
English Spelling and Pronunciation - A Brief Study

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Abstract

The present paper aims at the correlation between spelling and pronunciation of English words. English spelling is almost divorced from its pronunciation and there is no perfect guide how to learn the pronunciation of the words. The letters of alphabet used are always inadequate to represent the sounds. English alphabet contains only 26 letters but the sounds 44. IPA symbols are needed to understand the intelligibility of the pronunciation and the spelling-designed. Learners of English language have to understand that words from other languages may be adopted without being adapted to the spelling system. Most of the letters of English alphabet produce multiple pronunciations. English Pronouncing Dictionary is needed for better understanding of the spelling and pronunciation.

Keywords: Spelling and Pronunciation, Orthography, Intelligibility, Phonetic Symbols

Introduction

"If we know the sounds of a word (in English) we can't know how to spell it; if we know the spelling, we can't know how to pronounce it." (Otto Jespersen, philologist, Essentials of English Grammar, 1905, page 11).

"English spelling is almost divorced from its pronunciation and forms hardly any guide as to how words should be pronounced." (Mont Follick, The Case for Spelling Reform, 1964, page 87).

English, as a global language of communication, is spoken, written and used widely for many different purposes - international diplomatic relations, business, science and technology. It is also called the library language and medium of instructions in higher education - science and technology, computer and software engineering, medicine and law, pharmacy and nursing, commerce and management, fashion technology and so on. But English spelling system is notoriously illogical and un-phonetic. Students feel difficult and hard to learn English language as there is no one-to-one relationship between the 26 letters of the English alphabet and the 44 sounds they represent.

Rationale

*"The English language has the worst system of spelling of any major language."
(Robert C. Pinckert, Pinckert's Practical Grammar, 1986, page 22).*

"One cannot tell how to spell an English word by its pronunciation or how to pronounce it by its spelling." (Professor Albert C. Baugh, A History of the English Language, 1959, page 13).

"The English language, for all its variety and richness, is illogical. There is no way to learn its orthography [(spelling)]." (Vermont Royster, editor, The Wall Street Journal, Mar. 5, 1975).

The above statements reveal that one cannot find any correlation between the spelling and pronunciation (speech-sound) of the English words. The English language is illogical as there is no way to learn its orthography or spelling. It is true that no one can learn English sounds without special and careful study. The letters of alphabet used are always inadequate to represent the sounds of the English words. For example, the letter 'a' makes many different sounds, such as 'mat, lane, calm, any, tall, and, watch'. It is to understand that letter or letter combination can represent more than one sound because English spelling system is irregular, more complex and largely historical. So, it needs special notations, i.e. IPA symbols to understand the intelligibility of the pronunciation and the spelling-designed of the English words.

Review of Literature

Crystal (2012: 13) describes the nature of the spelling problem in yet another way: "English spelling is difficult, but it is not as chaotic as is often claimed. An explanatory perspective can make the learning of spelling easier." He adds that it is learnable but it takes a learner a few years to be in control of the spelling system.

A Brief History English Language: English is a West Germanic language that has borrowed many words from non-Germanic languages, and the spelling of a word often reflects its origin. There are many changes in the English language over the centuries due to socio-historical reasons and linguistic reasons. There is continuous development in English language because new generations use different words from previous generations. Regularly New vocabulary enters into the language, which changes the meaning of the words over time.

The English Orthography or Writing System: The word 'orthography' means the rules for writing a language. English orthography is the alphabetic spelling system which uses a set of rules that governs how speech is represented in writing. It is used to represent spoken English in

written form that allows readers to connect spelling to sound to meaning. English spelling system is comparatively complicated as the complex history of the English language. Most of the letters produce multiple pronunciations because a large number of words have been borrowed from many other languages in the world throughout the history of the English language, without successful attempts at complete spelling reforms.

Historical Background of English Spelling: The way in which letters are arranged in sequence to produce the pronunciation of a word is referred to as spelling or orthography. In some languages, such as Spanish, the correspondence between the letter and the sound is fairly straightforward as each letter or letter combination almost always represents one certain sound.

