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Introduction

I AM AN AMERICAN, New York born, but I started to spend some time in London in the 1990s, teaching study-abroad classes. Being interested in language, and reading a lot of newspapers there—one of the courses I taught was on the British press—I naturally started picking up on the many previously unfamiliar (to me) Britishisms and differences between British and American terminology.

Then a funny thing happened.

Back home in the United States, I noticed writers, journalists, and ordinary people starting to use British terms I had encountered. I'll give two examples that stick in my mind because they're tied to specific news events, and hence are easily dated. In May 2001, Chandra Levy, a congressional intern . . . well, what *did* she do? "Disappeared" was the traditional choice, and it was fine as far as it went. After weeks passed, and Levy did not reappear, the word began to seem a little threadbare. Perhaps that's why, on May 18, Helen Kennedy wrote the following sentence for the next day's *New York Daily News*; I've put the key two words in italics.

"Police don't know exactly when Levy *went missing*, but that was the last E-mail or phone call anyone got from her."

Go missing wasn't a venerable expression even in the United Kingdom, having been in wide use only since the 1960s; it was virtually or completely unknown here. I believe that its repeated iterations in U.S. coverage of the Levy case marked the beginning of its American ascendance. (Her story ended very sadly: her remains were found in a Washington, D.C., park in 2002, and a man was tried for and convicted of her murder.) In any case, now, when I tell people of a certain (young) age that Americans didn't always say "go missing," they look at me in disbelief.

A scant two years after the Levy story broke, it became clear that the United States would invade Iraq. Months passed; we did not invade. Then we did. Journalists again faced a question: What should we call that preliminary period? In September 2003, the *New York Times*' Thomas Friedman chose a Britishism to offer a collective answer that now appears inevitable, referring to "how France behaved in the run-up to the Iraq war."

Run-up quickly began to be very widely used. How do I know? I know because of the invaluable application and time-suck Google Books Ngram Viewer, the online tool that can measure the relative frequency with which a word or phrase appears in the vast corpus of books and periodicals digitized by Google Books (including separating out British and American use). Ngram Viewer shows that between 2000 and 2005, American use of *the run-up to* increased by 50 percent.

These two phrases were not—to use a Britishism that's dear to my heart—one-offs. Over the next several years, I started noticing dozens and dozens of other examples. Finally, in 2011, I decided to chronicle this phenomenon in a blog called *Not One-Off Britishisms*, which can be found at notoneoffbritishisms.com. To date, I have written more than nine hundred entries, and the blog has been viewed more than three million

times. In this book, I have taken the cream of the crop of the blog and organized, updated, and expanded the entries.

Among the most enthusiastic and, sometimes, gob-smacked readers of *NOOBs* have been British people. This is because they have been absorbed in an alternative narrative since 1781. In that year, John Witherspoon coined the term *Americanisms* and started complaining about the way words concocted by the ex-colonists were polluting the purity of the English language. Far from diminishing over the years, the resentment bordering on outrage has continued apace. Just a few years ago, on the BBC website, the English journalist Matthew Engel bemoaned the corrupting influence of U.S. words on British English and invited readers to weigh in with their picks for the worst of the worst. Within a day, nearly 1,300 people had responded, with nominations including *Can I get a . . . ?*, *24/7*, and *deplane*. (Lane Greene, who writes *The Economist's* pseudonymous language blog *Johnson*, pointed out that most of the entries weren't Americanisms at all but rather clichés, neologisms, or merely expressions that happened to annoy the complainer.) Subsequently, Engel expanded his screed into a book, *That's the Way It Crumbles: The American Conquest of English*.

So it can come as a shock to Brits to learn that their words and expressions have been worming their way into the American lexicon just as much, it would appear, as the other way around. The westward flow is, to be sure, a more recent phenomenon. Residents of the colonies and then the United States developed their own words and expression from the get-go, but it took until the late nineteenth century for an American to note that the British had been coming up with some new lingo of their own. The noticer was the literary critic Richard Grant White (father of the architect Stanford), and in 1868 he complainingly coined the term *Briticisms* to describe these words

and phrases. White didn't especially approve of them. Among the instances he cited was a peculiar British use of *directly*:

