

J. D. O'Connor

150

# Better English Pronunciation

NEW EDITION



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# Better English Pronunciation

Second edition

*J. D. O'Connor*

Professor of Phonetics in the University of London

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The responsibility for the book is mine; any credit I happily share with all those mentioned above.

J. D. O'C.  
*University College, London*



## Foreword to the second edition

Since this book was first published, in 1967, my attention has been drawn by users of it to various errors and omissions, and suggestions have been made for improving its usefulness. In this second edition I have now remedied the errors and omissions and I have adopted those suggestions which I think improve the book. To all those readers who were kind enough to write to me on these matters I offer my sincere thanks.

My old readers will no doubt consider the greatest change in this edition to be the use of a different phonetic transcription, and I agree. The reason why I decided to change the transcription is this: when the book was first published I used the transcription of Daniel Jones's *English Pronouncing Dictionary* (Dent), which I considered to be the best guide to English pronunciation for foreign learners (as I still do). The present editor of the dictionary, A. C. Gimson, decided, rightly in my opinion, to change his transcription for the 14th edition of 1977. This meant that my transcription no longer corresponded to any of those found in the major dictionaries commonly used by foreign learners. I have now rectified this quite unacceptable situation by adopting the Gimson transcription which is also used in the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1978) and the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (4th edition 1980).

There have often been understandable complaints from students that different writers on English pronunciation used different transcriptions. It seems to me that there is at least a movement towards using a standard transcription, namely, the one now used in this book, and this is a wholly welcome development.

The new transcription differs from the old only in the matter of symbols for the English vowels, and for the convenience of old readers I list both old and new forms below:


Old form	Key word	New form
i:	feel	ɪ:
ɪ	fill	ɪ
e	fell	e



## Foreword

ɔ:	fall	ɔ:
u	full	ʊ
u:	fool	u:
ei	fail	eɪ
ou	foal	əʊ
ai	file	aɪ
au	foul	aʊ
ɔɪ	foil	ɔɪ
æ	cat	æ
ɔ	cot	ɒ
ʌ	cut	ʌ
ə:	curt	ɜ:
ɑ:	cart	ɑ:
iə	tier	ɪə
ɛə	tear	eə
uə	tour	ʊə
ə	banana	ə

Vowels which were previously differentiated only by the length mark (: ) are now distinguished both by the length mark and by letter-shape, e.g. fi:l/fɪl. This makes for easier visual recognition and underlines the fact that the pairs of vowels differ not only in length but also in quality.

A recording of all the practice material is available on cassettes. The symbol  in the text indicates exactly what is recorded.

The book has been entirely re-designed and re-set, and the diagrams have been re-drawn; for this and much other help my thanks are due to the Cambridge University Press.

I hope that my book will continue to serve a useful purpose for both teachers and learners of English in helping them towards a better English pronunciation.



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# 1 Problems in pronunciation

## 1.1 Introduction

The purpose of this book is very simple: to help you, the reader, to pronounce English better than you do now. Millions of foreign students want to learn English as well as they can; for some it is only a matter of reading and writing it, and they will find no help here. But many students want to be able to speak English well, with a pronunciation which can be easily understood both by their fellow-students and by English people, and it is for them that this book is specially intended.

Written English and spoken English are obviously very different things. Writing consists of marks on paper which make no noise and are taken in by the eye, whilst speaking is organized sound, taken in by the ear. How can a book, which is nothing but marks on paper, help anyone to make their English *sound* better? The answer to this is that it can't, not by itself. But if you will co-operate, and listen to English as much as you can, along the lines that I shall suggest to you, then you will find that the instructions given in the following pages will make your ears sharper for the sound of English and when you can *hear* English properly you can go on and improve your performance.

