

Homophones

Homophones are words with different meaning that are pronounced the same but may be spelt differently (e.g., *know* and *no*, *bear* and *bare*, etc.). There are numerous such examples in English resulting from the peculiarities of English letter-to-sound rules, but they are quite rare in Hungarian due to the predominantly phonemic spelling system of the language. Homophones therefore constitute a potential source of difficulty for the Hungarian learner of English.

I'm on a seafood diet. When I see food, I eat it.

'What is a Christmas gift's favourite type of music?'
'Wrap.'

'What's a cat's favourite button on a DVD remote?'
'Paws.'

Words with the same pronunciation but different meaning are quite frequent in English and they serve as the basis of many puns – the examples above are just three of the hundreds (if not thousands) of similar jokes in English. The words that such puns are based on are referred to as homophones, and they very often have different spellings, too. However, two words do not necessarily have to be spelt differently in order to be called homophones. Consider the following jokes:

'Why did the teacher wear sunglasses?' 'Because the students were so bright.'

'Why did the cat come down from the tree?' 'Because it saw the tree bark.'

In this example, the two meanings of the word *bright* ('sunny' and 'intelligent') and those of *bark* ('to make the short loud sound dogs make' and 'the outer covering of a tree') are spelt the same, not like the word pairs *sea–see*, *wrap–rap* and *paws–pause* in the first three jokes. The two meanings of words like *bright* and *bark* are technically homophones too¹ because what defines homophones is *pronunciation*. Therefore, the most accurate definition of homophones is that they are words with different meanings that are pronounced the same, and they may or

¹ Actually, there is a difference before the two examples because the former exemplifies what is referred to as polysemy (i.e., when two words with the same spelling and pronunciation share the same origin and thus have different but related meanings), and the two meanings of the latter word are called homonyms (i.e., they are words that have different origins and unrelated meanings but happen to be spelt and pronounced the same), but we will not be concerned with this distinction here.

may not be spelt differently. However, we will only be concerned with homophones that have different spellings (i.e., heterographic homophones, to put it more technically) because they are the ones that may be the source of pronunciation difficulties faced by non-native speakers. In the rest of this text, therefore, wherever the word “homophones” is used, it will refer to heterographic homophones.

Why are homophones less frequent in Hungarian than in English?

The spelling system of Hungarian is based on four principles, the most dominant of which is the principle of pronunciation, according to which one letter corresponds to one sound and vice versa. As there are three more principles determining how Hungarian words are spelt, it cannot be stated that Hungarian has a fully phonemic spelling system (which would totally rule out heterographic homophones), but as the majority of Hungarian words are spelt according to the above-mentioned first principle, Hungarian homophones are relatively rare and can only be found when at least one member of the word pair is spelt according to one of two other principles of spelling². These are the following:

- The principle of word analysis: In morphologically complex words (i.e., in compound words and suffixed words), Hungarian spelling tends to reflect the original component morphemes of the words rather than the pronunciation of the words as a whole. E.g., *fűzfa* (which is a compound word consisting of *fűz* ‘willow’ and *fa* ‘tree’) and *vasból* ‘of iron’ (which consists of the root *vas* and the suffix *-ból*) are pronounced “fűszfa” and “vazsból” – the [z] of *fűz* and the [j] of *vas* change in pronunciation into [s] and [ʒ], respectively, but the spelling retains the original forms of the component morphemes.

Let us see a few examples of homophones emerging as a result of this spelling principle:

- *mészbe* ‘into whitewash’ – *mézbe* ‘into honey’: The [s] at the end of *mész* changes into [z] in pronunciation to assimilate in voicing to the following [b]. Thus the difference between *mész* and *méz* disappears in pronunciation if the suffix *-be* is attached to them. (This process is called voicing assimilation, and

² The fourth principle (namely the principle of simplification) affects a few very special cases, and it is unable to account for the emergence of homophones. This is the principle that (among other issues) explains why for example [ɲ:] is spelt <nny> as in *fonnyad*, to be mentioned below. The idea here is that short [ɲ] is indicated by the digraph <ny> (as in *nyár* ‘summer’), but when [ɲ] is pronounced long, its spelt form is simplified as it is only the first member of the digraph that is doubled, as in *dinnye* ‘melon’, *könny* ‘tear (liquid from the eye)’, *mennyi* ‘how much/many’, etc. This rule does not only affect the letter <ny> but all digraphs (cf. *hosszú* ‘long’, *meggy* ‘sour cherry’, *fütty* ‘whistle’, etc.).

this is what explains the phenomenon we have seen above concerning *fűzfa* and *vasból*.)

