

Which pronunciation do you prefer?

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Introduction

How do you pronounce *scone*? Is it /skɒn/ or /skəʊn/?

Dictionaries usually give both pronunciations, and it's clear that both are in widespread use. But which do most people prefer? Until now, no one knew.

According to the survey I have recently carried out, approximately two-thirds of us prefer /skɒn/, rhyming with *con*, and one-third /skəʊn/, rhyming with *cone*. Perhaps surprisingly, there little difference between the north and the south of England, although the Scots are solid for /skɒn/.

The survey I refer to is the 1998 LPD Pronunciation Preference Survey, part of the on-going research in connection with my *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* (LPD)¹. In September–October 1998 I persuaded some two thousand people, native speakers of British English, to answer a questionnaire about nearly a hundred items of uncertain or disputed pronunciation. Some, like *scone*, concerned vowels; others, such as *schedule*, concerned consonants; others again, e.g. *princess*, concerned stress placement.

At first sight it may seem absurd to try to carry out a pronunciation survey by using a written questionnaire. It would certainly be unwise to ask people to report on their own pronunciation performance: speakers are notoriously unreliable in reporting on their own speech. However this method is acceptable in a survey of pronunciation **preferences**. I carried out a pioneering survey of this kind in 1988, some of the results of which were printed in LPD. On that occasion I asked people, for example, whether they preferred *zebra* with /i:/ or with /e/, and found – somewhat to my surprise – that preference for /'zeb-/ ran as high as 83% (even though such luminaries as the television zoologist David Attenborough say /'zi:b-/).

How the survey was designed

The survey questionnaire was available not only in printed form but also by e-mail and as an interactive Web document². It 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. A typical question read as follows:

- Asia** (name of continent) Focus on the -s-.
- a /'eɪʃə/ the consonant sound is as in *pressure* AYSH-uh
- b /'eɪzə/ the consonant sound is as in *measure* AYZH-uh

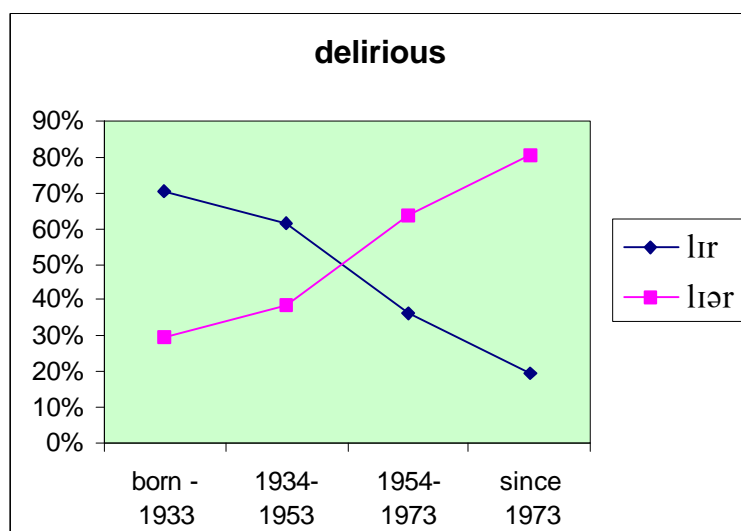
Each variant was presented in phonetic transcription, as an explanation of the sound(s) involved, and as a respelling. The respondent was asked to "indicate the pronunciation you prefer. Usually this will also be your own pronunciation".

I did not try to achieve a random sample of the whole population. Most people would not be willing to devote up to an hour to answering questions about pronunciation. Instead, I targeted a self-selected sample of the **speech-conscious**, those people who are interested in language and speech and who might therefore be motivated to invest time and effort in answering the questionnaire. Thanks to press and radio publicity, I was able to reach a fair number of them. The final sample size was 1,932.

Our changing preferences

By comparing the answers given by different age groups we can find evidence of pronunciation changes in progress. Some of these trends are well-known, but others may come as a surprise. All changes mentioned below are statistically significant.

One of the words changing most rapidly is ***delirious***. The traditional pronunciation of this word, /dɪ'lɪrɪəs/, has the same stressed vowel as *spirit*, and that is what 70% of the oldest age group (65+) voted for. But this is being displaced by a new pronunciation /dɪ'lɪəriəs/, rhyming with *serious*, and this is preferred by as many as 80% of the youngest group (25 years and under). The trend line for /ɪ/ goes sharply down, that for /ɪə/ rises sharply.



