



# Diction in Context

SINGING IN ENGLISH, ITALIAN, GERMAN, AND FRENCH

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Typeset in 11/14 Stone Informal by Flanagan's Publishing Services, Inc.  
Printed in the United States of America by Integrated Books International

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:**

Names: Smith, Brenda (Brenda Jo) author.

Title: Diction in context : singing in English, Italian, German, and French  
/ Brenda Smith.

Description: San Diego : Plural Publishing, Inc., 2019. | Includes  
bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019029717 | ISBN 9781635501209 (paperback) | ISBN  
9781635501247 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Singing--Diction. | English language--Pronunciation. |  
French language--Pronunciation. | German language--Pronunciation. |  
Italian language--Pronunciation.

Classification: LCC MT883 .S66 2019 | DDC 783/.043--dc23  
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019029717>



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# Introduction

In the preface to his book, *Rumi: The Book of Love: Poems of Ecstasy and Longing*, Coleman Banks states that “Poetry and music are two great mysteries of human consciousness” (Banks, 2003). A composer unites poetry with music for a singer to perform. In composing vocal works of any kind, a composer approaches an existing artwork—a poem—and infuses it with expanded artistic possibilities. Whether folk song, art song, oratorio, or opera aria, every work composed for singing is the result of the composer’s encounter with words. You, the singer, interpret the text and music. To do so, you must discern the intention of the composer’s interpretation. The goals of this book are to provide you with the tools needed to delve deeply into the poetry and music you sing, to pronounce text accurately, and to feel confident in expressing it.

Every poetic text offers myriad avenues that lead to meaning. With each new song, you embark on a personal journey to answer questions that will inform your performance. You may wonder what caused the composer to be drawn to this poem or poet. Were there events in the life of the composer that made a text particularly attractive? What was it about the text that inspired the composer to make a musical adaptation? Does the title of the song give clues to the composer’s interpretation? Might there be specific repetitions of text that reveal what most fascinated the composer? Does the text contain literary symbols that are reflected in the musical setting? Are there aspects of the culture or current events that may have influenced the composer’s musical language? Whether you are a student, a teacher of singing, or a vocal coach, *Diction in Context* should serve you as a source for answers to such questions.

Effective, expressive diction for singing requires more than just a mastery of pronunciation rules. What a word means in the context of a phrase determines much about how it is to be spoken, pronounced, and sung. Diction and interpretation are intimate, reciprocal partners, both utterly essential to a meaningful performance. For each style period and every culture, the events of the heart are expressed in unique ways. In these pages, you will find pertinent biographical, historical, and literary sources along with diction rules and textual examples of English, Italian, German, and French song. For each language, there is a section on sentence structure and syntax intended to assist you with poetic analysis and word-by-word translations. Representative song texts are provided for the purpose of comparative listening and phonetic transcription. Comparative listening reveals subtle differences in expression and diction. The texts are presented in a workbook format, allowing space for IPA dictation practice. You can verify the accuracy of your IPA transcriptions through online and published sources that are readily available.<sup>1</sup> Resources

<sup>1</sup>[www.ipasource.com](http://www.ipasource.com) and *Exploring Arts Song Lyrics: Translation and Pronunciation of Italian, German, & French Repertoire*, by Jonathan Retzlaff with IPA transcription by Cheri Montgomery, are available through most academic libraries at no cost.

for further reading and study are given at the conclusion of the book. As you supplement the usual didactic material with contextual knowledge, you can build a firm foundation and deepen your mastery of vocal repertoire. It is hoped that *Diction in Context* will be a lively and inspiring companion on your journey as a student, teacher, and performer.



## **Dear Students of Singer's Diction,**

**A**fter studying singing and teaching others for more than three decades, I have come to believe that the key to satisfying performance is a thorough understanding of the texts. The meaning of the text informs everything about the singing. There is a famous saying from the early Bel Canto masters: "To breathe is to sing." In your singing life, you will hear many interpretations of the phrase. For me, it means that the nature of a singer's inhalation determines much about the success a singer will have in the presentation of a phrase. There is a deep connection between meaning and delivery in spoken language. If it is your task to bring exciting, joyful news to a peer, you will instinctively inhale swiftly and speak the words vigorously. In sharing thoughts that are less favorable, it is likely you take time to breathe so that you can deliver the words carefully, with attention to timing and tone. In other words, you begin on the "inside" of the text to bring its meaning to the "outside" world. Expressive singing generates from the same thought process. To communicate the thoughts of poets and librettists in any language, singers use a variety of tools to discern the meaning buried beneath the surface of the text. This book is intended to help you understand what the texts mean and how they should sound, so that you can breathe and sing them intuitively and beautifully.

