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British and American grammar in contrast: a selected survey

Završni rad

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Summary

This paper is concerned with the American and British English grammar in contrast. More particularly, it is an overview of Rohdenburg and Schlüter's edited volume *One Language, Two Grammars? Differences between American and British English* (2009). It starts with a selected literature overview, in which we realize that the available empirically based studies are scarce and lack in-depth explanation. Afterwards we continue with a general overview of contrasts that are discussed in Rohdenburg and Schlüter (2009): comparative forms, positioning of adverbs, reflexives, compressed noun modification, infinitive vs. gerund, present perfect vs. preterite, subjunctive, mandative subjunctive, tag questions, and pragmatic functions of adverbs. In the next part, we focus on the detailed discussion of the three selected grammar contrasts: compound verbs, the formation of the preterite and the past participle, and nominal complements. Our corpus study is based on the examples chosen from the *One Language, Two Grammars? Differences between American and British English* (2009) and compared to the results given in the corpus of Global Web-Based English.

Key words: grammar, contrast, American English, British English

1. Introduction

American English and British English (AmE and BrE) are two major national varieties of English that differ in so many more ways than have been discovered and studied so far. Phonological, orthographic, and lexical differences in large empirically based studies usually receive much more attention than contrasts in grammar, which are often disregarded or completely non-observed. One of the large issues when exploring grammatical differences is lack of empirically based studies of standard BrE and AmE grammar in contrast (2009: 2). Moreover, the same source argues that most of the currently available studies are based on small corpora and thus restricted in their findings. The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to present some of the contrasts between AmE and BrE grammar that have been identified in contemporary, corpus-based research. Such research has led to a new understanding of grammatical differences between the two national varieties.

1.1.Goal

In view of the remarks given in the previous section, the goal of this paper is a) to present a survey of the most important contrasts between AmE and BrE grammar as detailed in Rohdenburg and Schlüter, eds (2009), so that one could get a more accurate, and empirically valid picture of the contrasts; b) to zoom in on three of the most important and the most noticeable grammar differences by testing the results presented in Rohdenburg and Schlüter, eds (2009) on new corpus data.

The structure of the paper is as it follows. Section 1.2. lays out the methodology of the paper. In section 2, we present a brief, selected overview of literature other than the volume that is the focus of this paper, dealing with AmE and BrE (grammar) contrasts. Section 3 is a review of the AmE/BrE grammar contrasts as detailed in Rohdenburg and Schlüter, eds

(2009). It is followed by a more detailed discussion of three selected grammar contrasts, which we have retested on data from a different corpus, the Corpus of Global Web-Based English. Section 4 summarizes the main points and findings of the present study.

1.2.Methodology

This paper is to large extent a literature review on the topic at hand, i.e. it presents the findings of one contemporary, empirical study of a wide range of contrasts between AmE and BrE grammar. At the same time, however this paper is also based on a small-scale independent study of selected contrasts, whose aim was to test some of the contrasts established in Rohdenburg and Schlüter, eds (2009) on new data.

2. A Selected Literature Overview

In previous empirically based studies the issue of grammar differences between AmE and BrE is rarely explained in great detail, and sometimes it is completely ignored. The description of the differences is typically brief and lacks an in-depth explanation of divergences. Vocabulary and pronunciation receive more attention in AmE and BrE language studies. According to Michael Swan (2005: 39), there are few differences in grammar. The most important difference is in the two varieties preferring different forms, for instance sometimes two different forms are possible in one variety of English, but only one of the forms is possible or normal in the other variety, e.g. I *(can) see* a car coming (AmE) / I *can see* a car coming (BrE). Quirk et al (1972: 20) explain that grammatical differences are few and the most conspicuous and widely known to speakers of both national standards. For example, AmE has two past participles for the verb *get* and BrE has only one, and in BrE the indefinite pronoun *one* is repeated in co-reference where AmE uses *he*. Furthermore, Quirk et al (1985: 19) mentions that with a singular collective noun AmE prefers using a singular verb, while in BrE either singular or plural verb can be used. Also, BrE tends to use the construction with *should* where AmE generally uses the present subjunctive. It is precisely for this reason that Rohdenburg and Schlüter, eds (2009) is such a welcome contribution to the field. Namely, the volume paints a much more accurate picture of the true contrasts between AmE and BrE grammar.