Sometimes the newly popular pronunciation is one that has traditionally been condemned as incorrect. This is the case with ***mischievous***, where 52% of the youngest group voted for stress on the second syllable, /mɪs'tʃi:vəs/. But taking all age groups together, 73% prefer to stress it on the first syllable, /'mɪstʃɪvəs/. Even for ***nuclear***, where there is very general agreement that it ought to end like *likelier*, one-seventh of the youngest group voted for its ending like *circular*.

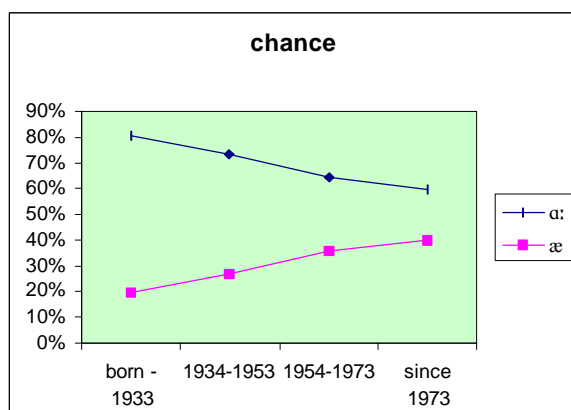
The young get their revenge when we take some newer words. They are pretty certain that ***gigabyte*** starts /'gɪg-/ , like *giggle*. But 30% of the oldest group thought it would be better with /'dʒɪg-/ , /'gɑɪg-/ , or /'dʒɑɪg-/ , which would get them no geek cred at all. The young know that a shopping ***mall*** is a /mɔ:l/, but a majority of those over 45 think it's a /mæl/, like *The Mall* in front of Buckingham Palace. Virtually all the young prefer ***ecosystem*** with /i:/ for the first vowel; over a quarter of the over-65's think it has /e/, like *echo*.

Spelling continues to influence pronunciation. Whereas ***falcon*** used to be pronounced with /ɔ:/ (*fall*) or perhaps /ɒ/ (*follow*), half of the under-26's in the sample prefer it with /æ/ (*fallacy*). ***Scallop***, similarly, is moving from /ɒ/ to /æ/. ***Forehead*** is increasingly pronounced as *fore* plus *head*, rather than in the traditional way rhyming with *horrid*.

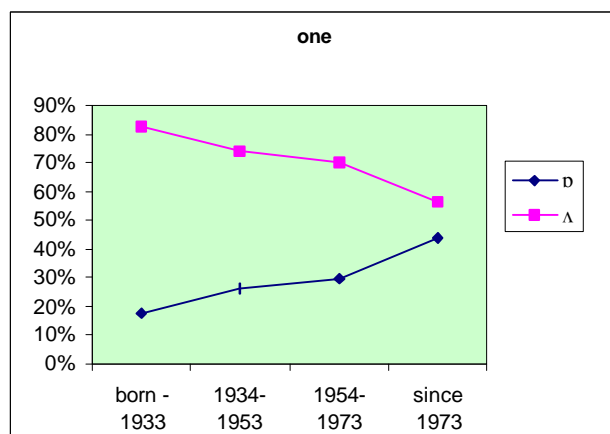
The last case can also be seen as a kind of morphological regularization. This is certainly the explanation for /s/ in ***newspaper*** being progressively displaced by /z/, and for a sharpish rise in /ju:θs/ as the plural of ***youths*** — though a majority in all age groups still prefer /ju:ðz/. (The latter, the traditional form, exhibits the same kind of irregularity as *knife-knives*, though without showing it in the spelling.)

