

Exploring the origins and evolution of American and British English



The primary sources of impact of Lynne Murphy's research are her blog, *Separated by a Common Language* (<http://separatedbyacommonlanguage.blogspot.co.uk/>), and Twitter feed through which she identifies and describes differences between British and American English.

Through the use of social media and online forums, Sussex researcher Lynne Murphy has generated and enlivened a public discourse, one that involves students, teachers, translators, editors and the general public, on the misconceptions about the origins, use and interactions of American and British English. This dialogue draws on evidence and research in English to highlight the dialect differences that puzzle us – challenging people's assumptions, dispelling some of the myths surrounding our transatlantic linguistic variations, and increasing our understanding of how our language evolves.

Overview

Depending on which side of the Atlantic you hail from, do you 'take' or 'make' decisions? Do you perhaps 'hire' or 'employ' a person, but 'rent' or 'hire' a piece of equipment? You may be bemused by the term 'bum bag' or by 'fanny pack', irked that a 'sandwich' can be so radically different from what you were expecting, or baffled as to whether the time is a quarter 'to' the hour or a quarter 'of' the hour. Why do we get so exercised by such lexical quirks and differences, and just how sure are you that the origins of the everyday language you use are what you think they are? Would it surprise you to know that nearly 25 per cent of 'Americanisms' – as identified by *BBC Magazine* readers – are not Americanisms at all?

George Bernard Shaw is said to have described England and America as two countries separated by a common language. Through her research on

lexis, semantics and pragmatics of language, Lynne Murphy (Reader in Linguistics [English] at the University of Sussex) examines how American and British English suffer misconceptions of their origins. She utilises public engagement to enable ordinary English users and learners of the language to learn about, discuss and contribute to a dialogue on the quirks of their national varieties of English. Through a wide range of approaches to lexical (word level) and pragmatic (talk-in-interaction) phenomena, Murphy asks questions of how semantic relations, such as synonymy and antonymy, affect word meanings and the structure and interpretation of discourse. She investigates how certain words come to be associated in speech or writing, how words and meanings are organised in the mind, and how meaning differs across cultures and how this reflects different cultural values.

Murphy notes that many linguistic and folk models of words, meanings and their relations rely largely on intuitions about language and experiments such as word-association tasks. She suggests that these methods are too 'metalinguistic' – that is, they rely on conscious access to what we know and believe about words. Instead she argues that the knowledge we display when thinking consciously *about* language is different from the subconscious knowledge that we use when speaking *in* a language. Relying on evidence from metalinguistic sources cannot tell us how language *really* works. She contrasts how people actually use words with the assumptions made by lexicographers when writing dictionaries and thesauruses, and promotes the

use of evidence for qualitative and quantitative analysis of real-world language use. Murphy has followed this strand of research through an increasingly reciprocal relationship between academic study and public engagement via blogging and social media.

Achieving impact

The impact of Murphy's work is felt through the engagement of thousands of people in an ongoing public discourse on linguistic issues. Such dialogue helps transform her audience's understanding of topics such as language change, intercultural communication and the nature of language itself.

The primary source of this impact is Murphy's blog, *Separated by a Common Language* (<http://separatedbyacommonlanguage.blogspot.co.uk/>), and her Twitter feed through which she identifies and describes differences between British and American English that are often overlooked in dictionaries or by language teaching. As well as creating a forum for discussion about language, these social activities change minds, dispelling myths about language by leading her readers away from introspection and hearsay and towards evidence-based information.

The influence of *Separated by a Common Language* is demonstrated by the rapid growth of its audience through word of mouth and media attention. With more than 420 blog posts between 2006 and 2013, each post typically attracts 40 to 150 comments, and Google Analytics show nearly 80,000 page views per month. Murphy's Twitter account (@lynneguist), which posts UK/US Difference of the Day and links to English research, has published over 17,000 tweets since May 2008 and has gone from 0 to 7,700 followers in four years (9,300 by September 2014). The blog has created an online community that empowers language users to actively engage by bringing their own ideas and views about the standards and variations in English. It is consistently listed in the top 10 linguistics blogs according to Blogmetrics.org.

Although designed to address the public, the quality of Murphy's blog



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and Twitter feed has led to their use by applied-language professionals working in translation, publication, natural language processing (NLP) and lexicography. The blog is nominated and ranked highly on the babla.com blog awards by language professionals. In addition, her work was cited by the Chartered Institute of Linguists as 'best practice' in the use of social media for language professionals. Emphasis Training, a writing skills consultancy, has engaged Murphy as a consultant in producing linguistic resources for business people. Her work is often cited in the applied fields of NLP and lexicography and her in-depth analysis has influenced dictionary treatment of words, including the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which redefined 'hot dog' thanks to her blog.

Future impact

Continuing this research, Dr Murphy has grant funding for a Junior Research Associateship (summer 2014) working on differences in attitudes towards dictionaries and authority (prescriptivism) in the US and UK. She is also in the early stages of work on how the word 'please' is used in the US and UK, including the relationship between perceptions of how it is used and what it is for versus how it is actually used. In addition, Murphy continues her public-facing work, which includes recent appearances on Radio 3's *The Verb* (talking about dictionary attitudes), at Skeptics in the Pub evenings across the Southeast, and a bimonthly column on British idioms for *Focus* magazine (UK). She recently delivered the annual guest lecture at University College London's Summer School on English Phonetics.

Working with us

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