

A Bit About Brit

*In Britain, the Royal Mail delivers the post, not
the mail,
while in America, the Postal Service delivers the
mail, not the post.*

—Bill Bryson, *The Mother Tongue*

Editors trained in American English (AmE, for convenience) who work with texts written by authors trained in British English (BrE, for convenience) can sometimes find themselves scratching their heads over what appear to be incorrect constructions, word choices, or spellings. On closer consideration, editors might conclude that the bits of English under their eyes, although strange, are not incorrect, yet not written the way a mother-tongue AmE speaker would ever do it. These situations can arise even when one is editing the work of a States-based writer who grew up in a home or school environment strongly influenced by speakers of BrE.

To change it, ignore it, or query it, that is the question—one that can be vexatious.

Some of these puzzlers are straightforward and can easily be resolved by resorting to a publishing house's designated style guide. That can sometimes get the editor off the hook, but sometimes no amount of brow-squeezing and dictionary-leafing will illuminate the way out. Therefore, it pays to study some of the major differences between BrE and AmE and to know of some resources to consult when problems appear otherwise insoluble.

Spellings

Spelling differences, preferences, and quirks are usually easy to spot if a spell-checker that is set to the local language is invoked. Most often, it will point out the national preference in the case of such spelling options as *flavor/flavour* and *catalog/catalogue*. Often, it will also question the use of a word that is peculiar to one side of the ocean, as with the British word *aubergine* (adopted from French) for the American *eggplant*.

Recent versions of Microsoft Word can automatically detect and correct British-preferred double-ell verb forms (*travelling*, *labelling*, and so on) without the user's even being aware that it is happening if the user selects "Tools/Autocorrect Options" and then checks the box "Automatically use suggestions from the spelling checker". For

this to work, the user must first select "Tools/Language/Set Language" and then choose "English (U.S.)".

Noun Number

Headline from 10 July 2006: "Italy conquer world as Germany wins friends". The reference is to the Italian soccer (oops! football—another difference) team's having won the World Cup and Germany's having fostered goodwill by hosting it. That illustrates a difference in how BrE treats "teams", whether sporting or corporate. A team is treated as a "they", whereas a nation is treated as an "it". (In *The Civil War*, Ken Burns related that before the conflict, the usage on both sides of the Atlantic was "The United States are . . .", but after it, the USA began using "The United States is . . .").

Differences in the Use of Articles and Prepositions

- He is *in hospital* [AmE *in the hospital*] for a week.
- He is down *in mouth* [AmE *in the mouth*] these days.
- The plaintiff plans to *protest at* [AmE *protest*] the court's decision.
- These cherries cost \$4.99 *the pound* [AmE *a pound*].
- Laptop growth rates of 40%–50% are expected *through to* [AmE *through*] July.
- They took a drive in the country *at* (AmE *on*) the weekend.

Punctuation

Although many differences exist, variances in punctuation between the two streams of English seem not to cause as much confusion as does variant vocabulary. What follows is not universal, but editors will usually find that BrE uses these conventions:

- Single quotation marks around the outside of quoted matter and double marks for quotes within quotes.
- Punctuation applied *after* quoted matter rather than before (the Council of Science Editors style manual observes BrE preference "according to the sense" in this regard but retains double marks outside quoted matter and single marks for quotes within quotes).
- No periods ("stops") after such title abbreviations.

viations as *Mr* (mister) and *Dr* (doctor) wherein there has been omission of letters internal to the word (an exception is *St.* for “Saint”); word truncations (wherein final letters of a word are deleted) usually invoke the period (e.g., *Hon.* for “Honourable”).

Some Mathematical/Numerical Differences

- Citing time of day, BrE uses a period, AmE, a colon: 4.45 PM/4:45 PM
- A British *ton* (sometimes called a *long ton*) is 2240 pounds. A *tonne* (metric ton) is 2205 pounds; the term is used worldwide, but it is more commonly encountered in BrE than in AmE.
- An Imperial (BrE) *gallon* is 1.20095 times as large as the AmE gallon.
- An AmE *billion* is sometimes called a *thousand million* or *milliard* in BrE.

Vocabulary

This category can be especially challenging for an editor who works in both BrE and AmE. Sometimes two words can convey the same meaning (*dustbin* and *garbage can* for a trash container), and sometimes one word common to both can carry two (sometimes opposite) meanings.

In the latter category, a classic case in point can be found in the writings of Winston Churchill, who cited a “long and even acrimonious argument” that occurred at an important World War II military conference because of a misunderstanding over the word *table*. The British wanted to “table a question for discussion”, which to them meant discuss it immediately, while the Americans understood that the question was to be deferred to some later time.

From the video program *Notes from a Small Island*, by Bill Bryson:

All together, there are 4,000 common words in English that are used differently on one side of the Atlantic Ocean from the other. [At this point the screen shows elderly vacationers getting off a bus at a British tourist attraction.] While to a Briton this is a *coachload* of *pensioners* in *trousers* and *trainers* arriving in a *car park* and *queueing up* in a *herb* [aspirated “h”] *garden* filled with *bahzil* and *aubergines*, to us Yanks it’s a *busload* of *senior citizens* in *pants* and *sneakers* arriving in a *parking lot* and *standing in line* in an *erb* [silent “h”] *garden* filled with *bayzil* and *eggplant*.

Two words in this realm are *dustbin*, which is *garbage can* in the States, and *dustman*, which means *garbage collector* (see “Chuckle of the Month” at the end of the column).

A useful online compendium of Americanisms with accompanying do’s and don’ts for writers can be

found on the Web site of *The Economist*. See “Online Resources” below.

Print Resources

Mother Tongue: The English Language. Bill Bryson. London: Penguin; 1990. (Also published as *The Mother Tongue: English & How It Got That Way*. New York: William Morrow; 1990.)

The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language. 2nd ed. David Crystal. New York: Cambridge University Press; 2003.

Divided by a Common Language: A Guide to British and American English. Christopher Davies. Boston: Houghton Mifflin; 2005.

The Economist Style Guide. *The Economist*. London: Profile Books; 2005.

The Oxford Companion to the English Language. Tom McArthur, ed. New York: Oxford University Press; 1992; see especially pp 41–46.

The Story of English. 3rd ed. Robert McCrum, William Cran, Robert MacNeil. New York: Penguin Books; 2003.

The Language Instinct. Steven Pinker. New York: William Morrow; 1994.

British English A to Zed. 3rd ed. Norman W Schur, revised by Eugene Ehrlich and Richard Ehrlich. New York: Facts on File; 2006.

Online Resources

The Economist Style Guide: Americanisms: www.economist.com/research/styleGuide/index.cfm?page=673931

The American British/British American Dictionary. Jeremy Smith: www.peak.org/~jeremy/dictionary/chapters/differences.php (Note: This Web site contains language that some readers may find offensive.)

American versus British English: “Basic Differences and Influences of Change”: www.esl.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?site=http://www.uta.fi/FAST/US1/REF/usgbintr.html. This site contains a good summary of basic differences between BrE and AmE.

Multimedia Resources

Notes from a Small Island. Bill Bryson. Video Program, 1999.

Chuckle of the Month: An American woman newly arrived in London opened her door to a knock one morning and found three men on her doorstep. “Good morning, madam”, said one. “We are your dustmen.” “Oh, I’m sorry”, she replied, “I do my own dusting.”