SOME ELEMENTS OF AUSTRALIAN SPEECH: VOWEL SOUNDS

Ian Slater*

Abstract

The increasing use of English as a means of global communication, often between non-native speakers, has led to wider exposure to, and awareness of, different varieties and accents of English. In this paper, the author, an Australian native speaker teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Thailand, attempts to highlight some of the features of Australian pronunciation which distinguish it from other varieties. In particular, it is contrasted with the British "prestige" variety Received Pronunciation (RP). The emphasis in the paper is on vowel sounds since these are often the elements of Australian pronunciation most easily distinguishable to the listener.

INTRODUCTION

The increasing use of English as a global language has many implications both for learners and teachers of the language (see Van Essen, 2004, for example). One important development is that English is increasingly being used as a medium for interaction between users for whom English is not their first language. Indeed, many researchers (see Graddol, 1997, for example) have pointed out that the number of non-native English speakers vastly outnumbers native speakers and this disparity is likely to continue to grow. This broader use of English has, amongst other things, led to greater attention being given, both in research and teaching, to different varieties and dialects of English.

Traditionally, and even still today in some quarters, certain varieties of English, notably British "Received Pronunciation" (RP) and General American (GenAm), are seen as "prestige" varieties. This has led to being proficient in such varieties becoming an idealized goal, particularly in terms of pronunciation and accent, for many non-native learners of English. Other varieties of En-

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glish exist, however, and in an environment of both increasing global use of English and increasingly easy global communication, such varieties are heard and spoken more widely than before.

The author of this paper is an English native speaker, born and educated in Australia. Since 1996, he has taught English as a foreign language (EFL) at an international university in Bangkok, Thailand. The international nature of the university means that instructors from over 60 nations teach a (predominantly Thai) student body using English as the medium of instruction. Obviously then, students are exposed to a rich range of varieties, dialects, and accents of English. Such exposure should, hopefully, assist students when they graduate to function effectively in English in a variety of contexts and with a variety of speakers, both native and non-native.

Aware that his own accent is neither RP nor standard American, the author felt it may be of interest to his colleagues, and perhaps to the broader community of interested students and lay people, to highlight some aspects of his own accent, particularly those that distinguish his pronunciations of English from the pronunciations of his colleagues from a variety of nations.

The purpose of this paper then, is to highlight some aspects of Australian pronunciation of English, particularly insofar as such pronunciation may differ from Received Pronunciation (RP). The paper focuses on Australian vowel sounds since it is here that the greatest distinctions between Australian speech and RP exist. No significant discussion of stress, rhythm, or intonation is undertaken. This is not to imply that, in these areas, Australian speech does not have its own peculiarities, but rather that space considerations force a deferral of the investigation of such issues to another paper.

Australia was first colonized by the English in 1788, considerably later than North America. It is not surprising then, that an Australian accent is much more similar to the accents of present-day England than those of the United States. Nevertheless, enough time has passed for Australia to have developed a distinctive accent of its own, easily recognized as different from any accent of England.

Australian English is remarkably homogeneous, particularly given the enormous area over which it is spoken. From Perth to Sydney is over 3000 kilometers, yet their accents are practically indistinguishable. Such variation in pronunciation as there is tends to be a matter of urban versus rural, the rural accent being somewhat slower and broader than the urban. Apart from this, accent variability in Australia is social and stylistic rather than geographical (Wells, 1982, p.593). This uniformity of spoken English in Australia is attributed by Bernard (as cited in Wells, 1982, p.593) to two principal factors: first, that the early white Australians entered through a very small number of seaports, and remained in contact by sea through these ports; and second, that they built up a social solidarity (whether as convicts or as free migrants) against their Britain-based officials and administrators. Moreover, gold rushes and other economic booms and failures ensured that the early Australian population remained a mobile one, with little chance to develop regional differences. It appears that a distinctive Australian accent had arisen by the 1830s or 1840s, although the proportion of native-born Australians did not exceed that of immigrants until the 1860s. (Wells, 1982, p.594)

In describing present-day Australian pronunciation it is usual, following Mitchell & Delbridge (1965), to distinguish three main types: Broad, General, and Cultivated; identified principally by differences in the quality of certain vowels. In Cultivated Australian, vowels have realisations similar to those of RP, whereas in General Australian they have undergone diphthong shifting similar to that found in the southeast of England. Broad Australian is similar to General, but has extra duration in the first element of the diphthongs.
Monophthongs

Comparing the vowels in RP with those in all three varieties of Australian English, Mitchell and Delbridge (1965, p.34) found a consistent variation in vowel quality.

