



On Grammatical Differences Between Daily British and American English

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Abstract

The grammatical differences between daily British English and American English are mainly in terms of the usage of prepositions, auxiliary verbs, articles, pronouns, adjectives and adverbs, and tense and subjunctive mood. These differences exert influence on English learning and interpersonal communication. This paper tries to illustrate the differences of grammar between British and American daily English based on the authors' teaching experience and learning experience in the UK. By comparison, English learners would understand more about the differences and be more effective while communicating with the people from the US and the UK.

Keywords: American English (AmE), British English (BrE), Grammatical differences

1. Introduction

English originates from England and belongs to Germanic of Indo-European family. Under the influence of culture of various countries and regions, English can be categorized into British English, American English, Australian English, New Zealand English, Canadian English, Indian English, Irish English, etc. However, at present, American English (AmE) and British English (BrE) are most commonly used. American English and British English are similar in most of aspects. Nevertheless, there are differences between American English and British English in aspects of word spelling, pronunciation and grammar. The differences are mainly shown in the usage of prepositions, auxiliary verbs, articles, pronouns, adjectives and adverbs, and tense and subjunctive mood. The differences include: (1) sometimes, British English and American English will adopt different grammars to express the same meaning; (2) sometimes, the same grammar expresses different meanings in British English and American English; (3) in some structures, either American English or British English will use integrated grammatical structure, while the other adopts omitted form; (4) sometimes, American English and British English use the same grammatical form to express the same meaning. However, one of them may use another form to express the meaning while the other does not have such form. In China, traditional teaching materials on English grammar adopt the rules of British English. But American English is more widely used in international level, which confuses those English learners who have not been systematically trained and results in "mixed" English. Although the difference between British English and American English is not that huge, the improper use of English will still make foolish figure or cause troubles.

A British woman got acquainted with an American woman during her visit in the US. One day, when they are visiting places of interests, the British woman says, "Let's have a rest. I'm already knocked up". The American woman responds that, "My heartiest congratulation." Hearing this, the British woman becomes a little angry and asks, "Why do you say that?" It is the phrase "knock up" that brings the confusion. In the UK, "knock up" means "tired very much", while in the US, this phrase means "pregnant". The phrase is the same; however, the phrase expresses different meanings in different countries and brings about misunderstanding.

British English and American English are different from each other in word spelling, idioms, number expression and etc. Even, in British and American English, the same word will express different concepts or the same concept is expressed with different words. We should summarize those differences and distinguish them so as to avoid the unnecessary troubles.

2. Grammatical differences between daily British and American English

2.1 Differences in verbs

2.1.1 In British English, the past tense of “get” is “got”, while American English usually use its past participle “gotten”. For example,

A. John has got much better during the last week. (BrE)

B. John has gotten much better during the last week. (AmE)

According to the custom that British English usually uses “got” while American English “gotten”, we can quickly tell the nationality of the speaker. The former is British and the later is American. When Americans use “got”, they mean “own, possess and dominate”, such as the following two examples:

They’ve got no pride.

I’ve got plenty of material if I can just handle it.

2.1.2 Another example is “have”. British English usually uses “Have you any children?” or “Have you got any children?” whilst Americans commonly express the same meaning with “Do you have any children?”

Let us see some other examples.

How many brothers do you have? (AmE)

How many brothers have you? (BrE)

You don’t have much room here. (AmE)

You haven’t (got) much room here. (BrE)

2.2 Differences in prepositions

Differences between British and American English in prepositions are shown in the following two aspects: (1) different use of prepositions in the construction of phrases; (2) when using phrases, one will use a preposition while the other will omit it.

2.2.1 Let us first review the different use of prepositions.

Your daughter’s name stands first in the list. (BrE)

Your daughter’s name stands first on the list. (AmE)

These dresses are in a sale. (BrE)

These dresses are on sale. (AmE)

He will come here at a quarter to three. (BrE, AmE)

He will come here at a quarter before /of / till three. (AmE)

Similarly, “five past nine” can be expressed in American English by “five after nine” or “nine five”. In front of “weekend” and “Christmas”, British English uses “at” or “over”, while American English adopts “over” or “on”.

At the weekend / Christmas (BrE)

Over the weekend / Christmas (BrE, AmE)

On the weekend / Christmas (AmE)

2.2.2 Omitting preposition

In British English, before “day”, “week” or “certain day”, preposition “on” shall be used, while it is not so in American English.

The new term begins on September 1. (BrE)

The new term begins September 1. (AmE)

I’ll see you on Monday. (BrE)

I’ll see you Monday. (AmE)

In American English, when “home” is used as an adverb, the preposition “at” is not needed. But, in British English, “at” is required before “home”. Hence, “at home” is used in British English.

Is he home? (AmE)

Is he at home? (BrE)

2.3 Differences in tense

There are differences in the use of tense in British and American English. When expressing the event that just happened,

British English usually uses past perfect tense, such as “I’ve just seen your brother” and “I’ve already eaten.” However, American English adopts past tense, such as “I just saw your brother” and “I already ate.” Let us have a look at other examples:

Now I know what it is! I’ve forgotten my husband. (BrE)

Now I know what it is! I forgot my husband. (AmE)

It’s been a long time since we met last. (BrE)

It is a long time since we met last. (AmE)

He went home after he had finished his work. (BrE)

He went home after he finished his work. (AmE)

2.4 Differences in use of subjunctive mood

In subjunctive mood, American English will reserve traditional subjunctive words.

