Preface

This book is directed mainly to those students who wish to take a journey deep into the heart of the English sound system and extrapolate the principles that engineer the passage of messages back and forth between speakers and listeners. The ultimate objective naturally is to accelerate the process of decoding oral communication. The text has been written in simple language to enable comprehension even at a pre-intermediate level of study.

The book is intended as well for all those who have an interest in how English sound is received, such as EFL/ESL teachers, actors and actresses, native and non-native public speakers, that is to say, presenters or chair people at academic conferences and business meetings.

The ideas that inform my discussion of English sound come from a variety of sources: my first Phonetics and Diction course with the authoritative Prof. Edith Wharton Skinner at Carnegie-Mellon University's Drama Department, revelations from my music studies with Prof. Joan Yakkey of the L. Cherubini Conservatory of Music of Florence, Italy, years of classroom experience with willing students who provided valuable feedback as to the first Sound & Rhythm booklet, then in the form of hand-outs, an action research study completed for a Master's degree that intended to determine the efficacy of syllabicated texts in helping English learners to grasp the dynamics of English sound articulation and, finally the vast literature in the field of English phonology. The more significant titles that are directly related to the writing of this book have been included at the back.

I am deeply grateful to my employer, the Università degli Studi di Firenze, and specifically the Language Centre of that University, for granting me the paid leave of absence necessary to complete the thesis component of my Master's degree and the opportunity to conduct the action research that was a necessary stepping stone to this book.

Let me also express my gratitude here to the encouragement and good editorial advice from friends Dino Perroni, Toni Dorfman, and Flavia Pozzolini.

Nancy Lippmann, *Sound & Rhythm : Understanding Spoken English: With Exercises and Answer Key*,
ISBN 978-88-8453-912-0 (print) ISBN 978-88-8453-913-7 (online) © 2009 Firenze University Press

PRONUNCIATION KEY

Sound Transcriptions

As this is a book for non-experts in phonology, I have purposely kept phonetic symbols and sound transcriptions to a minimum. Here is a list of the few symbols used:

- /ə/ as in <u>a</u>bout
- /ei/ as in d<u>a</u>y
- /ii/ as in m<u>ee</u>t
- /ai/ as in l<u>i</u>ke
- /ou/ as in h<u>o</u>me
- /iu/ as in m<u>u</u>te
- /au/ as in h<u>ow</u>
- /aw/ as in l<u>aw</u>
- /oo/ as in m<u>oo</u>n
- /oi/ as in b<u>oy</u>
- /ə ^{r}/ as in b<u>er</u>th/th<u>ir</u>d/w<u>or</u>d/s<u>ur</u>f

Sound & Rhythm Preview

Unit 1

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

This booklet is intended for the English language student in the classroom setting, where the sound of words and phrases is perforce mediated by its written representation. Given that written English is not the most reliable resource for identifying and memorizing its sound, we propose an alternative model for approaching the study of oral English, that is, learning how to pronounce it according to the methodology we will present, followed by ear development aimed at helping the student to decode the sound flow that arrives at his ears. This model is here referred to as "Sound & Rhythm".

The purpose of Sound & Rhythm is to throw a spotlight on the phonological features of spoken English. It encourages the learner to become aware of what is happening while listening to snatches of speech. It analyzes speech transcriptions in order to reason over the way a speaker will manage the sound articulation of his message and how he will use rhythm to shape and convey its content within the constraints of time.

For example, a native speaker issues the following speeches:

A. I'll call you back at ten.

B. He said he'd arrive in half an hour.

C. How long did you have to wait before he wrote to approve your topic?

A lot more is happening phonologically in the enunciation of these speeches than will ever be plainly visible in their written representation. In fact, their standard spelling provides little information as to the way the message will shape up orally. Now, proper study may point the way to the pronunciation of each single word, but without direct exposure to the oral language, the learner cannot know from written clues how the whole speech will reach his ears as flowing, connected sound.