The vowels affected are:

- [ɪ] as in bitter
- [ɛ] as in better
- [ʊ] as in batter
- [a] as in sort
- [ɜ] as in bird
- [ʌ] as in letter, above
- [æ] as in barter
- [ʌ] as in butter

1. The IPA representation of this sound is [e]. Mitchell and Delbridge's representation, however, is used throughout this paper.
2. The distinction between this sound and the standard IPA representation of it as [a] is discussed below.

The Australian vowels [ɪ], [ɛ], [ʊ], [a], [ʌ], are pronounced with a more closed tongue position (hereafter "closer") than in English speech. In addition to being closer, the Australian [ɪ] is more forward (i.e. pronounced more toward the front of the mouth) than the English vowel.

Mitchell and Delbridge (1965) also attempted to draw a complete distinction between the place of articulation of Australian and English vowel sounds. Their classification is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Australian</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Front vowels:</td>
<td>Front vowels:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ɪ], [ɛ], [ʊ], [a], [ʌ]</td>
<td>[ɪ], [ɛ], [ʊ], [a], [ʌ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central vowels: [ɛ], [ɜ]</td>
<td>Central vowels: [ɛ], [ɜ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Back vowels:</td>
<td>Back vowels:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ʊ], [a], [ʌ]</td>
<td>[ʊ], [a], [ʌ]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The differences in quality between English and Australian vowels are most clearly heard in [a], [ɛ], and [ʌ]. The difference between the English retracted [ɛ] and the Australian front [a] is easily heard and, in the speech of some Australians, the [a] is so much forward as to draw attention to its characteristic front resonance. The quality of these two vowels may account in part for the common opinion that Australian speech has less resonance than English, and that it is more palatal and "thinner" in tone. Moreover, when the English [ɛ] and [ʌ] are a little more open, in the pronunciation of some speakers, than is usual, the Australian is apt to think the speaker is pronouncing an [a], that he is saying [bad] for [bʌd], [had] for [hʌd], [bɛta] for [bɛtə]. Conversely an English speaker, struck by the closer quality of the Australian [ɛ], is apt to imitate it in any exaggerated fashion as an [ɪ]. The closer qualities of the Australian [ʊ], [ɛ] and [ɪ] compared with the English sounds, are not so easily heard. Often Australians are accused of pronouncing [ɛ] instead of [ʊ], thus: men for man, het for hat, bend for band. The difference between the English and Australian [ɪ] is clearly heard in the two pronunciations of pity. The English speaker produces a retracted and lowered [ɪ] in the second syllable. The Australian speaker produces his characteristic forward, close [ɪ] in the first syllable and an [i] in the second. The marked difference between the open [ɪ] and the [i] in the second syllable adds to the contrast between the precise shades of the [ɪ] in the first syllable (Mitchell and Delbridge, 1965, p.37).

Diphthongs

A. The Centring Diphthongs

Since the Australian vowels [ɪ], [ɛ] and [a] are closer than the corresponding English vowels, it follows that the initial vowel positions for the centring diphthongs [ɪɛ], [ɛɛ] and [aɛ] are closer. Since the Australian [ɛ] is closer than the English [ɛ], the vowel position towards which the diphthongs move is closer. The vowel-glides of [ɪɛ], as in here, [ɛɛ] as in air, [aɛ] as in four, [ʊɛ] as in tour, are represented on the cardinal
vowel diagram as follows:

![vowel diagram](image)

**Fig. 1:** The centring diphthongs in Australian speech. (from Mitchell and Delbridge, 1965, p.38)

In the pronunciation of some Australians, the glide in the centring diphthongs is very slight, with the result that the final [ə] sound is hardly heard. The effect is almost of a pure vowel lengthened. The pronunciation often more closely resembles [ɪː ɛː ɪ] than [ɪː ɛː ɪ], as in here [hɪː], clear [klɪː], fair [fɛː], chair [tʃɛː], four [fʊː], store [stʊː].

Both the centring diphthong and the lengthened pure vowel are likely to occur within the speech of any individual Australian speaker. The centring diphthong is generally used by Cultivated speakers in stressed syllables, especially when these occur at the very end of an utterance, or before a pause. But the same syllable followed immediately by another syllable with an [r] between generally has the lengthened pure vowel, thus beer [bɪː], compared to beery [bɪrɪ].

The tendency not to use the inward glide is most marked in General and Broad Australian. [ɪː] and [ɪː], for year and years, are common enough pronunciations in both varieties. Among Broad speakers, there is overlapping between [ɪ] and [ɪ], in that words like real, feel, meal might be pronounced with the diphthong normally used in the Broad variety for [ɪ], namely [ɪː]. Thus [rɪː], [rɪː], [mɪː]. There is also a tendency for these words to be pronounced as bisyllables, with a syllabic [ɪ]. In the same way, [ɪː], as in beer [bɪː] may be made bisyllabic in Broad Australian, and pronounced [bɪːɪ].

