

THE NATURE OF THE WESTERN TYPE OF AMERICAN ENGLISH (GA) AND THE SOUTHERN TYPE OF AMERICAN ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes two principal varieties of American English: General American (GA), representing the western type, and Southern American English. The discussion centers on the phonetic characteristics that differentiate these dialects, specifically vowel systems, consonant realization, and prosodic features. Comprehending these variations is vital for phonetic research and for practical applications in language instruction.

Keywords: General American, Southern American English, phonetic, American dialects, rhoticity, Southern Vowel Shift, pin-pen merger

American English encompasses numerous regional varieties that differ significantly in their phonetic realization. Among these varieties, General American and Southern American English represent two distinct phonetic systems that have developed through historical, geographical, and social factors. As Wells (1982) noted, American English varieties demonstrate systematic patterns of variation that reflect both historical settlement patterns and ongoing language change. This paper provides an overview of the phonetic nature of these two major dialect types, with a focus on their distinctive features.

General American or GA is traditionally defined as the accent of the American Midwest and West; its definition has evolved over time. GA is “a relatively neutral variety that lacks the most marked regional features found in other American dialects,” according to Ladefoged and Johnson (2015). This variety serves as a point of reference for describing American English phonetics.

The vowel system of General American is characterized by several distinctive features. According to Kretzschmar (2004), one of the most notable is the preservation of rhoticity, which means that the /r/ sound is pronounced in all positions, including after vowels. For many GA speakers, the vowel in words like “caught” and “cot” has merged. This is referred to as a phenomenon known as the “cot-caught merger”. Additionally, GA typically maintains the distinction between tense and lax vowels, and

the vowel system contains both monophthongs and diphthongs with relatively conservative realizations.

Regarding consonants, GA speakers typically pronounce /t/ with aspiration in the initial position. They also flap /t/ and /d/ between vowels, producing an alveolar tap [ɾ] in words like "butter" and "ladder." The pronunciation of /r/ is retroflex or bunched in all positions, which differs between American English and British English. Furthermore, GA usually maintains clear /l/ in the majority of positions, though some dark /l/ may occur in the coda position (Wells, 1982).

The prosodic patterns of General American include relatively level intonation compared to certain British dialects, with rising intonation typically used for yes-no questions and falling intonation for statements and wh-questions. Primary stress in polysyllabic words is clearly marked, and stress patterns generally adhere to standard American English conventions.

Southern American English, which is widely spoken throughout the southeastern United States, distinguishes it from other American varieties. According to Thomas (2004), "Southern American English represents one of the most phonetically distinctive regional varieties in North America, with features that have remained remarkably stable despite widespread mobility and media influence."

The most noticeable characteristic of Southern American English is its vowel system, which is significantly different from GA. The Southern Vowel Shift is a systematic alteration that affects a number of vowel phonemes. Front vowels tend to undergo raising and diphthongization, so that words like "bed" may sound closer to "bay-ed" to non-Southern ears. The vowel in "time" frequently turns into a monophthong, approaching [a:] instead of the diphthong [aɪ] that is present in GA. Additionally, unlike in some other American dialects, many Southern speakers maintain the distinction between tense and lax vowels before nasal consonants (Labov, Ash, and Boberg, 2006).

Another characteristic feature is the phenomenon known as the "pin-pen merger," where the vowels in words like "pin" and "pen" become identical before nasal consonants, usually realized as [ɪ]. This merger is common throughout the South and represents a defining characteristic of the dialect.

Consonantal features in Southern American English include the tendency toward consonant cluster simplification, particularly at word boundaries. Compared to GA, final consonant reduction or deletion is more frequent, particularly in clusters. Though historically some coastal Southern dialects were non-rhotic, Southern English maintains rhoticity in the majority of its regions. The pronunciation of /aɪ/ before voiceless consonants often shows monophthongization, so "night" may sound like "naht" (Thomas, 2004).

Compared to GA, Southern American English has more melodic intonation patterns and a larger pitch range. Southern speakers often use rising intonation at the end of declarative sentences, which can sound like question intonation to speakers of other varieties. Vowel lengthening, rather than actual temporal differences, may contribute to the perception of a slower speech rate.

Within American English, General American and Southern American English represent two different phonetic systems. Both have regular patterns for vowel realization, consonant production, and prosodic organization. Whereas GA serves as a reference variety with comparatively conservative features, Southern American English demonstrates unique vowel shifts, mergers, and prosodic patterns that reflect its unique historical development. Linguists, language instructors, and anybody else interested in the rich diversity of American English must comprehend these phonetic differences. Future studies could explore how these types continue to evolve in the context of increased mobility and digital communication.

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