

Carley Paul and Inger M. Mees: American English Phonetics and Pronunciation Practice

(Abingdon, New York: Routledge. 2019. 272 pp)

The book under review is about American English phonetics and pronunciation. It presents a twenty-first-century model of educated American English, “General American” (GA). The book is also complemented with supplementary material on a website containing recordings of all exercises.

The cover page of *American English phonetics and pronunciation practice* lists recommendations by experts Christian Jensen, Hiroshi Miura, and Petr Rösel. Rösel, in fact, applauds the present book with the same words as he did with the preceding book *English Phonetics and pronunciation practice* (Carley, Mees & Collins, 2018).

This book provides an accessible introduction to introductory articulatory phonetics for students of American English worldwide. Furthermore, built around an extensive collection of practice materials, this book teaches modern standard American English pronunciation to intermediate and advanced learners.

The authors state that even if people can understand what one is saying, an off-target pronunciation may still sound comical, irritating, or distracting to listeners. For instance, it may sound strange if one pronounces English /r/ with a back articulation (in your throat) instead of a front articulation (with your tongue-tip). If listeners are distracted because of a mispronunciation, they may lose concentration on what someone trying to say. Alternatively, if they need to invest a lot of effort in deciphering what someone is saying, they may lose track of their message. Moreover, judgments of someone’s overall ability in English are likely to be based on their pronunciation.

The book provides an up-to-date description of the pronunciation of modern American English. It illustrates each English phoneme with a selection of high-frequency words, as citation forms and in the context of sentences, idiomatic phrases, and dialogues. It then provides examples and practice materials on commonly confused sounds, including pronunciation diagrams, supported by a companion website featuring audio recordings of practice materials to check one’s pronunciation against. It can also be used for studying pronunciation in the classroom for independent practice. The authors of the current book recommend it for essential reading for any student studying American English phonetics and pronunciation, especially for learners of English as a foreign language, students of English language and linguistics, English teacher trainees, and professionals wishing to speak English with clarity and accuracy.

Modern corpus-based descriptions of colloquial English have been used to create materials that teach pronunciation while simultaneously practicing idiomatic language. Moreover, each phoneme is also practiced in contrast with similar, confusable sounds in minimal pairs, phrases, and sentences. Beyond the

segmental level of vowels and consonants, considerable attention is given to the difference between strong and weak syllables, an important component of English rhythm, while two chapters are dedicated to consonant clusters.

Chapter 1 introduces basic concepts, pronunciation priorities, and other components, including phonemes and allophones, spelling and sound, phoneme symbols, the syllable, stress, and pronunciation model. The accent of American English recommended by the authors is the one heard from educated speakers throughout the USA (as well as in Canada). This accent is General American (abbreviated to GA), which is the variety used by most American presenters in the media. It is sometimes even called “Network English.” It is either completely non-localizable (i.e., it is impossible to tell where the speaker comes from) or has very few regional traces. Thus, GA can be considered the common denominator of the speech of educated Americans. The English described in this book is the speech of the average modern General American speaker. Old-fashioned usages have been excluded, as have any “trendy” pronunciations that are too recent to have gained widespread acceptance.

Chapter 2 presents consonant sounds and familiarizes the readers with the anatomy of the vocal tract and tongue by describing consonants, voicing, place of articulation, manner of articulation, and all subdivisions related to English consonant sounds with several tables and examples.

Chapter 3 concentrates on the individual consonant characteristics, such as voiced and voiceless stops, fricatives, and other numerous properties of consonant sounds with detailed samples, sentences, and tables.

In Chapter 4, the authors continue elaborating the concepts specified in the previous chapter with more practices related to consonant contrast and minimal pairs, along with explicit examples and sentences. It provides practice distinguishing between pairs of consonants that learners tend to confuse.

Chapter 5 explains vowel theory, the salient role of the tongue and lips, and their shape in producing American English vowel sounds. Various characteristics of vowels are dealt with in detail, such as strong and weak vowels, checked and free vowels, monophthongs and diphthongs, rhoticity, and so forth. Vowel articulation is described along the lines of the International Association of Phonetics (IPA), including a set of IPA vowel charts for GA, i.e., one for checked (lax) vowels, one for free (tense) vowels, one for fronting diphthongs, and one for back diphthongs. The authors describe American English as a system with eight monophthongs and five diphthongs. Four central vowels (as in *murder* /mɜːdər/, *but* /bʌt/, and *the* /ðə/ are (implicitly) analyzed as allophones of schwa, conditioned by yes/no stress and yes/no coda /r/ following. Possible vowel contrasts' regional (and partly individual) variation is lucidly explained. Somewhat arbitrarily, the vowels in *laid* and *load*, which are often treated on a par with the monophthongs, are classified as diphthongs (called “narrow diphthongs” in contradistinction with the real (“wide”) diphthongs in *lied*, *loud*,

and *Lloyd*). The diagrams for checked and free vowels are combined, and the narrow diphthongs are added into one chart, which is included at the end of this review (panel G) and compared with alternative charts found in competing textbooks. Strikingly, no two published charts are the same.

