

# Gymnázium Mnichovo Hradiště

Studentská odborná práce



## Difference between American and British English

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<b>Třída:</b>	<b>3.A.</b>
<b>Předmět:</b>	<b>Anglický jazyk</b>
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<b>Měsíc a rok odevzdání:</b>	<b>31.5. 2022</b>

Prohlašuji, že jsem práci na téma *Difference between American and British English* vypracoval samostatně pod vedením vedoucího práce za použití uvedených pramenů a literatury.

Lukáš Eichler

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Podpis

# Abstract

This paper deals with the comparison between English spoken in the United Kingdom and English spoken in the United States of America. The Introduction will discuss historical reasoning for the language difference, then each chapter is going to discuss difference in speech, difference in the written word and other differences like grammar and vocabulary. Last part will conclude my personal feeling towards this topic and will summarize what the reader learns.

This paper also includes a practical part where I attach my own sound files to better compare the difference in speech.

## **Keywords:**

American English, British English, pronunciation, grammar, spelling, vocabulary, language history.

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# 1. Introduction

Before we start differentiating the two languages, we should ask, why are there differences in the first place? Most people would claim that Americans and the British speak the same language. However, that is not the case. Historical and political events are the main contributors for the language difference.

When the United States were still under British rule, people living there were in fact speaking, at the time, standard British English. But the great distance from the Old World and contact with native American civilizations were factors that affected those living in today's United States. After a hundred or so years, new words and changes to the language started to appear. With those changes a unique American national identity took hold, which later led to America's fight for independence. Once an independent state, The United States started language reforms to further help differentiate the two countries languages.

The British on the other hand were, at first, unimpressed by American way of speaking. "The common faults of American language are an ambition of effect, a want of simplicity, and a turgid abuse of terms."<sup>1</sup> Brits judged it for sounding too crude. However, later many words created originally by Americans, mostly places, animals, and natural phenomena, were incorporated into the British language.

This historical reasoning furthermore invokes the question if American English and British English are considered separate languages. There is not a direct answer to this question. It all depends in what context we take "different language". In the context of differing origin or language family, no, there not different. But in the context of a different language variant or dialect, then yes, they are different.

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<sup>1</sup> COOPER, James. The American Democrat: Or, Hints on the Social and Civic Relations of the United States of America.

## 2. Writing

Because language naturally changes phonetically, any changes to the written words between American and British English were done purposely.

Most of the purposeful spelling changes were done by American reformer Noah Webster in his work: *American dictionary of the English language*. He, like many Americans, wanted to further strengthen the American national identity and better unite the people as equals. He was quick to notice that after the revolution was the only time his work could have such great influence, as he noted: “Now is the time, and this the country, in which we may expect success, ... Let us then seize the present moment, and establish a national language, as well as a national government.”<sup>2</sup>

### 2.1. Switched letters

Switching in context of one language switching one of its letters for a different one. But also, in context of reversing the order of letters in an ending.

The first case includes the letters *S* and *C*. British words spelled with a *-NCE* ending are instead spelled with a *-NSE* ending in American English. There are exceptions in which the respective ending is not present, but the change still happens. (E.g., British: practise, American: practice)

American	British
defense	defence
license	licence
offense	offence
pretense	pretence

Table 1: *-NSE* and *-NCE* difference

Other set of letters with similar rules are the letters *Z* and *S*. British words spelled with a *-ISE* ending are instead spelled with a *-IZE* ending in American English and likewise there are exceptions in which the respective ending is not present, but the change still happens. (E.g., British: cosy, American: cozy)

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<sup>2</sup> WEBSTER, Noah. DISSERTATIONS ON THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE: WITH NOTES, HISTORICAL AND CRITICAL. Page 405 / 406

American	British
apologize	apologise
organize	organise
recognize	recognise

Table 2: *-IZE* and *-ISE* difference

The other case, in which letters were being reversed, only has one example. British words spelled with a *-RE* ending have their ending reversed as *-ER* in American English. This was Changed in the American spelling mostly because of the way Americans tend to pronounce *R* at the end of a sentence a lot more emphatically.

