

# The Study of English Style: British English and American English Words

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## Abstract

The British English and American English are most commonly used; which are usually referred as two 'main' accents for the English language. Both of them are having their own uniqueness and characteristics in terms of word choices. When the speaker utters the words in one particular accent, by some means the listener could recognise which English style is the speaker more familiar with. To obtain the data of which English style are the speaker more familiar with, a straightforward study was held. The respondents for this study are ten people who live in the city of Singaraja with various ages and social backgrounds. They are requested to determine which English words are more familiar for them by showing them a table of words list. Fine comprehension about English in cooperation with the vocabularies that the respondents have will lead them to English style that fits them in four English proficiencies.

**Keywords:** The British English, the American English, familiar words

## I. Introduction

As one of the most spoken languages all over the world, English plays a significant role in every single sector of humans' life. English has also become one of the official languages in the United Nations; together with Arabic, French, Russian, Spanish and Mandarin (Chinese). There are a lot of English accents such as Australian English accent in Australia, Canadian English accent in Canada, Irish English accent in Ireland, Scottish English accent in Scotland, Welsh English accent in Wales and many others.

Nevertheless, at this moment in time, British English and American English are most commonly used; which are usually referred as two 'main' accents for the English language. The differences between those two are actually not only about

the accent but also from the spelling differences and pronunciation differences. Another fun fact is that it is not only the spelling and pronunciation that we need to watch out for because there are also a number of words which have different meanings. It is all depending on whether they are used in a British English or an American English context.

The word '*football*' in British English, for example, refers to a game played between two teams of eleven people, where each team tries to win by kicking a ball into the other team's goal (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary Third Edition), whereas in American English the word refers to '*soccer*'. In American English, the word '*football*' actually refers to American football which is a game for two teams of eleven players in which

an oval ball is moved along the field by running with it or throwing it (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary Third Edition).

Zhang (2008) offered a good example to illustrate how the same utterance could have different meaning in the British English and American English. Zhang explained that there was a lady from Britain encountered an American woman in her visit to a particular destination in The United States of America. The British lady mentioned that she needed to rest because she had already *knocked up*. The American woman unpredictably congratulated her and this made the lady got annoyed. This seems sensible because the phrase '*knock up*' has led the conversation into a misunderstanding. If we say the phrase in the United Kingdom society, it actually means '*exhausted*' meanwhile in the United States of America it means '*pregnant*'. We can see that the same phrase has really different meanings within different countries. Thus, we should also know the real meaning of the phrase from the two points of view; both in British English and American English.

On the other hand, talking about the use of English language in Indonesia, the Indonesian people tend to mix their English into British and American English altogether. Sometimes, they apply the words which are familiarly used in British English, nonetheless they also apply the American English words on the other occasion. At first glance, this might be seen as an inconsistency of

Indonesian people in using English language. However, it is very likely that Indonesian people do not really recognise the differences between those two types. There is a tendency that they prefer to use the words that they are familiar with and often they hear either through daily conversation or from other media. Besides, all those words that they are familiar with become fossilised in their minds and it is rather difficult to use other words. For example, if someone knows the word '*candy*' better than '*sweet*', they will use the word '*candy*' more often in the conversation.

Without a doubt, British English and American English are diverse from each other in many aspects. It is possible as well to find the same word – in British English and American English – which convey very dissimilar context and the exact same context which are stated in different words. Due to the history and local culture, we need to study it thoroughly and carefully to steer clear of the redundant misinterpretation.

## II. Discussion

### 2.1 The Differences between British English and American English

As being stated previously, even though theoretically all of us speak exactly the same English language, there are some significant points wherein British English is different from American English. The followings are the differences:

### a. Spelling

The first difference is in the term of spelling. Especially for the spelling, the British English has commonly maintained the way of spelling of words which has been taken from other languages meanwhile American English has modified the way of spelling to make the word look more like how it actually sounds. For instance, if we talk about a kind of movement which needs skill and care, it is called '*manoeuvre*' in British English, meanwhile it is called '*maneuver*' in American English. Another characteristic difference in term of spelling is the existence the letter 'u' in the British English word when it is absent in American English word. The examples are '*colour*', '*flavour*', '*harbour*' and '*labour*' in British English. They are '*color*', '*flavor*', '*harbor*' and '*labor*' in American English.

