

# The Irregularities in the Correspondence of Sound and Symbol in English

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**Abstract:** In English, there is no simple sound-symbol correspondence system. One letter of the alphabet does not represent the same sound all the time, nor does a specific sound always find its representation in one letter of the alphabet. This inconsistency of English sound and its spelling symbols poses a great difficulty to L2 and foreign language learners. This study will look at the reasons for this problem of inconsistency; the manifestation of these inconsistencies and make some suggestions to ease the problem for second and foreign language learners.

**Keywords:** Irregularities; Orthography; Great Vowel Shift; Dialects

## 1. Introduction

The meaning of a symbol is established within a given language or culture. This is the case both for linguistic signs and for gestures (modes of address) or visual representations (e.g. the dove as a symbol of peace) (Bussmann & Kazzazi, 2001)<sup>[1]</sup>. In this thesis, linguistic symbols will be discussed such as letters, combination of letters. As we all know, there is a correspondence between sound and symbol in some languages, for instance, Japanese Kana. Kana is a Japanese system of syllabic writing, which has entirely regular correspondence between orthography and phonology. While Chinese characters is the other extreme. Chinese characters are ideographic characters, which have a very indirect or arbitrary relation with the pronunciation, depending on the character. (Seidenberg et al. 1984: 383)<sup>[7]</sup>.

However, English lies roughly between these two extremes. , The correspondence between symbols and sounds is ambiguous and irregular: each sound of English is represented by more than one written letter or by sequences of letters; and any letter of English represents more than one sound, or letters do not represent any sound at all.

### 1.1 Previous studies

English is so irregular that /fɪf/ might be spelled “ghoti”, which utilizes the “gh” from the word “cough”, the “o” as in women, and the “ti” as in “action”. Some linguists have recognized that the orthography is more complex than an irregular letter-to-sound system, and Francis analyze the relationship between spelling and sound and to enumerate the non-phonemic elements entering into this relationship. (Venezky, 1967: 78)<sup>[9]</sup>.

The most complete linguistic analysis of spelling-to-sound relations has been undertaken by Venezky.<sup>2</sup> Venezky analyzed the correspondences between the spelling and pronunciation in 20,000 words with the help of a computer. And as a result, he give a full description of the relationship between the spelling and pronunciation.

Therefore, we must also cope with the fact that the pronunciations of a significant pool of English words are arbitrary, irregular, or otherwise unpredictable.

### 1.2 Significance of the study

The irregularities of sound and symbol in English pose difficulties to L2/ foreign learners. Facing these irregularities, L2 learners cannot pronounce the unfamiliar or irregular words correctly, which will accordingly influence their English pronunciation and spelling. Glushko (1979)<sup>[3]</sup> also found that “exception” words which have irregular spelling-to-sound correspondences will take longer to read aloud than words with regular correspondences. (Glushko, 1979: 674)<sup>[3]</sup>. Meanwhile, pronunciation latencies were also longer for regular inconsistent words who have predictable pronunciations, but there are also words in English with similar spellings and irregular pronunciations. This result suggested that the inconsistencies in the mapping between spelling and sound in English have more pervasive effects on reading than previously thought. (Seidenberg et al, 1984: 384)<sup>[7]</sup> .

Therefore, figuring out the reasons of these irregular phenomenon, and find solutions to these problems which will be beneficial for our English study.

## 2. Methodology

Two research methods are adopted in this paper. The first one is literature analysis. Literature management software such as Endnote, CiteSpace and other literature metrological visual analysis software are used in order to simplify, visualize and systematize the source materials. Questionnaire is also designed for the study. According to the research topic, in view of university students’ proficiency of

English spelling and pronunciation, the questionnaire “Choose the correct English phonetic transcriptions” was devised. The purpose of the questionnaire is to examine the status of the respondents’ spelling and pronunciation, figure out their problems when facing these discrepancies between sound and symbol, and finally find solutions to solve these problems.

### 3. The reasons of the irregularities between sound and symbol

Many reasons contributed to the inconsistencies between sound and symbol in English. The main reasons are as follows.

#### 3.1 The printing of English

Okeke (2008)<sup>[6]</sup> points out that the printing of English is one of the obvious reasons why there is no regular correspondence between sound and symbol. The printing was established in 1475 when William Caxton published a book in Belgium, the *Recuyell of the Histories of Troye*, which is the first book to be printed in English. After printing was established, there was naturally a tendency to use forms of language that had already appeared in earlier printed books (Upward & Davidson, 2011)<sup>[8]</sup>. So printers tend to conform to a unified standard in printing. Therefore, the spelling of English was gradually fixed in the 15<sup>th</sup> century with the emergence of the printing of English.

