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Some Aspects of Spelling and Sound Inconsistencies in English

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I. Abstract.

Unlike English, many other languages have a very high correspondence between sound and spelling. So, learners of English as a second language may need to have their attention drawn to the different possibilities for pronunciation in English. This paper is intended to show how English language lacks a one-to-one correspondence among letters and sounds. English has twenty vowels and twenty four consonants, and hence , forty four phonemes in total. Besides, the English orthography includes just twenty six letters, which may be employed in symbolizing the forty four phonemes. Each English phoneme contains board methods of symbolization. Although some English words are inscribed by steady and regular spelling, there remains a substantial deposit of words that have irregular spelling.

Keywords: features , sound, spelling ,English.

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بعض جوانب عدم التطابق بين التهجية والصوت في اللغة الإنجليزية

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ملخص البحث بالعربية

على عكس اللغة الإنجليزية ، تتمتع العديد من اللغات الأخرى بتطابق بين الصوت والتهجية ، لذلك قد يحتاج متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية إلى لفت انتباههم للأحتمالات المختلفة للنطق باللغة الإنجليزية.

تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى إظهار كيف تفتقر اللغة الإنجليزية إلى التطابق بين الحروف والأصوات . حيث تحتوي اللغة الإنجليزية على عشرين حرفًا متحركًا وأربعة وعشرين حرفًا ساكنًا ، وبالتالي يبلغ إجمالي الأصوات أربعة وأربعين ، إلى جانب ذلك ، تشتمل قواعد الإملاء الإنجليزية على ستة وعشرين حرفًا ، والتي يمكن استخدامها في ترميز أربعة وأربعين صوتًا، و على الرغم من أن بعض الكلمات الإنجليزية يتم تسجيلها من خلال تهجية ثابتة ومنتظمة ، إلا أنه لا يزال عدد من الكلمات التي تحتوي على تهجية غير منتظمة.

II. Introduction

Spelling is written form, pronunciation is voiced form. English spelling is particularly difficult. Over the centuries the pronunciation of English has deviated ever further away from the spelling. In this concern Gimson (1994:4) states that a written form of English, based on the Latin alphabet, has existed for more than 1,000 years and, though the pronunciation of English has been constantly changing during this time, few basic changes of spelling have been made since the fifteenth century. The result is that written English is often an inadequate and misleading representation of the spoken language of today. Many languages have reformed their spelling to adjust to such changes, but English has not. It seems with spelling and pronunciation challenges. Kenworthy (1998:98) has pointed out that English spelling is not strictly regular alphabetic system in which one letter always stands for one sound and one sound only.

What makes spelling even more difficult is that the written form of the English language has an inconsistent pattern. Only approximately 50% of spellings follow regular phonetics rules.

English has 26 letters in the alphabet (from A to Z) but has many more sounds. To be precise, there are 44 sounds, but some people would argue that there are more if we include "triphthongs". We have five vowels in the in the alphabet – A,E,I,O,U, but there are twelve vowels sounds in English. It is not helpful to associate letters of the alphabet with sounds; it will work only in a very few cases. According to O'Connor (1980:7) it is very useful to have written letters to remind us of corresponding sounds, but this is all they do; they cannot make us pronounce sounds which we do not already know; they simply remind us. In ordinary English spelling it is not

always easy to know what sounds the letters stand for; for example, in the words " city, busy, women, pretty, village" the letters " i , y, u ,o ,e ,a " all stand for the same vowel sound, the one which occurs in sit.

It can be helpful to know what the 44 sounds are. There is an international phonetic alphabet which has a symbol for each sound. Wallwork (1985:27) points out in this respect that in order to describe sounds, it is customary to use a form of notation which can give a description both more accurate and more economical than to attempt to do so by ordinary alphabetical resources.

When you know the symbols, and you know which sounds they present, you will be able to find out how a new word is pronounced by looking in a dictionary. Most good English-English dictionaries show the pronunciation of words by giving the phonetic symbols.

III. Features of English Spelling System

There are some basic features of the English spelling system. One may conclude them in the following points.

1-There is not always a strict one-to-one correspondence between sounds and letters. Some letters do have only one value (single-valued),e.g., " d, m , p. " Some letters can have two or more values (multi-valued),e.g., " c " which can represent the sound /k/ and the sound /s/, for example, in words like " cat " and " cell ". Parninkas (1975:356) emphasizes that anyone who has studied English at all knows that the spelling is very irregular. When you see a new word, you cannot be sure how it is pronounced, when you hear a new word, you cannot be sure of the spelling.

