

# Towards an International System of English Vowels

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## 英語母音の国際標準標記について

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本稿は、現代英語の主要方言と非母語話者の母音の特徴を取り上げ、内在する音韻構造を論じながら、発音指導における標準表記の可能性を考察する試論である。英語は今や全世界に通用する国際化した言語としての側面と、世界の各地でそれぞれの地域の文化を背負いながら特殊化し自立した英語としての側面を併せ持っていることに鑑み、わが国の英語教育、とりわけ発音指導におけるモデルとしては、主要方言のいずれか一つを規範とするのではなく、英語母音に関わる音韻構造の分析に基づいた標準表記がより妥当であることを提案する。

### Abstract

*This article tries to identify what all second language varieties of English already have in common, and to establish the shared component as an "International English". This line of inquiry enables us to establish a single phonological system shared by all speakers of English around the world, regardless of whether their English is a first, second, and subsequent language. The vowel system of the international norm is based on a set of 13 vowels, consisting of 5 economically spaced peripheral positions, and 3 true diphthongs.*

### 1. Introduction

There is considerable interest in the world today in the spread of English as a language of international communication. Attention is at last being paid to the way the language is used outside the native-speaking community, and it is now almost axiomatic that English is no longer the exclusive property of native speakers. *World Englishes*, a relatively new

journal, encapsulates this growing research focus, and at the same time exemplifies a fundamental philosophical problem in the description of non-native English. What has been missing in the academic discourse is any attention to phonological matters. In addition, most of the interest has focused on differences between varieties rather than what they have in common. Furthermore, interest has so far been limited to the English of native and "official" users of the language. Only a little attention has been paid to the kind of transactional English used between speakers who have no other language in common.

I use the label "International English" consciously and deliberately to draw attention to my belief that there is, at some level, a single underlying phonological system governing all of the many varieties of English used around the world. This system is used, or referred to, as much in interactions between native speakers of different varieties as in those between non-native users from different backgrounds.

Against this background I wish to outline the basis of a research hypothesis and present some of the observations which have led to its formulation. More detailed data-collection, from many more locations, still has to be done.

The hypothesis is that an international form of English already exists and is used extensively in international transactions. Moreover, we might claim that the phonological systems of this variety are only trivially related those of any of the major national varieties. It may well be the case that the native varieties themselves can be viewed as no more than particular phonetic realizations of the basic underlying systems.

## 2. The Problem

Classical descriptions of native L1 varieties (e.g. RP, GA and Scots) are found in the previous phonetics literature. However, the observation of the English seems to have been missing, which is found in fluent adult users of English in Eastern and southern Africa, Japan, and a number of different settings in Europe.

"Fluent adult users" is used to imply that the pronunciation of such

speakers is stable or "fossilized". That is to say, is no longer susceptible to development by teaching or any other means. The study of such language would enable us to extend the notion of "standard" to include the stable language of all speakers who use English as a second or foreign language. This would include not only the well-established official varieties of English spoken in Africa, India, Singapore or Hong Kong, but also the countless varieties which have emerged as English becomes more and more the international Lingua Franca. I am not, therefore, looking at the processes of L2 acquisition but rather at the end-products of these processes.

These varieties clearly share many grammatical features and a common lexicon, but we have traditionally made much of the superficial differences between these so-called "non-native" varieties and the phonology of native standards such as RP, GA, or Standard Australian. One problem with the descriptions of native varieties is that they have been an unhappy mixture of phonetic detail and phonological truth, and this, more than anything else, has led either to acute problems of teaching pronunciation or to its total neglect by many teachers.

### 3. Vowel Systems

As an illustration of how an international phonology might be characterized, and how it might help to overcome these difficulties, it would be apposite to examine one small aspect of a possible system. Most of the differences between varieties of Languages can be accounted for by the description of their vowel systems. Vowel inventories, we have been told, (by Lass 1984 and many others) may differ in their size and in the way vowels are distributed in words.

My interest is in a considerable level of abstraction rather than on another piece of taxonomic phonetics. Concentration on phonetic detail has often led to considerable confusion about what actually constitutes a vowel phoneme. For example, it has often been claimed that RP has a total of 8 diphthongs, including 3 which are not found in either GA or Scottish English (cf. Gimson 1980). These are exemplified in the

respective pronunciations of the words beer, where, and sure. RP, it is claimed, uses a diphthong ending in schwa, whilst GA and Scottish uses a simple vowel + some form of /r/. This problem can be dealt with phonologically by treating the RP schwa element as a realizational variant, in some circumstances, of an underlying phonological /r/.

