NOTES ON THE USE OF THE SCHWA SOUND IN AMERICAN ENGLISH

(i) *Spelling a and e*

It has been noted that American speech has [ə] (schwa) in many instances where British English has [ɪ] for the spelling *a* or *e*. The American counterpart of the British unstressed [ɪ] is either [ɪ] or [ə] depending on the regional dialect and cultural level of the speaker.

Let us first examine the situation in Britain. Not even in Britain is the use of [ɪ] or [ə] uniform. The older generation seems to prefer the [ɪ] sound, the [ə] sound occurring somewhat more frequently among the younger. The [ə] sound is in more general use in the West of England than in the East. Nevertheless it would be a mistake to think that the [ə] variants are limited to the West. For example *report* may be pronounced [rɪ'pɔ:t] or [rə'pɔ:t] also by Londoners. Similarly, *celebrate* has two equally acceptable pronunciations: [s'ɛlɪbreɪt] or ['sɛlebrəɪt] The ending-*ate* of nouns and adjectives has either [ɪ] or [ə], e. g. *separate* ['sɛp (ə)rɪt] or ['sɛp(ə)rət], the second syllable of this word being usually omitted in Southern) English. Another example is *pirate* ['paɪərɪt] or ['paɪərət]. The noun ending-*age* isnormally [ɪdž] but when the syllable is not final, as in the plural, it may retain the [ɪ] or change it to [ə]: messages ['mɛsɪdžɪz] or ['mɛsədžɪz]. In this last example the [ə] is perhaps weaker and shorter than the second-syllable [ɪ] in *the* other variant. [ə] is very frequently substituted for [ɪ] in the penultimate syllables of terminations such as *-ity*, *-ily*, e. g. *ability* [ə'bɪlətɪ] for [ə'bɪlɪtɪ]; similarly, *visibility* [, vɪzɪ'bɪlɪtɪ], [,vɪzə'bɪlɪtɪ], [,vɪzə'bɪlətɪ] *easily* ['i:zɪlɪ] or ['i:zəlɪ]. Many say *challenge* ['tšăləndž] where Jones gives only [ɪ]. From these and other examples it seems that the schwa variants are most frequent when the adjacent consonant is *l, n,* or *r* (e. g. *celebrate, belligerent, enemy, benign, report, terrific*), although [ə] may occur in other positions too, as in *betimes, besiege, sedition,* etc.

Now in America the above variants are equally possible as in Britain. Differently from British English, however, American English shows a marked preference, at least in its informal style, for the schwa sound in many cases besides those already mentioned.

Kenyon says: „With some speakers the unstressed [ɪ] of words like message [mɛsɪdž], goodness [gudnɪs], greatest [gretɪst], tends to become lowered and retracted to [ə]. This results in such pronunciations as [ɛndəd], [rozəz], [gudnəs], [gretəst], [anəst], [aɪ no ət], etc. Professor Grandgent's investigations in 1895 indicated that this was then commonest in New York City, Philadelphia, and parts of the West and South, and that it was regarded as vulgar in other parts of the country. Krapp

believed the last statement no longer true. It is true that to the ears of many accustomed to say [gudnɪs], [aɪ no ɪt], the pronunciation [gudnəs] [aɪ no ət] is unpleasant. But apparently [ə] for [ɪ] in such cases is on the increase." Further he says: „The substitution of [ə] for [ɪ] is especially common in the endings-*ed* of verbs (*stated, needed),-es* of verbs *(passes, loses)* and of plural nouns *(places, noses),* and possessive -'*s* of nouns ending in sibilants *(Keats's, Jones's).*"

The tendency to substitute [ə] for [ɪ] is most marked in the Far Western and perhaps somewhat less so in the Middle Western dialects. *E* is often pronounced [ə] not only in medial but also in initial position, except when followed by two consonants. When followed by two consonants as in the prefix syllables *ex-*, *en-*, etc., the informal Far Western pronunciation is [ɪ]. For example *electric* [ə'lɛktrɪk], *effect* [ə'fɛkt], *emerge* [ə'mɚ:dž], but *enjoy* [ɪn'džɔ·ɪ·], *extreme* [ɪks'tri:m]. In more formal speech words of this latter class are pronounced with [ɛ]:[ɛn'džɔ·ɪ·], [ɛks'tri:m].

For a comparison of dialectal differences in this respect here are a few selected examples:

1. New England dialect: *holiday* ['halɪdɪ], *granted* ['gra:ntɪd], *darkness* ['da:knɪs], *careless* ['ka:lɪs], *origin* ['arɪdžɪn] *orange* ['arɪndž], *quarrel* ['kwarɪl]. [ə] rare in this dialect.

2. Southern dialect (General Southern): *business* ['bɪznɪs], *basket* ['bă·ɪskɪt].

The East Texas dialect shows agreater tendency to use [ə] for [ɪ]: *wanted* ['wɔnəd], *you throwed it out* [jə 'θo:d ət 'aut].

The Mountain dialect seems to prefer [ɪ]: *sausage* ['săsɪdž], *forest* ['farɪst].

