

British and American Pronunciation

Snezhina Dimitrova

In 1877, the British philologist Henry Sweet said that within a century “England, America, and Australia will be speaking mutually unintelligible languages owing to their independent changes of pronunciation.” Fortunately, this grim prediction did not come true. Still, more than 300 million people in the world today speak English as their mother tongue, and many differences between varieties of English do exist. But the differences in terms of vocabulary, grammar, or spelling are remarkably small compared with differences of accent. **Accent** is the term which linguists use when they refer to the pronunciation features typical of people who belong to the same geographical region or social class; speakers’ accents may also reflect their age, sex, level of education, etc. It is difficult to say exactly how many accents of English there are. Even within the United Kingdom, there are accents as varied as Scottish English, Irish English, Welsh English, Cockney, a newly-emerged accent called Estuary English, and many others. But as far as the teaching of English pronunciation to foreign learners is concerned, the choice of a model accent has traditionally been limited to what can be considered the two “standard” accents in Great Britain and the USA.

In the United States, this is an accent called **General American**, or **GA**. In fact, the label “General American” covers a range of accents which don’t exhibit any Eastern or Southern local colouring. General American is the pronunciation used by the majority of the population of the United States and by most US radio and TV announcers. It is also the model accent used in teaching English in such parts of the world as Central and South America, the Philippines, etc.

In Britain, the accent traditionally considered to be the standard pronunciation model is known under the somewhat strange name **Received Pronunciation**, or **RP** (where “Received” is interpreted as meaning “generally accepted”). It is regarded as the appropriate pronunciation model to be used in teaching English as a foreign language in those parts of the world where British rather than American English is traditionally taught. Although it is sometimes associated with the way educated people in the

south-east of England speak, RP is generally considered to be regionally “neutral”: it is not an accent typical of any particular geographical region in Britain, and can be heard anywhere in the country.

According to some authors¹, about 10% of the English are speakers of Received Pronunciation. On the other hand, the Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language tells us that today less than 3% of the people in Britain speak RP in a pure form. At the same time, it could be argued what the features of such a “pure” form are, because at present several varieties of RP exist. An example of the one most widely used – “General RP”² – is the accent which can be heard on the BBC. But there are at least two more varieties: a “conservative” form of RP spoken mostly by the older generation as well as in some professional circles, and often also associated with the “Establishment”, and “advanced” RP which is used predominantly by younger people belonging to certain professional and social groups, and is believed to set the trend for future developments.

In the last few years, however, a new term – **BBC pronunciation** has become popular. There are several reasons for its emergence, the most important of which are the existing diversity within RP itself, and the fact that today the term “Received Pronunciation” often evokes negative attitudes in many younger people because of the connotations of high socio-economic status and superiority which RP still has for many people. The term “BBC pronunciation”, on the other hand, doesn’t carry any such implications of social superiority and prestige.

There are many differences between British and American English which don’t concern pronunciation. For example, in England you live in a block of flats, take the underground and go on holiday. In the United States, you live in an apartment house, take the subway and go on vacation. These are examples of vocabulary differences. There are differences of grammar as well. In Britain you ask, “Have you got the time?” and receive an answer, “It’s ten past two.” In the United States you say, “Do you have the time?” and they tell you that “It’s ten after two.” British and American English also differ in terms of spelling. Thus, British English has *colour* and *centre*, where American English has *color* and *center*. *Catalogue* is spelt *catalog*, without *-ue* in the end in the United States, and so on. But it is in terms of pronunciation that British and American English differ most.

There are several ways in which accents may differ. They may have different phonemic inventories, that is, different numbers of distinctive vowel or consonant sounds. They may differ in terms of the actual phonetic realisations of their phonemes in the flow of speech. Other differences may involve phonotactics – the positions in the word and the syllable in which the phonemes of a language can occur, the pronunciation of groups of common lexical words, patterns of word stress, rhythm, intonation, and so on.

