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Australian English: Pronunciation and Transcription

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Australian English: Pronunciation and Transcription

Felicity Cox

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, xvii + 238 pp.

Reviewed by James Lambert, *City University of Hong Kong*

Australian English: Pronunciation and Transcription is the first textbook ever written to be completely devoted to Australian English, and as textbooks go there is very little this reviewer can do at the outset other than to thoroughly recommend it to anybody who is planning to teach a pronunciation course to Australians, or to anybody planning to teach a course in Australian English pronunciation. It is without a doubt peerless.

The arrangement of this textbook is magnificently suited to a course in Australian English pronunciation. Chapter 1 is a general background and introduction to Australian English speech production; Chapter 2 details the mechanisms of the physical production of speech sounds (respiration, phonation, vowel production, consonant articulation and voicing), provides their symbols in clear tables, and gives Wellsian lexical sets for the vowels; Chapter 3 covers syllables, word stress and sentence stress; Chapters 4 and 5 describe the technique for conducting, respectively, phonemic and phonetic transcription of Australian English, and contain numerous practice exercises focussed on particular aspects of pronunciation; and Chapter 6 is devoted to the evaluation of the two phonemic transcription systems available for Australian English (more on this later). Each chapter ends with a list of further readings.

Chapters are well sectioned, and numbered with a three-point numbering system, so that section 2.6.5 is the 5th subpart of the 6th part of Chapter 2. This makes internal cross-referencing, of which there is happily no excess, simple and user-friendly. The contents list spans four pages, and while thankfully indented would have benefitted from putting the six chapter listings in bold. Internally, the heading of each part and subpart is in large sans-serif bold and exceedingly easy to locate, making navigation around the book a breeze.

The book appears to have been designed, in all aspects, with the student in mind: a patently obvious boon for a textbook, but one that is all too often overlooked by publishers, and thus, in this case, a great merit. The book is a lightweight paperback (only 465 grams), so students will not have to actually *lug* it around, and although the 174mm x 247mm size is perhaps little on the big side, the text is large (13 point, double spaced, serif font) and clear (always useful when phonetic symbols are involved), and there are 3cm outer and bottom margins providing ample space for students to write in extra notes. The cardboard covers are perhaps a little on the weak side – my review copy arrived with a large and ineradicable crease down the back cover courtesy of the postal service, which may have been avoided if it had been made of sturdier stuff – but, to be fair, the cover and binding are certainly robust enough to survive a good semester's toing-and-froing, and that is adequate serviceability for your normal textbook. The cover art, basic gloss black with a spiral of IPA vowels and diphthongs in muted colours, is pleasant enough and only slightly unbalanced by the lime green Cambridge logo in the top left corner, whereas the dull magenta back cover will make the book easily locatable on a messy desk (or floor) at least half of the time.

The 11 tables are all well laid out and captioned. And the two most important tables, the Australian English consonant and vowel charts, are repeated in the front matter on separate pages (xv and xvii) directly before Chapter 1, thereby obviating the unhappy toil, and wear and tear, of locating page 28 or 49 every time you (the student) have forgotten which symbol goes with which sound. Further, a full set of the IPA symbols (i.e. for all languages) is given on the very last page, including non-pulmonic consonants, diacritics, suprasegmentals and tones. There are 36 diagrams, and while a few have quite small text, as though they were once bigger and had to be squeezed in, the rest are of very high quality and useful in illustrating the associated text.

But perhaps the most student-friendly aspect of the book is the language Cox has written the text in. For a subject so replete with terminology (most of which will be anywhere from unfamiliar to unknown to the bulk of students), the text reads almost magically as though it were written in “plain English”. It is clear that Cox has been teaching phonetics for many a year and is an adept at explaining the very complex in a logical and easily digestible manner. The text is beautifully clear and precise, and sentences are short and uncomplicated, so that each piece of the complicated whole is laid out progressively, thus allowing the reader to take the text at their own pace, not moving on until the current piece of the picture is understood or absorbed. Another pleasing facet of Cox’s style is the way in which terminology is handled through the use of a number of different defining strategies. All important vocabulary is given in bold (e.g. ‘Speech gestures made with the lips are **labial** and those made with the tongue are **lingual**’ p.29). Less important terms are often given parenthetically (e.g. ‘making vowels highly resonate and relatively loud (sonorous)’ p. 27). At other times, we find a combination of these devices (e.g. ‘In this case the airflow is **pulmonic egressive**, that is, flowing out (egressive) and from the lungs (pulmonic)’ p. 29). Whatever the case, it always reads well, as these examples demonstrate. In addition to this, there is a 14-page glossary in the appendices, with 210 entries, many of which define a number of related terms. Once again, the use of plain English is evident, amounting to a superb piece of lexicography.

