

English Pronunciation of the Unmarked Young
- a review of *Oxford Dictionary of Pronunciation for Current English*
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The *Oxford Dictionary of Pronunciation for Current English* (ODP) is a brand new dictionary that is as big and comprehensive as the two great dictionaries we are already familiar with, Daniel Jones's (now Roach & Hartman's) *English Pronouncing Dictionary* in its 15th edition (EPD 15), and John Wells's new edition of the *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* (LPD 2000). It is in fact bigger, with 100,000 entries, compared to the 80,000 entries in EPD 15 and LPD 2000; it has 1,208 pages and another 20 pages of front matter, compared to 559 plus 19 for EPD 15, and 870 plus 26 for LPD 2000. It is also more expensive: a penny short of £30, and is available in hardback only; EPD 15 is ten pence over £16 in paperback, and LPD 2000 a penny short of £18.

Oxford University Press appear to be a little coy about their new dictionary. There was no great fanfare; in fact, many of us came across it more or less by accident. It is not marketed by the English Language Teaching division of the press despite the reference to *Current English* in its title, and it does not feature in their list of *Dictionaries and Reference* on their website; nor does it come up under *Phonology* in their online Linguistics catalogue. But it *is* worth knowing about, for although it shares a lot in common with the other two dictionaries, it does strike out on its own path in some respects.

The compilers call themselves “specialists in accent and dialect” (p vii) and regard it as ironic that they of all people have been called upon to act as arbiters of the national habits or norms of British and American speakers of English. Clive Upton is at Leeds University and acknowledges a debt to John Widdowson, Harold Orton and David Parry, famed for the *Survey of English Dialects* and *The Linguistic Map of England*. William A Kretzschmar, Jr and Rafal Konopka belong to the University of Georgia, and their allegiances seem to include Hans Kurath, Raven I McDavid and *The Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada*. Such is their pedigree.

Their British model is a “younger, unmarked RP” (p xi), younger, that is, than the traditional RP speaker, and not ‘marked’ in respect of class or region: “an accent which, for native speakers, carries connotations of education and sophistication but no especially narrow regional overtones and certainly no serious negative judgements.... used by most national radio and television newsreaders and by very many middle-aged and younger professional people” (p xi), and labelled as ‘broadcast RP’ – hints of ‘BBC English/pronunciation’, the term preferred by EPD 15 and LPD 2000.

Well, how young and unmarked is it? There are certainly some visible signs of change from tradition. First of all, the symbol /æ/ is dropped in favour of /a/ to indicate the more open tongue position for the TRAP vowel that is clearly favoured by the younger generation in Britain. None of my students – not one – uses a pronunciation that would require the *phonetic* symbol [æ]. This is a gesture mooted in EPD 15 (p ix) where the more open articulation is recognized in their vowel chart. I think this is the right decision; it marks out visibly a very noticeable distinction between British and

American pronunciation, and it, incidentally, removes one unfamiliar symbol for students of British English.

Furthermore, the OPD lists /a/ as an alternative to /ɑ:/ in the BATH words; this is the one concession permitted to northern speakers of ‘broadcast RP’ in the dictionary. It is justified on the grounds that this RP is “not to be considered as a southern-British phenomenon” (p xii). This attitude contrasts notably with EPD 15 where no such concession is permitted, but also with LPD 2000 where /bæθ/ is treated as a localized northern form. Perhaps this concession also reflects the Leeds base of one of the compilers! I think this too is a move in the right direction, giving equal status to both articulations, which are now both heard on BBC news. (Huw Edwards, from Wales, steadfastly refused to modify his pronunciation in this respect when he became a national newsreader for the BBC, and thereby became a local hero!)

The third innovation is the use of the symbol /ɛ/ for DRESS words. I have long advocated this (see also Trench 2002) on practical as well as phonetic grounds. Many of our students do Phonetics not only to study English standard pronunciation, but also to compare one accent with another, and one language with another. For those purposes we need to keep the distinction between IPA /e/ and /ɛ/, so that the DRESS vowel in ‘RP’ can be shown to be ‘parallel’ to the /ɛ/ vowel of other languages and distinguished from their /e/ vowel; think of French *les/lait*, German *beten/Betten*, Welsh *hen/pen*, etc. IPA /ɛ/ represents the current phonetic quality of the DRESS vowel, and has the practical value of allowing contrastive analysis in this respect to be unambiguous.

There is a fourth innovation that I am delighted to report, and that is the recognition of the significant change in the production of the SQUARE vowel in Britain. I check the production of SQUARE with each annual set of my students, and practically all the English students produce it with a long monophthong [ɛ:], whereas the [ɛə] of the students from Wales is regarded as Welsh English, ie ‘marked’ for a regional variation. It is quite easy to get students to perceive their articulation of this vowel by getting them to check for any tongue movement in their pronunciation of the word *air*, a word not ‘cluttered’ by any consonantal accompaniment.

