

Unit 4



The syllable margins in the material world

restricting the airflow to produce contoids

Print version of the
Practical English Phonetics (British) /
Phonetics with Listening Practice (British)
presentation given on
le quartidi 14 brumaire an CCXXXIV
(04 November 2025)

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[ˈɪŋ.ɡlɪʃ fə.ˈnet.ɪks ˈjuː.nɪt ˈfɔː]
English Phonetics: Unit 4:

4.1

[ðə ˈsɪl.əb.əl ˈmɑːdʒ.ɪnz ɪn ðə mæ.ˈtɪri.əl.əl ˈwɜːld]
The syllable margins in the material world

[ɹi.ˈstɹɪkt.ɪŋ ðɪ ˈeə.fləʊ tə pɹə.ˈdʒuːs ˈkɒnt.ɔɪdz]
restricting the airflow to produce contoids

[ˈɹɒb.ət ˈspens]
Robert Spence

[lə kɑː.tɪ.di kɑːtɔːz bɹy.mɛːɹ ã dɒ.sɑː.tʁɑːt.katɹ]
le quartidi 14 brumaire an CCXXXIV
[ˈtʃuːz.deɪ ðə ˈfɔːθ əv nə(ʊ).ˈvem.bə ˈtwent.i.ˈtwent.i.ˈfaɪv]
(Tuesday 04 November 2025)

4.2

- This unit's subtitle in the previous iteration of the course was:
- [ə.ˈpɹəʊtʃ.ɪŋ ˈkɒn(t)s.(ə)n(.)ən(t)s ˌvɑː(ɪ)(.)əɹ ə.ˈnæt.əm.i ɪ ɪ ɑː.ˈtɪk.jəl.ətʃ.i fə.ˈnet.ɪks]
- which is shorthand for either:
- [ə.ˈpɹəʊtʃ.ɪŋ ˈkɒnts.ən.ənts ˌvɑːɹ ə.ˈnæt.əm.i ɪ ɪ ɑː.ˈtɪk.jəl.ətʃ.i fə.ˈnet.ɪks]
- or:
- [ə.ˈpɹəʊtʃ.ɪŋ ˈkɒns.nəns ˌvɑːɹ ə.ˈnæt.əm.i ɪ ɪ ɑː.ˈtɪk.jəl.ətʃ.i fə.ˈnet.ɪks]
- or something in-between.

4.3

Dedication (1)



Image source: Obituary for John C. (Ian) Catford <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/>

John Cunnison (Ian) CATFORD
26.03.1917--06.10.2009

4.4

Dedication (2)



Image source: Jacket design by David Rowley, from: Richard Dawkins: The Ancestor's Tale. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2004. Image flipped L-R for phonetic reasons.

The animal that we (and mice, and elephants, and whales, ...) were before that asteroid gave us our big chance. Note that we had a dorsal surface above and a ventral surface below. In describing the tongue, we use the same terms: dorsal and ventral. In this picture, where is "anterodorsal"? and where is "posterodorsal"?

4.5

1 Did you do your homework?

Places of articulation

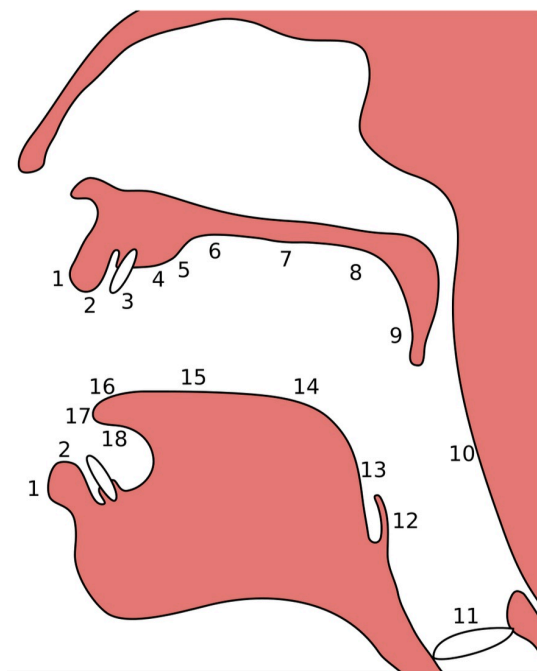


Image: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Places_of_articulation.svg

Pronounce the adjectives that relate to the places of articulation as indicated.

4.6

2 The syllable in the material world: which model?

The syllable in the material world: which model?