The uniquely new feature of this textbook is that it uses the revised transcription method devised by the author and her colleagues (Harrington, Cox and Evans, 1997; hereafter HCE), a transcription that is not only based on up-to-date research and data, but that is also faithful to the reference vowel symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet. The HCE system stands in contrast to the traditional phonetic transcription system that has long been used for Australian English, devised well over 60 years ago (Mitchell, 1946). The two systems differ principally in the rendering of the vowel system, and whatever the merits of the HCE system, the traditional system is still well in-place in Australia, being that used by both of the major players in the Australian dictionary market, *The Macquarie Dictionary* range and the *Oxford Australian* range. However, rather than solely promote her own transcription method, Cox takes a much more egalitarian and sensible path and provides dual transcriptions throughout Chapter 4 (and its answer keys) where the bulk of transcription is done, and further in all vowel tables throughout the book. This is sensible, first, on the grounds that it allows people brought up in the traditional system easy access to the book’s contents and for the book to be used alongside older texts or materials, and second, in that it allows the two systems to be directly compared by the reader. It thus also provides an excellent workbook for those wishing to transition from one system to the other. Chapter 6 is devoted to ‘evaluating’ these two systems and Cox proceeds respectfully, noting that ‘[a]coustic analyses of several different datasets have confirmed a mismatch’ between the traditional system and actual Australian English vowel production (p. 155) and that ‘Mitchell himself’ claimed ‘that the transcription was not intended to

indicate production' (p. 153). But, while stating that 'the HCE system is clearly superior to the traditional [...] system' (p. 162), Cox concedes that the traditional system may be suitable for dictionaries where 'phonemic equivalence with other varieties of English may be an important consideration' (p. 153), and only offers two examples, 'speech-language pathology or some TESOL uses', where 'phonetic accuracy is more important than phonemic equivalence' (p. 154). A more vigorous advocacy of the new system could be conceived.

Finally, according to the back cover blurb (repeated on the flyleaf), '*Australian English Pronunciation and Transcription* is complemented by an extensive website [...] which provides further explanatory materials and exercises with audio examples'. Interestingly, the website address given (www.cambridge.edu.au/academic/austenglish) is nothing but an advertisement webpage for the book, and you have to click on the 'Macquarie University' link to get to the actual 'extensive website' that has the extra material. A relatively useless bit of circuitousness if you have already bought the book, but no doubt useful for academics interested in a potential course book and desirous of an examination copy. The Macquarie University site, freely available to any web user, has a number of interesting pages on Australian English and many useful resources, but most significantly has interactive pages that match all the exercises in Cox's textbook, a useful free resource for anyone teaching from the book.

All in all, *Australian English: Pronunciation and Transcription* is an excellent textbook. Very well written and conceived, and of a very high quality (though I did notice one in-line citation missing from the reference list). Cox is to be congratulated and I do not doubt that her book will become *the* textbook of choice, and deservedly so. If I were pressed to come up with any desideratum, it would be the inclusion of material on Australian Aboriginal English and Australia's various Ethnocultural varieties (given but a passing mention in the introduction, blink and you'll miss it) – perhaps something for a second edition?

References.

1. Harrington, J, Cox, F and Evans, Z. 1997. An acoustic phonetic study of broad, general, and cultivated Australian English vowels. *Australian Journal of Linguistics*, 17: 155-84.
2. Mitchell, A. 1946. *The Pronunciation of English in Australia*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson.