

## Chapter 2

### Sound and fury: English phonology

/sawnd ən fjʌɹij/  
/ɪŋɡlɪʃ fənələdʒij/

In this chapter, we look at English sound patterns. We learn about the distinct sounds that make up words (*phonemes*), and the mechanisms in the vocal tract that are employed to produce them. We learn a system of writing that can be used to accurately reflect pronunciation, the *International Phonetic Alphabet*. We think about how sounds group into families, and consider one example of sound change from the prehistory of English. This groundwork will allow us, in future chapters, to understand the restrictions on phonological words in English, to look at other historical changes that altered the pronunciation of English words in the past, as well as to discuss differences between dialects of English spoken today. It will also enable us to analyze other kinds of processes in English words, when we look at prefixes and suffixes.

#### 2.1 *English spelling and English pronunciation*

The first thing we have to do, when considering the pronunciation of English words, is find a way to represent their pronunciation accurately in print (since you can't hear me talking). English spelling is notoriously bad at this: probably, at least once in your life as a literate English speaker, you have mispronounced a word in speech that you learned from a book. It happens to me pretty frequently.

Just consider the following famous sets of words

- (11) a. their                    they're            there  
 b. cox                        cocks              caulks  
 c. Mary                      merry              marry  
 d. prints                     prince  
 e. threw                     through  
 f. who's                     whose

Each set is pronounced the same way (at least in my dialect of English), but they are spelled differently: if you were an alien, or a child, looking at written English, you might reasonably surmise that they should sound different. And of course, there are similar problems in the other direction: the same spelling can be pronounced differently in different words:

- (12) a. lead [*a metal*]            lead [*to precede*]  
 b. dove [*a bird*]                dove [*fell in a controlled way*]  
 c. does [*an auxiliary verb*]    does [*more than one female deer*]  
 d. wound [*an injury*]            wound [*wrapped around*]

This fact about English orthography is very well known; everyone who has learned to write English knows it. Gerard Nolst Trenité, a Dutch teacher of English, wrote the following remarkable poem to illustrate this point. Try reading it aloud to yourself. All the rhymes are valid; if you hit a word you don't recognize, or that you don't believe rhymes, look it up in a good English dictionary.

### Exercise 1: Read this poem aloud.

#### The Chaos

Dearest creature in creation, Study English pronunciation. I will teach you in my verse Sounds like corpse, corps, horse, and worse. (Mind the latter, how it's written.) I will keep you, Suzy, busy, Make your head with heat grow dizzy. Tear in eye, your dress will tear. So shall I! Oh hear my prayer.	Just compare heart, beard, and heard, Dies and diet, lord and word, Sword and sward, retain and Britain. Now I surely will not plague you With such words as plaque and ague. But be careful how you speak: Say break and steak, but bleak and streak;
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Cloven, oven, how and low,  
Script, receipt, show, poem, and toe.

Hear me say, devoid of trickery,  
Daughter, laughter, and Terpsichore,  
Typhoid, measles, topsails, aisles,  
Exiles, similes, and reviles;  
Scholar, vicar, and cigar,  
Solar, mica, war and far;  
One, anemone, Balmoral,  
Kitchen, lichen, laundry, laurel;  
Gertrude, German, wind and mind,  
Scene, Melpomene, mankind.

Billet does not rhyme with ballet,  
Bouquet, wallet, mallet, chalet.  
Blood and flood are not like food,  
Nor is mould like should and would.  
Viscous, viscount, load and board,  
Toward, to forward, to reward.  
And your pronunciation's OK  
When you correctly say croquet,  
Rounded, wounded, grieve and sieve,  
Friend and fiend, alive and live.

Ivy, privy, famous; clamour  
And enamour rhyme with hammer.  
River, rival, tomb, bomb, comb,  
Doll and roll and some and home.  
Stranger does not rhyme with anger,  
Neither does devour with clangour.  
Souls but foul, haunt but aunt,  
Font, front, wont, want, grand, and grant,  
Shoes, goes, does. Now first say finger,  
And then singer, ginger, linger,  
Real, zeal, mauve, gauze, gouge and gauge,  
Marriage, foliage, mirage, and age.

Query does not rhyme with very,  
Nor does fury sound like bury.  
Dost, lost, post and doth, cloth, loth.

Job, nob, bosom, transom, oath.  
Though the differences seem little,  
We say actual but victual.  
Refer does not rhyme with deafer.  
Foeffer does, and zephyr, heifer.  
Mint, pint, senate and sedate;  
Dull, bull, and George ate late.  
Scenic, Arabic, Pacific,  
Science, conscience, scientific.

Liberty, library, heave and heaven,  
Rachel, ache, moustache, eleven.  
We say hallowed, but allowed,  
People, leopard, towed, but vowed.  
Mark the differences, moreover,  
Between mover, cover, clover;  
Leeches, breeches, wise, precise,  
Chalice, but police and lice;  
Camel, constable, unstable,  
Principle, disciple, label.

Petal, panel, and canal,  
Wait, surprise, plait, promise, pal.  
Worm and storm, chaise, chaos, chair,  
Senator, spectator, mayor.  
Tour, but our and succour, four.  
Gas, alas, and Arkansas.  
Sea, idea, Korea, area,  
Psalm, Maria, but malaria.  
Youth, south, southern, cleanse and clean.  
Doctrine, turpentine, marine.

Compare alien with Italian,  
Dandelion and battalion.  
Sally with ally, yea, ye,  
Eye, I, ay, aye, whey, and key.  
Say aver, but ever, fever,  
Neither, leisure, skein, deceiver.  
Heron, granary, canary.  
Crevice and device and aerie.