In Cultivated Australian, the RP-style diphthong [ʊː] is commonly used in words like pure, cure, curious, security, tour, allure, dour, though the glide may be minimized before an intervocalic [r]. Also, [ʊː] is occasionally heard in sure, insurance, poor and moor, but these words are more often pronounced [ʃ•ʊ] or [ʃ•i], [ɪʃ•ʊns], [p•ʊ] or [p•i], and [m•ʊ] or [m•i].

In the General version of words like security, impurity, endurance, there is generally a centralized vowel which might be represented as [ʊ]. Security might occasionally be spoken as [s•kʊʃʊɪ•tʊ•ɪ] by General speaker, but [s•kʊʃʊɪ•tʊ•ɪ] is commoner. It is to be doubted if [ʊ] is ever heard in Broad Australian, its place being taken by [ʊ] in words like sure, insurance, and poor, and by the centralized vowel [ʊ] in words like secure, tour, sewer, and dour. In such words the [ʊ] of the nucleus is followed by a syllabic [ʊ], so that tour and sewer, for example, make rhyming pairs with doer, all of them bisyllabic, while dour and doer are pronounced alike.

**B. The Closing Diphthongs**

In Cultivated Australian speech, the four diphthongs [ɛː], [ʊ], [aː], [ɒ] are almost the same as the corresponding diphthongs in Educated Southern English pronunciation.

![diphthongs diagram](image)

**Fig. 2:** The diphthongs in Cultivated Australian speech. (from Mitchell and Delbridge, 1965, p.40)
In Cultivated Australian speech, the diphthongs [ei], [ai], [ou], [au], [ai], [au] and by the diphthongisation of [i] and [u].

The General Australian variant of [ei], as in say, may be represented by the phonetic symbols [AI]. Examples of the occurrence of [AI] in General Australian speech are: ['SAIm], same; ['mAEk], make; ['rAIk], arraign; ['fAIk], shake; ['s'trAIj], Australia; ['s'trAI], astray; ['drAIk], draper; ['gAIk], gain; ['sAIv], save; ['trAI], trace.

The General Australian variant of the diphthong [ou], as in so, may be represented by the phonetic symbols [AU]. Examples of occurrence of [AU] in General Australian speech are: ['rAUpsilon], rope; ['sAUk], soak; ['rAUk], roller; ['nAU], know; ['sAU], sew; ['hAU], hoe; ['kAIron], alone; ['hDIpsilonAU], hollow; ['tEAIpsilonfAUpsilon], telephone; ['hAUS], host.

The General Australian variant of the diphthong [au] may be represented by the phonetic symbols [OU]. Examples of occurrence of [OU] in General Australian speech are: ['hQUpsilon], how; ['pQUpsilon], power; ['sQAnd], sound; ['kVQUpsilon], avowel; ['sCRQAnd], surround; ['hQUpsilon], house; ['kROUpsilon], allow; ['kRQAnd], crown; ['skOUT], scout; ['kROUpsilon], aground.

The General Australian variant of the diphthong [ai] may be represented by the phonetic symbols [DI]. Examples of the occurrence of [DI] in General Australian speech are: ['hDI], high; ['gDI], guide; ['nDI], find; ['sDI], supply; ['kDI], cried; ['brDI], bright; ['mDI], miner; ['dDI], deny; ['twDIS], twice; ['kWDIS], acquire.

In Cultivated Australian, the sounds [i] and [u] are normally diphthongized, and occur as [I] and [u].

The General Australian variant of the sound [i] as in tea may be represented by the phonetic symbols [I]. Examples of the occurrence of [I] in General Australian speech are: ['tAI], tea; ['mI'], machine; ['bI'], believe; ['hI'], heat; ['mI'], meet; ['kAI], key, quy; ['AI], these; ['AI], yield; ['tAI], team; ['AI], leaf.

The General Australian variant of the sound [u] as in two may be represented by the phonetic symbols [U]. Examples of occurrence of [U] in General Australian speech are: ['tOUpsilon], two; ['tFQUpsilon], chew; ['tRQUpsilon], rule; ['sTQUpsilon], stool; ['sSQUpsilonUpsilon], assume; ['mQUpsilonV], move; ['sTRQUpsilonUpsilon], strewn; ['kIpsilonUpsilon], aloof; ['rQUpsilon], roof; ['rQUpsilon], you.

