

British and American Pronunciation differences



AmE vs. BrE pronunciation

In the USA at least nine varieties are usually identified and, of course, the more precise and careful the analysis is, the more varieties will be described. These nine varieties are:

1. Western: spoken roughly west of a line drawn vertically down the centre of the USA.
2. North Central: spoken in the central northern areas, Montana, North Dakota and the north of Minnesota.
3. Inland Northern: spoken around the Great Lakes area in Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Indiana and Ohio
4. Midland: spoken across a central band including Wyoming, Colorado, Nebraska and Iowa
5. Western Pennsylvania: spoken in Kentucky, West Virginia and Pennsylvania
6. Southern: spoken across the central southern states from Texas in the west to North and South Carolina in the east
7. Mid-Atlantic: spoken in the east in the area around Delaware and New Jersey
8. New York City: spoken in New York
9. Eastern New England: spoken in Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Connecticut

In addition, there are sub-varieties specific to, e.g., Texas, Appalachia, Chesapeake Bay, Boston, New Mexico and California. The map looks like this:



Traditionally, in Britain eight varieties are usually recognised and each is further divided into between three and ten sub-varieties. The main ones are:

1. Scottish: spoken across the whole of the nation but with significant regional differences
2. Northern English: spoken south of the Scottish border between it and a line drawn roughly centrally east to west across the country
3. Midlands: spoken south of the east-west central line, east of Wales and west of East Anglia
4. East Anglian: spoken to the east of a line drawn from London to The Wash
5. Southern: spoken in the south east and south-central parts of the country, including London
6. South Western: spoken in the south west

7. Welsh spoken in Wales with significant local variations
8. Northern Ireland: spoken there and significantly different from the accents of Ireland itself

The map looks like this:



This is a short run-down of the most significant differences but they are not all exemplified in all the varieties identified above.

Rhoticity

AmE is a rhotic variety but most BrE forms are non-rhotic. The pronunciation, therefore, of words such as *curse*, *nurse*, *father* and so on is marginally different in the varieties. The symbol /ɜː/ represents this rhotic sound. At the end of words the /r/ sound in AmE is often syllabic (/r/) which can, alternatively, be transcribed as /ə/.

For example:

Example	AmE	BrE
<i>father</i>	/ˈfɑːð.ər/, /ˈfɑːð.ə/ or /ˈfɑːð.r/	/ˈfɑːð.ə/
<i>nurse</i>	/nɜːs/	/nɜːs/
<i>curse</i>	/kɜːs/	/kɜːs/

Word stress

Although rarely the cause of any misunderstanding, there are some differences. In many cases, both patterns exist in both varieties. Some examples are:

- a. Words stressed in the first syllable in BrE and the second in AmE include:
ballet, barrage, baton, brochure, buffet, café, chauffeur, debris, detail, frontier, garage, massage, parquet, plateau, risqué, sachet, salon and *vaccine*.
- b. A few words show the opposite pattern, stressed on the second syllable in BrE and on the first in AmE and they include:
address, cigarette, renaissance and *magazine*
- c. In BrE, it is common to stress two-syllable verbs which end in *-ate* on the second syllable but the first is often stressed in AmE. These include:
collate, cremate, curate, dictate, donate, frustrate, gyrate, locate, migrate, mutate, narrate, placate, pulsate, rotate, spectate, stagnate, translate, vacate and *vibrate*.

Weak, absent or full vowel sounds

In general, AmE more frequently uses the full vowel sound on unstressed syllables. Some examples are:

- Words ending with an unstressed *-ary*, *-ery*, *-ory*, or *-mony* have endings in which the vowel is usually weakened or elided altogether in BrE and given a fuller form in AmE.

For example:

Example	AmE	BrE
<i>military</i>	/ˈmɪ.lə.ˌte.ri/	/ˈmɪ.lɪ.tri/
<i>monastery</i>	/ˈmɑː.nə.ˌste.ri/	/ˈmɒ.nə.stri/
<i>testimony</i>	/ˈtest.ə.mo.ʊ.ni/	/ˈtest.ɪ.mə.ni/

- Conversely, words ending in *-ile* usually retain the full form of the vowel in BrE but a reduced or absent form in AmE. For example, *fertile* is /ˈfɜː.təl/ in AmE but /ˈfɜː.təl/ in BrE.
- Another difference here is that the 'r' is given a pronunciation lacking in BrE (that can be alternatively transcribed as /ˈfɜː.r.təl/ in AmE).
- AmE tends to have a syllabic final consonant in some words in this class so, for example, *fragile* may be pronounced as /ˈfræ.dʒəl/ or /ˈfræ.dʒl/ in AmE but is more likely to be /ˈfræ.dʒaɪl/ in BrE.
- An outlier is the pronunciation of *saint* before a name. In AmE, this is usually the full form as /ˈseɪnt/ but in BrE, it is reduced to /sənt/.

