

## **HISTORY OF ENGLISH SOUNDS**

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### **Abstract**

The present paper focuses on RP Pronunciations. The modern style of RP is an accent often taught to non-native speakers learning British English. Like all accents, RP has changed with time. The change in RP may be observed in the home of “BBC English”. The BBC accent of the 1950s is distinctly different from today’s accent.

### **Key Words**

Alternative Names, Usage, Dictionaries, Status, Phonology Vowels, Diphthongs and Triphthongs, BATH Vowel, Variation

### **History of English Sounds**

The introduction of the term ‘Received Pronunciation’ is usually credited to Daniel Jones. In the first edition of the English Pronouncing Dictionary (1917), he named the accent “Public School Pronunciation”, but for the second edition in 1926, he wrote, “In what follows I call it Received Pronunciation (abbreviation RP), for want of a better term. “However, the term had actually been used much earlier by Alexander Ellis in 1869 and P.S. Du Ponceau in 1818 (the term used by Henry C.K. Wyld in 1927 was “received standard”). According to Fowler’s Modern English Usage (1965), the correct term is” ‘the Received Pronunciation’. The word ‘received’ conveys its original meaning of ‘accepted’ or ‘approved’, as in ‘received wisdom’.”

RP is often believed to be based on the accents of southern England, but it actually has most in common with the Early Modern English dialects of the East Midlands. This was the most populated and most prosperous area of England during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. By the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, “Standard English” was established in the City of

London. A mixture of London speech with elements from East Midlands, Middlesex, and Essex became what is now known as Received Pronunciation. By the 1970s, an estimated 3% of British people were RP speakers.

## **Alternative Names**

Some linguists have used the term "RP" while expressing reservations about its suitability. The Cambridge-published English Pronouncing Dictionary (aimed at those learning English as a foreign language) uses the phrase "BBC Pronunciation" on the basis that the name "Received Pronunciation" is "archaic" and that BBC news presenters no longer suggest high social class and privilege to their listeners. Other writers have also used the name "BBC Pronunciation". The phonetician Jack Windsor Lewis frequently criticises the name "Received Pronunciation" in his blog: he has called it "invidious", a "ridiculously archaic, parochial and question-begging term" and noted that American scholars find the term "quite curious". He used the term "General British" (to parallel "General American") in his 1970s publication of *A Concise Pronouncing Dictionary of American and British English* and in subsequent publications. Beverley Collins and IngerMees use the term "Non-Regional Pronunciation" for what is often otherwise called RP, and reserve the term "Received Pronunciation" for the "upper-class speech of the twentieth century". Received Pronunciation has sometimes been called "Oxford English", as it used to be the accent of most members of the University of Oxford. The Handbook of the International Phonetic Association uses the name "Standard Southern British". Page 4 reads:

Standard Southern British (where 'Standard' should not be taken as implying a value judgment of 'correctness') is the modern equivalent of what has been called 'Received Pronunciation' ('RP'). It is an accent of the south east of England which operates as a prestige norm there and (to varying degrees) in other parts of the British Isles and beyond.

## **Usage**

Faced with the difficulty of defining RP, many writers have tried to distinguish between different sub-varieties. Gimson (1980) proposed Conservative, General, and

Advanced;Conservative RP refers to a traditional accent associated with older speakers with certain social backgrounds, General RP is often considered neutral regarding age, occupation or lifestyle of the speaker, and Advanced RP refers to speech of a younger generation of speakers. Later editions (e.g. Gimson 2008) use General, Refined and Regional. Wells (1982) refers to "mainstream RP" and "U-RP"; he suggests that Gimson's categories of Conservative and Advanced RP referred to the U-RP of the old and young respectively However, Wells stated, "It is difficult to separate stereotype from reality" with U-RP. Writing on his blog in February 2013, Wells wrote, "If only a very small percentage of English people speak RP, as Trudgill et al claim, then the percentage speaking U-RP is vanishingly small" and "If I were redoing it today, I think I'd drop all mention of"U-RP"". Now, however, linguists say that "RP" can be roughly divided into Conservative RP and Contemporary RP.

The modern style of RP is an accent often taught to non-native speakers learning British English. Non-RP Britons abroad may modify their pronunciation to something closer to Received Pronunciation to be better understood by people unfamiliar with the diversity of British accents. They may also modify their vocabulary and grammar to be closer to those of Standard English for the same reason. RP is used as the standard for English in most books on general phonology and phonetics, and is represented in the pronunciation schemes of most dictionaries published in the United Kingdom.

