

# DIVIDED BY CULTURE

Briten und Amerikaner sprechen die gleiche Sprache und doch trennt sie mehr als nur ein Ozean. Welche sind die trennenden Elemente? Der britische Autor Robert Gibson spricht mit dem Amerikaner Patrick Schmidt, einem interkulturellen Trainer, über die wesentlichen Unterschiede.

**G**eorge Bernard Shaw described Britain and America as “two countries divided by a single language”. One would think that Britons and Americans must have a similar culture because of common roots and, above all, a common language. Perhaps surprisingly, however, subtle cultural differences have a much more significant impact on British-US communication than the relatively minor linguistic ones. These cultural differences are particularly dangerous because they are so unexpected.

In her bestselling book *Watching the English*, the British-born writer Kate Fox comments on differences between Americans and Britons. One key area involves people’s attitude to modesty. She writes: “While the English are no more naturally modest or self-effacing than other cultures — if anything, we are inclined to be rather arrogant — we do put a high value on these qualities.”

This means, according to Fox, that most Britons dislike “hard sell” in advertising and marketing, which they associate with Americans. She also writes that the English, unlike Americans, distrust salespeople and do not express their complaints directly.

Privacy is highly valued by the British, who can be shocked by Americans; apparent wish to talk to everyone they meet. Americans often comment on the indirectness of British communication. Kate Fox quotes an American visitor who asked her why the British could not be “a bit more direct, you know, a bit more up-front? We would, as she pointed out, save ourselves

and everybody else a great deal of trouble.” For the British, American directness is seen as a sign of rudeness and of a lack of education.

To get a better idea of some other important differences between Britons and Americans, I spoke to US intercultural expert Patrick Schmidt, who has spent many years working with people from Britain.

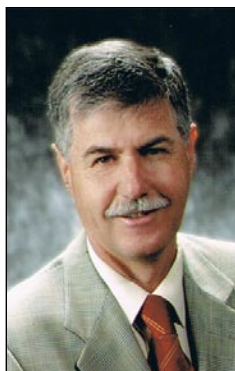
## What has been your involvement with the British?

When I started to work in Germany, I found most of my colleagues were British. Since we spoke the same language, I assumed that it would be easy to connect with them. Yet, with time, I noticed there were subtle differences in their communication style that surprised me. For example, it never occurred to me that an accent could give an indication that you went to an exclusive “public” school and not to a state school. My American upbringing of “all men are equal” made me blind to class status.

It took me several years to get the drift of the British mindset. George Bernard Shaw sums up well what I went through: “We (the British and Americans) are two countries separated by a common language”. What he meant was there are invisible cultural differences that can make communication between the two nations at times difficult, even with a supposedly common language. And was he so right!

**Your remark about class differences is interesting. I have the impression that these things are easier for outsiders to notice than for those brought up in the country. I am always surprised to experience the differences between Britain and America — the common language, in my opinion, is deceptive. It leads people to think that the culture is the same as well. What do you think are the most important communication differences between the British and Americans?**

Despite outside appearances of similarities, British and Americans have fundamentally different ways of communicating. The British want to be admired for their wit and make a point of not being too serious. In another words, they want to appear modestly clever through



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Sharing a joke:  
Barack Obama  
and TV host  
David Letterman

humour. It's a culture where direct display of feelings is suppressed; embarrassment and aggression are expressed only through the use of humor and understatement. This explains, in my opinion, why the British are masters in indirect communication — the message in any given conversational exchange may be contained in what is not said. For example, it might be sizzling hot and a Brit will say with a perfectly straight face "It's a bit warm, wouldn't you say?"

Americans are not so much into wit and self-deprecating humour. Rather, they unconsciously want to be liked and socially accepted. At the same time, they want to get straight to the point. This pro-active attitude with no subtle talk is strongly related to the American need of upward mobility. The thinking goes like this: If I am friendly and pro-active with a stranger, there's an increased probability with his or her help that I may move up the social ladder. This explains why we Americans are more direct than the British when it comes to expressing pleasure, giving compliments freely or revealing personal details to people they don't know well. So, for instance, an American might exclaim when meeting a British person for the first time, "Hey, I just saw a very interesting TV program about London and I really like the sophisticated way people speak in England. You really have such great style."

**When I watch American TV programmes, I sometimes wonder why the audience finds something funny. I suppose we have a different sense of humour. What differences do you see between British and American humour?**

What amazes me the most about the British is their large vocabulary and their continual efforts to be witty. From my American perspective, I have the impression that the British adore the English language and this

is demonstrated by their brilliant wordplay and other intellectual games.