1. BBC pronunciation and General American differ most in terms of their vowel systems.

1.1 Long/tense and short/lax vowels

General American is usually described as having tense and lax monophthongs. The muscles of the lips and the tongue are tightened for the production of tense vowels and more relaxed for the articulation of lax vowels. Generally, long vowels are tense while short vowels are lax. But vowel length is relatively less important in GA than in BBC English: GA vowels differ in length, but these differences depend primarily on the environment in which the respective vowels occur. Nevertheless, most dictionaries which show the pronunciation differences between the two “standard” accents retain the length diacritic [ː] in the transcription of the GA vowels, because in this way the relationship between the two vowel systems is shown more clearly.

- BBC pronunciation is described as having 7 short relatively pure vowels: /ɪ, e, æ, ʌ, ɒ, ʊ, ə/. These vowels can be found in GA as well, with the exception of the “short o” – the back rounded /ɒ/ vowel heard in BBC English in words such as *not*, *lot*, *block*, etc. In GA, this vowel sound is replaced with /ɑː/ - the back unrounded vowel that one hears in BBC pronunciation in *last*, *part*, *fast*, etc. So *not* is pronounced /nɒt/ in BBC English and /nɑːt/ in General American, and *lot* is pronounced /lɒt/ and /lɑːt/ respectively. Other examples of words the stressed vowels in which are subject to the same variation in the two accents are:

	BBC pronunciation	General American
<i>box</i>	bɒks	bɑ:ks
<i>hot</i>	hɒt	hɑ:t
<i>o'clock</i>	ə'klɒk	ə'klɑ:k
<i>bother</i>	'bɒðə	'bɑ:ðər
<i>honest</i>	'ɒnɪst	'ɑ:nəst
<i>knowledge</i>	'nɒlɪdʒ	'nɑ:lɪdʒ
<i>non-profit</i>	ˌnɒn'prɒfɪt	ˌnɑ:n'pra:fɪt

Notice, however, that there are also words which are pronounced with /ɑ:/ in both accents, e.g., *father, palm, balm, part, start, large, card*, etc.

- On the other hand, in a number of words in which BBC pronunciation has /ɑ:/, General American has the front open /æ/ vowel, e.g.

	BBC pronunciation	General American
<i>class</i>	klɑ:s	klæs
<i>last</i>	lɑ:st	læst
<i>ask</i>	ɑ:sk	æsk
<i>answer</i>	'ɑ:nsə	'ænsər
<i>laugh</i>	lɑ:f	læf
<i>advance</i>	əd'vɑ:ns	əd'væns
<i>can't</i>	kɑ:nt	kænt

- The long back mid rounded vowel /ɔ:/ which in BBC English occurs in words such as *thought, walk, law* is usually opener and less rounded in GA. In fact, the General American vowels in the open back area are characterized by a considerable amount of variation. Some Americans pronounce the above words with a vowel quality which is lower than the BBC vowel but is still characterized by a certain amount of lip-rounding. Some dictionaries use the

symbol /ɒ:/ to transcribe this GA vowel. But most words belonging to this large group have an alternative pronunciation in General American – one in which the vowel has lost its roundedness, thus becoming /ɑ:/. For example,

	BBC pronunciation	General American
<i>thought</i>	θɔ:t	θɑ:t
<i>caught</i>	kɔ:t	kɑ:t
<i>daughter</i>	'dɔ:tə	'dɑ:t̩ər
<i>author</i>	'b:θə	'ɑ:θər
<i>walk</i>	wɔ:k	wɑ:k
<i>autumn</i>	'b:təm	'ɑ:t̩əm

- All GA vowels are characterized by r-colouring when they are followed by the letter *r* in the spelling, e.g.,

	BBC pronunciation	General American
<i>car</i>	kɑ:	kɑ:r
<i>park</i>	pɑ:k	pɑ:rk
<i>start</i>	stɑ:t	stɑ:rt
<i>more</i>	mɔ:	mɔ:r
<i>course</i>	kɔ:s	kɔ:rs
<i>morning</i>	'mɔ:nɪŋ	'mɔ:rɪŋ

This r-colouring is particularly noticeable in the case of the mid central vowels /ɜ:/ and /ə/ as in *bird*, *nurse*, or in the last syllable of *another*. Dictionaries sometimes use special transcription symbols to show the pronunciation of these vowels in GA, e.g., /bɜːd/, /nɜːs/, /əˈnʌðə/. In this book, the r-coloured mid central vowels of General American are transcribed with the symbols for the respective BBC vowels followed by /r/, e.g., /bɜːrd/, /nɜːrs/, /əˈnʌðər/.

