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Course paper

American and British-English vocabulary differences

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Introduction

The history of the English language really started with the arrival of three Germanic tribes who invaded Britain during the 5th century AD. These tribes, the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes, crossed the North Sea from what today is Denmark and northern Germany. At that time the inhabitants of Britain spoke a Celtic language. But most of the Celtic speakers were pushed west and north by the invaders - mainly into what is now Wales, Scotland and Ireland. The Angles came from "Englaland" [sic] and their language was called "Englisc" - from which the words "England" and "English" are derived.

Old English (450-1100 AD)

The invading Germanic tribes spoke similar languages, which in Britain developed into what we now call Old English. Old English did not sound or look like English today. Native English speakers now would have great difficulty understanding Old English. Nevertheless, about half of the most commonly used words in Modern English have Old English roots. The words be, strong and water, for example, derive from Old English. Old English was spoken until around 1100.

Middle English (1100-1500)

In 1066 William the Conqueror, the Duke of Normandy (part of modern France), invaded and conquered England. The new conquerors (called the Normans) brought with them a kind of French, which became the language of the Royal Court, and the ruling and business classes. For a period there was a kind of linguistic class division, where the lower classes spoke English and the upper classes spoke French. In the 14th century English became dominant in Britain again, but with many French words added. This language is called Middle English. It was the language of the great poet Chaucer (c1340-1400), but it would still be difficult for native English speakers to understand today.

Early Modern English (1500-1800)

Towards the end of Middle English, a sudden and distinct change in pronunciation (the Great Vowel Shift) started, with vowels being pronounced shorter and shorter. From the 16th century the British had contact with many peoples from around the world.

This, and the Renaissance of Classical learning, meant that many new words and phrases entered the language. The invention of printing also meant that there was now a common language in print. Books became cheaper and more people learned to read. Printing also brought standardization to English. Spelling and grammar became fixed, and the dialect of London, where most publishing houses were, became the standard. In 1604 the first English dictionary was published.

Example of Early Modern English

Hamlet's famous "To be, or not to be" lines, written in Early Modern English by Shakespeare

Late Modern English (1800-Present)

The main difference between Early Modern English and Late Modern English is vocabulary. Late Modern English has many more words, arising from two principal factors: firstly, the Industrial Revolution and technology created a need for new words; secondly, the British Empire at its height covered one quarter of the earth's surface, and the English language adopted foreign words from many countries.

British English and American English

“Two nations divided by a common language” was how George Bernard Shaw (or any number of other people to whom the quote has been attributed) described Britain and the USA. Culturally, the two countries are further apart than you might be tempted to think, but just how similar are the English spoken in Britain and American English?

While it is true that there are plenty of differences between the English spoken in the UK and that of the USA, the first thing to point out is that Brits and Americans can understand each other perfectly well.

Anecdotally, some American people find certain British dialects harder to understand whereas Brits are more used to American English (AmE as linguists write it) due to exposure through movies, music and endless reruns of *How I Met Your Mother*.

As a learner of English, the choice of whether to learn British English or American English is much less important than your choice of study destination. For example, if you want to combine an English course with surfing, you are better off in Santa Monica than South London. If you want to be in a city where history lives around you, then London is the better choice. And there is also Australia, Canada, India, Ireland, New Zealand and South Africa, each with its own variety (sometimes varieties) of English.

What's more, if you are a non-native speaker, your English is likely to be the English of the future... more people now speak English as a second or third language than as a mother tongue.

But there are differences between American English and British English, and here are some of them:

Vocabulary

There are plenty of examples of words that are different in the US English and British English and it can be interesting how these differences came to exist in the first place. Some words became necessary long after the USA gained independence and no longer looked to London for guidance. Automotive vocabulary is one area where the two varieties have many different words:

American English

British English

trunk boot

hood bonnet

sidewalk pavement

gasoline petrol

parking lot car park

...and there are dozens of other words which vary for the same reason.

There are another group of words that vary in the two countries for historical reasons. The American word fall predates the British autumn, which only became the favoured British English word after the American civil war, when French was highly fashionable. The USA kept the older word. The same is true with candy (sweets in Britain) and faucet (tap in Britain). Meanwhile some older English words like fortnight, meaning two weeks, have fallen out of use in the USA, but are still in common use in Britain and the Commonwealth countries.

Check out this list of vocabulary differences. You should watch out for a couple of them... aneraser (AmE) is a rubber in Britain. In the USA, rubber is a colloquial term for a condom.