3. Overview of American and British grammar in contrast

This chapter will include a reasonably detailed overview of contrasts that are mentioned in the Rohdenburg and Schlüter's edited volume *One Language, Two Grammars? Differences between American and British English* (2009). I will exclude altogether differences having to do with pronunciation and phonological contrasts, and, in this section, I will skip the themes that will be taken up later, in Section 4. The differences that will be in the focus of this chapter include: comparative forms, positioning of adverbs, reflexives, compressed noun modification, infinitive vs. gerund, present perfect vs. preterite, subjunctive, mandative subjunctive, tag questions, and pragmatic functions of adverbs.

Comparative forms

There are two major morphosyntactic differences concerning the system of comparative formation in American and British English. The first difference is the choice between the synthetic and analytic comparative forms, with AmE preferring the analytic comparative. While there is no agreement yet on the reasons for this tendency, let us note in passing that according to Kytö and Romaine (2009: 89), this difference might be attributed to the 'colonial lag', viz. the tendency of British colonies to stick to the older forms of the English language longer than the 'original' variety. Namely, in Late Middle English (from about 1400 to 1500) there appeared to be a trend toward the synthetic comparative, which was not simply carried over to the American soil.[1]

The research conducted by Mondorf (2009) on American and British newspapers shows that AmE leads in the use of analytic, while BrE uses synthetic comparative forms more frequently, e.g. *more full* (AmE), *fuller* (BrE). The author (2009: 105) offers two reasons for

[1] Mondorf (2009) discusses at length the pros and cons of various explanations, and discards the 'colonial lag' explanation, by suggesting a more careful interpretation of the 'synthetic' trend of British English.

that; the first one is a lower frequency of the positive form of these adjectives in AmE, and the second one is a lower degree of attested gradability of these adjectives in AmE.

The second difference concerning comparative formation is not widely recognized, and it concerns the quantitative contrast of both the analytic and synthetic comparative forms in AmE and BrE. The research shows that BrE uses more comparative forms of both types than AmE.

Positioning of adverbs

Word-order differences between BrE and AmE are seldom mentioned, and one of the issues is the ignored variation between post- and pre-position of adverbs in the English language. A study by Berlage reported on in Rohdenburg and Schlüter (2009) explored the positioning of adverbs, in the corpus of American and British newspapers from the late 1960s. According to Berlage, AmE appears to prefer preposed adverbial usage, while BrE uses adverbs in mid-position, e.g. *already has cost* (AmE) / *had already cost* (BrE). In the same study, Berlage (2009: 147) takes a more detailed look at one specific adpositional phrase, viz. *notwithstanding*. The author concludes that a) in contemporary English, the adposition *notwithstanding* is more than twice as frequent in comparison to when it was first attested in 1930 and that b) the word-order contrasts are a question of relative frequencies rather than absolute. Berlage states the fact that both national varieties, considering the NPs that are dependent on *notwithstanding*, are exposed to complexity factors accounted for by means of the parameters of length.

Reflexives

When it comes to reflexive structures, scholars have empirically established the domination of the reflexive pronoun (e.g. *I washed myself*) over personal pronouns (e.g. *I*

washed me) in contexts where both forms are theoretically possible. However, through time it appears to that the zero variant (e.g. *I washed*) has become more frequent, and thus responsible for the decrease of the reflexive uses in Modern English (Rohdenburg 2009). According to Rohdenburg (2009), the differences between American and British English can be seen in two aspects. The first aspect concerns the fact that AmE was more extensively affected by the so-called zero variant than BrE. Rohdenburg (2009: 166) explains that the decrease of the overtly reflexive uses continues, and that AmE has been following this trend much more readily and extensively than BrE. The second aspect concerns the so-called obligatory reflexive structures, verbs whose reflexive pronoun cannot be replaced by zero (e.g. *to busy o.s.).* In this case AmE tends to use obligatory reflexive structures less than BrE. Rohdenburg (2009: 180) attributes this to the stronger tendency of AmE to avoid comparatively complex and formal structures.

