

British English pronunciation preferences: a changing scene

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Abstract. A poll of BrE pronunciation preferences was carried out in late 1998, based on a self-selected sample of nearly 2000 ‘speech-conscious’ respondents, who answered a hundred questions about words of uncertain or controversial pronunciation. The findings allow us to answer questions about lexical incidence and sound changes in progress. (This is a revised and considerably extended version of the report published as Wells 1999.)

1. Introduction

1.1 A survey of pronunciation preferences

In September and October 1998 some 2000 people, native speakers of British English (BrE), answered a questionnaire covering about a hundred items of uncertain or disputed pronunciation. This survey was carried out as part of the research for the new edition of a pronunciation dictionary (Wells, 1990 and forthcoming).

There are many words in English whose pronunciation is uncertain or controversial. For *scone*, some speakers say /skɒn/, rhyming with *con*, while others say /skəʊn/, rhyming with *cone*. For *schedule*, the traditional BrE form is /ˈʃedju:l/, but it can be observed that some British people nowadays say /ˈskedʒu:l/, which is the usual form in American English (AmE). In the suffix *-less*, as in *careless*, *useless*, the only vowel recognized in Daniel Jones-style RP was /i/; but it is clear that nowadays many speakers of neo-RP and near-RP, not to mention non-RP, use /ə/. Uncertainties such as these are often not a matter of social or local accent, since the same variability appears to exist in RP as in regional accents. There is a problem for lexicographers in deciding which variant to prioritize (or, for learner’s dictionaries, to recommend). Hitherto, lexicographers have had to rely on their informal impressions, moderated perhaps by comments and criticisms from reviewers and readers. This applies as much to specialist pronunciation dictionaries such as the renowned *EPD* (Jones 1917 and subsequent editions) as to general dictionaries.

For the first edition of the *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* (Wells 1990) I carried out a small-scale survey into people’s preferences for ninety such words: see the results reported in the dictionary and elsewhere (Wells 1995). This survey, conducted in 1988, revealed for example that speakers of BrE overwhelmingly prefer /e/ over /i:/ as the vowel of *zebra*. A similar survey for AmE was carried out by Shitara (1993).

This second BrE survey builds on the first, but was organized on a much larger scale, with nearly two thousand respondents being polled on a further hundred words. Together, these surveys enable us for the first time to give something more than an impressionistic answer to questions such as those mentioned above. They not only provide a basis for the ordering of variants in dictionaries, but in the case of items exhibiting strong associations between variant preferred and respondent’s age also furnish evidence of language change in progress.

1.2 Use of a written questionnaire

The survey made use of a written questionnaire, which respondents answered by ticking multiple-choice boxes (or doing the computerized equivalent). It therefore differs from other pronunciation surveys, which involve a phonetically trained field-worker transcribing an informant’s live or recorded utterances. Admittedly, it would be unrealistic to use a written questionnaire attempt a survey of actual pronunciation by asking respondents to report on their own performance, particularly where the respondents may be phonetically naive. It is well established that people do not report their linguistic usage accurately. Nevertheless, this method is acceptable in a survey of pronunciation **preferences**. People are often well aware which of two competing pronunciations they prefer. Indeed, this is the sort of issue about which they are only too ready to fire off letters to the editor of a newspaper or to phone in complaints to a radio station. Unlike such issues as, say,

the degree of aspiration of the [t] in *tomorrow* or the choice between syllabic [n] and [ən] in *station*, the selection of this or that vowel phoneme in *zebra* or *scone* is well above a speaker's threshold of consciousness. So we can ask them their views with confidence.

2. Method

2.1 Poll design

This second poll of BrE preferences was carried out in September and October 1998. The primary form of the questionnaire was a 12-page printed document which was distributed by post. It was also available as a plain-text electronic document, distributed by e-mail or through the world-wide web, and lastly as an interactive form on the web. Only about ten percent of respondents used electronic methods of response, though a further proportion printed out the e-mail or web document and used this for their written responses.

The survey was targeted not at a random sample of the population (where the response rate would surely be very low) but at a self-selected sample of the **speech-conscious**, those native speakers of British English interested in language and speech, who may therefore be motivated to spend up to an hour completing a questionnaire. Thanks to press and radio publicity given to the survey, some two thousand such respondents completed the questionnaire.

2.2 Recruitment of respondents

The respondents were recruited in several ways:

- by a direct approach to phonetician colleagues and students of phonetics, also to various other contacts;
- through publicity in the press arising from the author's public lecture at the British Association Festival of Science;
- through publicity on the radio arising from the same source
- from casual visitors to the web site of the Dept. of Phonetics and Linguistics, University College London.

A requirement imposed on respondents was that of having spent their childhood (4 to 15 years) living in Britain. Of 2,133 completed questionnaires received during the survey period (September and October, 1998), 201 were rejected because of failure to meet this requirement. Otherwise, everyone who submitted a completed questionnaire was accepted as a respondent, giving a sample size of 1,932.