The unstressed, unchecked, final vowel in HAPPY is given as /-i/, following LPD’s lead (and subsequently adopted by EPD 15), and therefore does not count as an innovation, but the use of [ɪ] for its unstressed but checked counterpart, eg in *added*, probably does. I say “probably” because OPD is not the first to acknowledge the widespread variability of /ɪ~ə/ in such environments, but may be the first to ‘capture’ this variability with a single symbol. Its distribution is presented on p xiii and xvii, and includes *-ness*, *-it*, *-ily*, *-ible*, *-ical*, *-ace* (eg *palace*), *-is* (eg *appendicitis*) and *-ist*, but not *-ism*, nor *-ic*, *-ish*, *-age* and *-ing*. This variability was neatly illustrated in one of *The Guardian*’s corrections and clarifications in April 2002: their correspondent had dictated over the phone that “Hawkins ... kept O’Sullivan scoreless”, which was interpreted by the editor as “Hawkins ... capped O’Sullivan’s score list”! ([θ] is introduced likewise for unstressed *-ful*.)

OPD differs from LPD in that [ɪ] and [ʊ] are preferred to LPD's initiative in the use of [i] and [u] for unstressed vowels immediately preceding another vowel: OPD has /reɪdɪəʊ/, whereas LPD 2000 (and EPD 15) have /reɪdiəʊ/.

These are all changes that I observe in current English, but I am greatly puzzled by one other innovation of theirs. Their symbol for the PRICE vowel is /Λɪ/, and they justify it on phonetic grounds: "The start-point for the unmarked BR (=British) diphthong is judged to be now characteristically in the area of *but* (half-open, back centralized), rather than the extreme low front position [a]" (p xii). They cite MacCarthy (1978) for further justification. But MacCarthy used the symbol [ʌ] for the starting point of the MOUTH diphthong too, which OPD does not; and furthermore, the vowel diagrams in MacCarthy (1978: 95) simply do not justify his (MacCarthy's), or their, choice of symbol, since both diphthongs are shown as starting from a very open front position. There is no hint in the vowel charts in EPD 15, LPD 2000, Crystal (1995) or Roach (2000) of anything but the traditional description. The latest Gimson (2001: 132) gives [Λɪ] as an alternative in the speech of some Scottish speakers who distinguish *tide* /tΛɪd/ from *tied* /taɪd/; and Kreidler (1997: 75) offers [Λɪ] as an alternative for "most Canadians and some Americans... before voiceless consonants (*right*)". The authorities seem agreed that [Λɪ] is very restricted both phonologically and regionally, so I feel justified in remaining "greatly puzzled".

Just two consonantal articulations are considered. Firstly, /tʃ, dʒ/ are treated as genuine alternatives to /tj, dj/ in *destitute* and *reduce* (and in *Tuesday* and *duo*, etc). EPD 15 allows them in the "more casual, informal style of speaking ... for common words" (p vi) – I think this is a dubious argument Tench (1997), while LPD 2000 treats the alternatives as "widespread in England among educated speakers, but which are nevertheless judged to fall outside RP" (p xiii). OPD considers them as legitimate alternatives within 'broadcast RP', which is surely the case – listen to our newsreaders!

The second is the controversial 'intrusive' /r/. No controversy for OPD; it is always included. No controversy for EPD 15: it is always *excluded*, as too controversial for foreign learners. LPD 2000 devotes a special note to *R-liaison* (p 629) and recognizes its existence as an option not only at the ends of words, but also within words as in *thawing*. OPD does likewise. Since neither OPD nor LPD are specifically designed for learners, it seems legitimate to allow /r/ to intrude in such cases. Many will remember newsreaders handing over to Barbara 'r' Edwards for the weather forecast!

All these cases – except the /Λɪ/ for PRICE – seem to me to reflect recent trends in the formal 'broadcast' speech of newsreaders and seem to be acceptable to the listening public, since there does not seem to be any public outcry against them. People do not complain about /'ɪʃu:z/ as opposed to /'ɪsju:z/ any more, and there do not seem to be any issues for complaint in the above cases /'aɪðə~'i:ðə/. The OPD does seem to represent this greater tolerance.

But there is another test of the 'currentness' of the pronunciation presented, and that is to use the LPD 2000 profiles of pronunciation change. In my review of LPD 2000 (Tench 2001), I praised Wells's 'opinion polls' and illustrated them with a few

examples, including *schedule*, *princess* and *kilometre*. The statistics indicate that whereas a good 90% of 70 year olds in UK begin the first word with /ʃ/, about 67% of 25 year olds begin it with /sk/, which is thus most likely to become the norm in the future, but all three dictionaries list the /ʃ/ pronunciation first. The influence of American pronunciation probably accounts for this change, as well as recognizing an analogy with *scheme*, *schizophrenic*, etc; *schism* is listed with /sk/ first in EPD 15 and LPD 2000 (apparently 71% in UK prefer it to /s/). I am certain that /sk/ will eventually become the ‘current’ form in UK as well as US.

