

British and American Phonology: Variation or Contrast

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Résumé:

Cet article essaye d'identifier quelques aspects de dissimilitudes phonologique et phonétique entre l'anglais américain standard (SAE) et l'anglais RP (Received Pronunciation ou Anglais Britannique Standard). Ceci afin de découvrir si ces différences pourraient être considérées comme contrastives. Malgré les quelques différences grammaticales entre les deux systèmes, il y a eu plus de similitudes dans l'orthographe standard que dans la prononciation standard et donc plus de conservation de la forme écrite que de la forme verbale. Nous essayons également d'analyser si interlocuteur de deux ou plusieurs « anglais » standard pourrait être considéré comme bilingue ou multilingue.

As English foreign learners, we do not, initially, distinguish between British or American English. In fact, even before realising that there are differences between the two, we soon discover that English is spoken not only in these countries but also in the British Isles, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, as well as in significant communities elsewhere. Indeed, codified English books expose as many dialects, accents¹, and standards² as we have hardly suspected to be possible in a single language. Besides, when collecting data concerning English phonetics and phonology, we have become acquainted with the term 'Englishes' that has been recently and increasingly used among linguists such as B. B. Kachru, Smith, Mc Arthur, Crystal, or Swiderski to refer to the differing existing English

¹ Lyons (1968) and Trudgill (1990) claim that any speaker of a language is a dialect speaker, and that the way they pronounce sounds is called accent. In a sense, dialect includes grammar, morphology, vocabulary and accent is the way with which we speak.

² According to Trudgill, a standard language is the codified dialect used in formal contexts i.e. Standard English is the one we write and read in books and the one we hear from educated speakers (1990: 2).

standards. In a sense, we do not have to acquire a unique English phonemic system any longer.

This paper tries to identify a few aspects of phonological and phonetic dissimilarity between Standard American English (SAE)³ and RP English and to discover whether or not those differences might be viewed as contrastive. Even if there are a few spelling and grammatical differences between both systems, there has been more agreement concerning standard spelling than standard pronunciation and more preservation of the written form via printing than of the spoken one. We also endeavour to analyse whether a speaker of two or more Standard ‘Englishes’ could be considered as bilingual or multilingual.

We mainly focus on one form of English, the one which is spoken by some native speakers (such as RP for England and SAE for the United States of America) and taught as the standard ‘form’ at school. We concentrate on ‘Englishes’ of educated speakers, skipping over other regional accents. Our discussion of these Standard ‘Englishes’ is not based on the assumption of their being prestigious but, on the assessment of their being ‘correct’ standards in the eyes of their speakers.

1. RP English Vs SAE Phonology and Phonetics

The meaning of *Received Pronunciation* abbreviated RP was attributed to the elite’s pronunciation in the nineteenth-century, it was, then, the most accepted accent in upper-class societies. Although the British society has changed, RP has remained the accent of educated and upper-class people. It is through public schools that RP has been maintained.

As far as Standard American English is concerned, people who migrated from the British Isles to the British colonies preserved not only their culture but their language too. They arrived from different parts of the Isles (England, Scotland, Wales, or Ireland) and came into contact to create new communities. After two or three generations, new varieties came into existence with basically assorted features and

³ Some linguists such as Trudgill and Hannah (2002) use the term *General American* to refer to American educated speech in formal settings. Others such as Kretzschmar (in Schneider *et al.* 2004) prefer to identify it as *Standard American English*. The latter will be our label for this variety.

mixtures from their fathers' different dialects (Trudgill; Hannah, 2002).

American standard developed because of demographic and public education. The first settlers in the diverse colonies were from different areas with different cultures and pronunciations. After several generations, the colonies sounded almost alike and no one was as identical as that of England. Nowadays, in comparison with RP, American English does not have one single accent that can be considered as neutral or 'regionless' by its speakers (Trudgill; Hannah, 2002: 35).

The following comparison of phonological systems comprises a brief analysis of the current English phonemic inventory, realisation, distribution, spelling, stress, and rhythm.

1.1 The Phonemic Inventory

Variation between RP and North American English started a few centuries ago, a fact that has rather created different systems mainly in vowels, since both of the consonantal structures are quite identical. Some RP vowels, for instance, mainly those which are historically derived from the loss of /r/ (/ɪə/, /eə/, and /ʊə/) do not exist in SAE. For an RP speaker *peer*, *pair*, and *poor* are uttered /pɪə/, /pɛə/, and /pʊə/ whereas for a SAE speaker these words are pronounced /pɪr/, /pɛr/, and /pʊr/. Moreover, RP distinguishes between *baaed* /A:/, *bawd* /ɔ:/, and *bod* /ɒ/ whereas Standard American English has only /A:/ for the three words. The difference between the systems is concrete in terms of quality and number of phonemes—RP having 44, whereas SAE 41.