- *fonnyad* ('wilt') – *fonjad* ('plait it'): The root of the second word (*fon*) ends in [n], but when the suffix *-j* (the imperative marker) is attached to it, then [n] and [j] merge into a third sound, namely [ɲ:] (spelt <nny>, as in the first word). *Fonnyad* and *fonjad* are therefore pronounced the same, but the spelling of the latter indicates its morphological structure.
- *áld* 'bless' – *áldd* 'bless (imperative mood)', *kedvel* 'like somebody' – *kedvvel* 'with good humour': There is a rule in Hungarian phonology according to which a long consonant gets shortened in pronunciation if it comes to stand right before or after another consonant. If the suffix *-vel* is attached to the root *kedv*, the <vv> will be pronounced as a short [v] (as opposed to in *hév+vel* 'fervently', in which it is pronounced long as it does not stand next to a consonant on either side), and it will sound the same as *kedvel*. Therefore, one must be careful not to forget when to spell double <v>, which happens to be a very frequent spelling error committed by Hungarians. (It is no wonder that the first few lines of the Hungarian national anthem often appear in spelling exercises. 😊)

The list above was not meant to be exhaustive; our purpose was only to provide a few examples that illustrate how homophones may emerge in Hungarian as a result of the application of the spelling principle of word analysis.

- The principle of traditional spelling: The spelling of some Hungarian words reflect pronunciations that have changed since the spelling conventions in question were laid down. The most famous example is that Hungarian has two spelling variants of the sound [j]: it may either be spelt <j> or <ly>. These spelling alternatives reflect an earlier stage in the development of the Hungarian language: there was a time in the history of Hungarian when <j> and <ly> indicated two different sounds. By today, the sound that used to be denoted by <ly> has disappeared, and it merged with [j]. The original spellings are retained though to this day, which has resulted in a number of homophones like *fojt* 'suffocate' and *folyt* 'it flowed', *foglyuk* ('their prisoner' / 'their partridge' / 'tooth hole') – *fogjuk* ('we are holding it' / 'let us hold it'), etc. (Words spelt according to this principle are such that even native speakers of Hungarian have a hard time learning the spelling of these words – notice that today there is no difference whatsoever

between the pronunciation of <j> and <ly>; therefore, when learning to spell, Hungarian schoolchildren need to memorise which word containing [j] is spelt with which option.) Now that we have seen how homophones may emerge in Hungarian, let us see the case of English.

Why are there so many homophones in English?

The reason why the English spelling system is difficult to learn for speakers of other languages (especially ones whose spelling system is fully or predominantly phonemic) is that English spelling rules contain only traces of the principle of pronunciation. English letter-to-sound rules are dominated by the principle of traditional spelling, so while in Hungarian there are only a few dozen words like *fojt* and *folyt*, where one has to memorise which spelling variant of [j] to use, the spelling of an awful lot of English words reflect pronunciations from hundreds of years ago that have changed since then.

To give an example, the <i> in the word *time* used to be pronounced [i:] until around the 15th century, and the letter <e> at the end of the word was also pronounced. The pronunciation of the word has undergone a number of changes: the stressed vowel has changed, and the word-final vowel has disappeared, making this originally two-syllable word one syllable shorter. Its spelling, however, has not changed since, so what we observe from today's perspective is that the letter <i> has a "strange" sound value, and the word-final letter <e> is silent (in fact, it has gained a different function than indicating a vowel sound – see more on this in our "Letter-to-sound rules" text). So basically what happened was that many English words used to be spelt according to the principle of pronunciation, but no spelling reforms have been introduced since the pronunciation of English changed dramatically; therefore the spellings of English words today follow the principle of traditional spelling to a great extent.

This is what is behind the fact that English has a lot of homophones: there are many word pairs that are pronounced the same today but differ in spelling, which reflects an earlier pronunciation difference, just like in the case of <j> and <ly> in Hungarian. E.g., the words *meet* and *meat*, which are homophones today, used to be pronounced differently during Shakespeare's time: *meet* was [mi:t] ("mít") and *meat* was [me:t] ("mét").

