

English language

Varieties of English

British English

The abbreviation RP (Received Pronunciation) denotes what is traditionally considered the standard accent of people living in London and the southeast of England and of other people elsewhere who speak in this way. RP is the only British accent that has no specific geographical correlate: it is not possible, on hearing someone speak RP, to know which part of the United Kingdom he or she comes from. Though it is traditionally considered a “prestige” accent, RP is not intrinsically superior to other varieties of English; it is itself only one particular accent that has, through the accidents of history, achieved a higher status than others. Although acquiring its unique standing without the aid of any established authority, it was fostered by the public schools (Winchester, Eton, Harrow, Rugby, and so on) and the ancient universities (Oxford and Cambridge). Other varieties of English are well preserved in spite of the leveling influences of film, television, and radio. In several Northern accents, RP /ɑː/ (the first vowel sound in *father*) is still pronounced /æ/ (a sound like the *a* in *fat*) in words such as *laugh*, *fast*, and *path*; this pronunciation has been carried across the Atlantic into American English.

In the words *run*, *rung*, and *tongue*, the RP pronunciation of the vowel is like the *u* in *but*; in some Northern accents it is pronounced like the *oo* in *book*. In the words *bind*, *find*, and *grind*, the RP pronunciation of the vowel sound is /ai/, like that in “bide”; in some Northern accents, it is /i/, like the sound in *feet*. The vowel sound in the words *go*, *home*, and *know* in some Northern accents is /ɔː/, approximately the sound in *law* in some American English accents. In parts of Northumberland, RP *it* is still pronounced “hit,” as in Old English. In various Northern accents the definite article *the* is heard as *t*, *th*, or *d*. In those accents in which it becomes both *t* and *th*, *t* is used before consonants and *th* before vowels. Thus, one hears *t'book* but *th'apple*. When, however, the definite article is reduced to *t* and the following word begins with *t* or *d*, as in *t'tail* or *t'dog*, it is replaced by a slight pause as in the RP articulation of the first *t* in *hat trick*. The RP /tʃ/, the sound of the *ch* in *church*, can become *k*, as in *thack* (“thatch, roof”)

and *kirk* ("church"). In some Northern dialects strong verbs retain the old past-tense singular forms *band*, *brak*, *fand*, *spak* for standard English forms *bound*, *broke*, *found*, and *spoke*. Strong verbs also retain the past participle inflection *-en* as in *comen*, *shutten*, *sitten*, and *getten* or *gotten* for standard English *come*, *shut*, *sat*, and *got*.

In some Midland accents the diphthongs in *throat* and *stone* have been kept apart, whereas in RP they have fallen together. In Cheshire, Derby, Stafford, and Warwick, RP *singing* is pronounced with a *g* sounded after the velar nasal sound (as in RP *finger*). In Norfolk one hears *skellington* and *solintary* for *skeleton* and *solitary*, showing an intrusive *n* just as does *messenger* in RP from French *messenger*, *passenger* from French *passager*, and *nightingale* from Old English *nihtegala*. Other East Anglian words show consonantal metathesis (switch position), as in *singify* for *signify*, and substitution of one liquid or nasal for another, as in *chimbly* for *chimney* and *synnable* for *syllable*. *Hantle* for *handful* shows syncope (disappearance) of an unstressed vowel, partial assimilation of *d* to *t* before voiceless *f*, and subsequent loss of *f* in a triple consonant group.

In some South Western accents, initial *f* and *s* are often voiced, becoming *v* and *z*. Two words with initial *v* have found their way into RP: *vat* from *fat* and *vixen* from *fixen* (female fox). Another South Western feature is the development of a *d* between *l* or *n* and *r*, as in *parlder* for *parlour* and *carnder* for *corner*. The bilabial semivowel *w* has developed before *o* in *wold* for *old*, and in *wom* for *home*, illustrating a similar development in RP by which Old English *ān* has become *one*, and Old English *hāl* has come to be spelled *whole*, as compared with Northern *hale*. In some South Western accents *yat* comes from the old singular *geat*, whereas RP *gate* comes from the plural *gatu*. Likewise, *clee* comes from the old nominative *clea*, whereas RP *claw* comes from the oblique cases. The verbs *keel* and *kemb* have developed regularly from Old English *cēlan* "to make cool" and *kemban* "to use a comb," whereas the corresponding RP verbs *cool* and *comb* come from the adjective and the noun, respectively.

