



A study of the differences between American English and British English: A Phonetic and a phonological standpoint

Ofurun Michael Mahori Onguta

Department of English Language and Literature, Rumbek University of Science and Technology, Catholic University of South Sudan, Rumbek Campus, East Africa.

Abstract

Language is a communicative tool, and phonetics and phonology are integral parts of language. English is primarily divided into American English and British English. For many English learners, especially those from South Sudan, distinguishing between American English and British English can be problematic, which significantly intensifies the difficulty of learning the English language. In the progression of learning English, we can effortlessly find that American English and British English occasionally have diverse pronunciation of the identical word; in the similar word, the stress syllables in American English and British English are different; in the equal sentence, the stress words in American English and British English are also altered. There are numerous reasons, including historical, social, and regional cultural factors, that warrant our careful study of these metamorphoses. These variances also pose a challenge for English apprentices, so it is essential to learn the phonetic and phonological differences between American English and British English.

Keywords: Phonetics, phonology, American English, British English, phonological differences

Introduction

The English language contains three vital aspects: phonetics, vocabulary and grammar. Phonetics is the key to language: accurate and elegant pronunciation and intonation are essential for learning vocabulary and grammar, as well as for listening, speaking, reading, writing, translation, and singing. Specifically, they facilitate the cultivation and enhancement of listening and speaking skills, making it more effective for accurate and effective communication.

English includes American English and British English. From the point of view of pronunciation, the current research classifies American English into three vernaculars: General American (also known as General English), New England American, and Southern American English (also referred to as Southern American English). As a result, the general pronunciation of American English is similar to the pronunciation of English in the North, and in Scotland and Ireland. Nevertheless, there are some dissimilarities in the pronunciation of morphology and syntax between American English and British English. The dissimilarities between the two regularly cause great misperception to South Sudanese learners whose English is a second language.

As a branch of English, American English has undergone significant transformation in its development due to the influence of regional and national connections. Today, there are differences in American English in terms of pronunciation, spelling, and usage. Even in most cases, people who use British English and American English cannot comprehend each other. It can be understood that even the identical language occasionally produces a foreign language outcome. In national English education, due to the diversity of reading and listening materials, a combination of British English and American English is used.

This research paper aims to exhibit the dissimilarities in pronunciation between American English and British English. It also seeks to explore the similarities and

differences between the two languages and to examine the motivations behind them, laying a solid foundation for South Sudanese students to achieve authentic British English pronunciation.

The Importance of English Phonetics

English is a non-relative pronunciation and belongs to the Indo-European language family. There are forty-eight (48) intercontinental phonetic symbols in the English language. These phonetic cyphers are very essential for learning English words and sentences, particularly spoken English. However, "in the process of language evolution, phonetics first appears, then words" (Li, 2018). Language is humans' sentiment and belief. Cultural communication is the most significant means of communication, and oral communication must depend on phonetics. Speech, the material shell of language, is the peripheral form of language and the most direct sign system for recording people's thinking activities. It is a vocal sound of definite social significance emitted by human vocal organs. The corporeal basis of speech comprises pitch, intensity, length and colour, which are also the four rudiments of speech. Without speech, there would be no written language. Phonetics is like the root of words, which is firmly deep-rooted, and the branches and leaves are unsurprisingly thriving.

Phonological Differences Between American English and British English

There are two primary varieties of English in the world at present: British English and American English. There are some variations between the two types of English in phonetics, phonology, morphology, and syntactic structure (Li 2009, 15) ^[7].

What are British English and American English? Generally speaking, British English broadly refers to Received Pronunciation (RP), which is based on the vernaculars of London and the surrounding regions. It is broadly

acknowledged as the teaching language of public schools. It is commonly regarded as standard British English. The BBC uses Received Pronunciation (RP) for its news broadcasts to project an image of formality, authority, and national understanding. American English primarily refers to General American Speech (GA), also known as Midwestern American Speech, which is widely used in textbooks, on the radio, and on television in the United States. On the other hand, in phonetics, the dissimilarities between the two may occasionally cause misapprehension and discomfiture to the communicating party. The phonetic variances between American English and British English consist of the dissimilarities in consonants, vowels, stress positions and alphabet combination pronunciation.

There is a joke: An Englishman and an American bump into each other by chance at the railway station. Americans are liberal and virtuous at making friends. After a few polite words, he asks, "What is your job?". The British responded, "I am a clerk." The American man was astonished to hear, "Clock? Your job is to tick tick all day long?" The identical word was pronounced by Americans as /klɜ:k/, whereas the British pronounced it as /kla:k/. The above joke highlights the pronunciation differences between the United Kingdom and the United States. These variances seem inappropriate, but they are of great importance in specific instances.

