

CHALLENGES OF INCONSISTENCY IN ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION AND PHONOLOGY

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17433705>

Abstract

The study of language demonstrates that each language possesses its own peculiarities. This study investigates the inconsistent nature of English phonology, which is manifested in irregular sound-to-letter correspondences, mismatches between sounds and letters, and the abundance of silent letters, among other inconsistencies. It argues that, unlike many other languages, English embraces these inconsistencies as inherent features of its phonology. Variations in letter or sound insertion, irregular past tense formation, and the prevalence of silent letters contribute to making English uniquely different from other languages. The study recommends that learners and speakers of English approach the language as it is, setting aside personal assumptions or preferences. It emphasizes that phonology is language-specific and operates within the accepted writing system, distinguishing it from phonetics, which is a universal feature of human language.

Keywords: English Language, Linguistics, Phoneme, Phonetics, Phonology, Structuralism

Introduction

With the advent of civilization, writing became a necessity in English language which is preferred above many other languages and it has come to stay with its challenge of inconsistencies in the spelling system. Ideally, the spelling system of a language should closely if not exactly reflect the pronunciation of words in a given situation. But English language though widely accepted and used, has a contrary status which has ever remain a daily confusion for both speakers and learners. Generally speaking, languages first exist in their spoken form before they are reduced to their written form, in which case, the writing system is not supposed to be distinct nor independent as well as contrary to the spoken aspect which is the original version of language.

According to Iorwember and Sale (2013), there are linguistic elements/features that are shared amongst languages. Di Pietro (1971) asserts that "despite variations in details due to environmental factors and historical change, the particular languages of man are alike in many essential ways..." It is expected that like other languages English phonological system should not be a hindrance or a challenge to both speaker and listeners who encounter it as a second (L2). However, the challenge of marrying the various sounds in

symbol with letters of English language is so enormous. Situations where sounds in the language are not consistent to their representation in letters create a disparity. In fact, the wide disparity between the sound and the letters in the phonology of English language is problem to the effective understanding and communication of English language over the years.

The knowledge of the theories of phonemes has explicated that one phoneme is different from another. No two phonemes are the same. For example, /t/, /d/, /c/, /s/ and many others and different properties, these properties are unique to each of them no matter the similarities that are shared amongst them. They contain meaning and these meanings are distinct and differing from one to another. Daniel Jone as cited in Agbedo (2013) that a phoneme is a “minimal unit of contrast within a sound system of a single language”. On this premise, it is clear that one phoneme should maintain a contrast to another and should not be treated as same.

It is on this note that the paper seeks to identify, discuss or analyse the challenges between sound and written system of the English language. The research explores areas of inconsistencies so as to establish their existence and why they are in the found to help the understanding of both speakers and listeners of the language.

Conceptual Clarification

Phonology according to Kristin and Anne (2010), “is the study of the sound system and the processes we use to discover the unconscious systems underlying our speech”. The above entails that linguistic sounds are not used in isolation; they are arranged to bring out meaningful formation called words, and they finally produce sentences. O’Grady, Archbald and Katamba (2011) maintain that while phonetics is primarily concerned with concrete physical properties of language sounds, phonology investigates how sound and meaning is connected.

A similar opinion is shared by Clark, Yallop, Fletcher (2007) that “phonetics and phonology are concerned with speech – with the words in which humans produce and hear speech. Talking and listening to each other are so much part of normal life that they often seem unremarkable.

The above views and opinions may vary in words, but the central idea is that phonology is a linguistic concept which underscores the study of sound. Though phonetics also deals with sounds of languages, the variance between phonetics and phonology is that while phonetics is about the universal sounds of human languages, phonology is reduced to a particular or definite language. Claire and Genoveva (2005) agreed that phonetics is concerned with how sounds are produced, transmitted and perceived. Phonology is concerned with how sound formation in relation to each other in a language. Here the behaviour of sounds and their nature is looked at depending or having a particular human language in view other than the general knowledge of sounds. This practice and study speaks of uniqueness and peculiarity located or found in which ever language or languages under study or analysis.