Let us list a few further examples of cases where it is possible to spell the same English sound in several different ways (all of which are due to historical sound changes that are beyond the scope of our discussion here), and how this is able to create homophones. In order to fully understand the explanations below, you are advised to consult our "Letter-to-sound rules" text beforehand.

- The two R-influenced values of the letter <o> have merged: *for* (its strong form) and *fore* used to have different vowels (just like *car* and *care*, *her* and *here*, etc.), but today they are homophones.
- [ɜ:] can be spelt <er>, <ir> or <ur> (as in *term*, *girl* and *burn*). This does not create too many homophones, but we can find a few, such as *fir* and *fur*, *berth* and *birth*, *tern* and *turn*, etc.
- Most vowel digraphs denote the same vowels as single vowel letters do. To list just a few examples, the digraphs <ei>, <oa> and <oo> regularly represent the vowels [eɪ], [əʊ] and [u:] (as in *eight*, *road* and *rood*), respectively, but these three vowels may be spelt with single vowel letters, too, namely with <a>, <o> and <u> (as in *ate*, *rode* and *rude*).
- Multiple digraphs may denote the same vowel: e.g., the digraphs <ee>, <ea> and <ie> are pronounced the same, as in *see* – *sea*, *peace* – *piece*, etc.
- The schwa can be spelt with any vowel letter (even by digraphs): e.g., *minor* and *miner* are homophones.

The examples discussed so far are all cases where the spellings of both members of homophone pairs are regular, which means that the pronunciation of the words in question can be easily learnt by intuition – in other words, learners are not likely to have difficulty pronouncing *for* and *fore* or *sea* and *see* the same. (We provide a more detailed explanation of what counts as a “regular” and an “irregular” spelling or pronunciation in our “Letter-to-sound rules” text.)

Where problems occur is when one member of a homophone pair is spelt (or pronounced – this is only a matter of perspective) irregularly. In such cases, if the learners are not aware of the fact that a particular word has an irregular pronunciation, their intuitions will mislead them, and they will wrongly pronounce the word in question as if it was pronounced regularly. E.g., *son* is pronounced the same as *sun*, but many learners are unaware of this – the way they often mispronounce it (rhyming with *Ron*) is how the word would be pronounced if it conformed to the regularities, but this word happens to be an exception to the letter-to-sound rules for English vowels.

Further such problematic examples include *suite* and *sweet*, *pear* and *pair*, *sew* and *so*, etc. – in all of these examples, the second members of the pairs are spelt according to the regularities, and it is the first members that are irregular – this is why many learners are unaware that these words are homophonous to *sweet*, *pair* and *so*, respectively, and they often mispronounce them as “sz(j)út”, “pír” and “sz(j)ú”. Pointing out the homophone pairs can increase the learners’ awareness of the pronunciation of irregular words, so whenever such

words come up in the English lesson, it is advisable not only to drill the correct pronunciation of the words (in order to prevent the learners from pronouncing them according to their intuitions and learning incorrectly pronounced forms) but also to highlight what other words the problematic ones are homophonous with.

Homophones that are not really homophones

Let us turn our attention to homophones that only *sound like* homophones but in fact they are not. How is this possible?

When a speaker *learns* a language (and does not *acquire* it as their first or second language as a child), they will perceive the target language through the filter of their mother tongue, i.e., sounds in the target language that do not exist in the learners' mother tongue will be perceived by them as if they were in fact the same sounds as ones that can be found in the learners' first language. In this way, there might be pairs of words in languages that are not pronounced the same, but non-native speakers of the language perceive them as being homophones.

For example, the vowel [æ] (as in *bad, cat, happy*, etc.) does not exist in Hungarian, and Hungarian learners' ears perceive it as being [e], therefore word pairs like *bad* and *bed, pat* and *pet, cattle* and *kettle*, etc. will be misperceived (and, as a direct consequence of this, mispronounced) by Hungarians as being homophones. Word pairs like *bad* and *bed* are referred to as minimal pairs, but not because the difference between these two words is “barely noticeable” (which is what a Hungarian learner might perceive) – *bad* and *bed* are called a minimal pair because they differ in only one sound in the same position, but this difference is in fact big and important. It is easier to understand this through the example of Hungarian words, so in the next section we discuss sound contrasts in Hungarian that cause difficulties to non-native speakers of the language.

