

The Work of the BBC Pronunciation Unit in the 21st Century

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After a brief account of its development in the latter half of the 20th century, this paper describes the BBC Pronunciation Unit as it operates today. The Unit's remit and staff are discussed, and examples of its work are given. The key policies that guide its recommendations are set out, and its research sources and methods are described. Detailed descriptions of the pronunciation database, the BBC Modified Spelling and the Unit's approach to issues of anglicization follow, and the paper concludes with a summary of the Unit's other responsibilities.

1. About the BBC Pronunciation Unit

The BBC Pronunciation Unit has an eminent predecessor in the form of the Advisory Committee on Spoken English (ACSE), which is discussed elsewhere in this issue. After the dissolution of the ACSE at the time of World War Two, the daily pronunciation advice work was taken over by linguists employed as full-time BBC staff, although former ACSE members Professors Arthur Lloyd James and Daniel Jones remained as Linguistic Advisers to the BBC until their deaths (Pointon 1988). The post-war Pronunciation Unit was staffed by modern languages graduates with phonetic training, and their work became increasingly focused on foreign pronunciations. Two of the longest-serving members of the Unit over the fifty years which followed were Miss G.M. Miller and Mr. Graham Pointon.

Initially the Pronunciation Unit was part of BBC Presentation, but it was later transferred to become part of the Information and Archives Department, which looks after all the BBC's media assets and delivers them to programme-makers. This move was not only an administrative one, but also reflected the Unit's new remit; rather than giving mandatory pronunciation

recommendations to announcers and newsreaders only, the Unit's research and advice was now available to all parts of the BBC.

In its current form, the Pronunciation Unit is staffed by three full-time pronunciation linguists, one of whom also takes a co-ordinating role. We are all trained phoneticians with additional skills in specific languages. As linguistics and phonetics have developed as academic disciplines over the past decades, it is now possible for us to find staff with extensive training and experience in these subjects as well as knowledge of modern languages.

We have several criteria when searching for a new pronunciation linguist. We require a university degree in linguistics or phonetics, or in modern languages or English with a significant linguistics component, and we also look for further experience in academic or professional linguistic research such as a postgraduate degree. We require near-native fluency in at least one language besides English, and familiarity with a wide range of languages is an advantage. We require a thorough and practical knowledge of the IPA and its application in phonemic and phonetic transcription of all languages.¹

In addition, we require a set of more general skills such as excellent written and spoken English, a meticulous eye for detail, the ability to work under pressure and to agreed procedures, and good general knowledge, especially in the areas of music, geography and current affairs.

The Unit's remit, briefly stated, is to research and advise on the pronunciation of any words, names or phrases in any language required by anyone in the BBC. The aim is to collaborate with programme makers in ensuring that BBC broadcasts are accurate and consistent. In a typical day, we will advise on pronunciations for several BBC networks (in total, there are eleven radio stations, nine television channels and also online services) across several genres (news, drama, quizzes, factual programmes, music). The work, of course, consists not only of giving answers to queries, but of working out what those answers should be.

2. Policies

This section summarises some of the general policies that the Unit applies in deciding which pronunciations we ought to recommend.²

- For place names in English-speaking countries, we recommend a standardized version of the local pronunciation.

1 Unit staff are expected to hold the International Phonetic Association's Certificate of Proficiency in the Phonetics of English; see <http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/courses/ipaexam/ipaexam.htm> for details.

