

The Relationship between the Spelling and Pronunciation of English in the South African Context

ABSTRACT

English spelling is not phonetic. This is just as well as the variety of accents world wide would make a universal phonetic spelling system impossible. But the non-phonetic and sometimes apparently eccentric nature of English spelling creates difficulties for learners and teachers need instruction in some aspects of the pronunciation of English. The problem is acutest with the vowels as only the letters *a e i o u* cater for the great variety of vowel sounds, but consonants, while generally providing the framework, can also give trouble. Teacher and learner must be aware of such things as silent letters, assimilation, slurring, stress, vowel reduction and some of the common tendencies in South African pronunciation. All this has implications for the training of English teachers.

The relationship between the spelling and pronunciation of English in the South African context

The relation between English spelling and pronunciation has always been a difficult one. Over the centuries, the spelling of English has lagged behind changes in pronunciation. Scholars and scribes have used various spelling conventions from time to time. Then, there are many accents and dialects, not least in Britain itself. Scots has developed its own orthography, but generally the same spelling system has been used for all educated writing. The matter of variation of accent has applied more widely with the coming into being of the gigantic USA and with the spread of English across the globe. The spelling system of English is therefore non-phonetic. This is a good

thing, considering the variety of accents for which a single spelling system has to cater, but it does create problems for those learning the language, whether the situation is mother tongue or second or foreign language.

The problem is obviously acutest with the vowels. The consonants generally provide the framework. The five letters, *a, e, i, o, u*, have to do service for a great number of simple vowels and diphthongs and school teachers should beware of telling pupils that those five letters are the "vowels" of English. In Received Pronunciation, alone, there are twelve simple vowels and nine diphthongs and this is only one of many accents. In South Africa there are a number of possible accents. There is a fading Received Pronunciation. Then, according to Lanham and McDonald's *The Standard of English in South Africa*, (Lanham:1985) there

are roughly three degrees of white English-speaking South African English, which they call conservative, respectable and extreme. There is an Afrikaans accent of varying strength. There are various Cape accents. There is an Indian accent that still, in some speakers, retains the characteristic reflexive consonants. Finally there is the fairly uniform pronunciation (depending on educational opportunities) of those whose mother tongues are the indigenous African languages. This last accent has affinities with English accents found generally in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Firstly, then, English spelling has lagged behind changes in pronunciation and this has been compounded by the use of different spelling conventions at different periods of history. Secondly, the spelling system, fortunately as it turns out, cannot encompass all the sounds, especially the vowels, that are encountered in the great variety of accents with which modern English is spoken. Then there are other characteristics of English pronunciation that further separate it from spelling, among them the processes of assimilation and slurring.

The first problem in the relation of English spelling to pronunciation is the incapacity of the system of orthography to encompass all the sounds that are encountered in English. But, further, the orthographic system is itself, for historical reasons, variable and inconsistent.

The letter G an example

Let us consider the letter 'g' in English spelling. It is pronounced [g] in *gate*, *get*, *give*, but [ɔʒ] in *gentle* or *gin*, and [ʒ] in *rouge*. It is [g] in the gill of a fish but [ɔʒ] in a gill, the measure of liquid. To indicate that the sound was [g] not [ɔʒ], English at one stage borrowed a convention of French scribes of putting a *u* after it, hence we have *guest*, *guide*, *plague*. But the convention was not adopted throughout the language. Caxton, the fifteenth century father of English printing, borrowed a Dutch spelling convention, hence we have *ghost* and *ghastly* although the old English word was

spelled *gast*, without an *h*. Old French used the letter *g* for [ɔʒ]. In Middle English *g* and *j* were used interchangeably for [ɔʒ], hence we have the pairs *gibe* and *jibe*, *gaol* and *jail*, *sergeant* and (in older spellings) *serjeant*. Modern French uses *g* for the sound [ʒ], hence the spelling of the relatively modern borrowings from French of *blancmange* and *prestige* where the letter *g* is used for the sound [ʒ]. However, *prestige* is also pronounced with [ɔʒ] and the same sound occurs in *prestigious*. Look at the words *enough*, *brought*, *hiccough*, *through*: the *gh* is silent or [t] or [p].

Differences in the relation of vowel sounds to spelling can be illustrated by various lists of words. For example, *Caesar*, *amoeba*, *people*, *speech*, *speak*, *cede*, *ceiling*, *lie*, *trio*, *quay*, *key*, all have the vowel [i:] but spell it in different ways, and *cat*, *cake*, *calm*, *call*, *any*, *was*, all have different vowel sounds spelled by the single letter *a*.

