

# Babel

A Linguistics  
Newsletter for  
the Community

[ʔ]

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## American English has got a lot of glottal stops!

If you re-read the previous sentence out loud, paying close attention to your pronunciation of the 't' in 'got' and 'lot', you should notice that your pronunciation of the 't' in these words is similar to the sound in the middle of 'uh-oh' or the 't' in the word 'Batman'. This is the glottal stop, which is represented as [ʔ] in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). It is created by obstructing airflow in the glottis - the slitlike opening between the vocal cords.

Glottal stops are common realizations of 't' in most varieties of English, but the context in which they appear depends on the particular dialect. For example, British dialects have t-glottaling before vowels (e.g. better → be[ʔ]er) where American varieties prefer it after vowels (e.g. hat → ha[ʔ]), especially when a consonant follows the 't' (as in "hit the ball", "Netflix", "fat cat". Moreover, t-glottaling is found to be more common in the western states (e.g. California, Washington) than in the non-western states (e.g. New York, Pennsylvania), and more prevalent in younger adults (under 30), especially females, than in older adults (over 30) (Eddington & Channer, 2010). **Additional reading on glottal stops in English can be found at:** <http://dialectblog.com/2011/04/01/glottal-stop-bad-for-you/>.

## Pronouns Predict Dating Success

Researchers say they can predict whether two people will end up dating by analyzing their language style and use of function words. Function words are the tiny words that glue our sentences together, words that we don't usually focus on in conversation, words like 'the', 'that', 'and', 'in', and 'are'. James Pennebaker (University of Texas) examined the use of function words in males and females who met for 'speed dating.' His team found that when the language style of two people matched, when they used pronouns, prepositions, and articles in similar ways, they were much more likely to end up on a date. This is not because similar people are attracted to each other. Instead, it's that when we are around people that we are interested in, our language style shifts to match their style. This is called *linguistic priming*.

Pennebaker also notes that one can tell who, among two people, has power in a relationship by simply listening to the relative use of the pronoun "I". The person with more power uses "I" less. Pennebaker suggests that "we use "I" more when we talk to someone with power because we're more self-conscious. We are focused on ourselves - how we're coming across - and our language reflects that."

Read more at NPR: <http://www.npr.org/sections/healthshots/2012/04/30/151550273/to-predict-dating-success-the-secrets-in-the-pronouns>.

The Babel newsletter is put together by linguist, **Karen Miller**, who directs the Language Acquisition Lab at Penn State University. For more information or for an electronic copy of this newsletter, please visit <http://childlanguagelab.la.psu.edu>.

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## Featured Books

### **The Power of Babel: A Natural History of Language** By John McWhorter

"There are approximately 6000 languages on earth today, the descendants of the tongue first spoken by homo sapiens some 150,000 years ago. How did they all develop? What happened to the first language? Full of humor and imaginative insight, *The Power of Babel* draws its examples from languages around the world, including pidgins, creoles, patois and nonstandard dialects." From Amazon.

### **The Stories of English** By David Crystal

"The English language is now accepted as the global lingua franca of the modern age, spoken or written in by over a quarter of the human race. But how did it evolve? How did a language spoken originally by a few thousand Anglo-Saxons become one used by more than 1,500 million?" From Amazon.