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TWO NATIONS DIVIDED BY A COMMON LANGUAGE

Annotation. Happily for English speakers, their language is internationally dominant in business. To put it bluntly, English is a top requirement of those seeking good jobs – and is often the language in which much of the business of “good jobs” is conducted. Unfortunately, business English is a language of many dialects. This paper concentrates on the two dominant terminologies (especially business-related terminologies) – used by Britons and used by Americans.

Key words: *American English, British English, business terminology, translation problems.*

Анотація. На щастя для англомовних, їхня мова домінує в бізнесі на міжнародному рівні. Відверто кажучи, англійська мова є основною вимогою для тих, хто шукає хорошу роботу, і часто нею ведеться більшість справ про «хорошу роботу». На жаль, ділова англійська є мовою багатьох діалектів. Ця стаття зосереджена на двох домінуючих термінологіях (особливо пов'язаних з бізнесом), якими користуються британці, так і американцями.

Ключові слова: американська англійська, Британська англійська мова, ділова термінологія, проблеми перекладу.

Introduction. After the restoration of independence, the transition to a market economy began and a situation arose where, in the absence of textbooks in Estonian, English textbooks had to be used. In the summer of 1992 and 1993, the authors of this paper had the opportunity to participate in the US-Estonian project «Training of trainers», whose US partner was Bentley College (since 2008 Bentley University). Being associate professors at the Faculty of Economics of the University of Tartu at that time, we asked the Americans for the opportunity to study with local students. We took eight subjects in the field of accounting and passed 21 exams. So, in essence, we acquired a university education.

We have used the acquired knowledge to create the specialty of accounting as well as to teach new subjects. While teaching and research, there was a need to translate both from English to Estonian and from Estonian to English, using both British and American literature. We discovered that the idea that the same language is spoken on both sides of the Atlantic is not entirely true. So, we began to collect and systematize the differences between both versions of English language. As a result, we have written some books and papers related to professional business vocabulary, including:

A dictionary *British & American Business Terms* [1], which includes three sections: *British – American Dictionary*, *American – British Dictionary* (both with 600 keywords) and a short explanatory dictionary entitled *Terms with Different Meanings* (with 250 keywords).

A multilingual *Dictionary of Accounting Terms: English–Eesti–Français–Deutsch* [8], which is intended for all those interested in accounting terms in English, Estonian, French and German. It includes approximately 2,800 entries, i.e. about 700 key words and phrases in each of the four languages. Identification has been provided for the terms characteristic of British English as well as for Americanisms. The identification *IFRS (International Financial Reporting Standards)* has been added to a phrase in case it is neither of British or American origin, but characteristic of IFRS terminology as such.

Two-volume *Encyclopedia of Accounting and Finance* in Estonian [2; 3], which contains almost 8,000 entries and appears to be unique, somewhat different from other encyclopedias. We have tried to combine a specialized explanatory dictionary and an Estonian-English specialized dictionary by providing the English equivalents for most Estonian terms, distinguishing between British and American terms.

We have also shared our experiences in conference presentations and articles published in scientific journals.

1. Why is American English different from British English?

American English (AmE), sometimes called *United States English* or *U.S. English*, is the version of the English spoken in the United States. *British English* (BrE) is the version of the English spoken in the United States. An estimated 4,000 words in everyday use in Britain have a different meaning or are used differently in the US [6, p. 1]. This has been pointed out by many well-known people. For example, in *The Canterville Ghost* (1887), Irish poet and dramatist Oscar Wilde wrote: «We have really everything in common with America nowadays, except, of course, language» [9]. Famous British mathematician and philosopher Bertrand Russell has said: «It is a misfortune for Anglo-American friendship that the two countries are supposed to have a common language» [7].

For a long time, in many literary sources we can find the sayings «England and America are two countries separated by a common language» or «The British and the Americans are two great peoples divided by a common tongue», usually attributed to famous Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw and «Two nations divided by a common language – Britain and American», often attributed to Sir Winston Churchill. Unfortunately, despite the veracity and popularity of these sayings, no evidence has been found that Shaw and/or Churchill would have formulated them.

Quote Investigator is a website that fact-checks the reported origins of widely circulated quotes. It was started in 2010 by Gregory F. Sullivan, a former Johns Hopkins University computer scientist who runs the site under the pseudonym Garson O'Toole. He is the Internet's foremost investigator into the dubious origins of most repeated quotations, aphorisms, and everyday sayings.

On April 3, 2016, the following question and its answer appeared on the mentioned website [4]:

Dear Quote Investigator: The influential Irish playwright and commentator George Bernard Shaw has been credited with a humorous remark about language. Here are four versions:

- 1) Britain and America are two nations divided by a common language.*
- 2) The English and Americans are two peoples divided by a common language.*
- 3) England and America are two countries separated by one language.*
- 4) The United States and Great Britain are two countries separated by the same language.*

Would you please explore the provenance of this expression? [4]

The conclusion of the long and comprehensive answer was as follows [4]:

In conclusion, there is some evidence that George Bernard Shaw made a statement about Britain and America of the following type: «England and America are two countries separated by the same language». However, the expression has been located neither in his writings nor in an interview. Also, many variant phrasings have proliferated over the years. Hence, there is some residual uncertainty about the quotation and its ascription. Perhaps future researchers will discover more.

But why is American English different from British English? Answer is:

- 1) American English saved the features of the old British English.
- 2) It borrowed many words from other languages.
- 3) Americans wanted to distinguish their variation of English from the British to emphasize their independence.

To understand why British English is so different from American English, it is necessary to learn something about the settlement of the United States.

