

The
British/American
Dictionary

Norman Moss

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Hutchinson

London Melbourne Sydney Auckland Johannesburg

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

This book is intended primarily to help Britons and Americans understand one another better and communicate with one another more easily. The need for such a book has occurred to me often as I watched some Anglo-American misunderstanding caused by the difference in vocabularies. Such as seeing an American trying to get a martini in a British pub, or a corned beef sandwich in a restaurant. Or the time I heard an American student at Cambridge University telling some English friends how he climbed over a locked gate to get into his college and tore his pants, and one of them asked, 'But how could you tear your pants without tearing your trousers?'

The book lists those words that are different in the two languages in their common usage. The criterion is whether a word is familiar to most people in one country or the other, not whether it is listed in a dictionary. There are words listed in *Webster's* that are in use in Britain but are hardly heard in America, and some in the *Oxford English Dictionary* that have not been heard in conversation in Britain for decades. And *Webster's* may not be much help to an Englishman who finds himself in difficulties with some of Tom Wolfe's baroque American, or Richard Pryor's humour.

Some words in one language are unknown in the other, like Britain's 'Bath chair', 'loo', 'panda car' and America's 'bobby pin', 'highball' and 'piker'. Others have different meanings that can cause misunderstandings, like 'dormitory', 'cot' and 'tights'. There are a few that even have the opposite meaning in the other language, like 'enjoin', 'public school' and 'table' (as a verb). Words in the first category cause incomprehension; those in the last two may cause trouble, because the difference can create situations in which people think they understand one another when they don't. I saw a minor instance of this recently when I attended a lecture in London given by a senior figure in the American nuclear

power industry. He talked about measures which delayed the construction of nuclear power plants for electrical utilities, and said these meant increased rates. The Britons in the audience nodded, for this made perfect sense; but it was the wrong sense. They did not really understand him, and *he* did not know that 'rates' means something different in Britain.

I have tried to give here not only the meaning of a word but also, where appropriate, the verbal or social context in which it is likely to be used. Most Americans know roughly what the word 'bloody' means in Britain, but not when they can safely use it.

Since the criterion for inclusion is what is commonly heard, it leaves much room for disagreement. Heard by whom? Language varies by age; occupation, social group and geography. In the case of some words, the linguistic dividing line is not the Atlantic but age; young people on both sides use terms in common that are alien to their parents. Most of the language coming out of the pop music world is international, as are the attitudes that go with it.

A word that is foreign to one person will not be foreign to another. New Yorkers, Washingtonians and Bostonians hear more words from Britain than Westerners. Americans who go to the theatre and to foreign movies regularly are more likely to hear British-English words than those who do not. Some people may inherit words from Britain through their families. Any reader may find words listed here as belonging to the other language that are familiar to him. The chances are that they are not familiar to some of his fellow countrymen.

Questions of what words do and do not belong in both languages are complicated by the speed with which the two languages are changing, both within themselves and in relation to one another. Words go out of use and others arise constantly. 'Glitch' and 'frag' (American) and 'gazump' and 'suss' (British) are recent arrivals, but will be around for a long time. Some service terms that made the transition to civilian life after World War II and were much used in the next two decades or so are heard only rarely today, words such as 'gen' and 'line-shoot' in Britain and 'sad sack' and 'scuttlebutt' in America.

In America, words associated with drug fashions have now emerged into the mainstream of the language. People who never touch even the softest drugs now talk happily about

being 'spaced out', and 'hyping up' something. Young people reach out for their colloquialisms into black slang, and come out with words like 'bad' and 'paper' in their new meanings. The counterpart in Britain is a reaction against gentility. Very visible in accents and clothes, this is seen also in vocabulary, for instance, in the adoption of words that are or are imagined to be underworld slang, like 'suss out' and 'bent'.

The two languages are moving together. The accents, speech rhythms and words of each country are becoming more familiar to the other. Increased travel across the Atlantic both ways is a factor. Others are the growing number of British programmes shown on US television – there have always been a lot of American programmes on the British airwaves – the wide circulation in Britain of American magazines, and the use of films from British publishers to reprint books published in America and vice versa.

