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ABSTRACT

The lack of a Hiberno-English phonetic system that teachers of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) can refer to is addressed. Through the utilization of a questionnaire given to seven English as a Foreign Language (EFL) schools in Dublin, and two additional schools outside of Dublin, an attempt was made to measure the amount of interest in this subject. More than half of the teachers canvassed would have desired a greater phonetic input in their TEFL training course. (GLR)

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T. Penston

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HIBERNO-ENGLISH:

A CALL FOR A STANDARD PRONUNCIATION IN TEFL

by Tony Penston

Paper delivered at the 1990 IATEFL International Conference,

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Hiberno-English, or Irish English, is the term given to the English spoken in Ireland. There are relatively few studies on Hiberno-English (H.E.). Those in existence have looked at it purely historically (e.g. Bliss 1972), or have concentrated on particular regions (e.g. Harris 1985), nearly all looking to English and/or Irish for comparison/derivation. Lately there have been calls for it to be viewed independently (e.g. Kallen 1985).

There has never been, to my knowledge, a mention of a standard H.E. pronunciation. Understandably, it's a difficult ground to tread on, some reasons for which follow.

(i) There has been no major dictionary of English published in Ireland, so there is no point of reference, no matter how erroneous it might be.

(ii) There are many regional accent variations in Ireland, perhaps as many as there are counties (32, all Ireland).

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(iii) There are two centres of political prestige in Ireland, Belfast and Dublin.

(iv) There has been little (overt) cultivation of a prestige accent, e.g. as in the British public schools and, early on, in the BBC.

(v) Psychologically, Irish people may not be too critical of local and foreign accents because (a) English is not "our" language anyway, (b) as we are a small country we see RP, American, Australian, etc. as equally prestigious, (c) emmigration is high, and emmigrants who return home with a foreign accent are not stigmatized.

(vi) In linguistic circles, perhaps standard dialects are looked upon now as snobbish remnants of a prescriptive age.

I would like now to propose that there is a need for the establishment of a standard H.E. pronunciation system. This need is in the sphere of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teaching, and especially, teacher-training for this (commonly given the abbreviation TEFL).

I became aware of this when I was lecturing on the Phonetics component of a TEF! course here in Dublin recently. The trainees were obliged to transcribe passages into RP; there was no mention of any other dialect on their course. They went about this without question, but after some time attempts at comparisons between their accents and RP were made. This, however, had to be done piecemeal and inconclusively as there was no H.E. phonetic system to refer to for TEFL purposes. On further inquiry I found that quite a few of my teacher colleagues were not too confident in the area of phonetics and could make only vague attempts at describing their own pronunciation.

New para  
↓

This lack of reference for both trainees and teachers is reason enough for me to believe that a standard H.E. pronunciation system should be proposed. Further arguments follow.

(i) Without a standard to refer to, Irish EFL teachers may feel on unsure ground as regards their pronunciation, e.g. which elements may or may not be stigmatized, confusing to the student, etc.

(ii) The EFL brochures for Ireland tirelessly imply that the best English is spoken in Ireland. How can we ever prove this if we can't even say what this best English is?

(iii) Futuristically, in international communication there may be a demand for an "international" accent. We cannot discuss this unless we have standards to compare.

(iv) Agreeing with Kachru (e.g. 1982), I believe there is a linguistic value in tabulating other Englishes.

Having convinced myself, but not many others, I might add, of the need for a H.E. standard pronunciation I then had to think what it was I was proposing and how I could arrive at describing/constructing it. What I am proposing is a semi-prescriptive, semi-descriptive standard for reference purposes mainly; it may or may not be adopted by whomsoever desires. It will be prescriptive in areas where ambiguity could otherwise occur, e.g. although many Irish people don't pronounce their 'th's, the EFL teacher should, to avoid the ambiguous tanks-thanks, for example. It will also be prescriptive for sake of simplicity, e.g. although the vowel in but is not often pronounced as a central vowel /ə/ I shall use this symbol because it is nearer to this than the RP /ʌ/ (see Wells 1982, p.422 for further description). In all

other areas it will be descriptive, but selectively so (please allow me this contradiction), i.e. descriptive of the prestige, or widely acceptable, dialect.

The identification of this prestige dialect, though, is the problem. As I have said, there are two political capitals in Ireland, but as I am seeking a standard for TEFL purposes I must choose that capital which is more TEFL oriented, and this is Dublin (Belfast has no all-year EFL school as yet). To identify the prestige, or generally acceptable Dublin accent I recorded the voices of the more popular presenters on the national radio station, plus a few top politicians. The "average" of these accents forms part of the basis for my proposed system of standard vowels (see below). Other information was taken from Wells (1982), Trudgill and Hannah (1982) and Harris (1985). I was also influenced a little by the data I got by questionnaire from a small number of Irish EFL teachers. My own introspection was also not ignored (I have a "soft" Dublin accent).