1.2 Realisation

The realisation of length for vowels seems to be more important in RP than it is in SAE—it is quantitative rather than qualitative. Indeed, many phoneticians such as Trudgill and Hannah (2002) and Barber (1999) use //A:// and /ɔ:/ to describe RP vowels and /A/ and /ɔ/ for SAE claiming that in the latter: “differences of vowel-length play a smaller part than in RP, and length-marks are not normally used in phonemic transcriptions.” (Barber, 1999: 243).

Besides, the realisation of length in RP does not necessarily entail an equivalent process in SAE— *half*, for instance, is realised as /hA:f/ in RP and /hΘf/ in SAE. In the 18th century, /A:/ was introduced in RP to replace /Θ/ before voiceless fricatives /f/ *stuff* /stA:f/, /s/ *ask* /A:sk/, /A:/ *bath* /bA:T/ and sometimes before /n/ *dance* /dA:ns/, a period when a great number of British people had already migrated and, therefore, had not been affected by the variation. As a result, /Θ/ is still kept in such environments in SAE.

Concerning diphthongs, /ɪə/ does not occur in SAE, it may be therefore realised differently since it is replaced by /ɪ/ in *clear* /klɪr/, /i:/ in *hero* /hi:rɒ/, or by /j/ in *Julia* /dʒu:ljə/. But for words such as *idea* where there are only two syllables in RP /aɪ.dɪə/, SAE has three syllables /aɪ.di:.ə/ since the phoneme /i:ə/ does not exist and cannot therefore constitute a single syllable.

A second element characterising SAE diphthongs is the realisation of /eɪ/ and /aʊ/. While the diphthong /eɪ/ in SAE is closer than that in RP, the first element of /aʊ/ in SAE tends to be more front in RP.

1.3 Distribution

There can be a different distribution of phonemes when the contexts of a phoneme in one variety of English are not similar to another one. Indeed, there are differences between the two systems in terms of their unconstrained combinations of phonemes. The distribution of /r/, for example, differs from one English to another. In RP, it does not occur finally or before another consonant, so the combination of /rd/ is unlikely to occur whereas, the occurrence of /r/ word-finally or before another consonant in SAE is predictable such as /kɑ:rd/ or /ɔ:rdʒ/.

As far as the vocalic system is concerned, some words spelt with *a* can correspond to /æ, ɑ:, ɒ/ in RP English and to /æ, ɑ:, ʌ/ in SAE, and those spelt with *o* generally correspond to /ɔ:, ɒ/ in RP English and to /ɔ:, ɑ:, ɒ/ in SAE depending on the subsequent segment. A few examples are provided in the following table:

Words spelt with a, o	RP	SAE
<i>bad</i>	æ	æ
<i>Han</i>	æ	ɑː
<i>path, half, dance</i>	ɑː	æ
<i>father</i>	ɑː	ɑː
<i>what</i>	ɒ	ʌ
<i>bard</i>	ɑː	ɑːr
<i>port</i>	ɔː	ɔːr
<i>shone</i>	ɒ	ou
<i>boss</i>	ɒ	ɑː
<i>cough, fog</i>	ɒ	ɑː / ɔː
<i>forest</i>	ɒ	ɔː

According to Trudgill and Hannah (2002), most words having orthographic *o* before *ng*, *g*, or before the voiceless fricatives /f/, /s/, and /θ/ are chiefly realised with /ɔː/ in SAE. However, in the *English Pronouncing Dictionary* (EPD) (2003), among words such as *wrong*, *dog*, *coffee*, *boss*, and *cloth*, several can have two possible realisations /ɔː/ and /ɑː/.

In order to validate or refute the idea of any possible distinction between the phonemic systems; we have examined several combinations in the *EPD*. The numbers of /ɑː/ and /ɔː/ occurrence in the two systems diverge. The following table records the number of words having /ɔː/ and those having /ɑː/ when they precede consonantal segments in SAE in comparison with RP English. It also shows the difference in the distribution and combination of ‘Englishes’ phonemes.

