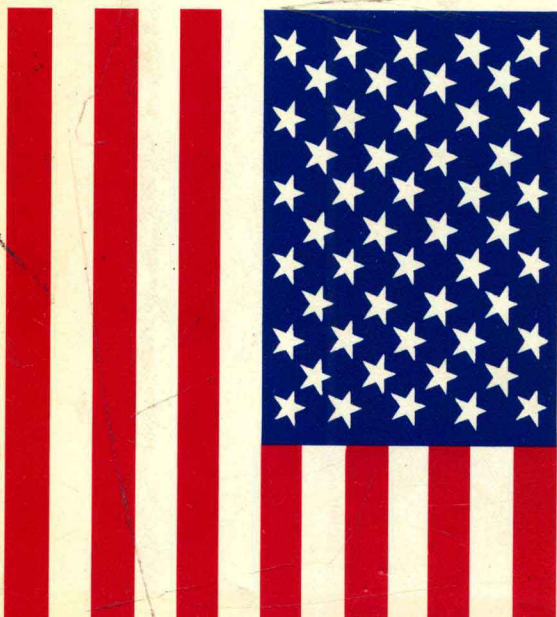




BRITISH ENGLISH

A to Zed

Norman W. Schur



A rigorously researched, wickedly witty, and eminently useful collection of nearly 5000 Briticisms (and Americanisms) for English speakers on both sides of the Atlantic.

BRITISH ENGLISH, A TO ZED

Norman W. Schur



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For Marjorie—incurable Anglophile

lexicographer. A writer of dictionaries; a harmless drudge . . .

—Johnson's Dictionary

Though a linguist should pride himself to have all the tongues that Babel cleft the world into, yet if he had not studied the solid things in them as well as the words and lexicons, yet he were nothing so much to be esteemed a learned man as any yeoman competently wise in his mother dialect only.

—John Milton

. . . The American language is in a state of flux based on the survival of the unfittest.

—Cyril Connolly in
The Sunday Times (London),
Dec. 11, 1966

When the American people get through with the English language, it will look as if it had been run over by a musical comedy.

—"Mr. Dooley" (Finley Peter Dunne)

I propose, therefore, the institution of a Society for the Prevention of Inadvertent Transatlanticisms (for short S.P.I.T.). No part of its aim would be to assert the existence of anything undesirable in North American English as distinct from English South-East Midlands English. The object is simply to strike a smallish blow for free will. . . .

—Geoffrey Marshall, in
"Appeal to the English,"
Oxford Magazine, 6
Michaelmas (1966) 97

Consider the influence of the USA. There are few families without American connexions today and American polite vocabulary is very different from ours. We fight shy of abbreviations and euphemisms. They rejoice in them. The blind and maimed are called "handicapped," the destitute, "underprivileged." "Toilet" is pure American (but remember that our "lavatory" is equally a euphemism). Remember too that the American vocabulary is pulverized between two stones, refinement and overstatement.

—Evelyn Waugh, "An Open
Letter To The Hon'ble Mrs Peter
Rodd (Nancy Mitford) On a Very
Serious Subject," in *Encounter*

. . . Why, oh why, do we quietly absorb, instead of resisting, these unnecessary . . . transatlantic importations which, far from enriching, nearly always degrade our beautiful language?

—Brigadier R.B. Rathbone,
in a letter to *The Times* (London)
dated Sept. 6, 1971

READERS who think this article is written in English are slightly mistaken. Actually, it's American English they're reading, a respectful but independent daughter of the Mother Tongue. Is the distinction trivial? Certainly not to lexicographers. . . .

—Mort La Brecque
"The Best of Dictionaries,
The Worst of Dictionaries," in
The Sciences, September 1972

American sub-titles

SIR—I wonder how many millions of television viewers find American dialogue baffling?

It is almost like a foreign language. Sub-titles, as in French and Italian films, would be a great help.

Noel Hardwick
in a letter to the *Daily Telegraph* (London) dated
August 25, 1980

The English and the American languages and literature are both good things; but they are better apart than mixed.

—H.W. and F.G. Fowler, in
The King's English
Oxford, 1906

Dick Washington . . . defeated the English at Bunker's Hill . . . After this the Americans made Whittington President and gave up speaking English.

