

THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BRITISH AND AMERICAN ENGLISH PHONETICS

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Abstract:

This article explores the phonetic differences between British English (BrE) and American English (AmE), highlighting how historical, social, and cultural factors have influenced the way English is spoken across the Atlantic. Key areas of divergence include variations in vowel and consonant pronunciation, rhoticity, and stress patterns. The article delves into historical phonetic shifts such as rhoticity, vowel differences like the long "a" sound and the schwa, and consonant variations such as the American "flap T" and British glottal stops. These differences not only shape pronunciation but also reflect the linguistic identity of the speakers. The article underscores how both British and American English, despite their differences, remain mutually intelligible and serve as global mediums of communication.

Key words: British English, American English, phonetics, vowel differences, rhoticity, flap T, glottal stops, historical linguistics, pronunciation, phonetic variation.

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English, as a global language, has diversified across continents, resulting in a variety of dialects and accents. Among the most prominent differences are those between British English (BrE) and American English (AmE). The phonetic differences between American English and British English mainly include the differences in consonants, vowels, stress positions and alphabet combination pronunciation, one of the most notable areas of divergence lies in phonetics—the sounds and pronunciations that shape speech. This article shows phonetic differences, highlighting how historical, social, and cultural factors have influenced the way English is spoken on opposite sides of the Atlantic.

Historical Roots of Phonetic Variation:

The phonetic differences between British and American English stem, in part, from the historical development of English over time. When the British settlers arrived in what would become the United States in the 17th century, they brought with them the dialects and speech patterns of their time. However, as time passed, both the colonies and the motherland evolved independently, leading to gradual shifts in pronunciation. Some of these changes were the result of natural language evolution, while others were shaped by external influences, such as contact with other languages and dialects.

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One significant historical phonetic shift is the phenomenon of rhoticity, which relates to the pronunciation of the “r” sound. At the time of colonization, most British English dialects were rhotic, meaning that the “r” sound was pronounced in all contexts. However, during the 18th century, non-rhotic accents began to emerge in Southern England, particularly in London. This shift, known as the loss of post-vocalic /r/ (where the “r” is dropped after vowels, as in “car” or “father”), became a defining feature of what is now considered Received Pronunciation (RP), the prestige accent in the UK. In contrast, American English remained largely rhotic, particularly in areas like the Midwest and the South.

Vowel Differences:

One of the most striking phonetic distinctions between British and American English is the pronunciation of vowels. Vowels in English can be highly variable across dialects, and the Atlantic divide has led to significant divergence.

The different pronunciations of the letter combinations - *oor*, - *ore* and - *our* in American English and British English are compared as followings:

	British English:	American English:
Door	/dɔː/	/dɒr/
Floor	/flɔː/	/flɒr/
Bore	/bɔː/	/bɒr/
Pour	/pɔː/	/pɒr/

The Long “a” Sound:

In words like “bath,” “dance,” and “grass,” British English often uses a broad “a” sound, represented phonetically as /ɑː/. This pronunciation is common in southern England and is a hallmark of Received Pronunciation. For example, “bath” in British English would be pronounced as /bɑːθ/, with a long, open vowel sound. In contrast, most American speakers pronounce this vowel as a short /æ/, rendering “bath” as /bæθ/. This is referred to as the trap-bath split in phonological terms, and it is a major source of difference between the two varieties.

The Schwa Sound:

Another difference is the use of the schwa sound /ə/, an unstressed, neutral vowel found in many unstressed syllables in both dialects. However, the frequency and placement of the schwa can differ. In British English, words like “leisure” or “sofa” often contain a schwa sound, while in American English, the vowel is pronounced more distinctly as /ɛ/ or /oʊ/. This difference is subtle but adds to the overall distinction in how words are articulated between the two dialects.

Diphthongs:

Diphthongs, or vowel sounds that involve a gliding transition from one vowel to another, also vary between British and American English. For instance, the pronunciation of the diphthong in words like “goat” or “boat” is typically more rounded in British English (/əʊ/) compared to American English, which tends to have a more open, monophthongal quality (/oʊ/). Similarly, the word “time” is often

pronounced with a more distinct glide in American English (/təɪm/) than in British English, where the diphthong may be less pronounced (/təɪm/).

Consonant Differences:

While vowel variation is perhaps the most noticeable aspect of phonetic divergence, there are also key differences in the way consonants are pronounced. These differences contribute to the overall rhythm and melody of the two dialects. There are 24 consonants in British English and 25 consonants in American English and they differ in various ways.

The pronunciation of bold letters in the following words:

/ɑr/	/ɜ/	/ɜ/	/ɔr/	/ɜ/
ar	er	ir	or	ur
	car			
	her			
	stir			
	store			
	fur			

The Flap “T”:

One of the most well-known differences between British and American English phonetics is the treatment of the “t” sound in certain contexts. In American English, the flapping of the “t” sound occurs when it is positioned between two vowels, resulting in a sound closer to a “d.” This is why “butter” in American English is often pronounced as /'bʌdər/, while in British English, it retains a clearer “t” sound as /'bʌtə/. This phenomenon is called alveolar flapping, and it is a characteristic feature of many American accents, especially in casual speech.

Glottal Stops:

In contrast, British English (particularly in some London and Cockney accents) often replaces the “t” sound with a glottal stop. In words like “bottle” or “water,” the “t” is sometimes pronounced by briefly closing the vocal cords, creating a break in sound rather than a clear consonant. Thus, “bottle” might sound like /'bɒʔəl/ in certain British accents. While this feature is not as common in Received Pronunciation, it is prevalent in some regional dialects and further distinguishes British from American speech.

Word Stress:

In British English, certain multi-syllable words may have a different stress pattern than their American counterparts. For example, the word “advertisement” is typically stressed on the second syllable in British English (/əd'vɜ:.tɪ.smənt/), while in American English, it is stressed on the third syllable (/əd.vɜ:.'taɪz.mənt/). Similarly, the word “controversy” is pronounced with the stress on the first syllable in British English (/ˈkɒn.trə.vɜ:.si/) but on the second syllable in American English (/kən'trɑ:.vɜ:.si/). These differences in stress can sometimes cause confusion for speakers of one variety when listening to the other.

Conclusion: Phonetics as Identity

The phonetic differences between British and American English are not just about sounds—they are also a reflection of identity, history, and culture. Phonetics plays a key role in shaping how speakers perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others. Whether it is the rhoticity of American English, the glottal stops

of Londoners, or the vowel distinctions between the two varieties, these differences are part of the rich tapestry of English as a global language. As English continues to evolve in different regions, these phonetic variations may shift further, but they will always serve as markers of the diverse ways in which people communicate across the world.

In the end, while British and American English may sound different, they remain mutually intelligible and connected by their shared linguistic roots. Understanding these phonetic distinctions not only enriches our appreciation of language but also deepens our connection to the people and cultures that speak it.

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