



A testing time for speakers of American English and British English



Laurie Bauer
WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

DO YOU speak American English? One of my colleagues recently received a phone call from a member of the public in which it was asserted that the New Zealand media and Government are intentionally trying to impose American English on all of us.

Part of the difficulty with any such claim is that most of us are not aware of just what is American and what is not.

So here is a test for you to try to find out for yourself whether you are speaking American English. Answer the questions first, and then look for the explanations below.

- 1** Is there anything wrong with the following sentence? The matter which we discussed yesterday was very important (a) Yes, (b) No
- 2** Would you write that you had (a) focused your camera or (b) focussed your camera?
- 3** Is there anything wrong with the following sentence? Last night the louts tread on the flowers in the gardens. (a) No, (b) Yes
- 4** Put the appropriate word in this sentence: The _____ on my car is broken, and it sounds as if I'm on a big motorbike. (a) muffler (b) silencer
- 5** Could you have a garden round your house which was just a lawn? (a) No, (b) Yes.

- 6** Does the pronunciation of vitamin start like (a) vital or (b) vittle?
- 7** Is the colour between black and white (a) gray or (b) grey?
- 8** Is there anything wrong with the following sentence? They protested the Government's decision. (a) No, (b) Yes
- 9** If you table a document in a formal meeting, do you (a) defer its discussion or (b) get it discussed immediately?
- 10** Would you expect a theorem to be (a) proven or (b) proved?

The short answer here is that every (a) answer you gave is American, and every (b) answer is British. But more interestingly, I would predict that the average New Zealander (and you may not be average) would answer with alternate (a) and (b) answers on this list of questions.

The use of "which" without a comma before it is fine in British English, but not in United States English, where "that" would be required. Microsoft Word will prompt you to change "which", because it is American software.

The use of double "s" in focused is British, but is changing there, so that single "s" is becoming the preferred option everywhere.

Tread is a possible past tense of the verb tread in the US, but not in Britain, where the form trod would be used. In Britain a muffler

would be used. In Britain a muffler is a scarf and in the US a silencer goes on a gun. In Britain a silencer is on a car. In the US the garden is the part that is devoted to flowers or vegetables; the lawn is part of the yard. Vitamin starts like vittle in Britain, but not in North America. The spelling of grey and gray is a well-known difference between British and US English. Canadians often use grey.

Traditionally, Britons would have to say that someone protested against or about or at something, while Americans can protest the decision.

In Britain if you table a document it is available for discussion because you have put it on the table, while in the US, if you table a document, you leave it on the table until the next meeting. Canadians have both usages.

The irregular "proven" is used more in America than in England, though the Scots use it.

To the extent that I could predict what a New Zealander would say, I could set up a test which would show conclusively that New Zealanders speak British English or that they speak American English. Another test would show they speak something that is different from both. Most of us do not know what is American and what is not, and that is as true of the politicians as it is of anyone else. The chances of them consciously trying to impose American English are low. The chances of them succeeding are even lower.

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