

"HEAR OUR VOICES" : CHANGES IN SPOKEN NEW ZEALAND ENGLISH

Elizabeth Gordon

Department of Linguistics

University of Canterbury

Margaret Maclagan

Department of Speech and Language Therapy

University of Canterbury

1. Introduction

Every introductory text book on linguistics states that all living languages are constantly changing. Most of the time changes go unnoticed; by the time they become noticed and people begin to write their letters of complaint to newspapers we can be fairly sure that the changes have been underway for a considerable period — even as long as twenty to thirty years (Gordon, 1998). While change is continual, we know that there have been periods in the history of English when it has been more rapid than at other times.

The pronunciation of English in New Zealand is in a period of fairly rapid change at the present time. We have taught our students that New Zealanders can understand other New Zealanders — it is the outsiders who have problems with our speech. But in recent times we have had to question our own teaching. For those of us who consider ourselves middle-aged the pronunciation of young New Zealanders can sometimes cause misunderstandings. Did that person say that her husband brought out the 'best' in her — or was it the 'beast' in her? Why did the TV newsreader say that this was a 'rear' view of the Queen, when Her Majesty was clearly facing the camera? Why does the airport call for people to go to the 'check-in counter' sound so much like the 'chicken counter?' There are many anecdotes like these which demonstrate current changes in New Zealand pronunciation. For those of us who have a professional interest in the clear communication of New Zealand speech, we believe it is important to have a knowledge of present changes.

2. New Zealand English research at the University of Canterbury

The study of pronunciation changes in the past involved working with written records; at its best, this source of data was always imperfect and the findings were often based on plausible suggestions and guesswork. Now at the University of Canterbury we possess recorded spoken data for the entire history of New Zealand English (NZE), something unique in the world. Researchers here are involved in a large project funded by the University of Canterbury and the Royal Society of New Zealand's Marsden Fund to

study the origins and evolution of New Zealand English. (The project has been given the acronym ONZE). The data for the ONZE project consist of three chronological archives of recorded speech representing all stages of the development of modern NZE.

(a) Mobile Unit Archive

The Mobile Disc Recording Unit of the National Broadcasting Corporation of New Zealand was set up after the Second World War. Between 1947 and 1949 a large van with a recording machine was taken to parts of New Zealand to collect (among other things) spoken pioneer reminiscences. Recordings were made of about three hundred speakers, some born in New Zealand as early as the 1850s with the majority born in the period 1860-1880. These recordings (on soft vulcanite discs) have now been copied onto magnetic tape so that they can be listened to repeatedly. Many have been transcribed and analysed, and background information about the speakers has been obtained (Lewis, 1996).

(b) Intermediate Archive

This archive consists of:

(i) interviews with contemporary elderly subjects who are descendants of Mobile Unit speakers and who in the main continue to live in the same communities as their recorded ancestors; and

(ii) contemporary recordings of similar aged subjects obtained by oral historians.

In this archive there are approximately 100 recordings of subjects born in New Zealand (North and South Island) between 1890 and 1930 with the majority born between 1900-1920.

(c) Canterbury Corpus

The third archive contains spoken data of people born between about 1930 and 1980. These recordings were collected between 1994 and 2000 according to a speaker quota sample balanced for age, sex and social class. It has both male and female speakers in two age groups, (20-30 years and 45-60 years) from both middle and working classes. The Corpus, which now contains recordings of about 320 speakers, contains both word-list speech and casual speech from each speaker. Most of the recordings have been collected by students in a third year linguistics class on New Zealand English (Gordon & MacLagan, 1995, 1999).

The advantages of having chronological archives are considerable. We are now able to determine which features of NZE were there from the beginning and which are more recent. Because of the number of speakers, we can be sure that our information about changes in NZE is accurate. Some of the results are surprising. For example, the feature which most clearly distinguishes New Zealanders from Australians is the centralised KIT vowel.¹ New Zealanders claim Australians say 'feesh and cheeps' while Australians

claim New Zealanders say 'fush and chups'. We now know that this was a 20th century development, with the first letters of complaint appearing in the 1960s. The interesting question now to be pursued is why this change occurred when it did.