## **In Dictionaries**

Most English dictionaries published in Britain (including the Oxford English Dictionary) now give phonetically transcribed RP pronunciations for all words. Pronunciation dictionaries are a special class of dictionary giving a wide range of possible pronunciations; British pronunciation dictionaries are all based on RP, though not necessarily using that name. Daniel Jones transcribed RP pronunciations of a large number of words and names in his English Pronouncing Dictionary. This is still being published by Cambridge University Press, and is now edited by Peter Roach, the accent having been renamed "BBCPronunciation". Two other pronunciation dictionaries are in common use the Longman Pronunciation Dictionary, compiled by John C Wells, using the name

Received Pronunciation, and the Oxford Dictionary of Pronunciation for Current English, compiled by Clive Upton. This represents an accent named BR which is based on RP, but is claimed to be representative of a wider group of speakers. An earlier pronunciation dictionary by J. Windsor Lewis gives both British and American pronunciations, using the term General British (GB) for the former and General American (GA) for the latter.

## **Status**

Traditionally, Received Pronunciation was the "everyday speech in the families of Southern English persons whose men-folk [had] been educated at the great public boarding-schools" and which conveyed no information about that speaker's region of origin before attending the school.

It is the business of educated people to speak so that no-one may be able to tell in what county their childhood was passed.

*-A Burrell, Recitation. A Handbook for Teachers in Public Elementary School, 1891*

In the 19th century, some British prime ministers still spoke with some regional features, such as William Ewart Gladstone. From the 1970s onwards, attitudes towards Received Pronunciation have been changing slowly. The BBC's use of Yorkshire-born Wilfred Pickles during the Second World War (to distinguish BBC broadcasts from German propaganda) is an earlier example of the use of non-RP accents, but even then Pickles modified his speech towards RP when reading the news.

Although admired in some circles, RP is disliked in others. It is common in parts of Britain to regard it as a south-eastern English accent rather than a non-regional one and as a symbol of the south-east political power in Britain. A 2007 survey found that residents of Scotland and Northern Ireland tend to dislike RP. It is shunned by some with left-wing political views, who may be proud of having an accent more typical of the working classes. The British band Chumbawamba recorded a song entitled "R.I.P. RP", which is part of their album *The Boy Bands Have Won*.

## Phonology

### Consonants

Nasals and liquids may be syllabic in unstressed syllables. While the IPA symbol [y~] is phonetically correct for the consonant in 'row', 'arrow' in many accents of American and British English, most published work on Received Pronunciation represents this phoneme as /r/.

Voiceless plosives are aspirated at the beginning of a syllable, unless completely unstressed vowel follows. (For example, the /p/ is aspirated in "impasse, with primary stress on "-passe", but not "compass", where " -pass" has no stress.) Aspiration does not occur when /s/ precedes in the same syllable, as in "spot" or "stop". When a sonorant /l/, /r/, /w/, or /j/ follows, this aspiration is indicated by partial devoicing of the sonorant. /r/ is a fricative when devoiced.

Syllable final, and /k/ may be either preceded by a glottal stop (glottal reinforcement) or, in the case of /t/, fully replaced by a glottal stop, especially before a syllabic nasal (bitten [E`~bj"n]). The glottal stop may be realised as creaky voice; thus, an alternative phonetic transcription of attempt [YÊt°~em"~t] could be [YE`t°~ emm0t].

As in other varieties of English, voiced plosives (/b/, /d/, /g/, /d`~/) are partly or even fully devoiced at utterance boundaries or adjacent to voiceless consonants. The voicing distinction between voiced and voiceless sounds is reinforced by a number of other differences, with the result that the two of consonants can clearly be distinguished even in the presence of devoicing of voiced sounds:

1. Aspiration of voiceless consonants syllable initially.
2. Glottal reinforcement of voiceless consonants syllable finally.
3. Lengthening of vowels before voiced consonants.

As a result, some authors prefer to use the terms "fortis" and "lenis" in place of "voiceless" and "voiced". However, the latter are traditional and in more frequent usage.

The voiced dental fricative (/ð/) is more often a weak dental plosive; the sequence /nð/ is often realised as [n̠n̠l] (a long dental nasal). /l/ has velarised allophone ([ɫ]) in the syllable rhyme. /h/ becomes voiced ([f]) between voiced sounds.

## **Vowels**

Examples of short vowels: /j/ in kit, mirror and rabbit, /ʊ/ in put, /e/ in dress and merry, /e/ in strut and curry, /æ/ in trap and marry, /ɒ/ in lot and orange, /ɔ/ in ago and sofa.

Examples of long vowels: /i:/ in fleece, /u:/ in goose, /ɜ:/ in nurse and furry, /ɔ:/ in north, force and thought, /ɑ:/ in father, bath and start.

## **Long and short vowels**

RP's long vowels are slightly diphthongised, especially the high vowels /i:/ and /u:/, which are often narrowly transcribed in phonetic literature as diphthongs [ji] and [Su].

