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Pronunciation Differences between British English and American English

One of the main difficulties a foreign student may face the remarkable variety of accents when learning English pronunciation. Like many other languages spoken in such a vast territory and by so many people, English presents wide variation in pronunciation. In spite of that wide variation, two standard pronunciations are distinguished: (1) The Received Pronunciation, also called Oxford English or BBC English, is the standard pronunciation of British English; (2) The General American is the accent considered as standard in North America. Such a pronunciation is heard in most of American films, TV series, and national news.

The main differences between British English and American English can be summarized as follows:

1. The presence of rhotic accent.
2. Differences in vowel pronunciation. The most relevant ones are change of diphthong [əʊ], change of [ɒ], change of [æ], and change of [ju:].
3. Differences in consonant pronunciation. This mainly involves the different pronunciations of letter t.
4. Change of stress. This comprises the change of stress in French loanwords, and suffix -ate.
5. Differences in articulation. American English has a clear tendency to pronounce unstressed syllables where British English does not show such a disposition.

1. Rhotic accent

The presence of the rhotic accent is one of the most noticeable differences between British and American English. American English is rhotic. British English is non-rhotic. Rhotic accent refers to the manner letter r is pronounced after a vowel within a syllable, as in words such as hard, borne, or here. [1] In English, rhotic accent is produced as a retroflex approximant. [2] The following words have rhotic accent: York, quarter, four, born, door, water, later, hers, heard, hurt, university, were, birth, thirty, ear.

2. Differences in Vowel Pronunciation

The shift from the British diphthong [əʊ] to [oʊ] in American pronunciation is also very distinguishing. The shift consisted in the change of the mid central unrounded vowel [ə] to the close-mid back rounded vowel [o] in the first vowel of the diphthong. [3] For example, BE- go [gəʊ] – AE- go [goʊ]; BE- [nəʊ] – AE- [noʊ]; BE- promotion [prə'məʊʃn] – AE- promotion [prə'moʊʃn].

Letter o is pronounced in many different ways in English and in American. Here we have a few illustrative examples of such diversity: Hot [hɒt] in BE, but [hɑ:t] in AE; coast [kəʊst] in BE, but [koʊst] in AE. The so-called “short o”, which often appears in a stressed syllable with one letter, underwent a change in American English. British English prefers a short sound as opposed to American English, which prefers a long sound in all cases. For example, BE- box [bɒks] – AE- box [bɑ:ks]; BE- gone [gɒn] – AE- gone [gɔ:n]; BE- possible ['pɒsɪb(ə)l] – AE- possible ['pɑ:səbl]; BE- sorry ['sɒri] – AE ['sɑ:ri].

The most frequent changes are from [ɒ] to [ɑ:] and [ɔ:]. However, in a very few cases vowel [ɒ] is changed to [oʊ] and [ʌ]. Here we have a list with the main examples: 1) Change [ɒ] to [ɑ:]: scone- BE [skɒn]- AE- [ska:n]; 2) Change to [oʊ]: impost- BE ['ɪmpəʊst]- AE ['ɪmpoʊst] , produce (as noun)- BE ['prɒdju:s] - AE ['prɒdju:s]; 3) Change to [ʌ]: hovel- BE ['hɒv(ə)l]- AE ['hʌvl], therefrom- BE [ðe:'frɒm]- AE [,ðer'frʌm].

In American English vowel [ɑ:] changed to [æ]. However, the change did not take off in British English. For example, brass- BE [brɑ:s] – AE [bræs]; half- BE [hɑ:f] – AE [hæf]; bath- BE [bɑ:θ] – AE [bæθ]; aunt- BE [ɑ:nt] – AE [ænt]; sample- BE ['sɑ:mp(ə)l] – AE ['sæmpl].