—W.C. Sellar and R.J. Yeatman,
in *1066 and All That*
Methuen, 1930

Giving the English language to the Americans is like giving sex to small children; they know it's important but they don't know what to do with it.

—Morton Cooper
as reported in *The*
Times (London), Nov. 1, 1974

I can't explain to the English that we speak a different language.

—S.J. Perelman
(American expatriate, explaining
why he went back)

. . . The Beelzebub of neologisms . . . is the Americanism . . . Whose language is it? Ours or theirs?

—Lord Disgusted (Michael
Fraysn), in the *Observer Weekend*
Review (London), Jan. 27, 1963

If it weren't for the language, you couldn't tell us apart.

—Bob Hope, to the British in
a television program

. . . We are told you also speak English here . . .

—Sir Peter Ramsbotham, British Ambassa-
dor to the United States, on television Mar. 8, 1977

Britons and Americans just have to be different! Their independence is, in most ways, an admirable characteristic: but in a comparative study of language it is rather a nuisance.

—Eric Partridge
Some Aspects of Etymology
A paper delivered to the English
Seminar of the University of Liverpool
Oct. 19, 1953

I am in no way criticising the American language, for, although originally English, admittedly it is today (1958) a separate language. . . .

—Henry Cecil in *Sober as a Judge*
(Michael Joseph, London, 1958)

Perhaps we can compel the deplorably permissive lexicographers to start banning such American solecisms as "hopefully" used absolutely to mean "it is to be hoped"; "different than"; and the ubiquitous flouting of "flaunt" and flaunting of "flout".

—*The Times* (London) June 27, 1981

Look at the process of deterioration which our Queen's English has undergone at the hands of the Americans. Look at those phrases which so annoy us in their speech and books, at their reckless exaggeration and contempt for congruity.

—The Very Reverend Henry Alford, D.D.,
Dean of Canterbury, in *Plea for the Queen's English* (1863)

. . . the English talk funny.

—William Safire, in *On Language*,
New York Times, October 2, 1983

Acknowledgments

This lexicon first appeared in the form of *British Self-Taught: With Comments in American*, published by Macmillan Publishing Company, Inc., New York, in 1973. Johnston & Bacon Publishers, of London and Edinburgh, a subsidiary of Cassell & Collier-Macmillan Publishers of London, brought out a somewhat revised edition under the same title the following year. Under the new title *English English*, it made its bow under the aegis of Verbatim, Essex, Connecticut in 1980. This incarnation, with the inestimable help of Kate Kelly (who wields the blue pencil at Facts on File, Inc., New York as skillfully as D'Artagnan brandished the sword) appears as *British English, A to Zed*. It has had the advantage of the author's longer experience of life in this scepter'd isle . . . this blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England . . . this land of such dear souls, this dear, dear land, with the consequent addition of new entries and the correction and amplification of old ones.

For the first edition, help far beyond the reasonable bounds of hospitality came to me from many kind and patient English friends. Besides much painstaking correspondence over the years, there were many long sessions in English homes, gardens and pubs: countless words, gallons of tea, barrels of beer. I was indebted to my great friends John and Sarah (now Sir John and Lady) Freeland, Ronald Smith, Alan Vaughan, Donald Walker and Peter Tanter, and my now dear departed C.E. Thompson, B.T. Flanagan, Kenneth Fearon, Charles Kirby and Philip Harding; not a single philologist in the lot, of immensely varied background, with nothing whatever in common except kindness, intelligence, wit and taste. On the American side, I owed much to Edmée Busch, who helped put the manuscript into intelligible shape, and my secretary, Dorothy Schnur, stubbornly loyal through moments of self-doubt. My friend, the literary agent Robert Lewis, made important suggestions at the outset and urged me on when I faltered. When I first suggested the idea of an Anglo-American glossary to my lifelong friend the late A.C. Spector, then assistant to the publisher of PLAYBOY, as an article for that distinguished ornament of American culture, he countered with, "It's too important for us; there's a book here," and I took him seriously.