#### 3.2 The Great Vowel Shift

On the other hand, the source of this ambiguity is also primarily due to what linguistic historians call the Great English Vowel Shift. Upward & Davidson (2011)<sup>[8]</sup> state that the Great Vowel Shift (GVS) is the name given to a number of important and related pronunciation changes which affected these long vowels during the 15th, 16th and perhaps early 17th centuries and which resulted in the differences between the sound–spelling correspondences of the continental European languages. During the process of GVS, the pronunciation of long vowels changed. For instance, the second grapheme <e> in “serene” who corresponded to the long vowel /e:/ became /i:/ in the GVS, while in “serenity”, the second grapheme <e> reads /e/. After English spelling was becoming more fixed, these sound changes were not reflected in the spelling system, which result in the different sound in same symbol.

#### 3.3 The preserved etymology in spelling

It’s an undeniable fact that the spelling of English is etymologized, which means that the English spelling retains etymology. In Modern English there are words “Dette and Sotill”, which were later written “debt” and “subtle” in order to show their connection with Latin source words “debitum” and “subtilem” (Upward & Davidson, 2011)<sup>[8]</sup>.

#### 3.4 The influence of loan words

What’s more, another reason concerns the inconsistency between sound and symbol is the influence of the borrowed words from Latin, French, Greek and Scandinavian, etc. Borrowed words from French such as “Ballet”, the grapheme <et> reads /ei/ rather than /et/, while in English word “wallet”, it pronounced /'wɒlɪt/. That the different pronunciation of the letters <et> can explain the reason why the same letters does not always represent the same sound. Furthermore, there are some more obvious borrowed words, “rouge” /ru:ʒ/, bourgeois /'bʊʒwa:/, etc, which increased the proportion of the discrepancy of English pronunciation and spelling.

#### 3.5 A variety of dialects and accents

Last but not least is the influence of dialects and accents. The pronunciation of geographic dialects vary from one to another.

For instance, the pronunciation of /r/ after a vowel, as in bark-in Britain. Speakers in the areas including Ireland, Scotland, southwestern England, and a small area near Liverpool–pronounce their /r/s in this position, but speakers in the area–basically the rest of England and Wales, including the city of London–do not (McKay & Hornberger, 1996)<sup>[5]</sup>.

English is widely used around the world, which brings about the changes of pronunciation in different accents. For example, the English of Afrikaans speakers is heavily influenced by the linguistic patterns of their mother tongue. They will pronounce hands as [haens], [faens] or [hens], which devolve the final /z/ and omit /d/. (Lanham & Traill, 1962: 175)<sup>[4]</sup>. However, these changes in dialects and accents are not reflected in the spelling, which aggravate the discrepancy between spelling and pronunciation in English.

### 4. The manifestation of the inconsistencies between sound and symbol.

The inconsistencies are shown in the following aspects: the same letter may represent the different sounds; the same sound may be represented by different letters; some letters are not pronounced; the sound are added to pronunciation of spelling while there is no corresponding letter.

#### 4.1 The same letter represent the different sounds.

(1) The letter <a> is pronounced (major pronunciations are listed)

/ə/-- “about”, “above”, “adjust”

/æ/-- “mad”, “hand”, “sad”

(2) The letter <c> can represent:

/k/-- “cat”, “cup”, “cottage”

/s/-- “cease”, “cyber”, “cite”

(3) The letter <u> can pronounce as:

/ʌ/-- “sun”, “gun”, “bus”

/u/-- “school”, “fool”, “pollute”

#### 4.2 The same sound represented by different symbols.

(1) The long vowel /i:/ may be realized by:

<e>-- “easy”, “each”, “eely”

<ea>-- “meat”, “eagle”, “peace”, “cease”

(2) The fricative /f/ is spelt:

<gh>-- “cough”, “enough”, “laugh”

<ph>-- “physics”, “photo”, “phone”, “graph”

(3) The vowel /e/ can be spelled

<ea>-- “bread”, “instead”, “measure”

<ai>-- “said”, “failsafe”

#### 4.3 Some letters are not pronounced.

(1) The letter “b” is silent: subtle--/'sʌtl/, limb--/lɪm/, climb--/klaɪm/.

(2) The letter “h” is silent: hour--/'aʊə(r)/, honest--/'ɒnɪst/, vehicle--/'vi:əkl/.

