

PAPER 7 (HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS)

What are the basic differences between British and American English?

There are considerable divergences between British and American English in spelling, vocabulary and pronunciation. Especially vowel sounds as in 'home', 'hot', and 'aunt' are differently used by the British and American English speakers. The differences in grammars are also obvious. This is the reason why an American can say "Do you have the time?" while an Englishman says "Have you got the time?" There are differences in vocabulary also so that every after dinner speaker knows that British braces are American suspenders, while British suspenders are American garters. Some of the divergences are due to the fact that British English has changed, while American has not. In other cases, both English men and Americans have made innovations but different ones. For example, in the naming of new objects we find American 'rail-road', 'auto', 'antenna', 'sidewalk' and 'subway' instead of British 'railway', 'car', 'aerial', 'pavement' and 'underground'.

AMERICAN SPELLING

We find that the distinctive features of American spelling are mainly the legacy left by Noah Webster (1758-1843) whose "American Spelling Book" appeared in 1783 and was followed by his "American Dictionary of the English Language" in 1828. 'Commonsense' and 'convenience', he said, had led him to write public, favor, nabor, hed, proof, flem, hiz(hiss), gir, det, ruf, etc., instead of traditional spelling for these words. But because Noah Webster wanted a market for his new book on both sides of the Atlantic, he later modified his drastic spelling changes considerably.

AMERICAN PRONUNCIATION

There are certain distinctive features of pronunciation in American English that are considerably different from those of British English. For example, in the words like 'four', 'door', 'farm', 'lord', and 'fire', the letter 'r' is still pronounced in American English as a fricative whereas in British English it is kept silent except when immediately followed by a vowel. Also Americans pronounce words like 'dance', 'fast', 'grass', 'half', and 'path' with the low front 'ae' heard as in 'cat', 'sat', etc. Again in American pronunciation words like 'dock', 'fog', 'hot', and 'rod' are pronounced with a low back 'a' as heard in 'father' (shortened). Words like 'duke' and 'steward' are pronounced as if the first syllable contained a (u:) sound. Again the 't' sound in 'beating', 'matter', and 'metal' become voiced sound very much like 'd'. word stress and sentence stress both are also weaker in American English pronunciation and intonation is more level. American speech is therefore more monotonous in sound, but at the same time it is generally more distinct than the English speech. Unstressed syllables are pronounced with more measured detachment and hence with greater clarity than in British English. On the whole we feel that the American English is slower in utterance. Also in certain parts of America the speakers speak so slowly as to drag out and diphthongize the stressed vowels, instead of 'yes' we hear 'yeis' and instead of 'class' we hear 'kleis'.

AMERICAN GRAMMAR

In grammar and syntax the differences between British and American usage are not great. We have already noticed two minor differences: the form 'dove' for 'dived', and the American use of 'do have' for 'have got'. Of course, we find the use of 'do have' in British English also as in (Do you have dances in your village?). Again American has

the two forms 'I have got' (meaning I have) and 'I have gotten' (meaning I have acquired or I have become) whereas British English uses only the first form. An American can use impersonal 'one', and then continue with 'his' and 'he', for instance- "If one loses his temper, he should apologize." This pattern of sentences is not acceptable for an English man who wants to replace 'his' and 'he' by 'one's' and 'one' and then the sentence becomes "If one loses one's temper, one should apologize." The American in his turn is likely to be surprised to have heard the British use of a 'plural verb' and 'plural intrusive pronoun' in sentences like "The government are considering the matter themselves." Prepositions, too, are sometimes used differently in American English. An English man lives in Oxford street, whereas an American will usually live on it. An English man caters for somebody, while an American caters to him. But besides all these minor things, British and American English syntaxes are identical in all essentials.

AMERICAN VOCABULARY

The largest divergences between British English and American English are perhaps in vocabulary. Usually the words that are used by Americans pertaining to travel and transport are different from those used by the English men. The Americans use 'travel by rail' instead of 'travel by train'. Instead of 'registering of luggage', they use 'checking of baggage'. The 'luggage van' is referred to as the 'baggage car'. Instead of 'notice board', they have 'bulletin board'. 'Time-table' is known as 'schedule'. The 'driver' of the train is the 'engineer' and the 'guard' is the 'conductor'. A 'railway station' is known as 'a railroad depot'. The 'car' is invariably an 'automobile' and it is taken to a 'gas station' for being supplied with petrol. But these differences are not such as to cannot be easily removed and are not very formidable to any intelligent traveler. The films and American literature have made people in England quite familiar with the new words and terms of expression in America at the same time.

There are so many reasons that bear a great impact upon the American English vocabulary. In the USA many features of the language of the 17th century English settlers have been retained as such. For example, 'old senses of words', 'old words and phrases' that have been totally vanished from the British English region are still retained in American English. Thus we find words like 'critter', 'figger', 'git', 'jine', 'ketch', 'sartin', 'vermint', and 'afeared' instead of modern British English like 'creature', 'figure', 'get', 'join', 'catch', 'certain', 'vermin' and 'afraid' respectively.

American English has borrowed words from those who have come into its contact. From the Red-Indian words such as 'catalpa' (a flowery tree), 'hickory', 'tapioca', 'canoe', etc. have been borrowed. Also there are American terms which are translated from Red Indians language like 'fire water', 'pale face', 'pipe of peace' and 'war path'. From the French have been borrowed the words like 'leave', 'seep', 'shanty', 'prairie', 'rapids', 'portage', and 'caribou'. From Spanish have come 'creole', 'quadroon', 'stampede', 'chile', 'ranch', etc. There are also many Spanish place names, especially saint's names like 'St. Barbara', and 'San Francisco'. From Dutch have been borrowed 'boss', 'cold', etc. From Irish 'cadger', to let on (pretend), jumpy, jaw (impudent, talk), wad (bundle), to quit (stop), etc. have been taken. But the largest number of loans are from German has given the words like 'dumb' (slow, stupid), 'loafer', 'frank-furter', 'hamburger', and educational terms like 'semester' and 'seminar'.

The American pioneers have also invented new uses for older English words as in 'run' (brook), 'bluff' (steep, broad faced, head land), 'clearing' (cleared land), 'rolling

country' (undulating plains). American plants and animals have also required the invention of new names like 'eel grass', 'blue grass', 'egg plant' and 'monkey nut'. Indeed, in the coining of new words and phrases the Americans in modern times have been more exuberant and uninhibited than the British.

It is a fact that the literary language of the USA and that of Great Britain are more or less the same. At least they have not diverged perceptibly so as to give the feeling that British English and American English are two entirely different things.

In spite of all that has been said it has still to be admitted that:

1. American vocabulary is in the main the same as English.
2. Even if it differs from English, it can be understood with a little effort.
3. Specifically American objects and ideas are becoming more and more familiar to English day by day.

The above discussed facts are more or less an obvious record of the distinctive features of the American English and the British English.