Dyooty or *jyooty*? Back to the beginnings

MICHAEL BULLEY

A reply to criticism

IN *ET*81 Keith Davidson makes some criticisms of my article 'Consonantal beginnings' (*ET*80). His main points relate to the following: (1) the pronunciation of words such as *tune* and *drink*; (2) the difference between *sph-* and *sf-*; (3) consonant pairs in non-initial position. On all these, I think that Davidson has missed the point and has offered misleading criticism. Here, then, is my reply.

On (1), in the original article, what I said about the pronunciation of *true*, *tune*, *drink* and *duty* in BrE was this: "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 [ʤ] (as in *jaw*), and with *tune* and *duty* in that pronunciation the [j] might also be absent." Davidson asks whether I am suggesting that "these might not be contrastive pairs" and whether I am saying that the initial dental sound can be lost, being "assimilated to [ʃ] and [ʒ]".

On the first, I was not talking about contrast, but variety. Some people have consistently only one pronunciation for these words; with other people, the pronunciation can vary. On the second, I did not say that the initial dental can be lost, but that the following [j], that is, the **y**-sound, might be. To put it another way, dispensing with the IPA symbols and the conventional niceties, we could say: "In BrE, the pronunciation of *true*, *tune*, *drink* and *duty* can, depending on the speaker, have one or more of the following possibilities for each word: *troo*, *chroo*; *tyoon*, *chyoon*, *choon*; *drink*, *jrink*; *dyooty*, *jyooty*, *jooty*."

On (2), the question is the 'naturalness' or not of words beginning *sf-* and *sph-*. The contrast offered was between *sphere* and the musical term *sforzando*, of Italian origin. Davidson claims that, whatever the origin or the spelling, this initial combination is not 'foreign' to English. My own experience, however, tells me that when native English speakers attempt to pronounce *sforzando* for the first time, particularly if they are unfamiliar with Italian musical terms, some of them hesitate, and I think that part of the reason is the 'unnaturalness' of the ninitial sf-. There are very few words in English beginning sph-, but because the word *sphere* is so common, people momentarily forget the unnaturalness, for English, of its opening consonants and pronounce it fluently. You could compare the way in which many native English speakers are now comfortable with the **sr** of *Sri Lanka*, because of the frequency of that word, but might stumble over the city of *Srinagar*.

On (3), I pointed to some consonant pairs in English that are found in the middle of words, but not at the beginning, such as *amnesia* and *capsize*. Davidson complains that I am ignoring the issue of syllable division here and says that amnesia is to be regarded as divided syllabically between the **m** and the **n**. This may well be valid, but is irrelevant to how anyone hears the two consonants together in reality. The word itself is pronounced in one go, without any pauses, and there is certainly no gap

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between the m and the n. So, if you made a recording of someone pronouncing *amnesia* and played back only the *mn* part, you would have a perfect pronunciation for any Greek word beginning mn-. Similarly, if you wanted to learn how to pronounce the beginning of the French word *psychiatre*, you wouldn't go far wrong in using the **ps** of *capsize*. Syllable division is more abstract than it might seem. The comedians, the Two Ronnies, once played on this in a famous television skit in which they confused phrases such as *four candles* and *fork handles*. If you heard amnesia pronounced at normal speed, I doubt very much whether you could say for certain that it was *am-nesia* rather than amn-esia or even the etymologically preferable *a-mnesia*. ■

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