

*Geoff Lindsey*

*Foreword by J. C. WELLS*

# ENGLISH *After* RP

*Standard British  
Pronunciation Today*

t[ɒ]rism

M[ɛjə]

W[ɛjə]

t[ɒ]rism

You[tʃ]ube

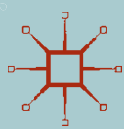
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## English After RP

Geoff Lindsey

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Standard British Pronunciation Today

Foreword by J. C. Wells

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# Foreword

The existing descriptions of standard British English pronunciation, known as RP, are outdated. People who speak like me now sound old-fashioned. This book brings things up to date. It describes the various changes that have taken place since about 1950 in the kind of pronunciation usually taught to British-oriented learners and teachers of English as a foreign, second, or additional language. It presents them in a concise, readable and teachable framework.

It will be invaluable not only to teachers of EFL, but also to everyone teaching or studying linguistics and phonetics, speech and drama, and speech and language therapy.

I first met Geoff Lindsey when he was a university student reading linguistics and phonetics. He was one of the best undergraduates I taught in my forty-plus years of university teaching. This is a book I wish I had written myself – but I don't think I would have been able to make such a good job of it as he has.

UCL  
London, UK  
20 August 2018

J. C. Wells

# Preface

The purpose of this short book is to gather in one convenient place a description of notable ways in which contemporary standard British speech differs from the British upper class accent of the last century, Received Pronunciation (RP).

The kinds of speakers who constitute today's pronunciation models are different in social terms from the typical speakers of RP, and the sound of their speech is different, too. But around the world, knowledge of British pronunciation is still rooted in RP: wherever I travel, I find that much of what is taught about British pronunciation is out of date. The social prestige which RP once enjoyed, and the scholarly prestige of the classic works describing it, have left a legacy of conservatism.

Many people are aware that things have changed, and a number of them have asked me to write a guide to modern developments. Although information about contemporary pronunciation can be found inside several detailed books (e.g. Cruttenden 2014; Carley et al. 2017), the intention here is pick out just features that have changed, as concisely as possible.

Most publications still use the set of phonetic symbols that were chosen for RP over half a century ago by A. C. Gimson, even though by Gimson's own criteria a number of them are no longer appropriate. Gimson wrote in 1981, 'it would clearly be absurd to teach a pronunciation regarded by native speakers as old-fashioned or even comic'. But if his vowel symbols

are interpreted literally, the result is an old upper-class accent which British people now find amusing. I'm sometimes told by non-native users of English that their native speaker friends find their pronunciation old-fashioned: generally speaking, this is because they were taught RP.

In my experience, users are more likely to take symbols at face value than to check the details behind them. But the established symbols must now be seen as more abstract, and treated with greater caution – especially as it's not realistic to expect EFL publishers to overhaul their symbols overnight. This book attempts to clarify differences between the symbols and reality.

In addition to changes in sounds, there are changes in sound distribution: the replacement in certain words of one phoneme with another. Distributional changes mean that some sounds are less common than they used to be, like the vowel /ʊə/ and the consonant cluster /tj/. Other sounds are more common than they used to be, such as the LOT vowel and the affricate /tʃ/. Such changes are treated in turn throughout the book, as are developments in stress, connected speech and intonation. Although a wide variety of features are covered, the book makes no claim to be exhaustive.

The book ends with a Mini Dictionary, which covers the various changes discussed from the perspective of representative words, most of them very common. The notes in the Mini Dictionary indicate which features are now firmly established as the preferred pronunciation of a word, and which are used by some but not all speakers.

To begin with, an account is given of what RP was: how it arose, what it signified, why it declined, and why, in the terms of its classical definition, it no longer really exists.

London, UK

Geoff Lindsey

# Symbols and Resources

In this book, phonemic transcriptions of words in their RP pronunciations are given in slash brackets. They usually follow those given in the 14th edition of the *English Pronouncing Dictionary* (1977), revised by A. C. Gimson.

Newer pronunciations of words are transcribed both with slash-bracketed traditional symbols (where possible), and also with more modern symbols in boldface. For example:

<i>tourist</i>	RP /'tʊərɪst/	newer /'tɔːrɪst/ <b>'tɔːrɪst</b>
<i>dissect</i>	RP /dɪ'sekt/	newer /dɑː'sekt/ <b>dɑː'sekt</b>
<i>various</i>	RP /'veəriəs/	newer <b>'vɛːrɪjəs</b>

Use is also made of square brackets, either to show the changing realization of individual sounds, e.g. [eə] changing to [ɛː], [ɒ] changing to [ɔ], or to show sub-phonemic details like dark /ɪ/ and affrication: [tʃ], [tʃ̠], etc.

The book often refers to vowels by means of capitalized keywords such as FLEECE, KIT and SQUARE. Each keyword refers to the vowel contained in it. Thus FLEECE (or 'the FLEECE vowel') refers to the vowel in the word *fleece*, and also in *see*, *reach*, *piece*, etc. KIT refers to the vowel in *kit*, and also in *thing*, *gym*, and both syllables of *English*. SQUARE refers to the vowel in *square*, *chair*, and *their*; and so forth. The keywords



used in this book are the ones in widespread use which were chosen by John Wells.

A chart laying out standard British vowels, with both modern and traditional symbols, can be found at the end of the book. Another resource which allows the comparison of modern and traditional transcriptions is the online searchable dictionary CUBE (CUrrent British English), at [www.cubedictionary.org](http://www.cubedictionary.org), edited by myself and Péter Szigetvári. There's a video which introduces the dictionary's many search capabilities.

Each word in the CUBE dictionary is linked to the site YouGlish, [www.youglish.com](http://www.youglish.com). This gives examples of each word spoken in YouTube clips, categorized into British, American and Australian English.

# Acknowledgements

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The intonation figures in Chaps. 28, 29, 30 and 31 were prepared by Alejandro Arrojo.

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# Introduction

## What Was RP?

### The Rise of RP

Around the beginning of the nineteenth century, something remarkable happened in Great Britain. All over the country, people at the top of society began to change the way they spoke: they began to adopt the speech patterns of the upper classes in the London area.

Before this, there had been greater diversity of speech among Britain's social elite. But the London area model steadily became established as uniquely respectable, or 'received'. By 1869, the phonetician Alexander Ellis could write of 'a received pronunciation all over the country, not widely different in any particular locality, and admitting of a certain degree of variety. It may be especially considered as the educated pronunciation of the metropolis, of the court, the pulpit, and the bar.'

This Received Pronunciation (RP) included fashions that had only recently arisen in the South. The word *after*, for example, was pronounced with a new broad *a* (see Chap. 11), and without its final *r* (Chaps. 20 and 25). In America, which had been settled earlier, the traditional unbroadened *a* and final *r* were preserved.

Why and how did upper class people all over Britain 'clone' the speech of the social elite in and around the capital?