Directly.—The radical meaning of this word is, in a right line, and hence, as a right line is the shortest distance between two points, it means at once, immediately. Its synonym in both senses is a good English word, now, unhappily, somewhat obsolete, *straightway* [see chapter 3]—our equivalent of which, *right away*, is laughed at by brother Bull as an Americanism. But John Bull himself uses *directly* in a way which is quite insufferable—to wit, in the sense of when, as soon as. This use of the word is a widespread Britishism, and prevails even among the most cultivated writers. For instance, in the London “Spectator” of May 2, 1867, it is said that “Directly Mr. Disraeli finished speaking, Mr. Lowe rose to oppose,” etc. . . . It is difficult to trace by continuous steps the course of this strange perversion, for which there is neither justification nor palliation.

White also complained about a supposed British insistence on saying *ill* instead of *sick* to describe someone who was under the weather.

They sneer at us for not joining in the robbery and the imposition. I was present once when a British merchant receiving in his own house a Yankee youth at a little party, said, “Good evening! We haven't seen you for a long while. Have you been *seeck*” (the sneer prolonged the word), “as you say in your country?” “No, thank you,” said the other, frankly and promptly, “I've been *hill*, as they say in yours.”

He went on, “For the use of *ill*—an adverb—as an adjective, thus: an ill man, there is no defence and no excuse, except the contamination of bad example.” Like many language peevers

through the ages, he was on shaky ground. In fact, there was nothing new about adjectival *ill*: “By my troth I am exceeding ill” is a line from *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Another complaint was *awfully* to mean “very,” instead of its early meaning of “in a manner that inspires awe or terror.” White wrote, “The misuse is a Britishism; but it has been spreading rapidly here during the last few years.” And here he was on the mark. In fact, I put forth this intensifier *awfully* as the very first NOOB.

Awfully and other early examples are explored in chapter 1 of this book; chapter 2 documents some of the numerous NOOBs that came out of the British military in World War I and especially World War II. There are numerous examples in each chapter, and I could have included more. Yet overall, in the nineteenth century and through most of the twentieth, the flow of Britishisms into the United States was more or less a trickle. In the 1936 edition of his classic *The American Language*, H. L. Mencken remarked, “It is most unusual for an English neologism to be taken up in this country, and when it is, it is only by a small class, mainly made up of conscious Anglomaniacs.” When Mencken published a lengthy supplement to the book nine years later, he suggested that the trickle had become a bit more robust, noting that England was “the fount of honor and mold of fashion to all Americans of social aspiration, including the tonier sort of pedagogues, and they make efforts to imitate English cultural patterns, including the linguistic.” As examples, he discussed American adoption of *swagger*, *swank*, *master’s bedroom* (later shortened to *master bedroom*), *swim-suit*, and, as an affectionate term for “mother,” *mummy* (see chapter 3).

The trickle became a wave in the period of High NOOB-ishness, which I date from roughly 1990 through the present,

and which the rest of this book concerns itself with. Chapter 3 presents forty of the most popular recent NOOBs, and the succeeding chapters cover, in order, insults and off-color terms (not surprisingly, a rich vein); words from sports, or, as the British say, “sport”; the culinary lexicon; American borrowing from British spelling, grammar, and punctuation; and cases where Americans have either adopted a faux Britishism (like pronouncing *divisive* to rhyme with *missive*) or somehow changed a real Britishism’s meaning. Chapter 9 zooms out a bit and looks at some more general and quirky topics, and the final chapter considers what might happen in the future.

Why *did* the big importation start in the early 1990s? As a case study, consider the word *laddish*. That adjective derives from a new spin on a particular meaning of *lad*, defined this way by *The Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*: “A young man characterized by his enjoyment of social drinking, sport, and other activities considered to be male-oriented, his engagement in casual sexual relationships, and often by attitudes or behaviour regarded as irresponsible, sexist, or boorish.” Brits have been tossing around *laddish* since at least around 1986 (again, according to the *OED*), but the word didn’t become current in the United States for another fifteen years or so. The rock critic Ann Powers was an early U.S. adopter, writing in the *New York Times* in 1999, “Blink 182 showers its fans with laddish love.” Since then *laddish* has appeared in the Lexis-Nexis database of major U.S. newspapers more than 325 times. (The total count is somewhat clouded by the arrival on the sporting scene of Mandy Laddish, a women’s soccer player for Notre Dame University, in 2010.)