2 These policies were first published, and are set out in more detail, in British Broadcasting Corporation (1974).

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- For place names in non-English-speaking countries, we usually also recommend a standardized version of the local pronunciation. However, if there is an established English form of a place name such as *Florence* or *Munich*, then we recommend this rather than the local form *Firenze* or *München* (see Section 7 for more on established anglicizations). For place names which have sounds which would cause difficulties of production or comprehension, we devise an anglicized form which is as close as possible to the native pronunciation.
 - For people’s names, we recommend the pronunciation that the individual concerned prefers. If we cannot speak to people themselves, we ask family members or colleagues. In the case of personal names of people from non-English-speaking countries, as with place names, we consult native speakers and reference works, and devise an anglicized pronunciation which is as close as possible to the original.
 - If people’s names, place names or words are fictional and the intended language or etymology is unclear or itself fictional, we consult the author directly. If this is not possible, we talk to the agent or publisher or to serious fans. This sort of pronunciation challenge is especially common in the genres of fantasy and science fiction.
 - When it comes to specialist vocabulary – medical, pharmacological, zoological, botanical, etc. – we consult published sources and expert informants.
 - For words and phrases in languages other than English, we make recommendations based on our own linguistic knowledge, a wide range of reference works, and (in the case of living languages) consultation with native speakers and other experts. There is a great deal of variation in the contemporary pronunciation of English words, and it is not part of the Pronunciation Research Unit’s role to enforce particular pronunciations. We are happy, if asked, to offer advice on which pronunciations are more common or recommended.

A brief digression is in order on this last point. Like our predecessors on the Advisory Committee on Spoken English, we are often asked to help out with ‘doubtful’ words which exist in English. It is important to differentiate here between accents and pronunciations. The concepts accent and pronunciation are often collapsed together in the popular perception, and much of our correspondence from the public is in fact concerned with complaints about broadcasters’ accents rather than their pronunciation. We would consider variation in the pronunciation of English words such as *bath*, *nurse*, *square*, *cure*, *water*, *milk*, *brother* to be a result of the speaker’s accent. Broadly, we do not concern ourselves with the way our broadcasters say these words. However, variation in the pronunciation of words such as *kilometre*, *contraversy*, *integral*, *cervical*, *research*, *schedule* – words for which more than one

pronunciation is codified – does fall within our remit. We can advise broadcasters on which of two or more acceptable pronunciations is likely to be appropriate for their audience, and provide information about which pronunciation is more conservative, or might be interpreted as an Americanism. We do not insist that one particular version is used across the Corporation, although, ultimately, once we have given the appropriate linguistic information, it is an editorial decision.

3. Research Sources and Methods

People often ask us how we find out which pronunciations to recommend. Assuming that a pronunciation has not already been researched and added to our database (see next Section), this is how we go about our research.

We begin our research using the resources to be found within the Unit. We have a substantial library of pronunciation dictionaries, gazetteers, encyclopaedias and other reference books. We have extensive in-house notes on the phonologies and anglicization of many languages, and the Unit staff themselves possess a wide range of language fluencies and knowledge. It can sometimes also be useful to consult our own pronunciation database to look for similar entries.

If the Unit's resources are insufficient, we broaden the research and consider other sources within the BBC. The BBC broadcasts in many languages besides English. Within the UK, broadcasts are made in Welsh, Scottish Gaelic, Hindi/Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali and Gujarati, while the BBC World Service broadcasts in thirty-two different languages worldwide. We are therefore fortunate to have many native speakers of these languages available to consult within the BBC. Other staff such as journalists working in monitoring and newsgathering can also help, and there is a useful intranet tool which allows all staff to circulate details of languages that they can speak. If the pronunciation is not in a foreign language but is fictional or specialist, we can also sometimes find help within the BBC. For example, the web team which looked after the (now discontinued) www.bbc.co.uk/cult site were very helpful with pronunciations from *Dr Who* and *Star Trek*, needed for a quiz programme. Any input that we receive in this way is purely goodwill, in line with the BBC value of collaboration across the Corporation.

Lastly, we consult certain external sources for pronunciation research. This includes embassies and high commissions, universities, museums and specialist libraries, and language units at other broadcasters. For some pronunciations – for example, the proprietary name of a new drug – it is best for us to be led by the press office of the relevant company. For actors' and celebrities' names, we generally consult their agents or representatives directly. We also use some approved online databases such as the U.S.

Library of Congress's guide to the names of public figures,³ making the necessary adjustments for British English.

Although we each carry out research on pronunciations individually, all but the most straightforward decisions are made collaboratively. Matters such as the relative reliability of sources and appropriate levels of anglicization are agreed within the team. Once a recommendation has been agreed upon, it is added to our pronunciation database.

