



British and American English

Oscar Wilde used to say jokingly that the reason why the English and the Americans don't understand each other is that they speak the same language. The English language was introduced into the New World by the first English colonists who landed in America in the early seventeenth century. It gradually developed through the centuries, amplifying its vocabulary and borrowing new words from the Indians (canoe, toboggan, cocoa etc), from the Spanish (mosquito, tornado, lasso etc) and from all the immigrants coming to America from every corner of the world. Nowadays it is spoken all over the North American continent, and in spite of regional and cultural variations, the English spoken in America has remained basically the same as the English spoken in Great Britain.

The main difference between the two languages lies in the pronunciation. The /t/ sound in the middle of words like "twenty" and "romantic" is often omitted by American speakers, who pronounce these words "twenny" and "romanic". Some vowel sounds are often pronounced differently. Many British speakers pronounce words like "glass" and "class" with a long "a" (glarse, clarse) while Americans will make them rhyme with "ass".

There are also differences and innovations in American English involving spelling and vocabulary. Such words as "colour", "honour", "theatre", "centre" and "marvellous" are spelt "color", "honor", "theater", "center" and "marvelous" in America.

In many cases different words are used to mean the same thing. School begins in "autumn" in Britain but in "fall" in the States. English children are fond of "sweets" and "biscuits", while American children are fond of "candies" and "cookies". You can travel by "tube" or by "tram" in Britain, but you travel by "subway" or by "streetcar" in America. The English go "on holiday", Americans go "on vacation", and the English live in "flats" while Americans live in "apartments".

Comprehension Questions

1. Why do modern Americans speak English?
2. Make a short summary of the main differences between British and American English, with some examples. Write about 100 words.



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Answer Key

1. Modern Americans speak English because the language was introduced into North America by the first settlers, who came from England.
2. (This is an example summary).

The main differences between British and American English are in the areas of pronunciation, spelling and vocabulary. British people pronounce the /t/ sound in words like “romantic” while Americans tend not to, and some vowel sounds are different, for example the pronunciation of the letter “a”. Some words are spelt differently, for example “centre” is spelt “center” and “colour” is spelt “color”. New words were introduced into the American language by immigrants from different countries. There are different words for the same things, for example English people say “sweets” and “autumn” and Americans say “candies” and “fall”.