4.5: English Accents

In this section we'll look at various English accents and how they differ from one another. The point, aside from learning some important aspects of the English language, is to get a deeper understanding of the concepts introduced in this chapter and the last one by comparing several similar phonological systems. We'll see that the ways in which the accents differ correspond to the kinds of knowledge about linguistic form that we've been discussing: the form that particular words take, the distinctions between phonemes, the detailed realization of individual phonemes, the allophones of phonemes that appear in different contexts, and phonotactics.

Accents Revisited

Let's first remind ourselves what an accent is: the set of pronunciation conventions of some speech community. Where we draw the boundaries between accents is pretty arbitrary; if we call General American a single accent, for example, we'll have to deal with the range of variation that exists among speakers within that large community. And any boundaries we draw will be wrong in another sense because the group of people who have one pronunciation convention may not coincide neatly with the group of people who have the other set of conventions that belong to the accent we're considering. For example, the group of speakers who pronounce the words pin and pen the same includes speakers of Southern US accent but also some speakers of General American, which is in many other ways a very different accent from Southern. The point is that conventions of pronunciation tend to cluster together; this is what allows us to talk about "accents" at all.

Another point to keep in mind is that in most countries there is a standard, prestige accent alongside a number of accents associated with particular regions, social classes, or ethnic groups. Each of these non-standard accents can be described in its "broad" form, the form that is most different from the standard in the country where it is spoken, but what many people are speaking much of the time is something in between a particular non-standard accent and the relevant standard. In this section I'll be mostly concerned with broad variants of non-standard accents because they illustrate the
range of possible differences best.

Ways to Talk about Differences Between Accents

When comparing two dialects or accents, one possibility is to see one of them as deviating from the other. A biased view of non-standard dialects often starts this way: the speakers of these dialects are seen as just making mistakes with the standard when what they say is non-standard. But of course this is not what is actually happening. Speakers of non-standard dialects learned the conventions of these dialects by hearing other speakers speak them, just as the speakers of standard dialects learned the conventions of their dialects. They are no more speaking the standard wrong than the speakers of the standard dialect are speaking their dialect wrong.

But there is one situation in which it does make sense to speak of dialect A as diverging from dialect B. Dialects of a single language always started out as a single dialect at some point in the past, and for a given convention, one of the dialects may have changed while the other preserved the original convention. Some people seem to have the sense that standard dialects are conservative, and that non-standard dialects are more likely to change, that is, to introduce "innovations". Sometimes this does happen. In fact some of the conventions that eventually become standard started out as innovations in non-standard dialects. We can see this process going on in England now as features from London accent are starting to creep into the speech of people in situations where we'd expect the standard accent of England. But it seems just as likely that the old conventions get lost in a standard before a non-standard. In North America, the distinction between /ɔ/ and /ɑ/ is in the process of disappearing in General American and (standard) Canadian English, while this distinction is maintained (conservatively) in all of the major non-standard dialects. Of course if we are not interested in history when comparing two dialects, which is more conservative doesn't really matter, and we can just treat the dialects as different from one another.

Overview of English Accents

Before looking at examples of differences between accents, it might help to have a sense of what the major accents are and where they're spoken. But you can safely skip this subsection if you prefer.

The British Isles

There is no "British" accent. England, Scotland, Ireland, and possibly Wales all have their own unofficial standard accents, and the standards of Scotland and Ireland in particular are as different from that of England as American accents are. The standard, or prestige, accent of England is usually referred to as Received Pronunciation (RP). This is what the royal family, all recent Prime Ministers, and most BBC announcers speak. It is probably what most Americans think of as an "English" accent, though it is spoken as a native accent by no more than about 10% of the English population. It differs most noticeably from General American in the pronunciation of a few vowels and in the way /r/ is treated following vowels. For example, in RP there would be no [r] sounds at all in the phrase the northern fourth of the park.

Within England there are many identifiable regional accents, probably more than in the United States in fact. Among these, London accent (sometimes called "Cockney") stands out because it is familiar to many Americans through film and drama characters such as Eliza Dolittle in "Pygmalion/My Fair Lady" and because it has a number of very
Characteristic features. Many of the vowels in this accent differ considerably from RP (and General American). Other very striking features are the loss of initial /h/ ("e 'as an 'ard 'eart" = "he has a hard heart") and the frequent glottal stops in place of other stops in other accents ("i'll ta?e a lo? o' time to se?le" = "it'll take a lot of time to settle"). Perhaps the other major accent boundary in England separates the accents of the north from those of the south. Americans may be familiar with northern England English through the speech of the Beatles or the characters in films such "The Full Monty". These accents can be identified fairly easily because they make no distinction between the vowels /n/ and /l/; both are pronounced like /u/.

