

American Vowels

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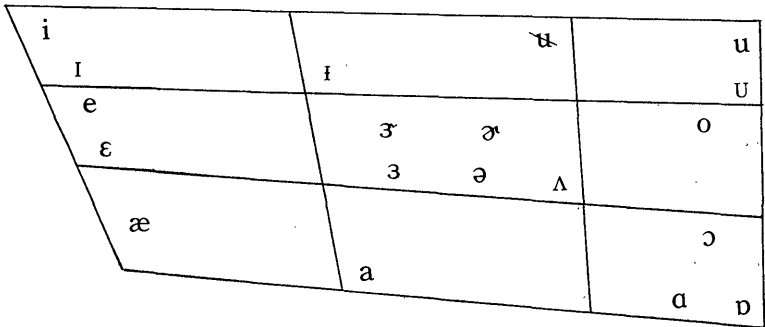
INTRODUCTION

I have once heard from an American that she did not understand all of the speech of the Englishmen during her stay in England. I was much surprised to hear that, although I knew that there are differences between American and British English. And I would like to know a true difference between them.

Although both American and British English have some dialects, I think "standard speech" should be used in this thesis. The term "standard speech" is socially acceptable pattern that is used by the educated persons. In England, the speech pattern of the educated people changes from region to region. But one dialect which is spoken by the graduates of English Public Schools has become the socially preferred standard. This dialect spoken by the upper classes of London and its environs has come to be known as "Southern British" or "Southern English." This pattern of speech has become Standard British English. In the United States, there is not a socially preferred standard of speech. The American English has three big dialects of region; the East, the South and the General American. The General American is the most widely spoken dialect. So the General American spoken by the educated people is considered Standard American English.

Because I have mainly studied American English, I do not use a phonetic transcription of Jones but of Kenyon. There is not a symbol of a long vowel, [i:], [e] and [o] as in rate and go are not diphthongs. They are similar to [e:] and [o:] in that of Jones. There are “r-colored” sounds, which British English does not have.

There is much more differences between vowels than between consonants. So that I will study about the difference between vowels of two countries.



The tongue positions of the vowels ⁽¹⁾

CHAPTER I

THE VOWELS OF AMERICAN ENGLISH

1. Front Vowels

○ [i] and [ɪ]

(1) [i] spellings

- e --- we, even, secret, be
- ie --- field, believe, piece
- ea --- reach, sea, teacher
- eo --- people

- ae --- aesthetic, Aesop
- oe --- amoeba, phoenix
- ee --- see, meet, week, keep
- i --- machine, police, unique

ei --- receive, conceive, seize ay --- quay
ey --- key

(2) [I] spellings

i --- fit, kit, ship, live	e --- pretty, decided
ee --- been	a --- surface
ai --- fountain, captain	ia --- carriage, marriage
ei --- foreign	

(3) Modifications and Variations in Usage

An initial unstressed [i] normally weakens to [I], e.g., *evet*, *believe* and *emotion*. When in the final position as in *city* and *pity*, many Americans use both [i] and [I], although shortened, lower and lax form of [i] is mostly heard. Many speakers in Eastern New England and New York City use [I] in the final unstressed syllable, but it is more common in the South than elsewhere. In the medial position and before another syllable beginning with a vowel, many Americans use the unstressed [i] more than [I], e.g., *react* and *audience*. But when medial sound is before a syllable beginning with a consonant, [I] is normally used as in *happiness* and *handicap*.

When suffixes beginning with a vowel are added, the words that use the unstressed [i] or [I] in the final position retain the same unstressed forms. Before the suffixes *-ly*, *-ful*, *-cal*, as in *easily*, *beautiful* and *historical*, spelled *i* is pronounced [I] or [ə]. [i] is never heard in the educated speech. When the suffix beginning with a consonant is added, [i] or [I] usually become [ə] but before the suffixes *-ness* and *-less*, [i] or [I] are retained.

