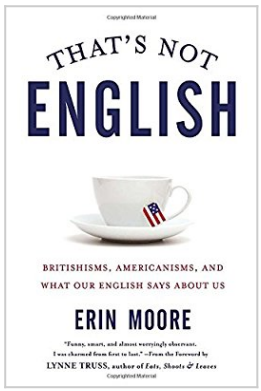

That's Not English: Britishisms, Americanisms, and What Our English Says About Us

By Erin Moore

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An expat’s witty and insightful exploration of English and American cultural differences through the lens of language that will leave readers gobsmacked

In *That’s Not English*, the seemingly superficial differences between British and American English open the door to a deeper exploration of a historic and fascinating cultural divide. In each of the thirty chapters, Erin Moore explains a different word we use that says more about us than we think. For example, "Quite" exposes the tension between English reserve and American enthusiasm; in "Moreish," she addresses our snacking habits. In "Partner," she examines marriage equality; in "Pull," the theme is dating and sex; "Cheers" is about drinking; and "Knackered" covers how we raise our kids. The result is a cultural history in miniature and an expatriate’s survival guide.

American by birth, Moore is a former book editor who specialized in spotting British books—including *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*—for the US market. She’s spent the last seven years living in England with her Anglo American husband and a small daughter with an English accent. *That’s Not English* is the perfect companion for modern Anglophiles and the ten million British and American travelers who visit one another’s countries each year.

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Editorial Review

Review
“As many of us know, straddling the Atlantic can be quite uncomfortable—and it doesn’t help that the word ‘quite’ doesn’t always mean what you think it means. This is a brilliant guide to the revealing differences between two branches of English….As an English person I will say, ‘Oh, jolly well done,’ but I’d like to add ‘Good job!’”
–From the foreword by Lynne Truss, author of *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*

“I’m mad about this book! I don’t mean ‘angry’ in the American sense, but Britishly ‘enthusiastic, gobsmacked.’ Much has been written about the language barrier between Britspeak and Americanspeak, but, more than any other explorer, Erin Moore puts a human face on the subject.”
–Richard Lederer, author of *Anguished English*

“The ocean that divides England and America is awash with linguistic wreckage and cultural tumult. But Erin Moore’s study of these infested waters is serene, assured and hugely entertaining. They should hand her book out at border control.”
–Simon Garfield, author of *Just My Type*

“Moore manages to create a text that is eminently readable, clever (in the sincerely-intended American sense) and thought-provoking, gently breaking down some of the cultural stereotyping that plagues both Americans and British.”
—*Publishers Weekly*

About the Author
Erin Moore grew up in Key West, Florida, and is a graduate of Harvard who also attended King’s College, London. She lives in London.

Foreword

Reading Erin Moore’s book, I suddenly realised a great truth. I was raised bilingual. Not that my Londoner parents took any pains in this department, but they were the first generation to have TV, and they considered it such a blessing to mankind that they never considered (for a single second) the option of switching it off. There were four things I absorbed about television from an early age:

- You never switch it off.
- American films are superior to British films.
- Jumping up and down in front of the television to get parental attention is just childish and will be ignored.
- American television is better than British television.

Thus I grew up watching *Bilko* and *My Three Sons* and *I Love Lucy* and *Dennis the Menace*. And I was

happy. The dialogue wasn't so hard to understand, after all—once you knew that "candy" meant sweets, that "sidewalk" meant pavement, and that children said "Gee" at the start of every sentence. True, nothing in the sunny home lives of the Americans on television related to my own experience. We had no picket fence; we had no gigantic refrigerator; we had a markedly different climate. But theirs was self-evidently the pleasant reality, ours but the bathetic and murky shadow. No wonder I grew up believing that Americans were the only standard by which to measure one's own inadequacies. At the age of seven, I was reading a fairy story about a banished king and his daughter in which the king exclaimed, "Have we not blue blood in our veins?" and I went to my mum (who was watching television) and tugged her arm. "Mum," I said, "what colour blood have Americans got?"

