Consonantal beginnings

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Possible pairings of consonants at the beginnings of English words

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 plays some part and ease of recognition may depend partly on 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 *z* (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 d and are sure it is the beginning of a word, you can know that it will be one of a restricted group such as *the*, *this*, *though* and *then* excludes 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, 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 of 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 *ft* 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, then go on to mention some marginal cases, alternative pronunciations, and foreign borrowings.

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, tr, sp, st, sk, sm, sn, sl, sf, sw, sj, rr, 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*, *tw* as in *thwack* and *thwart*, and *tj* as in *thurible* and *thurifer*.

As for alternative pronunciations, some speakers of standard British English, perhaps now the majority, pronounce *suit* without the *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 tʃ (as in 'chew') and the *d* of *drink* and *duty* is dz (as in *jaw*), and with *tune* and *duty* in that pronunciation the *j* might also be absent. There is also the palatal-lateral pronunciation of *glove* that might make a learner

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think it was spelt *dlove*; this pronunciation is similar to the lateral sound some people produce for the *t* in *dental*.

With foreign borrowings, you may accept a 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, it might be objected that I have already accepted *sf* as an 'uncontroversial' English pairing: consider *sphere* and its derivatives. The only other words 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 *tl* of *thlivo* in Greek, but may find initial *kv, pn, kt, ft* 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 _ and _ 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, tl*. 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 */r* plays a part, limited to words beginning */r*, 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 the preceding sentence ('Normal.... word') and, since it can easily be done in one breath, it sounds entirely normal as continuous sound, yet no native speaker would think it contained a word as it were beginning *chd-* (in 'speechdoes') or 'vp-' (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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