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The differences between American and British English

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Abstract. Any linguistic consideration of the differences between American and British English must focus on two points: (a) What are these differences? (b) Why do they exist? Although point (a) seems the more straightforward and methodologically achievable of these points, it is complicated by the fact that we lack certain historical data, particularly with respect to certain dialects; it is impossible to catalog undocumented differences, after all. Point (b) is also difficult to answer because of data gaps and methodological differences in evaluating the divergent evolution of English across the Atlantic. However, this paper presents an overview of the current state of linguistic scholarship on both points (a) and (b).

Keywords. American English, Language Variation, Linguistics, Sociolinguistics

Introduction

Any linguistic consideration of the differences between American and British English must focus on two points: (a) What are these differences? (b) Why do they exist? Although point (a) seems the more straightforward and methodologically achievable of these points, it is complicated by the fact that we lack certain historical data, particularly with respect to certain dialects; it is impossible to catalog undocumented differences, after all. Point (b) is also difficult to answer because of data gaps and methodological differences in evaluating the divergent evolution of English across the Atlantic. However, this paper presents an overview of the current state of linguistic scholarship on both points (a) and (b).

A Catalogue of Differences and Possible Reasons for Their Existence

To be useful, a catalog of differences between American and British English should be systematic. Differences can be categorized based on meaning, grammar and syntax, spelling, pronunciation, idioms and expressions, punctuation, cultural contexts, and other factors. In addition to simply cataloging factors, it is also helpful to look for possible explanatory patterns in differences, which, in turn, can be explained through historical linguistics and other methodological approaches.

Meanings

One way to categorize the differences between American and British English is through divergent meanings (Algeo, 2006; Davies, 2007; Rohdenburg & Schlüter, 2009; Trudgill & Hannah, 2013). Several words have different meanings in these two forms of English

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(see Table 1 below). Also, there are some words that have meanings in one form of English but not in the other.

Table 1
Catalogue of Selected Differences in Meanings

Word or Concept	American English	British English
Mad	Angry; mentally imbalanced.	Mentally imbalanced; the older meaning of *mad* as *angry* in British English is no longer retained.
Rubber	Slang for condom.	An eraser.
Flat	Level or smooth.	Level or smooth, but also an apartment.
Chips	Ultra-processed very thin slices of potato sold as snack food.	What Americans would call French fries.
Bonnet	The hood of a car.	A type of hat worn primary by women.
Nappy	--	An absorbent baby garment, what Americans would call a diaper.
Muffler	Part of a car.	A scarf.
Lorry	--	A type of truck.
Biscuit	A hard, crunchy cookie-like snack.	A soft, leavened bread roll.
Football	American football.	What Americans call soccer.
Holiday	A specific day of celebration or observance.	Any vacation period; a break from work or school.
Trainers	People who train others (as in a gym).	Athletic shoes/sneakers.
Vest	An undershirt.	A sleeveless garment, like a waistcoat, worn over clothing.
Boot	A type of footwear.	A car's trunk.

There are several possible reasons for divergences in meaning. One possible reason is that current (and, in some cases, historical) American usage represents meanings that were current in British English centuries ago (Wolfram & Schilling, 2015). One such example given by Wolfram and Schilling is for the word *mad*, which also meant *angry* when the British began to colonize North America, but which has subsequently lost that meaning in British English while retaining it in American English. Another source of differences worth noting is slang, which evolves based on local cultural developments (Mattiello, 2008); therefore, as the speakers of the same language begin to settle in different countries and develop distinct cultures, diverging cultures inform the emergence of new meanings (Coleman, 2012), such as *rubber* becoming slang for *condom* in American English but retaining the meaning of *eraser* in British English.

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Syntactic composition

Grammar, being the set of rules for language use, is another key means of indexing the differences between varieties of a language (Kimball, 1973). Table 2 below captures some of the differences between the grammar of British and American English. One reason for divergences in grammar is that the 18th and 19th centuries saw the rise of divergent grammar handbooks and style manuals in both Britain and America. In Britain, Robert Lowth and Lindley Murray (who was actually American-born but published widely in Britain) set prescriptive norms (Fens–De Zeeuw, 2018), whereas, in America, Webster's influence and later style guides (e.g., William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White's *The Elements of Style*) played formative roles (Greene, 2011). In Britain itself, some features of grammar that had been imported into America as early as Colonial times were themselves standardized by pressures internal to Britain (Ruano-García, 2020).

