
UNIT 34 USING THE RIGHT WORDS: AMERICAN OR BRITISH?

Structure

34.0 Objectives

34.1 Introduction

34.2 American English: its Chief Characteristics

34.2.1 Vocabulary

- 34.2.1.1 Words Peculiar to American English
- 34.2.1.2 Words with Different Meanings in the Two Varieties
- 34.2.1.3 Different Words for the Same Objects

34.2.2 Grammatical Features

- 34.2.2.1 The Verb Have
- 34.2.2.2 The Pronoun One
- 34.2.2.3 The Determiner One
- 34.2.2.4 Adverbs
- 34.2.2.5 The Preposition For
- 34.2.2.6 The Definite Article
- 34.2.2.7 Prepositions
- 34.2.2.8 Want to and Wanna
- 34.2.2.9 Fixed Expressions

34.2.3 Pronunciation

- 34.2.3.1 Ant or Aunt?
- 34.2.3.2 The Silent 'r'
- 34.2.3.3 ile or -il?
- 34.2.3.4 Cot, Hot, Pot

34.2.4 Spelling

34.3 Clichés

34.3.1 Shakespeare in Clichés?

34.4 Retronyms

34.5 Let Us Sum Up

34.6 Answers to Check Your Progress

34.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit,

- you will understand that when writing for a world wide audience, i.e. on the web, you have to be very aware of, and careful with, your language,
- As an example, you will be introduced to the differences between American and British varieties of English,
- As another example, you will be introduced to the notion of cliché or lazy writing, and to the pervasiveness of expressions in our everyday English that owe their origins to William Shakespeare, arguably the greatest dramatist in the English language, and
- The creation of new vocabulary in the form of 'retronyms' is a pervasive feature of current language use, and you will be introduced to this feature.

34.1 INTRODUCTION

When you write for the Internet, you write for the whole world. Your audience consists of speakers of English from across the world. (You may take a look again at Block 1 of this course to see the various countries in the world where the English language is spoken.) While the vastness of the potential audience is exciting, the variety of readers you may have also makes it important that you use English with as much care, knowledge and attention as possible, in order to avoid miscommunication and misunderstanding.

In this unit we shall discuss a variety of ways in which our knowledge of words, and our use of the right word, can improve our writing. We begin with a discussion of the chief characteristics that distinguish British English from American English. We shall see that the differences between these two varieties can be described primarily as differences in the use of words.

We shall then go on to discuss the lazy and the creative use of words, by looking at clichés or worn-out, tired and repeated expressions, and retronyms or new words for old objects; as also common expressions in English that can be traced to the plays of Shakespeare.

34.2 AMERICAN ENGLISH: ITS CHIEF CHARACTERISTICS

America was once a colony of the British Empire. The first settlers in America were Englishmen who had migrated from Britain and who spoke British English. But as time passed, the immigrants began a search for their own identity as distinct from their hitherto British identity. There were many social and political upheavals at this time, resulting in their growing discontent with the mother country, which contributed to this search for their own identity.

Apart from other social, political and economic systems, it is language that gives identity to a nation. The immigrants, in a bid to establish their own national identity, deliberately worked towards making American English distinct from British English. Thomas Jefferson, John Witherspoon, and Noah Webster are some of the important names who stressed, as a matter of national pride, the need of making American English different from British English.

The result of such efforts has been that American English and British English are now recognized as two different varieties of English. While there are differences between them in various aspects of language, namely, vocabulary, pronunciation and spelling, and even grammar, it is useful to discuss these differences primarily as differences in the use of words. The points of difference between the two varieties of English are listed below.

34.2.1 Vocabulary

34.2.1.1 Words Peculiar to American English

There are some words which are peculiar to American English, i.e. they do not occur in British English. Some such words are *commuter*, *cookie*, *intern*, *tuxedo*, *seafood*, *living room*, *dirt road*.

√ **Check Your Progress 1**

1. Look up these words in a dictionary and find out their meanings.

Can you say what the corresponding British words are?

commuter _____ *intern* _____ *tuxedo* _____

cookie _____ *seafood* _____ *living room* _____

dirt road _____

34.2.1.2 Words with Different Meanings in the Two Varieties

There is another group of words: these are words which have the same meaning in both varieties, but they have one meaning in American English and a different meaning in British English. The list below shows the differences in meaning of the same words.