This bilingualism was an illusion, of course. I did not speak American. The first time a waitress barked, "Links or patties?" at me in a real American diner, I was so confused that I wanted to cry. "I just want a sausage," I said lamely. Similarly, Erin Moore, before she came to live in England, believed she was a great Anglophile. Based in New York, she edited books written by British authors; she visited England frequently; she had British-born in-laws. However, nothing had prepared her for the day-to-day cultural chasms of misunderstanding that tiresomely divide the British English–speaker from the American. As this book so beautifully reveals, it's not just the vocabulary that is different: First, the vocabulary is symptomatic of much more; second, if you aren't pitch-perfect in your delivery, you still fail, and all your effort goes for nothing. Take the word "cheers."

The English say "chis" out of the sides of their mouths when they mean "thank you" or "good-bye." Americans do not pick up on this and instead say "cheers"—toothily, hitting the "r" a bit hard and implying an exclamation point, whether they mean it as a toast or as a casual good-bye. An English banker living in New York groused, "I'm getting sick of my clients saying 'cheers' to me. Americans say 'cheers' like Dick Van Dyke in *Mary Poppins*."

If you're a British person who has ever been confused by an American saying that he "quite" liked you (apparently this meant he liked you a lot, not that he was being mealy-mouthed), or if you are an American constantly looking round for the phantom gin and tonic that has elicited the bizarre British salute of "Cheers!," this book will get to the heart of your alienation. Word by troublesome word, Erin Moore delves into more cultural differences than you ever knew existed. A discussion of "proper" takes us to the proper English breakfast (with links, of course, not patties). This in turn leads to the latest item on the Denny's breakfast menu: the Peanut Butter Cup Pancake Breakfast, which sounds like a heart attack on a plate but also would probably be worth dying for. Similarly, the word "dude" takes us on a brilliant digression concerning the bogus power of the British accent to intimidate Americans and also speculates on why the British somehow can't bring themselves to adopt the term "dude," no matter how much they happen to be exposed to it.

By the end of this book you will be impressed (as I was) that the long-standing affection between our two cultures has managed to override all this mutual incomprehension for so long. Why no international incidents caused by honest misunderstandings? Is it because we are both too polite to say when we think there is a miscommunication? On a book-promotion tour in America a few years ago, I was asked on live National Public Radio to talk about what Kingsley Amis had famously said about "berks and wankers" when it comes to preserving rules of grammar. "Now, Lynne, would you consider yourself a berk or a wanker?" asked the solemn broadcaster, with no apparent mischief in mind. Both words are, of course, rude in British English, but "wanker" is very rude indeed, a more potently offensive equivalent to "jerk-off," and you wouldn't expect a nice British lady to use it while discussing outmoded attitudes to, say, ending sentences with prepositions. But I was on live radio, and the chap had asked the question without embarrassment, so I just went along with it. I pressed on and explained what Amis had meant about berks and wankers, all the while praying that "wanker" was either meaningless in American English or meant something innocuous such as

“clown.”

As many of us know, straddling the Atlantic can be quite uncomfortable—and it doesn’t help that the word “quite” doesn’t always mean what you think it means. Being British, I can (infuriatingly) even have it both ways. I can say, “Are you quite sure?”—meaning “Are you positive?” But I can also say, shrugging, “Mmm, I’m only quite sure”—meaning I’m not sure at all. I can only apologise for the confusion that this linguistic imperiousness understandably engenders in others. No wonder the British are known abroad as slippery customers who never mean what we say and never say what we mean. We must appear like Humpty Dumpty in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*:

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”

But I am so glad that such weaselly problems have led Erin Moore to write *That’s Not English*. It is a brilliant guide to the revealing differences between two branches of English from a writer who is funny, smart, and almost worryingly observant. I was charmed from first to last. As an English person I will say, “Oh, jolly well done,” but I’d like to add: “Good job!”

LYNNE TRUSS

Introduction

The idea that England and America are two countries separated by a common language is variously attributed to George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde. Regardless of who said it, this ubiquitous line trivializes the problem. I’ve known Americans who made entire careers in the Middle East on a few lines of Arabic and conducted affairs in Paris without enough French to fill an éclair. So why do Americans, who arrive in England with an entire language in common, have such a hard time fitting in? And why do English people, who once set up homes in every far-flung outpost of their empire, find America so foreign?

What underlies the seemingly superficial differences between English and American English are deep and historic cultural divisions, not easily bridged. An American who moves to England is like Wile E. Coyote running over a cliff into thin air. It isn’t a problem until he notices something is missing, and that something is the ground under his feet. An unscientific survey has shown that it takes about six months for an average expatriate to plummet into the ravine.

