

## Sound Change in Standard Englishes and Its Implications in TEFL

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In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in the study of language change and other types of linguistic variation in society. This interest was stimulated by the work of Labov and later by numerous linguists all round the world. But all this interest has been focused on language change in non-standard varieties, in the English of Detroit, New York City, Belfast or Edinburgh. Then what about change in the standard varieties?

This paper introduces and discusses sound change in Standard Englishes with special emphasis on vowel change, change of stress and /j/ deletion; standard Englishes and English in three circles; and their implications in Teaching English as a Foreign Language.

The standard pronunciation of English in England is usually referred to as RP. Some of the sub-types of RP include 'BBC English', 'The Queen's English,' or Oxford English. The counterpart accent for the United States is something called 'General American' which is spoken outside the southern states and the Eastern seaboard of the U.S.A. As is the case with British RP, one cannot tell from their accent where speakers of General American come from within this vast area.

In sound change there are phonemic as well as non-phonemic change. As far as general principles of sound change are concerned, non-phonemic sound change is harder to hear and very important. Imagine a speaker of RP or General American saying the words sit, set, sat and then speakers of other varieties of English saying the same words. All the speakers will make a difference between these words, so they will all distinguish three vowel phonemes. Each speaker will make a difference between these words, so they will all distinguish three vowel phonemes. Each speaker will make the distinctions in a different way. In fact these differences may be so great that if the words are spoken in isolation, confusion may arise.

Wells(1962) reports on an experiment in which 25 male speakers of RP, 23 of them of university age, were asked to read sentences of the form 'The word is \_\_\_\_\_' into a tape recorder. Different words were introduced into the slot, but all had the consonants /h/ and /d/ surrounding a vowel. The three words were had, hud and

who'd. Each sentence was read twice. The vowels were then analyzed on a spectrograph and the average values of the formants for each vowel were calculated. Henton(1983) reports on what happened when she repeated the experiment twenty years later. She used 10 male speakers of RP, aged between 25 and 37, and again each read each sentence twice. The spectrographic analysis was completed using more up-to-date technology, but the principles were still the same.

Table 1. Formant frequencies for three vowels of RP measured twenty years apart(male speakers)

	Values for 1962			Values for 1982		
	F1	F2	F2-F1	F1	F2	F2-F1
æ	748	1746	998	713	1615	902
ʌ	722	1236	514	645	1200	555
u:	309	939	630	347	1149	802

*Sources: Wells (1962) and Henton (1983)*

In Bauer's case a similar experiment was done over a longer period. Recordings for the experiment were made at the University of Edinburgh between 1949 and 1966 of students and staff members. They were reading the story of Arthur the Rat. These recordings included versions made by 37 speakers of RP, 18 males and 19 females. For comparison with Wells's and Henton's given above, the average formant values for males from this experiment is recorded in Table 2.

Table 2. Average formant figures for male RP speakers for three vowels

	F1	F2	F2-F1
æ	652	1647	995
ʌ	658	1365	707
u:	351	1066	715

*Source: Bauer (1985)*

According to a similar experiment conducted on female speakers by Bauer(1985), the values for /æ/ show a retraction, possibly, a lowering of this vowel over the century. The values for /ʌ/ seem to show a general fronting of this vowel, except the youngest speaker. The values for /u:/ show a marked fronting of the vowel in the

course of the century. The fronting of /u:/ is perhaps one of the most salient changes in the pronunciation of RP in the latter part of this century.

How is change of stress in English? The phenomenon of stress in English is very complicated, both in terms of its phonological patterning and in terms of its phonetic realization. Besides, there has been a change in the position of a stress in the course of time. Sometimes the same word is stressed differently when it comes to American English and British English.

The following shows stress patterns for ten words as listed in OED1(1884-1928).

Table 3. Stress patterns for ten words(as listed in OED1)

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ab'domen
a'cumen
an'chovy
bi'tumen
climac'teric
'dirigible
'exigency
'formidable
'fragmentary
'hospitable

---

Returning to the ten word data, one can refer to the OED2(1989) and other reference works and observe the stress change.

Table 4. Stress patterns in OED2

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'abdomen
'acumen
'anchovy
'bitumen
cli'macteric
di'rigible
ex'igency
for'midable
frag'mentary
hos'pitable

---

Besides, Table 5 shows stress differences in British English and American English(Stevens 1972).

