

The Consonants of English

1. Friction consonants

There are nine consonant phonemes whose main sounds all have friction as their most important feature. They are /f, v, θ, ð, s, z, ʃ, ʒ, h/.

For all of them the lungs push air through a narrow opening where it causes friction of various kinds.

/f/ and /v/

For both /f/ and /v/ the speech organs are in the position shown in Figure 12.

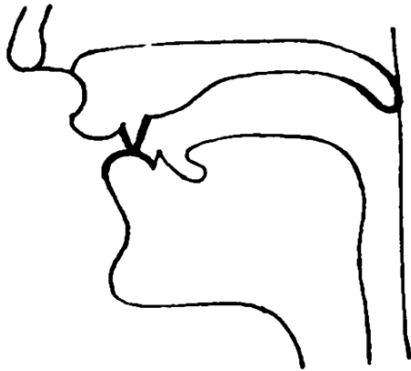


Fig. 12 /f/ and /v/

NOTICE

- 1 The soft palate is raised so that no air goes through the nose and it is all forced through the mouth.
- 2 The bottom lip is very close to the upper front teeth: this forms the narrowing and when air is pushed through this narrowing it causes slight friction.
- 3 The tongue is not directly concerned in making these sounds, but it does not lie idle; it takes up the position necessary for the *following* sound, so in *fi:* it will be in the /i/ position whilst /f/ is being pronounced, and in *fri:* it will be in the /r/ position, and so on.

The difference between /f/ and /v/ is mainly one of *strength*: /f/ is a strong consonant, /v/ is a weak one. Also /f/ is never voiced, but /v/ may be. And /f/ is rather *longer* than /v/.

So /f/ is a strong, voiceless, long consonant, /v/ is a weak, perhaps voiced, short consonant.

fɑ:st	fast	vɑ:st	vast	fju:	few	vju:	view
f:i:l	feel	vi:l	veal	frə	fear	vrə	veer
fəʊl	foal	vəʊl	vole	faɪl	file	vaɪl	vile
ferɪ	ferry	verɪ	very	fæt	fat	væt	vat
fæn	fan	væn	van	feɪl	fail	veɪl	veil

sʌfə	suffer	kʌvə	cover
defə	deaf	nevə	never
snɪfɪŋ	sniffing	ɡɪvɪŋ	giving

li:f	leaf	li:v	leave	laɪf	life	laɪv	live
hɑ:f	half	hɑ:v	halve	straɪf	strife	straɪv	strive
kɑ:f	calf	kɑ:v	carve	reɪf	Ralph	reɪv	rave

/θ/ and /ð/

/θ/ and /ð/ are also friction sounds, /θ/ is *strong* and /ð/ is *weak*. Both have the position of the speech organs shown in Figure 13.



Fig. 13 /θ/ and /ð/

NOTICE

- 1 The soft palate is raised so that all the breath is forced to go through the mouth.
- 2 The tip of the tongue is close to the upper front teeth: this is the narrowing where the friction is made.
- 3 The noise made by the friction for /θ/ and /ð/ is not very great, much less than for /s/ and /z/.

All that I said about strong and weak consonants on p. 25 is true for /θ/ and /ð/. /θ/ is stronger and longer and always voiceless, /ð/ is weaker and shorter and may be voiced. Confusing /θ/ and /ð/ will scarcely ever lead to misunderstanding because they rarely occur in words which are otherwise similar, but if you do not make the difference properly it will be noticeable.

θɪn thin	ðen then	θæŋk thank	ðæt that
θɪŋk think	ðɪs this	θɔ:t thought	ðəʊz those
θi:f thief	ði:z these		

ɔ:θə author	ʌðə other	mɑ:θə Martha	mʌðə mother
ɑ:θə Arthur	rɑ:ðə rather	nʌθɪŋ nothing	bɾʌðə brother
ɜ:θɪ earthy	wɜ:ðɪ worthy	bɜ:θə Bertha	fɜ:ðə further

grəʊθ growth	ləʊð loathe
tu:θ tooth	smu:ð smooth
bəʊθ both	kləʊð clothe

/s/ and /z/

/s/ is a strong friction sound and /z/ is a weak one. The position of the speech organs for these sounds is shown in Figure 14.

