American dialects

Dialectal variation in pronunciation of vowels

Vowels in American English show considerable dialectal variation, and we mention a few of those variations in the textbook (see Chapter 15 in particular). The linguistics student learning to do phonetic transcription would find a full catalog of variations overwhelming if even such a catalog could be compiled. What follows is a listing of some dialectal variation in vowel pronunciation (with implications for transcription), and students are encouraged to discuss possible dialectal variations with their professors.

High vowels

As suggested in the textbook, some speakers pronounce the high tense vowels [i] and [u] with an off-glide. In that case, the sounds could be transcribed as [ij] and [uw].

Some dialects also tense the high front vowel [I] before the velar nasal [ŋ] in words such as thinking or sink. Instead of pronouncing think as [θIŋk], a speaker of one of these dialects would say [θiŋk]. In southern Appalachia, this vowel is lowered and pronounced as [æ] in a stressed syllable, so think would be pronounced as [θæŋk]. Most speakers of American English pronounce the first vowel in words such as eagle and league with the high front tense vowel [i], so eagle would be transcribed as [igl]. However, in Philadelphia and extending along to the Ohio River valley and environs, the high front tense vowel [i] may be lax when it occurs before [g]. Thus, the word eagle rhymes with wiggle and would be transcribed [ɪɡl]. For some speakers, this laxing extends to front mid vowels as well, so the word pagan [pejgn] is pronounced as [pɛɡn]

Vowels before liquids and nasals and syllabic liquids and nasals

When a vowel occurs before r or l, the liquid affects the vowel, and the effect is different in different dialects. In words such as beer, cheer, and bear, speakers may produce the vowel as a full tense vowel with a schwa before the r, as a full tense vowel without schwa, or as a lax vowel. Thus, the word beer could be pronounced as [biər], as [biɹ], or as [bli].

Similarly, there is a widespread tendency for tense vowels to be lax before l. The result is that a word such as sale [sejl] may sound the same as sell [sɛl]. In some areas, this also extends to [u] and [u] in words such as pool [pʊl] and pull [pʊl]. You
can see a map showing the areas in which these vowels have been merged before /at at
www.ling.upenn.edu/phono_atlas/maps/Map6.html.

There is also dialectal variation in the pronunciation of syllabic liquids and
nasals. For example, in words such as Jordan, garden, or student, some younger
speakers in southern California pronounce a full vowel instead of a syllabic consonant
in the final syllable. For example, student [studnt] would be pronounced as [stʊdənt] by
these speakers. A student who does not hear the syllabic consonant as he or she
pronounces a word should check with the professor.

For speakers in the southern Midland and in the South of the United States, the
sound /ɛ/ becomes /ɪ/ before the nasal in words such as pen, hem, and length. In this
dialect, the word length [lɛŋθ] is pronounced [lɪŋθ]. You can see a map of the extent of
this dialectal variation at www.ling.upenn.edu/phono_atlas/maps/Map3.html.

Schwa

In Contemporary Linguistics, we have transcribed the underlined unstressed
vowels in the following words as a schwa: roses, wanted, sofa. Not all speakers,
however, pronounce a schwa in these words.

 Speakers in the southern Midland distinguish between schwa in Rosa’s [ɹəʊzəz]
and a mid high unrounded vowel /i/, called “barred i,” in roses [ɹəʊzɪz].

 Some speakers pronounce the past tense ending –ed in words such as wanted,
visited, and boarded as [əd], while other speakers pronounce the –ed with a high front
lax vowel: [ɪd].

 As mentioned in the text, for many speakers, the unstressed vowel at the end of
sofa and Canada is a schwa, but other speakers pronounce it as [ʌ].

Back vowels [ɔ], [ɑ], and [o]

Vowel contrasts: [ɔ] and [ɑ]: For many speakers of American English, the vowels in the
word pairs tot and taut, hock and hawk, and Don and dawn are pronounced differently;
these speakers pronounce tot, hock, and Don with the low back unrounded vowel [ɑ]
and pronounce taut, hawk, and dawn with the mid back lax rounded vowel [ɔ].

 However, for a growing number of speakers, this is not the case. For these
speakers, there is only one vowel for the words in the pairs, and that vowel is [ɑ]. This
seems to be a change in progress, which has been mapped by The Phonological Atlas
of North America. You can view their map at
www.ling.upenn.edu/phono_atlas/maps/Map1.html.
The vowel [ɔ] is also used in *Contemporary Linguistics* for the vowel in words such as *or*, *for*, and *more*. Some speakers, however, produce this vowel as the tense vowel [o] (without the off-glide [w]). Similarly, some speakers may produce the tense vowel [o] instead of [ɔ] as the first element in the diphthong [ɔj] in words such as *toy* and *boil*. For these speakers, the word *toy* [tɔj] would be pronounced [toj].

**Northern Cities Shift**

One particularly noticeable characteristic of speakers from cities around the Great Lakes is the fronting of the vowel [ɑ] in words such as *hot* with the result that it has almost approached the low mid vowel [a] for some speakers. Another tendency is for [æ] to become raised and made into a diphthong [ɪə] in some or all environments, so that the name *Ann* sounds almost like *Ian*. These two variations are part of what is known as the Northern Cities Shift, which is described in Chapter 15. You can read more about the Northern Cities Shift at one of the pages within the Phonological Atlas of North America project at the University of Pennsylvania: [www.ling.upenn.edu/phono_atlas/ICSLP4.html#Heading4](http://www.ling.upenn.edu/phono_atlas/ICSLP4.html#Heading4). (Note, however, that somewhat different symbols are used for vowels in this project than in the usual NA transcription or in IPA.)

**Southern Shift**

Speakers in the southern states are well known for their pronunciation of the vowel in words such as *time*, *ride*, and *I*. Instead of pronouncing a diphthong [aɪ], these speakers produce a monophthong [a]; thus *time* [tajm] becomes [tam], and *ride* [rajd] becomes [jad]. Other vowels in the Southern Shift are described in Chapter 15. The Phonological Atlas of North America also contains information about the Southern Shift. If you scroll down in the link listed above for the Northern Cities Shift, you will also find information about the Southern Shift: [www.ling.upenn.edu/phono_atlas/ICSLP4.html#Heading4](http://www.ling.upenn.edu/phono_atlas/ICSLP4.html#Heading4).

You can now try the advanced exercises on transcription.