

English Pronunciation at the Turn of the Millennium

We knew that there would be no significant change when the year 2000 arrived. It was a significant moment in history to celebrate, but we knew that nothing fundamental would change. We carry on as before – socially, personally, politically, economically, morally, philosophically, etc... and linguistically. Changes do occur, of course, but not usually at single moments of time, but rather over long periods. Like everything else, pronunciation changes, gradually – and inevitably, so it seems. Daniel Jones's *English Pronouncing Dictionary* nicely captures a whole century's changes of British (so called) Received Pronunciation in its 15 editions.

We also know that a pronunciation dictionary records only a limited tier of the pronunciation of a community's population. Daniel Jones's limited tier in 1917 was the kind of pronunciation associated with the families of Southern English persons whose menfolk were educated at "the great public boarding-schools" (Jones, 1917). The term Public School Pronunciation was used to refer to this very limited tier, but in 1926, it gave way to what is now the traditional name, Received Pronunciation – 'received' meaning 'widely accepted' as in the phrase 'received wisdom'. However, Trudgill & Hannah (1994: 9) claim that at the very most it is the accent of only 3-5 % of the population of England, so still a fairly limited tier. The vast majority of UK citizens – say, about 58 million – speak a variety of regional standard and non-standard accents. As Roach & Hartman (Jones, 1997: vi) admit in their introduction to the 15th edition of the *EPD*, a pronouncing dictionary that attempted to do justice systematically to a wide range of regional accents might become an unending task, however valuable it would be. Their solution is not to attempt it, other than to include, as a new feature, an American standard accent they call 'Network English'.

The inclusion of American pronunciation in the *EPD* was an innovation of an enormous dimension. It is quite likely to have been prompted by John Wells's inclusion of 'General American' in his *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* (Wells, 1990), which was a general acknowledgement that far more Americans speak English than British people do. Furthermore, Wells (1982: 118) had claimed that two-thirds of the American population spoke this 'General American' accent, and thus it represented a very large slice of the English-speaking community – possibly, about 150 million! But Wells went further: in addition to including "a number of pronunciations that diverge from traditional, 'classical' RP" (p xii), he also sought to do some justice to the other, regional, educated accents of England. He gave examples like *one* as /wɒn/ as well as the RP /wʌn/, and *last* in its typical Northern educated form /læst/ in addition to its RP form. In a very real sense, Wells was recording an impressively wider range of educated pronunciation of England than *EPD* had ever sought to. In his introduction, he also informed his readers about regional variations like the /-ŋ/ of *sing*, and the /ɔə/ alternative to /ɔ:/ in certain words like *four*. In this way, he was breaking the 3-5% "RP sound barrier" and representing at least the educated tier of England.

Wells has now gone further in the new edition of *LPD*, which has appeared since the turn of the millennium, and indeed makes a virtue of not ignoring widespread non-RP pronunciations of educated speakers in England, "as other dictionaries do"! (Wells, 2000: xiii). 'Estuary English' now gets a mention, with its preference for pronunciations with a glottal stop, vocalization of /l/ and the use of affricate

articulations at the beginning of *tune* and *dune*. And Australian pronunciation gets its own ‘box’, too (p 57) – an educated variety, of course. So here is a serious attempt to represent the educated (‘standard’) pronunciation of a wider range of native English speakers.

But, if Australian (admittedly, a good market), why not New Zealand? And why not South Africa, West Indies and Canada? And if England, why not Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Eire? Little ‘boxes’ like the Australian one would be very informative for all these varieties, and very appealing, too. And Wells is just the man to do it (Wells, 1982)! And then we would have as comprehensive a picture of world educated native-speaker English pronunciation as we could ever wish for. Whether we would ask for an Indian ‘box’, etc is another question; how many non-native educated accents to consider would probably depend on their status as ‘target’ forms for learners. But Wells expressed his doubts of the value of non-native standards in his interview with Michael Vaughan-Rees in *Speak Out!* 6. Nevertheless, the potential for an even more comprehensive account is certainly there.

One fascinating feature of Wells’s first edition was the evidence he provided, through his opinion polls, of current changes in British English pronunciation. By reference to his panel of 275 of native speakers of British English, he was able to give some idea of the scale of shifts in pronunciation. For instance, 57% of his panel indicated their pronunciation of *poor* as /pɔ:/, as opposed to the 43% who preferred the traditional RP /pʊə/. 56% indicated their stress pattern of *controversy* with the primary stress on the second syllable, while only 44% preferred the traditional RP stress pattern with its primary stress on the first syllable. In all, 100 items were tested.

This feature has been expanded in the new edition in three ways. First of all, an American opinion poll has been included. Secondly, a new British opinion poll has been conducted, this time with nearly two thousand participants; and this means, thirdly, that a comparison is possible between the two sets of British data as a device for monitoring change within a single decade. It now appears that the /pɔ:/ pronunciation of *poor* has reached 82% among the younger generation, and that the /kən'trɒvəsi/ over the stress pattern of that word has settled now on 60% for all generations in Britain. (The Americans appear to remain oblivious to this British /'ka:ntrəvə:si/.)

The statistics obtained from the panel references are displayed in a very helpful, visual, way in the new edition of *LPD*. The well known difference between the American and British pronunciations of *cigarette* is, literally, a good illustration of the increased clarity of presentation, but it may come as a surprise to learn that a good third of the American panellists actually indicated a preference for the ‘British’ stress pattern.