The movement of words is mostly eastwards. Every year, more and more words that were exclusively American are found in the written and spoken language of both countries. A generation ago, the use in Britain of the word 'guy', or 'campus', would stamp one as an American or Canadian, but today these words fall from the more purely British lips. The sexual term to 'lay', whereas it is not used much in Britain, has now become familiar enough for the village of Llay, near the Welsh border, to decline to send a Miss Llay to a county beauty contest.

Some words have been dropped from the American/British section of this dictionary since the first edition was published because, although they were American words then, have since become common to both languages: words such as 'hooker', 'macho', 'ID card' and 'rip-off'. This process of the absorption of American words into the British language has been going on for a long time.

Almost as soon as the British colonies were established in North America, the colonists took new words into their speech, some of them Indian words, some from neighbouring settlers who spoke different languages, which in those days meant Dutch ('boodle', 'stoop', 'dumb'), and French ('Indian brave', 'chowder', 'levee'). Later Americans picked up words from Spanish when the nation moved westwards, and from other languages as they were brought in by new kinds of immigrants.

Noah Webster, in whose name American dictionaries are published today, recognized this process when he wrote in the introduction to his first American dictionary, in 1789: 'Numerous local causes, such as a new country, new associations of people, new combinations of ideas in arts and science, and some intercourse with tribes wholly unknown in Europe will introduce new words into the American tongue.' This forecast was correct; the one that followed in the next sentence was not: 'These causes will produce in the course of time a language in N. America as different from the future language of England as the modern Dutch, Danish and Swedish are from the German or from one another.' Webster underrated the amount of social intercourse across the Atlantic which would ensure that the two languages and some of their speakers were in constant contact, not only in the days of universal *Dallas* and jet travel, but from the earliest days of the American nation.

Even before Noah Webster started compiling his dictionary, words and expressions came back to England from its colonies in America and infiltrated the language of the mother country. Words such as 'bluff' (meaning a feature of the landscape), 'canoe' and 'squatter' came over from America in the eighteenth century, a little while after the potato and the turkey. H. L. Mencken, in his book *The American Language*, lists American terms that were used by such quintessentially English writers of the Victorian period as Dickens and Thackeray, almost certainly in ignorance of their origin. It is indeed surprising how quickly immigrant words become integrated, the recent arrival and place of origin forgotten. Very few Britons today using the words 'doodle', 'fan', or 'grapevine' realize that they came from America in the 1930s, and were almost unknown in Britain before then. Some other words in common use in Britain, such as 'flashpoint', 'gimmick', and 'phony' are more recent arrivals still.

Usually, the importation of American words into Britain has encountered a linguistic snobbery that is only part of the cultural snobbery that so bedevilled Anglo-American relations for a long time. In the eighteenth century, Samuel Johnson, writing as a lexicographer, dismissed 'the American dialect' as a corruption of English. Frederick Marryat, the author of *Mr Midshipman Easy*, who followed the custom of so many Victorian authors of visiting America and publishing a diary

of his travels, wrote: 'It is remarkable how debased the language has become after a short period in America.' In 1930, Sir Alfred Knox, a Conservative member of parliament, called in the House of Commons for a limit on the importation of American films, explaining: 'The words and accent are disgusting, and there can be no doubt that such films are an evil influence on our language.' And, speaking of films, it was only a few years ago that, when Marlon Brando played Napoleon in the film *Desirée*, some English critics remarked loftily on the risibility of seeing Napoleon speaking American phrases in an American accent. It was left to a letter-writer to the London *Times* to point out that Napoleon using British phrases in a British accent would have been no less anomalous, since he actually spoke French.

For that matter, I myself, some years ago, worked on a British newspaper published in Paris under a liverish chief sub-editor (he would be chief copy editor on an American newspaper) who was incensed because, since several of his sub-editors (copy editors) were American, examples of the American language were constantly getting into the copy thrust under his nose. He used to insist that American English was quite simply broken English, as spoken by central European peasants who had just disembarked on the pier at Hoboken (or sometimes, in this exegesis, coolies newly disembarked at San Francisco).

