An Analysis of the Differences Between BE and AE in Growth and Linguistic Features

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The language of English is mainly classified into British English and American English. Britain is the birthplace of the language, and English has been bred and evolved significantly in this land. After a hundred years of evolution, American English has a full itinerary by its own national characteristics, and becomes an independent English model. In a large extent, it is different from British English. This paper analyzes the differences between British English and American English from the points of the growth and linguistic features of the language, so as to help people get more information about these two native languages, and thus, arouse their curiosity and creativity. I hope there will be more and more people enjoying the learning and using of English.

Keywords: British English, American English, differences

Introduction

English is the official language and common used language in both America and England, and it’s also the widely communicative language in the world. The English language was first introduced to the America by British colonization, beginning in the late 16th century. So, there are two major regional variants, British English and American English. The differences between American English and British English once caused George Bernard Shaw said that the United States and Britain are “two countries divided by a common language”. Coincidentally, the famous British writer Oscar Wilde also mockingly wrote: “it can be said that, now we and the United States is exactly the same in various aspects in addition to the language”. What will happen to them in the future? This problem has been widely concerned about English linguistics and English education.

For a long time, the British people despise other varieties of English; they think the British English is the authentic English. But after World War I, the United States national strength increased a lot; American English has become British English’s competitor. Especially after the Second World War, due to the rapid development of the mass media, American English produced a significant impact on British English. As a result the influence of American’s pronunciation and vocabulary on British English has increased. In fact, in the development of the modern English, American English and British English are highly interrelated and mutually reinforcing.

Nevertheless, it remains the case that although spoken American and British English are generally mutually intelligible, there are enough differences to cause occasional misunderstandings or at times embarrassment—for example, some words that are quite innocent in one dialect may be considered vulgar in the other.
Development of English

The Definition of British English

The definition of British English is that British English, mainly existing in the British Isles of England by the English rule, is the official language of British and commonwealth countries.

The Definition of American English

The definition of American English is that American English is in the form of a USA use. American English is a separate branch in British English, or as the linguists say, American English is a land in America that has been used in British English (transplant language).

Expectations of English Language Development

Language is a kind of culture and the product of social civilization. Whether it can be developed or not depends on the level of social development of the users and their countries. Language is also a means of communication, which is an important tool for interpersonal communication, communication between countries. Therefore, with the development of society, especially in today’s economic globalization, international exchanges and cooperation are constantly strengthened. Language, as an important communication tool, inevitably requires clear standards, which requires the unification and integration of languages. On the other hand, with the continuous exploration of objective things and the continuous improvement of cognitive ability, new vocabulary, new grammar, and new habits are bound to come into being for the purpose of convenient communication and accurate expression. As the most common language nowadays, the development of English is bound to follow this objective law, that is, it is gradually unified in its development, continuously developed in the unification, and continuously developed forward.

The Development of English

The history of English begins a little later after A.D. 600. The ancestors of the language were wandering in the forests of Northern Europe. Their language was a part of Germanic branch of Indo-European family.

People speaking this language spread to the northern coast of Europe in the time of Roman Empire. Among this people the tribes called Angels, Saxons, and Jutes which is called Anglo-Saxons come to England. The first Latin effect was in that period. Latin affected the language with the merchants traveling to these tribes. Some of the words taken from Latin are like kettle, wine, cheese, butter, cheap, and so on.

Also in the 14th century Rome Empire weakened because Goths attacked to Mediterranean countries of Roman Empire and Anglo-Saxons attacked to empire. On the other hand the Celtic tribes in Scotland and Wales developed. At the end of 410, the last roman emperor left the island to Celtic and Anglo-Saxons. Celtic and Anglo-Saxons fought for 100 years and Anglo-Saxons killed all the Celtics. In 550 Anglo-Saxons established England. During Roman Empire Latin was not the native language of the kingdom because people in the country were speaking Celtic.

When Anglo-Saxons became Christian in 597 they learned Latin. According to the effects on English, the history of the language is divided into three parts: Old English (7th century-1100), Middle English (1100-1450/1500), and Modern English (1500-now). In some books Modern English is divided into Early Modern (1500-1700) and Late Modern (1700-now).