"Long" and "short" are relative to each other. Because of phonological process affecting vowel length, short vowels in one context can be longer than long vowels in another context. For example, the long vowel /i:/ in 'reach' ri:tʃ/ (which ends with a voiceless consonant) may be shorter than the short Vowel /j/ in the word 'ridge' /rɪdʒ/ (which ends with a voiced consonant). Wilk, cited in Gimson, published durations of English vowels with a mean value of 17.2 csec. for short vowels before voiced consonants but a mean value of 16.5 csec for long vowels preceding voiceless consonants.

Conversely, the short vowel /æ/ becomes longer if it is followed by a voiced consonant. Thus, bat is pronounced [bæt] and bad is [bæd] In natural speech, the plosives /t/ and /d/ may be unreleased utterance finally, and voiced consonants partly or

completely devoiced (as in [b%æÐd%]); thus distinction between these words would rest mostly on vowel length and the presence or absence of glottal reinforcement.

In addition to such length distinctions, unstressed vowels are both shorter and more centralised than stressed ones. In unstressed syllables occurring before vowels and in final position, contrasts between long and short high vowels are neutralised and short [i] and [u] occur (e.g. happy  $\hat{E}hæpi$ ), throughout  $lèyu\check{E}a\hat{S}t$ ). The neutralisation is common throughout many English dialects, though the phonetic realisation of e.g. [i] rather than [j] (a phenomenon called happy-tensing) is not as universal.

### **Unstressed vowels vary in quality:**

- /i/ (as in HAPPY) ranges from close front [i] to close-mid retracted front [e];
- /u/ (as in INFLUENCE) ranges from close advanced back [u] to close-mid retracted central [u]; according to the phonetician Jane Setter, the typical pronunciation of this vowel is a weakly rounded, mid-centralized close back unrounded vowel, transcribed in the IPA as [u"=] or simply [S"];
- /Y/ (as in COMMA) ranges from close-mid central [X] to open-mid central [∅].

### **Diphthongs and Triphthongs**

The centring diphthongs are gradually being eliminated in RP. The vowel /TY/ (as in "door", "boar") had largely merged with /TÐ/ by the Second World War, and the vowel /ŶY/ (as in "poor", "tour") has more recently merged with /TÐ/ as well among most speakers, although the sound /ŶY/ is still found in conservative speakers (and this is still the only pronunciation given in the OED). See poor-pour merger. The remaining two centring glides /jY//eY/ are increasingly pronounced as long monophthongs (jÐ) [[Ð], although without merging with any existing vowels.

The diphthong /YŶ/ is pronounced by some RP speakers in a noticeably different way when it occurs before /l/, if that consonant is syllable-final and not followed by a vowel (the context in which /l/ is pronounced as a "dark l"). The realization of /YŶ/ in this case begins with a more back, rounded and sometimes more open vowel quality, it may be

transcribed as [T<sup>h</sup>Ń] or (R<sup>h</sup>Ń). It is likely that the backness of the diphthong onset is the result of allophonic variation caused by the raising of the back of the tongue for the /ɪ/. If the speaker has "ɪ-vocalization" the /ɪ/ is realized as a back rounded vowel, which again is likely to cause backing and rounding in a preceding vowel as coarticulation effects. This phenomenon has been discussed in several blogs by John C Wells. It is possible, according to Wells, that a speaker with the (R<sup>h</sup>Ń] or [T<sup>h</sup>Ń] pronunciation may pronounce the words 'holy' and 'wholly' with different realizations of /Y<sup>h</sup>Ń/ (the former having [Y<sup>h</sup>Ń and the latter [R<sup>h</sup>Ń] or [T<sup>h</sup>Ń), thus creating a phonological distinction (the wholly-holy split). In the recording included in this article the phrase 'fold his cloak' contains examples of the /Y<sup>h</sup>Ń/ diphthong in the two different contexts. The onset of the pre-/ɪ/ diphthong in 'fold' is slightly more back and rounded than that in 'cloak', though the allophonic transcription does not at present indicate this.

RP also possesses the triphthongs /ajY/ as in tire, /aŃY/ as in tower, / Y<sup>h</sup>ŃY~/ as in lower, /ejY/ as in layer and /TjY~/ as in loyal. There are different possible realisations of these items: in slow, careful speech they may be pronounced as a two-syllable triphthong with three distinct vowel qualities in succession, or as a monosyllabic triphthong. In more casual speech the middle vowel may be considerably reduced, by a process known as smoothing, and in an extreme form of this process the triphthong even be reduced to a single vowel, though this is rare, and almost never found in the case of /TjY~/ In such a case the difference between /aŃY/, /ajY/, and /QD/ in tower, tire, and tar may be neutralised with all three units realised as (QD) or [aD] This type of smoothing is known as the tower-tire, tower-tar and tire-tar mergers.