Does *princess* get stressed on the first or second syllable? Traditionally, the second in UK, but the first in US. All three dictionaries have exactly the same information, although LPD 2000 shows a graph indicating that nearly half British 25 year olds go for the first syllable like the Americans; no doubt, another sign of the times.

And *kilometre*? LPD 2000’s statistics indicate that in this word too Britain is following an American lead, with the stress on the second syllable rather than the first. That preference in UK has jumped from 48% in 1988 to 57% in 1998, yet LPD 2000 still lists it second to /ˈkɪləmi:tə/; OPD does likewise. EPD 15 lists /kɪˈlɒmɪtə/ first for UK; in this case, EPD 15 appears to be the more ‘current’.

The editors of OPD claim that the order of listing is not significant: “The ordering of variant pronunciations does not imply that one form is more desirable or ‘correct’ than another” (p ix). But there must be some motivation for the order. Look at *poor* and *sure* for instance. The British /pɔ:/ is listed first in all three dictionaries; LPD 2000 provides the crucial statistic that 82% of 25 year olds in UK now prefer this pronunciation to /pʊə/. 60% of them also prefer /ʃɔ:/ for *sure*; over 50% of 45 year olds do also. Hence, LPD 2000’s listing of /ʃɔ:/ before /ʃʊə/. Sure, the Queen says /ʃʊə/, but Prince Charles says /ʃɔ:/; it seems to me that this is now ‘current’ form, and OPD’s and EPD 15’s listing of the traditional form first tells me that in this respect they are less ‘current’.

It would be an interesting exercise to check all LPD 2000’s profiles with OPD’s ordering of variants, but that is an exercise too far for this review, but it would be an efficient way of checking their claim of representing a “younger, unmarked RP”. My general impression is that OPD is ‘current’ in its indication of the phonetic qualities of the sounds described above (apart from /ʌɪ/), but it appears less so in the five lexical items discussed. Look, for instance, also at *one*: OPD only gives /wʌn/ (as EPD 15 does), but LPD 2000 also gives /wɒn/ described on p xiii as “a localized northern form”, but recognized on p 533 as increasingly common in the younger generation.

I have paid particular attention to pronunciation features that are British, because that is what I am. On the American side, they have adopted a model that follows “the trend among younger educated speakers of exclusion of regional features. This model is quite similar to what one hears in the national broadcast media, since broadcasters have long participated in the more general trend of younger educated speakers” (p xiv). I quote at length to show how ‘broadcast’ speech has been taken as a guide for American pronunciation as it has for British, and how their description of the model parallels EPD15’s “Network English” (p vi). But their transcription conventions for American pronunciation are decidedly American! No vowel length is indicated, which

is the American tradition. /æ/ is retained. Of course, there is no /ɒ/, no /ʌ/, and no /ɜː, ɪə, εə - or εː, uə/ either. So, most of the vowel symbols are different. Whereas EPD 15 and LPD 2000 use symbols that are ‘convertible’ between British and American articulations, OPD does not. That is why OPD transcribes each entry in full in both accents, even when an entry is, occasionally, identical.

OPD transcribes all the variants in full too. This can look quite daunting, even pedantic, when, for instance, *educationalist* appears 8 times in its British variations – variations between syllabic and non-syllabic /n/ and /l/ and between /dj/ and /dʒ/. (EPD 15 and LPD 2000 do all these variations in two lines each.) Full versions of *all* variants in *both* accents help to explain why OPD is twice the bulk of EPD 15 and 50% bulkier than LPD 2000.

OPD is nevertheless very accessible. It displays its entries in four columns per page, each headword in large, bold type. EPD 15 looks less inviting with its smaller type and three columns, whereas LPD is more pleasing to the eye with its two columns, an intermediate size type and two colours.

OPD needs a new issue immediately to correct the vowel charts on p x. Both the British and American vowel charts have acquired an extraneous [e] in addition to the proclaimed /ε/, and the British chart is lacking /ɜː, ɪə, uə/ and the new /εː/. The [e] reappears on p xviii as an additional ‘foreign’ sound. The consonant list for both accents on p x includes a mysterious extra fricative [æ̃], which I wondered at first might be a typo for American/Scottish [ɹ/ɹ̥], but no, the *wh*- alternative is given as /ʰw/. Syllabic consonants are given as /m-, n-, l-/ instead of as /m̩, n̩, l̩/. All this looks surprisingly shoddy for a reference book that otherwise is very well produced.

One final question: I just wonder if the OUP English Language Teaching division will adopt the new transcription system for their future publications. They did once do something like that when they adopted Windsor Lewis’s (1972) transcription system in their ELT dictionaries, only to drop it following an outcry from teachers!

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