Chapter 1
Regional accent and dialect

In this chapter you will:

- Explore the ways in which language varies according to geographical region
- Consider what we mean by 'Standard English'
- Investigate the ways in which accent and dialect are presented in writing and performance

1.1 Accent and dialect

Everybody has an accent and dialect. Although you will often hear people say 'I don't really have an accent', it is actually impossible to speak without one. Accent simply refers to the way in which we pronounce the sounds that make up our speech, often in relation to geographical region. Dialect is a slightly larger term which includes the way we use vocabulary and grammar as well as pronunciation. In this chapter you will look at the ways in which accents and dialects vary, how they relate to what we know as 'Standard English', and what we feel about our accents. You will also see some examples of accent and dialect being represented in different types of writing.

KEY TERMS

Accent: variation in pronunciation, often associated with a particular geographical region

Dialect: variation in words and structures associated with a particular geographical region (also includes accent)

One of the most important influences on both our accent and our dialect is where we grew up, with each area of a country having slightly different ways of saying some things than its neighbours, creating what we know as regional variation. The UK is particularly rich and diverse in this respect, so much so that people from one part of the country can find it difficult to understand people from another part of the country, despite the fact they are both speaking English! The reason for this rich diversity can be seen in the history of the UK, with various groups of people conquering and settling different parts of the islands at different times, each bringing their own language or dialect with them. English eventually emerged as the dominant language, but with a great deal of variation, depending on the linguistic influences of each region. (See *Language Change* in this series for more on how English has changed over time.)

Even when the various areas of the country were at relative peace, the lack of movement of people between areas due to limited transport or physical barriers meant that each region maintained its own way of speaking. Nowadays of course, people are free to move around the country with ease, and technology enables us to communicate and come into contact with people from all areas of the country and around the world. Yet the UK is still a country of great linguistic diversity; many people still speak differently depending on where they come from and, although there are some signs of accents and dialects levelling out in some respects, there is no indication at all that they will disappear.

Of course it's not just the UK that shows such variation – the USA also boasts a wide range of different accents and dialects. People sometimes think that there is more accent and dialect diversity in the UK than in the USA, but this isn't really the case. This misconception is probably due to the fact that variation in the UK happens over such a relatively small area compared to the vast size of the USA. It is true that there is less regional variation in countries like Australia and New Zealand, but that is perhaps to be expected, given the comparatively short and recent history of English in those countries. Variation takes time to develop, although it is likely that it won't develop so much in those countries anyway, given twenty-first-century levels of mobility and communication.

1.1.1 How do accents vary?

Certain sounds play a much greater role than others in creating variation between accents. Most variation comes from differences in vowel sounds rather than consonants, although even this is not consistent. For example, most people in the UK pronounce the vowel sound in the word 'dress' the same way no matter where they are from, whereas there is a great deal of variation in the vowel sound in the word 'goat'. Similarly, despite consonants such as 's', 'f', 'b' and 'd' being fairly consistent across all accents, other consonants such as 'k', 't' and 'th' can vary considerably.

When we discuss accents, we need a way of describing the sounds that is separate from the spelling. There are two reasons for this: firstly, unlike some languages, English spelling often does not accurately reflect English pronunciation whatever your accent (consider the word 'rough' for example) and secondly, accent variation is not normally reflected in written English, which usually follows standard conventions. Neither of these facts should come as a surprise, given that we have approximately 44 separate phonemes (sounds) in English, yet only 26 letters in the alphabet.

KEY TERM

Phoneme: the smallest individual unit of sound in a language which conveys a meaning, for example in 'fell' and 'well', the /f/ and /w/ sounds are phonemes

One accurate way of describing sounds is to use the symbols of the English phonemic alphabet. In this alphabet, each phoneme of English has its own symbol. This allows us to distinguish between, for example, a northern England pronunciation of 'bus' – /bʊs/ – and a southern England pronunciation – /bʌs/. When we look up a word in a dictionary, the pronunciation is given using phonemic symbols.

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Although phonemic symbols provide a more accurate representation of sounds than letters do, they are still not precise. This is because there is variation even within single phonemes which they can't capture. For example, listen to the way you pronounce the /l/ sound in the words 'light' and 'cool', and notice the position of your tongue and lips for each. In most accents these will be quite different sounds, yet we only have one symbol for both of them. If we wanted to show this difference we would need to use the much more detailed resource of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), whose various symbols are able to describe all the sounds of any language. However, the phonemic symbols are usually enough to describe what we need when discussing differences between accents.

