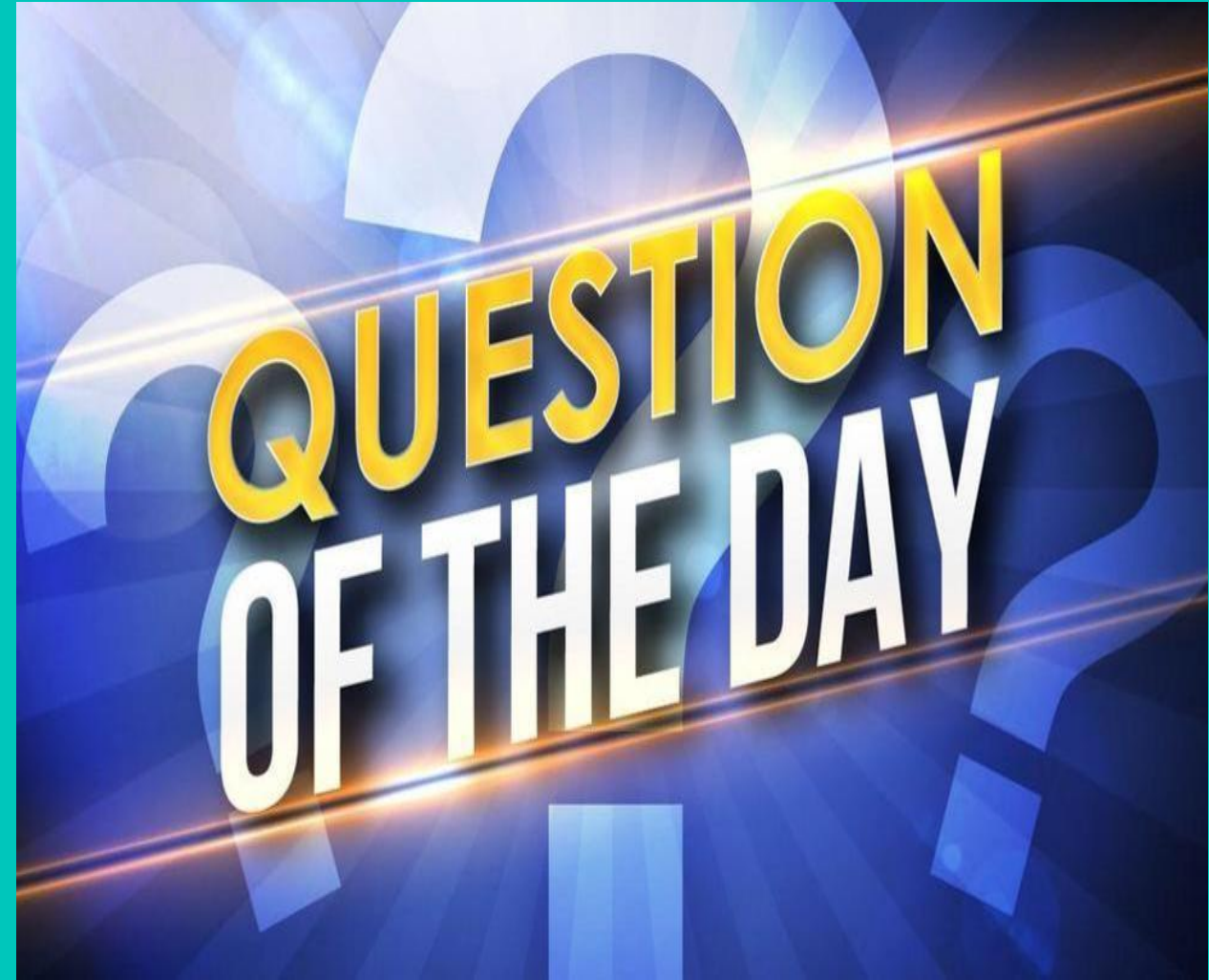


# Lexical set

By **John Christopher Wells**

A lexical set is a group of words that share a similar phonological feature.