3. Early features of New Zealand English

(a) TRAP and DRESS

When teaching about changes in NZE it is common practice to compare New Zealand vowels with Received British Pronunciation (RP) purely because this is the best known variety of British English. One of the most obvious differences between NZE and RP today can be found with the front vowels in TRAP and DRESS. RP speakers complain that New Zealanders make no difference between words like *ham* and *hem*, *cattle* and *kettle*. This is untrue, but it shows that the NZ TRAP vowel is realised in the same position as the RP DRESS vowel, so that a NZ pronunciation of *ham* sounds like *hem* to an RP speaker, and hence causes the confusion. In earlier accounts of sound changes in New Zealand, the comparison between the raised NZE vowels and the lower RP ones was interpreted by some to suggest that the RP variant was the starting point for the NZE change. Analysis of speakers in the Mobile Unit archive have shown us that such a view was quite wrong. These raised front vowels were very much a feature of early New Zealand speech and were most likely imported from the British Isles. It is the RP variants which have changed, and subsequently lowered (see Trudgill, Gordon & Lewis, 1998). In recent times TRAP and DRESS in NZE have continued to rise to the point that DRESS has moved up to the position of FLEECE. For some speakers the difference between DRESS and FLEECE is now only a matter of vowel length.

(b) Those terrible diphthongs!

The writing on early NZE always complained about the rising diphthongs, especially those in MOUTH and PRICE, but also in FACE and GOAT (Gordon, 1983; Gordon & Abel, 1990). These diphthongs always carry the potential for considerable variation and in New Zealand, as in other English speaking countries, are indicators of social class. Older New Zealanders tell of speech lessons which concentrated on exercises like 'How now brown cow?' designed to change what one school inspector described as the 'disgraceful diphthong.' The Mobile Unit archive has given us evidence of what has been called 'glide weakening' (Wells, 1982) whereby, as the first element of the diphthong shifts towards the modern NZE pronunciation, so the final diphthong element becomes /ə/ rather than /ʊ/. This especially affects the MOUTH variable and it is likely that when Mr. Augustus Heine, acting head-master of Wellington College complained in 1912 that '...the word is "house" not "heouse"' he was referring to the diphthong glide (AJHR, E-12, 1912, p. 624). This change also occurred in Australian English and South African

4. Well established changes in New Zealand English

(a) 'Phullus and Phullup went un for a swum' (Wall, 1964): the centralised KIT vowel

The centralised KIT vowel is perhaps the most characteristic feature of modern NZE, with New Zealanders being famous for eating '*fush and chups*'. But even though it is so well known and caricatured (for example by Ginette McDonald in her Lyn of Tawa character), it has only become prominent in NZE in the second half of the twentieth century.

Although Australians criticise the NZE KIT pronunciation, within New Zealand, the centralised KIT vowel is not stigmatised. This is different from the diphthongs, where 'broad' pronunciations are regarded as a sign of lower social class speakers. Centralised KIT vowels and raised TRAP and DRESS vowels are frequently found in their most advanced form in the speech of young women, especially those in the service industries such as shop assistants, secretaries, flight attendants and so on. These speakers are often extremely careful about the way in which they pronounce the stigmatised diphthongs, but seem unaware of their pronunciation of the front vowels KIT, DRESS and TRAP. We have found that an individual speaker can have very high front vowels of which she is quite unconscious, and at the same time thoroughly conservative diphthongs, whose social value she will be very much aware of (MacLagan, Gordon & Lewis: 1999).

(b) Which witch? The loss of /hw/

The distinction between the initial consonants in *witch* and *which* is a feature of Scottish and Irish English, and is found in some other regional varieties of English. The British phonetician A. C. Gimson writing in 1962 said that the use of /hw/ had declined rapidly in RP, though it was often taught as the correct form in verse speaking (Gimson, 1962, p. 212). In New Zealand in 1964 George Turner, lecturer in English language at the University of Canterbury, asked a large class of first-year students in Christchurch whether they thought it correct to distinguish such pairs as *where* and *wear* in pronunciation. He reported that 'on a show of hands they were evenly divided' (Turner, 1966, p. 105). Today a similar question put to first year university classes by the authors receives only a very few positive responses. From our analysis of data in the Canterbury Corpus it is clear that this distinction is now only ever found among some older middle class speakers; but even among older middle class women, who tend to be the most conservative speakers, less than half still make a distinction in their casual speech. For younger New Zealand speakers *which* and *witch* are identical.