/ɑː/ vs. /æ/

In southern BrE, words such as *bath* are pronounced with the /ɑː/ as, e.g., /bɑːθ/ (although that would be a short vowel in the north of England and elsewhere). AmE usually prefers /æ/ so we get for example:

Example	AmE	BrE
<i>banana</i>	/bə.ˈnæ.nə/	/bə.ˈnɑː.nə/
<i>path</i>	/pæθ/	/pɑːθ/
<i>last</i>	/læst/	/lɑːst/
<i>cast</i>	/kæst/	/kɑːst/

/ɒ/ vs. /oʊ/

Words pronounced with the short vowel /ɒ/ in BrE will often be pronounced with the longer diphthong /oʊ/ in AmE. For example:

Example	AmE	BrE
<i>shone</i>	/ʃoʊn/	/ʃɒn/
<i>yoghurt</i>	/ˈjoʊg.ɹt/	/ˈjɒg.ət/

/ɒ/ vs. /ɑː/

Other words which contain a short /ɒ/ sound in BrE such as *cot*, *hot* etc. will usually be pronounced in AmE with a more open /ɑː/ (which is the sound in BrE in words such as *part*).

For example:

Example	AmE	BrE
<i>hot</i>	/hɑːt/	/hɒt/
<i>yacht</i>	/ˈjɑːt/	/jɒt/

/ɔː/ vs. /ɑː/

Although by no means universal in AmE, there is a tendency to pronounce words such as *caught*, *bought* etc. with /ɑː/ rather than /ɔː/ as the vowel.

This is not considered a standard North American accent, incidentally, and most transcriptions are parallel.

For example:

Example	AmE	BrE
<i>brought</i>	/brɑːt/	/brɔːt/
<i>lord</i>	/lɑːrd/	/lɔːd/

/ɪ/ vs. /aɪ/

Word pronounced with the short /ɪ/ in BrE are often pronounced with /aɪ/ in AmE. For example:

Example	AmE	BrE
<i>dynasty</i>	/ˈdaɪ.nə.sti/	/ˈdi.nə.sti/
<i>italic</i>	/aɪ.ˈtæ.lɪk/	/ɪ.ˈtæ.lɪk/
<i>privacy</i>	/ˈpraɪ.və.si/	/ˈprɪ.və.si/

although the AmE pronunciation of the last example is very common in BrE.

/ʌ/ vs. /ə/

Although this is inconsistent with, for example, a word such as *cup* being pronounced with the same vowel (/ʌ/) in both varieties, AmE often reduces the sound to /ə/.

For example:

Example	AmE	BrE
<i>shut</i>	/ʃət/	/ʃʌt/
<i>dull</i>	/dəl/	/dʌl/

/aɪ/ vs. /i:/

Most obviously in the words *either* and *neither*, AmE prefers the /i:/ for the first vowel so we get:

Example	AmE	BrE
<i>neither</i>	/ˈni:.ðər/	/ˈaɪ.ðə/
<i>either</i>	/ˈi:.ðər/	/ˈaɪ.ðə/

Both pronunciations of both words are heard in both varieties.

/ɪə/ vs. /ɪ/

The pronunciation, for example, of *fear* in BrE contains a diphthong (/ɪə/) but this is often reduced in AmE to a pure vowel (/ɪ/).

For example:

Example	AmE	BrE
<i>beer</i>	/bɪr/	/bɪə/
<i>sheer</i>	/ʃɪr/	/ʃɪə/

This is not consistent and the pronunciation of, e.g., *here* contains the same vowel in both varieties although AmE sounds the /r/ at the end (/hɪər/ not /hɪə/).

/eə/ vs. /e/

The diphthong present in BrE in words such as *fair*, *care* etc. is often produced as /e/ in AmE.

For example:

Example	AmE	BrE
<i>pair</i>	/peɪr/	/peə/
<i>share</i>	/ʃeɪr/	/ʃeə/

/ə/ vs. /e/

Where BrE tends to weaken or even elide many vowels, there is a tendency in AmE to retain their full value so we get, e.g.:

Example	AmE	BrE
<i>accent</i>	/ˈæk.sent/	/ˈæk.sənt/
<i>nonsense</i>	/ˈnɑ:n.sens/	/ˈnɒnsəns/ (or even /ˈnɒnsns/)

See above for the /ɒ/ vs. /ɑ:/ difference.

/z/ vs. /s/

Where BrE would often have /z/ AmE sometimes uses /s/. For example:

Example	AmE	BrE
<i>Aussie</i>	/ˈɒ.si/	/ˈɒ.zi/
<i>erase</i>	/ɪ.ˈreɪs/	/ɪ.ˈreɪz/
<i>venison</i>	/ˈve.nəs.ən/	/ˈve.nɪz.ən/

/j/ vs. /ɜ/

This often (but not exclusively) applies to the pronunciation of the *-tion* and *-sion* suffixes. For example:

Example	AmE	BrE
<i>excursion</i>	/ɪk.'skɜ:.ʒən/	/ɪk.'skɜ:ʃ.ən/
<i>immersion</i>	/ɪ.'mɜ:.ʒən/	/ɪ.'mɜ:ʃ.ən/

/t/ vs. /d/

In the middle of many words a double 't' is pronounced in BrE as /t/ but AmE often prefers a voiced /d/ sound here.

For example:

Example	AmE	BrE
<i>butter</i>	/'bʌd.r̩/	/'bʌt.ə/
<i>hotter</i>	/'hɑ:.dər/	/hɒ.tə/

This is, however, not apparent in many AmE varieties and is not generally considered standard.

/ju:/ vs. /u:/

There is a tendency in BrE to insert an intrusive /j/ in some words which is often avoided in AmE. Pronunciations with and without the /j/ occur across North America, however.

In BrE, too, this is not a consistent pattern and words such as *chew*, *screw* etc. are not pronounced with any intrusion.

For example:

Example	AmE	BrE
<i>new</i>	/nu:/	/nju:/
<i>due</i>	/du:/	/du:/