2.3 Respondents' social characteristics

2.3.1 Bias. The resultant sample is unrepresentative of the general population of Great Britain in various ways. It does not accurately reflect the balance of sexes, age groups, or regional origin of the population as a whole. In particular, we cannot control for the bias towards the speech-conscious that results from the fact that the sample is self-selected. If we had approached a random sample of the whole population, the response rate would surely have been very low. Relying on a self-selected sample at least ensures respondent motivation.

2.3.2. Sex. More women than men volunteered for the survey: 1141 women (41%), 786 men (59%), 5 no data. However, spot checks suggested that sex differences in responses were not statistically significant. Accordingly it was decided to ignore this sample bias.

2.3.3. Age. The sample was biased towards older adults. Disregarding five (0.3%) who declined to reveal their age group, 219 (11.4%) of the respondents were aged 25 years or under; i.e. born since 1973; 395 (20.5%) were aged between 26 and 45 years (born 1954-73); 888 (46.1%) were aged between 46 and 65 (1934-53), and 425 (22.0%) were aged over 65 (born up to 1933). To correct this bias, it was decided that in presenting the overall results of the survey the age groups would be weighted 3:2:1:1. This gives approximately equal representation through the age range 10-75.

The effects of correcting age bias in this way can be seen in the following example. The preference figures for the final consonant in *booth* were as shown in Table 1 (all percentages rounded to the nearest whole number; respondents who expressed no preference have been excluded). Like many of our results, those for *booth* exhibit a statistically significant relationship between pronunciation preference and age. The figures in the table show that young people are more in favour of /bu:θ/ than are older people. To present the results simply as 34% for /bu:θ/, 66% for /bu:ð/ would reflect the sample bias towards older people. If, however, we weight the age- groups as suggested, we get an age-corrected result of 38% for /bu:θ/, 62% for /bu:ð/. It is these age-corrected results that are presented below and in the new edition of *LPD*.

	born by 1933	1934-1953	1954-1973	since 1973	raw total	weighted total
/θ/	153 = 37%	247 = 28%	123 = 32%	129 = 59%	652 = 34%	1033 = 38%
/ð/	261 = 63%	631 = 72%	267 = 68%	90 = 41%	1249 = 66%	1696 = 62%
Total	414 = 100%	878 = 100%	390 = 100%	219 = 100%	1901 = 100%	2729 = 100%

Table 1. Preferences for the final consonant in *booth*, by age group: raw figures, percentages within each age group, and overall totals and percentages raw and weighted for age group (1:1:2:3).

2.3.4. Regional origin. Of the 1932 respondents, 946 (49.0%) reported that they had spent their childhood in the south of England, 582 (30.1%) in the north of England, 68 (3.5%) in Scotland, and 56 (2.9%) in Wales. The remaining 280 (14.5%) had moved around within Great Britain. (Any who had spent significant periods outside Britain had already been excluded, as explained above.)

Although the items selected for inclusion in the questionnaire were mostly ones for which an association between response and regional origin was not anticipated, there were some for which the responses do exhibit such an association. Table 2 gives the preference figures for the vowel in *halt*. (All figures from this point on are expressed as percentages.)

	ɒ	ɔ:
North of England	81	19
South of England	30	70
Scotland	48	52
Wales	78	22
other, mixed	47	53
Overall	50	50

Table 2. Preferences for the vowel in *halt*, by regional origin

Inspection shows that the option /hɒlt/ (i.e. with the same vowel as in *lot*) is particularly associated with a northern or Welsh regional origin, while the option /hɔ:lt/ (i.e. with the same vowel as in *thought*) is particularly associated with a southern regional origin. For respondents with Scottish or mixed regional origins the figures are close to those for Britain overall.

Although people from the north of England are somewhat underrepresented in the sample, it was decided not to attempt to correct for this. (We shall, however, correct for age. There was an association between the older age groups and a preference for /ɔ:/. Correcting for this, the raw 50-50 split will be reported as 52% for /ɒ/, 48% for /ɔ:/.)

2.4. Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of about a hundred multiple-choice questions in which respondents were asked to say which of two or more pronunciations of a given word or phrase they preferred. It followed the same lines as in the author's earlier survey. A typical question took the following form:

Asia (name of continent) Focus on the -s-

- a /'eɪʃə/ the consonant sound is as in *pressure* AYSH-uh
 b /'eɪʒə/ the consonant sound is as in *measure* AYZH-uh

The word at issue was followed by a parenthesized gloss and an instruction to focus on some specific part of it. Each pronunciation variant offered was presented first in phonetic transcription, then as an explanation of the sound(s) involved, and thirdly as a respelling. The respondent was asked to “indicate the pronunciation you prefer. Usually this will also be your own pronunciation”.

The findings for *Asia*, like about half of the items in the questionnaire, turn out to exhibit a statistically significant association between age group and expressed preference. The /ʒ/ variant is preferred by a minority of the older respondents, but by a majority of the younger. The percentage figures are shown in Table 3.

	born by 1933	1934-1953	1954-1973	since 1973	weighted average
/ʃ/	77	64	32	33	49
/ʒ/	23	36	68	67	51

Table 3. Preferences for the consonant in *Asia*, percentages by age.