(insert here the graph from p 140)

The inescapable influence of the younger generation in UK is reflected in the graph for *schedule*. An initial /ʃ/ is clearly becoming old-fashioned, as two-thirds of the British 25 year olds preferred /sk/.

(insert here the graph from p 678)

And although the majority of British panellists still prefer their *princesses* with a stress on *-cess*, the majority amongst the 25 year olds is noticeably smaller.

(insert here the graph from p605)

Whether you like it or not, *kilometre* is going increasingly ‘American’ in UK; stressing on the first syllable has now given way to stressing on the second syllable in the past decade.

(insert here the graph from p 419)

A disadvantage of questionnaire research in pronunciation is the uncorroborated nature of self-reporting. Wells explains in a separate paper that his interest in this kind of survey is the indication of participants’ preferences, rather than their actual articulations. This may help to explain a mystery as to why 83% of British respondents prefer /z/ after the /b/ in *absorb*, but only 23% in what would appear to be the parallel case of *absurd*. The latter is often used in an exclamation uttered with much feeling, with an intonational tonic (or nucleus) on the second syllable accompanied by raised falling pitch; thus that syllable is detached to a greater extent both phonetically and prosodically from the first, and the <s> may well then be treated more like an word-initial consonant which is more likely to be /s/ than /z/. If I ask myself how I pronounce that word, I would put it into some kind of context, such as a typical exclamation uttered with much feeling! In this way, I become much more conscious of the articulation of the letter <s> and recognize it as the /s/. But I wonder what I do at most other times when I use the word without any paralinguistic marking. I agree that self-reporting is adequate for preferences, but a dictionary user may well wonder what British people really say in ordinary, spontaneous talk.

When the *LPD* was first published in 1990, it was full of innovations; the inclusion of an American accent, reference to other, non-RP, educated British accents and the publication of opinion polls were only three of the most noticeable. At the descriptive level, Wells introduced the symbolization of the neutralized contrasts of /i: ~ ɪ/ and /u: ~ u/ as the ‘weak’ vowels /i/ and /u/ as in *city* and *situation*; this was also adopted in *EPD 15*, but see Roach (1991: 77-8). A syllabification theory was incorporated with marking of syllable boundaries; this led to something similar in *EPD 15*. On degrees of word stress, *LPD 2000* follows *EPD 15* in symbolizing only primary and secondary stress; Wells has abandoned tertiary stress. He retains the use of the helpful signal of potential stress shift as in /,æk ə 'demɪk/ and illustrates it with: ,aca,demic 'freedom. (*EPD 15* gives illustrations of all cases!) I confess I am not convinced of the adequacy of Wells’s transcription; I would have

expected: '*academic freedom*', on practical notational grounds; for a similar comment, see my review of *EPD 15* (Tench, 1997: 46).

Then, at the practical, pedagogical level, a colour coding of advised pronunciations for learners was tried out, which appears to have been successful enough to be retained in the new edition – a blue that is now lighter, and easier to the eye (though not to the photocopier!). Secondly, *spelling-to-sound* boxes for each letter provide useful, concise, information on the way each is used to represent pronunciations; this, however, does not include a ‘sound-to-spelling’ guide, and so a student has to turn to Gimson (1994) to find out, for instance, how the vowel /u:/ is variously spelt in English. Thirdly, warnings are occasionally posted against possible pronunciations that are considered as incorrect like /mɪs'tʃi:vəs/ or even /mɪs'tʃi:viəs/ for *mischiefous*; and fourthly, a warning against non-native ‘spelling’ pronunciations is displayed on p723.

At a theoretical level, concise notes on phonetics and pronunciation matters are contained throughout in special boxes: notes, for instance, on affricates, aspiration and assimilation, down to weak forms and weak vowels. These are immensely helpful for linguistics students and teachers. In the second edition, Wells has also added a note on the pronunciation of e mail and www addresses. Non-English names are given their pronunciation in the standard form of the original language as well as an English version, and for this a complete listing of all the IPA symbols is provided. This was abandoned in *EPD 15* and ‘replaced’ with an *as if* pronunciation on the grounds that the dictionary was intended to represent the efforts of educated native English speakers to attempt the original, as for example *bolognese* is given a British English version /bɒlə'neɪz/, an American /boulə'ni:z/ and an *as if Italian* version /bɒlə'njeɪzeɪ/. This was worthwhile, but not at the expense of the standard Italian transcription; both are valuable as guides to pronunciations to serious students and teachers.

Wells has added another 5,000 entries in the new edition to cover the new vocabulary of the last decade, and a wider range of place names, especially in Australia and China (another good market!). (But if Australia, why not New Zealand ...!?) The additions bring the total to over 80,000, which matches *EPD 15*; hopefully, there won’t be an unseemly battle over which possesses the largest inventory! However, neither has the word spelt either as *galangal* or *gelangel*, the oriental spice that I closed my review of *EPD 15* on. I found the word in the article on Thai phonology in the *Journal of the IPA* as a gloss for a lexical tone minimal pair (Tingsavadh & Abramson 1993; see also IPA 1999: 149), and also in a Mongolian restaurant in the small South Wales town of Taffs Well! I thus stand by my proposal to transcribe it as /gə'læŋəl/.

I had the pleasure of reviewing the first edition of *LPD* (Tench 1990). I described any dictionary as a resource, and the *LPD* as “a mighty fine resource”. *LPD 2000* is an even mightier fine resource and deserves to take pride of place in any phonetics or TEFL staffroom, as the best statement of educated English pronunciation at the turn of the millennium – until, that is, the next edition!

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