

# English Phonetics and Phonology

A practical course

**Third edition**

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**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011–4211, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain  
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 1983  
Third edition 2000  
Fourth printing 2002

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Times 11/14pt. System 3b2 [CE]

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

ISBN 0 521 78613 4 paperback  
ISBN 0 521 79798 5 set of two cassettes  
ISBN 0 521 79799 3 set of two audio CDs

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# 1 Introduction

You probably want to know what the purpose of this course is, and what you can expect to learn from it. An important purpose of the course is to explain how English is pronounced in the accent normally chosen as the standard for people learning the English spoken in England. If this was the only thing the course did, a more suitable title would have been “English Pronunciation”. However, at the comparatively advanced level at which this course is aimed it is usual to present this information in the context of a general theory about speech sounds and how they are used in language; this theoretical context is called **phonetics and phonology**. Why is it necessary to learn this theoretical background? The same question arises in connection with grammar: at lower levels of study one is concerned simply with setting out how to form grammatical sentences, but people who are going to work with the language at an advanced level as teachers or researchers need the deeper understanding provided by the study of grammatical theory and related areas of linguistics. The theoretical material in the present course is necessary for anyone who needs to understand the principles regulating the use of sounds in spoken English.

The nature of phonetics and phonology will be explained as the course progresses, but one or two basic ideas need to be introduced at this introductory stage. In any language we can identify a small number of regularly used sounds (vowels and consonants) that we call **phonemes**; for example, the vowels in the words ‘pin’ and ‘pen’ are different phonemes, and so are the consonants at the beginning of the words ‘pet’ and ‘bet’. Because of the notoriously confusing nature of English spelling, it is particularly important to learn to think of English pronunciation in terms of phonemes rather than letters of the alphabet; one must be aware, for example, that the

word ‘enough’ begins with the same vowel phoneme as that at the beginning of ‘inept’ and ends with the same consonant as ‘stuff’. We often use special symbols to represent speech sounds; using the symbols chosen for this course, the word ‘enough’ would be written (**transcribed**) as **ɪnʌf**. A list of the symbols is given on p. ix, and the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) on which the symbols are based is reproduced on p. xi.

The first part of the course is mainly concerned with identifying and describing the phonemes of English. Chapters 2 and 3 deal with vowels and Chapter 4 with some consonants. After this preliminary contact with the practical business of how some English sounds are pronounced, Chapter 5 looks at the phoneme and at the use of symbols in a theoretical way, while the corresponding Audio Unit revises the material of Chapters 2–4. After the phonemes of English have been introduced, the rest of the course goes on to look at larger units of speech such as the syllable and at aspects of speech such as **stress** (which could be roughly described as the relative strength of a syllable) and **intonation** (the use of the pitch of the voice to convey meaning). It would be a mistake to think that phonemes are studied first because they are the most important aspect of speech; the reason is simply that, in my experience, courses which begin with matters such as stress and intonation and deal with phonemes later are found more confusing by the students who use them. You will have to learn a number of technical terms; you will find that when they are introduced in order to be defined or explained, they are printed in bold type. This has already been done in this Introduction in the case of, for example, **phoneme**, **phonetics** and **phonology**. Another convention to remember is that when words used as examples are given in spelling form, they are enclosed in single quotes (see for example ‘pin’, ‘pen’, etc.). Double quote marks are used where quote marks would normally be used; see, for example, “English Pronunciation” above.

Languages have different **accents**: they are pronounced differently by people from different geographical places, from different social classes, of different ages and different educational backgrounds. The word “accent” is often confused with **dialect**. We use the word “dialect” to refer to a variety of a language which is different from others not just in pronunciation but also in such matters as vocabu-



lary, grammar and word order. Differences of accent, on the other hand, are pronunciation differences only.

