

American English phonology in British dictionaries and its global implications

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Abstract

English is a global lingua franca, and American English (AmE) is its most widely used variety. Most aspects of 21st-century communication are shaped by AmE, making its mastery indispensable. Many learners, however, favor British English and its dictionaries, thereby studying AmE through a British lexicographical lens. This study investigated six popular British dictionaries to examine their representations of American pronunciation and the global implications. Using mixed methods framed in Chomsky’s Generative Phonology, Zgusta’s Metalexicography, and Kachru’s World Englishes, the study purposively analyzed dictionary screenshots, relevant tables, and graphical figures. Findings reveal that the Oxford Dictionary of English, which diverges most, uses vertical strokes (| |) instead of slashes (/ /) and capitalized digraphs in its respelling system; Collins Dictionary encloses phonemes in round brackets and marks stress with an underscore (_); the Cambridge Dictionary alone, which aligns most closely with General American (GA), uses GA symbols such as /t/ for the flapped /t/ and /ə/, /ɜ:/ for rhoticized vowels; the Oxford English Dictionary uniquely uses the symbol /ε/ for the pet-vowel; and the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary represents the American goat-vowel with the British phoneme /əʊ/. Globally, these inconsistencies in transcriptional norms complicate teaching, affect communicative clarity, weaken standardization efforts, impact digital technologies, and shape sociolinguistic identities. The study recommends collaborative guidelines to harmonize conventions and urges educators to adopt reliable norms. Given the research gap, future studies may investigate how American dictionaries apply GA symbols in representing American English pronunciation and prosody.

Keywords: American English, British dictionaries, British English, Global implications, Phonological representations.

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Contribution of this paper to the literature

This study documents inconsistencies in British dictionaries' transcription of American English phonology, challenging their authority as global standards. It links phonological theory, lexicography, and World Englishes, demonstrating how divergent norms affect teaching, intelligibility, and technology. The study thereby advances scholarship on pronunciation standardization and the global representation of English.

1. Introduction

The nature of English allows it to multiply and creep into habitable space. In this nature, it also embeds the flexibility to converge with users and the environment: a reality that has contributed to the popularity and dominance of English since the last century. Indeed, as [Kelly \(2001\)](#) observes, “English long ago outgrew the limits of the land from which it takes its name.” As [Yong and Peng \(2022\)](#) note, “Whether a language really has an international position and influence is chiefly decided by whether it can play the special role recognized by major countries and regions in the world.” The adaptability of English to users and environments results in dialects, as each language community develops and identifies with a variety of the language. In addition to the traditional variety, British English, other dialects emerge as standard, owing to the size and influence of the users. American English (AmE) became the first non-traditional standard, with native users thrice the size of native British English users. AmE emerged as a symbol of American independence from Britain and has not only flourished as a healthy language but also strengthened the roots of English through influence. This is quite reflected in [Shu and Liu \(2019\)](#) confirmation that “most of the foreign teachers in China come from the United States and Canada.” English dialects share many common features; thus, AmE differs from British English in various linguistic aspects, ranging from the written, spoken, and signed mediums. Notably, [Upton, Kretzschmar, and Konopka \(2001\)](#) emphasize that “Education is the prime consideration in the formation of American standards, and historically different spoken standards have obtained for different regions of the country.” America’s control over English is not disconnected from its technological, economic, and political supremacy. The best universities and most scholarships are from America, further attracting immigrants who are either proficient in English or prepared to learn it. The most widely spread English in the world easily became American English. However, the longevity of age-old English printing houses and the size of former British colonies still foster the advancement of British English. Although [Wells \(2019\)](#) notes that “the existing descriptions of standard British English pronunciation, known as RP, are outdated,” British dictionaries still sell. Even users inclined to American English prefer or own British dictionaries. Stating that the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) is more open to neologisms than its American counterparts, [Creese \(2018\)](#) emphasizes, “it includes more information in the new-word entries it carries, and the quality of the information included is higher.” This openness is further illustrated in [Ahmed's \(2025\)](#) observation that 49 Nigerian words were added to the OED in 2020 and 2025, with 28 of them not included in the Nigerian component of the international corpus of English (ICE). While this reflects consideration for other sources of language use besides a corpus, it also demonstrates how English expands to accommodate each language community in which it finds itself. [Yong and Peng \(2022\)](#) confirm that “It is a strategy of paramount significance for British publishers to develop English dictionaries that are geared towards the specific needs of foreign users.”

Apart from being rhotic, pronouncing the ‘r’ after a vowel, and having a few distinct sounds, the American English sound system is not far different from British English, but it is represented differently by most British dictionaries, which are in wider use than their American counterparts. Thus, learners and scholars encounter challenges in matching British dictionaries’ phonological transcriptions of American words to their sociolinguistic realities. This difficulty is further illustrated by [Abalkheel \(2020\)](#), who notes that “it is often complicated to relate one's unique needs for a dictionary to a native English-speaking instructor when trying to obtain the data to make an appropriate decision.” The importance of dictionaries as guides in language learning cannot be overstated. These are reference materials that not only reflect and preserve but also influence usage. Both teachers and learners need dictionaries to confirm information about a word. British dictionaries have the most influence on English learning and learners, as “British English lexicographical traditions and dictionary paradigms have exerted profound, continuous, and far-ranging influence upon world lexicography” ([Yong, 2022](#)). Consequently, their transcriptions shape speakers’ perceptions of other language variants, especially since they began regularly juxtaposing British and American usage.

[Yong \(2022\)](#) emphasizes that British English lexicography has been extensively researched, and the findings from this research have served as a major source of philosophies and techniques for the inception and development of dictionary making. Building on this authority, and considering the number of Commonwealth nations that use British dictionaries, learners who wish to familiarize themselves with modern English, presumably American English, must rely on several British dictionaries with varying phonemic representations. Teachers of beginner linguists also face the challenge of addressing the inconsistencies in popular British dictionaries in representing American pronunciation. Hence, there is confusion about which dictionary to prioritize and which phonological conventions to learn. While the internet, media, and scholarship expose English speakers to American English, it is important not only to learn it but also to understand the components of its speech sounds. As such, this study sought to achieve the following objectives:

- i. To examine the phonological representations of American English in British dictionaries.
- ii. To investigate the pedagogical, communicative, and standardization consequences in global contexts.

Given the peculiar ways British dictionaries present American spoken English, this study guides teachers and learners in deciding which dictionaries to adopt and in avoiding confusion over the representation of American spoken English. It also provides concrete evidence to help curriculum designers, educators, and students connect the learning of American English with both dictionary use and real-life practice.