Language starts with the ear. When a baby starts to talk he does it by hearing the sounds his mother makes and imitating them. If a baby is born deaf he cannot hear these sounds and therefore cannot imitate them and will not speak. But normal babies can hear and can imitate; they are wonderful imitators, and this gift of imitation, which gives us the gift of speech, lasts for a number of years. It is well known that a child of ten years old or less can learn *any* language perfectly, if it is brought up surrounded by that language, no matter where it was born or who its parents were. But after this age the ability to imitate perfectly becomes less, and we all know only too well that adults have great difficulty in mastering the pronunciation (as well as other parts) of foreign languages. Some people are more talented than others; they find pronouncing other languages less difficult, but they never find them easy. Why is this? Why should this gift that we all have as



children disappear in later life? Why can't grown-up people pick up the characteristic sound of a foreign language as a child can?

The answer to this is that our native language won't let us. By the time we are grown up the habits of our own language are so strong that they are very difficult to break. In our own language we have a fairly small number of sound-units which we put together in many different combinations to form the words and sentences we use every day. And as we get older we are dominated by this small number of units. It is as if we had in our heads a certain fixed number of boxes for sounds; when we listen to our own language we hear the sounds and we put each into the right box, and when we speak we go to the boxes and take out the sounds we want in the order we want them. And as we do this over the years the boxes get stronger and stronger until everything we hear, whether it is our own language or another, has to be put into one of these boxes, and everything we say comes out of one of them. But every language has a different number of boxes, and the boxes are arranged differently. For example, three of our English boxes contain the sounds at the beginning of the words *fin*, *thin* and *sin*, that is, *f*, *th* (this is one sound, of course) and *s*. Like this:

f	th	s
---	----	---

Now, many other languages have boxes which are similar to the English ones for *f* and *s*, but they do not have a special box for the *th*-sound. And we can picture this in the following way:

f	th	s
f	s	

When the foreign listener hears the English *th*-sound he has to put it in one of his own boxes, his habits force him to do so, and he has no special *th* box, so he puts it into either the *f* box or the *s* box:

f	th	s
f	s	

In other words, he 'hears' the *th*-sound as either *f* or *s*; a funny *f* or a funny *s*, no doubt, but he has nowhere else to put it. And in speaking the same thing happens: if he has to say *thin*, he has no *th* box to go to so he goes to the nearest box available to him, either the *f* or the *s*, and



he says either *fin* or *sin* (or it may be *tin*, if he has a *t* box in his language).

The main problem of English pronunciation is to build a new set of boxes corresponding to the sounds of English, and to break down the arrangement of boxes which the habits of our native language have so strongly built up. We do this by establishing new ways of hearing, new ways of using our speech organs, new speech habits.

This may sound easy, but it isn't. Unfortunately, it is never easy to establish good habits, it is always the bad ones which come most naturally, and you will need to do a great deal of hard work if you want to build yourself a set of English boxes which are nearly as firm as those of your own language. Anyone who says that you can get a good English pronunciation without hard work is talking rubbish, unless you happen to be one of the very small number of lucky people to whom pronunciation comes fairly easily. Most of us need to work hard at it, and this book is for people who are prepared to work hard. If you work hard and regularly along the lines suggested in this book, you will improve. One of the most important things to remember is that *everyone can improve*, even if they have no great talent for language. Quite apart from anything else, there is great satisfaction to be got from the development of what talent you have. You may never sound like a native English speaker, but at least you will have got as close to it as you can.

## 1.2 'Lend me your ears'

If speech depends on hearing, and books don't talk, what are you to do? Fortunately there is a lot of English spoken about the world. On films, on the radio, on tapes, on gramophone records; most people can get the opportunity of listening to English in some way, and this is what you must do. *You must hear English*. But just hearing it is not enough; you must listen to it, and you must listen to it not for the meaning but for the sound of it. Obviously when you are listening to a radio programme you will be trying to understand it, trying to get the meaning from it; but you must try also for at least a short part of the time to forget about what the words mean and to listen to them simply as sounds. Take one of the English sounds at a time, it might be the English *t*, and listen for it each time it comes; concentrate on catching it, on picking it out, on hearing what it sounds like. Don't just be satisfied to hear it vaguely, as if it were a sound of your own language; try and pick out the Englishness of it, what makes it different from the nearest sound in your language. And when you think you have got it,



then say it in some of the words that you have heard, and say it *aloud*. It is no use practising silently; all of us are much better at pronouncing if we do it silently, inside ourselves. But you can't talk English inside yourself, it has to come out, so practise aloud, even if it puzzles your family or your friends. Later in the book you will find pronunciation exercises to be done; these too must be done aloud.

