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English and French share the same letters of alphabet yet the sound segments represented by the same alphabet letters are very different in the two languages. This paper focuses on comparing the major differences in the sound systems between British English spoken in England and French spoken in France, disregarding the phonological variations of the sounds in these two languages used in other countries.

Before illustrating the different sound systems of these two languages, some particular features of the French language are described. Firstly, the final consonant is silent when the word is in isolation. As in '*les, vous, nous*' (i.e. the, you, we), /s/ is not pronounced. Secondly, liaison happens in pronunciation when the word that follows starts with a vowel in sequences, such as 'article + noun', 'adjective + noun', 'personal pronoun + verb', etc., in that the final consonant of the preceding word is jointly pronounced with the initial vowel of the following, for instance '*les \_ enfants* [le zãfã]' (i.e. the children) and '*vous \_ avez* [vu zave]' (i.e. you have). Finally, elision is obligatory. When a word that begins with a vowel is preceded by a word with an unstressed final vowel, the preceding unstressed vowel is deleted and the preceding word is contracted with the following word indicated by an apostrophe, as in the sequences of 'article + noun' and 'personal pronoun + verb', e.g., '*\*le \_ enfant → l'enfant*' (i.e. the child) and '*\*je \_ ai → j'ai*' (i.e. I have).

**Consonants.** In both English and French, the consonants /p, t, k/ are voiceless plosives. A difference between the voiceless plosives of the two languages is aspiration. In English, /p, t, k/ represent the bilabial, alveolar and velar plosives respectively. When in the word-initial position, as in '*pin, tin, kin*', they are aspirated [p<sup>h</sup>, t<sup>h</sup>, k<sup>h</sup>]. But when there is an initial /s/ occurring before, as in '*spin, sting, skin*', they are unaspirated [p, t, k]. There is basically no aspiration for /p t k/ in the word-final position, as in '*tip, pit, kick*'. In French, the bilabial /p/, alveolar /t/, velar /k/ remain as the unaspirated [p, t, k], whether in the word-initial position, such as in '*parler, tenter, karaté*' (i.e. to talk, to try, karate), or preceded by /s/, such as in '*spatial, stable, ski*' (i.e. spatial, stable, ski). Although the French consonants in the word-final position are silent, there are exceptions. The voiceless plosives in the word-final position behave differently. Consonants /p, t, k/ normally comply with the silent rule to disappear in the word-final position, e.g., /p/ →∅ as in '*trop, coup, sirop*' (i.e. too, punch, syrup), /t/ →∅ as in '*tout, sort, dort*' (i.e. all, goes out, sleeps) and /k/ →∅ as in '*tabac, estomac, blanc*' (i.e. tobacco, stomach, white). But there are exceptions that the word-final /p, t, k/ are retained, e.g., /p/ in '*cap, stop, handicap*' (i.e. cap, stop sign, handicap), /t/ in '*août, huit, ouest*' (i.e. August, eight, west) and /k/ in '*avec, sac, lac*' (i.e. with, bag, lake). There are

however cases where the plosive can be both, for instance, /t/ in 'est' (i.e. east) is pronounced, but is silent, /t/ → ∅, when it functions as the present tense of the verb 'to be'.

The second phonological property that differs between English and French is the 'r' sound. In English, it is generally pronounced as a postalveolar approximant [ɹ], rather than a retroflex [ɻ], especially in the word-initial position as in 'rat, red, rare'. Unlike in English, the French 'r' is a voiced uvula fricative, represented by [ʀ], as in 'rue, froid, arriver' (i.e. street, cold, to arrive), while it can be optionally produced as a vibrating trill. When the French 'r' occurs in the word-final position, it is pronounced especially in monosyllabic words as in 'car, pour, mer' (i.e. because, for, sea). But, weakening of the articulation or deletion of the word-final [ʀ] is also possible. Nonetheless, the final 'r' in the infinitive '-er' ending of a verb is not pronounced, [ʀ] → ∅, as in 'chanter, jouer, manger' (i.e. to sing, to play, to eat).

The 'h' sound is another difference between French and English. In English, /h/ is a glottal fricative. When /h/ occurs in the word-initial position, it is voiceless, represented by [h], as in 'hit, hub, hug'. But when /h/ occurs in between two vowels, it becomes voiced [ɦ], as in 'behind, ahead'. In French, while the letter 'h' is basically not pronounced, /h/ → ∅, the letter refers to a non-aspirated 'h' or an aspirated 'h'. If it is a non-aspirated 'h', liaison and elision are needed, as in 'l'hôtel [lɔtɛl], les hotels [le zɔtɛl], j'habite [ʒabit]' (i.e. the hotel, the hotels, I live). If it is an aspirated 'h', no liaison and elision is allowed, as in 'le héros [lə əʁo], les halles [lə al], en haut [ɑ̃ o]'.

Both the voiceless [θ] and voiced [ð] dental fricatives in English, as in 'thin, although', do not occur in French. The voiceless and voiced postalveolar affricates, represented by [tʃ] and [dʒ] respectively, as in 'church, juice' in English are also non-occurring in French. The same letters 'ch' and 'j' in French are the fricatives [ʃ] and [ʒ] respectively, as in 'chercher, joie' (i.e. to search, joy). These two fricatives occur in English, for instance [ʃ] in 'she' and [ʒ] in 'vision'.