Table 2
Catalogue of Selected Differences in Grammar

Category	American English	British English	Example
Use of Present Perfect	Less frequent; often replaced by the simple past	More frequent use of present perfect	AmE: Did you eat yet? BrE: Have you eaten yet?
Use of 'Got' vs. 'Gotten'	'Gotten' used as the past participle of 'get'	'Got' used as the past participle of 'get'	AmE: He has gotten better. BrE: He has got better.
Prepositions in Dates	Omission of 'on' before days and dates	Use of 'on' before days and dates	AmE: I saw her Monday. BrE: I saw her on Monday.
Prepositions in Phrases	On the weekend, different than	At the weekend, different to	AmE: We'll meet on the weekend. BrE: We'll meet at the weekend.
Verb Agreement with Collective Nouns	Singular verb forms with collective nouns	Plural verb forms with collective nouns	AmE: The team is winning. BrE: The team are winning.
Use of 'Shall'	Rarely used, replaced by 'will' or 'should'	More commonly used for suggestions or offers	AmE: Should we go? BrE: Shall we go?
Past Simple vs. Past Participle of Irregular Verbs	Some verbs use different forms (e.g., 'learned')	Certain verbs use alternative forms (e.g., 'learnt')	AmE: I have learned a lot. BrE: I have learnt a lot.
Tag Questions	Simplified or omitted in informal speech	More commonly used in formal and informal speech	AmE: You're coming, right? BrE: You're coming, aren't you?

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Use of the Subjunctive	Subjunctive is more common, especially after 'wish'	Less common; replaced by indicative or modal forms	AmE: If I were you… BrE: If I was you…
Use of Modal Verbs	Preference for 'should' or 'would' over 'shall'	Preference for 'shall' or 'should' in formal contexts	AmE: You should call him. BrE: You shall call him.
Verb Agreement with Numbers	Singular with units of time or measurements	Often plural with units of time or measurements	AmE: Ten dollars is enough. BrE: Ten pounds are enough.

Idioms

With both varieties of English branching out from a common linguistic root, their shared history explains why some idioms appear similar in structure, yet, as noted through this paper, differ in nuance or connotation. The role of print media and later mass communication further magnifies these differences, as each cultural context draws upon localized references and ways of expressing everyday situations (Hilmes, 2012; Kaul, 2006). Colonial and postcolonial histories also contributed to divergent idiomatic development.

To begin with, the settlement of the American colonies introduced English to a new sociopolitical environment, triggering innovations that took hold in the region (Rafatbakhsh & Ahmadi, 2020). These innovations often reflected the distinct experiences of settlers in a nascent society, such as references to agriculture, frontier life, or the merging of multiple language backgrounds (Ammer, 2013). British English continued its evolution across the Atlantic, influenced by its own social and political changes that gave rise to new idiomatic forms or the retention of older ones (Smith, 1925).

Over time, these changes solidified in each community, producing separate bodies of idiomatic expression (Strässler, 1982). The emergence of new technologies, especially in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, provided additional sources for idioms that sometimes spread internationally yet often remained more popular or recognizable in one variety of English than the other (Ammer, 2013). Various semantic and pragmatic factors underlie differences in how people interpret idioms across the two varieties (Brook, 2015). Usage patterns show (Breitinger, 1996) that an idiom may remain fully acceptable in one community while sounding archaic in the other, or that an American idiomatic phrase might acquire fresh connotations in British contexts, and vice versa. Local culture, such as the influence of sports, politics, and television, introduces region-specific references that shape idiomatic expressions in idiosyncratic ways (Makkai, 2013). Over time, some idioms cross the Atlantic through media circulation, but others never fully take hold, leaving a set of distinct markers (Algeo, 2006).

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Table 3
Catalogue of Selected Differences in Idioms

Category	American English Idiom	British English Idiom	Meaning
Ease/Success	A piece of cake	A doddle	Something very easy to do.
Being upset	Throw a tantrum	Throw a wobbly	To become very upset or angry.
Casual behavior	Play hooky	Bunk off	To skip school or work without permission.
Annoyance	Get on someone's nerves	Get on someone's wick	To annoy or irritate someone.
Financial problems	Broke	Skint	To have no money.
Excitement	Over the moon	Chuffed to bits	Extremely happy or pleased.
Avoidance	Take a rain check	Give it a miss	To postpone or decline something for a later time.
Death	Kick the bucket	Pop one's clogs	To die.
Insignificance	A drop in the bucket	A drop in the ocean	A small, insignificant amount compared to what is needed.
Surprise	Out of the blue	Bolt from the blue	Something happening unexpectedly.
Revenge	Get even	Get one's own back	To take revenge on someone.
Disorder	All over the map	All over the shop	To be disorganized or chaotic.
Pessimism	The glass is half-empty	All doom and gloom	To see things in a pessimistic way.