Areas of Sound and Spelling Inconsistencies

Scholars like Umera-Okeke (2018) has identified different problem areas in the sound and spelling system of the English language. Some of these problems areas can be grouped under the following headings:

- The same letter does not always represent the same sound in English - Sounds are not always represented by the same letters.
- Letters appear to be silent in some production.
- Insertion of sound where there are no letters
- Consistency in plural formation and past tense morphemes

An attempt will be made to x-ray these problems or inconsistencies with examples from both the consonants and vowels sounds of the English language. Some of these include:

1. A single letter having different sounds:

Letter **c** has no exact sound match or equivalent it can be realised as:

/k/ as in cup, can, come, carry etc

/s/ as in cement, celadon, certificate, ceil etc Letter **g** is pronounced as:

/g/ as in gadafi, gabon, get, got, guide, gross, etc

/dʒ/ as in knowledge, gauges, strange, age, large, huge, etc Letter **s** is realized as:

/s/ as in sand, saw, sin, sat, said, socks, stop etc.

/z/ as in bosom, busy, boys, easy, feasible, hesitate etc /x/ as in box, boxcar, boxing etc

/c/ as in voice, cement, celebrate etc.

/ʃ/ as in sure, mission, sugar etc.

Letter **u** is realised as:

/u/ as in push, bull, sugar, bush, full etc

/ai/ as in buy, guy etc

/oo/ as in cook, good, look etc

/ou/ as in would, house, etc

/o/ as in woman etc Letter **a** is pronounced as:

/æ/ as in battle, rag, match, bag, mad, etc

/a:/ as in cart, farm class etc

/ʊ/ as in was, want, wash, because etc

2. A situation of same sound with different letters.

The following can be seen as some cases of some sound with different letter representation in English language.

- The velar plosive /k/ is realised as follow:

- /k/ as in keen. Maker, think, key etc

/c/ as in came, cap, act, cattle, etc

/cc/ as in occasion, according, occur, occupy, etc

/ch/ as in chemist, stomach, monarch, etc

/ck/ as in pack, back, black, etc

- The Velar plosive /g/ is realised from:

/g/ as in gate, gone, give, got, go etc

/gg/ as in begged, juggle, etc

/gh/ as in ought, ghost, aghast, etc

- The palate – Alveolar Affricative /dʒ/ is represented by the following letters:

/j/ as in injury, rejoice, jump, ajar etc

/g/ as in germ, engine, George, village, porridge, etc

/dg/ as in budget, bridge, porridge, etc

/dj/ as in adjustment, adjoin, etc

It should however be understood that this is not peculiar to consonant sounds. Vowel sounds are also represented differently. Some of them include:

- Vowel sound /e/ is realised in the following spelling:

a as in many, any, aid, came etc **ai** as in said, again, main, etc

e as in end, them, met, let, etc **ea** as in dead, spread, health, etc **eo** as in leopard, Leonard, Geoffrey, etc **ue** as in endure, manure, value, sure, etc

- Vowel /u/ is realised in spellings follow:

ew as in blue, crew, chew etc **o** as in do, who, tomb etc **oe** as in shoe, canoe, etc **oo** as in school, broom, tooth, fool etc **ou** as in soup, coup, group, route, you, etc **u** as in huge, truth, blue, etc

ui as in juice, fruit, etc

There are also diphthongs that reflect the same problem spelling realisation. These can be seen as follows:

/ei/ as in height, neither, etc

/i/ as in line, site, silence, tidy, ice, etc

/ie/ as in die, cried, lie, etc

/uy/ as in buy, guy, etc

/y/ as in try, my, shy, etc

/ye/ as in bye, dye, etc

The above representations are just a few among many cases of such irregular and inconsistent features that can be seen in English language.

3. The challenge of silent letter.

Among other challenges of English phonology is that many words carry silent letters. Some examples include;

- Silent letter B as in: limb, thumb, comb, womb, debt, subtle, doubt, plumb, crumb, etc.

Silent letter C as in: muscle, scene, science, abscess.

Silent letter D as in: width, handsome, handkerchief, Wednesday, Sandpaper.

Silent letter G as in: gnash, gnaw, gnat, gnome, sign, hang, tongue, reign, thing, feign, diaphragm.

Silent letter H as in: hour, honest, honour, heir exhaust, exhibit, vehicle, shepherd, ghost.

Silent letter K as in: know, knit, knock, knee, knife, kneel, knowledge, knew, knapsack, knob.

Silent letter L as in: could, would, should, psalm, talk.

Silent letter N as in: Hymn, solemn, condemn, column, autumn.

Silent letter P as in: Psalm, psychology, pneumonia, psychic, pseudo, coups, cupboard, Thompson.