4. Pronunciation Database

From the days of the Advisory Committee on Spoken English, pronunciation recommendations were recorded on handwritten, and later typewritten, cards. In 1995 the information on the cards was all transferred to a computerized database used within the Unit. In 2001, an online service presenting information from this database was created, which allows BBC staff to access pronunciation advice at all times. In 2003, a synthesizer tool was added to this online service, so that users could hear the pronunciation aloud as well as reading it. In 2008, an overhaul project to transfer the database to a stable and up-to-date technology platform (from Visual Basic 6.0 to .NET3) and improve the functionality of the online service will be complete.

The database, built up over the course of the last eighty years, now consists of over 200,000 entries. A typical database entry shows the head-

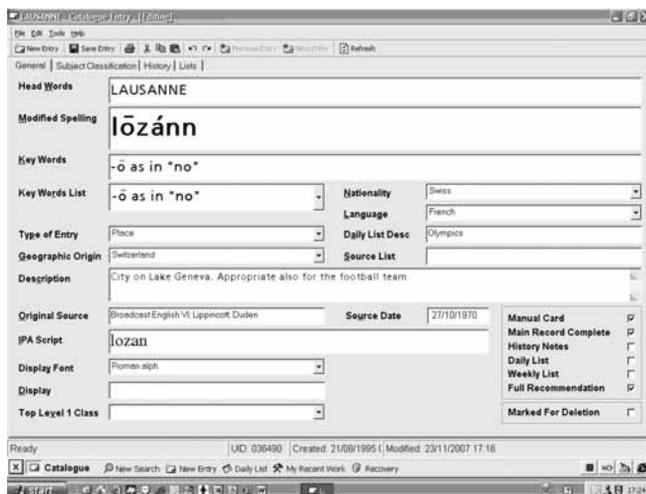


Fig. 1: A typical database entry, 'Lausanne'

3 <http://www.loc.gov/nls/other/sayhow.html>.

word, the pronunciation written in BBC Modified Spelling (with keywords), a description, notes on the source of the pronunciation, an IPA transcription and a range of metadata. Histories of any controversies or changes in recommendation are also attached to entries.

The online service does not present all of this information to our users. Only the headword, the pronunciation in Modified Spelling and the description are displayed, and the synthesizer ‘reads’ the Modified Spelling aloud.

5. Delivering our Advice

Once we have carried out the necessary research, it is essential that we communicate our advice to our users in a way that is accurate and comprehensible. Advice is delivered in both spoken and written form. In addition to the synthesized pronunciations that can be heard via the online service, Unit staff often give live spoken advice. In general, such advice is given down the telephone, but we sometimes also create digital recordings and use them to supply spoken pronunciations as sound files.

Written advice is generally supplied in electronic documents emailed to users, although we still occasionally send advice via fax or post. Written advice usually constitutes either a dedicated list of pronunciations tailored to a particular programme or broadcaster, or an existing document such as a script or a set of presentation details which we annotate with the required pronunciation advice in BBC Modified Spelling.

The BBC Modified Spelling is a simple respelling system, based on a restricted set of English phonemes with a small number of frequently-occurring additional sounds. Stress is indicated with an acute accent – á – over the nucleus of the stressed syllable, and vowel reduction with a breve – ä. Front rounded vowels are indicated with diaereses – ä –, and nasalized vowels with a following (ng). Underlining is used to distinguish the voiced dental fricative in *this* from the voiceless equivalent in *thin*, and the voiceless velar fricative in *loch* or palatal fricative in German *ich* from the affricate in *church*, and for special digraph characters zh (voiced alveolar fricative as in *measure*) and hl (alveolar lateral fricative as in Welsh *llan*). Rhoticity is reflected, and keywords are used to assist new users and to disambiguate ch, ö and ü, each of which are used to represent one of two sounds.