Scottish and Irish English share one feature with northern England English; the tense vowels /i/, /u/, /e/ and /o/ are not pronounced as diphthongs, as they are in RP (and General American). In addition, these accents are like General American, and unlike most accents of England, in how they treat /r/ after vowels.

The Western Hemisphere

The unofficial standard accent of the United States is usually called General American (GA). This is the accent of much of the Midwest and the West and the most frequent accent for US newscasters, though, interestingly, only five of the last ten US Presidents have spoken it. As the prestige accent, it has been encroaching on some regional accents, for example, in the northeast, but at the same time, changes within GA are creating what amount to new accents. One striking example of this is Northern Cities accent, spoken in cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, and Rochester, and distinct from GA in the pronunciation of lax vowels.

Almost everyone is familiar with Southern US accent, spoken by people mainly in the southeastern part of the country. Like London accent, this accent has strikingly different vowels from other English accents. African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) is a dialect associated with an ethnic group rather than a region, though of course you don't have to be African-American to have learned it. The accent associated with this dialect is similar in many ways to Southern US accent, while the grammar has its own characteristic properties.

People from the northeastern US are often easy to identify by their accents; the accent of New York City stands out within this region, again mostly for its vowels. Some other US cities, especially Pittsburgh, are known for particular pronunciation conventions. In Pittsburgh, for example, [a] may be used where GA has /aw/, so downtown may be [dan'tan].

Standard Canadian English (except in the province of Newfoundland) is very similar to General American, and it doesn't vary much from place to place. Two features that can help identify Canadians are their pronunciation of /ay/ and /aw/, which we'll learn about later, and a tendency to use rising pitch at the end of some statements as well as questions.

English is the native language of much of the Caribbean, with some features common to the region and others specific to particular islands. Americans may be familiar with Caribbean English through the speech of Jamaican performers of reggae music. As with other accents, there are characteristic vowels in these accents, and in addition, a tendency in the Caribbean, as there is in some US accents, to make no distinction between /t/ and /θ/ and between /d/ and /ð/. Jamaican English in particular also has quite striking intonation patterns.
The Southern Hemisphere

English is the native language of most Australians and New Zealanders and a sizable minority of South Africans. While the standard English accents of these countries tend to approach RP, the broad accents of most English speakers in all three countries have tense (long) vowels similar to those in London accent. The lax (short) front vowels of Australian and New Zealand English differ from those in other accents. Americans are likely to be familiar with these features from the speech of actors such as the Australian Paul Hogan.

Non-native Accents

English is spoken as a second language by millions of people, especially in regions that were once colonized by Britain in South Asia and Africa. In some of these regions there are particular English pronunciation conventions that derive from the phonology of the local languages. So in the English of South Asians (Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans, Nepalese, Bhutanese, and Maldivians), the alveolar consonants /t/, /d/, /n/, and /l/ tend to be replaced by retroflex consonants, an important place of articulation for consonants in the languages of this region. Some of these conventions may be viewed as belonging to a kind of non-native regional or national English standard. These non-native standards are one of the ways in which English is becoming even more of an international language.

Phonetic Differences

Exercise $\PageIndex{1}$

You learn that the phoneme /e/ is pronounced [yɛ] in Jamaican English. As a speaker of General American, how easy would it be for you to master this aspect of a Jamaican accent?

Probably the most common sort of difference between accents is purely phonetic. A phoneme in one accent corresponds perfectly to a phoneme in another accent, so we can consider it to be the same phoneme, but it differs in its precise realization, that is, how it is articulated and perceived.