British lexicographers will benefit from this study by learning to maintain greater consistency in their representations for users' maximum satisfaction. Moreover, while there are many studies comparing British and American English, few focus on the British depiction of American English. This study fills that gap and opens a new discussion on how British dictionaries influence the learning of American English.

This study focused on analyzing the phonological representation of American speech sounds in popular British dictionaries. Six British dictionaries were sampled, namely: the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), Oxford Dictionary of English (ODE), Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (OALD), Cambridge Dictionary, Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE), and Collins Dictionary. The online versions of these dictionaries were preferred, as they are the most updated among all formats (print, app, and online). However, other versions were considered only when there was a need for comparison. Thus, the phonological aspects of American English were purposefully investigated, comparing how different notable British dictionaries represent them. Primary data were obtained from these dictionaries, with screenshots presented in this paper as evidence.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Impact and Evolution of English in a Global Context*

The plurality of English has produced multiple varieties recognized by native speakers and linguists. This reflects the ever-growing nature of the language and the theory of the three circles: the inner circle (native speakers), the outer circle (users of English as a second language), and the expanding circle (speakers of English as a foreign language). Acknowledging Mandarin as the most spoken language in the world, [Rao \(2019\)](#) notes that English has attained its global status because Mandarin is regionally confined. This linguistic diffusion is further evident in the varieties across the three circles, which underscore the worldwide use of English. Thus, the world is linked by a language that facilitates learning, fosters multicultural interaction, and has traditionally positioned native speakers as norm-setters. Specifically, [Dangal \(2023\)](#) observes that “American English has emerged as the lingua franca of the modern world, playing a pivotal role in global communication.” The 21st century is marked by Englishes, raising concerns about learning and standardization. Although the standardization of English has been ongoing for centuries, it has assumed new dimensions in this century. Reflecting on this trend, [De Schryver \(2024\)](#) predicts that “Picturing the dictionary, therefore, in terms of what it is, what it does or how it looks will be nigh impossible in the future.” Despite numerous dictionary producers and lexicographical objectives, historically authoritative dictionaries continue to guide global learning and communication. Other instructional books differ in their approaches owing to the linguistic philosophies of their producers, resulting in diverse outcomes. Reliable dictionaries remain useful, although the question persists as to which should be prioritized. In a broader sense, [Peng \(2024\)](#) notes that “English fluency equips individuals with a distinct competitive edge, acting as a passport to a world of opportunities.” With lexicographical phonological models as guides, learners across circles can acquire local forms mutually intelligible within and beyond their circles. The rapid evolution of English produces varieties not always intelligible across local contexts, yet adaptation across cultures enhances understanding. The global spread of English has impacted all speakers. The notion of the native speaker is gradually becoming a myth, as non-natives increasingly contribute to the language’s rapid development. While other languages influence English, English also absorbs them. Local identities are often subordinated to global intelligibility. This reflects globalization and the role of English in it. Such globalization, however, has historical foundations, as [Yong \(2022\)](#) observes: “Owing to the obvious social superiority and cultural hegemony of the British and their language, those who spoke other European languages...came to merge into the flux of the English-speaking population.” The world is largely unified by English as a global medium, yet this emerging linguistic culture simultaneously drives the erosion of some languages and the transformation of others into new forms. Thus, according to [Park \(2017\)](#) “Future innovations are likely to come from interdisciplinary perspectives that strive to move beyond the traditional scope of linguistics and language study toward interfaces with social dimensions that can illuminate the practical conditions of English in the world.

2.2. *Phonological Features and Lexical Adaptations of American English*

According to [Yong \(2022\)](#) “The rise of the United States as a newly emerging power... inevitably led to the increased importance of English, thereby giving American English, originally a modification of British English, greater global prominence. Confirming America’s powerful cultural influence on the rest of the world, [Lindsey \(2019\)](#) observes that “within the English-speaking world, this includes aspects of pronunciation.” In line with this, [Makino \(2011\)](#) notes: “in Japan, American English is taught as a tacit target model in the school system. By implication, American pronunciation is taught to the students. Some linguists have often described American English as simplified, in contrast to British English, which is typically regarded as more traditional. This distinction is further complicated by issues of pronunciation, since, as [Yule \(2023\)](#) observes, “Written English is often a poor guide to pronunciation.” However, [Roca \(2016\)](#) believes that understanding English spelling in detail requires prior acquaintance with the fundamentals of both phonetics and phonology. In this regard, Noah Webster, in his project to create a distinct and accessible language for Americans, introduced spellings to match speech sounds (phonetic spelling) and encouraged pronouncing words as they are spelled (spelling pronunciation). Many new words were added to the American lexicon, some of which did not stand the test of time. America's phonetic spelling and pronunciation mirror the practices of many learners of English as a second language, thereby increasing the number of speakers who adopt AmE compared to BrE. Spelling, pronunciation and greater speech tempo are common features of AmE. Other features that set it apart are vowel quality ([Ladefoged & Johnson, 2015](#)), stress patterns, and rhoticity (pronouncing the letter 'r' even when it follows a vowel: a practice absent in traditional British dialects). According to [Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams \(2018\)](#) “Part of knowing a language means knowing what sounds (or signs) are in that language and what sounds are not. While it is important to keep records of a language in both speech and writing, American linguists introduced modifications to the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) for transcribing American speech sounds. Dictionaries helped implement these transcription rules. American transcription phonemes gradually developed through phonetics and phonology research in the United States to capture the peculiarities of American English. British dictionaries and others addressing American English adopted the American phonemes, thereby bridging the gap between American phonological reality and user perception. Given the reputation of British dictionaries and their wide readership ([Ndububa, 2025b](#)) when these works show inconsistency in representing American speech sounds, users get confused or misled.

2.3. The Global Authority of British Dictionaries in Shaping English Usage

Britain has a rich literary culture that has attracted admirers from many places and periods. Through the written word, British English has captivated audiences worldwide” (Ac, 2024). Language scholars and enthusiasts trace the spread and significance of English in the 21st century to its roots in the narratives of English writers and historians. This love for English motivates interest in traditional English books, with dictionaries being a central part of this tradition. As Yong (2022) observes, “Britain has become well established as a role model in both theoretical and practical aspects of English lexicography.” The enduring prominence of English has motivated language regulators to investigate its growth and development, a task that requires examining British dictionaries. Interest in British dictionaries and the cultural history of English has enhanced their status in lexicography. Exams such as Cambridge English, O-levels, A-levels, and the widely accepted IELTS are primarily British English-based, influencing English teaching worldwide and drawing learners to British dictionaries. Many countries, especially those in the Commonwealth, base their curricula on British English. As Shu and Liu (2019) note, “Most Chinese English teachers usually teach students British English pronunciation.” British publishers like Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press dominate international textbook production, while the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (OALD), according to Ndububa (2025c), is “the most popular and respected learner’s dictionary.” Yong and Peng (2022) also confirm that the Guinness Book of World Records recognized the Oxford English Dictionary as “the most inclusive monolingual print dictionary in the world.”