Silent letters

As part of the historical lag of spelling behind pronunciation there is the phenomenon of silent letters. This was already a problem in Shakespeare's time. In *Love's Labours Lost* Holofernes, the pedant, discusses the pronunciation and spelling of *debt*, *half* and *calf*. (Act V.1). The issue is whether the normally silent letter in the spelling should not be pronounced. Clearly, in Shakespeare's time, some were puzzled by the existence of silent letters while others spelled these words without the silent letter. Already, however, usage seemed to dictate that the letters should be silent. Holofernes seems to feel that they should be both in the spelling and pronounced, however awkward the phonetics.

The learner and teacher of English have to beware of silent letters. Here is a list, (but it is not a comprehensive one at all): *calm*, *balm*, *calf*, *dumb*, *listen*, *wring*, *wrong*, *knife*, *knee*, *gnaw*, *gnome*, *gnostic* (but *agnostic*), *pneumonia*, *pseudo*, *column*, *damn* (but *damnable*), *hymn* (but *hymnology*), *solemn* (but *solemnise*), *rhyme*, *rhythm*, *rhetoric*, *doubt*, *debt*,

receipt, island, foreign, reign, delight, though. The list is endless and the hapless learner can only learn them off by heart, grouping where possible.

The letter *R*

Consider the letter *r*. In Received Pronunciation it is silent in the post vocalic situation, that is, after a vowel. Consider *cart*, *carter*, *here*, *there*, *word*, *start*, *starter*, *standard*, *monarch*, *guard*, *actor*. In the general American accent the letter is, of course, pronounced in the post vocalic position, as it is in Scots, Irish and Welsh accents, although not necessarily with precisely the same sound. In the Southern American accent the post-vocalic *r* is of course not pronounced. Obviously, a heavy Afrikaans accent retains the post vocalic *r* in the form of the so-called 'rolled *r*'. It exists, too, in the traditional Eastern Cape English-speaker, perhaps a relic of contact with the Afrikaners in that region, perhaps a legacy of the Scots party of the 1820 Settlers.

The pronunciation or not of the letter *r* is further complicated by the existence of the linking *r* and the intrusive *r*, which are fully acceptable. In the word *here*, the *r* is not pronounced but in the phrase 'here and there' the *r* may be pronounced to form a link between the two vowels, while the *r* in *there* is silent. This is the linking *r*. The intrusive *r*, so-called because there is no justification in the spelling at all, is found in phrases such as 'Noah and his Ark' or 'Is Sylvia at home'. Essentially, despite the name 'intrusive', the intrusive *r* is a linking device. To the alarm of the learner, an *r* appears in pronunciation which is nowhere apparent from the spelling. In the case of the post-vocalic *r* the letter is there in the spelling but may not be pronounced, depending on the accent. The teacher must have the knowledge to interpret this set of contradictions to the pupils.

Spelling pronunciation

The matter of what is called 'spelling pronunciation' is interesting. Take the word spelt *victuals* which should be pronounced *vittles* if

traditional pronunciation is to be heeded. It used to be a common word for 'food' but now is relatively rare. Therefore, the danger exists that a pronunciation that appears to conform to the spelling will be attempted. This is what is likely to happen to rare words that are read rather than used in everyday speech, a tribute to the power of print and to the effects of literacy. Again, the teacher must be aware of the existence of this phenomenon.

Assimilation and slurring

The processes of assimilation and slurring cause pronunciation to differ from spelling. Assimilation is the modification undergone by a sound under the influence of an adjacent sound, slurring is the dropping of a sound altogether. *Wednesday* is a good example of slurring. If we were to pronounce it as it is spelt, we would be committing a spelling pronunciation, reversing the effects of centuries of slurring in the popular mouth. However, such reversals do occur, and spelling pronunciations become accepted. *Waistcoat*, for example, used to be pronounced as if it were spelt *weskit*, by educated and uneducated alike. Today we say the word according to the spelling, but this is a spelling pronunciation that everyone uses, so it is acceptable. *Boatswain* is probably in a threatened state. We no longer go down to the sea in ships, we fly, and the word is rarer and likely to become pronounced not as *bosun* but according to the spelling. *Housewife* used to be pronounced as if spelt *hussif*, and even spelt like that. Now it is rare to find somebody who knows this, and the related word *hussy* has acquired a meaning of its own and is itself fairly rare, in any case.

Assimilation accounts for many differences between spelling and pronunciation. *Raspberry*, the combination of *rasp* and *berry* has [zb] in the middle, not [spb], because of the influence of the voiced [b] on the two unvoiced consonants before it. We say ['jɑ:zbəɪ] and not [jɑ:spbəɪ]. Similarly we say the word *peeked* [p'i:kt], with an unvoiced [d] rather than voiced [t], at the end, even if the letter in the spelling is a *d*, because of the preceding

unvoiced [k]. Because of assimilation, then, pronunciation is different from what spelling would appear to indicate.

