

# Taking Ownership of the English Language

## Part 1 - Why and How: a Proposal

by Simon Vickers on 21 January 2023

---

### In short

The UK has a resource of immense value that it is letting slip away: the English Language.

I propose a method for using AI to first establish exactly what standard spoken English is, then to enable anyone anywhere in the world to learn it on-line for free.

I am asking for your support.

---

### The situation

The situation can be shown by the example of [David Graddol](#), famous in English-teaching circles, who, some twenty years ago, announced that “Large numbers of people will learn English as a foreign language in the 21st century, and they will need teachers, dictionaries and grammar books. But will they continue to look towards the native speaker for authoritative norms of usage?” (from his 1997 book *The future of English?*, published by the [British Council](#), see ‘The decline of the native speaker’, Pages 67-68). British academia took it for granted that the answer was *no*, and has taken a perverse delight in promoting the idea, diligently sawing off the bough on which they are perched, as it were. They now often speak of ‘[englishes](#)’ and are constantly discovering more of them,

trying to make the point that there is not and never could be any standard English and anyway what would it be?, and anyway it would be undesirable. They really hate the idea of standard English. The BBC, for instance, promotes the idea of [Indian English](#) etc etc.

---

### The value of English to the UK

English is the most used language in the world. Being known as the source of standard English makes the UK a magnet for international students and enables teachers of English and language schools to find jobs and exert influence throughout the world and it is a source of prestige. For the UK, English is a gift that keeps on giving and not soon just a memory like North Sea Oil. It needs to be fostered and supported by decisive action on the part of the UK government. It should not be taken for granted. The attitude of academia is unforgivable as English is a very valuable asset.

---

### What is a language?

It seems that at the time of the First World War, a minority of the French spoke French. The language was imposed on all French by heavy-handed government action. The same thing is now happening

in China, where in kindergartens there are notices saying speak *Mandarin or English*. In fact 'a language' has been defined as 'a dialect with an army and navy'

Languages are imposed and are not spontaneous, but not English! England is a relatively small place and the needs of intercommunication have resulted in the standardisation needed, possibly through attendance at public schools by the middle class. But the situation has changed and action is needed.

Languages only work because they are standardised. And a language can only be standardised if it is imposed by an authority. Like a garden, it needs tending. Consider the way Latin disintegrated into mutually incomprehensible dialects and languages. The disintegration of English is now being cheered-on by academia. This is definitely not in the interest of the UK.

The UK government needs to take decisive action to lay claim to English, and to protect and promote it. If they don't others will. The EU is considering to lay claim to their own version of English. It is time for action.

---

## What's to be done?

As far as written English is concerned, UK schools should have the matter in hand. However, as concerns spoken English, no formal approach is used, it being assumed that students already know it. This may work for students that come from traditional English-speaking backgrounds, but it does not offer clear guidance for those that do not. Most teachers have no formal training in pronunciation.

Language is essentially a spoken means of communication. For English, *this* is

where action is needed. for the English Language

Every language uses its own set of speech-sounds (phonemes), a bit like Morse Code. English has its own set, identified by linguists long ago. The trouble is that conventional English spelling gives only a basic indication of pronunciation and is frankly misleading. There is one set of symbols used for the sounds of English called the International Phonetic Alphabet (for all the known speech sounds of every language: complicated) and another using more familiar signs called Simplified Standard Sound Symbols (for English only: straightforward). Using such symbols for learning to speak English makes the whole business perfectly obvious.

Up to now only trained linguists have used such phoneme symbols to indicate pronunciation and it has never been a mainstream thing. But now artificial intelligence (AI) can do a better job, and far more cheaply.

