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Abbreviatory conventions in pronunciation dictionaries

All pronunciation dictionaries make use of **abbreviatory conventions** to save space. Devices such as italicization, superscription, and parenthesization make it possible to cater for several different phonetic forms without retranscribing the whole of the variant pronunciation.

The three currently available pronunciation dictionaries of English are EPD, LPD and ODP. They all exploit the possibilities of abbreviatory conventions in various ways, as do some general dictionaries.

All these three dictionaries agree in using a transcription that is more or less phonemic. This in itself can be seen as a kind of abbreviatory convention. They do not explicitly symbolize sounds whose use is allophonic (particular phoneme realizations predictable in context). They therefore make no use, for example, of the symbol [ʔ], despite the prevalence of the glottal stop in modern British English as a possible realization of /t/ in certain environments (but not really obligatorily in any environment). They do not show allophonic vowel length, despite the very obvious difference in duration in pairs such as *need*—*neat* (which all three dictionaries transcribe as ni:d, ni:t). They do not use the dark-l symbol [ɫ], despite the fact that /l/ is so pronounced except before a vowel sound. (One difficulty about introducing this symbol to a dictionary would be that any word that ends in /l/ is pronounced with a clear lateral if immediately followed by a word beginning with a vowel, but with a dark

lateral otherwise. So every word with a final /l/ can be pronounced either way, depending on context.)

All three dictionaries agree in the notation of consonant phonemes. As for vowels and diphthongs, LPD and the current EPD use exactly the same transcription symbol set, /i: ɪ e æ ɑ: ɒ ɔ: ʊ u: ʌ ɜ: ə eɪ əʊ aɪ aʊ ɔɪ ɪə eə ʊə/ for the stressable vowels of British English, plus /ɪ u/ for the unstressed vowels of *happy* and *thank you* respectively. (Throughout this paper, for reasons of space, I restrict my analysis to British English, disregarding except where stated what the dictionaries say about American English.) OPD, to the dismay of those who prefer a mutually agreed common standard for all EFL-oriented dictionaries, and for reasons that do not appear to be overwhelmingly cogent, replaces /e æ ɜ: aɪ eə/ in this set by /ɛ a ə: ʌɪ ɛ:/.

All pronunciation dictionaries make use of abbreviatory conventions to save space. The use of devices such as italicization, superscription, and parenthesization makes it possible to cater for several different phonetic forms without retranscribing the whole of each pronunciation variant.

Consider first the matter of optional **elision** (omission of a segment). Here, for example, are the entries for *handbag* and *asked* in the three dictionaries. (LPD's special blue type, for the main pronunciation at each entry, is here replaced by bold type.)

(BrE)	EPD	LPD	OPD
<i>handbag</i>	'hænd.bæg, 'hæm-	'hænd bæɡ →'hæm-	'han(d)bag
<i>asked</i>	ɑ:sk -t	ɑ:skt §æskt, Δɑ:kst	ɑ:sk, ask -t

We see that all three dictionaries indicate the elidability of the [d] in *handbag*, the first two by italicization, the third by parenthesization. Only EPD indicates the same for the [k] in *asked*. (EPD and OPD do not

transcribe *asked* as a separate item, but show separately how the stem *ask* and the suffix *-ed* are pronounced.) We may further note that the northern English variant of *ask* with a short vowel is ignored in EPD, shown with a special mark ('not RP') in LPD, and shown without comment in OPD. (All three dictionaries naturally give /æ/ in the AmE part of the entry, not reproduced above.)

All English double-stressed words are potentially subject to **stress shift** in the context of being followed by another stressed word. All three dictionaries indicate this, in some cases at least.

(BrE)	EPD	LPD	OPD
<i>nineteen</i>	ˌnaɪn'tiːn <i>stress</i> <i>shift:</i> ˌnɪntiːn 'years	ˌnaɪn 'tiːn◀	BR ˌnaɪn'tiːn AM ˌnaɪn ˈtiːn
<i>fundamental</i>	ˌfʌn.də.'men.təl US -təl	ˌfʌnd ə 'ment ˈl◀ -'ment ˈl◀	BR ˌfʌndə'mentl AM ˌfʌndə'men(t)l

So with *nineteen* EPD shows the stress shift by an example; LPD shows it by an abbreviatory convention, the special symbol ◀; OPD shows it, for American English but not for British, with a special stress mark convention. In thousands of other cases of potential stress shift, exemplified here by *fundamental*, only EPD shows the possibility (readily heard in a context such as *a fundamental error*).

