

BRITISH-AMERICAN Misunderstandings

Although the British and Americans share a common language, there are 3 problem areas to be aware of:

- (1) Words preferred in the UK versus words preferred in the US
(i.e. rubbish = British, trash = American)
- (2) Identical words which have totally different meanings
(i.e. first floor = "1. Etage" in UK, but "Erdgeschoß" in US)
- (3) Words which can be "safe" on one side of the Atlantic but "dangerous" on the other
(i.e. knock up = "jmd. aufwecken" in UK, but "jmd. schwängern" in US)

Scan the list below for words you would commonly use and check the US-UK differences.

What the BRITISH say:

afters (or pudding)
anti-clockwise
aubergine
autumn
bill
bin
bird
biscuit
bloke
boot
braces
brush
bum
bums
camp
car park
caravan
chap
chemist
chips
chum
courgette
crisps
curtains
CV
dressing gown
dual carriageway
dummy
engaged
estate car
fag
homosexual
fanny (Vagina)
flat

What the AMERICANS say:

dessert
counter-clockwise
egg-plants
fall
check
trashcan
chick
cookie
guy
trunk
suspenders
broom
butt
tramps
gay
parking lot
trailer
guy
drugstore
fries
buddie
zucchini
chips
drapes
resumé
robe
divided highway
comforter
busy
station wagon
cigarette
fag
fanny (Hintern)
apartment

Mädel

Hosenträger

Hintern
Obdachloser, Landstreicher
schwul

Hausmantel, Bademantel

Schnuller

flatmate	roommates	
football	soccer	
fortnight	two weeks	
French bean	snow peas	
full stop	period	
gherkin	pickles	
ground floor	first floor	Erdgeschoß
first floor	second floor	1. Etage
second floor	third floor	2. Etage
gobsmacked	extremely surprised, speechless	
holiday	vacation	
homely	ugly	
jumper	sweater	
kip	nap	Schläfchen
knickers	women's underpants	
knock up (aufwecken)	knock up (jmd. schwängern)	
left luggage	lost property	
lift	elevator	
loo	restroom	
lorry	truck	
mobile phone	cell phone, cellie	
momentarily (gleich)	momentarily (für eine sehr kurze Zeit)	
motor	automobile	
motorway	freeway	
mum	mom	
nappy	diaper	
nought	zero	
off-licence	liquor store	
omnibus	tram	
pants (Unterhosen)	pants (Hosen)	
pavement	sidewalk	
pensioner	seniors	
petrol	gas	
pint (20 fluid ounces)	pint (16 fluid ounces)	
pissed (betrunken)	pissed (verärgert)	
plaster	bandage or Band-Aid	
post	mail	
pram	baby carriage, baby buggy, stroller	
pub	bar	
pudding	dessert	
queue	line	
randy	hornygeil	
return ticket	round-trip ticket	
reverse charges	call collect	
ring	call	
roundabout	traffic circles, rotaries	
rubber	condom	
rubbish	trash, garbage	
sack	dismiss, fire	
scotch	whiskey	
Sellotape	Scotch tape (a brand name of 3M Corporation).	
shop	store	
skip	dumpster, trash bin	
stroke	slash	
slash	urinate	
sleeping policeman	speed-bump	
solicitor	lawyer	
a man who addresses a prostitute	solicitor	
spanner	monkey wrench	Engländer, Franzose

spunk
courage
stalagmite, stalagtites
starter
steady on
stilettos
sweets
tap
tarmac
tights
Tippex
torch
trainers (training shoes)
tram
treacle
trolley
trousers
pants
vest
waistcoat
Wellingtons
wheat
willie
windscreen
zed

semen
spunk
flowstones
appetizer
"hold your horses!"
pumps, high heels
candy
faucet
asphalt
panty-hose
white out
flashlight
sneakers
streetcar
molasses
shopping cart
pants
underpants
undershirt
vest
rubber boots, galoshes
corn
penis
windshield
zee

Wasserhahn

Hosen
Unterhosen
Unterhemd
Weste, Jacke

Weizen

Z

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A TYPICAL MISUNDERSTANDING

MANAGING BRITS AND YANKS

When that most idiosyncratic of Victorian dramatists Oscar Wilde visited America in the 1882 he was stopped by a customs official and asked if he had anything to declare. "Yes," replied Wilde, "my genius." Wilde's condescending superiority is not just a relic of the past. During the Lewinsky affair British Monty Python member John Cleese addressed a group of American professionals - "What's the difference between Britain and America?" he challenged the audience. "Let me tell you three differences. Firstly, in Britain we speak English. Secondly, in Britain when we stage a 'World Cup' in sports we allow other countries to play against us; and thirdly, In Britain when we are introduced to our Head of State,... we only go down on one knee!"



Why do the British still feel this need to play a form of linguistic one-upmanship against the Americans? Is it triggered by a feeling of nostalgia for the good old days when Britannia ruled the waves and two-thirds of the world map was coloured Commonwealth-red. Do we feel a certain resentment that our younger cousins have now taken over that role?

Fact is, in many matters of business the Americans are demonstrably better than the British. When faced with a problem the British tendency is to beaver away at the periphery, hoping one day to arrive at the centre. Americans prefer to identify the central problem and to attack that first - leaving side-issues for later. The British seem to have a resistance to direct action - some even say we lack a "killer" instinct. This may be because solving a problem means CHANGE - to change course mid-way is seen as irresponsible, as inconsequent, as 'un-British'.

This explains why the British have a national telephone and postal system which wholly failed to standardize area-codes. It explains a legacy coin currency which is so heavy that it wears out pockets and weighs down handbags. And it explains why the British still, and probably always will, drive on the left side of the road.

The popular English idioms "Don't change horses", "Let sleeping dogs lie", "Hang on in there", and "Make the best of a bad job" are incomprehensible to many Americans.

When you are in business meetings attended by Brits and Yanks, be sensitive to the rivalry which can sometimes surface - the British sense of inferiority will sometimes be compensated by joking around or sarcasm.

My advice to Germans faced with this behaviour is to smile indulgently, or better, if you don't quite understand, ask them to explain the linguistics, it's a great diversionary tactic and will inevitably calm the situation. Never take sides, ever! - confronted with a "common enemy" the Anglo's will forget their differences and gang up against you.

When Wilde said "America and Britain are a single country divided by a common language" he wasn't just joking, he was using one of the few remaining weapons in the Englishman's arsenal, a sense of humour.

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