	BrE	AmE
lumber	discarded furniture	timber (wood)
laundry	a place where clothing is washed	i. a place where clothing is washed ii. articles of clothing
lobbyist	parliamentary reporter	one who attempts to influence the legislative process
pressman	reporter	one who works in the pressroom where a newspaper is printed
dumb	unable to speak	stupid

34.2.1.3 Different Words for the Same Objects

There are a number of objects and ideas for which British English uses one word where American English uses another word. Given below is a list of some such words.

BrE	AmE	BrE	AmE
aerial	antenna	note	bill
autumn	fall	pavement	sidewalk
bonnet	hood	petrol	gasoline / gas
barrister	lawyer	post	mail
candy floss	cotton candy	queue	line
chips	French fries	railway	railroad
curtain	drapes	rubber	eraser
flat	apartment	rubbish	garbage

goods train	freight train	solicitor	lawyer
graduate	alumnus	sweets	candy
guard	conductor	tap	faucet
holiday	vacation	tin	can
hoarding	billboard	torch	flash light
interval	intermission	underground	subway
lift	elevator	undertaker	mortician
lorry	truck	van	baggage car
luggage	baggage	maize	corn
motorway	expressway		

34.2.2 Grammatical Features

The two varieties of English differ with regard to certain points of grammar. Some of the prominent points of difference are listed below.

34.2.2.1 The Verb *Have*

The verb *have* can be used as a main verb with a sense of possession in both varieties of English, as in the sentence "I have some money". But in interrogative and negative sentences (and also in question tags), American English prefers to use the dummy verb *do* with the main verb *have*. This point will be clear to you if you closely look at the following examples:

BrE

Have you (got) some money ...?

No, I **haven't (got)** any money.

You have two cars, **haven't** you?

AmE

Do you have some money ...?

No, I **don't have** any money.

You have two cars, **don't** you?

34.2.2.2 The Pronoun *one*

In British English the indefinite pronoun *one* is repeated in co-reference, whereas in American English the co-referential pronoun for *one* is *he/she*, or more recently, *they*.

BrE

If *one* wants to succeed, *one* must work hard.

One should be careful in choosing *one's* career.

One should not blame *oneself* *herself*

AmE

If *one* wants to succeed, (*s*)*he* must work hard.

One should be careful in choosing *his/her* career.

One should not blame *himself* for *one's* failures in life.
for *his/ her* failures in life.

34.2.2.3 The Determiner *one*

One is used as a determiner for emphasis instead of *a* or *an* in American English, for example in the sentences

That was one hell of a game!
She's one snappy dresser.

The use of *one* in this sense is, however, not permitted in British English.

34.2.2.4 Adverbs

British English and American English differ in the use of adverbials like *just*, *already*, *yet*, etc. In British English they are used with a verb in the present and past perfect form, not with a verb in the simple past tense. In American English, however, they are used with a verb in the simple past tense, in addition to a verb in the present and past perfect form.

BrE

The train **has** *already* **left** the platform.
She **has** *just* **finished** cooking.

AmE

The train *already* **left** the platform.
She *just* **finished** cooking.

34.2.2.5 The Preposition *for*

The verbs *want*, *like* and *prefer* can take a sentence as their object. In such cases the sentential object can be introduced by the preposition *for* in American English, but not in British English.

BrE

We would *prefer* his wife to go home.
[object of *prefer*]

We did not *like* her to be alone at night.
[object of *like*]

AmE

We would *prefer for* his wife to go home.
[object of *prefer*]

We did not *like for* her to be alone at night.
[object of *like*]

34.2.2.6 The Definite Article

The two varieties of English differ with regard to some of the uses of the definite article in fixed or idiomatic expressions, as shown in the following examples:

BrE

You must be cautious **in future**.
I am meeting him **the day after tomorrow**.

AmE

You must be cautious **in *the* future**.
I am meeting him **day after tomorrow**.

34.2.2.7 Prepositions

With regard to the use of prepositions, the two varieties differ quite a bit. This point will be clear from the following examples:

BrE

The office will be closed *from* Monday *to* Friday.
The guests will arrive *at* the following weekend.
My house is *in* Nehru Street.
He drove *towards* the marketplace.
It is five *past* four.