For the second edition, there was help from further quarters. My oldest friend, Ralph Berton, a remarkably acute and dogged word buff, was of invaluable aid in supplying new entries and suggestions for improvement. Robert Elwell kept sending a flow of new items accompanied by comments that I gleefully adopted. Dr. Edwin M. Hudson, a remarkably learned man of many parts, plied me with new entries and recondite discussion. Dozens of readers from distant places became, and have remained, pen-pals and have contributed all manner of improvements. Warren Knock, of Johnston & Bacon Publishers, was patient and creative during that episode. After the appearance of the London edition, I received a long and learned letter from Paul S. Falla, a New Zealander with a distinguished background in the United Kingdom diplomatic service, now living in England, and a linguistic wizard of encyclopedic knowledge. His help has been enormous and his family and mine have become fast friends. Ronald Mansbridge, until a few years ago head of the New York office of the Cambridge University Press, has never faltered in his interest and help. I have been fortunate in receiving creative editorial guidance from the noted lexicographer Laurence Urdang. I cannot include the name of everyone who has participated, but I may not leave unmentioned a remarkably learned and witty letter from the late novelist Desmond Bagley of Guernsey overflowing with valuable information and suggestions. His

untimely death deprived the world of a wonderful teller of tales and me of a beloved friend. From an avocational lexicographer to this team of pros and semipros, humble thanks.

I must end with a note of gratitude to my wife, Marjorie. Back in the late sixties, right after my return alone from our annual summer in England, my then still sketchy manuscript vanished. I was sure I had brought it back. Letters went back and forth between us. Searches on both sides proved fruitless. Dejected, I was on the point of abandoning the project, but Marjorie never gives up. One day her cable arrived: MANUSCRIPT FOUND, ON ITS WAY. Accidentally left behind, it had been stored in a most unlikely place by an overdiligent *daily* (cleaning woman). For my wife's persistence in the search and for her patient listening thereafter, I give my most loving thanks.

Preface

It was about twenty years ago, during one of many sojourns in the British Isles, that I began more and more to notice how many words and phrases uttered and written by the British were unfamiliar to my American eyes and ears. Occasionally they were unintelligible. Often the context made them clear. Much of the time it was only a question of what appeared to be preferred usage. I had never before heard of being *lumbered* (*saddled*) with an unwelcome job, but the context left little doubt. On the other hand, I really didn't know what a *lumber room* or a *hoarding* was. (A *lumber room* is a *storage room*, a *hoarding* is a *billboard*). I heard that a young student friend had *gone up*, and, vaguely wondering up where, asked a British friend whether *going up* by any chance meant *being promoted*. His reply was that the boy was much too young to be in the army. (*Promotion* means *advancement* generally, often with a military connotation, and normally has nothing to do with school grades.)

I began to note these peculiarities down. The list grew and grew and eventually reached the proportions of a glossary, and now a dictionary, with occasional reflections on British institutions, customs and idiosyncrasies in cases where it seemed no simple American equivalent could be found or would suffice. The list is still growing, even though, as edition has followed edition, I have had to delete certain entries born in one country and naturalized in the other.

The book is essentially a glossary of Briticisms for the guidance of Americans caught in the entrapment of a common language. I have seen fit to include certain terms and expressions which, though they may be fading from current British use, or may even have disappeared completely from most people's everyday conversation, an American might run up against in the literature of a few years ago, or quite possibly in the conversation of an elderly person, especially in the more remote (and less "with it") parts of the British countryside. In some instances, I have expanded the discussion in an effort to demonstrate not only peculiarities of the language of Britain, but also aspects of her culture as reflected by her language. In a few cases, I must admit, I have been unable to resist the temptation to stray a bit afield and include certain entries that may not be very useful, solely because they amused me, and may amuse you.

Language is so much a living, expanding and contracting thing that there can be no point at which any compilation of this sort ends. Even Dr. Johnson, in the words of John Moore (*You English Words*, J.P. Lippincott Company, Philadelphia, 1962), "... knew full well that his dictionary began to be outdated even while the proofs were on their way back to the printer. It is the despair and delight of lexicographers that in language they are dealing with a living thing. . . ."