Declining deference

There is a widespread perception, particularly among the young, that RP is no longer trendy. We can see the effects of the change in its evaluation by looking at the voting patterns for the vowels in ***chance*** and ***one***. In these words the RP vowel faces a rival, regionally associated with the north of England. The proportion of northerners in the sample was approximately constant across age groups. Yet in both words the proportion expressing a preference for the non-RP vowel rises as we move from older to younger respondents. The inference is that older northerners are more ready to vote

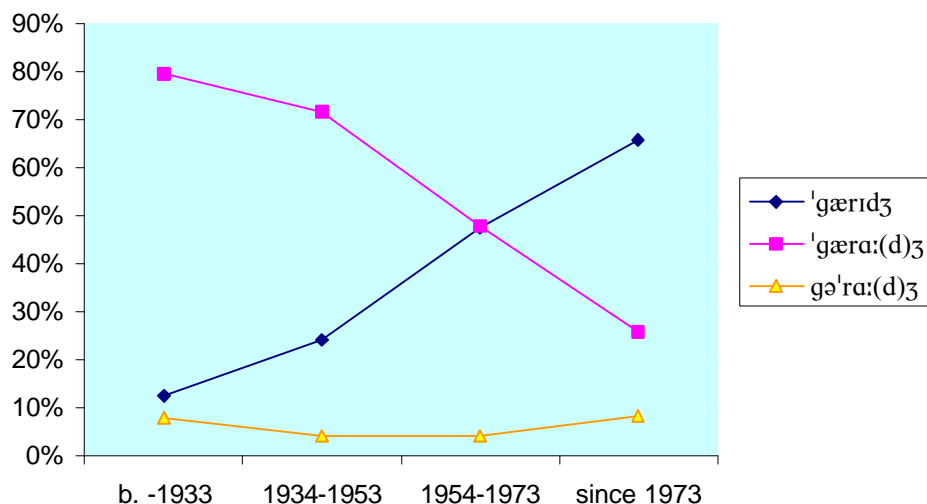


for the southern/RP vowel even though it may not be their native one; younger northerners feel no such obligation.



Vowel reduction

As every teacher knows, English vowels in unstressed syllables tend to be reduced (weakened). But it is *only* a tendency: some are, some aren't. One of the words in the survey was **garage**, where /'gæɾɑ:(d)ʒ/, with an unreduced second vowel, faces competition from /'gæɾɪdʒ/, rhyming with *marriage*. As the graph shows, the latter is sharply increasing in popularity. There are few takers for the American habit of stressing the final syllable.



In words ending in *-ary*, however, the trend seems to be towards restoring a strong vowel. In all of **necessary**, **ordinary** and **February** /eri/ was more popular among the young than among the old. In the case of the corresponding adverbs, the suffix is gradually acquiring not only a strong vowel but also the main stress: in **voluntarily** a majority of the over-45's voted for stress on *vol-*, but 89% of the under-26's voted for stress on *-tar-*.

It is possible that this change reflects American influence, since the Brits who stress *-tar-* might choose as the vowel any of /e/, /æ/, and /eə/; and of course Americans are notorious for tending not to distinguish *merry*, *marry*, *Mary*.

Americanisms?

Several other words seem to show that we are adopting American pronunciations. One striking case is ***schedule***, where the under-26 age group are alone in preferring /sk-/ over the traditional British /ʃ-/. A striking new preference for ***ogle*** to rhyme with *boggle* rather than *mogul* is also perhaps an Americanism: this pronunciation, preferred by 51% of the under-26's, is not mentioned in any British dictionary, though you will find it in both Webster's Collegiate and the American Heritage Dictionary.

Yet Americanisms also encounter resistance. The British are still pretty solid for ***niche*** with a French-style pronunciation, /ni:ʃ/. American /nɪtʃ/ was preferred by less than 10%, old or young. And only 3% of the Brits favoured ***simultaneous*** with /aɪ/ in the first syllable: we're all still pretty solid for /ɪ/.

Ultimately, every word has its own history. The LPD 1998 survey helps us to find out a little bit more about some of them. Mysteries do remain, though. Asked about /s/ or /z/ in ***absorb***, the respondents voted 83-17 in favour of /z/. Asked the same question about ***absurd***, they voted 77-23 for /s/. I do not pretend to have any explanation for this difference. Yet with a sample size of nearly 2000 it is a very robust result.

Oh, and ***Asia***? It seems that /ʃ/ is on the way down, and /z/ on the way up.

¹ Wells, J.C. 1990. *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary*. Harlow: Longman.

² You can inspect it at <http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/wells/poll98.htm>