Given the linguistic authority of British dictionaries and their treatment of American English, learners interested in American English depend on them. Thus, according to Sustarsic (2005), “it is only in the British dictionaries that we are likely to find both standard British and standard American pronunciation. Dictionaries are noted for recording standard forms of a language, although popular nonstandard forms are also recorded for documentation or sociolinguistic value. Based on corpus evidence, historical significance, linguistic rules, prescriptive institutions, or editorial judgment, words are recorded in dictionaries. These factors also apply to how British dictionaries document American English speech sounds. According to Ndububa (2025b), “British English dictionaries transcribe pronunciation using the IPA. The growing influence of American English since the 20th century is perhaps the main reason British dictionaries focus closely on American speech sounds. As Abu Fares (2019) notes, “With the passage of time, American English influenced British English and enriched its vocabulary.” Mammadzada (2023) also offers interesting insights from a novel perspective on American English and its influence on British and other regional Englishes. This influence, combined with the historical and institutional authority of British dictionaries, shapes how American English is codified globally, creating tensions between native American English phonology and its standardized representation.

2.4. Dictionaries as Reliable Tools for Language Learning

Dictionaries provide invaluable guidance in language learning. Peters and Fernández (2018) note that the community of practice involves applied linguists and language teachers, so as to optimize dictionary content for less/more advanced second-language learners. The phonological representations help both teachers and learners understand the sound properties of words. Hence, while dictionary makers pursue their objectives and focus on their audience, there should be consistency in the representation of speech sounds as affirmed. There should be not only consistency but also a clear lexicographical commitment to accuracy. Although dictionaries are man-made, they can be refined through thorough editorial sessions and constant revisions. Dictionaries command users’ respect and trust, and should meet their needs. According to Gouws (2018) “Dictionaries must provide data that contribute to satisfying the lexicographic needs of their intended target users. If a dictionary includes phonemic representations, they should be accurate. If a phonemic representation is conditional or tentative, this should be clearly indicated. This supports the view that “the most important sounds are the ones that can change the meaning of words” Carley, Mees, and Collins, (2018). Print, app, and web versions of a dictionary should all have the same content, and any differences should be clearly stated. Confusion arises when a dictionary provides incorrect information on word use or pronunciation. Learning is hindered when the user is misinformed. The role of a dictionary in providing reliable information is undermined when users’ needs are not addressed, because “the information needs that can be met by dictionaries and other lexicographical products are not abstract needs” Tarp (2018). As language learning materials, dictionaries are indispensable tools for tutors. Given their role in facilitating learning, clarity should be the predominant feature of every dictionary. The editorial team is not available to individual users for clarification or support. The credibility of a lexicographical work prompts a teacher’s endorsement, and this acknowledgment should be justified. Learners who need guidance in dictionary use may be at risk of internalizing flawed lexicographical content. Thus, it is advised that “each department involved in dictionary-making must uphold rigorous diligence” to ensure that the output is a trusted resource for users.

2.5. Empirical Review

Many studies have been conducted on American English from various perspectives, contrasting it with British English or investigating its components. Most studies focus on grammar or vocabulary. Very few examine phonological aspects, as Shu and Liu (2019) did; their study investigated the phonological differences between British and American English from a Chinese learner’s perspective. It reviewed existing literature to analyze the reasons behind pronunciation differences and laid a foundation for Chinese students to acquire authentic British or American English pronunciation. The findings revealed, among other things, that “The phonetics...of the two are generally the same, but the differences are relatively small” (p. 301).

Based on Sweller’s Cognitive Load Theory and Lado’s Contrastive Analysis Theory, Ndububa (2025b) used a comparative qualitative research design to analyze screenshots from popular British dictionaries and examine the challenges in teaching English speech sounds to non-native speakers. The study found that “many notable British dictionaries have dissimilar ways of enclosing phonemic transcriptions” (p. 84). Highlighting the research gap, Ndububa recommends that further studies consider investigating American transcriptions, since this was outside the scope of the study.

This study stands out as the only one to investigate the representation of American English phonology in notable British dictionaries, thereby addressing the research gap identified by Ndububa (2025b), who analyzed British speech sounds in the same sources.

2.6. Theoretical Framework

This study was framed primarily within Generative Phonology (GP), with Metalexicography as a secondary framework, and further grounded in the World Englishes paradigm (Kachru, 1992), particularly (Kachru, 1985) Three Circles Model.

Chomsky and Halle (1968) laid the foundation of Generative Phonology, which has given rise to other theories and been further developed over the years by linguists such as Goldsmith and Laks (2023) and Jensen (2004) as well as expanded in many works, including Goldsmith, Riggle, and Yu (2011) edited volume. GP posits that phonology involves not only the study of sounds but also the mental rules and underlying forms governing them. The theory has several principles that support this study's aims. Some of these principles are: every word has an underlying form in the speaker's mind which guides pronunciation, although phonological rules may alter these forms in specific speech contexts (this helped to assess whether American pronunciations are well captured in British dictionaries); every sound has unique features for describing it, and thus pronunciation is not solely based on letter combinations (this helped to determine whether British dictionaries mark American phonological features properly); and each distinctive sound property is either switched on or off depending on the phonological context (this principle guided the study in examining how British dictionaries marked the presence or absence of unique sound features like rhoticity in phonological representations). These three principles supported the first objective of this study, which was to examine the phonemic representations of American English words in selected British dictionaries.

According to De Schryver (2023), "The discipline of metalexicography is generally considered to have started in earnest with the publication of the Manual of Lexicography by Ladislav Zgusta. As a supporting theoretical framework for the study, metalexicography investigates not only the words in the dictionary but also methods of compilation, the clarity, concision, and completeness of entries, how entries are structured, and the extent to which a dictionary meets its lexicographical objectives.

The World Englishes theory emphasizes the plurality, functionality, and sociolinguistic reality of English, the legitimacy of its varieties, the norm-setting role of native speakers, and the norm-dependence of non-natives. The Three Circles Model holds that, based on the spread and use, English can be grouped into three hierarchies, with each variety influencing others through globalization. To address the complex international nature of English, Kachru (1985) urges recognizing "the present variation in English in terms of the three circles and the variation within each circle" and adopting "various authoritative means for controlling the 'divisiveness' and multiplicity of norms." In sum, Kachru (1985) argues that "what is needed is both attitudinal change and professionalism based on pragmatism and linguistic realism" (p. 29). The theory was particularly suitable for addressing the third objective of this study, given the adopted research design.

