

German pronunciations of English

This text is intended to point out some recurring mistakes in English pronunciation which are found with German speakers. These are ingrained with Germans and because so many people make these mistakes students often think that they are acceptable in English. This is most certainly not the case so be very careful to pronounce these words correctly and to grasp the general principles of English pronunciation, especially if you are training to be a teacher seeing as how you will be responsible for conveying knowledge of English to the next generation of pupils.

In the following transcriptions the [r] after a vowel should not be pronounced if you are aiming at a standard British English pronunciation. For nearly all other pronunciation models, especially General American English, post-vocalic [r] should be pronounced (observe, however, that the word *because* [bɪ'kɔ:z] does not contain an [r] sound, so do not pronounce it with one no matter what your pronunciation model is).

On transcription: the sound [ə] is called schwa and is what is heard in the first syllable of *about* [ə'baʊt]. It also occurs in stressed form as in *bird*. Here it can be transcribed as [ə:(r)] or [ɜ:(r)] (in both cases the same sound is intended). The sound [ɒ] is the short low back vowel as in English *lot* [lɒt]. The long form of this vowel is [ɔ:] as in *thought* [θɔ:t]. The diphthong [eɪ] is the sound in *game* [geɪm] and is a long vowel.

Word	English pronunciation	incorrect German pronunciation
<i>occur</i>	[ə'kɜ:r]	[ɔ'kju:r]
<i>determine</i>	[dɪ'tɜ:mɪn]	[dɪtɜ'maɪn]
<i>category</i>	['kætəgɹi]	[kə'tɛgəri]
<i>interpret</i>	[ɪn'tɜ:prət]	[ɪntɜ'pri:t]
<i>display</i>	[dɪs'pleɪ]	['dɪspleɪ]
<i>mistake</i>	[mɪs'teɪk]	['mɪsteɪk]
<i>design</i>	[dɛ'zaɪn]	[dɛ'saɪn]
<i>London</i>	['lʌndən]	['lɔndɔn]
<i>Latin</i>	['lætɪn]	['lɛtɪn]
<i>Canada</i>	['kænədə]	['kɛnada]
<i>Danish</i>	[deɪnɪʃ]	[denɪʃ]
<i>man</i>	[mæn]	[mɛn]
<i>men</i>	[mɛn]	[mɪn]
<i>Berlin</i>	[bɜr'lɪn]	['bɜ:rlɪn]
<i>Dublin</i>	['dʌblən]	['dʌbli:n]
<i>hypothesis</i>	[haɪ'pɒθɪsɪs]	[haɪpɒ'θi:sɪs]
<i>variable</i>	['veriəbl]	[vɛ'raɪəbl]
<i>status</i>	['stetəs]	['stɛtjʊs]

Notes

- 1) The vowel in English *black* is [æ], a low front vowel half way between [e] and [a]. This sound does not occur in German and those English loanwords in German which contain the vowel are pronounced with mid front [ɛ], e.g. *manager* [ˈmenetʃər], which is fine in German but completely unacceptable in English because it leads to severe mergers of words which must be kept apart, consider the following pairs as a small selection of minimal pairs involving [æ] and [ɛ].

<i>bad</i>	[bæd]	<i>bed</i>	[bɛd]
<i>bat</i>	[bæt]	<i>bet</i>	[bɛt]
<i>latter</i>	[lætər]	<i>letter</i>	[lɛtər]
<i>batter</i>	[bætər]	<i>better</i>	[bɛtər]
<i>shall</i>	[ʃæl]	<i>shell</i>	[ʃɛl]

- 2) Final devoicing is a general feature of German pronunciation (and Russian, Polish, etc.) which does not exist in English. For that reason German (and Slavic) speakers must pay particular attention to voicing in word-final position where this is called for in English. Here are a few word pairs where (in all cases but the last one) the only distinction is in the voice or voicelessness of the final segment.

	voiceless		voiced	(final consonant)
<i>pup</i>	[pʌp]	<i>pub</i>	[pʌb]	
<i>debt</i>	[dɛt]	<i>dead</i>	[dɛd]	
<i>dock</i>	[dɔk]	<i>dog</i>	[dɔg]	
<i>life</i>	[laɪf]	<i>live</i>	[laɪv]	
<i>teeth</i>	[ti:θ]	<i>teethe</i>	[ti:ð]	
<i>cease</i>	[si:s]	<i>seize</i>	[si:z]	
<i>rush</i>	[rʌʃ]	<i>rouge</i>	[ru:ʒ]	

Tip: To make the voiced consonant in words like those in the right-hand column above more audible, you should lengthen the preceding vowel somewhat.