○ [e] and [ɛ]

(1) [e] spellings

a --- gate, take, same, cake	ai --- pain, wait, afraid, aid
ay --- say, way, gray, play	ea --- steak, great, break
ei --- veil, rein, vein, skein	ey --- obey, hey, grey, prey

(2) [ɛ] spellings

e --- get, bed, set, end	ea --- breath, head, death
ei --- heifer, leisure	eo --- leopard, jeopardy
a --- many, any	ae --- aesthetics
ai --- said, against	ay --- says
u --- bury, burial	ie --- friend
ue --- guess, guest	

(3) Modifications and Variations of these Sounds

The most obvious variation of [e] occurs as a diphthong. It has a tendency to become a diphthong.

In the final syllable of the days of the week, [e] that is unstressed usually becomes [ɪ]. In the unstressed endings, -ace and -age, as in solace and message, [ɪ] or [ə] are heard more than [e]. The same change is found in the other words with the ending, -ative, when the syllable of -ative is unstressed.

Though before [l] or [r] in the same syllable like pail, pale and pair, the [e] sound inclines to [ɛ], there are many who use [e] before [l]. Before r or rr, the [e] sound varied to [ɛ] and to [æ] in such words as there and stair. Speakers of the Atlantic coastal area and the South pronounce [æ] in marry carrot and the like. Both [æ] and [ɛ] are used for these words elsewhere in the United States, although there is a tendency to become [ɛ]. In the words with an r between vowels as area and dairy, they prefer [e] in the South, but the [ɛ] sound is heard, too. Most speakers of the Atlantic coastal area, the Northern Inland and the West use [ɛ], plus off-glide [ə] or [ɹ].

○ [æ]

(1) [æ] spellings

a --- add, back, examine ai --- plaid
au --- aunt, laugh

(2) The Varieties of The [æ] Sound

In the speech of many parts of the United States, the [æ] sound before r as in marry and carry, is raised towards [ɛ]. But this [ɛ] is slightly different from the short [ɛ] of get and it becomes a diphthong as [ɛə]. Many speakers in the r-less areas usually retain the [æ] sound in these words as [mæri].

The cultivated people prefer [ə] to [æ]. This variation appears before the final voiced plosives (as bad and hag), before the voiced affricate (as badge), before both voiced and voiceless fricatives (as salve and laugh), and before the nasals [m] and [n] (as ham and sand). Before [s] and [ʃ], the raised or diphthongal sounds are found, as in bask and cash. But it does not appear before [z] or [ʒ] as in hazard or casual.

2. Back Vowels

○ [ɑ]

(1) [ɑ] spellings

a --- farm, father, calm o --- hot, box, lock, stop
e --- sergeant ea --- heart
ua --- guard

(2) The Variations of This Sound

There was no clearly established [ɑ] form until the Eighteenth Century. The use of the [ɑ] sound instead of [æ] became common at the end of the century.

Almost all the Americans use [ɑ] in the short o words and wa

words. In many wa words as water and watch, [ɔ] and [ɒ] exist as a variation of [ɑ] in Midwestern and Western speech. For these words, [ɑ] and [ɔ] appear in the Southern speech and [ɑ] and [ɒ] in New England. Most speakers in New York City use [ɑ] for wa words though some use [ɒ].

In such words as moral, tomorrow and forest, speakers in the r-less areas of New England, New York City and the South prefer [ɑ], although [ɔ] predominates elsewhere. The [ɑ] sound is mostly heard for spelled o followed by a velar [k], [g] or [ŋ] in Eastern New England and New York City. In the other areas, [ɑ] or [ɒ] are sometimes used but [ɔ] is predominant. In the Atlantic coastal regions, [ɑ] and [ɒ] change freely with each other as the variant of the same phoneme.

○ The Variants of the [ɒ] Sound

This sound is remembered as a variant of [ɑ] in hot and of [ɔ] in dog. The use of the [ɒ] sound is found in the Atlantic coastal area. It is used predominantly in Eastern New England, irregularly in New York City and occasionally in the South.

This sound is heard in individual words in all over the United States. And it has no clear consistency according to regional and standard level. It is commonly used in the words that contain as follows: (1) o or wa followed by r as in horrid, where the other use [ɑ] or [ɔ]; (2) o or wa followed by [f], [s] and [θ] as in cough, toss and cloth, where the others use [ɔ]; (3) o or wa followed by affricates [tʃ] and [dʒ] as in watch and lodge, where the others use [ɑ]; (4) o or wa before the bilabial or alveolar stop as in cod and hop, where the others use [ɑ].

