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The Phonetics of English Pronunciation

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IPUS

Programme for the term (1)

- Week 1: • Is pronunciation important?
• The problems of learning an L2 pronunciation
- Week 2: • What's different in English for Germans?
- Week 3: • How can we know what's different about consonants?
- Week 4: • Are German and English consonants very different?
- Week 5: • English (and German) consonants 3:
- Week 6: • German and English vowels 1:
- Week 7: • German and English vowels 2:
- Week 8: • German and English vowels 3:

Programme for the term (2)

- Week 9: • Putting words together 1: Weak forms
- Week 10: • Putting words together 2: Linking
- Week 11: • Putting words together 3 (and creating new words):
Compounds and collocations.
(Homework: Transcription exercise)
- Week 12: • More prosody: Intonation
- Week 13: • Revision practice exam
- Week 14: • Final Exam

Coursebook:

Eckert & Barry: *The Phonetics and Phonology of English Pronunciation*
Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2002

Is pronunciation important?

- Words and word-forms, phrases and grammatical forms are registered *consciously*, but accent is registered *sub-consciously* as a part of the speaker's personality.
- Foreign accents awaken (often negative) national stereotypes, however unfair the association might be:
„Ve hef vace off makink you tok!“ (*We have ways of making you talk*)
- In *favourable* circumstances, the incorrect pronunciation of a word does not cause misunderstanding but
- „If all my friends pronounce English like me, it must be right!“
.... **Denglish** as the accepted norm In Germany
- *Reading*: Eckert/Barry, pages 1-5

Because we can't SEE pronunciation (it is not part of the written form that dominates our education), we tend to ignore its importance, although we react to pronunciation all the time:

We build up a picture of what a person is like from the way he or she speaks. (which can be a big disadvantage for foreigners if they cannot express themselves freely in a language. They are often considered to be less intelligent, less capable, less educated.

We need to bear in mind that there are a lot of national stereotypes that are linked with certain types of pronunciation. Such stereotypes are often unconscious, but they affect people's attitudes.

It is true that a bad pronunciation rarely prevents communication completely (because the person listening USUALLY tries to make sense of what is being said). But people will stop trying more quickly if a pronunciation is bad.

One big barrier to learning the correct pronunciation is the fact that most learners make more or less the same mistakes. So an incorrect pronunciation gets established and people think it is correct: *Denglish* and *Français* have become established terms because of this fact!

So... what ARE the problems of learning an L2 pronunciation?

- Written vs. spoken language; letters vs. sounds. (orthographic interference!)
- Hearing **what** is said vs. listening to **how** it's said. (we are very good at decoding meaning; bad at listening!)
- Learning new (complex) articulation patterns (new gestures are (mostly) easy; but NOT when communicating)
- Changing established (complex) articulation patterns. (new sounds that are near to L1 sounds are especially tricky)
- Making new and changed patterns automatic. (if you want to communicate, you can't think of what your tongue and lips are doing)

1. Orthographic interference: However obvious it might seem to be (once it has been mentioned!) that „a letter is not a sound“, it is easy to forget that many of the letter-to-sound relationships are different for English than for German.

All your school education was based on your interpretation of the written word – on your ability to read. Since this was (nearly) all in German, the German orthographic patterns and the sounds they stand for are very strongly established and are very likely to interfere with your interpretation of English orthography.

It takes a lot of conscious effort to establish the English patterns as a parallel system.

2. Another barrier to learning new pronunciation is the fact that we listen to speech in order to understand the content of what is said. It is very difficult to listen to the **sound of spoken language**.

3. The same goes for the production of new sounds. We learned at a very early age to control our articulators in speech. The articulatory patterns are all automatic, so that when we speak we can concentrate on **what** we are saying. This makes it very difficult to **change** articulatory patterns to produce the proper sounds of a foreign language. We will always tend to slip back into the closest **native** (= German) patterns.

Problem 1

Letters vs. sounds: Orthography is only a rough guide to pronunciation!

- <WIND> = German /vɪnt/ and English /wɪnd/
(but also Engl. /waɪnd/_{verb})
- German <Wein> and English <vine>: BOTH pronounced /vaɪn/
- Consider George Bernard Shaw's (deadly serious) joke:
 <ghoti> = **fish** ! [f] fish, enough
 [I] fish, women
 [ʃ] fish, nation
- A very sure way of overcoming orthographic ambiguities is to become familiar with [fə'netɪk trɑ:n'skrɪpʃən]
- **Start to work with transcription now.**
 Read the famous „spelling“ poem (p. 253-4 in book) and compare the orthography with the transcription.

