

WHAT IS PHONOLOGY?

/wɒt ɪz fə'nɒlədʒi/

1. **Phonology** /fə'nɒlədʒi/ is the study of the distinctive sounds of a particular language. Another term, which is used mainly by American linguists, is **phonemics**. On this site we look at the phonology of the English language, particularly the forty-four individual phonemes of Received Pronunciation.

To illustrate simply. Imagine a box of play bricks. The entire box contains a limited number of pieces with which to “play”.

The box is the phonology of the language; the bricks are the phonemes, the individual sounds in a particular language. These can be put together to build groups of sounds, forming whole words.



The individual phonemes /f/ + /ɪ/ + /ʃ/ can be “stuck together” to form the word /fɪʃ/ *fish*.

The “builder” can be very creative, using what bricks are in the box, that is within the limits of the phonology of a language. There are certain conventions, though. Wheels usually go below the chassis, not on top. Of course there is nothing stopping the builder from putting the wheels on the roof of a house, but this would be rather unconventional.

In the same way the phoneme /ʒ/ in the words *treasure*, or *pleasure* or *television* usually appears in the middle of a word in English, sometimes at the end but not at the beginning.

Each language is a different box, containing another set of phonemes. Some boxes have more items, some less. For example, the English language has a larger set of vowels than does Czechs.

Often a building block can be found in more than one set. The phoneme /m/ occurs in both English and Czech in *doom* and *dùm*.

There may be an item which occurs in one set and not another. The phoneme /θ/ in the word *think* and *thing* is not found in the Czech phonological set. Of course, nothing forbids someone using a piece which belongs in one set in a different set. It may however appear out of place. It is as if Spiderman's head were placed on the body of a Disney Princess.



Image source: <http://shop.lego.com/en-CZ/Preschool-ByCategory>

So when Czechs say the English word *bluetooth* /blu:tu:θ/, they do not use the /θ/ since it does not belong in the set of Czech phonological items. Instead, they replace it with a phoneme which is in their set /t/ and say /blu:tu:t/.

Loan words, that is words which are borrowed from one language by another language, are often pronounced according to the sound system of the language which uses the word.