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THE FAITH OF THE TH-SOUNDS IN ENGLISH

Giulia Suciu

Assist. Prof., PhD, University of Oradea

Abstract: Often difficult to pronounce, the TH-sounds represent a real challenge for the speakers of English as a foreign language. Whereas the TH-sounds do not appear in many languages, English has two, which makes it even more confusing for English learners. The present article looks at the correct articulation and pronunciation of the two fricative sounds /θ/ and /ð/ and the impact of multiculturalism on their future.

Keywords: dental sounds, fricatives, multiculturalism, voiced, voiceless, TH-dropping

THE TH-SOUNDS

Consonants play a decisive role in making a language understood. If you leave out the vowel letters in a sentence, native speakers – and not only – will make out the meaning of the sentence quite easily.

e.g. *C - ld y - h - lp m -, pl - s -?*
(Could you help me, please?)

If, on the contrary, you leave out the consonants, the message will be pretty difficult to decipher, even for a native speaker.

e.g. *- ou- - -ou – e- - -e, - -ea-e?*

'What's more, consonants are produced by a definite interference between the speech organs, therefore consonants are easy to be described and understood.'[1] Unlike vowels, which are pronounced with no obstruction of the air flow, consonants are articulated by 'interrupting, restricting or diverting the airflow in a variety of ways'[2].

Another feature that makes consonants easily understandable is the fact that 'throughout the word consonants are pronounced more or less in the same way. The differences in accent between different speakers reside mainly in the different pronunciation of vowels.'[3]

Of all English consonants, the ones considered to be the most difficult to reproduce phonetically are the sounds /θ/ and /ð/. They are the only pair of English sounds that share the same spelling: TH.

The TH-sounds under scrutiny are articulated by leaving a narrow passage for the air stream to escape, thus causing friction to be heard, hence the name fricatives. The friction occurs between the tip of the tongue and the top front teeth. An alternative method of producing the TH sounds is to place the tip of the tongue between the top and bottom front teeth. While this method will produce the correct sound, it often creates difficulties transitioning to and from other sounds.

Cruttenden describes the production of the English dental fricative sounds as follows: 'The soft palate being raised and the nasal resonator shut off, the tip and rims of the tongue

[1] Suciu, Giulia. 2014. *English Phonetics and Phonology Revisited*. Editura Universitatii din Oradea. p.62
[2] Kelly, Gerald. 2000. *How to Teach Pronunciation*. Longman. Pearson Education.p. 47
[3] Suciu, Giulia. 2014. *English Phonetics and Phonology Revisited*. Editura Universitatii din Oradea. p.62

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make a light contact with the edge and inner surface of the incisors and a firmer contact with the upper side teeth, so that the air escaping between the forward surface of the tongue and the incisors causes friction (such friction often being very weak in the case of /ð/).'[4] The fact that friction is very weak in the case of the voiced sound /ð/ makes Roach[5] question the classification of the above- mentioned sound as fricative, suggesting that it would be more accurate to classify it as a weak dental plosive.

What's more, speakers of British English and American English are known to articulate the TH-sounds differently: While speakers of British English pronounce it by touching the tongue tip behind the top teeth, speakers of American English commonly '"have the tip of the tongue protruding between the upper and lower front teeth'.[6]

Dental TH-sounds do not occur in many languages, that is why learners of English as a foreign language find it difficult to correctly articulate them. According to a survey made by Maddieson[7], the TH sounds occur in 43 (7.6%) out of the 566 languages surveyed. To make things even more complicated, English has two such sound, both made by making light contact with the back of the top, front teeth and squeezing the air through. If we simply squeeze the air through, the sounds that we get is /θ/. If we add voice, (the vocal cords vibrate) the sound that we get is /ð/. In conclusion, with the exception of one being voiced and the other one unvoiced, the two sounds are nearly identical.

Generally speaking, every time the letters TH appear within a word, one of the fore-mentioned sounds should be used. However, since exceptions make the rule, there are a few words in English that do not observe this rule.

e.g. *the river Thames* /temz/
the name Thomas /ˈtɒməs/ or *Esther* /ˈestə/
or the herb thyme /taɪm/

From a grammatical point of view, words fall into two main categories: function words and content words. Content words give us the most important information in a sentence, while function words are mainly used to 'link' these words together. Content words carry real meaning, therefore this category includes nouns (*theatre, Thomas, author* etc.), verbs (*think, thank, bathe* etc.), adjectives (*Southern, thoughtful, trustworthy*) and adverbs (*thankfully, thoughtfully* etc.) Function words carry only grammatical meaning, including thus preposition (*through*), articles (*the*), pronouns (*this, that*), auxiliaries (*have, are, was* etc.).

There are no rules as to when a word contains the voiced dental sound, or the unvoiced dental sound. However, there are certain regularities which might be helpful:

- The voiceless sound /θ/ is mainly found in content words (*thought, theatre, breath, path, thousand, Catherine, Samantha, thirsty, month etc*.) while the voiced sound /ð/ is mainly found in function words (*the, this, that, other, another, rather, either, with etc*.)
- TH at the beginning of a word is usually the voiceless /θ/ (*threat, thief, thriller etc.*), exception making the function words (*this, the, that, there, than, thus etc*.)
- TH in the middle of a word is usually the voiced /ð/ (*mother, father, either, brother, together, weather etc*.) exception making the loan words (*method, mathematics, mythical, cathedral etc*.)