- 2-In the English spelling system a " root " is always spelled the same, for example, in " sign" and " signal" , the root (s-i-g-n) always represented with the same order of four letters even though it is not pronounced the same in the two words. This visual principle works in another interesting way. There are very few " homographs" in English; words which are written the same but are pronounced differently and have different meaning, for example, " tear " (drops of water coming from eyes) and "tear" (to pull sharply apart). But there are quite a few "homophones"; words which are sounds the same but written differently and have different meaning, for example, "sight" and "site", "air" and "heir", "deer" and "dear", "marshal" and "martial".
- 3-Some of the symbols used in the writing system are combinations of two or more letters from the alphabet. They are called "composite symbols". For example, " ph" represents the sound /f/, like in "photo", "phase", etc.
- 4-Some of the symbols are used to signal something about another symbol. When functioning this way, they have no sound value themselves. For example, the letter "e" at the end of a word; it tells the reader something about the value of the preceding vowel letter. This is the so-called "silent -e". In the word "swede" it signals that the preceding "e" is pronounced as /i:/ as in "meat". Final "e" is also used to signal something about a preceding consonant: in the word "page" it indicates that "g" has the value of /d / not /g/. In "rice" it signals that the letter "c" is pronounced as /s/.
- 5-Position and surroundings are very important in the English system. For example, "-gh-" can represent the sound /f/, but it can only do this at the end of a word. "Wh-" can only occur at the beginning of words.

IV. Pronunciation and spelling problems

Because English spelling is not regular, Arab learners may face a problem in the phonological structure of some English words. These are the most important problems:

- 1- Orthography vs. pronunciation. For example, Arab learners may find a problem in the phonological structure of the sight words because Arabic is for the most part phonetically represented. Thus a learner who has not heard or practiced words like “enough”, “trough” or “hiccough”, is likely to make mistakes because the visual configuration is misleading. The same problem is found with “double o”, words such as foot, look, took, wood, book which are pronounced with an / Ū / sound; whereas other “double o” words such as, food, mood and moon are pronounced with /u: / sound. Arab learners of English may mispronounce words which have an initial position / n / sound with different spelling such as, knot, mnemonic.
- 2-Because same words have similar spelling, but are pronounced differently, an Arab learner are likely to mispronounce them. For example, brown/ shown, mow/ now, simply/ imply, etc.

V. Rules and regularities of English spelling

A. Rules for consonants

1-Some consonant letters have only one sound value.

(d) as in: dig, bed

(f) as in : fat , leaf

(j) as in : jar

(m) as in : man , dam

(n) as in : no, in

(p) as in : pick ,up

-
- (r) as in : rat
 - (v) as in : vex , save
 - (x) as in : fox
 - (y) as in : yes , yard
 - (z) as in : zodiac
 - (t) as in : team , tent

One should note that some of the above letters are not pronounced in certain cases. For example, the letter “n” in “column” , “r” in “survive” and (p) in “psyche” and in “coup”

2-The following letters have a regular sound value, except in cases where they are not sounded at all:

“b” as in boy,bib,box. But “b” is silent in bomb, lamb and limb.

“h” as in hot, exhale. But silent in honest,hour,honour,heir.

“k” as in keep. But silent in knee, know , knob.

“l” as in land, lily. But silent in should, half.

“w” as in want, well. But silent in write, answer.

3-The following single consonants can have two sound values. “c” can be /k/ as in “cat” or /s/ as in “cell”. Also,rarely the sound represented by “ch” as in “cello”. “c” represents /s/ sound when it is followed by “i”, “e” or “y”, and represents /k/ sound everywhere else. “g” can be /g/ as in “go” or /dʒ/ as in “page”. “g” has the value/d /when it is followed by “i”, “e” or “y”, and represents /g/ everywhere else. But there are exceptions, for example, give ,get, gear, forgive, anger, eager. There are not very many exceptions but some of them are very common words.

4-When consonant letters are doubled in English, they keep the same sound value. For example, “bb” in “ebb”, and “cc” in “tobacco”.