There were three main sections in the questionnaire, dealing respectively with consonants, vowels, and stress patterns. There were also non-linguistic questions relating to age, sex, nationality, region of origin, and occupation.

The questionnaire included a few of the same items as the 1988 survey, with a view to discovering whether people’s preferences have changed since then. But mostly it dealt with new items.

3. Findings

3.1 Declining standards?

The belief is widespread among the general public that standards of pronunciation are declining. In part this reflects no more than the usual resistance to any form of language change, since change is interpreted as deterioration. Thus new trends such as the glottalling of /t/ and the vocalization of /l/ attract adverse comment. What support, if any, do our findings give to the claim of declining standards?

3.1.1 Loss of stigmatization. The word *nuclear* attracted unfavourable comment when pronounced by the American former President Eisenhower. Like many people, he put /jə/ between the /k/ and the /l/. In terms of RP, the traditionally correct form is /'nju:kliə/, while the traditionally stigmatized form is /'nju:kjələ/. We formulated this question by asking whether the respondent preferred to make *nuclear* end in the same way as *likelier* or in the same way as *circular*. We found that while all age groups unite in preferring the former, the under-26’s show more toleration for the latter form than do the older age groups. See Table 4.

<i>nuclear</i>	born by 1933	1934-1953	1954-1973	since 1973	weighted av.
/-kliə/	95	97	96	86	94
/-kjVlə/	5	3	4	14	6

Table 4. Preferences for *nuclear*, by age

In *mischievous* the penultimately-stressed form /mɪs'tʃi:vəs/ progressively gains support at the expense of the traditionally correct, initially-stressed /'mɪstʃɪvəs/, and for the youngest age group even becomes the majority preference. See Table 5.

<i>mischievous</i>	born by 1933	1934-1953	1954-1973	since 1973	weighted av.
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stress on first	93	83	72	48	73
- on second	7	17	28	52	27

Table 5. Preferences for *mischievous*, by age

3.1.2 Less deference to RP. Britain's traditional prestige accent, Received Pronunciation, has received a bad press in recent years. It is widely claimed that RP is nowadays 'increasingly perceived as exclusive and formal' (Coggle, 1993), and there is plenty of anecdotal evidence suggesting that younger people, in particular, no longer defer to it in the way their elders do or did. We have evidence in support of this view in two items from the questionnaire: *chance* and *one*. In the south of England these words are generally pronounced as in RP, i.e. /tʃɑ:n(t)s/ and /wʌn/, with the same vowels as *start* and *strut* respectively. In the north, however, these pronunciations face rivals in the shape of the local-accent variants, /tʃæn(t)s/ and /wɒn/, with the vowels of *trap* and *lot* respectively. In our survey, in both cases we found that the proportion of non-RP preferences is higher in the younger age groups, even though the proportion of northerners is fairly constant across age groups (Table 6). Since there is no reason to suppose that the northern variants are spreading geographically, we infer that northerners who grew up using them are now less ready to defer to the upper-class and country-wide norm when asked about their preferences.

	born by 1933	1934-1953	1954-1973	since 1973	weighted av.
/æ/ in <i>chance</i>	20	27	36	40	31
/ɒ/ in <i>one</i>	18	26	30	44	30

Table 6. Percentage preferring non-RP vowels in *chance* and *one*, by age

3.1.3 Vanishing variants. In one item we can trace the path from decline to extinction of a variant. For *questionnaire* (Table 7) we see /kwestʃə'neə/ entirely displacing, among the under-26's, the formerly less-preferred variant /kɛstʃə'neə/. This French borrowing, still pronounced in a French-influenced way by some of the older respondents, ultimately becomes completely anglicized.

<i>questionnaire</i>	born by 1933	1934-1953	1954-1973	since 1973	weighted av.
/kwes-/	79	93	98	100	94
/kɛs-/	21	7	2	0	6

Table 7. Preferences for the initial syllable of *questionnaire*, by age

For words spelt *wh-*, as is well known, English and Welsh people mostly long ago abandoned the pronunciation with /hw/. In mainstream RP, as well as in local accents of England and Wales, *whine* is a homophone of *wine* /waɪn/. Nevertheless people quite widely believe that the pronunciation with /hw/ is 'better', so that we might expect a fair proportion of respondents to prefer it over /w/ when explicitly asked. This expected vote in favour of /hw/ should be increased by the votes of the Scots, who have largely resisted this sound change. The questionnaire item devoted to this issue was *white*. The results, shown in Table 8, indicate that preferences are gradually moving into line with actual usage. Among the 47% of over-65's who claim to prefer /hw/, I doubt that proportionally many more regularly use it than among the mere 9% of under-26's who voted for it. And these figures include the Scots (3.5% of the total sample; 82% of them voted for /hw/). We see here, then, the gradual disappearance of a variant that had been theoretically admired but ignored by most in practice. The next generation of English and Welsh people will not even claim to prefer it.