---

## What do I propose?

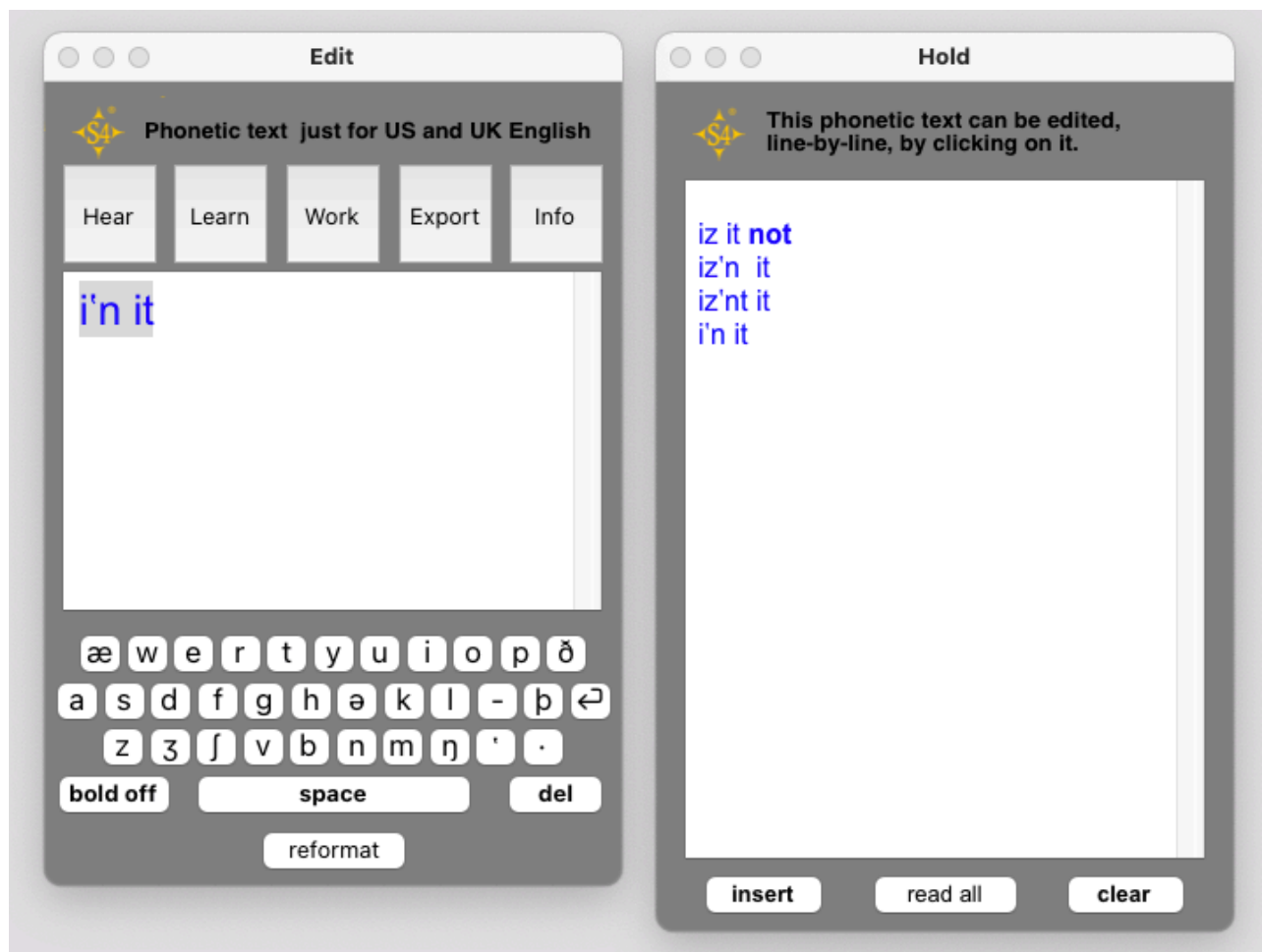
Using my knowledge of phonetic text and how to produce it, I have been working on creating a relational database containing records with a sentence in conventional text, phonetic text and sound (plus metadata). The authentic source material is the Roald Dahl books available as audiobooks and in print as they are narrated by excellent speakers of English (Steven Fry, Hugh Laurie etc). The next step will be to create from this data a list of each word it contains in conventional and phonetic spelling together with the sound clips to form a dictionary that can be accessed on line. Thus it will be

possible to know all the ways each word is pronounced in the sound clips. And so it will at last be possible to move from the anecdotal to the empirical as concerns actual pronunciation of the words of English by competent speakers.