The importance of stress

Another factor that serves to separate pronunciation from spelling is the important aspect of stress in English, with the possibility that the vowel in unstressed syllables will be reduced to the neutral vowel [ə]. This is, of course, more likely in an R.P. related accent than in others, but it is a feature broadly of mother-tongue English, not least of pronunciation in the USA.

The result is that beggar, baker, elixir, actor, flavour, Arthur, all have the neutral vowel in the final syllable (and, of course, the *r* may not be pronounced). Once again, what the spelling seems to indicate is not reflected in the pronunciation. This points to a general problem that those who are not mother tongue speakers of English may have with understanding spoken English. What may be seen in the spelling is far from what is actually heard, because of vowel reduction. Natural mother-tongue speech gets over unstressed syllables with great rapidity with the aid of reduction to the neutral vowel. The full vowel is often not heard, whatever the spelling might be. In training people in listening, it is a necessary tactic to make this plain to students, and there is a need to teach the comprehension of spoken English. While the unstressed syllables must be picked up, it is also crucial to identify the main stress in a word and, when speaking, to put the main stress in the right place.

Stress timed and syllable timed

In South Africa we have the situation of stress-timed languages (English and Afrikaans) rubbing shoulders with syllable-timed languages (the indigenous African languages). In a stress-timed language there are alternating stressed and unstressed syllables and the unstressed syllables are got over quickly. In a syllable-timed language equal time is given to each syllable. Black speakers of English show frequent uncertainty as to where to put the stress. In addition,

the indigenous African languages have no central vowels, including the neutral vowel, and no such phenomenon as vowel reduction.

To add even further to the confusion, English makes a clear distinction between long and short vowels. Some are long, others are short. There are no long and short pairs. Thus [i:] as in *speak*, the central [ɜ:] as in *bird*, [u:] as in *food*, [ɔ:] as in *short* and [ɑ:] as in *park* are always long. The others, [ɪ], as in *sit*, [ɛ] as in *set*, [æ] as in *cat*, [ʊ] as in *put*, [ə], the neutral vowel in unstressed syllables, [ʌ] as in *but* and [ɒ] as in *pot*, are all short and never long.

Take the word *agreement*. The stress is on the second syllable, and the vowel is, in addition, long, [i:]. The first and third syllables are unstressed and the neutral vowel should be used. However, a speaker of a syllable-timed language is likely to even out the stresses and to put full vowels in what were the unstressed syllables, perhaps [a] and [ɛ]. If to this is added a shortened vowel in the now less distinctively stressed second syllable, a very different sounding word will be produced from that in a natural English mother-tongue pronunciation.

Another example is provided by a well-known interviewer on English TV, who sometimes produces an interesting mispronunciation of the word *purpose*. It should be pronounced with stress on the first syllable and a reduced vowel in the second. Also the final consonant is the unvoiced [s]. If, however, the centralised [ɜ:] of the first syllable is unstressed and made the short [ɛ], and the vowel in the second syllable is stressed and made the long [ɔ:], and the final consonant becomes the voiced [z], then a very different word is uttered.

[ˈpɜ:pəs] [pɛ'pɔ:z]

This shows how little control spelling exercises over pronunciation in a complex multilingual environment. It is just as well that English spelling is not phonetic.

Pronunciation causes misspelling

An interesting case is what is happening to *this* and *these* in both spelling and pronunciation.

The plural form is disappearing, partly under the force of mispronunciation. The muddle between the short [ɪ] of *this* and the long [i:] of *these* has meant that a short vowel has won but it is still in vowel quality like the high front [i]. Its shortness, however, causes confusion with the word *this*. What also happens is confusion about the final consonant and the unvoiced [s] is retained in the plural form, instead of the voiced [z].

Because of these factors, the teacher who tries to correct something like 'this things is ...', is dealing with more than just a concordial muddle about singulars and plurals. The ear is out of tune. There is uncertainty about whether *this* and *these* at the phonetic level are really different and this works back to the written forms. Pronunciation has a deleterious effect on both spelling and grammar.

Voiced and unvoiced final consonants

The question of voiced and unvoiced final consonants is an interesting one. In the phonological system of Afrikaans there are no voiced final consonants, whatever the spelling. Therefore, the words *eet* and *eed* are both pronounced with the unvoiced [t]. English makes a careful distinction between voiced and unvoiced final consonants. So we have pairs such as *dogs* and *docks*, *rags* and *racks*, *cadge* and *catch*, *edge* and *etch*, *owed* and *oat*. This confusion of voiced and unvoiced final consonants is fairly widespread, going beyond just the English/Afrikaans bilingual situation. There is general difficulty with *belief*, *believe*, *life*, *live*, *to live*. The writer has seen *dick* written for *dig*. What has happened is that the student probably pronounced *dig* as *dick* and then came to write it in that way.