I shall deal with the questionnaire first. In February-March of this year I delivered questionnaires to seven EFL schools in Dublin. I also mailed to two schools further out. I personally returned later to the local schools to pick up the completed forms. As a measure of the amount of interest in this subject, only about half of the questionnaires I distributed were returned. The two schools canvassed by mail didn't reply. All in all I was left with 24 completed questionnaires. Below are extracts from same.

EXTRACTS FROM QUESTIONNAIRE (March 1990)

PART I Sample: 24

Q1. Have your students ever asked you about the pronunciation of English in Ireland?

<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>
23	1

Q2. Do you think Irish EFL teachers should approximate to RP when teaching European students?

<u>Yes</u>	<u>"To some extent"</u>	<u>No</u>
0	5	19

Q3. Do you think there should be some standard Irish-English (Hiberno-English) pronunciation for Irish EFL teachers to refer to?

<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>	<u>Blank</u>
9	12	3

Q4. Do you understand all the symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) as used in the popular English dictionaries?

<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>
15	9

Q5. Do you think more, or fewer phonetic lectures would have been desirable on your TEFL training course?

<u>More</u>	<u>Other answers</u>	<u>Blank</u>
13	8	3

EXTRACTS FROM QUESTIONNAIRE (March 1990)

PART II Sample: 20

(From this part are excluded four respondents who declared their accents to be RP or British)

Q6. Indicate whether you pronounce the vowels in the following pairs of words the same or differently:

			<u>Same</u>	<u>Diff</u>
Group 1	)	earn      urn	7	13
	)	nurse    terse	9	10
	)	dare      earn	5	14
Group 2	)	lark      lapwing	8	11
	)	bat       bath	13	7
	)	calm      laugh	13	6
Group 3	)	caught    cot	4	16
	)	horse     lot	7	12
	)	(horse    hoarse	11	8)
Group 4	)	bus       bush	5	14
	)	put       but	8	11
	)	put       strut	12	8
Group 5	)	sure      shore	1	18
	)	poor      pore	1	18

Comments on Questionnaire Data:

Straight away I will admit that the size of the sample is too low to allow any scientific claims to be made: nevertheless some interesting information is yielded.

In part I, Q2 replies show that there's little inferiority complex about our pronunciation, so H.E. should remain relatively stable in the future.

Q3 replies show that my cause will be something of an uphill battle.

However, Q4 and Q5 replies suggest that quite a few teachers may be phonetically ignorant, and would wish to redress that situation. I could argue that a greater phonetic awareness would increase the number of my supporters.

Q5 replies, by the way, seem to hold a message for TEFL course designers.

Part II, again, cannot be scientific. I didn't have time to interview the teachers in Labovian style, nor certainly for spectrographic analysis, had I access to such a facility. Self-analysis is rarely accurate in phonetic research (I did recommend that a colleague actually mark the pairs of words while the respondent pronounce them); however, the results seem surprisingly interesting.

I shall be referring to my "Draft Proposal" (below) from here on.



DRAFT PROPOSAL FOR A STANDARD HIBERNO-ENGLISH (IRISH ENGLISH)

PRONUNCIATION SYSTEM FOR TEFL PURPOSES

Asterisk\* indicates major differences from RP

Vowels (pure):

1. /i/                   bee, spear, meat, seek, very, funny
2. /ɪ/                   bit, thin, lid
3. /e/                   ferry, bet, terse\*
4. /e:/\*                fairy, dare, earn
5. /a/                   bat, cam, fatter, dance\*, lark\*
6. /a:/\*                bath, calm, father, bar, basket, past
7. /ɑ/\* or /ɒ/        tot, don, horse\*, caught\*, cot
8. /ɑ:/\* or /ɔ:/\*     taught, dawn, talk, law
9. /ʊ/                   put, bush, good, foot, butcher, your\*
10. /u/                  boot, soup, sure\*, poor\*, you
11. /ə/\*                strut, front, bus, bird, nurse, urn  
(and usual weak vowel occurrences)

Diphthongs:

12. /ei/                bay, mate, crane
13. /ai/                buy, might, tie
14. /aʊ/               out, pow, sound
15. /ɔi/                boy, toy, noisy
16. /oʊ/\*             hoarse, boat, toe, shore, pole

Consonants:

- Same as RP except (i) Hiberno-English is rhotic,  
(ii) /hw/ is the first consonant in "where", etc.

