

Trans-Atlantic Street Names

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The British and American national varieties of the English Language differ in a multitude of ways: orthographic, phonological, syntactic, lexical, and onomastic. One of the onomastic difference is in the street names, including both their generic and specific parts. British street-name generics include terms like *crescent* and *mews*, which are atypical of American use. American generics include terms like *boulevard*, atypical of British use. The specifics also differ, whether they are descriptive (British *High Street* versus American *Main Street*) or commemorative (British *Great Queen Street* versus American *Madison Avenue*). The street names of London and New York City, the largest and commercially most important cities of the two nations, are illustrative of onomastic and cultural differences between Britain and America.

The British and American national varieties of the English language differ in a multitude of ways: orthographic, phonological, syntactic, lexical, and onomastic. One of the onomastic differences is in street names, including both their generic and their specific parts. The street names of London and New York City, the largest and commercially most important cities of the two nations, illustrate some of the onomastic and cultural differences between Britain and America.

An old cliché has it that, if you know New York, you do not know the United States, and much the same can be said of London and the United Kingdom. To be sure, neither London nor New York City is typical of the whole of their countries; yet as the major metropolises of the two nations, both cities represent their respective national life and culture. And so the patterns of naming streets in London and New York City can be taken as broadly representative of differences between the two major cultural varieties of the English language.

Selection of names

The source used here for New York City street names is the *National Five Digit ZIP Code and Post Office Directory* (pages 3-1664-1667). The listings in this directory are copyrighted by the United States Postal Service, and for New York City are restricted to the three-digit ZIP codes of 100, 101, and 102 in Manhattan. This listing includes 845 street names.

The source for London street names is the *London Street Finder*. This guide is based on the Ordnance Survey, with the sanction of Her Majesty's Stationery Office. It includes a much larger number of street

names than the New York directory for two reasons. First, London has in fact more street names; London streets are on the whole shorter than New York streets and the names change more often. Second, the *London Street Finder* includes all of greater London, rather than only the central part of the city.

Because of the extremely large number of street names in London, a sampling was taken of the names in the guide, consisting of eight names from each page of the alphabetical listing. The listings on each page are in four columns; the names chosen were the first at the top of each column and the first in each column above a line drawn across approximately the middle of the page. This sample consists of 881 street names.

The term "street name" refers here to whatever designation is used for a location, other than a house or lot number. For the most part, these are what are commonly understood as the names of streets. However, in a few cases, locations are not streets in the ordinary sense, but something else. For example, in New York, Ellis Island is twenty-seven acres in size, and its name is the postal designation for structures on the island; consequently *Ellis Island* is for present purposes a "street name." Similarly, in London *Buckingham Palace* is a location designation and thus counts here as a "street name." (Royal residences are not on ordinary streets, just as royal persons do not have ordinary surnames.) Such exceptions to the usual pattern are few.

The comparisons that follow are based, then, on all 845 New York City street names (including comparable location designations) in the 100-102 ZIP Code areas and a sample of 881 similar names from the greater London area. This data base inevitably introduces certain biases, which must be kept in mind. However, the names are representative of the two major metropolises of the United Kingdom and the United States, and thus are fit subjects for examination.

Generics

The first thing to note is a disparity between the two cities in the number of different generics used in street names. Some streets in both London and New York are named without a generic element. New York street names, however, include 31 different generics, whereas London street names include 49 different generics. The New York database is 96 percent as large as the London base; but it contains only 63 percent as many different generics. Clearly, there is more uniformity in New York than in London generics.

The greater uniformity in New York is attributable to the fact that in much of Manhattan street layout and naming follow a grid pattern. Streets that run north-south have the generic *avenue*, and streets that run east-west have the generic *street*. In both cases, the specific part of the name is a number. Because Manhattan island is long and thin in shape, the north-south *avenues* run for long distances; they are also relatively far apart

from each other, there being only twelve such numbered *avenues*. The east-west *streets*, on the other hand, are comparatively short since they run across the narrow dimension of the island, and they are relatively close to each other, there being several hundred numbered *streets*.