The consonant sequence 'gn' sounds differently in the two languages. In English, it is cluster sequence with a voiced velar plosive [g] followed by an alveolar nasal [n], as in 'pregnant'. In French, 'gn' is pronounced as a palatal nasal [ɲ], as in 'poignet' (i.e. wrist).

Both English and French have the consonants /d/, /n/, /l/, /s/, /z/ and /t/. However, the place of articulation of these consonants is post-dental in French and alveolar in English.

Last but not least, there are three semi-consonants in French, which are /ɥ/, /w/ and /j/. /ɥ/ is a voiced labial-palatal approximant, and it always occurs before the high front unrounded vowel /i/, as in 'pluie, lui, nuit' (i.e. rain, him, night). /ɥ/ does not exist in the sound system of English. In French, /w/ is produced when a vowel /u/ is followed by another vowel, as in 'ouest, nouer, jouer' (i.e. west, to tie, to play), and it also occurs as a component of [wa] represented by 'oi' as in 'soir [swaʁ], toit [twa], quoi [kwa]' (i.e. night, roof, what). The /w/ sound also exists in English, as in 'we, west'. In both French and English, /w/ is a

labial-velar approximant. /j/, a palatal approximant, also occurs in both French and English. In French it is produced in the words that begin with ‘y’ and when the vowel ‘i’ is followed by another vowel or in the words with ‘il’ and ‘ill’, as in ‘yeux [jø], hier [ijɛʁ], travail [tʁavaj], fille [fij]’ (i.e. eyes, yesterday, work, girl). However, there are exceptions, such as ‘ville [vil], tranquille [tʁɑ̃kil]’ (i.e. city, quite).

**Vowels.** Another major difference between English and French is the vowel sounds. The pronunciation of the French vowels is more predictable than the English ones, as it has a higher consistency with the orthographic representation. For the vowels which are in common in French and English, it should be noted that the tongue height and the front-back position may not be the same for the vowels in the two languages. For example, the high front vowel /i/ in English is not extremely front, as in ‘beat, tree’, whereas the vowel /i/ in French is produced by raising the tongue very close to the palate and with a high degree of lip spreading, as in ‘gris, si, lit’ (i.e. grey, if, bed).

For the orthographic representation in French, the diacritics are used for indicating the variations of a vowel. For instance, the letter ‘e’ represents a mid-high front vowel [e] as in ‘parlé, bébé’, but a mid-low front vowel [ɛ] as in ‘frère, père’. There is no such practice in English.

In British English, there are some vowels which have no corresponding counterparts in French. And, this is also true in vice versa. For example, the high front rounded vowel /y/ in French has no equivalent sound in English. In French orthographic system, in nearly all the cases the letter ‘u’ represents a high front rounded vowel [y], as in ‘tu, vu, rue’ (i.e. you, seen, street). The exception is in ‘eu’. It is pronounced as [y] only when ‘eu’ functions as the past participle of ‘to have’, as ‘eu’ is normally pronounced as [ø], as in ‘eux, européen, euphorie’ (i.e. them, European, euphoria). Similarly, the lax form of high front unrounded vowel [ɪ] in English, as in ‘bit, did, sit’, does not occur in French.

The French has four nasal vowels, including /ɛ̃/, /œ̃/, /ɑ̃/ and /ɔ̃/. [ɛ̃] is the nasalized mid-low front unrounded vowel which occurs in the word-final or pre-consonantal ‘in, im, un, um’ as in ‘main, impôt, un, parfum’ (i.e. hand, tax, one, perfume). As for [œ̃] which occurs in ‘un, um’, it is no longer pronounced and has been replaced by [ɛ̃]. [ɑ̃] is the nasalized low back unrounded vowel which occurs in ‘an, en’, as in ‘enfant [ɑ̃fɑ̃], lent [lɑ̃], dans [dɑ̃]’. [ɔ̃] is the nasalized mid back rounded vowel which occurs in ‘on, om’, as in ‘bon [bɔ̃], tomber [tɔ̃be]’. The nasalisation of vowels also happens in English, but only when the vowels precede a nasal consonant, such as the vowels [ɪ̃] in ‘skim, seen’ and [æ̃] in ‘can [æ̃]’.

**Diphthongs.** Diphthongs consisting of two vowel elements occur in English only. In British English, the different types of diphthongs are as follows: diphthongs that begin with a low central vowel, including [aɪ] as in ‘guide, side’ and [aʊ] as in ‘mouse, foul’; and

diphthongs that begin with a mid front vowel, including [eɪ] as in ‘hey, say’, [əʊ] as in ‘hole, cold’ and [ɔɪ] as in ‘soy, joy’. In English, there is a diphthong /ju/ that begins with a palatal approximant /j/ followed by a vowel /u/, as in ‘cue, due, stew’. There are three more diphthongs /ɪə/, /eə/ and /aə/ in British English. These three diphthongs only occur in the words followed by a silent ‘r’, such as [ɪə] in ‘here, hear’, [eə] in ‘hair, fair’ and [aə] in ‘hire, wire’. It may be considered that the final ‘r’ has become a /ə/ sound and grouped with the preceding vowel to form a diphthong. Such kind of process is not observable in French. This is because the vowels in French cannot be followed by a glide and hence there is no diphthong in the French language.

### References

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