Films or radio programmes have the disadvantage that you can't stop them and ask for something to be repeated. Gramophone records and tapes do not have this disadvantage. With them you can repeat any part of the text as often as you need, and you must do this: it is much better for your ear if you listen to the same passage six times than if you listen to six different passages; but be careful – listen closely each time, don't relax after two or three hearings, try to keep your ears as closely concentrated on the sound of the passage at the sixth hearing as at the first. In this way you will build up a store of sound-memory which will form a firm base for your performance.

Now, performance. When you practise (aloud, of course), you must listen carefully and accurately. If you have listened properly in the first place you will know what the English words and sentences sound like, and you must compare as closely as you can the sounds that come out of your mouth with the sounds that you are holding in your head, in your sound-memory. Don't be satisfied too easily, try to match your sounds exactly with the sounds that you have listened to.

Some of you may be able to make use of a tape-recorder; if you can, you will be able to hear what you sound like to other people and this is very helpful. If you can, record on the tape-recorder a sentence or a longer passage with which you are familiar through hearing it said by an English speaker. Then listen to it, closely and carefully, and see where your performance does not match the original; mark the places where you are dissatisfied, and practise these bits until you think you have them right; then record the passage, listen critically again, and repeat the sequence. One word of warning – a tape-recorder will not do the job for you; it is a useful instrument, but it is not a magic wand which will make your English perfect without any effort from you. It is useful only because it enables you to listen to yourself from the outside, which makes it easier for you to hear what is wrong, but it is you who have to put it right, and the machine cannot do this for you. In the end it is absolutely essential for you to be able to match what you say with your sound-memory of English. So although a tape-recorder is helpful, this does not mean that if you haven't got one your English will not improve, and, just as important, it does not mean that



if you have a tape-recorder your English will necessarily be better. Careful listening is the most important thing; and careful matching of performance with listening will bring you nearer to the ideal of a perfect English pronunciation. And make no mistake, your aim must be to acquire a perfect English pronunciation. You will almost certainly not succeed in this aim because it requires, as I have said, a very rare gift; but unless this is your aim you will not make all the progress of which you are capable; keep working towards perfection until you are quite sure that it is neither necessary nor profitable for you to continue. Then you will have done yourself justice.

### **1.3 Which English?**

What do we mean by a perfect English pronunciation? In one sense there are as many different kinds of English as there are speakers of it; no two people speak exactly alike – we can always hear differences between them – and the pronunciation of English varies a great deal in different geographical areas. How do we decide what sort of English to use as a model? This is not a question which can be decided in the same way for all foreign learners of English. If you live in a part of the world like India or West Africa, where there is a tradition of speaking English for general communication purposes, you should aim to acquire a good variety of the pronunciation of this area; such varieties of Indian English or African English and the like are to be respected and used as a model by all those who will need their English mainly for the purpose of communication with their fellows in these areas. It would be a mistake in these circumstances to use as a model B.B.C. English or anything of the sort.

On the other hand, if you live in an area where there is no traditional use of English and no body of people who speak it for general communication purposes, then you must take as your model some form of native English pronunciation, and which form you choose does not very much matter. The most sensible thing to do is to take as your model the sort of English which you can hear most often. If you have gramophone records of English speech based on, let us say, an American pronunciation, make American your model; if you can listen regularly to the B.B.C., use that kind of English. But whatever you choose to do, remember this: all these different accents of English have a great deal in common, they have far more similarities than differences, so don't worry too much what sort of English you are listening to provided it *is* English.



