

F. L. SACK

THE STRUCTURE
OF ENGLISH

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**A PRACTICAL GRAMMAR
FOR FOREIGN STUDENTS**

BY

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Preface

This Grammar, together with its companion volume "English Exercises¹", is intended for the advanced student at a higher secondary school, college, or university, and for the "Old Boy" who wishes to brush up his English and reach that degree of proficiency where the correct English expression of a thought: words, forms, sentence-pattern, comes to him naturally and without the help of his mother tongue.

Why grammar? As grammar is, at best, considered a necessary evil, a few words may be said to vindicate its right to exist. A child learns its mother tongue by pure imitation and unconscious analogy and may pick up a second language, even a third, "the easy way". So why should not a grown-up person learn "naturally", merely by listening, reading, and speaking? The thousands of immigrants in America who even after years of residence in the new country speak a broken or faulty English provide the answer. An adult, even an adolescent, cannot, as a rule, "pick up a language". It is not only that his memory is less impressionable, but his mental consciousness has become sharper, so that speech habits of his native tongue intrude when he is speaking a foreign language. That means he is apt to arrange the words of the new language according to the patterns to which he is used. A Frenchman is inclined to say "I am here for two months", by analogy with «Je suis ici depuis deux mois». Once his attention is directed to the specific English speech pattern, there is a good chance that he will in future use the correct form "I have been here for two months". It is the function of grammar to sharpen the student's observation and to help him recognise "what is done".

The snags of English. The difficulties of learning English vie with the weather as a popular topic of conversation when English people and foreigners meet. In the one case as in the other there is generally complete agreement. As regards English, the opinion prevails that the language would be easy to learn if it were not for the chaotic spelling. Now the truth is (as Ch. III sets out to prove) that spelling is not chaotic at all. On the other hand, the difficulties of syntax are considerable. In themselves the patterns are simple enough, but English abounds in alternative constructions: simple tense and progressive tense, *who/which* and *that*, gerund and infinitive, etc. What is the sphere of application of each? How do they differ? And to complicate matters still further, written English and spoken English frequently go different ways.

The ideal grammar-book will be clear, accurate, reliable, and reasonably complete, simple in its explanations, and entertaining in its examples. It has not yet been written, but perhaps a kind critic will find in the present work an approximation to the ideal. Anyway, my endeavour was

¹ A completely revised edition of «English Exercises», published by Messrs. Francke, is in preparation.

(a) to present a clear picture of the essential structural features of English, carefully distinguishing between main rule (i. e. pattern of usage) and minor rule or exceptions;

(b) to explain the differences between alternative constructions, and in particular to differentiate between written and spoken English;

(c) to use simple language, with a minimum of technical terms;

(d) to give examples that are natural and not too dull;

(e) finally so to choose the type and so to arrange each page that the student with a visual memory will have the greatest possible help.

As regards **method**, this book is a compromise: Mainly it is a functional grammar, i. e. it sets out to answer such questions as "How do we express past action in English?" or "What means has the language of expressing obligation?" But a strict consistency in the observance of this principle would have obscured rather than shown up certain important patterns, and therefore the other method, starting from the form, has been adopted occasionally.

Acknowledgements. On p. VIII I have indicated the scholarly and practical works to which I am chiefly indebted. Here I wish to acknowledge the assistance that was afforded to me personally. My thanks are due to Mrs. M. D. Hottinger-Mackie, M. A., whose criticism in the initial stage of the book I found very wholesome, Miss E. Raybould, Ph. D., and Miss M. Schubiger, Ph. D., with whom I was able to discuss a few moot points, Mr. N. H. G. Lawless of Berne, who read the greater part of the MS and offered many valuable suggestions, and Professor Daniel Jones, who kindly checked Chapter II.

I am under the greatest obligation to Dr. Fredrick T. Wood of Sheffield for his very generous help. Dr. Wood read nearly the whole of the proofs and let me have the full benefit of his vast knowledge and unfailing judgement where finer shades of meaning and usage of rival constructions were concerned. Considerations of space prevented me from making full use of all his comments. Any shortcomings and errors are, of course, to be laid at my door.

Finally I wish to thank Mr. C. E. Lang, head of the publishing firm of Messrs. Francke, for his kindness and encouragement.

Wabern-Berne, May 1954.

