

Mr Tickle in Connected Speech

PhD placement student Andrew Booth writes:

At the *Evolving English* exhibition at the British Library (2010-11), we asked visitors to submit recordings of their voices in specially designed telephone booths. Around 15,000 speakers took part, and the outcome is the [Evolving English VoiceBank](#) and [WordBank](#) – a collection of accents and dialect words from over the UK, and all around the world. Using the recordings can help linguists or language learners and language teachers in a variety of ways.

Connected speech is an umbrella term, which is used to describe the different processes of change words experience when spoken in natural and uninterrupted speech. It is easier to read a sentence with the words spaced evenly, than it is when there are no spaces in between. In speech we do not have the luxury of set boundaries, and when natural speech occurs, some sounds are lost or changed to enable speed and fluency. The rhythmic organisation of English can cause letters to be inserted, changed or deleted. Here are some examples –

- ‘ten minutes’ said quickly in the middle of a sentence may become /teminits/
- ‘in bed’ in the middle of the sentence ‘sat up in bed’ could become /imbed/
- ‘to a’ may become /towa/ in the sentence ‘came to a school’
- ‘raw egg’ may become /ro:r eg/ when said quickly
- ‘must have’ isn’t usually /must hav/, but pronounced /mustuv/

Teaching connected speech to learners of English can be an immensely complicated procedure if you are determined to spell out the rules and terminology that unveil the secrets to connected speech. Within connected speech we have the terminology of **progressive assimilation** which covers the first two examples above and **linking** or **intrusive** /r/ or /w/ explains the second two and **weak forms** which can explain the final one. Any or all of the terms are enough to put an English language learner (or anybody) off learning languages forever. However, by showing the features of connected speech the fluency and understanding of English can be improved rapidly.

As a rule, when teaching English, I will stay as far away from the terms above as possible. They only deter learners and do not help when pupils are already learning in a language that isn’t their mother tongue. However, I will not skirt the subject and have found a few rules that may help my teaching. Examples of a few of these are below:

Rule 1 – When a word ends in a consonant and the next begins with a vowel, the consonant may move to the other word or straddle between the two words: *fast asleep* sounds like *fas•tasleep* or *back upstairs* sounds like *back □ upstairs*

Rule 2 – If the consonant at the end of one word is the same as the start of another, the end consonant is not finished and merges with the beginning of

the following word- *thought* □ *to himself*, *less* □ *strict*

Rule 3 – If a word ends in a single /n/ and the next begins with a /b/, /m/ or /p/ – the /n/ disappears and becomes a /m/ (see examples above)

Rule 4 – With non-stressed words of only one syllable that are not central to the context, compare the sentences – *yes, we can!* to *we can do it!* – the word can is much stronger in the first than the second

The examples above may seem to be imperceptible to a native speaker of English, they may even seem impossible when you try and say them in isolation. However, after listening to *Mr Tickle* time after time, I found that we really are chained to the conventions of connected speech, even though we do not know them.

Listen to the first minute and a half of the following excerpts from *Mr Tickle* read by native English speakers; see if you notice any of the rules in these sentences: (The first voice is someone from the South East of England, the second is from Manchester and the third is a Spanish speaker)

[C1442X1339X1655X3044 extract 1](#)

***He was** having a dream. It **must have been** a very funny dream because it made him **laugh out** loud, and that woke him up.*

[C1442X1339X1655X3044 extract 2](#)

*He sat up **in** bed, stretched **his extraordinary** long arms, and yawned **an enormous** yawn.*

[C1442X1339X1655X3044 extract 3](#)

*Today looks very much **like a tickling** day," he **thought to** himself.*

Note that the Manchester speaker is also using connecting speech for /g/ in words ending *ng*. This could be another blog post in itself!

If we compare the same passage to a speaker whose first language generally does not use these connected speech features, you may be able to hear a difference. The Spanish speaker in the extracts above puts the same emphasis and length on each syllable:

In English we love to assimilate and compress words together or even delete letters from their original place when we speak naturally. There are many more examples of connected speech in the excerpt above that I have not included. Awareness of some of these features can help a learner not only to sound like a native speaker but also help them to understand these weird and interesting variations of our speech.