Glossary of terms and transcription conventions

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Dialects and Accents

Each extract is accompanied by a short content summary and brief notes drawing attention to the most salient features of the speaker’s dialect. These notes are presented under the headings phonology, grammar and lexis, with occasional additional commentary.

A dialect is a specific variety of a language, differing systematically from others in terms of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary, but still generally comprehensible to speakers of other dialects within that language.

Accent refers simply to different pronunciation patterns. Despite popular belief to the contrary, everybody speaks with an accent. In fact, all native speakers adjust their speech patterns according to context and situation: from relaxed conversation in familiar surroundings to more formal settings. Most of us have been accused of having a ‘telephone voice’, for instance. However, the range of any speaker’s repertoire is defined by who he or she is. People from different places clearly speak differently, but even within the same small community, their speech may vary according to age, gender, ethnicity and social and educational backgrounds.

Phonology

Phonology refers to the sounds of a given language or dialect and the way individual sound segments – vowels and consonants – fit into the overall system. The conventions of written English are notoriously misleading: the spelling of a word may not bear much resemblance to how it is spoken. Linguists, therefore, use a series of internationally agreed characters to indicate how and where in the mouth particular sounds are articulated. Known as the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), these characters enable the sounds of a language to be more accurately transcribed.

Unfortunately, IPA symbols predate computers, so here a computer readable transcription called SAMPA is used instead. SAMPA converts the IPA characters to more widely available fonts, enabling data to be transferred electronically.

Below is a description, using SAMPA, of one particular British English accent: Received Pronunciation (RP), commonly but somewhat misleadingly referred to as BBC English. RP is the proper name of the regionally non-specific accent perhaps most readily associated with speakers from public school backgrounds. It does, however,
encompass a wide variety of speakers and should not be confused with the notion of ‘posh’ speech. RP is best considered as the accent on which teaching English as a foreign language is based.

RP is given here as an example, not to imply greater merit than any other English accent, but because its instantly recognisable form provides a relatively fixed point against which comparisons may be made. The notes attached to the extracts draw attention to any particularly interesting contrast between a speaker’s accent and RP.

The sounds of RP: consonants

- **pea** p
- **tea** t
- **key** k
- **bun** b
- **gun** g
- **done** d
- **thin** T
- **sin** s
- **shin** S
- **then** D
- **zip** z
- **treasure** Z
- **chin** tS
- **gin** dZ
- **net** n
- **song** N
- **wet** w
- **yet** j
- **red** r/
- **long** l  syllable initial “clear l” produced at front of mouth
- **fall** L/  syllable final “dark l” produced simultaneously at front and back of mouth (also for syllabic consonant, e.g. little [lIt=L/])

The sounds of RP: vowels

The following descriptions are based on an approach pioneered by Wells (1982) in which vowel sounds are assigned to word sets, identified by small CAPITALS. Thus MOUTH refers to the set of words containing that specific vowel sound – words such as house, ground, now, plough – whilst BATH refers to the set of words which includes grass, path, plant and so on.

- **KIT** I
- **DRESS** E
- **TRAP** a  (see below¹)
- **LOT** Q  (also CLOTH – see below²)
- **STRUT** V
- **FOOT** U
- **BATH** A:
- **NURSE** @:
- **FLEECE** i:
The sounds of RP: weak syllables

happy  i
letter  @
confirm  k@n
kisses  Iz
started  Id
bucket  It

NB

1 Many conservative RP speakers might use /l/ (a sound somewhere between /a/ and /E/) for TRAP.
2 In conservative RP the CLOTH set, including such words as gone, off and lost, is identified with the THOUGHT set, but for current RP speakers the CLOTH set has merged with the LOT set.
3 Unlike RP speakers, rhotic speakers (speakers who retain “r-colouring” in words where <r> follows a vowel, such as world and car) will differentiate between NORTH and THOUGHT and between START and PALM. For the sake of economy, NORTH and START have been used here to encompass both sets for non-rhotic accents.
4 For many current RP speakers NEAR is realised as [I:], SQUARE as /E:/ and CURE has merged with THOUGHT and NORTH, hence [O:].

While IPA allows a wealth of diacritics to make extremely fine distinctions between sounds, this is avoided here for the sake of clarity. So although there are, for instance, audible differences between the GOAT vowel in the northeast, where the phonetic quality is somewhere between /o:/ and /u:/, and the same vowel in other parts of the north (a sound somewhere between /o:/ and /O:/), the broad transcription [o:] has been adopted here. Also, for the sake of brevity, well known phenomena such as the north / south contrast in the BATH (/a/ versus /A:/) and STRUT (/U/ versus /V/) sets are not always acknowledged unless of particular significance - such as in the area where the transition can be observed. Features such as pitch and intonation also play a major role in defining a person’s accent, but it has not been possible to include such information here.

