# How to make those ‘difficult’ English sounds

## 1 General advice (from Unit 01)

1. Imagine you are training to be a spy, and are going to be working in England. A German accent would give you away!
2. Start with the entire body in its biological and social environment. Sleep in an English-style bed, eat an English-style breakfast, surround yourself with everything English; stand the way English people do, walk the way they do, hold your mouth the way they do. Then the sounds will come naturally.
3. Free up your sound-making. Stop being an adult with desires and purposes and intentions. Just be a child and play. Do not let your phonetics be constrained by anything related to language (such as German sound patterns, or German sentence patterns, or German ways of organizing ideas, or …)
4. Find someone to imitate. It should be someone quintessentially English. Abandon your own desires and purposes and intentions and just imitate the other person.

## 2 Slightly more specific general advice

1. You normally only need to control three basic variables to produce sounds.
   (a) For consonants, the variables are:
      i. place of articulation
      ii. manner of articulation
      iii. voicing
   (b) For vowels, the variables are:
      i. closeness-openness
      ii. frontness-backness
      iii. rounding
2. For consonants, the most important place to start practising is the fricatives.
3. For consonants, the most important thing is to understand the difference between fricatives and approximants.
4. In a language, every sound functions in one or more systems, and is defined solely by its *valeur* in those systems. What this means is: you can define every sound by what it is not.

# 3 How to make [ð]

If a consonant is difficult, try comparing it with all the other consonants in the same column (same PLACE of articulation) and with all the other consonants in the same row (same MANNER of articulation). If the consonant is part of a voiceless-voiced pair, compare it with its partner. In the case of [ð], that means:

| | dental | | alveolar | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | voiceless | voiced | voiceless | voiced |
| plosive (blocked airflow) | | d̪ | ← | d |
| | | ↓ | | |
| fricative (rough airflow) | θ → | **ð** | s | z |
| | | ↑ | | |
| approximant (smooth airflow) | | ð̞ | | |

You can produce a [d]: an 'alveolar' consonant, with the tip of the tongue touching the ridge behind the top front teeth. Move the tip of the tongue forward until it touches the top front teeth: a 'dental' consonant. Now gradually lower the tongue. First, go from a plosive (where you cut off the airflow completely) [d̪] to a fricative (where you restrict the airflow, making it 'turbulent' or 'rough') [ð]. Then lower your tongue even further, so that the friction stops. You now have the approximant [ð̞] (like [ð], but with more space for the air to flow through smoothly). Now raise the tongue further towards the top front teeth to create friction.

In all of these sounds your vocal folds were vibrating, i.e. all these sounds were voiced. But now try comparing the voiced [ð] with the voiceless [θ]. I noticed that you had far fewer problems with [θ] than with [ð]. So why not just attempt to produce a voiceless [θ] but turn the voicing on so that you produce [ð] instead?

If a consonant is too difficult, why not give up and produce something else instead? If instead of [ð] you routinely produce [d] you will sound Dutch, and if you routinely produce [z] you will sound like a parody of a German. But if you produce [v] (in the middle of words or at the end of words) you will sound working-class—and your spying mission for the EU can continue unabated:

⟨brother⟩ /ˈbɹʌð.ə/ [ˈbɹæð.ə] → [ˈbɻæv.ə] ⟨breathe⟩ /bɹiːð/ [bɻiːð̞] → [bɹiːv̞]

You would still have the problem of producing a [ð] at the beginning of a word, though. In this position, [ð] is important, because it signals that the word is a function word, not a content word. But at the same time, such words are not usually stressed. So in fast speech you might be able to get away with assimilating the [ð] to the preceding sound:

⟨of a⟩ /əv ə/ [əv ə] → [əv.ə] ⟨is a⟩ /ɪz ə/ [ɪz ə] → [ɪz.ə]
⟨of the⟩ /əv ðə/ [əv ðə] → [əv.və] ⟨is the⟩ /ɪz ðə/ [ɪz ðə] → [ɪz.zə]