Pronunciation & dialects

American English is much more homogenous than British English, meaning it is often harder to tell where in the USA someone is from just by hearing their accent. Linguists have identified somewhere between 6 and 25 American dialects, although the major divisions are between Northern, Midland and Southern dialects, which are roughly grouped together.

When looking at the map, bear in mind that dialects/accents don't have clear borders – instead you have what is called a dialect continuum, where differences accumulate gradually (particularly in rural areas).

American history is a history of migration, both from overseas and within the country, so accents constantly mixed as people moved around the country.

A couple of things make American pronunciation distinct from British, notably that most varieties of American English are “rhotic”, meaning that the r sound is nearly always pronounced anywhere in a word, which it isn't in most British dialects. So the word butter, for example, ends with an r sound in most US varieties, with an uh sound in most British varieties (although not in Scotland, Ireland or the south-west of England).

There is greater variety of dialects in Great Britain because the language developed over a millennium and a half, from a mix of languages spoken by various settlers from elsewhere in Europe. Families stayed in the same place for generations. This meant that the language developed differently from town to town. Liverpool and Manchester, for example, have highly distinct accents despite being less than 60km apart.

You will inevitably take on some of the accent of the place in which you learn. This is a good thing! Your accent will be a part of your own story whether you learn British, American, South African, Australian or any other form of English.

Spelling

London-pigeon

photo: Tom Hammond

There are a number of differences between British and American spelling. In America, for example, it is rare for a word to end with –re, whereas this is common in Britain. Some examples include center (centre) and meter (metre). American English also drops the u in British words like colour (color) and flavour (flavor) and an l in traveller (traveler) and reveller (reveler).

The man chiefly responsible for these differences was Noah Webster, whose name you will still find on the front of America's most popular dictionaries. He wanted to simplify English spelling and saw the political benefits of a new country having its own language. For more on this topic, see our post on why English spelling is complicated.

Some irregular verb endings are also commonly used in British English but not in American English, for example burnt (burned in AmE), learnt (learned), smelt (smelled)... although you would be unlikely to notice the difference in conversation.

Grammar

There are subtle differences between British and American grammar that have developed over the centuries, for example:

BrE: Metallica are playing in London tonight.

AmE: Metallica is playing in Boston tonight.

BrE: Our team are here to help.

AmE: Our team is here to help.

In British English, group nouns like team and squad can be singular or plural; in American English they are singular. Names of bands or teams are always plural in British English, singular in American English.

BrE: He's finally got over her.

AmE: He's finally gotten over her.

In American English, gotten is the past participle of the verb to get. This is one of the more distinctive elements of American English as get is such a common verb.

BrE: Monday to Friday inclusive.

AmE: Monday through Friday.

You will often hear the American version in Britain now.

BrE: The judge ordered that he should be imprisoned.

AmE: The judge ordered that he be imprisoned.

Somewhat surprisingly, corpus study shows that the subjunctive is much more common in American English than British English, although it is making a comeback in the UK too. This is interesting because it was common in Britain centuries ago but gradually fell out of use (with Brits using "should" to indicate the subjunctive, or just using indicative forms instead) until the twentieth century.

How did English become the world's most widely spoken language?

Five hundred years ago, between five and seven million people spoke English, almost all of them living in the British Isles. Now, anywhere up to 1.8 billion people around the world speak English.

How did this happen?

The growth of English has nothing to do with the structure of the language, or any inherent qualities, and everything to do with politics.

The British Empire

After developing for almost a millennium on the British Isles, English was taken around the world by the sailors, soldiers, pilgrims, traders and missionaries of the British Empire. By the time anything resembling a language policy was introduced, English had already reached all corners of the globe.

For example, English-speaking puritans were not the only Europeans to arrive in North America: Spanish, French, Dutch and German were also widely spoken. All of the languages were reinforced by waves of immigration from Europe in the following centuries.

British-Empire

But in the process of designing a “United” States, the USA’s founders knew the importance of language for national identity. English was the majority language and had to be encouraged. As recently as the start of the 20th Century, several states banned the teaching of foreign languages in private schools and homes. The U.S. Supreme Court only struck down restrictions on private language education in 1923.

Even today, English is not the official language of the USA, but there is no question that it is the dominant language in practice.

And it wasn’t just America that said “hello” to English. At one point in the early twentieth century, the British Empire expanded across almost a quarter of the world’s surface, not including the USA. According to a popular saying, “the sun never set on the British Empire”.

Nowadays, the sun has set on the empire, but English remains an important language in every single former colony.

