

# Potentially Confusing And Embarrassing Differences between American and British English

We speak English in the UK.  
So do you in the US.  
But yet we don't speak the same language.

David Barton  
*Dept. of Geological Sciences, Durham University, South Road,  
Durham, United Kingdom, DH1 3LE*  
d.j.barton [at] durham.ac.uk

---

David Barton maintains an extensive list of  
*Words That Could Be Confusing And Embarrassing In The UK & US*  
See the complete list at <http://www.systems.demon.co.uk/ukus.htm>.

---

It was said by Sir George Bernard Shaw that 'England and America are two countries separated by the same language'. My first personal experience of this was when I worked as a camp counsellor for two months in 1993 in a Summer Camp run by the Boy Scouts of America, as part of an international leader exchange scheme. Before I went, all the participants in the scheme were given a lecture by an American woman in Baden Powell House (the world headquarters of the Scout Movement) in South Kensington, London. We were told what to do, say and expect of the United States. As part of the talk, we were given a short list of words that are in common use in the UK which Americans would either be confused by or would even offend them. I memorised the words and thought 'I'll cope'.

When I finally arrived in the States three months later, I realised that perhaps a lifetime of watching American television and a half hour speech were not adequate preparation for appreciating and coping with the differences between American and British speech. In the first hour of arriving at the camp I was exposed to High School American English, Black American English and the American English spoken by Joe Q. Public, all very different to each other. Needless to say, I did cope in the end. I found the Americans I met to be very welcoming and helpful and were patient with me when I made a social faux pas when I used an inappropriate word or phrase.

Upon my return I began to wonder whether anyone had documented the differences between American and British English. I found several books on the subject but often these were written in a dry and academic way. I felt that I could do better and use my sense of humour and personal experiences to help people from both sides of Atlantic to communicate more effectively when they meet.

My research into the subject led me to several conclusions. Firstly, American English and British English are converging thanks to increased transatlantic travel and the media. The movement of slang words is mostly eastwards, though a few words from the UK (particularly defamatory words like 'wanker' - the slang word for an onanist) have been adopted by the more anglocentric Ivy League fraternities. This convergent trend is a recent one dating from the emergence of Hollywood as the predominant film making centre in the world and also from the Second World War when large numbers of American GIs were stationed in the UK. This trend was consolidated by the advent of television. Before then, it was thought that American English and British English would diverge as the two languages evolved and absorbed words brought to their respective countries by immigrants and their colonies.

In 1789, Noah Webster, in whose name American dictionaries are still published in to this day, stated that:

*'Numerous local causes, such as a new country, new associations of people, new combinations of ideas in arts and some intercourse with tribes wholly unknown in Europe will introduce new words into the American tongue.'*

He was right, but his next statement has since been proved to be incorrect.

*'These causes will produce in the course of time a language in North 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 had under-rated the amount of social intercourse between England and her former colony. Even before Webster had started to compile his dictionary, words and expressions had returned from the Americas and had infiltrated the mother tongue, for example 'bluff', 'canoe', and 'hatchet'. Very few people in Britain realise how many of the words they use are of American origin. Often this importation of American words has encountered a linguistic snobbery by the British, which was a manifestation of the cultural snobbery that bedevilled Anglo-American relationships for a long time. This is not, thankfully, the case now.

Secondly, there are some generalisations that can be made about American and British English which reveal the nature of the two nations and their peoples. British speech tends to be less general, and directed more, in 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 shared assumptions and attitudes. In other words, the British are preoccupied with their social status within society and speak and act accordingly to fit into the social class they aspire to. This is particularly evident when talking to someone from 'the middle class' when they point out that they are 'upper middle class' rather than 'middle middle class' or (God Forbid) 'lower middle class'. John Major (the current UK Prime Minister) may have said that we are now living in a 'classless society' but the class system still prevails. At the moment both he and the Leader of the Opposition, Tony Blair, are talking about capturing the 'middle England, middle class vote' as the key to winning the next general election.

American speech tends to be influenced by the over-heated language of much of the media, which is designed to attach an impression of exciting activity to passive, if sometimes insignificant events. For example, 'firing off a letter' and 'grabbing some lunch'. Yet, curiously, really violent activity and life changing events are hidden in bland antiseptic tones that serve to disguise the reality. Two examples come readily to mind - the US Military with their 'friendly fire' and 'collateral damages' and the business world with their 'downsizing'. British people tend to understatement whereas Americans towards hyperbole. A Briton might respond to a suggestion with a word such as 'Terrific!' only if they are expressing rapturous enthusiasm, whereas an American might use the word merely to signify polite assent.

