

An American (Language) Abroad

BY JAMES A. CLAPP, Ph.D.

In the words of George Bernard Shaw, "England and America are two countries ... separated by a common tongue."

Many American visitors to Europe make England their first stop on the Continent. The British Isles are not only closest to the U.S., but there's also some comfort, particularly for the first-time traveler, in the familiar language spoken there. In Britain, the American can read signs and newspapers, order food, and ask directions with little fear of embarrassing pronunciation, scrambled syntax, or of a bewildering answer to a simple question.

Or so it seems.

Consider the following reply one might receive to a common question an American might ask of an Englishman on the streets of London: "If you have no assurance, mind your plimsoles when entering the convenience opposite the chemist's in Lester Square."

Translation: If you do not have insurance (assurance, not confidence), walk with care (mind) in your tennis shoes (plimsoles) when you enter the public restroom (convenience). You might also wonder whether you are in "Lester" Square, since the signs are spelled "Leicester." And the "chemist's" isn't a laboratory; it's the drugstore. Once you do get to the restroom, you are likely to find it marked "WC" (water closet), and if it's crowded there may be a "queue" (a line of persons) that you will have to join to wait your turn. This will give you time to contemplate George Bernard Shaw's quip that "England and America are two countries ... separated by a com-

mon tongue."

To acquire fluency in English English it might help to begin by recognizing that there are a variety of local dialects spoken in Britain, many more than in the U.S., where we have "east coast," "southern," and a sort of general American dialect. The national standard in Britain is known as King's English, which is spoken by "telly" (television) "newsreaders" (broadcasters), and the more educated classes. It differs from "American" in its more pronounced rise and fall in pitch and its more crisp enunciation. King's English coincides with cultured "Londonese," but is not to be confused with the "Oxford" accent. Outside of London there are numerous other dialects: those of Devon, Cornwall, Yorkshire, Dorset, Somerset, and Lancashire, among others.

Perhaps the most unusual of the lot is Cockney, the peculiar slang made popular by Eliza Doolittle of *My Fair Lady*, and spoken only by those who have been born within earshot of the bells of St. Mary-le-Bow in London's Cheapside. Cockney is most notable for dropping the letter "h." In this dialect, words like "half" become "alf" (or even "arf"), "hat" becomes "nat," etc. Sometimes the lost "h's" reappear on words on which they don't belong (for example, "Epworth" becomes "Hepworth"). Americans will recognize a pattern similar to the Bostonian dialect, where "r's" are not pronounced in some words and turn up

at the end of others ("Chiner," "Africer").

Returning to the more common dialect, there are other matters to consider in approaching fluency in the King's English. Some words are both spelled and pronounced differently. Americans are somewhat familiar with terms like "leftenant" and "shedule" for lieutenant and schedule. But while the British pronounce those words as they spell them, in other cases they do not: Berkeley, Derby, and clerk are pronounced "Barkeley," "Darby," and "clark." Here at least there appears to be a linguistic rule: "er" followed by a consonant becomes an "ar" sound. Yet others simply must be learned outright; for example, one finds the direction to Harwich by asking for "Harridge," "Auchenleck" somehow got reduced to "Afleck," and "St. Olav" has been transformed into "Toooley."

Less of a problem are the many English words which are spelled differently but pronounced the same by Americans, among them: "gaol" (jail), "tyre" (tire), "kerb" (curb), "cheque" (check), and "grey" (gray). The letter "x" is sometimes used in place of "ct" in words like "inflexion" and "connexion"; "our" replaces the American "or" endings in "honour," "flavour," and "labour"; double letters are used in the British spelling of words like "waggon" and "traveller"; and there is the more familiar "re" ending in the British versions of "centre" and "theatre."

Finally, we have the numerous differences in expressions and vocabulary which give British English such a quaint sound to the American ear. Take the following snatch of conversation one might overhear in a London pub:

"A fortnight ago (two weeks ago), I took the underground (subway) to collect (pick up) my mackintosh (raincoat) at my mate's (friend's) flat (apartment) in (on) Bayswater Road. Once above ground, I was nearly struck by the off-side (right-side) wing (fender) of a lorry (truck) with a dirty windscreen (windshield). I should have used the subway (pedestrian underpass).

"My mate lives in a homely (pleasant) block of flats (apartment building) between an ironmonger (hardware store)

and an off-license (liquor store). He's a black-coated (white-collar) worker with the corporation (municipal government), and lets (rents) the flat from his brother, who is an estate agent (Realtor).

"I took the lift (elevator) to the first floor (second floor) where he lives. I knew he was in because I could hear his wireless (radio). He called out to let myself in as he was trying to ring up (telephone) a booking clerk (ticket agent) for some return (round-trip) tickets for his holiday (vacation) on the Continent and was waiting to be put through (connected).

"When he was finished he opened a tin (can) of aubergine (eggplant) soup which we consumed with biscuits (crackers) and bangers (sausages). Af-

terwards I helped with the washing up (doing the dishes).

"He had to leave straightaway (immediately) for an appointment with his barrister (attorney) regarding some death duties (inheritance taxes) so he asked me to post (mail) a letter for him on my way home. It wasn't until I reached the roundabout (traffic circle) in Trafalgar Square and the weather had turned a light fog (misty) that I realized I had not got (gotten) my mackintosh. I must be going a bit crackers (crazy)."

Small wonder that a movie marquee in Picadilly Circus once advertised: "American Western Film - English Subtitles."

Writer James A. Clapp is based in San Diego, California. ▲

Yesterday a fortnight