Unit 2_THEORY (I):
English Accents in the British Isles

This document is the first of two that introduce the main accents of the British Isles. It focuses primarily on the syllabus topic *Description of English Accents in the British Isles: RP English*, with an introductory section on *Ways of Comparing Accents*. Remember that the recent changes in RP should be studied in the textbook (section 2.1). ✋

INTRODUCTION: WAYS OF COMPARING ACCENTS (based on Wells, 1982)

When analysing SEGMENTAL differences among accents, we can consider either their historical development or their current (synchronic) form. This course adopts a synchronic approach, describing accents as they are pronounced today.

Within this framework, **two main types of pronunciation differences** are examined:

a) **Systemic** (or **phonological**) differences: Accents may differ in their phonemic inventory, that is, in the number or identity of the phonemes they use. For instance, while many English accents feature two vowel phonemes in the close back area (/uː/ and /ʊ/), Scottish English includes only one, /uː/.

b) **Realizational** (or **phonetic**) differences: Accents may differ in how specific phonemes are phonetically pronounced. For instance:

- The vowel in *kit* is pronounced differently in Australian English compared with RP.
- These differences may also involve the presence or absence of certain allophones: for instance, Irish English consistently uses a clear /l/, while RP distinguishes between clear and dark 'l'.

JC Wells also highlights **two additional types of pronunciation differences**:

c) *Phonotactic distribution* differences: These refer to differences in the contexts where certain phonemes can or cannot occur. Examples include:

- o In rhotic accents (e.g., GA), the consonant /ɾ/ occurs in pre-consonantal and word-final positions, whereas it is absent in those positions in non-rhotic accents such as RP.

- o *Yod-dropping* (the omission of /j/ after certain consonants) varies across accents (see RP below).

- o Neutralisation, where contrasts maintained in one accent are absent in another—for example, *Mary* and *merry* are homophonous in New Zealand English but distinct in RP.

d) *Lexical distribution* differences: These occur when specific words or morphemes have different phonemic representations across accents. For example:

- o In many northern English accents, both /uː/ and /ʊ/ occur, but their distribution differs: words such as *cook* or *hook* use /uː/ instead of /ʊ/, unlike RP.

- o Vowels in unstressed syllables may also differ: RP uses a schwa in the third syllable of *ceremony*, while GA uses /oʊ/.

- o H-dropping also falls under lexical distribution differences.

These variations are often word-specific, lack generalisable rules, and are usually related to historical developments.

While the differences outlined above concern individual sounds, especially vowels—which often account for major accent variation—accents also differ in **SUPRASEGMENTAL** features such as stress and intonation. For instance:

- o In Welsh English, unstressed syllables often carry a higher pitch than stressed syllables, unlike RP.
- o Intonation and stress patterns may also contribute to differences in meaning not found in other accents.

Finally, accents vary significantly in connected speech (also called continuous or running speech), influenced by factors such as speech rate and degree of formality. Key processes include elision and assimilation.

DESCRIPTION OF ENGLISH ACCENTS IN THE BRITISH ISLES

In Britain, accents do not form a series of sharply defined varieties but rather a **continuum**, with gradual changes in pronunciation from the southwest of England to the north of Scotland. However, for descriptive purposes, it is useful to treat accents as if they were distinct, clearly identifiable varieties.

1. RP ENGLISH

Students covered RP English in detail in the course *Pronunciación de la Lengua Inglesa*. If you have not taken that course, please visit the folder *Additional Pronunciation Resources: Course_Pronunciación de la Lengua Inglesa* and download the PDF documents available there. These resources provide essential background and transcription guidance. Therefore, this section focuses only on additional information and on transcription aspects relevant to this course.

An extra comparative section has also been included, contrasting our transcription symbols with those used in Trudgill & Hannah. This section is optional but may help you strengthen your understanding of the material presented in the textbook.

1.1. Historical and Social Context

As you may already know, English spelling was largely standardised in the 18th century, but spoken English has continued to evolve for several reasons (based on Cruttenden, 2008, pp. 75–76):

a) <u>Age</u>: Marked differences exist between younger and older speakers,

b) <u>Communication</u>: Distinct speech patterns developed in areas with limited interaction or historically poor communication between communities,

c) <u>External influence</u>: Foreign invasions shaped the linguistic features of some regions while others remained largely unaffected.

Together with political and economic developments, and a long-standing social preference for a particular pronunciation since the 16th century, these factors contributed to the rise of the accent of southeast England—especially the London area—as the most prestigious regional accent in the UK. Over time, this accent lost some London-specific features and, by the 19th century, became associated with the speech of the upper classes. Pronunciation became an important marker of social status, with members of the ruling elite and others seeking upward mobility adopting this prestigious accent.