The American language has less regard than the British for grammatical form, and will happily bulldoze its way across distinctions rather than steer a path between them. American English will casually use one form of a word for another, for example turning nouns into verbs (e.g. 'author' a book) and verbs and nouns into adjectives. In Britain, a disrespect for grammatical rules, particularly amongst the middle classes, would immediately reveal you to be 'not one of us'. Listening to listener feedback programmes on Radio 4 (one of the radio stations run by the British Broadcasting Corporation or BBC) would reveal this. People actually write into complain about grammatical mistakes made by news presenters!

Amongst young British people, this is not necessarily the case. British teenagers have long been accused of being poorly educated by politicians, parents and employers since they have little regard for grammar in their speech. As a consequence of American culture and speech patterns being commonplace on children's television programmes in the UK, I have noted that most young British children of my acquaintance now play with their toys in an American accent with the attendant syntax and grammatical structures. American teenagers have taken this disregard for grammatical form one step further and have almost abandoned syntax altogether. For example, a teenage girl might describe the time she met her new boyfriend by saying 'I looked at him and I was, like, whoa!'.

In my list (and in the sample below) I have described the words which cause the most confusion when a British subject and a United States citizen meet. I have chosen words that are used by all members of American society - or at least to the best of my knowledge. In the corresponding British slang, the words listed are used by Britons irrespective of social class, background or geographical location, unless I have stated otherwise. I have discovered from feedback about my web page that Americans on the Eastern Coast are exposed to more British culture through television and plays and, as a consequence, know, understand and use a greater number of British slang words than their counterparts in the Mid-West and on the West Coast.

---

The complete list is available at: <http://www.dur.ac.uk/~dgl3djb/ukus.html>

Please send further suggestions for Anglo-American Confusions to:

[d.j.barton@durham.ac.uk](mailto:d.j.barton@durham.ac.uk)

# *The List*

**Anglo-american relations.** Ask the average American what they think England is like and they may paint some romanticised image of Royalty, cricket, people who speak like the Queen / Dick Van Dyke, castles and their friend Bob who lives in London. When they get here they often disappointed to discover that England is smaller and damper than they expected and the sad fact that not every Englishman knows their friend Bob. Also, we don't have Twinkies, the Queen is never in and the house that Auntie Nellie lived in before she emigrated to the US has been knocked down and been replaced by a multistorey car park. Despite all this, millions of you guys visit our country and we are very glad to see you. A word of warning though. Some English people seem to think it is absolutely hilarious hearing Americans mispronounce place names. To spoil their little game here are some handy hints. Firstly, Leicester is pronounced 'Lester'. Secondly, in place names like Birmingham and Durham the 'ham' is pronounced 'um' (e.g. Durham is pronounced Dur-um). Thirdly, Reading, the city, is pronounced 'redding'. Finally, Fowey is pronounced 'foy'. Unfortunately there are many others - too many to list here...

**Billion.** In the US a thousand million. In the UK a thousand times that amount. As a consequence there are considerably more US billion dollar industries than there are UK billion pound ones despite the exchange rate.

**Bomb.** Imagine you are a composer of musicals. Your latest magnum opus has just opened simultaneously in the West End of London and on Broadway. The reviews on both sides of the Atlantic have described your production as 'a bomb'. In the US, if the production was described as a 'bomb' it would mean that your musical is going to flop badly and probably won't join the ranks of your other successful masterpieces such as... erm... In the UK, the musical was described as 'going down a bomb' - a great success in other words. In this situation, your best hope would be that the UK production will make up the loss made by the US one - otherwise it will cost a absolute bomb (in the UK this means a lot of money).

**Crib.** I occasionally listen to rap music, so this word has puzzled me in the past. In the UK, a crib is small bed-like object that is used by newly born babies as place of rest in-between crying, eating, making a mess, more crying, relieving themselves, gurgling cutely when the grandparents come round and screaming loudly when they leave. I should know - I was a little anarchist when I was very small. Mind you, I soon progressed onto a cot - the same sort of idea but bigger and with reinforced bars to stop you getting out - much to my annoyance. Also, in the UK 'to crib' means to copy in an exam. In the US, you do not make a distinction between a cot and a crib. Anyway (getting back my original point), when a rapper is talking about taking his baby back to his crib (his small apartment), infant care may not be the most likely outcome. At least, not in the short term... By the way, a cot (for adults) is called a camp bed in the UK.