Compressed noun modification

According to Biber, Grieve, and Iberri-Shea (2009), over the past four centuries, extensive stylistic change affected both written and spoken English language. It has been found that written prose in the seventeenth century was already quite different from the conversational registers, and the divergence increased even more over the eighteenth century. Furthermore, recent technological developments, like typewriter and word processors, give the author the ability to manipulate the language of written texts. On the other hand, the so-called informational explosion resulted in the pressure to communicate information as efficiently and economically as possible. According to Biber, Grieve, and Iberri-Shea (2009), these two factors have led to the rapid increase of the use of syntactically complex and compressed noun modification devices. One of the linguistic domains that engage attention is the choice among structural devices used to modify noun phrases. It is a well-known fact that the structural

devices that can be employed to modify the head of a noun phrase vary in type, size and complexity, ranging from relatively simple adjectival modifiers all through heavy postmodifying clauses such as relatives, appositives etc. What is fascinating is to observe how the choice of modifier types changes through time, how it is affected by the type of the text and the communicative situation at hand, and whether the trends in the two national varieties are similar or not. Biber, Grieve, and Iberri-Shea's study (2009) shows that, generally speaking, noun modifiers are more common in informational written registers than in other registers. Also, when it comes to the usage of attributive adjectives and nouns as pre-modifiers in newspaper reportage, AmE and BrE were found to be generally similar in their use of those features (2009: 186). Both attributive adjectives and pre-modifying nouns have increased in use over the past three centuries. However, in the last fifty years, attributive adjectives have become less common in AmE, while in BrE they stayed extremely frequent. In comparison, while the usage of premodifying nouns escalated in AmE, in BrE that feature has leveled out.

Infinitive vs. gerund

The differences between the infinitive and the gerund in American and British English have been developing ever since the Old English times. Generally speaking, scholars agree that even though AmE might be further advanced than BrE, i.e. shows trend towards the gerundial complementation, they both show tendency to develop in the same way, toward non-finite complement variants, but at different speeds. The research by Vosberg (2009) is based on a couple of verbs and verb-noun collocations *have no business*, *decline*, *lay claim*, and *can't stand*. Vosberg argues that *have no business*, *decline*, and *lay claim* show a tendency toward the -ing complement more in AmE than in BrE. This finding leads the author to conclude that AmE prefers forms that are less formal and less explicit.

Present perfect vs. preterite

English uses two different constructions to refer to past time, the present perfect and the preterite. Research shows that in general BrE tends to use present perfect, while AmE speakers would rather choose the preterite, e.g. I *have seen* him recently (BrE) / I *saw* him recently (AmE). From a historical perspective, in Old English the dominant form of the verb was the preterite. However, forms that resemble the present perfect were also recorded at that time. Elsness (2009) shows evidence that over the years the frequency of the present perfect has gotten bigger, until the Modern English period when it started to decline. Elsness (2009) corpus research confirms the previously stated hypothesis that the present perfect forms are more often used in BrE, while AmE prefers the preterite. He also argues that, generally speaking, in English, unlike in German and French, the present perfect continues to abate, and the national variety that leads this trend is AmE. The main reason advanced by the author is that the difference between the preterite and the present perfect is so small and has lowered to such extent that it is almost impossible to define.

Subjunctive

The subjunctive forms declined in the period of Modern English. However, they were reintroduced in twentieth century English (Kjellmer 2009). Up to less than a century ago, verb forms such as *be shared* were extremely rare, as well as negated forms such as *not use*, e.g. "Most dermatologists suggested that you *not use* these soaps". Nowadays, subjunctive is typical for AmE, but it also begins to appear in BrE. According to Kjellmer (2009), a potential reason why the subjunctive returned in AmE is that the ground was well prepared for the change through biblical subjunctives (*that he come not*) and through the use of potentially subjunctive forms, i.e. forms that are used to state an action that might be possible. Furthermore, the author argues that the tendency towards increasing the usage of subjunctive

forms in BrE is due to the considerable impact of AmE on modern BrE. Why the unexpected order of the elements occurs, or why *not* occurs before the verb in negated subjunctive constructions, may be explained by a combination of circumstances. For example, the construction *that he not go* can be interpreted as a defective form of *that he (should) not go*.