F. L. Sack

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I. The English Language ¹

The original population of the British Isles, the Britons, spoke ¹ a Celtic language, which still lives on in the Welsh of Wales and the Gaelic of Scotland and Ireland. In the 5th century Germanic invaders, in particular Angles and Saxons, made themselves masters of England. Their language, on which modern English is based, was closely related to Dutch and German and to the Scandinavian languages.

In the 8th and 9th centuries another Germanic invasion occurred, this time of Scandinavians, especially Danes, who settled in the eastern part of England, north of the Thames. At that time Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse (as the older form of the Scandinavian languages is called) were still so close to the common source as to pass for different dialects rather than distinct languages. Still, the Danes brought new words and new forms with them, and a great many Scandinavian words found their way into English. Thus, to give one example, all the words beginning with *sk* are of Scandinavian origin, and we have e. g. *skipper* besides the English word *ship*. Then there is *sky* besides the Saxon word *heaven*, *skin* besides *hide*.

The relation between English and German, both mem- ²bers of the West-Germanic group, is somewhat obscured owing to the drastic changes in the consonant system which affected German in very early times. A Germanic *th*, preserved in English, became *d* in German, and we have the cognates *thing/Ding*, *thick/dick*, *thin/dünn*, *north/Norden*, *south/Süden*, and many more of that kind. Other changes were (*th-d* belongs to group *a*):

- (a) *d—t*: *do/tun*, *side/Seite*, *deed/Tat*, *wide/weit*, *dead/tot*, *death/Tod*.
t—z, *tz*, *s*, *ss*: *two/zwei*, *ten/zehn*, *cat/Katze*, *white/weiss*, *that/das*.
- (b) *p—pf*, *f*, *ff*: *penny/Pfennig*, *apple/Apfel*, *pipe/Pfeife*, *deep/tief*.
v, f—b in some words: *live/leben*, *love/lieben*, *half/halb*.
- (c) *k—ch* (except in initial position): *make/machen*, *cook/kochen*, *smoke/schmauchen*, *yoke/Joch*.

The sound *g* was kept in German, but changed in Old English to *y* or *i*; thus we have *say/sagen*, *day/Tag*, *rain/Regen*, etc.

In 1066 England was conquered by the Normans, who spoke ³ a French dialect, and for a considerable time the two languages

¹ For fuller treatment of the subject the student is referred to the excellent work by Dr. F. T. Wood: *An Outline History of the English Language* (Macmillan & Co.).

existed side by side. Gradually they mingled: the structure of the language and the bulk of the everyday vocabulary remained Germanic, but hundreds of French words were absorbed and are today hardly distinguishable from the native element. The political and social superiority of the conquerors is reflected in these loans; words pertaining to administration, military matters, law, and refined living are French. Examples:

*sovereign, parliament, minister, council, royal, peer, duke.
war, battle, siege, peace, attack, defend, defeat, conquer, enemy.
court, judge, jury, crime, accuse, acquit, plead.*

But also a great many words of everyday life were adopted, e. g. *uncle, cousin, to marry, age, use, aid, money, price.*

Norman French differs from modern French, e. g. in preserving *s* before consonant. Compare *state/état, school/école, sponge/éponge; forest/forêt, beast/bête, pasture/pâturage.*

- 4 Another event in the life of the nation that had a far-reaching influence on the language was the revival of learning in the 16th century, with its eager study of Latin. Latin was not only read but spoken by scholars and courtiers, and in consequence a great number of Latin words flowed into the language, though nearly all of them belong to literary English. Examples: *summary, contradict, comprehend, fact, paternal, filial, floral* and many other adjectives.

- 5 While the vocabulary of spoken English is predominantly of Saxon origin, written English draws from an inexhaustible store of Romance words, derived partly from French, partly direct from Latin. Many are synonyms of Saxon words. Examples:

*help begin hearty feeling freedom understand climb
aid commence cordial sentiment liberty comprehend ascend*

There are even triplets, e. g. *kingly, royal, regal; wonderful, marvellous, miraculous*: This wealth of synonyms, i. e. pairs or groups of words that mean more or less but not exactly the same, is one reason why English is not an "easy language".

- 6 This book deals with the English as spoken by educated people in Britain. While local differences are comparatively unimportant, a distinction must often be made between written English and spoken English.