3. Methodology

The study employed a mixed-methods, comparative, and quantitative research design. The qualitative component involved analyzing and interpreting the phonemic representations of American speech sounds across selected British dictionaries. The quantitative component supported this by presenting frequency counts of sound occurrences in tables and visually illustrating, in percentages, the extent to which each dictionary aligns with or deviates from conventional American phonetic symbols. The study used purposive sampling, deliberately selecting dictionaries that consistently capture American phonemic transcriptions, with online access preferred due to more frequent updates and the absence of print versions; app versions were used when full online access was unavailable. The dictionaries sampled included the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), Oxford Dictionary of English (ODE), Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (OALD), Cambridge Dictionary +Plus, Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE), and Merriam-Webster Dictionary, owing to their widespread use in English-learning communities. Although Collins Dictionary was not fully engaged due to its limited provision of American transcriptions, it was included to illustrate other aspects of phonological representation. Data were collected through document analysis of phonemic transcriptions, which involved capturing entry images, tabulating sound occurrences, and quantifying them for graphical presentation. To ensure clarity and precision, the dictionaries were sometimes zoomed in before image capture, and the images were trimmed to display only the transcriptions, excluding irrelevant information.

In this paper, image datasets are presented first, followed by tabular data and then bar chart data, each of the three categories significantly and distinctly supporting thematic analyses to address the study objectives based on the adopted research methods. The image datasets capture aspects of the study that the tables and the chart do not, while the tabular data explicitly compare the phonological representation of American English sounds in British dictionaries with those of GA. The phonemes are analyzed horizontally (from top to bottom) according to their appearance in the tables. GA phonemes were selected according to Fromkin et al. (2018); Ladefoged and Johnson (2015) and Jones (2011) "Symbols Used for the Transcriptions", Upton et al. (2001) and Wells (2000) "Key to Phonetic Symbols for English").

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Typographic Encoding of Phonological Information

Dictionaries, designed with specific objectives for target users, vary in their lexicographical outputs. This subsection examines selected British dictionaries, illustrating their treatment of the phonemic representation of American speech sounds.



Figure 1. Collins – Encoding.



noun

1 a heavy defeat of a sporting opponent:
they confirmed their

Figure 2. ODE – Encoding.



noun

the process of separating grain from corn or other crops:
farm workers started the

Figure 3. ODE – Encoding.

In Figure 1, Collins Dictionary uses round brackets to enclose phonemes instead of slant strokes and employs an undertie (̣) under the /e/ phoneme to indicate stress, both of which are uncommon in standard phonemic representation. In Figure 2, the ODE uses vertical strokes to enclose phonemes and capitalizes the phonemic symbols: other uncommon transcriptional practices. In Figure 3, the ODE uses an incorrect transcription of a word contrary to its lexicographical rules: the word *threshing* is transcribed the same way as *thrashing* in Figure 2, which constitutes a transcriptional anomaly.

4.2. Treatment of Historically Silent Aitches in Wh-Initial Lemmas

Dictionaries are indispensable resources for documenting a language and providing essential information for learners. However, they may also mislead with inaccurate or ambiguous information. The images below illustrate how specific British dictionaries represent the articulation of traditionally silent aitches in wh-initial words.



pronoun

1 [interrogative pronoun] asking for information specifying something

Figure 4. ODE – Aitch.

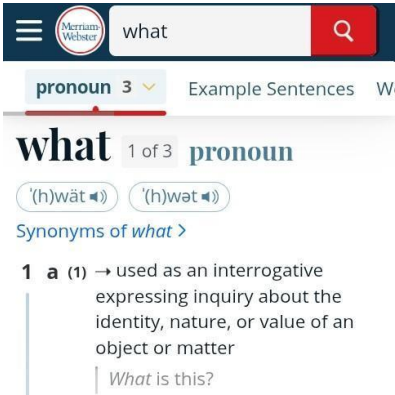


Figure 5. Webster – Aitch.

Definition of **which** pronoun from the Oxford
Advanced Learner's Dictionary

which *pronoun, determiner*

A1

/wɪtʃ/

/wɪtʃ/

Idioms

- 1 ★ **A1** used in questions to ask somebody to be exact about one or more people or things from a limited number

Figure 6. OALD – Aitch.

The same word has been searched in the dictionaries represented in Figures 4 to 6. In Figure 4, the ODE presents in the transcription that the aitch (h) may be pronounced. Although the phoneme is in brackets to suggest it is optional, most British dictionaries (including the remaining samples in this study) do not recognize the phoneme at all in its pronunciation or transcription. In Figure 5, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary provides the same result as the ODE in Figure 4. In Figure 6, the OALD indicates the omission or silencing of the aitch (h) in the word, a result similarly found in the OED, Cambridge Dictionary, LDOCE, and Collins Dictionary.

4.3. Cross-Varietal Representation of the Rhoticized Schwa and Flapping

Rhoticity and flapping are common features of American phonology, and lexicographical works endeavor to represent them for learners. The three notable dictionaries shown below illustrate the British representation of American rhoticized schwas and the flapped voiceless alveolar plosive.

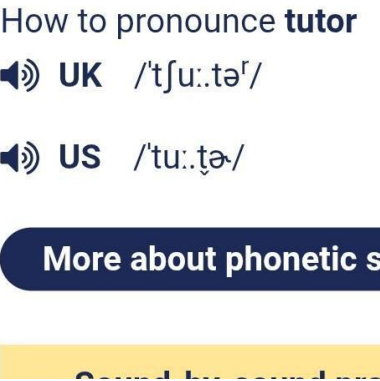


Figure 7. Cambridge – RS/F.

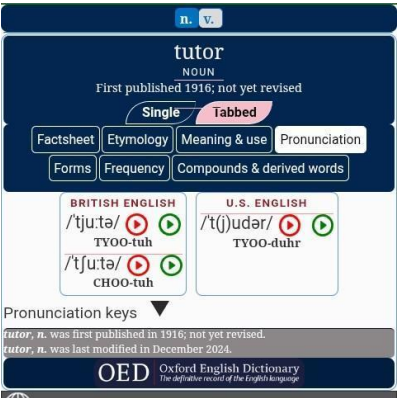


Figure 8. OED – RS/F.

tutor

From Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English

Related topics: [Education](#), [College](#)

tu·tor¹ /ˈtʃʊtə \$ ˈtu:tər/ ●●○ **noun**

[countable] 🔊 🔊

1 someone who gives private lessons to one student or a small group, and is paid directly by them

🔊 The children were educated at home by a succession of tutors.

► see thesaurus at [teacher](#)

Figure 9. LDOCE – RS/F.