Mandative subjunctive

The mandative subjunctive (e.g. *He demanded that I be there on time*) reappeared in different varieties in the English language. The majority of studies agree that the subjunctive is more typical of American English, while British English seems to lag behind it. However, they all agree that AmE prefers the subjunctive form, and BrE favors the modal construction (*They suggested that he should be reprimanded*). The research by Crawford (2009) is based on identifying the range of nouns, verbs and adjectives that trigger its use. Then, he indicates how each particular trigger accompanied by different type of complement clause behaves. These types of complement clauses are referred to as 'mandates'. The studies conclude that BrE had an equal distribution of subjunctive and *should* mandates in verb and noun triggers but a preference for *should* mandates in adjective triggers. Furthermore, AmE shows more mandates than BrE in general, but the largest difference is found in the noun triggers and then the verb triggers. In both varieties adjective triggers express mandates equally.

Tag questions

Tag questions were affected by some changes in their form and use since the classic descriptions of the first half of the twentieth century (Allerton 2009). Even though the results of the several studies are only preliminary, according to Allerton (ibid.), general differences can be observed. One of them is that AmE prefers invariable tag *right?* to traditional tags (concordant mini-clauses), e.g. *is it?*, *aren't we?*. In recent times British English shows the

most significant change in case of dispreference for concordant mini-clauses, following the American model. The concordant tag questions have more complex grammar, and the trend for grammar simplification might be influenced by the internationalization of English.

Pragmatic functions of adverbs

When it comes to the pragmatic functions of adverbs, the similarities and differences between the two varieties have been discussed. Even though adverbs *sure* and *surely* have a common origin, there are differences in meaning. Adverb *surely* is derived from *sure* and they are etymologically related. Through history, in BrE both *sure* and *surely* seem to display parallel developments because they evolve the meaning 'certainly' and acquire adversative and argumentative meanings. In AmE *sure* seems to have developed differently. Usually it is a response reacting to a prior turn. For example, a response to speech acts such as requests, offers, thanks and apologies. However, American *sure* and British *surely* display both functional similarities and functional differences.

3.1. Compound verbs

One of the differences between American and British English that we take up in this chapter is the use of compound verbs. In literature these differences are rarely mentioned, while in studies of English word formation they have been studied from both the synchronic and diachronic point of view. However, based on an empirical research reported on by Erdmann (2009), it can be said that compound verbs are more frequent in American than in British English. Generally, the majority of compound verbs are written as one word or as a hyphenated form, while two-word forms are extremely rare. According to Erdmann (2009: 40), AmE shows a slight tendency towards one-word forms, while verbs in BrE are hyphenated more frequently, e.g. *to backpedal* (AmE) / *to back-pedal* (BrE), *to sugarcoat* (AmE) / *to sugar-coat* (BrE), *to shortchange* (AmE) / *to short-change* (BrE). Erdmann bases his findings on the following three dictionaries: The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (4th edition; henceforth abbreviated as AHD 4), Merriam- Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (11th edition; MW 11) and Encarta World English Dictionary (2001 edition; EWED 2001) for AmE, and Collins English Dictionary (5th edition; COLLINS 5), Concise Oxford Dictionary (10th edition; COD 10) and The New Oxford Dictionary of English (2000; NODE 2000) for BrE. To see whether the same tendencies can be observed in a different corpus, I have checked the spelling of three of these compound verbs in the corpus of GloWbE. The verbs listed in Rohdenburg and Schlüter, eds (2009) *to handpick, to shadowbox, to shortchange, to poormouth, to keypunch, to spellcheck,* and *to breakdance* show no results in both hyphenated and one word forms and therefore the analysis is based on only three verbs. My findings are shown in Table 1. below.

	AmE	BrE
to backpedal	68	23
to back-pedal	-	-
to sugarcoat	109	27
to sugar-coat	38	23
to babysit	186	122
to baby-sit	-	-

Table 1: The difference in hyphenation between the two varieties

The data above show that AmE shows a tendency towards one-word forms for the two verbs analyzed. However, according to the GloWbE, the verbs *to backpedal / to back-pedal* and *to babysit / to baby-sit* show no results for the hyphenated form. This might be the indicator of the gradual decline of the hyphenated form, which may or may not affect other compound verbs in future. Also, the verb *to sugarcoat / sugar-coat* shows generally less examples of the hyphenated form for both American and British English, although the difference is more drastic in AmE. In sum, we may say that the pattern observed by Erdmann (2009) was also found in our small sample of data.