From group 1, especially earn-urn (diff.), I infer justification for vowels 3 and 4 (and 11) on my Draft Proposal (D.P.). The dare-earn difference (I would pronounce them the same) seems a peculiarity, which I haven't had time to investigate.

In group 2, bat-bath (same) especially provide justification for vowels 5 and 6 on the D.P.

In group 3 the grounds are not so good for vowels 7 and 8 on the D.P., but I'll press on.

Group 4 shows a peculiar lexico-sensitive factor in play: I would presume that as bus and bush are words commonly met in class Irish teachers who wouldn't normally differentiate between them have "done their homework" on them. Strut, however, would not be so frequently used and the teacher is therefore unsure which way to pronounce it. This phenomenon would not be new to students of diachronic sound change, where a phoneme doesn't change across the entire lexicon irrespective of frequency and other factors. In other words, if H.E. were to undergo a sound change where the slightly-rounded and backed central vowel, as used in bus, front, strut, etc. changed to, say, RP /ʌ/, this would happen with bus before it happened with strut. That being said, sound change or no, I am inclined to be prescriptive here and separate put and strut into vowel categories 9 and 11 on the D.P.

In group 5, sure-shore would correspond to vowels 10 and 16 on the D.P.

### Notes on the Draft Proposal:

I have used the word draft because this phoneme list is still at an early stage and I invite suggestions from anyone who is interested in this topic.

One area of vacillation on my D.P is vowels 7 and 8. I am inclined to go prescriptive and recommend the rounded form /ɔ/, as this is common to RP and American English, and is used by "discerning" H.E. speakers. But, on listening to the voices on the radio there seems to be a case for the retention of the unrounded variety.

I have not used vowel-length marking where it is not phonemic: /i/ and /u/ are usually represented in British learner's dictionaries as /i:/ and /u:/. I may revert to this after some tests.

The only justification for vowel category 4, /e:/, is the minimal pair ferry-fairy, and less frequent Derry-dairy, and, supposedly, a few others of that type. Somehow, I feel there is an overkill here.

For vowel 11, after /ə/, my next choice would be /ɜ/, but not /ɝ/, as I feel the rounded variety may be stigmatized. /ə/ is not descriptive but it is a fair point of reference.

Caught, with a short vowel (category 7), is an exception to the taught-tot opposition. This is the way I hear it.

## Radio Recordings:

I recorded well-known presenters on RTE national radio, also some high-ranking politicians.

GAY BYRNE

Extract 1. According to the ratings, Gay Byrne is the most popular "chat show" man in Ireland. In this extract he seems to check himself on the word your, changing the vowel from rounded to unrounded. This perhaps reflects the frequent put-strut neutralization (group 4, questionnaire). It could be deemed a hypercorrection if Gay, operating under pressure, allocated your to the strut class (vowels 9 and 11, my D.P.).

Extract 2. Gay pronounces the vowel in want with very little rounding, even though it is preceded by a rounded consonant. I would transcribe this vowel as /a/, vowel 7 on my D.P.

Extract 3. Gay's pronunciation of sound, /ʌʊ/, exemplifies one of my areas of prescription. I prefer /av/, perhaps because it is more "international". Vowel (diphthong) 14.

Extract 4. Awful, /ɑ:/, corresponds to vowel 8 on my D.P. Parts, /a:/, corresponds to vowel 6.

Extract 5. Frump, /ə/, corresponds to my prescriptive vowel 11.

Although I agree with Wells (1982, p.422) that "it is typically a mid

centralized back somewhat rounded vowel", I prefer simplicity, while acknowledging the widely-used standard American pronunciation.

#### COMMERCIAL

Extract 6 is an ad, by way of a break, to show that RP has high prestige value in Ireland. The speaker on the ad has learnt to drop his 'r's, and adopt the RP /əʊ/ for the first vowel in homecare, but his off, /ɑ/, still needs rounding. Or perhaps the product is not quite for the top end of the prestige market?

#### PAT KENNY

Pat Kenny is another popular presenter on radio and television

Extract 7. Lovetown, /ə/, is something similar to Gay Byrne's frump (vowel 11).

Extract 8. Hum, /ə/, exhibits some rounding.

In most other vowels Pat's pronunciation also resembles Gay's.

#### DOIREANN NI BHRIAIN

Doireann Ni Bhriain provides us with a female contribution. She is another well-known radio and TV personality.

Extract 9. Job, /ɑ/, corresponds to vowel 7, and up, /ə/ to vowel 11.

Again, there is similarity with her colleagues' accents.

