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Phonemic Transcriptions in British and American Dictionaries

Summary

In view of recent criticisms concerning vowel symbols in some British English dictionaries (in particular by J. Windsor Lewis in JIPA (Windsor Lewis, 2003), with regard to the *Oxford Dictionary of Pronunciation* (Upton, 2001), this article extends the discussion on English phonemic transcriptions by including those that typically occur in standard American dictionaries, and by comparing the most common conventions of British and American dictionaries. In addition to symbols for both vowels and consonants, the paper also deals with the different representations of word accentuation and the issue of consistency regarding application of phonemic (systemic, broad), rather than phonetic (allophonic, narrow) transcription. The different transcriptions are assessed from the points of view of their departures from the International Phonetic Alphabet, their overlapping with orthographic representation (spelling) and their appropriateness in terms of reflecting actual pronunciation in standard British and/or American pronunciation.

Key words: transcription, dictionary, British English, American English.

Fonemske transkripcije v britanskih in ameriških slovarjih

Povzetek

Ob upoštevanju kritičnih prispevkov, ki zadevajo rabo samoglasniških simbolov v nekaterih britanskih slovarjih (predvsem gre za zapis J. Windsorja Lewisa v reviji JIPA (Windsor Lewis, 2003), o rabi simbolov v slovarju izgovorjave *Oxford Dictionary of Pronunciation* (Upton, 2001), avtor v tem prispevku razširi razpravo o fonemski transkripciji na predstavitev tipičnega nabora simbolov v standardnih ameriških slovarjih in primerjavo tega z običajnim naborom simbolov v britanskih slovarjih. Poleg samoglasniških in soglasniških simbolov gre pri tej primerjavi tudi za označevanje besednega naglasa in za vprašanje doslednosti z vidika rabe fonemske (tj. systemske) v nasprotju z rabo fonetične (oz. alofonske) transkripcije. Ob tem se avtor sklicuje na razlike med obravnavanimi transkripcijami in simboli, ki so sestavni del Mednarodne fonetične abecede, upoštevajoč tudi možnost prekrivanja transkripcije z ortografskim zapisom posameznih besed, in na ustreznost simbolov z vidika odražanja dejanske izgovorjave posameznih glasov v standardni britanski oz. ameriški angleščini.

Ključne besede: transkripcija, slovar, britanska angleščina, ameriška angleščina.

Phonemic Transcriptions in British and American Dictionaries

1. Introduction

When deciding on how to represent the pronunciation of English in the form of transcription, one first needs to be aware of the well-known fact that sounds and letters in English simply ‘don’t agree’. The main reason for this is of course the fact that there are considerably more sounds in English than the letters used for the orthographic representations (i.e. the written forms) of the English lexicon. There are only 26 letters in English, while the total number of sounds (vowels and consonants) is somewhere between 40 and 45, depending on whether we are dealing with the standard British, American, or some other standard English pronunciation.

It is therefore quite clear that in addition to the straightforward application of most of the letters of the alphabet for individual sounds (as e.g. the letter <t> for the sound /t/), we need to apply some (less familiar) symbols to cover those sounds that cannot be represented in this way.

Some of the basic principles, including but not restricted to those proposed by Windsor Lewis (Windsor Lewis, 2003) that seem to be worth accounting for, are:

- a) usage of familiar symbols,
- b) avoidance of diacritics,
- c) avoidance of overlap with spelling of other items,
- d) approximation to actual pronunciation,
- e) providing both American and British pronunciation.

2. American versus British

2.1 Main differences

The most important general difference between transcriptions in British and American dictionaries is the prevailing American tendency to base their transcription system on orthography (letters) rather than some special ‘phonemic’ symbols. In order to compensate for the lack of a sufficient number of letters, authors make use of various digraphs and diacritics. This means that users do not need to become familiar with an extra set of symbols in order to work out the pronunciation of lexical items, but they are not much better off, since they still need to decipher the meanings of digraphs and in particular of the various, often confusing diacritical marks. In some ways, this approach seems more user-friendly in trying to link pronunciation symbols with orthography, but it provides little information on pronunciation itself. For example, offering the transcription /th/ for the pronunciation of e.g. *thunder* can only be interpreted as ‘pronounce this sound as it is usually pronounced when the spelling is <th>’; of course, we still have to think of how to show the difference between the /th/ of *thunder* and that of e.g. *this*. In American dictionaries this is usually solved by underlining, bold-typing or italicizing one of the two symbols. With the diacritics and doubling used with

the five vowel letters /a e i o u/, however, these advantages disappear and using the same letter for different sounds becomes a disadvantage rather than a welcome simplification.