How to Make Your /o/s Sound English or Irish or Scottish

Take the vowel /o/. In GA, this is pronounced as a diphthong beginning as a rounded mid back vowel and ending as a rounded high back vowel (or semivowel): [ou]. In RP, on the other hand, this same phoneme has a slightly different realization. It begins as an unrounded mid central vowel and ends as a rounded high back vowel: [au]. In other accents, such as Irish, Scottish, and northern English, /o/ is not a diphthong at all; it is realized as [o]. But since the set of words in GA with [ou] is the same as the set of words in RP with [au] (with perhaps a few exceptions) and the other accents with [o], we can see these as the same phoneme. If you're a speaker of GA, and you want to sound English, one thing you could do would be to simply pronounce all instances of /o/ in your speech as [au], just as a speaker of RP could pronounce all instances of /o/ as /ɔu/ as a part of affecting an American accent.

Another similar example concerns the vowel /ə/, as in the words hot, sock, and rob. In RP, this vowel is pronounced in roughly the same position as it is in GA (that is, with the same height and backness), but in RP it is somewhat rounded (leading some Americans to think that the RP vowel in these words is /ɔ/). Sometimes a different symbol is used for the
vowel in fact. But this difference between the accents is a bit more complicated than this because, as we'll see below, it applies to only some instances of /ɑ/ in GA.

For English vowels, the pattern of phonetic differences between accents is often more extensive than just the correspondences between individual phonemes. The realization of a number of vowel phonemes in one accent may correspond to different realizations for all of those phonemes in another accent. This may be true for the lax ("short") vowels or the tense ("long") vowels or both.

Let's compare the tense vowels, including the diphthongs, of GA and London accent. These accents have the same set of tense vowel phonemes, which we have been writing using the symbols /i, e, o, ay, aw, ɔy/, but each is realized differently in the two accents, in some cases, very differently. The first figure below summarizes what you already know about the tense vowels of GA. Recall that each of these vowels is actually pronounced like a diphthong, though this is not reflected in the symbols used for /i, e, o, u/ and it may be difficult to hear or feel for /i/ and /u/. Each line represents one of the phonemes, and it is labeled with a word containing the phoneme (written in the same color as the line). Circles at one end or the other of an arrow represent rounding, and the arrows next to the words show the direction of the diphthong. The second figure shows the corresponding vowels in London accent. Click on the words to hear my imitation of a Londoner saying them. The colors in the two figures represent phonemes that correspond, though in some cases they differ considerably in their phonetic realization, as you can see.

How "phoned Ray" in London Sounds like "found rye" in Indianapolis

The main point to note here is that there is a clear correspondence between the GA and London vowel phonemes, even though the correspondences might not be reflected in the symbols that we use to represent the phonemes. For example, we have been using /e/ to represent the vowel in *bait*, but [e] is very far from the vowel in this word in London; for
London accent, a better symbol would be [aɪ], which of course is the realization of a completely different phoneme in GA, the one in the word bite. So when we are talking about two phones in different accents, there are two ways we can compare them, phonetically and phonemically/lexically. Phonetically, the vowel [aɪ] in London, as in the word bait, is quite similar to the vowel [aɪ] in GA, as in the word bite. But phonemically or lexically, the vowel [aɪ] in London functions the same way as the vowel [eɪ], that is, /eɪ/, in GA.

**Phonemic Differences**

Exercise \(\PageIndex{2}\)

You’re a young speaker of a Caribbean accent in which there is no /θ/ or /ð/ phoneme (thing is /tɪŋ/; this is /dɪs/). When you start school, you’re expected to learn a prestige accent in which distinctions are made between /t/ and /θ/ and between /d/ and /ð/. In what ways might this be difficult for you?

Another possibility is that two accents may differ in the number of phonemes. That is, a distinction that is made in one accent and used contrastively is not made in the other accent. This means that some words that contrast in one accent may sound the same in the other accent.

I have already mentioned two examples of this phenomenon. Many, perhaps most, speakers of GA and Canadian English do not make a distinction between the phonemes /ɒ/ and /ɑ/; they have a single phoneme instead. The actual phonetic character of the sound varies somewhat; it is more like [ə] for Americans but more like [ɔ] for many Canadians. The point is that the speakers do not distinguish words from one another using a distinction between [ɑ] and [ɔ]. Pairs of words like the following are distinct in other English accents, but they sound the same for these speakers.

1. awed, odd
2. dawn, Don
3. cawed, cod
4. caught, cot

In these accents, there is a distinction between /ɑ/ and /ɒ/ before /r/, for example, in pairs such as car and core, part and port, lard and lord. But in this same context, there is no distinction between /ɒ/ and /o/, so we could consider a word such as core to be /kɒr/ rather than /kɔr/.