- Two possible models of the structure of syllables:
 1. **Initial Margin + Nucleus + Final Margin**
 2. **Onset + Rhyme**
(Nucleus + Coda)
- In **phonology**, more *interactions* occur between the Nucleus and the Final than between the Initial and the Nucleus.
- At the levels of **phonetics** and **material reality** the simpler model will do:
 - **Initial Margin + Nucleus + Final Margin**
- Phonologically: **vowels** (typically occur at Nucleus) vs **consonants** (typically occur at margins).
- Phonetically: **vocoids** (unobstructed central airflow through mouth) and **contoids** (all other sounds).
- Nucleus **more sonorant** (=“sounds” more) than margins; cf. dt. *Selbstlaute* (vowels), *Mitlaute* (consonants).
- / s t r e ŋ θ s /
- [s t r e ŋ k θ s]

4.7

3 Words of warning and encouragement

Words of warning and encouragement (1)

- Phonetics is the only part of language that interfaces with material reality ...
- ... studying phonetics = 'getting too close and personal' ...
- ... and it forces you to confront unsettling ideas.
- Even a brief glance at the human vocal tract confirms that it is not the result of conscious design; it is pure *Bastelarbeit*:
 - lungs were originally buoyancy tanks
 - only humans can speak
 - only humans can choke on their food
 - so speaking must be worth the risk
 - see the handout: http://spence.saar.de/phonetics/unit04_20252/B__Handout/01_dawkinsetc_new.pdf
- Are you afraid of the IPA?
 - Keep your chart handy: http://www.spence.saar.de/phonetics/unit01_20252/D__IPA_Chart/
 - Only learn as many symbols as you need.
 - You probably already produce way more sounds than you're aware of.

4.8

Words of warning and encouragement (2)

- Why bother to learn to produce all possible consonant sounds?
 - **Negative stereotypes** that involve (perceived) ethnicity involve (unexamined, misunderstood) sounds: (Chinese; Arabic)
 - Wrong **consonants** are more associated with foreignness:
 - * Are you sure you want to sound foreign?
 - Wrong **vowels** are more associated with social inferiority/superiority (class) and non-standardness/standardness (region):
 - * *I don't like their vowels* = 'I don't like their values'.
 - **Allophones**: many phonemes have more than one phonetic realisation, depending on the surrounding sounds and/or the speech style: *thRough*, *veRy*; *aeSthetic*, *calliSthenics*, *StrengthS*
 - **Other first-world Englishes**: (AuE) ['ɹaɪrə] for <writer> *or* <rider>; (Irish) [tʰm] for <thin> vs [tʰm] for <tin>; (Scottish) /r/ realised as [r]; joke-telling(?)
 - **Third-world Englishes** (retroflex [ɳ t̪ d̪ ʒ ʈ ɭ ʡ] in Indian English).
 - **Non-native beginners and speakers with speech defects**: understanding the 'wrong' sounds they're making.

4.9

4 How we make sounds

The human vocal tract (after Catford)

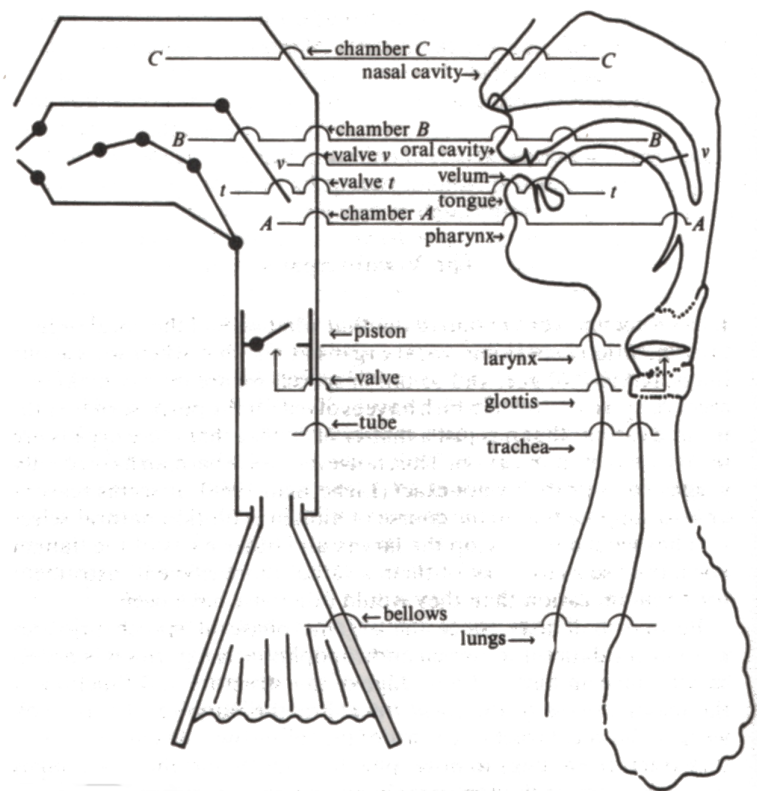


Figure 1: The vocal tract as a machine (J.C. Catford, *Fundamental Problems of Phonetics*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977)