First, Old English. When England was established, there were several kingdoms and the most advanced one was Nurthermbria. It was in this period that the best of the Old English literature was written, including the epic poem Beowulf.
In the 8th century Nurtumbrian power declined; West Saxons became the leading power. The most famous king of the West Saxons was Alfred the Great. He founded and established schools, translated, or caused to be translated many books from Latin into English.

After many years of hit-and-run raids between the European kingdoms, the Norsemen landed in the year of 866 and later the east coast of the island was belonged to the Norseman. Norse language affected the English considerably. Norse was not so different from English and English people could understand Norseman. There were also some borrowed pronouns like they, their, them in this language. It is supposed also that the Norseman influenced the sound structure and the grammar of English.

There were still some aspects we do not know in Old English. In vocabulary Old English is quite different from Middle English. Most of the Old English words are native English which were not borrowed from other languages. On the other hand Old English also contains borrowed words coming from Norse and Latin.

Second, the Middle English. Between 1100-1200 many important changes took place in the structure of English and Old English became Middle English. The political event which affected the administration system and language was the Norman Conquest. In 1066 they went crossed the Channel and became the master of England. For the next several years, England was ruled by the kings whose native language was French. On the other hand French could not become the national language because it became the language of the court, nobility, polite society, literature. But it did not replace the language used by the people. English continued to be the national language but it changed a lot after the conquest.

The sound system and grammar were not much affected but vocabulary was affected a lot. There were words related with government: parliament, tax, government, majesty; literary: story, romance, poet, literary; learned: study, noun, surgeon, anatomy, stomach; ordinary: nice, second, very, age, bucket, final, gentle, fault, flower, count, sure, move, surprise, plain, and so on.

Middle English was still a Germanic language but it is different from Old English in many ways. Grammar and the sound system changed a lot. People started to rely more on words order and structure to express their meaning rather than the use of case system. This can be called as a simplification but it is not exactly. Languages do not become simpler; they merely exchange one kind of complexity for another. For us Middle English is simpler than Old English because it is closer to Modern English.

Third, Early Modern English. Between 1400-1600 English underwent a couple of sound changes. One change was the elimination of a vowel sound in certain unstressed positions at the end of the words. This change was important because it influenced thousands of words and gave a different aspect to the whole language.

The other change is what is called the Great Vowel Shift. This was a systematic shifting of half a dozen vowels and diphthongs in stressed syllables. The shift altered all the words in which these vowels sounds occurred. These two changes resulted in the basic differences between Middle English and Modern English. But there are several other developments that affected language. One was the invention of printing. It was introduced to England by William Caxton in 1475. As this book became cheaper and cheaper, more people learned to read and write in communication.

The period of Early Modern English was also a period of English Renaissance, which means the development of the people. New ideas increased. English language had grown as a result of borrowing words from French, Latin, and Greek.
The greatest writer of the Early Modern English period is Shakespeare and the most known book is the King Jones version of the BIBLE.

Last, Recent Developments. The first English Dictionary was published in 1603. Another product of the 18th century was the invention of English Grammar. As English is replaced with Latin as the language of scholarship, it failed to control the language.

The period in which English developed most was in the Modern English. In that period the people who spoke that language increased dramatically. Now, English is the greatest language of the world both spoken natively and as a second language.

**Differences Between BE and AE in Growth**

We know that any kind of development and change of the language is a complex process; it not only reflects the culture of a nation or a country, but also reflects the development of the traditional politics and economy. The British and American history, together with the regional culture, led to the differences between British English and American English.

**Social Life**

Language and culture are related; language is a mirror of culture; language is the carrier of culture. And language is also a kind of active material, embodying the political, economic, and cultural characteristics, reflecting the spirit of the people at that time. Because of the change of life and the emergence of a new generation of people some new words appeared. For example, a “hippie” in the United States in 20th century, refers to those that have the social discontent, and rebellious spirit of young people. And the “baby boomer” in the 1980’s yuppies, refers to a well-paid professional job and rich material life style of young people; they spend generously, enjoying the fashionable life, known as the “generation”. The vicissitude of the English word reflects changes in life of general Englishmen at the second half of the 20th century. With the improvement of national life, giving the child a little gift is no longer regarded as something difficult; this catchword went out of the stage of history.

