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Pronunciation Textbook Discrepancies

A WIDE VARIETY OF PRONUNCIATION TEXTBOOKS ON AMERICAN ENGLISH ARE ON the market today, allowing teachers to select the most suitable materials for their ESOL students. This abundance of texts would be ideal, were it not for some inconsistencies in the presentation of pronunciation features. Thus, textbooks often differ in the use of pronunciation symbols, the description of individual vowels and consonants, the number of sounds characterized as diphthongs, and the delineation of pitch and stress patterns. Given the fact that many ESOL students move through several texts in the course of their studies, these discrepancies are confusing and can create insecurity among students as well as teachers.

This article provides discussion of the most common discrepancies, exemplified in five popular pronunciation texts: *Accurate English, Pronunciation Pairs, Phrase by Phrase, Sound Advantage, Speechcraft,* and the *Manual of American English Pronunciation*. The texts were selected for their range from beginning to

advanced level and for their diversity in notation and content. *(Note:* No criticism of the selected texts is intended. All of the listed books are internally consistent and represent excellent guides for pronunciation instruction.) Before discussion of the pronunciation texts, we'll take a brief look at related discrepancies in monolingual dictionaries.

While this article focuses on U.S. English, similar discrepancies exist in publications on other varieties of English. Teachers are encouraged to compare the findings in this article with their teaching materials and to explore inconsistencies in their own linguistic environment.

Monolingual dictionaries

The idiosyncratic use of pronunciation symbols in monolingual American English dictionaries has been a long-standing source of frustration for language students and teachers alike. Sound transcriptions differ from dictionary to dictionary and bear little or no resemblance to the international pronunciation alphabet (IPA), which is standard in most bilingual dictionaries and pronunciation textbooks. The vowel sound in the word *tap,* for example, is consistently transcribed as /æ/ in bilingual dictionaries and pronunciation texts. In monolingual U.S. dictionaries, however, transcriptions usually involve a variation of the letter *a* as the preferred symbol. The *American Heritage Dictionary,* for instance, uses /ă/ and *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (Webster's)* uses /a/—a symbol which in many bilingual dictionaries and pronunciation textbooks stands for the vowel sound in *top,* rather than *tap.* Similar confusion reigns for /i/ which in most bilingual dictionaries and pronunciation texts stands for the vowel in *teen* but in *Webster's* is used for the vowel in *tin.* Likewise, /j/ stands for the beginning of the word *year* in many foreign language education materials but is used in *Webster's* for the beginning of the word *jeer.* These are just a few examples. Discrepancies also exist with respect to other sounds.

Students often ask why monolingual American dictionaries don't use the IPA. The answer probably lies in the same U.S. insularity that has resulted in so many other deviations from international standards (including standards of measurement, weight, and temperature). In addition, the relatively minor importance of foreign language education in the United States may have reduced the perceived need for an all-enveloping sound description system, like the IPA.

Pronunciation textbooks

If discrepancies were limited to monolingual versus bilingual language materials, the relevance of this issue for ESOL students—especially at the beginning and intermediate level, where students seldom use monolingual dictionaries—would be minor. Unfortunately, discrepancies can also be found within the realm of foreign and second language materials. Since deviations are probably more confusing with respect to pronunciation texts than bilingual dictionaries—with students going through several textbooks as their proficiency increases—the following discussion uses pronunciation texts as examples. Discrepancies with respect to vowel sounds will be discussed first, followed by consonants and prosodics.

Vowels

In general, ESOL pronunciation textbooks adhere to IPA standards to a great extent. Among the vowels, for instance, the following sound symbols enjoy widespread agreement and are used consistently, without much variation: /ɪ/, /ɛ/, /æ/, /ə/, /ɔ/, and /ʊ/. There are a few sounds and intonation features, however, that seem to incite such strong passions as to warrant idiosyncratic notations. When these deviations occur, they often represent not only deviations from IPA notation but also diversity in opinion over the specific nature of the sounds and features.

Table 1 (next page) shows a selection of vowel sounds as they are treated in various pronunciation texts. Also included are two monolingual dictionaries to illustrate the additional dichotomy between the ESOL and monolingual realm.