American English (again taking the language of educated speakers) differs little in grammar, but considerably in pronunciation and the everyday vocabulary.

II. Pronunciation

A. The English Sounds¹

We cannot learn the pronunciation of a language from books any more than 7
we can learn swimming from books. The student will find in this chapter a survey of the English sound system and some practical hints on how the more difficult sounds are formed, but it must be understood that the exact or specific quality of the English consonants and the timbre of the English vowels can only be acquired by imitation.

It is a matter of common knowledge that English spelling is a very uncertain guide to pronunciation, and there are two reasons for this:

(a) our alphabet lacks the means of conveying even a rough idea of some of the sounds, as there are many more sounds than letters;

(b) the spelling is historical, i. e. registers the pronunciation as it used to be (see Ch. 3). So if the present-day pronunciation of words is to be recorded in writing, a special **phonetic script**, must be used, based on the principle that each distinct speech sound is represented by one and only one symbol. The phonetic script adopted in this book is that of the Association Phonétique Internationale, which makes use of the normal alphabet as far as possible, but requires a few extra symbols, e. g. for the *th*-sounds and the open *e*-sounds. Where it is desirable to distinguish sound-symbols from letters, the phonetic script (or as it is also called phonetic transcription) is given in square brackets, e. g. *team* [ti:m], *begin* [bi'gin]. Note that stress is indicated by a sort of straight apostrophe and that long vowels are marked as such by a colon.

Consonants

The following consonants exist in English:

voiceless **p t k f s ʃ θ h**

voiced **b d g v z ʒ ð r l m n ŋ**

Examples for **s z, θ ð, ʃ ʒ, and ŋ**:

s, z *hiss, pass, see sil. — rose, reason, zero.*

ʃ, ʒ *ship, shilling, bush. — measure ['meʒə]*

Frequent combinations are **tʃ** and **dʒ**: *chap, check, each. — Jim [dʒim], John, age [eidʒ].*

θ, ð *thick, thin, south. — that, father.*

ŋ *king [kiŋ], long.*

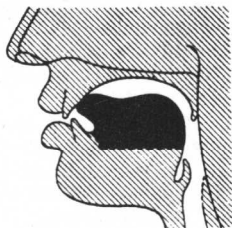
Note. "Voice" is produced by the vocal chords behind the Adam's apple, which are made to vibrate. Pronounce a few sonorous words, like *moon, name, mean*, and cover the ears with your hands. You will hear a buzzing noise. Then whisper the words and note the difference. The vibration of the vocal chords may also be felt by placing three or four fingers against the throat.

This distinction between voiced and voiceless sounds is of the utmost importance. Many foreigners, especially speakers of a Germanic language, fail to make English sufficiently sonorous. — On the other hand, the "buzzing" must not be overdone. (See § 14.)

¹ This chapter is based on the standard work "An Outline of English Phonetics" by Professor *Daniel Jones* (fourth edition). All the diagrams are taken from that work and are reproduced by kind permission of the author. The upper figure on p. 6 is a combination of two figures in Professor Jones's book.

- 9 **p t k** and **b d g**. — **p t k** are pronounced with considerable force of breath, and a slight *h* is heard after these sounds, thus: *time* [t^haɪm], *pin* [p^hɪn], *king* [k^hɪŋ]. — **b d g** are pronounced with less force than **p t k**, and care must be taken that they are really spoken with “voice”, in initial and final position as well as elsewhere. Hints for practice: speak a “long” *b*, *d*, or *g*, e. g. *bad* [bbæ:dd], *big* [bbigg].

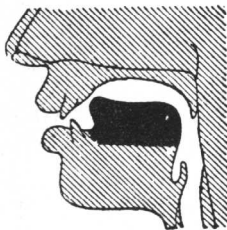
As regards the pronunciation of *t* and *d*, the diagram shows the correct tongue-position: the tip of the tongue touches the teeth-ridge, i. e. the part between the upper teeth and the hard palate.



- 10 **f, v**. The sounds are formed by pressing the lower lip against the upper teeth. Examples: *five*, *vivid*. — For practice bite on the lower lip.
- 11 **θ, ð**. The spelling *th* has often proved misleading; the sounds have nothing to do with either *t* or *d*, but can best be compared to lisped *s*-sounds. Say *Susy lisps*, imitating the lisping sounds, i. e. pronounce [s] and [z] with the tip of the tongue between the teeth.