British transcriptions are more or less consistently based on the symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). While this makes little difference with regard to consonants, the whole system of vowel symbols is completely different, with hardly any equivalence between the two symbol sets. Admittedly, it is quite a difficult task for dictionary users to learn the whole set of the IPA symbols used for this purpose but these are undoubtedly more appropriate in terms of information provided on actual pronunciation of individual sounds, as well as in terms of crossing language boundaries (being ‘international’ rather than restricted to English).

2.2 Symbols for consonants

To begin with, there is no problem with most of the consonantal symbols, as appropriate letters can be used to represent them in both American and British dictionaries. These symbols are also used within the International Phonetic Alphabet, although there are differences among languages with regard to the actual pronunciation of individual sounds. Thus, for example, /t/ is a dental plosive in some languages and alveolar in others. We should also be aware of the fact that many of the consonantal letters are sometimes unpronounced (we talk about ‘silent’ or ‘mute’ consonants), so one still needs to be careful not to equate sounds and letters, not even in the case of these ‘unproblematic’ consonants.

Thus, the same symbols are used in all dictionaries for 16 (precisely two thirds of) English consonants:

- plosives: p t k b d g
- fricatives: f v s z h
- sonorants: l r w m n

However, there are some problems already here (such as the marking of voiced /t/ and application of the <h> symbol as part of the symbols for certain vowels and for the pronunciation of <wh> words in American English); these specific cases will be discussed separately below.

Turning to the problematic third of the symbol set, we find that these relate to

- the sounds of breaT^H and breaT^{He}
- the sounds of SHort, pleaS^{ure}, ChurCH and JuDGe
- the initial sound of Yell and
- the sound of baNG

The usual symbols used for these sounds in British and American dictionaries respectively are given with examples in Table 1.

EXAMPLE	British	American
breath	θ	th <u>th</u>
breathe	ð	th th th
short	ʃ	sh
pleasure	z	zh
church	tʃ	ch
judge	dʒ	j
yell	j	<u>y</u>
bang	ŋ	ng <u>ng</u> ng ŋ

Table 1: Consonantal symbols in British and American dictionaries

2.2.1 Dental fricatives

Concerning the dental fricatives, it could be argued that both with British and American symbols the user faces the same problem, namely that of possibly confusing which symbol stands for the strong (voiceless) and which for the weak (voiced) sound. The two IPA symbols in the British version, however, will simply have to be learnt, while the <th> symbols are of course a reminder of the spelling of the two sounds. Unfortunately, American dictionaries distinguish between them in different ways. Thus in the Random House (Nichols, 2001) and in Webster's dictionary (Guralnik, 1986), the symbol for the strong fricative is simply /th/ in one and /th/ with a bottom tie bar (th) in the other, and the one for the weak sound is diagonally crossed in both dictionaries, which is rather difficult to 'reproduce' if one has to apply the transcription in a document such as this paper. In this regard, the IPA symbols, which can easily be obtained as a separate font, are considerably less problematic. Some other American dictionaries use underlining or italics for the weak sound, which of course only adds to the confusion of the users. However, since the purpose of crossing or linking two letters (as for the sibilants below) is obviously to suggest that a sound is represented by two letters, underlining and italics are technically a much better solution for the purpose.

The Penguin dictionary (Allen, 2000), which gives British pronunciations only, while its symbols mostly follow the American conventions, offers /dh/ for the weak sound, which seems interesting, but in combination with the rest of the symbols this leads to some bizarre transcriptions, such as e.g. /'fahdhə/ for the word *father*.

2.2.2 Sibilants

As for the dentals, the difference is again between using IPA symbols in British and digraphs suggesting the usual spelling of individual sibilants in American dictionaries. It should be noted, however, that for Slovene users the familiar letters (š, ž, č, dž), applied for example in the biggest existing English-Slovene dictionary (Grad, 1978), is definitely a recommendable option, along with other simplifications that are often applied in our bilingual dictionaries,

in particular from the point of view of the general public. The IPA symbols for the affricates consistently show the ‘composite’ nature of the affricates (with two elements for each of them) while in American transcription the prevailing orthography is used to represent the IPA /dʒ/. On the other hand, I have often observed the problems that students have with the IPA symbol /j/, interpreting it as /dʒ/, and reading for example *used to*, transcribed /ju:st tə/ as /dʒʌst tə/.