As a result, Received Pronunciation (RP) became dominant in radio and television broadcasting, served as the reference model for learners of English, and was extensively described in pronunciation manuals. Although only a small percentage of the population speaks with this accent today, it still retains a degree of prestige.

1.2. Phonetic Symbols Used in Transcription Practice

To maintain consistency across the phonetic transcriptions of RP English, this section presents two tables (Tables 1 and 2) with the symbols for the vocalic and consonantal phonemes of British English with an RP accent, together with illustrative keywords. Short explanations of specific pronunciation features relevant to RP transcriptions are also included.

1.2.1 **Vowels**

VOWEL SYMBOL	KEYWORD
/iː/	B<u>ee</u>
/ɪ/	B<u>i</u>t
/e/	B<u>e</u>t
/æ/	B<u>a</u>t
/ʌ/	B<u>u</u>t
/ɑː/	B<u>ar</u>
/ɒ/	L<u>o</u>ck
/ɔː/	L<u>or</u>d

VOWEL SYMBOL	KEYWORD
/ʊ/	L**oo**k
/uː/	L**u**ke
/ɜː/	b**ir**d
/ə/	lett**er**
/aɪ/	m**y**
/eɪ/	m**ay**
/ɔɪ/	t**oy**
/aʊ/	n**ow**
/əʊ/	kn**ow**
/ɪə/	T**ea**r
/eə/	T**are**
/ʊə/	t**ou**r

Table 1. Symbols to represent RP English vowels

➤ In the eighteenth century, a significant historical change took place: the loss of /r/ before consonants or pauses (a process known as **R-dropping**). This development contributed to the emergence of the central vowel /ɜː/ and the centring diphthongs /ɪə, eə, ʊə/ in RP and other non-rhotic accents.

➤ In RP, falling-closing diphthongs (/aɪ, eɪ, ɔɪ, aʊ, əʊ/) may, in slow and careful speech, be followed by /ə/ within a word, as in *fire*, *player*, *loyal*, *power*, and *lower* (/aɪə, eɪə, ɔɪə, aʊə, əʊə/, respectively). This sequence of three vocalic qualities is traditionally known as a **triphthong**.

➤ Although linguists disagree on whether a triphthong constitutes one or two syllables, this course follows the approach used in *Pronunciación en la Lengua Inglesa*, treating triphthongs as a single phonetic unit within the same syllable. However, in rapid or casual speech, the second element of the triphthong is often weakened or even omitted,

a process known as **smoothing**. This phenomenon is particularly common before *r* or *dark l*:

- Smoothing particularly affects the triphthongs /aɪə, eɪə, aʊə/, resulting in /aːə, eːə, aːə/, respectively. This change may lead to homophones (e.g., *tower* and *tyre*), which can cause confusion if the process is not understood.

- Two additional cases are worth mentioning:
  - The smoothed version of /əʊə/ produces a long monophthong acoustically similar to [ɜː]. Perceptually, it may resemble two *schwas* [əə] or a single long *schwa* [əː].
  - Smoothing of the triphthong /ɔɪə/ ([ɔːə]) is less common and remains a subject of debate. Wells notes that the final schwa may disappear entirely, resulting in [ɔɪ].

- While all triphthongs /aɪə, eɪə, ɔɪə, aʊə/ may be reduced to long monophthongs in rapid or casual speech—particularly among younger speakers—we recommend avoiding this level of simplification in transcription practice unless explicitly indicated. For example, the smoothed form of *our* may appear as /ɑː/, or even /aː/.

- It is important to note that smoothing does not always remove [ɪ] or [ʊ] entirely. These vowels may still be faintly audible or difficult to identify.

- Smoothing is less likely in stressed syllables, since stressed forms are typically articulated more fully and clearly.

1.2.1.1. <u>Intermediate Vowels</u>

In modern RP English, native speakers often neutralise the phonemic oppositions /iː/ - /ɪ/ and /uː/ - /ʊ/ in certain unstressed (weak) contexts. The resulting weak vowels display

phonetic qualities that combine features of both /iː/ and /ɪ/, and /uː/ and /ʊ/, respectively.

To represent these intermediate vowels in transcription, additional symbols—/i/ and /u/—are used. The following sections briefly explain the use and distribution of these weak vowels.

/i/:

- *Definition:* A short high close front vowel.

- *Spelling*: Typically corresponds to the letters *i* and *e* in spelling (orthography).

- *Phonological contexts*: This vowel commonly occurs in the following unstressed environments:

  - **Word-final position**: Found in words ending in -*y*, -*ee*, -*ie*, or -*ey* after one or more consonants (*happy, committee, Annie, easy*). It also occurs in compound words, stems, or inflected forms with an additional final consonant sound (*bellybutton, happier, easiest, newsiness, hurried, Lesley's, cookies*).

  - **Word-internal unstressed position before a vowel**: Examples include *audio* or *mediate*.