What began as a pastime took on tangible form and, somewhat to my own surprise, has emerged as a serious compilation. I would be grateful if (in addition to omissions and possible erroneous inclusions and definitions) new items which appear from time to time were called to my attention. Not the least of my rewards has been the volume and tenor of the response I have received from scholars and aficionados in many parts of the world who have written letters ranging from a few words of appreciation to essays full of valuable information and comments. Many of the entries must evoke some controversy and even censure. "A dictionary-maker," said H. W. Fowler in his preface to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (reprinted in the sixth edition of that admirable work, 1976), "unless he is a monster of omniscience, must deal with a great many matters of which he has no first-hand knowledge. That he has been guilty of errors and omissions in some of these he will learn soon after publication, sometimes with gratitude to his enlightener, sometimes otherwise." Dr. Johnson, in the preface to his *Dictionary*, expressed the gloomy view that "... It is the fate of those who toil at the lower

employments of life . . . to be exposed to censure, without hope of praise; to be disgraced by miscarriage, or punished for neglect. . . . Among these unhappy mortals is the writer of dictionaries. . . .” Again and again when I inquired about the precise meaning of an unfamiliar term, I received as many different answers as the number of kind British friends consulted, so that my final choice of American equivalent sometimes represented a compromise, a solution usually satisfactory to no one. I trust, however, that my book will afford a measure of enlightenment and occasionally some pleasure, and if it should serve to prevent even the tiniest bit of Anglo-American misunderstanding, I should feel that my labors were well rewarded.

Norman W. Schur
Hawkhurst, Kent, England
Weston, Connecticut, U.S.A.

Explanatory Notes

For a full discussion of the criteria used in assembling the Briticisms and their American equivalents the reader is referred to the Introduction. The following are brief notes on how to use the dictionary.

Entries

Briticisms, listed alphabetically, are set in boldface on the left-hand side of each entry. American equivalents are set in boldface on the right, opposite the British headword. When there is no American equivalent, *SEE COMMENT* refers the reader to the comment under the headword.

Labels

Parts of speech are set in italics, immediately following the British headword. Usage labels: when a Briticism is nonstandard this is indicated in italics, either at the beginning of the comment, or, when there is no comment, immediately following the function label. The labels used are: *Slang*, *Inf.* (Informal), *Old-fash.* (Old-fashioned), and *Rare*. American equivalents are similarly labeled. Though it has been the policy to attempt to provide American equivalents of the same usage level, that has not always been possible, and in such cases a comment always follows the headword. When the American equivalent is only an approximation of its British counterpart, it is preceded by *approx.*

Pronunciation

When the pronunciation of a Briticism is idiosyncratic, i.e., not ascribable to general differences between British and American pronunciation, a phonetic transcription in small capital letters is given at the beginning of the comment, following the usage label. The system of notation used is too simple to merit a table of its own.

Sense Distinctions

Arabic numerals separate the senses of a headword, both in the American equivalent and in the comment. Divisions are based on usage rather than strict semantic distinctions.

Comment

Examples of typical usage are set in italics, as are British and American terms that are used hypostatically. Glosses of Briticisms are set in single quotes. Briticisms used in the comments which appear in the alphabetical listing are set in **boldface** when it is felt that referring to them would add to the understanding of the comment.

Cross-References

See, *See also*, and *See under* refer the reader to other entries and to the Appendices. Cross-reference is based on various criteria: related meanings (similarity and contrast), related subject matter (e.g., pub terms, telephone terminology—in such cases the reader may be referred to the Appendices), morphological similarity (in several cases the American equivalent is itself an entry, e.g., *vest* is the equivalent of the British *waistcoat* and is also a Briticism of which the American equivalent is *undershirt*). Readers are also referred to the Appendices that deal with general differences between British and American English, when they have bearing on the entry. Words appearing in **boldface** type in the text of a comment have their own entries in proper alphabetic sequence.

Appendices

The Appendices are of two kinds: the first section contains short notes on general differences between British and American English. These are far from

comprehensive, but the reader is referred to works that deal more fully with the topics discussed.

The second section contains tables and glossaries of terms whose meaning and use are best shown when the terms are grouped together (e.g., currency, measures) and lists of specialized slang terms of which only a few are included in the A-Z section.