/ɔ:/	Words in RP	Words in SAE	/ɑ:/	Words in RP	Words in SAE
/ɔ:p/	143	27	/ɑ:p/	156	1167
/ɔ:b/	194	51	/ɑ:b/	395	709
/ɔ:t/	1343	218	/ɑ:t/	1118	1096
/ɔ:d/	917	211	/ɑ:d/	1006	1477
/ɔ:k/	442	279	/ɑ:k/	752	2005
/ɔ:g/	193	453	/ɑ:g/	194	859
/ɔ:f/	205	111	/ɑ:f/	531	653
/ɔ:v/	15	25	/ɑ:v/	184	251
/ɔ:θ/	177	61	/ɑ:θ/	102	199
/ɔ:ð/	13	1 swaths	/ɑ:ð/	54	80
/ɔ:s/	495	161	/ɑ:s/	968	1366
/ɔ:z/	337	133	/ɑ:z/	255	470
/ɔ:ʃ/	129	104	/ɑ:ʃ/	89	266
/ɔ:ʒ/	22	8	/ɑ:ʒ/	88	92
/ɔ:dʒ/	63	8	/ɑ:dʒ/	205	395
/ɔ:tʃ/	86	50	/ɑ:tʃ/	138	182
/ɔ:m/	493	61	/ɑ:m/	633	1589
/ɔ:n/	712	290	/ɑ:n/	1343	3719
/ɔ:ŋ/	10	332	/ɑ:ŋ/	19	503
/ɔ:l/	1327	1283	/ɑ:l/	494	3190
/ɔ:r/	1348	5879	/ɑ:r/	267	4549
/ɔ:j/	7	9	/ɑ:j/	20	58
/ɔ:w/	70	2	/ɑ:w/	48	31

The table above shows that SAE has more words with {/ɑ:/+Consonant} than with {/ɔ:/+Consonant}. It also proves that phonemic distribution is not similar between RP and SAE; indeed, only 156 words with /ɑ:p/ occur in RP but 1167 ones take place in SAE.

1.4 Spelling

The difference in spelling may also result in a difference in pronunciation. A word such as *aluminium* in British English /,æljə'mɪnjəm/ differs from *aluminum* /ə'lu:mɪnəm/ in SAE. However, we have to underline that not all words spelt differently have necessarily dissimilar realisations, this occurrence involves but few words.

1.5 Stress

Even if there exists variation in pronunciation between RP and SAE as in *cordial* /'kɔ:dɪəl/ /'kɔ:dZəl/, *schedule* /'Σədju:l/ /'skedZu:l/, *vase* /vɑ:z/ /veɪs/, stress remains a stable quality for most words except foreign and compound words.

Foreign words, especially of French origin tend to be initially stressed in RP but finally stressed in SAE. All the following words, for instance, bear stress in the last syllable in SAE: *ballet*, *brasserie*, *cachet*, *café*, *causerie*, *chalet*, *château*, *croissant*, *ennui*, *gateau*, *matinee*.

A great number of compound words such as *ice cream*, *weekend*, or *New Year*, and *open-minded* are stressed on the second syllable in RP but on the first one in SAE. Moreover, in RP, other instances such as polysyllabic words ending with *-ary* or *-ory* are usually stressed on the antepenultimate syllable and are reduced on the penultimate one, while in SAE; primary stress remains difficult to determine:

Words	RP English	SAE
<i>ancillary</i>	/æn'sɪl ^ə rɪ/	/'æntsəleri/
<i>appreciatory</i>	/ə'pri:ʃɪət ^ə rɪ/	/əpri:'ʃɪətɔ:rɪ/
<i>capillary</i>	/kə'pɪl ^ə rɪ/	/'kæpəleri/
<i>corollary</i>	/kə'rɒl ^ə rɪ/	/'kɔ:rəleri/
<i>laboratory</i>	/lə'bɒrət ^ə rɪ/	/'læbrətɔ:ri/

1.6 Rhythm

RP and SAE are stress-timed i.e. all syllables in an utterance occur at equal intervals. RP uses more stress contrasts and a wider

range of pitch than SAE so that it sounds to an American speaker over-emotional. According to Barber (1999), RP uses one heavy stress and several weak ones but SAE adds within the same word another stress known as ‘secondary stress’. *Insane*, for example, has one stress in RP /ɪn 'seɪn/ whereas an additional stress in SAE / ,ɪn 'seɪn /.

Nevertheless, we have tried to confirm this assertion by calculating words bearing secondary stress in the *English Pronouncing Dictionary* (2003) and have found 25223 words in RP and 24329 in SAE. This implies that there are more secondary stressed words in RP than in SAE and not the contrary—a difference of only 3.54% (894 words).

Concerning primary stress, RP records 107942 words bearing primary stress and 107776 ones in SAE —almost 0.15% more (166 words). Though small, both results show that words in RP bear more stress than in SAE.

The use of more stresses entails that the rhythm in speech is slower. It can explain to a certain extent why most students⁴ of English prefer the BBC to the CNN as if RP English sounded easier or more intelligible than any other accent. Of course, we must point out that such an attempt of explanation is an impression based only on our personal experience and not on scientific grounds; and can therefore be subject to discussion either by its being confirmed or invalidated.