Special care must be taken, when *θ* and *ð* occur near the sounds [s] and [z]. Example: *This is the house that Jack built*. Practise [ɪzðə] as if it were one word.

12



r. There are different kinds of *r*: there is e. g. the rolled or trilled *r*, where the tip of the tongue taps against the teeth-ridge in rapid succession, or the “back rolled” *r*, where the uvula (that little point at the end of the soft palate) vibrates similarly against the tongue. — Now the English *r* is not a rolled consonant but a fricative consonant, like *ʃ* or *ʒ*, i. e. it remains unchanged and continuous no matter how long the sound is drawn out. The diagram shows the tongue position, which is similar to that of *ʃ*. The lips are usually slightly rounded¹.

Foreigners find it difficult to acquire this special kind of *r*, and here are a few practical hints: Place bent knuckle of thumb between the teeth and pronounce the words [ə ʒaund ʒɪŋ],

¹ *r* between two short vowels is short itself, often it is heard as a mere “flap”, e. g. *carry*, *hurry*.

ə ʒed ʒouz], or [ai dʒi:m ə dʒi:m], pressing the tip of the tongue against the teeth-ridge¹. The resulting sound is very near to an English *r* (*a round ring, a red rose, I dream a dream*). Another way is to say [əaund əɪŋ, əed əouz], curling back a little the tip of the tongue in pronouncing ə. Do not forget to round the lips! (Small children in England replace *r* by *w*!)

r after *p, t, k* is voiceless. Examples: *prize, tree, cream*. For practice: whisper the words *prize, tree*, etc., then repeat the words whispering only the first half.

Note that in Standard Southern English *r* does not occur before a consonant or in final position, i. e. the letter *r* in words like *part, car* is not pronounced. In the western parts of England, however, there is a difference between *caught* and *court* (pronounced in Southern English as [kɔ:t]; no proper *r* is pronounced either, but the preceding vowel is spoken with the tip of the tongue a little curled back ("retroflexed vowel").—Many Scotsmen pronounce a front rolled *r* in all positions.

1. There are in English two kinds of *l*: clear *l*, used before vowels, and dark *l*, used before consonants and in final position. Examples: *live, light, black; cold, help, hill*. The dark *l* is pronounced with the back part of the tongue raised in the direction of the soft palate. For practice of the dark *l*: Say [ull], trying to keep the [u]-sound in the *l*. 13

Note concerning voiced consonants.

1. *b d g* when initial are pronounced by many Englishmen as partially or totally unvoiced (*Books are cheaper now. He wrote books.*) After a vowel these sounds are always voiced (*I got a book*). 14

2. [z] in final position is not fully voiced. It begins with "voice", which stops before the sound is finished (*rise, rose*). The ending -s may be completely voiceless and sound like a weak [s] e. g. in *dogs, hands*. This devoicing, however, occurs only at the end of a word-group; compare *Put up your hands! Hands off!*

3. *ð* and *v* in initial and final position are also partially unvoiced in the pronunciation of some speakers.

Vowels. The following vowels occur in English:

Single vowels: *i: i e æ a: ɒ ɔ: u u: ʌ ə: ə* 15

Diphthongs: *ei ai ɔi. au ou. iə eə uə*

Half-vowels: *j w*

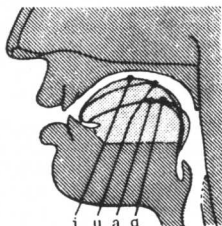
Vowels are classed according to the part of the tongue that is raised — front vowels, back vowels, central vowels — and according to the height to which the tongue is raised — close, half-close, half-open, open vowels.

The quality of the vowel is also determined by the lip-position. In English only the back-vowels [ɔ:, u:, u] are

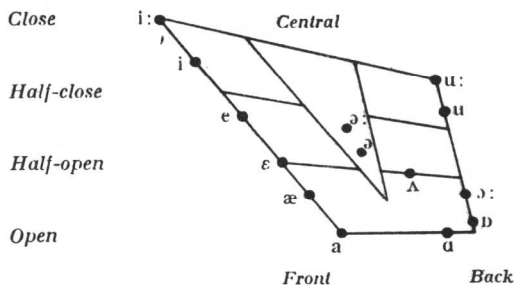
¹ Or say ʒaund ʒɪŋ, bʒaʊn bʒed, gradually shortening the ʒ.

rounded. - Another element is muscular tension, i. e. a vowel may be pronounced with a certain strain or as a slack, or relaxed, sound. (See below i:, i and u:, u.)

