The final future of *t*

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Will the final *t* become totally bottled up?

IT WAS about 15 years ago, I suppose, that I was told by an 18-year-old student that you shouldn't pronounce the final *t* in words like *went*. She meant in no circumstances. So struck was I by this that I reflected on my own practice, as a British English speaker, with such words. I decided that, in general, I released a final *t* before a following vowel, before a pause and before 'soft' consonants like *h* or *w*, but might sometimes keep it in before a 'strong' consonant, like *m* or *b*. So, I would say 'I wen**t** away', 'Wha**t**?' and 'Tha**t** hospital', but, pre-consonantal, either 'He sen**t** bottled water' or 'He sen' bottled water'. You would, of course, refer also to words spelled with *te* at the end, like *mate*, as being pronounced with a final *t*.

Since that time, and particularly in recent years, I have noticed an increase in the non-released version of final *t*, pre-vowel or pre-pause, from BrE speakers in contexts where before I would not have expected it, as, for example, from BBC newsreaders.

What to call this pronunciation? The term 'glottal stop' is often used for it, but since some popular writers employ that term merely pejoratively and since, in any case, there is some doubt whether it is appropriate, I shall be vaguer and refer to 'plosive' vs 'non-plosive', or 'released' vs 'non-released', and indicate the latter here by an apostrophe.

It is not the case that, in the non-plosive version, a plosive final *t* is replaced by nothing. You can hear that *cour'* is different from *core* and *tea'* from *tea*, but the difference is less distinct than that between *court* and *core*.

The non-released pronunciation is associated particularly with accents of south-east England and it looks as if that part of the country, as before in the history of BrE speech, is having a strong influence. How far will it go? To take BBC newsreaders again, I should not be surprised now if one of them ended a sentence with *we'll have to wai'*, but would be by *she migh' have*, though less surprised if the latter came from a news reporter. Accents such as Cockney have non-released *t* also mid-word, but there seems little likelihood at present that the BBC would allow a newsreader to say *ma'er* for *matter*.

It looks as if there is a balance here to be made between the effort of the speaker and that of the listener. The non-plosive final *t* requires less effort to produce than the plosive and so wins on that account, but it may sometimes require more effort, even if subconscious, from the listener to distinguish what the word is. There is a story that the former British Prime Minister, John Major, misheard a non-released final *t* in that way. He was, so it is said, having his hair arranged at a television studio for an interview he was about to give, and the make-up artist, looking at the results of his efforts, exclaimed 'Great!' 'Grey?' replied an irritated PM, 'Of course, it's grey! What else do you expect the hair of a man my age to be?'

The non-plosive version can also cause problems for foreign listeners who would have understood the word if the *t* had been plosive. Some Czech friends of mine, whose English



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was quite good, once asked me what the word 'rippo' meant. The word they had heard was 'report' spoken by people with an accent from south-east England.

There is no point in guessing what will happen with this contrast between plosive and non-plosive final *t*. Thirty years ago, many people in British public life were heard to pronounce *involve* as *invove* and one wondered whether it would become widespread. Now it is not heard at all. The real distinction is human, rather than phonetic: between, on the one hand, the que sera sera attitude and, on the other, those who think that, given the will, something can be done about it. I belong to the latter camp, but fear the former is currently predominant.

So, I would say, as I said a few days later all those years ago to my 18-year-old student, no: there are some contexts where you *should* pronounce the final *t*, as it sounds better.

What should teachers of English to foreigners do? Each to his own, I suppose. As for me, I teach my French students that a released final *t* is never wrong and always sounds good, but that I'll forgive them if they say I'm a *grea' teacher*. ■

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