

British vs. American English (2)

Pronunciation

There are dozens if not hundreds of different ways to speak English. I can't cover all the varieties of accents, dialects and derivations of spoken English in this article. Let's focus on the basics here.

There are two major standards of spoken English — British and American English. Interestingly enough «RP» («Received Pronunciation», which is also known as «Queen's English» or «Oxford English») is spoken only by about 5% of the UK population which means there are many different dialects to be found in the British Isles. If you travel the UK you will notice that the differences in pronunciation are stronger and wider than in the US although the latter clearer is the bigger country.

I think this is due to the fact that statistically the average US American relocates more often within the US than his British counterpart. A dialect develops when people live closely together for a longer period of time and the community creates their own unique way of speaking. No doubt people in the southern US states have that distinctive «drawl» whereas people from Boston sound pretty different. But let's focus on the major differences between RP and standard US American English:

- Americans usually pronounce the letter «r» by rolling their tongue back and pressing it to the roof of their mouths whereas most British people don't pronounce the letter «r», especially when it occurs at the end of a word.
- In American English the words «can» and «can't» sound very much alike while in standard British English you can clearly make out a difference. (not so in most British made pop songs, though).
- Americans tend to pronounce words like «reduce», «produce», «induce», «seduce» — mostly verbs that end with «duce» — more relaxed, that means after the letter «d» there follows the vowel «u». In British English after the letter «d» you can make out a little «j».
- Americans have a tendency to reduce words by omitting letters. The words «facts» for example sounds in American English the same as «fax» — the «t» is not spoken.
- Sometimes letters are omitted in British English such as in the words «secretary», where the «a» is not spoken.
- In American English, the letter combination «cl» in words such as «cling», «climate», «club» etc., sound more fricative. You can produce these sounds by straining your vocal cords.

Word Stress sometimes is different in both versions:

British English	American English	(«advertisement» sounds completely differentt in both versions)
advertisemen details	advertisement details	

Vocabulary

There are some words and terms that are either used only in British or American English. However, with new media like the internet and in the more internationalized world these words become fewer and fewer. That's why I'll give you only a selection of the examples I've personally come across. What's really important is not that there are differences but that any British person understands any American without great difficulty and the other way round. I know I'm repeating myself, but please don't forget that British and American English are more similar than different.

British English	American English
lift	elevator
boot	trunk
autumn	fall
litter	garbage
crossroad	crossing
trousers	pants

Well, we could add to this list a couple of hunderd words and phrases and even then the vast majority of the almost 1 million English words would be the same in both versions of English.

Just one last example I'd like to give you here as it might be a bit amusing. The rather colloquial phrase «I'm totally pissed» means different things in British and American English. I won't give you the two different meanings here — if you really want to I'm sure you'll have your own way of finding out.