In South Sudan, most apprentices start learning English in primary school or even kindergarten. Most South Sudanese English teachers ordinarily teach students British English pronunciation. Nonetheless, most foreign teachers in South Sudan come from East African Countries, mostly from Uganda and Kenya. A slight inconsistency, such as the different pronunciation of a letter in a word due to L1 interference, can occasionally lead to a loss of listening ability in South Sudanese English language learners or the misinterpretation of oral communication. For that reason, it is indispensable to explore the differences between British English and American English for South Sudanese English learners.

The pronunciation of American English and British English is diverse, and the phonetic symbols used are slightly different. American English used to use the Webster-NOAH phonetic alphabet. The primary difference between the Wechsler phonetic alphabet and the International Phonetic Alphabet lies in the vowel phonetic alphabet; the consonant phonetic symbols are identical, except for a few variations (Wang, 2008)^[8].

1. Differences in Consonants

There are twenty-four (24) consonants in British English and 25 consonants in American English. They can be divided into two classifications: clear consonants and voiced consonants. When consonants are pronounced, airflow is exhaled from the lungs, passes through the trachea and vocal cords, and is obstructed by a specific vocal organ and comes out from the mouth or nasal cavity. The vocal cords do not vibrate with clear consonants, and the vocal cords vibrate with voiced consonants. American English is the same as British English. There are eight pairs of clear and voiced consonants, such as /p b t d k g f v s z ʒ ʒ θp tʃ dʒ/. There are nine other mismatched consonants, two of which are clear, / h w/ and seven voiced consonants, /r m n ŋ l w j/.

Take the consonant /r/ for example: the letter r is often combined with vowel letters to form a combination of letters. In British English, the /r/ sound acts as a fricative sound at the beginning and end of a word, while in American English, the /r/ sound can appear at the end of a word.

Note the pronunciation of bold letters in the following words.

ar	ɜ	ɜ	ɔr	ɜ
ar	er	ir	or	ur
far	her	birth	nor	fur
argue	berm	merth	borfer	burst
harm	term	circulate	lord	turtle
smart	fern	vitgin	north	curb
sharp	terminal	dirty	more	murder

In British English, the letters r and vowel letters in the above-mentioned letter combinations constitute a combination of letters, which is pronounced as vowels and the letter r is not pronounced; in American English, the letters r and vowel letters together constitute a combination of letters, the letter r reads /r/ sound, which is one of the noteworthy differences between American and British sounds.

In addition, American English has one and a half vowels /hw/ more than British English. The /hw/ phoneme is a clear consonant. When pronounced, the vocal cords do not vibrate, the lips are slightly rounded, and the back of the tongue wants to raise the soft palate. When air flows through the mouth, from the gap between the lips, the upper teeth cannot touch the lower lip. /HW/ phoneme is the standard pronunciation of most wh-letter combinations in American English, such as.

What	Hwat
whenever	hwɛn'ɛvə
whether	'hwɛðə
wherever	hwɛr'ɛvə

2. Differences in Vowels

Many Americans speak with a lesser or even slighter mouth when they pronounce, but this only embodies part of the American pronunciation. Many Americans have their hair cut a little more than half (Zhu, 2003)^[11].

American English diphthongs are identical to those in British English. The shared feature is that the first one slides to the second one. The first one is long, strong and clear, and the second one is short, weak and vague. Commonly speaking, the second one is not the end of the pronunciation, and the two sounds are combined to form a single sound, which is called a diphthong.

British English has five closing diphthongs /eɪ əʊ aɪ aʊ ɔɪ/ and three concentrated divowels /ɪə eə ʊə/. British English also has five consonant diphthongs /eɪ/ /oɪ/ /aɪ/ /aʊ/ /ɔɪ/. Nevertheless, there are four focused diphthones in American English /ɪr ɛr ur or/. In American English, there is a concentrated diphthong /or/ that is generally used, which is equivalent to /ɔə/ in English. However, the British seldom use /ɔə/ this intense diphthong, preferring to use /or:/ this post-vowel instead of /or/. The different pronunciations of the letter combinations -oor, -ore, and -

our in American English and British English are equated as follows.

American English		British English
door	dɔr	dɔ:
floor	flɔr	flɔ:
bore	bɔr	bɔ:
pour	pɔr	pɔ:

There are five closing diphthongs in American English.

American English	British English	Word
e	eɪ	a
o	əʊ	no
aɪ	aɪ	I
Aʊ	aʊ	now
ɔɪ	ɔɪ	boy

There are four centring diphthongs in American English.

