

## “British English vs. American English: Some Implications for Thai Users”

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The English language that is so widely used around the world today is not only an academic language but is also a global or universal language. Not only is English widely used in academic research in many areas but reports on such research are also written and discussed about in English. Moreover, much of the international trade and diplomacy throughout the world is conducted via the English language as media.

To a large extent, the English language is responsible for making possible the globalization that is part and parcel of the world economy as we know it today. It plays a dominant role both as a first and second or foreign language for several hundreds of millions of people around the world. It has been estimated that there are over 350 million speakers of English as a first language (L1) and another 300 million or so speakers of English as a second or foreign language (L2). It is very likely that in the not too distant future, the number of L2 English users may outnumber L1 English users (see Table 1).

It is this development and expansion of English as a second or foreign language that provides the future development of the

English language. This is so in spite of the increasing influences of the other major language of the world: Chinese, French, German, Russian, Japanese, Spanish, etc. The English language, in both its British and American forms, has several distinct advantages over the other “international languages.” For one, English is the native language of two major influential nations, namely, the United States and the United Kingdom. For another, English is used around the world in both writing and speech. It has been estimated that three fifths of the world’s mail and postal service is written in the English language.<sup>1</sup> It should also be noted that today’s world-wide usage of the internet (e-mail, etc) is also conducted largely in the English language.

What are some other advantages which the English language has over the other international languages? There are several. Firstly, its writing system is alphabetical in contrast to the other international languages such as Chinese or Japanese. Consequently, English can be typed and printed more easily in contrast to the other international languages. This, in turn, makes it easier for English to be used in textbooks, reporting of

research and publishing of newsprint. Secondly, English words are relatively short. Thirdly, in comparison to other language such as French, Spanish or Italian, the English language is free from a complicated inflectional system. Those who have studied Latin, a highly inflected language, will readily appreciate this last factor.

As a second or foreign language, English has replaced French in some schools in Asia and Latin America. In the age of globalization or as it is referred to in Thailand, "yuk loka piwat", a more highly interdependent world will need to rely even more on bilingualism, that is, English plus the local or national language in order to carry out its affairs both academic and commercial. It has been estimated that by the turn of the century, most people around the world will be using some form of English, either as a first or as a second or foreign language.

In Thailand, both British English and American English have been very influential not only in academic areas but also in the economic and commercial areas. Although both British English and American English had an early influence on the Thai educational system, it is American English which has gained the upper hand today, especially at the tertiary level of the Thai educational system. A rough estimate of Thai users of English as a foreign or second language puts the figure between 600 thousand to a million.

Officially, there are no second languages in Thailand and the national language policy has tended to place great emphasis on the study of the national language, namely Thai. With the economic boom of the 1980's, however, demands for the study of modern foreign languages have steadily expanded.

Consequently, there was a great demand for professional people to be adept, not only in their national language, but also in a foreign language. Therefore, English has become more than just a tool for gaining access to modern technology and trade but also a key to professional advancement as well.

In the academic area, ESL or EFL teachers in Thailand are often faced with the task of explaining to their students why some English words are pronounced one way by some native English speakers but another way by others. ESL or EFL teachers are sometimes asked to sort out the confusion regarding the "correct spelling" of certain English words. In fact, such differences only scratch the surface of the differences between "British English" and "American English".

Two approaches are possible in the study of "British English VS. American English", the two main branches of the English language. One extreme approach interprets the differences between the two as being so wide that they are regarded as two distinct languages: on the one hand, you have an "American language"; on the other hand, you have a "British language". This extreme view, however, is probably unacceptable, except perhaps but to a few ultra-nationalists on both sides of the Atlantic. Besides, the fact that there is relatively little difficulty in communicating between British people and Americans makes this extreme view rather untenable.

The other extreme approach is to take the view that there are no essential differences between British English and American English. This other extreme approach, however, is just as untenable. Obviously, there are differences between British English and American

English that can be readily observed in everyday usage.

Consequently, I believe that a milder interpretation should be adopted: that “British English” and “American English” are one and the same language but with distinct differences in several areas of the language.