5 (Pulmonic) Consonants: dimensions of articulation

(Pulmonic) Consonants: dimensions of articulation

- Consonants (contoids) can be looked at in terms of their articulation, their acoustics, or their auditory perception
- Their articulation can be described in terms of:
 - AIRFLOW (for the moment, we assume ‘pulmonic’)
 - VOICING
 - * voiceless [stimmlos] or voiced [stimmhaft]
 - PLACE of articulation (the “horizontal” dimension) specifying upper (passive) and (if necessary, also:) **lower (active) articulators**
 - * bilabial, **labio**dental, dental, alveolar, postalveolar, **retroflex**, palatal, velar, uvular, pharyngeal, glottal
 - * more delicately: **apico-/apical**-alveolar, **lamino-/laminal**-alveolar, **(antero)dorsal**-palatal, **(postero)dorsal**-velar, etc.
 - MANNER of articulation (the “vertical”) dimension
 - * plosive, nasal, trill, tap or flap, fricative, lateral fricative, approximant, lateral approximant (make sure you understand what each of these terms means; note Eckert and Barry’s way of classifying these into “obstruents” and “sonorants” [E&B: 36–39]; and don’t forget to add affricate = plosive+fricative)
- Check out: Glossika Phonics <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCFu0FZ0wFoHK2deKF1daLGA> (for the diagrams; some of the pronunciations are strange...)

6 Which English consonants do *you* find difficult?

Which English consonants do *you* find difficult?

p			t			k
b			d			g
				tʃ		
	f	θ		dʒ		
	v	ð	s		ʃ	h
			z		ʒ	
m			n			ŋ
			l		r	
w						j

pit			to			cod
bit			do			god
				chin		
				gin		
	fin	thin		sin	shin	hit
	van	the		zoo	vision	
man			not			sing
			lay		ray	
wet						yet

4.12

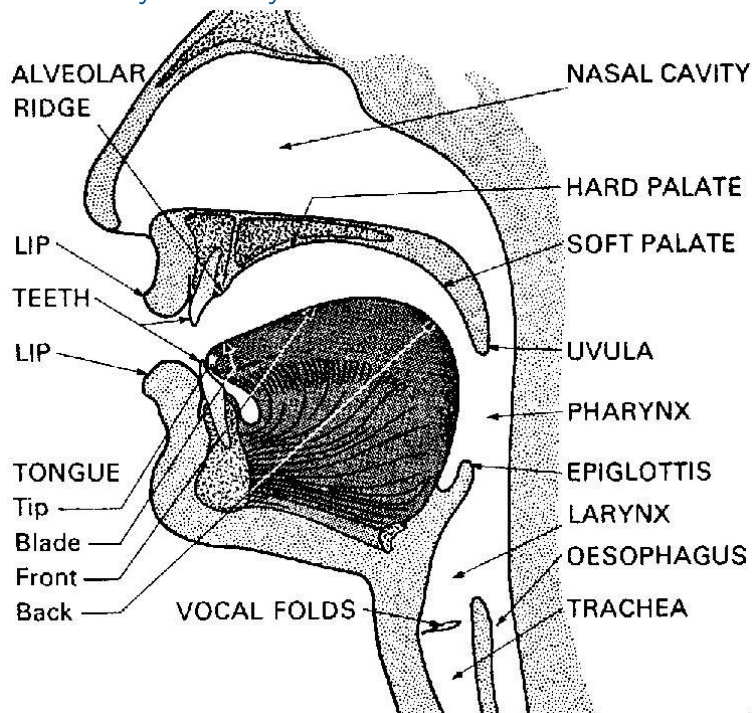
The most important thing to practise:

obstruents	voiceless plosives	p t k	
	voiced plosives	b d g	
	voiceless affricates	tʃ	
	voiced affricates	dʒ	
	voiceless fricatives	f θ s ʃ h	
	voiced fricatives	v ð z ʒ	← turbulent airflow
sonorants	voiced approximants	w l ɹ j	← smooth airflow
	voiced nasals	m n ŋ	