AmE

The office will be closed *from* Monday *through* Friday.
The guests will arrive *on* the following weekend.
My house is *on* Nehru Street.
He drove *toward* the marketplace.
It is five *after* four.

The school is *behind* my house.

The school is *at the back of* my house.

The earth moves *round* the sun.

The earth moves *around* the sun.

On Mondays the shops remain closed.

Mondays the shops remain closed.

On Sundays I like to cook.

Sundays I like to cook.

34.2.2.8 Want to and Wanna

The sequence of the verb *want* and the infinitive marker *to* in a sentence is contracted to *wanna* in the informal speech in American English, whereas in British English this is not allowed, neither in formal nor in informal speech.

BrE

I want to go home.

Did you want to read this story?

AmE

I wanna go home.

Did you wanna read this story?

34.2.2.9 Fixed Expressions

British English refers to rivers such as the Thames as *River Thames*, but in American English they can be referred to as *Thames River*. Similarly, for referring to time, British English uses expressions like *half an hour*, *five past three* and so on. But in American English the same time is referred to with expressions like a *half hour*, *five after three*.

34.2.3 Pronunciation

34.2.3.1 Ant or Aunt?

There are many words in British English which are pronounced with the back long vowel /a:/, as in the words *last*, *fast*, and *past*. Such words in American English are pronounced with the front short vowel /æ/ as in the words *fat*, *mat*, and *sat*. A small list of such words is given below, with the alphabet highlighted (in bold, blue) which differs in pronunciation in the two varieties:

advance	basket	disaster	plant
after	bath	grass	rather
ask	class	half	sample
aunt	command	pass	task
banana	dance	path	vast

34.2.3.2 The Silent 'r'

The letter 'r' is not pronounced in British English if it occurs finally in a word or occurs before a consonant. This letter is, however, pronounced in all positions in a word in American English. For example, compare the phonetic transcriptions of the word 'car' in these two varieties of English

	BrE	AmE
car	/ka:/	/ka:r/

college

erase

geyser

herb

toffee

smart

tactile

wrath

3. Give the American spelling of the following words (consult a dictionary):

anaemia

caesarian

diarrhea

draughtsman

fulfil

paralyse

reveller

storey

tyre

theatre

34.3 CLICHÉS

When people write in a hurry – and most newspaper articles are written in a hurry to meet a deadline, as is a lot of writing for the web – they tend to use readily available language, a sort of prefabricated language that comes readily to mind, without much effort. Such language is called clichéd language.

What is a cliché? A cliché is a word or an expression that was originally an interesting way of saying something. But it has been used so often by everyone that it now looks worn out and tired! It no longer catches our attention, or conveys a fresh meaning to us.

Here are some examples of clichés. Some clichés are just fixed expressions whose meaning is quite obvious: for example,

Her room is **neat and tidy**.

The two words, **neat** and **tidy**, go together almost automatically, although they mean almost the same, and one of them is enough to convey our thought. They usually occur in that order, too; you don't usually see the expression "tidy and neat".

Other clichés are more idiomatic, and you may not at first know what they mean. You can find their meanings in the dictionary, listed under one of the “content” words in them. Below we’ve given you the meaning of one such expression.

By and large, I think they’re right. (By and large = in general, on the whole)

[Consult the entry for *large* in a learner’s dictionary. You may find there other fixed expressions and clichés such as **as large as life**, **larger than life**, **in large part**, and **at large**.]

Find out the meanings of the other expressions in the box, and write them down in the space given.

√ **Check Your Progress 3**

4. Find out what the italicised words and expressions mean, using a dictionary. Under what word did you find each expression listed?

i. The news was *a bolt from the blue*. _____

ii. *The time is ripe* for action. _____

iii. That *goes without saying*. _____

We have said that newspaper articles are usually a good source of clichés. They are written in a hurry, and they are read in a hurry too! A popular cartoon shows a newspaper editor scolding a young reporter for using clichés. The joke is that the editor himself uses a string of clichés in order to reprimand the reporter. Can you spot the clichés in his words below?

√ **Check Your Progress 4**

5. Underline the clichés in the editor’s words below. Find out their meaning from a dictionary.

Editor to reporter: “This piece is brimming with clichés – clichés are a dime a dozen! If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times – be original! Now get out there and burn the midnight oil – it’s better late than never!”