The General Australian diphthongs are shown below:

![Diagram of diphthongs in General Australian speech](image)

**Fig. 3: The diphthongs in General Australian speech.** (from Mitchell and Delbridge, 1965, p.43)

The Broad Australian variant in words like male, same, has a slower glide than the General variant, and it may start from a more advanced position. It might be represented as [AI].

The Broad variants of the vowel in rope, roller, hoe, likewise have a slower glide, and possibly a more advanced starting position. The sound is frequently unrounded. The variant might be written [AI].

The tendency to a slower glide is observed in the Broad pronunciation of words like hour, power;
sound. The sound is prone to nasalising, and the nasality may be quite marked when a nasal consonant follows the vowel. The variant may be represented [q*U].

The vowel in words like high, find and bright has slower glide in Broad Australian speech, and may be written [n*I].

In words like beat, machine, key, the vowel in Broad Australian has a slower glide, with the first element prominent and possibly more open than in General Australian. It may be heard as [«I]. Similarly words like boot, two, stool will have a slower glide, possible a more open starting position, and be unrounded throughout. The variant may be written [«U].

In Broad Australian, there is a tendency for front vowels to be closer in tongue position than in the other varieties. The sounds [I], [E] and [Q] are often spoken with noticeable tension. There is also a tendency, especially with the latter two, for the sounds to be nasalized.

**Weak vowels**

Australian English has a phoneme [«], restricted in occurrence to weak syllables. It contrasts with all other vowels. There is generally no opposition between [I] and [«], the later occurring to the exclusion of the former. There is no distinction then in the pairs shown below (usually distinct in RP):

- boxes and boxers, both [boks«z];
- founded and founced, both [founnd«d];
- valid and salad rhyme, both end [-«d];
- rabbit and abbot rhyme, both end [-«t];
- bucket and ducat rhyme, both end [-«t];
- Alice and callous rhyme, both end [-«s];
- Armidale, NSW, is homophonous with Armadale, Vic.

(Wells, 1982, p.601)

The suffixes spelt -ate, -ess, -est, -et, -id, -ist, -less, -let, -ness accordingly all have [«] in Australian speech. So does -age, as cabbage [kɒb«dʒ], village [vɪldʒ] (compare British [kɒbdʒ], [vɪldʒ]). One must perhaps not be too categorical about these suffixes where Cultivated Australian is concerned, however. Wells (1982, p.602) notes that there do seem to be some speakers who have [I] not only in -age but also in -ive, thus massive [mɒsɪv] (usual Australian form: [mɒs«v]).

The words it, is, and him, as a result of this tendency, have distinct strong and weak forms in Australian English, e.g. stressed it [I], unstressed [«]. Thus pack it is still homophonous with packet, both [pɒkt]. Hence weak it and at are phonetically identical, as are weak is and as.

The vowel for happy is [I]. Pairs such as studied and studded (homophonous in RP with [-Id]) are sharply distinguished by Australians, as [stʌdɪd] vs. [stʌdɪd]. The prefixes be-, de-, e, pre-, and re- all fluctuate between [I] and [«]; they do not, of course, have RP-style [I]. Thus pretend can be [prɪtɛnd] or [prɛtɛnd]. However se- is apparently always [s«], thus select [sɛlɛkt].

The Australian trend towards merging of all unstressed vowels in [«] may lead also, for example, to identity between the initial syllables of July and Geelong, thus [dʒəlaɪ], [dʒɛldI].

The fact that the final vowel of Latin and Martin is phonemically [«], not [I], causes these and similar words to be subject to Syllabic Consonant Formation: [lɪtn, 'mætn] (compare the usual RP: [lɪtn, 'mætn], where Syllabic Consonant Formation is blocked by the presence of [I] in the structural description).

Constraints on Australian [I] also mean that the rival forms of -ing differ not only in the place of articulation of the nasal but also in the vowel: high-prestige [n], low-prestige [«n]. Hence the prevalence in Broad Australian of forms such as [rɒdn] riding, [rɒbn] rabbiting (a pronun-
Consonants

The consonants of Australian English generally follow RP. The non-rhotic distribution of [r] and the variable dropping (except in Cultivated Australian) of [h] further contributing to the general impression of Englishness as against Americanness. The most noticeable differences are with the pronunciation of [t] and [l].

The Intervocalic [t] may be pronounced as a tap or trill rather than a plosive. Moreover, is no sharp clear [l] vs. dark [l] distinction as in RP.