Let's look at the letter-sound problems:

- There are *letter combinations* which are identical with very different pronunciations in German and English
- but of course there are homographs within a language(= words spelled identically) that are NOT homophones (pronounced the same).
2. *Conversely* there are the different orthographic conventions in German and English that mean *different spellings are pronounced similarly*

..... And there's another problem:

We are so pleased to know the orthographic conventions that we don't bother to listen to the details of the pronunciation:

Phonetically, German /vaɪn/ is NOT (really) the same as English /vaɪn/

3. So there are *two problems* – 1. the *orthographic conventions* and 2. the *actual sounds* themselves!

In this course we shall be looking at the differences between German and English in the *production and perception of sounds* and chains of sounds = *pronunciation of words and phrases*.


But learning the spelling AND the pronunciation of words is not so easy ... especially in English (see the GBS example). However it *cannot* be the aim of a lecture to teach you how to pronounce particular words. That is *your* responsibility.

Study the famous poem (part of which) which we have reproduced in our book (together with the transcription!!)

Try to associate work out the pronunciation of the words you don't know by comparing the transcription symbols with the symbols used for words you DO know.

Problem 2

Hearing what's said vs. listening to how it's said.

- Primarily, we listen to someone to hear WHAT she/he is saying. 
- What did the person say?
 - ◆ “Ich bin in den Laden reingegangen....” ?
 - ◆ “Bin in den Laden reingegangen....” ?
 - ◆ “Bin in’n Laden reingegangen....” ?
 - ◆ “Bin in’n Lad’n reingegang’ng....” ?
- *Orthography is not VERY good at capturing the details of the pronunciation:* [bɪn ɪn ˈla:dŋ raɪŋgəgəŋ]

Hearing WHAT is said is the primary goal of speech communication (for a listener).

We’re mostly very good at it --- in fact so good that when we often reconstruct something that wasn’t actually pronounced.

Of course that is easy in our native language – We don’t have to hear the exact pronunciation because we speak as we learned when we were growing up.

We do all the stylistic reductions that suit the situation quite automatically, because we know HOW to speak WHEN.

..... well in principle anyway (can you remember a situation where you have heard someone speaking wrongly for the situation?)

Another example ...

- **Hast Du einen Moment Zeit?**

- How would you say it?

- ♦ [hast du: ʔamən mo'ment 'tsaɪt]

Hast Du einen Moment Zeit?

- ♦ [has du_ɑm: mo'men 'tsaɪt]

Has Du ein 'Momen Zeit?

- ♦ [has du_ən mo'men 'tsaɪt]

Has Du 'n Momen Zeit?

- ♦ [hasɳ mo'men 'tsaɪt]

Has 'n Momen Zeit?

Even the most common expressions can be said in different ways, depending on:

- how predictable the question is,
- how much background noise there is,
- how familiar you are with the person you are talking to.
- etc....

E.g. a) „Hast Du einen Moment Zeit“ might be

b) [hast du: ʔamən mo'ment 'tsaɪt]

But it is more likely to be something like:

c) [hasɳ mo'ment 'tsaɪt]

If you were asked to write down what a person pronouncing (c) had actually said, I expect you would write the orthographic form of (a). Because that was what you understood.






----- *A comment on transcription symbols* -----

You can see that many of the symbols used to represent sounds are familiar letters. But there are more than 26 different sounds in English (in German too!) so we have to use different (though related, if possible) symbols to cover all sounds.

Here we see [ɛ] for the short „E“ in *Moment*. The letters <ng> are represented by [ŋ] and a mark under the [ŋ] to show that the „N“ is a separate syllable. The two dots after a sound [:] (usually a vowel) show that the sound before it is long.

Problem 2 (cont.)

Hearing *what's* said vs. listening to *how* it's said (2)

- Even though we listen to understand, we still notice other things:
 - a) If a speaker is local or from a different region. 
 - b) If the person friendly or not;   
 - c) (on the telephone) If he/she is old/ill/unhappy etc.
- What can YOU say about the man's accent?
- Potentially, we have the ability to distinguish what is *different* ...
Can you *describe* what is „different“ (from native) in the pronunciation?  Not so simple?
- ...So we need the *tools* (= terminology, understanding, training) to *identify* what the differences are.
- ... Also, *hearing* and *identifying* the problems is not everything!

