

AUSTRALIAN VOWELS: AUSTRALIAN IDENTITY

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The Australian English accent is differentiated from other varieties of English mainly by the pronunciation of vowel sounds. There are some consonantal differences but it is primarily the vowels that give our accent its distinctly Australian flavour. At the Speech Hearing and Language Research Centre (SHLRC) at Macquarie University in Sydney there is a long tradition in describing and researching the Australian English accent. The work is based on acoustic techniques and provides objective information on the structural characteristics of the dialect. Observations of Australian English vowels have given us detailed insight into variations that occur within the dialect and how Australian English (AusE) differs from other English dialects.

If we compare AusE with the dialect generally considered to be our primary external standard, Received pronunciation of British English (RP), it is possible to describe a range of distinctive vowel differences between the two. The front vowels in AusE, as in the words HID, HEAD, and HAD, are all raised relative to the same vowels in RP. This means that the vowel in the word HID is rather closer to the HEED vowel than in RP. The vowel in the word HEAD is closer to the HID vowel than in RP and the vowel in the word HAD is closer to the HEAD vowel than in RP. The vowels in the words HARD and HUD, which are back vowels in RP, are more fronted in AusE and therefore closer to the HAD vowel. The high HUDE and HOOD vowels are very similar to one another in RP but these two are quite distinct in AusE.

There are also diphthong differences between these two varieties. The rising diphthongs occur in the words HADE, HIDE, HOYD, HOWD, and HODE, and the centring diphthongs occur in the words EAR and AIR. The EAR and AIR diphthongs in AusE are often pronounced with negligible offglide so the production is rather like prolonged HID and HEAD vowels. The glides in the HOWD and HODE vowels have different orientations in RP relative to AusE and the HADE, HIDE, HOYD vowels have undergone a process of shift such that AusE HADE is similar to RP HIDE and AusE HIDE is similar to RP HOYD. These differences may in some instances lead to misunderstanding such as the unfortunate woman who believed she was being sent home from the hospital 'to die' after being informed that she was 'going home today'.

Australia and its neighbour New Zealand share many of these vowel differences with RP; not surprising as we are descended from rather similar dialect stock. The similarities between AusE and New Zealand English (NZE) are so great that speakers of other dialects often cannot differentiate between the two. Indeed, there have been many occasions where New Zealanders have been cast in foreign films to play Australians and

vice versa. However, speakers of either New Zealand or Australian English are very unlikely to confuse the two. There are many salient features that are essential in characterising these two regional dialects of English. The rising diphthongs are essentially the same for both AusE and NZE and display the same range of variation. The differences between the two dialects reside primarily in the short front vowels and in the centring diphthongs. In NZE the centring diphthongs EAR and AIR have merged for most young speakers whereas in AusE these two vowels remain very distinct and there is no suggestion in our research of any merger in progress. In NZE the vowel in HAD is quite close to the AusE HEAD vowel and the NZE vowel in HEAD is very similar to AusE HID although a length difference remains. NZE HID has moved to a more central location and is similar to the schwa vowel (a short form of the HERD vowel) whereas AusE HID remains close to HEED. The central HID vowel is probably the most salient differentiating feature of NZE. It is the speech sound most parodied by Australians imitating New Zealanders in phrases like ‘fush ’n’ chups’ (although this vowel quality is a gross exaggeration). There have been various reports in recent years about a NZ influence on AusE, along with the suggestion that AusE is becoming more like NZE. After extensive investigations at SHLRC into the vowel sounds of both dialects we have not found any evidence of this phenomenon. Our work has involved numerous studies to track vowel change in progress and has involved analysis of speakers from a wide range of social groups. We find no evidence of centralised HID and no evidence of EAR/AIR merger in AusE. The short front vowel raising which is characteristic of NZE is socially and regionally variable in Sydney and cannot be said to represent a change toward NZE. Australia and New Zealand maintain an amicable socio-cultural rivalry and this rivalry cements the linguistic differences between the two nations. Australians don’t want to sound like New Zealanders and New Zealanders certainly don’t want to sound Australian.

This rivalry is keenly illustrated by the linguistically aware graffiti artist who upon encountering **NZ SUX** boldly emblazoned on a wall at Bondi Beach replied with his spray can **AUSTRALIA NIL**.

The dominant external cultural force impacting on Australia at the present time is North America. However, even this mega-culture whose influence continues to have a profound effect on all facets of Australian life has not affected our pronunciation. The resistance of AusE pronunciation to American pressures reinforces the notion that our accent is the most salient marker of identity and nationalism. If the all-pervasive North American influence cannot affect our pronunciation there is little likelihood that New Zealand can have an impact, even given the large numbers of New Zealanders currently living in Australia. So we must lay the NZ influence theory to rest. The differences between the two dialects remain intact and presumably will continue to serve as a mechanism for maintaining our cultural distance.

Language is a dynamic symbol of identity and culture. Linguists have the exciting task of describing the current status of the language, mapping the progress of change and discussing the relationships between linguistic and social factors. Language provides important insight into the individual and national psyche.

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