

When Did Americans Lose Their British Accents?

Researched and presented by George Kurt Plohn

Kurt, as a still active professional translator of five languages, is very much interested in linguistic issues.

One of the most interesting parts of history is linguistic evolution. It is interesting that Americans and our northern neighbors in Canada mostly sound alike when they speak, except for a few sounds, but then listen to the British across the ocean, and you immediately start wondering what's going on.

The obvious question comes up how and when English colonists in America lost their British accents and how American accents came about.

Or may be it was the other way, according to another assumption. In 1776, whether you were for declaring America independent from the crown or swearing your loyalty to King George III, your pronunciation would have been much the same. At that time, American and British accents hadn't yet diverged. It is the standard British accent that has drastically changed in the past two centuries, while the typical American accent has changed only subtly.

Traditional English, whether spoken in the British Isles or the American colonies, was largely "rhotic." Rhotic speakers pronounce the "R" sound in such words as "hard" and "winter," while non-rhotic speakers do not. Today, however, non-rhotic speech is common throughout most of Britain. For example, most modern Brits would tell you it's been a "hahd wintuh."

Two people, one common language, sort of.

Center vs. centre, color vs. colour, realize vs. realise — a seemingly endless list of spelling divergences have cropped up in the 250 years since the colonies and United Kingdom were ruled by one and the same king. Why are there so many differences in British and American spelling, and how did they creep in?

Each word has its own unique history, but the primary mover and shaker in this transatlantic drama is the nineteenth century American lexicographer **Noah Webster**, he of dictionary fame. According to "A History of English Spelling" (Manchester University, 2011) by D.G. Scragg, Webster's dictionary of 1828 is largely responsible for standardizing the accepted spelling of American English.

Before 1828, many words, such as *humor* (or *humour*), *defense* (or *defence*) and *fiber* (or *fibre*), had two acceptable spellings on both sides of the pond, because they were introduced in England via both Latin and French, which used different spellings. Webster picked his preferred forms (the former ones in each example above),

justifying his choices in various ways, but partly on nationalist grounds: he wanted American spelling to be distinct from, and (in his opinion) superior to, British spelling.

"Since the book was successful in establishing its authority throughout the States, [Webster's spelling variants] have been generally recognized as American forms," Scragg writes. "In that sense Webster was the first to differentiate between British and American usage, and in that it was frequently he who chose the variant of two spellings in early nineteenth-century use which have subsequently been preferred in the United States, he can be said to have influenced the development of spelling. He is in a way 'responsible' for such forms as *center*, *color* and *defense*."

Some of Webster's changes spread to England, such as his choice of dropping the "k" on the end of words like *musick* and *publick*. Others did not. In fact, though many of the word forms adopted by Webster in his dictionary were originally acceptable in England, they came to be used less frequently there over time, because they were regarded as "Americanisms." For example, today, British newspapers and magazines such as *The Times* and *The Economist* use "-ise" on the end of words such as *realise*, *organise* and *recognise*, even though the "-ize" ending is also technically correct in the U.K.

But America is difficult to ignore, especially where we have adopted more economical forms of words, such as *program* instead of *programme*. "Despite the still widespread dislike of American forms prevalent in Britain, it is likely that publishers will be unable ultimately to resist the saving in paper, ink and type-setting labor involved in the shortened forms," Scragg writes. He notes that many of the British tabloids have dropped the longer forms of words already, while the more serious newspapers are clinging to them, tooth and nail.

There are many, many evolving regional British and American accents, so the terms "British accent" and "American accent" are gross oversimplifications. What a lot of Americans think of as the typical "British accent" is what's called standardized Received Pronunciation (RP), also known as Public School English or BBC English. What most people think of as an "American accent," or most Americans think of as "no accent," is the General American (GenAm) accent, sometimes called a "newscaster accent" or "Network English."

English colonists established their first permanent settlement in the New World at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607, sounding very much like their countrymen back home. By the time we had recordings of both Americans and Brits some three centuries later (the first audio recording of a human voice was made in 1860); the sounds of English as spoken in the Old World and New World were very different. We're looking at a silent gap of some 300 years, so we can't say exactly *when* Americans first started to sound noticeably different from the British.

As for the "why," though, one big factor in the divergence of the accents is rhotacism. The General American accent is rhotic and speakers pronounce the *r* in words such

as *hard*. The BBC-type British accent is non-rhotic, and speakers don't pronounce the *r*, leaving it more like *hahd*. Before and during the American Revolution, the English, both in England and in the colonies, mostly spoke with a rhotic accent. We don't know much more about other accents, though. Various claims about the accents of the Appalachian Mountains, the Outer Banks, the Tidewater region and Virginia's Tangier Island sounding like an uncorrupted Elizabethan-era English accent have been busted as myths by linguists.

TALK THIS WAY

Around the turn of the 18th to 19th century, not long after the American revolution, non-rhotic speech took off in southern England, especially among the upper and upper-middle classes. It was a signifier of class and status. This posh accent was standardized as Received Pronunciation (RP) and taught widely by pronunciation tutors to people who wanted to learn to speak fashionably. Because the Received Pronunciation accent was regionally "neutral" and easy to understand, it spread across England and the empire through the armed forces, the civil service and, later, the BBC.

Across the pond, many former colonists also adopted and imitated Received Pronunciation to show off their status. This happened especially in the port cities that still had close trading ties with England — Boston, Richmond, Charleston, and Savannah. From the Southeastern coast, the RP sound spread through much of the South along with plantation culture and wealth.

After industrialization and the Civil War and well into the 20th century, political and economic power largely passed from the port cities and cotton regions to the manufacturing hubs of the Mid Atlantic and Midwest — New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Chicago, Detroit, etc. The British elite had much less cultural and linguistic influence in these places, which were mostly populated by the Scots-Irish and other settlers from Northern Britain, and rhotic English was still spoken there. As industrialists in these cities became the self-made economic and political elites of the Industrial Era, Received Pronunciation lost its status and fizzled out in the U.S. The prevalent accent in the Rust Belt, though, got dubbed General American and spread across the states just as RP had in Britain.

Of course, with the speed that language changes, a General American accent is now hard to find in much of this region, with New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Chicago developing their own unique accents, and GenAm now considered generally confined to a small section of the Midwest.

As mentioned above, there are regional exceptions to both these general American and British sounds. Some of the accents of southeastern England, plus the accents of Scotland and Ireland, are rhotic. Some areas of the American Southeast, plus Boston, are non-rhotic.