By more than 1500 years’ changes, the English language has developed from a local language spoken by a small number of people in Germanic tribes to its present position as a very important language spoken by a large numbers of people all over the world. The wide spread of English can due to the development of the politics, economy, and the society. Meanwhile, the unique character of the English Language is also very unnoticeable. On the one hand, it shares with West Germanic languages many common words and similar grammatical structures. On the other hand, more than half of the English vocabulary is derived from Latin and French. Besides, English has accepted words from other languages of the world in the course of its historical development. The English language has become an international language.

**The History of the Nation**

Language has distinctive feature of society, reflecting and recording the history of a country. The inheritance and development of English and history are inseparable. The English has a long history of over thousands of years after it appeared from A.C. 450 ago. In this period, Britain has experienced the invasion, their medieval feudal society, the bourgeois revolution, the industrial revolution, the overseas colonization, and expansion stage, formed ordinary historical culture. For example, the word castra (CAMP/camp) is the best proof of the British Rome in the years of military occupation. In 1649 the feudal reactionary forces chief
representative of Charlie Thi as “the tyrant, traitors, murderers and enemies of the state” was sent to the guillotine. Regicide is an English word, which is the best evidence of the unprecedented history that a feudal monarch was beheaded. The first industrial revolution in Britain began in the second half of the 18th century, and then the word, such as flying shuttle (Fei Suo), spinning jenny (spinning) appeared. So did it in America. The plantation history of America is related to the early colonial since Britain colonized the North America. The British colonized.

Later on, three tribes from the Northern Europe invaded Britain and settled down on the island: Angles, Saxons, and Jutes. These three tribes merged into one people. And the three dialects they spoke naturally grew into a single language, the English language. The North America in 1607, it established the first colony Jamestown, and then it was known as the plantation; the Old English means colony. The frontier spirit and pioneering spirit are the important components of national cultural characteristics of Americans that they are proud of. In the middle of the 20th century black people struggled for the civil rights against the racial discrimination. They created the famous sit-in, lie-in, swim-in, and other forms of struggle. After a long and unremitting struggle, the black won the integration (apartheid).

Regional Culture

Language is a true reflection of the objective world, a kind of social phenomenon. What kind of environment, in which the people live and work, will produce what kind of language. There is always in a certain geographical space in the cultural entity, which must reflect the geographical features of the natural landscape. Some words used by Americans do not exist in Britain, because of the differences in social life, geographical environment, and customs between these two countries. America’s territory is wide and large; the landform varies a lot. We can find lots of amazing landscape here such as the winding mountains, the expansive plain, the rolling hills, the flat highland, the low-lying swamp, and all other kinds of landforms. For example, the caribou (North American caribou), sagebrush (North Ai Guancong), Sequoia (Hong Shan), and the Everglades (South Florida Everglades), all of those are unique to Americans. The UK is surrounded by the sea, so there is a close relationship between the people’s life and ocean as well as the shipping industry. British people have to use a large number of the sea-related vocabulary words, because they rely too much upon the ocean, such as plain sailing, go with the (Everything is going smoothly) stream (swim), on the rocks (rocks), etc. The west of England is Atlantic; east is Europe. In continental Europe, north wind is bitterly cold while the west wind blowing from the Atlantic is worm and pleasant. Therefore, Mansfield, a laureate poet said, “It’s a warm wind, the west wind, full of bird crying”. Similarly, there are also some words easily found in British vocabulary, while not seen in American vocabulary, such as prince, duke, marquis, and knight. Some words are unique to British English too.

The Social Economy

Development and change of any kind of language is a complex process; it not only reflects the culture of a nation or a country, but also reflects the development of traditional political and economic history. Political events, figures and movement, parties, policy may lead to the change of language. Sometimes, the language will change dramatically, especially in the process of the social and political change. In the United States, the September 11, 2001 terrorists attacked the world trade center in New York; this incident led to generating a lot of new words. The Ground Zero is used to refer to the ruins of the world trade center after the terrorist attacks. “9.11” also has a special significance, especially when referred to the terrorist attacks. Even
the word “Osamaniac” also appears in the media, the term used to refer to Osama Ben Laden’s crazy love. Watergate is a term used to infer the political events, because President Clinton had white Watergate (Whitewater).

America is a nation founded by immigrants; from the many one (UCO) is the motto. It reflects the characteristics. In the past few centuries, tens of millions of immigrants going across the ocean sea came from every corner of the world. The name “United” in “the United State”, not only refers to the nations of the world, but that brought about by their colorful culture. The staggered combination of various national culture styles can be said to be a major feature of today’s American social life.