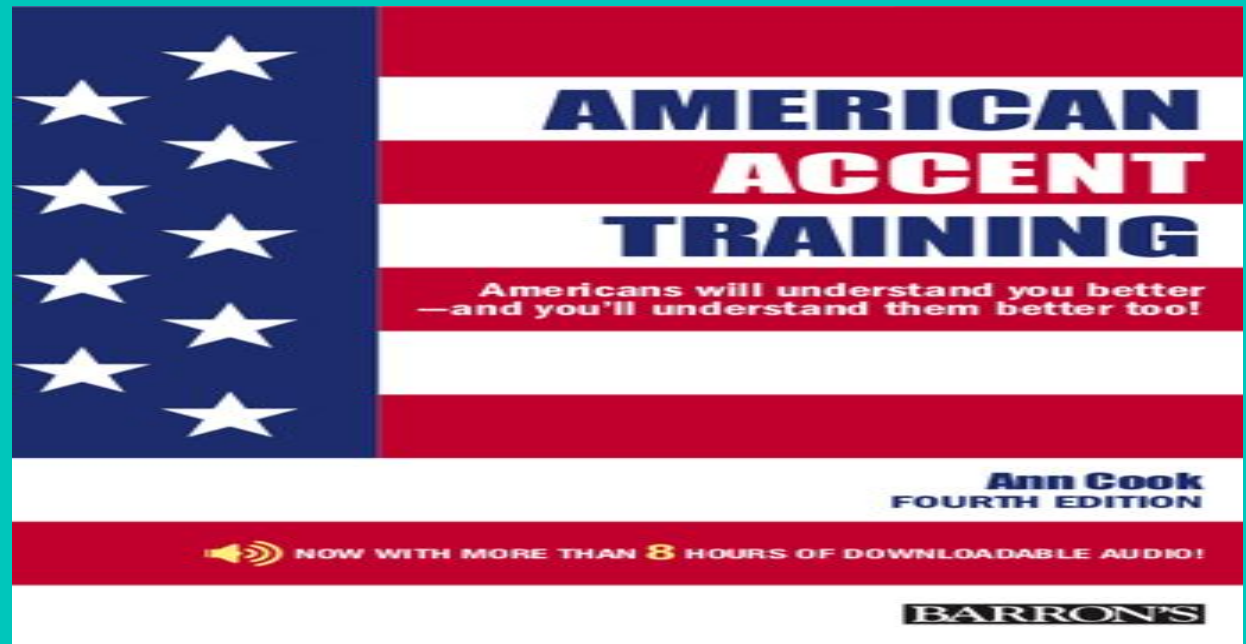
The Standard Lexical Sets for English introduced by John C. Wells in *Accents of English* are in wide usage. Wells defined each lexical set on the basis of the pronunciation of words in two reference accents, which he calls RP and GenAm.



- "RP" refers to Received Pronunciation, the traditionally prestigious accent in England.[2]



- "GenAm" refers to an accent of the General American type, which is associated with a geographically "neutral" or widespread sound system throughout the US



John Christopher Wells (born 11 March 1939 in Bootle, Lancashire)[1] is a British phonetician and Esperantist. Wells is a professor emeritus at University College London, where until his retirement in 2006 he held the departmental chair in phonetics.



Wells earned his bachelor's degree at Trinity College, Cambridge and his master's degree and his PhD at the University of London.

Wells is known for his book and cassette Accents of English, the book and CD The Sounds of the IPA, Lingvistikaj Aspektoj de Esperanto, and the Longman Pronunciation Dictionary. He is the author of the most widely used English-Esperanto dictionary.



Wells classifies words of the English language into 24 lexical sets on the basis of the pronunciation of the vowel of their stressed syllable in the two reference accents. Each lexical set is named after a representative keyword.

