

Benjamin Smith Lyman's Native Variety of English

Timothy J. Vance

National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics (国立国語研究所)

Benjamin Smith Lyman (1835–1920), a geologist and mining engineer, was hired by the Meiji government as a foreign expert (*o-yatoi-gaikoku-jin* お雇い外国人). He arrived in Japan in 1873 and stayed almost eight years. He is famous among linguists for his 1894 article on *rendaku*, but in 1878 he published “Notes on Japanese Grammar” in two installments in the *Japan Daily Mail*, an English-language newspaper. Despite the title, the first installment deals with the pronunciation of Japanese, and the second deals with orthography (i.e., romanization).

Lyman's phonetic descriptions are in some respects quite sophisticated for the time, and his extensive experience with languages other than English was a great help. He knew French and German well, and he had exposure to several other languages, including Hindi and Mandarin. He was hampered, however, by the lack of a universal phonetic transcription system and by the unavailability of the phonemic principle. The IPA was not founded until 1886, and the idea that different phonetic segments (physical entities) could be understood as realizations of a single phoneme (a psychological entity) did not become commonplace until the early 20th century. Consequently, Lyman's basic approach was to compare the vowels and consonants of Japanese to the sounds of other languages.

Because vowels vary so much across space and time, particularly in English, it is not easy to interpret what Lyman wrote about Japanese vowels. He followed a classification scheme proposed by Porter (1866), which was an admirable effort for the time, and we can see how Lyman applied Porter's system to English in an article on English orthographic reform that he published many years later (in 1915). Lyman had lived in Boston, Philadelphia, and India before coming to Japan, and the native English speakers that he interacted with in Japan were a heterogeneous group. To make matters worse, it is hard to be sure about some of the relevant aspects of his native dialect. It is clear from his 1915 article that he was well aware of dialect differences in English pronunciation, but he was a hopeless purist. He believed that English should become the universal language of humankind and that his proposed orthography would improve its prospects, but he realized that the spellings chosen in the new system would have to reflect a particular variety of English. He argued that the norm should be “the usage of speakers of some region, or of some degree of cultivation” (Lyman 1915:369), and there is little doubt that he considered himself a model speaker.

Lyman's hometown was Northampton, Massachusetts, and Kurath and McDavid (1961) provide narrow phonetic transcriptions of the vowels in several words produced by a Northampton speaker who was interviewed at age 51 in 1931. This speaker seems to have had a so-called *r*-less dialect, since there is no indication of rhoticity in the transcriptions of any of the diagnostic words. Kurath and McDavid say that the absence of /r/ in syllable codas was typical of “cultivated city speech” in this area around 1930, but apparently the situation was different in the mid-19th century, when Lyman was growing up. We can be sure that Lyman's native dialect was not *r*-less because in his later article on writing reform he cites “dropping *r* altogether after a vowel

and before a consonant, as in *arm*” to illustrate “slackness or slovenliness of articulation or enunciation” (Lyman 1915:362), and he even suggests that “well taught children should . . . everywhere learn to pronounce the words as they are spelled, and not be allowed to drop the sound of *r* in *arm* . . .” (Lyman 1915:369).

The upshot is that we cannot really be sure about the characteristics of Lyman’s native vowel system. If the upper-class dialect in his native region could shift from *r*-ful to *r*-less between the 1830s (when Lyman was born) and the 1880s (when Kurath and MacDavid’s consultant was born), there could very well have been significant changes in the vowel system as well. As a result, some of the uncertainties about Lyman’s descriptions of Tokyo vowels in the early Meiji period are difficult or impossible to resolve.

References

- Kurath, Hans, and Raven I. McDavid, Jr. 1961. *The pronunciation of English in the Atlantic states*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Lyman, Benjamin Smith. 1878. *Notes on Japanese grammar*. Yokohama: Japan Weekly Mail.
- . 1894. *The change from surd to sonant in Japanese compounds*. Philadelphia: Oriental Club of Philadelphia.
- . 1915. A practical rational alphabet. *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 54:359–370.
- Porter, Samuel. 1866. The vowel elements in speech. *American Journal of Science and Arts* 42:167–189;303–319.