The use of abbreviatory conventions also allows these dictionaries, to varying extents, to represent lexical pronunciations other than the mainstream variant or the variant judged most suitable for EFL purposes.

(BrE)	EPD	LPD	ODP
<i>fence</i>	fents	fen's	fɛns

<i>poor</i>	pɔːʳ, puəʳ	pɔ: puə <i>plus stats and graph</i>	pɔ:(r), puə(r)
<i>you're strong form</i>	jɔːʳ, juəʳ	jɔ: juə	juə(r)
<i>tune</i>	tju:n, tʃu:n	tju:n →\$tʃu:n	tju:n, tʃu:n
<i>going to, gonna</i>	gɔ̃n.ə, 'gɒn.ə	gən ə, gən u <i>prevocalic etc</i>	'gɒnə(r), 'gənə(r)

Thus EPD and LPD, but not ODP, allow for the possible epenthetic [t] in words such as *fence*. The alternation between [uə] and [ɔ:] cannot be covered by an abbreviatory convention. For *poor*, all three dictionaries not only show the [ɔ:] pronunciation but indeed prioritize it over the traditional [uə] form, LPD supporting this decision by opinion poll findings. For the parallel contracted form *you're*, however, ODP strangely omits the [ɔ:] pronunciation that the other two prioritize. These entries also demonstrate the varying treatments of possible linking [r], which LPD leaves to a general rule stated in the preliminaries, while EPD and ODP mention it explicitly with an abbreviatory convention.

An affricate [tʃ] can nowadays often be heard in place of traditional [tj], as in *tune*. LPD marks this with the ‘non-RP’ sign, perhaps wrongly, and an arrow to show that this form can be derived by rule from the main variant given. The other dictionaries merely list the two possibilities.

The weak form of *going to*, sometimes spelt *gonna*, was not part of the Jonesian canon, but clearly needs to be recognized as part of contemporary English (including RP or whatever we think has replaced it). Here we see some disagreement over the facts. EPD and ODP believe there is a form with [ɒ], [ˈgɒnə]. I do not believe I have ever heard this form: has anyone got real evidence for it? Is it in anyone’s corpus? Or is it just an inferred spelling pronunciation, a ghost form? LPD is the only

dictionary to recognize a prevocalic form with [u], which seems well attested (*I was going to ask* aɪ wəz ɡənu 'ɑːsk).

(BrE)	EPD	LPD	ODP
<i>having</i> (¹ ævɪn)	'hæv.ɪŋ	' hæv ɪŋ	'havɪŋ
<i>twenty</i>	'twen.tɪ	' twent i Δ'twen i	'twenti
<i>drawing</i>	drɔː -ɪŋ	' drɔː f ɪŋ	'drɔː(r)ɪŋ
<i>pronunciation</i>	prəˌnʌnt.si'ei.ʃən	prə ˌnʌn's i 'eɪʃ ən Δ-ˌnaʊn's-	prəˌnʌnsɪ'eɪʃn

This brings us to the question of description versus prescription, always a slightly difficult issue for lexicographers who have been trained in a firmly descriptive tradition but who are aware that the dictionaries they write are used mainly by people seeking authoritative guidance on how to speak. A degree of prescriptivism is therefore expected and indeed found. Apart from possible mentions in the preliminaries, no dictionary acknowledges the popular English pronunciation habits of h-dropping and so-called g-dropping. Whereas the commonest English pronunciation of *having* is probably [¹ævɪn] (“*avin*”), our dictionaries show only [¹hævɪŋ]. The widespread dropping of the second [t] in *twenty*, heard in Britain as well as across the Atlantic, is recorded only by LPD, and then with an admonitory warning triangle. Intrusive [r], nowadays heard at all social levels in words such as *drawing*, is ignored by EPD. The frequently heard variant of *pronunciation* with [aʊ] is admitted by LPD, with a warning triangle, but ignored by the other two dictionaries.

