

Re: How do you pronounce "HLL"

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- *From:* "Beth" <BethStone21@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx>
 - *Date:* Mon, 08 Aug 2005 06:45:31 GMT
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Gmork wrote:

> Frankie say:

>> Thinking more about it, I think the pronunciation of "HLL" may be

>> influenced by the indefinite article preceding it. "a high level

>> language" or "an aitch ell ell". Depends.

>

> It's the other way around. The pronunciation, with some exceptions,

> dictates whether to use a or an. Here, "an HLL" is correct because

the

> sound at the beginning is a vowel.

>

> An HLL (a-).

> An MP (em-).

> An x-ray (ex-).

>

> I'm not aware of any exceptions in this case, though there are some

> involving "h".

AHEM

There are NO EXCEPTIONS involving "h"...

As you correctly determined, it's solely a "pronunciation thing" to use "an" when the next sound is a vowel...even, as "an X-ray" or "an MP3" shows, when the written letter is not a vowel, if the SOUND is a vowel sound then it's "an"...

This last point is where the "h" confusion comes from...some accents – the true "cockney" native Londoner accent, for example – 'ave a tendency to "drop the aitches"...and because these people 'ave an 'abit of never pronouncing an "h" at the start of a word, then, under these various "drop the h" accents, all these "h" words start with a vowel sound...so, you see, they "'ave an 'abit" of doing this...while everyone else would "have a habit" instead...

There are NO EXCEPTIONS involving "h"...it should ALWAYS be "a horse", "a historic occasion", "a habit", etc....

Unfortunately, because of a tendency of some strong accents to "drop the

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"h" then it's created a "confusion" for some people, who think that "h" is somehow "special"...it isn't...the "rule" still stands: It's "an" before a vowel sound, "a" otherwise (basically, the simple purpose of "a / an" is because "a" itself is a vowel and then that's two vowels next to each other...and something like "a alphabet" has to have, as someone else noted, a "stall" or "stutter" placed into it in order to separate the "a" article and the "a" at the start of "alphabet"...English avoids this little "issue" by having the "an" alternative that, by sticking the "n" in there, allows "an alphabet" to be said without pause or hesitation...

[Note that despite there being spaces between words in written language, there are no "pauses" in spoken language, in fact – except for the deliberate stuff, of course, of commas, colons, full stops (US: periods) and such – between words...this is one of the reasons why "computer speech recognition" has often been such a pain to implement...the human brain just "knows" all the words being spoken and the context of the speech and uses that "internal knowledge" to "separate out" the sounds into words...

For example, think about the phrase "Armoury Car"...say it aloud and then you'll spot that this would be very difficult for a computer to discern from "America", if someone had a bit of an "unusual" (non-native English) accent speaking it...definitely problematic is you've got the non-rhotic English accent (don't explicitly pronounce "r" at the end of words...Brits and Aussies are normally like this...some American accents are "rhotic", some are not)...or, of course, the various Bart Simpson jokes of phoning up Moe and asking for "Mike Hunt" and so forth...

Basically, the good "speech recognition" stuff tends to simply be wired up to a dictionary, is programmed with basic appreciation of grammatical structure (to help it "work out" what the right interpretation might be by favouring those which are grammatically correct over those that aren't)...and the main "trick" is to process an entire sentence then you can use the other words as "clues" (i.e. try dividing up different ways until you find a combination that actually makes some kind of grammatically sense with the words found in its "dictionary")...

Turning on the TV "subtitles" feature on for "live" events, I've noticed that they must use speech recognition computers that follow these principles...and you can see it in action...how it's always about a sentence behind...

I like to switch on the TV "subtitles" feature whilst watching the "Eurovision Song Contest"...a kind of "schadenfreude", watching the speech recognition machine suffer terribly and get everything totally wrong on a show where they keep switching languages every two words: "Great Britain, no points...Gross Britannien, nul points...let us now go to the Netherlands" / "Good evening, bonsoir, Guten Abend and Goedenavond from the Netherlands to our hosts in Berlin! Here are the votes from Amsterdam...Voici les voix d'Amsterdam"...and so

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forth...though, I notice, this year, they had the sense to pre-program the song lyrics into the machine (although, it did screw up and confuse one song for another, showing the wrong lyrics), rather than for it to try to decypher them...as, if not in English for "universality", they could be singing the song in any language...including the Israelis, say, deciding to sing in French, this year...and, no, I have no idea how Israel counts as "European" for this "Eurosong Contest"...but they seem to let anyone in, to be honest, "Euro" or not...]

Anyway, there is actually NO EXCEPTION for "h" at all...it's just the tendency of some accents to "drop the h" ...so, aloud, they say "an 'istoric occasion" or "an 'orse" ...because, like "an X-ray" or "an MP3 player", it's whether the _SOUND_ is a vowel sound, regardless of how it might be spelt when written down...as they "drop the h", they make the word inadvertently start with a vowel and, hence, the "an" before words starting with "h"...

This is also confused a little bit more – as is Randy's point with this thread, in fact – that if the word is an acronym like "HLL", then "aitch ell ell" is actually "an aitch ell ell" ...because, just to confuse matters, the letter is called "aitch" and does not start with the letter it represents (mind you, it's not alone: "double u" ...or "ex"...or "em"...or "en"...or even "why")...so, "a happy bunny" or "an 'orse" or "an HLL" ...and "H" looks like a terribly confused situation...