Pákó and the “ú” állomás – Hungarian minimal pairs

There might not be too many Hungarians who are not familiar with Fekete Pákó, the Nigerian celebrity who has lived in Hungary for a long time now. The most salient feature of his Hungarian pronunciation (for which he often gets mocked) is that he substitutes the vowels “ö/ő” and “ü/ű” with “o/ó” and “u/ú”, respectively. Browsing YouTube, we may easily come across videos in which various Hungarian celebrities try to teach Pákó these vowels through words like *tücsök* ‘cricket (the animal)’ and *űrállomás* ‘space station’. Not surprisingly, none of the attempts at teaching him the problematic vowels was successful.

A very important aspect that Pákó's "accent coach wannabes" seem to be totally unaware of is that the reason why he is unable to copy the pronunciation of *tücsök* and *űr* is NOT that he is physically incapable of producing the vowels "ö/ő" and "ü/ű", but because he cannot *perceive* the difference between "ö/ő" and "o/ó" and "ü/ű" and "u/ú". So whenever somebody demonstrates the pronunciation of *tücsök* and *űr* to Pákó and asks him to repeat the words, what Pákó hears is *tucsok* and *úr* and *this* is what he copies.

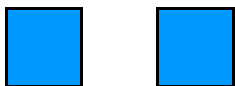
For a native speaker of Hungarian, the difference between *űr* and *úr* is salient (this explains why Hungarians keep making fun of Pákó's Hungarian pronunciation), but it might not be so for speakers of other languages. Whether or not a speaker will perceive the difference between two sounds depends on whether the two sounds in question are responsible for a meaning contrast in the speaker's mother tongue(s) – in other words, whether there exist minimal pairs in that language in which the one difference is the two phonemes in question. Pákó's first language, which is Yoruba, does not have word pairs between which "ö/ő" and "o/ó" or "ü/ű" and "u/ú" would be the only difference (in fact, "ö/ő" and "ü/ű" do not even exist in that language), therefore his perception has not "learnt" to differentiate between word pairs like *kör* 'circle' and *kor* 'age', *űr* 'space' and *úr* 'gentleman', etc. He will therefore misperceive such Hungarian minimal pairs as being homophones, and it is because of the faulty perception that he is unable to pronounce the vowels in question. Therefore, in order to achieve any progress in getting him to acquire these sound contrasts, it is Pákó's perception that needs to be improved first through a series of ear training sessions, and he should only start practising the pronunciation of the problematic vowels *after* he has learnt to differentiate between the vowels confidently when he hears them.

Summary

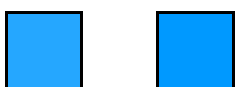
To summarise how the acquisition of non-native sound contrasts works, let us visually support what has been discussed above. At the level of objective reality, any two sounds of a language are distinct from each other, but speakers' perception might be different from the reality. Let us visualise this through the example of *bad* and *bed* (but the explanation would fit any other example, like *űr* and *úr* for Hungarian, etc.). English native speakers will perceive these two words as being different because the contrast is able to account for meaning differences in English. Such pairs of words will sound just as different to native speakers' ears as red and blue look different to the eye:



A Hungarian speaker's perception of the same two words will be different. In the most serious cases (Pákó's seems to belong here), they might perceive the two words as totally the same:



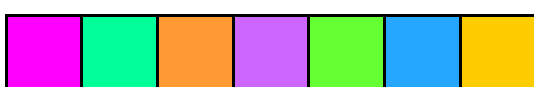
Even if the case is not serious, the two words will sound at least very similar to a Hungarian ear, just like two similar shades of blue:



What usually happens is that when the difference is pointed out to the student (e.g., by making them listen to minimal pairs), they notice *some* difference, but it is so small that they are not normally able to copy it. In the two squares above, one might even have a hard time noticing that the two shades are not the same, but if we merge the two boxes, the difference will be more noticeable:

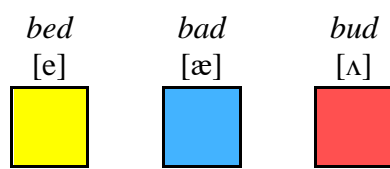


The root of the problem is that students do not encounter a pair of problematic sounds by listening to minimal pairs illustrating the difference. Rather, they will encounter the two sounds independently of each other. The strings of squares below represent three words, each containing one of the two problematic sounds:

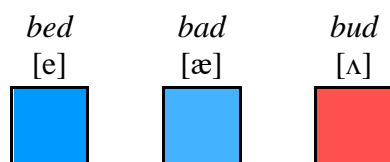


A non-native speaker having difficulty distinguishing the two sounds in question is highly unlikely to ever notice in this way that there are actually two different shades of blue that can be found in these “words” – unless the difference is specifically pointed out to them with the help of minimal pairs, all they will notice is that the three instances of blue are different from the variety of the other colours they are surrounded by (they are all blue), but the difference between the *shades* of blue will not be noticeable for them.

