

British english vs. american english essay sample

[Linguistics](#), [Language](#)



As English continues to assert its dominance as a leading language used worldwide, it's no wonder to learn that it is now an acknowledged global language and the standards that its users hold it to will splinter and change over time. Most of the variance can be attributed to differing national histories and cultural development. Today, English is used in a range of contexts around the world as the native language of millions, the official language of numerous nations, and as a lingua franca in a multitude of international purposes. Undoubtedly due to these shifts in globalization, "more users of English than ever before feel some connection to the language, especially through their national dialect" (Adger, Wolfran & Christian, 2007, p. 2). The key question in this paper is, "what are the most prominent differences between American and British English syntax?"

The purpose of this paper is to further explain these findings related to the key question in the areas of grammar, spelling, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Additionally, implications for teaching various English dialects in the classroom will be included. For many years, the only standard for properly spoken and written English was Standard British English (SBE). McArthur (2001) states: Standard American English (SAE) holds similar prestige on the world stage thanks to the growth of the United States' prominence as a global power and, with the advent of the computer age; word processing software has nudged standards towards SAE conventions (p. 6). However, the question is increasingly being asked: who really has the right to decide what is standard for a language with hundreds of millions of users around the world? According to Adger, Wolfram, & Christian (2007), "Standard English (SE) is seen as a dual standard of the U. S. and U. K.

conventions and still seems to be the goal of language learning programs around the world" (p. 4).

Distinctions between phonological domains, lexical oppositions, and pragmatics have aided in the separation of SBE and SAE. Furthermore, regional syntactic variations within the United Kingdom and the United States also contribute to confusion with English speakers. There are several grammatical differences between American and British English, especially in the area of noun, complementation, verbs, and verb tenses. Although the differences between the American and British application of grammar and are not tremendously profound, they are significant in our analysis of both uses. In SBE, according to Rohdenburg and Schlüter (2010), " collective nouns may take either the singular or plural verb forms, while in American English typically collective nouns are typically singular in construction" (p. 29). An example to demonstrate this finding for British English usage would be: " The army were training up the mountain." Comparatively, the SAE example would read: " The army was training up the mountain." As mentioned previously, SBE may take either form.

When exploring the grammatical concept of possession, there are two widely recognized forms to express this concept, ' have' and ' have got.'

Yiakoumetti (2007) mentions, " while both grammatical forms are correct in SBE and SAE, ' have got' is generally the preferred form in British English" (p. 58). An example for ' have got' would include: " Have you got a car?" and contrastively, an example for ' have' is: " Do you have a car?" Another variance in the examination of SBE and SAE grammar is the use of

prepositions when describing a location. Algeo (2001) affirms, “ in SAE, one always speaks of the street ‘ on’ which an address is located, whereas in SBE ‘ in’ may be used in several contexts such” (p. 163). Lastly, another grammatical difference between British and American English is the use of certain verb tenses. As stated by Rohdenburg and Schlüter (2010), “ in British English, the present perfect is used to express an action that has occurred in the recent past that has an effect on the present moment” (p. 10). An example of this form would be: “ I’ve lost my keys.” The use of this form is acceptable in SAE; however, the simple past tense form would be more frequently used to describe an event that has recently occurred in the past.

There are several words in American and British English that are spelled differently but pronounced in the same way. Scott (2004) states, “ according to The Oxford Companion to the English Language, major differences between documents written in British English and those written in American English are in their spellings” (p. 158). These subtle changes can be traced back to Noah Webster. Scragg (1974) explains that, “ English spelling was not yet standardized in the 18th century, therefore many of the proposed changes came from Noah Webster himself” (p. 82). The table below illustrates a contrast of some of the words spelled differently, but with similar pronunciation. British English American English

Analogue Analog

Grey Gray

Centre Center

RecogniseRecognize

FavourFavor

As demonstrated above, the comparisons show that certain words in SBE ending in the unstressed '-ue' or '-our' are spelled in SAE eliminating the 'u' completely. Additionally, Algeo (2001) points out, "some words from French, Latin, or Greek origins end with a consonant followed by 're' in British English whereas these words have '-er' as the ending" (p. 104). It is important to note that there are exceptions to this usage as Algeo states, "the difference in these spellings relate only to root words; '-er' rather than '-re' is universal as a suffix for agentive and comparative forms (p. 103). Lastly, a common difference in SBE and SAE spelling are the widely noticed '-ize' and '-ise' endings. Algeo (2001) adds, "for Greek-derived spellings, British English most commonly uses the '-ise' ending" (p. 109). Perhaps the largest separation between British and American English comes from the differences in vocabulary.

