What price /prʌɪs/?

MICHAEL BULLEY

Some thoughts on the new *OED*'s view of British pronunciation

RECENTLY I wrote an English pronunciation guide for a French choir that I belong to, who are going to sing Tippett's *A Child of Our Time*. I didn't do the whole libretto, just around a hundred words. With a couple of exceptions, I used the normal alphabet, transcribing the words as if I was speaking French. Some of the results, as you can imagine, look odd and require some modification of the French sounds. Now and again, I added extra instructions, such as 'make the *eu* very short'.

Some of my fellow choristers are intellectually combative – and attached to what they learned in their English lessons at school or university, even when what they learned is wrong or out of date. So, when the first rehearsal arrives, I am prepared for someone to tell me the short English *a* isn't like the French one and to refer me to the [æ] phonetic symbol. Anticipating this, I have already printed out the pronunciation guide for British English from the new – third – edition of *The Oxford English Dictionary*, which has [a] for what it calls the TRAP vowel (the vowel in the word *trap*, as representative of a specific sound). And, if that proves not to be enough, I'll take a copy of my article in *English Today* 58 (April 1999): 'It isn't /hæt/, it's /hat/.'

One of the two exceptions I made in the guide for the singers was a separate symbol for short *i*, the KIT vowel in the *OED*. I wrote it as [ĭ]: the IPA symbol is [ɪ]. My reason for isolating this sound was that most French learners have, to start with at least, a problem in distinguishing the vowels of *ship* and *sheep*. The other was to use the IPA symbol [ʌ] for the *OED*'s STRUT vowel. I couldn't see any other option, as this vowel does not exist in French. I tried to explain it in my guide, in very unacademic terms, by saying it was a bit like the vowel in the French words *me* and *te*, but with the lips wider apart and the sound hitting the palate further back towards the throat. Clearly, the best option is just for me to demonstrate it.

[The writer's views on this vowel can be found in 'Klamp Santouits – buttered or battered?' (*ET*68, Oct 01) – Ed.]

All this prompted me to check what the *OED* is currently recommending for British English pronunciation. I therefore looked it up on the *OED* online and printed out the phonetic guide for the new edition. The online version is currently a bit confusing, as it is transitional: some entries are revised, while others remain those of the Second Edition. So, where the overall advice for pronunciation has changed, you get some pairs of words that are perfect rhymes, but whose endings are represented by different phonetic symbols. What this article is really about is my misgivings about some of the new *OED*'s ideas on British pronunciation.

The first thing I noticed was [ʌɪ] for the PRICE diphthong. I should have been more prepared for this, since, in a reply to my 1999 article in *ET*61 (Jan 00) ('[hæt], [hat] and all that'), Edmund Weiner and Clive Upton of the *OED* – while agreeing with what I had said about the the TRAP vowel – referred to some other changes they were proposing for *OED*3, including /prʌɪs/ to replace /praɪs/. I thought it odd at the time, but lazily didn't think any

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more of it, and it slipped from my memory. So, the other day, I tried it. The result was awful. I sounded like a ham actor attempting, without success, a rustic Devonshire accent. For me, the first part of that diphthong may perhaps not be exactly the TRAP vowel, but it is certainly closer to it than to STRUT. I, therefore, would have stuck with the second edition's /praɪs/, which is what the new *OED* gives for US English.

What, then, is behind this difference of opinion? I think the answer can be found in Weiner and Upton's 2000 article. They write: '... it is essential to use the true mainstream RP sound [ʌ], not the raised variety which is itself increasingly being heard for STRUT – and which itself may in due course be recognized as an RP sound.'

Putting this in a less technical way, I think that by this 'new' sound for STRUT they mean here one that is closer to the ANOTHER vowel or a shortened version of the NURSE vowel than to the TRAP vowel. If I am right about that, I take issue with the 'increasingly being heard' and would say that this sound has been well established for a long time in standard educated English for [ʌ]. In other words, I think that, whereas *OED*3 has moved with the times with the TRAP vowel, it has left the STRUT vowel behind in a variety of English where the TRAP vowel is [æ]. Giving [ʌ] for STRUT is uninformative and you would require a vocal demonstration, but /prʌɪs/ for PRICE gives the game away, I think, and shows an interpretation of [ʌ] that is too close to [a].

In my 1999 and 2001 articles, I referred to another work as being revealing on this point: *Vox Latina*, a 1965 guide to the sounds of classical Latin. The author, W. Sydney Allen, says that the short Latin *a* should be pronounced like the Italian *a* – not as in English *cap*, but as in *cup*. I argued that this pronunciation of *cup* was non-standard and outdated even for 1965 and that the short Italian *a*, and therefore the short Latin *a*, was pretty much like the vowel in modern English *cap*. It seems to me, therefore, that *OED*3 is sticking to this old-fashioned interpretation of the STRUT vowel and imagining it pronounced rather as Sydney Allen did.