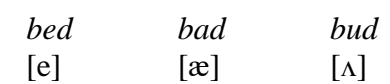
The interesting part of this story is that speakers of different languages will have difficulty perceiving different sound contrasts. Let us compare how an English, a Hungarian and an Italian speaker will perceive the words *bed*, *bad* and *bud*. The objective reality is that the vowels of these words, namely [e], [æ] and [ʌ], are three distinct vowels and each of them is equally different from the other two. On the one hand, the perception of a native speaker of English will be the same as the reality: as *bed*, *bad* and *bud* all mean something different in English, a native speaker will perceive them as being different:

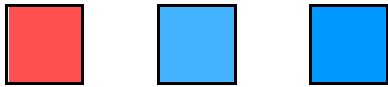


On the other hand, non-native speakers’ perception might be totally different if there are no words in their language between which the only difference is that one word has one of these three sounds where another word has one of the other two vowels. Interestingly, speakers of different languages may perceive these three words differently. For example, as we have seen above, Hungarian speakers will perceive the first two of these words as being similar or the same, and the third one as different:

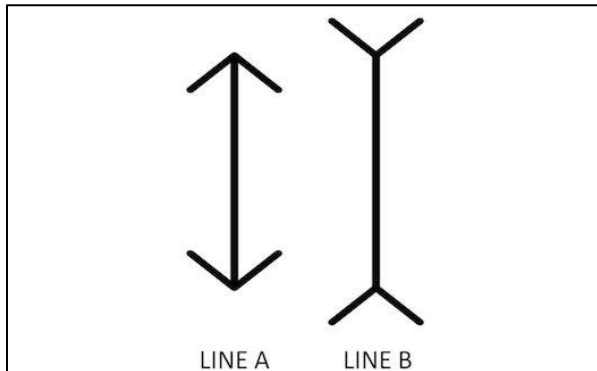


To Italian speakers’ ears, however, the second and the third word will sound similar or the same, and the first one will be distinct from them:





This issue is actually very similar to optical illusions, which may be effective tools to further support our explanation because people tend to be more familiar with such examples than foreign accent related issues (or audio illusions in general). A particularly famous optical illusion is the one where two lines with arrows at both ends are to be compared in length:



The question here is: Which line is longer, line A or line B? Of course the answer is that they are equal in length, but this is not what you see – your brain deceives you into perceiving that line B is longer. It is easy to check what the truth is, though: if you pick a ruler and measure the length of each line, you will be convinced that they are indeed equally long. The most important message conveyed by such illusions is that *what you see is not the objective reality*. In this particular case, a simple object like a ruler is able to dispel any doubts about this.

What happens in the case of speech sounds in foreign languages is very similar: *what you hear is not the objective reality*. In order to be able to copy a sound in a foreign language that does not exist in your mother tongue, it is vitally important to be able to first *perceive* the difference between the sound in question and the one from your mother tongue you mix it up with – not until you can confidently hear the difference between *bed* and *bad* is there any point in trying to pronounce *bad* properly. Therefore, some learners' ears need to be trained before they are ready to practise pronouncing the vowel [æ].

There is one more crucial step of acquiring a foreign sound contrast, which in fact needs to take place even before the ear training sessions: students must *believe*, even if they are unable to perceive it, that the difference *exists*, and that the difference is important to make. A learner who fails to accept that two sounds they perceive as being the same are in fact different and the

difference matters will not be motivated to train their ears so that they will be able to perceive the contrast, which will significantly hinder their progress.

The good news is that there is a method which is able to support learners' believing that two words are or are not pronounced the same, irrespective of how accurate their perception is. The method is just as simple as using a ruler in the case of optical illusions: learners need to check an IPA transcription of the words in question. They do not even need to be able to read phonetic symbols; all they need to do is compare the two transcriptions: if the same string of symbols is used to transcribe both words, the two words are homophones, and if there is a difference between the two transcriptions (e.g., *bed* [bɛd] – *bad* [bæd]), it means that the two words are not pronounced the same.