34.3.1 Shakespeare in clichés?

We have said that clichés often start out as expressions that were original and creative. Because these expressions are so well-liked, they get borrowed by everyone, and overused.

A very interesting example of such “overuse” has been pointed out by Bernard Levin, an English journalist and theater critic. Levin shows us that many of us may be quoting Shakespeare, without even being aware of it! Such is the impact of Shakespeare on the English language that what look to us like common expressions in everyday speech are words that were originally written by him – colourful expressions invented by him.

In the quotation from Levin that follows, we have added emphasis to some of the Shakespearean quotes, to help you identify them. Try and identify the others on

your own. Notice also how Levin uses repetition as a rhetorical device to make his point that the English language is full of quotations from Shakespeare!

If you cannot understand my argument, and declare **'It's Greek to me'**, you are quoting Shakespeare;

if you claim to be **more sinned against than sinning**, you are quoting Shakespeare;

if you recall your **salad days**, you are quoting Shakespeare;

if you **act more in sorrow than in anger**, if **your wish is father to the thought**,

if your lost property has **vanished into thin air**, you are quoting Shakespeare;

if you have ever refused to **budge an inch** or suffered from **green-eyed jealousy**, if you have **played fast and loose**, if you have been **tongue-tied**, **a tower of strength**, **hoodwinked** or **in a pickle**,

if you have knitted your brows, made a virtue of necessity, insisted on fair play, slept not one wink, stood on ceremony, danced attendance (on your lord and master), laughed yourself into stitches, had short shrift, cold comfort or too much of a good thing, if you have seen better days or lived in a fool's paradise –

why, be that as it may, the more fool you, for it is a foregone conclusion that you are (as good luck would have it) quoting Shakespeare;

if you think it is early days and clear out bag and baggage,

if you think it is high time and that that is the long and short of it,

if you believe that the game is up and that truth will out even if it involves your own flesh and blood,

if you lie low till the crack of dawn because you suspect foul play, if you have your teeth set on edge (at one fell swoop) without rhyme or reason, then – to give the devil his due – if the truth were known (for surely you have a tongue in your head) you are quoting Shakespeare;

even if you bid me good riddance and send me packing, if you wish that I was dead as a door-nail, if you think I am an eyesore, a laughing stock, the devil incarnate, a stony-hearted villain, bloody-minded or a blinking idiot, then – by Jove! O Lord! for goodness' sake! what the dickens! but me no buts – it is all one to me,

for you are quoting Shakespeare.

Where in Shakespeare – in what play or sonnet – did these expressions first occur? I can identify some – for example, "my salad days, when I was green judgment" is from *Antony and Cleopatra*. But I'm afraid I can't tell you the all sources for these expressions from Shakespeare; it takes a better Shakespeare scholar than I to do that!

✓ **Check Your Progress 4**

6. How many of the expressions from Shakespeare listed above do you know? How many can you find in a learner's dictionary, listed as idiomatic expressions? Make a list.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

34.4 RETRONYMS

One feature of the web is that very often you are reading things that are written now, today, this hour, this minute – not a language written a hundred years ago, or even a year ago. This means that you will keep coming across words that you may not know, words that you have not heard or read before.

You may have heard of **synonyms** (words which have the same or very similar meanings) and **antonyms** (words opposite in meaning to each other). But have you heard of “**retronyms**”?

William Safire is a columnist for the New York Times who writes about language and style. In an article on “retronyms”, he discusses an interesting way in which we create new words for old objects, because we have invented newer things or objects.

Do you know the word “snail mail”? If you regularly use e-mail, you probably refer to ordinary mail sent through the post as “snail mail”. (It’s much slower than e-mail!) As e-mail becomes more and more common, it has come to be called simply “mail” (there is even a movie, “You’ve got mail”), and the word “mail”, which originally meant letters sent through the post-office, has been replaced by a new word “snail mail”!

The word “snail mail” is a “retronym”. A retronym, says Safire, is “a newly necessary modification of an old noun”. (The old noun is “mail”; it has now become necessary to modify it with the word “snail”).

A dictionary definition of “retronym” is “a word or phrase created because an existing term that was once used alone needs to be distinguished from a term referring to a new development”.