<i>white</i>	born by 1933	1934-1953	1954-1973	since 1973	weighted av.
/hw-/	47	29	16	9	23
/w-/	53	71	84	91	77

Table 8. Preferences for the initial consonant(s) of *white*, by age

3.2 Are older people out of touch?

Three of the questionnaire items were words which have only recently come into general usage: *gigabyte*, *ecosystem*, *mall* (the latter in the sense ‘shopping centre’). The voting figures for all three offer some support for a claim that older people are less certain how to pronounce them than the younger (Tables 9, 10).

<i>gigabyte</i>	born by 1933	1934-1953	1954-1973	since 1973	weighted av.
/ˈɡɪɡ-/	69	81	93	86	84
/ˈdʒɪɡ-/	15	10	6	9	9
/ˈɡaɪɡ-/	14	8	2	4	6
/ˈdʒaɪɡ-/	2	1	0	1	1

Table 9. Preferences for the initial syllable of *gigabyte*, by age

Thus it was the 26-45-year-old group who voted most strongly for what is undoubtedly the established pronunciation of *gigabyte* among those who have occasion to use the word, the computer-literate: /ˈɡɪɡəbaɪt/. Many of the over-65’s, in particular, had probably come across this word only in writing, and were consequently more likely to vote for the other options offered, all of which are to some extent supported by the spelling, and also (for /ˈdʒaɪɡ-/) by the related word *gigantic*. Surprisingly, even the under-26’s seem not to be quite as computer-literate (if that is what it is) as the 26-45’s.

	born by 1933	1934-1953	1954-1973	since 1973	weighted av.
/i:k-/ <i>cosystem</i>	72	83	95	96	88
/mɑ:l/ <i>mall</i>	38	35	51	76	50

Table 10. Preferences for the vowel in the first syllable of *ecosystem* and the vowel of *mall*, by age

The figures for *ecosystem*, on the other hand, show a steady increase in preference for /i:/ over /e/ as we move from older to younger. Clearly enthusiasm for matters environmental among the young ensures that they are almost all familiar with this word and thus less likely to produce a spelling pronunciation. The same trend is evident with *mall*, where by a substantial majority the two senior age groups preferred /mæ/ (well established as the name of the London street *The Mall*); the 26-45’s were equally divided; and only the under-26’s were sufficiently well acquainted with this American import (cf. the native British *shopping centre*) to know its American pronunciation, which we may presume will ultimately prevail in British speech too.

3.3 Spelling pronunciation

English spelling being what it is, one constant pressure on pronunciation is the influence of the orthography. A pronunciation that is perceived as not corresponding to the spelling is liable to be replaced by one that does. A number of items in the questionnaire fall under this general heading, interpreted in a broad sense as covering also morphological regularization supported by the spelling.

3.3.1 a/ plus a consonant. The words *scallop* and *falcon* both demonstrate a trend for traditional /ɒ/ to be displaced by /æ/, the short vowel most usually associated with the spelling *a* (Table 11).

	born by 1933	1934-1953	1954-1973	since 1973	weighted av.
/æ/ in <i>scallop</i>	43	44	50	67	51
/æ/ in <i>falcon</i>	21	23	32	50	32

Table 11. Percentages of respondents preferring /æ/ in *falcon* and *scallop*, by age

For *scallop* an alternative spelling, *scollop*, arose in the seventeenth century, but has now become rare. The OED (1992) comments that ‘while the pronunciation (ˈskɒləp) is still common in all uses, the spelling *scollop* appears now to be confined to sense 2 [an object of the shape of a scallop-shell], and even in that application is less usual than *scallop*’. Thus the obsolescence of the spelling with *o* has now led to the obsolescence of the pronunciation with /ɒ/.

The case of *falcon* is more complex. Its traditional pronunciation is /ˈfɔ:kən/, and until the fifteenth century it was spelt

without an *l*. The spelling was then refashioned after (Late) Latin *falco falcon-*. In due course a corresponding /l/ came to be pronounced, no doubt under the influence of the spelling. The pronunciation most highly favoured by the survey respondents was /'fɔ:l kən/, with the traditional vowel plus /l/; nevertheless this form is declining sharply in popularity (Chart 1). The older /'fɔ:kən/ scored a mere 3% overall; it shows a slight increase in popularity (to 5%) among the youngest respondents, presumably because of the current trend towards l-vocalization that makes *salt* a potential homophone of *sort*. As with *halt* (2.3.4) there is a rival form with /ɒ/, namely /'fɒl kən/, which scored 27% overall. The new /'fælkən/, although coming second overall with 32%, is nevertheless the only form increasing in popularity, and reaches 50% preference among the under-26's. The American television drama series *Falconcrest*, consistently there pronounced /'fælk-/ , may have contributed to its spread.

Chart 1. Preferences for the segments between /f/ and /k/ in *falcon*, by age

3.3.2 Inflectional regularization. Many nouns in /θ/ traditionally switch to /ð/ in the plural, as *mouth* /mauθ/ – *mouths* /mauðz/. They follow the same minor rule as *knife–knives*, but are gradually being regularized, perhaps because the spoken alternation is not reflected in spelling. We asked about the plural of *youth* (Table 12). Although /ju:ðz/ remains the preferred form overall, at 82%, we found the expected increase in popularity of /ju:θs/, but only among the youngest age group, and even with them scoring only 27%. This finding is very different from Shitara's (1993) finding for American English, where 61% overall favoured the voiceless fricative, fairly constantly across age groups. In Britain, only the Scots (57%) approach AmE levels.

