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UPDATING A DICTIONARY OF AMERICAN ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION

Introduction

    An attempt to compile the necessary data or evidence to be used
as a basis for an updated dictionary of American English pronuncia-
tion will, necessarily, seek answers to certain difficult questions.
The concerns faced by editors of such a lexicon will be of greater
import than those faced by editors of general English language dic-
tionaries, where pronunciation decisions--though important--represent
only a small part of a larger task.

    The PRONOUNCING DICTIONARY OF AMERICAN ENGLISH (PDAE) by Kenyon
and Knott (1944) remains, to this day, the major lexical reference
in a single volume of American English pronunciation. Even our gen-
erative phonologists, who have long since revised the Bloomfieldian
concepts of phonemic categories into the noted feature framework,
still refer to the data in PDAE--as they must. Thus, Chomsky and
Halle make numerous references to PDAE for pronunciations of spe-
cific words. PDAE has no competitors.

    D. Jones's EVERYMAN'S ENGLISH PRONOUNCING DICTIONARY (EPD), orig-
inally compiled in 1917, was extensively revised in a 14th edition
(1977) by Professor Gimson of University College, London. It is the
primary source, in a single volume, of British (RP) forms. The
publication of J.W. Lewis's CONCISE PRONOUNCING DICTIONARY OF BRIT-
ISH AND AMERICAN ENGLISH (CPDBAE) in 1972 did not replace PDAE as a
major reference work. T. Pyles (1973:114) noted that "CPDBAE is an
altogether reliable treatment of the most up-to-date type of British
pronunciation. . . . It is considerably less satisfactory for Ameri-
can pronunciation". CPDBAE still refers to 'General American'; up-
to-date American phoneticians no longer so refer. It overlooks the
recent scholarship about regional variants, and contains no reflec-
tion of the data and insights of recent American sociolinguistic
studies. And the data (little as they may be) on Canadian forms
appear nowhere. American English can no longer exclude Canadian
English.

    The foremost item of concern lies perhaps in the area known as
the entry of variants: which ones, to what extent, how arrived at?
The application of low-level phonological rules will explain morpho-
logical endings in the past tense forms of crushed and bathed or the
final phonemes of bits and bags, for the consonant, vowel, and stress
differences of malign and malignant, telegraph and telegraphy, recite
and recitation. But the application of similar rules will not work
easily for certain variant entries--where the recognition of com-
plexities must begin. The variable rules concept that was intro-
duced by Labov (1969) provides some special insights. Though the
concept is not completely refined nor agreed to by all (cf. Kay and
McDaniel 1979 and Sankoff and Labov 1979), it does highlight certain
practical implications that stem from the theory. One is the thought
that there cannot be a shift of a person's (or a group's) usage in

one phonetic environment while that of all other usages in other phonetic environments remain stable. The model suggests, for instance, that the retraction or backing by speakers in a speech community of the initial vowel of the cluster in a word like <u>aisle</u> would have a noticeable effect on the initial element of the complex cluster in a word like <u>hour</u>--in the same regional/social dialect, with perhaps lowering of <u>one</u> and fronting of the other. The model further suggests that when the phonetic constraints are reordered for a group, they are similarly reordered for other speakers in the community where the same variable rules apply. Quite reasonable. With data describing the usages in sufficient samples in similar and different phonetic environments by speakers from different and similar age and social groups in a restricted speech community, the entry decisions are dictated and will need to be closely watched to see if they fill the expected grids of the pronunciation framework.

But we have some evidence that the above implications are not always as predictable as we would hope them to be. We know from other studies (e.g., Anshen 1969, Labov 1963, McDavid 1952, Stewart 1968, and Wolfram and Fasold 1974) that certain usages observed in a heterogeneous community demonstrate that the same variable constraints are not always shared throughout that community, nor do they result in the same order of linguistic change. From Labov's study of Martha's Vineyard, for instance, we learned that certain social groups centralized or retracted vowels in a different order from others, sometimes by design. And in his New York City study, it was clear that nondeleted /r/ in a postvowel position is widely accepted in casual conversational speech styles by certain upper middle-class native speakers, while other social groups do not use similar forms; and again there are seemingly dictated preferences. The suggestion is clear--rules are not always equally applied in heterogeneous communities. Sociolinguistic analyses of these and other studies provide food for lexicographic thought in developing an updated American pronunciation dictionary. We will not be able to rest with comfort until we have checked the sources, gathered the evidence to see that we have not overlooked the constraints noted above.

