



Paul Warren

Professor of linguistics at Victoria University of Wellington

In her November 29 column, my colleague Corinne Seals noted that covert linguistic racism can include not making a genuine attempt at pronouncing someone's name or dismissing it as "too hard to say".

This raises the interesting question of how well we manage the pronunciation of a name or other words in languages with which we are not familiar.

Babbling infants produce a wide range of speech sounds as they experiment with their speech articulators (tongue, lips, etc). Initially some sounds are impossible, such as those requiring the tongue-tip to be brought up to the teeth – not easy when you have no teeth. With amazing rapidity, however, infants learn to discriminate more accurately between the speech sounds they hear in their environment, i.e, the sounds of the languages being spoken by those around them.

For speech production this requires developing fine motor skills and muscle memory for the different sounds.

Part of learning to speak an additional language involves (re-)training the articulators to produce the sounds found in that language. As children move



Sound barriers

Language Matters

towards and through adolescence, and as their speech becomes more finely tuned to their first language(s), learning a new system of sounds grows more and more difficult, though not impossible.

Intriguingly, some of the most difficult sounds when learning an additional language are those that are almost but not quite the sounds we are already comfortable producing in our own language (such as the French "u" sound for English speakers). Just missing the target for the sounds of the language you are learning can really mark you out as not being a native speaker.

Producing speech sounds involves achieving target positions for the articulators. But many of these targets are not extremely precise and can vary depending on what the preceding and following sounds are, how fast you are speaking, the formality of the speaking context and on many other factors.

However, the required degree of precision depends also on what other sounds the language has. If your articulators stray too far from the target of one sound then you may end up producing a different sound, rather than one that is just a variant of the first sound.

Problems arise if the range of variation of a single sound in your first language

covers the ranges of two distinct sounds in an additional language you are learning.

For example, Spanish learners of English commonly find it difficult to distinguish words like *ship* and *sheep* (at least as spoken by British or American English speakers). Because Spanish has a single vowel that covers both of these, a new difference needs to be learned.

While not impossible to learn, some sounds in an additional language can be difficult because they require very different use of the articulators. For most readers of this column, the click sounds found in many languages in southern Africa would be difficult to produce as parts of words and sentences, though we can produce some of them as non-linguistic sounds such as the *tchick-tchick* "gee-up" sound, or the *tut-tut* click to show disapproval.

Language nerds might find fascinating the World Atlas of Linguistic Structures online (wals.info), which provides data on the distribution of language features including sounds. Feature 19A in WALS covers the "Presence of Uncommon Consonants". Perhaps unsurprising is the inclusion there of those click consonants.

What might surprise readers is that the "th" sounds are also uncommon – these are the consonants at the beginning of *thin* and *this*.

Only 43 of the 567 analysed languages have these sounds. So show some sympathy for non-native English speakers trying to pronounce *Matthew* or *Beth*.

Contact us

Got a language query? Email opinion@stuff.co.nz. Not all queries will be answered.

Los Angeles Times

Scandal spotlights small police departments

Views from around the world. These opinions are not necessarily shared by *Stuff* newspapers.

Two Torrance police officers allegedly spray-painted a swastika inside a car they had directed to be towed in January 2020, and the resulting district attorney's investigation led to the discovery of a sickening stockpile of racist, antisemitic and homophobic texts sent between them and among about a dozen other members of the 200-plus officer agency. Now the *Times* reports hundreds of criminal cases could be thrown out because the messages reveal a level of bigotry that could undermine the officers' credibility in court.

Already, the Los Angeles County district attorney's office has dropped 35 felony cases, and the Torrance city attorney another 50.

Viewpoint

The growing scandal underscores the rot that persists at the heart of some police departments, especially smaller ones that have until now escaped the kind of scrutiny directed toward larger agencies. District Attorney George Gascón has reopened an investigation into the 2018 killing of Christopher DeAndre Mitchell by two of the officers involved in the texting scandal.

In the wake of the *Times* story, California Attorney-General Rob Bonta announced that his office has begun a review of the Torrance Police Department. It's likely not the only city whose police warrant scrutiny. Gascón, Bonta, and indeed all of us should keep the pressure on.