Handbook to English

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Handbook to English

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Standard English and Other Dialects

1.0

English is one language, but it has a great many varieties. Over 1500 years ago English began, not as one standard language, but as a number of different West Germanic dialects spoken by the Angles, Jutes, and Saxons who invaded

Britain from the northern shore of Europe.

A dialect is a variety of a language, usually spoken by people in one particular region or social group. If the people who live in a small community rarely travel and do not often talk with people from other regions, their dialect becomes more and more different from the English spoken in other regions. On the other hand, when the people in a community often travel and talk with people from other Englishspeaking communities, their variety of English becomes more like that of the people they meet.

In the last century, rapid transportation, radio, and television have brought people of different English-speaking groups closer together. One result has been that the differences between regional dialects are not as great as they used to be. But another result is that you hear more varieties of the language than most people did a few decades ago.

The English vocabulary has grown enormously in the last 1500 years. It now includes over 500,000 words and is still growing. No one person knows all these words; but each word is used by people who speak some variety of English.

Over 300 million people now speak English as their primary language. No one person knows all of these people or all of the varieties of English they speak or write. But all of us do know some of them; and the more we travel and learn, the more people we meet.

One of your problems in learning English today is to understand more than just the one variety of English you

first spoke as a small child.

1.1 BRITISH AND AMERICAN ENGLISH

Any American who travels in England and any Englishman who travels in the United States soon learns that there are differences between American and British English. As someone has said, America and Britain are divided by a common language. Henry Higgins in the English comedy My Fair Lady says that in America the English language hasn't been spoken for years.

Pronunciation

The British usually speak with more tension in their voices than do Americans and through a smaller opening in their mouths, or vocal sound boxes. (See Section 2.) As a result, in British English the vowels in words like blast, fast, and half are pronounced farther back in the mouth than is usual in American English. The final /r/ of British English—in words such as bark, brother, core, father, fork, and rather—is barely pronounced, more like the pronunciation in Eastern New England and the South than in most other regions of the United States. Further, the vowel in the final syllable of words like dictionary, secondary, and territory are not stressed as much as they are in American English, so that in standard British speech they become, for example, diction'ry, second'ry, and territ'ry.

Spelling

There are a number of differences between British and American spelling. For example, the British spell a bank check with a -que (cheque). The British play chequers on a chequerboard; Americans play checkers on a checkerboard. In words ending in -re which English took from French, such as centre, metre, and theatre, British spelling retains the French -re ending, while in America they are usually spelled center, meter, and theater. British spelling uses c instead of s in the words which Americans spell defense and offense (British defence and offence). In such words as reveler, traveler, and wagon, British spelling doubles a consonant: reveller, traveller, waggon, American spelling has dropped the u in the -our ending of a number of words which the British spell, for example, colour, honour, and saviour (American color, honor, savior).

Vocabulary

American words often become familiar to Britishers when they read American books or see American films; and British words often become familiar to Americans when they read British books or see British films. Differences between American and English vocabularies do, however, remain. Here are some examples.

AMERICAN	BRITISH
billboard	hoarding
billion	milliard
good boy!	good lad!
carnival	fun fair
conductor	guard (of a train)
corn (food)	maize
drug store	chemist's shop
elevator	lift
freight train	goods train

4 Standard English and Other Dialects

garbage can
gasoline
house trailer
installment plan
monkey wrench
radio
spark plug
squash
subway
T. V.
ticket agent

touchdown in football transmission (in car) traveling salesman

water heater weather bureau

white collar (worker)

dust bin petrol bus caravan

hire-purchase system adjustable spanner

wireless sparking plug vegetable marrow tube, underground

telly

booking clerk try in rugger gear box

commercial traveller

geyser

meteorological office

black coat

EXERCISES British and American English

A. From the spelling of each of these words, would you think it was written by an American or a Britisher?

1. center5. honor9. splendour2. cheque6. offense10. theatre3. colour7. metre11. traveler4. defence8. reveller12. waggon

- **B.** Which of the following sentences were probably spoken by an American? Which were probably spoken by a Britisher? Why do you think so?
 - 1. I saw it on the telly last night.
 - 2. We stopped to get gasoline.
 - 3. They saw maize growing in the field.
 - 4. He took the underground to the next station.
 - 5. We turned it with a monkey wrench.
 - 6. Jim's uncle is a truck farmer.
 - 7. You can get the lotion at a chemist's shop.

- 8. We had vegetable marrow for lunch.
- 9. Take the elevator to the fourth floor.
- 10. The government loan was for a milliard dollars.

1.2 REGIONAL VARIATIONS IN AMERICAN ENGLISH

If you travel from one part of the United States to another—for example, from Maine to Pennsylvania to South Carolina to Mississippi to Texas to California and back through the Middle West—you will notice that the way English is spoken in one region is somehow different from the way it is spoken in another. Exactly how the regional intonations and pronunciations differ is usually easier to hear than to explain; but you soon become aware of regional variations in American speech.

If you stay in one region for some time, you will also find that there are variations of English *within* the region. Not only does each person have his own characteristic way of using the language, but there are social and occupational varieties. (See Sections 1.4 and 1.5.)

You may also find other varieties of English spoken in particular groups. But no matter what the language groups are within a region, you will probably notice that their speech has distinct regional characteristics, whether they are, for example, in Boston, Massachusetts; Charleston, South Carolina; or Little Rock, Arkansas.

You may notice, too, that many people do not think of their variety of English as being a variation. Most of us feel that *our* way of speaking is the normal way, which of course it is for us. It is *other* people who speak differently. Other people may speak a dialect, but we don't. As Ivy says in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, "Ever'body says words different. Arkansas folks says 'em different, and Oklahomy folks says 'em different. And we seen a lady from Massachusetts, an' she said 'em differentest of all. Couldn' hardly make out what she was sayin'."

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