

The British English Language Podcast



Improve your English language skills with Amy - a podcast with a British accent for intermediate level students

Episode 6 - British Vs. American English

Hello everyone ! Welcome back to The British English Language Podcast ! My name's Amy and I created this podcast especially for intermediate level English language students who have an interest in learning British English with a native from the UK. I hope that you'll enjoy listening to these episodes and that you find them helpful for your learning processes.

If this is the first time you're listening then I'd like to let you know that the text for each episode can be found on my website - www.britishenglishlanguage.com. These transcriptions are available for you to read and print and my advice is to study them whilst listening to help in your understanding of written English too.

So, without further ado, let's get started !

Episode 6 - British Vs. American English

The British introduced English to the Americans when they reached America by sea between the 16th and 17th centuries. At this time, the spelling of words (i.e. how words are written) had not yet been standardised/normalised. In the UK the dictionary (i.e. the book containing English words with their meanings) was created by London-based academics. Meanwhile, in the US, apparently, an American named Noah Webster changed the spellings to make the American version different as a way to show cultural independence from Britain.

Interestingly, American pronunciation is older than British pronunciation. The way that the letter 'r' is pronounced in the US is how it was pronounced originally in Britain. However, according to my research, the aristocracy/higher classes in British society began to soften the pronunciation of 'r', making this way of speaking fashionable at the time and becoming the way British people speak today.

British and American English is the same language but, although a British person can communicate with an American without difficulty, there are many differences throughout these two dialects. During this episode I'm going to be describing these differences, demonstrating how they affect the pronunciation of words, some vocabulary, as well as the spelling of words. Finally giving examples of differences in every day phrases.

Pronunciation

I felt inspired to discuss this episode's topic after I realised that, in the previous episode, I had made a booboo (a booboo being an American informal expression for error or mistake). During that episode, in which I discussed the topic of Paganism, I explained that Paganism is polytheistic. But polytheistic is the American pronunciation ! The way that this word should be pronounced in British English is 'pol-yth-e-istic' ! And the same goes for polytheism. I pronounced polytheism the American way, poly-the-ism, however the British way should be 'pol-yth-e-ism' !

So what are some other ways that the pronunciation of British English differs from that of American English ?

Well, like I mentioned before, the letter 'r' is more pronounced in American English when it isn't the first letter of the word. So, when a word begins with 'r' then it would be pronounced the same way in both versions, for example 'rabbit'. However, when 'r' is located near or at the end of the word then the two pronunciations are clearly very different. For example the word 'heart'. In British English, the 'r' is so soft that it isn't even pronounced, however in American English it would sound more like 'hear-t'. Another example would be 'car' in British English and pronounced 'car' in American English.

Americans also often pronounce 't's differently. This is obvious in a word like 'water', which would sound more like it's spelt with a 'd' in the American pronunciation - 'wah-der'. Another example is the word 'totally' which would be pronounced 'to-dally' by Americans.

In a word like mountain, the 't' wouldn't be pronounced at all and would sound like 'moun-n' in America.

Another subtle difference in pronunciation is demonstrated in which syllable is emphasised. For example A-dult in Britain and a-DULT in America. Also week-END in Britain and WEEK-end in America.

Vocabulary

The differences in vocabulary between American and British English are probably the most confusing and can cause the most error in understanding. There are lots of differences in words used every day and I'm going to list a few of the most common -

In the UK Mary lives in a **flat**, but in the US she lives in an **apartment**.

In the UK students attend **university** but in the US they attend **college**.

In the UK we go on **holiday** every summer, but Americans take a **vacation**.

In the British autumn, Paul wears a **jumper**, but in an American autumn he wears a **sweater**.

I love to wear Converse Allstar **trainers** and Britney, from the US, loves her Converse Allstar **sneakers**.

James, from the UK, likes drinking **fizzy drinks**, but when he's in the US he drinks **soda**.