Because these pairs of words sound the same in this accent, there is a potential problem for the hearer that does not exist in an accent where the distinction is made. We know that this feature of this accent is relatively new; that is, the earlier distinction made in this and other accents has been lost (and is apparently being lost by more and more speakers). Given the problem that hearers have distinguishing words like the pairs above, how can such a change take place? In fact it turns out that there are very few such pairs. The additional burden on the hearer is apparently small enough that the loss of the distinction is tolerated by speakers and hearers of the accent.

Another example was also mentioned earlier, the lack of a distinction between the phonemes /ʌ/ and /ʊ/ in accents of northern England. For these speakers there is a single phoneme, normally pronounced [ʊ]. So the following words, which sound different in most other accents, are pronounced in the same way by these speakers.
5. cud, could
6. buck, book
7. luck, look
8. putt, put
9. stud, stood

In this case, unlike that of /ɑ, ɔ/ in North America, it is the accent that fails to make the distinction that is more conservative; Middle English did not make a distinction between /ʌ/ and /ʊ/. In any case, as before, the lack of a distinction does not leave hearers for this accent handicapped because there are not many pairs of words distinguished only by this difference.

As a final example of phonemic differences in English vowels, consider how the vowel /ɑ/ in GA corresponds to vowels in RP. In GA this vowel appears in words where it is spelled "o" — hot, shock, stop — and words where it is spelled "a" — father, part, carve. In RP, on the other hand, these sets of words have different vowels, a short, rounded, low, back vowel in the first set (which I'll write with /ɑ/ even though it differs a little from GA /ɑ/!) and a long, unrounded, low, back vowel in the second set (which I'll write /ɑː/). That is, in RP, the words father and bother do not rhyme. Most of the words with /ɑː/ in RP have an /r/ in GA that does not appear in RP, as we'll see below. This means that, even though RP has two vowel phonemes where GA has one, there are few if any words that are distinguished in RP but not in GA. For example, a pair such as pot and part is distinguished by the consonant (/l/) in GA but by the vowel in RP (GA: /pɑt/, /pɑrt; RP: /pɑt, /pɑːt/).

But RP /ɑː/ also corresponds to many words that have /æ/ in GA. Some words are pronounced with /æ/ in both accents, for example, gas, bad, can, and lamp. Other words with /æ/ in GA are pronounced with /ɑː/ in RP, for example, glass, rather, can't, and laugh. Note that there is in general no way to predict from the context which words will have /æ/ and which will have /ɑː/ in RP. Thus an American trying to imitate an RP accent will have to remember which words have which phoneme. This is difficult and leads to frequent over-generalization mistakes such as the pronunciation of gas as /ɡɑs/ or stand as /stɑnd/ in American attempts at imitating RP.

Differences in the number of English consonant phonemes are not as common, but there are some. In a number of accents, especially in the Caribbean, in London, in AAVE, and in some US cities, the dental fricatives /θ, ð/ do not exist as separate phonemes. Where other accents have these phonemes, these accents have either /t/ and /d/ or /f/ and /v/. So in accents where /θ/ is not distinguished from /t/ and /ð/ is not distinguished from /d/, each of the following pairs of words would sound the same.

10. tin, thin
11. tie, thigh
12. boat, both
13. true, through
14. tread, thread
15. den, then
16. ride, writhe

In these accents an older distinction has been lost, but as with /ɑ/ and /ɔ/ in North America, the loss apparently does not

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seriously interfere with communication because there are not too many pairs of words that end up as homophones with the loss of the distinction.

Going From an Accent with Fewer to an Accent with More Distinctions is Difficult

Going back and forth between two accents is more complicated when the number of phonemes differs than when there are only phonetic differences. Say a speaker of GA or Canadian English who does not make the distinction between /ɑ/ and /ɔ/ wants to learn or to imitate the speech of someone from London or New York or Houston, all places where the distinction between these two phonemes is made. The problem is that words with these phones in this person's mental lexicon are all represented in terms of one vowel category, whereas the same words are represented in terms of two different categories in the mental lexicons of speakers of other accents. For each word, say, caught or hawk or hot or lock, the speaker will have to figure out which vowel in the other accent is appropriate. But unless the speaker has learned this for each word, this will be impossible. In this situation, speakers often make mistakes, over-extending either one or the other phone. For example, a North American speaker might overuse /ɔ/ in trying to speak with an RP accent, using this vowel for words like hot and lock. In the same way, a speaker from northern England trying to speak with an RP accent, might over-extend the vowel /ʌ/, using it for words normally containing /ʊ/ such as sugar and cushion.