### b. Pronunciation

The second difference is in the term of pronunciation. The words in British English and American English might be the same in the spelling way; however people from London (the United Kingdom) and people from New York (the United States of America) can possibly pronounced it in a different way. We can take the word '*advertisement*' as the example. The word is pronounced /əd'vɜː.tɪs.mənt/ in British English, meanwhile it is pronounced as

/ˈæd.vɜː.taɪz.mənt/ in American English. In addition, for another example, the word '*croissant*' – which is an Austrian piece of light crescent-shaped pastry – is also pronounced differently; it is /'kwæs.ɒ/ in British English and /kwa:'sɑː/ in American English.

### c. Grammar

The third difference is in the term of grammar. There are a number of grammatical differences between British and American English. For instance, if someone asks if you are heavy-eyed or sleepy but you have just finished your nap, in British English you need to apply present perfect tense "No, I've taken a nap already". However, in American English, you may answer it by applying the simple past tense "No, I took a nap already" which is considered to be erroneous in British English grammar.

In addition, the two English styles have also their own tendency in the style. Two websites concerning about English styles, [www.ulatus.jp](http://www.ulatus.jp) and [www.enago.jp](http://www.enago.jp) stated that:

- British English has a predilection to react slowly towards the existence of brand new words and phrases. Conversely, American English implements them more willingly.
- British English diction has a slight tendency to be indistinct and tedious while American English tends to be more straight to the topic and clear.

- c. American English tends to contain more slang (very informal language which is usually spoken rather than written) expressions practised by particular groups of people wherein British English does not.

## 2.2 The Test of English Style: British English or American English?

To find out which 'English style' is more familiar and more often spoken by some samples of society, a study was conducted. The respondents for this study were ten people who live in the city of Singaraja. In this study, all respondents were given a table consisted twenty pairs of words which belong to British English and American English in random order. The following table is the material for the study:

1	Trainer	Sneaker
2	Jumper	Sweater
3	Cookie	Biscuit
4	Chip	French fry
5	Airplane	Aeroplane
6	Gray	Grey
7	Flat	Apartment
8	Lift	Elevator
9	Schedule	Timetable
10	Rubber	Eraser
11	Mail	Post
12	Holiday	Vacation
13	Truck	Lorry
14	Toilet	Bathroom
15	Cotton candy	Candyfloss
16	Mobile phone	Cellular phone
17	Mummy	Mommy

18	Crosswalk	Zebra crossing
19	Z /zed/	Z /zi:/
20	Cozy	Cosy

From the table above, there are two instructions that the respondents need to accomplish; related to the word pairs. The first instruction is choosing which words that they are more familiar with and the second instruction is explaining whether the word pairs have the same meaning or not. The respondents have to explain it when they think the words have different meaning. If they think the words have the same meaning, they do not necessitate for elucidating it.

Basically, all the word pairs have the exactly identical meaning one to another. The words are different due to the word varieties in both the British English and the American English style. The followings are the meaning of the twenty pairs, based on Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary Third Edition:

1. Trainer – UK (US: Sneaker): a type of light comfortable shoe that is suitable for playing sport
2. Jumper – UK (US: Sweater): a piece of clothing made from wool which covers the upper part of the body and the arms, and which does not open at the front
3. Biscuit – UK (US: Cookie): a small, flat cake that is dry and usually sweet
4. Chip – UK (US: French fry): a long thin piece of potato that is fried and usually eaten hot

5. Aeroplane – UK (US: Airplane): a vehicle designed for air travel, which has wings and one or more engines
6. Grey – UK (US: Gray): of the colour that is a mixture of black and white, the colour of rain clouds
7. Flat – UK (US: Apartment): a set of rooms for living in which are part of a larger building and are usually all on one floor
8. Lift – UK (US: Elevator): a device like a box which moves up and down, carrying people or goods from one floor of a building to another or taking people up and down underground in a mine
9. Timetable – UK (US: Schedule): a list of the times when events are planned to happen, especially the times when buses, trains and planes leave and arrive
10. Rubber – UK (US: Eraser): a small piece of rubber used to remove the marks made by a pencil
11. Post – UK (US: Mail): letters and parcels that are delivered to homes or places of work
12. Holiday – UK (US: Vacation): a time, often one or two weeks, when someone does not go to work or school but is free to do what they want, such as travel or relax
13. Lorry – UK (US: Truck): a large vehicle used for transporting goods
14. Toilet – UK (US: Bathroom): a room with a toilet (a bowl-shaped device with a seat which you sit on or stand near when emptying the body of urine or solid waste, or another device used for this purpose) in it
15. Candyfloss – UK (US: Cotton candy): a large soft ball of white or pink sugar in the form of thin threads, which is usually sold on a stick and eaten at fairs and amusement parks
16. Mobile phone – UK (US: Cellular phone): a telephone which is connected to the telephone system by radio instead of by a wire, and can therefore be used anywhere where its signals can be received
17. Mummy – UK (US: Mommy): mother
18. Zebra crossing – UK (US: Crosswalk): a place on a road, especially one where there is a lot of traffic, across which wide black and white lines are painted, and at which vehicles must stop to allow people to walk across the road
19. Z /zed/ – UK (US: Z /zi:/): (the pronunciation of) the 26<sup>th</sup> and last letter of the English alphabet
20. Cosy – UK (US: Cozy): comfortable and pleasant, especially (of a building) because small and warm