4.13

7 You can make any consonant you want

You can make any consonant you want



4.14

You can make any consonant you want

THE INTERNATIONAL PHONETIC ALPHABET (revised to 2005)

CONSONANTS (PULMONIC)

© 2005 IPA

	Bilabial	Labiodental	Dental	Alveolar	Postalveolar	Retroflex	Palatal	Velar	Uvular	Pharyngeal	Glottal
Plosive	p b			t d		ʈ ɖ	c ɟ	k ɡ	q ɢ		ʔ
Nasal	m	ɱ		n		ɳ	ɲ	ŋ	ɴ		
Trill	ʙ			r					ʀ		
Tap or Flap		ⱱ		ɾ		ɽ					
Fricative	ɸ β	f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ	ʂ ʐ	ç ʝ	x ɣ	χ ʁ	ħ ʕ	h ɦ
Lateral fricative				ɬ ɮ							
Approximant		ʋ		ɹ		ɻ	j	ɰ			
Lateral approximant				l		ɭ	ʎ	ʟ			

Where symbols appear in pairs, the one to the right represents a voiced consonant. Shaded areas denote articulations judged impossible.

- Keep your copy of the IPA chart handy.
- You have received the **description** of a **consonant** sound to produce (**voicing**, and **place** and **manner** of articulation).
- **Read out** the description aloud.
- **Pronounce** the sound.
- Hint: If the sound seems difficult, move **up and down the column** and **back and forth along the row**, until you have situated it in relation to other possible consonants.

4.15

You can make any consonant you want

- Use **voicing** as well as **place** and **manner** of articulation to describe the consonant sounds indicated by the framed graphemes or by the framed IPA symbols:

– < th is na ti on has enou gh f sh to feed itself >

– [m m eməɪ ə v ɔ:l wɪmɪn ɪɹ p t m ɔ:l w ɔ:z]

- Read Eckert and Barry pp 36–39 on manner of articulation and on the voiceless/voiced opposition http://spence.saar.de/phonetics/unit05_20252/B__Handout/
- We'll follow Eckert and Barry in talking about **fortis** consonants (stronger, like [p]) and **lenis** consonants (weaker, like [b])

4.16

What are the *other* parts of the tongue doing?

- I was (almost) today years old when I learnt / learned that:
 - The reason why the Chinese don't mind whether you pronounce 北京 <Beijing> as /beɪ.dʒɪŋ/ or /beɪ.ʒɪŋ/ is that both are wrong. Leaving aside the voiced/voiceless problem,
 - * /beɪ.dʒɪŋ/ gets the **MANNER** of articulation right: [affricate]
 - * /beɪ.ʒɪŋ/ gets the **PLACE** of articulation (almost) right: [palatoalveolar].
 - * Actually, it's [alveolopalatal] – the tip of the tongue is pointing downward and is touching the oral surface of the bottom front teeth at the gum line.
 - * For years I tried to pronounce 习近平 <Xi Jinping> [ɕɪ tɕɪnʌ.pʰɪŋ] as a slightly fronted variant of [çɪ tçɪnʌ.pʰɪŋ], and my Chinese teacher Chen Lansun was never completely satisfied; the place of articulation was wrong — (pre-) palatal [ç], not palatoalveolar [ɕ].
 - * If I had used the older, English-specific Wade-Giles transliteration system <Hsi Chin-P'ing>, I would have got the initial consonant of the articulation of the family name 习 exactly right.
- And from a student in winter semester 2024/2025 I learnt that
 - English [ɹ] is produced with the blade of the tongue placed close to the roof of the mouth just behind the alveolar ridge; but the *sides* of the tongue are **raised**, and are in contact with the oral surface of the **upper back teeth** at the gum line.

4.17

8 We are mammals and have mammalian reflexes

What is this baby hominid doing?



4.18

We are mammals and have mammalian reflexes

- One of the first things a mammal does ...
- ... after trying out its lungs ...
- ... is ...
- ... to suck!
- (If it doesn't, it dies.)
- What does your mouth do when you suck?
- There are two basic 'postures' — / u / and / i /
- For / u / the oral cavity is long and thin, the lips are rounded, the back of the tongue is up, and the front of the tongue is down
- For / i / the oral cavity is short and wide, the lips are spread, the front of the tongue is up, and the back of the tongue is down
- 'Neither / u / nor / i /' is / ə /.
- What is 'both / u / and / i /'?

4.19