As a beginning student of singing, you must learn to sing poetic texts in the four basic languages: English, Italian, German, and French. There are many excellent resources in the form of pronouncing dictionaries, diction handbooks, and websites that you can access to determine the proper pronunciation of each word that has been set to music. You will study vocal technique to establish a healthy approach to the basics of singing: relaxation, posture, breathing, and resonance. These two elements, pronunciation and singing skill, form the foundation for vocal performance. The missing element is the meaning of the words within the poetic context. Though the subjects of poetry are universal, the specific use of words is exquisite to the poet and the culture. The more confident you can be about the intended meaning of a poetic idea, the more successful you will be in expressing it in performance. As you study the artistic, literary, and philosophical ideas contained in the poetry set by composers of various times and nationalities, you will begin to grow as a citizen of the world. With this understanding, your performances will gain depth and artistry. You will become a powerfully poetic singer.

Within these pages, you will find what I have shared with first-year students for many years. In my courses, weekly class periods contain the study of diction anatomy and mechanics, exercises in the imitation of sounds and poetic analysis, and lessons in cultural history and comparative listening. The repertoire represents what is considered age and size appropriate for beginning students at the collegiate level. This introductory

course should ground you in the skills you need to explore all repertoire as you advance to upper-level study. The songs and arias discussed here are mere examples of the many musical masterpieces that await further exploration. Please consider this book an invitation to a life of discovery.

The book concludes with resource material for further study and a glossary of terms. May these pages inspire and equip you for a lifetime of singing in English, Italian, German, and French!



## **Dear Teachers of Singer's Diction,**

**T**his book is a collection of the materials I have gathered over three decades of teaching. I use these materials to invite first-year students into the world of art song and early opera. Singer's diction is much more than accurate pronunciation of words. To sing any language meaningfully, a performer must comprehend which words carry the poetic essence and what components of vowel color and consonant articulation deliver it. The main goal for each student of singer's diction should be to read a poetic text with the inflection suggested by the musical setting. Such a reading could be called a "lyric" one, one that promises the expressive qualities to be heard in performance. The format of the course I teach is that of a so-called "flipped classroom," where students will participate with the teacher in comparative listening, IPA dictation practice, and class discussion.

Voice teachers and singers are fortunate to have excellent resources for determining the proper sounds and articulation for words in English, Italian, German, and French. At the conclusion of this book, you will find an extensive list of online and printed resources. The publisher has designed a website through which you can access PowerPoints and additional teaching materials to supplement the contents of this book.

The implementation of these resources is only the first step toward mastery of texts set to music. Students must investigate the culture depicted in poetry and music to build a deeper layer of understanding. The study of representative poets and composers and their styles gives students further assurance. A thorough inquiry into poetic form and symbolism helps determine which words are significant and worthy of expression. (Please be aware that all word-by-word translations and poetic equivalents contained in this book are my work.) The internet allows everyone the opportunity to listen and compare the musical interpretations of reliable singers, both historical and contemporary. Along with this body of knowledge, students must gather the phonetic and grammatical tools to speak and sing texts confidently. In studying the publications, websites and demonstrations, I find that many resources are based upon the phonetic spellings for spoken language. As singers and singing teachers, we adjust the pronunciation of the spoken text to the melodic contours of the musical setting. We consider vocal technical issues such as phrase shape, tuning and tessitura. To create a well-sung phrase, a singer may need to modify the vowel, delay the consonant, or make myriad other adjustments. This text hopes to honor the artistic freedom of the singing teacher and vocal coach, while suggesting basic practical solutions for the achievement of impeccable singer's diction in English, Italian, German, and French.

Many first-year students have little experience with English grammar, sentence structure, and syntax or with poetry and textual interpretation. The exercise of comparative listening, class discussion, and peer review opens the door to creative thinking and critical analysis. By listening to representative performances and discussing the poetic symbols, idioms, and practices of each time period and nationality, students develop a framework for interpreting assigned vocal repertoire. The lively circumstance of listening, discussing, transcribing, and performing makes clear that the interpretation of text and music is never static. The daily classroom experience becomes an exploration of spontaneous thought and feeling based on good aural models and confirmed in writing through a solid acquaintance with the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA).