# 4 How to make [w]

You may have noticed that [w] is not on the IPA consonants chart. If we wanted to put it in, we would need an extra column for a kind of 'double' articulation called 'labial-velar':

| | labial-velar (lip-to-lip and back-of-tongue to soft palate) | |
|---|---|---|
| | voiceless | voiced |
| plosive (blocked airflow) | k͡p | g͡b |
| | | ↓ |
| fricative (rough airflow) | | ɣ͡β |
| | | ↓ |
| approximant (smooth airflow) | | **w** |

Another way to produce [w] is to treat it as a very short vowel that is no longer able to function like a vowel and has become more like a consonant:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| two syllables | u.a | each vowel functions on its own as the Nucleus of its syllable |
| | ↓ | |
| one syllable | u̯a | u̯ is the weaker part of the diphthong functioning as Nucleus |
| | ↓ | |
| one syllable | **wa** | u̯ has mutated into the consonant w functioning as Onset |

Another point worth remembering about [w] is that in English there is a phonemic contrast between /w/ and /v/, and that /v/ is part of an entire system of 'lenis' fricatives, each of which contrasts with a corresponding 'fortis' fricative:

/f/ ↔ /θ/ ↔ /s/ ↔ /ʃ/

↕ ↕ ↕ ↕

/v/ ↔ /ð/ ↔ /z/ ↔ /ʒ/

↙↗

/w/

In German, the letter ⟨w⟩ is /v/, and is pronounced [v] (voiced labiodental fricative) or [ʊ] (voiced labiodental approximant). It does not immediately seem to be part of a fortis-lenis opposition with /f/. Indeed, it could be argued that there is *no* systematic distinction between fortis and lenis fricatives in German at all! Is there one, for example, for [s] and [z]? In initial position, only [z] occurs; in final position, only [s]; in medial position, between two vowels, [s] only occurs after a short vowel (as in ⟨lassen⟩), [z] only after a long vowel (as in ⟨lasen⟩). On the other hand, I often hear ['fʊzəlɪç] and [fɛᵽ'mazl̩n], although the official forms are

[ˈfʊsəlɪç] and [fɛɐ̯ˈmasl̩n], which I have never heard in the Saarland, even though they are the only ones that German orthography legally allows to be spelled!

Finally, something from the Potterverse to practise … let us speak ***with one voice*:**

***"Master Regulus was very worried, very worried," croaked Kreacher.***

In English, [v] is like [f] (⟨ferry⟩ 'Fähre' [ˈfe̞ɹ̠.i]) but with voicing ([ˈve̞ɹ̠.i]) – so make an effort to produce friction! (Not quite as much as for [f], though.) And always use your lips when pronouncing [w]!

# 5 How to make [ɹ̠] ( or [ɹ̠ʷ] )

The IPA symbol [ɹ] stands for an approximant which could be dental (like [ð]), alveolar (like [z]), or postalveolar (like [ʒ]). To make it clear that we mean postalveolar, we can write the 'retracted' symbol under it ([ɹ̠]). We also need to indicate that in English the sound often has lip-rounding, so we end up with [ɹ̠ʷ] (more common at the beginning of a word than in the middle.) **Also, and more importantly: raise the *sides* of your tongue till they touch your upper back teeth at the gum-line, creating a tunnel.**

| | postalveolar | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | voiced | | |
| fricative (rough airflow) | ʒʷ | labialized | |
| | ↓ | | CONSONANTS |
| approximant (smooth airflow) | ɹ̠ʷ | labialized | |
| | ↑ | | |
| close | ʉ̟ | rounded | |
| | | | VOWELS |
| close-mid | ɵ | rounded | |
| mid | ə | | |
| | central | | |

Start with the voiced postalveolar fricative [ʒ], as in ⟨pleasure⟩ or ⟨leisure⟩, but round your lips when you say it: [ʒʷ].

Lower the **centre** of your tongue slightly, so there is enough room between the centre of the tongue and the alveolar ridge to allow a smooth airflow; you now have a voiced postalveolar approximant, the quintessential English ⟨r⟩ sound.

Alternatively, start with the mid central vowel [ə]. Raise your tongue slightly and round your lips. You now have the rounded close-mid central vowel [ɵ]. Keep going further in the direction of a rounded close central vowel. If you hear friction (i.e. if the airflow becomes turbulent), you've gone slightly too far.