American English	British English	Word
ɪr	ɪə	ear
ɛr	eə	share
ur	ʊə	poor
or	ɔ:(ə)	more

American English has three vowel letters that are pronounced differently from those in standard British English. They are "a" vowel in dance, fast, grass, half, and path, "o" vowel in dock, fog, hot and rod, and "u" vowel in dew, news, and tutor (Li 2009, 365).

- The letter vowel "a" in dance is read in British English /ɑ:/, but read in American English /æ/.
- The vowel "o" in rod is read in British English /ɒ/, but in American English /ɑ/.
- In dew, the vowel letter "u" is read in British English /u:/, but in American English /u/.

1. The Changes of Stress Position

1.1 The change of stress position of a word

The stressed syllables in English words are word stress, and the stressed syllables are marked on the upper left of the word. Monosyllabic words have strong pronunciation and can be stressed, but their stress symbols need not be marked. Two or more syllables can have one or more stressed syllables. The stressed syllables vary from word to word and are irregular. Hence, when learning new English words, we should master the correct stressed syllable and pronunciation. If the accent is mispronounced, it is likely to be misleading or mystifying. For example, the word menu /menju:/ (recipies) is on the first syllable, while manure /mənʃuə/ (faeces), word stress falls on the syllable. Of course, here are two different words, but in restaurants, it is often said, "Here is the menu." /hɪə ɪz ðə 'menju:/ read "Here is the manure." /hɪə ɪz ðə mənʃuə/. What an embarrassment it is!

The present research identifies three degrees of stress in English: primary, secondary, and zero. The term *primary stress* refers to the strong emphasis a speaker puts on the most important syllable of a particular word. *Secondary stress* refers to a less strong emphasis on the next most important syllable. *Zero stress* refers to any syllable that receives no stress; such syllables are called unstressed syllables.

In other words, an unstressed syllable receives no intensity or loudness at all. For instance, words like

'timetable/'tʌm, teɪbl/ and 'operation/'ɒpə'reɪʃn/exhibit three degrees of stress. The frequent occurrence of the unstressed syllable is one of the essential physiognomies of spoken English, and the one that most distinguishes English from other language families (Wang 2005, 82-83)^[20].

The stress of English words is very irregular, but it follows the following rules.

- a. As a noun, the stress of a disyllabic word often falls on the first syllable; as a verb, the stress often falls on the second syllable.

For example.

noun	verb
'insult	in'sult
'record	re'cord
'increase	in'crease
'import	im'port
'object	ob'ject

- b. The stress of compound nouns is generally on the first syllable.

For example.

'blackboard	'handbag
'bookstore	'bedroom

The stress of compound verbs is usually on the second syllable.

For example.

over'load	ill-'treat
short'change	cross-'section

- c. Some compound words have binary pronunciation.

For example.

'second-'handed	'kind'hearted
'arm'chair	'four-'footed

- d. A few compound words stress the second syllable.

For example.

what'ever	who'ever
your'self	through'out

- e. Stress of monosyllabic words with suffixes.

The first syllable of a monosyllabic word is often stressed, for example, by adding suffixes such as -er, -ly, -ing, -ed, -ful, -est, -less, -ness, -ish, -res, etc.

For example.

teacher /'ti:tʃə/(teacher-er) biggest /'bɪɡɪst/(big-gest) quickly /'kwɪkli/(quick-ly) smallest /'smɔ: lɪst/(small-est).

Stress of words with A-like prefix.

The words which by adding suffixs such as a-, be-, re-, res-, in-, im-, en-, em-, es-, ex-, con-, com-, dis-, mis-, pre-, pro-, trans-, usually are stressed the second syllable.

For example.

about /ə'baʊt/(a-bout), believe /bɪ'li:v/(be-lieve), report /rɪ'pɔ:t/(re-port), condemn /kən'dem/(con-demn), inform /ɪn'fɔ:m/(in-form), discuss /dɪs'kʌs/(dis-cuss).

De-, in-, re-, con-, pre- and other prefix words can also be reread on the first syllable. Occasionally, the exact syllable words and stressed syllables may also have different connotations and parts of speech.

For example.

(Noun)	(Verb)	
desert /'dezət/(n.)	desert /dɪ'zə:t/(v.)	
insult /'ɪnsʌlt/(n.)	insult /ɪn'sʌlt/(v.)	

f. Stress of polysyllabic words.

The universal rules of polysyllabic word stress are as follows.