As being mentioned previously, there are ten respondents for this study. They came from various social backgrounds and have different occupational backgrounds as well. Firstly, they were interviewed briefly to obtain the information about their basic English threshold. Acquiring the people who own good basic English comprehension as the respondents is one fundamental condition for this study. The

followings are the respondents' data, their age and together with their professions:

1. Respondent 1 (26 years old) – A lecturer
2. Respondent 2 (20 years old) – A college student (English Language Faculty)
3. Respondent 3 (28 years old) – A music teacher
4. Respondent 4 (30 years old) – A housewife
5. Respondent 6 (20 years old) – A college student (Medical Faculty)
6. Respondent 7 (18 years old) – A college student (Economy Faculty)
7. Respondent 9 (16 years old) – A senior high school student
8. Respondent 10 (30 years old) – A journalist
9. Respondent 11 (22 years old) – A college student (Technical Faculty)
10. Respondent 12 (20 years old) – An entrepreneur

The followings are the answers of the respondents, including their reasons and opinions. The word with BE means it is British English word and AE means American English word:

1. Respondent 1

1	Sneaker	AE
2	Sweater	AE
3	Biscuit	BE
4	French fry	AE
5	Airplane	AE
6	Grey	BE
7	Apartment	AE
8	Lift	BE
9	Schedule	AE
10	Eraser	AE

11	Post	BE
12	Holiday	BE
13	Truck	AE
14	Bathroom	AE
15	Cotton candy	AE
16	Mobile phone	BE
17	Mommy	AE
18	Zebra crossing	BE
19	Z /zed/	BE
20	Cozy	AE

The first respondent revealed that she is fond of English language since she was a kid. However, she does not know which style do the words she uses belong to; is it the British English or the American English. The respondent stated that according to her acquaintance:

1. 'Apartment' is more luxurious than 'flat' with higher payment if someone lives there.
2. 'Bathroom' is a room with complete stuffs for having shower, defecate or urinate, meanwhile 'toilet' is the same with restroom which is specific room in public places just to defecate and urinate only.
3. 'Cotton candy' is a soft sweet just like the cotton in the form which is pink in colour meanwhile 'candyfloss' is a sweet with mint or menthol flavour.

**Total Answers: 8 British English words, 12 American English words**

## 2. Respondent 2

1	Sneaker	AE
2	Jumper	BE
3	Biscuit	BE
4	Chip	BE
5	Airplane	AE
6	Grey	BE
7	Apartment	AE
8	Lift	BE
9	Schedule	AE
10	Rubber	BE
11	Mail	AE
12	Holiday	BE
13	Truck	AE
14	Toilet	BE
15	Cotton candy	AE
16	Mobile phone	BE
17	Mommy	AE
18	Zebra crossing	BE
19	Z /zed/	BE
20	Cozy	AE

The second respondent is a student in the Faculty of English Language and he stated that most of the lectures at his college are given in British English formats. Hence, he is used to hear and uses more British English words when he speaks English. The respondent stated that according to his acquaintance:

1. 'Lift' is a kind of small room in a building that can move up and down wherein people use it to move from one floor to another or to carry goods in a faster way than using stairs. On the other hand, 'elevator' is a kind of moving stairs, just like escalator.

2. 'Lorry' is larger than 'truck' to carry more goods and can be found easily in the harbour.

**Total Answers: 11 British English words, 9 American English words**

## 3. Respondent 3

1	Sneaker	AE
2	Sweater	AE
3	Biscuit	BE
4	Chip	BE
5	Aeroplane	BE
6	Gray	AE
7	Apartment	AE
8	Elevator	AE
9	Schedule	AE
10	Eraser	AE
11	Mail	AE
12	Holiday	BE
13	Truck	AE
14	Toilet	BE
15	Cotton candy	AE
16	Mobile phone	BE
17	Mummy	BE
18	Crosswalk	AE
19	Z /zed/	BE
20	Cozy	AE

The third respondent stated that he often watches movies and songs which used American English. He mentioned that he thinks that American English is easier and clearer for him to understand than the British one. The respondent stated that according to his acquaintance:

1. 'Biscuit' is a kind of sweet dry small cake which can only be manufactured in factory using

machines meanwhile 'cookie' can be made at home (homemade).