Note that a speaker going in the other direction would not have the same problem. A speaker of RP would just have to remember to pronounce both /ɑ/ and /ɔ/ in the same way when imitating GA and to pronounce /ʌ/ and /ʊ/ in the same way when imitating an accent of northern England.

Allophonic Differences

A further possibility is for two accents to differ in the way a phoneme is realized in different phonetic contexts. The allophones of the phoneme may differ, or the contexts in which they apply may differ. Let's consider /t/ again, a phoneme with a wide range of allophones in many English accents. In the context where it is surrounded by vowels and does not begin a stressed syllable, this phoneme is realized as a tap, [ɾ], in GA, Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand accents, for example, in words like butter, settle, and city and phrases like put it on and at a glance. Speakers of most accents of England never use this allophone, however. Instead, some of them, especially London speakers and others whose speech is under the influence of London accent, use a glottal stop, [ʔ], in this same context. The glottal stop is a possible allophone of /t/ in GA, but only in the context where it follows a vowel and precedes a consonant, for example, in outright chaos and let me go. In these contexts, even more speakers in England also have glottal stops.

Another place where English accents often differ with respect to their allophones is the pronunciation of /l/. All English accents have an /l/ phoneme, but it may be realized differently. In many accents, including GA and RP, there are two allophones, a "clear" one, for which the tongue body is pushed up and forward, and a "dark" one, for which the tongue body is pulled backwards. Most GA speakers use the clear allophone only when it comes at the beginning of a syllable (possibly at the end of a consonant cluster), for example, in live, play, and relate. (For comparison, here's how these words would sound with very dark /l/: live, play, relate.) In other contexts, for example, in full, old, and silly, GA speakers use the dark allophone. (For comparison, here's how these words would sound with very clear /l/: full, old, silly.) (Note that this description of the contexts requires that we treat the syllable boundary in silly as occurring between the /l/ and the /i/.) In RP, the clear allophone is generally even clearer than in GA (a phonetic difference), and it is used in word such as silly as well, though not in full and old. That is, in RP, we can say that the clear allophone of /l/ occurs
generally before vowels. In other accents, one or the other variant of /l/ may be used always. In Irish English and
Caribbean English, the clear /l/ tends to appear in all contexts, while in Scottish English, the dark /l/ tends to appear
everywhere. So in these accents we can say that /l/ has only a single allophone.

Long Lax Vowels Give Southern US Accent Much of Its Characteristic Sound

Accents may also differ in their vowel allophones. The Southern US accent has unusually complex lax ("short") vowel phonemes. In fact "short" is not at all appropriate for this accent since these vowels are often longer than the "long" vowels. In particular, each of the front lax vowel phonemes, /ɪ/, /ɛ/, and /æ/, has a wide range of possible realizations,
depending on the place of articulation of the following consonant, the backness of the next vowel, and whether the vowel
is in a word consisting of one syllable. Each of these vowels has at least one diphthong allophone. Listen to the vowels
indicated in bold in the following sentence:

17. Deb lives in the lab.

Each is realized as a diphthong. When these same vowel phonemes appear before /k/, however, they have (non-
diphthongal) allophones close to the GA vowels.

18. Mick wrecked the jack.

Since all of these allophonic differences concern realization and not how words are represented in the lexicon, they are
more like the phonetic than the phonemic differences discussed above. If a GA speaker wanted to imitate a London
speaker’s use of the glottal stop allophone of /t/, they would only have to worry about what context each /t/ occurred in,
using a glottal stop whenever the /t/ occurred after a vowel and not at the beginning of a stressed syllable. Words in the
GA speaker’s lexicon with /t/ would also have /t/ in the lexicon of a Londoner, so there would be no need to remember
new properties of individual words.