In this book I cannot describe all the possible pronunciations of English that might be useful to you so I shall concentrate on one, the sort of English used by educated native speakers in south-east England, often referred to as Received Pronunciation (R.P. for short), that is 'accepted' pronunciation. R.P. will be the basis; but I am less interested in making you speak with this particular accent of English than in helping you to make the necessary differences between the basic sounds which are found in all kinds of English: these are found in R.P. and because of this it is as useful to describe R.P. as to describe any other native pronunciation, and if you really want to speak with a British accent, then this is as good as any, in the sense that it is widely acceptable.

#### 1.4 The basic sounds

The sounds at the beginning of each of the words in the following list are all different: the letters which stand for these sounds (usually one letter per sound, but sometimes two) are printed in *italic type*:

<i>p</i> ier	<i>v</i> eer	<i>n</i> ear
<i>b</i> eer	<i>s</i> heer	<i>w</i> eir
<i>t</i> ier	<i>h</i> ear	<i>y</i> ear
<i>d</i> eer	<i>l</i> eer	<i>c</i> heer
<i>g</i> ear	<i>r</i> ear	<i>j</i> eer
<i>f</i> ear	<i>m</i> ere	

It is the sound at the beginning of the word, the initial sound, which makes one word different from all the other words in the list. Since this is so, since these sounds are *distinctive*, it is obviously necessary to be able to make them sound different: they are basic sounds of English – all kinds of English. So are the sounds of the letters in *italic type* in these lists:

<i>b</i> ase	<i>w</i> rath
<i>b</i> aize	<i>w</i> rong
<i>b</i> athe	
<i>b</i> eige	
<i>b</i> ake	

In these lists the sounds at the end of the word are distinctive, the final sounds. If you count up the sounds which are distinctive in initial



position and those which are distinctive in final position you will find that there are twenty-four altogether. These twenty-four sounds which occur initially and finally, though they occur in other positions too, are called *consonants*.

Now look at these lists:

feel	cat	tier
fill	cot	tear
fell	cut	tour
fall	curt	
full	cart	
fool		
fail		
foal		
file		
foul		
foil		

Most of these sounds, represented again by letters in italic type, occur surrounded by consonants, and this is typical, although most of them can also occur initially and finally too. These sounds are called *vowels*.

#### NOTICE

- 1 Five of these words, *curt*, *cart*, *tier*, *tear*, *tour*, have a letter *r* in them. In many English accents, e.g. American, Canadian, Scottish, Irish, this would be pronounced exactly like the consonant at the beginning of *red*, but in R.P. and various other accents the letter represents part of a basic vowel unit. There is more detail about this on p. 61.
- 2 There is one other vowel, making twenty in all, which occurs in the word *banana*. This is a very special and very important vowel in English and it is discussed in full on pp. 82-4.

## 1.5 Letters and sounds

These must never be mixed up. Letters are written, sounds are spoken. It is very useful to have written letters to remind us of corresponding sounds, but this is all they do; they cannot make us pronounce sounds which we do not already know; they simply remind us. In ordinary English spelling it is not always easy to know what sounds the letters stand for; for example, in the words *city*, *busy*, *women*, *pretty*, *village*, the letters *i*, *y*, *u*, *o*, *e* and *a* all stand for the *same* vowel sound, the one which occurs in *sit*. And in *banana*, *bather*, *man*, *many* the letter *a* stands



for five different vowel sounds. In a book which is dealing with pronunciation this is inconvenient; it would be much more useful if the reader could always be certain that one letter represented one and only one sound, that when he saw a letter he would know at once how to pronounce it (or at least what to aim at!). That is why it is helpful to use letters in a consistent way when dealing with English. We have twenty-four consonants and twenty vowels to consider and we give to each of these forty-four units a letter (or sometimes two letters, if this is convenient). In that way we can show without any doubt what the student should be trying to say.