NOTICE

- 1 The soft palate is raised so that all the breath is forced to go through the mouth.
- 2 The tip and blade of the tongue are very close to the alveolar ridge. There is a very considerable narrowing at this point, *not* near the teeth and *not* near the hard palate.
- 3 The teeth are very close together.
- 4 The friction for these sounds, especially for /s/, is much greater than for /f, v, θ/ and /ð/.

There will be a sound similar to /s/ in your language: make this sound, then keep your mouth in that position and draw air inwards; make small changes in the position of the tip and blade of the tongue until you can feel that the cold air is hitting the tongue at the very centre of the alveolar ridge, not further forward and not further back. /z/ is the weak sound, so when you are satisfied with the strong friction for /s/, push air through more slowly so that the friction is weaker. Alternate strong and weak friction.

sɪŋk sink	zɪŋk zinc	su: Sue	zu: zoo
sed said	zed Zed	si:l seal	zi:l zeal
sɔ:n sawn	zəʊn zone	sɪst cyst	zest zest

lu:sə looser	lu:zə loser	kɔ:sə coarser	kɔ:zə causer
leɪsɪ lacy	leɪzɪ lazy	fʌsɪ fussy	fʌzɪ fuzzy
bʌsɪz buses	bʌzɪz buzzes	reɪsɪŋ racing	reɪzɪŋ raising

pleɪs place	pleɪz plays	ni:s niece	ni:z knees
kɔ:s coarse	kɔ:z cause	praɪs price	praɪz prize
lu:s loose	u:z lose	hɜ:s hearse	hɜ:z hers

/ʃ/ and /ʒ/

/ʃ/ is a strong friction sound and /ʒ/ is a weak one. The position of the speech organs for these sounds is shown in Figure 15.

NOTICE

- 1 The soft palate is raised so that all the breath is forced to go through the mouth.
- 2 There is a narrowing between the tip of the tongue and the *back* of the alveolar ridge.
- 3 The *front* of the tongue is higher than for /s/ and /z/.
- 4 The lips are very slightly rounded.

Start from /s/: pull the tip of the tongue backwards a little so that the narrowing is at the back of the alveolar ridge (draw the breath inwards to check that you have the tongue in the right place). Keep this position and put the rest of the tongue in position to say the vowel /ɪ/, *slightly* round the lips, and push the breath through strongly. /ʃ/ is a much noisier sound than /f/ and /θ/ and only a little less noisy than /s/. For /ʒ/ the friction is weaker, and shorter.

səʊ	so	ʃəʊ	show	sɑɪ	sigh	ʃaɪ	shy
sɒk	sock	ʃɒk	shock	si:	see	ʃi:	she
sɔ:t	sort	ʃɔ:t	short	seɪm	same	ʃeɪm	shame

rɪzən	risen	vɪʒən	vision	reɪzə	razor	ɪreɪʒə	crasure
reɪzən	raisin	ɪnveɪʒən	invasion	rəʊzə	Rosa	kləʊʒə	closure
ru:z	ruse	ru:ʒ	rouge	beɪz	bays	beɪʒ	beige

fɪnɪʃ	finish	rʌbɪʃ	rubbish	kræʃ	crash	krʌʃ	crush
wɒʃ	wash	pʊʃ	push	li:ʃ	leash	hɑ:ʃ	harsh

/h/

There are as many /h/-sounds in English as there are vowels, because /h/ always occurs before a vowel and consists of the sound of breath passing between the open vocal cords and out of the mouth which is already prepared for the following vowel. Before /i:/ the mouth is in position for /i:/, before /ɑ:/ it is ready for /ɑ:/, and so on; so in order to make /h/-sounds, the mouth is held ready for the vowel and a short gasp of breath is pushed up by the lungs. /h/ does not make very much noise, but it must not be left out when it should be sounded, for two reasons: (1) many words are distinguished by the presence or absence of /h/, like hɪə *here* and ɪə *ear*, (2) English speakers consider that the leaving out of /h/ is the mark of an uncultivated speaker.

hɑ:t	heart	hɜ:	her	hæt	hat
hɔ:l	hall	hu:	who	hi:	he
bɪhaɪnd	behind	rɪhɜ:s	rehearse	ri:haʊz	re-house