

English phonology

English phonology is the study of the phonology (i.e., the sound system) of the English language. Like all languages, spoken English has wide variation in its pronunciation both diachronically and synchronically from dialect to dialect. This variation is especially salient in English, because the language is spoken over such a wide territory, being the predominant language in Australia, Canada, the Commonwealth Caribbean, Ireland, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States in addition to being spoken as a first or second language by people in countries on every continent, and notably in South Africa and India. In general the regional dialects of English are mutually intelligible.

Although there are many dialects of English, the following are usually used as prestige or standard accents: Received Pronunciation for the United Kingdom, General American for the United States and General Australian for Australia.

The number of speech sounds in English varies from dialect to dialect, and any actual tally depends greatly on the interpretation of the researcher doing the counting. The *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* by John C. Wells, for example, using symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet, denotes 24 consonants and 23 vowels used in Received Pronunciation, plus two additional consonants and four additional vowels used in foreign words only. For General American it provides for 25 consonants and 19 vowels, with one additional consonant and three additional vowels for foreign words. The *American Heritage Dictionary*, on the other hand, suggests 25 consonants and 18 vowels (including r-colored vowels) for American English, plus one consonant and five vowels for non-English terms.

The vowels of English differ considerably between dialects. Because of this, corresponding vowels may be transcribed with various symbols depending on the dialect under consideration. When considering English as a whole, no specific phoneme symbols are picked over others; instead lexical sets are used, each named by a word containing the vowel in question. For example, the vowel of the LOT set ('short O') is transcribed /ɒ/ in Received Pronunciation, /ɔ/ in Australian English, and /ɑ/ in General American. For an overview of the correspondences see IPA chart for English dialects.