A QUICK GUIDE TO THE COLLECTION OF MINIMAL PAIRS

The collection of minimal pairs is a handout designed both to help you improve your pronunciation and vocabulary and to remind you what the sound distinction fuss is ultimately about: not aesthetics (sounding less foreign in order to please Anglophiles etc) or meeting course requirements, but improving your chances of actually communicating what you think you're communicating by means of pronunciation (we talked about this when we did basic intonation patterns, remember). Consider the following exchange between a Swedish student and a Scottish visitor (both male and in their 20’s):

- You must be from Scotland or something.
- Aye, I'm from Glasgow...
- I could tell from your arse.
- My h-what?!
  [slight pause]
- Er... you know, you say "R-r-rangers" and stuff.

I overheard their conversation on campus some time ago and I have no idea where it went from there, but I'm convinced that the Swedish speaker both meant to say and thought he said r's /z/ rather than arse /s/. Apparently, the distinction between /s/ and /z/ – however insignificant it may seem – had more impact on his message than his body language, facial expression, intonation, grammar etc altogether. Sometimes we're saved by the context or by other factors, sometimes we're not. I hope the minimal pair exercises will help you depend less on other people's ability to conclude what you intend to say when you actually say something else. Suggested steps:

1. Begin with a section targeting the sounds that you think or know you have problems with.
2. Mark or highlight all pairs in which you're familiar with both words.
3. Read out the marked/highlighted pairs aloud (ideally to someone else) and make sure that the words don't sound the same (and, of course, that the difference lies in the relevant sounds and not somewhere else...). You don't need to work out which of the words in each pair is pronounced with which phoneme – in the 'Minimal Pairs: /s/ versus /z/ section you'll always find the /s/ word before the /z/ word, in the 'Minimal Pairs: /v/ versus /w/ section you'll always find the /v/ word before the /w/ word etc. This will help you focus on the production and distinction of the different sounds, but if you want to test yourself on their distribution you'll have to separate and/or re-arrange the words or use a different test method altogether.
4. Once you feel more confident distinguishing between the minimal pairs you know the meaning of, look up the ones you're unfamiliar with and then read out the whole section at least once more.
5. Turn to another section and repeat the above steps if necessary.

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