But it isn't really...the fundamental "rule" is simply that it's "an" before a vowel _SOUND_ (how it is written is immaterial, it's how it is pronounced that decides it), otherwise an "a"...

The problem is that some people – due to accents and other "variations" – pronounce a vowel sound when, strictly, they shouldn't be doing so...the rules themselves aren't confused...the people and their accents are...

There is no exception for "h" ...the root problem is simply that, when "h" starts a word, people don't always pronounce it the same way...indeed, though the Oxford English Dictionary (the "de facto" authority in the UK, at least) does not acknowledge "haitch" as a valid alternative to "aitch", some people (Roman Catholic Irish, for example) sometimes say "haitch" and, thus, it would be "a haitch ell ell" to their pronunciation...

Nevertheless, there should be no "confusion" or "exception" within the context of your own accent – even if different accents and pronunciations don't always correspond – because it's all about the "vowel sounds"...

Unfortunately, as a different conversation in a different thread acknowledged, some people don't even know what is and isn't a "vowel sound"... "W" and "Y" are strange letters because they've changed...English is a Germanic language and if you note the

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pronunciation of "W" in German, it's a "V" consonant, not an "ooh" vowel sound...hence, originally, English probably was similar...which explains the designation of "W" as a "consonant"...despite the fact that, sorry, the current "ooh" sound (with or without the "h" following) is essentially a vowel in its sound...yet, English did not change the "designation" and it's inconsistently treated as a consonant sound, even though it isn't: "a while", not "an while"...

And there used to be a "thorn" letter, which looked like "y"... "thorn" was simply pronounced "th", not "uh"...hence the phrase "ye olde tavern"...this, in fact, would NOT have been pronounced any differently in the past to "the old tavern"...just old archaic spelling using "thorn" and a silent "e" at the end, where modern spelling doesn't require one...note that this is how "thou" turned into "you" too...people writing "thou" using the "thorn" letter – which looks like modern "y" – and then it "blended" together...

Anyway, these letters have actually changed...and this is how they have the strange "semi-vowel" classification...I mean, in pronunciation terms, there can be no "half-way" between a vowel and a consonant...it's got to be one or the other...and (ignoring the exceptions of the nasal "n" and the aspirant "h"), every word must have a vowel sound in it somewhere because that's how the human vocal apparatus works (this is true of all languages because it relates to what humans can physically pronounce, not anything language-specific)...as such, the word "sky" – which by the "classification" that "y" isn't a vowel – appears to be "a word without a vowel"...of course, it isn't..."y" is a vowel in this context 100% unambiguously...but, according to the "theory" that "y" is not a vowel, words like "sky", "spy" and such should not exist...

No, "h" isn't the problem..."w" and "y" are the true problems...even though – say it aloud to assure yourself of this being the case – a word like "yacht" starts with a vowel sound (sounds very much like "ee": "ee-oh-t"...indeed, it sounds like the same as what the Germans call their letter "j" in full: "jot" ;)...because of its "classification" as a "consonant", it's "a yacht", not "an yacht"...similarly, it's "a while", not "an while"...but the actual SOUNDS that appear there are VOWELS (check out their IPA pronunciations: IPA is a "sound alphabet" and has a letter for each possible sound in any language...and then words can be written 100% phonetically in this alphabet and it provides a "language neutral" way to write pronunciations...often used in dictionaries (especially English ones, where written and spoken language can differ so wildly in places) after the "keyword" to clarify its pronunciation)...

English is, without doubt, the most non-phonetic (and confusing for it) language on the planet...basically, the pronunciations of words "evolved"...but everyone insisted that the spellings would not be "revised" to match...this is also NOT helped, of course, by the fact that English is a bastardised language, formed from many quite significantly different "source" languages, so it was a confusing mess

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when it started...it's just gotten worse ever since...

Indeed, one very common strategy with people who are learning English is simply to consider the written and spoken language as "partially separated"...that is, you learn the pronunciation of each word on a "case by case" basis, more or less ignoring the spelling of it entirely (it's a "hint" as to how it might be pronounced but no more than that)...

No wonder Englishmen like Shakespeare and Tolkien invented words (Tolkien entire separate languages of them, Shakespeare merely "embellishing" English :) in their writings...when faced with such a hotch-potch bastardised inconsistent mess...

The "Vulgar Tongue" is still, really, a name that fully applies to English...BUT, note, this "mess" is a mess to be celebrated in an odd sense because the "mess" derives from English being the "common tongue"...a language guided by "democracy", "consensus" and "evolution"...it's an "open source" language, so to speak...and similarly prone to "no organisation whatsoever" in its implementation...

So, note, I'm not actually negatively criticising English pointing these things out...it's not an insult, so requires no defence...English is a mess but it has reached that state for good reason...and long may it continue to be a mess – as long as it's still the "common tongue", guided by its people, not "authorities" – because that's the way we like it, right? :)

Beth :)

• **References:**

- ◆ **How do you pronounce "HLL"**
◇ From: randyhyde@xxxxxxxxxxxxxx
- ◆ **Re: How do you pronounce "HLL"**
◇ From: Frank Kotler
- ◆ **Re: How do you pronounce "HLL"**
◇ From: soceraphobia
- ◆ **Re: How do you pronounce "HLL"**
◇ From: Frank Kotler
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◇ From: Gmork

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