Should any of the following concepts be kept in mind by the editorial staff? The sociolinguist now knows that every speaker is a part of many nested and intersecting speech communities. Will the stylistic difference that range from very formal to very intimate usages be of concern to him? We know that speakers in the same communities apply the phonological rules differently. For example, as speakers advance in age, the tendency to delete past tense morphemes is an almost fully predictable one. Shall we be careful to recognize and enter such forms? With the additional recognition of the complexities of geographical dialects of this continent, there are other complex variations within each, as all linguists know. Shall we keep in mind not only the differences between two sexes but also those that are, or may be, associated with young, middle, old, aged people; with speakers that bridge all shades of the social spectrum; those from educated lower, middle, middle-middle, upper middle, middle upper, etc., even to the speakers of the most highly educated levels? The mix is varied and complex.

Additionally, the large urban centers of this continent have been hosts to speakers in large numbers, of very many languages of the

world. We do know that speakers filter the sounds they hear through
a grid established by the native language that they intuitively
adopt.   Sounds from 'elsewhere' are squeezed into that grid system.
When they do not easily fit into the speaker's system, or when we
try to sound like the native speakers of another language, certain
shifts are made.   We know, for example, that initial, unaspirated
voiceless plosives are common to other languages (like French)--not
to English; or that /n-ŋ / may not be phonemically distinct in other
languages (Spanish); or that English cognates with interdental fric-
atives may be stops elsewhere (German); or that voiceless alveolar
fricatives (/s/) and voiceless alveolar stops (/t/) can be (dia-
lectal) variants of each other (Hebrew) rather than distinctively
perceived, as in Germanic and Romance languages.   To the speaker of
languages other than English, our dictionary entries will need to be
treated with care.   Such treatment may include concern with adopted
forms from other languages.   If so, then it may be possible to
'handle' the medial cluster of Russian Kruschev, or the final sound
of French laissez-faire or Grenoble, the initial sound of Arabic
Gaza, the first consonant of Hebrew Achinoam, the middle consonant
of Dutch Nijmegen or the final one in Scottish Loch, the aspirated
voiced initial sound in Sanskrit dharma, the 'soft' consonants of
the Slavic languages.   Expressions and words that have entered the
language and that are not fully Anglicized into an American-English
phonological grid are all around us.   Perhaps we can develop a some-
what more extended system than that typically found in our commer-
cial dictionaries--a more accurate system that will not be too un-
wieldy.   Is it worth a try? And are there data that stem from a
review of some of the creolization studies (e.g., those done by
William Stewart and Derek Bickerton and others) that describe pro-
nunciation usages by certain American speakers that should be con-
sidered by the editors? If so, we can insert them, properly foot-
noted, if they belong.

We have only begun to draw attention to general approaches,
areas, concepts that stem from activity in linguistic analysis over
the past 3-4 decades, since the issuance of the PDAE.   The details
of what we must review are staggering--for it is almost 40 years
since that volume was issued.   The very large numbers of studies
done on the consonants and vowels of American English (what happens
with intervocalic stops; how we identify fricatives; studies of vowel
duration and shifting consonant perception; the analysis of un-
stressed vowels; the treatment of syllabic consonants; the structure
of the vowel system; vowel variables in social stratification; the
perception of American-English diphthongs; the /o-u / and
postvocalic /r/shifts in American English; factors conditioning
vowel duration; and others) will need sifting for insights and data
that should not be overlooked.   Nor can we forget the special large
area studies of New England and the Atlantic States (Kurath and
McDavid 1961), the Upper Midwest (Allen 1973) and the not yet
available data of the Atlas studies of the Gulf States, the Middle
and South Atlantic, the Great Lakes areas, and those of the
DICTIONARY OF AMERICAN REGIONAL ENGLISH (cf. Hartman 1969); the
small and large published studies of selected parts of the
continent--Bedford, Pa., Eastern Virginia, Boston, Edmonton,
Southeast Alabama, New York City, New England, Terre Haute,
Tuscaloosa, Northwest Ohio, Appalachia, Detroit, Maryland, the
Pacific Northwest, etc., and the special studies done by W. Avis,
M.H. Scargill, H.R. Wilson, P.J. Gregg, and others on Canadian
English.   These studies will provide data that will need

categorization in addition to the notation of special pronunciations for specific utterances.