American	British
center	centre
fiber	fibre
liter	litre
theater	theatre

Table 3: *-ER* and *-RE* difference

## 2.2. Missing letters

American English Discarded letters in some spelled words due to them not being fully pronounced and being generally seen as unnecessarily added.

Famously the letter *U* is absent in American spelling of word that end or Include *-OUR* in British spelling.

American	British
color	colour
humor	humour
favorite	favourite
flavor	flavour
behavior	behaviour
labor	labour

Table 4: *-OR* and *-OUR* difference

American English removes double *L* used whenever in British English a suffix is added to a verb that ends with a *L*.

American	British
traveling, traveled, traveler	travelling, travelled, traveller
canceling, canceled	cancelling, cancelled
fueled, fueling	fuelled, fuelling
marveled, marvelous	marvelled, marvellous

Table 5: *-L* and *-LL* difference

American spelling also simplifies more complex words of Latin or Greek origin. *-OE* and *-AE* voles are replaced with just *-E*.

American	British
leukemia	leukaemia
maneuver	manoeuvre
estrogen	oestrogen

Table 6: *Simplified foreign words and original spelling difference*

## 2.3. General difference in spelling

These are mostly exceptions that do not have any particular reason to be different from each other.

Some of it were changed in the American English to sound more like its pronunciation over in the Americas. (E.g., American: mom, British: mum, Etc.) Some were simplified, (E.g., British: Jewellery, American: Jewelry, Etc.) and others don't have a direct reason (E.g., British: pyjamas, American: pajamas, British: tyre, American: tire, Etc.)

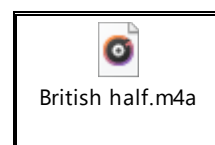
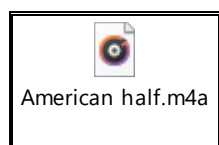
## 3. Speaking

The way both respective languages sound would be among the first differences people notice. English language is known for its wide variety of variations and accents. However, in this paper, we'll be comparing the differences between general American English and UK's received pronunciation.

### 3.1. Different letter pronunciation

Both languages pronounce some letters differently. Mainly the vowels *A* and *O* and the consonants *R* and *T*.

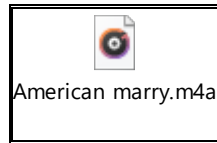
British words that pronounce *A* as /ɑ:/ are instead pronounced in America as /æ/. This is true in every case except in words where *A* is followed by a *R*. In that case *A* is pronounced as /ɑ:/ in both languages. British words where *A* is pronounced as /æ/ don't change in Americans pronunciation. However, in the American pronunciation, words where *A* is followed by *RR* are pronounced with /e/ instead of British /æ/. Lastly, words in which *A* is followed by *LL* pronounce the *A* as /ɔ:/ in British English while its pronounced as /ɑ:/ in American.



Sound file 1: *American half* /hæf/

Sound file 2: *British half* /hɑ:f/





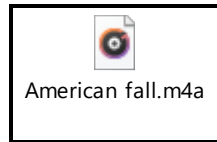
American marry.m4a

Sound file 3: *American marry* /mer.i/



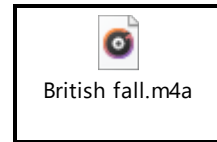
British marry.m4a

Sound file 4: *British marry* /mæɹ.i/



American fall.m4a

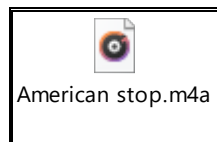
Sound file 5: *American fall* /fɑ:l/



British fall.m4a

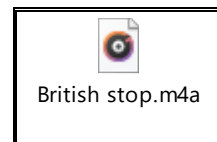
Sound file 6: *British fall* /fɔ:l/

British words that pronounce *O* as a /b/ are instead pronounced as /ɑ/ in American English. This is also the case for some words that aren't spelled with an *O* and instead are spelled with an *A*, thus making the American pronunciation sound more appropriate, based on the spelling.