Index of American Equivalents

This addition to the new edition of the book should be of special help to users searching for British equivalents of particular American words and phrases. The American equivalents given in the main, A-Z section of the book are listed alphabetically in the Index, together with the equivalent Britishism, which the reader will find treated in full in the main section.

Abbreviations

| | | | |
|----------------|--------------|--------------|--------------------|
| <i>adj.</i> | adjective | <i>n.</i> | noun |
| <i>adv.</i> | adverb | <i>pl.</i> | plural |
| <i>approx.</i> | approximate | <i>prep.</i> | preposition |
| <i>conj.</i> | conjunction | <i>v.i.</i> | verb, intransitive |
| <i>inf.</i> | informal | <i>v.t.</i> | verb, transitive |
| <i>interj.</i> | interjection | | |

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Introduction

The nature of the relationship between British and American English has been the subject of debate (often heated) for years. *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* defines British English as "English characteristic of England and clearly distinguishable from that used in the United States. . . ." Evelyn Waugh's amusing dedication page in *The Loved One* reads in part: "My thanks are due to Mrs. Reginald Allen who corrected my American; to Mr. Cyril Connolly who corrected my English." The anonymous author of the article entitled "Broadcasting of the Year" in a *Whitaker's Almanack* of the middle twenties talks of the introduction of international broadcasting and characterizes the American emanations as particularly successful "because of the similarity of the languages."

However, in *Memoirs of the Second World War*, Churchill tells how an Anglo-American misunderstanding of a single word at a high-level military meeting resulted in "long and even acrimonious argument." The word was the verb *table*, which means 'shelve' (i.e., 'defer consideration of') to Americans, and the precise opposite: 'bring up for immediate discussion' to the British.* During that war, Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten made the statement that he believed himself qualified to act as "Anglo-American interpreter" between the Americans and British in Southeast Asia.

Charles Smithson, the English hero of John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, bored and unhappy on the Continent, runs into two Philadelphians and leaps to the "pleasure of conversing with someone in a not too alien tongue." In the same vein, John Eisenhower, in *Strictly Personal* (Doubleday & Co. Inc., New York, 1974), after mentioning a conference among his father, Christian Herter, Harold Macmillan, and Selwyn Lloyd, seems pleased to point out that ". . . meetings with the British were always eased by the fact that the two nationalities speak relatively similar tongues." This is described by Edwin Newman, reviewing the book for *The Washington Post*, as a "rare attempt at humor," but I think that it is a fairly serious characterization of the relationship between the two branches of English. Robert Knittel, then editorial director of Collins Publishing, says that halfway across the ocean the two languages nuzzle up to each other and fraternize enough to become "mid-Atlinguish."

Some reactions to the differences have been far less conciliatory. In *Sir Michael & Sir George*, J.B. Priestly presents one character's thoughts on this subject as follows: "Sir George, not for the first time, thought how difficult it was to achieve real communication with some Americans, just because they used the same words but gave them different meanings." In *Less Than Kin*, William Clark recalls the Shavian quip that Britain and America are two countries divided by a common tongue. Dylan Thomas, in *A Visit to America*, describes himself as "up against the barrier of a common language." Consciously or not, they were all echoing Oscar Wilde's epigram: "The English have really everything in common with the Americans, except of course language."

What, then, is the nature of the relationship between "British" and "American"? Would it offend my compatriots if their idiom were characterized as a dialect of the mother tongue? Mencken thought the shoe was on the other foot. A letter appeared in *The Times* (London) on April 12, 1972, from Mr. Dixon Harry of Nottinghamshire objecting in vigorous terms to the Americanization of "good English words." In a riposte eight days later, Mr. Bernard F. Shinkman of London quoted Fowler quoting Mencken on the subject of what was standard and what was dialect. It was Mencken's theme that Britain, displaced by the United States as the most populous English-speaking country, was no longer entitled to pose as arbiter of English usage. "When two-thirds of the people who use a certain language decide to call it a *freight train* instead of a *goods train*, the first is correct usage and the second a dialect."

