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18 May. the US Senate votes English as the official 'national language' of the United States. President Bush said: "I think people who want to be citizens of this country ought to learn English." Republicans claim the law will affirm the pre-eminence of English.

UNESCO. International Mother Language Day 2006 focused on languages and cyberspace. The event promotes linguistic diversity and aims to help minor languages survive alongside the major international languages.

Whale researchers have found that blue whales produce different sounds in different parts of the ocean. Now British academics have found similar regional accents in ducks. Ducks from London, they claim, make a harsher sound than their country cousins!

EU Translation costs have shot up by nearly 50% since ten new members joined in 2004. Despite having 20 official languages, English remains the EU's lingua franca although Germany is pressing for greater prominence for German in EU texts.



Do you speak American?

Shelley, a Californian businesswoman, tells me that when she first came to England she got lost in Harrods. "There were no exit signs" she says; "There was a 'Way Out', but I thought it was just being exuberant, like 'Outta sight!' or something." It's banal to repeat that Britain and America are divided by a common language, but language is an evolving process and British and American English have been evolving separately for nearly 400 years. Henry Sweet, an early linguist, predicted that Americans and Britons would be mutually unintelligible within a century – and that was in 1877. His vision of the future was a little cloudy perhaps, but the two languages are considerably different, as is the potential for misunderstanding. When something 'goes like a bomb' in England it's a great success while in America it's a complete disaster. If an American 'tables a motion' it's taken out of discussion not put forward as in England. So what are the main differences?

The differences are everywhere, in: vocabulary, grammar, idioms, punctuation, spelling, dates and even numbers. Sometimes different words have a common meaning, luggage and baggage, for instance are interchangeable. But, sometimes these shared words have additional meanings unique to only one country. In Britain a leader can also mean the main editorial article in a newspaper. Sometimes the secondary meaning in one country is the primary meaning in the other, dumb in the US for instance, means stupid not mute. Worse, the secondary meaning in one can mean the direct opposite in the other – to table a motion is one example.

Shades of meaning can be different too. Rude suggests impolite in the US but something more like indecency in the UK. Presently in the UK, means occurring soon, but in the US it means, happening now.

Lots of identical words mean different things depending on where you are. Rubber (particularly unfortunate!), torch, jumper and biscuit for instance. If you're mean in the US you're angry, but in the UK you're stingy. Mind in Britain means to look after or look out for, while in the US it means to remember. (Shelley was bewildered by the 'Mind the Gap' signs on the underground.) These very common words cause the most confusion: garters becomes suspenders, suspenders becomes braces, but braces don't hold up your trousers they straighten your teeth!

Americans have coined thousands of new words since colonists first began to borrow plant and animal names from Native Americans: toboggan and squash, for instance. Other colonising languages add to the mix, cookie, for instance, is loaned from Dutch.

American English can be more direct and vivid than the British variety. As a famous American once said "When we're through with the English language, it'll look like it's been run over by a musical comedy". On the other hand, American English extends words in ways that can sound ponderous to Britons; transportation instead of transport and burglarize instead of burgle.

Americans will happily use:

- nouns compounded from verbs and prepositions (fallout, workout, know-how, the run-around),
- verbed nouns (to author, to party, to impact, to host),
- verbed, -ize words (fetishize),
- verbed adjectives (finalize),
- nouned adjectives (the hopefuls),

These new words are often resisted in the UK which is generally slower to adapt. Even some Americans are nervous of the more irregular verb forms which have 'crope' into their language.

Idiom

An idiom is a phrase that expresses a whole idea and these are particularly important to language learning. In back of, for instance, meaning behind, wouldn't be understood in the UK. In the US you'd 'visit with' a friend, while in the UK you would just 'visit'. 'One' as in "one does what one can" is rare in the US and sounds very formal. The "I do not!", "You do too!" would never be heard in England. In the US 'ten after six' means ten past six, while in the UK 'half nine' means half past nine.

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An American, whose husband was stationed in England, got up early one morning to find out if the milkman could explain the small holes in the foil tops on the milk bottles, and the missing portions of cream. Without blinking, he suggested, "Must be yer tits, ma'am."