In preparing for a more serene contact with the oral language, the classroom learner needs to take notice of certain Sound & Rhythm questions:

speed	how fast does speech move? How many seconds does it take to say each one of the above speeches?
accentuation	do all the words receive more or less the same stress? If not, where do the accents fall in the above speeches? On all the words? On certain words? On certain syllables?
tempo	what supporting beat or tempo drives the speech forward, governing the way the syllables fall rhythmically into place?
sounds	in the family of English sounds, are there stronger ones that emerge and weaker ones that attenuate? Does each sound have a single articulation or does it vary

Nancy Lippmann, *Sound & Rhythm : Understanding Spoken English: With Exercises and Answer Key*,
ISBN 978-88-8453-912-0 (print) ISBN 978-88-8453-913-7 (online)

in quality depending on what sounds surround it? Will a single sound be articulated in the same way when it is word-initial as when it is word-final? Is there a relationship of predominance when sounds meet at word boundaries?

sound units do the individual words emerge as perceptible units in the sound flow just as they do in writing?[1]

These are all considerations that Sound & Rhythm addresses in the following units in order to make sense of oral English for learners.

In the classroom, necessity dictates that we must use the written language as a resource to discuss Sound & Rhythm concepts. Written English with all its spelling inconsistencies is not much help in investigating phonological concepts in action. In fact, English spelling gives priority to maintaining a connection with the etymology of the words. The words *picture*, *debt* and *move*, if spelled more in imitation of the way they sound (that is: "pikcher", "det" and "moov") would impede reading comprehension. Written English is really the realm of the reader. It does little to further the cause of those who seek in the letter configurations a univocal letter-to-sound key for determining the pronunciation of English words.

For this reason, our discussion of sound will be supplemented, or mediated, by a special Sound & Rhythm notation, which is placed above the text or incorporated into the standard text. Its aim is to help the learner to interpret speech transcription, as if it were a page of music, and understand how and why the sound shapes up as it does. The Sound & Rhythm notation – based on dots, full-stops, superscripts and other graphic devices – aids the eye in interpreting the sounds of words and the flow of connected speech, without causing one to lose the sense that the standard text provides.

The booklet has been organized to set forward the principles of Sound & Rhythm and then immediately illustrate the concepts with examples and exercises. Working from simple to complex, we will first analyze English sound dynamics at the word level, after which we will look at what happens in the sound flow, that is, when words connect in phrases and sentences, producing a continuum of sound. This is the critical moment that most involves the listener, whose job it is to draw out the lexical units from the moving sound and decipher the meaning.

Evincing meaning from the sound flow is the ultimate goal, which can only be attained by many, many hours of direct exposure to and interaction with the oral language. Sound & Rhythm aims to set the learner going along this route, fortified with a well-tuned receptive attitude and outfitted with the best notional framework for producing and deciphering English speech.

PREVIEW OF BASIC SOUND & RHYTHM CONCEPTS

The phonological questions set out in the Introductory Remarks provide a good starting point for getting acquainted with the Sound & Rhythm approach. Let us proceed to answer these questions and discover a few basic concepts about the way English moves in terms of sound.

1. SPEED: how fast does speech move? How many seconds does it take to say the following speeches?

Human beings speak at a rate of approximately 6 syllables per second. Let us take a look at some examples.

A. I'll CALL you BACK at TEN.

B. He SAID he'd arRIVE in HALF an HOUR.

C. How LONG did you have to WAIT for him to WRITE and apPROVE your TOpic?

[1] The answers to the questions above are given in the following section: Preview of basic Sound & Rhythm concepts.

Speech A is exactly 6 syllables and will take approximately 1 second to pronounce; Speech B, is 9 syllables in length and will take 1.5 seconds; and Speech C, 17 syllables long, will take about 3 seconds. This is the rate of normal speech. A native speaker will find 8-9 syllables per second fast and 3-4 syllables per second quite slow.

On the other hand, for most learners, normal speed is much faster than they expect and are willing to tolerate, as their language processing abilities are not robust enough to keep pace.

2. ACCENTUATION: where do the accents fall in the above speeches? On all the words? On certain words? On certain syllables?