During the rather complex history of English, the language has been subjected to numerous influences that resulted in it actually becoming a mixture of other languages, benefiting from abundant contributions to its vocabulary, but also blending different spelling systems. These contribute to the irregular and sometimes incredibly inconsistent and confusing spelling of the written language, which in turn interacts with a varied and sometimes unpredictable pronunciation. In order to master English spelling, one needs to learn a great many spelling rules and be aware of the numerous possible letter combinations.

English Spelling and Pronunciation

Jerome K. Jerome says, "English spelling would seem to have been designed chiefly as a disguise for pronunciation."

Hedge (1983, p. 89) defines, "Writing is the way in which a writer puts together the pieces of text, developing ideas through sentences and paragraphs within an overall structure."

Hornby (2000) says "Spelling is a Linguistic process of phonemic orthography."

Kenworthy (1990) said that the spelling system is considered in two different situations: the situation of the reader and that of the writer.

In the words of Al-Hamash(1974-114,), "Spelling is necessary for composition and composition writing strengthens the mastery of correct spelling" though spelling is different from composition, sound, letters, word parts, word meaning, and word history are those elements which play the important role in learning to spell the words of English language. Spelling is a reflection of one's word knowledge.

Spelling is a linguistic unit of language referring to writing skill. It is defined as the act of forming words correctly from individual letter. Spelling has its rules to form words in a correct way in which letters should appear in proper sequence to be meaningful.

It is the study of learning pronunciation of words in a proper way to spell correctly. It is to understand that spelling originated as transcriptions of sounds spoken language according to the alphabetic principle. Pronunciation changes in due course in all languages for some reasons, but spellings may resist change. Learners of English language should understand that words from other language may be adopted without being adapted to the spelling system and different meanings of a word or homophones may be deliberately spelled in different ways. The letters of alphabet used are always inadequate to represent the sounds of the English language. For example, the letter 'a' makes many different sounds, such as '*mat, lane, calm, any, tall, and, watch*'. So, it needs special notations, i.e. IPA symbols to understand the intelligibility of the pronunciation and the spelling-designed of the English words.

According British Received Pronunciation, the sounds of English are represented by 44 symbols called phonemes: 24 consonant sounds and 20 vowel sounds. The 44 sounds of the IPA or International Phonetic Alphabet are very helpful since every phoneme represents only one sound.

Phonetic Symbols (44 Speech Sounds):

Vowel Sounds: 20 (12 pure vowels and 8 diphthongs) and Consonant Sounds: 24

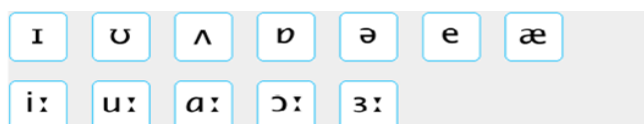


Figure 1-Pure Vowels



Figure 2-Diphthongs



Figure 3-Consonants

Pure Vowels and Diphthongs

PURE VOWELS			DIPHTHONGS		
S.No.	Phonetic Symbol	Key Words	S.No.	Phonetic Symbols	Key Words
1	i:	Feel, meal, seal	1	eɪ	Play, day, take
2	ɪ	Fill, mill, sill	2	aɪ	My, sigh, tie
3	e	Net, set, met	3	əʊ	Go, soak, coke
4	æ	Mat, rat, fat	4	aʊ	Now, shout, vow
5	a:	Car, farm, all	5	ɔɪ	Boy, coil, toy
6	ɒ	Hot, got, shot	6	ɪə	Fear, here, beer
7	ɔ:	Caught, born, sought	7	eə	Pair, rare, share
8	ʊ	Pull, book, bush	8	ʊə	Poor, cure, tour
9	u:	Pool, rule, tool			
10	ʌ	Cut, null, dull			
11	ɜ:	Girl, dirt, firm			
12	ə	About, ago, China			