Eight years after moving to London from New York, I’m still having Wile E. Coyote moments. English people get a kick out of Americans cheering their children on at the playground because they would only say “Good job” with reference to a child’s bowel movement. Americans are similarly bemused when the English shout “Well done!” because to them that’s nothing but an unsophisticated way to order meat. Americans are wary of anything described as a “scheme” because in American English the word has nefarious connotations, whereas the English will talk about their “retirement schemes” or their “payment schemes” without guile. An American friend of mine got a huge unintentional laugh at her company’s London office when she said, “I really have to get my fanny into the gym!” (If you don’t know what’s so funny about that, check *Mufti*.) You don’t even have to stray into scatological or sexual realms to cause offense. Saying “couch” (or worse, “settee”) instead of “sofa” is a class-baiting crime in some English households, but the only way to find this out is to trespass on the delicate sensibility. This particular social minefield does not exist for the American, who is allowed to bumble along in ignorance. But ignorance is not always bliss, as every expat learns.

The English abroad in America are less prone to such gaffes, since they have been exposed to American vocabulary and pronunciation through television, films, commercials, and other cultural exports for most of their lives. But landing in America can be overwhelming nonetheless. It isn't just that Americans make certain assumptions about the English character; it's also that having your own assumptions about Americans constantly confronted and challenged can be exhausting at first. We underestimate the culture shock involved when traveling between English-speaking countries at our peril. Once the novelty wears off, homesickness hits hard and fast. You can take nothing for granted.

England and the United States exist in mutual admiration and antagonism. This tension won't go away anytime soon, and it's regularly stoked. The BBC was inundated with suggestions after asking the public to submit their most reviled Americanisms. *The New York Times* reported Americans, in contrast, to be "Barmy over Britishisms." The differences in our language are most telling when it comes to vocabulary, which opens the door to a deeper exploration of how we think and who we are. The same word can have divergent, even opposite, meanings in England and America (*quite, proper, middle-class*). Some words exist in one English and not the other (*mufti, bespoke, dude*). There are words lionized by one country and reviled by the other (*whilst, awesome, shall*) and words that have connotations in one country that they lack in the other (*sorry, smart, ginger*). There are words that just sound *veddy, veddy* English, that Americans are more and more tempted to borrow willy-nilly, even when they don't always know what they are getting into (*bloody, shag, bugger, cheers, gobsmacked*).

These differences may charm, annoy, or obsess English speakers, but one thing is sure: They mark us wherever we go. And that is a good thing. Differences in language contribute to individual and cultural identity. They are interesting, valuable, and fun in themselves, but they are also the blazes on the trail. If you ignore or fail to understand them, you might as well be speaking a different language. You'll certainly feel lost in the wilderness. This book is a guide to English and American cultural differences, through the lens of language: the words we use that say the most about us, and why. It is a cultural history in miniature, and an expatriate's survival guide—from the United Kingdom, to the United States, and back again.

Joe Queenan once wrote that "Anglophilia, like pornography, is one of those things that are hard to describe but you know when you see them." I've always been one of *those* Americans. It runs in families. My nana gave me a pop-up book about the royal family and told me stories about her family's time in the Cotswolds while my grandfather enjoyed what had to be one of the cushiest postings of his air force career. At the age of five, I dragged my mother out of bed for a predawn viewing of Princess Diana's wedding. I still remember the nightdress I wore for the occasion. Mom was the one who woke me sixteen years later with the terrible news from Paris. For a certain cohort of American women, unlikely or silly or embarrassing as it may seem, these events were childhood's bookends. A hopeful and credulous part of us, awakened while watching Princess Diana's walk down the aisle, died a little during her funeral cortege.

Today, a new generation is delighting royal watchers worldwide, and giving souvenir makers a renewed revenue stream. The English have a lot to be proud of, having recently celebrated the marriage of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, the Olympics on home soil, the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, and the birth of a future king. American Anglophilia is at an all-time high, too. You know it when you see it.

