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Reading: Speech is Complex

Changing your accent can be a long and sometimes a frustrating journey. Try to keep in mind that your accent is only ONE aspect of your *communication profile*. Other things: your voice quality, how quickly or slowly you speak, what volume you speak at, body language, eye contact and of course, what you actually say and how confidently you say it, are all important parts of your communication profile. You are learning to become a stronger more effective communicator. You will learn much more than simply what sounds you say differently.

Almost everyone who wants to improve their accent knows that they do not have the same “intonation” patterns as native speakers. Intonation refers to the *music of language*; changes in the patterns of volume, pitch and rate we make that are regularly associated with meaning. The trick is - because the elements of speech are so complex and interconnected, it is difficult to teach intonation without dealing with the differences in sounds that many non-native speakers also have.

Think of it this way: people typically speak at about 100 words per minute. Each word may have a different numbers of syllables: sometimes two sometimes more than six. What’s a syllable? Let’s just say for now it is a sound segment with a vowel. *Cat* is one syllable. *Cattle* has two syllables: *ca* and *ttle*. For the purpose of this discussion just think of the average number of syllables per word as 2 – so if we are speaking 100 words a minute, we are uttering approximately 200 syllables in a minute!

Each syllable has at least one sound, but often more. Look at *Cat* again. It has one syllable and three sounds: K, A, and T. Some syllables have *more* than three sounds: the word *pride* has four (P, R, I and D). For simplicity’s sake let’s say each vowel has just two sounds. So that means each minute we talk we are saying 2 x 200 or 400 sounds every 60 seconds! Each sound requires you to makes changes to your lips, jaw, tongue and vocal folds. Like I said -it’s very complex.