

Some differences between US and UK English

I started keeping these notes some 35 years ago, and much of the usage may be a little outdated.

1. Grammar

There is little significant difference between the grammar of North American English (AE) and British English (BE), and as BE today is widely exposed to the influence of its AE cousin these few differences seem to be disappearing. The following generalisations may be worth noting

Throughout this 'Grammar' section examples of AE are given in ***bold italic text*** and BE in *plain italic text*.

1. AE tends to use the simple past to give news where BE is more likely to use the present perfect:

Did you hear the news?
The President (just) resigned
Have you heard the news?
The President has (just) resigned.

Notice that with the word 'just' speakers of BE generally use the present perfect. BE speakers do the same with sentences including the words 'already', 'yet', and 'ever' whereas AE speakers also use the simple past:

Did you see that movie already?
I didn't see that movie yet
Have you seen that film already?
I haven't seen that film yet

Not all AE speakers do this: some adopt BE usage and some speakers of BE use the versions given above as AE.

2. The verb 'have' is used rather differently in the two varieties. Some observations:
 - i) Older BE speakers tend to use the verb 'have' with the auxiliary 'do' for repeated actions or habits and the auxiliary 'have' with 'got' to refer to the present:

Do you have classes on Fridays?
Have you got a class today?

For present activity AE speakers are more than likely to say

Do you have a class today?

- ii) Some older BE speakers will use a stressed form of 'have' in short question forms:

Have you a class today?

and in longer sentences, with a more formal style:

The school has not the capacity to increase the intake

We even see this in contracted forms:

I've to see the Headmaster today

These three uses are not usually present in AE.

- iii) Some AE speakers may drop the 've in sentences like

I got to go.
Seems we got a problem here.

- iv) AE speakers will at times mix auxiliaries in tags:

John's got a new car. He does?

BE speakers always use the same tag:

John's got a new car. Has he?

- 3) The word 'gotten' is not used at all in present day BE. In AE 'gotten' is the past participle of the verb 'get', except in the structure 'have got' discussed in 2 iii) and 2 iv) above.
- 4) With sensory verbs ('see', 'hear', 'feel', 'smell' and 'taste'), Standard BE does not use continuous tenses, preferring to use the auxiliary 'can':

I can see you

Can you hear that noise?

AE often uses the simple present in these cases:

I see you

Do you hear that noise

- 5) The past tenses of many verbs are different. Some comments:
- i) Verbs like 'dream', 'burn', 'learn', 'smell', etc., which in BE have two possible past forms (although favouring the +/t/ form), are regular in AE.
 - ii) The past tense of 'eat' ('ate') is pronounced differently; in AE it's /eɪt/ and in BE it's usually /et/.
 - iii) The past tense of 'wake' in AE is often 'waked'; in BE always 'woke'
 - iv) The past tense and past participle of 'spit' in AE is both 'spit' and 'spat'; in BE is usually 'spat' only.
 - v) The verbs 'quit' and 'wet' are regular in BE but irregular in AE where they do not change for past or past participle.
 - vi) The verb 'dive' is regular in BE (dive-dived-dived) but is often irregular in AE (dive-dove-dived).
- 6) AE is more likely to use a subjunctive form in formal 'that clauses' after certain verbs, such as 'ask', 'suggest', 'recommend', etc. in sentences like:

I insist that John be heard

My advice is that the school hire new staff

On the whole AE is stricter in this usage although it is certainly not infrequent in BE. However, BE often inserts the word "should", as in:

I insist that John should be heard

My advice is that the school should hire new staff.

AE does not usually use 'should' in this way.

- 7) In tag replies BE often uses an extra (and optional) 'do', 'does' or 'done' after the principal auxiliary:

John should have gone to school. He has (done).

I don't smoke as much as I used to (do).

AE would not usually use the words in brackets in these examples.

- 8) With nouns that can have singular or plural connotations ('family', 'committee', 'team') BE will use either a singular or a plural verb, depending on whether the group is seen as a single collective unit or as a collection of individuals. AE tends to use singular verbs only (with the exception of the word 'family') although as in BE it may use a plural pronoun referent:

The committee is in recess.

They will return at three o'clock.

- 9) When telephoning, BE speakers will use 'this' to identify themselves and 'that' to enquire about the identity of the caller:

*Upton 3189. Hello. This is John Smith.
Is that Mike Jones?*

AE speakers are more likely to use 'this' to enquire about the identity of the caller:

Who is this?

This use also seems to be on the increase in BE nowadays.

10) AE often uses 'like' in sentences like:

It looks like it's going to rain all day

BE does this too but it is perhaps more common to use 'as if':

It looks as if it's going to rain all day

The form with 'like' is quite common in BE colloquial speech but is not usually used in written or more formal contexts.

11) AE often uses 'real' as an intensifier where BE uses 'really':

This is real easy
This is really easy

The same thing happens in AE before an adverb:

She plays real well

where BE is more likely to say

She plays really well.

12) AE will usually mix the pronouns 'one' and 'his' but BE always sticks to the same pronoun

One should show respect for his elders
One should show respect for one's elders

13) There is a difference in word order with mid-position adverbs. AE frequently puts these before auxiliary verbs and parts of the verb 'be' whereas BE more commonly puts them between the auxiliary and the main verb. Compare:

It probably will rain today
It will probably rain today

The plan often has been criticized
The plan has often been criticized

In British English the first of these, **It probably will rain today**, sounds either emphatic or against expectations.

14) There are differences in prepositional usage. Compare;

The office is open Monday through Friday
The office is open from Monday to Friday

The time is ten of eight/ten after eight
The time is ten to eight/ten past eight

Let's meet Sunday
Let's meet on Sunday

They met in back of the house
They met behind the house

He threw it out the door
He threw it out of the door

Other examples are not hard to find, but these can perhaps be regarded as lexical differences rather than grammatical ones.

- 15) The word 'different' in BE is followed by the preposition 'from' (and increasingly 'to'), but in AE it is usual to say 'different than'
- 16) Time references with 'presently' and 'momentarily' can be confusing. In AE these can mean both 'now' and 'soon'. In BE 'presently' means 'soon' and 'momentarily' means 'for the time being', 'for the space of a moment'.
- 17) 'Dare', 'need', 'ought' and 'used to', used as quasi-auxiliaries, tend not to be used in AE. Where BE speakers might say:

I daren't do it
You needn't do it.
I oughtn't to have done it
? I usedn't to do it

AE equivalents are likely to be:

I don't dare do it
You don't have to do it
I shouldn't have done it
I didn't use to do it

In BE few speakers still use the *usedn't* form.

- 18) Some nouns differ in number, being singular in AE and plural in BE. Examples (AE first) include 'inning/innings', 'math/maths' and 'sport/sports'.

As stated at the beginning of this section the differences are slight and perhaps of no real significance other than their curiosity value. Nevertheless, these comments refer to standard AE and BE only, and regional dialects may show much more drastic variation. Apologies to speakers of other varieties of English too, for whom these comments may not apply at all. For reasons of space, however, discussion of these other Englishes must lie outside the scope of this article.

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