It has been more than three decades since my sentimental education at Nana's knee. After studying nineteenth-century British literature at colleges in America and England, marrying into an English/American family, and realizing the dream of becoming a dual citizen, let me tell you: Living in England really takes the edge off one's Anglophilia. What I loved before was not England itself, but the *idea* of England. Now my feelings, while still positive, are more complicated, attached as they are to specific people, experiences, and the circumstances of daily life in London with my husband, Tom, and our young children, Anne and Henry. As a sympathetic soul said to me during my first, rocky transitional year, moving to a new country is *jolly*

hard! An American in England will always feel like a foreigner, and not always entirely admired—or welcome. Which is fair enough. American expatriates are a dime a dozen, particularly in London, and have been for a long time. In Hugh Walpole's *Portrait of a Man with Red Hair*, published in 1925, Harkness, an American expat on a train, is told by an Englishman, "If I had my way I'd make the Americans pay a tax, spoiling our country as they do."

"*I* am an American," says Harkness, faintly.

This may come as a surprise to Americans who have been to England on vacation, and spent a couple of madcap weeks seeking out everything they expected to find: legendary politeness and reserve, the much-vaunted stiff upper lip, Beefeaters, ravens, double-decker buses, infallible taxi drivers, Shakespeare, warm beer, pub lunches, and afternoon tea. Check, check, check, and check. Stereotypes confirmed, there is just enough time for a stop at Harrods before heading for Heathrow. Meanwhile, one of my English friends makes a compelling case that the English have more, culturally and temperamentally, in common with the Japanese than they do with Americans. That's why it is possible to spend months, and even years, as an outsider in the country and never penetrate beneath the surface to how people really live and think, and what their words actually mean. Though as time passes, one does begin to develop an inkling of just how much one doesn't know, and this actually helps. The similarities in our English can be misleading. It's the differences that give us direction and help us, finally, to know where we stand.

As late as the nineteenth century, it was feared that the two nations would lose their ability to communicate. Noah Webster predicted American English would one day be as different from the English spoken in England as Swedish and Dutch were from German. Thankfully, this never happened. What developed instead is a keen sibling rivalry. England plays the role of the cool older sister, trying to ignore the fact that pesky little America is now big enough to pin her to the wall.

Given their history, it should surprise no one that Americans were not always so enamored of Britishisms. In the early 1920s, H. L. Mencken sneered at English neologisms and the small class of "Anglomaniacs" who used them. He noted that the majority of Americans regarded everything English as affected, effeminate, and ridiculous. This, long before American moviegoers' obsession with Hugh Grant and Daniel Craig, though it was the theater that would later supply untraveled Anglophiles with "a steady supply of Briticisms, both in vocabulary and in pronunciation. . . . Thus an American of fashionable pretensions, say in Altoona, PA, or Athens, GA, learned how to shake hands, eat soup, greet his friends, enter a drawing-room and pronounce the words *path*, *secretary*, *melancholy*, and *necessarily* in a manner that was an imitation of some American actor's imitation of an English actor's imitation of what was done in Mayfair." If this seems an unnecessarily cruel assessment of the origins of Anglophilia, consider the source. Few partisans of American English have been as sure of themselves, or as committed to American individualism, as Mencken.

Believe it or not, there was once a time when British travelers could not praise American English enough. Relatively soon after America was founded, the English language spoken there sounded just archaic enough—free of the neologisms that corrupted that of their countrymen. But it wasn't long before America had neologisms of its own—such as *happify*, *consociate*, and *dunderment*—that sounded preposterous to English ears. America was too new and too young to pose a threat to their culture and language.

There is little love for an Americanism now. From the time of the first "talkies" (which were often translated for British audiences in the early days of the movie invasion), anxiety about American English's influence has spread. John Humphrys, venerable presenter of BBC Radio 4's *Today* program, admitted that as much as the English like to tell themselves (and, even more, the French) that their language has become the world's second language, they know that the lingua franca is actually American. Naturally, there is resentment that "our former colony has stolen our crown . . . The language is by rights 'ours,' so anything they might do to it

is bound to be a debasement." It's no wonder that some people still think of the English spoken in England as the mother tongue, and the English spoken in America as its wayward child. But it isn't true. Today's English English, like American English, evolved as a dialect from sixteenth-century English, and neither can claim to be closer to the original.