**Cricket.** Popular myth has it the sound of the English Summer is incomplete without the sound of willow against leather, scones with jam and whipped cream and a cup of tea in a fine bone china cup. This translates into American English as 'sitting around eating small plain cakes with jelly and cream watching a game where the idea is to stand around for hours on end.' Ah yes, but this is Tradition you see. Occasionally you might see a chap throw a ball at another chap with a bat, who is wearing padding on his legs, in an attempt to knock over the wicket (the sticks behind the batsman). If this ball bounces in an unexpected manner, this is called a googly. If it is a really erratic googly, the ball may hit the batsman in the goolies (male private parts) at which point the batsman is allowed to throw a wobbler (get upset). This might be a 'bit of a sticky wicket' (a problem)... If it is any consolation to our American Chums, a lot of English people don't understand cricket either and can't see the point in a three day game which ends in a draw. The English Cricket team is also spectacularly bad at playing the game that England taught to its former colonies, even if the rules were designed to make sure that only the English knew and understood them. As a consequence, most English people consider their country's cricket team to be a joke and certainly wouldn't go as far as admitting that they actually supported them. This could be a problem if Norman Tebbit (the Conservative Member of Parliament) gets his way and introduces the 'Cricket Test' (i.e. which cricket team you supported) as an immigration test.

**Fag.** A goody but an oldie. Over here a 'fag' is a cigarette. So in the song 'Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag' the line 'As long as you have a Lucifer to light your fag' is not a fundamentalist Christian's statement that all homosexuals will burn for eternity in hell, but saying that 'if you always have a match to light your cigarette...' Also, when at a public (i.e. private - confused you will be) school in the UK, you may have to 'fag' for an older boy. This usually involves shining shoes, cleaning up and performing other favours for this older lad. In return for fagging, the older boy looks after your interests and makes sure that you fit into the school and promote the school spirit (bon vivre, not necessarily the alcoholic kind). This may also be a fag (i.e. a tiresome thing).

**Fancy.** In the UK to be sexually attracted to or to desire. Also a tea cake.

**Football.** A classic example of our culture gap. To us Brits football is what you call soccer. To you football is what we call pointless. You probably think the same way about cricket... Our soccer commentators are every bit as annoying as your football ones since they speak in cliches (Over the moon, Ron; Sick as a parrot, Ron; The boy did good, Ron), wear bad 1970s tweed jackets, have unattractive hairstyles (e.g. the 'Brian Moore' where a practically bald man grows one side extra long and then combs it over his bald patch - this invariably flutters in his face in strong winds), have no idea what-so-ever about football and tend to be called 'Ron'. Then again, given the fact that most footballers are capable of great athletic feats on the pitch but are unable to string a sentence together without slipping into cliches (I gave it 110% today, Ron; I'm a bit choked (disappointed) after missing that penalty, Ron; I'm chuffed (glad) that we beat the local Junior School second eleven today, Ron) I suppose they are only making the best of a pretty poor situation. Worst of all the football commentators is the one they call 'Jimmy Hill' who is used as a bogeyman by soccer fans to frighten their kids.

**Going shopping.** Going shopping for the first time in the US is worrying experience for Johnny Brit. Firstly, everything is sold in stores, rather than shops. Secondly, you push your shopping around in a cart rather than a trolley. Thirdly, all of your shopping is put into paper shopping bags rather than the familiar plastic carrier bags by someone called the teller rather than the cashier. Most terrifying of all is the thousands upon thousands of different varieties of junk food, all of which are very bad for you. Two cases in point - blue-berry kool aid and beef jerky. Yuck. Mind you, we do have Pot Noodle over here. These are freeze dried noodles in a spicy sauce that are reconstituted by adding boiling water - disgusting but strangely satisfying after you have been drinking...

**Jelly & Jam.** In the UK, jelly is either the stuff you US-types call jello or a seedless preserve made from fruit, sugar and pectin. To confuse things further, fruit preserves are generically called jam over here too. Hence, if you were in an English restaurant enjoying a piece of bread with peanut butter and fruit preserve on it you would be eating 'a peanut butter and jam sandwich.' BTW, I used to enjoy peanut and jelly sandwiches when I was little in the UK sense of the word... Sloppy, but very nice.

**Lift.** In the US the device used to travel between floors in a hotel is called an elevator. In the UK it is called a lift. Also, a word of warning for American hitch-hikers. When hitching it is best to ask 'for a lift' and not a ride (which is a sexual favour in the UK).

**Lorry.** A UK truck. A word used in the tongue twister 'Red Lorry Yellow Lorry' by parents to torture their kids. Try it. You'll hate me for it.