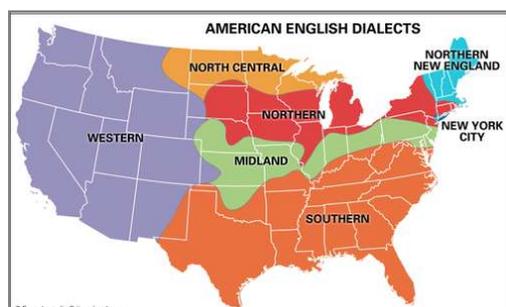
In Wales, people often speak a clear and measured form of English with rising intonations inherited from ancestral Celtic. They tend to aspirate both plosives (stops) and fricative consonants very forcibly; thus, *two* is pronounced with an audible puff of breath after the initial *t*, and *while* may be heard with a voiceless /w/.

Scots, or Lowland Scottish, was once a part of Northern English, but the two dialects began to diverge in the 14th century. Today speakers of Scots trill their *r*'s, shorten vowels, and simplify diphthongs. A few Scots words, such as *bairn*, *brae*, *canny*, *dour*, and *pawky*, have made their way into RP. Scots is not to be confused with Scottish Gaelic, a Celtic language still spoken by about 60,000 people (almost all bilingual) mostly in the Highlands and the Western Isles. Thanks to such writers as Robert Burns and Sir Walter Scott, many Scottish Gaelic words have been preserved in English literature.

Northern Ireland has dialects related in part to Scots and in part to the southern Irish dialect of English. The influence of the Irish language on the speech of Dublin is most evident in the syntax of drama and in the survival of such picturesque expressions as *We are after finishing*, *It's sorry you will be*, and *James do be cutting corn every day*.

American and Canadian English

The dialect regions of the United States are most clearly marked along the Atlantic littoral, where the earlier settlements were made. Three dialects can be defined: Northern, Midland, and Southern. Each has its subdialects.



American English dialects

Map showing the dialect regions of the United States.

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The Northern dialect is spoken in New England. Its six chief subdialects comprise northeastern New England (Maine, New Hampshire, and eastern Vermont), southeastern New England (eastern Massachusetts, eastern Connecticut, and Rhode Island), southwestern New England (western Massachusetts and western Connecticut), the inland north (western Vermont and upstate New York), the Hudson Valley, and metropolitan New York.

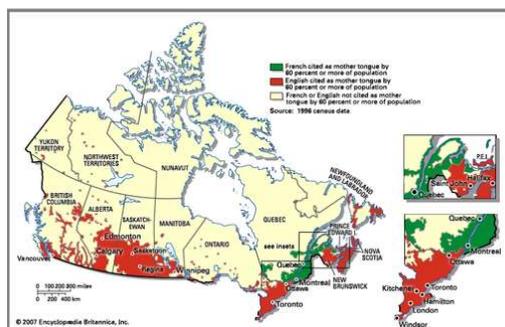
The Midland dialect is spoken in the coastal region from Point Pleasant, in New Jersey, to Dover, in Delaware. Its seven major subdialects comprise the Delaware Valley, the Susquehanna Valley, the Upper Ohio Valley, northern West Virginia, the Upper Potomac and Shenandoah, southern West Virginia and eastern Kentucky, western North Carolina and South Carolina, and eastern Tennessee.

The Southern dialect area covers the coastal region from Delaware to South Carolina. Its five chief subdialects comprise the Delmarva Peninsula, the Virginia Piedmont, northeastern North Carolina (Albemarle Sound and Neuse Valley), Cape Fear and Pee Dee valleys, and the South Carolina Low Country, around Charleston.

These boundaries, based on those of the *Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada*, are highly tentative. To some extent these regions preserve the traditional speech of southeastern and southern England, where most of the early colonists were born. The first settlers to arrive in Virginia (1607) and Massachusetts (1620) soon learned to adapt old words to new uses, but they were content to borrow names from the local Indian languages for unknown trees, such as *hickory* and *persimmon* and for unfamiliar animals, such as *raccoon* and *woodchuck*. Later they took words from foreign settlers: *chowder* and *prairie* from the French, *scow* and *sleigh* from the Dutch. They made new compounds, such as *backwoods* and *bullfrog*, and gave new meanings to such words as *lumber* (which in British English denotes disused furniture, or junk) and *corn* (which in British English signifies any grain, especially wheat) to mean “maize.”