- 3) Phonotactics is concerned with the position and sequence of sounds in words. Here as elsewhere there are differences between English and German. For instance, German has the sequence [tʃ] in word-medial and word-final position, e.g. *quetschen* [-tʃ-], *Klatsch* [-tʃ]. But it does not have it in initial position with native words. Hence Germans tend to simplify [tʃ] to [ʃ] changing the English pronunciation of a word like *chips* [tʃɪps] to [ʃɪps] which is, of course, the word *ships*, something else entirely.

There are some sequences of sounds which are pronounced differently in principle in German and English. For instance, if /s/ follows /l, n, r/ in German it is voiced, e.g. *Impulse*, *insistieren*, *Kontroverse* with [-lz-, -nz-, -rz-]. However, in English the fricative in such cases is nearly always voiceless, e.g. *impulses* [ˈɪmpʌlsɪz], *insist* [ɪnˈsɪst], *reversing* [rɪˈvɜːrsɪŋ].

- 4) The stressed syllable of a word is indicated by a superscript vertical stroke placed before the syllable in question, e.g. *hostel* /ˈhɒstəl/ and *hotel* /həʊˈtel/. Stress is frequently contrastive in English as in *convert*, *rethink*, *convict* (noun) and *convert*,

*re*¹*think*, *con*¹*vict* (verb). This contrast can also apply to nouns vis a vis adjectives, e.g. *con*¹*tent* (noun) but *con*¹*tent* (adjective).

- 5) Stress is not always predictable in English so make sure that you look it up in your dictionary. Importantly, stress patterns of neoclassical compounds (words from science and technology based on Latin or Greek stems) are virtually always different in English from the corresponding patterns in German. There are regularities here which you can learn, so do that and get the patterns right. Here is a small selection of words which are commonly pronounced incorrectly.

<i>subsequent</i> [ˈsʌbsəkwent]	(stress on first syllable)
<i>orthography</i> [ɔrˈθɒgrəfi]	(stress on middle short ‘o’)
<i>homogenize</i> [həˈmɒdʒənaɪz]	(stress on middle short ‘o’)
<i>allophony</i> [əˈlɒfəni]	(stress on middle short ‘o’)
<i>defer, infer, confer</i>	(all stressed on last syllable)
<i>synchrony</i> [ˈsɪŋkrəni]	(stress on first syllable)
<i>diachrony</i> [daɪˈækərəni]	(stress on second syllable)

Tip: there are some endings in English which are always stressed, e.g. *-iety*, *-ee*, *-ation* and so they attract the stress away from any syllable which might precede them, e.g. *social* [ˈsəʊʃəl], *society* [səˈsaɪəti], *detain* [dəˈteɪn], *detainee* [dɪteɪˈni]. *converse* [kənˈvɜːrs], *conversation* [kənvərˈseɪʃən]. This also applies where the semantic relationship between verb and noun is not very obvious, e.g. *re*¹*fer* : *re*¹*fer*.

- 6) Stress in compounds in English is often level stress (as opposed to stress on the lexical stem of a word in German). This leads to incorrect stressing in cases like *Second World War*, English: [ˈsəkənd ˈwɜːrld ˈwɜːr], (wrong) German: [ˌsəkənd ˈwɜːrld ˌwɜːr]. In addition many placenames have level stress (each word is pronounced with equal stress) although the German equivalent has initial stress, e.g. *Hong Kong* is pronounced [ˈhɒŋ ˈkɒŋ] in English. However, this is not always the case – English stress is a mixture of patterns. For example, words containing ‘Street’ show initial stress but those with ‘Square’ have level stress: *King* ˌ*Street* but *King* ˌ*Square*. A false analogy can also lead to incorrect stress in English. For instance, the word *Arabia* has stress on the second syllable but the name of the language, *Arabic*, is stressed on the first syllable.

And don’t forget:

Consult the section *Material on Phonetics* (under *Levels of Language*) on the ELE website for further information (especially the module *Contrastive Phonology*).

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