  - **Unstressed prefixes before a vowel**: May occur in prefixes like *re-*, *pre-*, and *de-* (*react, preoccupy, deactivate*).

  - **Unstressed prefixes before a consonant**: May occur in prefixes such as *be-, e-, re-, pre-*, and *de-* (*become, elect, return, precocious, depend*). [It is also possible to hear /ə/.]

  - **Unstressed suffixes in disyllabic forms**: Found in suffixes like -*iate* and -*ious* (*appreciate, hilarious*).

  - **Weak forms of specific pronouns and verbs**: Occurs in *me, he, she, we,* and *be*.

  - **The weak form of "the" before a vowel**: Example: *the apple*.

/u/:

- *Definition:* A short high close back vowel.

- *Spelling*: It is most often represented in spelling by the letters. Most frequently corresponds to the letters *u* and *o* in spelling (orthography).

- *Phonological contexts*: While less common than /i/, it is typically found in the following environments:

    o **Word-internal unstressed position before a vowel**: Example: *evacuation*.

    o **Weak forms of specific pronouns and auxiliary verbs**: Found in *you, who (relative)*, *to, into,* and *do (auxiliary)* before a vowel.

Traditionally, no additional symbols were used to represent these intermediate vowels; they were conventionally transcribed as /ɪ/ and /ʊ/ in dictionaries and phonetic resources. However, the inclusion of /i/ and /u/ in modern transcription systems reflects their distinct status.

For further guidance on weak forms and their use, please refer to the document *Weak Forms* available in the *Additional Pronunciation Resources* folder. ✋

1.2.2 **Consonants**

CONSONANT SYMBOL	KEYWORD
/p/	*pea*
/b/	*be*
/t/	*tear*
/d/	*dear*
/k/	*coat*

CONSONANT SYMBOL	KEYWORD
/g/	*goat*
/m/	*Sim*
/n/	*sin*
/ŋ/	*si**ng***
/tʃ/	*Chin*
/dʒ/	*Gin*
/f/	*Few*
/v/	*View*
/θ/	*brea**th***
/ð/	*brea**the***
/s/	*Sue*
/z/	*Zoo*
/ʃ/	*Shoe*
/ʒ/	*vi**s**ion*
/h/	*Home*
/l/	*Light*
/r/	*Right*
/w/	***Wh**at*
/j/	***Y**acht*

Table 2. Symbols to represent RP English consonants

Other key features:

- In RP, the consonant /t/ is often replaced by a glottal stop (/ʔ/) in specific contexts, a phenomenon referred to as **T-glottalling**. This substitution typically occurs both within words and across word boundaries. According to Lecumberri & Maidment (2014), it generally occurs when:

- o /t/ is followed by a consonant other than /h/

- o /t/ is preceded by a sonorant (vowels, nasals, or approximants)

- o /t/ occurs in syllable-final position (coda), either in stressed or unstressed syllables.

According to the authors, in **medial positions**, /t/ is less frequently replaced by /ʔ/, such as before a syllabic /l̩/ or /r/ (e.g., *bo**ttl**e* and *ma**ttr**ess*) or between vowels (as in *wa**te**r*) in traditional RP.

As Trudgill claims (in Foulkes and Docherty 1999: 136), t-glottalling "is one of the most dramatic, widespread and rapid changes to have occurred in British English in recent times", becoming increasingly common in modern RP English, especially among younger speakers. Wells had already observed (1997) that t-glottalling in RP is extending to additional contexts, including word-final position before a pause (e.g., *righ**t***) and before a vowel (e.g., *qui**te** awful*).

Note: Even when all the conditions for t-glottalling are met, its use is optional, and it is not compulsory to indicate it in RP transcriptions unless explicitly stated. ✋

- In **RP**, native speakers may reinforce /p, t, k, tʃ/ by means of a glottal closure [ʔ], which generally precedes the oral closure. This phenomenon, known as **glottal reinforcement** (or **glottalization**), typically occurs in syllable-final position, especially at the end of accented syllables, when preceded by a vowel, nasal, or lateral and followed by a pause or another consonant (for /tʃ/, also followed by a vowel). Examples include *help* /helʔp/, *atlas* /ˈæʔtləs/, *bank* /bæŋʔk/, *reach it* /riːʔtʃ ɪt/.

Note: Glottal reinforcement is a recognised and acceptable feature of

RP, but its use varies across speakers, styles and contexts; therefore, its inclusion in transcriptions is optional unless explicitly indicated. 🖐

- **Yod-dropping** refers to the omission of the palatal approximant /j/ (the *yod*) when preceded by certain consonants. The phenomenon is variable and optional, depending on the speaker, style, lexical item and context.

