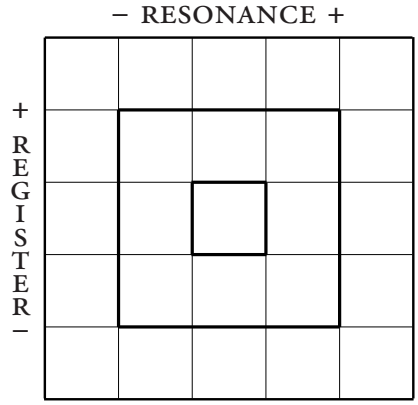
The classification of individual voices

This chapter can be found in the second edition of *English PronunciationS*.

Individual voices can be classified according to two parameters: *register* and *resonance*. For any given voice, these parameters respectively refer to an average of their height and vibration, obtained by taking into account the intermediate excursion point of each parameter, according to statistical frequencies of occurrence. They range on a five-degree (though continuous) scale, departing from a middle –un-marked– value; and extending to the cells on the border of the diagram (or *idiophonogram*, marked with '+' or '–'.

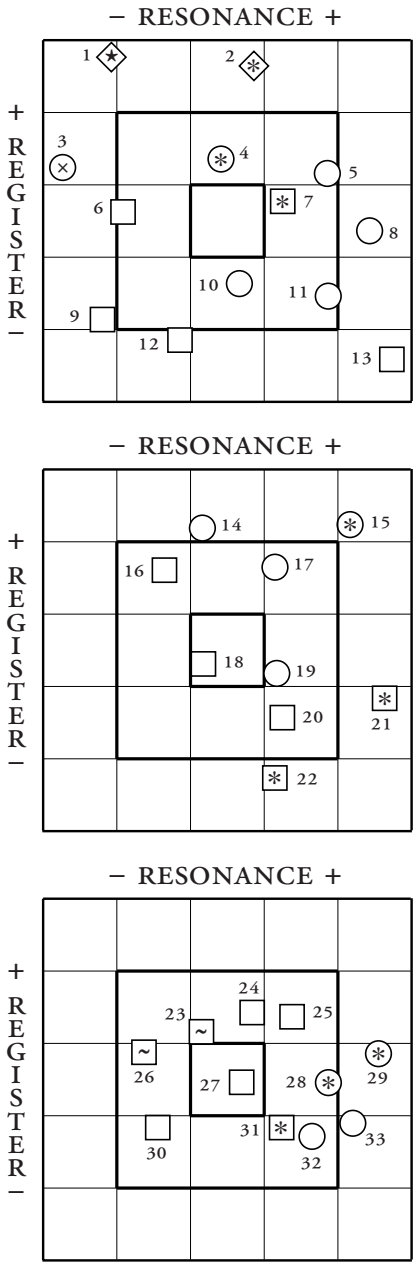
Further important information about the speakers' (or, rather, in this particular case, the singers') sex and age can be supplied in a simple way, as we shall see in a moment. Of course, we must keep in mind that sex and age characteristics form social stereotypes, which depend –at least– on three factors: *physiological* (such as anatomical dimension), *cultural* (such as social and ethnic habits), and *individual* (such as states of health). But, thanks to our own experience, we can generally manage fairly well to make our judgements about the speakers sex and age (except for really ambiguous cases). All this happens in spite of the (sometimes great) differences in the use of paraphonic features made by the various cultures all over the world.

fig A. Idiophonogram for the classification of individual voices.



It is not so hard, however, even to determine whether a newborn baby is male or female from its first wailings. As a matter of fact, generally, a newborn-male

fig B. Idiophonogram with 33 voices.