Table 5. British English American English

adDRESS	ADress
artiSAN	ARTisan
cigaRETTE	CIGarette
DEtail	deTAIL
docTRinal	DOCtrinal
GArage	gaRAGE
laBORatory	LABoratory
reCESS	RECESS
reVEille	REveille

In the light of the above, it seems clear that whether the old or new pronunciation will prevail is not certainly definite. The stresses that purists are complaining about are the natural outcome of a process of change which has been going on for a long time. Therefore, stresses accepted unquestioningly today are already in the process of change, no doubt.

Words with u(e) and ew used to be pronounced with /ju:/, while those with oo and ou have always contained /u:/ with no /j/.

The following table shows some examples of words from the 14th edition of The English Pronouncing Dictionary (EPD 1988) and The American Heritage Dictionary (AHD 1976).

Table 6. Current pronunciations of words with historical /j/ in two varieties of English

Word	British RP (EPD 14r)	US English (AHD)
blue	blu:	blu:
beautiful	bjʊ:	bjʊ:
cute	kju:	kju:
fume	fju:	fju:
huge	hju:	hju:
mute	mju:	mju:
ewe	ju:	ju:
chew	tʃu:	tʃu:
rule	ru:	ru:
enthuse	θu: ~ θju:★	θu:
dew	dju:	du: ~ dju:
tune	tju:	tu: ~ tju:
suit	su: ~ sju:	su:
new	nju:	nu: ~ nju:
lewd	ju: ~ lu:	lu:

Notes: ~ indicates 'alternates within the community'

★The alternation is shown at *enthusiasm* rather than at *enthuse*

From the evidence we have noticed above, we can say there is no a priori reason why a change that has taken place in one variety of English should be expected to take place in another. However, some consistent patterns could be predicted, too. According to Bauer(1994) British RP is likely to lose /j/ in stressed syllables following /θ/, /l/ and /s/ before it loses it following /d/, /t/ and /n/.

Generally people believe that there is a 'right' way of using English, even though they do not necessarily use the 'correct' forms in their own speech(Choi, 1993). Then which variety of English is recommended to the speakers of English as a foreign language?

Trudgill and Hannah(1982) say that although the RP of Standard English has been heard constantly on radio and television for decades, "only 3 to 5% of the population of Britain actually speak RP." On the other hand, according to Albert H. Marckwardt's *American English*(1980), sociopolitical factors have contributed to the establishment of American English as the unofficial second language of almost the entire world.

In the meantime, the spread of English may be viewed in terms of three circles representing the patterns of acquisition, types of spread and the functional domains in which English is used across cultures and languages. The first circle includes the areas where English is used as the primary language—the U.K., the U.S.A., Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

The second circle covers the regions which have gone through extended periods of colonization, by the users of the first circle varieties. The third circle accepts English as an international language. This circle is currently expanding rapidly and includes populations of such countries as China, Greece, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, Korea, Nepal, Taiwan, Russia and Zimbabwe.

Certainly these three circles bring to English an unparalleled cultural pluralism, and a linguistic diversity. Naturally many problems arise from this diffusion. The problems usually have to do with codification, standardization, nativization and teaching.

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Native speakers of English often complain that English is deteriorating or being corrupted. This complaint reflects in the main a conservative resistance to change. On the other hand, some native speakers insist that the use of English is deteriorating.

Actually we can observe many changes taking place in twentieth-century standard varieties of English. Some changes are relatively straightforward while others are not. According to Weinreich et al.(1968), a language change theory involves such problems as constraints, transition, embedding and evaluation.

English pronunciation has changed beyond all recognition since the time of Proto-Indo-European. Otto Jespersen(1909) contends that English is changing for the better. But most modern linguists will say that change in itself is neutral, neither inherently good or bad.

Standard English pronunciation is necessary and must be maintained. However, since the standard pronunciation of English differs from one variation to another, many of the narrow and strict forms of prescriptivism have already lost sight of the true function of prescription in maintaining the standard. Therefore, attitudinal changes should be made on the part of native speakers of English. The very key to attitudinal changes lies in developing respect for the diverse varieties of English pronunciation, if they are comprehensible.

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