[4] Cruttenden, Alan. 2008. *Gimson's Pronunciation of English*. (7th edition.) London: Hodder Education. p.195
[5] Roach, Peter. 2000. *English Phonetics and Phonology: A practical course*. (3rd edition.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.p.56
[6] Ladefoged, Peter. 2001. *A Course in Phonetics*. (4th edition.) Boston: Heinle & Heinle, Thomson Learning.p.6
[7] Maddieson, Ian. 2005. "Presence of Uncommon Consonants", in: Martin Haspelmath, Matthew S. Dryer, David Gil and Bernard Comrie (eds.), *The World Atlas of Language Structures*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p.82-83

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- TH at the end of the word: verbs usually end in the voiced sound /ð/ (*breathe, bathe, soothe, loathe etc.*), while nouns and adjectives end in the voiceless sound /θ/ (*breath, bath, path, tooth, teeth)*
- Some verb-noun pairs are pronounced with /θ/ as a noun and as /ð/ as a verb (*you mouth with your mouth, you breathe a breath, you bathe in a bath etc.*)

COMMON ERRORS

There is considerable evidence proving that most non-native speakers of English replace both /θ/ and /ð/ sounds with acoustically or articulatorily similar sounds from their native language. French, German and Japanese speakers replace the TH-sounds with /s/ and /z/, Russian, Turkish and Romanian speakers replace them with /t/ or /d/, Polish speakers with /f/ and /v/ etc.

There was a video circulating the web corroborating the fore-mentioned evidence, starring a German coast guard, who received an SOS message while on duty and the conversation developed as follows:

'*Mayday! Mayday! We are sinking! We are sinking!'*
'Hello! This is the /zis iz zə/ German coast guard.'
'Mayday! We are sinking! We are sinking!'
'What… are you sinking about?'

The choice of the phonemes /s,z,t,d,f,v/ to replace the TH-sounds can be explained both from a phonetic and a phonological point of view, since all these phonemes bear strong acoustic and articulatory similarities to /ð/ and /θ/.

Even speakers who are successful in the pronunciation of these troublesome sounds in isolation, find it difficult to pronounce them after the sounds /d,t,n,l/. This happens because these sounds are also made on the teeth if followed by TH. (e.g. *although, anthology, width etc.*)

THE TH-SOUNDS: TO BE OR NOT TO BE?

All posh accents pronounce /ð/ and /θ/ on the teeth, but what does the future have in store for these two troublesome sounds?

'Languages change constantly, and they do so whether or not we want them to. New words replace old ones, grammatical rules arise and fade away, and the ways we pronounce vowels and consonants are always shifting and mutating. English has changed enormously over its 1,500-year history. Even in the last 50 years we have seen big changes in the accents and dialects of the language, including Standard English…Over the last 50 years we have also seen Standard English and Received Pronunciation ('Queen's English') lose some of their status. Where once it was more or less obligatory to speak these for anyone wishing to enter the professions, the clergy, the upper ranks of the military, acting, or broadcasting, these days, non-standard accents and dialects are much more widely accepted.'[8]

According to an article published by The Telegraph on the 29th of September 2016[9] 'visitors expecting to hear the Queen's English spoken on the streets of London in 50 years may need to "fink" again.'

[8]Watt, Dominic and Brendan Gunn. The Sound of 2066. Available at http://www.about.hsbc.co.uk/~/media/uk/en/news-and-media/160929-voice-biometrics-sounds-of-britain-2066.pdf?la=en-gb.
[9] Available at http://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/2016/09/28/th-sound-to-vanish-from-english-language-by-2066-because-of-mult/

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In a report commissioned by HSBC, entitled 'The Sound of 2066', linguists predict that the TH-sounds will disappear completely in the capital of the UK. "In the future we are likely to see the standard TH sounds being lost altogether… The TH sound – also called the voiced dental nonsibliant fricative – is likely to change to be replaced an "f", "d", or "v" meaning "mother" will be pronounced "muvver" and "thick" will be voiced as "fick".'

The reason for this is the presence of so many ethnic minorities in London who struggle to pronounce the interdental consonants on the one hand, and the MLE, the newcomer on the UK dialect scene, on the other hand. MLE, Multicultural London English, incorporates pronunciations from Englishes spoken by ethnic minorities (Caribbean, Asian, West African).

So this is what the future of English dental fricatives will look like, according to Dr Dominic Watt, a sociolinguistics expert from the University of York, author of the report *The Sound of 2066*:

- TH stopping – the dental consonants TH will be replaced by /d/ meaning *this* /ðɪs/ or *that* /ðæt/ will become /dis/ and /dæt/.
- TH fronting – words which begin with a TH sound will be lost so *thin* /θɪn/ will become /fɪn/ and *think* /θɪŋk/ will change to /fɪŋk/

This may come as relief to foreign learners of English struggling with the TH sounds, but there is also a vast majority claiming that such a development is unthinkable. Joseph Hudson, founder of the Pronunciation Studio, a speech school in Central London, thinks that the TH sounds are not likely to disappear from the language, since they have survived well over a thousand years thus far.

Well, I guess time will tell, but meanwhile let's enjoy the TH sounds while they are still here.

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