The textbook is intended to serve a yearlong sequence of four segments (English and Italian in fall semester, and German and French in spring term). At the university where I teach, each segment consists of 8 weeks of classes with three meetings weekly. I divide the 8 weeks into two larger historical units, representing repertoire composed before and after 1800, respectively. Within each unit, the first 3 weeks are spent introducing the target language, its music and cultural history, and vocal literature. During the 4th and 7th week of the English, Italian, and German diction courses, students perform representative repertoire as assigned. Because of the nature of the French language and the complexity of its musical settings, students research and prepare only one *mélodie* to be presented in the 7th week of the term. (Sample repertoire lists for student presentations are included in each chapter.)

Prior to each presentation, students prepare a phonetic transcription in IPA that identifies the proper pronunciation of each word as it would be spoken. Students should be encouraged to use printed and/or online resources to prepare the transcriptions and to cite the sources properly. Students are asked to note any vowel modifications suggested by their studio teacher. Any modification should be included in the IPA transcription as variants intended for the singing of the text. For all texts in foreign languages, students are required to create a word-by-word as well as poetic translation. The texts, transcriptions, and translations are submitted in advance to be corrected and duplicated for class use. An able pianist rehearses the repertoire with each student prior to the presentation and performs with the student in class.

Because the poetry and music for the first segment of each language is generally unfamiliar to students, I present orally the program notes for each selection during the first presentation in English, Italian, and German. The first presentation in English, Italian, and German is graded pass/fail and serves as a “dress rehearsal” for the second, graded one. For the French presentation, each student receives private diction coaching and is guided to the pertinent resources for the investigation of the musical style and composer’s/poet’s lives. Because there is only one presentation in the French segment of the course, the private coaching session mentioned above serves the same purpose as the pass/fail first presentations in the other languages.

The second presentation in each language is a graded event. Students prepare their assigned text as described above and formulate a brief introduction to the musical style period, the lives of the composer and poet to be given orally as program notes. After the presentation, the introductions are collected, edited, and distributed electronically to the class for future use. (Sample presentation assessment sheets are included at the appendix of this book.)

For all presentations, the student performer explains briefly what the text means and what words or musical phrases are particularly expressive. Before the student performer sings, the entire class reads aloud the text from the corrected IPA transcription that has been distributed. This allows every class member to engage with the poem and to practice its sounds and symbols. The student performer follows with a “solo” reading of the text. Each student singer is encouraged to read the target text with the inflection intended for the sung performance. Finally, the student sings the assigned work accompanied by the collaborative pianist. After each performance, class members comment on the diction challenges that were successfully met.

With each language, the students participate in a cultural celebration of the target language. In English, this might be an afternoon tea with a poetry reading and musicale. It could be the viewing of a film that contains a performance of an early English song. At the conclusion of the Italian segment of the course, the students gather for an Italian dinner. This event coincides with the holiday season. Between the main course and dessert, the class carols in the neighborhood before returning for panettone and warm cider. At the midpoint of the German diction course, the students enjoy a “Kaffeetrinken” that includes cake and coffee along with the singing of a part song, solo performances of Lieder, and the reading aloud of a German fairytale. It has become a tradition to conclude by singing Schubert’s “An die Musik” together. The academic year ends with a four-course luncheon of French food. After the meal, we discuss how our course material will be used in future years of study.

Perfect diction is grounded in the careful imitation of exquisite models. In this textbook, you will find representative poems in each language with suggestions for comparative listening with a rubric for listening and transcribing. The foreign language texts are presented in a format conducive to dictation practice along with a word-by-word translation. A poetic equivalent appears at the end of each dictation practice page. The strategies described should help each student “divide and conquer” the texts. The strategies include the identification of parts of speech, familiar words, rhyme scheme, word repetition, and expressive elements. In this format, students encounter poems first as texts and second as musical settings. Through comparative listening, students apply pronunciation rules and IPA symbols to confirm what they have heard sung by qualified performers. (As noted above, the accuracy of phonetic transcriptions can easily be verified by online or published resources.) Discussion often arises between classmates about what vowel sound a performer has sung. Because singing is not an exact science, the class eventually arrives at a consensus that defines the “range of normal.” The effort made to arrive at a workable solution for problematic words or phrases involves engagement by every member of the class.