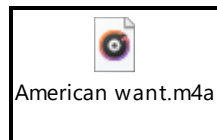
American stop.m4a

Sound file 7: *American stop* /stɑ:p/



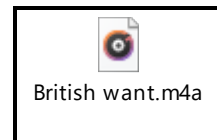
British stop.m4a

Sound file 8: *British stop* /stɒp/



American want.m4a

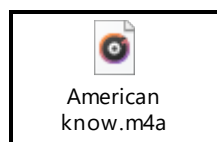
Sound file 9: *American want* /wɑ:nt/



British want.m4a

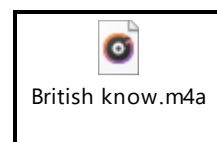
Sound file 10: *British want* /wɒnt/

There is the only one example of a difference in diphthong. The British pronounces *-OW* and *O* (in words like; no, go) as /əʊ/ while the Americans as /oʊ/.



American know.m4a

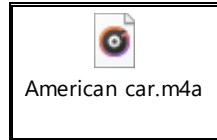
Sound file 11: *American know* /noʊ/



British know.m4a

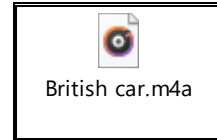
Sound file 12: *British know* /neʊ/

American English always Pronounces *R* clearly, meaning it's rhotic. British is on the contrary non-rhotic, meaning *R* is only pronounced if it's followed by a vowel. This effects, most notably, words that ends or include *R* in the middle of a word.



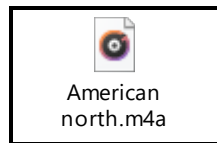
American car.m4a

Sound file 13: *American car* /kɑ:r/



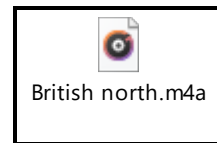
British car.m4a

Sound file 14: *British know* /kɑ:ʔ/



American north.m4a

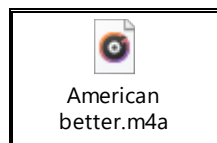
Sound file 15: *American north* /nɔ:rθ/



British north.m4a

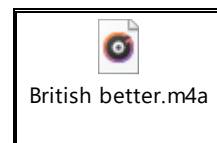
Sound file 16: *British north* /nɔ:θ/

The British *T* is pronounced always as a hard T, also known as a voiceless /t/. While in America an alveolar tap /r/ is used in some words instead. Mostly when it's between two vowels or between a vowel and *R*.



American better.m4a

Sound file 17: *American better* /'ber.ər/

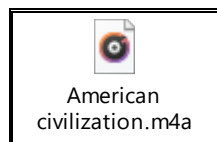


British better.m4a

Sound file 18: *British better* /'bet.ər/

### 3.2. Different pronunciation of endings

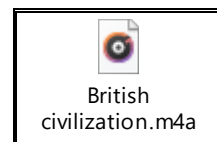
The endings *-ization* and *-ile* are pronounced in British English with a bigger emphasis on the *i* and is pronounced as /aɪ/. While in American pronunciation the *i* is pronounced as a /ə/ in both endings.



American civilization.m4a

Sound file 19: *American civilization*

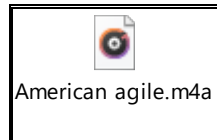
/,sɪv.əl.ə'zeɪ.jən/



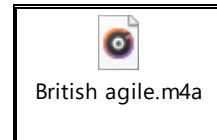
British civilization.m4a

Sound file 20: *British civilization*

/,sɪv.əl.aɪ'zeɪ.jən/



American agile.m4a



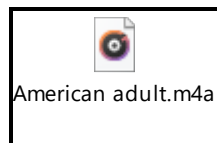
British agile.m4a

Sound file 19: *American agile* /'ædʒ.əɪl/

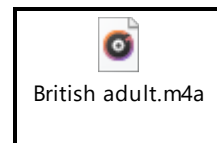
Sound file 20: *British agile* /'ædʒ.əl/

### 3.3. Different stress

In some cases where British English places the stress on the second syllable, American English places the stress on the first syllable instead.



