

Unit 8 - United States



The objectives for this unit are:

- reading: read a text about differences between American English and British English.
- colloquial English: learn some American English words.

Unit 8 - United States - Reading: Key phrases

The following words and phrases appear in the text you are going to read in this section:

mindset a set of attitudes or fixed ideas that someone has and that are often difficult to change.
You won't get him to try anything new - he has a very conservative mindset.

persuasion of the type mentioned.
I have some acquaintances of the Liberal persuasion.

play out happen or take place.
The same scenario plays out all over the country every Monday morning.

mooch be somewhere not doing very much.
He's happy to mooch around the house all day.

tag along go somewhere with someone, especially when you have not been asked or invited
Do you mind if I tag along with you tonight?

blurt out say something suddenly and without thinking carefully.
She blurted it out before I could stop her.

draw on (of a period of time) pass by and approach the end.
Night was drawing on.

whys and wherefores the reasons for something
I have no intention of going into the whys and wherefores of the current situation.

vernacular the language spoken in a particular area or by a particular group.
He spoke in the vernacular in order to reach a wider audience.

insight an understanding of what something is like.
I hope you have gained some insight into the difficulties we face.



Language is the dress of thought

So said Samuel Johnson. I've often wondered what Doctor Johnson would have made of twenty-first century English and its many variants around the world. In particular, what would his opinions have been concerning my own variant: American English. What conclusions could he possibly draw regarding the mindset of a person living in a country that didn't even exist when he originally wrote those words?

Of course, any verdict Doctor Johnson might come up with would be based upon the comparison of my English with his own. And I dare say, as so often happens when American English is compared with British English, the good Doctor's diagnosis would be unfavorable.

I have had many opportunities to make those kinds of comparisons myself due to the fact that I have several friends of the British persuasion. One such friend has only recently left these shores after a three-week visit in which almost every situation we experienced together showed us the differences that play out between our particular flavors of the same language.

The game began before he had even finished unpacking his case. While I mooched around in the kitchen preparing coffee for myself and tea for my guest, a disembodied voice floated down the stairs asking if it were possible to 'put my trousers in the wardrobe' in order to protect them from the attentions of the cat. I was happy to confirm that he could, indeed, hang his pants in the closet, though I declined to mention that the cat and his attentions were often to be found in there.

One little custom that we have is to eat out on the first night of any visit to each other's country, with the guest paying as a way of saying 'thank you for letting me stay'. My British friend duly obliged that evening, stating that this one would be 'on him', and that all I had to do was 'get' the tip. After a delightful meal, my friend asked the waitress if she could bring him the 'bill' and whether or not it would be okay for him to pay by 'cheque'. The waitress's blank look, and the fact that she didn't know what to say for the first time that week, told me that it might be a good idea if this one were 'on me'. I asked her to bring me the 'check' and said that I would be paying with 'bills'. Needless to say, I 'got' the tip as well.

The main reason for my buddy coming over this time was for him to fulfill a lifelong ambition to visit the Grand Canyon. As I hadn't seen the Grand Canyon since I was a kid I decided to tag along and when we got there, we signed up for a day long, guided hike around the area. It was hard work, even for my friend who, unlike me, uses his legs almost every day. I was relieved when lunchtime neared and the guide said that we would be stopping 'momentarily'. My friend frowned and blurted out: 'Can we not stop for a bit longer?' There was a pause and more frowns before I found myself explaining to all involved that 'momentarily' in the US means 'in a moment' or 'soon', whereas in the UK it means 'for a brief period of time'. Our confusion passed momentarily: in the US sense for the guide, and in the UK sense for my friend and myself.

Stopping off in nearby Tusayan at the end of the day, our brief period of relief ended when my guest informed me that he would like to 'post' something for his wife and asked if I could help him find somewhere to do so. Thinking that he required the web and some social networking site, I began asking the locals if there were any coffee shops with public-access computers at hand. When a picture postcard of the Grand Canyon appeared in front of my face, waving itself around vigorously, it dawned on me that what he really required was a stamp and a mailbox so that he could mail it back home.

Blank looks and confusion are surprisingly frequent occurrences when spending time with our cousins from across the water, and as my friend's vacation drew on, we discussed these instances and the whys and wherefores of them happening. It became clear that my friend is firmly of the belief that British is best, though I disagree, having the opinion that there is no best, only different. And even as we argued, more examples of the disparities in our vernacular appeared. At one point during our discussions I suggested that we 'table' our argument, or postpone it for later. My friend replied that he had already 'tabled' his argument when he put it forward for debate. Later, my guest stated that my arguments were 'moot' which I took to mean irrelevant or not valid and, consequently, somewhat ill-mannered on his part. I relaxed when he explained that for him 'moot' meant open to debate or subject to uncertainty.

I began to think again about what Doctor Johnson had said. We really do dress up our thoughts with words. My friend was inclined to argue that British is best, so he 'tabled' (or put forward) his argument because it was 'moot' for him in the British sense of the word. I, on the other hand, wanted to 'table' the discussion (for later or indefinitely) because saying one type of English is better than another type is, for me, 'moot' in the American sense of the word. Here we were using the same words to argue two contrasting viewpoints because we had decided that those words were going to mean what each of us wanted them to mean.

I may be wrong. Maybe British English really is better than American English. I don't think so though. What I do know is that the differences in our usage of the language provide us with a valuable insight into the internal workings of other people. Just as Doctor Johnson had implied.



Language is the dress of thought: check your understanding

Decide if the statements from the text are **true**, **false**, or **not mentioned**...

1. The author's friend is staying in a hotel.
2. When Americans finish eating in a restaurant they ask for the check.
3. The author is not used to walking long distances on a regular basis.
4. The author thought his British friend wanted to post something on the Internet.
5. The British man's wife lives in London.
6. The author agrees with what Samuel Johnson said.

Language is the dress of thought: skill transfer: Practice

Write a short paragraph to answer each of these questions:

What differences between British English and American English have you encountered?

Why do regional variations develop?

What dialects are there in your native language?

Unit 8 - United States - American English

These American English words are taken from the text you read in the previous section. Most of these words are also used in British English, but with different meanings:

momentarily in a moment

I'll join you momentarily.

pants trousers

I've spilled some ink on my pants.

closet wardrobe or cupboard

He took a clean shirt from the closet and started to get dressed.

mail send a letter or packet by post

Did you mail the letter I gave you yesterday?

check bill, amount to be paid in a restaurant

Can we get the check, please?

bill note, paper money

He left a ten-dollar bill as a tip.

table postpone or leave an idea or proposal for a later date

They tabled the proposal until the next meeting. changed its policy.

moot irrelevant; having little or no relevance

The issue became moot after the company

American English: Practice

All of the sentences contain examples of British English. Replace one word in each sentence with an American English equivalent.

1. Please take a seat. The doctor will be with you shortly.
2. The dog has gotten my trousers dirty!
3. He took his tie off and put it in the wardrobe with the others.
4. I posted the packet to the client as you asked me to.
5. When the waiter brought the bill it had the wrong amount on it.
6. He folded up the notes and put them in his wallet.
7. Let's postpone that plan for now - we'll come back to it next year.
8. This whole matter is becoming increasingly irrelevant.