

# Some differences between US and UK English

*Note that I started keeping these notes some twenty to thirty years ago, and much of the usage may be a little outdated.*

## 5. Pronunciation

There are obviously many regional accents in both Britain and the United States and therefore the comments below are only applicable to ‘standard’ American (AE) and ‘standard’ British (BE) English, insofar as these generalisations have any meaning at all. Still, for theoretical purposes they will demonstrate ‘major’ differences, even if not applicable to individual speakers or regional varieties.

- 1) Stressed vowels tend to be drawn out longer in AE than in BE. Consequently speakers of BE often say that AE speakers ‘drawl’, while speakers of AE comment that British speech is ‘clipped’.
- 2) There is a tendency in AE for vowels to be nasalised (air comes out of the nose and mouth at the same time). This is unusual in BE and makes a big difference to the overall sound.
- 3) Although most vowels are somewhat different in AE and BE there are several cases which are particularly so:
  - i) the vowel in words like ‘go’ and ‘bone’ is a diphthong (double vowel) in BE (/əʊ/). In AE it is shorter, perhaps becoming a monophthong (single vowel), /oʊ/ or /ɔ:/.
  - ii) In BE the vowel in words like ‘pot’ and ‘not’ is pronounced with the lips in a rounded position (/ʊ/). This lip rounding is absent in AE and the sound is more like the /ɑ:/ in ‘car’ and ‘heart’ or the /ɔ:/ in ‘caught’, depending on the speaker. In fact it is probably true to say that the BE vowel /ʊ/ does not exist in AE.
  - iii) The back vowel /ɑ:/ in BE in words like ‘glass’ and ‘castle’ tends in AE to be more of an /æ/ (as in ‘cat’ and ‘battle’).
  - iv) For many speakers of AE ‘marry’, ‘merry’ and ‘Mary’ sound the same. In BE the three vowels, /æ/, /e/ and /eə/ respectively, are quite clearly distinguished. Conversely, the words ‘paw’, ‘pour’ and ‘poor’ are homophonous for many speakers of BE.
- 4) Standard BE is non-rhotic, that is the sound /r/ is not pronounced before a consonant or after a vowel when the vowel is at the end of a word. AE pronounces the ‘r’ in these cases. So words like ‘bar’, ‘bird’ and ‘offer’ will sound very different.
- 5) In AE alveolar plosives (/t/ and /d/) both tend to be voiced when they occur between vowels. Because of this, the words ‘writer’ and ‘rider’ sound very similar, if not indistinguishable. The /t/ in BE is not usually voiced between two vowels and therefore /t/ and /d/ always sound different.
- 6) Similarly when AE has a sequence of vowel + /nt/ + vowel (as in the word ‘twenty’) the /t/ may often be eliminated, the word sounding more like /twenti/. In BE this would be unusual. Generally both the /n/ and /t/ are sounded as in /twenti/.
- 7) BE often inserts a /j/ sound (as in the word ‘yes’) before a /u:/ sound, written ‘-ew’ or ‘-u’. So in BE words like ‘new’ and ‘tube’ are pronounced /nju:/ and /tju:b/ or even /tʃu:b/ “choob” for some speakers, whereas in AE they would be pronounced /nu:/ and /tu:b/, without the /j/. This is sometimes referred to as yod-dropping, the yod being a common name for the symbol /j/.
- 8) BE often reduces words more than AE, so words may have fewer syllables. For example, the word ‘literary’ in spoken BE usually has two syllables only (/li/ + /tri/) whereas in AE it has three and sometimes four.
- 9) In BE words ending in the suffix ‘-tile’ are pronounced with more stress on the last syllable, an /aɪ/ vowel, as in ‘futile’ and ‘missile’ (/fju:taɪl/ and /mɪsaɪl/). AE does not stress the second syllable at all which is as likely as not to be a syllabic (/fʊtl/ and /mɪsl/).

- 10) In fact there are many individual words that are pronounced differently. The word 'vase' is /vɑːz/ in BE but /veɪz/ in AE. And words like 'thorough' and 'borough' are /θʌrə/ and /bʌrə/ in BE but /θʌrəʊ/.

Martin Eayrs <[martin@eayrs.com](mailto:martin@eayrs.com)>