- The difference between unstressed /ɪ/ and /ə/ is often lost in GA, e.g.,

	BBC pronunciation	General American
<i>rabbit</i>	ˈræbɪt	ˈræbət
<i>robin</i>	ˈrɒbɪn	ˈrɑːbən
<i>packet</i>	ˈpækɪt	ˈpækət
<i>rocket</i>	ˈrɒkɪt	ˈrɑːkət
<i>notice</i>	ˈnəʊtɪs	ˈnoʊtəs
<i>watches</i>	ˈwɒtʃɪz	ˈwɑːtʃəz
<i>wanted</i>	ˈwɒntɪd	ˈwɑːntəd

1.2 Diphthongs

- BBC pronunciation has 3 diphthongs ending in /ə/ - /ɪə, eə, uə/, as in *here, there, poor*. General American has no separate phonemic diphthongs which end in /ə/. The vowels in the above three words are pronounced as sequences of ɪ + r, e + r, and ʊ + r, respectively. (But remember that /ʊə/ is often replaced by /ɜː/ in BBC pronunciation.) For example,

	BBC pronunciation	General American
<i>near</i>	nɪə	nɪr
<i>beard</i>	bɪəd	bɪrd
<i>care</i>	keə	ker
<i>where</i>	weə	wer
<i>pure</i>	pjʊə, pjɜː	pjʊr
<i>Europe</i>	ˈjʊərəp	ˈjʊrəp
<i>poor</i>	pɜː, puə	pʊr

- In BBC pronunciation the diphthong in words such as *no, go, don't* has a central starting point - /əʊ/. In General American, the starting point of this

diphthong varies a great deal, but is generally more back and rounded - /ou/,
e.g.,

	BBC pronunciation	General American
<i>no</i>	nəʊ	noʊ
<i>go</i>	gəʊ	goʊ
<i>note</i>	nəʊt	noʊt
<i>home</i>	həʊm	hoʊm
<i>don't</i>	dəʊnt	doʊnt
<i>photo</i>	'fəʊtəʊ	'foʊtəʊ

2. Consonants

The consonantal systems of BBC pronunciation and General American do not differ considerably. The overall number of consonant phonemes in the two standard accents is the same. The differences concern their phonetic realization and their distribution.

- One of the most typical features of GA concerns the realization of /t/ between vowels. In this position, both in individual words and across word boundaries, /t/ is pronounced as a quick tap and is accompanied by voicing, so that it sounds almost like a /d/. The symbol most frequently used in pronunciation dictionaries to show a voiced /t/ is /t̚/, for example,

	BBC pronunciation	General American
<i>atom</i>	'ætəm	'æt̚əm
<i>city</i>	'sɪtɪ	'sɪt̚ɪ
<i>writer</i>	'raɪtə	'raɪt̚ər
<i>a lot of</i>	ə 'lɒt əv	ə 'lɑ:t̚ əv
<i>get it</i>	'get ɪt	'geɪt̚ ɪt

However, there is no t-voicing in *attend*, *return*, *attack*, etc., because the process of tapping and voicing the /t/ takes place in GA only when the first of the two vowels is

stressed. Neither is the /t/ voiced in *lightness* /^llaɪtnəs/, *lighthouse* /^llaɪthaʊs/: in these words, /t/ is not immediately followed by a vowel. T-voicing also takes place when the stressed vowel is followed by /r/ or by /n/, e.g., *party* /^pɑ:rtɪ/, *reporter* /rɪ^pɔ:rtər/, *twenty* /^ttwentɪ/, *hunter* /^hʌntər/. /t/ is also voiced when it is followed not by a vowel but by the syllabic lateral /l/, e.g., *battle* /^bætl/, *little* /^lɪtl/, *frontal* /^ffrʌntl/.

