

More on the Tactics of [a1r], [a3r], [e1r], and [e3r]

There are four [r]-colored vowel sounds that enjoy a large number of variant pronunciations, variants that produce a tangle of potential sound-to-spelling correspondences: [a1r] as in *tariff*, [a3r] as in *fare*, [e1r] as in *sheriff*, [e3r] as in *fear*. There is a great deal of overlapping variation among these sounds, not just among dialects, but also with an individual speaker at different times. However, by looking carefully at the variant pronunciations of words in CommonWords containing these four sounds, and by applying the Principle of Preferred Regularity, we can see some patterns that simplify and bring a degree of predictability and regularity to the tangle. Though the match is not perfect, these [r]-colored vowels tend to follow the canonical tactical patterns like VCV and VCe#, which mark long and tense vowels, and VCC, which marks short and lax.

Here is the data, with instances given in parentheses:

Sound	Basic Spellings	Digraph Spellings
[a1r]	<arV> (49) <arrV> (19) <arrVV> sometimes (4)	
[a3r]	<are#> (37) <ere#> (23) <arVV> (8) <ary#> (5) only with primary stress	<air> (19) <eir> (2) <ear> (9)
[e1r]	<erV> (38) <errV> (18) <ary#> (42) only with secondary stress	
[e3r]	<ere#> (24) <erVV> (21)	<ear> (32) <eer> (16) <ier> (7)

Most of the basic spellings are consistent with the canonical tactical strings:

VCe#: Both <are#> and <ere#> mark tense vowels: *bare, here, there*.

VCVV: Both <arVV> and <erVV> mark tense vowels: *area, variation; cereal, period*.

VC'C'V: Both <arrV> and <errV> mark lax vowels: *barrel, marry; errand, terrible*.

But some of the spellings run counter to the canonical tactical strings:

VCV: Both <arV> and <erV> mark not tense but what I take to be lax vowels: *familiarity, marathon; ceremony, inherit*.

However, there are complications:

1. As usual, we must exempt the digraph spellings from tactical patterns, though there is some subpatterning at work: Though <ear> is ambiguous – sometimes spelling [a3r] as in *wear, pear*, but usually spelling [e3r] as in *near* and *year* – it always spells tense vowels at the end of free stems. When it is followed by a consonant, it spells lax vowels: *earth, pearl, yearn*. (Notice the tense/lax change in *hear* and *heard*.) Also, *heart* has <ear> spelling [o3r], due to a common lengthening (and tensing) of earlier [e]. This change led to several respellings (earlier *sterre* became *star*, for instance, and *clerk* became the name *Clark*).

2. The difference between <ary#> = [a3r] and <ary#>=[e1r] is driven by stress differences: Words in which the <a> has primary stress, as in *Mary, vary*, have [a3r]; the much more common words with vowels with secondary stress have [e1r]: *library, ordinary*.