

The question was:

What are the differences in pronunciation between British and American English?

Pronunciation in The United States of America:

Pronunciation varies quite dramatically between and within varieties. In the USA at least nine varieties are usually identified and, of course, the more precise and careful the analysis is, the more varieties will be described. These nine varieties are:

Western: spoken roughly west of a line drawn vertically down the centre of the USA.

North Central: spoken in the central northern areas, Montana, North Dakota and the north of Minnesota.

Inland Northern: spoken around the Great Lakes area in Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Indiana and Ohio

Midland: spoken across a central band including Wyoming, Colorado, Nebraska and Iowa

Western Pennsylvania: spoken in Kentucky, West Virginia and Pennsylvania

Southern: spoken across the central southern states from Texas in the west to North and South Carolina in the east

Mid-Atlantic: spoken in the east in the area around Delaware and New Jersey

New York City: spoken in New York

Eastern New England: spoken in Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Connecticut

In addition, there are sub-varieties specific to, e.g., Texas, Appalachia, Chesapeake Bay, Boston, New Mexico and California.

The map looks like this:



Pronunciation in The United Kingdom:

Traditionally, in Britain eight varieties are usually recognised and each is further divided into between three and ten sub-varieties. The main ones are:

Scottish: spoken across the whole of the nation but with significant regional differences

Northern English: spoken south of the Scottish border between it and a line drawn roughly centrally east to west across the country

Midlands: spoken south of the east-west central line, east of Wales and west of East Anglia

East Anglian: spoken to the east of a line drawn from London to The Wash

Southern: spoken in the south east and south-central parts of the country, including London

South Western: spoken in the south west

Welsh spoken in Wales with significant local variations

Ireland: spoken in Northern Ireland and significantly different from the accents of Ireland itself

The map looks like this:



It is clear then that any discussion of differences between British and American English will have to focus on standard varieties. For the purposes of this little guide, we'll take BBC English as the standard British accent and General American as the standard in the USA.

When looked at through this rather distorting lens, the major differences concern vowel sounds but there are three important differences in the pronunciation of consonants which we'll look at first.

| Consonants | | | | |
|------------|---|---------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| Sound | Main differences | Example | American transcription | British transcription |
| /t/ | In British English a double t in the middle of a word is pronounced /t/ In American English the double t is closer to a /d/ sound | <i>butter</i> | /'bʌd.ɾ/ | /'bʌt.ə/ |
| /r/ | 1. In British English the letter r is usually not pronounced at the end of words unless the following sound is a vowel In American English the letter r is almost always sounded | <i>other</i> <i>people</i> | /'ʌð.ɾ.'pi:p.ɫ/ | /'ʌð.ə.'pi:p.ɫ/ |
| | 2. In British English, the letter r is not usually pronounced before a consonant In American English, it is. | <i>heart to</i> <i>heart</i> | /'hɑ:rt.tə.'hɑ:rt/ | /hɑ:t.tə.hɑ:t/ |

There are more vowel differences between British and American English and the variation within the countries is also wider.

Here are some of the main issues:

| Vowels | | | | |
|---------|----------------|---------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| British | American | Example | British transcription | American transcription |
| /ɑ:/ | /æ/ | <i>last</i> | /lɑ:st/ | /læst/ |
| /ɔ:/ | /ɑ:/ | <i>caught</i> | /kɔ:t/ | /kɑ:t/ |
| /ɒ/ | /ɑ:/ (or /ɔ:/) | <i>pot</i> | /pɒt/ | /pɑ:t/ |
| /əʊ/ | /oʊ/ | <i>show</i> | /ʃəʊ/ | /ʃoʊ/ |
| /ɪə/ | /i/ | <i>dear</i> | /dɪə/ | /dɪr/ |
| /eə/ | /e/ | <i>share</i> | /ʃeə/ | /ʃer/ |
| /ʃʊə/ | /ʊ/ | <i>sure</i> | /ʃʊə/ | /ʃʊr/ |
| /ju:/ | /u:/ | <i>new</i> | /nju:/ | /nu:/ |