

MYTHS AMONG FOREIGNERS ABOUT ENGLISH NON-SIBILANT FRICATIVES

[Updated 2-8-01]

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FORTITION: Foreign students are taught that the sounds spelled as "th, f/ph, v" in English are fricatives pure and simple; no hint is given of the fact they are usually occlusives. This means that the "f" in *first* is like an unaspirated "p" (phonetic [p]) made with the lower lip against the upper teeth, at least when no vowel immediately precedes; the "v" in "vote" is made in the same way (phonetic [b]) when no vowel immediately precedes; the "th" in *thin* (when no vowel immediately precedes), in *esthetic*, and in *synthetic* is made like a "t" articulated like the unaspirated "t" [t] of most languages, i.e. with the tongue against the upper teeth; and the "th" in *though* is made like a "d" (phonetic [D]) pronounced in the same manner, at least when no vowel immediately precedes.

(LENITION is the reverse process, occurring between a stressed nucleus and a following unstressed vowel in faster tempos: In the various kinds of English, "p" in *supper* becomes [P] (like "f" except made with BOTH lips); "b" in *rubber* becomes [B]--like Spanish "b" in many positions, like our "v" except made with BOTH lips; "k" in *locker* and "c" in *sticky* respectively become [x] and [ç]; "g" in *mugger* and *piggy* respectively become [g] and [J]. (The last is like a "y" made with the main part of the tongue raised closer to the hard palate--or roof of the mouth at that point.) In parts of Ireland, tongue-tip "t" and "d" are similarly affected, becoming retroflex sibilants--[ʂ] in *city* and [ʐ] in *ready*. The change of "t" to [d]--in all but a few varieties in all but the slowest tempos--in *butter* and *warranty* is the a kind of half-way lenition.)

The foregoing information and the fact that foreign students are unaware that English assimilates "ths" to a fronted sibilant of appropriate order, long in moderate tempos when a vowel follows in the next closely linked word). ([CLICK HERE FOR MORE ON THIS.](#)) This effectively deletes 'th'--gives rise to enormous difficulties and un-English pronunciations. Sometimes, though we drop an adjacent //f// or //v//.

Consider that we drop "f" in *fifth* and *twelfth*, and that *fifths* and *twelfths* end in a (long) sibilant fronted to the position of "th." The result differs minimally from *fists*--the nucleus in *fifths* being followed by a (long, where feasible) fronted s and the one in *fists* being followed by a [long, where feasible) prevocalic) alveolar (gingival) [s]. (*Fists* of course undergoes the deletion of interconsonantal-//t//, just as do *mustn't*, *wastepaper*, *listen* [but not *piston*], *adjustment*, *last night*, *exactly*,

softly, listless, shiftless mustn't, apostle [but not *apostolic* or *pistol*], etc.) The data have been checked in all countries where English is natively spoken (by a large percentage of the population, in the instance of South Africa). The loss of "t" between "c" or "k" and "s" is reflected in spellings like *crucifixion* and (in Britain) *connexion, reflexion*, etc. (I've never seen *elexion*!)

Consider also that in conversational tempos, native-speakers, unawares of it themselves, stop (occlusivize) the underlying fricative before a syllabic nasal in *govern+ment* (the entity you pay taxes to; it lacks "r", and //n// becomes syllabic-m, which drops out in faster tempos before the following [m]; contrast *govern#ment*), the technical term in grammar; the same occlusivization is generally heard in "eleven, heaven," etc., where //v// becomes [b] before syllabic-m, especially before a following stressed syllable. In some regions, "southern" ends in fronted-d plus syllabic-n, minimally different from *sudden*. (*Business* may have [d] for non-fronted //z//, just as *hasn't, isn't, doesn't, and wasn't* normally do in some regions of North America and Britain.) *Months* is frequent enough that, even though it ends in a stressed syllable, "ths" is usually pronounced as normal alveolar [ts] in this word in the mouths of cultivated speakers. But the cluster remains fronted to a dental [ts] in more monitored styles. *Hundredths* ends in alveolar [ts] after the unstressed nucleus in normal styles but dental [ts] in formal styles. Can you pronounce a native-like *thousandths*? Again it may be fronted in somewhat monitored pronunciations. *Clothes* (the noun, not the verb) sounds just like the verb *close* (the verb in [z], not the adjective in [s]): It normally ends in [z] in cultivated pronunciation, ending is [z] but occasionally in fronted-z in more monitored (self-conscious) or studied pronunciation.

Symbols needed for this discussion are:

for "s" with tongue position of "th" (fronted "s"): q
for "z" with tongue position of "th" (fronted z): 1
for "th" in "thin" (phonetic thorn): t
for "th" in "though" (phonetic barred-d): d
for fronted (never aspirated) apical stop: ɿ
for fronted light apical stop: D
for "p" made with bottom lip against upper teeth: p
for "b" made with bottom lip against upper teeth: b
for "f" made with both lips: [P]
for "v" made with both lips: [B]
for the glottal stop (word final //t// when not preceded by a fricative and not followed in next word by a consonant other than //r//): /

Because of the fronting of occlusive forms of "th"--becoming a fronted dental stop, ɿ or D--native-speakers (except in the New York City area) think they are saying the fricatives, "th" as in *ether* and *either*. Thus, *esthetic* exhibits [ɿ].