Gone but not forgotten

In most of the British Empire, the main goal was trade so fewer Britons actually settled. This explains why English did not come to dominate colonies in Asia and Africa, where it was the language of business, administration and education, but not the language of the people.

British-Empire-colonies

To this day, English has a key administrative role in these former colonies. For a long time, access to English meant access to education, whether in the mission schools in Africa or the first universities in India. This created an English-speaking elite in some of the world's most populous countries, and elites are good at self-preservation.

Post-independence, many countries became officially multilingual for the first time, but the various groups needed a language for communication with each other and with other nations. Again, that was English. English is now the dominant or official language in 75 territories: a direct legacy of the British Empire.

In countries where large settler colonies were formed, such as Australia, Canada and the USA, native languages and cultures have been pushed to near-extinction by the presence of English.

It was not the first language of European colonialism; Portuguese and Dutch left the continent earlier. And, as recently as the 19th century, English wasn't the world's lingua franca (as the term suggests, French was the number one language of international communication). So something must have happened more recently to give the language its unique international status.

Without the rise of the USA in the 20th Century, the world's language landscape would look very different.

Two world wars and the rise of the USA

While Europe was rebuilding in the years after 1945, the USA boomed. American businesses picked up where the British East India Company had left off centuries before, taking English around the world as a language of trade. The influence of American business, combined with the tradition of English left around the world by the British Empire, have made English the number one language of international trade in the 21st Century. All of the world's top business schools now teach in English.

English is now the most widely spoken foreign language in 19 of the 25 EU Member States where it is not an official language. The 6 states where English is not number one also show the importance of politics in language policy: Russian is the most widely spoken foreign language in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia; Croatian the most commonly spoken in Slovenia; and Czech the most widely spoken in Slovakia.

americana-montage

But the cultural legacy of the post-war decades is also very important to the growth of English as a world language.

As well as sending money across the Atlantic, the USA provided the soundtrack through rock and roll, jazz and, later, disco and hip hop. Hollywood movies became global sensations and American television series became cultural reference points. American culture was everywhere, radiating confidence and success; just the things for a world that had been ravaged by war.

It wasn't just American music that brought English into the world's discotheques and homes. British bands including the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Queen, Pink Floyd, the Police or Led Zeppelin ensured that Britannia ruled the airwaves, if not the waves.

The hippy movement came from San Francisco and London. Music festivals including the Isle of Wight and Woodstock became iconic for a whole generation, whether English speakers or not.

This "soft power" continues today...

English is "cool"

Advertisers pride themselves on riding the cultural zeitgeist; creating consumer desire through making products sexy. One of the ways they do this is through using English words. Check out Der Spiegel's German examples, La Razon's Spanish examples, Slate.fr's French ones and La Repubblica's Italian ones.

Now-hiring

Many examples of English in advertising come from multinational companies, who wish to keep their message consistent across markets, but some examples are local firms looking for that elusive element of glamour that English can bring. Of course, this happens in English too: haute couture and Eau de Toilette sound much sexier untranslated.

Bands release their work in English to reach the largest possible audience. Filmmakers too. This invisible pressure to produce creative works in English adds to the cultural momentum the language developed in the second half of the Twentieth Century.

The style-conscious language of extreme sports is English: snowboarders ollie, fakie and rodeo whether they are Canadian, Swiss or Japanese.

The word “cool” itself has been assimilated into various languages.

Science & Technology

The global power of the USA coincided with the birth of popular computing, and English is the language of the technological revolution and the internet. Consider a keyboard for example; they are designed for Latin characters, so speakers of Asian languages (particularly) use complicated techniques to enter words.

What happens inside the devices is also dominated by English. The USA remains the most innovative technological nation and, because of the language policy of the nation’s founders, English is the dominant language.

Pull not push

Apart from the efforts of some early colonisers, hundreds of years ago, the success of English has more to do with “pull” than “push”. People in British colonies who wanted an education would receive that education in English. Artists who want to reach the largest audience for their work can do that in English. If you want to trade internationally, you will need to speak English. And you don’t have to speak English to have a successful career, but it certainly helps.

Will English remain number one?

Some people suggest that English has become ubiquitous because it is “easy to learn” or especially flexible, but a glance backwards suggests that this is irrelevant. Despite a devilishly complex case system, Latin was Europe’s most influential language for over a thousand years (and its descendents are still going strong). People learned Latin then for the same reasons they learn English now: to get ahead in life and have access to knowledge. Yet now Latin is only spoken by priests and scholars.