3. New York City dialect: *forest* ['farɪst], *accurate* ['ăkjərɪt].

4. Western (Middle Western and Far Western) dialect: *regard* [rə'gard], *cement* [sə'mɛnt], *basket* ['bă:skət] *ragged* ['ră:gəd], *knowledge* ['na:lədž], *prevent* [prə'vɛnt], *summit* ['s ʌmət].

(Examples recorded in my own phonetical notes and in L. Herman and M. S. Herman's *American Dialects.* .)

I have left out of consideration the minor dialects and those showing the influence of other, especially non-Germanic, languages. Nor can I aim at completeness here.

Apart from regional differences the carefulness or carelessness of the speaker decides for one or the other variant. Careful speakers prefer the [ɪ] variants, but the [ə] variants often come more naturally. The same speaker may use either sound in different styles of speech. Besides, words in current use have [ə] more often than do rarer words.

Where both variants are considered equally good use, most Webster dictionaries (4, 5, 8) use the ambiguous symbol *ĭ*, at least for the more common words.

Not even derivations of the same stem are always pronounced alike. Kenyon (4a) says: „... thus many speakers who pronounce the *i* as [ə] in *eradicate,* would pronounce it as [ɪ] in *radical.* Moreover, the words differ according to style: some words have [ɪ] only in very careful speech (as *policy),* while others may have it also in colloquial speech (as *editor).*"

As shown in the Webster dictionaries and Kenyon's pronouncing dictionary, nouns ending in-*ification* usually have [ə] for the first *i* and [ɪ] for the second: *diversification* [daɪ, vɚ·səfɪ'keɪɚən] or [də,vɚ·səfɪ'keɪšən].

(ii) Spelling *u*

The unstressed syllable [ju] is also variable both in British and American English. Words like *popular* occur both with [jə] and [ju] if the *u* is followed by a consonant. The syllable remains [ju] before a vowel sound, as in *contiguous* [kən'tɪgjuəs]. Here it would be difficult to find other rules than that the choice of the variants depends on the carefulness of the speaker. A particularly interesting case is the word *pendulum* which is ['pɛndjuləm] or ['pɛndjələm] in British English and ['pɛndžuləm], ['pɛndžələm] or ['pɛndləm] in American. (Recorded in Webster's New World Dictionary and The New American Webster Handy College Dictionary). Another word in which [ə] may take the place of [ju] in American English, is *peninsula,* pronounced [pə'nɪnsələ] or [pə'nɪnsjulə] . Jones records the pronunciation of the penult only as [ju].

(iii) Spelling *a e* and *o* in ary, -ery, -ory

In British English polysyllables with these endings are normally pronounced with the schwa sound in the penult: [—ərɪ]. American English has a secondary stress on the *a, e,* or *o* respectively in these words and the vowels are then [ɛ] and [ɔ] or [o] with some lengthening. (We must not forget, of course, that the continuant *r* is a vowellike consonant and forms true diphthongs and near-diphthongs or partial diphthongs with preceding vowels .The more it modifies the preceding vowel, the more it tends to merge with it and therefore it is often very difficult to analyze length in such combinations.) Thus *January,* which in British English is pronounced ['džănjuərɪ], is normally ['džănju, ɛ·rɪ] in American. *Monastery* is ['mɔnəstrɪ] or ['mɔnɪstrɪ] (this latter not recorded in Jones) in British English and ['manəs, tɛ·rɪ] in American. To British *territory* ['tɛrɪt(ə)rɪ] corresponds American ['tɛrə, tɔ·rɪ] or [—, to·rɪ].

Out of undue respect for British English, however, many people of the educated classes try to imitate the British pronunciation by using [ə] in these words because they consider it more correct. But they usually lengthen this syllable thus: ['džănju,ə·rɪ], which makes their pronunciation sound un-British.

These words of Latin origin came into English through Old French. In Old French the main stress was usually on the next to the last syllable. Middle English borrowed these words with the main stress on the same syllable and gave these words a secondary stress on the second preceding syllable according to the principle of alternating rhythm: *,terri'torie.* With its tendency to stress the first syllable of words, English soon shifted the main stress on to the originally weakly stressed syllable and the syllable which originally wore the main stress retained a weak, i. e. secondary stress. British English comparatively recently lost the secondary stress, while it still remains in American English. So the American pronunciation variants in words of this type are only more conservative but not less correct forms.

(iv) Monosyllables

Monosyllables usually change their vowels according to stress, the most frequent vowel change from the stressed forms to the unstressed ones being either the substitution of the strong vowel by [ə] or loss of the vowel.

Here we are only concerned with those cases in which the strong vowel may be substituted by[ə]in the weak form. The occurrence of [ə] in the following unstressed monosyllables is recorded by Kenyon but not by Jones : *by* [bəɪ], *I* [ə], *my* [mə], *no* [nə], *one* [wən] (pronoun), *to* [tə] (before vowels), *up* [əp], *what* [hwət], *you* [jə], *you're* [jə].

Conclusion

It is clear from the above that with the exception of syllables under secondary stress and a few special cases like *vacation, satanic,* where British English uses [ə], American [e] in the first syllable, the [ə] sound has a much wider regional and social spread in American than in British English.

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