5-In English there are composite consonant letters where two or three letters represent one sound. The following have only one sound : “ng” as in “ring”, “ck” as in “kick”, “le” as in “bottle”, “ph” as in “photo”, “sh” as in “she”, “wh” as in “where” and “tch” as in “watch”. In some cases, two composite letters have two possible sounds. For example, “ch” can represent the sound /t / as in “child”, “change” and “choice”. It can also represent /k/ as in “chorus”, “chord”, “chlorine” and “technical”. On the other hand, the two letters “gh” can represent /f/ sound as in “tough”, “enough” and “cough”. “gh” letters can also represent/g/ sound as in “ghost”, “ghetto”, “ghastly”, and “ghoul”. The two letters “gh” can stand for “silence”, for example, in words like : ‘taught’, “through” and “daughter”.

B. Rules for vowels.

1-The single vowel letters: “a”, “e”, “i”, “o” and “u” have two sound values.

Letter	sound 1	sound 2
“a”	/ei/ “made”	/ æ / “man”
“e”	/i:/ “pete”	/ e/ “bed”
“i”	/ai/ “find”	/ i/ “ fit”
“o”	/ ou / “vote”	/ɒ / “not”
“u”	/ju:/ “cute”	/ ʌ / “but”

To know which of the two sounds a letter stands for, we should consider these patterns.

-If the single vowel letter is followed by a single consonant letter, then the vowel sound will be the one in column two above. For example, “fit”, “ret”, “cut” and “top”.

-If the single vowel letter is followed by two consonant letters, then the vowel sound will have also the sound in column two. For example, “rest”, “fast”, “must” and “film”.

-If the single vowel letter is followed by a consonant and the letter “e” at the end of the word, it represents the sound in column one. For example, “mute”, “came” and “like”.

2- Single vowel letters in polysyllabic words.

In polysyllabic words, the rule is : when a single vowel letter is followed by two consonant , it has its short value, for example, the letter “a “ in “action” represents the sound /æ/.But when a single vowel letter is followed by one consonant, it has its long value, for example, the letter “a” in “relation” represents the sound /ei/ .

3- Vowel digraphs.

Vowel digraphs means two vowel letter represent a single vowel sound. For example, “ea” in “heat” represent the sound /i:/ .In contrast to a single vowel letter, these digraphs do not change their sound value in stressed or unstressed position. For example, “eu” in “neutral” represents the same sound in “neutrality”. Each vowel digraph has one major value (the vowel digraph represents one particular sound in the majority of the words). On the other hand vowel digraphs may have minor values, and some of them may occur in common, high-frequency words .But when a learner meets a new word with a certain vowel digraph, the chances of its major value sound is very high. The following are some examples for major values and minor ones.

1-The vowel digraph (au)

major value

/ɔ:/

naught

laud

minor value

/ a: /

aunt

laugh

/ɒ/

laurel

2- The vowel digraph (ea)

major value

/i: /

meat

eat

minor value

/ei / / e /

great head

break dead

3- The vowel digraph (ee)

major value

/ i: /

need

seed

minor value

/ i /

been(weak form)

4-The vowel digraph (ei/ey)

major value

/ei/

rein

reign

obey

minor value

/ai/

either

height

eye

5-The vowel digraph (eu/ew)

Major value	minor value
/ ju: /	/ əʊ /
new	sew
few	
neutral	

6-The vowel digraph (ie)

Major value	minor value
/ai/	/e/
die	friend
tie	
lie	
<hr/>	
/i:/	
achieve	
believe	

7-The vowel digraph (oa)

Major value	minor value
/ əʊ/	/ɔ:/
coast	broad
coax	
coat	saw

8-The vowel digraph (oi/oy)

Major value

No minor value

- /ɔɪ/

joy

coy

boy

toy

coil

foil

9-The vowel digraph (oo)

Major value

minor value

/u:/

/ʌ/

room

blood

root

flood

boot

/ʊ/

foot

book

rook

10-The vowel digraph (ui)

/ju:/or/u:/

/i/

Suit

build

bruise

biscuit

11-The vowel digraph (ou/ow)

Major value	minor value
-------------	-------------

/au/

/ʌ/

drown

trouble

drowse

enough

town

couple

trout

/ɒ/cough

/ɔ:/

own

owe

shoulder

/u:/

group

soup

routine

VI. Conclusion

Using the phonemic chart is to highlight the links between the alphabetical spelling and its pronunciation. We sometimes think that English spelling is hard because there are as many exceptions as there are rules. A few years ago English spelling closely reflected the pronunciation of the writer. However, with the invention of the printing press, spelling gradually became standardized and fixed with the pronunciation continued to evolve. The result today is that most phonemes can be presented by a number of different spelling in different words. Instead of worrying about the consequent lack of clear spelling rules, we can create conditions to internalize spelling-pronunciation relationship.

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