Although written advice is generally delivered using the BBC Modified Spelling, we sometimes need to give pronunciation advice using a plain text format instead.⁴ This is necessary when the pronunciation will be delivered to the end user via a plain text system such as a teleprompter, SMS or online

4 This system is described at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/magazinemonitor/phonetics.doc>.

messaging. BBC Modified Spelling is unsuitable in such cases because of its additional formatting. Our plain text system separates syllables with hyphens and capitalizes the stressed syllable. It is extremely similar to the respelling system used in Olausson and Sangster (2006).

a as in man, marry	b as in bat
aa as in father	ch (tch) as in church
air as in fair	<u>ch</u> as in loch or Ger. ich
aw as in law	d as in dog
ay as in day	f as in fit
e as in get, merry	g as in get
ee as in beef	h as in hat
eer as in beer	<u>h</u> as in Welsh llan
i as in sit, mirror	j as in Jack
ī as in high	k as in king
o as in not, sorry	l as in live
ō as in no	m as in man
ö as in Fr. cœur or Fr. peu	n as in nut
öi as in Fr. fauteuil	ng as in singer
oo as in moon	ng-g as in finger
ōō as in book	p as in pat
ōör as in poor	r as in run, over
ow as in now	s as in sit
oy as in boy	sh as in shut
u as in hum	t as in top
ur as in fur	th as in thin
ü as in Fr. vu or Ger. fünf	<u>th</u> as in there
a(ng) as in Fr. vin	v as in vat
aa(ng) as in Fr. blanc	w as in will
o(ng) as in Fr. pont	y as in yes
ö(ng) as in Fr. un	z as in zebra
	<u>zh</u> as in measure

Fig. 2: The BBC Modified Spelling system

6. Anglicization

BBC broadcasters are not expected to be *au fait* with every sound and phonological rule of every language they use. When we make a recommendation, it is not supposed to be a super-accurate rendering of the original language; it is standardized and modified, designed for a speaker of English addressing an English-speaking audience. Many of our non-English pronun-

ciations are subject to a degree of anglicization by the very process of expressing them in the BBC Modified Spelling, because of the restricted phonological set used.

Our general aim is to recommend pronunciations that are as close as possible to the native language in question, but they still need to flow naturally in an English broadcast, causing minimal problems of production (for the speaker) and perception (by the audience). Of course, we are able to coach individual users on more authentic pronunciations and other non-English phonemes such as clicks if this is required in a specific context, but in general, the limits of the BBC Modified Spelling are observed.

This presents challenges when it comes to speech sounds which do not map neatly onto the sounds in the set available. One example of this would be the long front open vowel in Arabic (as in *Osama bin Laden*), for which we must choose between 'aa', giving a vowel of the right length but too far back, or 'a', which is closer to the right quality but too short. Another example would be the voiced velar fricative as in Dutch and Arabic; the closest available sounds are voiced velar stop (g) or voiceless velar fricative (ch), but choosing either requires a compromise on either voicing or manner of articulation. There are many similar challenges. Native speakers are consulted on which compromise they would prefer, but they do not always agree with one another. Cases like the above can be difficult to resolve, but we try to take a systematic approach, making sure we anglicize consistently.

There is a second aspect to anglicization which we must consider carefully. This concerns English versions of proper names and loaned lexical items, which we refer to as established anglicizations. For instance, many names of foreign countries, rivers and cities have accepted English forms, either of both spelling and pronunciation (e.g. *Warsaw* for Polish *Warszawa*), or just of pronunciation (e.g. *Paris*). We always recommend that established anglicizations are used wherever they exist, as using a native pronunciation instead can confuse the listener, and may sound affected. These established anglicizations are codified in gazetteers, atlases and dictionaries, but they may change over time: *Niger*, *Majorca*, *Basle*, *Cartagena*, *Zaragoza*, and *Ossetia* are just some of the place names for which the Unit now makes recommendations closer to the native pronunciation rather than older anglicizations. Official spellings or transliterations of names can also change (e.g. *Kolkata*, *Beijing*) which can lead to further changes in established anglicized pronunciations.

Less commonly, anglicization can apply to people's names as well as place names. This is particularly common with high-profile people in the areas of international sport, show business and politics. We research the level of anglicization which a particular person prefers for their name before making recommendations on these names (e.g. *Michael Schumacher*, *Roman Abramovitch*).