<i>youths</i>	born by 1933	1934-1953	1954-1973	since 1973	weighted av.
/ðz/	83	85	85	73	82
/θs/	17	15	17	27	18

Table 12. Preferences for the final consonants of *youths*, by age

3.3.3. Derivational regularization: velar softening. Latin-derived words in which spelling *g* is followed by *i*, *e*, *y* are traditionally pronounced with /dʒ/; thus *longitude* is traditionally /'lɒndʒɪtju:d/. This conflicts, however, with the postvocalic consonant of the related and very much more frequent *long* /lɒŋ/, so that a rival pronunciation /'lɒŋɪtju:d/ also exists. The results given in Table 13 show that the /ndʒ/ variant is in severe decline. The figures for /ŋg/ may need to be interpreted with some reserve, however, since several respondents spontaneously mentioned /'lɒŋɪtju:d/, an option not allowed for in the questionnaire.

	born by 1933	1934-1953	1954-1973	since 1973	weighted av.
/ndʒ/	25	18	10	11	15
/ŋg/	75	82	90	89	85

Table 13. Preferences for consonants after /ɒ/ in *longitude*, by age

3.3.4 Derivational regularization: stress. The questionnaire included five words with the suffix *-able* in which speakers disagree over stress placement: *applicable*, *incomparable*, *irrefutable*, *justifiable*, *transferable* (Table 14). The only one of these to exhibit a significant and constant trend of change in preferred stress placement was *incomparable*, in which the pattern /ɪn'kɒmp(ə)rəb(ə)l/ (preferred by 87% of the over-65's) is being displaced by antepenultimate stress, reflecting the stress of *compare* /kəm'peə/. We did not ask about the identity of the stressed vowel in this new form, which may be either /eə/ (cf. *compare*) or /æ/ (cf. *comparison*).

	born by 1933	1934-1953	1954-1973	since 1973	weighted av.
<i>applicable</i>	72	83	92	83	84
<i>incomparable</i>	13	24	49	71	41
<i>irrefutable</i>	91	94	95	89	93
<i>justifiable</i>	72	74	80	73	75
<i>transferable</i>	84	83	87	75	82

Table 14. Percentages of respondents preferring antepenultimate stress in *-able* words, by age

In *applicable* and *irrefutable* the majority thus prefer a stress pattern that agrees with the final stress of the underlying verb (*apply*, *refute*). On the assumption that most people use final stress in the verb *to transfer*, this is true also of *transferable*. Although there are a few words such as initially-stressed *admirable* that resist this regularizing pressure, most do not. For *justifiable* the majority preference for stress on /faɪ/, in spite of stress on /dʒʌst/ in *justify*, is perhaps to be explained by dislike of word stress earlier than antepenultimate.

3.3.5. Regularization of compounds. We asked about *newspaper*, an evident compound whose expected pronunciation would be /'nju:z,pɛɪpə/. Nevertheless, many speakers pronounce it irregularly, /'nju:s,pɛɪpə/, with the fricative assimilated in voicing to the following voiceless /p/. Voting here was as shown in Table 15. Comparison of different age groups showed a just significant movement ($p < .02$) towards regularization with /z/. (A historically parallel case, *fivepence* as /'faɪfɒns/, has disappeared from view as a consequence of decimalization of the currency in 1971: we now mostly say *five pence* /,faɪv 'pens/ or *five p.* /'pi:/.) A slightly more rapid regularization was found in *forehead*, where the morphologically irregular /'fɒrɪd/ is being displaced by the regular /'fɔ:hed/. (There was also a small write-in vote for /'fɒred/, not given as an option in the questionnaire.)

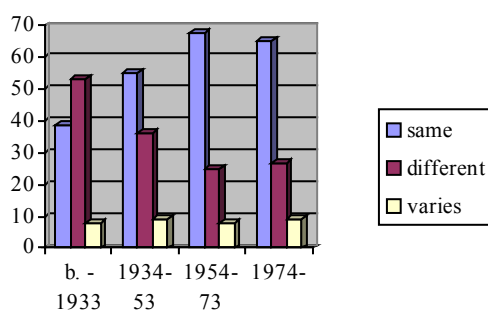
	born by 1933	1934-1953	1954-1973	since 1973	weighted av.
/'nju:z,pɛɪpə/	51	55	56	64	57
/'fɔ:hed/	51	58	66	81	65

Table 15. Percentages preferring regularized pronunciations of the compounds *newspaper* and *forehead*, by age

3.4 Sound changes in progress: the loss of /ʊə/

The diphthong /ʊə/ is disappearing, mostly being replaced by /ɔ:/. Its current status was tested by questions about homophony between words that might have /ʊə/ and those that certainly have /ɔ:/.