CHARLES J. HAUGHEY

Extract 9: The Taoiseach (Prime Minister) of Ireland doesn't lip-round on always or organization, instancing vowel 8, /ɑ:/.  
Title [ʌi] exhibits a potential neutralization: buy-boy, which I have

prescribed against, for the sake of clarity. Vowels 13 and 15.

Extract 10. Farmers, /ɑ:/, and otherwise, [ɔ̃] (prescribed as /ə/) are commonly pronounced so in Southern H.E.

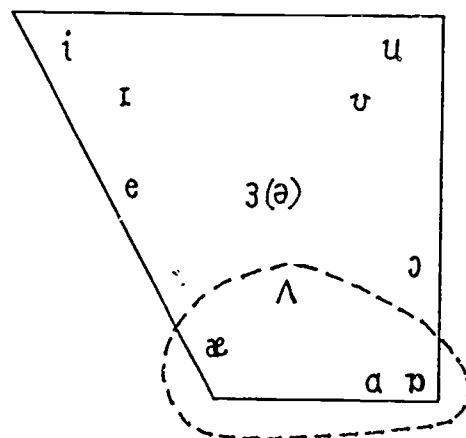
Alan Dukes and Dick Spring, leaders of the main opposition parties, exhibit pronunciation traits similar to the above.

I could be accused of being selective in the above choices. I haven't paid attention to any presenter or politician with a provincial or RP accent. But, as I said at the outset, my proposed standard is somewhat prescriptive. Therefore I must choose the general Dublin prestige and exclude minority accents.

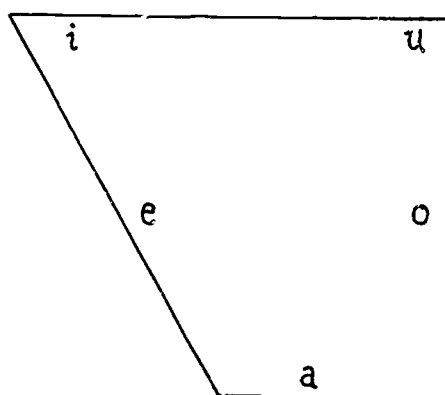
## A Comparison of Spanish and H.E. Vowels:

Spanish speakers in particular say that the best English is spoken in Ireland. Perhaps they mean that the English most easily comprehensible aurally to them is spoken in Ireland, for, apart from its rhotic quality, H.E. has a simpler vowel system. A comparison of the vowel charts of RP, Spanish and H.E. would illustrate this:

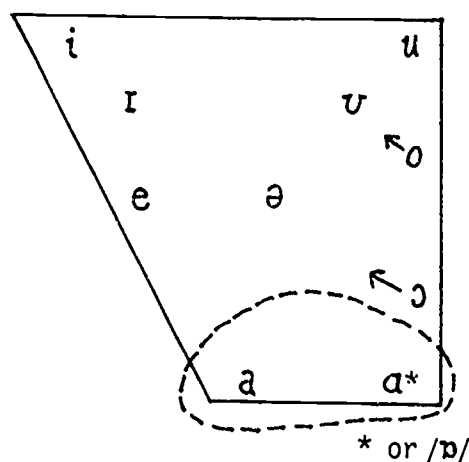
A COMPARISON OF THE VOWELS OF RP, SPANISH AND HIBERNO-ENGLISH



RP (roughly per  
Gimson 1980)



Spanish (per  
Ladefoged 1982)



Hiberno-English  
(proposed herein)

Arrowed vowels are  
the initial segments  
of diphthongs only



RP has 11 pure vowels and c. 8 diphthongs (per Gimson 1980, pp.93,94).  
H.E. has 8 pure vowels and c. 5 diphthongs (per this paper).

It is not just the smaller number of vowels which makes things easier for the Spanish L1 speaker; it is also their distribution and contrast, e.g. in RP there is a high frequency of contrast in the lower vowels - hat, hut, heart, hot - /æ, ʌ, ɑ, ɒ/. I know I am ignoring vowel length here which is very important, but initially, a Spanish L1 learner of English is insensitive to this. The fact is that in H.E. there are only two, not four, low vowels (see broken circles on vowel charts above).

#### Conclusions:

It seems to be relatively easy to set up a prestige/simplified standard pronunciation of H.E. How much it gets heeded is another thing.

Besides its value as a reference system in TEFL, the H.E. standard can be used for comparisons.

An important finding in the questionnaire was that more than half the teachers canvassed would have desired a greater phonetic input in their TEFL training course.

Another observation was that lexis plays an important role in phonemic variation: the vowels in bus-bush were mostly perceived as "different", while those in put-strut were mostly perceived as "same".

Lastly, although there is great variation of accent in this country, the accents of three of the top radio personalities and the three main political leaders are remarkably similar.

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