The English language was brought to America by British colonisation, beginning in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. The early US settlers had no verbal contact with the folk they left behind in England, and the language division began. Over the years, many Europeans settled in the United States, bringing their languages with them. English was not the native tongue of many settlers in North

America in the Colonial period. Each language left its mark on spoken English, with mainly the written word standardizing speech.

An American lexicographer Noah Webster thought that the spelling in the American dictionary must show the US independence as a country that was not a British colony anymore. That seems plausible. The written norms of the English language were officially stated in the 18th century when the US gained its independence from Great Britain. The work on the UK English dictionary was already in progress, but the spelling was not standardized yet. So, Americans saw their chance to distinguish themselves even more through the English language and took it. And what could possibly better fit the task than more straightforward spelling that was more similar to the pronunciation of words? As opposed to the British dictionary, Webster took the letter *u* from words like *colour* and *labour* to make *color* and *labor* out of them. Also, he replaced *s* with *z* in the suffix *-ise* in verbs. So, now, in *AmE*, we have *memorize* instead of *memorise* and *capitalize* instead of *capitalise*.

After the United States won its independence, immigrants from around the world continued to come there. They have contributed many of the words that distinguish *AmE* from *BrE*. Davies notes that until the 1900s many books were imported from England, which did keep American English from straying too far [6, p. 2].

All languages change over time, and since the separation of the two varieties, American English has not changed in the same way as British English. British and American English probably reached their greatest divergence just before the Second World War and since that time have been getting closer, or at least better understood by the other country [6, p. 2].

2. Three examples of language convergence and divergence

Despite all the communication now going on between Britain and the United States, it is amazing that new words coined in one country are represented by another word in the other country [6, p. 4]. Some words can have completely different meanings in the two versions or are even unknown or not used in one of the versions.

Case 1. Different British and American terms have the same meaning.

The most usual meanings of the UK terms «stock» and «shares» are translated in the US terms «inventory» and «stock», respectively. It would be unwise therefore to try to discuss with an American the use of FIFO for stock valuation. It would be unwise therefore to try to discuss with an American the use of FIFO for stock valuation. Worse, the US expression treasury stock might be taken to mean gilt-edged (i.e., government) loan securities in the United Kingdom, whereas it actually means a corporation's own shares bought back and held in the corporate treasury.

Case 2. The term has some different meanings in *BrE*, some different meanings in *AmE*, and in addition some meanings common to both.

One of the most interesting terms is *account*. After reviewing many English business dictionaries, the authors of this paper found 12 meanings for this term – 8 only for the British, 2 only for the Americans and another 2 common to both.

Table 1

Different meanings of the word *account*

American meanings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1) In investment banking, a financial and written arrangement between parties to an underwriting syndicate, or the status of securities owned and sold. 2) An arrangement between a broker-dealer house and its client wherein the firm, through its registered representatives, serves as agent in purchasing and selling securities and sees to related administrative matters.
British meanings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Another term for statement. 2) Plural form (accounts). Financial statements – in particular the directors report and accounts of an accounting entity (balance sheet, profit and loss account). 3) Plural form (accounts). The department in a company where accounting performed. 4) The balance of customer's borrowing and lending with a bank. 5) A period designated by the stock exchange during which all transactions fall to be settled at the same time. 6) The period of two weeks (occasionally three weeks) on the London Stockmarket prior to the settlement date. 7) In an advertising, marketing, or public-relations agency, a client of the agency from whom a commission or fee is derived in return for the service. 8) A regular customer.
Common meanings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Contractual relationship between a buyer and seller under which payment is made later. 2) Systematic arrangement showing the effect of transactions and other events on a specific balance sheet or income statement item.

This case shows how important a role convergence and divergence play.

Case 3. A term has opposite meanings to the Britons and Americans

In the eighteenth century, the phrase «to lay on the table» could mean either to bring up or to defer. By the nineteenth century, the Britons had preserved one of those meanings and Americans the other. So, the verb *to table* meant one thing in *BrE* and quite another in *AmE*.

For Britons, *to table* means to put something forward for discussion. For Americans, *to table* means to leave to discuss until later.

In parliamentary procedure, the verb *to table* has the opposite meaning in the United States from that of the rest of the world:

- In the United States, *to table* usually means to postpone or suspend consideration of a pending motion. Generally, to avoid spending time on debate and consideration.
- In the rest of the English-speaking world, *to table* means to begin consideration (or reconsideration) of a proposal.

Motions using the word *table* have specific meanings and functions, depending on the parliamentary authority used. The meaning of *table* also depends on the context in which it is used.

In parliamentary language, *to table* means

- for Britons, to put down, exact opposite of the American meaning (to lay a bill on the table = to present a bill to the House of Commons for discussion);
- for Americans, to set aside a motion rather than discuss it. This is the exact opposite of bill in the House of Representatives.

In his book [5, p. 609], Sir Winston Churchill relates the confusion that arose between American and British military leaders during the Second World War: «The enjoyment of a common language was of course a supreme advantage in all British and American discussions. The delays and often partial misunderstandings which occur when interpreters are used were avoided. There were however differences of expression, which in the early days led to an amusing incident. The British Staff prepared a paper which they wished to raise as a matter of urgency, and informed

their American colleagues that they wished to table it. To the American Staff tabling a paper meant putting it away in a drawer and forgetting it. A long and even acrimonious argument ensued before both parties realized that they were agreed on the merits and wanted the same thing.».

Concluding remarks. The main contribution of this paper is to pay attention to convergence and divergence of British and American English. This is especially important for researchers and translators whose first language is not English.

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