Respondents were asked whether *yours* sounds identical to *yaws*. 58% of them thought that it does, 33% that it does not, and 8% that it varies. Responses by age group are shown in Chart 2. They are also shown in Table 16, where they have been adjusted to exclude those who considered the homophony variable. Not surprisingly, the Scots gave very different answers from the rest: 96% of them thought the two words sounded different.

Chart 2. Comparison of *yours* and *yaws*, by age group

	born by 1933	1934-1953	1954-1973	since 1973	weighted av.
<i>yours-yaws</i>	42	60	73	71	64
<i>poor-pour</i>	25	40	65	82	55
<i>sure-shore</i>	26	36	55	61	46

Table 16. Percentages reporting homophony in three pairs of words, by age

Table 16 also shows the percentages of respondents considering that *poor* sounded identical to *pour* and *sure* to *shore*, i.e. pronounce *poor* as /pɔ:/ rather than /pʊə/ and *sure* as /ʃɔ:/ rather than /ʃʊə/, again excluding those who claimed that the homophony was variable. In all age groups the vote for *poor-pour* homophony was higher than for *sure-shore*. In all except the under-26's the vote for *yours-yaws* homophony was higher than for the other two pairs. The same figures are presented graphically in Chart 3. I have no explanation for the slight fall-off in *yours-yaws* homophony among the younger respondents.

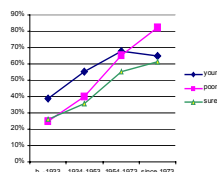


Chart 3. Percentages preferring /ɔ:/ in three /ʊə/ words, by age

3.5 Sound changes in progress: yod coalescence

In a process lasting over many centuries, /tj/ and /dj/ are gradually becoming /tʃ/ and /dʒ/ respectively: an alveolar plosive plus palatal semivowel becomes a palatoalveolar affricate. In words such as *nature* this process is long complete; but there are many other words where this ‘yod coalescence’ is still variable.

3.5.1 /tj/ → tʃ/. We looked at *perpetual*, *situation* and *tune*, words in which RP used to have only /tj/. The polling figures for all three (Table 17 and Chart 4) show clear evidence of sound change currently in progress. Rejected by the older respondents, it is preferred by the youngest.

My impressionistic view had been that yod coalescence was much more readily accepted before a weak vowel, as in *perpetual* and *situation*, than before a strong one, as in *tune*. (Note that in American English the first two items have /tʃ/, whereas in *tune* Americans never coalesce, but tend rather to lose the /j/ altogether, thus /tu:n/.) But the polling figures bear this out only for the older age groups. The under-26's turned out to favour coalescence in *tune* more than in the other two words. It may be that the change is more readily accepted in familiar words than in more learned ones. Regionally, *tune* with /tʃ/ is most readily accepted in Scotland (49%), least readily in Wales (16%), overall 35%.

	born by 1933	1934-1953	1954-1973	since 1973	weighted av.
<i>perpetual</i>	23	32	52	57	43
<i>situation</i>	16	25	43	50	35
<i>tune</i>	10	22	42	61	35

Table 17. Percentages preferring yod coalescence (/tʃ/) in three words, by age

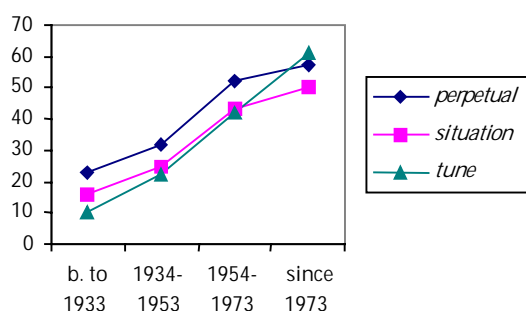


Chart 4. Preference for /tʃ/ over /tj/ in three words, by age

3.5.2 /dj/ → dʒ/. A generally similar pattern emerges with the voiced plosive plus yod. We looked at *gradually*, *schedule*, and *during*. The polling figures are shown in Table 18 and Chart 5. (For the initial consonant(s) in *schedule*, see 3.8.1 below.) Respondents here indeed favoured coalescence more before a weak vowel (*gradually*) than before a strong one. They also favoured it more in the function-word *during* than in the content-word *schedule*.

	born by 1933	1934-1953	1954-1973	since 1973	weighted av.
<i>gradually</i>	30	40	59	70	51
<i>schedule</i>	8	13	23	35	21
<i>during</i>	15	23	36	58	34

Table 18. Percentages preferring yod coalescence (/dʒ/) in three words, by age

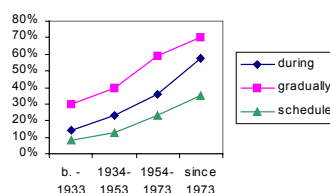


Chart 5. Preference for /dʒ/ over /dj/ in three words, by age

3.6 Sound changes in progress: Cheshire-cat plosives

In certain sequences involving nasal plus obstruent there are sounds that may or may not be present.