○ [ɔ]

(1) [ɔ] spellings

a --- all, tall, salt	o --- border
au --- fault	aw --- fawn
al --- talk, walk, chalk	oa --- broad
ou --- brought, thought, tought	

(2) Variations of the [ɔ] Sound

Many speakers use the lower form of this sound, often approaching the [ɒ] sound. Such pronunciation is found in all the [ɔ] words; fought approaches [fɒt].

This sound is commonly found in New York City and New England, and it is used in the speech of the upper educated level in many other areas in the United States. For many speakers in Eastern New England and almost all the speakers in New York City, [ɔ] is the first element of the words which has long o plus r, where the others pronounce [oə], [oɚ], [ouə] and [ouɚ]. Such speakers have no distinction between for and four.

○ [o]

(1) [o] spellings

o --- no, note, hope, stone	oa --- road, coal, moan
oe --- doe, hoe, toe	ou --- soul, shoulder
ow --- know, snow, shadow	oo --- brooch
ew --- sew	eau --- beau, bureau
eo --- yeoman	ol --- folk, yolk

(2) Modifications and Variations of the [o] Sound

When it is stressed before a voiceless consonant as in coat, the off-glide [ʊ] normally appears. When the stressed [o] is in the final position or before a voiced consonant as in go and sown, the off-glide sound appears clearly. It is rare in American English that [o] is used as a pure monophthong, although it is found in the

other languages. This sound possesses more or less off-glide [U].

The use of the centralized variant that is not as tense as that in the Southern British is increasing in the United States. The leveling of both [o] and [ɔ] to [ɔ̄] is found in most speakers in New York City and many in the southern area of Eastern New England. The speakers in the South consistently retain the distinction. But [o] in the South is usually lower than that of go.

When the word as tomato exists alone, unstressed [ə] or the little stressed [o] are heard. But it is in the phrase as in "tomato plant", the final [o] becomes shorter.

○ [U] and [u]

(1) [U] spellings

oo --- book, wood, look, cook	u --- ful, pudding, cushion
o --- wolf, woman	ou --- could, would, should

(2) [u] spellings

oo --- cool, soon, balloon	u --- rule, truth, rune
o --- move, prove, whom	ou --- soup, youth, group
ue --- true, blue	ui --- fruit
eu --- maneuver	oe --- canoe, shoe
ew --- jewel, grew, drew	

(3) Variations and Modifications of These Sounds

The [u] sound has diphthongal character, especially when it is stressed and lengthened. It is made by moving from a slightly unrounded [U] to a tenser, stressed and more closed [u]. But it is usually transcribed by only the [u] symbol.

Both sounds are variants of each other in oo words. Before the final r in the same syllable, [u] is weakened to [U] as in poor and sure. Fronted and unrounded variant of [u] is heard throughout the United States.

The combining sound of [ɪ] and [u] as in blue and flew is used everywhere in the United States, alongside with [u]. And one speaker often uses the both forms in the same word at a different time. Unstressed [u] before a vowel is weakened to [ʊ] as in gradual[grædʒuəl]. Many other languages do not possess the [ʊ] sound, so that [u] is used as a substitution of [ʊ] by non-native speakers.

3. Central Vowels

○ [ə]

It is almost an intermediate sound between the low front vowel [æ] of cat and the low back vowel [ɑ] of ah.

Usually this sound is found as the first element of two diphthongs, [aɪ] and [aʊ], as in high and how. As a monophthong, it is heard in a small area, Eastern New England only, and it exists only as a variant of [æ] of ask and [ɑ] of park. In the Southern and South Midland states [ə] is also heard as a monophthong but the educated people of this area do not use it. It does not have any special spelling form.

(1) The [ə] variant

The [ə] sound of the word father today had not appeared in the speech of most speakers in the United States by the Eighteenth Century. The change from [æ] to [ə] occurs first in the words that possess a vowel followed by a final and a preconsonantal r as in car hard, and that have a vowel followed by l which has now vanished on pronunciation as in calm and psalm. The shift to [ə] in the first group of the words was not thoroughgoing for many in New England and some in New York City. As a result, the [ə] sound appeared. In the rest of the United States, it was complete.