Chapter 6 provides practices related to the individual vowels, as in chapter 3, describing different vowel properties and using examples to illustrate the correct pronunciation of American English vowels. Additionally, this chapter provides practice in pronouncing the vowels of GA and their various allophones. The exercise material includes the target sounds in different phonetic contexts, words and phrases, sentences, and dialogues.

Chapter 7 elaborates the subjects described in the previous chapter by providing practices in distinguishing between pairs of vowels that learners tend to confuse. The exercise material includes minimal pairs demonstrating the contrast in different phonetic contexts and words, phrases, and sentences containing both sounds.

Chapter 8 illustrates weak vowels and weak forms and the use of syllabic consonants. A small set of vowels, known as the weak vowels, predominate in unstressed syllables such as schwa. One notable characteristic of weak syllables is that, in certain circumstances, they can have a consonant as their nucleus. On the other hand, strong syllables must always center around a vowel. Meanwhile, syllabic consonants develop out of sequences of schwa and a sonorant, the more vowel-like type of consonant. When particular consonants precede these sequences, the articulators can move directly from the consonant to the sonorant, skipping the schwa altogether.

Chapter 9 provides practice in pronouncing syllabic consonants in the phonetic contexts that favor their use. The exercise material includes the target sounds in words, phrases, and sentences.

In Chapter 10, consonant clusters are discussed as different from consonant sequences. English consonants can occur in groups known as consonant clusters (clusters are a matter of pronunciation, not spelling, e.g., a single spelled consonant *x* as in *six* counts as two spoken consonants /ks/. However, groups of consonants occurring between words do not count as consonant clusters. Consonants that are merely adjacent to each other straddling a syllable boundary are consonant sequences. Accordingly, the clusters permissible in English differ in whether they are at the beginning of a syllable (onset clusters) or the end of a syllable (coda clusters). What follows is a summary of the clusters commonly found in the core vocabulary of English. The authors include a series of clusters that end in /j/, somewhat arbitrarily, without noting that these clusters can only occur when the following vowel is /u/. Other textbooks (e.g., Ladefoged & Johnson, 2011) solve the restricted distribution differently by setting up a fourth diphthong /ju/ (which has its drawbacks, see below).

Chapter 11 provides elaborate practices and examples of onset and coda clusters in different vocabularies.

Eventually, chapter 12 presents various features related to the connected speech, including elision and assimilation. When it comes to features of connected speech, however, it cannot be said that these phenomena must occur in the contexts described but only that they very commonly do, which raises the question of whether the learner should attempt to imitate these patterns of native speakers. The authors of this book recommend learning about connected speech because it will help the EFL learners with listening comprehension to a better understanding of spoken English. They declare that learners have connected speech habits that are almost certainly different from English and that applying those patterns to English will result in mispronunciations.

This review concludes with some remarks.

1. In this book, we can find specific information on a wide variety of pronunciation of sounds beneficial to the teachers and students. This book does not contain prepared exercises, but we can make our own using the detailed descriptions of sounds, example words, sentences, and dialogues. Compared with other pronunciation books, this one can be a go-to resource for creating individualized exercises for one-on-one teaching.

2. This book is helpful if someone needs a foundation in phonetics and pronunciation and a resource for doing individualized exercises to improve the pronunciation of American English sounds.

3. Surprisingly, there is no chapter on speech melody (intonation) and its role in marking specific words as communicatively important in the sentence and paragraph. This seems an omission since the proper use of (sentence) prosody is essential, not so much for the EFL speaker's intelligibility, but especially for his/her comprehensibility (see, e.g., Hahn 2004, Yenkimaleki & Van Heuven 2021a).

4. This book builds on a series of textbooks that the second author joined in the early 1980s (Collins & Mees 1984, *The sounds of English and Dutch*; Collins & Mees 2013, *Practical phonetics and phonology: A resource book for students*), where Collins (deceased 2014) has been gradually replaced by Carley (first in Carley, Mees & Collins (posthumously) 2018: *English Phonetics and pronunciation practice*). The present book is basically the same book as *English Phonetics and pronunciation practice*, with the same division into chapters, but adapted to American pronunciation.

5. The present book competes with well-known introductions to American English phonetics such as Yavaş (2011), Ladefoged & Johnson (2011), or Ladefoged & Disner (2012). It is, however, less technical and emphasizes the need to listen and practice (and provides a wealth of materials to do so). The latter has a downside in that the monitoring of

errors is left to the student's discretion. Students generally find it difficult (if not impossible) to hear the difference between model utterances (produced by a native speaker) and their imitation. Feedback is needed to help the student here, either by a human expert or by a supervisory computer system. Automated feedback is becoming state-of-the-art in pronunciation pedagogy; see, for instance, the competitor book by Smakman (2020): *Clear English Pronunciation* – also published by Routledge, which comes with a supporting website that provides visual feedback on the student's imitation of model sentences (see also Smakman 2015).¹ Recent studies have shown that supervision and feedback by computerized systems, either as a substitute of, or complementary to, human instruction is more effective than traditional pronunciation teaching (e.g., Yenkimaleki & Van Heuven 2019, 2021b).