What we are left with is the vanity of small differences, and we are more focused on them than ever. Greater access to travel and international journalism might be expected to cause a flattening-out of such differences in language, but ironically it has only increased our awareness of them. Cross-pollination is largely self-conscious, whether we embrace or avoid it. The American market routinely remakes English-language books and television for American audiences. Harry Potter's jumpers and biscuits become sweaters and cookies. *The Office* is remade with American actors (and their American teeth). Publishers and producers claim that they do this to make English exports more accessible. But many Americans resent it, and avidly ferret out the originals. Why would they, if they weren't seeking entrée to the preoccupations, idiosyncrasies, and oddities of the other culture? Not to mention shamelessly borrowing words to enhance their cultural cachet—call it *Masterpiece Theatre* syndrome. Shows that survive the move to America more or less intact—like *Downton Abbey*—do so because they are inextricable from their cultural setting and that is the reason Americans love them so much. (Just as the English love quintessentially American shows like *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad*.) When will publishers and Hollywood come to realize that the differences are valuable in themselves, and stop tampering with them? We should celebrate them instead, and by "celebrate," I don't mean "imitate."

In this book, I'll correct some popular misconceptions about both England and America and explain the subtleties that elude the cursory look, or the tourist on a ten-day tour. One of the most important of these is what it means to say *England* versus *Britain* or *the United Kingdom*. Great Britain includes the countries of England, Scotland, and Wales. The United Kingdom includes not just Great Britain, but also Northern Ireland. So only someone who is from England—the UK's largest country, containing 84 percent of its population—is English. Someone who is British might be Scottish, Welsh, Irish (from Northern Ireland), or English. Similarly, Americans, while resigned to being called Yankees by the English, have a narrower definition of the word, and it differs regionally. Southern Americans use *Yankee* to describe Northerners, and Northerners use it to describe New Englanders—the only Americans who identify *themselves* as Yankees (for more on this, see *Yankee*). England and America are diverse countries with a lot of different local accents and dialects, not to mention regional differences in vocabulary, which it would be impossible to do individual justice to. Still, to the extent that it is possible to generalize about them, I'll be doing just that. Anyone who would find out the truth has to start somewhere.

I pledge not to play favorites—as is only fair when speaking of siblings. My loyalties, like my language, are transatlantic. I refuse to choose sides—at least not permanently. I also refuse to relinquish my American accent, even if I adopt a few new words and allow my syntax to shift and adapt. Using English spellings still feels wrong, if not exactly treasonous. My father-in-law understands; he retains his English accent almost four decades after moving to America, yet his siblings tease him for what they feel is a thorough defection. A small (American) child once told my mother-in-law, "I'm sorry about Mr. Moore's disability," meaning his funny accent, a kind of speech impediment few people had in Tucson, Arizona, in the 1980s. I would say expatriates can't win, but it isn't really true. I think we have the best of both worlds.

As a former book editor who specialized in finding and publishing British books for American readers, I know how fruitful cultural tensions can be. I am a passionate and curious reader and observer of the way people talk, and the ways we understand—or misunderstand—one another. This subject is a moving target, and extremely subjective. You are bound to disagree with me at times. My hope is that this book will help Americans and the English communicate better, or at least understand why we don't.

That's Not English is for you if you love language enough to argue about it; if you enjoy travel, armchair or

otherwise; if you are contemplating a move to England or America; if you consider yourself an Anglophile; or if you've ever wondered why there isn't a similarly great word for English people who love America. (*Americanophile* feels like a mouthful of nails, and *Yankophile* sounds truly disreputable.) This is a love letter to two countries that owe each other more than they would like to admit. God bless us, every one.

Quite

In which we find out why Americans really like quite *and the English only quite like* really.

What harm could an innocent little adverbial modifier do? Look no further for evidence than *quite*, which has been the cause of confusion, unemployment, heartbreak, and hurt feelings, all because of a subtle—yet vital—distinction that is lost on Americans, to the consternation of the English.

Both nations use *quite* to mean "completely" or "totally." This meaning dates to around 1300, and applies when there is no question of degree. If you say a person is "quite nude" or a bottle is "quite empty," it might sound oddly formal to the American ear, but it will cause no controversy or misunderstanding. Nude is nude. Empty is empty. The trouble begins when *quite* is used to modify an adjective that is gradable, like "attractive," "intelligent," or "friendly." For, then, the English use *quite* as a qualifier, whereas Americans press it into service as an emphasizer. In English English, *quite* means "rather" or "fairly," and is a subtle way of damning with faint praise. To an American, *quite* simply means "very," and amps the adjective. No subtlety there.

