

International Phonetic Alphabet School

DAY 5: CLUSTERS

SUNDAY 13TH OF JANUARY

with Yurie Umamoto

Incomprehension between speakers of English as a vehicular language is hardly ever caused by the quality of the grammar, lexicon, or intonation of the speaker, but to the quality of the pronounced consonants.

An example of a problematic consonant is the 'TH' /ð/. Not everybody is able to produce or even hear that sound, and the majority of English speakers today uses /s/, /t/ or /d/ instead.

A great deal of incomprehension is caused by consonant clusters. In the English language, it's possible and very common to place several consonants in a row. But in many other languages it is not. In Japanese, for example, a consonant is usually followed by a vowel, by a consonant, by a vowel, by a consonant, and so on. My own last name is a good example (Umamoto).

When speakers of Japanese need to pronounce a consonant cluster, they tend to insert short vowels to assist pronunciation.

FILM /fɪləm/, LECTURE /lɛgətʃə/, MONTHS /məntəs/

Other speakers tend to omit consonants altogether, especially at the beginning or the end of a word.

ART /ɑ/, INSTANT /ɪstən/, TEST /tɛs/, TEXT /tɛs/.

Most people tend to combine insertion and omission:

SCRIPT /səkərɪp/, ARTIST /ərətɪs/, PROGRAM /pəɡrəm/.

When you have trouble following somebody's speech in English, try to identify their cluster strategies. They are an important cause of unintelligibility and they are consistent.

As such, they can open your ears somebody's voice.

Today, listen for consonant clusters in your own or other people's Englishes.

In conversation, try to adopt one of these strategies to your own English:

INSERT A VOWEL

OMIT A CONSONANT

- Are you understood differently?
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