Additional abbreviations & symbols used

@ italic lexical item actually used by speaker in extract
<>/ orthographically represented by x
/s/ phonemic realisation (underlying sound) is x
[x] phonetic realisation (actual sound) is x
[x]  x is half-long
[x:]  x is long
x ~ y  x occurs as frequently as y
x > y  x occurs more frequently than y
→ becomes
+ followed by
C consonant
V vowel
# word or syllable final
= syllabic consonant, e.g. middle [mId=Lf], button [bVt=n]
? glottal stop, e.g. London better [bE?@ ]
?t glottal reinforcement of /l/, e.g. Tyneside happy [ha?pi]
?t glottal reinforcement of /t/, e.g. Tyneside better [bE?ta]
?k glottal reinforcement of /k/, e.g. Tyneside lucky [IU?ki]
_t /l/ produced with tongue behind top teeth, e.g. Irish three [_tr/i:]
_d /d/ produced with tongue behind top teeth, e.g. Merseyside this [_dIs]
2 e.g. French deix [d2]
4 a tapped /l/, e.g. American English better [bE4@´]
6 e.g. German besser [bEs6]
7 a sound between /I/ and /U/, e.g. Norfolk cup [k7p]
8 e.g. Tyneside goaf [g8:l] (close to RP girf [g@:L/] with rounded lips)
9 e.g. French neuf [n9f]
 Y e.g. German hübsch [hYps]    
: a sound between /E:/ and /i:/, e.g. Tyneside hate [he:t]
 o: a sound between /O:/ and /u:/, e.g. North East no [no:]    
{ e.g. conservative RP hat [h{t} – a sound between /a/ and /E/]
}    
 x e.g. Scottish loch [LOx] or Merseyside book [b}:x]
 k affrication of /k/, e.g Merseyside back [bak]
 t affrication of /t/, e.g. Merseyside out [aut]
 d affrication of /d/, e.g. Merseyside down [d’aUn]
 W aspirated /w/, e.g Scottish English when [WEn]
 R uvular /r/, e.g. French gros [gRo] or German rot [Ro:t]
 r trilled /r/, feature of some Scottish English accents
 v/ labiodental /r/ (almost /w/, but produced with top teeth on bottom lip)
 ` rhoticity or “r-colouring”, e.g. West Country farm [fa:ma]
 h-dropping e.g. hero /hE/ → [Ed]
 tth-fronting /T/ → [f], e.g. three → [fr/i:] and /D/ → [v], e.g. feather → [fE:v@]
 e.g. English better [bE?@]    
 l-vocalisation /l/ → [o] e.g. London milk [mIok] and middle [mlds]
 Yorkshire assimilation e.g Bradford [br/atf@d], Whibsey [wlpsI] etc.
 geminate consonant e.g. Italian pizza [pizz@]
 parasitic l e.g. Bristol idee [aldf@L/], piano [pi@n@L/]
<a> + C all, almost; talk, walk, wall etc.
</a> all, call, called, fall, taller etc.
</any> any, anything, anywhere, many etc.
</el> clip, close; tackle etc.
</day> Sunday, Monday etc.
</ever> never, ever, everything etc.
</gl> glass, glove; wriggle etc.
Grammar

Grammar refers here not to a traditional prescriptive concept of ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, but
to the structural system underpinning a language or dialect. Individual sounds of a
dialect combine to form words, which in turn combine to form phrases and sentences.
Just as with phonology, the grammar of a language varies according to location and
context. There is no officially approved standard English grammar, unlike those
established by academic bodies in France and Germany, for instance. However, there is
a widely accepted norm, known as Standard English (SE).

SE is regionally non-specific. Conventions do vary slightly between countries, such as
the UK and the USA, and there is much debate about the notion of a standard
‘International English’. Nonetheless, SE can be spoken with any accent and is, again,
best viewed as the type of English taught to foreigners. For most native speakers it is the
form to which we aspire in writing and from which we might deviate slightly - or even
wildly - when we speak, depending on context. Although there is a great deal of
terminology specific to the description of a grammar, most terms can be found in a
dictionary and are not discussed here.

Notes accompanying the extracts identify the speaker’s use of grammatical features
diverging from SE. Examples include morphological phenomena, such as non-standard
verbal inflections (they says) or the absence of plural markers (for the last six month);
syntactical features, such as non-standard word order (the last thing ever I did); or non-
standard pronominal usage, for example, the retention of thee and thou. Each case of
non-standard grammar is indicated and a brief transcription provided to locate the
feature within the extract.

Lexis

The lexicon or vocabulary of a particular dialect is notoriously difficult to establish with
any degree of reliability and authenticity, although we frequently associate certain
words and expressions with particular parts of the country. It is not surprising that more
localised lexical items are heard in the Survey of English Dialects than in the
Millennium Memory Bank, recorded almost fifty years later. This does not mean,
however, that there is no longer any lexical diversity in Britain. Above all, many words
used by speakers in the Survey of English Dialects refer to traditional working practices or ways of life that have become as obsolete as the words that defined them.

The entries in this section simply isolate a particular word or expression that is either obsolete or archaic, such as *wireless* for ‘radio’ or *afore* for ‘before’, or lexical items of local currency, such as *since* for ‘ago’ or *gan* for ‘to go’. A brief definition is given here, but further information can be found either in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) or the English Dialect Dictionary (EDD).

**Further Reading**