Naturally, textbook authors have reasons for their choices. Sometimes the various choices and their reasons are provided in the text; other times they are not. It is when no explanation is given that students may become confused. The following is an attempt to explain the discrepancies in the vowel section of Table 1.

/i/ and /u/

The sound /i/ is transcribed /iy/ or /i^{y}/ in some pronunciation texts to indicate that, especially in the Eastern United States, there is a tongue movement at the end of the sound, rendering it a glide rather than a pure vowel. For the

Sound Types and Sample Words		Comparison of Pronunciation Symbols in Selected Pronunciation Texts and Monolingual Dictionaries								
		AE	MP	PP	PbP	SA	SC	VD	AH	W
Vowels	**bee**	i	iy	iy	i^{y}	iy	iy	i	ē	ē
	palm	ɑ	a	ɑ	ɑ	a	ɑ	ɑ/ɒ	ä	ä
	custom	ə	ə	ʌ	ʌ	ə	ʌ	ʌ	ŭ	ə
	custom	ə	ə	ə	ə	ə	ə	ə	ə	ə
	boot	u	uw	uw	u^{w}	uw	uw	u	o͞o	ü
Diphthongs	**pie**	aɪ	ay	ay	ɑi	ay	ay	aɪ	ī	ī
	out	aʊ	aw	aw	ɑu	aw	aw	aʊ/ɑʊ	ou	ō
	boy	ɔɪ	ɔy	ɔy	ɔi	oy	oy	ɔɪ	oi	ȯi
	pay	eɪ	ey	ey	e^{y}	ey	ey	e	ā	ā
	boat	oʊ	ow	ow	o^{w}	ow	ow	o/oʊ	ō	ō
Consonants	**year**	y	y	y	y	y	y	j	y	y
	curler	ɚ	ər	ɜr	ɚ	ər	ɜr	ɜ˞	ûr	ər
	curler	ɚ	ər	ɜr	ɚ	ər	ər	ɚ	ər	ər

Pronunciation Texts

AE = Accurate English • **MP** = Manual of American English Pronunciation • **PP** = Pronunciation Pairs • **PbP** = Phrase by Phrase • **SA** = Sound Advantage • **SC** = Speechcraft • **VD** = Voice and Diction

Monolingual Dictionaries

AH = The American Heritage Dictionary • **W** = Webster's

Table 1
Pronunciation textbook discrepancies

same reason, /u/ is sometimes transcribed /uw/ or /u^{w}/ (Ladefoged 1982).

One reason for pronunciation textbook authors (or editors) to eschew the glide notation and use /i/ and /u/ instead is that they may be from a part of the United States other than the East and therefore prefer the pure vowel transcription. In addition, there is the argument that /iy/ and /uw/ are based on phonemic (not phonetic) analysis and that glide transcriptions mix vowel and consonant (or semi-vowel) symbols, therefore making them undesirable.

The reason for the transcription discrepancies is therefore a combination of regional predisposition, linguistic philosophy, and ultimately personal choice.

/ɑ/

Moving down the vowel chart from /i/, the next controversial sound is the /ɑ/, as in *palm.* The IPA differentiates between three low, albeit similar vowels and recommends three different symbols: /a/, /ɑ/, and /ɒ/. At least the first two of these symbols are often used interchangeably in language texts.

The difference between /a/, /ɑ/, and /ɒ/ is that the sounds constitute a progression from front to back vowel. Specifically, /a/, which is farthest in the front, is used at the beginning of diphthongs; the low, tense /ɑ/ is the sound most Americans use for the vowel in *balm;* and the low, lax /ɒ/, which is farthest back and more rounded, is accompanied with a slight rounding of the lips and found mostly in New England and British speakers, as in *bomb* (Eisonson 1992; Ladefoged 1982).

In the case of the three *a*-sounds, the reason for the discrepancies seems to be one of desired simplification. The symbol /a/ or /ɑ/ is often used as a stand-in for all variations, so that students are spared from, perhaps unnecessary, confusion.