Before the Declaration of Independence (1776), two-thirds of the immigrants had come from England, but after that date they arrived in large numbers from Ireland. The Great Famine of 1845–49 drove 1.5 million Irish to seek homes in the New World, and the European revolutions of 1848 drove as many Germans to settle in Pennsylvania and the Midwest. After the close of the American Civil War, millions of Scandinavians, Slavs, and Italians crossed the ocean and eventually settled mostly in the North Central and Upper Midwest states. In some areas of South Carolina and Georgia, enslaved Africans working on rice and cotton plantations developed a contact language called Gullah, or Geechee, that made use of many structural and lexical features of their native languages. This variety of English is comparable to such contact languages as Sranan (Taki-taki) of Suriname and Melanesian Pidgins. The speech of the Atlantic Seaboard shows far greater differences in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary than that of any area in the North Central states, the Upper Midwest, the Rocky Mountains, or the Pacific Coast. Today, urbanization, quick transport, and television have tended to level out some dialectal differences in the United States. On the other hand, immigrant groups have introduced new varieties in which the influence of ethnic origins is evident, and some immigrant languages are widely spoken (notably Spanish, in the southeastern and southwestern states).

The boundary with Canada nowhere corresponds to any boundary between dialects, and the influence of United States English is strong, being felt least in the Maritime Provinces and Newfoundland and Labrador. Nevertheless, in spite of the effect of this proximity to the United States, British influences are still potent in some of the larger cities; Scottish influences are well sustained in Ontario. Canada remains bilingual. Less than one-fourth of its people, living mostly in the province of Quebec, have French as their mother tongue.



Distribution of majority Anglophone and Francophone populations in Canada. The 1996 census of Canada, from which this map is derived, defined a person's mother tongue as that language learned at home during childhood and still understood at the time of the census.

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Australian and New Zealand English

Unlike Canada, Australia has no concentration of a European language other than English within its borders. There are still many Aboriginal languages, though they each are spoken by small numbers and their continued existence is threatened. More than 80 percent of the population is of British descent, but significant growth in the numbers of immigrants, especially from Europe and the Pacific Rim countries, took place in the last quarter of the 20th century.

During colonial times the new settlers had to find names for fauna and flora (e.g., *banksia*, *iron bark*, *whee whee*) different from anything previously known to them: trees that shed bark instead of leaves and cherries with external stones. The words *brush*, *bush*, *creek*, *paddock*, and *scrub* acquired wider senses, whereas the terms *brook*, *dale*, *field*, *forest*, and *meadow* were seldom used. A creek leading out of a river and entering it again downstream was called an *anastomizing* branch (a term from anatomy), or an *anabran*ch, whereas a creek coming to a dead end was called by its native name, a *billabong*. The giant kingfisher with its raucous bray was long referred to as a *laughing jackass*, later as a *bushman's clock*, but now it is a *kookaburra*. Cattle so intractable that only roping could control them were said to be *ropable*, a term now used as a synonym for "angry" or "extremely annoyed."

A *deadbeat* was a penniless "sundowner" at the very end of his tether, and a *no-hoper* was an incompetent fellow, hopeless and helpless. An *offsider* (strictly, the

offside driver of a bullock team) was any assistant or partner. A *rouseabout* was first an odd-job man on a sheep station and then any kind of handyman. He was, in fact, the “down-under” counterpart of the *wharf labourer*, or *roustabout*, on the Mississippi River. Both words originated in Cornwall, and many other terms, now exclusively Australian, came ultimately from British dialects. *Dinkum*, for instance, meaning “true, authentic, genuine,” echoed the *fair dinkum*, or *fair deal*, of Lincolnshire dialect. *Fossicking* about for surface gold, and then rummaging about in general, perpetuated the term *fossick* (“to elicit information, ferret out the facts”) from the Cornish dialect of English. To *barrack*, or “jeer noisily,” recalled Irish *barrack* (“to brag, boast”), whereas *skerrick* in the phrase *not a skerrick left* was obviously identical with the *skerrick* meaning “small fragment, particle,” still heard in English dialects from Westmorland to Hampshire.