In making such comparisons, however, it is necessary to generalize. After all, there are differences *within* both American English and British English. For example, the American Southern dialect differs markedly from the American New England dialect. This divergence is also true of British English where the *Queen’s English* is quite different from the *cockney* dialect.

It is necessary, therefore, for purposes of comparisons to use the *General American* dialect as being representative of American English and *Received Standard English* as being representative of British English. By doing so, it is then possible to categorize such contrasts into 4 broad categories, namely: *differences in the usage of the lexicon; variations in pronunciation; syntactic differences; and, lastly, differences in spelling.* Each category can then be further sub-categorized.

*Differences Between British English and American English in the Usage of the Lexicon:*

We are here dealing with “current usage”. It is largely in the area of specialized languages such as those of travel, sports, trades, and the professions that have striking differences in word choice lexical usage in the two major dialects of English, British English and American English.

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Perhaps the subject of *education* would be a good starting point. This area offers an abundance of lexical differences between British English and American English. The British usage of the term “public school”, for example, is often a cause for confusion for many people. In England, this is the equivalent of the American “boarding school”. The American “public school,” on the other hand, is the equivalent of the British “board school”. The American “elementary school”, however, is known in England as “prep school”. Classes in England are called “forms” whereas in America, they are known as “grades”. For example, the British 6<sup>th</sup> form or class is equivalent to the American 12<sup>th</sup> grade, also known as the “senior” year in American high schools.

Another area full of contrasts in lexical usage between “British English and American English”, is the area of *motoring*. The American family fills up the “auto” with “gas” while the British family fills up the “car” with “petrol”. In the US., the front part of the car is known as the “hood” but the same thing is called a “bonnet” instead in England. An American “oil-pan” is called a “sump” in England. An American “gear shift” is equivalent in meaning to the British “gear lever”. “High gear” is the American word for the British “top gear”, also the name of a popular British motoring program on television. Other differences in this area are “truck vs. lorry, subway vs. underground,

dynamo vs. generator, windscreen vs. windshield, mudguard vs. fender, silencer vs. muffler, and saloon vs. sedan, etc”.

Apart from the examples given above, there are many more lexical differences of *miscellaneous* kind. In some cases, different lexical items are used for the same things. In other cases, the same words are used in “*British English*” and “*American English*” but have different meanings.

In America, for example, an “elevator serves an “apartment” in contrast to the UK where a “lift serves a “flat.” An American “hobo” is the equivalent of the British “tramp”. An American “undershirt” is the equivalent of the British “singlet” or “vest”. An American “business suit” is the equivalent of the British “lounge suit.”

We should be aware, of course, that some of the lexical forms are, in fact, interchangeably used in both American English and British English. This is true of examples such as “store vs. shop, round-trip ticket vs. return ticket, maybe vs. perhaps, and schedule vs. time-table” (the word “schedule”, itself, being pronounced differently in American English and British English as we shall see later in “pronunciation differences” below.)

#### *Differences in Pronunciation Between British Received Pronunciation and General American Pronunciation*

When contrasting *pronunciation differences* between *British Received pronunciation* and *General American pronunciation*, one has to keep in mind the following factors. Firstly, both “British English” and “American English” were originally the same language; that is, they have a *common origin*. Secondly,

there are *variations* within “British English” and “American English” themselves. As I mentioned earlier, the American *New England dialect* varies from the American *Southern dialect* just as much as the British *Queen’s English* differs from the British *cockney dialect*.

Therefore, it is a fact that a Southern Englishman’s pronunciation may differ from that of his Scottish neighbor’s pronunciation just as much as from that of the pronunciation of his American counterpart.

However, keeping these factors in mind, it is still possible to point out some of the more glaring differences between “British pronunciation” and “American pronunciation.” Such *pronunciation differences* can be categorized under the following headings: *differences in the “pronunciation of certain words common to both British English and American English”*; *differences in the usage of “intonation”*; and, *differences in the usage of “stress”*.

#### *Differences in the Pronunciation of Certain Words Common to Both American English and British English*

Both Americans and British speaking people use the /æ/ digraph sound in about six hundred commonly used words. Of these, about one hundred and fifty are pronounced differently with Americans using the /æ/ digraph sound whereas British speakers use the /a/ sound instead. Examples are numerous in words such as “*dance, nasty, after, sample, brass, task, ask, last, rather, etc*”, where the /æ/ digraph sound is ever present in American English but is replaced by the sound /a/ instead in British English.

Of the other remaining four hundred and fifty such words, the /æ/ digraph pronunciation is used in both *American English* and *British English* in commonly used words such as "cat, that, hat, vat, sat, etc".<sup>2</sup>

Another very obvious and rather well-known pronunciation difference lies in the distinction between the /r/ vs. the /r-less/ dialects. It is probably true to generalize that, with the exception of New Englanders, most Americans belong to the 'r-pronouncing'

dialects whereas British speakers belong to the /r-less/dialects.

When comparing the pronunciation of British English with American English, one of the most evident differences concerns the presence or absence of the voiced apico-alveolar retroflex semi-vowel sound as represented by the phonetic symbol /r/. This can be observed in examples such as the following:

<i>American English</i>	<i>British English</i>
/bar/     bar	/ba/
/skar/    scar	/ska/
/kart     cart	/kat/
/bɔ̃rt/    Bert	/bɔ̃t/
/hard/    hard	/ha:d/
/lard/    lard	/la:d/
/ʃɔ̃rt/    shirt	/ʃɔ̃ t/
/skɔ̃rt/    skirt	/skɔ̃t/

Note that in the 'r-less' dialects, the absence of the "r" sound is consistent not only for "final-r" (as in the word *scar*), but also in the case of a "preconsonantal - r"(as in the word *cart*). This is not to say that the sound /r/ is never used in British English, of course. As we know, it occurs quite commonly in initial position in words such as "radio, radiator, razor, rover, remain, resist, resonance, etc", to mention just a few, in both British and American English. This sound also occurs in medial position in British English and American English for that matter, in bi-syllabic words between the two syllables in words such as "borrow, tomorrow, carrot". However, it does not occur finally or

pre-consonantly in British English in contrast to American English.

Another observable difference occurs in words such as "hurry, worry, thorough, etc." where Americans use the schwa sound /ə/ in cases where British English speakers use another vowel sound / / instead.

There are numerous other differences of a *miscellaneous* kind. We can readily recognize such *pronunciation differences* in words such as "clerk, tomato, lieutenant, schedule, etc." Note the following "pronunciation" differences" :

**American English**

/klɔrk/	clerk
/tometou/	tomato
/liutenɔnt/	liutenant
/skɛdʒual/	schedule

**British English**

/klak/	
/tomatou/	
/lɛftɔnɔnt/	
/sɛdʒual/	

Turning now to differences between British English and American English pronunciation in the area of *supra-segmentals*, namely, the differences in usage of "word stress" between British English and American English. Generally, American English has the same word stress pattern as British English<sup>3</sup>.

However, some words common to both British English and American English have different stress patterns.

*Differences in the Usage of Word Stress Between American English and British English*

**American English**

/'sɛkre, taeri/	secretary
/'diksɔnaeri/	dictionary
/'arbi, traer/	arbitrary

**British English**

/'sɛkrɔtri/	
/'diksɔnɔri/	
/'abitrɔri/	

Another area of supra-segmental differences between *British English* and *American English* is that of "intonation".

*Some Differences in Intonation Between British English and American English*

Although both dialects have the same intonation levels (*extra high, high, mid or normal and low*), there can be some differences in the use of *intonation* on occasion between these two major dialects.<sup>4</sup> Note the following distinctions in *intonation*.

**American English**

My name is Elton John.

Are you quite sure?

Will you pass the salt please?

**British English**

My name is Elton John.

Are you quite sure?

Will you pass the salt, please?

From a comparison of American and British intonation patterns above, it can be noted that *British intonation* tends to have a higher intonation level either at the beginning or

soon after, and then, the tone descends gradually until the final juncture.

*American intonation*, on the other hand, maintains a fairly *constant level of intonation* throughout the sentence until just at the end when it falls sharply. But, here again, we are dealing with generalities since not everyone has exactly the same intonation pattern in all the possible occurrences.