In the second group of the words, the change from [æ] to [ɑ] was thoroughgoing for all the speakers. In the words like ask, the shift to [a] or [ɑ] remarkably appeared in the New England area.

This shift to [ɑ] or to an incomplete intermediate sound occurs in the words which have spelled a followed by voiceless fricatives [f], [θ] and [s] as in half, path and pass and by [m] or [n] with a consonant as in sample and branch.

○ [ʌ]

(1) [ʌ] spellings

o --- son, come, love, month

oo --- blood, flood

u --- sun, puzzle, discuss

ou --- touch, couple, double, cousin

(2) Variations and Modifications of the [ʌ] Sound

The [ʌ] sound is uncommon in other languages. It always has some degrees of stress, and it is usually a short vowel.

The most noticeable variation of [ʌ] is [ɜ] in the words containing a following vocalic r. In New York City, Boston and Baton Rouge, they pronounce [hʌri] and [wʌri] for hurry and worry, and [hɜri] and [wɜri] or [hɜi] and [wɜi] are used by speakers in Buffalo, Dayton and St. Helena. As a matter of fact, many speakers in New York City and some in Eastern New England use the [hɜri] form, too.

○ [ə]

(1) Use and Variations of the [ə] Sound

This sound, called the schwa sound, is the indeterminate weak vowel. In early times, the unstressed vowels were more distinctly pronounced. The spelled form of the vowels are retained, but these

unstressed vowels became more weak and more obscure. They have a tendency to level towards the [ə] sound. Thus the schwa sound can be spelled with any vowel.

The variation of this sound depends on the phonetic surroundings of the vowel. But it is not an unstressed variation of the other vowels. Because, any stressed vowel also possesses the unstressed form. The [ə] vowel is found in the monosyllabic articles, prepositions, conjunctions, pronouns and proverbs. [ə] and [ɪ] are used in the unstressed medial and final syllables, though most speakers use [ə] in most words. Before the final labials [p], [b] and [m], [ə] is commonly heard; [ɪ] is common before the final [k]; and [ɪ] or [ə] before the final [l].

CHAPTER II

THE DIFFERENCES OF SOUNDS IN VOWELS BETWEEN AMERICAN AND BRITISH ENGLISH

1. The Pronunciation of 'A'

The difference in the [ɑ] and [æ] sounds is one of the most noticeable ones between Standard American English and Standard British English. In England they prefer the [ɑ] of dark, broad a, before f, ft, m, nch, nd, nt, sk, sp, ss, st, and th, as in laugh, draft, calm, branch, ask, clasp, grass, last, and path. On the other hand, most speakers in the United States use the [æ] of bat, flat a, in the same words. But there are many Englishmen who use the [æ] sound before n and f and before s followed by a consonant, e.g. fancy, amass, plastic, lass, massive, maticate, elastic and gas. Be-

fore m, the speakers in England use [ɑ] in example but [æ] in stamp. American English and British English have the same pronunciation in the word can. But it is different when they use it as a negative, can't: English speakers prefer the [ɑ] sound in can't. Most speakers in the United States use [ɑ] before (l)m as in palm and calm, before r or r with a consonant as in bar, cart, park, and dark, and before th as in father. The [ɑ] sound is heard in many words in the Boston area and the South, for example, master, aunt, tomato and as forth.

In the Eighteenth Century, [ɑ] was considered a rusticism in both the United States and England. People who spoke with care commonly avoided it. At that time, they preferred [æ] even in such words as calm, far, hard and what. (They made "what" rhyme with "hat".) But in these years [ɑ] was used in the folk-speech of New England as it was in that of Old England. In about 1780, the [ɑ] sound became fashionable without being noticed in Standard London English. But the influence to the speech of the cultivated New Englanders is not known. In any event, in "The American Spelling Book" Noah Webster preferred [ɑ] before the final r or r followed by a consonant as in bar and depart, before (l)m as in embalm, before the final s or s followed by a consonant, as in pass, and ask, before f as in staff and half, before th as in path, before lv as in salve and calves, before n followed by ch, s or t as in blanch, dance and ant, in words with spelled au before s as in sauce and in words spelled au before n followed by ch, d or t as in staunch, jaundice and aunt. William Russell advocated the [æ] sound in all the words as glass, grasp, past, graft, grant, dance, branch, chant, rather, and bland. When people spoke with affectation, the [ɑ] sound appeared in such words as vase, drama, amen

and tomato. But Evacustes A. Phipson, an Englishman denounced this intrusion as follows:

It is really distressing to a cultivated Briton visiting America to find people there who……follow what they suppose to be the latest London mannirism, regardless of accuracy. Thus we find one literary editress advocating the pedantic British pronunciation tomarto in lieu of the good English tomato, rhyming with potato, saying it sounds so much more “refined.” I do not know whether she would be of the same opinion if she heard one of our costermongers bawling out “‘Ere’s yer foine termarters, lyde, hownly tuppence a pahnd.” Similarly, we sometimes hear Anglomaniac Americans saying vahz for vase. Why not bahz, and cahz?⁽²⁾

The pronunciation of the word patent is the [æ] of cat in General American, but Standard British English uses the [e] of late when it is used to mean a license or monopoly. In England mater possesses the [e] sound but in the United States, alma mater has the [ɑ] sound for the second and the third a’s although the first a is usually pronounced as [æ] of pal. The third a of apparatus is also pronounced as [e] in England, where most Americans use [æ] of cat. The same difference is found in the pronunciation of data, gratis, status, strata and so forth. On the contrary, in the first syllable of phalanx, Standard British English has the [æ] of rack, but the [e] sound is used by most speakers in the United States. In the final syllable of charade and promenade, most American use the [e] sound but the [ɑ] is heard in England. English always uses the [æ] sound of rack in the second syllable of asphalt where [ɔ] of bawl is sometimes heard in the United States. In the first syllable of patriotism, most speakers in England always pronounce the [æ] sound, but the [e] sound is

often found in General American.

The usual pronunciation of again and against is similar to the [ɛ] of hen, but it has also the [e] of lame in the United States by a spelling pronunciation.

2. The Pronunciation of 'E'

There are some differences between the pronunciation of e in British English and American English. In the word evolution they use the [i] sound of bee in England, but [ɛ] is always heard in the United States. And in the first syllable of epoch, Standard British English has the [i] sound but [ɛ] is often used in General American. On the contrary, in the first syllables of penalize, lever and egoist, British English possesses [ɛ] and American English has [i]. When they say the words seamstress and cleanly, Englishmen carefully pronounce as [sem-] and [klen-] but American speakers commonly stick to the pronunciation of the stems. In the United States, the [ɛ] sound of set often appears in pretty by a spelling pronunciation, it always rhymes with sit in England. The [i] sound of deaf has disappeared from the speech of the cultivated people in the United States, although it survives in the substandard speech. In the same way the [ɪ] sound for get, yet, general, steady, chest and instead has disappeared even in the vulgate.

3. Monophthong and Diphthong

The neutral sound [ə] is losing slightly, especially in American English in such words as moral, quarrel, real and the like. They become [mɔrl], [mɔrl], [kwɔrl], [kwɔrl] and [ril], [rɪl]. It appears not only in the substandard American that a diphthong is made as

a monophthong, but in Standard American English, e.g. the second syllables of fertile, hostile, docile, servile, agile and reptile. In Standard British English, these words are pronounced rhyming with vile, but the [ɪ] sound is used in fragile and facile. Englishmen also use [ɪ] in senile, where most Americans use [ɑɪ]. In the United States the [ɑɪ] sound of sliver is shifted to [ɪ] and that of farina to [i]. Both pronunciations of these words in Standard British English are the [ɑɪ] sound. In the word dynasty, American English has [ɑɪ] and British English has [ɪ]. And in isolate, [ɑɪ-] is always heard in England and sometimes the [ɪ-] sound is used in the United States.