This analysis would enable us to reduce the basic phonological inventory of RP by 3 phonemes and bring it more in line with that of GA. Furthermore, RP had two additional "closing" diphthongs which GA and other standards, such as Scottish, do not have. These are the particular RP realizations of the long /e/ and /o/ vowels. In phonetic terms these two long vowels may well consist of a glide, but I would again argue that this does not justify treating them as phonological diphthongs any more than the gliding long vowels in see, bath, or food.

If we pursue this line of analysis (which extends that of Giegerich 1992) we arrive at a position where both RP and GA have the same number of vowel phonemes: seven pairs of vowels contrasting length, plus three "true" diphthongs, /ai/, /au/, and /oi/. Rhoticity is no longer relevant to the deeper phonological levels. There still remain some distributional differences, but these also belong to the realm of phonetic or realizational detail which I do not propose to deal with here.

If we turn now to Scottish English we find the position is even simpler. Here we also find the three true diphthongs, three pairs of vowels distinguished for length, as in the word-pairs bid-bead, bet-bait, and cut-coat, and three simple back vowels without length contrasts: a total of twelve vowels. If we postulate that the length contrasts in the back vowels are still present in some underlying representation, at least perceptually, we might increase that total to fifteen: six pairs and three two diphthongs. The major difference, then, between Scottish English and other native standards would be in the lack of the pair of central vowels, as in contexts such as about, fir or nurse. Scots use more open short vowel of cut as equivalent to schwa, and a range of peripheral vowels, related historically to spelling, in place of the long central vowel. Native varieties may therefore be adequately accounted for, at least at an abstract level, by a set of between twelve and seventeen vowel phonemes, with the

possibility of fifteen if we discount the largely redundant pair of central vowels.

Let us now consider some non-native varieties. I shall concentrate here on two, in the belief that these are broadly representative of a much larger picture. The traditional view of non-native varieties is that there is a process of simplification of a native variety achieved by substitutions from the vowel system of a non-native speaker's L1. A more radical view, which is worthy of further investigation, is that many non-native users of English perceive a different and much simpler vowel system because that is what they were taught. It is also what they hear from the vast majority of non-native interlocutors from other backgrounds.

First, I would like to examine the description of west African English offered by Trudgill and Hannah (1985) and Wells (1982). West African English, which has an official status in several countries of that region, has simple vowels in five different locations around the vowel periphery: /i/, /e/, /a/, /o/, and /u/. In addition, there are length contrasts in the front and back mid locations, namely /e/ and /o/, which yield a total of seven discrete simple vowels. West African English also has the three true diphthongs found in the native standards. Central vowels are entirely missing. If we apply the same criterion to the length contrasts which we used for Scottish English, we might again claim that the length contrast are present in an underlying form in an underlying form at all simple vowel locations. We could then argue that West African English has a potential total of thirteen discrete vowels in its inventory: five pairs and three diphthongs.

Second, an example of a non-official variety of English is provided by the kind of English spoken by Japanese, which also has no central vowels and long or short peripheral vowels. Japanese combines certain short vowels to produce the /ai/, /au/ and /oi/ diphthongs. We find a total of thirteen discrete vowel phonemes.

#### 4. Conclusion

In looking for an international norm of spoken English we must bear in

mind that non-native users of English in the world today already greatly outnumber native speakers. More importantly it has been suggested that the number of transactions between users of English which do not involve a native speaker already stands at about 70%, and that this proportion is likely to rise considerably in the next 50 years. This is due to population shifts and the vast growth of trade in Asia which native speakers of English are powerless to control. It is more likely that native varieties will shift under the weight of this influence than that these users of English will move closer to the phonology of one or other variety.

Against this background, the 17 or 20 vowels of a tiny minority of RP speakers are of little communicative importance. Even the vowels of GA are of little influence on speakers who have already developed their own norms and are using them effectively in many years of life.

It seems likely, therefore, that the vowel system of the international norm will be based on a set of about 13 vowels, consisting of 5 economically spaced peripheral positions, and 3 true diphthongs. Length, as in Scottish English, will be an optional realizational feature for some speakers, and central vowels will be entirely lacking. The distributions of these vowels in words will, of course, vary as they do in many of the native varieties, but that is not the concern of this paper. There will, therefore, be considerable variation around a norm. But that norm is unlikely to be found in a study of any of the native varieties. What form it will take, and what implications will be for other levels of phonology, will be the subject of an extensive, worldwide data-collection exercise.

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