not their language. It is not a possession which they lease out to others, while still retaining the freehold. Other people actually own it.

Surveys of range of use carried out by UNESCO and other world organizations reinforce the general statistical impression. English is used as an official or semi-official language in over sixty countries, and has prominent place in twenty further countries. It is either dominant or well established in all six continents. It is the main language of books, newspapers, airports and air-traffic control, international business and academic conferences, science, technology, medicine, diplomacy, sports, international competitions, pop music, and advertising. Over two-thirds of the world's scientists write in English. Three-quarters of the world's mail is written in English. Of all the information in the world's electronic retrieval systems, 80% is stored in English. People communicate on the Internet largely in English. English radio programmes are received by over one hundred and fifty million in one hundred and twenty countries. Over fifty million children study English as an additional language at primary level; over eighty million study it at secondary level (these figures exclude China). In any one year, the British Council helps over a quarter of a million foreign students to learn English, in various parts of the world. Half as many again learn English in the USA (Crystal, 1997:360).

The historical account traces the movement of English around the world, beginning with the pioneering voyages to the Americas, Asia, and the Antipodes. It was an expansion which continued with the nineteenth-century colonial developments in Africa and the South Pacific, and which took a significant further step when it was adopted in the mid twentieth century as an official or semi-official language by many newly independent states. English is now represented in every continent, and in islands of the three major oceans – Atlantic (St Helena), Indian (Seychelles) and Pacific in many islands, such as Fiji and Hawaii (Crystal, 1997:24).

## **BRITISH ENGLISH**

British English is the form of English used in the United Kingdom. It includes all English dialects used in the United Kingdom. The spoken forms of British English vary considerably, reflecting a long history of dialect development amid isolated populations. In the United Kingdom, dialects, word use and accents vary not only between England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, but also with them. Received Pronunciation (RP) refers to a way of pronouncing Standard English that is actually used by about two percent of the UK population (Kirby, 2007). It remains the accent upon which dictionary pronunciation guides are based, and for teaching English as a foreign language. It is referred to colloquially as “The Queen’s English”, “Oxford English”, and “BBC English”.

British English is used in former colonies of the British empire, as in Africa (including Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, Egypt, etc); the Indian subcontinent (Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh); Malta; Australia; New Zealand; and in Southeast Asia (Myanmar, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand). It is also used in all Middle Eastern countries, except Israel and Saudi Arabia.

### **AMERICAN ENGLISH**

American English is the form of English used in the United States. It includes all English dialects used in the United States. The English language was first introduced to the Americas by British colonization, beginning in 1607 in Jamestown, Virginia. American English is used as a lingua franca or a second language by people in many parts of the world, including East Asia (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, etc); the Americas (excluding the former British colonies like Canada, Jamaica, and Bahamas), Liberia in Africa.

Noah Webster believed it was important for America, a new and revolutionary nation, to assert its cultural independence from Britain through language. He wrote the first American dictionary. He was also an ardent advocate of spelling reform and thought words should be spelt more like they sound. Many years before he published his well-known *American Dictionary of the English Language*, he published a smaller, more radical dictionary he called *A Compendious Dictionary* that included spellings such as ‘wimmen’ for ‘women’ and ‘tung’ for ‘tongue’. That dictionary was skewered and he dialled down the spelling reform in his final masterpiece. Yet still, Noah Webster, his attention for spelling reform, and the success of his final dictionary in 1928 are the reasons Americans spell words differently. However, in *A Companion to the American Revolution* (2008), John Algeo notes, “It is often assumed that characteristically American spellings were invented by Noah Webster. He was very influential in popularizing certain spellings in America, but he did not originate them. Rather he chose already existing options such as center, color and check or such grounds as simplicity, analogy or etymology”.

### **ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN CHINA**

Liu Yongjun (2008) said, “English teaching has achieved great success in the past thirty years. I said the past thirty years. That means, starting from time when the opening-up policy was adopted in China. From 1978 on, English teaching has been stressed a lot because China has developed the race to communicate with the world. English tests are required for various fields, for example, college entrance exams, academic title exam and also further education exams.” In China now there are English education departments in most of the universities and colleges. In the past, maybe there were English education departments only in some universities. But now it’s very common that most of the colleges or universities have English

departments. The government stressed that all the students from primary school to university are to learn English.