Take the wrist-watch, for example. It used to have two hands and a face with numbers. Then along came the digital watch, which flashed its numbers. So the older type of watch became an “analogue watch”. (The difference between “analogue” and “digital” is explained in our unit 31 in this Block. The analogue is a continuous signal, like the watch hand which rotates continuously. The digital is an on-off signal that shifts from one state to another state: so it is *either* 5:44 *or* 5:45 on your digital watch, and never some time in between these two times.)

The word “retronym” itself seems to have been used by Safire in 1980. He says it was coined by a president of National Public Radio in the U.S.A., who noticed the term “hard-cover book”. All books were “hard-cover” books until soft cover books were invented, which were originally called “paperbacks”. But as paperbacks proliferated, they became plain books, and the original books became “hard-cover books”!

What about the telephone? Whenever I watch a movie, I can guess at its date of production by looking at the kind of telephones on its sets! Do you remember the kind of telephone that had a dial? It has now been replaced by the telephone with buttons (with numbers on them) that you push. This new telephone was first called the “push-button phone”, and then the “touch-tone phone”; while the old telephone became the “rotary phone”. But then along came the ubiquitous cell phone (“Didn’t they have cell phones in those days”? asked a teenager who was watching an old movie), and so the rotary phone and the touch-tone phone both became “landlines”!

What kind of milk do you drink? Toned, skimmed? ... in the U.S.A. they have “2 per cent milk”, “non-fat milk”, “lactose-free milk” and “calcium-enriched milk” ... so we have the retronym “whole milk” for ordinary milk! The U.S.A. also has “bottled water”, as we also now have (we call it “mineral water”). So ordinary water in the U.S.A. is now called “tap water.” Luckily, we don’t as yet have this term for water in our country!

√ **Check Your Progress 5**

7. Fill in the blanks.

Synonyms are words

.....

Antonyms are words

.....

Retronyms are

.....

.....

34.5 LET US SUM UP

- When you write for the Internet, you write for the whole world.
- The variety of readers you may have makes it important that you use English with as much care, knowledge and attention as possible, in order to avoid miscommunication and misunderstanding.

- American English and British English are now recognized as two different varieties of English. There may differ in vocabulary, pronunciation and spelling, and even grammar. But it is useful to discuss these differences primarily as differences in the use of words.
- When people write in a hurry – and most newspaper articles are written in a hurry to meet a deadline, as is a lot of writing for the web – they tend to use readily available language, a sort of prefabricated language that comes readily to mind, without much effort. Such language is called clichéd language.
- A cliché is a word or an expression that was originally an interesting way of saying something. But it has been used so often by everyone that it no longer catches our attention, or conveys a fresh meaning to us.
- Bernard Levin, an English journalist and theater critic, shows us that many of us may be quoting Shakespeare, without being aware of it. Such is the impact of Shakespeare on the English language that what look to us like common expressions in everyday speech are words that were originally written by him.
- One feature of the web is that very often you are reading things that are written now, today, this hour, this minute – not a language written a hundred years ago, or even a year ago. This means that you will keep coming across words that you may not know, words that you have not heard or read before.
- You may have heard of synonyms (words which have the same or very similar meanings) and antonyms (words opposite in meaning to each other). But you may not have heard of “retronyms”. A retronym is “a newly necessary modification of an old noun”. It is “a word or phrase created because an existing term that was once used alone needs to be distinguished from a term referring to a new development”.

34.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Please consult your dictionary.
2. Please consult your dictionary.
3. Please consult your dictionary.
4.
 - i. *a bolt from the blue*: an unexpected and unpleasant event, an unwelcome surprise (found under the noun bolt).
 - ii. *The time is ripe (for something/ for someone to do something)*: It is the right moment for (doing) something (found under the noun time, but with a cross-reference under the adjective ripe).
 - iii. *goes without saying*: is very obvious, or easy to predict (found under the verb say).
- 5.. *“This piece is brimming with clichés – clichés are a dime a dozen! If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times – be original! Now get out there and burn the midnight oil – it’s better late than never!”*

[Please consult a dictionary to find out the meanings of these expressions]

6. Please give your own lists in answer to this question.
7. Synonyms are words which have the same or very similar meanings.
Antonyms are words opposite in meaning to each other.
Refronyms are new words that are created for old objects, because we have invented newer things or objects.