/ə/

The issue of the schwa may be the most vexing of all discrepancies. ESOL students are

often told that the schwa (or /ə/) is the most common sound in English, used for the majority of unstressed vowel sounds. However, some textbooks differentiate between the unstressed schwa and the stressed, slightly lower and more back sound /ʌ/, while others use the symbol /ə/ for both. In other words, some textbooks maintain that the vowel sounds in the words *above* and *custom* are different (i.e., that the stressed syllable is pronounced /ʌ/ and the unstressed one /ə/), while other textbooks recommend pronouncing them identically as schwas for all syllables. Proponents of the latter pronunciation argue that it is mostly British speakers who use the /ʌ/. While the difference between /ʌ/ and /ə/ may be small, one reason to retain the distinction is that it forces students to focus on the important features of stress and vowel reduction in American English (Edwards 1992).

In a related matter, a more minor deviation can also be found concerning final *-ed* and *-es* (as in *rented* and *houses).* Some texts recommend a pronunciation of /ɪd/ and /ɪz/, others of /əd/ and /əz/. Yet others give a choice between the two versions, stressing that both /ə/ and /ɪ/ are common as reduced vowels. No specific reasons for the discrepancy is apparent; the matter seems to be one of personal choice.

Diphthongs

The last vowel discrepancy is the question of how many diphthongs exist in American English. Some textbooks count five main diphthongs (/aɪ/, /aʊ/, /ɔɪ/, /eɪ/, /oʊ/); others count only three (/aɪ/, /aʊ/, /ɔɪ/) and consider /ey/ and /ow/ glides, similar to /iy/ and /uw/. In other words, /eɪ/ and /oʊ/ are considered full diphthongs by some, while others maintain that the second vowel sound is not fully developed and the whole sound is therefore more of a glide. The book *Voice and Diction* goes even farther and transcribes the two sounds as /e/ and /o/—with the rationale that they are nonphonemic diphthongs; i.e., there are no minimal pairs differentiating diphthong and pure vowel sound.

Disagreement also abounds on the starting and ending vowel of these sounds. For the beginning of /aɪ/, for example, symbols vary from /a/ to /ɑ/; for the end of /aɪ/, the transcriptions /ɪ/, /i/, and /y/ are used. Sometimes, the choice is influenced by regional differences. The diphthong /oʊ/, for example, has a relatively limited range in the Midwest (making a transcription of /o/ more logical) and a wider range in other regions of the United States (giving more support for the use of the symbol /oʊ/) (Ladefoged 1992). Other times, it is not clear whether variations indicate personal convictions of the authors or whether choices are made to simplify sound descriptions and limit text-internal symbol variety for the sake of low- or intermediate-proficiency students.

Consonants

Pronunciation textbooks exhibit fewer discrepancies with respect to consonants than vowels. If there are problem areas, they seem to be of relatively minor relevance as well.

The r-sound

ESOL students who are familiar with the markedly different *r*-sounds in other languages might find the use of the symbol /ɾ/ for the American *r*-sound slightly confusing. In IPA notation, the symbol /ɾ/ actually indicates a trill, as in Spanish *perro (dog),* for example. The American *r*-sound (variably described as a glide, liquid, semi-vowel, or approximant) would be more accurately transcribed as /ɹ/ (Edwards 1992; Ladefoged 1982). Simplification seems to be the reason for the substitution.

/j/

Maybe the most confusing IPA deviation can be noticed in the frequent use of /y/ for the first sound in *year.* According to the IPA, /y/ is the rounded vowel sound found in the French *une* or German *über.* For the beginning sound in *year*—which is variably described as a consonantal or nonconsonantal sound (Edwards 1992)—the symbol /j/ should be used. Presumably, the reason for using /y/ instead is the similarity of this symbol with the letter *y,* as in *year.* This connection is supposed to allow students a more intuitive approach to the pronunciation of this sound.