Katie often orders Chinese **takeaway** in London, but when she's in New York she orders Chinese **takeout**.

British people love to eat **biscuits** with their tea and Americans call these **cookies**.

A British person would visit the **chemist** to buy his/her painkillers and an American would go to the **drug store**.

British people love to play **football** and in the US the same game is called **soccer**.

Things can get even more confusing when the same word in British English means something totally different in American English. One common example is the word 'pants'. In America 'pants' means trousers, but in the UK it means underwear !

Another example is the word 'gas' which refers to petrol in the US but it is not used for refuelling cars in the UK.

Something interesting about the English language is that Americans have borrowed some Spanish words and the British have borrowed some French words. For example, the herb cilantro (Spanish) in the US is coriander (French) in the UK. And the vegetable zucchini (Spanish) in the US is courgette (French) in the UK.

Spelling

A common spelling difference between British and American English is changing an 's' for a 'z'. For example - organise, emphasise, familiarise, analyse etc, are all spelt with 'ze' instead of 'se' at the end. This is because the Americans preferred to spell words how they sound.

Some irregular verbs in the UK, ending in 't' were made regular in the US by ending in 'ed', for example dreamt became dreamed, burnt became burned and learnt became learned.

You might notice, with the word 'colour', that in American English the 'u' is left out (color). This is also true for behaviour (behavior), humour (humor) and flavour (flavor). Again, you can see that American English sounds like how it is written in these examples too.

Something else you will notice is that sometimes British English uses double 'l' whilst Americans use single 'l' - for example in the word 'travelled'. However, confusingly, this can be the opposite in some cases. For example 'skilful' in British English uses two single 'l's but Americans would use two double 'l's (skilful/skillfull).

I've included a list of some other common spelling differences, as well as vocabulary, in the transcription at the end so that you can learn them in your own time.

Every day phrases

I remember, when I was younger, meeting an American who used the phrase 'what's up?' as a greeting. I was so confused and didn't know how to answer. I felt like saying 'uhh nothing, there's nothing wrong with me!', I didn't know what the right response was and I had to ask him what to say, it sounded so strange to me !

The phrase 'what's up?' hasn't become popular in Britain, however an obvious consequence of globalisation, travel, media and films etc, is that we've become very influenced by each other, but mostly American English being incorporated into British English, particularly in every day phrases.

Words such as 'cool' and 'awesome' originated in the US but are very popular words used by younger generations here in the UK. Also, phrases such as 'no way!', 'you're welcome' and 'have a nice day' are also American but commonly used by many British people.

There are also some differences in grammar between British and American English but I can talk about those in another episode if you're interested to know more ! Please do send me a message via the contact form on my website -

www.britishenglishlanguage.com to let me know what kind of content you would be interested in listening to.

Thank you so much for joining me in this episode of The British English Language Podcast ! I really hope you found the information useful and I hope you'll join me for the next episode too. Have a nice day and I'll see you next time !

Further examples

Spelling differences -

| UK | US |
|------------|-----------|
| Aeroplane | Airplane |
| Programme | Program |
| Grey | Gray |
| Theatre | Theater |
| Centre | Center |
| Metre | Meter |
| Practise | Practice |
| Catalogue | Catalog |
| Fulfil | Fulfill |
| Cancelled | Canceled |
| Marvellous | Marvelous |
| Offence | Offense |
| Anaemia | Anemia |
| Tyre | Tire |

Vocab differences -

| UK | US |
|---------------------|--------------|
| Ground floor | First floor |
| Underground train | Subway |
| Chips | French fries |
| Crisps | Chips |
| Shop | Store |
| The cinema | The movies |
| Carpark | Parking lot |
| Lift | Elevator |
| City centre | Downtown |
| Bonnet (of the car) | Hood |
| Boot (of the car) | Trunk |
| Lorry | Truck |
| Postbox | Mailbox |
| High Street | Main Street |