According to Marcus Cunliffe, in *The Literature of the United States*, a chauvinistic delegate to the Continental Congress moved that the new nation drop the use of the English language entirely; William Morris, in *Newsbreak* (Stackpole, New York, 1975),

*The "opposing" parties were on the same side of the controversy.

reports that the more violently anti-British leaders moved to reject English as the national language in favor of Hebrew, until it was pointed out that very few Americans could speak it; and another delegate proposed an amendment providing that the United States retain English and make the British learn Greek!

American claims to the English language are far from being left unanswered. In April 1974, Jacques Chastenet of the Académie française, suggesting Latin as the most suitable official tongue for the European Economic Community (Common Market), expressed the concern that "English, or more exactly American, might otherwise take over." He characterized "American" as "not a very precise idiom." Frederick Wood's attempt at consolation in his preface to *Current English Usage* (Macmillan & Co. Ltd., London, 1962) might seem even more offensive: "Certain words and constructions have been described as Americanisms. This does not necessarily mean that they are bad English." In "An Open Letter to the Honorable Mrs. Peter Rodd (Nancy Mitford) On A Very Serious Subject," Evelyn Waugh, discussing the American influence, writes: "... American polite vocabulary is different from ours. ... [It] is pulverized between two stones, refinement and overstatement." Cyril Connolly went pretty far in *The Sunday Times* (London) of December 11, 1966: "... the American language is in a state of flux based on the survival of the unfittest."

Some have expressed more neutral sentiments in assessing the relationship. "British and American English undoubtedly are different," writes John W. Clark, associate professor of English, University of Minnesota, in *British and American English Since 1900* (Greenwood Press, New York, 1968), coauthored by Eric Partridge. "American English, especially today, might be called, I think, a smart-aleck language. Perhaps it would be more accurate as well as more up to date to call it a wise-guy language. ... Another way of saying it is to say that British English has more *frein* and American English more *élan*. Yet another is to say that British English is stuffy and American English bumptious." Mario Pei refers to the "two major branches of the English language," and a British literary critic speaks of being "bilingual in the two branches of English." Perhaps Peter Strevens (*British and American English*, Collier-Macmillan, London, 1972) has put it even more clearly in asking whether British and American English should be regarded as different forms of one language or as two different languages, and in answering his own question by calling them "varieties of English." American English, he writes, "[is] an equal partner with British English."

Whatever the relationship may be, and however strongly opinions are voiced, it seems clear that in the jet age, what with the movies (the *cinema*), TV (the *telly*), and radio (the *wireless* still, to many Britons), linguistic parochialism is bound to diminish. In *Words in Sheep's Clothing* (Hawthorn Books, Inc., New York, 1969), Mario Pei, after referring to the different meanings given to the same word in the two countries, writes: "... In these days of rapid communication and easy interchange, such differences are less important than you would think." The latest edition of the *Pocket Oxford Dictionary* includes a fair number of American terms not found in earlier editions: *teen-age*, *paperback*, *T-shirt*, *supermarket*, *sacred cow*, *sick joke*, and many others. And in their recorded dialogue, published under the title *A Common Language, British and American English* in 1964 by the British Broadcasting Corporation and the Voice of America, Professors Randolph Quirk of University College, London, and Albert H. Marckwardt, of Princeton University, agreed, according to the Foreword, that "... the two varieties of English have never been so different as people have imagined, and the dominant tendency, for several decades now, has been clearly that of convergence and even greater similarity." And in a similarly optimistic mood, Ronald Mansbridge, manager emeritus of the American branch of the Cambridge University Press, in his foreword to *Longitude 30 West* (a confidential report to the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press by Lord Acton), refers to the two countries as "strongly linked together—let us reject the old joke 'divided'—by the English language."

Sam Vaughan, an American publisher, says, "New York looks more like London every day," in an article entitled "A Tale of Two Cities" which appeared in *The Sunday Times* (London) of April 11, 1976, and to prove that the two cities were beginning to sound alike as well, he offered the following evidence:

Our dialogue has been influenced. Some words, like "bloody" and "smashing," have long been in use here. Yet they remain English—quaint, different, characteristic over- or under-statement. Others, however, such as "super," have been adopted wholly and have lost their English accent.

If someone answers the phone, saying "Hopkins here," he is no longer mimicking