- Polysyllabic words are usually stressed on the penultimate syllable;
- Three-syllable words are, of course, stressed on the first syllable. The stress of polysyllabic words is as follows: difficult /'dɪfɪkəlt/ (dif-fi-cult).

1.2 The change of stress position in sentences

There are stressed syllables and unstressed syllables in words and, of course, stressed and unstressed syllables in sentences. To learn English pronunciation well, we must practice using weak forms. Not only does the weak form affect the fluency of speech, but it also means that all the irrelevant words are strong, the words that should be prominent are not prominent, and may even cause some unnecessary misunderstandings. In a sentence, English speakers join stressed and unstressed syllables together effortlessly. Stress syllables are long, have a pitch change and have full vowel sounds, while unstressed syllables are short and often have a reduced vowel sound. In English sentences, notional words, such as nouns, adjectives, adverbs, substantive verbs, several times, interrogatives and interjections, are usually stressed. Their stressed syllables must be long and loud, a phenomenon known as sentence stress.

- Functional words, such as articles, prepositions, conjunctions, auxiliary verbs and modal verbs, are usually not stressed in sentences. For example: 'Two 'newly-'married 'couples 'walked 'quietly along the 'river.
- When a noun, adjective or adverb modifies another word, both words are stressed. For example: a 'later 'paper.
- However, "street" is not reread in street names, while "road" and "avenue" are reread. For example: 'Main Street.
- The indefinite pronoun one is usually not stressed. For example: a 'beautiful one.
- Generally speaking, nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and meaningful verbs tend to have sentence stress, but in practical use, some words can be stressed to emphasise the point the speaker wants to highlight. For example: 'John was 'reading an 'English 'novel at 'home 'yesterday 'afternoon.
- In spoken English, only new concepts accept sentence stress, which is called logical stress. Logically stressed words normally accept intonation. Words mentioned above usually do not accept sentence stress.

- 'Where are you 'going?
- 'New 'York.

- Commonly speaking, personal pronouns, articles, auxiliary verbs and so on are not stressed in sentences,

but in order to emphasise a specific meaning, they also need to be stressed under certain circumstances. For example: 'What did 'Tom 'say to 'Sally?

- Modal verbs, auxiliary verbs, and the verbs "be" and "have" are generally not stressed. It can be stressed or not at the beginning of an interrogative sentence. When combined with "not", it should be stressed. In affirmative short answers, they appear at the end of the sentence and should be stressed.
- (*it*) May I 'ask a 'question?
 - 'Yes, he is.
 - 'Yes, I 'have. 'No, I 'haven't.

1.3 Alphabetic Combination Pronunciation in American English

What is very different from British English is that American English is often pronounced by combining letters. Therefore, English learners sometimes hear sounds that are similar to those in British English but distinct from them.

For example:

- The British English pronunciation of honest is /'ɒnɪst/, where "h" is not pronounced; however, in American English, h is still pronounced as /'hɒnɪst/.
- The letter "a" is pronounced in British English /ɑ:/, while in American English it is pronounced /n/ /f/ /s/ /θ/ before the /æ/. Such as: after /'æftə-, pass /pæs/, path /pæθ/.
- In stressed syllables, the amalgamation of letters ar, ear and Er is at times pronounced as /ɑ:/ in British English, while the American sound needs to be added as /ɪ/ pronunciation, pronounced as /ɑr/.
- The letter wh-in British English is read as /w/, while in American English it is read as a mix of /hw/. For example: when /hwen/, white /hwaɪt/.
- In American English, blasting vowels /t/ appear in unstressed syllables, between two vowels, or with l, n, which is typically muddled into /d/. There is no such change in British English. For example: city /'sɪdi/, letter /'lɛdər/ (Li, 2005).
- The alphabetic combinations er, ear, ir, ur, or, our are pronounced as /ɜ:/, with a curly tongue /r/ at the end of the syllable, and /ɜ:/ in the English syllable.

Tracing the Source of the Differences Between American and British English Phonetics

George Bernard Shaw once said, "There is a common language gap between Britain and America." The expansion of any language involves a complex process. The emergence of every language has its causes and context. English belongs to the Germanic branch of the Indo-European language family (Li 2009, 1). American English originates from British English but differs from it in certain aspects.

