

The General American Dialect

An Introduction

What is GenAm?

- Network English, Standard American English
- Few native speakers, usually acquired.
- Minor differences in realization depending on speaker.
- Regionally intermediate, different from the regional accents of both the Southern states, the midwest and the US Northeast
- One of the 2 globally preferred dialects of English, next to RP.

The 'Regional Home' of GenAm



History

- Prior to WWII, a variety based on RP considered standard for stage and screen in anglophone North America
- 1944 John Kenyon & Thomas Knott – *Pronouncing Dictionary Of American English* – set the standard for GenAm pronunciation.
- 1940's -Mid-Atlantic English – halfway between RP and GenAm, used on stage and in films.

Signature Sounds

- Rhoticity (r-coloration)
- Absence of intrusive /r/
- Glottal stop /ʔ/
- /ɛ/ slightly more open than RP /e/
- Difference between short lax /ɪ/ and long /i:/
- BATH and TRAP lexical sets both pronounced with /æ/
- No diphthongization of /o/ in GOAT, unlike RP /əʊ/
- /t/ in middle position before vowels realized as tapped or flapped, similar to /r/ or /d/

BATH raising

the front near-open /æ/ in words such as *half*, *cab*, *bad*, *man* or *lash* is raised (Eastern New England)

THOUGHT-LOT merger

words from both lexical sets pronounced with back open-mid /ɑ/ (i.e. *lawn*, *on*, *frog*, and *John* share the same vowel) (Northwest and North-central areas)

Threefold homophonization in marry-merry-Mary typical of most GenAm Speakers

(for more see Wells 1982, vol. 3. section 6.1.2-6)

Consonants

	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Dental	Alveolar	Post – alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Plosive	p b			t d			k g	
Affricate					tʃ dʒ			
Fricative		f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ			h
Nasal	m			n			ŋ	
Lateral				l				
Approximant					ɹ	j	(ɹ) w	

Vowels

Monophtongs	Front	Central		Back
		plain	rhotacized	
Close	i			u
Near-close	ɪ			ʊ
Close-mid	e (eɪ) ¹			o
Mid		ə	ɜ	
Open-mid	ɛ	ʌ ² (ɜ)	ɝ	ɔ~ɑ ³
Near-open	æ			ɑ

1. close-mid /e/ occurs in open syllables only, also occurs as a diphthong in the FACE set
2. always has a centralized back quality preceding /t/, in some speakers may be more front, in OH realized as a central /ɜ/
3. depends on whether speaker is from an area affected by the THOUGHT-LOT merger

Lexical Sets

Lexical Sets representing GenAm vowel pronunciation.		
FLEECE		GOOSE
KIT		FOOT
FACE		GOAT
	NURSE	
DRESS	STRUT	THOUGHT
TRAP		PALM

Note In the CLOTH lexical set either /ɑ/ or /ɔ/ are used depending on the speaker. GenAm naturally lacks the open back rounded RP vowel /ɒ/.

Diphthongs

Diphthong	Lexical Set
eɪ	FACE
aɪ	PRICE
ɔɪ	CHOICE
oʊ	GOAT
aʊ	MOUTH

Merging of vowels before /r/

Vowel in /____r/	Merge as...	Example words
/ir ~ ɪr/	/ɪr/	<i>near, spirit</i>
/eɪr ~ ɛr ~ ær/	/ɛr/	<i>fairy, ferry, marry</i>
/ɑr/ (START, LOT)		<i>bar, sorry</i>
/ɔr ~ or/	/ɔr/	<i>war, bore, orange</i>
/ʊr ~ ʊr/	/ʊr/	<i>you're, poor</i>
/ʌr ~ ɛr/	/ɜr/	<i>current, furry</i>

Rhythm, Tempo, Tone & Pitch

- **PITCH:** Sentence emphasis added by increasing volume rather than pitch. Higher pitches typically avoided in GenAm
- **RHYTHM:** Emphasis is spread more evenly throughout the utterance than in RP
- **TEMPO:** of GenAm is usually lower than in RP
- **SENTENCE STRESS:** The beginning of the utterance spoken more loudly, volume decreases towards the end
- **TONE:** Harder tone, more emphasis on vowels than in RP

References

Meier, P. *Accents for Stage and Screen*

Wells, J.C. *Accents of English*, vol. 3

The Telsur Project by William Labov *et al.*

http://www.ling.upenn.edu/phono_atlas/home.html