- 'Chip' is a food made from potato or cassava which is round and thin in shape and it is crunchy. Conversely, 'french fry' is only be made of potato which is cut into long thin piece and be fried for snack or main meal.

**Total Answers: 8 British English words, 12 American English words**

#### 4. Respondent 4

1	Sneaker	AE
2	Sweater	AE
3	Biscuit	BE
4	Chip	BE
5	Aeroplane	BE
6	Grey	BE
7	Flat	BE
8	Lift	BE
9	Schedule	AE
10	Eraser	AE
11	Post	BE
12	Holiday	BE
13	Truck	AE
14	Toilet	BE
15	Candyfloss	BE
16	Mobile phone	BE
17	Mummy	BE
18	Zebra crossing	BE
19	Z /zed/	BE
20	Cosy	BE

The fourth respondent mentioned that she has a number of foreign friends who come from England thus she knows pretty

much about the terms which originally come from British English. She gets more familiar with the British words rather than the American English words as well. The respondent stated that according to her acquaintance:

- 'Chip' is a thin and round piece of fried potato which is usually eaten as a snack meanwhile 'french fry' is a fried potato as well but the shape is thin and long.
- Besides has the same meaning with 'zebra crossing', the term 'crosswalk' has another name as well in British English. It is also called 'pedestrian crossing'. Based on Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 'pedestrian crossing' is a part of a road specially marked with lines, etc where vehicles must stop to allow pedestrians to cross.

**Total Answers: 15 British English words, 5 American English words**

#### 5. Respondent 5

1	Sneaker	AE
2	Sweater	AE
3	Cookie	AE
4	French fry	AE
5	Airplane	AE
6	Grey	BE
7	Apartment	AE
8	Lift	BE
9	Schedule	AE
10	Eraser	AE
11	Mail	AE
12	Holiday	BE
13	Truck	AE

14	Toilet	BE
15	Cotton candy	AE
16	Cellular phone	AE
17	Mommy	AE
18	Zebra crossing	BE
19	Z /zi:/	AE
20	Cozy	AE

The fifth respondent mentioned that she admits herself that she tends to use American words when she speaks English. The American English sounds more familiar to her ears. The respondent stated that according to her acquaintance:

1. Since the Indonesian people are seldom to use the word 'trainer' on daily use, the meaning itself is changing one way or another. The word 'sneaker' sounds more casual meanwhile the word 'trainer' is more specified.
2. The word 'holiday' means the free day when the people tend to just stay at home, meanwhile the word 'vacation' means the free day when the people do many outdoor activities; such as going to the beach or to the place they have not been before, for instance going abroad

**Total Answers: 5 British English words, 15 American English words**

#### 6. Respondent 6

1	Sneaker	AE
2	Sweater	AE
3	Biscuit	BE

4	Chip	BE
5	Airplane	BE
6	Gray	AE
7	Flat	BE
8	Elevator	AE
9	Schedule	AE
10	Eraser	AE
11	Mail	AE
12	Vacation	AE
13	Truck	AE
14	Bathroom	AE
15	Cotton candy	AE
16	Mobile phone	BE
17	Mommy	AE
18	Crosswalk	AE
19	Z /zed/	BE
20	Cozy	AE

The sixth respondent mentioned that when speaking in English language, he still uses the British English words and the American English words simultaneously. However, he has no idea about which style do the words he uses belong to. The respondent stated that according to his acquaintance:

1. The word 'cookie' refers to the sweet cake which usually has chocolate chips as its topping and 'biscuit' is a plain cake which means it is not decorated in any way, with no topping added.
2. The word 'mail' means the letter that are delivered to someone and the word 'post' means the service to send the

letters from the sender towards the receiver.

**Total Answers: 6 British English words, 14 American English words**

7. Respondent 7

1	Sneaker	AE
2	Sweater	AE
3	Cookie	AE
4	French fry	AE
5	Airplane	AE
6	Gray	AE
7	Apartment	AE
8	Lift	BE
9	Schedule	AE
10	Eraser	AE
11	Mail	AE
12	Vacation	AE
13	Truck	AE
14	Toilet	BE
15	Cotton candy	AE
16	Cellular phone	AE
17	Mommy	AE
18	Crosswalk	AE
19	Z /zi:/	AE
20	Cozy	AE

Similar with the sixth respondent, the seventh respondent mentioned that he often uses the words from both the British English and the American English as well. However he stated that he realises some differences between the words in British English and American English. The respondent stated that according to his acquaintance:

1. The word 'mummy' can be ambiguous in which it means 'mother' and 'a dead body'.
2. 'Crosswalk' is wider than 'zebra crossing' and it can be found in the highways in the city centre easily.