2.2.3 Sonorants

As it has just been observed for the IPA transcription of the palatal semi-vowel, the influence of orthography seems to be an argument in favour of the American link between orthography and pronunciation. However, while the transcription /y/ may work well for words like *yellow*, it is not quite unproblematic when the sound is not represented by the letter <y>. Thus, the representation of e.g. *beauty* by the initial /by-/ is not very helpful. A similar problem occurs with the transcription of the velar nasal (as in *sing*). While the IPA symbol is not difficult to remember, the (usual) American spelling representation is both misleading (suggesting somehow that the <g> should be pronounced when it actually shouldn’t), as well as awkward (notice that *anger* gets a double <g> /ng-g/ and *thank* is transcribed with /ngk/).

2.3 Symbols for vowels

As for the consonants, the main difference between American and British dictionaries is in the usage of letters and digraphs in American dictionaries vs. IPA symbols in British dictionaries. Since the 5 vowel letters and several digraphs are still insufficient for the 17 vowels of General American (let alone the 20 of Standard British English pronunciation), American dictionaries also use different diacritics in order to distinguish between short and long vowels (both monophthongs and diphthongs). In British dictionaries, the simple length mark (:) is used for the long monophthongs and IPA-based digraphs are consistently applied for the 8 diphthongs. There is, however, a problem with the representation of vowels in those British dictionaries which provide also American representation, since the authors try to show the pronunciation differences by using different symbols. American dictionaries, on the other hand, usually disregard British pronunciation.

2.3.1 Short vowels

As can be seen in Table 2, American dictionaries offer a relatively neat solution by simply using the five vowel letters and the IPA symbol for the schwa. Unfortunately, there is also a digraph for the vowel of *put*, and some dictionaries use the ‘breve’ diacritic to show that the vowels are short.

In British dictionaries, there is some variation for the *set* and *sat* vowels in British pronunciation, and for the vowels of *pot*, *loss* and *cut* in American pronunciation. The least satisfactory, in

my opinion is the symbol /ɔ/, either with or without the length mark, because it leads one to pronounce words like *loss* with the vowel of BE for e.g. *laws*. In addition, the introduction of /ɛ/ Upton et als. (Upton, 2001) for the vowel of *set*, although it can be justified on the grounds of its degree of openness, is nevertheless completely unnecessary.

EXAMPLE	British	American
Sit	ɪ	ɪ ɨ
Set	e ɛ	e ɛ̃
Sat	æ a, æ	a ă
Pot; loss	ɒ o, ɑ: ɑ; ɒ o, ɔ: ɔ	o ɔ̃
Put	ʊ	ʊo
Cut	ʌ, ʌ ə	u ʊ̃
<i>about; father</i>	ə; ə, ʳ ər	ə, ʳ

Table 2: Vowel symbols in British and American dictionaries: short monophthongs

Table 3 shows that there is some further variation in British dictionaries with regard to the short monophthongs /ɪ/ and /ʊ/, when used in unaccented position, i.e. as 'weak' vowels. The reason for this is the possibility of further weakening of both vowels to the schwa. Some dictionaries use a very complex system of numbering, such as /ə¹ ə² ə³/ etc. for different alternations between the schwa and several other Vs, as e.g. Collins Cobuild (Sinclair, 2001).

EXAMPLE	British	American
reply	ɪ/ə ɪ, ɪ/ə ɪ	ɪ ɨ
hopeful	ʊ/ə ʊ	ʊo

Table 3: Vowel symbols in British and American dictionaries: variation in short monophthongs in unaccented position.

2.3.1 Long monophthongs

While the American system becomes even more confusing here with three different diacritics and a diagraph for the vowel of *root* (see Table 4 below), the British dictionaries show some variation with regard to usage of length mark, the symbol for the vowel of *shirt* and that for the American pronunciation of *task*. We could imagine a very neat set of symbols in British dictionaries by way of deletion of all length marks (since this is an allophonic feature anyway) and by avoiding the unnecessary extra symbol /a/ for the American pronunciation of *task*. Such transcriptions have actually been applied by Windsor Lewis (Windsor Lewis, 1972) but were later unfortunately disregarded by the majority of British (as well as other) transcribers. The author further simplified the symbol set by using simply the letter /o/ instead of /ɒ/, which is a bit questionable from the point of view of IPA, where /o/ is used for a mid-close rather than a mid-open or even open vowel.

EXAMPLE	British	American
seat	i:	\bar{e}
start; task dance	ɑ:, ɑ:r ɑr; ɑ: ɑ:/a, æ	a(r)
shirt	ʒ: ə:, ʒr ər	ûr
port	ɔ:, ɔ:r ɔr	ôr
root	u:, u: u ʊ	\bar{o}

Table 4: Vowel symbols in British and American dictionaries: long monophthongs

2.3.2 Diphthongs

The American set of symbols is again too complex, due to different diacritics and digraphs (see Table 5), while the straightforward British system was also here unnecessarily upset by Upton et al. (Upton 2001), by the introduction of /ʌɪ/ (exclusively) for the British pronunciation of *light*, as well as by that of /ɛɪ/ for the vowel of *scare*, which not only disregards the well-established symbol but also conceals the close relationship between the three ‘centring’ diphthongs.