- Probably the most important difference between the consonants of the two accents concerns the distribution of /r/. BBC English is a non-rhotic accent, and in it this consonant occurs only before vowels. There is no such constraint on its distribution in GA, which is a rhotic accent: in it, /r/ is pronounced everywhere there is an *r* letter in the spelling: before a vowel, after a vowel and in front of another consonant, e.g.,

	BBC pronunciation	General American
<i>cry</i>	kraɪ	kraɪ
<i>force</i>	fɔ:s	fɔ:rs
<i>sharp</i>	ʃɑ:p	ʃɑ:rp
<i>car</i>	kɑ:	kɑ:r
<i>fear</i>	fɪə	fɪr
<i>care</i>	keə	ker

- Many speakers of General American don't pronounce /j/ in a stressed syllable after the alveolar consonants /t, d, n/, e.g.,

	BBC pronunciation	General American
<i>tune</i>	tju:n	tu:n
<i>due</i>	dju:	du:
<i>news</i>	nju:z	nu:z
<i>reduce</i>	rɪ'dju:s	rɪ'du:s
<i>subdue</i>	səb'dju:	səb'du:
<i>student</i>	'stju:dnt	'stu:dnt

- The two variants (allophones) of /l/ - the “clear” [l] and the “dark” [ɫ] are very similar in General American, and to a speaker of BBC English both of them may sound “dark”.
- The consonant /ʃ/ is voiced – pronounced as /ʒ/ - in a number of words, e.g.,

	BBC pronunciation	General American
<i>excursion</i>	ɪk'skɜ:ʃn	ɪk'skɜ:rʒn
<i>version</i>	'vɜ:ʃn	'vɜ:rʒn
<i>Asia</i>	'eɪʃə	'eɪʒə
<i>Persia</i>	'pɜ:ʃə	'pɜ:rʒə

3. Other differences between BBC pronunciation and GA

- There are a number of suffixes the vowels in which are pronounced differently in the two standard accents.

There is a tendency for the *-ile* suffix in *hostile*, *fragile*, *futile*, etc. (pronounced /-aɪl/ in BBC English) to have a weak vowel or a syllabic consonant and to be pronounced /əɪl/ or /l/ in General American, e.g.,

	BBC pronunciation	General American
<i>agile</i>	'ædʒaɪl	'ædʒəɪl, ædʒl
<i>hostile</i>	'hɒstaɪl	'hɑ:stl
<i>futile</i>	'fju:taɪl	'fju:tɫ
<i>fragile</i>	'frædʒaɪl	'frædʒl
<i>mobile</i>	'məʊbaɪl	'moubɫ

The suffixes *-ary*, *-ery*, *-ory*, *-mony* usually have a weak vowel in BBC pronunciation but a strong one in GA, e.g.,

	BBC pronunciation	General American
<i>customary</i>	'kʌstəməri	'kʌstəmeri
<i>dictionary</i>	'dɪkʃənəri	'dɪkʃənəri
<i>monastery</i>	'mɒnəstəri	'mɑ:nəsteri
<i>mandatory</i>	'mændətəri	'mændətɔ:ri
<i>testimony</i>	'testiməni	'testəmouni
<i>ceremony</i>	'serəməni	'serəmouni
<i>territory</i>	'terətəri	'terətɔ:ri

- Some words have different stress patterns in the two accents. For example, *detail* is usually pronounced /'di:teɪl/ in BBC pronunciation and /dɪ'teɪl/ in GA, *ballet* is usually /'bæleɪ/ in BBC but /bæl'eɪ/ in GA, many two-syllable verbs ending in *-ate* have stress on the suffix in BBC pronunciation but on the first syllable in GA, e.g.,

	BBC pronunciation	General American
<i>rotate</i>	rəʊ'teɪt	'routet
<i>donate</i>	dəʊ'neɪt	'dounet
<i>dictate</i>	dɪk'teɪt	'dɪkteɪt

- Finally, there are a number of words the pronunciation differences in which don't follow any predictable pattern, e.g.,