Phonotactic Differences

Exercise ³

Some accents (such as AAVE and Caribbean) do not permit consonant clusters such as /st/ and /nd/ at the ends of
words, while other accents (such as GA and RP) do. With respect to just this property, would you expect it to be easier
for a speaker of AAVE to learn GA or for a speaker of GA to learn AAVE?

The Behavior of /r/ After Vowels is One of the Main Features Distinguishing English
Accents from One Another

Accents can also differ from one another in their phonotactics, that is, in the way in which consonants and vowels
combine to make syllables. The most noticeable place in English where there is this sort of variation is in the distribution
of the phoneme /r/. In most accents, /r/ can occur freely at the beginnings of words, both alone (rat) and in clusters
(brat). In GA, however, there are restrictions on which vowels can occur before /r/ within a word. For many speakers, the
vowels /i, e, u, o, ʌ/ cannot occur before /r/. In RP (and many other accents, including AAVE and some southern and
northeastern US accents), the restrictions are even more severe: /r/ can only occur before a vowel. That is, in words
such as harm, port, hurt, and weird, there is no [r] sound at all in these accents. And in words such as car, pour, her, hair, here, fire, and power, there is no [r] sound unless the words immediately precede a vowel in the following word. So the following sentence has no [r] sounds in RP, imitated here by me.

19. Arnold carelessly poured the sour yogurt on the fire.

In fact the situation in RP is more complicated than this. First, where there used to be /r/ after a vowel, and where there still is today in most accents, RP sometimes has a [ə], resulting in the diphthongs /ɪə/, /ɛə/ and /ʊə/. These diphthongs are considered to be separate vowel phonemes in some descriptions of RP. There are also pairs of homophones in RP that differ in GA and other accents, for example, farther/father and source/sauce. One further complication is that [r] gets inserted in some contexts in RP. But I’ll save this for a later section.

Another example of restrictions on the distribution of a phoneme concerns the vowels /ɪ/ and /ɛ/ in Southern US English (and also the English of some neighboring regions), which we’ve run into before. In these accents, the distinction between /ɪ/ and /ɛ/ is neutralized before [n]; only /ɪ/ occurs in this context. So in these accents, the following pairs of words are pronounced the same.

20. pin, pen
21. tin, ten
22. since, sense
23. sinned, send
24. mint, meant

As with other cases of the loss of a contrast, there is the possibility of a burden on the Hearer because of the words that are no long distinguished. This loss may explain why speakers of these accents seem to replace pen and pin with longer expressions such as fountain pen, ballpoint pen, and straight pin. Note that pen and pin are both nouns referring to physical objects, so there might be some confusion on the part of a hearer for these two words.

Finally, English accents may differ in what sorts of consonant clusters are possible. AAVE and Caribbean accents, for example, have more restrictions on what can occur at the ends of words than GA or RP do. For example, word-final consonant clusters ending in /pl/, /tl/, /kl/, or /dl/ in other accents are simpler or different in these accents: wasp /wɒs/, list /lɪs/, left /lɛf/, act /æk/, desk /dɛsk/, ask /æks/, find /fɪnd/, cold /kəld/, loved /lʌvd/.

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**Lexical Differences**

Exercise \(\PageIndex{4}\)

In the United States some words have pronunciations that are stigmatized; some of the pronunciations are associated with particular regional accents. Examples are get pronounced /gət/ and once pronounced /wʌnəs/. If you spoke an accent that included these pronunciations, how easy do you think it would be to learn to pronounce such words in the standard (prestigious) way?
Tomato is /ˈteɪməˌtoʊ/, but Potato is not /ˈpəˈtɑːtoʊ/ in England. Some Pronunciation Conventions are Purely Lexical

A final way in which accents can differ is lexically, that is, in the conventional pronunciation for particular words. For example, a small number of words are pronounced differently by GA and and RP speakers (and most other speakers on the two sides of the Atlantic). Examples include schedule (GA: /ˈskɛʃəl/, RP: /ˈʃɛʃəl/), tomato (GA: /ˈteɪməˌtoʊ/, RP: /ˈteɪməˌtoʊ/), laboratory (GA: /ˈlæbrəˌtɔrɪ/, RP: /ˈlaˌbɔrəˌtri/), lieutenant (GA: /ˈluːtənənt/, RP: /ˈlɛtənənt/), figure (GA: /ˈfɪgər/, RP: /ˈfɪɡər/), beta (GA: /ˈbetə/, RP: /ˈbɪta/). Note that none of these differences is related to any more general difference between the accents; that is, it could not be predicted from what we know about the phonetic, phonemic, allophonic, or phonotactic differences between GA and RP.

