

Confused by American pronunciation? I'll explain why

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The other day my wife said something to me about, as I thought, a woman looking raddled.

This was a bit of a surprise to me as it was a rather unkind personal remark of a type that she is generally not given to making. But then I quickly realised that what she had actually said was that the woman had been rattled.

My wife very kindly agreed to leave the USA and come to live with me in England 36 years ago, but she still sounds American to English people. And the fact is that Americans pronounce rattle and raddle the same. They pronounce a t, where it occurs between two vowels, in the same way that they pronounce a d. So there are many pairs of words that we differentiate which they do not: bitter and bidder, latter and ladder, putting and pudding, seeding and seating.

This can also happen before an l, as in metal pronounced the same as meddle. This means they can employ rhymes which don't work for us, like "put the pedal to the metal".

There is nothing wrong with any of this. Pronouncing latter and ladder the same is not bad, incorrect, lazy, sloppy or any of the other adjectives which people who



■ So how would you pronounce this man's job title? In British English it's 'waiter' - as it is spelled - but in US English the word is pronounced 'wader'.
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don't like certain accents tend to throw in their direction. It's just the American and Canadian - and, increasingly, Australian and New Zealand - way of speaking. Some English people sometimes do this too.

The lack of differentiation between some instances of t and d hardly ever causes misunderstandings.

It is extremely hard to think of a sentence where the two words waiter and wader are likely to be confused. When the lack of differentiation does cause problems, as with my confusion the other day, this mostly lasts only a second or so.

It is also only fair to point out that there are many pairs of words which we here in the east of England pronounce the same, but which most Americans differentiate between because they pronounce the letter r where we do not: paw and poor, father and farther, caught and court, spar and spa. We can rhyme idea and near in a way Americans can't.

I must confess, however, that I do remember when I was a child hearing somebody singing the American song Puttin' on the style and wondering why anybody would want to place a dessert on a stile.