Here again are the words listed on pp. 6-7 and this time beside each word is the letter of the International Phonetic Alphabet which will *always* be used to represent the sound to which that word is the key, however it may be spelt in other words. Most of the letters will be perfectly familiar to you, others will seem strange for a little while; but not for long.



pier /p/	fear /f/	rear /r/	cheer /tʃ/
beer /b/	veer /v/	mere /m/	jeer /dʒ/
tier /t/	sheer /ʃ/	near /n/	
deer /d/	hear /h/	weir /w/	
gear /g/	leer /l/	year /j/	
base /s/	wrath /θ/		
baize /z/	wrong /ŋ/		
bathe /ð/			
beige /ʒ/			
bake /k/			
feel /i:/	fail /eɪ/	cat /æ/	tier /ɪə/
fill /ɪ/	foal /əʊ/	cot /ɒ/	tear /eə/
fell /e/	file /aɪ/	cut /ʌ/	tour /tʊə/
fall /ɔ:/	foul /aʊ/	curt /ɜ:/	
full /ʊ/	foil /ɔɪ/	cart /ɑ:/	banana /ə/
fool /u:/			

The use of the colon (:) with the vowels /i:/, ɔ:/, u:/, a:/, ɜ:/ is to show that they are in general *longer* than /ɪ, ʊ/ etc. They are also different in their actual sound, as the different letters indicate.

Here are some examples of words written in this way: *city* sɪtɪ, *busy* bɪzɪ, *women* wɪmɪn, *banana* bənɑ:nə, *bather* beɪðə, *man* mæn, *many* menɪ, *wrong* rɒŋ, *change* tʃeɪndʒ, *house* haʊs, *thought* θɔ:t, *could* kʊd, *cough* kɒf, *rough* rʌf, *though* ðəʊ.



This way of writing or transcribing makes it possible to show that some words which are ordinarily spelt in the same way sound different; for example, *lead*, which is pronounced li:d in a phrase like *lead the way*, but led in *lead pipe*. It also makes clear that some words which are spelt differently sound the same, for example, *rain*, *rein*, *reign*, which are all pronounced reɪn.

## 1.6 Sounds and sound-groups

A sound is made by definite movements of the organs of speech, and if those movements are exactly repeated the result will always be the same sound; it is easy to show that there are more than forty-four sounds in English – even in the pronunciation of a single person, without worrying about differences between people. For instance, if you say *tea* and *two* ti:, tu: you will notice that the lips are in a rather flat shape for ti: but are made rounder for tu:, and this is true for both the consonant /t/ and for the two vowels. So the organs of speech are not making *exactly* the same movements for the /t/ of *tea* and the /t/ of *two*, and therefore the resulting sounds are not exactly the same. You can prove this to yourself by only saying the consonant sounds of these words: think of the word *tea* and pronounce the beginning of it – but not the vowel. Then do the same for *two*; think of the word but stop before the vowel: you can hear and feel that the two sounds are different. Obviously most of the movements we make when pronouncing these two sounds are the same, and they therefore sound alike, but not identical.

Take another example, /h/. When we pronounce the words *he*, *hat*, *who* hi:, hæɪ, hu:, the /h/-sounds are different: in pronouncing /h/ we put our mouth into the position needed for the following vowel and then push out air through this position, but since the three different vowels have three different mouth-positions it follows that the three /h/-sounds must also be different. You can prove this again, as with the /t/-sounds, by saying the beginnings of these words whilst only thinking the rest.

Each of the letters we use to show pronunciation may stand for more than one sound; but each of the sounds represented by one letter has a great deal of similarity to the other sounds represented by the same letter; they have more similarities than differences: none of the /h/-sounds could be mistaken for an /l/- or an /s/-sound, and none of the /t/-sounds can be confused with a /p/- or a /k/-sound.

These groups of sounds, each represented by one letter of the