

Controlling the Velocity: A Response

by J. Donald Bowen

Ed. Note: Edward Harvey, author of "Controlling the Velocity: A Sine Qua Non in Teaching Listening" (TESL Reporter 13,2:30) received the following response to his article from J. Donald Bowen of UCLA. At the editor's request and with Dr. Bowen's permission, it is published here because of the valuable, additional light it sheds on the issue of rate alteration in spoken English.

For me the really significant difference between slowed-down/normal, formal/informal, largo/allegro—or whatever one chooses to call this crucial distinction—is not the rate of articulation *per se*, but the specific changes that occur in the varied patterns. This can very well reflect a language universal (but I don't have contact or understanding with enough of the world's languages to do more than modestly speculate). Some of these features (maybe all) differ with different speakers. In my own speech, there are various alternate forms that respond to a difference in formality levels. From discussions with my colleagues I have become aware that our speech patterns are not always in agreement. Examples of pronunciation patterns that show changes between formal and informal are:

- hw → w *where, when, etc.*
 t → d *better, barter, etc.*
 t → ? *fountain, button, etc.*
 h- → Ø *his, her, him, etc. (when not initial in a phrase)*
 ɪŋ → -ən *goin', eatin', studyin', etc.*
 ɑ → ə *what, from, etc.*
 ə → Ø *liberal, general, natural, etc.*
 ʋ → ɤ *an, and, for, have, argument, wouldn't, etc.*

Additionally, there are forms like *swish*, *horsh**, representing assimilation patterns other than the very important palatal series (treated at some length in my PEP text, pp. 158-164). So we get *horse shoe* becom-

ing *horsh shoe* and *swiss chalet* becoming *swish chalet*, etc. Then there is "feature spreading" of a kind that shows up in *thief* changing to *thiev-* when the plural (note not in the possessive, however) /-z/ is added. Also, the nasals, especially in certain prefixes, tend to adjust to the position of the next following consonant so that /kan-/ becomes /kaŋ-/ in *Congress*, or /kam-/ in *combat*.

The important thing to remember is that these modifications don't just happen when rate of articulation is increased, unless the subject has already mastered English, in which case the lesson is superfluous. ESL students need to know what is happening, so they can monitor what they hear and what they say.

Note that the processes mentioned can be viewed as occurring along a scale, and therefore may occur as a series of variant forms:

What are you doing?

- Full form /hwât àr yùw dúwìŋ/
 Formal conversation /wât àr yə dúwìŋ/
 Substantial reduction /wâtəyə dúwən/
 Full reduction /wâçə dúwən/

Additionally there are stress effects, duration, meter, etc. that I don't fully understand, or maybe appreciate.

The common denominator is changed forms associated with velocity. We don't just speed things up, we modify in very substantial ways, and these modifications must be part of the student's equipment. If he doesn't understand what happens in allegro speech, when speech is speeded up to normal tempo, he'll be confused and helpless. Many a plateau is developed right there, on the contrast between formal and informal speech.

I hope this information is what you wanted and that you find at least some of it useful.