Divergence Between American and British English

Seeds of Divergence: Regional Dialects That Took Root in America and Faded in Britain

Divergence is only possible from a point of fixed convergence, with respect to which it is important to note that early colonial America was a mirror of British English given the folkways that connected British people to their new home. David Hackett Fischer has identified the following major migratory waves (Fischer, 1989):

- 1629-1641: 20,000 Puritans, mainly from East Asia, relocated to New England to escape persecution.
- 1642-1675: 40,000 Cavaliers and their domestic servants flee the southwestern counties of England and resettle in Virginia and the Chesapeake Bay area to be free of the Long Parliament and the Puritans.
- 1675-1725: 23,000 Quakers from the North Midlands move to Pennsylvania and the Delaware Valley to leave behind the Act of Uniformity.
- 1715-1775: 275,000 people from the North Border regions of England, Ulster, and Scotland resettle in western Pennsylvania, the Appalachians, and remoter parts of New England, driven by the fallout of the 1706-7 Act of Union.

We can ascribe linguistic particularities to each of these waves and track them to ultimate outcomes in American English. For example, the first Puritan Wave spoke in the East Anglian dialect, which was characterized by certain vowel pronunciations and the dropping of 'r' in some positions (prefiguring "r-dropping" heard in Eastern New England accents); these features helped form the basis of the "Yankee" accent, with some parallels to what later became the Boston accent (Wolfram & Schilling, 2015). The Cavaliers would have spoken mainly a West Country (Cornwall, Devon, Somerset, Dorset) dialect with a distinctive rhotic "r" (strongly pronounced "r"); longer, broader vowels; and certain lexical items. This dialect would

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have contributed to the development of the Tidewater and Southern coastal dialects, often described as having a "drawl" in vowels and a slower cadence (Wolfram & Schilling, 2015). The Quakers would have spoken Northern or North Midlands (Cheshire, Lancashire, Yorkshire influences), plus some Midlands forms, featuring flattened vowels ("bath" pronunciation or similar variants) and distinctive lexical choices. The Quakers influenced what became the "Mid-Atlantic" or "Philadelphia" accent region, with a mix of Quaker and later Germanic influences (Wolfram & Schilling, 2015). The post-1715 migration brought in Scots-Irish and Northern English border dialects characterized by strong 'r' (rhotic), certain lexical items (e.g., "bairn" for child, "wee" for small), and sometimes the Scots "-ing" → "-in'" endings. These dialects formed the basis of the Appalachian accent (sometimes called "Hillbilly English"), with distinctive grammar (a-prefixing, e.g., "a-hunting") (Wolfram & Schilling, 2015).

Something interesting happened in England after these migrations: The standardization of English. The four waves of migration mentioned by Fischer introduced and seeded several regional varieties of English in Colonial and later independent America; meanwhile, in Britain itself, many regionalisms were being extinguished (Davies, 2007). The publication of Samuel Johnson's Dictionary in 1755 was a major milestone that standardized many spellings and defined "proper" usage, and, at the same time, grammarians like Robert Lowth and others published influential guides prescribing consistent grammar rules. By the late 1700s, the idea of a "standard" written (and increasingly spoken) British English had gained significant traction—especially among the educated classes and in London-centric institutions. Could it therefore be that some of the divergence between American and British English can be explained by the importation of varied English dialects that were flattened in the home country?

Consider the persistence of rhotic speech in much of North America. When early colonists departed from rural regions of England—especially the West Country and parts of the North—pronouncing the final "r" was still common. Over time, however, many educated speakers in England came under the sway of what would become a standardized, "r-dropping" norm (often called Received Pronunciation or RP) (Wolfram & Schilling, 2015). As that prestige accent swept through London and radiated outward, the older, more rhotic forms dwindled within England itself (Brook, 2015). In America, meanwhile, there was no equivalent push toward a single, non-rhotic model, and so the "r" continued to be pronounced across large swaths of the colonies—particularly in areas shaped by West Country settlers. Likewise, certain archaic vocabulary transplanted by the early migrants survived in American speech long after falling out of favor in England (Wolfram & Schilling, 2015). Words such as fall (for "autumn") and gotten (for the past participle of "get") reflect older English usage. In Britain, Johnson's dictionary, along with the strong preference for "classical" or "Latinate" forms among 18th-century grammarians, helped whittle away many expressions deemed rustic or outdated. In the colonies, however, such words were not subjected to the same rigorous scrutiny, allowing them to remain in active use and eventually to crystallize as perfectly standard in American English. Even grammar shows traces of these older dialect features. Some forms of American English, for example, preserve the usage of "might could" or "might should" in certain Southern or Appalachian varieties—an echo of modal stacking once more common in British regional dialects (Wolfram & Schilling, 2015). While these constructions became stigmatized or ceased to exist in England, they carried on in parts of the American South, quietly attesting to the language of the early Scotch-Irish and Northern English border migrants.