Following //n//, which drops out before heavy obstruents after nasalizing the preceding nucleus, we get "epenthetic" or inserted [ɪ] or [D] followed, respectively, by [t] and [d]. Examples of the former include *synthesis* and *tenth*. But *tenths* is complicated by the change of "th" to [q]--as well as the epenthetic [ɪ] following //n//, which may drop out as the result of nuclear nasalization.

Since many European languages possess fronted [ɪ D q ɪ]--[ɪ] being unaspirated in many--it should be easy for them to pronounce the words illustrated here with the correct sounds. But one constantly hears contorted, un-English contortions for simple items like *esthetic* (which has got [qɪ]) and *twentieth century* (which has got [q] for "th#c"). *Width* ends in [ɪ] or [D] plus [t]. *Panther* is said with [t] preceded by epenthetic [ɪ]. It is paralleled in *infant* with labiodental [m] (made with lower lip against upper teeth; this nasalizes the preceding vowel in this environment and, in many lects, then drops out) plus [p]. *Tenths* of course ends in (long in slower tempos) [q] with [ɪ] inserted between the nasal and it. The environments for replacing /f/ and /v/ with [p] and [b], respectively, as for using [ɪ D] for "th". In frequent words like *government*, *eleven*, *even*, *seven*, a bilabial [b] and a following syllabic "m" are normal in cultivated speech.

In what environments do the non-sibilant fricatives become occlusives (besides the position immediately preceding syllabic nasals)? Basically, occlusivization is found everywhere when "th f v" begin a word except following a vowel or fricative in the preceding word. At the end of a word, this is not true of "th" when a sibilant immediately follows, as already noticed in the difference between *faiths* and *face*, which differ in faster tempos only in that the [q] ends the first (the sibilant is longer in slower tempos than [s] in *face*). Similarly *sphere* differs from *spear* only in that "ph" in the former is [p] not [p]. It is only the alveolar (gum-articulated) vs. dental (fronted to the upper teeth) difference that distinguishes English *lathes* from *laze*; though when a consonant does not follow, *-thes* is long [ɪ:] in slower tempos. If the second "f" (from //v// in *five*) in *fifth* drops out with most people, nevertheless some keep [f] and change the "th" to a normal "t"--as did Anglo-Saxon. *Fifths* ends in a long [q], unless a consonant follows immediately. The assimilation of "th" to a following [q] or [ɪ] operates across boundaries, as in *twentieth century* "twentieth century."

Phonetic helps for English rarely, if indeed ever, point out that words ending in *-kts*, *-pts*, *-fts* delete the "t" in normal tempos and (except in fast tempos) lengthen the preceding *k*, *p*, or *f*; examples are *acts* (which in fast tempos sounds like *axe*), *Copts* (which in fast tempos sounds like *cops*), and *rifts* (which in fast tempos sounds like *riffs*). The pronunciation helps fail to note that words ending in *-sk*s and *-sp*s change the *k* or *p* between the sibilants to the corresponding fricatives--[x] (as in German "ach" and "ich" (in disks) and [P] (in *lisps*); these are respectively

written phonetically as [x] [the sound of German "ch" in *ach!*] in *mosques*, with what is annotated phonetically as [ç] [like German "ch" in *ich*] in *disks*, and with [P] (a kind of "f" made with both lips, the lower lip playing no role) in *riffts*. As already noted, "t" in the same position between two occurrences of [s] is deleted. The long "s" that results from blending the preceding and following sibilants is shortened in faster tempos, as in *fists* and *mists*, so that the latter sounds like *miss*. In overly precise speech this "t" is represented by squeezing the long "s" in the middle. Incidentally, the inflections *-es* and *-ed* are pronounced with the vowel at the end of *sofa* in most regions; this sounds odd to speakers in other regions, where the sound is like "y" in *pretty*, and in singing it is really off-putting.

Foreigners would be disabused of many un-English utterances if the textbooks wrote "t" for prevocalic *to*, or in slight less-rapid tempos "t(w)"; "th" for prevocalic *the* (as was written in early Modern English; the sound is the stopped [D] unless a vowel immediately precedes), or in a slower tempo, [D]y); "d" for *do* before a vowel. The result is "t(w)'act," ['D3~n(d)]'the end" or "Dyuniversity" (= "th' univesity" [|Di%ne\v5sedi]) and "d'I?" Actually, these particles affect the pronunciation of a following *you*, since "t'you" and "d'you" are pronounced without the glide, namely as ['thi%] and ['di%], respectively. In casual speech, "th" is dropped following *all* and *on*--and their final "l" and "n" are fronted to a dental articulation. More slangy-sounding is the dropping of "th" in *there* and *all 'at*. (for "all that"). "Th" is of course dropped between consonants in *isthmus* and *asthma*.

Given that many European languages possess [t̪ d̪], won't English pronunciation become marvelously easier if foreign learners do it like native-speakers--deleting //t// and //d// between consonants where we do and assimilating them to a following sibilant where we do, and mainly changing " th" to [t̪ d̪] where we do? Why not? Ignorance is the only thing blocking this. (The rules for interconsonantal *t/d*-DELETION are given in Bailey and Maroldt, *Grundzuege der englischen Phonetologie: allgemeine Systematik* of 1983 and later rev. by Maroldt in the ed. of 1988; *Arbeitspapiere zur Linguistik 16* des Technischen Universitaet Berlin.) Readers may wish to refer to C.-J. N. Bailey's *English phonetic transcription*, published by the Summer Institute of Linguistics and the University of Texas at Arlington (1985), where this and much more information is provided.

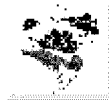
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