Primarily, there are differences in national history. Language, as a carrier, symbolises the course of a country and is one of the most potent ways of reflecting a country's history. Great Britain has a longer history than the United States. Britain has gone through the ancient Rome Empire,

Anglo Saxon era, Britain and France hundred years' war, maritime hegemony, the outbreak of Civil War, the Abolition of Monarchy, the establishment of the Republic, glorious revolution, heyday, the "sun not to fall Empire", World War I and World War II, until present day. These long histories make the British tender of history. With the evolution of history, from Old English to Middle English and then to Modern English, the vocabulary has expanded, grammar has also undergone transformation, and pronunciation has changed significantly over time. The United States is a comparatively short-lived country. American English is based on the Victorian form of British English. The history of American English is closely tied to the arrival of American immigrants.

The earliest settlers came from the Puritans in the eastern part of England, specifically in Suffolk County. They settled in the market town of southeastern Massachusetts in 1620 (Li 2009, 364). The American Revolution broke out in 1775. On July 4th, 1776, the Declaration of Independence was officially published. The United States has experienced the colonial period, the War of Independence, the Westward Movement, the Progressive Movement, the Gilded Age, World War I, World War II, and the Cold War, among other significant events, up to the present day. Although the United States has a short history. It has a vast territory, so Americans are interested in geography. During the immigration process, numerous British English terms have been adopted by the United States; however, some English terms that are no longer used in British English are still used in American English. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, Britain experienced its first industrial insurgency. Since then, there have been flying shuttle and revolving jenny in English. Similarly, the British colonists established Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in the United States, which was initially referred to as a plantation. It used to mean colony.

Additionally, there is a notable difference in social life. The British island countries separated from the European continent, the mild and humid climate and the gentle terrain have created the comfortable living conditions of Britain, which has also promoted the establishment of the British "island state mentality" centered on the characteristics of steadfastness, prudence, rationality, independence, flexibility, conservatism, humility, compromise, tolerance and restraint (Wang, 2016) [19]. It is said that the English people are very noble and stubborn. It is because of this personality that their English sounds more harmonious and high-pitched, which is quite similar to French. English pronunciation sounds clear and high-pitched, and the intonation changes significantly, fluctuating, and the language's speed is faster. Compared to the British, Americans are generally cheerful, enthusiastic, and informal. Americans are comparatively stable and low-pitched, and their sentences tend to be lower-pitched and gentler in tone. American English sounds mellow and exaggerated, but its intonation is relatively flat.

Besides, there is a difference in regional culture. Language not only reflects a country's history, but also witnesses its regional culture in a specific space. The sea surrounds Britain. Countless English words are related to the sea, fish,

water and navigation activities—for example, plain sailing (plain sailing). The United States has a vast territory, with rolling mountains, immense plains, and varied terrain, including flat heights. For example, caribou (North American reindeer), sagebrush (a type of North American Bush), Sequoia (a type of tree), the Everglades (a southern part of the United States' swamp land), and other words are unique to American English. Some words in British English cannot be found in American English, such as prince, Duke, knight and so on, which are peculiar to British English.

In conclusion, the influence of other languages is different. French and Latin have a significant influence on British English. In 1066, the Duke subjugated England. At that time, French became the official language of Britain and the language of the ruling class, while English was regarded as a low-level, civilian language; the ability to speak French became a symbol of social status. To marry into the upper class, the original English began to learn French, which led to the introduction of a large number of French words into English. Thus, English was profoundly influenced by French in an unprecedented manner. To date, English has been influenced by many French words, while German has had a significant impact on the development of American English. (It is also well understood that German Americans are the second largest ethnic group in the United States after British Americans.)

Opinions on the Phonetic Differences Between American English and British English

With the United States' increasing global presence, American English has become increasingly essential. Equated with British English, it not only retains some of the characteristics of British English but also progressively develops its distinct features. Diverse cultures breed different languages. Whether American English or British English, they are the product of a country's history and culture. English learners should respect them.

For South Sudanese English learners, it is necessary to learn the differences between British English and American English. Many English learners often feel inadequate in listening training and testing, as well as in verbal communication with native speakers, because they frequently encounter words that are both familiar and unfamiliar, many of which are linked to the phonetic differences between American English and British English. The nonexistence of identification of subtle variances between American English and British English leads to a loss of marks and communication disappointment.

Conclusion

American English and British English differ in pronunciation, but neither is superior to the other. Some people prefer the orthodoxy of British English, while some prefer the freedom of American English (Wu, 2014). Either way, it is worth learning.

The existence of any language is meaningful. "Seeking common ground while preserving differences" may be the correct attitude of South Sudanese English learners to deal with the differences between British and American English pronunciation. There are similarities and differences

between British English and American English. The phonetics, phonology, morphology, and grammar of the two are usually the same, but the differences are comparatively minor. In any case, South Sudanese English learners should bear in mind and perceive the phonological differences between British English and American English while learning English.

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