I suggest that meeting should be postponed. (AmE)

I suggest that meeting be postponed. (BrE)

I wish I would have done it. (AmE)

I wish I had done it. (BrE)

However, British English will include “should” in subordinate clause in non-formal and non-law English.

If I would have seen one, I would have bought it for you. (AmE)

If I had seen one, I would have bought it for you. (BrE)

I insist that you go. (AmE)

I insist that you should go. (BrE)

2.5 Differences in use of nouns

2.5.1 Differences in forms

BrE	AmE
Candidature	Candidacy
centenary	centennial
cookery (book)	cook (book)
racialist, racialism	racist, racism
Sparking plug	Spark plug
transport	transportation

2.5.2 Same word, different meanings

The same word expresses different meanings in British and American English. Generally speaking, there are two types. The first one is to add meanings. When Americans want to express a new thing or object, it seems to them that the most convenient method is to add a new meaning to one existing word. For example:

“Clout” refers to power, influence or prestige, esp. in politics

“Family” means one of the operational units of the Mafia

“Point” indicates a charge of fee discounted by lender from a loan, by which the effective interest rate is increased.

The other is to change the meaning. Many words that originate from the UK now possess a totally different meaning in the US.

Word	AmE	BrE
Bill	Bank note	A demand for payment of a debt
Billion	A thousand million	A million million
Guy	Fellow, any person	A ridiculous figure
Pressman	An operator of a printing office	A newspaper man
Public school	A municipal-run school	A private school

2.5.3 Same meaning, different words

When expressing certain object, thing or concept, British and American English will adopt different words.

AmE	BrE
Bar	Public house, pub
Can (as a can of soup)	Tin
Candy	Sweets
Cookie	Sweet biscuit, small cake
Cracker	Biscuit (dry)
Long distance call	Trunk call
Package	Parcel
Intersection	Junction, crossroads
Railroad	Railway
Subway	Tube, underground
Superhighway, speedway	Motorway

2.6 Differences in articles

2.6.1 The omitting of articles

Most phrases of British English have articles, while those of American English do not have. The “the” in the standard expressions in British English “all the afternoon”, “all the winter”, “all the week”, “this time of the year”, ect. are usually omitted in American English. For example:

The swimming pools are open all summer.

I'll be here all afternoon.

He has been gone all week.

British English will use articles in front of “sickness”, “river” and etc., while American English does not. For example, British English expresses in the form of “the measles”, “the mumps”, “the flu”, “the Niagara Falls” and “the Black Creek”, while American English says “measles”, “mumps”, “flu”, “Niagara Falls” and “Black Creek”.

However, there are exceptions. In some expressions, British English does not use articles, while American English does.

BrE	AmE
Go into hospital	Go into the hospital
In hospital	In the hospital
At university	At the university

Sentences are as follows:

Next day, the rain began. (BrE)

The next day, the rain began. (AmE)

In future, I'd like you to pay more attention to detail. (BrE)

In the future, I'd like you to pay more attention to detail. (AmE)

2.6.2 The position of articles

British English and American English are different from each other in the use of “a” or “an” with “half”. In British English, “a” follows “half”, for example, “half a dozen”, “half an hour”, “half a mile”, and “half a pound”. In American English, “a” is put in front of “half”, for example, “a half dozen”, “a half hour”, “a half mile” and “a half pound”.

2.7 Differences in pronouns

British English and American English use different pronouns to repeat the indefinite pronoun “one”. British English uses “one”, for example, “One cannot succeed unless one tries hard”, while American English uses “he”, for example, “One cannot succeed unless he tries hard”.

Other examples are as follows:

One should learn to take care of oneself. (BrE)

One should learn to take care of himself. (AmE)

One can't be too careful, can one? (BrE)

One can't be too careful, can he? (AmE)

2.8 Differences in adjectives and adverbs

2.8.1 In non-formal American English, adjectives can be used as adverbs, for example "a real good meal". However, in British English and formal American English, only adverbs can be used, "a really good meal".

2.8.2 In American English, adverbs can be used more freely in respect of position. They can either be placed in front of auxiliary verbs or behind them, while the meaning of the sentences remains the same. For example, we can either say "They never will agree to it" or "They will never agree to it". For another example, "You probably could have done it yourself" means the same as "You could probably have done it yourself". However, in British English, adverbs are usually placed behind the first auxiliary verb. For example:

They will never agree to it.

You could always have called us first.

2.8.3 In British English, the adverbs "yet" and "already" can not be used in past tense and can only be used in past perfect tense. However, in American English, they can be used both in past tense and past perfect tense. Let us see the following examples.

I haven't bought one yet. (BrE, AmE)

I didn't buy one yet. (AmE)

Have you read it already? (BrE, AmE)

Did you read it already? (AmE)

To put it simply, we can summarize the grammatical differences between British and American daily English as follows:

- (1) Sometimes, British and American English use different grammatical form to express the same meaning;
- (2) Sometimes, the same grammatical form expresses different meanings in British and American English;
- (3) In some structures, either British English or American English will use integrated grammatical form, while the other adopts the omitted form;
- (4) Sometimes, American and British English use the same grammatical form to express the same concept and meaning. However, one of them may have another expression form, while the one does not. We could only avoid misunderstanding by attaching attention to those differences in our learning.

3. Conclusion

Although there are many differences in detailed aspects in the use of daily British and American English, they are similar to each other in most of aspects. Therefore, they shall only be considered as different forms of the same language rather than two different languages. In addition, we cannot say which one is better or advanced. Any judgment or opinion that "British English is better or worse than American English" is biased.

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