**Britishisms and the Britishisation of American English**

**By Cordelia Hebblethwaite**

There is little that irks British defenders of the English language more than Americanisms, which they see creeping insidiously into newspaper columns and everyday conversation. But bit by bit British English is invading America too.

"**Spot on** - it's just ludicrous!" snaps Geoffrey Nunberg, a linguist at the University of California at Berkeley.

"You are just impersonating an Englishman when you say **spot on**."

"**Will do** - I hear that from Americans. That should be put into quarantine," he adds.

And don't get him started on the **chattering classes** - its overtones of a distinctly British class system make him quiver.

But not everyone shares his revulsion at the drip, drip, drip of Britishisms - to use an American term - crossing the Atlantic.

[**Why do Americanisms irritate people?**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/14130942)

[**50 Americanisms noted by readers**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-14201796)

[**American English is getting on well, thanks**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-14285853)

"I enjoy seeing them," says Ben Yagoda, professor of English at the University of Delaware, and author of the forthcoming book, How to Not Write Bad.

"It's like a birdwatcher. If I find an American saying one, it makes my day!"

Last year Yagoda set up a [**blog dedicated to spotting the use of British terms**](http://britishisms.wordpress.com/) in American English.

So far he has found more than 150 - from **cheeky** to **chat-up** via **sell-by date**, and **the long game** - an expression which appears to date back to 1856, and comes not from golf or chess, but the card game whist. President Barack Obama has used it in [**at least one speech**](http://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/2010/12/07/presidential-press-conference-tax-cuts-and-unemployment-extension#transcript).

Yagoda notices changes in pronunciation too - for example his students sometimes use "that sort of London glottal stop", dropping the T in words like "important" or "Manhattan".

| **The Britishisms are coming**  |
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| **Ginger (red hair)**  |
| The use of **ginger** in the US to describe red hair took off with publication of the first Harry Potter book in 1998, says Kory Stamper of Merriam-Webster. Unlike in the UK, there is no anti-ginger prejudice in the US, she says - Americans think of warm, comforting things like gingerbread.[**See the full Google ngram graph**](http://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=ginger+hair&year_start=1900&year_end=2008&corpus=5&smoothing=3) | Graph |
| **Sell-by date (expiration)**  |
| Americans use "expiration date" for the British **sell-by date** - the date by which supermarket food must be sold. But **sell-by date** is increasingly used in the US in a figurative sense. Eg "That idea is well past its sell-by date."[**See the full graph**](http://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=sell+by+date&year_start=1900&year_end=2012&corpus=5&smoothing=3) | Graph |
| **Go missing (disappear)**  |
| This came to the fore in the US when intern Chandra Levy "disappeared", says Ben Yagoda. **Go missing** was widely used, he says, because it felt more nuanced. In his view, British terms can "really serve a purpose" when there is no exact equivalent in American English.[**See the full graph**](http://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=go+missing&year_start=1800&year_end=2008&corpus=5&smoothing=3) | Graph |
| **Chat up (hit on)**  |
| The use of **chat up** to refer to flirtatious conversation really began to take off in the 1990s, says Kory Stamper. Often you can't pinpoint why a word or phrase gets picked up, she says. **Chat up** is a good example of a Britishism that has "snuck in on cat's feet".[**See the full graph**](http://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=Chat+up&year_start=1900&year_end=2008&corpus=5&smoothing=3) | Graph |

Kory Stamper, Associate Editor for Merriam-Webster, whose dictionaries are used by many American publishers and news organisations, agrees that more and more British words are entering the American vocabulary.

**Also overheard in the US...**

* **Do the washing up** - British for "wash the dishes"
* **Keen on/ keen to -** a British way of saying "to like" or "be eager to"
* **Barman** - bartender
* **Bit** - as in "the best bit" of a film... Americans would usually say "part"
* **To book** (eg a hotel) - Americans would say "reserve"
* **Called Joe** - Americans say "named" Joe
* To **move house -** a British way of saying "to move"

Stamper is one of the powerful few who get to choose which words are included in the dictionary, as well as writing their definitions.

One new entrant into the Merriam-Webster dictionary in 2012 was **gastropub** (a gentrified pub serving good food), which was first used, according to Kory Stamper, in London's Evening Standard newspaper in 1996, and was first registered on American shores in 2000.

"The British pub is a very different critter from an American bar," she says, but bars with good beer and food are springing up in many cities in the US, and the British term is sometimes used to describe them.

**Twee** (excessively dainty or cute) is another "word of the moment", says Stamper, as is **metrosexual** (a well-groomed and fashion-conscious heterosexual man) which "took off like wildfire", after it was used in the American TV series Queer Eye. There was even a backlash against it - a sure sign, she says, that the word had "absolutely made its way into the American vernacular".

**What about Canadian English?**

**Jack Chambers** Linguistics professor, University of Toronto

* Canadians spell many words the British way - like "colour", "neighbour" and "centre"
* British English was "enormously influential" from 1850-1950, largely due to a wave of immigration from Britain - an accent known as "Canadian dainty" came into being as upper middle class Canadians tried to sound British
* Canadians have tended to pronounce words like "tomato" and "leisure" the British, rather than American, way - as well as using words like "tap", when an American would say "faucet" - but this is changing
* "When people put on a British accent [now], we consider it affected and funny - but it doesn't happen very frequently"

There has also been "a huge up-tick", says Stamper, in the use of **ginger** as a way of describing someone with red hair.

She sees this as clearly tied to the publication in the US of the first Harry Potter book. [**Dozens of words and phrases were changed**](http://www.uta.fi/FAST/US1/REF/potter.html) for the American market, but **ginger** slipped through, as did **snog** (meaning "to kiss amorously") - though that has not proved so popular.

We are not seeing a radical change to the American language, says Jesse Sheidlower, American editor at large of the Oxford English Dictionary - rather a "very small, but noticeable" trend.

Bill Kretzschmar, professor of English at the University of Georgia, makes a similar point - that while the spike in use of some British terms may look dramatic, it is often because they are rising from a very low base. Most are used "very infrequently", he says.

And it is not so much the masses who use these terms, says Geoffrey Nunberg, as the educated elite. Journalists and other media types, like advertising agencies, are the worst offenders, in his view.

"The words trickle down rather than trickle up," he says.

"It sounds **trendy** - another borrowing we could use without - to use a British term. It just sounds kind of Transatlantic."

Obama was "chuffed to bits" to "natter" with David Cameron in March

But the line between trendy and plain pretentious is a fine one, says Sheidlower.

Anyone who says **bespoke** - as Americans sometimes do when referring to a custom-made suit or a bicycle - is just "showing off".

**Defining terms**

* **Briticism** - Word or phrase characteristic of the English or Great Britain - first used in US in 1868
* **Britishism -** First used in US in 1853, for something "characteristic of British people" - only later applied to words
* **Briticization** or **Britishisation** - First reference is 1953 in Britain
* **Britspeak -** No specific entry in the dictionary at the moment, but "worth considering" says the OED's Jesse Sheidlower

Source: [**Oxford English Dictionary**](http://www.oed.com/)

But some British terms can be useful, says Sheidlower, and fill in a gap where there is no direct equivalent in American English - he cites **one-off** (something which is done, or made, or which happens only once) as an example.

**To go missing** is another useful term, says Ben Yagoda, as it is more nuanced, conveying a greater sense of uncertainty than the standard "to disappear". Its use climbed significantly in 2001, with the high-profile case of the missing intern Chandra Levy.

British TV shows like Top Gear, Dr Who, and Downton Abbey may be another reason more British words are slipping in, says Yagoda, as well as the popularity (and easy access via the internet) of British news sources, such as The Guardian, The Economist, The Daily Mail - and the BBC.

Yagoda also points to a number of British journalists who have risen to influential positions in the US, including Tina Brown - who has worked as editor of Vanity Fair, The New Yorker, The Daily Beast, and Newsweek - and Anna Wintour, editor in chief of American Vogue.

"English for everybody is becoming more international, every day that passes," says Bill Kretzschmar who is also editor in chief of the Linguistics Atlas Project, which tracks spoken English.

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**A self-confessed Anglophile**

**Zella Watson** Former book editor and creator of Anglophiles United

Language is part of our self-identity. It evokes strong emotions in the same way that other elements of self-identity do - such as politics or religion.

In my work Americanising British terms for young-adult literature, I tended to leave in any Britishism that I could get away with. If the context allowed the reader to understand, and if the word was in the Merriam-Webster dictionary, I generally left it in. I generally had no problem leaving in a word like **peckish** because we have no commonly used term that means exactly the same thing.

I love Britishisms, and I liked the idea of expanding young readers' vocabulary. But I would change a word like "chips" and "crisps" because Americans do use a different, specific word for these things.

The use of **university**, rather than college or school, for example, may well be used by Americans to make sure they are understood outside the country.

The same thing might be influencing a trend that Yagoda has spotted for Americans to use the day, month, year format for dates - 26/9/12 rather than 9/26/12.

There is not so much an "on and off switch" between versions of English, says Kretzschmar, but more of a continuum - with the same words in existence in different places, but just used at different frequencies.

Some words, often the more formal ones, were once common on both sides of the Atlantic, but dropped out of American English usage while remaining popular in Britain, says Yagoda - **amongst** (instead of among), **trousers** (instead of pants), and **fortnight** (two weeks) are examples.

And some words which Brits regard as typically American - including "candy", "the fall", and "diaper" - were originally British, but dropped out of usage in Britain between about 1850 and the early 1900s, says Kory Stamper.

"America has always welcomed words from all over," she says.

"If it doesn't look conspicuously foreign, I don't think anyone questions - it's just English at that point."

The word **gormless** (the best American equivalent is probably "clueless") is on the rise in the US, for example, says Stamper, but no-one thinks of it as a British word. For some reason it sounds Southern to many American ears.

**The American 'tung'**

* Lexicographer, author and editor Noah Webster was born in Connecticut in 1758
* Believed spellings were needlessly complicated, and tried to simplify them
* Many changes were adopted into American English - "traveled", "defense" and "color", for example
* He also wanted to change "women" to "wimmen" and "tongue" to "tung", but neither was adopted
* Learned 26 languages in order to write An American Dictionary of the English language - published in 1828 (22 years after his first dictionary) it had 70,000 entries
* Many Americans learned how to read using his famous Blue Backed Speller

There would have been no difference between British and American English when the founding fathers first crossed the Atlantic. It took time for the two to go their separate ways - a process given a jolt by Noah Webster, who published the first dictionary of American English in 1806, 30 years after the Declaration of Independence.

Webster introduced the distinctive American spellings of words like "honour" (honor), "colour" (color), "defence" (defense), and "centre" (center), as well as including specifically American words like "skunk" and "chowder".

"He wanted very much for this budding new nation to have its own language," says Kory Stamper, whose Merriam-Webster dictionary is the modern-day version of Webster's work.

"If [we were] not British, but American, we needed to have an American language as well."

These days, the "balance of payments" language-wise is very much skewed the other way - with Americanisms used far more in Britain than the other way round, says Nunberg.

And though a few people do take umbrage at the use of British words in American English, they are in the minority, says Sheidlower.

"In the UK, the use of Americanisms is seen as a sign that culture is going to hell."

"But Americans think all British people are posh, so - aside from things that are fairly pretentious - no-one would mind."