In Figure 7 the Cambridge Dictionary shows the American transcription of the word tutor as /ˈtuːt̬ər/, indicating flapping with a diacritic under the /t/ phoneme. The transcription also shows that a schwa /ə/ occurring in suffixes ending with 'r' (like -or or -er) is rhoticized and represented distinctly in accordance with established General American phonetic notation. In Figure 8, the OED confirms that the voiceless alveolar plosive /t/ is flapped but transcribes it as a /d/ phoneme. The OED has no special rhoticized schwa symbol but adds an /r/ at the end of the transcription to indicate rhoticity. In Figure 9, the LDOCE shows no recognition of the flapped /t/, but recognizes the rhoticity of the schwa at the end by adding an /r/ phoneme.

4.4. Representation of the Receding Centring Diphthongs

Given the absence of centring diphthongs in American English, English dictionaries should reflect this. Presented below are the British representations of this phonemic absence.

fear

NOUN

First published 1895; not yet revised

Single Tabbed

Factsheet Etymology Meaning & use Pronunciation

Forms Frequency Compounds & derived words

BRITISH ENGLISH /fiə/ feer

U.S. ENGLISH /fi(ə)r/ feer

Pronunciation keys

fear, n. was first published in 1895; not yet revised.
fear, n. was last modified in September 2024.

OED Oxford English Dictionary
The definitive record of the English language

feared - Online Dictionary

Figure 10. OED – fear.

tour

NOUN

First published 1913; not yet revised

Single Tabbed

Factsheet Etymology Meaning & use Pronunciation

Forms Frequency Compounds & derived words

BRITISH ENGLISH /tuə/ toor

U.S. ENGLISH /tu(ə)r/ toor

In sense 1.1 also

BRITISH ENGLISH /ˈtaʊə/ tauor

U.S. ENGLISH /ˈtaʊər/ tauor

Figure 11. OED – tour.

air

NOUN¹

Revised 2008

Single Tabbed

Factsheet Etymology Meaning & use Pronunciation

Forms Frequency Compounds & derived words

BRITISH ENGLISH /e:/ air

U.S. ENGLISH /e(ə)r/ air

Pronunciation keys

air, n.¹ was revised in June 2008.
air, n.¹ was last modified in December 2024.

OED Oxford English Dictionary
The definitive record of the English language

air - Online Dictionary

Figure 12. OED – air.

All the sampled dictionaries in this study use a monophthong with rhoticity for centering diphthongs, except the OED, which in Figure 10 employs a schwa to represent the near-close-schwa diphthong, in Figure 11 to represent the near-back-schwa diphthong, and in Figure 12 to represent the open-mid-schwa diphthong.

4.5. Patterns of Error, Irregularity, and Inconsistency

Dictionaries are trusted sources of information, but can mislead through unverified content. Considerable effort goes into producing and updating them. The following dataset shows instances of incorrect or unusual information in British dictionaries, as noted in Figure 3.



Figure 13. OALD – Matrix.

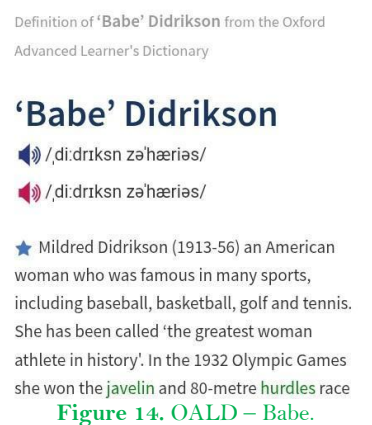


Figure 14. OALD – Babe.

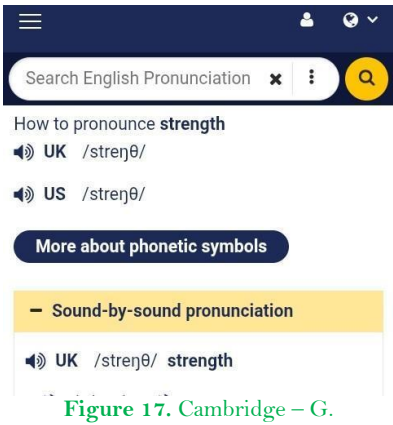
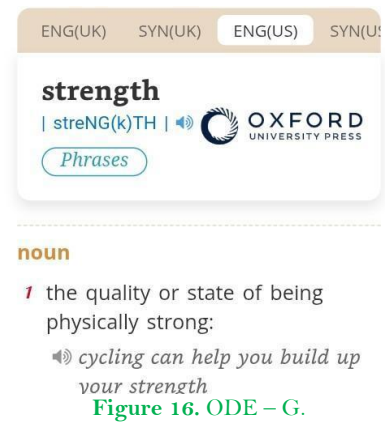


Figure 15. ODE – Higher.

In Figure 13, the OALD transcribes ‘The Matrix’ as /ˌmeɪtrɪks ˈtʃɜːtʃɪl/, which actually represents 'Matrix Churchill'. In Figure 14, it again misrepresents ‘Babe Didrikson’ as /ˌdiːdrɪksn zəˈhæəriəs/, the transcription of 'Didrikson Zaharias’. Both may mislead users and require immediate correction. In Figure 15, the ODE uses unusual symbols for the lemma, unlike its treatment of similar American transcriptions. According to its regular style, the transcription should be |ˈhī(ə)r|, but it is rendered differently: |ˈhaɪə|. This inconsistency in a work of such stature should be addressed immediately.

4.6. The American ‘Strength’ in British Voices

Dictionaries have specific objectives and targeted users, but this does not affect the reliability or precision of their content. When a dictionary presents the standard pronunciation of a language or variety, it reflects the established norms guiding representation. British dictionaries, as shown below, have peculiar perceptions of the American pronunciation of 'strength'.



In Figure 16, the ODE indicates that /k/ may or may not be produced in 'strength' by enclosing it in round brackets. Webster and OED show the same representation. In Figure 17, Cambridge Dictionary does not recognize the /k/ phoneme: a result replicated by LDOCE. In Figure 18, the OALD recognizes the sound but, unlike ODE, does not use brackets to indicate optional realization, unlike Cambridge.

4.7. Diverging Syllables and Rhythmic Twists

Some non-native learners consult multiple dictionaries for comprehensive and comparative purposes. Managing irregular content across these dictionaries can be challenging. As shown below, British dictionaries vary in their transcription of 'Muhammad'.



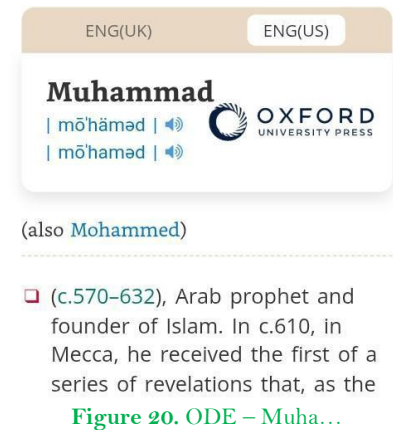


Figure 20. ODE – Muha...

