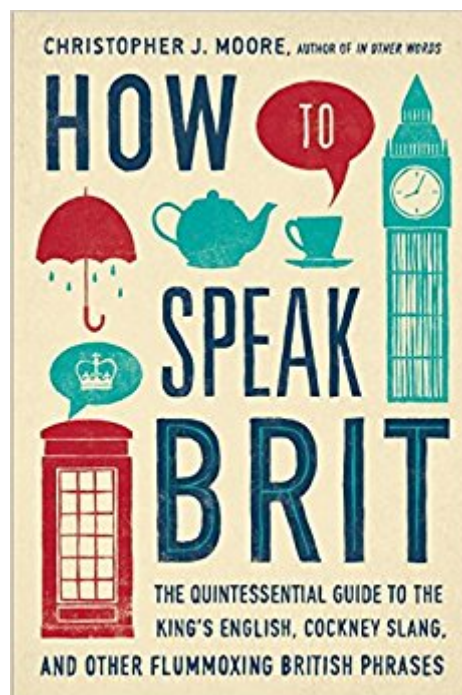




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# How To Speak Brit: The Quintessential Guide To The King's English, Cockney Slang, And Other Flummoxing British Phrases



## Synopsis

The quintessential A to Z guide to British Englishâ "perfect for every egghead and bluestocking looking to conquer the language barrier" Oscar Wilde once said the Brits have "everything in common with America nowadays except, of course, language." Any visitor to Old Blighty can sympathize with Mr. Wilde. After all, even fluent English speakers can be at sixes and sevens when told to pick up the "dog and bone" or "head to the loo," so they can "spend a penny." Wherever did these peculiar expressions come from? British author Christopher J. Moore made a name for himself on this side of the pond with the sleeper success of his previous book, *In Other Words*. Now, Moore draws on history, literature, pop culture, and his own heritage to explore the phrases that most embody the British character. He traces the linguistic influence of writers from Chaucer to Shakespeare and Dickens to Wodehouse, and unravels the complexity Brits manage to imbue in seemingly innocuous phrases like "All right." Along the way, Moore reveals the uniquely British origins of some of the English language's more curious sayings. For example: Who is Bob and how did he become your uncle? Why do we refer to powerless politicians as "lame ducks"? How did "posh" become such a stylish word? Part language guide, part cultural study, *How to Speak Brit* is the perfect addition to every Anglophile's library and an entertaining primer that will charm the linguistic-minded legions.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Christopher J. Moore is an author and editor. He splits his time among Scotland, Spain, and the Swiss Alps.

Introduction There is something that has to be understood straightaway about the British: As soon as you open your mouth, your listener puts you into a social category. "Language most shewes a man: speake that I may see thee," wrote the playwright Ben Jonson as early as 1641 to point out that your life could literally depend on the way you spoke. The principle of respecting the King's English was already well established by the mid-seventeenth century and we have to go back some two-hundred years further to find where it all started. In the Middle Ages, Latin and French had been the languages of government and diplomacy, but during the Renaissance the change to vernacular languages was happening all over Europe, and England was no exception. As yet, English had little or no standard spelling and existed in a thousand different varieties and dialects. Only around the start of the fifteenth century did a standard form of English begin to be adopted for government business in London, thus establishing a court English as opposed to a country English. When William Caxton set up his printing press later that century, this was the standard he adopted, initiating an industry so successful that here we are, still at it, making books. As for the actual expression, "the King's English," Thomas Wilson appears to have been the first to use it in his *Art of Rhetorique* of 1553, where he takes to task the pretensions of those who infect the English language with fancy foreign borrowings, or what he calls "strange inhorn terms." Wilson was so irritated with what he saw as a departure from plain speech that he wrote, "they forget altogether their mother's language. And I dare swear this, if some of their mothers were alive, they were not able to tell what they say, and yet these fine English clerks will say they speak in their mother tongue, if a man should charge them for counterfeiting the King's English." Over the next three centuries, many other writers pursued the same ideal, driven by their annoyance with lax standards to publish guides and norms for good writing and speaking. Educationalists followed suit, with the newly founded grammar schools teaching good practice. Language was increasingly the key that opened the door to elegant society, employment, and advancement. Lessons in elocution "the art of speaking properly" became a necessary part of the education of any young lady, especially those, like Jane Austen's heroines, in search of a husband with estates and an income of more than three thousand a year. Perhaps the most famous example in literature of the social power of received English is found in George Bernard Shaw's 1916 play *Pygmalion*, popularized in the 1960s stage musical and movie *My Fair Lady*. Here, Shaw complained bitterly, "it is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman hate or despise him." To give a flavor of Shaw's irritation, we need only turn to the opening scene of the play where Eliza Doolittle, a Cockney flower girl, encounters the mother of a young