We have adopted *laddish*, first and foremost, because media and technology have dramatically sped up linguistic cross-pollination among national or regional forms of English. Once, *Upstairs, Downstairs* and David Frost accounted for

pretty much all the British people on American television. Now—with *Downton Abbey*, *The Crown*, *Call the Midwife*, John Oliver, James Corden, and both *Doc Martin* and *Doctor Who*—we cannot escape them. And if writers can sit in their homes in Indianapolis or Perth Amboy and have immediate access to *The Guardian*, *The Economist*, BritBox, and BBC, the fresh new words and phrases they find there will surely find their way into their prose. In addition, the chattering classes—a useful Britishism that can be broadly defined to include all manner of blogger and online correspondent—have a persistent desire for ostensibly clever ways to say stuff. They have borrowed from Wall Street, Silicon Valley, teen culture, African American vernacular, sports, and hip-hop, and they increasingly borrow from Britain.

I date the run-up (that’s an alternate meaning of *run-up*: “increase”) in Britishisms to the early 1990s, and it’s surely significant that this was when such journos as Tina Brown, Anna Wintour, Andrew Sullivan, and Christopher Hitchens came to the United States or consolidated their prominence here. Shortly thereafter, the Spice Girls had a hand in popularizing *posh* and *ginger*. That latter word—used by Brits as a noun equivalent to the U.S. *redhead*—became even more pervasive with the Harry Potter books, one of whose main characters, Ron Weasley, is famously a ginger. J. K. Rowling introduced to American eyes quite a few other Britishisms as well, brilliantly cataloged on the Harry Potter Lexicon website, including *barmy*, *berk*, *bin*, *biscuit*, *blimey*, *bloke*, and *bog-standard* (and that is obviously just the Bs).

A long time ago, the *Harvard Lampoon* published a parody of *Life* magazine, which included an article called “Flying Saucers: Threat or Menace?” And so I ask: NOOBs—threat, menace, or boon? In order to answer that question, it’s useful to divide NOOBs into categories. The ones I’ve discussed

so far—*go missing*, *laddish*, and the rest—have caught on because they offer value: first, describing a thing for which there's no precise American equivalent and in the process giving the American language a brisk, thanks-I-needed-that slap in the face.

On the other hand, what about the American chaps who say *chap* and talk of their time *at university* (see chapter 3)? The threat and menace of NOOBs, such as it is, is pretentiousness, and this rears its head most directly in the case of Britishisms that have an exact U.S. equivalent: for example, *advert* (advertisement), *called* (named), *bespoke* (custom-made, chapter 3), *chat show presenter* (talk-show host), *queue* (line, chapter 3), *whilst* (while, chapter 3), and *full stop* (period, chapter 3). There exists in our country a perfectly good word for the smaller dish that is consumed before the main dish, and it's *appetizer*. *Starters* are for people who wear hunting jackets with Turnbull & Asser ascots, which really isn't appropriate dress at Famous Dave's. (And as for calling dessert *afters*, fuhgeddaboutit.)

A third category comprises terms like *kerfuffle*, *plonk* (cheap wine), *twee*, and *gobsmacked*. They have the advantage and suffer the fate of all vogue words and catchphrases. At first, they come off as clever and hip, but their expiration date (or as the Brits say, sell-by or expiry date) comes swiftly, after which they're nothing but clichés.

I've included in this book a few of the comments on my original blog posts, because, in contrast to the well-deserved bad rap internet comments often get, *NOOBs* readers are frequently erudite, funny, and informative. Every once in a while, they fill me with wonder and delight. That was the case when I heard from Helen Kennedy, the first journalist, according to my unscientific investigation, to write that Chandra Levy had

gone missing. She said reading my mention of her in the *go missing* post had made her day:

I always knew I would amount to something, and having some small part in the downfall of American English—well, could one be more subversive? No, one could not.

I'm half-American and half-Irish, raised in England and Italy. I am CONSTANTLY having to turn to my colleagues to ask if “advertising” has a Z here, etc. . . . I genuinely had no idea that “gone missing” was not regular Ammerican.

Finding out that the expression was apparently blown to these shores, like some exotic seed, by someone who learned it in the U.K. left me—and there's no other way to express it—gobsmacked.

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