Consonants

S.No.	Phonetic Symbol	Key Words	S.No.	Phonetic Symbols	Key Words
1	p	Pat, pit, pull	13	s	Sill, sat, sun
2	b	Bat, bill, bull	14	z	Zip, zeal, zero
3	t	Tap, tin, tone	15	ʃ	Sugar, shoe, show
4	d	Done, din, dog	16	ʒ	Vision, pleasure, measure
5	k	Kite, king, car	17	m	Man, male, mill
6	g	Gun, gate, goal	18	n	Not, nail, know
7	tʃ	Chair, charm, chin	19	ŋ	Thing, dung, bang
8	dʒ	Judge, jar, gin	20	h	Hall, how, hen
9	f	Fan, fill, phone	21	l	Low, line, lane
10	v	Van, vine, vote	22	r	Road, ram, rug

11	θ	Think, thank, thin	23	w	Water, win, won
12	ð	The, this, then	24	j	Yes, you, yolk

It is known that there is no correlation between the spellings and pronunciation of words in English language, because the English alphabet contains only 26 letters but the sounds 44. In almost, spellings or letters can be pronounced in more than one way and often in many different ways. Letters are the marks of sound, the first elements of written language. Here are the letters or single characters: *a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, j, k, l, m, n, o, p, q, r, s, t, u, v, w, x, y, z.* and the compound characters (distinct sounds): *ch, sh, th, ng.*

Vowels and Consonants: The letters are of two kinds, vowels, and consonants. The letters, *a, e, i, o, u, y* represent vowel sounds. These vowel-letters can make many different sounds.

- The vowel letter- '*a*' makes different sounds such as:

mat - /mæt/ *lane* - /leɪn/ *calm* - /kɑ:m/ *any* - /'eni/
tall - /tɔ:l/ *watch* - /wɒtʃ/ *sofa* - /'səʊ.fə/

- The vowel letter '*e*' sounds as follows:

mete - /mi:t/ *met* - /met/ *her* - /hær/
clerk - /kla:k/ *pretty* - /prɪti/

- The vowel letter '*i*' sounds as follows:

sit - /sɪt/ *mind* - /maɪnd/ *police* - /pəli:s/

- The vowel letter '*o*' sounds as follows:

note - /nəʊt/ *rot* - /rɒt/ *move* - /mu:v/
woman - /wʊmən/ *women* - /wɪmɪn/ *money* - /mʌni/

- The vowel letter '*u*' sounds as follows:

truth - /tru:θ/ *but* - /bʌt/ *bush* - /bʊʃ/ *busy* - /bɪzi/

- The vowel letter '*y*' sounds as follows:

chyle - /kaɪl/ *synonym* - /sɪn ə nɪm/ *pity* - /pɪt i/

The consonant-letters of alphabet represent the 24 consonant sounds (RP) which are shown with the help of phonetic symbols (IPA) in the following table:

Consonant-letters and their corresponding sounds

Articulators (Manner)	VOICED			VOICELESS		
	Alphabet-Letter(s)	Phonetic Symbol	Examples	Alphabet-Letter(s)	Phonetic Symbol	Examples
Plosives/ stops	b	/b/	bull	p	/p/	pull
	d	/d/	din	t	/t/	tin
	g	/g/	goat, gun	k, c	/k/	king, coat
Affricates	j, g	/dʒ/	judge, gin	ch, tu	/tʃ/	chair, nature
Fricatives	v	/v/	van, vote	f, ph, gh	/f/	fan, phone, tough
	th	/ð/	then, this	th	/θ/	thin, thank
	z, s	/z/	zip, rose	s, c	/s/	sill, cell
	sio, su	/ʒ/	vision, pleasure	s, sh, sio, tio, ch	/ʃ/	sugar, show, mission, motion, chef
				h	/h/	hall, hat
Nasals	n, ng	/ŋ/	bank, thing,	m	/m/	man, moon
				n	/n/	nose, net
Lateral				l	/l/	late, line
Semi-vowels	w	/w/	win, wall	y	/j/	yes, young,
Frictionless continuant	r	/r/	rate, run			



Irregularities in English Orthography

“The irregularities in the English orthography have always been a subject of deep regret.” (Webster, 1828)

The irregularity of English spelling is due to the fact that “there is no one – to – one correspondence between sounds and letters”(Taylor, 1981:317).

English spelling is irregular as there is no one – to – one correspondence between sounds and letters. The written symbols or letters in English do not always represent speech sounds. One letter can stand for several sounds and the same sound can be used for more than one symbol. Words are formed of spelling by using letters, orthographically. A word can be represented by a

combination of letters. Correct spelling is just as important in writing as correct pronunciation is in speaking. The mastery of spelling demands the mastery of English spelling patterns for reading and writing.