EXAMPLE	British	American
Late	eɪ	\bar{a}
Light	aɪ ʌɪ, aɪ	\bar{i}
Choice	ɔɪ	oi
Shout	aʊ	ou
Coat	əʊ, oʊ	\bar{o}
Fear	ɪə, ɪ ^r ɪr	\bar{e} r êr
Scare	eə ɛɪ, e ^r ɛr	âr
Cure	ʊə, ʊ ^r ʊr	öör

Table 5: Vowel symbols in British and American dictionaries: diphthongs

2.4 Other symbols

Due to restrictions of space, I will not discuss some of the less important features (e.g. marking of syllabicity of consonants and that of optional schwa elision), and will restrict my comparison to the marking of word accentuation and to the symbols used for allophonic realizations of the vowels /ɪ/ and /ʊ/ and the consonant /r/.

With regard to accentuation marking, the IPA convention is to place the (primary and secondary) stress marks *before* the accented syllables, a practice followed by most British dictionaries, while American dictionaries mostly have them *after* these syllables. It was perhaps in order to avoid this ambiguity that some lexicographers (as for example those of the English-Slovene (Grad 1978) and some American dictionaries) chose to place the primary stress *on* the

accented syllable, which makes the matter clear but is technically more problematic. Perhaps a better solution is either to use bold type or underlining of accented syllables, as for example in American Heritage Dictionary (Pickett 1994). It should also be pointed out that very few dictionaries provide the very important primary and secondary accentuation marking for compounds (eg. ,*running* 'commentary). An exception is for example the Macmillan dictionary (Mayor 2002), which uses the same symbol for secondary and tertiary stress (eg. '*desig,nated*).

Finally, with regard to the allophonic variants mentioned above, which are mostly given specific symbols only in British dictionaries, I have always thought that they are completely unnecessary and only make the whole set of symbols (even more) inconsistently phonemic, i.e. they bring in the element of 'realization' into what is mostly meant to be a representation of the 'system'. Rather than making the set of symbols too complex, we should strive to make it simpler. Some moves have been made in this direction in British dictionaries, e.g. by introducing the same first element for the diphthongs /aɪ/ and /aʊ/ and by replacing /ɛ/ with /e/ (as well as /ɛə/ by /eə/), and the next logical step would be the above mentioned removal of the length mark. Unfortunately, while this proposed simplification has not been widely accepted, the allophonic symbols /i/ and /u/ have spread from the LPD (Wells 2000) to almost all British monolingual dictionaries (see Table 6). As for the 'voiced /t/' in the American pronunciation of e.g. *waiting*, it can either be ignored (if considered an allophonic feature) or marked as /d/ (if we adopt the view of some phonologists and phoneticians that e.g. *latter* and *ladder* are homophonous in General American); this has actually been applied in some British dictionaries. In any case, the more common marking of this sound with a diacritic is awkward and not really useful, since not even phoneticians can agree on what this 'voiced tap' really is and in what way it differs from either /d/.

Vocing of /t/	EXAMPLE	British	American
	tight, waiting	t, t̚ d	t, t
Neutral Vs	EXAMPLE	British	American
/i/	city	i	ē
/u/	influence	u u	ōo

Table 6: Representation of some allophones in British and American dictionaries.

3. Conclusion

It follows from my discussion above, that while I would opt for some simplifications and in particular a more consistently phonemic transcription in British dictionaries, I still prefer the existing situation in these to the very confusing marking in the majority of American dictionaries. While the point of departure of the American approach was obviously to try and use familiar symbols (i.e. letters) rather than the less familiar phonetic symbols, the authors could not avoid using digraphs and diacritics. This, in combination with the difficulty of

finding proper links between spelling and pronunciation, has made the transcriptions in American dictionaries even less transparent and user-friendly than the IPA approach in British dictionaries. In addition, if the transcription is meant as a rough guide to the pronunciation of a lexical item, then an agreed set of phonetic symbols seems more appropriate than usage of letters representing the usual spellings within a particular language. Finally, it should be pointed out that it is only in the British dictionaries that we are likely to find both standard British and standard American pronunciation, which may be a decisive criterion for the EFL user to opt for one of the British rather than American sources when looking up the pronunciation of English words.

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