Languages and borders change over time, but English is likely to remain the world’s number one language during our lifetimes.

Why is English spelling so irregular?

As the world's international language, English has a lot going for it. For one thing, it's quite easy to learn for speakers of other European languages.

Nouns only have a single gender, so it is "the little girl", unlike "la niña" (Spanish) or "das Mädchen" (German). The cases are relatively simple (unlike many Slavic languages) and there are hardly any declensions to remember (I walk, you walk, they walk, and so on).

English spelling, on the other hand, is complicated and often illogical. You don't say what you see.

dictionary

Photo: crdotx

Have you ever wondered why the letters "ough" can be pronounced in so many different ways (/oʊ/ as in "though", /u:/ as in "through", /ʌf/ as in "rough", /ɒf/ as in "cough", /ɔː/ as in "thought", /aʊ/ as in "bough", /ə/ as in "thorough"?)

Or why there are so many silent letters like the k in knee and knock, the c in science or the h in ghost? Or why the letters "bow" can mean two different things depending on how they are pronounced? Or why Brits and Americans spell some words differently?

The truth is, people have struggled to spell in English for as long as people have been trying to write English.

First attempts to write English

st_augustine_of_canterbury

After the Romans left in the fifth century, various Germanic tribes invaded and settled in England, bringing with them the language that forms the basis of modern English. But the Roman alphabet that we use today didn't arrive until Christian missionary Augustine of Canterbury landed in 597AD.

Augustine's missionaries used the Roman alphabet to write down the language they heard, but the alphabet only had 23 letters while there were around 35 sounds. The Christians borrowed a couple of Runic letters to describe the sounds (like the ð that you still find in Icelandic) but still had to stick Roman letters together in ways they were not designed for.

The trouble with English spelling had begun!

Normans

When the Vikings invaded England in the eighth century, it's very likely they could understand what the Anglo Saxons were saying because the Germanic languages – which included the language of the Vikings – were closer together than they are today.

But when the Normans invaded in 1066, they spoke French. And they had no intention of learning English.

For the next two hundred years, French was the language of the English aristocracy, of the government and the courts. Most aristos didn't bother to learn English. Why would they? But the common people continued to speak English.

When the Normans lost Normandy and became, well, English, they started switching to the English language of the land they ruled. But English had hardly been written for over 200 years; all official text had been written in French and anything related to the universities or clergy was in Latin. So the scribes tried to write down what they heard and were pretty inconsistent.

They applied French spelling conventions to English words, so *cwen* became *queen*, *cirice* became *church* and *c* was used instead of *s* in words like *cell* and *circle*. They also struggled with English handwriting, where *u*, *v*, *n* and *m* all looked very similar. So they replaced *u* with *o* in words like *done* and *come*.

At the same time, thousands of French and Latin words were entering the English language. The scribes kept the original French spelling for some (*table*, *double*, *centre*) but changed the spelling of others to reflect their English pronunciation (e.g. *beef*, *battle*, *government*, *mountain*).

This was a wild time for English spelling as the concept of “correct” spelling didn't really exist. People also spelled according to their local dialect.

The printing press

By the time William Caxton brought the printing press to England in 1497, French and English had become well and truly mixed. English was also filling up with new foreign words to describe the concepts that arrived with the Renaissance, as people rediscovered classical texts and became open to new ideas for which English had no words. Unlike most languages, English happily took words from other languages, often with no attempt to officially anglicise them.

Irregular spelling was a problem for the printers, who wanted consistency but had to appeal to the maximum possible number of readers. Which dialect should they

choose as the basis of written English? They chose the London English of Chaucer, whose *Canterbury Tales* was the first book printed in English. You can see a digitised version on the British Library website.

The printing press brought with it the idea of correct spelling. But it also brought some new spelling confusion to English. For example, because many of the printers were Dutch, they used Dutch spellings for words like ghost, aghast, ghastly and gherkin, which keep their silent h to this day. Other words like ghospel, ghossip and ghizzard lost their Dutch h over the years.

What's more, Caxton's timing was unfortunate for future generations of English spellers...

The Great Vowel Shift

The printing press gave English spelling a big push towards standardisation. English pronunciation, on the other hand, was anything but steady and the century after the arrival of the printing press saw major changes in the way English was spoken.

For example, words like he, she, knee, name, fine and be were pronounced as they were spelled when the printing press arrived. Much like a German would pronounce those letters nowadays. But during the next century, the pronunciation changed to roughly what English people use today. No one is really sure why. But spelling did not change to reflect the new pronunciation.