man who asks her how the girl knows her son: ELIZA. Ow, eez ye-ooa san, is e? Wal, fewd dan yâ™ de-ooty bawmz a mather should, eed now bettern to spawl a pore gelâ™s flahrzn than ran awy athaht pyin. Will ye-oo py me fâ™them? [Shawâ™s note: Here, with apologies, this desperate attempt to represent her dialect without a phonetic alphabet must be abandoned as unintelligible outside London.] Eliza, painfully aware of her dreadful Cockney accent, goes to see Henry Higgins, a professor of phonetics, to ask him for elocution lessons. The professor, spurred on by a bet with a friend, takes on the challenge of changing the flower girlâ™s speech and manners to make her acceptable to upper-class London society. In the end, like the sculptor Pygmalion in the classical myth, he falls in love with his own successful creation. However, we are in another world now. From the 1940s onwards, new linguistic theories emerged, banishing the insistence on correctness that our elders used to teach us. From then on, all varieties of language became new hunting grounds, and linguists raced about cataloging dialects and tongues, the rarer and more threatened the better. In the remotest corners of Britain, modest and retiring grannies were surprised to find microphones thrust under their noses, with the invitation to sing, chant, or narrate anything that came into their heads. Society and education moved rapidly with this change in attitude. Added to the new linguistic freedoms was that of ignorance, as grammar was no longer taught in schools, and no British person under the age of forty now has any idea what a substantive, preposition, or adverb is, let alone the correct use of the apostrophe. The BBC, slow to change but quick to keep up its listening audience figures, showed how to move with the times in broadcasting. Local radio DJs were recruited off the street, or from pirate radio stations, with their local accents, jokes, and rapid-fire wit. Accents became the new cachet, attractively packaged to represent real, live people rather than social constructs. Among the shifts in perception, a national bank discovered that its telephone clients seemed to trust a Scottish accent more than any other, and so it was to be. Linguists gave us the freedom to speak as we like, and as a result, perhaps at no time since the first Elizabethan period, when Shakespeare took full advantage of it, has the language been in such a state of rapid and creative change. The sheer inventiveness of English is what captures the imagination. Itâ™s a Dogâ™s Life The comforts of hearth and home are central to the British sense of well-being. A cozy, private home with a roaring fire to keep the gloomy weather at bay, a pipe and slippers, and a cherished dog snoozing at your feetâ™all of these are parts of the British psyche that run deep. Home may be a magnificent manor, a modest semi-detached, or a clapped out caravan, but for a Brit, thereâ™s simply no better place to be. Aga (noun) A heavy duty, cast-iron stove cherished by middle-class Brits as a symbol of home and its comforts. An Aga is a rather unusual and extremely expensive kind of domestic stove, which has become an iconic piece of equipment for a certain type

of British household. The Agaâ™s inventor, Gustaf DalÃ©n (1869â“1937), was a blind, 1912 Nobel Laureate for Physics. Wanting a stove without knobs and controls and that didnâ™t require constant tending, DalÃ©n went about designing a self-regulating version for his own kitchen. Agas, despite being somewhat clunky in appearance, are surprisingly fuel-efficient and capable of running for twenty-four hours on only eight pounds of solid fuel while producing an intense and lasting radiant heat. Now over eighty years old, the Aga has come under British ownership and, with its enthusiastic adoption by middle-class households, has acquired an essentially British character. It has even inspired a modern genre of novels known as Aga-Sagas (typified by the work of the writer Joanna Trollope) that explore the Home Counties (the counties in the south and southeast of England that directly surround London) existence of middle-class families, their domestic life, passions, and temptations. Yet none of this tells you what exactly the appeal of an Aga is, why owners fall hopelessly in love with them, nor why their Aga appears to represent for them an ideal of home comfort and convenience. You will just have to find someone who owns one, and ask them. Make sure you allow plenty of time for the long, detailed, and enthusiastic reply.

Bloomsbury (proper noun) A faded, yet elegant, area in central London near the British Museum, known as the home for scandalous behavior by the literary and artistic set in the early twentieth century. Once characterized by Georgian period squares, and known for its bookshops, publishing houses, and social elegance, Bloomsbury was devastated by German bombs during the Second World War. In the 1970s, London University and its construction of charmless, concrete buildings left the area a pale shadow of what it once was. Yet echoes of a more elegant, if risquÃ©, past are still present. The so-called Bloomsbury Group in London had something of the same notoriety as the literary and artistic Americans who congregated in Paris around the 1920s and scandalized everyone with their unconventional lifestyles. Future publisher Leonard Woolf, while an undergraduate at Cambridge, had already established relationships with an elite group of young intellectuals known as the Apostles. Later, with his wife, novelist Virginia Woolf, he maintained a close-knit circle of like-minded thinkers and artists, centered on Gordon Square where Virginia lived. The inner circle included artists Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell; critics Lytton Strachey, Roger Fry, and Clive Bell; as well as the economist John Maynard Keynes, though many others dropped in to share in the avant-garde buzz surrounding the group, given the added attraction of their effortlessly superior social standing. But the elitist ambience of the group, their progressive politics, and their disregard for conventionâ” especially in personal and sexual relationshipsâ” left room for much criticism, leading to the famous comment that the group did little more than âœlive in squares and love in triangles.â• The outcome of so much intensity and striving for a new social order was not always happiness. Virginia Woolf,

after many years of mental instability, and against the background of her long-lasting love affair with the blue-blooded Vita Sackville-West, committed suicide in 1941.