## BATH vowel

There are differing opinions as regards whether /æ/ in the BATH lexical set can be considered RP. The pronunciations with /QD/ are invariably accepted as RP The English Pronouncing Dictionary does not admit // in BATH words and the Longman Pronunciation Dictionary lists them with as marker of non-RP status. John Wells wrote in a blog entry on 16 March 2012 that, when growing up in the north of England, he used /QD/ in "bath" and "glass", and considers this the only acceptable phoneme in RP. Others have argued that /æ/



is too categorical in the north of England to be excluded Clive Upton believes that /æ/ in these words must be considered within RP and has called the opposing view "south-centric". Upton's Oxford Dictionary of Pronunciation for Current English gives both variants for BATH words. A F. Gupta's survey of mostly middle-class students found that /æ/ was used by almost everyone who was from clearly north of the isogloss for BATH words She wrote, "There is no justification for the claims by Wells and Mugglestone at this is a sociolinguistic variable in the north, though it is a sociolinguistic variable on the areas on the border [the isogloss between north and south]". In study of speech in West Yorkshire, K. M. Petyt wrote that "the amount of /Qɒ/ usage is too low to correlate meaningfully with the usual factors", having found only two speakers (both having attended boarding schools in the south) who consistently used /Qɒ/.

Jack Windsor Lewis has noted that the Oxford Dictionary's position has changed several times on whether to include short / æ / within its prescribed pronunciation. The BBC Pronouncing Dictionary of British Names uses only Qɒ/, but its author, Graham Pointon, has stated on his blog that he finds both variants to be acceptable in place names.

Some research has concluded that many people in the North of England have a dislike of the /Qɒ/ vowel in BATH words. A. F Gupta wrote, "Many of the northerners were noticeably hostile to /arQɒs/, describing it as 'comical', 'snobbish', 'pompous' or even 'for morons.'" On the subject, K M Petyt wrote that several respondents "positively said that they did not prefer the long- vowel form or that they really detested it or even that it was incorrect" Mark Newbrook has assigned this phenomenon the name "conscious rejection", and has cited the NH vowel as "the main instance of conscious rejection of RP" in his research in West Wirral.

Most of these variants are used in the transcription devised by Clive Upton for the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (1993) and now used in many other Oxford University Press dictionaries.

The linguist Geoff Lindsey has argued that the system of transcription for RP has become outdated and has proposed a new system as a replacement.

## **Historical variation**

Like all accents, RP has changed with time. For example, sound recordings and films from the first half of the 20th century demonstrate that it was usual for speakers of RP to pronounce the /æ/ sound, as in land, with a vowel close to (I), so that land would sound similar to a present-day pronunciation of lend. RP is sometimes known as the Queen's English, but recordings show that even Queen Elizabeth II has changed her pronunciation over the past 50 years, no longer using an (I)-like vowel in words like land.

Some changes in RP during the 20th century include:

- Words such as cloth, gone, off, often were pronounced with /Tʌ/ instead of /R/, so that often and orphan was homophones (See lot-cloth split) The Queen still uses the older pronunciations, but it is rare to hear them on the BBC any more.
- There was a distinction between horse and hoarse with an extra diphthong /TY/ appearing in words like hoarse force, and pour.
- Any final y on a word is now represented as an /i/ - a symbol to cover either the traditional /j/ or the more modern /iɪ/, the latter of which has been common in the south of England for some time.
- Before the Second World War, the vowel of cup was a back vowel close to cardinal [CE] but has since shifted forward to a central position so that [P] is more accurate, phonetic transcription of this vowel as ɜ̄ is common partly for historical reasons.
- In the 1960s the transcription /Ŷ/ started to be used for the "GOAT" vowel instead of Daniel Jones's /ô/, reflecting a change in pronunciation since the beginning of the century.

The change in RP may be observed in the home of "BBC English". The BBC accent of the 1950s is distinctly different from today's: a news report from the 1950s is recognisable as such, and a mock-1950s BBC voice is used for comic effect in programmes wishing to satirise 1950s social attitudes such as the Harry Enfield Show and its "Mr Cholmondley-Warner" sketches.

More recently, in speakers born between 1981 and 1993, the vowel /R/ shifted up approaching [T] in quality. The vowels /Š/ and /uĐ/ have undergone fronting and reduction in the amount of lip-rounding (phonetically, this can be transcribed [Š<sup>˘</sup>] and [%o<sup>˘</sup>Đ], respectively), while /æ/ has become more open.

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