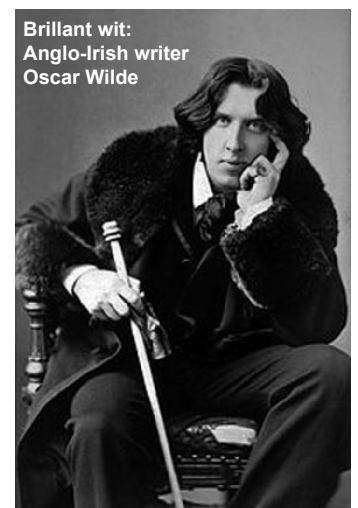
Anglo-Irish Oscar Wilde's famous phrase "I can resist everything except temptation" is an example of how the stereotypical British mind can construct apparently contradictory ideas so as to amuse the listener. And you are almost always challenged to respond in kind. One person will make some funny statement and you are expected to outdo the others with a witty remark.

American humor, by contrast, tends to be more aggressive or disruptive. Americans will often begin with sincere statements and then, out of nowhere, the speaker will destroy it by uttering some absurd statement that has no logic. For instance, the American TV comedian David Letterman announces with a straight face the 10 top reasons why Barack Obama likes his job at the White House. He then proceeds to list reasons that are totally absurd, such as "Living in the White House means I don't have to pay rent." Or the speaker will sometimes create a setup for a joke and then omit the punch line. The joke is that there is no joke.

**Do you have any ideas about where the cultural differences come from?**

From my readings and observations, remnants of the feudal system of status and class are still traceable in Britain. This meant that having the right background, education, a refined use of the language, and a proper accent lead to a good position in society. What began in the ruling class was later adopted by all levels of society. This may explain why the British, as a whole, tend to be more demanding in style and eloquence. They also like to use reservation and understatements to appear like a discerning, "gentleman farmer".

Americans, on the other hand, have a different perspective to their native tongue. After throwing the British out at the end of American Revolutionary War in 1783, the American rebels began to, in the real sense of the word, americanized English completely. The whole idea behind the American Revolution was that "all men are created equal", which meant there shouldn't be any discrimination to people who don't speak or write well. In fact, to appear sophisticated and elegant in your communica-



Brilliant wit:  
Anglo-Irish writer  
Oscar Wilde

tion style might be interpreted as a way to look down at your fellow Americans. This radical democratic thinking led to a simplification of the language.

Additionally, you shouldn't forget that the United States took in millions of immigrants, most of whom didn't speak English. This meant the language was forced to simplify itself.

Last, but not least, American values of "time is money" and "being pro-active" have had an effect on speech and writing patterns. Communication in the USA is based on pragmatic thinking, like newspaper headlines — short and to the point. That's why Americans don't have the need to be subtle in their conversations and may feel uncomfortable with refined, indirect statements, which the British excel at.

### How do you think the British tend to see you as an American?

I have the feeling they don't know where to classify me. On one hand, I fit the stereotypical image of a "wheeler dealer", a person who gets things done immediately, one who "shoots first and then asks questions". On the other hand, the fact that I speak French and German confuses my British friends somewhat. The whole world thinks Americans aren't capable of speaking foreign languages. And if I want to really confound them, I might say jokingly that I'm an American, living in self-imposed exile.

### What I enjoy about working with American colleagues is their optimism and refreshing openness. It is really easy to make contact with people. Is there anything you like about working with British colleagues?

Well, I have been working with British colleagues for over 30 years, many of whom now have become very good friends. I appreciate their joviality, wordplay and their self-deprecating attitude. I like to make outlandish statements, knowing that they will respond with an even more ridiculous joke. There's never a boring moment!

### What I find difficult about working Americans is that this optimism sometimes seems too much, and I have the impression that they can be irritated by my attempts to bring them down to earth. What do you find difficult about working with the British?

I once experienced how the British behave if they feel they are being put into a corner. It happened during one of my German-British intercultural training ses-

sions. The German participants felt that their British counterparts were not doing their fair share of work in a joint-venture project. When the leader of the German group presented their interpretation of the conflict, the British responded with long-winding, complicated answers that even I had difficulty understanding. This is a tactic known as linguistic ruthlessness that may be used to maintain the upper hand, especially with foreigners who don't speak English well.

## For more information

### BOOKS

*Old World, New World*, Craig Storti, Intercultural Press, ISBN 978-1-877864-86-5, \$29.95

*Working with Americans: How to Build Profitable Business Relationships*, Allyson Stewart-Allen, Lanie Denslow, Pearson/Financial Times, ISBN 978-0-273-65626-5, £17.99

*Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour*, Kate Fox, Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 978-0-340-75212-8, £11.90

*Notes from a Small Island*, Bill Bryson, Black Swan, ISBN 978-0-552-99600-6, £13.80

*In Search of Intercultural Understanding: A Practical Guidebook for Living and Working Across Cultures*, Patrick Schmidt, Meridian World Press, ISBN 978-0-9685293-1-7, Euro 17.80

*Stephen Fry in America*, Stephen Fry, HarperCollins, ISBN 978-0-00-726635-7, Euro 10.80



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