Mark Twain responded to British pretensions to linguistic superiority in the cocky tone of the successful upstart. 'The King's English is not the King's. It's a joint stock company, and Americans own most of the shares,' he wrote in *Pudd'nhead Wilson's Journal*. A few other writers since then have felt the need to emphasize the separateness of the American language, as well as of American literature.

Today there is no such pattern of attack and justification. There is in Britain little pretension to linguistic superiority, and a wide acceptance on both sides that the language is a shared property and heritage. Britain is neither chauvinist nor culturally isolationist. The age of the common man favours the American language and the American style (culturally, as distinct from politically; the Left in Britain has always been pro-American). In fact, it is now chic to use American terms in a way that, in another age, it was chic to use French terms. Shaggy-haired urban hillbillies proclaim that a new record is

'real funky, man', while in television studios and advertising offices, thrusting young men say 'No way', and express admiration for each other's 'chutzpah'.

I found an interesting confirmation of the prestige status of American terminology in Britain recently when I met the organizer of a group called Prostitutes United for Social and Sexual Integration. I asked her why, since she clearly intended her organization to be taken seriously, she gave it this name, so devised that the acronym is PUSSI. (If the British reader needs a translation, it is in the American/British section.) She said that though 'pussy' as a sexual colloquialism is American, it is used in Britain by people 'in the business'. And she added: 'It's an elitist word.' Which left me reflecting that one person's elite is another person's lower depths.

On the other hand, words associated with more humdrum, domestic activities, the words of the kitchen and the handyman's cellar, tend to stay on their own side of the Atlantic. 'Gripewater', 'paraffin', and 'muslin' are still foreign words to Americans, 'apple butter' and 'shellac' to Britons. To most people in Britain, a joint is still something you roast rather than something you smoke.

Generalizations about the two languages are as risky and prone to exceptions as are generalizations about the two peoples, but I'll risk a few observations.

British speech tends to be less general, and directed more, in its nuances of meaning, at a sub-group of the population. This can become a kind of code, in which few words are spoken because each, along with its attendant murmurings and pauses, carries a wealth of meaning that rests on shared assumptions and attitudes. No pauses are more pregnant than these British pauses. When a Cockney reacts to a situation with a loaded 'Aye aye . . .' or a girl from an upper-crust family with, 'After all, it's a bit much, isn't it?' the speaker assumes that the listener's background and reactions must be so similar to his own that he will be comprehended instantly, and will not be asked, for instance, 'Much *what*? The traditional Englishman's reputation for taciturnity stems from his tendency to remain within his own social group, where there isn't much to say because everyone knows the same things and feels the same way about them.

In America, unlike in Britain, there really is such a thing as *journalese*. That is, there are words that are used in news-

print and heard on newscasts and nowhere else, words such as 'gridiron', 'leatherneck', and 'parley'.

American speech continues to be influenced by the overheated language of much of the media, which is designed to attach an impression of exciting activity to passive, if sometimes significant, events. Someone 'fires off' a letter, 'hits' a bank for a loan, and 'grabs' some lunch. The fraudulent nature of this kind of language was brought home to me when I heard someone to say he was going to 'grab some sleep'.

Yet, curiously, really violent activity is often described in bland, antiseptic tones that serve to disguise the reality. During the Vietnam War, the US military bureaucracy was well known for the terms it used to disguise the brutal business of war, such as 'ordnance expended' for bombs dropped. Very recently a BBC report by *Panorama* on weapons in space showed a Pentagon official talking about an American satellite that could 'negate by impact' a Soviet satellite, meaning that it could destroy it by crashing into it.

The American language has less regard than the British for grammatical form, and will bulldoze its way across its distinctions rather than steer a path between them. It will casually use one form of word for another, turning nouns into verbs, as with 'author', 'fund', and 'host' ('scalp' which was originally only a noun, is an early example of this), and vice versa. This practice is spreading to Britain also. Even the quality newspapers reporting the conflict in Northern Ireland have used the noun 'shoot-out' and the verb 'gun down'.