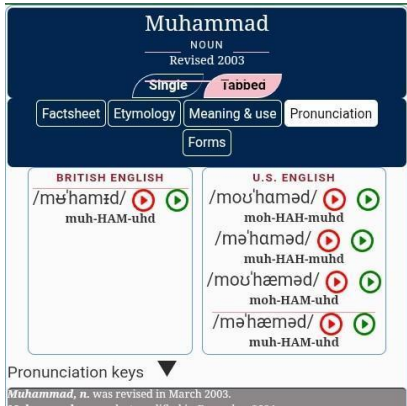


Figure 21. OED – Muha...

In Figure 19, Cambridge Dictionary transcribes the lemma as /moʊ'hæm.ɪd/, while in Figure 20, ODE renders the last vowel as a schwa /ə/. In Figure 21, OED presents four transcriptions: retaining the schwa in the final syllable of the word (as in ODE), using a schwa in the first syllable of two transcriptions (unlike ODE and Cambridge Dictionary), and omitting /æ/ in the middle syllable of two transcriptions (another feature absent in ODE and Cambridge Dictionary). A learner is thus left uncertain about which representation to adopt for a standard exam.

4.8. Cross-Platform Errors, Redundancies, and Inconsistencies

Given the freedom of publishers to produce different forms of their work or release them on various platforms, lexicographers issue different dictionary formats designed for different purposes and contexts. However, while dictionary platforms and graphical designs may vary, content should remain consistent across all platforms. This subsection examines British lexicography’s efforts to ensure consistent content across platforms.

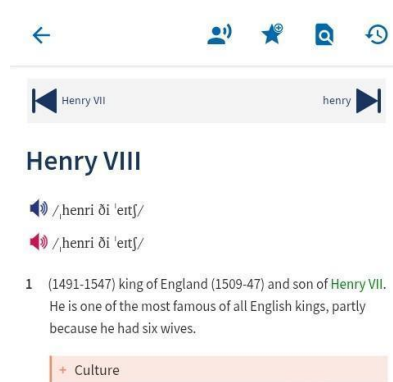


Figure 22. OALD – CP.



Figure 23. OALD – CP.



Figure 24. OALD – CP.

Figures 22 to 24, showing the mobile app version of the OALD, present incorrect transcriptions. These transcriptions do not match the online representations and thus indicate nonuniformity and inconsistency. In Figure 22, the transcription for 'Henry VIII' should be /henri ði 'eɪtθ/, but /henri ði' eɪtʃ/ is shown. In Figure 23, 'Agincourt' is incorrectly transcribed /'ædɪnkɔːr/ instead of /'ædʒɪnkɔːr/. In Figure 24, the lemma 'On Her/His Majesty's Service' does not appear on the online platform and is still not fully transcribed in the app version. The transcription given in the image does not capture the 'His' portion of the lemma and may confuse learners about the actual pronunciation of the phrase. Hence, the phonological representation is incomplete, incorrect, and misleading.

Table 1. Voiceless consonants compared with general American phonetic symbols.

OED	ODE	OALD	Cambridge	LDOCE	Webster	GA
p	p	p	p	p	p	p
t	t	t	t	t	t	t
k	k	k	k	k	k	k
d	d	t	t̬	t	t	t̬
f	f	f	f	f	f	f
θ	TH	θ	θ	θ	th	θ
s	s	s	s	s	s	s
ʃ	SH	ʃ	ʃ	ʃ	sh	ʃ
h	h	h	h	h	h	h
tʃ	CH	tʃ	tʃ	tʃ	ch	tʃ

Table 1 contrasts standard American voiceless consonants with both Merriam-Webster and General American (GA). All sampled dictionaries reflect GA for the first six symbols: /p/, /t/, /k/, /f/, /s/, and /h/. The alveolar flap, /t̬/, is shown only by Cambridge. OED and ODE use /d/, possibly as an alveolar flap, while OALD, LDOCE, Cambridge, and Webster use /t/, indicating no recognition of the phonological process. Theta /θ/, esh /ʃ/, and the voiceless postalveolar affricate /tʃ/ are similarly represented in OED, OALD, Cambridge, and LDOCE. Webster uses /th/, /sh/, and /ch/, while ODE capitalizes these digraphs: /TH/, /SH/, and /CH/. Based on similarity with the ten GA symbols, the dictionaries score as follows: Cambridge 10/10, OED 9/10, OALD 9/10, LDOCE 9/10, and both ODE and Webster 6/10, making Cambridge fully reflective of GA voiceless consonants.

Table 2. Voiced consonants compared with general American phonetic symbols.

OED	ODE	OALD	Cambridge	LDOCE	Webster	GA
b	b	b	b	b	b	b
d	d	d	d	d	d	d
g	g	g	g	g	g	g
v	v	v	v	v	v	v
ð	TH	ð	ð	ð	th̥	ð
z	z	z	z	z	z	z
ʒ	ZH	ʒ	ʒ	ʒ	zh	ʒ
dʒ	j	dʒ	dʒ	dʒ	j	dʒ
m	m	m	m	m	m	m
n	n	n	n	n	n	n
ŋ	NG	ŋ	ŋ	ŋ	ŋ	ŋ
l	l	l	l	l	l	l
r	r	r	r	r	r	r
j	y	j	j	j	y	j
w	w	w	w	w	w	w

According to Table 2, the following GA phonemes are represented similarly in the sampled British dictionaries: /b/, /d/, /g/, /v/, /z/, /m/, /n/, /l/, /r/, and /w/. These four dictionaries—OED, OALD, Cambridge Dictionary, and LDOCE—use the same phoneme /ð/ as GA, while Webster uses /th/ with a subscript diacritic (̥) below it, and ODE uses the same notation as Webster but in capital letters. For /ʒ/, the same four dictionaries use the GA symbol; Webster uses /zh/; and ODE does the same but capitalized. For /dʒ/, the four dictionaries again follow GA, while Webster and ODE use /j/. For /ŋ/, all sampled dictionaries use the GA symbol except ODE, which uses /NG/. Finally, for /j/, the four dictionaries follow GA, while Webster and ODE use /y/.

Based on similarity scores, the ODE, OALD, Cambridge, and LDOCE each have their symbols fully consistent with GA; Webster matches 11 of 15 phonemes, while ODE scores 10/15.

Table 3. Monophthongs compared with general American phonetic symbols.