The accent that we concentrate on and use as our model is the one that is most often recommended for foreign learners studying British English. It has for a long time been identified by the name **Received Pronunciation** (usually abbreviated to its initials, **RP**), but this name is old-fashioned and misleading. Since it is most familiar as the accent used by most announcers and newsreaders on BBC and British independent television broadcasting channels, a preferable name is **BBC pronunciation**. This should not be taken to mean that the BBC itself imposes an “official” accent – individual broadcasters all have their own personal characteristics, and an increasing number of broadcasters with Scottish, Welsh and Irish accents are employed. However, the accent described here is typical of broadcasters with an English accent, and there is a useful degree of consistency in the broadcast speech of these speakers.

This course is not written for people who wish to study American pronunciation. The pronunciation of English in North America is different from most accents found in Britain. There are exceptions to this – you can find accents in parts of Britain that sound American, and accents in North America that sound English. But the pronunciation that you are likely to hear from most Americans does sound noticeably different from BBC pronunciation.

In talking about accents of English, the foreigner should be careful about the difference between **England** and **Britain**; there are many different accents in England, but the range becomes very much wider if the accents of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (Scotland and Wales are included in Britain, and together with Northern Ireland form the **United Kingdom**) are taken into account. Within the accents of England, the distinction that is most frequently made by the majority of English people is between **Northern** and **Southern**. This is a very rough division, and there can be endless argument over where the boundaries lie, but most people on hearing a pronunciation typical of someone from Lancashire, Yorkshire or other counties further north would identify it as “Northern”. This course deals almost entirely with BBC pronunciation. There is, of course, no implication that other accents are inferior or less pleasant-sounding; the reason is simply that BBC is the accent that has always been

chosen by British teachers to teach to foreign learners, and is the accent that has been most fully described and has been used as the basis for textbooks and pronouncing dictionaries.

A term which is widely found nowadays is **Estuary English**, and many learners of English have been given the impression that this is a new accent of English. In reality there is no such accent, and the term should be used with care. The idea originates from the sociolinguistic observation that some people in public life who would previously have been expected to speak with a BBC (or RP) accent now find it acceptable to speak with some characteristics of the accents of the London area (the estuary referred to is the Thames estuary), such as glottal stops, which would in earlier times have caused comment or disapproval.

If you are a native speaker of English and your accent is different from BBC you should try, as you work through the course, to note what your main differences are for purposes of comparison. I am not, of course, suggesting that you should try to change your pronunciation! If you are a learner of English you are recommended to concentrate on BBC initially, though when you have worked through the course and become familiar with this you will probably find it an interesting exercise to listen analytically to other accents of English, to see if you can identify the ways in which they differ from BBC and even to learn to pronounce some examples of different accents yourself.

### **Notes on problems and further reading**

The recommendation to use the name *BBC pronunciation* rather than *RP* is new to this edition of the book, and is not universally accepted. It is used in the *Daniel Jones English Pronouncing Dictionary* (15th edition; edited and revised by P. Roach and J. Hartman, 1997), in Trudgill (1999) and in Ladefoged (2000); for discussion, see the Introductions to the *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* (Wells, 2000; pp. xiii, and the 15th Edition of the *Daniel Jones English Pronouncing Dictionary* (p. v). In the original *English Pronouncing Dictionary* of 1917, by the way, the term used was *Public School Pronunciation* (*PSP*). Where other writers have used the term *RP* in discussion of standard accents, I have left the term unchanged. Other writers have suggested the name *GB* (*General British*) as a term preferable to *RP*;

I do not feel this is satisfactory, since the accent being described belongs to England, and citizens of other parts of Britain are understandably reluctant to accept that this accent is the standard for countries such as Scotland and Wales. The BBC has an excellent Pronunciation Unit, but most people are not aware that it has no power to persuade broadcasters to use particular pronunciations: BBC broadcasters only use it on an optional basis, and the Corporation obliges the Pronunciation Unit to charge a fee for their advice.

I feel that if we had a completely free choice of model accent it would be possible to find more suitable ones: Scottish and Irish accents, for example, have a much more straightforward relationship between spelling and sounds than does BBC, and have simpler vowel systems, and would therefore be easier for most foreign learners to acquire. However, the majority of English teachers would be reluctant to learn to speak in the classroom with a different accent, so it seems this is not a practical possibility.