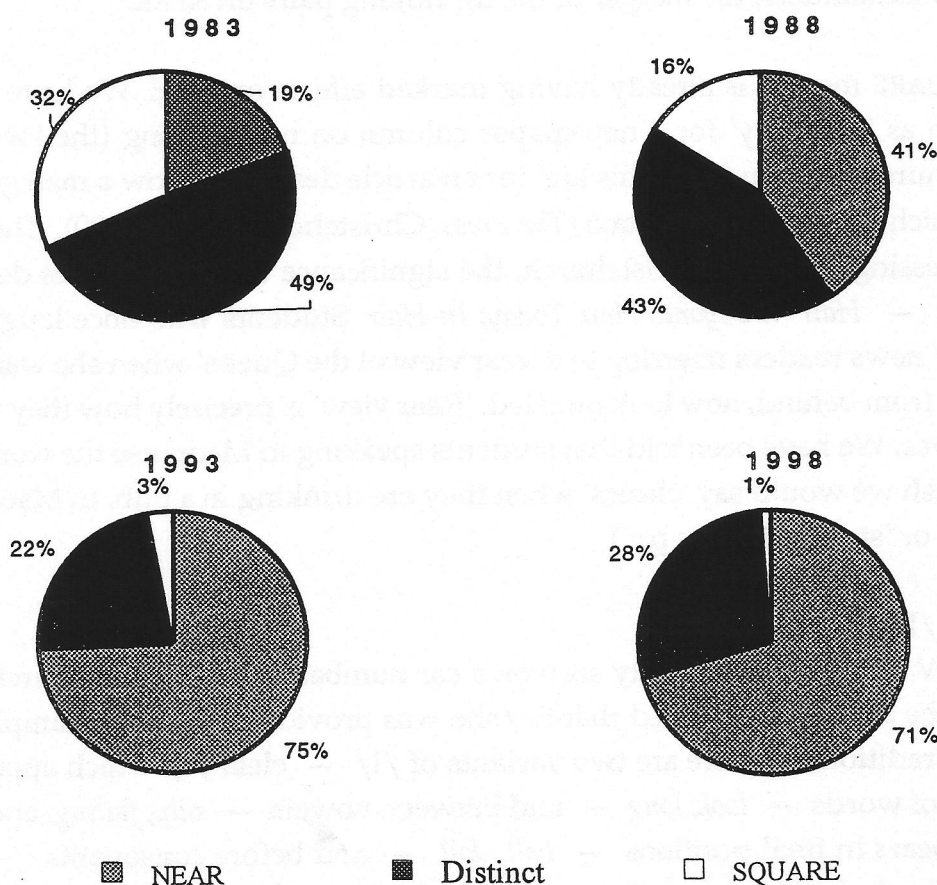
(c) The merger of NEAR and SQUARE

From time to time in the history of English we find vowel mergers whereby over time

two distinct phonemes are no longer differentiated and are realised by a single phoneme. Most speakers of English would have no idea that the words *meet* and *meat* were once pronounced differently and that the vowels have undergone a merger. In NZE the diphthongs in NEAR and SQUARE have been merging over the past two to three decades and most recent analyses show clearly that this merger is on the NEAR diphthong.

A number of people have carried out research into this merger (Bayard, 1987; Holmes & Bell, 1992; Batterham, 2000). At the University of Canterbury, we have been carrying out a longitudinal research project into the merger beginning in 1983 (see Gordon & MacLagan, 1989; MacLagan & Gordon, 1996). Every five years we have recorded over a hundred 14-year old students at four Christchurch secondary schools reading among other things lists which included the word pairs: *here/hair*, *bear/bear*, *cheer/chair*, *ear/air*, *fear/fare*, *fear/fair*, *spear/spare*, *shear/share*, *tearful/careful*, *really/rarely*, *kea/care*.

Figure 1: Percentage identification of word pairs as NEAR, distinct or SQUARE



Word pairs: *here/hair*, *bear/bear*, *cheer/chair*, *ear/air*, *fear/fare*, *fear/fair*, *spear/spare*, *shear/share*, *tearful/careful*, *really/rarely*, *kea/care*.

