

LEARNING ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION: A SURVEY

A.Vasantha Kumari

Assistant Professor of English, Government Degree College for Women, Begumpet, Hyderabad

ABSTRACT

Attempts have been made in this article to make a detailed survey on the specific areas that pose difficulty for the non-native speakers of English especially while learning English pronunciation. As would be evident from the paragraphs that follow, some of the major areas that are problematic for the speakers are: disparity between letters and sounds, word accent, silent letters, assimilation and elision, accent and rhythm, oronyms, homophones and onomatopoeias. The most obvious reason for this difficulty, of course is the fact that English is not spelt phonetically. Thus, two words can share none or any or all of the spellings, pronunciations or meanings.

Spoken English involves pronunciation of English. The pronunciation in actuality is the living form of a word, of which spelling is only a symbolization. Hence, words are heard and not seen. It is therefore not surprising that most of the world's over three thousand languages are spoken languages with no writing system as such. However, even in case of the languages having writing systems, there is no one to one correspondence between the letters of the alphabet and the sounds each of them produces English being an ideal example.

Language is for communication which it does in one of the two ways: spoken or written. Of the two, however, the spoken mode is more complex, especially in English. This is so because English is not spelt phonetically. Two words thus can share none or any or all of the spellings, and meanings.

In the English language thus a lot of disparity exists between sounds and letters: forty four sounds as against twenty six letters. The result is that one letter produces many sounds: as 'u' in input, bury, club, hum, jury, linguist, busy, sure and status respectively. Similarly, one sound 't' is produced by many letters: as in temple, matter, debt, sight, Thailand, ptomaine, clapped, indict, yacht, etc. In case of word accent too, the pattern of accentuation varies depending on whether a word is used as a noun or adjective or verb, e.g. 'export (adj/n) and ex'port(v). It also changes in case of derivatives as in a'cademy-aca 'demic-acade 'mician.

Another interesting feature that confounds the speaker for whom English is not the first language pertains to silent letters. Letters may not be the most difficult feature of English spelling but are surely the

most paradoxical. Some letters lose their usual characteristic feature. It thus looks absurd for a phonetic writing system to include symbols required for the spelling of a certain word without that particular symbol being represented.

There is hardly a letter in the English alphabet that does not figure in the spelling of some word without being represented in its pronunciation. For example, a in cocoa. aesthetic bread etc.

Assimilation and elision are also some other features that are interesting. Assimilation is when one sound is influenced and changed by a neighbouring sound. Assimilation is generally of three types: assimilation of place, manner and Expressions like, 'rat bag' /raepbaeg/ or oat meal/o'pmi:l/ are examples of the first type in which the sound // is replaced by a /p/ sound.

Secondly, in words like soldier which illustrate assimilation of manner, the sound /d/becomes /j/. The third type of assimilation relates to voice which is illustrated by the pronuncia- tion of have to in which the // sound is replaced by the /f/ sound.

Assimilation is caused mainly because the tongue cannot always move quickly enough to get from one position to another in order to articulate the following sound.

As far as elision is concerned, some sounds, especially consonants get elided as in the case of next day /neksdei/in which gets elided. sound or Elision means when a syllable gets lost or omitted. Elision is one of the major reasons for the found in English mismatches between a word's spelling and its pronunciation. Thus, English has an unpredictable pattern of pronunciation which makes it difficult for the users of English for whom English is not the mother tongue.

Other features of English which make it more difficult and complicated relate to word accent rhythm; silent letters; homo-phones; change of pronunciation depending on whether a word begins with a small letter or a capital one, whether it is singular or plural and whether used as an adjective or noun or verb; onomatopoeias; and various sounds produced by combination of letters. Each of these features is dealt with in greater detail in the paragraphs that follow.

DISPARITY BETWEEN, SOUNDS AND LETTERS

English has 44 sounds as against only 26 letters of the alphabet. It means that there is no one-to-one correspondence between sounds and letters. This is why one letter of the English alphabet represents different sounds and different letters represent one sound. Some examples are provided below for illustration.

The letter a represents nine different sounds, viz, as in the words: aluminum, any, ask, bake, call, hat, fare, village and wash respectively. It is silent in a word like cocoa. Similarly, another letter f represents /f/ as in fish, /v/ as in of and is silent as in halfpenny /ha: peni/.

One more letter O also represents a number of sounds as do the examples show. born, corrupt, cover, one, polish, tomb, wolf, women, and world. It is also silent in people.

There is the other way round too, Le. different letters represent one particular sound as is evident from the examples provided here: the letter Or combination of letters, viz.oe,ie, ae, is, ti, e, ee, ey, ay, ea, ei, ix and i represent one sound/i: /in the words amoeba, believe, Caesar, debris, Hawan, he, keep, key, quay (a concrete structure), sea, seize, Grand Prix and ski respectively.