Within the large area of Manhattan governed by the grid pattern, the two generics *avenue* and *street* predominate; and because of the shape of the island, *street* is by far the most frequent generic. Such a grid pattern is common in the United States, being used in many American cities. It is uncommon in Britain, where streets tend to be shorter, to change names frequently, and to run in a variety of directions rather than primarily in north-south and east-west directions. The consequence is a larger number of street names and a greater variety of generics in London than in New York.

A specific and notable consequence of the New York grid pattern is the predominance of the generic *street* in New York City. Of New York streets, 537 out of 845 (63.55 percent) are named with the generic *street*. This compares with only 75 out of 881 London streets (8.51 percent). A gap of 55.04 percent separates the frequency of the generic *street* between New York and London. That is the most pronounced difference between the two cities in the use of street-name generics.

The most frequent generic for street names in the London sample is *road*, which accounts for 324 out of 881 (36.78 percent) of London streets. By comparison, in New York only 4 out of 845 streets (0.47 percent) are named with the generic *road*. In other American cities, *road* may well be more frequent, but few American cities are likely to approach the frequency of London in their use of *road*. The gap of 36.31 percent for the frequency of *road* between London and New York is the second most pronounced difference in street-name generics.

Much smaller discrepancies are in three other generics. In the London sample, 73 out of 881 (8.29 percent) of streets have the generic *close*, and 59 out of 881 (6.70 percent) have the generic *gardens*. Neither generic is used in New York. *Close*, according to the *Longman Dictionary*, is a British term for "a road closed at one end" (note the use of "road" in the definition where American use would expect "street"). It also denotes "an area beside or round a cathedral that is enclosed by buildings," but that sense is not important for the London street generic.

Gardens, according to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, is a generic for "a street, square, etc." The term may derive from the use of *garden* to refer to a small park-like common area, often enclosed and private, in residential areas, but many streets designated *gardens* have no such area in sight. In such cases, the use of generic *gardens* is apparently for its connotation rather than its descriptive relevance.

The last noteworthy discrepancy is for the generic *place*, which is used in 76 out of 845 New York street names (8.99 percent), but in only 25 out of 881 London street names (2.84 percent). This is a discrepancy of 6.15 percent.

All other differences are smaller in percentage. Of the generics found in both New York and London, London uses *avenue*, *court*, *drive*, *green*, *hill*, *lane*, *mews*, *park*, *row*, *walk*, and *way* more frequently, but the differences are at most 2.35 percent (for *lane*) and the numbers for the most part are not great (for *lane*, 9 instances in New York and 30 in London). An exception to the last generalization is *avenue*, which is fairly popular in both cities, being used in 63 New York street names (7.46 percent) and in 76 London street names (8.63 percent). New York, on the other hand, uses *alley*, *market*, *square*, and *terrace* more frequently than London does, but by small percentages and generally at no great frequency.

The only surprise in these generics is *mews*, which occurs twice in New York, whereas it is doubtless very rare elsewhere in the United States. Labeled "chiefly Brit" by *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, the term *mews* is defined there as "stables usu. with living quarters built around a court . . . living quarters adapted from such stables . . . back street: ALLEY." *Mews* addresses have become somewhat perversely rather fashionable in London.

London also has a number of generics not found in New York City: *approach*, *bridge*, *broadway* (which of course is prominent as the specific of a New York street), *circus* (the equivalent of American *circle*), *common* (a tract of public open land in a town), *cottages*, *crescent* (a street in the shape of an arc), *croft* (an enclosed field or small farm), *dene* (according to the *Concise Oxford*, "a narrow wooded valley. . . a vale (esp. as the ending of place names)," probably used for its connotative value), *end*, *gate*, *grove*, *mall*, *mansion*, *mead*, *palace* (Buckingham), *passage*, *path*, *ride*, *rise*, *side*, *slope*, *station*, *vale*, *view*, *villas*, *wharf*, and *yard*. New York has a somewhat smaller number of generics that are not in the London sample: *basin*, *boulevard*, *center*, *circle*, *hall*, *island*, *mile*, *oval*, *parkway*, *piers*, *plaza*, *slip*, and *village*.