	BBC pronunciation	General American
<i>schedule</i>	ʃedju:l	'skedju:l
<i>either</i>	'aɪðə	'i:ðər
<i>clerk</i>	klɑ:k	klɜ:rk
<i>nourish</i>	'nʌrɪʃ	'nɜ:rɪʃ
<i>nougat</i>	'nu:gɑ:	'nu:gət
<i>apparatus</i>	ˌæpə'reɪtəs	ˌæpə'ræʃəs

simultaneous

ˌsɪmɪlˈteɪniəs

ˌsɑːmɪlˈteɪniəs

In conclusion, it must be said that there is a lot of accentual variation both within Britain and the United States. Also, some Eastern accents in the USA sound closer to BBC pronunciation than to General American, while some British accents resemble General American rather than BBC English. Nevertheless, BBC pronunciation and General American still are, and will most probably continue to be, the two accents which learners of English who wish to acquire (near) native-like pronunciation take as their model.

Exercises

Exercise I

Give examples of differences between British and American English in terms of:

	British English	American English
vocabulary		
grammar		
spelling		

Exercise II

Put these words in one of the two columns below according to the pronunciation of their stressed vowel in GA.

part, calm, fast, grass, laugh, palm, last, bark, large, after, psalm, past, can't, chance, advance, demand, father

/ɑ:/	/æ/
part,	

Exercise III

Transcribe the vowels in the words below. The first one is done for you.

	BBC pronunciation	GA
lot	ɒ	ɑ:
start		
war		
not		
north		
far		
bad		
cast		

Exercise IV

What is the vowel in the words below in BBC pronunciation and in General American - /ɒ/, /ɔ:/, /ɑ:/ or /æ/?

sport, wrong, gas, task, advantage, spot, grasp, glance, raw, storm, map

BBC pronunciation

- /ɒ/.....
- /ɔ:/ sport,
- /ɑ:/.....

/æ/.....

GA

/ɔ:/ sport,

/ɑ:/.....

/æ/.....

Exercise V

Use phonemic transcription to show the pronunciation of these words in General American.

fearful /'fɪrfl/

hospital / /

attitude / /

broadcast / /

brochure / /

product / /

experience / /

afterthought / /

Exercise VI

Underline the words in which /t/ will be voiced in General American.

atom, re-sit, writer, atomic, attitude, attic, assertive, attach, potato, matter, pretty, between, contract

Exercise VII

Read these words and arrange them in the columns below according to the pronunciation of their suffix vowel

customary, necessary, testimony, monastery, ordinary, category, futile, voluntary, matrimony, missile, hostile, territory, dictionary, melancholy

BBC pronunciation	General American
-(ə)ri customary,	-eri customary,
-əni	-oʊni
-aɪ	-ɔ:ri
-(ə)li	-əl
	-ɔ:li

Exercise VIII

Use phonemic transcription to show the BBC and the GA pronunciation of the following words:

	BBC pronunciation	General American
waiter	¹ weɪtə	¹ weɪtər
herb		
product		
primary		
tomato		
neither		
leisure		
clerk		
lieutenant		
progress		

Exercise IX

What are the stress patterns of these words in BBC pronunciation and in General American?

laboratory, advertisement, dictate (vb.), limousine, ballet, frontier, vibrate, address (noun), inquiry, magazine, weekend, premiere

BBC pronunciation	General American
la'boratory,	'laboratory,

Exercise X

In order for two words to rhyme, they must have the same vowel followed by the same consonant(s) in their stressed syllables. Which of the following words rhyme in BBC pronunciation and in General American? Put a tick in the appropriate box below.

	BBC pronunciation	GA
park – lark	✓	✓
clerk - work		
laugh – staff		
dance - advance		
demand – respond		
brought - court		
past – last		

Exercise XI

Diagnostic passage

Read and record the text below. Then compare your recording with the one on the cassette and look at the comments.

I arrived in New South College on a Sunday afternoon. The porter at the lodge told me how to get to the central office block, where a clerk at the Accommodations Office gave me my keys. So I wandered about, looking for the pretty little cottage I had seen on the colour photograph in the prospectus. I hadn't thought it necessary to ask the clerk for directions. But it was getting dark and there was just nobody around. The beautiful blonde girl I had momentarily seen a minute ago had disappeared in the direction of the car park. Everybody seemed to have gone to spend their leisure time in the city. The dark green bushes on both sides of the path were beginning to look hostile, and I couldn't help thinking that I had got lost.