**Differences Between BE and AE in Linguistic Features**

**The Reasons for the Difference Between BE and AE**

American English derives from British English. British English is the English and the British Isles life its colonial country’s official language, while English is able to become the world’s most popular a kind of language, depends on the British colonial power is strong, and the American English to be able to continue to carry forward, and especially after World War II in the near future the international economic, political, military status is inseparable. The reason for the difference is that American English has become an important branch of English. At present, American cultural products such as movies and books sell well all over the world, far ahead of other English-speaking countries, so that its language is effectively promoted. At the same time, the United States is a multi-ethnic immigrant country, the American society is influenced by multiculturalism, and the language needs constant innovation, after absorbing Indian, German, French, Spanish, Dutch vocabulary, and a large number of black cultures, thus forming the current American English. While Britain’s political and economic status in the world has declined slightly, the status of the United States has accelerated, which has greatly increased the international influence of American English.

Although American English is evolved from the British English, there still are some evident differences in history, culture, and economy, which result in the differences between British English and American English.

**Spelling**

When it comes to different spellings there is not really that much to say because in the near future the world will more or less agree on one uniform version. British English has a tendency to keep the spelling of many words of French origin whereas Americans try to spell more closely to the way they pronounce words and they remove letters not needed, which makes sense to me. Here are some examples:

| British English | American English |
|----------------|-----------------|
| centre         | center          |
| theatre        | theater         |
| realize        | realize         |
| catalogue      | catalog         |
| programme      | program         |
| travelled      | traveled        |
| neighbour      | neighbor        |
| grey           | gray            |
| plough         | plow            |
Pronunciation

There are dozens if not hundreds of different ways to speak English. It is very difficult to cover all the varieties of accents, dialects, and derivations of spoken English in this article. In this thesis I will mainly 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 in the UK you will notice that the differences in pronunciation are stronger and wider than in the US although the latter is the clearer and 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. There is no doubt that people in the Southern US states have that distinctive “rawl” whereas people from Boston sound pretty different. But let’s focus on the major differences between RP and standard US American English.

Vowels. The most different of the vowel between British English and American English is the vowels. In British English, the pistachio vowel in a unit usually sounds in the non-repeaters short sound, like “about” and in the cochlear “er”, such as “computer”. In American English, “er” is seldom to be used as muddy vowel, but sometimes, some short sounds, like “i”, “u”, even “u”, are used as muddy vowel, such as sentimental, actuality, wuss, and hooker, etc.

The representative distinction between British English and American English is “er”. In British English, the short sound “er” is the pistachio vowel as mentioned above; it is just a draw of the pistachio vowel. But in American English, it is sound like “r”.

Apart from the short sound Light Reading (as singular) and after the vowel (as clarity), and in British English, “ar” is the long [a:].

Here is a more important distinction in vowel pronunciation; it is short sound “o”. In British English, it is only for shortening a long sound “o” as “or”.

Consonants. Americans usually pronounce the letter “r” by rolling their tongue back and pressing it to the
roof of their mouths whereas most British people do not 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. 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.

Vocabulary

English basic vocabulary system is based on the common vocabulary core. Without this vocabulary core, both American English and British English will not exist.

The same words with different meaning. The same word both in the United States and England presents the completely different concept respectively. For example, for the word billion, it is one million in England but one thousand million in USA. The British regard first floor as the floor just upper the ground floor but American take it as the ground floor. Calico in England refers to white cloth but printed cloth in USA. The word politician is a neuter non in England. It refers to one keenly interested in politics.

| BE          | AE       |
|-------------|----------|
| Biscuit     | 软饼     |
| Billion     | 十亿     |
| Overall     | 紧身裤   | 工装裤   |

Different words with the same meaning. British English and American English with different words share the same concept. For example:

| BE          | AE       |
|-------------|----------|
| lift        | elevator |
| tin         | can      |
| tap         | faucet   |
| sweets      | candy    |
| film        | movie    |
| petrol      | gas, gasoline |
| train       | trolley  |
| ring sb. up | call sb. up |

Grammar

Use of the Present Perfect. In British English the Present Perfect is used to express an action that has occurred in the recent past that has an effect on the present moment. For example: “She’s lost her purse. Can you help her look for it?” In American English the following is also possible: “She lost her key. Can you help her look for it?”
British English:
“I’ve just received an email.”
“I’ve already answered it.”
“Have you completed your article yet?”