Specifics

Of New York street names, 14 (1.66 percent) have no generic; and of the London sample, 25 (2.84 percent). A few of these, such as London *Saint Margarets*, are genuinely specific names without a generic. A good many are names that incorporate a generic into the specific term: London *Ingleway*. Some are generics used specifically: London *the Crescent*. Some are historically generics that have become specifics: New York *Bowery*, from a Dutch term for 'farm.'

Although streets have often been named to commemorate persons, such as New York *Audubon Avenue* or London *Wickliffe Avenue*, a new and distinctively American naming practice is to use the generic *boulevard* with a personal name as specific: *Cabrini Boulevard*. The personal-name specific is often a full name, as in the New York examples:

Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard
Dr. Martin L. King Jr. Boulevard
Duke Ellington Boulevard
Frederick Douglass Boulevard
Henry J. Browne Boulevard
Isaac Bashevis Singer Boulevard
Luis Munoz Marin Boulevard
Malcolm X Boulevard

As the foregoing examples suggest, the persons commemorated in this pattern are often of minority ethnic groups. A similar pattern not strongly connected with ethnicity are names with the generic *place*:

Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen Place
Charlie Parker Place
Colonel Robert Magaw Place
James Cagney Place
Leonard Bernstein Place
Reinhold Niebuhr Place
Rev. Dr. John W. Saunders Place
Taras Shevchenko Place

The closest thing to this pattern in London use is a name like "Queen Annes Place," but it lacks the topicality of the New York names.

The New York generic *plaza* is often used with specific terms for public institutions: *United Nations Plaza*, *Chase Manhattan [bank] Plaza*, *Exchange Plaza*, *Federal Plaza*, *Lincoln Center [for the performing arts] Plaza*, *Madison Square Plaza*, *Rockefeller [Center] Plaza*. That generic is also used, however, to commemorate persons: *Confucius Plaza*, *Dag Hammarskjold Plaza*, *Joe Louis Plaza*. Or, among other uses, it combines with a placename specific: *Park Avenue Plaza*, *Times Square Plaza*.

Another characteristically American practice, which is typical not just of New York but also of many other American cities, is the numbering and sometimes lettering of streets: *Fifth Avenue*, *Forty-Second Street*, *Avenue C*. Of the 537 New York names with the generic *street*, 345 (64 percent) are numbered streets. London or Britain generally has nothing comparable.

For the most part, however, London and New York specifics are not of different kinds. They are, indeed, often identical. Thus both London and New York have a *York Avenue* and a *Riverside Drive*. Yet many street names have a characteristic flavor that strongly identifies them with one nation or the other. Thus, characteristically American are *Harlem River Drive*, *United Jerusalem Place*, *Rogers and Hammerstein Row*, and *Runyons Way*. On the other hand, characteristically British are *Upper Wickham Lane*, *Marylebone Passage*, *Disraeli Road*, and *Little Saint James Street*.