Another observable difference between British English and American English occurs in the area which can be categorized as “*syntactic differences*”. Differences in the grammatical usage of the educated American and that of his British counterpart can be quite

distinct in usage of the *definite* and *indefinite articles* as follows.

*Different Usage of the Definite Article (the) and the Indefinite Article (a, an)*

For example, there is a tendency in American English to omit either the “*definite article*” or “*indefinite article*” where this omission does not result in any ambiguity or misunderstanding. Note the following examples of such differences in British and American usage of the “*definite and indefinite articles*”.

**American English**

day after tomorrow  
a half dozen eggs  
a half hour

**British English**

the day after tomorrow  
half a dozen eggs  
half an hour

British English also differs from American English in the *pluralization of certain nouns*. Note the following.

**Pluralization of Nouns**

**American English**

accommodations  
candies  
cramps

**British English**

accommodation  
candy  
cramp

In the *conjugation* of certain verbs, forms now obsolete in British English (and now regarded as being “*ungrammatical*”) are still quite common in American English.

*Differences in the Conjugation of Certain Verbs*

Note the following differences between British English and American English in the *conjugation of verbs*:

American English

dive, dove diven (the latter is quite commonly used in American English)

get, got, gotten

proved, proved, proven

strike, struck, stricken

British English

dive, dived, dived (diven is not used in British English)

get, got, got

prove, proved, proved

strike, struck, struck

Differences in the Usage of Adverbs

Americans tend to use *adverbs* in certain cases where they are usually omitted by

speakers of British English. Note the following contrasts in the usage of adverbs between American speakers and British speakers:

American English

beat up

close/shut down

figure out

test out

watch out

British English

beat

close/shut

figure

test

watch

Differences in the Usage of Some PrepositionsAmerican English

to name for

the worst accident in years

five minutes after three

the man on the street

on the train

ten fifty

British English

to name after

the worst accident for years

five minutes past three

the man in the street

in the train

ten to eleven

Differences in the Usage of Some Question Forms

The inverted question form is generally preferred in both American English and

British English. However, certain distinctions appear as follows:

American English

Does he have a car?

Do you have the time?

(or, What time is it?)

British English

Has he a car?

Have you the time?



*Differences in Usage of the Auxiliaries  
“Shall” and “Will”*

Generally speaking, modern *American English* rarely distinguishes between “will” and “shall”, whereas in *British English*, “will” is used with the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> persons and “shall” is used with the 1<sup>st</sup> person. In fact, the

American structuralist Charles Fries had observed the following distinctions in the usage of “will” and “shall” by Americans and British English speakers as follows.

*Distribution of Will And Shall in Current English Usage*

	<i><u>American English Usage</u></i>		<i><u>British English Usage</u></i>	
	<u>will</u>	<u>shall</u>	<u>will</u>	<u>shall</u>
2 <sup>nd</sup> person	96%	4%	96%	4%
3 <sup>rd</sup> person	95%	5%	89%	11%
1 <sup>st</sup> person	86%	14%	29%	71%

From the data obtained regarding contrasts in the usage of will and shall by American speakers and British speakers, it is clear that American and British speakers have little or no difference in the usage of *will* and *shall* in relation to the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> persons.

It is in the usage regarding the 1<sup>st</sup> person that differences between the two dialects emerge. Americans clearly have a tendency to use “will” whereas British speakers tend to use “shall”. This difference in usage is, therefore, one of *distribution* and not of form, since both dialects make use of “will” and “shall”, differing only in the frequency of usage of one or the other.

The last area of differences between British English and American English lies in the area of spelling differences. Here also, it is possible to categorize various sub-types of differences. The most well known spelling difference between British English and American English has to be the different usage of “-er” and “-re”.

Usage of -er vs. -re:

Some English words derived from French words (a different category from such words as “writer, header, New Yorker, etc” where the “-er” is a suffix) are spelled differently in American English and British English. The former uses “-er” on most occasions. British English, however, always uses “-re”.

*American English*

caliber  
center  
theater or -re  
somber

*British English*

calibre  
centre  
theatre  
sombre

Note that there are exceptions regarding usage of the “-er” / “-re” category. After the letter “c”, both American English and British English use “re” as in the words “*massacre*, *wisecre*”, and so on.