There are also lexical differences between GA and other US accents, especially broad Southern and AAVE. Some examples are police (/pəˈlis/ vs. /ˈpolis/), wash (/wɑʃ/ or /wɔʃ/ vs. /wɔrʃ/), yellow (/ˈjɛlər/ vs. /ˈjælər/), and catch (/kætʃ/ vs. /kɛtʃ/).

Other lexical differences may apply to larger sets of words. One way this can happen is with the pronunciation of parts of words that recur in many words. The word ending spelled -ile occurs in many English words such as fertile, docile, mobile, and sterile. This ending is normally pronounced /əl/ in GA but /æl/ in RP. A more familiar example is the pronunciation of the word ending spelled -ing in words of more than one syllable, that is, words like playing, eating, and something, but not thing and sing. Some speakers, located in various places in the English-speaking world, always pronounce this ending /ɪŋ/. Many other speakers have two pronunciations for the ending, one reserved for more formal situations, the other for more informal situations. For RP speakers and many GA speakers (including me), the formal pronunciation is /ɪŋ/ and the informal pronunciation /ən/. For other GA speakers (a group that appears to be growing), the more formal pronunciation is /ɪn/.

Even though these differences in pronunciations of word parts such as -ile and -ing apply to large numbers of words, they still need to be seen as lexical differences since there is nothing in what we know about the phonetic, phonemic, allophonic, or phonotactic differences between the accents that would allow us to predict the different pronunciations from the contexts of the phones.

Learning to change your pronunciation of particular words, for example, if you want to make your pronunciation more standard or want to imitate a different accent, is not too difficult, as long as there are no differences of other types (phonetic, phonemic, allophonic, phonotactic) to worry about. On a word-by-word basis, you just have to remember the new pronunciation in terms of the phonemes that are part of your native accent.

Suprasegmental Differences

English Accents Sound More Similar When They're Sung Because Pitch Differences are Lost

In the section on syllables, we saw that languages vary in terms of how they use the dimensions of pitch, loudness, and duration. One very noticeable difference between English accents is in the details of how these dimensions interact with
the structure and the meanings of sentences, that is, in their intonation. Because of the inherent difficulty of describing intonation, however, these accent differences are apparently not as well studied as differences at the level of consonants and vowels.

One difference between GA and RP is in the typical pitch pattern used for yes/no questions, that is, questions that can be answered with yes or no, rather than with phrases like Felix or on Tuesday. In GA, the usual pattern for these questions involves a pitch rise on the stressed syllable of the last stressed word in the sentence followed by a continuing high pitch on succeeding syllables. In RP, the syllables leading up to the stressed syllable of the last stressed word in the sentence are relatively high, and the pitch falls on that stressed syllable and then rises to a high pitch again, remaining high for the rest of the sentence as in GA. Consider the following question in the two accents.

1. Has she written to you?
2. Has she writ ten to you?

This difference in intonation is similar to phonetic, rather than phonemic, differences at the level of consonants and vowels because it does not involve more distinctions made in one or the other accent. It is just the realization of the yes/no pattern that differs for the two accents.

We’ve seen that accents within a language can differ in all of the characteristic ways that languages differ from one another. What makes accent differences special is the fact that the different dialects are related to one another; they ultimately derive from the same dialect in the past. This means that either phonemes in one accent correspond directly to phonemes in the other accent, or, if phonemes have split or merged in one of the accents, one phoneme in one accent corresponds to multiple phonemes in the other. These correspondences are easy to observe because of the correspondences between words in the different accents. The word cat is [kʰæt], [kʰat], [kʰæt], and [kʰæt] in different accents (GA/RP, Scottish/Northern English, Northern Cities, Australian/New Zealand), and from the lexical correspondences we can discover the vowel correspondences. One interesting kind of information that we can infer from these sorts of correspondences is the history of the dialects, how the parent dialect turned into the different daughter dialects. Of course the same is true for related languages. That is, we could learn something about the history of Spanish phonology by looking at correspondences between words in modern Spanish and related languages such as French and Portuguese. We'll see more about how this works in the section on phonological change.