

George Bernard Shaw famously declared that England and America were two countries divided by a common language. Oscar Wilde wrote in *Canterville Ghost* that the Brits “have really everything in common with America nowadays, except, of course, the language.”

Most of us are aware of some differences in spelling, vocabulary and idiomatic expressions when comparing British and American English. For example, it is common knowledge that the word *color* in America is *colour* in England, or that Americans like to *socialize* while the Brits *socialise* instead. But there are other differences between the two language variants. Take

prepositions: American athletes play *on* a team while their British colleagues play *in* a team. Or how about words that mean different things in different places: reportedly, the opposite meanings of the verb *to table* created a misunderstanding at a meeting of the Allied forces during WWII, because in England to table an item on an agenda means to *open it up* for discussion, whereas in America, it means to *remove* it from discussion. Other differences include pronunciation, use of tenses, dates and times,

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# Divided By A Common Language

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*Your Respondents May Lose Interest  
If They Don't Understand*



## Do You Speak This Type Of English?

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punctuation and numerous other grammatical and lexical dissimilarities.

### Beyond UK and US

Microsoft Word 2003 spellchecker lets you choose from no less than 18 varieties of English, listing the following countries: Australia, Belize, Canada, the Caribbean, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Jamaica, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, South Africa, Trinidad and Tobago, the United Kingdom, the United States and Zimbabwe. As a matter of fact, English is spoken in the following 54 sovereign states and territories: Antigua and Barbuda, Australia, Barbados, Belize, Botswana, Cameroon, Canada, Dominica, Fiji, Ghana, Grenada, Guyana, India, Ireland, Jamaica, Kenya, Kiribati, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Malta, the Marshall Islands, Mauritius, Micronesia, Namibia, Nauru, New Zealand, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palau, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Rwanda, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Singapore, the Solomon Islands, South Africa, Sudan, Swaziland, the Bahamas, Gambia, Trinidad and Tobago, Uganda, the United Kingdom, the United States, Vanuatu, Zambia and Zimbabwe. In addition, English is the dominant language in 25 non-sovereign entities (such as Hong Kong). The accompanying map shows where English is the dominant language.



In some of the countries listed, English does not have “official” status. It comes as a surprise to most people that among the countries lacking an official language are Australia, the United Kingdom, and – how about that – the United States. On the other hand, in some countries where English is the official language (or one of multiple official languages), the number of native speakers is quite low relative to the country’s population. India, for example, with a population of 1.1 billion, has fewer than 200,000 native speakers of English. According to the Constitution of India, Hindi is the official language and English the ‘subsidiary official language;’ however, English is mandated for the authoritative texts of all federal laws and Supreme Court decisions, and (along with Hindi) is one of the two languages of the Indian Parliament.

Today, approximately 375 million people around the world speak English as their first language, which makes it the third largest language by number of native speakers, following Mandarin Chinese and Spanish. English and Spanish come close in terms of the number of native speakers; consider the fact that about one eighth of the population of the United States are native Spanish speakers. Of course, when we combine native speakers of English with those who speak it as their second language, English is considered the number one language spoken worldwide, even though in this case Chinese comes quite close, too. The trick is to determine what the actual number is of people who speak English as their second language, because of different levels of mastery of the language. Will two semesters of studying English make you an English speaker? Four? Or do you have to use the language on a daily basis to be considered? There are no clear guidelines.

### Localization Issues

English is a “pluricentric” language, which means that there is no central language authority like France’s *Académie française*, and therefore no variety is considered the “standard.” In theory there is a concept of “International English,” but in practice the English language in each country has its own peculiarities and “International English” is not being used, simply because most people don’t even know it exists, and also because there is currently no consensus as to exactly what it means.

To keep track of multiple English versions, it is advisable to use ISO country codes in the file name, for example: “surveyname\_ENG\_GBR.doc” where “ENG”

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## What Did You Say?


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identifies the language (English) and “GBR” identifies the country (United Kingdom). Software localizers typically use two-letter codes (for example, “en\_gb”). Both 3-letter and 2-letter code lists are defined in ISO 639 and ISO 3166 respectively. The 2-letter country codes are also used on the Web (for example, [www.deutschland-tourismus.de](http://www.deutschland-tourismus.de) is a German site).

Even though people in England, Canada, India or Australia will have no difficulties understanding American English, it is an established practice to provide localized versions when conducting marketing research in different English-speaking countries. Localization (or “localisation” as the Brits would have it) goes beyond replacing “color” with “colour.” Consider the screener part of a survey. Currencies need to be localized, and sometimes the income breaks as well – respondents in India will have very different

incomes than those in Singapore. The same applies to educational levels – not every country uses the same educational system.

While the cost of localization for multiple English-speaking countries is significantly lower than the cost of preparing a survey for countries where languages other than English are spoken, it is a cost nonetheless and needs to be budgeted for marketing research projects. Do-it-yourself solutions might work if you have a branch in the target country or if your client has a presence in the target country and can take on the localization.

Running a U.S. survey through a U.K. (or Indian, or Australian, etc.) spellchecker in MS Word will not do the trick and if you do not have in-country resources, you would be well advised to use a professional language service. A language service provider will be able to advise on various language issues (for example, do you need to localize a U.S. survey for Canada?) and will help you navigate the intricacies of localization. 

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