Still, we can point to many additional examples beyond rhoticity, gotten, and fall that illustrate how older English forms, carried to America, remained viable there even as they faded or vanished in Britain. One notable case involves certain strong verbs—in other words, the

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irregular past tenses and participles that characterize older Germanic tongues. While 18th-century grammarians in Britain often strove to regularize these forms, American speakers continued to use them (Wolfram & Schilling, 2015). Thus, words like dove (instead of dived) and snuck (instead of sneaked) gained currency on this side of the Atlantic, persisting well into modern usage. In Britain, by contrast, the push for a more "correct" or systematic approach to verb conjugation saw dived and sneaked become the more acceptable variants in standard writing and, over time, in much of educated speech.

In the realm of lexical choices, "archaic" or region-specific vocabulary can be spotted throughout American English. While "mad" for "angry" was once familiar on both sides of the ocean, British usage gradually swung in favor of using mad to mean "insane," reserving angry for the emotional state. In North America, however, it remained perfectly ordinary to say, "I'm mad at him," reflecting earlier British norms that had fallen out of favor (Wolfram & Schilling, 2015). Likewise, terms like by and by (meaning "eventually" or "before long") endured in various American dialects—especially in older rural speech—even as they took on an archaic or quaint tone back in Britain, where standard usage gravitated toward more contemporary expressions like "soon" or "eventually" (Rohdenburg & Schlüter, 2009).

Similarly, we can look at certain grammatical constructions that British prescriptive rules helped diminish after 1700. A prominent illustration is the so-called double modal, as in might could or might should, which was not at all outlandish in earlier English dialects. Today, such expressions are mostly stigmatized or absent in the UK, but in parts of the American South and Appalachia—where many Scots-Irish and Northern English border populations settled—these structures remain in casual speech. Another subtle example is the use of "I guess" for expressing supposition or uncertainty, which thrives in American English but is less common in British usage, where forms like I reckon or I suppose became more standardized or regionally marked (Wolfram & Schilling, 2015).

There are even phonological elements beyond rhoticity that reveal these older dialect legacies. Some Americans, for instance, retain older vowel pronunciations—like the "short o" in words such as gone or on—that once rang familiar in many parts of England but have since been shifted or leveled in modern British accents (Wolfram & Schilling, 2015). Likewise, certain Appalachian or Southern accents preserve a variety of older diphthongs and elongations, reminiscent of the West Country lilt or the Scots burr. Though these might sound quaint or "un-English" to contemporary British ears, they are in fact direct heirs to ways of speaking once heard in rural Devon, Somerset, or the Borders before the era of strict standardization.

All these instances point to a consistent pattern: the 18th-century push toward a standardized British English—driven by dictionaries, grammar books, and the social prestige of London speech—progressively minimized or eradicated local forms. Yet in North America, those same "provincial" or "colloquial" expressions could survive unchallenged or even fuse with other regionalisms to create entirely new varieties. Thus, what we often think of as quintessentially American words or pronunciations may actually be vestiges of an older English still flourishing here long after it was pruned away in the homeland.

Frontier Encounters and National Identity: Additional Forces Shaping American English

Even beyond the retention of older British dialect features, other dynamics at play in colonial and early national America encouraged a linguistic path distinct from that of Britain. Perhaps the most significant was the richly multilingual environment that emerged in the colonies. English speakers did not merely replicate the folkways of Somerset or Yorkshire in a

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vacuum; they lived alongside Dutch settlers in New York, German immigrants in Pennsylvania, French speakers in the Mississippi Valley, Spanish speakers in Florida and the Southwest, and multiple Indigenous peoples across the continent. This created a contact situation in which vocabulary, speech rhythms, and even grammatical patterns could filter into local English (Micklethwait, 2005). A familiar example is the incorporation of Indigenous words—like *hickory*, *pecan*, or *succotash*—into mainstream American usage. Similar borrowings came from French (particularly in Louisiana) and Spanish (especially in Texas and the Southwest). Each new addition subtly guided American English in directions not pursued at home, where such external influences were less pervasive or urgent (Micklethwait, 2005).