I raise now some of the obvious problems to be considered and resolved by any dictionary editor. They loom for a pronouncing dictionary. I direct attention to only a few such items.

No key can possibly accommodate all the sounds and systems native to other languages for words and expressions that must be entered in an English lexicon for those borrowed words that have become part of the language. As I noted earlier, the key must consider making provision, in some reasonable way, for the entry of Semitic gutturals, 'soft' Slavic consonants, the glottal intervocalic insertions of Hawaiian, the aspirated voiced plosives of Hindi, the unaspirated plosives of French and Thai and many more. The decisions of the major commercial dictionaries do provide a guide, but it may be essential, especially for an American English pronunciation dictionary, to expand the treatment of borrowed words/expressions somewhat.

We have not only restaurants that serve the special dishes of the countries of Africa, Europe, Asia, South America, and the subcontinent--with their labels; we also have their populations, one and more generations removed, to provide us with usages that are becoming real parts of the spoken dialects of our major urban centers.

Will the key to be used be a variation of the International Phonetic Alphabet key or a diacritic key that uses the commonly spelled forms, or both, so that both linguists and lay people can refer to the dictionary with ease?

It should be clear to us that the editors of a dictionary of current American English pronunciation have to know the usages of those who function in the University, the Courts, the legislatures, the public platforms, as well as those of everyday speech by the rest of the educated speakers of many nested communities of the country. These provide the sources which the reader seeks-- 'educated usages'--however defined. Does such a definition, then, include poorly formed sentences and 'unexpected' pronunciations that some of us decry/condemn, but which others of will not only tolerate, but use? We are back to 'nonstandard' forms, and the inclusion of four-letter words, long since resolved differently by every lexicographer. This 'avoidance symptom' was called sharply to our attention by W. Labov (1970:80-87) when he suggested that our obligation is to study and report the language in use by the speech community (not only those that stem from our own intuitions and performances).

I can identify some such usages heard in the speech of a reasonable number of my colleagues at the dinner table, on the ballfield, in the swimming pool, on the tennis courts: the fronted/raised diphthong in cow and out; the retracted ones in why and line; the raised, diphthongized, and nasalized vowels of candy and grass; the fronted/diphthongized forms of third and person; the assimilated [opm̩]; the centralized vowels of blue and broke; the deleted interdentals in words like sixths. I have not heard a voiceless /t/in thirty and forty on the tennis courts in as many years. Yet some or all of these are denied/decried usages by colleagues who may avoid

them themselves but hear them in the speech of other colleagues. I think no less of either group. The entry of such variants as 'acceptable' must reflect the speakers' performances--attitudes to the contrary notwithstanding. If others label such usage 'non-standard' despite their presence in the mainstream, the lexicographer may not exclude them if their presence is widespread enough to warrant insertion in the data base. For it is the unrehearsed, spontaneous forms in the stream of speaking--which perhaps we must label as unidealized versions heard far from our antiseptic, acoustically-clean laboratories--that we seek. The kinds of language we use in the subway, on the bus or street, in our living rooms and bedrooms, in the supermarket, pharmacy, and pizza parlor belong in the dictionary.

To these must be added those stylistic variants where code-switched forms abound. Labov (1970) touched on these and discussed variants like walkin', cap'm (captain), twenny (twenty), gramma (grandma). Such variants categorize themselves differently from those like the /n-ŋ / forms of incapable, incognito, and conclude, where, at least with most American English speakers, the alveolar forms have no common velar variant.

I overlook here what our acoustic phoneticians have already demonstrated--that certain phonetic constraints and contexts lead us to recognize that what we have perceived may not have been said. For instance, unexpected long vowels, rather than expected short vowels, will make us hear pig for pick and sub for sup. There is no voice bar throughout the initial sound of buy and gum; the rapidity of the onset of the following vowel is what makes us believe we hear /b/ when we have in fact said an unaspirated /p/ or /k/ in spy and scum. Things are complex enough and no lexicographer will get away with the respelling of (sbi) for spy or (sgum) for scum. None of us would dare try!