#### 4.4 The inserted sound

(1) /j/ is pronounced before u, for example:

Use /ju:z/

Cute /kju:t/

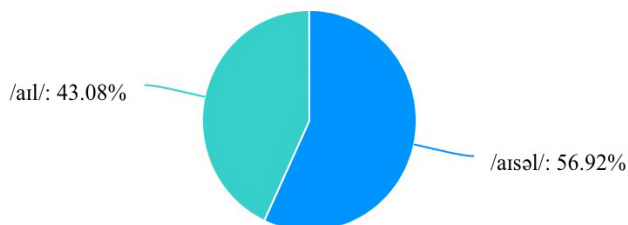
/w/ is inserted before the letter o in one, once. (Okeke, 2008: 71)<sup>[6]</sup>

### 5. Results and solutions to the problem of spelling and pronunciation

In order to know the difficulties L2/ foreign learners may encounter when they meet the inconsistencies between sound

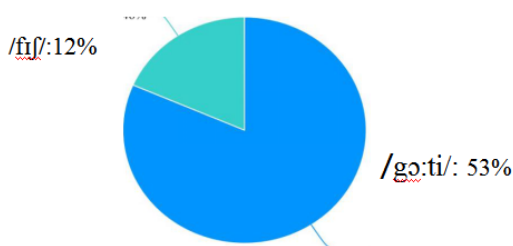
and symbol, a questionnaire was made and distributed online to 65 junior college students, hoping to learn about the difficulties they would face in dealing with inconsistent English spelling and pronunciation. The topic of the questionnaire is “ Choose the correct English phonetic transcriptions”, and 10 items were designed in which each item have two different answers. For instance, the item “above” includes two different phonetic transcriptions--/ə' bʌv/, /e' bʌv/. All the items are classified as 5 pairs. Each pair of words correspond to the each embodiment of inconsistencies of sound and symbols. The purpose of this questionnaire is to examine whether students can recognize the correct pronunciation when facing the inconsistency of symbol and sound, and figure out in which aspect they perform the worst that we need to pay more attention to in order to address the problem.

The results show that some junior college students still choose the wrong answers as they are easily get confused when they meet different phonemes of the same grapheme. What's more, as shown in figure 1, more than half of students don't know the silent letter <s> in the word “aisle” which explain that they have no perception or have low perception of the silent letters in the pronunciation of words.

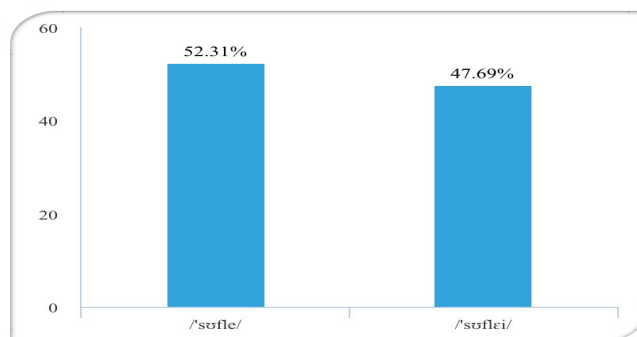
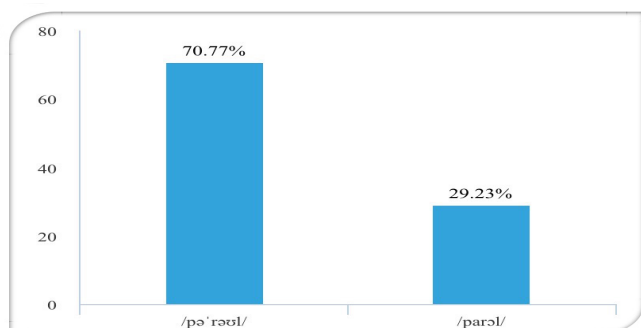


Meanwhile, from students' choices of pronunciation of “ghoti”, we can know that when students face unfamiliar words, the way they pronounce the words is to follow its spelling and its usual corresponding pronunciation, however, sometimes it doesn't work. As shown in figure 2, most of students choose the wrong answer.

Most important of all, from the data gathered, we



found that in response to the pronunciation of loan words “parole” and “soufflé”, there always more than half of students choose the wrong pronunciation.



The overall results show students' poor performances in the choices of pronunciations of silent letters, loan words and unfamiliar words. When facing different pronunciations, it's harder for them to decide which one is correct answer.

Hence, we need to pay more attention to the silent letters, unfamiliar words and loan words, which needs us to collect as much as possible in our daily study when facing these pronunciation and remember more regular correspondence between sound and symbol.

**The limitations of the study:** The questionnaire is not quite complete and the items are relatively simple, there should be more items, for instance, list a phoneme, and students are asked to choose all of its possible graphemes, which can examine their competence in dealing with the divergence between symbol and sound. Moreover, the choice of loan words--parole is not quite proper for it has the pronunciation /pə' rəʊl/ in English, which has been incorporated into English pronunciation and spelling patterns, it cannot be the best representative of loan words, which should be replaced by the words who are more representative like “rouge” or “bourgeois”.

**Conclusion:** The study has discussed the reasons of the irregularities in the correspondence of sound and symbol in English, the specific embodiment of these irregularities. By summarizing the data in gathered from the questionnaire, it is found that students have low competence in recognizing the correct pronunciation of words have silent letters, loan words and unfamiliar words. Hence, the results remind us of paying more attention to these inconsistencies when studying, also collect these irregularities as much as possible so as to reduce our difficulties as a L2/ foreign learners.

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