At this point, English was full of unusual pronunciations and silent letters. The situation wasn't helped by...

Scholars
Scholars

English is unique among the world's most popular languages in that it doesn't have an academy to say how the language should develop.

L'Académie française, for example, seems to spend most of its time nowadays keeping English words out of French. Which is quite funny really, when you consider how many French words came in the other direction

The lack of an official academy is also one reason why English spelling is complicated.

During the 16th and 17th centuries in particular, lots of scholars came up with ideas for improving English. One of these was to alter spelling to reflect the

classical roots of some words. For example, b was added to the word debt to reflect its relationship to the Latin debitum. Up until this point, it had been spelled and pronounced dette. A b was added to doubt (from dubitare). Rime became rhyme (from the Greek rhythmus). And so on. These letters have never been pronounced in English.

But the scholars didn't always get it right. For example the s in island was added because they thought the word came from the Latin insula, whereas it is really an Old English word.

At the same time, changes were made illogically to other parts of English spelling, for example the ght from night and light was added to delight and tight, but not to spite and ignite.

Scholars tried to make English a neater language but ended up making it messier!

The U S of A

Modern American spelling differs from British English. This is largely due to Noah Webster, whose name you may recognise from the front of American dictionaries. In his first American dictionary in 1828, he listed words such as color, honor and favor, which would all include u in British English.

This was an attempt to remove some of the French influence in the English language! Nowadays, it just adds more confusion for learners.

Find out more [about the differences between British and American English.](#)

Why doesn't someone do something about English spelling?

Well, largely because nobody can agree on what to do.

There have been many advocates of spelling reform over the centuries, the most famous of whom were George Bernard Shaw and Teddy Roosevelt. But the issue has fallen off the agenda in recent decades and looks unlikely to resurface any time soon.

From Shakespeare to Snoop: seven people who have changed the English language

English is a wonderfully flexible language, a kind of linguistic free-for-all, where words have tumbled in and out over the centuries, from a huge variety of sources.

Here are seven people who have influenced the language we speak today.

William Shakespeare

From addiction to zany, his language was never lacklustre. He wrote with swagger and without compromise. William Shakespeare added more than 1700 words to the English language.

When he couldn't find a word to express something in a play, he would make a new one, adapting either foreign words or existing English words. Shakespeare is almost certainly the most productive person in the history of the English language.

Lisa Simpson

One of the newest words to enter the Oxford English dictionary can be traced directly to Lisa Simpson.

The man responsible for the international success of McDonald's and therefore the McPrefix: attaching "Mc" at the start of a word to suggest a kind of mass-market affordability. Examples include the McJob, McMansion and McChurch. This has spread to other languages too and Germany's largest chain of gyms is called McFit.

Noah Webster

The "Webster" in the title of American dictionaries, Noah Webster believed that great nation such as the USA needed a language of its own: American.

Or American English anyway. He is personally responsible for many of the spelling differences between British and American English, including the single "l" in traveler, the "er" in center and the "or" in flavor.

Webster made these changes in his dictionaries because he wanted English spelling to be more logical and less influenced by French. Instead he made it more complicated.

Samuel Johnson

It's hard to imagine a world without reliable dictionaries, but that is the world in which Samuel Johnson grew up. This was becoming a problem by the mid-eighteenth century: despite centuries of mass publication through the printing press, European languages were anything but organised. English in particular was a mess.

Different countries tackled the problem differently: in France, the 40 “immortals” who made up the Académie française took 55 years to produce their French Dictionnaire. The Italian equivalent took the Florentine Accademia della Crusca 30 years.

Johnson, working with six assistants, completed his dictionary in around 8 years!

It wasn't the first English dictionary, but it was comprehensive and influential. Not all of the phrases are still in use, which is a shame when they include belly-god, “one who makes a god of his belly”.

Vocabulary

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.[citation needed] Almost the entire vocabularies of the car/automobile and railway/railroad industries (see Rail terminology) are different between the UK and US, for example. Other sources of difference are slang or vulgar terms (where frequent new coinage occurs) and idiomatic phrases, including phrasal verbs. The differences most likely to create confusion are those where the same word or phrase is used for two different concepts. Regional variations, even within the US or the UK, can create the same problems.

It is not a straightforward matter to classify differences of vocabulary. David Crystal identifies some of the problems of classification on the facing page to his list of American English/British English lexical variation and states "this should be enough to suggest caution when working through an apparently simple list of equivalents".[57]

Overview of lexical differences

Note: A lexicon is not made up of different words but different "units of meaning" (lexical units or lexical items e.g. "fly ball" in baseball), including idioms and figures of speech[citation needed]. This makes it easier to compare the dialects.