Abbreviatory conventions are also well-suited also to the coverage of pre-lateral effects, syllabic consonants, and varisyllabicity.

(BrE)	EPD	LPD	ODP
<i>cold</i>	kəʊld	kəʊld →kɒʊld	kəʊld
<i>field</i>	fiːld	fiː ld	fiːld

<i>oil</i>	ɔɪl	ɔɪ̯l	ɔɪl
<i>royal</i>	'rɔɪəl	'rɔɪ̯əl	'rɔɪəl

Things are happening to English long vowels and diphthongs when followed by /l/. In words such as *cold* many speakers use a vowel quality that is very different from their ordinary [əʊ] of *goat*, being opener, backer and rounder. Although still presumably allophonic, this vowel quality is so salient for many native speakers that they demand a separate symbol for it, which LPD duly supplies (but not the other dictionaries). In the case of traditional [i:] before [l], as in *field*, many speakers now identify the vowel with that of NEAR rather than that of FLEECE, a possibility halfheartedly catered for by LPD's raised schwa but ignored by the others. (In LPD, raised symbols denote optional additions, italic symbols optional omissions.) When we consider pairs such as *oil* and *royal*, *tile* and *trial*, all dictionaries persist in the orthography-based fiction that they differ in the number of their syllables and by the presence or absence of a schwa. Only LPD goes some way to admitting the truth, that for the majority of speakers these are perfect rhymes and have been for probably a century or more.

(BrE)	EPD	LPD	ODP
<i>bottle</i>	'bɒt.l̩	'bɒt əl	bɒtl
<i>glottal</i>	'glɒt.əl	'glɒt əl	'glɒtl
<i>garden</i>	'gɑː.dən	'gɑːd ən	'gɑːdn
<i>distant</i>	'dɪs.tənt	'dɪst ənt	'dɪst(ə)nt
<i>Clinton</i>	'klɪn.tən	'klɪnt ən	'klɪntən

We turn now to the question of syllabic consonants. Arguably, all English words with syllabic consonants have possible alternative variants with a schwa plus a non-syllabic consonant, and vice versa. In some phonetic environments the syllabic consonant is favoured, in others disfavoured. Syllabic consonants are favoured, for example, in the environment of a preceding stressed vowel plus /t/ or /d/, as in the above examples *bottle*,

glottal, garden. Here EPD stands out for its unusual point of view that schwa-plus-[l] is acceptable where the orthography has *al* but not where it has *le*. Given that *bottle* and *glottal* are perfect rhymes (and that people often can't remember how to spell *peddle/pedal* or *principle/principal*), I do not share this view. ODP does not admit the schwa variants. After a sequence of consonants the schwa pronunciation is more strongly favoured, as in *distant*, or overwhelmingly favoured, as in *Clinton* (though not in AmE or for that matter in Northern Ireland). LPD and ODP distinguish these three degrees of possibility, but EPD countenances only two.

(BrE)	EPD	LPD	ODP
<i>generally</i>	'dʒen.ər.əl.i	'dʒen ər_əl i	'dʒen(ə)rəli, 'dʒen(ə)rli
<i>naturally</i>	'nætʃ.ər.əl.i	'nætʃ ər_əl i	'natʃ(ə)rəli, 'natʃ(ə)rli
<i>gardener</i>	'gɑ:d.ən.əʳ, 'gɑ:d.nəʳ	'gɑ:d nə	'gɑ:dŋə(r), 'gɑ:dnə(r)
<i>gluttony</i>	'glʌt.ən.i	'glʌt ən i	'glʌtəni, 'glʌt ŋi

By **compression** I mean the possibility of reducing the number of syllables in a word by removing the syllabicity of a segment followed by a weak vowel. LPD has an abbreviatory convention to show possible compression, with the special symbol [̣]. We see examples in the items *generally* and *naturally*, words which in my view are most frequently pronounced as three syllables. I analyse this as the possible compression of syllabic [r] derived from underlying schwa plus /r/, though most people admittedly just think of it as the possible elision of schwa. EPD does not overtly recognize this possibility, showing *generally* and *naturally* as categorically quadrisyllabic. LPD has a complicated notation – arguably too complicated – involving the compression mark and both raised and italicized schwas, which unpacks in such a way as to cater for the six

correct possible combinations [-əɹəli, -əɹli, -rəli, -rli, -rəli, -rli] (but not the impossible [-əɹli] or [-rli]).

