

## Some characteristics of current Standard Southern British English

(based mostly on <http://seas3.elte.hu/cube/accent.html>)

### 1 The terms *RP* and *SSBE*

Contemporary *Standard Southern British English (SSBE)* may be thought of as characteristic of university-educated young adults from the south of England. It is heard from a majority of presenters and correspondents in British news broadcasting. Clearly it is not a majority accent in the UK (so the term “General British” used by some publishers is misleading). But English speakers around the world are familiar with it – it is often heard in Hollywood films, for example – and internationally it is associated with Britain.

Many sources, including the Cambridge, Collins and Longman dictionaries, still use for their British English transcriptions a set of vowel symbols which was chosen by A. C. Gimson more than half a century ago to describe explicitly the upper class speech of the period before the tumultuous social changes of the 1960s: classic *Received Pronunciation (RP)*.

This Gimsonian transcription does not give an explicit indication of 21<sup>st</sup> century SSBE. In fact, if its vowel symbols are pronounced with the explicit values of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), the result is an accent which now sounds to native speakers old-fashioned, “posh” and even amusing.

### 2 Some differences between RP and SSBE

Complete the sentences of the following paragraphs and answer the questions.

#### 2.1 Vowels

ɛ:      o:      ɪ:      a

In words such as *trap*, *bad* and *ham* classic RP had a relatively nonlow vowel, shown in Gimsonian transcription as /æ/. Current SSBE has an opener vowel, nearer to [\_\_\_\_].

Listen to how the word *bad* is pronounced in the Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries (<http://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/>) – which sound do you think its vowel is closer to: [ɛ] or [a]?

In classic RP, the vowel of words like *square*, *care* or *air* was a diphthong, shown in Gimsonian transcription as /ɛə/ or /eə/. In current SSBE it is a long monophthong, [\_\_\_\_]. (The process of a diphthong/triphthong becoming a monophthong is called *smoothing*.)

Listen to the pronunciation of the word *hair* in the Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries. Do you hear a monophthong or a diphthong? Is it in harmony with how it is transcribed there?

In words such as *poor*, *tour*, *sure* classic RP had a diphthong, shown in Gimsonian transcription as /uə/. In current SSBE, this tends to be replaced with /\_\_\_/, the vowel of words like *thought* or *force*.

Check the transcription of *tour* in the Oxford Learner's Dictionaries. How does it reflect this change?

In classic RP, the vowel pronounced in words like *near* or *beer* was a diphthong, shown in Gimsonian transcription as /iə/. In current SSBE, as a result of smoothing, it has become a long monophthong, [\_\_\_]. (When heavily accentuated, it may also be pronounced [ɪjə].)

You can hear instances of this difference, for example, in the following Harry Potter scene: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZU14amon00E> – What is the pronunciation of the word *here* in “When did he get here?” (at 2:25)? How is the same word pronounced in “Dumbledore must know you're here, Harry.” (at 3:15)?

Actually, the same simplification was observable in the case of the vowel of words such as *more* or *force*, just earlier: in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century it was still pronounced [ɔə], but later it underwent smoothing and turned into [ɔ:], which is how it is transcribed already in the Gimsonian system.

## 2.2 Consonants

The consonant system has remained far more stable. Probably the biggest change now underway is the loss of /\_\_\_/ and /\_\_\_/, a phenomenon often referred to as “TH-fronting”: /\_\_\_/ becomes /\_\_\_/, while /\_\_\_/ becomes /\_\_\_/ word-initially and /\_\_\_/ elsewhere. This means that the words *three* and *free* become homophones; the pronunciation of *there* is identical with that of *dare*, while *together* is pronounced “*togevver*”. TH-fronting is stigmatized to some degree with older speakers, but it is now extremely common among the youngest speakers throughout Britain, across socioeconomic groups. It can already be heard to a limited extent from TV presenters, including newsreaders. It is possible that /\_\_\_/ and /\_\_\_/ will become marginal in future SSBE.

For further help and information about this change, you can check the following article recently written on the topic:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/2016/09/28/th-sound-to-vanish-from-english-language-by-2066-because-of-mult/>

Based on this, how does the pronunciation of the following words change?

think	/θɪŋk/	>	/_____/
that	/ðát/	>	/_____/
mother	/máðə/	>	/_____/



Perhaps the main consonantal difference between classic RP and current SSBE is the extent to which the clusters /\_\_\_/ and /\_\_\_/ become the affricates /\_\_\_/ and /\_\_\_/, especially in unstressed syllables, e.g. RP /kəŋgrátʃulɔjt/ > SSBE /kəŋgrátʃulɔjt/, but even in stressed syllables, e.g. RP /prədʒúws/ > SSBE /prədʒúws/. (This makes, for example, *dune* homophonous with the word \_\_\_\_\_ in SSBE.)



Look up the words *gráduátion* and *redúce* in the Oxford Learner's Dictionaries (<http://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/>) and in the Cambridge Dictionary (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>), and check how their underlined parts are transcribed. Which is the most advanced in indicating the change described above?

	<i>grá<u>du</u>átion</i>	<i>re<u>dú</u>ce</i>
<i>Oxford</i>		
<i>Cambridge</i>		

### 3. CUBE

CUBE (standing for *Current British English*) is a free online dictionary designed and compiled by Péter Szigetvári and Geoff Lindsey. One of its several advantages is that it has a phonetically up-to-date transcription system which is more representative of contemporary Standard Southern British English pronunciation than the widely used Gimsonian system.

To visit the website of the dictionary, go to <http://seas3.elte.hu/cube/>

For some tips on how to use the dictionary and to find out more about its advantages, go to [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_Tcrv8lgLbk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Tcrv8lgLbk) and watch the short tutorial.