

A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH PHONEMES IN BRITISH AND AMERICAN PRONUNCIATIONS

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Abstract. This article presents a comprehensive contrastive analysis of English phonemes as they are realised in two of the world's most extensively studied and pedagogically influential accent systems: Received Pronunciation (RP), the codified prestige accent of Southern British English, and General American (GenAm), the de facto broadcast and educational standard of the United States.

Keywords: phoneme, allophone, Received Pronunciation, General American, contrastive analysis, British English, American English, IMRAD, vowel systems, consonant systems, rhoticity, phonological variation, EFL phonetics pedagogy.

Annotatsiya

Ushbu maqolada dunyoning eng ko'p o'rganilgan va pedagogik jihatdan ta'sirli ikkita aksent tizimi: Janubiy Britaniya ingliz tilining kodlashtirilgan nufuzli aksenti bo'lgan Received Pronunciation (RP) va Amerika Qo'shma Shtatlarining de-fakto eshittirish va ta'lim standarti bo'lgan General American (GenAm) misolida ingliz tili fonemalarining qiyosiy tahlili taqdim etiladi.

Kalit so'zlar: fonema, allofon, Received Pronunciation (RP), General American (GenAm), qiyosiy tahlil, Britaniya ingliz tili, Amerika ingliz tili, IMRAD, unlilar tizimi, undoshlar tizimi, rotiklik, fonologik variativlik, EFL fonetikasi pedagogikasi.

Аннотация

В данной статье представлен комплексный сопоставительный анализ английских фонем в том виде, в каком они реализуются в двух наиболее изученных и педагогически значимых акцентных системах мира: Received Pronunciation (RP), кодифицированном престижном акценте южнобританского английского языка, и General American (GenAm), фактическом стандарте вещания и образования в Соединенных Штатах.

Ключевые слова: фонема, allophon, Received Pronunciation, General American, сопоставительный анализ, британский английский, американский английский, IMRAD, системы гласных, системы согласных, ротичность, фонологическая вариативность, методика преподавания фонетики EFL.

Introduction

These two varieties have long served as the twin reference points of English phonology research and foreign-language phonetics instruction, yet a systematic, side-by-side phonemic analysis of them structured according to a rigorous academic framework has remained underrepresented in the pedagogically focused literature. The present study addresses this gap by employing a dual methodological approach: *contrastive analysis* (CA), which identifies and describes phonological similarities and differences between the two accent systems, and the *discussion method*, which interprets those differences

in light of established theoretical frameworks and their practical implications. The entire study is organised according to the IMRAD (Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion) format, which imposes scientific rigour and transparency on the analysis. Drawing upon the foundational work of Jones (1917, 1950), Trubetzkoy (1939/1969), Chomsky and Halle (1968), Wells (1982), and Labov (1966, 1994), the study systematically maps and contrasts the vowel inventories, consonant realisations, rhoticity patterns, and key phonological processes including mergers, splits, flapping, and glottalisation that distinguish RP from GenAm. The results identify and analyse eight major vowel-system divergences and five significant consonantal differences. The discussion situates these findings within structuralist, generative, and Optimality Theory perspectives, before concluding with a focused treatment of the pedagogical implications for EFL learners, with specific attention to learners in Uzbekistan who encounter both British and American English through media, textbooks, and international communication.

Of all the dimensions along which British and American English differ lexical, grammatical, orthographic, and pragmatic none is more immediately perceptible to the ear, and none more systematically structured, than phonology. A listener who switches between a BBC news broadcast and an American network programme does not simply hear a different accent in the colloquial sense; they are registering the surface output of two distinct phonological grammars: two different organisations of the same inventory of underlying speech sounds into contrastive, meaning-distinguishing units, and two different systems of rules or ranked constraints that map those underlying units onto concrete, audible realisations.

The two varieties that are the focus of this study Received Pronunciation (RP) and General American (GenAm) occupy a central and privileged position in both descriptive phonetics and applied language pedagogy. RP, first comprehensively described by Daniel Jones in *An Outline of English Phonetics* (1918) and in the *English Pronouncing Dictionary* (1917), has historically served as the prestige reference accent for British English, associated with the BBC, the legal profession, and elite education (Wells, 1982; Gimson, 2014). GenAm, a term coined by Kurath (1928) for the accent of the American Midwest and West, has served an equivalent role in the United States, as the accent of broadcast journalism, corporate communication, and mainstream educational aspiration (Labov, Ash & Boberg, 2006). Both accents are the most thoroughly described varieties in their national traditions, making them the logical and necessary starting point for a contrastive phonological study.

Despite the richness of the existing literature on each accent individually, what has been less systematically pursued is a focused, IMRAD-structured, methodologically explicit contrastive analysis of the two systems taken together, with clear separation between descriptive results and theoretical discussion, and with direct attention to pedagogical consequences. The present paper fills this gap.