References

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Appendix 1: Street Generics by percent, generic, and (number)

London

36.78	road (324)	01.48	park (13)
08.63	avenue (76)	01.36	mews (12)
08.51	street (75)	01.14	row (10)
08.29	close (73)	01.14	walk (10)
06.70	gardens (59)	00.79	hill (7)
03.41	lane (30)	00.79	square (7)
02.84	place (25)	00.68	terrace (6)
02.84	<i>no generic</i> (25)	00.57	common (5)
02.61	crescent (23)	00.57	court (5)
02.61	way (23)	00.45	rise (4)
02.04	grove (18)	00.34	alley (3)
01.93	drive (17)	00.23	approach (2)

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00.23	cottages (2)	00.11	mansion (1)
00.23	croft (2)	00.11	market (1)
00.23	passage (2)	00.11	mead (1)
00.23	path (2)	00.11	palace (1)
00.23	villas (2)	00.11	ride (1)
00.11	bridge (1)	00.11	side (1)
00.11	broadway (1)	00.11	slope (1)
00.11	circus (1)	00.11	station (1)
00.11	dene (1)	00.11	vale (1)
00.11	end (1)	00.11	view (1)
00.11	gate (1)	00.11	wharf (1)
00.11	green (1)	00.11	yard (1)
00.11	mall (1)		

New York

63.55	street (537)	01.06	boulevard (9)
08.99	place (76)	01.06	drive (9)
07.46	avenue (63)	01.06	lane (9)
03.67	plaza (31)	01.06	park (9)
02.25	square (19)	00.95	slip (8)
01.66	<i>no generic</i> (14)	00.59	alley (5)
01.54	terrace (13)	00.59	island (5)

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00.59	row (5)	00.12	basin (1)
00.47	court (4)	00.12	Circle (1)
00.47	road (4)	00.12	green (1)
00.35	market (3)	00.12	hall (1)
00.35	piers (3)	00.12	hill (1)
00.35	way (3)	00.12	mile (1)
00.24	center (2)	00.12	oval (1)
00.24	mews (2)	00.12	village (1)
00.24	parkway (2)		
00.24	walk (2)		

Appendix 2: Street Generics by city, number, and percentage

Generics	New York		London		Difference
<i>no generic</i>	14	1.66%	25	2.84%	1.18
alley	5	0.59%	3	0.34%	-0.25
approach			2	0.23%	
avenue	63	7.46%	76	8.63%	1.17
basin	1	0.12%			
boulevard	9	1.07%			
bridge			1	0.11%	
broadway			1	0.11%	
center	2	0.24%			
circle	1	0.12%			
circus			1	0.11%	
close			73	8.29%	
common			5	0.57%	
cottages			2	0.23%	
court	4	0.47%	5	0.57%	
crescent			23	2.61%	
croft			2	0.23%	
dene			1	0.11%	
drive	9	1.06%	17	1.93%	0.87
end			1	0.11%	
gardens			59	6.70%	
gate			1	0.11%	
green	1	0.12%	1	0.11%	-0.01
grove			18	2.04%	
hall	1	0.12%			
hill	1	0.12%	7	0.79%	0.67
island	5	0.59%			
lane	9	1.06%	30	3.41%	2.35
mall			1	0.11%	
mansion			1	0.11%	
market	3	0.35%	1	0.11%	-0.24
mead			1	0.11%	
mews	2	0.24%	12	1.36%	1.12
mile	1	0.12%			
oval	1	0.12%			
palace			1	0.11%	
park	9	1.06%	13	1.48%	0.42

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parkway	2	0.24%			
passage			2	0.23%	
path			2	0.23%	
piers	3	0.35%			
place	76	8.99%	25	2.84%	-6.15
plaza	31	3.67%			
ride			1	0.11%	
rise			4	0.45%	
road	4	0.47%	324	36.78%	36.31
row	5	0.59%	10	1.14%	0.55
side			1	0.11%	
slip	8	0.95%			
slope			1	0.11%	
square	19	2.25%	7	0.79%	-1.46
station			1	0.11%	
street	537	63.55%	75	8.51%	-55.04
terrace	13	1.54%	6	0.68%	-0.86
vale			1	0.11%	
view			1	0.11%	
village	1	0.12%			
villas			2	0.23%	
walk	2	0.24%	10	1.14%	0.9
way	3	0.35%	23	2.61%	2.26
wharf			1	0.11%	
yard			1	0.11%	