To get a rough idea of the possible tongue-movements: raising and lowering of front part or back part of the tongue, the student should place the little finger on his tongue and pronounce [i-u-a], [a-i], [a-u].



In the vowel [a] we distinguish a clear or front [a] and a dark or back [ɑ]. If we connect the four points by lines, we get this figure:



This diagram is useful to show 1. the relation of the English vowels to each other, 2. the English vowels in relation to the vowels of the student's language.

In most dictionaries the symbol ɒ is replaced by ɔ so as to simplify the phonetic transcription. But the vowels differ so widely in quality that two distinct symbols would seem preferable. — a and ɑ, however, need not be differentiated, as a only occurs in the diphthongs [ai] and [au].

16 Single vowels

i:, i. *seat* [si:t], *team* [ti:m]. — *sit*, *Tim*.

The two sounds differ not merely in length. [i:] is a very close vowel, the lips are well spread. [i] is less close, it is a lax sound, the lip position is neutral. For the sake of simplicity the same symbol is used for both.

e. *pen*, *ten*, *head* [hed].

æ. *black* [blæk], *cat* [kæt], *bad* [bæ:d], *man* [mæ:n].

[æ] is a very open sound. It is mostly short. — For practice: listen to a sheep. What does it say? bæ:, bæ:, bæ:.

a:. *park* [pa:k], *start* [sta:t], *car* [ka:], *master* ['ma:stə].
The English [a:] is of the back variety. — Cf. § 15, footnote.

u:, u. *pool* [pu:l], *fool* [fu:l], *pull*, *full*.
As with [i:, i], the difference is not merely one of length. [u] is more open than [u:] and is spoken with less energetic rounding of the lips. Altogether it is a "slack" vowel.

ɔ:. *lawn* [lɔ:n], *call* [kɔ:l], *port* [pɔ:t], *short* [ʃɔ:t].
This is a very sonorous sound. Note that the tongue is fairly far back, the mouth is well open, the lips are rounded. For practice: cup your hands and shout [kɔ:l], making the sound carry far.

ɒ. *Tom* [tɒm], *dog* [dɒg], *not* [nɒt], *stop* [stɒp].
Though mostly spelt with *o*, this is not an [o]-sound, but rather a dark [ɑ], spoken with hardly any lip-rounding.

ʌ. *duck* [dʌk], *bumble-bee* [bʌmblbi:], *hunt* [hʌnt], *come* [kʌm].
This is a central vowel, standing half-way between [ɒ] and [ə]. It is spoken with lax muscles, and the lips must not be rounded. Students who have an open [o] in their language (German *komm*, French *bonne*) can start from this sound, speaking it without lip-rounding. — The acoustic quality happens to be very near to the front [a], which may serve as a substitute.

ɜ:. *bird* [bɜ:d], *first* [fɜ:st], *Percy* [pɜ:si], *turn* [tɜ:n].
This is a tense vowel; the lips are well spread, the teeth but little apart. For practice, it may be advisable to speak [ɜ:] with the teeth kept actually in contact. — The sound is mostly spelt *ir*, *er*, *ur*, but in Standard Southern English no trace of the *r* is heard.

ə occurs only in unstressed syllables. See § 38.



Lip-position of ʌ



Lip-position of ɜ:

Diphthongs ['difθɒŋz].

17

Diphthongs are gliding sounds, in which two vowels are distinguishable. There are two kinds: they either end in [i] or [u], or they end in [ə].

1. **ei** (*name*), **ai** (*time*), **au** (*town*), **ou** (*note*), **ɔi** (*boy*).
2. **iə** (*dear*), **ɛə** (*dare*), **uə** (*poor*).

ai and **au** begin with the front vowel [a] (as in French *la patte*), and move in the direction of [i] and [u]¹.

ou is a difficult sound to acquire. It is important to start with [o], and not with [ʊ] or [ɔ:]. The initial [o] differs from the pure [o] heard in French *beau* or German *wohl*, being a more central vowel, i. e. having a little of the [ə]-quality, though the lips are rounded throughout. (Slight rounding at the beginning, strong rounding at the end of the diphthong.)

iə and **uə** begin with the lax [i] and [u]. **əə** begins with an [e]-sound that stands half-way between [e] and [æ]. This open [ɛ] only occurs in combination with [ə].