Study the following consonant sounds: - some common spelling patterns based on letters or groups of letters.

- The letter ‘C’ sounds
 - (a) hard like /k/, when it is followed by *a, o, u* as in *case, coat, cut*, and soft like /s/, before *e, i, y* as in *cell, circle, cylinder*. (b) at the end of words it is always hard like /k/, as in *public*, and before the vowels, *e, i*, the syllable slides into the sound of /ʃ/ as in *cetaceous, gracious, social*.
- The letter string- ‘Ch’ is heard the sound of /tʃ/ in words of English origin, as in *chip, chain*; the sound of /ʃ/ in some words of French origin, *machine, parachute*; and some words of Greek origin, the sound of /k/, as in *chaos, chorus*.
- The letter string- ‘Sc’ is pronounced like /sk/, before *a, o, u, r* as in *scale, scoff, sculpture, scribe* and it is soft /s/, before *e, i, y*, as in *scene, science, scythe*.
- The letter ‘G’ has two sounds hard /g/ and soft /dʒ/, (a) always it’s hard sound before *a, o, u*, as in *gate, got, gum*, and before *e, i, y*, it has the same hard sound in some words like, *get, gear, give, gynaecology*. (b) the soft sound /dʒ/ is also heard as in the words, *gem, giant, gym, age, general*. All these varieties of pronunciation are to be learnt only by practice, observation, and a dictionary.
- The letter string- ‘Gh’ sounds like /f/, as in *laugh, cough*, or silent as in *bought, light*.
- The letter string- ‘Ph’ also sounds like /f/, as in *phone, philosophy*, except in the word, *Stephen*, where it sounds like /v/, as in *of, move*.
- The letter string- ‘Ng’- is a nasal sound of /ŋ/, as in *English, sing, bang*.
- The letter string- ‘Th’- produces two different sounds, /ð/ as in *then* and /θ/ as in *thin*

Implications

In fact, English spelling system is comparatively complicated and irregular because of the complex history of the English language. Most of the letters of English alphabet produce

multiple pronunciations since a great number of words are borrowed from many other languages in the world. Spelling inconsistencies are easily found among letter-sound correspondences in the different sounds of the letter combination. For example the letter-string, *ough* makes multiple pronunciations such as:

though - /ðəʊ/ (sounds like *slow*)

tough - /tʌf/ (like *huff*)

cough - /kɒf/ (like *off*)

hiccough - /hɪkʌp/ (as *cup*)

plough - /plau/ (as *now*)

through - /θruː/ (as *you*)

Learners of English language should be familiar with the complexity of English spelling system. In English language there are more than 1,100 different ways to spell its 44 sounds with 26 letters (alphabet) which are used to design spelling of the words. Thus, the teachers and learners of English are advised to notice that:

- Students should be given more exercises in English spelling in order to be familiar with the words of confused or miss-spelt.
- Students should know how to spell the irregular spelling patterns of the words.
- The words borrowed from other languages continue to be spelt according to the ‘foreign’ spelling rules
- To learn a word in English, focus should be first on how to pronounce it – and then only learn how to spell it.
- To speak English well, one should learn and practice the needed vocabulary, a pleasant accent, and good grammar.
- The learners should learn words with their possible prefixes and suffixes.
- The learners should be able to distinguish between vowel and consonant letters.
- The learners should be able to identify how many syllables a word has.

Conclusion

Learners of English have to understand that there exists no perfect correspondence between the sounds (pronunciation) and letters (spelling) in English. Letter or letter combination can

represent more than one sound as English spelling system is irregular and more complex. Therefore, it needs special notations, i.e. IPA symbols to understand the intelligibility of the pronunciation and the spelling-designed of the English words. Learners need to be familiar with all the possible spelling rules and be aware of the numerous possible letter-sound combinations in order to master English spelling and pronunciation. Finally, all the learners of English language are advised to consult an English Pronouncing Dictionary for better understanding of the spelling and pronunciation of the words that are unfamiliar or confused.

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