However, this bluntness is not seen in the heart of the language, the relation of words to meaning. American speech is not more direct and forthright than British. If anything, it tends to flabbiness, loading sentences with circumlocutions and abstractions, and inflating some words so that they lose strength and substance, words like 'great' and 'disaster'. A Briton may be mislead by this, thinking that if an American responds to a suggestion with 'Terrific!' this signifies rapturous enthusiasm, whereas it is only polite assent.

In this connection, it is interesting to note that when, some years ago, Professor Alan Ross, the British linguist, published a celebrated study of upper-class and non-upper-class language in Britain, classifying words and phrases as 'U' (for upper-class) and 'non-U', most Americans writing about it

missed the point entirely. They assumed it was the upper crust who would use the genteel, pussy-footing term, whereas in almost every instance it was the non-U term that is more genteel and circumlocutory, the U more direct – a product of the U person's natural confidence.

I remember one time when I was a reporter in the London bureau of the Associated Press, coming back to the office with a story about an important sale of paintings, in which I quoted a baronet as saying that someone had 'plonked down a hundred thousand smackers'. The news editor was one of those Americans who still see and portray England as a place where doddering dukes grope their way through pea soup fogs dratting the fact that they've dropped their blasted monacles. He would not allow the phrase in the story because he said Americans would not recognize a member of the British aristocracy talking like that. I wasted a good deal of time trying to persuade him, not just that this was what the man said, but that this was just the sort of thing that he *would* say.

Yet, sometimes, it is the American language that is the more muscular of the two, for instance, in the hands of some of the finest American prose stylists, such as Tom Wolfe and J. D. Salinger, and in some of the best American magazine journalism. In different ways, either one or the other may be the more robust, elegant, precise or colourful.

The title of this dictionary deserves a note of explanation. Some people will object that there is no such thing as the 'British language', that Britons speak English. It is true that English is the language that, along with its users, conquered Welsh and the Gaelic of Scotland, and that it is certainly not in its origins a Scottish or Welsh language. But to call this an *English/American Dictionary* would imply that Americans do not speak English. So 'British' is used here to mean the predominant language spoken in the British Isles, as distinct from that spoken in other parts of the English-speaking world.

A few more words about what is and is not found here. Meanings that are common to the two languages are not necessarily included, even where the word is in here with another meaning. For instance, in the British/American section, the word 'chemist' is defined as a druggist. It is not explained that the word in Britain also means a scientist whose field is chemistry, since it means that in America also.

Occasionally, the common meaning is included where it might cause confusion otherwise. The sole criterion is what is useful.

Sporting terms are not included except where they are used outside the context of the game. If an American goes to a cricket match, he expects to hear unfamiliar words that he would not hear anywhere else. However, he may be talking to an Englishman about anything at all and hear that someone is 'on a sticky wicket'. Just as, if the Englishman has fallen among Americans, he might hear it said that someone has 'two strikes against him'. So the cricket term 'wicket' is defined, and the baseball term 'strike'. In other areas, specialized terms are included and explained if the non-specialist is likely to encounter them, shopping for the household, in business, or in a newspaper's political or financial columns, for instance.

One other class of words deserves mention, though not included in the dictionary. There are some words that are in the language of both countries, but that seem to come with the accent of only one. For instance, an American would be unlikely to use the word 'bottom', as in 'he fell on his bottom', or 'crafty' as in 'that was a crafty move'. Similarly, there are words which, although perfectly acceptable in Britain, sound more natural on American lips, such as 'liquor' and 'vacation'.

Words are not included that are particular to only one part of the country (an exception is made with some cockney terms, which are heard outside the boundaries of London, and are in any case more likely to be encountered by Americans than other regional terms). In America, the rural South has a whole vocabulary of its own, and young Southern Californians have a special language, that changes every six months. There is no attempt to include here archaic words, however colourful or philologically interesting. Differences in spelling are not included, what the pseudonymous American poet Firth, in his poem 'Orthography', calls 'The lure of the East when Kipling spells "pyjamas".'

I have tried to make this dictionary comprehensive, but not exhaustive.

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American/British

A

abolitionist, *n* – an anti-slavery campaigner in pre-Civil War America; the anti-slavery movement.