Perhaps I am being egotistical here: I describe my pronunciation as 'educated, standard' (if there are regional influences, they will be from the south-west and north-east of England, which should cancel each other out) and if I attempt the word *price* using for the first half of it the vowel I use in *cup* or *strut*, the outcome is ridiculous. I acknowledge, of course, that a dictionary pronunciation guide cannot engage in endless refinements, but I cannot help feeling that the *OED* has moved forward here with one leg, but not the other. If, though, my own pronunciation of *price* is best represented by the /praɪs/ of the second edition, maybe I should feel a little uncomfortable, since Weiner and Upton might say that it was I who was behind the times in pronouncing it in an old-fashioned RP way! Against that, though, [aɪ] is what *OED*3 gives for US English. Is there really much difference between Americans and Britons when they say *price*? I should have thought not.

Another diphthong that seems to be outdated is that in GOAT, given as [əʊ]. Before talking about it in detail, this might be a good point to say something about Received Pronunciation. Editors of dictionaries have, of course, to choose some variety of the language as the basis for their pronunciation guides. In the 20th century, RP was the variety of a large number of Britons we could describe as 'well-spoken' – though that is, of course, a socially tendentious description. It is the accent, for example, of the upper-middle class characters in the 1945 film, *Brief Encounter*. This accent had a good deal of influence, indeed sometimes bizarrely so. To speak of the cinema again, if you watch some British films of the 40s or 50s, you find factory girls being played with cut-glass accents that would not be out of place for a lady-in-waiting at Buckingham Palace. To modern sensibilities it is absurd, but it was probably accepted as normal at the time.

Yet those RP speakers were outnumbered, certainly from the 1940s onwards and probably from before that, by 'well-spoken', well-educated Britons who did not say 'het' for *hat*, 'cap' for *cup* or 'sintince' for *sentence*. Perhaps, then, it is historically unfortunate – when we are looking for a good representation of typical, standard, modern British English (in England at any rate) – that the accent of those speakers, for one reason or another, did not then influence the pronunciation guides of dictionaries. One consequence is, I would say, an awkward mixture (as in *OED*3) between an 'old' RP and a style it would be wrong to describe as 'new', and seems to me to offer a better link to the varieties of current spoken British English. Putting it more bluntly, I would say that *OED*3 is pronouncing *cap* in 'well-

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spoken' modern British English, but not yet *cup* or *goat*.

Getting back to *goat*, therefore, the first part of the diphthong [əʊ] given for it in *OED*3 is the symbol for the ANOTHER vowel. I should say that the modern version, by contrast, begins with more of an *o* sound, not too far from the vowel in the French *gros* or a 'Yorkshire' pronunciation of *goat*. If you say [əʊ], you don't push your lips forward much, certainly not to start with (any pursing would come with the [ʊ]), whereas I would say that in the standard modern style there is an immediate pursing of the lips. To say /gəʊt/ sounds old-fashioned to me.

In modern English English, when we 'go home', I think we 'gow howm' rather than 'giew hiewm'. I would give it phonetically, then, as /goʊ/, which, again, is what *OED*3 gives for US English. However, I don't think we should conclude from this, along with /praɪs/, that there has been some American influence in these sounds. It is simply that the modern standard versions for both varieties are fairly close and stand in contrast to an old RP style.

Finally, there are the diphthongs [ɪə] and [ʊə] for NEAR and CURE. The diphthong that used to be given for SQUARE has now – correctly I would say – been reduced to the monophthong [ɛː]. All words containing these sounds are spelled with an *r* after the vowel. This *r* can be pronounced in a rhotic rather than a vocalic way, particularly if the following word begins with a vowel, as in 'The cure is to stay in bed', 'near every station'. In that case, the [ə] is weakened or even disappears, so that we have a monophthong or a vowel and a half. It seems better, then, to say that, in such words, we have allomorphic variants for *r* rather than the second part of a diphthong. To adopt such an idea would simplify the teaching of the vowels to learners, since you could absorb these so-called diphthongs into the simple system. They then become part of a set of short/long pairs.

I admit that these pairs are, in some cases, dodgy in strict academic phonetic terms, but I think (and have found) that they work in practice. So, with the proviso just given, we have *trap* + *start*, *dress* + *square*, *kit* + *fleece*, *lot* + *force*, *foot* + *goose*, *strut* + *nurse*, leaving the schwa [ə] vaguely defined as a 'weak vowel' in its own right or as that to which some vowels may be weakened in a particular context (such as *I don't know what to do*).

This has been, of course, a personal view, as is almost bound to be the case when you discuss pronunciation ('Me? An accent?'). There is also likely to be an aesthetic element. When you are explaining or recommending the pronunciation of a word, it is hard to resist choosing a version that not only seems typical among the varieties produced by the 'well-spoken', but is also one you like. For learners of English, perhaps the best advice is to tell them to ignore what the textbooks and dictionaries say and imitate those native speakers their teachers say speak well. Even so, some authorities, and particularly the *OED*, can be influential and are reference points for many students and learners of British English.

There are other points in *OED*3's pronunciation guide that one could discuss. Of those I have mentioned here, I would say the guide is spot on with TRAP, is stranded across two timezones with PRICE and with GOAT sounds like Agatha Christie's Miss Marple. ■

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