The er-sound

Pronunciation texts vary in their transcription of the r-colored (or rhoticized) vowels found in words such as *curler.* In different texts /ɜr/, /ər/, /ɝ/, and /ɚ/ are used to transcribe the sound. The first issue here concerns the number of symbols in the transcription. Proponents of a single symbol for the sound combination (/ɝ/ and /ɚ/)—which is also recommended by the IPA—maintain that the sound is a phonetic reality and should therefore be represented as such (Edwards 1992).

The second discrepancy concerns the issue of stress. Some texts differentiate between stressed (/ɜr/ or /ɝ/) and unstressed *er*-sounds (/ər/ or /ɚ/). The symbols /ɜr/ and /ɝ/ thereby indicate a higher tongue position and are used for stressed sounds, whereas /ər/ and /ɚ/ have a lower tongue position and are used for unstressed sounds. The word *curler* would thus be transcribed /ˈkɜrlər/ or /ˈkɝlɚ/.

Other texts don't differentiate between stressed and unstressed *er* and use one of the four alternatives as a stand-in for all occurrences. Since the difference between stressed and unstressed *er* is minor, this widespread simplification is perhaps understandable.

/w/

The allophonic difference between /w/ for the first sound in *weather* and /hw/ or /ʍ/ for the first sound in *whether* is minor as well. It is therefore only occasionally noted in pronunciation texts. The rationale is that the differentiation seems to be disappearing in most forms of English, especially in frequently used words, such as *what* and *when* (Eisonson 1992; Ladefoged 1982).

Final stops

Of slightly more relevance are discrepancies in the description of final stops: /t/, /p/, /k/. While some texts recommend releasing final stops, others describe them as unreleased. Yet others give the speaker an option of releasing or not releasing them. At play are issues of formality and careful articulation, as well as sound environment. Most people, for example, don't release final stops when the next word begins with a nasal, as in *cat nap* or with another stop, as in *the cat pushed* (Ladefoged 1982).

Prosodics

Apart from discrepancies among vowel and consonant transcriptions, differences also exist in the treatment of prosodic features, such as stress and intonation. Many of the issues are outside the purview of the IPA and therefore lack a standardizing force.

Terminology

Discrepancies in the realm of prosodics start with confusing terminology. The nomenclature used for the stress on a syllable (e.g., the third syllable in the word *informátion),* for example, includes the terms *syllable stress* and *word stress;* whereas terms used for the main stress in a thought group or sentence range from *sentence stress,* to *phrase stress, information focus,* and—again—*word stress* (e.g., Eisonson 1992). The term *word stress* can therefore indicate either type of stress, depending on the pronunciation text, which is indeed very confusing.

Apparently, no prescription exists. One hopes that, in the course of time, a single common usage would manifest itself and become the standard.

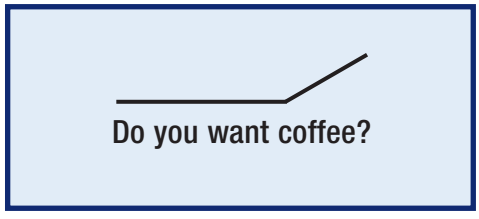
Stress and intonation features

Differences in diacritics for primary and secondary stress are also common (e.g., ˌinfor'mation, ínformàtion). In addition, textbooks differ in whether they indicate secondary stress or limit themselves to primary stress notations only.

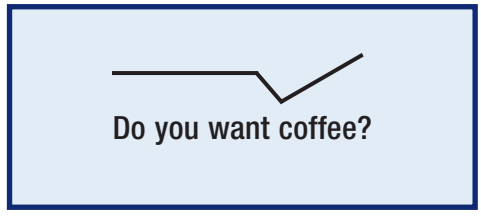
Similarly, the number of pitch levels in American English is either not mentioned at all or differs between texts. Ranges from three to four or more levels are common.