Silent letter T as in: listen, often, castle, butcher, wrestle, departs, report, rapport, wretch, ballet, Christmas.

Silent letter U as in: guess, guest, guard, guide, rouge, colleague, guitar, guinea, vague, guilt. Silent letter W as in: whore, wrath, wrist, wrap, sword, wrapper, whom.

4. Insertion of sound where there is no sound in the actual sense.

One of the sound spelling issues in the English phonology is the intrusion of sound where there is no spelling to indicate the sound, in which case words could be spelt but the pronunciation is a problem to learners. Examples are:

/j/ is pronounced before letter **u** in the following words: use /ju:z/

cute /kju:t/

Beauty /bju:ti/

Eulogy /ju:ledʒi/

Cube /kju:b/

Europe /luərəp/

/W/ is inserted before letter **o** as in these words:

One /wʌn/

Once /wʌns/

/K/ is an extra sound inserted before letter **s** in:

Accept /əksept/

Access /ækses/

Accident /ækisident/

Axle /æksl/

Axis /æksis/

Axe /æks/

5. Differences in the plural formation and past tense.

Plural formation in the English language is consistent, some of these variants in plural formations are:

/s/ as in:		/z/ as in:		/iz/ as in:	
Cats	/kæts/	Maps	/mæpz/	Leaves	/li:vz/
Books	/buks/	Cows	/kauz/	Houses	/hauziz/
Laughs	/la:fs/	Girls	/gz:lz/	Rushes	/rʌfɪz/

The inconsistency is revealed in such a manner the first column carries /s/ as plural formation the /s/ is seen reflecting in the pronunciation while the second presents a similar if not same manner of plural formation, but the pronunciation is not the same. Better still, /es/ also appears as another form of plural formation with /iz/ as another form and yet many others abound.

This has the capacity of affecting both learners and speakers of the language in gaining quick understanding. A similar situation or problem affects the formation of the past tense though formed by the addition of the same letters -ed.

Stoned	/stəʊnd/	washed	/wɒʃt/	started	/stɑ:tɪd/
Played	/pleɪd/	faced	/feɪst/	handed	/hædɪd/
Begged	/bɛgd/	looked	/lʊkt/	panted	/peɪntɪd/
Bribed	/braɪbd/	laughed	/lɑ:ft/	divided	/dɪvəɪdɪd/
Dared	/deəd/	rushed	/rʌst/	bolted	/bəʊltɪd/

Way Forward to Spelling/Pronunciation and other Inconsistencies in English Phonology

The first thing to bear in mind is that language is a divine gift. This has been acknowledged by Omachonu (2011) who opined that “the divine source speculations on the origin of language hold the view that God or other spiritual beings gave language to mankind”. This is to maintain that what constitutes language generally is beyond humans. The elements of individual languages cannot and should not be reduced to what a human language can create and determine completely. Language teachers and learners have the responsibility of looking at what language is and not as how they may want it to be. Okeke (2018) maintains that “our duty as language teachers is to teach the language not about the language”. A language is what native speakers say not what some people think they ought to say. If a language is not correct, then what is said is not what is meant.

Structuralists also maintain that some structures are fixed and to maintain the structure and nature of a language. Juwirth (2005) holds that “every English word has a fixed accent contour, the contour being constituted by the varying degrees of prominence given to the syllables of the word. While teachers will enable to teach language as it is part of learning for students to study varying elements constituent in the language. Moreover, English phonology should be understood as being unique. Phonology as mentioned before is never a general concept it applies to individual languages unlike phonetics.

The understanding of the language therefore entails careful following of its phonological nuances. As inconsistent as they are our study must embrace it as it is. For Forel and Puskas (2005) English spelling

and English pronunciation are two different things. It is important that learners should put in mind that we are not interested in letters here.

Conclusion

The peculiarity of the English language phonology is that it is highly inconsistent. These inconsistencies are widely spread in the areas of differences in the spelling and sound representation, sameness in sound or letters but different representations. It also include inconsistency in areas of insertion of letters or sound in words position without obvious justification as well as variance in its mode of past tense formation and the presence of silent letters widely spread in its writing system. All these inconsistencies have only succeeded making English language uniquely different from other languages. Hence, the universality of language does not necessarily mean sameness of all languages of the world; speakers and learners of the English language only need determination and careful study to understand the phonological build-up of the language. This is because all languages of the world are rule govern and English language cannot be an exception.

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