American English:
“I just received an email.” or “I’ve just received an email.”
“I’ve already answered it.” or “I already answered it.”
“Have you completed your article yet?” or “Did you complete your article yet?”

**Possession.** There are two forms to express possession in English—have or have got.
“Do you have a computer?” or “Have you got a computer?”
“She hasn’t got any hobbies.” or “She doesn’t have any hobbies.”
“She has an interesting new book.” or “She’s got an interesting new book.”

While both forms are correct and accepted in both British and American English. Those like “have got” “have you got”, “he hasn’t got”, etc., are generally the favorite forms in British English while most speakers of American English use the have “do you have”, “he doesn’t have”, etc.

**Present Progressive (also known as Present Continuous).** There are some verbs in British English that cannot be used in the Present Progressive while in American English they can. Here are two examples:

British English
“I like this conversation more and more.”

American English
“I’m liking this conversation more and more.”

British English
“I remember this quite clearly.”

American English
“I’m remembering this quite clearly.”

**Adverbs.** Americans tend to use adjectives instead of adverbs. Instead of “That’s really good” you might hear them say “That’s real good” or instead of “I’m doing very well” they say “I’m doing pretty good”. Here are some more examples:

| British English                  | American English            |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| He did that really quickly.      | He did that real quick.     |
| Let’s take things slowly.         | Let’s take things slow.      |
| Her car drives more quickly.      | Her car drives quicker.      |

**Plurals.** There are a number of nouns that are uncountable in British English while they do have a plural form in American English. Here are some examples:

| British English                  | American English            |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| types of accommodation           | accommodation               |
| types of food                    | foods                       |
| a lot of fruit                   | many foods                  |
| strands of hair                  | hairs                       |
Letters Format

American English and British English also have some differences in letter format. There is a certain archaism in British English, which is also related to the generation of British English. It has a long history and is relatively strict in terms of words, while American English is relatively young in terms of its birth, so its letter format presents a lively and vigorous characteristic. In American English, the letter format is vertical (flush), while in British English, it is indented (serrated), meaning the first letter of each paragraph is indented. There are also some differences in the format of the address. In American English, the address, the addressee, and the position of the addressee are usually juxtaposed into one line, which is called vertical. In British English, the recipient’s position is indented by the recipient’s company and address.

Specific Vocabulary

Britain and the United States are fundamentally different in history, culture, society, religious belief, geographical location, and many other aspects. Therefore, British English and American English have many unique words that represent local culture and unique charm. For example, the United States is located in the middle of North America and has more forest and mountain resources, so caribou National Park in Florida is one of the words in American English. The UK is located in the northwest of the European continent, surrounded by the sea, so its rivers are also quite famous, such as Severn River, River Thames, and other River nouns representing the British characteristics, as a special vocabulary to reflect the British people’s longing for the water culture. From the perspective of politics, society, and culture, the United States is a federalist country that pays attention to democracy, freedom, and dreams. Therefore, in American English, words such as electoral college and American Dream highlight the features of democratization and liberalization in American politics and culture. Britain, on the other hand, is a more traditional constitutional monarchy, and its unique characteristics of retro aristocracy are also reflected in its unique vocabulary. For example, King, Marquess, Viscount, and other terms represent the English title of Lord and King.

Conclusion

The contemporary new technology revolution is booming and the worldwide trend of economy exchanges with the globalization. So with the political, economic, and cultural exchanges becoming increasingly close as well as people’s need for all kinds information becoming more and more urgent, the information is spread at an unprecedented rate in the diffusion of space. English, as a lingua franca, is a tool for information feedback, gradually showing its important position in international communication. English is not the traditional sense of “national language”; instead, it has become a public communication tool between different countries and diverse peoples. The differences between British English and American English will become increasingly little, due to the British and American culture communication being more and more frequent. So, in the future, English should develop toward a direction of the coexistence of the commonness and diversity of the language. British English and American English are quite different in many aspects. Currently, in the world there are nearly hundreds of languages existing, but the most useful language is English and it is the language which can be widely understood in everywhere of the world. English is only a language widely understood. For a non-native speaker, English is a bridge for us to communicate with the westerners. And to be an English major, to know clearly about the differences of this language is essential to us and will help us to learn it more systematically.
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