

## BBC Learning English - Talk about English

July 11, 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.

---

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

In today's programme we are looking at the topic of pronunciation, we'll be answering a question on spelling and pronunciation and looking at what happens to certain sounds in words when people are speaking naturally and fluently.

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

**Alan:** (brief hello)

**Callum:** First today, a question about spelling and pronunciation, Rohini, who's living in the United States, emailed us and wants to know why we use the article 'a' in front of the word European – a European. European begins with the letter 'E' which is a vowel, so he's wondering why don't we use 'an'

**Alan:** to recap – sounds not same as letters, although European begins with a vowel letter, it's actually pronounced as a consonant. Elaborate with further examples if necessary. As a sound-based rule 100% - there are no exceptions. Other examples: an honest man, an MP (contrast: a member of Parliament), an envelope (contrast: a stamped addressed envelope), an hour, a university (compare: an uncle –same letter u but two different pronunciations)

Natural tendency to join words together in the easiest, simplest and smoothest way

(Leads on to a mention of the boundaries between words when spoken. Tend to make them as smooth as possible to enable fluency.)

**Callum:** One thing that is very common in fluent speech is linking.

Brief recap of consonant to vowel and /w/ /j/ linking.

We looked at consonant – vowel linking in phrases such as ‘out of order’.

Linking w between vowel sounds – No entry

Linking j between vowels – see it

**Callum:** There's another kind of linking to take a quick look at ..

**Alan:** This is with ‘r’. Those British speakers who don't pronounce final ‘r’ will reintroduce it when the next word begins with a vowel. So for example the word ‘there’ – in RP for example, no ‘r’ sound at the end – but if the next word begins with a vowel then we do pronounce the ‘r’ – e.g. ‘there is’

(but it should be said that there are many accents which do pronounce the ‘r’ sound in the first place)

Some examples:

Four

Four eggs

Where is the car? (no r)

(but there is a linking r in ‘where is’)

The car is here

**Callum:** Today we're looking at some more features of natural fluent speech.

What is it that happens when native speakers are talking that makes it difficult to catch the words, even when you know them.

One thing we've looked at is linking, which sometimes changes or adds a sound to make it easier to say. But there are other things that also happen.

**Alan:** We've looked at what happens when a word ends with a consonant sound and the next word is a vowel sound, and when there is a vowel sound to vowel sound link. But what happens when there are two consonant sounds the same, one at the end of a word, one at the beginning of the next?

**Callum:** We have an example here of that:

**INSERT EXAMPLE**

I'm a bit tired

**Callum:** What can you highlight from this example?

**Alan:** Linking I'm\_a, weak form 'a', but also we have the word 'bit', which ends in the consonant sound /t/ and that's followed by the word 'tired' which begins with the same sound. When this happens we don't pronounce both - so not, bit tired (pronouncing both) – but join the two together but we don't hear the first t – at the end of bit.)

When we say 'I'm a bit tired' we can't really hear the t sound at the end of bit. What happens is that our tongue is in the right position to say t but we only release this sound when we say the next word.

### **INSERT EXAMPLES**

We have a lot to do

Tell me what to say

Sit down

**Callum:** This sounds quite subtle and difficult and is it really necessary for people to do this when they talk.

**Alan:** Probably not important to try to do it, because by trying to do it can give unnatural emphasis.

In fact, learners should never actually try to do this, because the whole point is that it happens in a very natural way without making any effort at all. But knowing that it happens can help you understand what you hear. It may help you to work out the grammar.

**Callum:** Let's have a listen to some examples of that, when you listen to these examples, can you tell what tense they are?

### **INSERT EXAMPLE**

I've finished it.

She's slept for 3 hours

**Alan:** Because I can see them written down in front of me I know that they are both present perfect – I have finished and She has slept – but we have reduced ‘have to ‘ve’ , so we don’t hear it separately from the f sound at the beginning of ‘finished’. Similarly, we have reduced ‘has’ to ‘s’ and we don’t hear it separately from the following ‘s’ sound in ‘slept’.

This makes the present perfect sound just like the past simple.

Of course, in real life the context makes it clear which tense we are using, or we may hear words such as ‘yesterday’ or ‘last week’ which we can use with the past simple but not with the present perfect. In fact, it may not matter very much which tense we use. That may sound a bit shocking to students who are accustomed to doing exercises in which they have to choose the right tense, but real language can be very messy.

**Callum:** There's one more feature we of fluent, connected speech that we're going to look at today. See if you can work out what it is. You are going to hear a number of examples – in each case you'll hear the word, then you'll hear that word in a sentence. Something will happen to that word in the sentence, can you work out what it is? Here's a clue, concentrate on the last sound of the word. Here are the examples.

### **INSERT      EXAMPLES**

Next – I'm going next week –      next - next week

Worst – That was the worst job I ever had! – worst - worst job

Just – Just one person came to the party! – Just – just one

Can't – I can't swim – can't – can't swim

**Callum:** Did you hear the difference. Alan, what's happening there?

**Alan:** In rapid speech /t/ sound at the end of a word often disappears completely if there are consonant sounds on either side. In other words, when we have three consonant sounds in a row and the one in the middle is t, the t will often disappear. Can hear this in individual words to – like Westminster or postman –

This also happens with /d/ sound.

**Callum:** That's all we have time for in today's programme, before we go, a quick recap of the features we've looked at so far:

**Alan:** We've seen that words run together in different ways,

- they can link
- they can merge
- and they can drop sounds

**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