3.1.1. Inflection

In both varieties the second element of the compound verb is marked for verb inflection; if it is a regular verb, it gets inflected as a regular verb, and if it is an irregular verb it follows its irregular inflection pattern. According to Erdmann (2009: 43), there are no significant differences between AmE and BrE in the inflection of such verbs; however, in both varieties it is claimed that verbs that can have both regular and irregular past tense form as a second element in a compound verb show a stronger preference for the regular –ed form.

In the following table I will show the frequency of 6 pairs of verb forms found as second elements of compound verbs in the corpus of GloWbE.

	AmE	**BrE**
lighted	525	337
lit	4048	4828
sunburned	69	45
sunburnt	27	81
hightlighted	3538	7403
highlit	-	-
moonlighted	-	-
moonlit	103	143
spotlighted	106	36
spotlit	-	-
backlight	166	132
backlit	181	194

Table 2: The frequency of the inflection in compound verbs

As the data in Table 2 shows, there is a bit of inconsistency across the forms observed in the selection of inflected forms. The compound verb *to sunburn* in the past tense and past participle form shows stronger preference for the –ed form in AmE, and for irregular form in BrE. Compound verbs ending with light *sunburn* and *backlight* show preference for regular form in AmE, and irregular forms in BrE. Verbs *highlight* and *spotlight* show results only for regular forms, while verb *moonlight* displays only irregular forms.

3.1.2. Distribution

Generally speaking, compound verbs are more frequent in American than in British English (Erdmann 2009: 46). However, there are a number of differences in American and British English usage of the same compound verbs. These differences might result from a number of reasons, such as tradition, customs, as well as economy and legal and social regulations. For example, the verb *to railroad* shares the meaning 'to rush or coerce someone into doing something; to push a measure through quickly by applying pressure' in both American and British English. Furthermore, the verb *to second-guess* meaning 'to predict or aniticipate' in AmE and BrE, can also mean 'to criticize someone' in AmE. However, the verb *to warehouse* which means 'to store goods in a warehouse', has an additional meaning in AmE, 'to confine or house people in a large, impersonal institution'. In the following table, based on the corpus of GloWbe, we illustrate the frequencies of the selected compound verbs in AmE and BrE.

	AmE	**BrE**
to railroad	3680	877
to second-guess	151	106
to warehouse	2041	2834

Table 3: Frequencies of compound verbs in the two national varieties

According to the corpus, the compound verbs concerned are slightly more often used in American than in British English, except for the verb *to warehouse*, which shows more frequency in British English.

3.2. The formation of the preterite and the past participle

One of the important morphological differences between American and British English is the usage of the preterite and the past participle (Levin 2009: 60). There are variations in both AmE and BrE, but scholars agree that –ed is more frequent in AmE, and –t is favored in BrE, and the situation is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

3.2.1. Individual verbs and frequency

Our corpus search will be based on eleven verbs *burn, dream, dwell, kneel, lean, leap, learn, smell, spell, spill, and spoil* in AmE and BrE. We will compare the frequency of the two different forms of the verbs in the AmE and BrE section od the corpus of GloWbE (see Table 4).

	AmE	**BrE**
burned	7213	4297
burnt	2127	3119
dreamed	2695	2176
dreamt	543	1077
dwelled	86	56
dwelt	533	276
kneeled	65	44
knelt	366	357
leaned	1861	1274
leant	66	424
leaped	409	278

leapt	435	1054
learned	42262	22889
learnt	1564	9962
smelled	1107	609
smelt	166	571
spelled	2313	965
spelt	187	924
spilled	1338	876
spilt	172	541
spoiled	2645	1588
spoilt	149	1636

Table 4: Frequency of the individual verbs in regular and irregular forms

My corpus analysis confirms that for the majority of the examples AmE prefers the -ed form, with only three verbs *dwell, kneel* and *leap* preferring the irregular inflection. In BrE, 7 out of 11 verbs prefer the regular form, which means that the difference between the two national varieties is not that dramatic.

3.3. Nominal complements

According to Rohdenburg (2009: 194), McWorther claims that, in comparison with other Germanic languages, English is strikingly less formally marked than its Germanic sister languages i.e. English prefers uncomplicated options over its more complex variants. Furthermore, the same phenomenon is thought to develop with BrE and AmE. Rodhenburg (2009: 194) claims that with most types of constructions AmE prefers simpler or formally less explicit forms than BrE. For example, according to Rohdenburg (2009: 196), Kirschner was the first to emphasize that AmE examples are prone to the shorter version.