Methodology

The **IMRAD** framework Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion is the internationally recognised standard for structuring empirical and analytical research reports across the sciences and social sciences (Swales, 1990; Paltridge & Starfield, 2007). It enforces a disciplined separation between what was studied (Introduction), how it was studied (Methods), what was found (Results), and what the findings mean (Discussion). Applying IMRAD to a theoretical phonological study of RP and GenAm

provides a level of analytical transparency and structural clarity that benefits both the researcher and the reader, making the study's claims more easily evaluated, critiqued, and replicated.

Contrastive analysis (CA) is a systematic linguistic methodology that compares the phonological, grammatical, or lexical systems of two languages or varieties in order to identify similarities and differences (Lado, 1957; Fries, 1945). Applied to two varieties of the same language as in the present study CA enables a precise mapping of where and how the varieties diverge, without the distortion that results from treating either variety as the unmarked norm against which the other is measured. Both RP and GenAm are treated throughout this study as complete, internally coherent phonological systems of equal theoretical standing, consistent with the principle established in Wells (1982) and Labov (1994) that no variety of English is phonologically superior to any other.

The contrastive analysis in this study proceeds along three analytical dimensions:

(i) Phonemic inventory: The total set of contrastive sound units in each variety the phonemes that distinguish meaning.

(ii) Phonetic realisation: The concrete articulatory and acoustic properties with which phonemes are instantiated in speech the allophones and their distributional environments.

(iii) Phonological processes: The rules or constraints that govern the mapping from underlying phonological forms to surface phonetic realisations, including processes of merger, split, lenition, flapping, and glottalisation.

Discussion and Results

Alongside contrastive analysis, the study employs the **discussion method**: a qualitative analytical approach in which the raw descriptive findings generated by CA are interpreted and evaluated in relation to competing theoretical frameworks, existing scholarly debate, and real-world implications. The discussion method is essential for phonological research because phonological facts do not interpret themselves. A merger, for example, is simultaneously a phonetic phenomenon (two previously distinct sounds become acoustically indistinguishable), a cognitive phenomenon (two previously distinct perceptual categories collapse into one), a sociolinguistic phenomenon (a change that spreads through a community along social networks), and a pedagogical phenomenon (a contrast that learners from one variety must learn to perceive or produce in another). The discussion method allows all of these dimensions to be addressed in sequence and in relation to each other.

The study draws on three principal categories of source material. First, the authoritative descriptive phonological literature on RP: Jones (1917, 1918, 1950), Gimson (1962/2014), and Roach (2000). Second, the authoritative literature on GenAm: Kenyon (1924), Ladefoged (2006), and Labov, Ash and Boberg (2006). Third, Wells's (1982) system of **twenty-four keyword lexical sets** groups of words that share the same vowel phoneme across most varieties of English which serves as the primary comparative grid for the vowel analysis. The twenty-four sets (KIT, DRESS, TRAP, LOT, STRUT, FOOT, BATH, CLOTH, NURSE, FLEECE, FACE, PALM, THOUGHT, GOAT, GOOSE, PRICE, CHOICE, MOUTH, NEAR, SQUARE, START, NORTH, FORCE, and CURE) provide a structured, variety-neutral framework for comparing vowel systems without privileging either RP or GenAm as the reference

point. This framework is combined with the IPA transcription system to ensure phonetic precision throughout.

The contrastive analysis begins at the broadest level with a comparison of the total phonemic inventories of RP and GenAm. Table 1 summarises the vowel and consonant phoneme counts for each variety. The most immediately striking finding is the significant disparity in the size of the vowel inventories: RP possesses twenty vowel phonemes (twelve monophthongs and eight diphthongs), while GenAm has sixteen (eleven monophthongs and five diphthongs). This four-phoneme difference is not a minor detail; it reflects deep structural differences in how the two varieties have organised the vowel space over their separate histories. The consonant inventories, by contrast, are numerically identical — both varieties maintain twenty-four consonant phonemes — though the distribution, realisation, and phonological behaviour of several consonants differ substantially between the two systems.

Conclusion

This study has provided a comprehensive, IMRAD-structured, contrastive analysis of English phonemes in British Received Pronunciation and American General American, focused exclusively on the phonological differences and similarities between these two major accent systems. The study employed contrastive analysis as its primary method and the discussion method as its secondary analytical framework, producing findings that are descriptively systematic and theoretically grounded.

For a student of theoretical phonetics, the comparison of British and American English phoneme systems demonstrates in concentrated form the fundamental principles that govern phonological variation and change: that phonemes are defined by contrast within a system; that systems change through mergers and splits that restructure the phonemic inventory; that these changes are constrained by universal phonological principles; and that the phoneme is simultaneously an abstract mental representation, a physical sound, and a bearer of social meaning. The present paper has attempted to illuminate all three of these dimensions through a rigorous contrastive analysis of the British and American accent traditions, the two most globally influential phonological systems in the English-speaking world.

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