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978-0-521-37137-7 - British or American English?: A Handbook of Word and Grammar Patterns

John Algeo

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British or American English?

Speakers of British and American English display some striking differences in their use of grammar. In this detailed survey, John Algeo considers questions such as:

*Who lives *on a street*, and who lives *in a street*?

*Who *takes a bath*, and who *has a bath*?

*Who says *Neither do I*, and who says *Nor do I*?

*After “thank you”, who says *Not at all* and who says *You’re welcome*?

*Whose team *are* on the ball, and whose team *is*?

Containing extensive quotations from real-life English on both sides of the Atlantic, collected over the past twenty years, this is a clear and highly organized guide to the differences – and the similarities – in the grammar of British and American speakers. Written for those with no prior knowledge of linguistics, it shows how these grammatical differences are linked mainly to particular words, and provides an accessible account of contemporary English as it is actually used.

JOHN ALGEO is Professor Emeritus in the Department of English, University of Georgia, Athens. His previous posts include Fulbright Senior Research Scholar, University College London (1986–7), Guggenheim Fellow (1986–7), and University of Georgia Alumni Foundation Distinguished Professor (1988–94). Over the past forty years he has contributed papers to a wide variety of books and journals, including 91 book reviews.

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Preface

The study on which this book is based began about forty years ago as a casual interest in the subject engendered by Thomas Pyles's history textbook, *The Origins and Development of the English Language* (now in its fifth revised edition, Algeo and Pyles 2004). It was focused during a year (1986–7) the author spent in the Survey of English Usage at University College London as a Fulbright Senior Research Scholar and a Guggenheim Fellow. In those days, the Survey was only beginning to be converted into electronic form, so at first research involved hunting through paper slips and copying information by hand. Later, as the Survey was computerized, electronic searches became possible, initially only at the Survey office and later through a CD anywhere.

The present study later benefited from the collection of citations made by Allen Walker Read for a historical dictionary of British lexical items. My wife, Adele, and I then set out to supplement Read's files with citations we collected from more recent material than he had used, including citations for grammatical as well as lexical matters. Our own corpus of British citations is now about three million words in size. That is not large for a contemporary data file, but it consists entirely of citations that we had reason to suspect exemplified British use.

Work on this book was delayed by a variety of other duties to which its author had fallen heir. It is now presented, with painful awareness of its limitations, but, as the French are fond of saying, *faute de mieux*. Undoubtedly, British and American English are grammatically different in ways not reported here. And some of the grammatical differences reported here may be less certain than this book suggests because of difficulties in identifying and substantiating those differences or because of the misapprehension of the author. Nevertheless, I hope that it will be helpful in pinpointing various areas of structural difference between the two major national varieties of the language.

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The debts owed for help in producing this book are more than the author can pay. The greatest debt for a labor of love is to his wife, Adele Silbereisen Algeo, who has assisted him in this, as in all other activities during the nearly fifty years of their married life. In particular, she has been the major collector of British citations that compose the corpus from which most of the illustrative quotations have been taken. She has also critiqued and proofed the text of the book at every stage of its production.

Gratitude is also due to a succession of editors at the Cambridge University Press who have, with kind hearts and gentle words, tolerated a succession of delays in the book's preparation. Likewise gratitude is due to the Cambridge University Press for permission to use the Cambridge International Corpus, without which statements of relative frequency in British and American use would be far more intuitional and far less data-based than they are.

I am indebted to a variety of scholarly studies, both general and specific, for their insights into British–American differences. These are cited in the text of this book and listed in the bibliography of scholarly works at the end. I am particularly indebted to the works by Randolph Quirk, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech, and Jan Svartvik (1985), Michael Swan (1995), and Pam Peters (2004). For existing scholarship that has not been cited here, I can only say “*mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.*”

Individuals who, over the years, have kindly sent Adele and me quotations that have been entered into our corpus include notably Catherine M. Algeo, Thomas Algeo, L. R. N. Ashley, Carmen Acevedo Butcher, Ronald Butters, Tom Creswell, Charles Clay Doyle, Virginia McDavid, Michael Montgomery, and Susan Wright Sigalas.

Finally, and in a sense initially, I am grateful for the support of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and the Fulbright Senior Research Scholar Program for support at the Survey of English Usage, University of London, during the academic year 1986–7, when the project was begun, and to the now departed Sidney Greenbaum, who as Quain Professor of English Language and Literature invited me to the Survey.