Where do we find enough evidence so we know what to do with uncommon words, hardly ever used in the spoken form? How often do we actually use or hear the word widths as it is spelled? The collapsed cluster is probably what we would hear, if we ever used it! What medial vowel is the common one in ptarmigan: / ɩ / or / ə /? Is optative ever heard with primary stress on the second syllable? Does anyone we know ever say it? And has the lexicographer recently visited enough construction sites to know that sheathing (the boards that sheathe the outside wall of a construction site) is rarely pronounced by anyone on the site except as though it were spelled sheeting? Yet the spelled form with the medial voiced fricative is what the non-construction-engineer/lexicographer will insert in his dictionary.

I now want to compare certain decisions made in the keys and respellings in certain regular and pronouncing dictionaries. Although my concern at the moment is with American English forms, a decision to exclude any entries of British pronunciation needs careful appraisal. There seems to be a market for a volume in which both British and American forms appear--at least the CPDBAE and the LONGMAN DICTIONARY OF CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH (LDOCE) made that inclusive decision with what, I think, were not the most satisfactory results. (I worked on the latter as a consultant for American English forms.) Such a dictionary may prove useful to those who

want a record of both forms for all entries and for foreign-language
users of the dictionary who want similar data. If the decision is
to move in that direction, it will compound the problems enormously
--the first problem being the decision on pronunciation keys that
would relate to British and American forms without confusion.

Two phonetic dictionaries (EPD and PDAE) and two American dic-
tionaries (RANDOM HOUSE and AMERICAN HERITAGE) list three different
vowels for the words fed, fade and fared, while two British diction-
aries do not. In LDOCE and CPDBAE, Fred, fared, and frayed
(afraid), led, laird, and laid differ only in the addition of the
off-glide. American readers of these British dictionaries (for whom
they are written) may be confused when they get to the words ferry,
fairy, and fade and apply the system available, which shows [feri,
feəri, feid]. This will work well for many but not for those
American/Canadian spekers whose initiating vowel for the latter two
words is qualitatively different, consistently. For them, the words
farrow (harrow), ferry (herring), fairy (hairy), fade (hate), fail
(hail) expect [færo, fɛri, fɛəri, feɪd, feɪl, fɛəl]   with four clearly
distinctive vowel nuclei in the first four word-pairs and either of
two in the last. Our pronunciation editors for American commercial
dictionaries do not show the same vowel, monophthongally or as the
first pair of the complex nucleus, in fend, fail, fair as do both
PDBAE and LDOCE for American pronunciations of these words: i.e.,
[fend, feɪl, feə(r)].

Conclusion

Let me conclude this with problems to be resolved. There is no
doubt of the need to provide an updated American English pronouncing
dictionary, since it is reasonable to anticipate that no contem-
plated standard dictionary can be expected to address the needs that
a pronouncing dictionary must meet. So, before the first page is
set, the editorial staff will have decided:

(a) the number of stresses and the method of entry to be used in
    the system;
(b) that the system to be developed must account for Canadian
    and American regional and social variants;
(c) that it makes a difference if we approach a dictionary as a
    reference source for native speakers as opposed to non-
    native speakers;
(d) that the editorial staff will need to develop an appropriate
    system for the gathering, sifting, and categorizing of data;
(e) that we will need solutions to big and small policy matters,
    like pronunciation keys and syllabification;
(f) shall we use superscripts for deleted sounds (like the "r"
    in fear); for palatalized soft Slavic consonants; for the
    French final sound of lettre?
(g) should we worry about the phonetic variations we can almost
    see on the spectrogram (like for the medial vowel of regu-
    lar, possible)?
(h) there are 'er' and 'or' forms, heard for the sure and
    curious words, in addition to the oor forms, which recent
    dictionaries do not show; how widespread is their use?
(i) we need careful policies on items of a number of
    regional/social variants like the [ər - ʌr] of hurry, the

[aˑ - aɪ] for <u>fight</u>, the [kaʊ - kʊʊ] of the northeast and the [æʊ] of the South and some urban northeastern centers, etc. (And now that H.B. Allen's data are available for the upper Midwest, these also provide important, verified information for our use. The Linguistic Atlas findings for the southeastern United States and those from F.G. Cassidy's massive DARE project will provide additional source materials.)

(j) finally, the problem of labels will not go away. If you label a form as 'metathesized' or 'spelling pronunciation' or even 'informal'/'formal', are fingers being pointed?

You can surely add, as I can, many other problems that need consideration and solutions. And editors will continue to be criticized for insertions of 'vulgar' or 'nonstandard' forms that will result in published and spoken criticisms, with derisive overtones!

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