**Chelsea** (proper noun) An affluent area in London that is home to the annual Chelsea Flower Show. The annual Chelsea Flower Show is reputed to be the greatest flower show on earth. It is a major event for all those men and women who have spent the entire year pottering (and probably potting, too) and who come out by the thousands to see how the professional garden designers fare in competition against each other. Why the general public subjects itself to this experience of acute envy is not exactly clear. Most amateur gardeners spend a great deal of time battling against the unexpected and the unwilling—weather, plants, neighbors, and spouses. But if there is one consolation found in coming to Chelsea, it seems that the professionals have precisely the same problems: Plants fail to thrive, water features dry up or overflow, neighbors complain, workmen don't turn up on time, and trellises collapse in the wind. And still, in the end, the results can be marvelous.

Yet a word of cautionary wisdom. The writer Rudyard Kipling produced what may be the best practical comment on gardening in literature in a brief verse that goes: Our England is a garden, and such gardens are not made by sighing, "Oh, how beautiful!" and sitting in the shade.

**(The) Continent** (noun) An affectionate, if slightly patronizing, expression to describe where non-Brits in Europe live. The British are very conscious of being an island nation. On the Continent, that is, the other side of the English Channel, is where everyone else in Europe lives. There was, reportedly, a famous London newspaper headline which read, "Fog in Channel. Continent cut off." In earlier centuries, it was considered an essential element of a young person's proper education to do the Grand Tour of European cities, learning something of our neighbors' artistic and cultural achievements in the process. Many British travelers fell in love with these places. Some never came back. But for most, the experience was somewhat mixed and dangerously unhealthy. The strange food, the doubtful purity of the water, the casual approach to life's little intimacies, were far too unfamiliar and uncomfortable, even life-threatening, for those of a delicate temperament. For such unsteady souls, the White Cliffs of Dover were a truly beloved sight on the return home. For these reasons, it could be said that the moment you first stepped off a plane or boat and onto the Continent used to be a turning point in a British person's life.

**Coventry**, send someone to (expression) To ostracize, ignore, shun, or treat as a pariah. Coventry is a businesslike town in the Midlands (the area that separates the north of England from the south) that appears to have never done anyone any harm, yet the saying implies otherwise. Like so many sayings that enter popular language, this one has an uncertain origin. It may have its roots in the seventeenth century when, during the English Civil War between Royalists and Parliamentarians, any soldiers of King Charles I that were captured in the

battles around the Midlands were literally sent to Coventry, a town that was loyal to Parliament. The people of Coventry were not very welcoming to these enemies and tended to ignore the disgraced soldiers, refusing to serve them in taverns or inns so they were largely reduced to begging in the streets. To be sent to Coventry, then, may have served as a threat hanging over Royalist soldiers so that they fought all the harder to avoid capture. Unfortunately, the threat didn't have the required effect. The Parliamentarians subsequently defeated and deposed the forces of King Charles I and, in 1649, in an act that sent shockwaves around the royal courts of Europe, cut off his head. Many thought we had reached, in today's phrase, the end of monarchy, but it was not to be. Dickensian (adjective) Gloomy, squalid. The Victorian novelist Charles Dickens (1812-70) wrote compelling works filled with vivid details of the difficult social conditions in the London of his day. The accounts in his novels of the appalling fate of the poor and the squalid conditions in prisons and poorhouses attracted much attention and increased public awareness of the terrible suffering endured by the lowest classes of society. The term Dickensian is still used to describe acute conditions of poverty or deprivation wherever they may be found in Britain. DIY (noun phrase) An abbreviation of the phrase Do-It-Yourself, referring to the maintenance, building, and repairs of the home by the homeowner, often left unfinished.

This book was a bit disappointing to me, since so many of the words and phrases (such as "Raining cats & dogs") are commonly used in America! It does, however, give some explanation of the origins of the words or phrases, so for that, it's a rather fun read.

I gave this as a gift and she loved it!

Makes watching all those Brit dramas more understandable.

As a Brit living in the USA, I bought this for one of my colleagues as a joke. Overall it's good, but I feel there is a lot missing. I feel it's overpriced too.

Interesting & really funny in places. How a Brit thinks.

Such a cute book! I got this as a friend who's traveling to London and she loved it! She says it's actually kind of useful too.

Really funny. Great gift for someone moving to the UK

There are a lot of words that are not in here. I am from England and it was just ok.

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