Is anyone surprised? The stereotypes of the discerning Brit and the hyperbolic American have as much currency now as they ever did. American adjectives have always gone up to eleven. English visitors to a young America were amazed by the tall language they heard—words like *rapscallionly*, *conbobberation*, and *helliferocious*. Such words seem outlandish today only because of their unfamiliarity. Whether or not they were widely used in the Wild West, they made Americans seem badass. Everyone, not least the milquetoasts back east, wanted to believe in an America that was unleashed and not quite housebroken.

These words beggar *awesome*, a widely derided modern example of American hyperbole. Once, only God could be awesome. Now even a mediocre burrito qualifies. It wouldn't be so bad if *awesome* hadn't been aggressively exported. A post on urbandictionary.com rings with contempt, describing *awesome* as "a 'sticking plaster' word used by Americans to cover over the huge gaps in their vocabulary." Here, *sticking plaster* is the dead giveaway to the poster's nationality.

Another Englishman who has come out, bravely and publicly, against *awesome* is a poet who works in a Los Angeles bookstore (imagine!). John Tottenham's campaign to stamp out the word *awesome* (which he told the *Daily Mail* was "bogus") extends to an "Anti-Awesome oration" and some snazzy bumper stickers. He devoted an almost American level of enthusiasm to the task before pulling himself up short at having T-shirts made, which would have been taking it too far. He was the one who chose to live in LA, after all. You can't very well move to the beach and complain about the sand.

American enthusiasm was once an object of admiration. An English novelist named Mrs. Henry De La Pasture was quoted in *The New York Times* in 1910: "The Americans have been obliged to invent a new verb for which we have no use over here—'to enthuse.' Why don't we enthuse? And why, if we do conjugate this verb in secret, are we so afraid to let it be known? . . . We fear terribly to encourage ourselves or others. The people over there are not afraid. They let themselves go individually and independently over what they like or admire, and pour forth torrents of generous praise which we should shrink from voicing unless we were quite sure that everybody else agreed with us, or unless the object of our admiration had been a long time

dead.” The English may detect a note of condescension here, but an American won’t.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Paulette Cantu:

Book is to be different for each and every grade. Book for children right up until adult are different content. As it is known to us that book is very important for people. The book That's Not English: Britishisms, Americanisms, and What Our English Says About Us has been making you to know about other information and of course you can take more information. It is quite advantages for you. The publication That's Not English: Britishisms, Americanisms, and What Our English Says About Us is not only giving you more new information but also for being your friend when you feel bored. You can spend your own spend time to read your publication. Try to make relationship with all the book That's Not English: Britishisms, Americanisms, and What Our English Says About Us. You never truly feel lose out for everything in case you read some books.

Irene Forrest:

This book untitled That's Not English: Britishisms, Americanisms, and What Our English Says About Us to be one of several books that will best seller in this year, that's because when you read this reserve you can get a lot of benefit on it. You will easily to buy this kind of book in the book retail outlet or you can order it by using online. The publisher in this book sells the e-book too. It makes you quicker to read this book, as you can read this book in your Smartphone. So there is no reason to you personally to past this reserve from your list.

John Collins:

Reading a reserve tends to be new life style in this era globalization. With reading you can get a lot of information that can give you benefit in your life. Together with book everyone in this world can easily share their idea. Textbooks can also inspire a lot of people. Plenty of author can inspire all their reader with their story as well as their experience. Not only the story that share in the books. But also they write about advantage about something that you need example. How to get the good score toefl, or how to teach your children, there are many kinds of book which exist now. The authors nowadays always try to improve their expertise in writing, they also doing some exploration before they write to their book. One of them is this That's Not English: Britishisms, Americanisms, and What Our English Says About Us.

Terry Snider:

Do you like reading a reserve? Confuse to looking for your favorite book? Or your book has been rare? Why so many concern for the book? But virtually any people feel that they enjoy intended for reading. Some people likes looking at, not only science book and also novel and That's Not English: Britishisms, Americanisms, and What Our English Says About Us as well as others sources were given knowledge for you. After you know how the fantastic a book, you feel wish to read more and more. Science book was

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