
American and British English Preferences: Spelling, Grammar, Punctuation, Prepositions, and Vocabulary

Review by Madeline Haggan, University of Kuwait

AMERICAN AND BRITISH ENGLISH PREFERENCES: SPELLING, GRAMMAR, PUNCTUATION, PREPOSITIONS, VOCABULARY. Nancy Salama and Mary Ghali. Cairo, Egypt: Arab Renaissance Publisher, 1982. pp. 258, \$10.00.

Most English speakers can smile indulgently at Shaw's well-known thrust about the British and Americans being "separated by the same language." However, the difference between British and American English is not always so amusing to those whose job it is to teach English as a foreign language. Although academically well qualified for their job, and linguistically sophisticated, many such teachers, particularly when working abroad, find that their studies have not prepared them for the very real linguistic shock of working with colleagues and textbooks from the other side of the Atlantic.

Experience shows that Quirk and Greenbaum may be over-optimistic when they claim that "grammatical differences between British and American English are few and the most conspicuous are widely known" (1973: 4). Indeed, it is all too common that a teacher in this situation unwittingly marks students wrong on a point of grammar or spelling, only to discover later that it would have been perfectly acceptable to a transatlantic colleague.

This can be disconcerting to say the least and can have unsatisfactory repercussions.

Some teachers, for instance, may become overly loyal to their own brand of English, leading to an unnecessarily intolerant rejection of that of the other side. This attitude readily becomes transmitted to the students, and a kind of linguistic snobbery develops which is both culturally and pedagogically inappropriate.

On the other hand, other teachers, trying to be more open-minded, often find their professional confidence shaken by the situation. Encountering a disputed form, they may experience some kind of semantic satiation effect and find themselves unable to give a judgement as to whether a student's offering is right or wrong. This is confusing to the serious student, although some, being more unscrupulous and grade-oriented than others, are quick to take advantage by arguing with their British teacher that their American teacher had taught them to write it that way, and vice-versa.

From these remarks, it is obvious that a book such as *American and British English Preferences* has been long overdue. Here at last, within the covers of one reference text, are brought together those points of difference that hitherto were to be found scattered in various research papers and books on language. However, valuable as such a compilation would have been, the interest and worth of this book lie in the fact that it goes beyond a mere re-hash of what one might have read elsewhere. Instead, an attempt has been made to reveal those forms

that are actually preferred by speakers of the respective varieties. In this way the authors avoid the pitfalls of merely cataloguing the existing points of difference regardless of their frequency of occurrence. Particularly helpful are the notes given in "Advice to the Teacher" (ATT), where after leading us skillfully through the often complex variations in form that are possible, and the views of other authorities on the matter, they present us with a clear statement summarizing present trends in usage and recommending what the teacher should do.

The authors are themselves experienced teachers of EFL so that the range of material covered is slanted more towards classroom needs than towards broad, theoretical interest, and while they make no claim to be comprehensive, their coverage is both impressively and satisfyingly extensive. For example, apart from the expected differences pinpointed in grammar, spelling, vocabulary, etc., a chapter is included on the calligraphic preferences of the two groups. Needless to say, this constitutes an area of almost limitless idiosyncratic variation, but teachers of middle European students may find it useful to have access to such a list of acceptable forms. Anyone who has tried to decipher a handwritten letter in English from a continental correspondent will readily agree that the forms used in cursive script are not uniform throughout the languages using the Latin alphabet. This awareness of the problem is, indeed, one of the factors which makes this book fascinating reading for the general reader as well as the specialist.

Take, for instance, the chapter on punctuation, where topics range from differences in letter formats to differences in calendar layouts. With regard to the latter, we are given the intriguing information that, whereas a horizontal listing of the days of

the week is acceptable to both British and American users, only 11% of their American informants preferred a vertical arrangement as compared to 69% of their British informants. Hardly a fact to shake the teaching world, but it does serve to illustrate how perusal of this book constantly reveals differences of which the reader might not have been aware.

The book, of course, is not without its faults. Respecting the informants, for example, some criticism is in order. Besides using source material already published on British and American English, the authors based many of their conclusions on responses to a questionnaire filled out by 68 British and 46 American participants. While it is possible to overlook the discrepancy in respective sample sizes, the lack of a description of the sample populations is less easily excused. All we are told is that the participants were educated. Age, sex, professional bias, region of origin—all factors which might affect responses—are not revealed. Since the book is published in Cairo, how many of the informants were expatriates whose preferences might already have been 'contaminated' through lengthy exposure to transatlantic contacts? Neither is any information provided regarding the questionnaire itself. Although a lengthy presentation of the research method would no doubt be out of place in the book, more information on the informants would have been reassuring, along with perhaps a sample of the questionnaire items.

Another troubling point is the format. For quick reference, a teacher wants to find the relevant page easily and be able to grasp the point immediately. This facility is lost to some extent here by the use of too many, often unfamiliar, abbreviations, and an over-use of boldface type. On other pages, careless proofreading, or printing, allows an

apparently random use of heavy black type (e.g., p. 105). Finally on matters of format, a comprehensive index would greatly enhance the usefulness of the book. The "Index for British Vocabulary" helps, but it is not enough.

Finally, in spite of the stated aim of indicating preferences rather than providing all the possibilities, this approach is not always consistently adhered to. In the "Spelling" section, for example, in the British column, *connexion*, *deflexion*, and *inflexion*, are given equal weight as *connection*, *deflection*, and *inflection*. Surely an indication of the frequency informants' actual preferences would have been revealing.

Notwithstanding the above criticisms, *American and British English Preferences* remains an invaluable text made all the more useful by its extensive bibliography on the subject. The proof of the pudding is truly in the eating, and this reviewer has frequently been glad to have the book to refer to.

Reference

- Quirk, R. and S. Greenbaum. 1973. *A University Grammar of English*. London: Longman.