Separate Words

Words which acquire a variant national pronunciation in Australia are usually those in ordinary current use. Words which are less commonly used, for instance scholarly and literary words, are less likely to vary from RP, since the people who use them usually refer to the dictionaries to ascertain the pronunciation.

Mitchell and Delbridge (1965, p.50) noted that an unaccented vowel or diphthong which in English pronunciation is reduced to the neutral [ə] or [ʌ] retains its full value in Australian speech. Thus the Australian pronunciations of accent and income are ['qksent] and ['ɪnkʌm], never ['qksənt] and ['ɪnkəm]. Similarly the pronunciations ['s3kəmsnt] and ['knɔnsIkrməns] for circumstance and consequence are less common in Australian speech than ['s3kəmsnəns] and ['knɔnsIkrməns]. Other words in which this tendency can be seen are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Australian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bankruptcy</td>
<td>['boŋkrəptsI]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brimstone</td>
<td>['brɪmstən]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>combat</td>
<td>['kʌmbət]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>comrade</td>
<td>['kʌmred]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>crayon</td>
<td>['krəɪn]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ingot</td>
<td>['ɪŋət]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nomad</td>
<td>['nəʊməd]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>product</td>
<td>['prədəkt]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>proverb</td>
<td>['prəbɜr]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>steadfast</td>
<td>['streft]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>subject</td>
<td>['səbstrkt]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vagabond</td>
<td>['vɔɡəbənd]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Mitchell and Delbridge, 1965, p.51)

In a similar way, the endings -ial, -ius, -ious, -eous, which in English pronunciation are often reduced to monosyllables are usually disyllabic in Australian speech:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Australian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Genial</td>
<td>['dʒiəl]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>genius</td>
<td>['dʒiəns]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>helium</td>
<td>['helɪm]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ingenious</td>
<td>['ɪndʒiəns]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>spontaneous</td>
<td>['spənstəniəs]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Mitchell and Delbridge, 1965, p.51)

What is termed "spelling pronunciation" is also common in Australia. In many words, a syllable commonly dropped in English pronunciation is retained in Australian pronunciation.

Regarding other issues of lexical distribution, Mitchell and Delbridge (1965, p.52) note that the following English pronunciations are not heard, or are very rarely heard, in Australia:

- immediate: ['ɪmɪdʒəm]
- projectile: ['prədʒɪl]
scone  ['skoun]
transition  [ˈtrənʃən]
year  ['jɪər]

The usual Australian pronunciations are:  
[I'mɪlɪdɪɛt],  [prɛˈdʒektɪl],  ['rəʊstɛ],  ['skʊn],  
[trənˈzɪʃn],  [jɪɛ].

Other notable pronunciations are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>British</th>
<th>Australian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>aquatic</td>
<td>[ˈkwɒtIk]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>artisan</td>
<td>[ɑtˈɪzɒn]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>auction</td>
<td>[ˈɔkʃn]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>austere</td>
<td>[ˈɔstɛ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>caustic</td>
<td>[ˈkɑstɪk]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>colander</td>
<td>[ˈkələndər]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>combat</td>
<td>[ˈkɒmbət]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>comrade</td>
<td>[ˈkɒmrəd]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>decade</td>
<td>[ˈdeɪkəd]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jubilee</td>
<td>[dʒuˈbli]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>quagmire</td>
<td>[kwɑɡˈmaɪər]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chassis</td>
<td>[ˈkæʃɪs]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>immediate</td>
<td>[ɪˈmiːdɪət]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melbourne</td>
<td>[ˈmɛlbən]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oral</td>
<td>[ˈɔrəl]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland</td>
<td>[ˈkwɪnslənd]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from Mitchell and Delbridge, 1965, p.52-53; Wells, 1982, p.597)

Finally, among many Australian speakers there is an inclination, whenever a choice is to be made between [a] and [ɑ], to choose the latter. For the [ɑ] speaker of words like dunk, dance, and demand, the choice of [a] is a sign of pedantry, snobbishness, or of undue striving for effect. Those who say [plæstɪk], plastic, [laðə], latter, [plæstɪk] elastic, and even [trænsfə], transfer, are thought to make themselves slightly ridiculous. There is, however, a genuine choice between [a] and [ɑ] in words like demand, circumstance, grasp, Newcastle (this choice is regionally conditioned), and contrast.

**CONCLUSION**

What appears above is an overview of the salient features of Australian pronunciation, viewed in relief against the backdrop of RP. Further analysis, comparing the Australian accent, in any of its three main varieties, to General American (GenAM) pronunciation could also prove instructive. It is to be hoped also, that this short paper spurs the writer's colleagues to investigate their own varieties of English and to write about them for the edification of students and teachers alike.

**REFERENCES**


