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The Unpredictability of the Sonority of English Words

Arun K. Behera, Ph.D.

Pronunciation Difficulties Generated by English Alphabet

Learning/teaching English pronunciation is not easy as far as sonority is concerned. One of the immediate factors is the lack of correspondence between the letters of the English alphabet and the sounds of English. There are at least 44 sounds or phonemes as against only 26 letters. The result is: nonnative speakers (L2 speakers or foreign language learners) find it hard to bridge the discrepancy between sounds and spellings.

Misinterpretation of the Spelling System – A Major Cause

Often, a nonnative speaker's difficulties with pronunciation originate from a misinterpretation of the spelling system rather than difficulty with the pronunciation of the sounds. A learner who expects the letter *b* to be pronounced / b / as in the words *bat*, *robin*, *cab* etc. will be uncomfortable to find that it is not pronounced that way in words like *doubt*, *tomb*, etc. in which case the letter *b* is silent.

There are, of course cases where one can, to a large extent predict a certain letter or set of letters to behave in a particular manner. The letter *h*, for example, is silent in words like *honest*, *humble*, *heir* etc. Or the letter *k* is silent in words like *knife*, *know* etc. But that again is not a regular phenomenon so as to be generalized.

Problems Caused by Silent Letters

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Silent letters, thus pose no less threat to those learning pronunciation of English. It is the unpredictability of the sounds vis-à-vis the letters that put the learners fumbling. He or she can't make out which letter(s) becomes(s) silent. There is no pattern or paradigm as such to give any clue to those learning English pronunciation. Thus, for example it becomes tough for the nonnative speaker to appreciate how a particular letter *c* loses its sonority in words like *Czar*, *indict*, *scene* etc.

A List of Silent Lettered Words

An exhaustive list of silent lettered words (with phonetic transcriptions and meanings wherever felt required) is provided below to account for the discrepancy in so far as sonority is concerned. An attempt has been made here to cover all the letters of the English alphabet (A-Z) with examples of words in which each of the letters is silent. Care has also been taken to ensure that as many words as would be required to illustrate the point are supplied.

A- *aesthetic* / i:s'θetik /, *aisle* / aɪl / (a passage), *board* / bɔ:d /

B- *bdellium* / 'delɪəm / (a type of a tree), *bomb* / bɒm /, *doubt* / daʊt /

C- *Czar* / zɑ: /, *indict* / ɪndaɪt / (accuse), *scene* / si:n /

D- *djinn* / dʒɪn / (a Muslim mythological figure), *Wednesday* / wenzdeɪ /

E- *eucalyptus* / ju:kəlɪptəs /, *ewe* / ju: / (a female sheep), *eye* / aɪ /

F- *halfpenny* / heɪpni / (a former bronze coin), *Neufchatel* / nɜ:fætəl /

G- *paradigm* / pærədaɪm / (pattern), *resign* / rɪzaɪn /

H- *hour* / aʊə /, *myrrh* / mɜ: / (a gum resin), *oh* / əʊ /

I- *business* / bɪznɪs /, *friend* / frend /, *fruit* / fru:t /, *heifer* / hefə / (a cow)

J- *jai alai* / haɪ əlaɪ / (a game), *Jung* / ʃʊŋ /, *marijuana* / məɪrwɑ:nə /

K- *knife* / naɪf /, *knowledge* / nɒlɪdʒ /

L- *half* / hɑ:f /, *palm* / pɑ:m /, *talk* / tɔ:k /

M- *mnemonic* / nɪmɒnɪk / (designed to aid memory)

N- *autumn* / ɔ:təm /, *damn* / dæm /

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O- *leopard* /lepəd /, *Oedipus* /i:dɪpəs /

P-*cupboard*/kʌbəd/, *pneumatic* /nu:mætɪk/, *psyche* /saɪk/, *receipt* /rɪsi:t /

Q-*quay*/ki:/(a port-like base), *quiche*/ki:f/(an open pastry with a savory)

R-*forecastle* /fəʊksəl / (the forward part of a ship), *smart* / smɑ:t /

S-*island* / aɪlənd / , *viscount* / vaɪkəʊnt / (British nobleman)

T-*often*/ɒfən/ , *hautboy* /əʊbɔɪ/ (a player of a wind instrument), *tsar* /zɑ:/

U-*build*/bɪld/, *circuit*/sɜ:kɪt/, *guess*/ges /, *oblique* /əʊbɪlɪk/, *urn*/ɜ:n /

V-*fivepence* / faɪfəns /

W-*sword* / sɔ:d /, *writhe* / raɪð / (twist)

X- *tableaux* / tæbləʊ / (picturesque presentations), *Xerox* / zɪərɒks /

Y-*prayer* / preɪə/, *you* / ju: /, *Yugoslavia* / ju:gəʊslɑ:vɪə /

Z-*chez* /ʃeɪ/ (at the house of ...), *Czech* /tʃek/, *rendezvous* /rɒndɪvu:/

Sonority is Unpredictable in English

The list of words provided above justify how unpredictable sonority is. No nonnative speaker would think that the letters *c*, *o*, *s*, *x* and *z*, for example would not produce any sound in words like *indict*, *Oedipus*, *viscount*, *tableaux* and *rendezvous* respectively. It is not unachievable to get at the nuances of silent letters in English. It requires constant practice and regular usage to get out of this problem of sonority.

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