Around the beginning of twentieth century several changes took place in the English vowels. One of them was the so-called yod-dropping, the omission of sound [j] before [u:]. The change is named after the Hebrew letter yod, which represents the sound [j]. Both BE and AE embraced the change,

although AE extended the cases in which yod-dropping was applied. Yod-dropping before [u:] takes place in BE and AE in the following cases: 1) After the affricates [tʃ] and [dʒ], as in chew[ʃu:], juice[dʒu:s]; 2) After [r], as in rude[ru:d], prude[pru:d], shrewd[ʃru:d]; 3) After clusters formed by a consonant followed by [l], as in blue[blu:], flu[flu:]. Apart from this common corpus of words, in AE as well as in many other varieties of English we observe yod-dropping in further cases: 1) After [s] and [z], as in suit[su:t], assume[ə'su:m]; 2) After [l], as in lute[lu:t], and pollute[pə'lu:t]. 3) Especially in AE, after [t], [d], and [n], as in tune[tu:n], stew[stu:], student['stu:dənt] and new[nu:].

3) Differences in Consonant Pronunciation

In American English letter t is pronounced in six different ways: 1) As an aspirated sound [tʰ], for example tempting[ˈtʰemptɪŋ], potential [pəˈtʰenʃl]. 2) As an de-aspirated sound [t] - tempting[ˈtʰemptɪŋ], stop[stɑ:p], pet[pet]. 3) As a flapped sound [ɾ]. This phenomenon applies when words are linked together in a full prosodic unit, as in the sentence What is this?['wʌtɪz'ðɪz] when uttered in colloquial register. 4) As a glottal stop [ʔ]. A glottal stop is a voiceless sound produced by the obstruction of the airflow in the vocal tract. The glottis is the organ that actually prevents the air from passing through the vocal tract. Examples - put[puʔ] or report[rɪˈpɔ:ʔ], button[ˈbʌʔn], or continent[ˈkɑ:nʔɪnənt]. 5) As a glottalized stop [tʔ]. In a glottalized [tʔ] the stop [t] and the glottal stop [ʔ] are produced at the same time. Example where this sound can be found are mutton[ˈmʌtʔn], or curtain[ˈkɜ:rtʔn]. 6) In the presence of the pattern formed by a stressed vowel followed by [nt], sound [t] is not pronounced in some varieties of AE - winter[ˈwɪnə] or center[ˈsenə]. In British English the flap [ɾ] is never used, but instead it is pronounced as a de-aspirated [t] or as a glottalized [tʔ]. [4]

4) Change of Stress

Loanwords from French were adapted by American English in a different way than there were by British English. Change of stress is the most noticeable difference: 1) First-syllable stress in BE but second-syllable stress in AE: baton [ˈbat(ə)n]/ [bəˈtɑ:n], brochure [ˈbrəʊʃə]/ [brʊʊˈʃɔ:], garage [ˈgɑ:rɑ:(d)ʒ]/ [gəˈrɑ:ʒ]. 2) Common words where AE has a first-syllable stress and BE has last-syllable are cigarette [ˈsɪgəret]/ [sɪgəˈret], magazine [ˈmægəzi:n]/ [magəˈzi:n]. [5]

Words ending in -ate, mostly verbs, have a different stress pattern in both accents depending on the length of the word. Most 2-syllable verbs ending in -ate have first-syllable stress in AE and second-syllable stress in BE. This includes dictate [ˈdɪkteɪt]/ [dɪkˈteɪt], donate [ˈdoʊneɪt]/ [də(ʊ)ˈneɪt] and etc. [6]

5) Changes in Articulation

There are some minor differences in articulation between British and American English. These differences do not compromise mutual understanding. American English is inclined to pronounce unstressed syllables. Thus, we hear necessary[ˈnesəsəri] in BE, but a more clearly articulated version in AE, necessary[ˈnesəsəri], with two stronger vowels in the same word. [7]

The material collected in this article should be enough to acquire a basic understanding of the main differences between British and American English. Understanding those differences will equip the advanced student with an excellent tool for enhancing listening comprehension and achieving greater clarity of pronunciation.

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