Another sound, /u/is also represented by letters or combination of them: oo (brooch-an ornament), oa (coast), aux (fauxpas), ew (sew), ow (slow), ou (soul), ough though), oe (foe), au (mauve-purple colour), oh (oh), o (open) and eau (Rousseau). Similarly, in words like Asia, assure, luxury, machine, schedule sheep and tuition, the letters s.ss,x,ch,c,sch,sh, and ti represent the sound /sly.

Moreover, the combinations of some letters also produces certain sounds in an unpredictable manner. A few of such combinations like au, ere, ou and ough will suffice the case in point:

August, aunt, Austin and faux pas (blunder)
here, Inhere and were
group, pour, round, soul and touch

WORD ACCENT

Word accent means that in English, one particular syllable gets prominence or stressed or has a greater breath force. Since the word has a linguistic identity, it is made up of one or more phonemes. These phonemes again combine to form syllables. Thus in a word containing two or more syllables, one of them gets accented. The pattern of accentuation differs when the same word is used as different parts of speech. The following examples would show how place of accent changes when the words are used as nouns or adjectives(in the first column) and verbs(in the second column):

'conduct	con 'duct
'digest	di 'gest
'import	im 'port
'permit	per 'mit
'present	pre 'sent

Similarly, the place of accent also changes when the derivatives of the same words are used. The list of words below show how it happens:

a "cademy-academic-academician
 advertise-advertisement
 photograph-photographer
 photo graphic
 politics political-politician
 responsible-responsibility

a name an aim
 buys ink-buy zinc
 great ape-grey tape
 ice cream-I scream
 may cough-make off

Homophones

Similar to the oronyms are what are called homophones. These are in reality words pronounced the same although they differ in spelling and meaning. Such words also do not trouble the speaker less as would be evident from the list of examples that follow:

aisle-I'll- isle
 cite-sight-site
 ewe-yeu- you
 right-rite-wright-write
 vain-cane-vein

As far as rhythm in English is concerned, it is an important aspect. This is significant because English is said to have a stress-timed rhythm. Rhythm refers to the fact that in an English utterance, the strong or prominent or accented syllables tend to occur at regular intervals of time not withstanding the number of weak or unaccented syllables between any two accented syllables. In connected speech, the string of syllables shows a unique feature-the weak forms. Some syllables get weakened when uttered in connected speech. Thus, for example, the expressions like I am, he will, she has, they are and who would are uttered in their weak forms.

Silent letters

Silent letters are one area that is always troublesome. What happens in some cases is that certain letters become silent by losing their characteristics of being pronounced. This is very unpredictable as do the examples below illustrate with the letters followed by a list of words:

b-bdellium(a gum resin), comb, doubt, subtle, womb
g- campaign foreign, phlegm, resign,
f- business, friend, fruit, heifer (a young cow)
P- corps, coup, cupboard, pneumatic, psychology
s-aisle, debris, island, isle, viscount (a member of the Peerage)

Oronyms

There is one more interesting feature, i.e. oronyms. Oronyms are strings of words or phrases that sound the same as another string though spelt differently. These also pose difficulties for the users for whom English is not the first language. Some of the examples of oronyms are provided below:

CHANGE OF PRONUNCIATION

Of course, the most difficult of all areas in spoken English relates to the change of pronunciation with the change in number, i.e. singular and plural. The words used in plural take the plural marker /z/ or /s/ only as the case may be, with the root remaining the same. This is so because, they spell the same in singular as well as plural forms. Some of these are given below as illustrations:

chassis
 corps
 faux pas (a blunder)
 'pince-nez (eye glasses clipped to the nose by a spring) rendezvous (a place appointed for a meeting).

Similarly, pronunciation also changes depending on whether a word begins with a small letter or the capital one. The list of examples below shows how it happens:

'August (the eighth month of the year)
 Au'gust (marked by grandeur)
 Job (proper noun)
 job (a paid employment)
 'Nestl 'e /neslei/(name of a company)
 'nestle / nes! /(to settle)
 Polish (one from Poland)

'polish (wiping something to give it a shiny look)
'Reading (proper name)
'reading (the act of reading a book etc.)

Onomatopoeia

There is one more interesting feature in spoken English, that poses some sort of difficulty to the user of English called onomatopoeias. These are combinations of sounds in words that resemble or suggest what the words really refer to. These are mostly sound related words some of which are given below with their meanings as examples:

Blast (an explosion or a powerful movement of air from explosion)

Creak (to make a harsh sound)
Hiss (to make a sound like a snake)
Murmur (a low continuous sound in the background)
Whistle (a high pitched sound made by blowing through the partly closed lips)

The survey shows that pronunciation in English is unpredictable. One tends to make errors especially as far as disparity between sounds and letters is concerned. Similarly, other major areas that also pose no less confusion to the speaker of English for whom English is not the mother tongue relate to silent letters, word accent, cronyms, homophones and onomatopoeias.

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