

# Sorting Out Sounds

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## Sound is Sound and Ink is Ink

Often we talk as though learning the sounds of a language is a rather clear cut affair. "There are 45 sounds in this language, 35 consonants and 10 vowels". This idea may get reinforced by the way we talk about alphabetic writing systems. "This language has a one-to-one relationship between letters and sounds." We can see the neat little letters sitting one after the other and we imagine that there are neat little sounds to go with them. Furthermore, the way the sounds are named—"the voiceless aspirated velar stop"—reinforces this sense of tidiness.

In fact, matters are not at all tidy at the beginning. There are various small details of sound that native listeners are unknowingly using to create their sense of vowels and consonants. In fact, a small auditory detail that an English listener uses to recognize a "k" sound in one word may be used to recognize a "p" sound in another.

When you first started listening to your new language, it was an assault on your present listening system. Some of the important small details of sound that you are subconsciously looking for aren't there, while many details are present that your listening system has no way to deal with yet. That's why it might have sounded so muddy. The fact that it has already cleared up a little is proof that you *are* learning something, even if you can't put your finger on it! But you are still a long way from hearing things as native listeners hear them; that will require gradual learning for some time yet.

All of this is to say that we want to be cautious in approaching the sounds of this new language. As soon as we commit words to writing, we may have a feeling of "Whew! Finally I've got it." But sound is sound and ink is ink, and ***the only way to learn what a language is supposed to sound like is with one's ears.***

## A Helpful Learning Activity - Columns of Differences

With that caution, we can start sorting out sounds by emphasizing what *differences* native listeners hear, and then focusing on hearing the same differences. We can start with consonants at the beginning of words. This activity works best once you have quite a few hundred words in your word log to draw from.

For example, first we can take all the words that start with anything like a "p" or "b" sound, and write them in a single column. Then we can compare the first two words. Is their initial consonant the same or different? If different, start a second column. Now any word that sounds different in its initial consonant from the previous word in the first column can go into the second column at first. But then we also need to compare the words in the second column in the same way. If some of them sound clearly different a third column might be needed.

Once we have two or more columns, we might find that we keep changing our mind about which column some words go in, for example, deciding both to move words from the first column to the second (and maybe back again) and from the second column to the first (and maybe back again). That could be because the sounds involved are really not different. Perhaps what is one consonant in the host language overlaps with what are two consonants in your native language, and that is causing you to keep changing your mind about the identity of this consonant.

That will get you started on consonants. Depending on the language, you might end up with what seems like a different set of consonants in the middles of words, or at the end. For language learning purposes you don't need to worry about that. The point is to learn what they sound like and to produce them accordingly in your own speech.

For vowels, you might choose to use the above procedure, concentrating on vowels in a particular position in words. For example, if there are lots of words that are a single syllable, starting and ending with a single consonant, then you could use them, starting with a single column and then sorting the vowels out as same or different using the procedure described above.

## Use These Columns for a Listening Activity

In the end, the columns you end up with can be used for listening practice. Suppose there are three columns of p-like or b-like sounds. Thus you have three (long!) lists, one for each consonant, and all words in each list begin with the same consonant.

Have a native speaker read the words going down each list, so that you hear the same consonant many times.

Then have the native speaker go across the lists, that is, first reading the first word in each column, one after the other, followed by the second word in each column, one after another, and so on. This time, instead of hearing long lists of words which all start with the same consonant, you'll hear a list of triplets of words, each starting with a different consonant.

Some differences may be extremely difficult to hear at first. It might help if you have a tape-recorder with variable speed. When the words are slowed down, the differences are often easier to hear.

After these types of listening exercises, you can also try sticking one non-belonging word (from one of the other lists, starting with a different consonant) in the middle of one of the long lists, and see if it "stands out like a sore thumb".