**Momentarily.** Imagine you are flying from the UK to the US. Just before you land, the air stewardess announces that 'we are about to land momentarily'. If she is American, she has just said that we are going to land in the very immediate future. However, if she is British, you may be spending less time in the US than you originally planned. The UK meaning in this context is 'for a short time' as opposed to the US 'in a short time'. Also, when an American stewardess said that the plane would be taking off momentarily on the way home, I had images of the Boeing 747 kangaroo hopping all the way back to Blighty...

**Pants and Knickers** You call pants what we call trousers; pants are the things that go underneath. In the US knickers are knee-length trousers similar to what the Brits call 'breeches'. In the UK, they are the things that go underneath. Typically British men wear pants under their trousers and women wear knickers, unless of course, you are a Tory (Conservative) MP and then anything goes... Also NORWICH (Norwich is a city in England famed for it's football team, it's cathedral and chat show host Alan Partridge) was an acronym used by service personnel during WWII for '(k)Nickers Off Ready When I Come Home'. To be on the safe side when visiting the doctors it's best to keep your pants/knickers on...

**Policemen.** UK policemen are unarmed. As a consequence I feel safer over here than I did in the US. Anyway, the following are used to describe policemen: bobbies, peelers, filth, cops, pigs, the old Bill (or the Bill), rozzers, coppers, a plod or perhaps 'bastards' if you are feeling lucky. I'm not sure how many of those you guys might use. Imagine you are a tea leaf (cockney rhyming slang for a thief) and you spot a car in good nick (reasonable condition) so you decide to nick (steal) it. Along comes PC (Police Constable) Plod, puts his hand on your shoulder and says 'You're nicked mate!' even though he isn't your friend and he probably isn't wielding a knife. This is your cue to say 'It's a fair cop! You got me banged to rights and make no mistake. You'll find the rest of the swag (ill-gotten gains) in the sack!' if you are stupid or 'I aint done nuffink, copper!' if you are aren't. Since you had 'been a naughty boy' you would be taken to court, and you may find yourself confronted by a 'beak' (a magistrate), who might send you down for some time 'at her Majesty's Pleasure'. You would go to gaol (or jail), or 'nick' as it is sometimes confusingly called.

**Randy.** In the US a perfectly reasonable first name. Pity then, the multitude of poor Americans given this unfortunate appellation when they come over to old Blighty. Wherever they go, grimy street urchins snigger, little old ladies try desperately to stifle guffaws and ordinarily quite sensible members of society burst out in laughter. And why? In the UK, saying 'Hi, I'm Randy!' is akin to saying to our American cousins 'Hello friend, I'm feeling horny.' However, save your pity for poor soul Randy Highman who introduced himself to my supervisor at a conference not so long ago...

**Rubber.** In the UK a rubber is a pencil eraser. In the US, it is a condom. Don't be shocked if the mild mannered new Englishman in your office asks for a pencil with a rubber on the end. Especially when he says that he enjoys chewing it when he is thinking.

**School.** In the UK if someone said that they were 'going to school', it would mean that they are attending an educational establishment that has students between the ages of five and sixteen. In the US, it can also mean the place of higher education that you attend after high school which us Brits call University. Confusing? You bet.

**Smart.** In the US to be smart implies that you are intelligent, clever, witty, a joy to be with, wonderful company etc. It can mean this in the UK as well, but typically in the UK 'to be smart' means that you are well dressed. Being smart (UK) is not a prerequisite for being smart(US) though in my experience...

**Table.** Imagine you are in a boardroom. The chairperkin (note dubious PC nomenclature) says 'I reckon we should table the motion about the McBigcorp account'. If you were American you would think 'Gee, I guess we can forget about that for a while' - i.e. the motion has been postponed. If you were English, you would think 'Jolly good show old bean! I fancied talking about that one!', i.e. the motion has been brought up for discussion. How do people in trans-atlantic companies cope?

**Torch.** You and your British friend have gone camping. You've pitched your tent and have just got into your sleeping bags. Suddenly your friend says 'Where's my torch?' At this point you have images of him producing a US torch (i.e. one with flames) and setting the tent on fire! You feel relieved when he digs deep into his rucksack and produces ...a flashlight. Phew!

**Z.** The twenty sixth letter of the alphabet. You call it 'Zee'; we call it 'Zed'. A whole generation in England has had to relearn the alphabet after hearing the 'Alphabet song' on Sesame Street. Sadder still, the song doesn't rhyme with the English 'Zed'. At least the 'Numbers song' works (1-2-3-4-5, 6-7-8-9-10, 11-12, do do-do do-do do-do do etc etc...)

---

The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. II, No. 5, May 1996

<http://iteslj.org/>

---

<http://iteslj.org/Articles/Barton-UK-USwords.html>