The learning of English in China has a long history and probably began in association with the Canton trade. Bolton (2003) suggests that the first fully documented encounter between English speakers and Chinese in the delta area occurred in 1637, when an expedition of four English trading ships arrived Macau and Canton, at a time when there was already extensive trade between Europe and China controlled by the Portuguese based in Macau. The British expedition communicated with the Chinese through Portuguese-speaking interpreters, marking the start of a language, sometimes inglorious, history of contact between Cantonese and English speakers. The first record of Chinese attempts to pronounce English come from the diaries of Petter Mundy, an early 17<sup>th</sup> century English trader. By 1836, it was reported that at Canton 'English is the only medium of conversation between foreigners and Chinese' (Bolton, 2003:145-151).

With rapid economic growth and development, the role of English has become increasingly important in the daily life of the people in China. It is estimated that there are 440-650 million English learners and users in China alone, making it the largest English learning and using population in the world (Bolton, 2003; He & Zhang, 2010; Jiang, 2002). Wu (2009), the ex-Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Education of China, has indicated that mastery in English could enable Chinese people to successfully participate in international politics, trade, and business and in information communication. A great government and non-government funding has been committed to the development and delivery of the English curriculum at all the levels of education in China. In universities in China, English is a compulsory course that all students are required to complete and as a consequence, college English is receiving considerable attention from the Ministry of Education in China (Yuan et'al, 2015).

## **DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BRITISH AND AMERICAN ENGLISH**

Having known the international status of English language and its two major varieties: British and American English, it is important to know their differences. The differences between British and American English are found in their grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, spellings, etc. We shall discuss the spelling and vocabulary differences.

### **Spelling Differences**

Gelderen (2006) explains how differences in spelling between American English and British English occur for external reasons – the conscious decisions of editors, educators and politicians. The slight spelling differences can be understood by both American English and British English speakers; hence, the relatively Standard English may be responsible for keeping the varieties mutually understandable.

Tottie (2002) acknowledges how most spelling differences are systematic, although some have to be learned individually. The spelling differences are divided and organized by simplified rules and they are seen as systematized. Among the systematic differences, some of the most important spelling differences are American English (AmE) '-or' compared to British English (BrE) '-our' as in 'color/colour', AmE '-re' compared to BrE '-er' as in 'centre/center', AmE '-log' compared to BrE '-logue' as in 'catalog/catalogue', AmE '-ense' compared to BrE 'practise (verb)', while in AmE it is spelled practice (verb), and the use of

double ‘l’ in AmE while BrE spelling use one ‘l’, as in travelled/traveled. American spellings are in general shorter although there are some exceptions, as in AmE ‘fulfill’ compared to BrE ‘fulfil’. The verb ending ‘-ize’ is the prevalent spelling in American English, as in ‘fraternize, jeopardize, militarize, etc’ as British English rather use the ‘-ise’ ending, although there are variations in British English while both variations sometimes are accepted, as in ‘organize/organise, naturalize/naturalise, etc’. Some spellings, nevertheless, have to be learned since they do not follow any pattern and cannot account for a systematic nature. Below are some examples of spelling differences between British and American English.

<b>BRITISH ENGLISH</b>	<b>AMERICAN ENGLISH</b>
Words ending in –re/er	
Centre	Center
Fibre	Fiber
Litre	Liter
theatre	theater/theatre

<b>BRITISH ENGLISH</b>	<b>AMERICAN ENGLISH</b>
Words ending in –our/or	
colour	Color
flavour	Flavor
humour	humor
Labour	Labor
neighbour	neighbor

<b>BRITISH ENGLISH</b>	<b>AMERICAN ENGLISH</b>
Words ending in –ize/ise	
apologise/apologize	apologize
organise/organize	organize
recognise/recognize	recognize
naturalise/naturalize	naturalize

<b>BRITISH ENGLISH</b>	<b>AMERICAN ENGLISH</b>
Words ending in –yse/yze	
analyse	analyze
breathalyse	breathalyze
paralyse	paralyze

<b>BRITISH ENGLISH</b>	<b>AMERICAN ENGLISH</b>
Words ending in a vowel plus ‘l’	
travelled	traveled
travelling	traveling
Fuelled	Fueled



fuelling	Fueling
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<b>BRITISH ENGLISH</b>	<b>AMERICAN ENGLISH</b>
Nouns ending with –ence/ense	
defence	defense
licence	license
offence	offense
pretence	pretense

<b>BRITISH ENGLISH</b>	<b>AMERICAN ENGLISH</b>
Nouns ending with –ogue/og	
analogue	analog/analogue
catalogue	catalog/catalogue
dialogue	dialog/dialogue

<b>BRITISH ENGLISH</b>	<b>AMERICAN ENGLISH</b>
Words spelled with double vowels	
leukaemia	leukemia
manoeuvr	maneuver
oestrogen	estrogen
paediatric	pediatric