Keyword ↕	RP ▲	GenAm ◆	Example words
PRICE	aɪ	aɪ	ripe, write, arrive, high, try, buy
MOUTH	aʊ	aʊ	out, house, loud, count, crowd, cow
TRAP	æ	æ	tap, back, badge, scalp, hand, cancel
BATH	ɑː	æ	staff, brass, ask, dance, sample, calf
PALM	ɑː	ɑ	psalm, father, bra, spa, lager
START	ɑː	ɑr	far, sharp, bark, carve, farm, heart
DRESS	e	ɛ	step, neck, edge, shelf, friend, ready
FACE	eɪ	eɪ	tape, cake, raid, veil, steak, day
SQUARE	ɛə	ɛr	care, fair, pear, where, scarce, vary
NURSE	ɜː	ɜr	hurt, lurk, urge, burst, jerk, term
happy	i	i	copy, scampi, taxi, sortie, committee, hockey, Chelsea
FLEECE	iː	i	creep, speak, leave, feel, key, people
KIT	ɪ	ɪ	ship, sick, bridge, milk, myth, busy
NEAR	ɪə	ɪr	beer, sincere, fear, beard, serum
LOT	ɒ	ɑ	stop, sock, dodge, romp, possible, quality
CLOTH	ɒ	ɔ	cough, broth, cross, long, Boston
CHOICE	ɔɪ	ɔɪ	adroit, noise, join, toy, royal
THOUGHT	ɔː	ɔ	taught, sauce, hawk, jaw, broad
NORTH	ɔː	ɔr	for, war, short, scorch, born, warm
FORCE	ɔː	or	four, wore, sport, porch, borne, story
GOAT	əʊ	o	soap, joke, home, know, so, roll
GOOSE	uː	u	loop, shoot, tomb, mute, huge, view
FOOT	ʊ	ʊ	put, bush, full, good, look, wolf
CURE	ʊə	ʊr	poor, tourist, pure, plural, jury
STRUT	ʌ	ʌ	cup, suck, budge, pulse, trunk, blood
letter	ə	ər	paper, metre, calendar, stupor, succo(u)r, martyr, figure
comma	ə	ə	catalpa, quota, vodka

For example, the word rod is pronounced /rɒd/ in RP and /rad/ in GenAm. It therefore belongs in the LOT lexical set. Weary is pronounced /'wɪəri/ in RP and /'wɪri/ in GenAm, and thus belongs in the NEAR lexical set.

Some words of the English language do not belong to any lexical set. For example, the *a* in the stressed syllable of *tomato* is pronounced /ɑː/ in RP, and /eɪ/ in GenAm, a combination which is very unusual, and is not covered by any of the 24 lexical sets above.



## Choice of the keywords

Wells explains his choice of keywords ("kit", "fleece", etc.) as follows:



"The keywords have been chosen in such a way that clarity is maximized: whatever accent of English they are spoken in, they can hardly be mistaken for other words. Although *fleece* is not the commonest of words, it cannot be mistaken for a word with some other vowel; whereas *beat*, say, if we had chosen it instead, would have been subject to the drawback that one man's pronunciation of *beat* may sound like another's pronunciation of *bait* or *bit*



## Usage

The Standard Lexical Sets of Wells are widely used to discuss the phonological and phonetic systems of different accents of English in a clear and concise manner. Although based solely on RP and GenAm, the Standard Lexical Sets have proven useful in describing many other accents of English. This is true because, in many dialects, the words in all or most of the sets are pronounced with similar or identical stressed vowels. Wells himself uses the Lexical Sets most prominently to give "tables of lexical incidence" for all the various accents he discusses in his work.



For example, here is the table of lexical incidence he gives for Newfoundland English

KIT	ɪ		FLEECE	i:		NEAR	ɛr
DRESS	ɛ		FACE	ɛ:, ɛɪ		SQUARE	ɛr
TRAP	æ		PALM	æ, ɑ:		START	æɪr
LOT	ɒ		THOUGHT	ɑ:		NORTH	ɔ̃r
STRUT	ɔ̃		GOAT	ʌʊ		FORCE	ɔ̃r
FOOT	ʊ		GOOSE	u:		CURE	ɔ̃r
BATH	æ		PRICE	əɪ		<i>happy</i>	[i]
CLOTH	ɑ:		CHOICE	əɪ		<i>letter</i>	ər [ə-]
NURSE	ɜr		MOUTH	əʊ		<i>comma</i>	ə

Lexical sets may also be used to describe splits and mergers. For example, RP, along with most non-rhotic accents, pronounces words such as "father" and "farther" identically. This can be described more economically as the merger of the PALM and START lexical sets. Most North American accents make "father" rhyme with "bother". This can be described as the merger of the PALM and LOT lexical sets.



## Once Wells wrote:

I sometimes think that a century from now my lexical sets will be the one thing I shall be remembered for. Yet I dreamt them up over a weekend, frustrated with the incoherent mess of symbols used in such contemporary publications as Weinreich's "Is a structural dialectology possible?"

He also wrote that he claimed no copyright in the Standard Lexical Sets, and that everyone was "free to make whatever use of them they wish"



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