AC/DC, *adj* (abbr) – 1. attachable to either alternating or direct current. 2. bisexual.

Acapulco gold, *n* – a common, Mexican-grown variety of marijuana.

access television, *n* – not quite what it is in Britain, but a television programme made by a station affiliated to a network but independently of the network.

adjuster, *n* – (in insurance) an assessor.

administration, *n* – a cabinet and other officials appointed by the President. One speaks of 'the Reagan Administration' as one would 'the Thatcher Government', although it includes more people. On the difference between British and American terminology, F.J. Goodnow, in his Book *Politics and Administration*, offers this explanation: 'The one, through its control of Parliament, makes as well as administers laws; the other merely administers laws made by Congress.'

adobe, *n* – a sun-dried brick made of earth or clay. Adobe houses are common in the

Southwest. This is a Spanish word that has crossed the Rio Grande. Pronounced 'a-doe-bee'.

aerosol bomb, *n* – an insecticide spray.

affair, *n* – this also means a party or other planned social occasion. Thus, a catering firm advertising in the *New York Post*, 18 Feb, 1982: 'For any kind of affair. You can have it in your own living room.'

AFL/CIO, *n* (abbr) – the American Federation of Labor/Congress of Industrial Organizations, the national trade union body. It was formed by the merger of these two separate organizations in 1955, the AFL the older, and the CIO, formed during the New Deal, and more militant.

air, *n* – to give someone the air means to turn one's back on him or her. Also used sometimes about a thing, meaning to give it up.

air cushion vehicle, *n* – hovercraft. Sometimes abbreviated to ACV.

aisle, *n* – a gangway in a church, store or any other building; e.g. 'the British fashion of having railway compartments instead of an undivided car with a nice

long aisle' - from *Dodsworth* by Sinclair Lewis.

à la mode, *adj* - with ice cream.

alderman, *n* - a local official elected separately from councillors. In most localities in America, aldermen form a separate legislative body.

alfalfa, *n* - a leafy plant related to the bean grown widely in the United States and used as fodder. The approximate British equivalent is lucerne.

Alger, *prop n* - see Horatio Alger.

all-American, *adj* - in the top class in a particular sport. In some sports, newspapers will choose an imaginary 'all-American' team composed of the best players.

all-fired, *adv* (col) - tremendously, extremely. An old-fashioned, rural-sounding term.

alligator pear, *n* - avocado.

alma mater, *n* - one's old school or university.

alumnus, *n* - a graduate of a school or university. The Latin endings are preserved, so that the feminine is alumna, and the plural alumni and alumnae.

ambrosia, *n* - a dessert of fresh orange, bananas, coconut and other fruits.

ambulance-chaser, *n* (col) - a lawyer who rustles up business in unethical ways. Supposedly, he chases ambulances in order to persuade the victim of an accident to sue someone.

American Legion, *prop n* - the largest ex-servicemen's organization, nationalistic in its politics.

American plan, *n* - a hotel rate including meals.

Amtrak, *prop n* - the nationally-owned National Railroad Passenger Corporation, which operates some rail services between major cities.

Angeleno, *n* - a citizen of Los Angeles.

angel food cake, *n* - a light, fluffy, plain cake.

Annapolis, *prop n* - the location of the US Naval Academy, and in common speech the Academy itself; the equivalent of Dartmouth.

annie oakley, *n* (col) - a free ticket to an event. Named after the famous markswoman because these tickets sometimes have a hole punched in them, like a bullet hole.

ante, *n* - the stake in a wager. The term comes from poker. To ante up means to put down one's stake. penny-ante means cheap, small-time.

ante-bellum, *adj* - pre-American Civil War. One speaks of a Southern ante-bellum mansion.

antenna, *n* - aerial.

antsy, *adj* (col) - jittery. A shortened version of 'ants in his pants'.

apartment, *n* - flat. An apartment house is a block of flats.

apartment hotel, *n* - a block of service flats.

ape, *adj* (col) - to go ape means to go wild with excitement.

appaloosa, *n* - a hardy breed of horse developed in the American West, distinguished by its mottled colouring.

apple butter, *n* - a spiced apple sauce served as a condiment.