McArthur (2001) states, "most of the differences in lexis or vocabulary between British and American English are in connection with concepts originating from the 19th century to the mid 20th century, when new words were coined independently" (p. 4). Mahmood, Mahmood and Talaat (2011) add that, "the differences in vocabularies throughout American and British English are comprised mainly of nouns, which being the building blocks of a language, exhibit more differences than verbs or any other word class (p. 768). The following table gives a small number of vocabularies in American

and British English that have similar meaning: British English American English

Flat Apartment

Sweets Candy

Petrol Gasoline

Trainers Sneakers

Queue Line

Jumper Sweater

Mahmood, Mahmood and Talaat (2011) also point out that, “ the differences between the two types of English, American and British are mutually unintelligible by their speakers and often prefer the use of one vocabulary to the other” (p. 763). However, speakers of these two languages do not emphasize on their use and they can opt to interchange or eliminate them. Though the effect of cross-culture media has done a great deal to acquaint American English speakers and British English speakers with each other’s regional words and terms, according to Crystal (2003): Many words are still recognized as part of a single form of English and though the use of a British word would be acceptable in SAE (and vice versa), most listeners would recognize the word as coming from the other form of English and treat it much the same as a word borrowed from any other language (p. 31).

It is important to point out that the several examples shown throughout this examination demonstrating grammar forms, spelling, and vocabulary are not completely exhaustive of the variances between SBE and SAE spelling. There are distinctive features in British English pronunciation considerably different

from those in American English. Rohdenburg and Schlüter (2010) state, “ the same words in both English dialects will often have different pronunciation and spellings but bear the same meaning (p. 67). As such, both the spelling and the pronunciation are clearly noticeable. The following table provides some examples of this: British English American English

Criticise Criticize

Analyse Analyze

Aluminium Aluminum

Garage Garage

Based on this list of words, all of which are pronounced and spelled differently and are clearly recognizable as having the same meaning.

Paatero (2002) asserts, “ in the case of different pronunciation throughout words shared by British and American English speakers, the same underlying concept and general likeness of the words remain.” On the other hand, other words in SBE and SAE have a higher variation in pronunciation compared to those illustrated above. As shown by Rohdenburg and Schlüter (2010), “ words such as ‘ fire’, ‘ lord’, and ‘ farm,’ the letter ‘ r’ has a fricative pronunciation in American English and kept silent when using British English, in exception of when followed immediately by a vowel” (p. 8). In addition, Berg (1999) concludes that “ American pronunciation of the first syllable of words like ‘ steward’ and ‘ duke,’ sound like they contain a ‘ u’, whereas one can hear the low front ‘ ae’ in words like ‘ path,’ ‘ half,’ and ‘ glass.” The differences in pronunciation between SBE and SAE are somewhat considerable and according to Rohdenburg and Schlüter (2010), “

word and sentence stressing in American English pronunciation is weaker than in British pronunciation" (p. 9).

In addition to examining the differences between SBE and SAE, the benefits of this study are important when considering the significance of dialects in an English language-learning (ELL) classroom. Adger, Wolfran and Christian (2007) imply, " as a society, we still harbor language prejudice to a far greater degree than we tolerate other ethnically related bias, at least publicly" (p. 6). Little has been done to develop scientifically based language awareness about English dialects in an ELL classroom. According to Adger, Wolfran, and Christian (2007), " educational programs typically do not thoroughly explore the dialectal differences that are clearly manifested in the communities they serve or confront the complex social attitudes surrounding variation in English" (p. 8). Studies in dialect diversities could serve to answer questions in disparities within English. This is incredibly relevant, especially when the high-stakes international tests of English proficiency are normed to either British or American English standards.

The goal of the concise research presented was to assess the differences between that of Standard British and Standard American English syntax. In doing so, findings directly addressed a sample of differences within the syntactic areas of grammar, spelling, vocabulary, and pronunciation.

With comparison to research, the areas addressed yielded specific differences, however they were minor. The issue of these dialects in a language learning classroom environment was also briefly explored, yet research was insufficient to attribute any effects on language learners. In

conclusion, it is presumed that these factors in dialectical differences should be addressed on an individual basis to better understand how certain language learners may be influenced by their use and on their language learning process. Being mindful of these will likely benefit a learner's success rate in learning a second language.

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