Note. Some speakers use əə in words that are spelt — *ore* or *oar*, e. g. *more*, *board*. But [ɔ:] is just as good.

18 Length of vowels

The length of a vowel is not absolute. If we compare *cart*, *card*, *car*, or *wheat*, *weed*, *see*, or *white*, *wide*, *why*, we find that the vowels are shorter before voiceless consonant than before voiced consonant or when final.

19 Semi-vowels

English semi-vowels are [w] and [j]. Examples: *winter*, *well*, *queen* [kwi:n]; *year*, *young*. They are really very short vowel glides, from the [u]- or [i]-position to the next vowel. Note that [w] is pronounced with the lips well rounded. (Foreign speakers frequently replace the [w] by some sort of v.)

Note. Some English speakers pronounce *what*, *when*, etc. as [hwɒt, hwen]. This is not recommended to foreign students.

B. Connected Speech

20 Sense-groups

Normally speech is broken up not into words, but into sense-groups; a sense-group is spoken without any stop or pause between the words. Examples:

Jack of all trades, and master of none.
'dʒækəv'ɔ:l'treɪdz, ən'ma:stərəv'nʌn.

What do you think of the weather? — I'm sure it'll keep fine.
'wɒtdju:'θɪŋkəvðə'weðə? — aɪm'sʊərɪtl'ki:p'faɪn.

What's on the wireless tonight? — I don't know. Let's look at the programmes. There's a play by Shaw. That's the only

¹ [i] and [u] are often not actually reached, *time* being pronounced [taɪm] or [taem].

attractive thing as far as I can see. — What time does it begin? — At a quarter past eight.

'wɒtspɪndə'waɪəlɪstə'nait? — ai'daʊnt'nou (or: 'daʊn'nou).

lets'lukətðə'prɒgræmz. ðəzə'pleɪbaɪ'fʊ:

'ðætsði'əʊnliə'træktɪv'θɪŋ əz'fɑ:rəz'aɪkən'si:

'wɒt'taɪmdəzɪtbi'gɪn? — ətə'kwɒtəpɑ:st'eɪt.

Note in particular:

(a) There is no stop before initial vowels.

(b) Final r is pronounced if the following word begins with a vowel, e. g. *master of none*. Other examples: *dear old chap*, *never again*, *far away*, *your English book*.

(c) In word-groups like *what time*, *we had a good time*, *it's a hot day*, i. e. when the final consonant of the first word and the initial consonant of the second word are of the same or a similar kind, the two consonants fuse to one "long" sound. Further examples: *a black cat*, *a big gap*, *the back garden*. The difference between *big gap* and *began* as far as the g is concerned is that in the former case the consonant is "long"¹. — Similarly only one "long" consonant is heard in *begin now*, *a fine night*, *the same man*, though in rapid speech what often happens is that the first consonant simply drops out.

Word-stress and Sentence-stress

Most words of more than one syllable have one syllable 21 stressed, and the other syllable or syllables unstressed. The difference between stressed and unstressed syllable is strongly marked, as in all Germanic languages, and speakers of a non-Germanic language must be careful not to give too much prominence to the unstressed syllables. For practice: say 'spi:k^{ɪŋ}, 'spi:k^ə, 'frend^{lɪ}, 'frend^{lɪnɪs} (*speaking, speaker, friendly, friendliness*).

By sentence-stress is meant the distribution of emphasis 22 within a sentence. Examples are given in § 20. Generally there is a stress on all nouns, adjectives, full verbs, also on demonstrative and interrogative pronouns and on adverbs; there is no stress on "function-words", such as articles, and auxiliary verbs.

¹ t d, k g, p b are "plosives", i. e. the speech organs block the air passage which is suddenly opened again. Now in *what time*, *big gap* etc. this blocking, also called the "stop", is prolonged. Further: in *began* an impetus is given to the air stream before the g, in *big gap* it is given within the "stop", just before it is released.