

Can't say, don't say, won't say

John Phillips, 6th October 2014

Some years ago I stayed in a guest house in a village near Oxford. The woman who ran the house was talking to some of her guests and introduced her young kitchen helper. "I don't think you've met Edith," she said. "She's just arrived from Germany". Then she added, confidentially, "Actually, her name's *Edith*, but you know, they can't say **th**".



I had to smile to myself. For a moment I imagined Edith's parents desperately trying to say their daughter's name but, finding it impossible to pronounce, had to settle for **Edit**. The reality, of course, is rather different. The name **Edith** exists in both English and in German, and is spelt the same in both languages. The English pronounce the **th** at the end of the word with that tricky sound which is represented in phonetics by the symbol /θ/.

To say this sound you put the tip of your tongue between your teeth, blow and you get the sound /θ/: what could be simpler? Nearly all of us have got what it takes to make the sound: tongue tip, teeth, breath. There it is, right at the end of the English words **teeth** and **breath**.

It's not only English which uses this sound: it also occurs in a number of other languages, for example in the Welsh word **llaith**, meaning 'milk' or the Castilian Spanish word **cerveza** meaning 'beer'.

In German, however, the **th** at the end of the name Edith is pronounced not /θ/ but /t/.

The German language, like French, Italian and many other languages, doesn't have the sound /θ/, so speakers don't grow up using it. So in the end it's not correct to say "German speakers **can't** say /θ/". It would be more correct to say "German speakers **don't** say /θ/".

As a result, when they are called upon to pronounce English words like **think**, what usually comes out is **sink**.

But there's more to it than that. If for years and years you **don't** do something, in a sense you **can't** do it. For example, I don't play the violin. I don't own a violin, and I've never taken violin lessons. You could say that I have all I need to play the violin: I have ten fingers, a musical ear, I can read music, but it's still a fact that I **can't** play the violin.

So, in a sense the guest house hostess was right: German speakers can't pronounce /θ/. But here's the important point: **can't** is not a permanent state of affairs.

If I bought a violin and started to take lessons and practised conscientiously, after a while I would be able to play the violin more or less well. In the same way, a German speaker who today can't say /θ/, with the right kind of practice, will soon be able to say it.

But the story doesn't end there! I think there is a third reason why people pronounce the sound /θ/ in a different way. Some people may connect the sound /θ/ with childish

pronunciation or with “lispings”. In that case, it’s not so much that they **can’t** say it, nor that they **don’t** say it, but simply that they **won’t** say it. It just sounds so silly that they refuse to try.

But before you get the impression that only German speakers have these kinds of inhibitions about making “funny foreign sounds”, it’s actually very common. I suspect that the most common issue for English speakers when they are learning German is the sound which we write with the letters **ch**. The Welsh or the Scottish have no problem with this sound. The Scottish word **loch** meaning ‘lake’ or the Welsh word **bach** meaning ‘small’ both have this sound, written in phonetics as /χ/ —but many English people simply **won’t** pronounce it. Why? I believe the reason is that to the English ear, it’s not a speech sound, but the sound you make when you are clearing your throat. Instead we tend to replace the sound /χ/ with a different sound. So an English-speaking person might pronounce the German word **einfach** either as **einfasch** or **einfak**¹.

In the end perhaps the third reason is the most important one. When we say “I won’t say it” then we probably won’t succeed in learning to use the language in any great depth. It has nothing to do with lack of **ability** (I can’t), nor lack of **practice** (I don’t), but it’s a question of whether “I will” or “I won’t”, in other words it’s a question of **attitude**.

One of the most important things a language teacher can do is to help their students get over their inhibitions. If I am learning a new language, and I think that the language I am learning sounds “childish”, “silly”, “gutteral”, “ugly”, then I am making a value judgement based on my own language and culture. As a result, I am very unlikely to learn to speak the new language.

As I teach English I’ll do all I can get you to say /θ/ correctly. But I’ll also try hard to get you to stop saying **I can’t**, **I don’t**, or **I won’t**.

Things to discuss

- How do you feel if someone says about you “She can’t say **th**.”?
- “Learning to say /θ/ is a waste of time. If I don’t pronounce it quite right, people will still understand me. We should spend our time learning more grammar and vocabulary”. Do you agree?
- Do some people feel embarrassed to say words like **thick** or **thin**? Are there any sounds in other languages which you **can** say, but for some reason **won’t** say.

¹ And that can of course can be very charming, as the case of the Canadian ice-hockey coach Sean Simpson shows us.

Tip

Look in the mirror and say the word **thin**. If you can't see the tip of your tongue, you're not saying /θ/ right!

Many people manage to say /θ/ on its own, but find it extremely difficult in words and phrases there is also an /s/ or an /f/ sound. Try these:

Mister Smith, maths, thirsty, thirty-first (31st), thief, faith

And what about these?

width, depth

Did you know that in some dialects of English /θ/ is pronounced differently? In the cockney dialect of London, for example, you might hear someone talking about the number **firty-free** (33).

More English words containing the sound /θ/

Edith is not the only name which uses the sound /θ/. Here are some more:

Bethany, Elizabeth, Ethan, Jonathan, Keith, Kenneth, Katherine, Nathan, Nathaniel

Here are some everyday English words which contain the sound /θ/:

think, thought, thing, thick, thin, Thursday, thank you, nothing, through /θru:/, thousand, throw, three, thirty, third, thirsty

youth, both, bath, path, moth, cloth

thief, thunder, thrust, throat, thigh /θaɪ/, thumb, thorough /'θʌrə/, thought /θɔ:t/

Both English and German borrow a lot of words from Greek, and many such words contain the letters **th**. In English it gets pronounced /θ/.

theology, thermometer, theory, mathematics, therapy

Beware!

The letters **th** don't always represent the sound /θ/. There are some words where **th** makes the sound /ð/. There are not many words with that sound, but they are amongst the most common words in the English language:

the, this, that, these, those, that,

with, whether,

there are also a few less common word with the sound /ð/:

bother, wither, weather,

To pronounce /ð/ you put the tip of your tongue between your teeth—in the same way as when you say /θ/—but this time the sound is “voiced”, that is, your vocal cords vibrate.