But the need to ***understand*** does NOT mean that we do not also interpret details of the pronunciation.

We DO notice if a person does not speak the same dialect;

we also notice if a person is sad, happy, angry etc

Using the sensitivity for these things when talking with people does NOT give us the ability to explain and describe what the differences are.

You need to know what to listen for, and you need the terminology to express what it is.

This recording is of a German speaker reading a sentence:

Sarah was a nurse who had been working in the newest area of the territory.

The vowel sound in *working* is more like the vowel in German *hört*.

The first consonant sound in *working* is like the [v] in *Wort*

Most striking is, however, the Low-to-High melody pattern of the word groups!

But when you have identified the problems you still need to speak (produce, pronounce) words with the problem sounds correctly. This not as easy as we would like!

Problem 3

Learning new (complex) articulation patterns

- The problem sounds that you identify have to be ***produced, articulated, pronounced!***
- That means *learning new motor patterns*
..... and most of your everyday motor patterns were established when you were between 6 months and 6 years old!
- A speech sound requires fine control of up to 50 muscles.
- Establishing the gestures means that you learn to (sub-consciously) link the muscular control pattern with the sound you are producing.
Things necessarily feel strange at first!
- But remember also: *sounds are rarely produced in isolation*
.... all the gestural combinations have to be established too.

Remember that all your articulatory habits were acquired at an early age; they are completely natural for you.

Developing new patterns is a very different task; it has to be ***consciously*** controlled at first, and you have to become accustomed to the movements (in relation to the new sound in your ears!).

The movements and the sounds are bound to ***feel and sound strange at first.***

You are building up ***a new auditory-motor relationship*** at an age when nature doesn't expect you to (nature designed you to acquire it when you were 12-24 months old!

Problem 4

Changing *established* articulation patterns.

- Some English sounds are only *a little bit different* from German ones..... these are often more troublesome than completely new sounds (N.B. British & American have different „faux amis“: G “Cord” - Br./Am. “caught ”; G. “Mett” - Br./Am. “mat”)
 - It is more difficult for learners to hear and identify the difference.
 - It requires more careful adjustment of the articulatory gestures to avoid “slipping back” into the established German pattern.
- Even more than with „new“ sounds, these will feel strange because *you are moving your articulators along new tracks*.
- (and you may find that after many years the shifted articulation even affects your *native language pronunciation!*)

Learners often find it easier to learn to pronounce completely new sounds (e.g. the English <th> sounds or the R sound) than sounds which are rather similar or which are sometimes very similar and sometimes not (like the English L sounds).

A particular problem are vowel sounds, because they are often similar but not identical in two languages. You must:

- a) accept that there IS a difference, then
- b) develop an impression of what the difference sounds like, and
- c) find out what to do to pronounce the new sound, then
- d) practise the new gestures.

Problem 5

Making new and changed patterns *automatic*.

- *Auditory awareness + new articulatory gesture* is not the final answer!
- You speak to express your thoughts and feelings (just as you normally listen to understand someone else's thoughts)
..... *so you have no time to pay proper attention to your pronunciation.*
- All articulatory gestures have to be „*overlearned*“; they have to be automatic (with a sub-conscious link between „the feel“ of the articulatory movements and the sound of the utterance)

The process of practising a new sound (in a lot of different phrases), until it comes out correctly and automatically, is the most difficult aspect of learning pronunciation.

You can learn ABOUT the problems (you will have to do that to get credit points for the course!), and you can probably imitate the correct sound. But it takes a lot of effort to acquire the sounds properly.

To sum it all up

- Pronunciation is a difficult thing to get into, because
 - you have to *make conscious* something that you use sub-consciously,
 - something you *learned* to use sub-consciously *many years ago*.
- Pronunciation is difficult to change because
 - ANY established motor pattern is difficult to change (have you tried to change how you walk?)
- Pronunciation is difficult to learn, because
 - it has to be „**overlearned**“ so that the new patterns can be used in communication just as the old ones are.

Don't forget to read:

- Pages 1-5 (a general explanation and motivation)
- Pages 253-4: The „spelling poem“

It might surprise you, how much you already know about the exceptions to the standard English spelling-to-sound rules

.... but it might surprise you how many exceptions there are that you DON'T know.

You DON'T have to hand anything in this week!