**American English**

**1. Introduction**

Even to non-native speakers of the English language it is in most cases an easy task to differentiate between British and American native speakers by listening to their pronunciation. In this term paper the most characteristic phonological features of American English will be named and explained and an overview of the variety of dialects within the United States will be provided. This can be done best by using British Standard English – also known as *Received Pronunciation* (RP) – as reference accent and pointing out the differences to American English.

**2. General American**

However, it is hard to work with the term *American English* when doing a phonological analysis of American speech since it covers a broad spectrum of different dialects. For this reason the term *General American* (GA), which is widely used and preferred by most linguists today, will be introduced and worked with.

General American can be seen as the Standard English of North America, but in contrast to Received Pronunciation, it is not defined by social reputation or a specific geographical origin.[1] Throughout the United States one can not really find a socially preferred accent that is commonly recognized as *the* standard pronunciation. There have been several different approaches to defining a Standard English for the USA and in this paper General American will be used in means of a range of accents that do not exhibit any of the North-Eastern or Southern features which “are perceived as regional by the majority of American speakers.”[2] One has to keep in mind that GA is not “a single and totally homogenous accent. But since its internal variation is mainly a matter of differences in the phonetic realizations of a system of phonemes that is by and large shared by all GA speakers, the generalization expressed in the notion ‘General American’ is useful in phonological terms.”[3]

**2.1 The Vowels and Diphthongs**

Comparing the vowel charts of General American and Received Pronunciation, one will notice that there are a rather small number of differences in the phonemic inventory of both accents, so the difference in pronunciation must mainly be due to differences in the phonetic realizations of the phonemes.[4]

Concerning the vowels and diphthongs, the only major difference of the GA phonemic inventory compared to the RP inventory is the lack of the short ‘o’ (/Ŋ/) and of the centering diphthongs (/Iə, εə, ʊə/).

The first of these two phenomena is often referred to as the *cot-caught merger* since in GA the vowels in those two words are turned into a single sound which is very close to the long ‘ah’ vowel (/α:/) so *cot* and *caught* become homophones[5] in American pronunciation. Many GA speakers perceive the vowels /Ŋ/, /ɔ:/ and /α:/ as allophones[6].[7]

Additionally, GA phonology does not have the RP *broad A* (/α:/) in words such as *class* or *dance*, but still uses the older form /æ/. “Formerly, all dialects of the English language had the sound of /æ/ as in *cat* ( /kæt/ ) in all of these words. At some time, probably during the late eighteenth century, a sound change occurred in southern England that changed the sound of /æ/ to /α:/ in words in which the former sound appeared before”[8] /f, θ, ð, s, z, v/, “either alone or in the company of /m/ or /n/.”[9]

Using this example it might be surprising to learn that American English is phonologically more conservative than today’s RP. In fact, GA is in various characteristics close to seventeenth century English (The spoken English in some rural areas of the United States is sometimes even said to be *Elizabethan English*) since the American population did not participate in a lot of sound changes that appeared in England after the settlement of North America.[10]

As a general characteristic of GA affecting the realization of all vowels, one can notice that vowel length is relatively less important than it is in RP. Even though vowel length does differ in GA pronunciation as well, these differences depend primarily on the environment in which the respective vowels occur.[11]

Regarding diphthongs, the lack of the three centering diphthongs (diphthongs ending in a ‘schwa’ sound) has already been mentioned. This characteristic can be explained through the fact that in GA the /r/ sound is pronounced in any position of the word while in RP it gets vocalized to /ə/ and merged into a diphthong when preceded by a vowel. This vowel then serves as starting point of articulation so the word *near* will be pronounced /n **I** ə/ in RP but /n **I** r/ in GA.[12]

The RP diphthong /əʊ/ is pronounced with a more back and rounded starting point in GA so it becomes a /oʊ/ sound, for example heard in the words *go* and *don’t*.[13]

**2.2 The Consonants**

In contrast to the vowels and diphthongs, the consonants used in GA do not differ considerably from those used in RP. In fact, the overall number of consonantal phonemes is the same in both standards; however one can notice a difference in distribution and realization.

Probably the most significant phenomenon of GA is the distribution of the /r/ sound. GA is a non-rhotic accent which means that – as mentioned above – the /r/ is pronounced anywhere there is an ‘r’ letter in the spelling. RP, on the other hand, is a non-rhotic accent so /r/ is only pronounced before vowels (*prevocalic r*) as in *great.* This ***derhotacization* started to take place in England from the beginning of the 17th century onwards, but was not followed through by the settlers of the North American continent** with the notable exception of the New England area and parts of New York State **.**[14] **One can notice an early stage of derhotacization in GA when focusing on the pronunciation of the letter ‘r’ preceded by the mid-central vowels /ε/ and / ə /. For example in the cases of *nurse* and *mother*, the /r/ is not fully pronounced, but the vowels become ‘r-colored’.**[15]

**Another prominent and widespread feature of GA is referred to as *t-voicing*. The American /t/, when positioned between two vowels (the *intervocalic-t*), becomes very voiced, often not** distinguishable from the voiced consonant /d/. However this only happens if the first of the two vowels is stressed, so a GA speaker would voice the /t/ sound in the words *city* and *better*, but not in *attend*, *return* or *attack*. In phonemic transcription, the intervocalic-t is represented by /t/.

The last noticeable characteristic of the GA phonology which will be mentioned here is sometimes called *yod-dropping.* GA speakers do not pronounce the /j/ sound in stressed syllables succeeding dental or alveolar consonants as in *tune*, *news* or *suitcase* (RP /ju/, GA /u:/). This does not apply when /ju/ is preceded by labials or the sounds /k/ or /h/, so the /j/ will be pronounced in the words *beauty*, *cue* and *hue*.[16]

**[...]**

[1] Bronstein, Arthur J.: The Pronunciation of American English, p.6

[2] Tottie, Gunnel: An Introduction to American English, p.13

[3] Giegerich, Heinz J.: English Phonology, p.47/48

[4] Hansen, Klaus: Die Differenzierung des Englischen in nationale Varianten, p.119

[5] Homophones are words which have the same phonetic form but unrelated meaning

[6] Allophones are different realizations of one phoneme which do not bring about a change of meaning

[7] Giegerich, Heinz J.: English Phonology, p.61

[8] Broad A – Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, 24.09.2004 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Broad\_A>

[9] ibid.

[10] American English - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, 24.09.2004 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American\_English>

[11] Jones, Daniel and Peter Roach, Hg./eds.: English Pronouncing Dictionary, p.xi

[12] Hansen, Klaus: Die Differenzierung des Englischen in nationale Varianten, p.119

[13] Tottie, Gunnel: An Introduction to American English, p.18

[14] Rhotic – Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, 24.09.2004 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhotic>

[15] Švejcer, Aleksandr D.: Standard English in the United States and England, p.33

[16] Tottie, Gunnel: An Introduction to American English, p.18