3.6.1. Plosive epenthesis. In words such as *chance* we know that the perceptual difference between /-ns/ and /-nts/ may depend on no more than the fine timing of the relative movements of the tongue tip and the velum. There are those of us for whom *chance* and *chants* are homophones, and those of us for whom they are clearly different. The polling figures revealed a firm preference in *chance* for /ns/ (83% overall), firmer though among the old (87%) than the young (75%). Regionally, resistance to the epenthetic plosive is strongest among the northern English (90%), weakest among the southerners (81%). I suspect that for many this may reflect an idealistic preference rather than their actual pronunciation.

The figures for *length* were rather different. Here both /leŋθ/ and /leŋkθ/ are competing against an interloper, /len(t)θ/. Among those who voted for a velar nasal, epenthetic /k/ reached scores as high as 51% (southerners) and 50% (youngest), with an age-corrected mean of 40%. An alveolar nasal was preferred by 17% overall, with highs of 30% (youngest) and 25% (Scots).

3.6.2 Plosive elision. The other side of the epenthesis coin, from a morphological as well as an orthographic point of view, is elision (deletion). We asked about *puncture* and *jumped*. The first of these may have [k] or [t] or both or neither; there is also the possibility of being a homophone of *puncher*. Voting overwhelmingly favoured presence of both plosive elements (87%). Only among the youngest was there any substantial vote for [ˈpʌntʃə] (11%). In *jumped*, the vote for ‘like *jum* plus *t*’ was 24%, higher than I at any rate had expected; perhaps some of those who chose it were really thinking of [dʒʌmʔt] rather than [dʒʌmt].

3.7 Sound changes in progress: vowel reduction

There are changes both in the identity of weak vowels (as in *careless*) and in the selection of weak as against unstressed strong vowel in certain items (as *garage*).

3.7.1 Preconsonantal weak vowels. There is a slow drift in English from /ɪ/ to /ə/ in weak preconsonantal positions. We looked at the second syllable of *careless*. Respondents were asked whether it is the same as in *callous* (i.e. /ə/), or as in

Alice (/ɪ/), or whether these words rhyme anyhow (putative /i/), or whether the vowel is as in *less* (/e/). We are pretty confident that people don't actually pronounce it as the last of these, although 38% of respondents claimed to prefer this option (55% of the oldest, 32% of the youngest). Disregarding these votes and the mere 3% cast for the putative /i/, the respondents split 76% for /ə/, 24% for /ɪ/. This seems to vindicate my decision in LPD to give /-ləs/ first place, a decision which surprised some people. Schwa was particularly favoured in Wales (where nobody voted for /ɪ/) and in the north of England; it was particularly disfavoured in Scotland (the only region where /ɪ/ got more votes than /ə/).

3.7.2 Where do you keep the car? In RP, a *garage* is traditionally called a /'gærɑ:ʒ/ or /'gærɑ:dʒ/; popularly, though, it is a /'gærɪdʒ/. (I was brought up to consider the latter a 'vulgar' pronunciation.) We also know that Americans and West Indians stress the final syllable. The polling figures are shown in Table 19, and visually also in Chart 6. There were strong associations with age and regional origin, /'gærɪdʒ/ being particularly favoured by the young (66%) and the non-English (Scots 65%, Welsh 51%), and particularly disfavoured by the old (13%). Where a strong vowel was chosen, there was a choice between a final affricate /dʒ/ and a fricative /ʒ/. The older respondents were equally divided between the two possibilities, but the two younger age group showed an increasing preference for the affricate.

<i>garage</i>	born by 1933	1934-1953	1954-1973	since 1973	weighted av.
/'gærɪdʒ/	13	24	48	66	39
/'gærɑ:(d)ʒ/	80	72	48	25	56
/gə'rɑ:(d)ʒ/	8	4	4	9	5

Table 19. Preferences in *garage*, by age

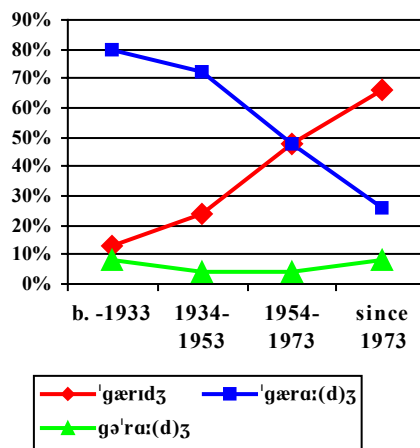


Chart 6. Preferences in *garage*

3.7.3 The ending -ary. The questionnaire items *necessary*, *ordinary* and *February* revealed a sudden surge in preference for a strong vowel in this ending among the under-26's. The polling figures, shown in Table 20, reveal rather different patterns for the three items in question, with weak /(\ə)ri/ much more popular in *ordinary* and *February* than in *necessary*.

	born by 1933	1934-1953	1954-1973	since 1973	weighted av.
<i>necessary</i>	73	73	77	89	78
<i>ordinary</i>	27	27	32	52	34
<i>February</i>	42	40	41	49	43