Comments

The aim of your recording and these comments is to help you to determine which of the two standard accents your pronunciation is closer to – BBC English or General American. Listen to your recording of the diagnostic passage, compare it with the one on the cassette which accompanies this book, and read the comments below. Alternatively, before reading the comments, you could try to analyse the passage yourself, and then compare your analysis with the one given here.

The superscripts have been added in the text below in order to help you find more easily the words and phrases which the comments refer to.

I arrived in New¹ South College² on² a Sunday afternoon^{3,4}. The porter^{4,5} at the lodge² told⁶ me how to get to the central office^{2,12} block², where a clerk⁷ at the Accommodations² Office^{2,12} gave me my keys. So⁶ I wandered^{2,4} about, looking for⁴ the pretty⁵ little⁵ cottage^{2,5} I had seen on² the colour⁴ photograph^{6,3} in the prospectus². I hadn't thought^{8,11} it necessary⁹ to ask³ the clerk⁷ for⁴ directions. But¹¹ it was getting⁵ dark⁴ and there¹⁰ was just nobody^{6,2} around. The beautiful⁵ blonde² girl⁴ I had momentarily^{6,9} seen a minute¹² ago⁶ had disappeared¹⁰ in the direction of the car⁴ park⁴. Everybody² seemed to have gone² to spend their¹⁰ leisure⁷ time in the city⁵. The dark⁴

green bushes on² both⁶ sides of the path³ were⁴ beginning to look hostile⁹, and I couldn't help thinking that¹¹ I had got² lost².

¹ *New* is pronounced /nju:/ in BBC English, but usually /nu:/ in General American.

² These words have the “short o” vowel /ɒ/ in BBC pronunciation, but /ɑ:/ in General American.

³ These words are pronounced with /ɑ:/ in BBC English and with /æ/ in General American.

⁴ In these words, the *r* comes after a vowel and before another consonant, or at the end of the word. General American is a rhotic accent, and in it all letters *r* from the spelling are pronounced. The words in which the *r* comes before a vowel and will be pronounced in both accents are not marked.

⁵ The consonant /t/ in these words is between vowels, the first of which is stressed. In General American, /t/ in this position is voiced and tapped.

⁶ The diphthong in these words is pronounced /əʊ/ in BBC English, while in General American it has a back rounded starting point and is usually pronounced /oʊ/.

⁷ *Clerk* is pronounced /klɑ:k/ in BBC English and /klɜ:rk/ in General American. *Leisure* is pronounced /^llezə/ and /^lli:zər/, respectively.

⁸ These words, which in BBC pronunciation have the rounded /ɔ:/ vowel, are usually pronounced with an unrounded vowel in General American - /ɑ:/.

⁹ The suffix vowels in these words are the other way about in the two standard accents: in *necessary* and *momentarily*, *-ary* and *-arily* have weak vowels in BBC pronunciation and strong vowels in General American. *Hostile* has a strong vowel in the suffix in BBC pronunciation and a weak one in General American.

¹⁰ The BBC centring diphthongs /ɪə/ and /eə/ are replaced in GA pronunciation by a vowel + r.

¹¹ The /t/ between vowels will most probably be voiced in the phrases *thought it, but it, that I*: t-voicing in General American occurs not only within words, but also across word boundaries.

¹² The weak vowel in these words is usually /ə/ in General American.

Were you able to determine which of the two accents – BBC pronunciation or General American – your pronunciation is closer to? Try to be consistent and to adhere to the model you have chosen. Having understood the major ways in which the two accents differ, try to get rid of those features which are not typical of “your” pronunciation model.

Notes

¹ According to Wells (1982:118), “Even with the more generous definitions ... not more than about 10 percent of the population of England could be considered as RP speakers.”

² The terms “General”, “Conservative”, and “Advanced RP” were used by Gimson (1970), whereas Cruttenden (1994), following Wells (1982), prefers to talk about “3 main types of RP: General RP, Refined RP and Regional RP” (1994:81).

³ The term “BBC pronunciation” was first put forward in the Introduction to Jones (1997, ed. by Roach and Hartman) and is further discussed in Roach (2000).