In *gardener* LPD takes the line that compression of the syllabic nasal of the stem is categorical, while the other two dictionaries regard it as variable. Who is right is an empirical question. The item *gluttony* is of interest since we all agree that in this word compression is not possible, even though the structural description for the compression rule appears to be met.

	EPD	LPD	ODP
<i>convenient</i>	kən'vi:ni.ənt US -'vi:n jənt	kən 'vi:n i_ənt ʃkən-	kən'vi:nɪənt AM kən'vi:njənt
<i>glorious</i>	'glɔ:ri.əs	'glɔ:r i_əs	'glɔ:riəs AM 'glɔ:riəs
<i>annual</i>	'æ.n.ju.əl	'æ.n ju_əl	'ænjuəl, 'anjəl
<i>fire</i>	faiə ^r	'faɪ_ə	'fʌiə(r) AM 'faɪ(ə)r

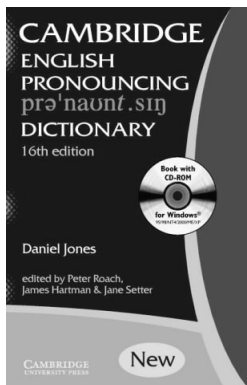
Another subcategory of compression turns the weak vowels [i] and [u] into the corresponding semivowels, [j] or [w] respectively, again before a following weak vowel. It allows a word such as *convenient* to be pronounced as three syllables rather than four. Where there is a preceding [n], EPD and ODP treat the compression as not worthy of mention in BrE but as categorically required in AmE. LPD allows both possibilities in both varieties. With a preceding [r], EPD requires three syllables at all times. This flies in the face of the literary tradition that clearly allows this compression, as seen in the first line of the familiar hymn *Glorious things of thee are spoken*, where *glorious* is to be scanned as a trochee, not a dactyl. ODP's notation for BrE is ambiguous, since it writes weak-i plus schwa with the same notation as the NEAR diphthong; its AmE version of *glorious* is categorically trisyllabic.

In words such as *annual* we have an obscure phonetic situation towards the end of the word. We can agree that the underlying representation is [-ju.əl], and EPD admits no other possibility. Clearly, however, the word may be pronounced as a disyllable, the second syllable having either a rising diphthong, [-juəl], or a monophthong, [-jəl] or [-jul]. LPD's notation covers these possibilities in a single notation with two abbreviatory conventions (compression mark and italicization), while ODP introduces a special symbol, the barred [̥] – not actually an IPA symbol – to cover the two monophthongal possibilities.

We come lastly to words of the type exemplified in *fire*, where we have to contend not only with the possibility of compression (varisyllabicity) but also that of **smoothing** (loss of the second element of a closing diphthong before a following vowel). EPD implies categorical compression, i.e. a monosyllabic pronunciation, by the subtle device of not including a stress mark. Only LPD explicitly allows for the possibility that the [ɪ] element of the diphthong might remain unrealized, by italicizing it, and that the word may have either one or two syllables, by the use of the compression mark. ODP can be seen as implying, by its stress mark, that the word is disyllabic. In my view, the truth lies neither in EPD's categorical monosyllabicity nor in ODP's categorical disyllabicity: this word is varisyllabic. We see that the more elaborate the abbreviatory conventions (as in LPD), the more precisely the range of variants can be documented. Whether this is what the average user of the dictionary wants is another matter.

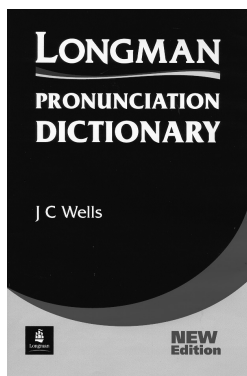
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EPD

LPD



ODP