In conclusion, *American English pronunciation and practice* is precisely what the title promises. It is an accessible introduction to the traditional description of vowel and consonant pronunciation, a British book adapted to the pronunciation of General American, supplemented by a wealth of illustrative materials on the publisher's website (materials which used to accompany such books on cassette or CD). On the downside, the book is phonologically shallow, presents a rather superficial treatment of the segmental structure of English, pays insufficient attention to the melodic aspects of English, and misses the technological opportunities available today to provide the student with automated feedback on the quality of his/her pronunciation of English.²

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¹ For the interactive support of *Clear English Pronunciation* see: <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/clearenglishpronunciation>.

² In yet another publication by the authors (Collins, Mees & Carley 2019), however, the various melodies of British (but not American) English are amply illustrated.

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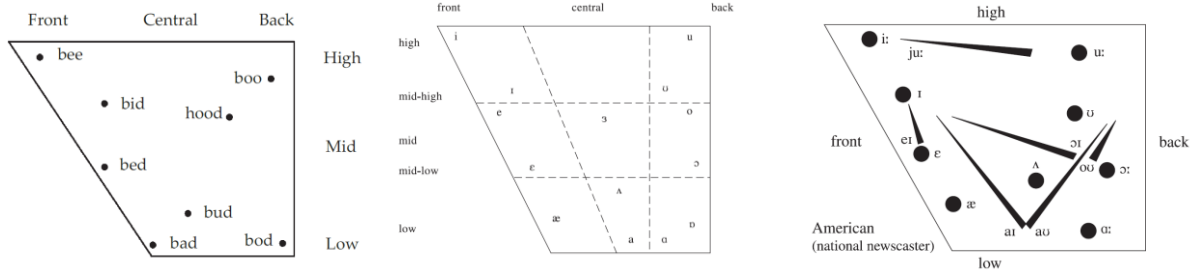
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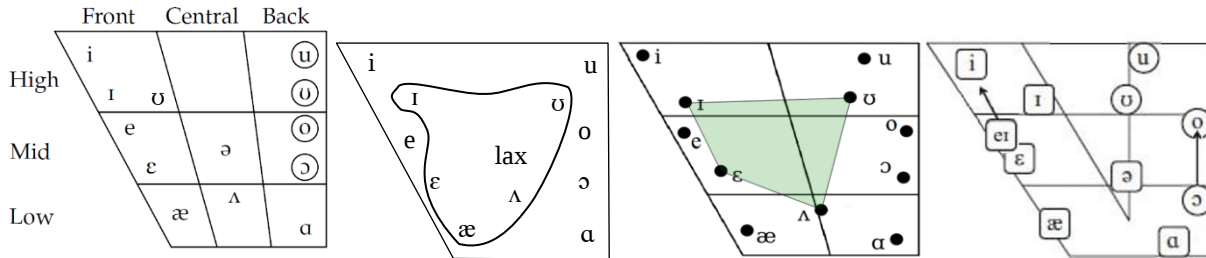
APPENDIX

As an illustration of the paucity of phonological motivation in the book under review, consider its analysis of the GA vowel system (in panel G). Ladefoged and Disner (2012) distinguish eight American English monophthongs (A). In B. Ladefoged and Johnson (2011) add the mid central vowel /ɜ/, which, however, only occurs when followed by coda /r/ and therefore should not be considered a phoneme but as a positional allophone of /ʌ/ (a case of complementary distribution since /ʌ/ never occurs before coda /r/. B. contains additional vowel articulations [e], [o] and [a] but these are given as the starting points of diphthongs. It is clear that the vowels in *laid* and *load* are seen as half-diphthongs while the vowels in *lied*, *loud* and *Lloyd* are seen as full diphthongs. Analyzing the vowel in *lewd* as a rising diphthong /ju/ (with the low-intensity element [j] preceding the louder [u] element) seems ad hoc, since this would make it the only rising diphthong in the language. Also, the pronunciation [ju] is very often in free variation with [u] in American English, and there are no minimal pairs that hinge on a /ju/ ~ /u/ contrast. It would therefore be better to analyze [ju] as a sequence of a glide /j/ followed by a vowel /u/. Yavaş (2011) analyses the half diphthongs in *laid* and *load* as monophthongs /e/ and /o/, respectively. Then again, Yavaş distinguishes five lax vowels in the American English inventory, which fits with the traditional distributional criteria for lax (“checked”) vowels, i.e., that they cannot occur at the end of a word or syllable, and cannot be followed by coda /ŋ/. He concedes, however, that /æ/ is phonetically long and tense (e.g., Strange et al.,

2004); Van Heuven et al., 2020). Carley et al. discuss possibly different analyses of the American English vowel system but in the end do not motivate their choices.



A. Ladefoged & Disner (2012: 133) B. Ladefoged & Johnson (2011: 44) C. Ladefoged & Johnson (2011: 90)



D. Yavaş (2011: 12) E. Yavaş (2011: 80) F. Van Heuven et al. (2020: 120) G. Carley & Mees (2020)