Another useful way of talking about the sounds of English and how they vary between accents is to use lexical sets. This is a system devised by the phonetician John Wells, who wanted a straightforward way to refer to similarities and differences between particular vowel sounds in different accents. Words are grouped together into lexical sets according to how they behave within any particular accent, and each set is represented by a keyword. For example, the keyword KIT represents a lexical set which includes words such as 'ship', 'mist' and 'visit', all words which use the /ɪ/ sound. We can therefore refer to /ɪ/ as the 'KIT' vowel.

KEY TERM

Lexical set: a group of words which have the same vowel sound in a given variety of English. For example, if a particular variety uses /æ/ in the word 'bath', then it will also use /æ/ in other words within the lexical set (e.g. 'path', 'graph', etc). Each set is represented by a keyword which is usually written in SMALL CAPS

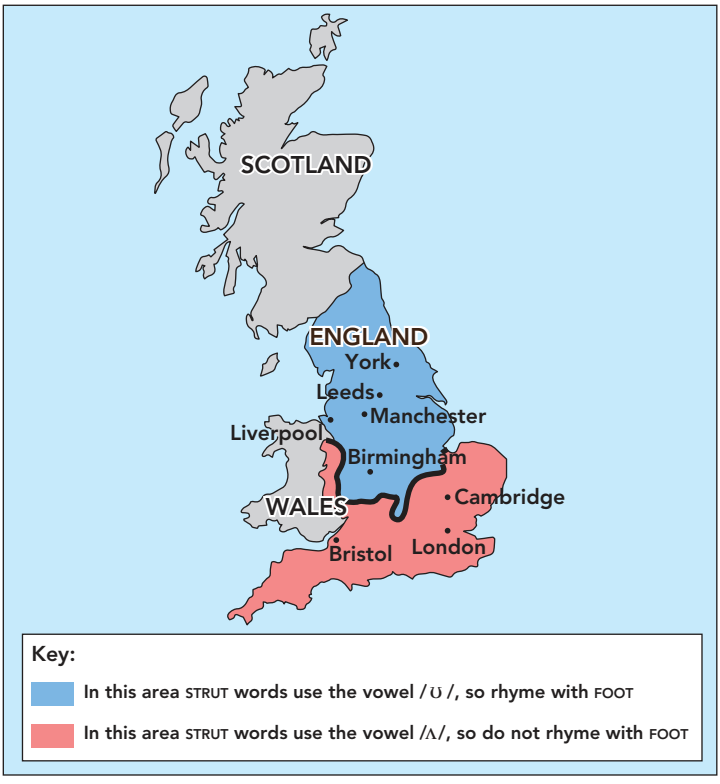
The system becomes particularly useful when describing specific accent differences, such as the variation in the word 'bus' within England. The vowel in 'bus' belongs to the lexical set STRUT, meaning that it will sound the same as the vowels in 'fun', 'must', 'come', and any other STRUT words, whatever the accent. In southern English accents, STRUT has the /ʌ/ vowel. However, in most northern English accents these words are pronounced using something close to /ʊ/, along with other words such as 'good', 'would' and 'put'. Because the lexical set system is based on southern English vowels, /ʊ/ is associated with the FOOT lexical set. See Table 1.1 to see how this works.

Table 1.1: FOOT and STRUT in southern and northern English accents

	STRUT cut, much, blood, touch	FOOT put, look, could, good	
Northern English accents	/kʊt, mʊtʃ, blʊd, tʊtʃ/	/pʊt, lʊk, kʊd, gʊd/	No split
Southern English accents	/kʌt, mʌtʃ, blʌd, tʌtʃ/	/pʊt, lʊk, kʊd, gʊd/	Split

Because of this separation between STRUT words ('fun', 'must', 'come') and FOOT words ('good', 'would', 'put'), we describe southern English accents as having a FOOT/STRUT split (i.e. the words in each of these sets are pronounced with two different vowels). On the other hand, northern English accents, which use the same vowel for both groups of words, are described as lacking a FOOT/STRUT split. Incidentally, the reason this is described as a 'split' is because the northern pronunciation was the original one hundreds of years ago, and the southern one represents a change that took place in which some words took on a new vowel.

