

**THE PRONUNCIATION
OF STANDARD
ENGLISH IN AMERICA**

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The pronunciation of standard English in America by George Philip Krapp

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GEORGE PHILIP KRAPP

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The Pronunciation
of Standard English
in America

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BY

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TO WHOM
IT MAY CONCERN

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PREFACE

WHETHER one thinks this should or should not be so, it is a fact that most cultivated persons in America nowadays, and an increasing number in England, are more or less self-conscious about their speech. The present very general interest in the practical applications of the science of phonetics is one of the proofs of the truth of this statement. With our strange mingling of races, our widely separated but rapidly inter-communicating local units of population, our constantly shifting social boundaries between class and class, it is inevitable that, in America at least, such should be the case.

When people become conscious of so familiar an activity as speech, it means that changes are taking place in it. The universal possession of all persons in the land, the rich and the poor, the learned and the unlearned, of farmer, artisan, laborer and merchant, speech is not only the great social solvent which makes the nation one, but also the readiest test by which such differences as exist are measured and known. And where these differences and distinctions arise out of a rapidly developing civilization, as in America, it is often extremely hard to determine their value. If we had but a single standard of speech, universally accepted and practiced, the task undertaken in this book would be easy, though obviously it would be unnecessary. But we have no standard beyond opinion, which in a democratic society must always be many-headed. If therefore in the following pages the

author has been at times less dogmatic than some of his readers think he should have been, his plea is that where there is a diversity of opinion and practice among reasonable people, there must be also an equally broad charity in judgment. Could anything be more absurd than to stigmatize as incorrect a pronunciation which is actually in general use, to put down in a dictionary only one pronunciation of a word when several are current among cultivated speakers? All cultivated speakers do not speak alike in America. If we think they should, that is a theory hard to enforce by compelling one group to yield to another. To be sure, opinion may be well-informed or ill-informed, and genuine blunders are usually due to lack of information, not to perversity. It is the purpose of this book to provide a rational method of examining pronunciation, the most important of the practical aspects of speech, in order that those who have a conscience in the matter may exercise it with justice both to themselves and to others.

The materials of the book have been ordered under the several sounds of the language. To one experienced in phonetics, no other plan would seem possible, and though perhaps at first embarrassed by an unfamiliar method, the untrained student will in the end find this the most profitable way of approach to the subject. The important thing is to acquire skill in hearing sounds as sounds, to be able to think of them as sounds apart from their representation in conventional spelling. The market is plentifully provided with dictionaries, with alphabetical lists of words said to be frequently mispronounced. The information contained in these books may or may not be trustworthy, but the best of them can offer little help to the student who wishes to observe the

facts for himself and to arrive at his own judgments. And even the fullest of these lists cannot possibly be complete or contemporary. Pronunciation changes day by day, and dictionaries soon become antiquated. The intelligent person is one who makes his own dictionary as he goes along. The author's intention has not been, therefore, to provide exhaustive lists of words which may be mispronounced, but to show how the whole subject should be approached. Such words as are treated, however, will be found in alphabetical order in the index at the end of the book.

Wherever a question of choice between two pronunciations arises, there is rarely any difficulty in making a choice after the facts are once known. It is the province of a book like this to show students how they may become sure of their facts, not to make their choices for them. The author has endeavored, however, not to make trouble where there really is none. It would have been easy to swell the number of 'mis-pronunciations' by culling from the lists of books of the twenty-thousand-words-often-mispronounced kind. But most of the words recorded in such books are not mispronunciations. They are merely rare and learned words which few persons ever have any occasion to pronounce. A word can be said to have acquired a pronunciation in the English language only when it is current on the lips of English-speaking people. Otherwise it is an eye-word, without an established phonetic value. The instances discussed in the present volume are such as the author himself has observed. None are taken at second hand from books. Though they may not correspond to every other person's particular observations and special difficulties in pronunciation, what they may lack in inclusiveness will

perhaps be compensated for by the fact that they are neither traditional survivals from books nor fanciful dilemmas of a theorist, but genuine records of present speech in America.

The professional student of phonetics seems to find it hard to resist the fascination which the game of inventing symbols exerts. The conventional alphabet is obviously inadequate for any scientific purposes, and scores of phonetic alphabets have been invented to take its place. If a phonetic alphabet is an evil, it is a necessary evil. But moderation should be practiced in the exercise of this evil, for once started, there is obviously no limit to the number of symbols one may devise as records of his observations. It may be said, moreover, that in the end not even the most elaborate phonetic alphabet can record all the shadings and nuances of speech sounds current daily in good use. For one seeking absolute completeness and precision, some device, richer in possibilities than an alphabet must be discovered.

In this book neither absolute precision nor a very high degree of precision in the notation of sounds has been attempted. The author's aim having been not to elaborate, but to simplify as much as possible, it may occasionally be felt that certain sounds have gone unrecorded. Thus the alphabet employed provides symbols for only two pronunciations of the vowel in **got**, **hot**, **not**, etc., that is the short of the vowels which appear in the first syllables of **father** and **author**. Perhaps a third intermediary sound should have been recorded, representing a vowel approximately with the same tongue position as the vowel of **father**, but with slight rounding of the lips. Likewise the two vowels of a word like **city** are not quite the same, though they have been indicated in the

present volume by the same phonetic symbol. Yet again, the initial consonants in pairs of words like **haul** and **heel**, **gone** and **geese**, **call** and **keel** are acoustically different and are organically formed in different ways. The quality of the consonant, in these instances, is dependent upon the vowel by which it is followed. In a word like **city**, the second vowel may be said to be an unstressed variant of the first. And whenever it is possible to take account of sound variations in this way by means of a general explanatory statement, the author has chosen to do this in preference to adding to the number of symbols. Where one has several relatively slight variations in pronunciation, as in the pronunciation of **not**, **hot**, **got**, etc., the author has again preferred to indicate what might be called the extremes of tendency by means of phonetic symbols, filling in the modifications between these extremes by means of a descriptive statement. No introductory work on phonetics can read like an algebraic formula, or if it did, no one would read it.

Perhaps a word of explanation, if not of apology, is needed for the use of the word **American** as signifying the United States. In this the author is merely following general usage and does not mean to imply that the English of Canada either is or should be like the English of the United States. Canada is fortunate in having the adjective **Canadian**, but we have no adjective form for the United States. If we seem to be appropriating a general term for a specific meaning, we would point out that such is not the case, for **American** has practically ceased to be a general term. By this same warrant of usage, the term **English** has been applied to the speech of America, just as it must be applied to every country where the English language is spoken. If a more exact