Consonantal beginnings

MICHAEL BULLEY

Possible pairings of consonants at the beginnings of English words

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WHEN YOU listen to your native language, you identify separate words mostly subconsciously, but with a learnt language you can use some conscious knowledge to help you.

There are some languages in which relative pitch is important in distinguishing among words, but in English it is hardly relevant. Rhythm can be influential, and ease of recognition here may depend partly on similarities with the rhythms of the learner's own language. The decisive element for English, though, is sound, and this article will concentrate on consonantal sounds at the beginnings of English words. Some sounds can give a helpfully negative indication: if you hear [ʒ], as in the second consonant of *measure*, you can be almost certain that it is not the beginning of an English word. Others can be helpfully positive: if you hear [ð] and are sure it is beginning a word, you can know that it will be one of a restricted group, such as *the*, *this*, *though* and *then*, excluding verbs, nouns, adjectives and adjectivally-derived adverbs.

It is not too difficult to work out which single consonants can begin English words, so I intend here to go one step further and talk about the possibilities for two successive consonants. One knows not to take anything for granted, and so there may well be languages I have no knowledge about that have initial combinations I should have thought unlikely or impossible. Taking into account only the consonants that occur in English, I have counted, from the languages I do know something of, about forty pairs of consonants that do not occur in word-initial position in English. I am thinking here of combinations like [pt] and [fθ] from Greek, or [pf] and [kn] from German, or [vr] and [mw] from French.

I shall begin, then, with those pairs that seem definite for English, even though some might relate to only a few words, and then go on to mention some marginal cases, alternative pronunciations and foreign borrowings. (I have used IPA symbols where they make for clarity, but the phonetic representation here is more in the style of a dictionary pronunciation guide than of a phonetic transcription.)

The uncontroversial pairs are the following: pr, pl, pj, tr, tw, tj, kr, kl, kw, kj, br, bl, bj, dr, dw, dj, gr, gl, mj, nj, fr, fl, fj, vj, θr, sp, st, sk, sm, sn, sl, sf, sw, sj, ʃr, hj, a total of 36. Examples are: *prize*, *plot*, *pure*, *true*, *twice*, *tune*, *cruel*, *clap*, *quick*, *cute*, *browse*, *blunt*, *bugle*, *drink*, *dwell*, *duty*, *grace*, *glance*, *music*, *news*, *frog*, *fly*, *few*, *view*, *throat*, *spot*, *stand*, *scatter*, *smile*, *snow*, *slip*, *sphere*, *sweater*, *suit*, *shrew*, *huge*.

Rare combinations are: [gj], as in *gules*; [θw], as in *thwack* and *thwart*; [θj], as in *thurible* and *thurifer*.

As for alternative pronunciations, some speakers of standard British English, perhaps now the majority, pronounce *suit* without the

MICHAEL BULLEY studied Classics and linguistics at the universities of Edinburgh and London, then spent twenty-odd years teaching Classics in state education in various places in England. In 2002, he qualified as a teacher of English in French national education and taught for a time in Dijon before deciding to move to Chalon-sur-Saône to try to continue earning a living in language work but in a less organized way. He has appeared several times in ET and has contributed articles to journals on Classical, linguistic and philosophical topics.

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[j] and, in nonstandard British English and from some speakers in standard American English, *news*, *tune* and *duty* are pronounced without the [j], but it is always kept for *pure*, *cute*, *bugle*, *music*, *few*, *view*, and *huge*. In some people's speech — sometimes, often or always — the [t] of *true* and *tune* is [ʧ] (as in *chew*), and the [d] of *drink* and *duty* is [ʤ] (as in *jaw*), and with *tune* and *duty* in that pronunciation the [j] might also be absent. There is also the alveolar, or palatal, pronunciation of of *gl-* that might make a learner think that *glove* was spelt 'dlove'; this pronunciation is similar to the sound some people produce instead of [t] in *dental*.

With foreign borrowings, you may accept the word as naturalized but still having a 'non-English' initial combination, or you may consider it just as a foreign word that happens to be used in English. For example, I would accept *guava*, *schnauzer* and *schmuck* as naturalized, but classify *bwana*, *Sri* (as in *Sri Lanka*), *zloty* and *sforzando* as resident aliens. As for this last one, it might be objected that I have already accepted [sf] as an 'uncontroversial' English pairing. The main word here is *sphere*, with its derivatives. The only others like this in reasonably regular use are *sphinx* and *sphincter*. Yet, because *sphere* is a word of such common currency, it and the others, all derived from Classical Greek, sound naturally English, as opposed to the musical terms of Italian origin, like *sforzando*, which remain 'foreign' to the phonetic nature of English. It is a pity, I think, that in Spanish and Italian orthography *ph* is no longer used for words of Greek origin, since there is clearly a distinction in type in Italian, for example, between *sfera* (sphere) and *sforzare* (to force).

Of the 'non-English' initial pairs, some seem more adaptable than others. For example, native English-speaking learners of foreign languages have few or no problems in pronouncing the [mw] of *moi* in French (in fact, alas, a similar sound can sometimes be heard in British English accompanying a kiss on the cheek: *mwa! mwa!*) or the [θl] of *thlivo* in Greek, but may find initial [kv], [pn], [kt], [fθ] and [vg] harder to manage.

Of course, many combinations that are not found in initial position in English occur non-initially, such as *aptitude*, *amnesia* and *advice*. It is not, then, that there is any inherent difficulty for a native English speaker in producing those sounds together; it is just a question of position in the word. So, while [pn] and [ps] are acceptable in *topknot* and *capsize*, the [p] disappears from the pronunciation of words of Greek origin like *pneumatic* and *psychiatry*. In this respect, French is more accommodating: all its words beginning *pn-* and *ps-* are from Classical Greek (that is, there are no really 'native' French ones), but both consonants are always pronounced.

In the English system, it is clear that [r], [l], [w] and [j] are the favoured sounds for the second of the initial pair. After stop consonants, the missing possibilities are [pw], [tl], [bw] and [gw] (unless you want to count *guava* and *gwyniad*); initial [ʧ] and [ʤ] have already been mentioned as alternatives, in some circumstances, to [t] and [d]. After fricatives, there are some missing possibilities that would not sound too un-English — [fw], [vr], [vw], [θl]. The only cases where a stop consonant or a nasal is the second of the pair are when [s] is the first. Of the other sibilants, only [ʃ] plays a part, limited to words beginning [ʃr], like *shrink*. These gaps provide breathing-spaces in the system so that not too many precise oppositions are required.

The conventions of writing can mislead us about speech. Normal speech does not have pauses after every word. I have just experimented with that very sentence ('Normal.... word') and, since it can easily be done in one breath, it sounds entirely normal as continuous sound, and yet no native speaker would think it contained a word beginning *chd-* (as in 'speechdoes') or *vp-* (as in 'havepauses'). With your own language you have a subconscious feeling for the various possibilities for word-beginning, mid-word and word-ending, but the learner too, I think, can develop that sort of feeling, more consciously to begin with, as a way of analysing the spoken language. ■

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