It has been my experience that the final presentations in each language demonstrate the positive results of this active, attentive learning. Students recognize the choices to be made in pronunciation and interpretation. Having gathered the tools for good decision making regarding musical and literary style as well as diction, students present their assigned repertoire with understanding, artistry, and confidence.

I strive to select repertoire that is age and size appropriate for the average first-year student in a collegiate setting. Each selection is approved in advance by the studio teacher. In this book as in my course, it is not possible to study every worthy poem set to music in any language or time period. I have sought to include representative works by standard



composers in each language. The works I have chosen, with few exceptions, can be sung by most voice types. The majority of study repertoire is accessible for performance with piano. Vocal works that demand an orchestral accompaniment are included for historical purposes; they are given less space than those works appropriate for study at the beginning of a collegiate career. I hope you will find here a basic structure that can be adapted to suit the songs and arias that are of special interest to you.





## Introduction

**A**s a student of singing, you will confront a world of unfamiliar poetry and music in at least three languages besides your native English. From the outset, you will be hearing and learning vocal repertoire in Italian, German, and French. The first English works you study might be Shakespeare texts with archaic words, the meaning of which you may not comprehend. There are several tools you will need. The tools are: meaning, pronunciation, articulation, enunciation, punctuation, and cultural context.

## Meaning

Since vocal repertoire, unlike other musical forms, is based on the text, its rhythm and meaning, the first tool you require is a means of grasping the meaning of the poem. In many ways, this is the most important tool. As you immerse yourself in each language and its poetry, you analyze, maybe even learn to savor, every vowel and consonant. You will notice how its subtle, hidden meaning awakens your heart. When you speak aloud or sing the poem, its message is translated instinctively into shades of vocal color.

To understand what the poem means, you will need to study its form as well as its content. Within the form, you will notice certain combinations of vowels and consonants that require special care. The rhyme scheme, the rhythmic patterns, and the use of alliteration often drive poetic phrases to points of tension or climax. This poetic momentum demands the perfect pronunciation of each word.

## Pronunciation

The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) is the tool that will assist you in pronouncing each word with confidence. Every student of IPA learns the symbols by associating them with sounds found in words from the native language. The words associated with each IPA symbol become “points of departure” for documenting the sounds of words in foreign

languages. Think of the IPA symbols as a code that will help you “decode” unfamiliar words. If you select your associative words with care and memorize them with diligence, you will equip yourself for an exciting journey of discovery in the world of singer’s diction.

## Articulation

To pronounce well, you must learn the physical aspects of each vowel and consonant. Articulation in diction refers to the “anatomy” and “mechanics” of creating sounds. Vowels and consonants occur through movements of the tongue and lips along with the vocal tract. If these movements are intentional and efficient, you will be able to sing well and be understood clearly. Vowels are created through neurological signals you send when you imagine or “audiate” the sound. Consonants are formed by adjustments you make. For example, “d,” “l,” “n,” and “t” occur when the tip of your tongue interacts with the alveolar ridge behind your teeth. The back of your tongue forms the consonants “g” and “k.” You control the speed and character of these interactions. Effective articulation requires a thorough understanding of the physical movements that cause each vowel and consonant in every language. The study of articulatory anatomy and mechanics helps you “divide and conquer” the pronunciation of words. We speak of persons as “articulate” when they use language well. An articulate singer sings text with clarity and crispness. Such a singer sings the right vowels and consonants in a clearly audible, vocally efficient manner. Your voice teacher or vocal coach will be the extra “eyes and ears” that help you fine tune your skills.

## Enunciation

Enunciation and articulation are related terms that are frequently used interchangeably. To enunciate a word, you must articulate it clearly. When a speaker or singer “enunciates” a word, the listener hears specific elements of a word presented with special care. The enunciated word receives an emphasis that causes the word to rise above other words in a spoken or sung phrase. To enunciate a word dramatically, a speaker or singer may delay the delivery of a syllable, a vowel, or a consonant. In summary, enunciation is an intentional, emphatic form of articulation.

## Punctuation

Punctuation marks are valuable tools for determining how you gather meaning from a text. Punctuation marks such as commas and semicolons delineate phrases, while periods confirm complete thoughts. Certain kinds of punctuation marks indicate how a phrase should be performed. For example, parentheses, exclamation marks, and question marks signify the need to adjust one’s tone of voice. Dashes or colons imply time spent before the next phrase begins. Punctuation can determine the nature of a breath or pace the drive toward a climatic word. Punctuation marks act as guideposts that help a reader follow an author or poet’s path. When setting a text to music, vocal composers recognize

punctuation marks as messages sent by the poet to the poem's interpreters. Adherence to punctuation often unravels mysteries hidden within a text.