This can be true not only of proper names but also of lexical items. Words and phrases in languages other than English often appear in an English-language context. Topics such as music, science and literature, food and drink, dance and sport provide many examples. When these words are treated as foreign, the Pronunciation Unit makes recommendations which are as close as possible to the original language, subject to the usual simplifications, as described in Section 2 above. However, when these words and phrases are taken into English, they are generally pronounced using only English sounds, and in such cases a more anglicized recommendation is more appropriate. For example, the French phrase *trompe l'œil* is usually pronounced 'tromp loy' in English, rather than with a more native pronunciation with nasalized and front rounded vowels. As with place names, these anglicizations can change over time. Words borrowed from other languages are often initially given foreign pronunciations, and then anglicizations become established: the relatively new addition *sudoku* is an excellent example of this. Conversely, as awareness of foreign languages and cultural sensitivity increases, more native-like pronunciations can emerge to replace more traditional anglicized forms. An example of this would be the title of the Spanish novel *Don Quixote*, which used to be anglicized to 'don KWIK-sot', but this is now felt to be rather dated; 'don kee-HOH-ti' is the anglicization we now recommend. As a whole, the level of anglicization within the BBC has decreased over the years as broadcasters and audiences have become more familiar with the sounds of foreign languages and the BBC has served an increasingly global audience.

7. Other Unit Responsibilities

As well as carrying out research, maintaining the pronunciation database and responding to programme makers' queries, we have a range of other responsibilities. We try to anticipate need for pronunciations and, to that end, we prepare targeted lists of pronunciations for particular groups of people within the BBC.

Every day, we review prospective news stories and prepare an online Daily List of names, places and phrases which are likely to feature in the day's news broadcasts across the BBC's networks. This list is made available for download from our internal website and is widely used by newsreaders and announcers. It is prepared every morning and updated through the day.

We also prepare themed lists for major sports events that the BBC is covering, such as Wimbledon, the World Cup, or similar, and for major news and political events such as the general elections or the war in Iraq. We compile a special list whenever one is requested; for example, we recently

compiled a list of Channel Island place names for BBC Radio Jersey. Again, these special lists are available to be downloaded internally, and digital or paper copies are also sent directly to the broadcasters concerned.

In addition to preparing these lists, we are responsible for publicizing our service to encourage uptake within the BBC, and promoting the Unit and its work both within and beyond the BBC. This often involves outreach or training visits to particular areas of the Corporation, maintaining our relationships with areas that already use us, and building up new connections with areas that could perhaps use us more. From time to time, members of the Unit appear on BBC programmes to discuss matters of pronunciation, especially local radio and programmes which deal with audience complaints such as Radio 4's *Feedback* or News24's *NewsWatch*. On occasion, Unit staff have collaborated with Oxford University Press in editing and publishing reference books based on the Unit's pronunciation database (Miller 1971; Pointon 1990; Olausson and Sangster 2006).

We also deal more directly with audience feedback. A weekly digest is supplied to us by the BBC Information Department which summarizes all complaints received by telephone, email or post which relate to language or pronunciation.⁵ If we feel it is appropriate, we may contact the programme makers concerned to ensure they are aware of the ways in which we could help them avoid such problems in the future. Although this central route for making complaints is available, we are still also written to directly by audience members who wish to discuss pronunciation matters. Popular concerns include stress placement, foreign names, geopolitical considerations, and broadcasters' regional accents. We do respond to all letters received, although, given our small size and our other responsibilities, this cannot be our first priority.

We have general managerial and secretarial support from BBC Information and Archives staff who work outside the Unit, but administrative matters such as recruitment and training of staff, document handling, performance management and library maintenance necessarily consume a certain amount of our time. Unit staff members each take responsibility for their individual professional development through monthly language study days and attendance at occasional seminars from phoneticians experts in a particular language.

In conclusion, as the present contribution and others in this issue have shown, the Pronunciation Unit's role and responsibilities have expanded considerably since the days of the ACSE which was its ancestor. The procedures and practices that we follow in the 21st century to carry out research and disseminate our recommendations would be very unfamiliar to our

5 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/complaints/>.

predecessors, and some of our policies have altered and developed with the changing times. However, a fundamental belief in the importance of accurate pronunciation has been constant throughout the history of the Corporation, and the present-day Pronunciation Unit maintains this with pride.

8. References

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