There are also two different descriptions of the rising sentence intonation used for *yes/no* questions, such as *Do you want coffee?* In some texts, the pitch is described as level until it rises on the last syllable (see Illustration 1 below left); in others, it is depicted as level followed by a fall-rise; i.e., a dip to a lower pitch level prior to the rise (see Illustration 2 below right). The latter was previously considered British but is now often used in American English as well. Interestingly, while some pronunciation texts describe the *yes/no* question intonation as a simple rise (as in Illustration 1), taped speech samples accompanying the books may feature fall-rise patterns and thus contradict the textual description (e.g., Hagen and Grogran 1992). It's possible that such internal discrepancies are simply based on a difference between

(left) **Illustration 1**
Rise



(right) **Illustration 2**
Fall-rise



author and taped speaker; or they may be a sign of changes in language use overtaking established transcription habits. In either case, teachers and students should be aware of the two alternatives.

Conclusion

Many more sound and prosodic discrepancies exist than have been discussed in this article. The reasons for discrepancies vary. What follows are the most common explanations and one example for each.

- Regional differences. For example, many speakers in the Eastern United States differentiate between the vowels in Don and Dawn; not so in the Western United States.
- Level of simplicity or detail desired in a publication. For example, the number of content word categories—which are important for the stress-timed rhythm of English—range from the basic list of nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and full verbs to expanded, more comprehensive inventories that include demonstratives, possessive and reflexive pronouns, negatives, questions words, and adverbial particles, such as *off* in *take off.*
- Levels of careful articulation, often combined with British versus American tendencies. For example, the medial *t* preceding an unstressed syllable, as in *city,* can be pronounced vigorously as a /t/ or as the quick, less vigorous intervocalic tongue flap or tap /ɾ/.
- Speed of articulation. For example, /t/ after /n/, as in *twenty,* may be articulated in slow but not articulated in fast speech.

Many of these discrepancies are minor in relevance or may constitute levels of detail rather than true differences. Others are more confusing but are explained sufficiently for the reader to make educated choices.

It is when controversial features are unexplained in the textbook and are not discussed in the classroom that an already difficult subject can become unnecessarily taxing. Instructors should therefore be aware of the major discrepancies found in pronunciation texts and dictionaries and be prepared to address them in class. This can be done in a variety of ways. Teachers may opt for a case-by-case explanation when students question a discrepancy (e.g., they perceive the vowel sounds in the word *custom* to be different even though they are transcribed as the same sound in their textbook). Alternatively, instructors may preempt questions by teaching a whole unit on the more controversial issues. Such a unit could be as basic or complex as the students' proficiency level allows.

Since regional differences and personal preferences (e.g., desired level of detail, formality, and speed) seem to be major influences in the phenomenon of discrepancies, it may be helpful for teachers to diagnose their own speech patterns and choose the transcriptions that best match their pronunciation. If an instructor pronounces the controversial vowel in *teen* without a glide, for example, /i/ would be the symbol of choice instead of the other alternatives /iy/ or /iʸ/. Such a personalized transcription system can provide consistency in the face of textbook variations and even a level of support for the instructor.

Instructors often teach two or more different levels of students, with different textbooks, in the same term. Rather than having to remember how each book deals with the controversial features and risk losing track of which of the controversial symbols to use in which class, the teacher can thus adhere to his or her own system. Not only does this method relieve the instructor of having to recollect the countless variant combinations in the assigned textbooks, it also ensures that the teacher's transcription symbols match his or her specific speech patterns, making lessons on the controversial features more authentic and coherent.

Thus, a personalized transcription system will allow instructors to navigate between textbooks more easily and ensure cohesion between their modeling and transcriptions. In addition, the teacher's use of his or her own choices can become a catalyst for addressing the question of variation. When teachers introduce the issue of textbook discrepancies to their students, explain the points of contention, and model their own and the alternative speech patterns, they make students familiar with important and interesting issues in pronunciation theory and practice, as well as raise awareness about the range of acceptable patterns (Levis 1999). A teacher may use a fall-rise pitch pattern, for example, when discussing yes/no question intonation but point out that the textbook features the alternative level-rise pattern.

➪ 31

Students may then experiment with both patterns and decide which one suits them better.

Such experimentation can heighten a student's sense of linguistic self-awareness and promote a spirit of adventure in the classroom. It also helps empower the students to become responsible for their own learning. In the end, this level of insight and the realization that there are choices may well capture at least some students' imagination and lead them on a path of continued fascination with language and language learning.

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