(1) The money (that is) owed to him…

(2) The money (that) is owed him…

My informal corpus search of the form *owed* and some other forms analyzed below, it seems that the picture is not completely black and white. In some cases, like in the case of *owed*, it seems that AmE and BrE often share the same set of developments.

	AmE	**BrE**
owed to him	24	23
owed him	88	68

Table 5: Nominal complements in the verb owed

3.3.1. Antagonistic verbs

The term antagonistic verbs should be understood as verbs that denote an activity directed against the person or thing and which are the least potentially associated with prepositional objects using the preposition *against*. Following the claims laid out above, we

would expect that AmE prefers shorter, preposition-less forms, with BrE favoring the more complex forms.

According to Rohdenburg's research (2009: 199), antagonistic verbs with preposition *against* show a slight tendency of AmE towards forms without the preposition, i.e. the les complex, shorter form. Only the verb *race* favors the complex form. However, in BrE both forms, with and without preposition *against*, have almost leveled out. The verbs *fought*, *play*, and *offend* show preference for the shorter form, while *battled*, *protested*, *appealed*, and *race* favor complex form.

We analyzed the following set of antagonistic verbs in GloWbE to see which forms are preferred in AmE and BrE: *fight (against), battle (against), protest (against), and appeal (against), race (against), play (against), and offend (against).*

	AmE	**BrE**
fight against the	531	516
fight the	2491	1937
battle against the	246	244
battle the	267	218
protest against the	280	605
protest the	482	206
appeal against the	-	-
appeal the	288	287
race against the	65	68
race the	146	311
play against the	174	129
play the	6852	8347

offend against the	-	-
offend the	171	156

Table 6: Frequencies of the antagonistic verbs with/without preposition *against*

All the verbs in the analysis confirm the thesis that AmE prefers less complex forms, i.e. without the preposition *against*. A similar preference for simpler forms is found in BrE; only two forms prefer the complex complementation, viz. *protest* and *battle*.

Our next analysis concerns the verbs of leaving with/without the prepositional *from*.

	AmE	**BrE**
flee from the	76	45
flee the	313	293
depart from the	138	135
depart the	99	73
resign from the	84	116
resign the	42	39
escape from the	586	734
escape the	1915	1994

Table 7: The frequencies of the verbs of leaving with/without preposition *from*

Table 7 shows a different distribution of results. AmE and BrE are the same in showing no bias toward either complementation form. Given that these results do not follow the expected distribution, or the distribution of other groups of verbs shown above, it is clear that much more research is needed to arrive at definitive conclusions. After all, we have only looked at very small samples of data.

4. Conclusion

Even though American and British grammar might seem very similar, there are some notable differences that require attention and further research. For many years this issue has been completely ignored and neglected. Many of the current empirically based studies are concise and have no lengthy and extensive explanations. The purpose of this study was, therefore, to survey some of the less-known grammatical differences between British and American English that have so far been ignored.

The analysis concerning the compound verbs shows a general tendency of AmE towards one-word forms, and indicates to some extent the possibility of the gradual decline of the hyphenated form. When it comes to inflection, according to the corpus, both AmE and BrE seem to level out in the frequency of the irregular and regular forms of compound verbs. Generally speaking, compound verbs are slightly more often used in AmE than in BrE.

The analysis of the frequency of the two different forms in the usage of the preterite and the past participle, regular (-ed) and irregular (-t) forms, confirmed the thesis that AmE prefers the –ed form, however, it was shown that BrE may not be that different from AmE in this respect. Our data showed a similar preference of BrE for regular forms.

The analysis dealing with the antagonistic verbs confirms the thesis that AmE generally favors forms without the preposition *against*. But similarly to the issue of preterite vs. past participle forms, in our small sample of data BrE was found to be similar in favoring the simpler complementation forms. Furthermore, neither variety showed a clear preference for either complex or simple complementation forms in our small sample of verbs of leaving.

The issue of American and British grammar in contrast still lacks of empirically based studies and the analyses presented in this study only confirm the need for much more extensive and detailed research based on authentic language data.

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