The development of a distinct American identity also became relevant, particularly after the Revolutionary War. As political separation hardened, the new republic felt less inclined to defer to British norms. This shift was most famously championed by Noah Webster, who argued in the late 18th and early 19th centuries that America should cultivate its own linguistic standard, independent of London's (Micklethwait, 2005). His dictionaries and spellers proposed revised spellings—*color* instead of *colour*, *honor* instead of *honour*, *center* instead of *centre*—and codified pronunciations that, in Webster's view, reflected the "purity" of American usage, untainted by what he believed to be elitist or arbitrary British conventions (Micklethwait, 2005). Webster's works were widely adopted in American schools, thus forging a homegrown standard that legitimized local norms. This was something akin to the English standardization process taking place in Britain—except that it was being driven by an altogether different ideology and national sentiment.

Additionally, the simple geographic realities of the new country—the push westward, the establishment of frontier settlements, and the generally looser social hierarchy—helped preserve a wide array of local speech forms (Algeo, 2006; Ammer, 2013; Wolfram & Schilling, 2015). While Britain was becoming ever more urbanized and centralized, with London dominating cultural life, the American population continually rediscovered frontier conditions where formal schooling and close ties to an elite standard were less common. In more remote areas, speech continued to evolve largely on its own terms, meaning that older British dialect remnants were free to persist and intermingle with the speech of newcomers. This mixture, in turn, generated unique regional accents and lexical quirks—from the coastal maritime traditions of New England to the later cowboy lingo on the Plains.

In Britain, standardization was seen by many as an index of refinement and social standing; in America, by contrast, there were fewer institutional forces to shame dialectal variety, at least during the formative years (Wolfram & Schilling, 2015). Universities were fewer and decentralized, and newspapers might adopt Webster's spellings or otherwise reflect the speech of local communities rather than that of a distant capital. Where Britain's prestige model pulled dialects toward Received Pronunciation, America lacked a single, dominant accent that ruled nationally. The net effect is that what emerged in the United States was an English molded by numerous social, cultural, and linguistic pressures—some inherited from Britain, some absorbed from Indigenous or immigrant languages, and some consciously shaped by political or educational movements.

All these factors, external to the simple question of transplanted dialects, helped amplify the divergence between American and British English. If the seed of difference was indeed the variety of folkways and dialects carried to the colonies, the soil in which that seed grew included an environment of broader linguistic exchange, a new political identity distinct from that of Britain, and a looser standardizing influence that permitted more eclectic developments. Consequently, just as regionalisms were being leveled or pruned away in Britain,

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they could adapt, thrive, or fuse in America, resulting in a language that—by the time of the 19th century—showed clear departures from its parent. Thus, while the divergence certainly originated in the "importation of varied English dialects" at a time when Britain hadn't yet homogenized them, it was further catalyzed by the ethos and realities of a newly forming nation.

Conclusion

The historical record and the linguistic evidence presented here illustrate that the interplay between older regional British dialects, colonial migration waves, and early American sociopolitical dynamics produced the bedrock for distinct varieties of English on each side of the Atlantic. By examining words and idiomatic expressions whose meanings diverge (like "mad," "rubber," and "bonnet"), alongside grammatical features (including tense usage, prepositions, and collective noun agreement), it becomes clear that early colonial imports of English dialects were preserved in ways that diverged from Britain's subsequent path of rigorous standardization. In America, varied dialect features—largely sourced from East Anglia, the West Country, the North Midlands, and the Scottish-English borders—were able to flourish due to less centralized prescriptive pressure; meanwhile, in Britain, the establishment of normative dictionaries and grammar guides (particularly after 1755) curtailed these same features. When coupled with a multicultural frontier environment in North America—where Indigenous languages, Spanish, French, German, and other tongues intermixed—American English continued to evolve in directions not mirrored in Britain. At the same time, British English underwent widespread leveling under the influence of London-based prestige accents, with regional forms becoming stigmatized or lost. The result is that American English now frequently retains forms and lexical items reminiscent of earlier British usage (for instance, "gotten" and "fall" for autumn), while British English has shifted toward different grammatical norms and standardized spellings. These changes reveal not only divergences in linguistic form but also parallel divergences in cultural identity, as seen in Noah Webster's efforts to codify distinctly American spellings and expressions in the young republic.

Although the systematic cataloging of these differences in meaning, grammar, and idioms allows for a clearer sense of how the two varieties have grown apart, data gaps inevitably remain, especially for dialect features that were underdocumented in the colonial period. Nevertheless, by tracing which older regional features survived in the United States while vanishing at home, and by recognizing the later prescriptive pressures within Britain that continued to reshape the language, it's possible to see how today's American and British English reflect centuries of parallel yet diverging linguistic trajectories.

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