The sample has equal numbers of boys and girls and the schools were selected to reflect social class differences. Longitudinal studies like this are very rare and we are very fortunate to have been able to track the course of a sound change and also to observe the process of this merger. The results presented in Figure 1 show that, over the four cycles of the study, progressively more words have been pronounced as NEAR and progressively fewer distinctions have been made between members of word pairs like *beer* and *bear*. The results were also analysed by looking at the consistency with which speakers treated the pairs of words. In 1983, a third of the speakers still kept the word pairs distinct, but 50% of the speakers were variable in the way they pronounced the pairs. The number of speakers who gave variable responses to the NEAR/SQUARE words in 1983 indicated that a sound change was in progress. By 1998, 80% of the speakers merged the word pairs on NEAR and only 10% gave variable pronunciations. These results indicate that the merger is nearly completed in NZE.

Over the course of this change we have found that social factors (such as sex and social class) influenced the process of the change, especially the speed with which it occurred, and the direction of the merger in its early stages (in 1983 some speakers merged the diphthongs on SQUARE), but they did not affect the final outcome, which is the same for all young New Zealanders, the merger of the diphthong pairs on NEAR.

The NEAR/SQUARE merger is already having marked effects on NZE. We have found headlines such as 'Hair Say' for a newspaper column on hairdressing (the *West City Times*, Christchurch) and 'In fare of his life' for an article describing how a man got into a stolen car which he thought was a taxi (*The Press*, Christchurch, 13/1/2000). There are several hairdressing salons in Christchurch, the significance of whose names depends on the merger — *Hair 'n Beyond*; *Hair Today*; *In Hair*. Students who once laughed at accounts of TV news readers referring to a 'rear view of the Queen' when she was obviously not seen from behind, now look puzzled. 'Rear view' is precisely how they would say it themselves. We have been told that students speaking in Maori use the word *turu* where in English we would say 'cheers' when they are drinking in a pub. In Maori *turu* means 'chairs' or 'stools' (J. King p.c.).

(d) Aw mine: /l/ vocalisation

The letters 'AW MINE' were recently seen on a car number plate in Christchurch. It is unlikely that the car owner realised that he/she was providing a useful example of l-vocalisation. Traditionally there are two variants of /l/ — clear /l/ which appears at the beginning of words — *look, long* — and between vowels — *silly, failing*, and dark /l/ which appears in final positions — *ball, doll* — and before consonants — *milk, child*. In NZE the dark /l/ is becoming vocalised which means that effectively it is being replaced by the vowel in FOOT. It is not that the /l/ phoneme is being lost but rather that it is being realised differently. Many people find it very difficult to hear the difference

between a dark /ɪ/ and a vocalised /i/, and vocalising /i/ does not lead to misidentifications between words.

This change is not unique to New Zealand and there are even grumbings that it can sometimes be heard in RP (Wells, 1994, p. 202). Barbara Horvath from Sydney University has been carrying out research into /i/-vocalisation in different countries. (Horvath, & Horvath, 1999). Her current findings are that NZE is ahead of Australian English in percentage of /i/-vocalisation. From our analysis of /i/-vocalisation in the Canterbury Corpus we have good evidence that it is increasing. When they are reading twenty words from a reading list, only older middle class women continue to use dark /ɪ/ more than 50% of the time whereas younger working class males vocalise /i/ over 70% of the time. Reading words in a list is a very formal (and artificial) linguistic exercise so we would expect even more /i/-vocalisation in casual speech.

It is possible that some degree of /i/-vocalisation has been around in New Zealand for a long time and we have found a few examples in the Mobile Unit Archive (see Gordon & Trudgill, 1999). However as our results from the Canterbury Corpus have shown, its incidence is steadily increasing. As with the NEAR/SQUARE merger it is now being reflected in writing. In 1995 a writer in *The Press* newspaper in Christchurch reported seeing a notice offering 'warnuts for sale', (10/2/95).

(e) Ellen or Alan? Changes in the vowel before /ɪ/

We have found that when our students are doing phonemic transcription they frequently have difficulty identifying vowel sounds in words containing /ɪ/. Some vowel contrasts are neutralised before dark /ɪ/ so that distinctions that can be made in other contexts cannot be made before /ɪ/.

For NZE, several vowel contrasts can be neutralised before dark /ɪ/. DRESS and TRAP can be almost identical so that *Ellen* and *Alan* or *elementary* and *alimentary* sound the same and students called *Ellen*, *Alan* or *Helen* report that they all respond when /ælən/ is called out. LOT, GOAT and STRUT are pronounced so that there is little if any difference between *doll*, *dole* and *dull*. KIT, FOOT, THOUGHT and GOOSE become very similar, so that *fill*, *full*, *fall* and *fool* are difficult to distinguish, and because the GOOSE vowel is retracted before /ɪ/ rather than being central, the main difference between *full* and *fool* is now length.

