English phonetics and phonology: General American vs. RP

1 There are two main accents used as reference accents for the teaching of English pronunciation: “RP” (Received Pronunciation) and “General American” (GenAm).

Broadly, you can say that RP is a standard form of British pronunciation accepted as reference in England and Wales. Note that in Scotland and Ireland, RP is not considered a reference accent – the two countries have their own educated standards. (As do Australia and New Zealand.)

GenAm is the standard pronunciation in the USA; there are very small differences in Canada.

Note that many people see both GenAm and RP as abstractions mainly used for pedagogical purposes; and that they are standards of pronunciation – grammar and vocabulary are separate matters.

Especially in the British Isles, there is a huge variety of accents, and a vast majority of speakers speak some type of a local accent; currently, these can be heard from the broadcast media, and “weaker” accents, especially from the North of England (as well as Standard Scottish English and Standard Irish English) are widely accepted. Speakers of RP are a minority.

In the US, there is more prejudice towards non-standard accents (especially towards Southern or North-Eastern accents), but a smaller proportion of the population speak those.

2 You need to be aware of the differences between the two standards at least passively to be able to understand spoken native English more comfortably.

It is also a good idea to try to aim for one of the two standards in your own pronunciation, and to be generally consistent about it. Mixing the two standards in an unpredictable way tends to cause problems to listeners, and may be highly confusing to your own students.

However, if you decide to opt for a “middle-of-the-Atlantic” accent, my advice is to (a) make it rhotic, i.e. to pronounce /r/ wherever it’s spelled; (b) opt for /l/, not /l/, in LOT words; (c) avoid the flapping of /t/; (d) probably opt for /æ/ in BATH words. (All of these distinctions are mentioned below.) In this situation, too, it is extremely important to be consistent, and e.g. avoid mixing two very different qualities for the same vowel in different words.

3 Any two English accents can differ from each other in four ways:
   - Systemic: differences in the number (presence/absence) of specific sounds (phonemic inventory);
   - Distributional: which sounds are used in which words;
   - Lexical (incidental): some words have different pronunciations (but not in a systematic way);
   - Phonetic: essentially the same phonemes are realized in different ways.

4 Main differences between General American and Received Pronunciation.

(a) Systemic differences:
   - GenAm has /æ/ in LOT words, while RP has /ə/, a rounded vowel similar to /a/ in Polish words such as kot. Thus God /ɡɑːd/ vs. /ɡɒd/, stop /stæp/ vs. /stɒp/, etc.
   - GenAm has /æ/ in BATH and DANCE words, while RP has /ə/, thus dance /daɪns/ vs. /daɪns/, last /lɑːst/ vs. /læst/, bath /bæθ/ vs. /bɑːθ/, etc. Note that both accents have /ə/ in PALM words.

(b) Distributional differences:
   - Most of England, including RP, is non-rhotic (and so is Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and some accents on the East Coast of the US), while GenAm, and most of North America (and Scotland, Ireland, and some parts of south-western England) is rhotic. In other words, in RP /r/ is only allowed before a vowel, thus red /rɛd/ and pride /praɪd/ but start /stɑːt/, car /kɑːr/, near /nɜːr/, beard /bɜːrd/, square /skwɛər/, shared /ʃeəd/, nurse /nɜːs/. In GenAm, /r/ is pronounced wherever it is spelled.
GenAm generally avoids /tʃ dʒ ʃŋ/ at the beginnings of words, thus *dune /dən/, *tune /tən/, *suit /sət/, *new /nuː/ etc. These do have the /ʃ/ in RP, thus /dʒən/, /tʃən/, etc. Recently, there is a tendency in England to merge the /tʃ/ and /dʒ/ to /tʃ/ and /dʒ/, respectively, and omit the /ʃ/ altogether after /s/.

(c) Lexical differences: there are quite a lot of examples; these are completely unpredictable.

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(d) Phonetic differences, involving differing realizations of essentially the same phonemes:

- /æ/ is “higher” in GenAm (more similar, but not identical, to Polish /ɛ/ in e.g. lek). In modern RP, the vowel is close to [a], despite the traditional notation /æ/, and is almost like Polish /a/ in e.g. siać.
- /ɔː/ much “higher” in modern RP, and quite rounded, sounding almost (but not quite) like Polish /u/.
- In the RP GOAT diphthong, there is no lip rounding at the beginning, thus /ɡəʊ/.
- The tapping of /t/ (pronouncing /t/ in certain positions as a voiced sound similar to Polish /d/ or very short /ɾ/) is more widespread in GenAm, thus city /ˈsɪt̬i/ (actually this is practically obligatory).
- There is a very distinct clear-dark distribution for /l/ in RP; in GenAm, this is much less marked.
- Glottalization of /t, tʃ/ and (less often) /p, k/ is much more common in all accents of British English.

Reading, recordings and other materials


Kortmann, Bernd – Edgar W. Schneider (eds.). 2004. A handbook of varieties of English. (2 volumes.) Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. A huge recent work covers all the varieties of English, with a CD and supplementary online material. Also covers other areas where varieties of English differ, e.g. grammar, vocabulary, etc.

All recent pronunciation dictionaries contain both British and American pronunciations.

Useful web pages

International Dialects of English Archive: http://www.ku.edu/~idea/
Not too recommendable in terms of descriptions but offers a lot of recordings.

The Speech Accent Archive: http://accent.gmu.edu/
Recordings of both various types of native English, and learner English.

A very good source of British English recordings from the British Library.

There are also links to various online materials from my page: http://www.ifa.amu.edu.pl/~wjarek