Both American and British speakers prefer to use “-re” in words such as “cadre, macabre, timbre” (tone quality, not wood as in “timber”, used in both countries). However, if it is the “metric system” of measurement, then it is “metre” in England but “meter” in the US.

#### **American English**

color  
fervor  
honor  
labor  
rigor  
favor  
neighbor

Here again, there are exceptions to the differences in spelling. Americans tend to use “-our” in only two words, namely, glamour and saviour.

#### **American English**

defense  
offense  
pretense  
vise (a tool)

In cases where a word is used either as a noun or as a verb, the tendency is as follows. British English spells the verb with “-s” (license) and the noun with a “-c” (licence). American English, however, often varies. In

Again, in the example of the word “theatre/theatre”, both “-er” and “-re” versions are used in the US whereas in British English, only the “-re” version is acceptable.

#### Usage of “-or / -our” category

In the English language, there are some nouns ending in “-r”. These are originally derived from Latin nouns having the nominative “-or”. In British English, such nouns are spelled with “-our” whereas in American English, “-or” is used.

#### **British English**

colour  
favour  
honour  
labour  
rigour  
favour  
neighbour

#### Usage of “-c / -s” category

In this category, *British English speakers* prefer to use “-c” whereas *American speakers* prefer to use “-s” in the following words.

#### **British English**

defence  
offence  
pretence  
vice (a tool)

the case of nouns, Americans use “-c” more often than “-s”.

Another category is that of “-ection” vs. “-exion”

**American English**

deflection

connection

inflection

**British English**

deflexion

connexion

inflexion

One exception to this is the word “*direction*” which is spelled the same way in both dialects, ie. “*direction*.”

The next category of spelling differences concerns the “-e / -ae” and the “-e / -oe” words. Only a few examples are relevant

**American English**

anesthetic

anemia

fetus

esophagus

hemoglobin

**British English**

anaesthetic

anaemia

foetus

oesophagus

haemoglobin

Another distinction in spelling between British English and American English involves usage of the “single-l” and “double-l” category.

Usage of the “single-l” and “double-l” category.

**American English**

distil / distill

instal / install

**British English**

distil

instal

**“Miscellaneous Spelling Differences”**

Finally, the rest of the spelling variations can be grouped together under the “miscellaneous” category. The few remaining differences between American and British spelling occur in such words as “check” vs “cheque” “tire vs tyre”, and “rime vs rhyme, and caburetor vs caburettor”, etc.

here. The two kinds of digraphs, “-ae” and “-oe” are used in British English. In American English, the one letter variant “-e” is generally preferred.

Usage of the “-e / -ae” and the “-e / -oe” category

According to the Webster dictionary, words ending in “double-l” usually drop one “l” when adding a prefix. This is the usual practice in both British and American English. However, in American English, the usage of the “single-l” occurs side by side with the “double-l”. British English prefers the single spelling as in the following examples.

In summary, let me re-cap. Indeed, British English and American English do have obvious differences in the *lexical area*, in the *pronunciation area*, in the *spelling area*, and even in the *syntactic area*. Even for some English native speakers, both British and American, such differences can and often do

cause misunderstanding in communication and, at times, even some embarrassment, particularly regarding differences in the lexical area. Therefore, it should not be surprising that non-native Thai users of English encounter some difficulty and misunderstanding regarding such differences in usage.

Some Implications for the Thai ESL or EFL Users

From a study of the main differences between British English and American English, the following points should be noted: Firstly, although there are obviously many contrasts between British English and American English, and, no matter how striking such *differences* are, the *similarities* far outweigh them.

Secondly, to avoid confusion by Thai users of English, such users of English would benefit if such differences were not “discovered” by the learners in a haphazard fashion.

Therefore, for the benefit of the Thai users of English, it would be well worth the effort for ESL or EFL English teachers to introduce the differences (and point out the similarities) in an orderly manner and, perhaps, at an early stage, thus eliminating a lot of confusion in the learning process.

Thirdly, such a move would also contribute significantly to vocabulary expansion at the same time. It would also help instill in the Thai users of English or, L2 users in general for that matter, an acceptable standard of pronunciation.

