

British and American English

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Language experts say that spoken English was almost the same in the American colonies and Britain two-hundred years ago. Americans began to change the sound of their speech after the Revolutionary War in seventeen-seventy-six. They wanted to make it different to separate themselves from the British in language, in the same way they separated themselves from the British government.

Some American leaders proposed major changes in the language. Benjamin Franklin wanted a whole new system of spelling. His reforms were not accepted. But his ideas did influence others. One was Noah Webster.

Webster wrote language books for schools. He believed the United States should have a system of its own language as well as government. Webster published a dictionary of the American language in eighteen-twenty-eight. It established rules for speaking and spelling the words used in American English.

Webster wrote that all words should be said in the order of the letters that spell them. This is why Americans use the letters “e-r” to end many words instead of the British “r-e.” He spelled the word “center,” for example, “c-e-n-t-e-r,” instead of the British “c-e-n-t-r-e.”

Noah Webster said every part of a word should be spoken. That is why Americans say “sec-re-ta-ry” instead of “sec-re’try,” as the British do. Webster’s rule for saying every part of a word made American English easier for foreign settlers to learn. They learned to say “waist-coat,” for example, the way it is spelled instead of the British “wes-kit.”

The different languages of many people who came to the United States also helped make American and British English different. Many of their foreign words and expressions became part of English as Americans speak it.

Sometimes Americans and British people do not understand each other because of different word meanings. For example, the word “jumper” in Britain means a sweater. In the United States, it is a dress. The British word “brolly”¹ is an “umbrella” in America. And the British call potato chips “crisps.” All of these differences led British writer George Bernard Shaw to joke that Britain and America are two countries separated by the same language!

¹ **brolly** is actually used in Australian English these days.