Figure 1.1: The approximate border between northern and southern English uses of FOOT/STRUT (based on the map from Chambers and Trudgill, 1998).



The full list of lexical sets can be seen in Table 1.2, along with some example words. The phonemic symbols next to each represents the sound of the vowel in the accents known as Received Pronunciation (RP) or General American (GA). These two accents often serve as models for teaching English, and are represented in dictionary pronunciations of words. If you would like to hear the sounds represented by the symbols, there are plenty of resources online such as the interactive phonemic charts by Macmillan.
RP: www.cambridge.org/links/escdiv6001
GA: www.cambridge.org/links/escdiv6002

KEY TERMS

Received Pronunciation (RP): an accent in English which does not indicate a person's geographical location and which is recognised as having a high social status; RP is found throughout the English-speaking world

General American (GA): The majority accent in the USA, lacking any distinctly regional characteristics. It is an imprecise term that is used in linguistics mainly for comparison purposes

As you can see, several of the sets have the same RP phonemic symbol, meaning that in an RP accent they are pronounced with the same vowel. However, the fact that the different sets exist means that in some accents at least, they are pronounced differently. Similarly, some of the sets have different symbols in RP, yet they would have the same symbol in another accent (for example, NURSE and SQUARE in Liverpool English). It is worth bearing in mind that while all of the sets play a role in distinguishing between accents, some of the examples are only relevant to American English (John Wells used RP and General American as his reference 'standard' accents when he originally compiled the list). For example, in many US accents, LOT and CLOTH have different vowels (LOT is usually close to /ɑː/ (RP PALM) while CLOTH is close to /ɔ/ (RP THOUGHT)), whereas in most British accents they have the same vowel.

Table 1.2: A list of lexical sets and example words for Received Pronunciation (RP) and Gener

Keyword	RP	GA	Example words	Keyword	RP	GA	Example words
KIT	ɪ	ɪ	ship, sick, lift, build	GOOSE	uː	u	loop, mute, spoo
DRESS	e	ɛ	step, bell, death, said	PRICE	aɪ	aɪ	like, die, ice, ride
TRAP	æ	æ	cat, dash, tax, ant	CHOICE	ɔɪ	ɔɪ	noise, join, boy,
LOT	ɒ	ɑ	odd, font, swan, wasp	MOUTH	aʊ	aʊ	out, house, coun
STRUT	ʌ	ʌ	cut, much, blood, touch	NEAR	ɪə	ir	deer, fear, here,
FOOT	ʊ	ʊ	put, look, could, good	SQUARE	eə	ɛr	care, pear, where
BATH	ɑː	æ	path, daft, dance, laugh	START	ɑː	ɑr	sharp, large, carv
CLOTH	ɒ	ɔ	cough, broth, long, cross	NORTH	ɔː	ɔr	for, war, short, so
NURSE	ɜː	ɜr	hurt, church, girl, stern	FORCE	ɔː	or	four, wore, porch
FLEECE	iː	i	creep, meet, speak, key	CURE	ʊə*	ʊr	pure, tourist, lure
FACE	eɪ	eɪ	cake, late, name, weight	*happy*	i	i	city, busy, copy, s
PALM	ɑː	ɑ	calm, father, spa, lager	*lett*ER	ə	ər	paper, centre, or
THOUGHT	ɔː	ɔ	taught, sauce, fought, jaw	*comm*A	ə	ə	vodka, quota, pa
GOAT	əʊ	oʊ	soap, oak, know, rogue	*This is now quite an old-fashioned pro use /ɔː/ as in NORTH for this set.			

In addition to the differences between FOOT and STRUT described in Table 1.1, Table 1.3 shows a few of the more salient variations in British English accents.

Table 1.3: Some examples of accent differences in British English

BATH and TRAP	Separate in southern England, the same in northern England.
NURSE and SQUARE	Pronounced with the same vowel in areas of the north-west of England. Interestingly, some areas (e.g. parts of Lancashire) use the /ɜː/ vowel for both, whereas other areas (e.g. parts of Merseyside) use /ɛː/ for both.
LOT and THOUGHT	Pronounced with the same vowel in most Scottish accents, so *cot* and *caught* are homophones.
happy	Many northern English accents have /ɪ/ for the vowel at the end of these words while southern English accents tend to have /i/ or /iː/.
FACE and GOAT	Many northern English accents have long monophthongs for these words – /feːs/, /goːt/.