## Cultural Context

Singing any text set to music requires an understanding of the literary and musical style period in which the work was conceived. When you seek to determine the tempo, pacing, or inflection of a spoken or sung text, the style of the period will provide you with valuable clues. In reading a text aloud or silently, you often encounter unfamiliar words or idioms. The use of language is indicative of the poet's time, place, and mannerisms. In creating a musical setting, a composer may choose to represent the elements of the poem's original style or to demonstrate the timeless value of the text's message by designing a new, modern context for it. The more you know about the original circumstances of a poem or its musical setting, the more confident you will be in your interpretation.

## The Anatomy of Diction

Most books about vocal technique or singer's diction begin with an explanation of the anatomical parts involved in singing and speech. Correct posture is foundational to good singing and speaking practice. Learning to sing well involves the memorization of physical sensations; therefore, it makes sense to position your body in the same way for practice and performance. Careful repetition develops skill mastery and confidence. A solid vocal technique promises stability in your stance, flexibility in your breath, consistency in your resonance, and precision in your articulations. The physiology of the voice is complex, involving the interaction of brain centers that coordinate the larynx or "voice box," chest and abdominal muscles, and the vocal tract articulators (Smith & Sataloff, 2013). The vocal tract is the resonating system that includes the larynx, the pharynx, and the oral cavity. (See the Glossary for definitions of these terms.) An alert, focused mind governs every step of speaking and singing. At every point in the process of vocal production, efficiency is the goal.

## The Mechanics of Diction

The mechanics of diction are difficult to describe in words. The singing voice is the only musical instrument that cannot be seen or touched. The actions of the voice are the results of signals from the brain. Phonation or "sound making" involves the interaction of breath energy with the vocal folds and the resonators. The complex, intricate movements of the tongue, lips, jaw, and palate cause the utterance of vowels and consonants.

Through computer imaging and MRI technology, it is possible to see the shape of the vocal tract during the phonation of individual vowels and consonants. Many excellent online and published resources contain explanations, charts or drawings to demonstrate the movements of the tongue, lips, jaw, and palate. A variety of terms have been applied to the positions of vowels along the vocal tract. Vowels have been described as "front,"

“central,” and “back”; “fronting” and “backing”; or “bright” and “dark.” Vowels are sometimes called “lip” versus “tongue” vowels, referring to the location of the sensations in the mouth. These are not conflicting terms, but they can be very confusing. The words are intended to convey the situation within the mouth when a vowel is spoken or sung. The charts, drawings, and images remind you of what your body did.

We learn our languages by imitating the sounds made by others. As described above, the vocal tract responds to signals and replicates the sound the respondent has heard. Your body knows what to do to create each sound. As singers, we do not learn to “make” vowels and consonants. We learn to understand the natural production of vowels and consonants and to facilitate its efficiency.

Singing any vowel or consonant is somewhat different than speaking it. In singing, you strive for a relaxed jaw, while in speaking, a relaxed jaw, though desirable, is not essential to the task. You sing higher and lower pitches than you speak. Because the vocal tract arranges itself differently for each note we sing, the position and stability of the vocal tract during singing are major vocal technical considerations. When you sing, dynamic, instantaneous changes occur that involve mental agility, breath pressure, and physical responses. Each adjustment will have an impact on the shape of your vocal tract. Your teacher will help you develop the strategies required to cope with these subtle changes. Because of the adjustments necessary for each sound you make, there is no single way to create any vowel or consonant. Once you are aware of what the body does to produce a vowel or consonant sound, you will aim for efficiency and avoid any intrusion on the natural process.

Vowels and consonants have been “classified” to compare the means by which they are produced. Vowels may be classified as “closed” or “open.” A “closed” vowel is one that is created by a rounding or tightening of the lips. The sound of the letter “a” in the word *chaos* is such a vowel and has the IPA symbol of [ɛ]. The “open” version of the same sound is found in the word *bed* and is identified with the IPA symbol [ɛ]. The “open” sound does not require the rounding or tightening of the lips. Some vowels are classified as “pure.” A pure vowel occurs without any conscious effort of the tongue, lips, jaw or palate. The pure vowels are the basic sounds of [a] as in *father*, [ɛ] as in *bed*, [i] as in *me*, [ɔ] as in *awe*, and [u] as in *shoe*. Because the formation of “pure” vowels is uncomplicated, pure vowels are easy to sustain in singing.