Some Australian English terms came from Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples: the words *boomerang*, *corroboree* (warlike dance and then any large and noisy gathering), *dingo* (reddish brown wild dog), *galah* (cockatoo), *gunyah* (bush hut), *kangaroo*, *karri* (dark red eucalyptus tree), *nonda* (rosaceous tree yielding edible fruit), *wallaby* (small marsupial), and *wallaroo* (large rock kangaroo). Although there is remarkably little regional variation in pronunciation throughout the entire continent, there is significant social variation. The neutral vowel /ə/ (as the *a* in *sofa*) is frequently used, as in London Cockney: *arches* and *archers* are both pronounced [ɑ:tʃəz], and the pronunciations of the diphthongs in RP *day* and *go* are more like (RP) *die* and *now*.

Although New Zealand lies over 1,000 miles away, much of the English spoken there is similar to that of Australia. The blanket term Austral English is sometimes used to cover the language of the whole of Australasia, but this term is far from popular with New Zealanders because it makes no reference to New Zealand and gives all the prominence, so they feel, to Australia. Between North and South Islands there are observable differences. In particular, Maori, which remains a living language (related to Tahitian, Hawaiian, and the other Austronesian [Malayo-Polynesian] languages), has a greater number of speakers and more influence in North Island.

South Asian English

In 1950 India became a federal republic within the Commonwealth of Nations,

and Hindi was declared the first national language. English, it was stated, would “continue to be used for all official purposes until 1965.” In 1967, however, by the terms of the English Language Amendment Bill, English was proclaimed “an alternative official or associate language with Hindi until such time as all non-Hindi states had agreed to its being dropped.” English is therefore acknowledged to be indispensable. It is the only practicable means of day-to-day communication between the central government at New Delhi and states with non-Hindi speaking populations, especially with the Deccan, or “South,” where millions speak Dravidian (non-Indo-European) languages—Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, and Malayalam. English is widely used in business, in higher education, and in scientific research.

In 1956 Pakistan became an autonomous republic comprising two states, East and West. Bengali and Urdu were made the national languages of East and West Pakistan, respectively, but English was adopted as a third official language and functioned as the medium of interstate communication. (In 1971 East Pakistan broke away from its western partner and became the independent state of Bangladesh.) English is also widely used in Sri Lanka and Nepal.

African English

Africa is one of the world’s most multilingual areas, if people are measured against languages. Upon a large number of indigenous languages rests a slowly changing superstructure of world languages (Arabic, English, French, and Portuguese). The problems of language are everywhere linked with political, social, economic, and educational factors.

The Republic of South Africa, the oldest British settlement in the continent, resembles Canada in having two recognized European languages within its borders: English and Afrikaans, or Cape Dutch. Both British and Dutch traders followed in the wake of 15th-century Portuguese explorers and have lived in widely varying war-and-peace relationships ever since. Although the Union of South Africa, comprising Cape Province, Transvaal, Natal, and Orange Free State, was for more than a half century (1910–61) a member of the British Empire and Commonwealth, its four prime ministers (Louis Botha, Jan Smuts, J.B.M. Hertzog, and Daniel F. Malan) were all Dutchmen. The Afrikaans language began to diverge seriously from European Dutch in the late 18th century and gradually came to be recognized as a separate language. Although the English spoken in

South Africa differs in some respects from standard British English, its speakers do not regard the language as a separate one. They have naturally come to use many Afrikanerisms, such as *kloof*, *kopje*, *krans*, *veld*, and *vlei*, to denote features of the landscape and employ African names to designate local animals, plants, and social and political concepts. South Africa's 1996 constitution identified 11 official languages, English among them. The words *trek* and *commando*, notorious in South African history, are among several that have entered world standard English.

Elsewhere in Africa, English helps to answer the needs of wider communication. It functions as an official language of administration in, and is an official language of, numerous countries, all of them multilingual. Liberia is among the African countries with the deepest historical ties to English—the population most associated with the country's founding migrated from the United States during the 19th century—but English is just one of more than two dozen languages spoken there by multiple ethnic groups. English's place within that linguistic diversity is representative of English in Africa as a whole.

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