This change was described in written records more than 60 years ago. For example, Arnold Wall (an Englishman who was professor of English at Canterbury University College) referred to it in his book written in 1938 called *New Zealand English: How it Should be Spoken*. Under the heading 'Essential faults in New Zealand English' he wrote:

Short "u" [ʌ] before "l", "result," "ultimate," is mispronounced as "o". "Result" becomes "resolt"; "agriculture" and "oltimate" are frequently heard. (Wall, 1938:20).

5. Recent Changes in New Zealand English

(a) 'Somefing for muvver': TH-fronting

'TH-fronting' is the term being used by sociolinguists to refer to the substitution of /f/ and /v/ for /θ/ and /ð/ in words like *something* and *nothing*, *mother* and *father*. This is becoming increasingly frequent in casual speech in NZE but has not yet been the subject of letters of complaint. So far it has not exceeded 5% in the more formal style of the Canterbury Corpus word list. It is used more by the younger, working class speakers and also by the older working class males. We suggest that the word *with* may be one of the key words in the spread of TH-fronting. Because there is already variation in its pronunciations, /wɪθ/ or /wɪð/, the additional pronunciations /wɪf/ or /wɪv/ are not so immediately noticeable. We have evidence of speakers (including some who are middle class) who have TH-fronting only on *with* (see Campbell & Gordon, 1996).

(b) Chree or tree? Affrication of /tr/, /dr/ and /str/

In NZE /tr/ has always been pronounced with friction in the /r/. Recently speakers in New Zealand, together with speakers in some other English speaking countries, have begun to use more friction in /tr/ clusters so that the production sounds more like [tʃr] and *tree* sounds like 'chree'. This is called 'affrication' because it is making the /tr/ cluster more like the affricate. The word list for the Canterbury Corpus contains the words *street*, *train*, *tree* and *dream* to test for /tr/ affrication. Words with /tr/ clusters are so far showing the greatest degree of affrication (with up to 80% of younger male speakers saying 'chree'), followed by words with /dr/ while those with /str/ are showing least affrication. At present the change seems to be being led by younger speakers irrespective of social class.

(c) Letter or Ledder? /t/-flapping

The flapping or voicing of intervocalic /t/ in words like *city* and *letter* has probably be around for a long time in working class New Zealand speech. Recent research suggests that it is becoming more widespread. Holmes (1994) found up to 80% intervocalic /t/-flapping in the casual speech of younger male working class speakers. In the Canterbury Corpus speakers were asked to read the words *city*, *letter*, *scatter*, *better*, *batter* and *Peter*. There was a sharp stylistic difference between the formal speech of word-list reading when there were only few flaps, and casual spontaneous speech where every group except the older middle class women used flaps.

6. Other changes in NZE

(a) 'Home Growen': GROWN and GROWEN

One of the characteristics of NZE is the pronunciation of *-own* past participles like *grown* as the two-syllable /grouən/ rather than the traditional single syllable pronunciation /groun/ (see MacLagan & Gordon, 1998). This is a different type of change from the others discussed because it is a morphological change rather than a phonological change. It seems to be modelled on the analogy of other past participles like *eat/eaten*, *fall/fallen*, *give/given*. It is also different because unlike most sound changes it has not begun in working class speech.

With GROWN/GROWEN, there seem to be two competing views of what is correct. Some speakers consider that *-OWN* is correct because it is the traditional pronunciation, while others consider that *-OWEN* is correct because it allows distinctions to be made between pairs of words like *groan* and *grown*. There are only three minimal pairs (*groan/grown*; *throne/thrown*; *moan/mown*) and only nine past participles in total which end in *-own*, so this change does not affect many words. In 1997 stage 1 students at the University of Canterbury carried out a survey to test usage. The results astounded everyone because 574 speakers used the *-OWEN* pronunciation and 574 speakers used the *-OWN* pronunciation (MacLagan & Gordon, 1998). Other analyses of data have produced very similar results suggesting that New Zealanders are divided 50/50 in their usage and whichever variant they choose speakers will insist that theirs is the correct form.

b) *The* before a vowel

Traditionally there have been two pronunciations of the definite article *the*, /ðə/ before words beginning with a consonant and /ði/ before words beginning with a vowel. Many speakers are now using the pronunciation /ðə/ before all words. We do not yet have any figures for this, but it is a change that is increasing, especially among younger speakers. It is a common feature of Maori English, but it can also be heard in the speech of people of all ages and social classes.

