

American and British trade talks started this week — here's why the shared language could get in the way

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By Rupert Steiner

The U.K. team 'needs to be direct,' dodging words such as 'rather' and 'quite' — and should avoid talking about sex



The Union Jack and the Stars and Stripes side-by-side in front of the White House. Getty Images

UKX 0.40% ▲ DJIA 0.15% ▲ ES00 0.54% ▲

Trade talks between the U.S. and Britain began on Tuesday aimed at striking an “ambitious free-trade agreement.”

U.S. Trade Rep. Robert Lighthizer and International Trade Secretary Liz Truss of the U.K. launched negotiations via videoconference.

The talks were prompted by [Britain's leaving the European Union in January](#), which means it is now free to negotiate its future trading terms with other major economies.

The U.S.-U.K. trading relationship is worth more than \$235 billion a year, and both are the largest investors in each other's economies, with mutual investments valued at as much as \$1 trillion.

This first round of negotiations is set to last approximately two weeks and involve around 100 negotiators on each side. Talks are to cover areas including goods-and-services trade, digital trade, investment and support for small businesses.

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— Allyson Stewart-Allen, University of Oxford's Saïd Business School

Further rounds are to take place approximately every six weeks and to be carried out remotely until it is deemed safe to travel. Truss said in a statement: “The U.S. is our largest trading partner and increasing trans-Atlantic trade can help our economies bounce back from the economic challenge posed by coronavirus.”

“We want to strike an ambitious deal that opens up new opportunities for our businesses, brings in more investment and creates better jobs for people across the whole of the country.”

In addition to being each other’s top source of international investment, the U.S. and U.K. already share the world’s largest bilateral investment relationship.

Josh Hardie, deputy director-general of business lobby group the Confederation of British Industry, said: “The start of these talks offers a sign of hope to businesses. It’s vital that we keep one eye to the future and how we can plan for an economic recovery.”

Opinion: [The U.K. economy was crippled before the virus hit: more reason for the government to be careful about Brexit](#)

Despite the common language, there are more differences than similarities between U.S.’s business culture and those of the rest of the world.

Allyson Stewart-Allen, an expert in intercultural work and associate fellow at the University of Oxford’s Saïd Business School, told MarketWatch that the “U.K. team will need to be direct, explicit and transparent in their demands and avoid words such as ‘rather’ and ‘quite,’ which convey risk avoidance and tentativeness in the American English language.

“Americans value speed and getting tasks done more than relationship building,” she said. “Thus, the U.K. team must be quantitative and ready to do deals rather than deliberate and seek perfection.”

Stewart-Allen is a Californian and has just published a book, “Working with Americans,” in which she offers advice for building trans-Atlantic business relationships.

“It’s best not to expect your American colleagues to know what is happening in your country or region,” she wrote. “Equally, don’t be surprised if you don’t understand all of the American humor even if a colleague might explain it. When it comes to geography, every city has its own special topics: freeway jams in Los Angeles, weather in San Francisco, commuting in New York.”

In terms of small talk, she advised caution when testing the boundaries, by avoiding national politics, religion and sex. “In France, it’s OK to talk about sex but not money,” she said. “The reverse is true in the U.S.”

And when met with the standard welcome, “How are you?” she warned, “no matter that it sounds like a question, it isn’t. It’s a greeting.”

The U.K.’s FTSE 100 **UKX, 0.40%** was up 0.64% in early trading after the Dow Jones Industrial Average **DJIA, 0.15%** closed up 133 points Tuesday evening. U.S. stocks **ES00, 0.54%** looked to be on track for gains at Wednesday’s open.

Read: [U.K. coronavirus death toll passes Italy to become highest in Europe](#) **MW**



‘Trump haters’: Why the president won’t let Fauci testify in the House

President Donald Trump on Tuesday said letting Dr. Anthony Fauci testify in the House of Representatives would be a “cat

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