2. RP English Vs SAE: the Contrast

We owe the concept of ‘contrast’ to contrastive linguistics, which studies systematic differences and similarities among languages at every level of linguistic structure. Fries (1945) and Lado (1957) advanced and formulated a theory that would serve language learners and language learning above all. The theory aims at avoiding common errors that would arise from interlingual transfer when learning a foreign language.

It is valuable to compare the theoretical organisation of the nature of sounds and the way they behave in a language. An understanding of phonology helps the teachers delimit the zones of difficulties for English learners, avoid mistakes, examine

⁴ A questionnaire on this account was handed out in the University of Mostaganem. The survey was to gather students’ preferences for one English Standard or more. Data was recorded from 268 graduates and undergraduates. The majority of the students (64.93%) prefer English RP to any other variety.

pronunciation difficulties, and guide their students to overcome them. The comparative survey of English standards can also be important for the choice of the standard to teach.

The above comparison has revealed not only some variation in the phonetic representations but also a concrete ‘contrast’ in the methodical behaviour of phonemes. Sometimes the difference in pronunciation is so considerable that it can affect reading poetry where words such as *poor* and *door* may rhyme in RP but not in SAE. Besides, homophonous words in one English are not necessarily the same in another since the realisation of a particular phoneme may be altered—[Θ], for instance, has become closer in SAE and lower in RP English.

Undoubtedly, there are different forms of English and we can discover an infinite number of discrete linguistic features. However, can we assert that there is enough contrasting evidence to identify them as two distinct languages? Some phoneticians like J. C. Wells (1996) explain this phenomenon and argue that if we look backward in time we shall discover that such a change has led to the growth of different languages.

French, Spanish, and Italian have a common ancestor—Latin. However, the variation in one system does not obligatorily entail the same kind of variation in another. Each system develops autonomously. Moreover, it is very unlikely that English will be divided into a number of non-intelligible languages, as was the case of Latin; since the distinction between French and Spanish, for instance, is quite quantitative. Unlike current English speakers, French, Spanish, and Italian ancestors stayed within limited ways of communication from one another. Nowadays, internet and English speaking televisions and radios effectively maintain intelligibility.

As English foreign learners, we have to understand the nature of English and ask a fundamental question that has still remained unanswered: can we speak of Standard American **and** RP English or of Standard American **or** RP ‘Englishes’? Many scholars adopt the criterion of *mutual intelligibility*⁵ as a solution to such a linguistic situation—a British and an American can understand each other even

⁵ A speech can be comprehensible by both parties toward each other.

in rapid speech, in sum, RP and SAE do not contrast and are one language (Swiderski, 1996: 29). However, *Mutual intelligibility* remains questionable when it comes to term two varieties as belonging to the same language.

The speakers of the Scandinavian languages (Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish) can perfectly understand and communicate with one another (Trudgill, 1998). However, these languages are officially recognised as separate languages. German, likewise, is supposed to be one single language even if some varieties are absolutely unintelligible to speakers of other varieties (Id.). Mutual intelligibility does not necessarily make Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish one common language, nor does the lack of it make the existing types of German different languages.

Usually, the name of a language designates an ethnic group or a set of ethnic groups. The term *Chinese*, *Italian*, or *Polish* for instance, refers to the language and to the people who speak it. Such a language can act as a strong unifying force of the nation and that is why some countries may develop a new one⁶ to mark their differentiation from other countries or nationalities.

Nowadays, the name of a language such as English does not automatically indicate a national identity. If somebody speaks English, they can belong to some other speech community than England. Recent statistics (Mc Arthur, 2002) on English use prove that over 400 million people whose mother tongue or first language is English have different cultures. And almost 80% of English speakers all over the world are bilingual—approximately one-and-a-half to two billion English speakers. This amount clearly demonstrates that speakers have different languages and belong to different cultures.

Phonologically speaking, SAE and RP vary but can we still acquire them as two variations of the same language or as contrastive standards? Like all life forms, language in general and English in particular experience constant change, development, and evolution⁷. Organisms mutate to respond to the demands of their environment. The contexts in which English is used are not determined only by English native speakers who may regard themselves as speaking the

⁶ Bahasa is a newly created language in Indonesia. (Hudson, 1983: 33)

⁷ Charles R. Darwin (1809-82): English natural historian and geologist, supporter of the theory of evolution by natural selection.

same language or as speaking different languages but also by the majority of people who use it.

The phonemic differences between SAE and RP seem too significant to be considered only as accents variation. Indeed, each system has its own phonemic organisation. Yet, can we claim that they might be contrastive? Some future variations or changes should also be taken into account. The way people perceive, use, and react to a language cannot be taken for granted since references are a fluctuating variable. It is therefore necessary not to forget that this report of differences, which may be valid today, will not be so anymore in a future time because language inevitably and necessarily evolves.

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