Table 19. Percentages preferring /eri/ in three -ary words, by age

3.7.4. The second month. There are two uncertainties in *February*: not only the identity of the vowel, if any, between /u/ and /ri/, but also the identity of the consonant that follows the /b/. In Table 20 we see a steady rise in the popularity of /j/ over apparent time (i.e. /^lfebjuəri/ etc.) and a corresponding decline in that of /r/ (/^lfebruəri/ etc.).

	born by 1933	1934-1953	1954-1973	since 1973	weighted av.
/j/	13	26	46	64	39
/r/	87	74	54	36	61

Table 20. Preferences for the consonant after /b/ in *February*, by age

3.7.6 Going in the same direction. In the first syllable of *direction* and *financial* (Table 21) we see younger respondents increasingly preferring strong /aɪ/ over weak /ɪ/ or /ə/. For *direction* respondents were also offered the choice between /aɪ/ and /aɪə/; the breakdown of the four possibilities by age is shown in Table 22.

	born by 1933	1934-1953	1954-1973	since 1973	weighted av.
<i>direction</i>	56	60	75	83	69
<i>financial</i>	64	75	83	87	79

Table 21. Percentage preferring a strong vowel in the first syllable of *direction* and *financial*, by age

	born by 1933	1934-1953	1954-1973	since 1973	weighted av.
/aɪ/	40	46	57	71	54
/aɪə/	16	14	18	12	15
/ɪ/	25	21	10	8	15
/ə/	19	18	16	9	15

Table 22. Preferences for the vowel in the first syllable of *direction*, by age

3.7.7 In these circumstances. In the final syllable of *circumstance* we face the choice not only between strong and weak vowel but also between two possible strong vowels, /ɑ:/ and /æ/. All three are found in RP. Table 23 shows that in this word too vowel weakening is becoming old-fashioned. The vote for /æ/, the majority preference, is steady, while the up-and-coming vowel is /ɑ:/.

	born by 1933	1934-1953	1954-1973	since 1973	weighted av.
/ɑ:/	10	23	24	28	24
/æ/	64	63	70	64	66
/ə/	17	14	7	7	11

Table 23. Preferences for the vowel of the last syllable of *circumstance*, by age

3.8 Talking points

A number of the words investigated, falling under none of the above heads, are the subject of much popular discussion. People hold strong views about them, though there are other apparently comparably varying words (3.8.4) about which they are indifferent.

3.8.1 The daily timetable. People complain that British English is becoming Americanized. One piece of evidence they point to is the pronunciation of *schedule*. Is the traditional BrE /ʃ-/ being displaced by AmE /sk-/? Briefly, yes: the /sk-/ form, preferred by 30% of respondents overall, received 8% of votes for the oldest group but 65% for the youngest (Table 24).

	born by 1933	1934-1953	1954-1973	since 1973	weighted av.
/ʃ/	92	88	67	36	70
/sk/	8	12	33	65	30

Table 24. Preferences for the initial consonant(s) in *schedule*, by age

3.8.2 Does *scone* rhyme with *John* or with *Joan*? or even with *June*? British dictionaries have usually preferred /skɒn/, while recognizing the existence of /skəʊn/. (The Scottish proper name *Scone*, though, is /sku:n/.) The polling figures (Table 25) show that /ɒ/ is generally preferred, although there is a slow yet significant swing towards /əʊ/. Four (= 2%) of the under-26 respondents voted for /u:/, perhaps in jest; so did one in the age group 46-65. Regionally, there was no important difference except that Scots overwhelmingly (99%) prefer the vowel of *John*.

	born by 1933	1934-1953	1954-1973	since 1973	weighted av.
/ɒ/	70	65	65	60	65
/əʊ/	30	35	35	38	35

Table 25. Preferences for the vowel in *scone*, by age

3.8.3 Controversy. The pronunciation of this word remains controversial in Britain: is it stressed on the first syllable, or the second? The first pronunciation preference poll I carried out, in 1988, showed 44% preferring initial stress, 56% antepenultimate. The 1998 figures (Table 26) do not differ greatly from this, although it should be noted that in this item of the questionnaire there was an unusually high abstention rate (164 respondents, 8.5%). Although the middle two age groups seem to show a swing towards /-¹trɒv-/, the youngest age group produced figures agreeing exactly with those of the earlier survey.

	born by 1933	1934-1953	1954-1973	since 1973	weighted av.
/ ¹ kɒn-/	49	38	33	44	40
/- ¹ trɒv-/	51	62	67	56	60

Table 26. Preferences for stress placement in *controversy*, by age

3.8.4 Mysteries remain. In the case of the fricative in *absorb*, the respondents voted 83-17 in favour of /z/. In the case of that in *absurd*, they voted 77-23 in favour of /s/. Furthermore the figures for *absurd* show no significant trend over apparent time (Table 27), while those for *absorb* exhibit a highly significant, though gradual, drift towards /z/. How are we to explain these findings? As far as I can see, we cannot. Yet with a sample size of nearly 2,000 they are very robust.

	born by 1933	1934-1953	1954-1973	since 1973	weighted av.
<i>absorb</i>	66	83	88	86	83
<i>absurd</i>	20	25	25	18	23

Table 27. Percentages preferring /z/ over /s/ in *absorb* and *absurd*, by age

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