OED	ODE	OALD	Cambridge	LDOCE	Webster	GA
æ	a	æ	æ	æ	a	æ
əʀ	əʀ	əʀ	ə̆	əʀ	əʀ	ə̆
ɛ	e	e	e	e	e	e / ɛ
əʀ	əʀ	ɜ:r	ɜ̆:	ɜ:r	əʀ	ɜ̆:
ə	ə	ə	ə	ə	ə	ə
ə	ə	ʌ	ʌ	ʌ	ə	ʌ
ɪ	ɪ	ɪ	ɪ	ɪ	ɪ	ɪ
ī	ē	ī	ī	ī	ē	ī
ī	ē	ī:	ī:	ī:	ē	ī: / ī
ɑ	ä	ɑ:	ɑ:	ɑ:	ä	ɑ:
ɔʀ	ô	ɔ:r	ɔ̆:r	ɔ:r	ô	ɔ:
ʊ	oō	ʊ	ʊ	ʊ	u̇	ʊ
u	oō	u:	u:	u:	ü	u: / u

Vowels, in phonetic structural terms, appear more specialized and dialect-specific than consonants, with each dictionary emphasizing particular vowel systems. Among the monophthongs in Table 3, GA’s schwa /ə/ (5th) and /e/ or /ɛ/ (3rd) are the only phonemes consistently represented across all sampled dictionaries. The cat-vowel /æ/ aligns with GA in all but ODE and Webster, which use /a/. The second phoneme, /ə̆/, is a rhoticized schwa, used in GA for suffixes with ‘r.’ Only Cambridge employs this symbol; the others use a schwa with rhoticity /əʀ/. The fourth phoneme, the nurse-vowel, is structured similarly to the rhoticized schwa. Cambridge again uses this exact form, while OED, ODE, and Webster add rhoticity to a schwa, and OALD and LDOCE add it to a reversed epsilon. OED, ODE, and Webster substitute a schwa for the wedge /ʌ/, whereas OALD, Cambridge, and LDOCE align with GA.

For the kit-vowel /ɪ/, ODE and Webster use /i/, while the others follow GA. ODE and Webster also mark /e/ with a diacritic to represent GA’s happy vowel /i/ and its long version /i:/, while OED, OALD, Cambridge, and LDOCE retain GA’s forms. OALD, Cambridge, and LDOCE use /ɑ:/, while OED omits the length colon. ODE and Webster modify /a/ with two dots. None of the dictionaries use GA’s more-vowel: OALD, Cambridge, and LDOCE add rhoticity, while ODE adds rhoticity without the length mark. For the put-vowel /ʊ/, OED, OALD, Cambridge, and LDOCE follow GA, while ODE writes two o’s with a breve to mark shortness, and Webster uses a dotted ‘u.’ At the bottom of the table, the pool-vowels /u:/ (or /u/) appear. ODE writes two o’s with a horizontal diacritic to mark length, Webster uses a ‘u’ with two dots, and ODE, OALD, Cambridge, and LDOCE use GA’s exact symbols.

Based on similarity scores with GA, Cambridge scores 12/13; OALD and LDOCE each score 10/13; OED scores 8/13, while ODE and Webster each score 2/13.

Table 4. Diphthongs compared with general American phonetic symbols.

OED	ODE	OALD	Cambridge	LDOCE	Webster	GA
aɪ	ī	aɪ	aɪ	aɪ	ī	aɪ
aʊ	ou	aʊ	aʊ	aʊ	au̇	aʊ
oʊ	ō	əʊ	oʊ	oʊ	ō	oʊ
eɪ	ā	eɪ	eɪ	eɪ	ā	eɪ
ɔɪ	oi	ɔɪ	ɔɪ	ɔɪ	ôi	ɔɪ

In Table 4, OED, Cambridge, and LDOCE use the same diphthongs as GA. OALD applies a British form for the American snow-diphthong but follows GA for the other four. ODE and Webster both employ the short /ɪ/, the small omicron /o/, and the plain /a/, each symbol bearing a horizontal diacritic on it, to represent /aɪ/, /oʊ/, and /eɪ/, respectively. ODE uses “ou” for the how-vowel and “oi” for the boy-vowel, while Webster combines “a” with a dotted “u” for the how-vowel, and a small omicron with a dot above it combined with /i/ for the boy-vowel. In this section, OED, Cambridge, and LDOCE each score 5/5, OALD scores 4/5, and ODE and Webster each score 0/5.