4. The Pronunciation of 'Either' and 'Neither'

At the time of Noah Webster, [i-] and [ni-] for either and neither were preferred both in England and in the United States. But the pronunciation [ɑɪ-] and [nɑɪ-] has been common in New England for more than a century. In earlier times, New Englanders pronounced [ɛɪ-] and [nɛɪ-] which are still used in Ireland. How the fashion of [ɑɪ-] pronunciation appeared is not known. But it has been used on both sides of the Atlantic from the middle of Nineteenth Century. It was resisted by the American virtuoso of language, Edward S. Gould:

A common reply, in the United States, to the question, "Why do you say i-ther and ni-ther?" is "The words are so pronounced by the best educated people in England." But that reply is not true. That is to say, a majority of the best English usage is not on that side of the question. All that any man in the United States can gain by the pronunciation of i-ther and ni-ther is the credit, or the discredit, of affectation, or ostentation, ... as who should say, "I know how they do it in

England"; for assuredly, that pronunciation is not sanctioned by a majority of our best-educated men.⁽³⁾

In the Oxford Dictionary published in 1897, [i-] and [ni-] were preferred, but it pointed out that [aɪ] and [naɪ-] are influential in the cultivated English speech.

5. The Pronunciation of 'o'

The difference between the American o in rock and the English o in the same word has been studied by phonologists for a long time. The English [ɔ] sound is a lightly rounded vowel, and it is not found in General American speech although it is similar to the short form of the pronunciation of au in such words as authentic and autocracy. The American pronunciation of o in rock is a short form of [ɑ] as in what and not. Larsen and Walker said:

Cultivated Englished speakers do not recognize this ah-sound in the words commonly spelled in e, e.g., not, rod, rock, fog, hop, rob, pomp, on, beyond, novel; English phoneticians indeed condemn it as dialectal in these words, and recognize only the first sound described above. In American, on the other hand, both sounds are heard in all these words, the shortened ah-sound being preferred in all positions. Both sounds are heard in American speech also in the wa words, e.g., wander, want, wash, watch, swamp, swan, quarrel, squander, squalid; but here too the shortened ah-sound is preferred.⁽⁴⁾

This sound is heard in the United States in wa words, e.g. water, wash, swamp, swan and squalid. It appears in God too. God has three pronunciations; [gɒd], [gɑd], [gɔd].

In the days of Middle English, the oy of boy was pronounced as a diphthong, [ɔɪ], but during the early Modern English period, this

pronunciation became assimilated with that of [aɪ] in wine. The use of this pronunciation prevailed at the time of the settlement of the United States. The colonists brought it with them. At the same time it took root in Ireland, and it still prevails there. But in England, the [aɪ] sound changed to the [oɪ] sound by reasoning from the spelling in the late Eighteenth Century. In the United States, the [aɪ] sound persisted up to the time of the Civil War in common speech, is still used in such words as boil, hoist, oil, join, spoil, joist, pennyroyal, poison and roil in some areas.

6. "R-colored" Sounds

Existence of "r-colored" sounds is the most noticeable characteristic of American English. In England, some of the speakers in the northern area use "r-colored" sounds, but there is none of them in Standard British English.

The vowels [ɜ] and [ɝ] are the sounds of stressed syllabic [r]. Both [ɜ] and [ɝ] are tense, stressed, and usually long vowels. The [ɜ] is used in the "r-less" areas in the United States and in England for the word third. The retroflex [ɝ] is the symbol used for stressed syllabic [r] that is heard in General American. The vowel before vocalic r as in hurry and courage is pronounced [ɝ] in General American. But the speakers in England use the [ʌ] sound as some people in the "r-less" areas do.

The [ə] sound is the vowel of unstressed syllabic [r] heard in such words as father and batter. The symbol [ə] represents a sound very similar to [r]. In the "r-less" areas of the United States and England, [ə] is used instead of [ɜ].

CONCLUSION

When colonists brought the language with them in Seventeenth Century, the pronunciation is the same both in England and in the United States. In England it changed to the present forms. On the contrary, it did not noticeably change in the United States. That was the cause of being made the difference. The difference usually occurs especially in the pronunciation. Although there are so much differences, I think the native speakers of American or British English can understand each other.

It is interesting that sounds of the northern area in England are similar to that of American English, and that there are many similarities between the sounds of England and of New England and New York City. As the sounds of American English is different not so much from that of British English in Seventeenth Century, I think it is useful to study English at that time to know American English exactly.

Notes

- (1) John S. Kenyon, *American Pronunciation*, Ann Arbor, George Wahr Publishing Co., 1951
- (2) H.L. Mencken, *The American Language*, "supplement" Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 1952
- (3) Ibid., H.L. Mencken, *The American Language*, "supplement" Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 1952
- (4) Ibid., H.L. Mencken, *The American Language*, "supplement" Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 1952.

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