1 Bee Gees
2 *Treble voices*
3 Kim Carnes
4 Marianne Faithful
5 Maria Callas
6 Bob Marley
7 Paul McCartney
8 Ella Fitzgerald
9 Louis Armstrong
10 Grace Jones
11 Amanda Lear
12 Barry White
13 Bing Crosby

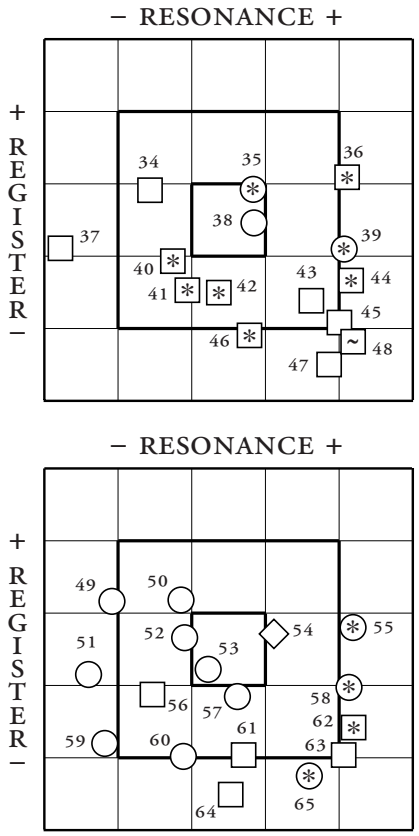
14 Lio
15 Nikka Costa
16 Demis Roussos
17 Olivia Newton John
18 John Lennon
19 Dionne Warwick
20 Frank Sinatra
21 Elvis Presley
22 Waylon Jennings

23 Neil Young
24 David Bowie
25 Julio Iglesias
26 Bob Dylan
27 Luciano Pavarotti
28 Marilyn Monroe
29 Barbara Streisand
30 Charles Aznavour
31 Yves Montand
32 Édith Piaf
33 Liza Minnelli

voice has intense resonance and stronger strength, and a relatively lower register, though only a little, and still (very) high, even in comparison with child voices, not to mention (both female and male) adult voices. A newborn female voice, instead, generally has reduced resonance and weaker strength, and a relatively higher register: very high, then.

Sex can be indicated by means of a dot for *female*, or a square for *male*; when no distinction is needed or possible, as for particular groups, we use a rhomb. *Age* can be indicated according to four general classes: *childhood*, *youth*, *adulthood*, and *old age*. They could be shown by attaching a little bar to their symbol of sex, respectively: under it, on its left-hand side, upon it, or on its right-hand side.

fig c. Idiophonogram with 32 further voices.



34 Little Richard (also with ⋆)
35 Astrud Gilberto
36 Paul Anka
37 Ray Charles
38 Mariah Carey
39 Patsy Cline
40 John Denver
41 James Taylor
42 B.B. King
43 Gene Autry
44 Frankie Laine
45 Fats Domino
46 Don Williams
47 Jim Reeves
48 Willie Nelson
49 Billie Holiday
50 Dinah Washington
51 Norah Jones
52 Chrissie Hynde (*Pretenders*)
53 Blondie
54 Beach Boys
55 Françoise Hardy
56 Harry Belafonte
57 Judy Garland
58 Doris Day
59 Amy Winehouse
60 Nina Simone
61 Dean Martin
62 Hank Williams
63 John Lee Hooker
64 Johnny Cash
65 Tracy Chapman

Of course, the two five-degree continuous parameters of register and resonance, and the sex and age classifications are only a rough approximation to a full identification of individual voices. As a matter of fact, each voice shows –in different ways– particular mixtures of individual paraphonic characteristics, together with more or less remarkable idiophonic, social, and geographical features. All of them could be singled out and quantified, and then indicated by means of the appropriate phonetic, prosodic, and paraphonic signs. Of course, the last-mentioned ones are those for pitch, strength, duration, emission, and articulatory and phonatory qualities, plus –at least– two further ones: *brightness*, when a voice (not: pronunciation) is distinct and clear ⟨*⟩; or, on the contrary, *harsh* voice ⟨×⟩, or even 'falsetto', or *false* voice ⟨⋆⟩; and, lastly, *nasal* voice ⟨~⟩. So, a few voices, although located nearby in the diagram, may still be different enough, because they have –or lack– (more or less frequently) certain paraphonic features.

Some illustrative examples –mostly singing in English– are shown in *fig* B-C. They have been chosen among (rather) well-known entertainment people, whose actual voices can be heard quite easily on the radio and from recordings (almost) all over the world, although some of them are no longer performing or living.