It is amazing how the system of spelling holds up despite variation of accent. Not only does the spelling system hold up, but the interpretative capacity of the brain triumphs over adversity. Take *cat*. In South Africa the vowel [æ] can either be raised to the central front [ɛ] or to the low central [a], a considerable variation. The framework of consonants helps keep things on track, but the system is strained,

nevertheless. Take also *bird*. The central, long [ɜ:] gets shortened and fronted to the tense [ɛ], a considerable transformation that works because we are all familiar with it. Whether *bird bed* or *heard head* are internationally viable is another matter. Teachers, at least, should know what is going on in such cases.

Diphthongs

The diphthong [aɪ], as in *fine*, offers an interesting case of multiple variations for which the spelling system must cater as well as it can. First there are two glide weakened variations, one fronted to a low, front tense vowel, the other backed to a low back vowel. Then there is a glide lengthened variant with the glide going all the way to [i:]. Sometimes this lengthened glide becomes a jump rather than a glide, so ceasing to be a true diphthong. A single spelling encompasses all these variants. Again, teachers should be aware of the kind of variants to which diphthongs are prone, although none of the others have as many variants as [aɪ]. The diphthong [ɛə] as in *there*, or *fair hair*, is usually totally shorn of its glide, and in some accents [eɪ] as in *play* is heavily glide weakened, too.

In conclusion: the teacher

Given the way in which the English spelling system provides only a complex or rather vague guide to pronunciation, there are bound to be problems, especially in the linguistically diverse situation that we have in South Africa. Things are bad enough in the first language situation. They are worse in the second or third language situation. The training of English teachers in South Africa must include instruction through a practical phonetics and pronunciation course in the relationship between English spelling and pronunciation. The topics to be covered have been outlined briefly in this article. An understanding of how spelling in English is not a precise guide to pronunciation is needed. The teacher needs to be equipped with some knowledge of assimilation, slurring, spelling pronunciation, silent letters, stressed

rhythm, reduction. Then there are the conflicting vocalic systems of English and of the African languages; the lack of central vowels in the African languages, uncertainties about vowel length and difficulties with diphthongs. Finally there are certain problems with consonants, largely connected with voicing and unvoicing, although precise knowledge of the point of articulation of each consonant can also be useful. An introduction to received pronunciation could serve as an underpinning but some knowledge of South African variants is also needed.

A very important area to work on at an early stage is stress, the imparting of a natural stressed rhythm. Obviously the teachers have to have some theoretical knowledge, however simplified, themselves. Practice must be done with individual words and also with sentences, and as soon as possible, pupils must learn how to use a dictionary to discover the correct stress on individual words. One reason for teaching stress on individual words and on more extended utterances is so that poetry can be taught and poetry is, in fact, (because rhythm is usually clearly obvious, especially in poetry that is clearly metrical) a good medium for teaching the stress-timed nature of English. This can start at a very early stage with nursery rhymes, which usually exhibit a very obvious stressed/unstressed pattern. Stress pattern must be made consciously part of the teaching procedure and the teacher must know what she is trying to achieve.

It is hard to give broad, all-inclusive advice

on the many other problems caused by a non-phonetic, historically based spelling system. Much has to be learned piecemeal, a detail at a time. Perhaps the main thing is for teachers to understand and impart to their pupils the knowledge that the spelling system is not phonetic and that they must beware of spelling pronunciations. The sooner pupils can use a dictionary, the better. Spelling pronunciation, or an attempt to pronounce according to what the spelling of a word appears to indicate, is a constant hazard. For example, one often hears over the air the word *says* pronounced not [sɛz] but [seɪz] because the *ay* in the spelling seems to indicate those sounds, an analogy with a word like *play*. Much English pronunciation has to be learned detail by detail.

Mention of broadcasting raises the matter of role models. The chief role model is the teacher. In the training of English teachers, methodology is useless without content, without detailed knowledge of the language, of what has to be put across with, if need be, the necessary corrections. The challenge to teacher training is to produce teachers with knowledge of their subject. Unless the teacher, and especially the teacher of the early stages of English, has some knowledge of the nature of English rhythms and pronunciation and of how spelling can be a hazard, bad habits that will probably never be corrected will be the consequence. For this the teacher needs instruction and knowledge and the relation of spelling to pronunciation is one of the basic areas in which teachers should be instructed.

References

Lanham, L.W. and MacDonald, C.A. 1985. *The Standard in South African English and its Social History*. Heidelberg: Julius Groos.

*Prof. P.J.H. Titlestad
Department of English
University of Pretoria
0002 PRETORIA*

Peter Titlestad was born in Pretoria, studied at Cape Town and Cambridge, taught for a short time at the Univer

sity of Natal in Durban and has since spent his working life at the University of Pretoria. Hence, his working life and many of his teaching interests have been shaped by an English second language teaching environment.