The words in the sound flow do not receive equal accentuation or stress; the accents fall on the words that carry the meaning. And, if the word is formed of more than one syllable, then the accent or stress falls on the prominent syllable of that word. In fact, when talking about stress, our unit of analysis is not the word, but its sub-unit, the syllable.

In the examples above, stress will fall, as you can see, on the syllables indicated in capital letters.

Speed may be adjusted by adding or removing accents.

For example:

SLOW: 8 accents
How LONG did you HAVE to WAIT for HIM to WRITE and apPROVE your TOpic?

NORMAL: 5 accents
How LONG did you have to WAIT for him to WRITE and apPROVE your TOpic?

3. TEMPO: what supporting beat or tempo drives the speech forward and governs the way the words fall rhythmically into place?

There is a steady cadence which drives the sentence and gives rise to the rhythm of English sound. The stressed elements fall on the beat, and the non-stressed elements take place between beats, that is to say, off the beat. Evidently, these in-between syllables must be articulated very quickly, in time to meet the downbeat of the next stressed syllable. In the normal-speed version of Example C:

How LONG did you have to WAIT for him to WRITE and apPROVE your TOpic?

the in-between syllables *did-you-have-to* will be sharply compressed in their articulation between the stressed syllables LONG and WAIT. The same is true for *for-him-to* between WAIT and WRITE. We could say that the English sound flow has peaks of stressed syllables and valleys of compressed syllables having a reduced articulation. Decoding the valleys is an important issue in understanding oral English and requires a great deal of attention.

4. SOUNDS: in the family of English sounds, are there stronger ones that emerge and weaker ones that attenuate? Does each sound have a single articulation or does it vary in quality depending on what sounds surround it? Will a single sound be articulated in the same way when it is word-initial as when it is word-final? Do sounds that meet at word boundaries influence each other?

Yes, in English certain sounds vary in their articulation. For example, the final V in *five dollars* is practically inexistent; the final V in the verb phrase *I have to go* is devocalized, becoming /f/ owing to its final position and to time constraints.

H is an ambivalent sound, and not easy to manage. Sometimes it is aspirated and very audible as in *hundred,* and sometimes it is absent as in *in her bag* or in *I have to go* . Examining Example B from above with the addition of helpful graphics:

He SAID he'd arRIVE in HALF an HOUR.

we see that the H of *he* and *he'd* are muted, while in *half,* it is sounded, but in *hour* it is not.

The T sound is really two sounds: it has a word-initial articulation which is very strong and clear and a word-final articulation which is extremely attenuated and often interpreted as D. In Example A:

I'll CALL you BACK at TEN.

the Final T of *at* is not the same as the Initial T of TEN.
And in Example C:

How LONG did you have to WAIT for him to WRITE and apPROVE your TOpic?

the Final T of *wait* and *write* are not the same sound as the strong Initial T of *topic*.

At word boundaries, word-initial sounds will predominate over a preceding similar sound. In *where does she live*, the word-final S attenuates in favor of the very strong word-initial SH and flows into it. Again, at word boundaries, word-final sounds can jump across and become word-initial. In Example B:

He SAID he'd arRIVE in HALF an HOUR.

the final D of *said* becomes the first sound of the next syllable, forming *sai.dhe'd* .

Another common occurrence at word boundaries is when a word-final D is followed by a word-initial Y. Let's observe Example C again:

How LONG did you have to WAIT ……

A new sound is formed, namely *DJ*, and the verbal part of the phrase is pronounced *di.dju.have.to*. The same is true for a word-final T followed by a word-initial Y, as in *can't you*; a new sound emerges, that is CH, altering:

You can swim, can't you?
into
you. can.swim kan.chu?

5. SOUND UNITS: do the individual words emerge as perceptible units in the sound flow just as they do in writing?

There are no "blank spaces" or vocal markings in oral language to tell us where words start and stop. The speech flow moves in syllable units. It is up to the trained ear and the language-decoding section of the brain to know how to separate and/or combine the syllables into words, and from there into a meaningful message.