

BBC Learning English - Talk about English

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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 and in particular what happens to words when they are pronounced not by themselves, but when they are pronounced as part of everyday speech.

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

Alan: (brief hello)

Callum: When studying vocabulary, it's important to find out how a word is pronounced, and if you know the phonemic symbols which represent the sounds of English, you can use a dictionary to find out this pronunciation. However words aren't always pronounced the same! The pronunciation of a word can change in normal speech. Alan, can you give us some examples of this?

Alan: (Recap:

Linking: different kinds – there's linking of a final consonant sound to a following vowel sound, for example – fried egg

There is linking of final vowel sound with initial vowel sound, either with a w sound, for example – go in. Or with a j sound, for example- say it

Merging: Also when one word ends in a consonant sound and the next begins with a consonant sound, we don't hear both separately, we just hear one e.g. a bit tired

Disappearing: And then there is elision where sounds that we can see in the spelling disappear in the pronunciation. This particularly affects t when it has a consonant sound on either side e.g. just do it

Callum: So we've seen that in speech, sounds link, they merge and they even disappear. Unfortunately that's not all that they do. Sounds can also change!

Here are some examples. Listen to two words said individually, then listen to them in a sentence – can you hear the difference, what is happening where the two words meet.

INSERT EXAMPLES 1

Good girl. She's a good girl. Good girl - Good girl

Alan, what's happening here

Alan: The sound at the end of the first word is taking on the quality of the sound at the beginning of the second. So the /d/ at the end of good, becomes like the /g/ at the start of good. It doesn't disappear, it actually sounds like a /g/.

Here are some more examples:

INSERT EXAMPLES 2

Goodboy. He's a good boy. Good ...boy. Good boy

White Paper. I only use white paper. White Paper. White paper

Speed Boat. I've never been in speed boat. Speed Boat. Speed boat

Callum: Why does this happen?

Alan: The reason for this feature of connected speech – it’s called assimilation, by the way, is to do with the place in the mouth where we make sounds.

For example, when you say /b/ or /p/ you can feel that both your lips are pressed together. When you say /t/ or /d/ or /n/ you can feel that your tongue is touching above your top teeth, [on a place called the alveolar ridge].

When you say /k/ or /g/ or the –ng sound at the end of words like 'going', you can feel the back of your tongue touching the roof of your mouth.

What happens is that the sounds pronounced on the alveolar ridge change so that they resemble sounds made in the other two places. For example, in the phrase ‘we can go now’ the /n/ in ‘can’ sounds like ‘ng’ because of the influence of the following /g/ sound. If we take the phrase ‘We can buy it’ the /n/ in ‘can’ sounds like a /m/ because of the influence of the following /b/.

Callum: Let’s listen to those phrases said very slowly and then at normal speed.

INSERT EXAMPLES 3

We can go now. We can go now. Can go Can go

We can buy it, We can buy it. Can buy. Can buy

So the same word can be pronounced in more than one way.

Alan: Yes, because we could hear the strong form – can, the weak form cn, or the assimilated forms in ‘we can go now’ and ‘we can buy it’

More examples: On my way here today, I walked through Green Park. If I say this slowly it is Green Park but at normal speed it is Greem Park.

INSERT EXAMPLES 4

Green Park. I walked through Green Park. Green park Green park

On Monday. He arrives on Monday. On Monday On Monday

Fine by. It's fine by me! Fine by fine by

Callum: And sometimes sounds can disappear and cause other sounds to change. Let's hear an example of that, first within a single word

INSERT EXAMPLE 5

Hand bag. I can't find my handbag. Hand bag handbag

Callum: A hambag!

Alan: first thing is the /d/ sound between two consonant sounds, it disappears, this now leaves the /n/ sound at the end of the first syllable, the next sound is /b/ and so the lips try to say /n/ while getting into the right shape to say /b/ and that turns it into an /m/ sound, so it sounds like 'hambag'.

Callum: That was an example from a single word. But what about in a sentence? One of the famous sites of London is an old cathedral. Listen to the words and how they are pronounced individually then together.

INSERT EXAMPLE 6

Saint Paul's. I'm going to visit Saint Paul's Cathedral today. Saint Paul's, Saint Paul's

Alan: What is happening here is that first of all we are pronouncing the word 'saint' in its weak form 'st'. The /t/ sound then disappears because it has a consonant sound on either side. This puts /n/ next to /p/ so the /n/ changes to /m/ and it sounds like 'smpauls'.

Callum: And isn't there another kind of assimilation, different from what we have been discussing so far?

Alan: Yes, there is a type of assimilation known as coalescent assimilation in which both sounds change to a third sound. For example when we say Could you come tomorrow? The d at the end of could, and the j at the end of you join together to make a third sound, so it sound like /dz/. Other examples are

INSERT EXAMPLES 7

Would you. Would you like some tea? Would you – would you
Did you. Did you see it?. Did you did you

Callum: Today we've been looking at pronunciation and particularly at how sounds at the end of words can change when they bump into the following word, as they do in everyday speech.

Here now is another example of every day speech which doesn't exactly sound the same as the individual words.

INSERT EXAMPLES 8

Do you want to get a cuppa? (like – djew wanna getta cuppa?)

Alan: Quite a few things happening here! First 'Do you' - 'djew' .
The /d/ and /j/ are joining to make a /dz/ sound
Elaborate and extend with further examples (I can get these recorded if you have specific examples you'd like to refer to
Want to – wanna – elision and weak form (though yes not a true example as a rather informal(lazy?) pron.
Get a – getta – linking and weak form

Cup of tea – cuppa – elision of /f/, weak form and linking

Callum: So when this happens and with the other features of fluent speech, like linking and joining and disappearing sounds it's not surprising that many people find listening a difficult skill. Often what they hear doesn't seem to match what they know. Alan, what's your advice for students on how to deal with this.

Alan: The features we have been looking at today are the inevitable result of speaking fast and fluently, so there is no need to deliberately practise them but knowing about them can improve your listening comprehension. One thing that learners can do is learn the phonemic symbols because this will enable you to find out the pronunciation of words from a dictionary. However, some of the features we have been looking at, such as sounds disappearing and changing, are not always indicated by the phonemic symbols in dictionaries. But learners can listen carefully, especially to what happens to the sound /t/ and the sound /m/ because these are the probably the easiest ones to spot. Some learners might find it helpful to read aloud while listening to a cassette, if they have both the cassette and the tapescript.

Callum: Well, I'm afraid that's all we have time for today, thank you very much Alan for being with us.

Alan: Goodbye

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

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