

## BBC Learning English - Talk about English

July 4, 2005

### About this script

Please note that this is not a word for word transcript of the programme as broadcast. In the recording and editing process changes may have been made which may not be reflected here.

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**Callum:** Hello and welcome to Talk about English. I'm Callum Robertson.

In today's programme we're going to be looking at the topic of pronunciation. What makes good pronunciation and what is it that native speakers do when they are talking that you can do to make your spoken English more fluent and natural.

To discuss these topics I've been joined today by teacher, teacher trainer and materials writer, Alan Stanton. Hello Alan

**Alan:** (brief hello)

**Callum:** When learning a language there are many things to study and practice – such as vocabulary and grammar; skills such as reading, writing and speaking. A key to good speaking is good pronunciation. Alan, first, how important do you think pronunciation is as a language skill and what do we mean by good pronunciation?

NB: The following are notes that we were used for the discussion when it was recorded. This is not a transcript

**Alan:** People want to be understood when they speak to others. They don't want their words to be mistaken for other words because they haven't pronounced them

very well. (Possible story of student who wanted to buy a train ticket to Turkey and was sold one to Torquay)

Good pronunciation – clear and comprehensible, not placing a strain on the listener, not necessarily a perfect imitation of a particular native-speaker accent

*Where to start with pronunciation – because it's not the same as spelling.*

Sometimes difficult to know the pronunciation from the spelling. 26 letters but 44 sounds. Can use phonemic symbols to represent these sounds. Possible to find out the pronunciation by using a dictionary, if you know these symbols

*Should students aim to sound like a native speaker?*

Not essential to sound like native speaker – lots of acceptable native speaker accents. Important to understand native speakers- speech will be fast and fluent – may cause difficulties. Important to know what native speakers do when they speak. Useful for listening to the radio, TV, films even if you don't meet many native speakers

*What are some of these things?*

### ***Weak forms***

One important feature is the weak pronunciation of vowel sounds. For example 'and' sounds like 'n', 'of' sounds like

'To' sounds like .....

Schwa – most common weak form – very prevalent in fluent speech – common in grammar words / prepositions etc

### ***Sounds not letters***

*As mentioned before there are the phonemes, sounds, which can be used to 'spell' the pronunciation of individual words*

There are some words like 'cat' where we can hear every sound that appears in the spelling. Three letters, three sounds. In contrast, fought, past of fight, six letters, three sounds. 'catch' five letters, three sounds, 'caught' six letters, three sounds. 'through', seven letters, three sounds.

### ***Final consonant – initial vowel linking***

*So far we've looked at individual words but we don't usually speak in individual words.*

In writing you can see the gaps between words, but when speaking fluently it can become difficult to hear those gaps because usually they aren't there at all and often, when two words come together we naturally do things to make them flow easily and these things quite often mean that the sound spelling of a word will change. If we take the phrase 'a cup of tea'

'a' 'cup' 'of' 'tea'

but when we say them together as part of sentence, different things happen -  
We could say 'cup of tea' very slowly but usually we join the words together -

'cupevtea'

*So what is happening here?*

A number of things, one to look at today - linking – where we join two words together. Happens in different ways.

When a word ending in a consonant sound is followed by a word beginning in a vowel sound, there is a smooth transition from one to the other. ‘Cup of’ becomes ‘cupev’

This is very common and can be found in just about any example of speech. Here are a few sentences from a BBC News report about traffic problems in a small Russian town.

### INSERT NEWS insert

By Russian standards Tashtagol is **a** tiny little town - just twenty-thousand people, **a** few streets **and a** handful of roads. So you may be surprised to learn that traffic problems here have been causing chaos - not because **of** cars but because **of** cows.

Highlight examples from text and comment as necessary

### INSERTS (Can be played in as short clips)

..is a tiny little town

a few streets **and a** handful of roads

not because **of** cars but because **of** cows

These examples (above) show linking to a weak form which is very common – but not just with weak forms, all consonant vowel combinations -

*We have an example of that here*

### INSERT switch off

"Don't forget to switch off the light before you go out"

Comment on 'switch off' - linking to a strong vowel

*And that can sometimes lead to misunderstandings can't it?*

Eg 'fry degg' instead of 'fried egg' I scream/ice cream. 'Switch off the light' may sound, because of linking as if there is a word 'choff'

*Consonant to vowel linking the most common, but not the only form of linking.*

If we listen to the end of the switch off the light sentence, we can hear another kind of linking

### **INSERT    switch off**

"Don't forget to switch off the light before you go out"

When a word ending in a vowel sound is followed by a word beginning in a vowel sound, we need to add another sound to make the transition between the words smooth – we add either a /w/ as in 'win' or a /j/ as in yes.

So, for example, 'do it' – sounds like 'dowit'  
and 'I am' is pronounced like 'Iyam.'

In this example we had 'go out' – 'gowout'

*Outline when /w/ and when /j/*

When a word ends in o or u, we can hear a w sound. When it ends in I or ee or i, we can hear j (Strictly speaking it is rounded and spread lip position but it is

best to keep it simple. It is not possible to get these wrong – only not to do them at all – because it is a purely physiological reaction)

*Some examples*

Contrast: three eggs (j sound) two eggs (w sound)

Go up, go in, go out, no entry (all w)

See it (j)

Callum: That's just about all we have time for today. Before we go a quick recap, Alan, what are the main points we talked about today?

Alan: Number of letters not the same as the number of sounds  
Weak forms very common – a, to, of  
Final consonant linking to following vowel (sit up\_)  
Final vowel linking to following vowel as w or j (two eggs. Three eggs)

Callum: Remember you can listen to our programmes online and do a range of exercises including pronunciation practice on our website at [bbclearningenglish.com](http://bbclearningenglish.com)

Hope you can join us next time for more Talk about English. Goodbye