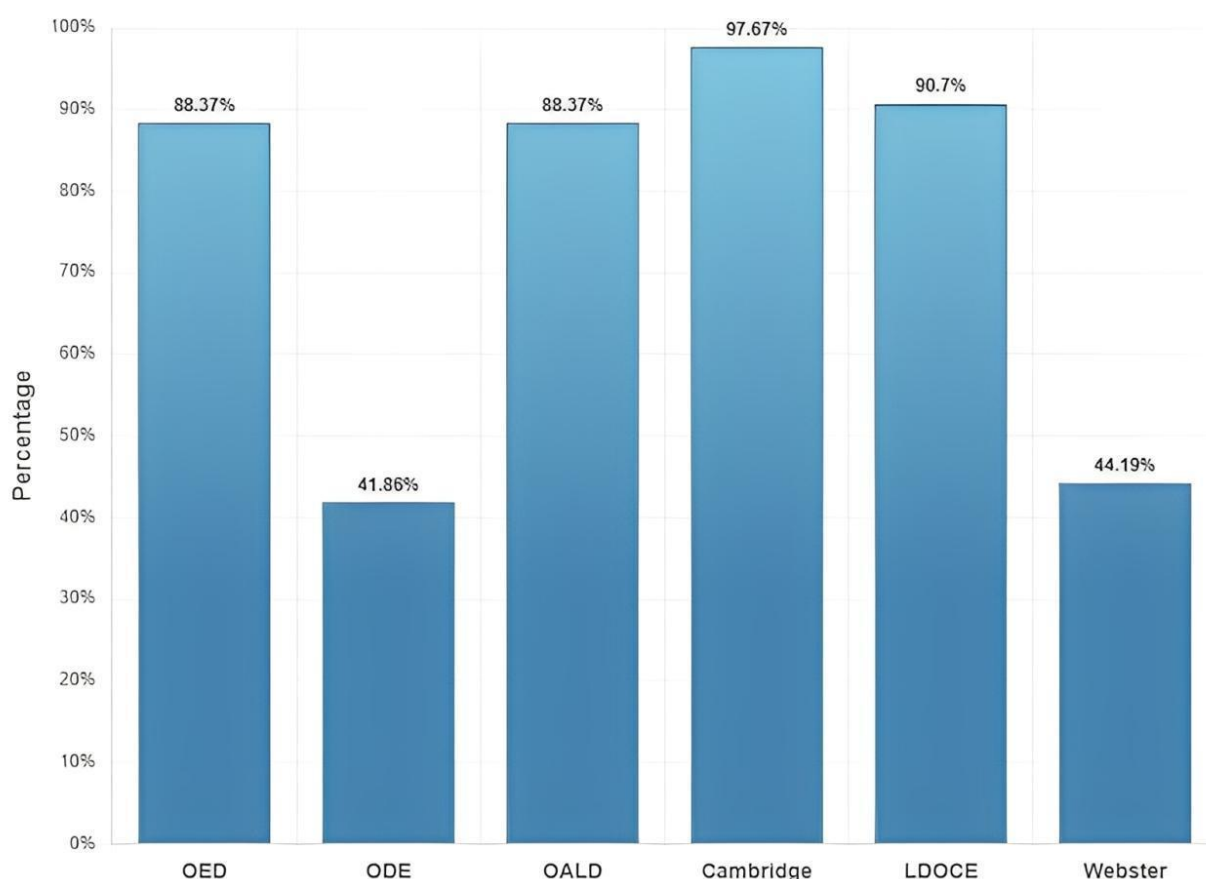


Figure 25. Percentage comparison with General American phonetic symbols.

Figure 25 illustrates, through a bar chart, the similarities between the sampled dictionaries' phonological representation of American English and GA. Based on their overall scores across all tables, Cambridge leads with 97.67% (42/43 phonemes), followed by LDOCE with 90.70% (39/43), and OED and OALD, both at 88.37% (38/43). Webster records 44.19% (19/43), while ODE scores the lowest at 41.86% (18/43). Thus, Cambridge ranks highest in similarity with GA, LDOCE second, and OED and OALD tied in third, while Webster and ODE place fourth and fifth, respectively, both below the average score.

4.9. Findings

In representing American English phonology, Collins Dictionary encloses phonemes in round brackets and marks stress with an underscore (_). The ODE uses vertical strokes (| |) instead of slashes (/ /) and, in its respelling system, employs capitalized digraphs for fricatives, affricates, and nasals with postalveolar, dental, and velar articulation. The ODE also provides options for realizing /h/ in wh-initial words. Distinctively, the OED offers alternatives for producing a schwa /ə/ in centering diphthongs, which are typically treated as monophthongs by other British dictionaries, and also indicates rhoticity. The ODE and OALD display inconsistencies in transcription, often deviating from their own standards. While many phonemes are shared, others follow distinct conventions. Non-uniformities exist between the OALD app and online versions. The ODE aligns partially with Merriam-Webster, and both the EOD and ODE use a schwa for the but-vowel, yielding a stressed schwa in 'above.'

For the flapped /t/, only Cambridge Dictionary uses the GA symbol /ɾ/. The ODE and OED render it as the /d/ in dine, while the OALD and LDOCE retain /t/. Apart from the flapped /t/, the theta /θ/, esh /ʃ/, and char-consonant /tʃ/ (represented as capitalized digraphs in ODE) differ among the dictionaries, but all dictionaries share symbols for other voiceless consonants (/p/, /t/, /k/, /f/, /s/, /h/) and most voiced consonants (/b/, /d/, /g/, /v/, /z/, /m/, /n/, /l/, /r/, /w/). The ODE also uniquely uses /j/ for the joy-consonant and /y/ for the yam-consonant.

Uniquely, the ODE uses plain /a/ for the cat-vowel; other dictionaries use /æ/. Cambridge Dictionary follows GA conventions for rhoticized schwa (others append /r/ to /ə/) and the nurse-vowel. The OED and ODE use /ə/ + /r/ for the nurse-vowel, while OALD and LDOCE use /ɜ/ + /r/. Only the OED represents the egg-vowel as /ɜ/, aligning with GA, while others use /e/. The non-rhotic /ə/ is the only phoneme consistently represented across all dictionaries. The ODE diverges most, assigning unique symbols to nearly every monophthong and representing short and long /u/ with paired 'o's and horizontal diacritics. Hence, users must exercise particular care in distinguishing the phonemes.

With the exception of the ODE and OALD's use of a British phoneme for the know-vowel, all dictionaries share symbols for American diphthongs: /aɪ/, /aʊ/, /eɪ/, and /ɔɪ/.

4.10. Global Implications of Findings

The pedagogical implications of these findings include complications in teaching American English globally, as students in non-native communities acquire incorrect or hybrid pronunciations. Hence, educators must carefully decide which lexicographical norms to adopt for instructional uniformity. Another pedagogical concern is the lack of consistency across platforms, which not only fosters distrust among global learners in the app and web versions of dictionaries but also in their overall reliability. Given that dictionaries can provide inaccurate information, users may lose confidence and interest in consulting them.

The communicative implications include a negative effect on mutual intelligibility when people from different regions, trained on distinct systems, interact. This communicative breakdown, which compromises clarity, identity, and authority, also manifests in professional settings where English serves as a lingua franca. Another communicative issue is the apparent inability of dictionaries to transmit information consistently, which forces individuals to seek information through other means like chatbots and search engines.

The standardization implications include the weakening of efforts to maintain a global standard in international testing systems such as TOEFL and IELTS, as well as in reference works. Thus, the authority of prestigious British dictionaries as standard-bearers is questioned and diminished at the global level. Another consequence for standardization is the risk that, since dictionaries supply data for recognition and text-to-speech systems, inconsistent representations may embed inaccurate speech content into global language technologies, thereby reinforcing non-standardized models worldwide. Because American English may represent the English of the present time, English may appear to be an unregulated language, and thus fosters other countless substandard varieties.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how British dictionaries represent American English phonology and the global consequences of their divergent practices. The findings reveal inconsistent transcriptional norms that complicate teaching, undermine communicative clarity, weaken standardization efforts, impact digital technologies, and shape sociolinguistic identities. These outcomes question the authority of British dictionaries as reference works and call for greater consistency in phonemic representation to support pedagogy, intelligibility, and international standards.

Through a systematic comparative analysis, the study revealed transcriptional differences often overlooked in English language research. By integrating generative phonology, metalexigraphy, and World English theory, it advances a multi-framework approach linking phonological description, dictionary practice, and the global spread of English within Kachru's Three Circles Model.

The study recommends that British dictionaries adopt greater consistency in representing American English phonology, with alignment across print and digital platforms. Collaborative guidelines should harmonize conventions, educators should select reliable norms, and testing bodies and technology developers should review their reliance on dictionary data to prevent flawed representations from spreading globally.

This work focused mainly on British lexicographical sources, with one American dictionary used for comparison, and did not address prosodic features. Future research could examine how consistently major American dictionaries apply General American symbols to represent pronunciation and prosody.

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