  In the third edition of Wells' Longman Pronunciation Dictionary (2008), yod-dropping in stressed syllables in **RP** is reported as the main pronunciation after /l/ or /s/ (e.g., *lu*dic /ˈluːdɪk/, *su*it /suːt/). By contrast, after /t/ and /d/, the preferred RP pronunciation generally preserves the yod (e.g., *tu*be /tjuːb/, *du*ke /djuːk/), with yod-coalescence listed as an alternative pronunciation (see below), while yod-dropping after /n/ is classified by Wells as non-RP (e.g., *ne*w /nuː/*).

  As an alternative pronunciation, yod-dropping in stressed syllables may also occur after /z/ or /θ/ (e.g., *Zeu*s → /zuːs/, en*thu*siasm → /ɪnˈθuːziˌæzəm/), although in these contexts the yod is usually preserved in the main RP pronunciation.

  Notes:
  Since yod-dropping is not widely accepted among native RP speakers, it is not compulsory to include it in transcriptions, except after /l/ and /s/ in stressed syllables. 🖐

  Yod-dropping is not a contemporary trend but a continuation of a historical process that began in the seventeenth century, known as *Early Yod-Dropping*. During this period, the yod was deleted in the following contexts: (i) after /tʃ/ and /dʒ/, as in *chew* /tʃuː/, (ii) after /r/ in *rude* /ruːd/, and (iii) after clusters with /l/, as in *glue* /gluː/.

- **Yod-coalescence**, the process by which /tj/ and /dj/ merge into /tʃ/ and /dʒ/, occurs both within and across word boundaries and underwent significant development during the twentieth century. While it was first widespread in unstressed syllables (e.g. *perpe**tu**al* /pəˈpetʃuəl/, *gra**du**ate* /ˈɡrædʒuət/), its use later extended to stressed syllables (e.g., ***tu**be* /tʃuːb/, ***du**ke* /dʒuːk/), where it is now considered an alternative pronunciation in RP. However, as this change has not been universally adopted by all RP speakers, it is treated as optional in transcriptions. ✋

- Regarding ***Wh*-words**, <u>some</u> RP speakers pronounce them with /hw/ instead of /w/. However, since this variation is not widely accepted among native speakers, it is not compulsory to include it in transcriptions. ✋

- **Velarization** occurs in RP when the consonant /l/ appears in syllable-final position. This includes:
    - Before a pause, as in *du**ll*** (/dʌl/ → [dʌɫ])
    - Before another consonant (except /j/), either within a word or across word boundaries, as in *he**l**p* (/help/ → [heɫp]) or *fu**ll** stop* (/fʊl stɒp/ → [fʊɫ stɒp]).

In these positions, /l/ is velarized (dark L) and represented in <u>phonetic</u> transcription as [ɫ].

In other contexts, /l/ is pronounced as clear L [l]:
    - When it occurs in a syllable onset, typically before a vowel, as in ***l**eave* (/liːv/ → [liːv]), or before the palatal approximant /j/, as in *wi**ll** you* (/wɪl juː/ → [wɪl juː]).

- o When a syllable-final /l/ is followed by a vowel—either as part of an affix or at the beginning of the next word (preferably unstressed)—its realization depends on syllable structure:

    - If the /l/ remains in the coda, it is dark [ɫ], as in *fina**ll**y* /ˈfaɪn əl i/ ([ˈfaɪn əɫ i]), or *fidd**l**e it* /ˈfɪd əl ɪt/ ([ˈfɪd əɫ ɪt]).

    - If the /l/ becomes the onset of the following syllable after compression, it is clear [l], as in *fidd**l**ing* /ˈfɪd əl ɪŋ/ ([ˈfɪd əɫ ɪŋ] → [ˈfɪd ɫ̩ ɪŋ] → [ˈfɪd lɪŋ]).

Note: In phonemic transcriptions, most of those used in this course, velarization is not indicated. ✋

1.3. Phonetic Symbols Used in Trudgill & Hannah's book (for reference only)

As you may know, different transcription systems use slightly different symbols to represent vowel sounds. Trudgill & Hannah use a system that differs from the one adopted in this course. For comparison, Table 3 is provided below for your reference. Please note that this material is not part of the required syllabus and is included purely for informational purpose if you wish to review it.

Trudgill & Hannah's Vowel Symbols	*Our Vowel Symbols*
iː	iː
ɪ	ɪ
ɛ	e
æ	æ
ɑː	ɑː
ɒ	ɒ
ɔː	ɔː
ʊ	ʊ
uː	uː
ʌ	ʌ
ɜː	ɜː
ə	ə
ei	eɪ

Trudgill & Hannah's Vowel Symbols	*Our Vowel Symbols*
ai	aɪ
ɔi	ɔɪ
ɪə	ɪə
ɛə	eə
ʊə	ʊə
ou	əʊ
ɑu	aʊ

Table 3. Comparison of Trudgill & Hannah's vowel symbols with our symbols

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