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Splitting the infinitive

An infinitive is a verb form which acts as a substantive, that is, it expresses existence, and may be preceded by 'to' as in the verb to be and to go. A split infinitive is one where an adverb is put between the 'to' and the verb. 'To boldly go' is a famous example, from the introduction to Star Trek. Sounds innocent enough, but almost nothing elevates the grammarian temperature as dramatically as a split infinitive. There's scant logic to justify the explosion, though.

For a start, infinitives have been happily split since the 14th century only falling out of favour in the 19th. Even then, arguments against were based on analogies with Latin grammar. The Latin infinitive is a single word, academics argued, so the equivalent in English should be treated as if it were a single unit too: except it isn't; English isn't Latin. Distinguished writers have split infinitives: Wordsworth, George Eliot, Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln all did it whenever it suited them.

Like any useful grammatical rule it's all about clarity. The following example, from *The Complete Plain Words* by Sir Ernest Gowers, reveals when infinitives help and when they hinder the meaning of the sentence:

"The tenant hereby agrees:

- (i) to pay the said rent;
- (ii) to properly clean all the windows;
- (iii) to at all times properly empty all closets;
- (iv) to immediately any litter or disorder shall have been made by him or for his purpose on the staircase or landings or any other part of the said building or garden remove the same."

Clause (ii), "to properly clean all the windows", is fine. In clause (iii), inserting "at all times properly" between the "to" and the "empty" makes the whole clause clumsy and difficult. Putting 30 words between the "to" and the "remove" in clause (iv) makes the entire sentence almost impossible to understand without reading it several times.

To conclude, the definitive infinitive rules are; 1, never split an infinitive, 2, unless you choose to, 3, in which case, ensure that clarity is preserved, 4, and if not, revert to rule 1.



Aoccdrnig to rscheearch...

Sutedis cialm the odrer of lettres in a wrod deosn't mtaer mcuh. The iprmoetnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat ltteer is in the rghit pclae. Tihs is bcuseae we dno't raed ecah lteter by itslef but sacn the shpae of the wrod as a wlohe.

Editor's note: Just so you know! This new study won't affect proofing procedures at Temple Translations at all.

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Next Issue

Pardon my French

13th Century lawyers were paid by the page. Does that begin to explain the intricacy of modern legal language?



Do you speak American?

continued

There is a long list of usages that, although clear to both languages, are only correct in one.

Americans will 'do it over' while the British would 'do it again'. America can be different than Britain, but Britain could only be different 'from' or 'to' America. Only an American would say 'I sure could use a drink', and only a Briton 'my bank are awful'. Americans will study 'math' and the British 'maths'. Americans will be 'obligated' while the Brits would only ever be 'obliged'.

Real problems happen where wholly different concepts find expression in a single word. British men wear 'pants' under their trousers; Americans, wear their 'pants' on top (that's how we know superman is American). Clever Americans are 'smart' but, the dullest Briton could be 'smart' just by putting on a tie. In America, you get 'sick' and feel 'ill'. In Britain you get 'ill' and feel 'sick'. In America you don't ask anyone to lend you a 'rubber'; in Britain you can tell everyone you need a 'fag'; in neither country should you name your son Randy.

Speaking numbers

A billion means more to a Briton than an American; a 'million million' as opposed to a mere thousand million. In the US the 'and' is often dropped from numbers, as in 'a hundred twenty' rather than 'a hundred and twenty'. Americans might watch 'Two Thousand One-A Space Odyssey' while the British would see 'two thousand and one'. In some cases the 'and' is used to indicate a decimal point; one hundred fifty one (151) as opposed to one hundred and fifty one (100.51).

Generally, American English allows more variation and has less regard for grammatical form than British English. Perhaps that's why American English can sound sloppy to British ears. (Only Britons would write angry letters about Newsreader grammar!) British forms, many of which are rare in the US except in formal situations, can sound rather pompous to Americans.

In conclusion, it's the American variety of English that is now the world's international language. The better we understand its subtle yet significant differences the better we'll communicate with the whole world.

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