Fourthly, because of globalization, it may not be wise to limit ourselves to just the two

major dialects of English, namely, British and American. The primary goal in learning an EFL or ESL, after all, is to be able to communicate effectively.

Perhaps Singaporean English, Indian English, or even Thai English could and should be acceptable, at least as far as the *spoken language* is concerned. To what extent then, should preference be given to British or American English? This depends on the educational scale involved. English language teaching or ELT must aim at a moving target.

In fact, the further an individual proceeds up the educational scale, the more closely his local L2 form of English needs to conform to standards of international intelligibility. As Prof. Strevens has pointed out, the most pedagogically acceptable English language model is usually a “native-speaker model”. In foreign language teaching, usually, the normally accepted target is that of the “educated, metropolitan native speaker.”<sup>5</sup>

Although the most suitable pedagogically correct model might be a native speaker model (British or American), in the ESL or EFL arena where local forms of English have developed and command approval, however, such newer forms of English may become more acceptable, even more practical, than the British or American model. After all, not all forms or dialects of L1 are suitable for teaching purposes as far as ELT is concerned, and this has nothing to do with academic arrogance or social snobbery.

Consequently, “the native speaker of English must accept the fact that the English language is no longer his possession alone. It belongs to all those users of English around the world. Moreover, those newer forms of English, born

of “new countries” and with “new communicative needs” should be accepted into the “marvelously flexible and adaptable galaxy of *Englishes* which make up the English language”.<sup>6</sup>

In conclusion, it is proper here to reflect briefly on future possible developments relating to contrasts between British English and American English. Specifically, will such “differences” between the two main branches

of the English language grow wider as time goes by or will they tend to narrow?

According to a study by Prof. Albert H. Marckwardt, “although the gap between British and American English is not likely to close, there are no indications that it will widen.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the influence of one (i.e. British English) on the other (i.e. American English) is negligible and contrasts are there and will remain so, as long as British society and American society exist independently of one another and yet relate to one another.

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### End Notes

- (1) Albert H. Marckwardt. “The Future of English”, p.355.
- (2) Marckwardt, “The Future of English”, p. 355.
- (3) Linguists recognize 4 levels of phonemic stress in both American English and British English, namely, primary stress (strongest), secondary stress (next strongest), tertiary stress (least stress) and, weak accent or zero stress-see Phinit-Akson, Vinit, *Linguistic Structure of English: A Course in Applied English Linguistics*, p 59.
- (4) Lewis, J., “A Concise Pronouncing Dictionary of British and American English”, p.39
- (5) Stevens, “Teaching English as an International Language”, p.362.
- (6) Ditto.
- (7) Marckwardt, “The Future of English”, p.362.

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**Table 1****GEOGRAPHICAL AND NUMERICAL DISTRIBUTION OF L1 AND L2 USERS OF ENGLISH (\*)****A. MAJOR ENGLISH SPEAKING REGIONS (\*\*)**

	L1	L2	Total English Speakers
AUSTRALIA	15.3 m..	21 m.	17.4 m.
CANADA	19.7 m.	6.0 m.	25.7 m.
NEW ZEALAND	3.4 m.	0.2 m.	3.6 m.
UNITED KINGDOM	56.9 m.	1.1 m.	58.0 m.
UNITED STATES	226.7 m.	30.0 m.	256.7 m.
SUB TOTAL	322.0 m.	39.4 m.	361.4 m.
B. ASIAN REGION - (***)	1.5 m.	114.5 m.	116.0 m.
ENGLISH SPEAKERS			
C. AFRICAN REGION	5.1 m.	73.8 m.	78.9 m.
ENGLISH SPEAKERS			
D. OCEANIC REGION	0.1 m.	0.5 m.	0.6 m.
ENGLISH SPEAKERS			
E. OTHER ENGLISH	21.3 m.	71.8 m.	93.1 m.
SPEAKERS			
F. GRAND - TOTAL	350.0 m.	300.0 m.	650.0 m.

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(\*) Estimates of L1 and L2 English speakers are based on various sources. The exact numbers are likely to be larger.

(\*\*) Countries where the majority of English native speakers or L1 speakers reside. These are the traditional bases of English where it is the primary language.

(\*\*\*) Does not include China.