**Total Answers: 2 British English words, 18 American English words**

8. Respondent 8

1	Sneaker	AE
2	Sweater	AE
3	Biscuit	BE
4	French fry	AE
5	Airplane	AE
6	Grey	BE
7	Apartment	AE
8	Lift	BE
9	Schedule	AE
10	Eraser	AE
11	Post	BE
12	Holiday	BE
13	Truck	AE
14	Toilet	BE
15	-	-
16	Mobile phone	BE
17	Mommy	AE
18	Zebra crossing	BE
19	Z /zi:/	AE
20	Cozy	AE

The eighth respondent mentioned that she is used to know American English more than the British English. She is more comfortable to watch Hollywood movie and she obtained a lot of brand new vocabularies especially in the American English. It is exceptionally beneficial to support

her job as a journalist. The respondent stated that according to her acquaintance:

1. 'Jumper' is different with 'sweater' wherein 'jumper' has hoodie as the part of it meanwhile 'sweater' does not.
2. 'Apartment' is a type of dwelling or residential which is rented out but it has a larger area than a flat.
3. Especially for the words number 15 ('candyfloss' and 'cotton candy'), the respondent confessed that she never knew those words, thus she passed these words.

**Total Answers: 8 British English words, 11 American English words**

#### 9. Respondent 9

1	Sneaker	AE
2	Sweater	AE
3	Biscuit	BE
4	French fry	AE
5	Airplane	AE
6	Grey	BE
7	Apartment	AE
8	Lift	BE
9	Schedule	AE
10	Eraser	AE
11	Post	BE
12	Holiday	BE
13	Truck	AE
14	Toilet	BE
	Cotton candy	AE
15		
	Mobile phone	BE
16		
17	Mommy	AE
18	Crosswalk	AE

19	Z /zed/	BE
20	Cozy	AE

The ninth respondent mentioned that she enjoys using any of English style on every occasion she speaks English. She confessed that she does not really discern the discrepancy between the British English and American English. The respondent stated that according to her acquaintance:

1. 'Aeroplane' is a very large aircraft which can carry more passengers than 'airplane'.
2. 'Timetable' is way more complete than 'schedule' because 'timetable' has more detail of time, place and event.

**Total Answers: 8 British English words, 12 American English words**

#### 10. Respondent 10

1	Sneaker	AE
2	Sweater	AE
3	Biscuit	BE
4	Chip	BE
5	Airplane	AE
6	Grey	BE
7	Apartment	AE
8	Lift	BE
9	Schedule	AE
10	Eraser	AE
11	Mail	AE
12	Holiday	BE
13	Truck	AE
14	Toilet	BE
15	Cotton candy	AE
16	Mobile phone	BE
17	Mommy	AE

18	Zebra crossing	BE
19	Z /zi:/	AE
20	Cozy	AE

The tenth respondent mentioned that he often speaks English when he talks to his foreign clients. However, he does not really understand the differences between British English and American English. The respondent stated that according to his acquaintance:

1. The word 'jumper' here describes an athlete in an athletic sport and probably the athlete wears a pair of 'sneakers'.
2. The term 'post' refers to a conventional letter meanwhile 'mail' refers to the modern (electronic) letter.

**Total Answers: 8 British English words, 12 American English words**

### III. Conclusion

From the results of the test above, it can be seen that there are two respondents (the second and fourth respondents) who are more familiar with British English words. The rest are more familiar with American English words (the first, third, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth and tenth respondent).

#### Conclusion

It is awe-inspiring indeed that there are a lot of differences between British English and American English. Most British people and American

people realise that fact, hence they who speak British English and they who speak American English do not need to find themselves in too much trouble when they go travelling to the United States of America or the United Kingdom.

It is a good consideration for trying to be consistent – deciding which type of English you are going to utilise and try to stick with it both in spoken and written way. However, it is still acceptable if sometimes we use the British English words and on another occasion we use American English words. It is also an excellent thought to consider for having study in the United Kingdom if you want to learn more about British English and learn American English in the United States of America. One thing to be sure is there is nothing wrong with the English style which is used by the people. As far as it is meaningful and could be comprehended by the listeners, it would be fair.

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