<b>BRITISH ENGLISH</b>	<b>AMERICAN ENGLISH</b>
Miscellaneous words	
cheque	Check
Grey	Gray
Plough	Plow
moustache	mustache

### Vocabulary Spelling

Modiano (1996) recognizes the differences in vocabulary to be increasingly important as the influence of American English, in recent years, has had a great impact on the English use. The differences in vocabulary are divided into three categories, depending on how they differ and in what sense they might cause confusion. The first category indicates that the terms not only share the same meaning, but are readily understood and, to varying degrees, are used in both the United Kingdom and the United States. The second category indicates that there are two different terms for the same referent, but in this case the terms are not interchangeable. Despite the differences in preference, they rarely cause breakdowns in communication. The third category indicates more complicated terms which cause misunderstandings and failure in communication, as the terms have completely different meanings. In the third category, the potential of breakdowns in communication are much greater than in categories one and two. Carlo, in his article ‘Lexical differences between American and British English: a survey study’ says that when American and British people meet, the first obvious difference is their

accent, the pronunciation of words. However, at a deeper and less apparent level, vocabulary differences give the right to treat the two varieties as two completely different languages. Sometimes, words are used in different ways to name the same thing, such as for the American ‘railroad tie’ and the British ‘railway sweeper’. Sometimes, two different words are used but their meaning is quite obvious, such as for the American ‘luggage’ and the British ‘baggage’. In other cases, some words that are common in one place are rare in the other, such as the words ‘soppy’ or ‘row’: although they are listed in American dictionaries, they are very uncommon in American speech but they are quite well known in the United Kingdom. Some words retained in the United Kingdom have been dropped by American, such as ‘fortnight’ and ‘constable’ and many no longer used in British are retained in American, such as ‘mad’ (in the sense of angry), ‘fall’, ‘sick’, etc.

Many online sources offer useful comparisons between British and American lexicon, such as *the Macmillan English Dictionary Magazine 2004* and James Smith’s *American to British Dictionary*, both of which have been very useful. Below are some of the examples ranging from clothes, school, building, food, car, people, sports and others.

<b>BRITISH ENGLISH</b>	<b>AMERICAN ENGLISH</b>
Trainers	Sneakers
Jumper	Sweater
Waistcoat	Vest
Braces	Suspenders
Car park	Parking lot
Bonnet	Hood
Boot	Trunk
Petrol	Gas
Football	Soccer
Pitch	Field
Draw	Tie
Kit	Uniform
Motorway	Highway
Pavement	Sidewalk
Zebra crossing	Crosswalk
Lorry	Truck
Flat	Apartment
Lift	Elevator
Aubergine	Eggplant
Sweets	Candy
Ice lolly	Popsicle
Treacle	Molasses
Chips	French fries
Crips	Potato chips
Biscuit	Cookie
Underground	Subway
Phone box	Phone booth
Queue	Line
Nappy	Diaper
Dummy	Pacifer
Loo	Restroom



Takeaway	Takeout
Timetable	Schedule
Rubber	Eraser
Post	Mail
Full stop	Period
Nought	Zero
Postal code	Zip code
Windscreen	Windshield
Indicator	Blinker
Holiday	Vacation
Autumn	Fall
Diversion	Detour
Flyover	Overpass
Lorry	Truck
Serviette	Napkin
Spectacles	Eyeglasses
Vest	Undershirt
Cooker	Stove
Cashpost	ATM
Cool box	Cooler
Hand luggage	Carry-on
Spanner	Wrench
Duvet	Comforter
Sellotape	Scotch tape
Barrister	Attorney
Caravan	Trailer
Dustbin	Garbage can
Motorbike	Motorcycle
Pub	Bar
Spanner	Wrench
Tin	Can
Curriculum vitae	Resume
Cupboard	Closet
Starter	Appetizer

## CONCLUSION

Crystal (1997:137) asserted that the ‘World Standard Spoken English’ would certainly arise. He believes that World Standard Spoken English is still in its infancy and thinks that American English variety will be most influential in the development of World Standard Spoken English. Many grammatical issues in contemporary British usage show the influence of American forms, American spellings are increasingly widespread (especially in computer contexts), and there is a greater passive awareness of distinctively American lexicon in the United Kingdom (because of media influence) than vice versa. While there are certainly

many more varieties of English, American and British are the two varieties that are taught in most ESL/EFL programmes. Generally, it is agreed that no version is 'correct'. For Chinese students, whose English language is neither a first language nor second language, to master the differences between British and American English; consistency in usage of any variety is the key.

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