American adult.m4a

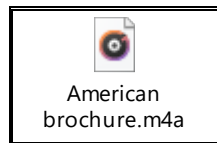


British adult.m4a

Sound file 21: *American A-dult*

Sound file 22: *British agile a-DULT*

If the word is taken from French, British English places the stress on the first syllable, while American places it on the second.



American  
brochure.m4a

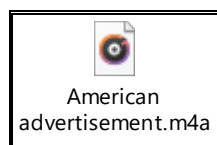


British  
brochure.m4a

Sound file 23: *American bro-CHURE*

Sound file 24: *British BRO-chure*

Lastly, some multisyllable words have its stress placed on a different syllable.



American  
advertisement.m4a



British  
advertisement.m4a

Sound file 23: *American*  
*AD-ver-tise-ment*

Sound file 24: *British*  
*ad-VER-tise-ment*

## 4. Other

This section includes all the non-verbal and non-written changes, like the difference in grammar and vocabulary.

## 4.1. Grammar

For past actions which are important in the present meaning present perfect could be used in both languages. But for American English, present simple is more commonly used if the action is considered as finished.

American English: "He already finished studying."

British English: "He has already finished studying."

American English: "Did you do the housework?"

British English: "have you done the housework?"

Auxiliary verb *Shall* is used more often in British English, where on the other hand *will* or *should* is more often used in American English.

American English: "Should I be more precise?"

British English: "Shall I be more precise?"

American English: "I will get you some water"

British English: "I shall get you some water"

Some auxiliary verbs change only in specific phrases.

American English: "On the weekend."

British English: "At the weekend."

American English: "Different than the others"

British English: "Different to the others"

The past participle of *get* in American English is *gotten*. British English doesn't use *gotten* anymore and instead they shortened it to *got*. Both languages use *have got* in sentences implying possession or necessity.

American English: "He's gotten better at studying."

British English: "He's got better at studying."

American English: "I got a jar of dirt."

British English: "I got a jar of dirt."

Collective nouns are followed by a singular or plural verb in British English. American English uses singular verbs to all collective nouns. The collective noun "*police*" is the only exception and is always followed by a plural verb in both languages.

American English: "The group is visiting from abroad."

British English "The group is/are visiting from abroad."

American English only uses *take* with verbs implying washing, taking a holiday, and resting, while British English uses *take* and *have* with those verbs interchangeably.

American English: "I'll take a shower."

British English "I'll take/have a shower."

## 4.2. Vocabulary

Both languages use a different lexicon of words to describe the same specific thing or action. After pronunciation, the difference in vocabulary would be among the second changes people notice between the languages.

American	British
cookie	biscuit
fries	chips
apartment	flat
elevator	lift
soccer	football
garbage	rubbish
highway/freeway	motorway
truck	lorry
bathing suit	swimming costume
sneakers	trainers
buddy	mate
mailman	postman

Table 7: Different vocabulary difference

British English uses abbreviations more often than their full words, unlike American English.

<b>American</b>	<b>British</b>
zipper	zip
vegetables	veg
refrigerator	fridge

Table 8: *Shortened words difference*

Last but not least, the noun *Math* is singular in American English, but it is plural in British English.

## 5. Conclusion

The goal of this paper was to inform the reader of the differences between American and British English. Even though both languages are over ninety percent similar, their differences are sufficient enough to justify their distribution. In a way we could title American spelling and grammar as the more streamlined version of the British variant. Similarly, American pronunciation and vocabulary could be titled as a regional variant of the British variant, similar to accents like: Scottish accent, Welsh accent, Irish accent, etc....

Personally, after researching all the specific differences and their reasons, I found the study of linguistics fascinating. It combined my interests of history and language.

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