For introductory reading on the choice of English accent, see O'Connor (1980: 5–6); Brown (1990: 12–13); Cruttenden (1994: Chapter 7). For a discussion of the status of RP, see Abercrombie (1965). For those who want to know more about British accents, a simple introduction is Hughes and Trudgill (1996); more advanced works are Trudgill (1999) and Foulkes and Docherty (1999). Undoubtedly the major work on accents of English is Wells (1982), which is a very valuable source of information (see especially pp. 117–18 and 279–301 on RP).

Much of what has been written on the subject of “Estuary English” has been in minor or ephemeral publications. A valuable collection of such works has been made available by J. C. Wells on the internet. See <http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/estuary>

A problem area that has received a lot of attention is the choice of symbols for representing English phonemes. In the past, many different conventions have been proposed and students have often been confused by finding that the symbols used in one book are different from the ones they have learned in another. The symbols used in this book are in most respects those devised by A. C. Gimson for his *Introduction to the Pronunciation of English* (the latest version of which is the revision by Cruttenden; see Cruttenden, 1994). These symbols are now used in almost all modern works on

English pronunciation published in Britain, and can therefore be looked on as a *de facto* standard. Although good arguments can be made for some alternative symbols, the advantages of having a common set of symbols for pronunciation teaching materials and pronunciation entries in dictionaries are so great that it would be very regrettable to go back to the confusing diversity of earlier years. The subject of symbolisation is returned to in Section 5.2 of Chapter 5.

### Notes for teachers

Pronunciation teaching has not always been popular with teachers and language-teaching theorists, and in the 1970s and 1980s it was fashionable to treat it as a rather outdated activity. It was claimed, for example, that it attempted to make learners try to sound like native speakers of Received Pronunciation, that it discouraged them through difficult and repetitive exercises and that it failed to give importance to communication. A good example of this attitude is to be found in Brown and Yule (1983: 26–7). The criticism was misguided, I believe, and it is encouraging to see that in recent years there has been a significant growth of interest in pronunciation teaching and many new publications on the subject. No pronunciation course that I know has ever said that learners must try to speak with a perfect RP accent. To claim this mixes up **models** with **goals**: the *model* chosen is BBC (RP), but the *goal* is normally to develop the learner's pronunciation sufficiently to permit effective communication with native speakers.

Pronunciation exercises can be difficult, of course, but if we eliminate everything difficult from language teaching, we may end up doing very little beyond getting students to play little communication games. It is, incidentally, quite incorrect to suggest that the classic works on pronunciation and phonetics teaching concentrated on mechanically perfecting vowels and consonants: Jones (1956, first published 1909), for example, writes “‘Good’ speech may be defined as a way of speaking which is clearly intelligible to all ordinary people. ‘Bad’ speech is a way of talking which is difficult for most people to understand . . . A person may speak with sounds very different from those of his hearers and yet be clearly intelligible to all of them, as for instance when a Scotsman or an American addresses

an English audience with clear articulation. Their speech cannot be described as other than ‘good’” (pp. 4–5).

Much has been written recently about **International English**, with a view to defining what is used in common by the millions of people around the world who use English as a foreign language (Crystal, 1997; Jenkins, 2000). This is a different goal from that of this book, which is describing a specific accent. The discussion of the subject in Cruttenden (1994: Chapter 13) is recommended as a survey of the main issues, and the concept discussed there of **Minimum General Intelligibility** is a useful contribution to the International English debate.

There are many different and well-tried methods of teaching and testing pronunciation, some of which are used in this book. I do not feel that it is suitable in this book to go into a detailed analysis of classroom methods, but there are several excellent treatments of the subject; see, for example, Kenworthy (1987); Dalton and Seidlhofer (1994); Celce-Murcia *et al.* (1996). At a more advanced level, Ioup and Weinberger (1987) is a collection of papers on **Interlanguage Phonology** that is relevant to the study of learners’ problems.