ACTIVITY 1.1

Your accent

Look at the words in the table of lexical sets (Table 1.2). How does your pronunciation compare to those of the RP or GA examples? Do you have any of the differences described in Table 1.3? Can you identify any other regional variations based on what you've heard on TV or in the media? For example, how do some people from Manchester (UK) typically pronounce the *letter* vowel?

If English is your second language, are you aware of having a British or American accent? How does your pronunciation compare to the pronunciations in Table 1.2?

In both cases it might be helpful to first listen to some recordings of example RP and GA vowels found online (e.g. www.cambridge.org/links/escdiv6003).

Whilst it's mostly vowel sounds which vary between accents, some consonant sounds do too. Sometimes there are sounds which used to be associated with particular regional areas, but have spread to other areas. For example, th-fronting, where people use /f/ or /v/ for 'th' in words such as 'three' or 'brother' used to be thought of as a London feature, but now it

can be heard all over the UK. Other times there are sounds which remain very much associated with a particular region, for example the /t/ sound in Liverpool English which can sound a bit like /ts/ in words such as 'tree' or 'ten'.

Another very important feature which distinguishes English accents is the use of postvocalic /r/. Postvocalic /r/ is the name given to an /r/ sound that comes after a vowel. It is there in the spelling, for example in words such as 'car' and 'park', but is not always sounded in speech. Most accents in England don't pronounce this sound, with only relatively small areas (parts of the north-west and parts of the south-west) clinging on to what used to be a widespread feature of British English. However, it is still the usual pronunciation for most Scottish, Irish and US accents of English. Accents which do pronounce the /r/ are known as rhotic accents.

KEY TERMS

Monophthong: a vowel which has a single sound throughout its duration. For example, the /iː/ vowel sound in the word 'sheep'

Th-fronting: the pronunciation of 'th' as /f/ or /v/. So 'think' becomes 'fink' and 'with' becomes 'wiv'

Postvocalic /r/: the /r/ sound that appears after a vowel and before a consonant ('farm') or at the end of a word ('far'). It is not pronounced in most English accents

Rhotic accent: an accent which pronounces postvocalic /r/

ACTIVITY 1.2

Accent survey

Devise a survey which will enable you to analyse different people's accents. If you are able to talk to the people face-to-face and record their speech you could simply ask them to read a list of words, or perhaps a few sentences. Make sure you have included a few examples of those words which you think are likely to vary according to accent. If you have time, you could also try to record the same people speaking more naturally in conversation (remember to ask permission and explain what the recording is for). Why do you think this might be important?

If you are not able to speak to people face-to-face, you could try devising some questions which will tell you about their accent. A good way to do this is by asking if certain words rhyme in their speech. For example:

- Do the words 'hut' and 'foot' rhyme in your speech?

- Do you pronounce the words 'fur' and 'fair' the same?
- Do you pronounce the words 'paw' and 'pour' the same?

When you have finished, compare the accents. Are they different? In what ways?

If you do not have access to people who have different English accents, try to analyse videos of people speaking instead. Listen out for some keywords which you think are likely to vary. Make a note of how they are pronounced. If you don't know the phonemic symbol, or if you can't describe the difference, try to replicate the pronunciation yourself and notice what changes. For example, is your mouth more open? Is there more/less movement of your tongue?

1.1.2 Lexical variation

All of the examples so far have been to do with accent; however, there is also a great deal of regional dialect variation in the UK. After accent, perhaps the most noticeable differences occur at the level of lexis, with people from different areas of the country having different words for even the most everyday things. Probably the most well-known area of disagreement is the one surrounding the item pictured in Figure 1.2. Depending on where someone grew up, this could be a picture of a bread roll, a barm, a morning roll, a bap, a batch, a cob, a scuffler, a stotty, or a buttery. And what about those things on your feet – are they trainers, runners, sneakers, joggers, sandshoes, plimsolls, pumps, creps, or kickers? No doubt you have a clear idea about the differences between what some of these words refer to, but the interesting thing is that these differences vary from region to region. It's not just that people from different places use different words for some things, rather that people from different places often use the same words for different things!

Figure 1.2: What do you call these?