At this point it will be necessary to type in

but needs the attention of a professional programmer to round off the edges (I am just an amateur). This is what the phonetic text typing tool that I have made looks like.

Without a tool like this typing phonetic text is an awkward business, with this tool it is



the phonetic text. I have developed a typing tool to do this (coded by myself using LiveCode). This includes an unfinished teaching module for others to learn to type phonetics text from dictation, which is surprisingly easy once you try. With my typing tool, once a piece of text is typed in, pressing a button causes it to be immediately converted into sound, enabling the phonetic text typed to be checked. This typing tool is ready to use

surprisingly easy. In the picture, it is showing the different registers of saying 'Isn't it'. Text is entered by typing on the computer keyboard or pressing on the blue keys buttons in the app. Pressing the Hear button converts what is in the Edit window to sound. Sentences are stored in the Hold window, and can be moved to the Edit window to work on. What is in the Hold window can be converted into an HTML file by pressing the Export button. It

works fine but the learning module accessed with the Learn button is only half finished. This app was programmed by me using LiveCode and will run on a computer under MacOS, Windows and Linux. Both webpage and iOS versions would be possible but I have not made either yet. Once a database containing the Roald Dahl audiobook collection pronunciation data has been created, the data will be used to train an AI system to automatically recognise the phonemes in any recordings of English speech. In this way, a large database of audiobook speech can be rapidly be built up. For example the medical field could be covered, making it possible to find out how to properly pronounce all the words of the profession, very useful for students. And so a pronouncing dictionary could be created that would be more comprehensive, useful and authoritative than any existing dictionary, being made totally-objectively directly from authentic material.

Then AI could be used again to enable students to properly pronounce the sounds, the words and the phases of English by machine-analysis of their speech and automatically coaching them in real time, accurately and cheaply. If foreign speakers could learn to correctly pronounce English on-line and their own time for free it would be of enormous benefit to them and for the conservation of English: a conservative project. Also, pupils in UK schools could learn pronunciation to a standard, objectively. The system could also be used to accurately speak with a cockney or American accent etc by reading off phonetic text. Pronunciation is something that needs to become conscious and empirical.

It can no longer be taken for granted that mainstream speech will be learnt at school, action needs to be taken. The database and method I propose would be the basis for that action.

---

## What am I asking for?

I am asking you to give me the chance to realise my project. I basically wish to have the credit for this initiative. I will make my material and knowhow available and give you my best support if I get due credit for devising and implementing this scheme. I would be proud to do something to support the English language for it is the repository of our culture.

Specifically:

- I wish to lead a programming and data entry team to get to the point where AI can automatically detect the phonemes of English speech. I wish to be paid for the time I spend doing this and any associated expenses.
- I wish to be known as the originator of this project and for Simplified Standard Sound Symbols (S4) to be used to represent the phonemes of English in it. I wish that the S4 logo be used to represent S4 as a registered trademark and mark of quality that I own.



---

## Conclusion

Success in the UK presenting itself to the world as the source of proper English will require leadership, focus and investment of resources, but the prize is worth the effort.

Here is an opportunity that is not to be missed for a big return on a modest investment.

There is a lot more that could be said. Some background can be found on my website: [www.s4phonetics.com](http://www.s4phonetics.com). And you can contact me by email at [simon.vickers@mac.com](mailto:simon.vickers@mac.com) and by phone at +33 787 666 300 (France) to discuss the issues arising from this proposal.