Though the influence of cross-culture media has done much to familiarize BrE and AmE speakers with each other's regional words and terms, many words are still recognized as part of a single form of English. Though the use of a British word would be acceptable in AmE (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. For instance a British speaker using the

word chap or mate to refer to a friend would be heard in much the same way as an American using the Spanish word amigo.

Words and phrases that have their origins in BrE

Some speakers of AmE are aware of some BrE terms, although they may not generally use them or may be confused as to whether someone intends the American or British meaning (such as for biscuit). They will be able to guess approximately what some others, such as "driving licence", mean. However, use of many other British words such as naff (slang but commonly used to mean "not very good") are unheard of in American English.

Words and phrases that have their origins in AmE

Speakers of BrE are likely to understand most common AmE terms, examples such as "sidewalk", "gas (gasoline/petrol)", "counterclockwise" or "elevator (lift)", without any problem, thanks in part to considerable exposure to American popular culture and literature. Certain terms that are heard less frequently, especially those likely to be absent or rare in American popular culture, e.g. "copacetic (satisfactory)", are unlikely to be understood by most BrE speakers.

Words and phrases with different meanings

Words such as bill (AmE "paper money," BrE and AmE "invoice") and biscuit (AmE: BrE's "scone", BrE: AmE's "cookie") are used regularly in both AmE and BrE but mean different things in each form[citation needed]. As chronicled by Winston Churchill, the opposite meanings of the verb to table created a misunderstanding during a meeting of the Allied forces;[58] in BrE to table an item on an agenda means to open it up for discussion whereas in AmE, it means to remove it from discussion, or at times, to suspend or delay discussion.

The word "football" in BrE refers to Association football, also known as soccer. In AmE, "football" means American football (although "soccer", a contraction of "association (football)", the standard AmE term, is also of British origin, derived from the formalization of different codes of football in the 19th century, and was a fairly unremarkable usage (possibly marked for class) in BrE until relatively recently; it has latterly become falsely perceived as an intrusive Americanism).

Similarly the word "hockey" in BrE refers to field hockey; in AmE "hockey" means ice hockey.

Other ambiguity (complex cases)

Words with completely different meanings are relatively few; most of the time there are either (1) words with one or more shared meanings and one or more meanings unique to one variety (for example, bathroom and toilet) or (2) words the meanings of which are actually common to both BrE and AmE but that show

differences in frequency, connotation or denotation (for example, smart, clever, mad).

Some differences in usage and/or meaning can cause confusion or embarrassment. For example the word fanny is a slang word for vulva in BrE but means buttocks in AmE—the AmE phrase fanny pack is bum bag in BrE. In AmE the word fag (short for faggot) is a highly offensive term for a gay male but in BrE it is a normal and well-used term for a cigarette, for hard work, or for a chore, while a faggot itself is a sort of meatball. In AmE the word pissed means being annoyed whereas in BrE it is a coarse word for being drunk (in both varieties, pissed off means irritated).

Similarly, in AmE the word pants is the common word for the BrE trousers, while the majority of BrE speakers would understand pants to mean underwear. Many dialects in the North of England agree with the AmE usage and use pants to refer to trousers; this is often incorrectly considered an Americanism by people from elsewhere in Britain. The word pants is a shortening of the archaic pantaloons, which shares the same source as the French for trousers, pantalon.

Sometimes the confusion is more subtle. In AmE the word quite used as a qualifier is generally a reinforcement: for example, "I'm quite hungry" means "I'm very hungry". In BrE quite (which is much more common in conversation) may have this meaning, as in "quite right" or "quite mad", but it more commonly means "somewhat", so that in BrE "I'm quite hungry" can mean "I'm somewhat hungry". This divergence of use can lead to misunderstanding.

Frequency

In the UK the word whilst is historically acceptable as a conjunction (as an alternative to while, especially prevalent in some dialects). In AmE only while is used in both contexts.[citation needed]

In the UK generally the term fall meaning "autumn" is obsolete. Although found often from Elizabethan literature to Victorian literature, continued understanding of the word is usually ascribed to its continued use in America.[citation needed]

In the UK the term period for a full stop is not used; in AmE the term full stop is rarely, if ever, used for the punctuation mark. For example, Tony Blair said, "Terrorism is wrong, full stop", whereas in AmE, "Terrorism is wrong, period."

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