Consonants are classified by points of origin and contact and by voice use. By understanding how each consonant is formed, you can plan the efficient use of each one in combination with vowels that precede or follow. A full description of consonants and consonant clusters is found below.

## Classifications of Vowels

The basic vowel sounds that are unique to the English language are: [æ] as in *cat*, [ɜ] as in *learn* and any of its “r” related shapes such as [ə] and [ɜ], the vowel [ʌ] as in *up*, the adjusted version of [ɪ] written as [ɪ] or [i] and associated with unaccented “-ly” or “-y” endings, the voiceless or voiced “-th” [θ] as in *breath*, [ð] as in *breathe*, and the vowel sound spelled in English “w” [w] as in *weep*, *wonder*, or *wandering*. The spelling “wh” [ʍ] or [hw] also appears only in the English language.

Italian has fewer vowel sounds than English. In German, vowels used in English but not in Italian such as [ɪ] and [ʊ] and [ə] appear along with mixed vowels called “umlauts” and consonant sounds known as the “ich-laut” [ç] and the “ach-laut” [x]. The French language contains mixed vowels that are very similar to the German ones plus four additional nasal vowel sounds [ã], [ɛ̃], [õ], and [œ̃].

## Classifications of Consonants

Consonants are classified based upon how they are produced. Consonants that require the voice are called “voiced” consonants. Those that do not require the voice are called “unvoiced” or “voiceless” consonants. In English, the voiced single consonants are: b [b], d [d], g [g], l [l], m [m], n [n], v [v], and z [z], and the unvoiced or voiceless single consonants are: f [f], k [k], p [p], s [s], and t [t]. When voiced as in the English word *breathe*, “th” is indicated by the symbol [ð]. When unvoiced as in *breathh*, the “th” is indicated by the IPA symbol [θ]. Note that the unvoiced symbol is the same as the Greek letter for “theta,” a word that is pronounced with an unvoiced “th.” The consonant “w” is voiced in the word *wonder* and unvoiced in the word *why*. The voiced “w” is identified by the IPA symbol [w] and the unvoiced one as [ʍ] or [hw]. The letter “h” [h] is also an unvoiced or voiceless consonant. The letter “y” in certain words such as *yes* functions as a consonant that is indicated by the symbol [j] in the IPA. The letter “r” enjoys a wide range of expressive possibilities. The extent to which the sound of “r” is to be heard determines the kind of symbol you will use. In general, an “r” is flipped or tapped between vowel sounds. This kind of “r” is indicated by the symbol [ɾ]. When the language or the circumstance requires a rolled or trilled “r,” the symbol [r] is used. You will discover language and situation specific uses of the letter “r” indicated by one of the following symbols: [ʀ], [ɻ], [ʁ], or [ʕ].

There are consonant clusters that are expressed clearly through the symbols chosen to designate them. For example, there are nasal sounds that create “ng” [ŋ] as in *sing* or [ɲ] as in *Tanya*. Compare the sound [ʃ] heard in the word *sugar* with [tʃ] in the word *char*. Note the differences in voicing between the consonant [ʒ] representing the sound in *pleasure* and the cluster [dʒ] as in *jam*. There are also consonants that appear in foreign languages but not in English, such as the [ç] or “ich-laut” in German found in the word *ich* and the [x] or “ach-laut” found in *ach*. The letter “z” in German is pronounced as a consonant cluster with the symbol [ts] as heard in the term name of the insect, the “tse-tse” fly, in English. In Italian, the letter “z” is pronounced in certain words as [ts] in some words and as [dz] in others.

## Classifications of Consonant Articulations

Each consonant is created or “articulated” by moving the tongue, the palate or the lips or some combination of these elements. Consonants are classified or “grouped together” by the method of their articulation. In principle, a consonant is formed when an articulator (e.g., tongue, lip, teeth, palate, etc.) interrupts the flow of air as it moves through the vocal tract. The “point of articulation” refers to where the interruption takes place. It might be at the level of the lip or “labial” and is called a “bilabial” consonant. If the interruption takes place at the level of the teeth, it is called a “dental” consonant. “Labiodental”