7. Implications of NZE sound changes for ESOL teachers

Some of the changes discussed here have greater implications for ESOL teachers than others. Within New Zealand a number of these changes are still below the level of awareness and probably do not affect comprehension to any great degree. For the mergers, /hw/ is low in frequency and the context will distinguish between words with /w/ (like *witch*) and those with /hw/ (like *which*). Similarly SQUARE and NEAR are respectively 15th and 16th in frequency out of 18 vowels for English (Gimson, 1962, p. 143) and it is difficult to find many contexts where their merger really causes misunder-

standings. It can sometimes be difficult to sort out which word is meant in an utterance like *The students /ri:əli/ work hard*. Do they *really* work hard, or *rarely* work hard? But even here, intonation will usually indicate which meaning is meant.

Any sound change can increase comprehension difficulties for speakers accustomed to different varieties of English. The current changes in NZE will certainly make it more difficult for some New Zealanders to be understood overseas and will make some New Zealand speakers harder to understand for those learning to speak English. Where real difficulties can arise, is for speakers from outside New Zealand, whether or not English is their first language, who still, for example, make distinctions between NEAR and SQUARE and who may have problems understanding younger New Zealanders who use the NEAR diphthong for everything. Similar problems may arise because of the raising of the front vowels DRESS and TRAP. Non-New Zealand speakers may hear a younger person's *pan* as *pen*, with potential problems for word identification. /l/-vocalisation should not cause problems, but the vowel neutralisation before /l/ may cause misunderstandings for non New Zealand speakers in some situations. Word pairs like *full* and *fill* are now very difficult to distinguish in NZE.

The issues are likely to be different for older and younger ESOL teachers. Young teachers are highly likely themselves to use many if not all of the changes described here. They will be unaware of the extent to which or the speed with which the model they are giving their students is changing. For older teachers, the changes may be more obvious and different from their own practice. If teachers lack knowledge about what is happening within their own language, features which are part of a natural process of change may be labelled by some as incorrect or lazy.

One of the questions teachers might ask themselves is how far they can accommodate these changes. Are they teaching students to be understood primarily within New Zealand or do they want their students to be understood outside New Zealand also? Most of the time, students who learn English with a New Zealand accent will be understood both within and outside New Zealand. In this paper we have highlighted some areas where teachers may have to consider their teaching practice in the of light changes currently happening within NZE.

8 Conclusions

All living languages change, but at present NZE seems to be moving faster than other varieties of English in some areas. Some of the changes described here are also affecting other

varieties of English — for example the loss of /hw/, vocalisation of /l/, /t/-flapping and TH-fronting. The NEAR/SQUARE merger seems to be a characteristic of NZE and we seem to be ahead of other varieties of English in the use of the -OWEN pronunciation for -own past participles and in the degree of /l/-vocalisation.

Many of these changes appear first in the casual speech of people in the lowest socio-economic stratum, those whose speech is most disliked and despised in all English speaking communities. When these changes spread to other social classes it is inevitable that this is received by many with alarm and dismay, but it should be noted that this is because of the social implications carried by these pronunciations and not necessarily because they cause misunderstandings or result in unclear communication.

From the researchers' point of view, the changes in New Zealand speech and the new possibilities of studying them are the cause of great excitement and interest. For those whose work involves teaching clear communication these changes can produce some less exciting challenges. In our view it is very important that research into language change in NZE continue so that the changes can be accurately described. Then those for whom their effects are more immediate and practical, can make decisions on the basis of accurate information.

Note

For convenience we follow British sociolinguistic practice and refer to the sounds in question by using key words from John Wells' standard lexical set (Wells, 1982). Because each keyword has different consonants around the vowel, each word is 'unmistakable no matter what accent one says them in' (Wells, 1982, p. xviii). Keywords are written in small capitals (e.g. KIT) and refer to the designated vowel in all words which contain it. Using keywords can avoid confusion caused by the use of different symbols for phonemes — for example, Americans usually use /E/ for DRESS and /e/ for FACE, New Zealanders usually use /e/ for DRESS and /ei/ for FACE and Australians usually use /E/ for DRESS and /eI/ for FACE.

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