



Correct English Pronunciation

This note addresses and solves some perplexing questions in English pronunciation. It is not about accents, national, regional, or class. They are all equally correct or incorrect, depending on one's point of view, I guess. It is about the sound value of letters in English words, and specifically it is about how to pronounce vowels.

It is impossible to understand and use a language without understanding the pronunciation rules, because at their roots all languages are spoken languages. The written languages related to them are in themselves not properly “language,” if we understand that term to mean the medium in which we form interpersonal communication. This note, for instance, is a communication of sorts, but it is not interpersonal in the strictest sense. I have no idea who is reading it, and as I write I do not get any of the immediate feedback of understanding or confusions that we get when we converse directly with others. That is not to diminish the value of the written word. It is in many ways far more effective and powerful than conversation. The reader could be reclining comfortably thousands of miles away; he could be doing so centuries after I type these words; and he could bring to this experience a great wealth of related knowledge and experience that I couldn't even guess at.

We all know that the messages conveyed in writing are far more complex and generally more memorable than the spoken words of daily conversation. The medium however is the same, and it is the medium of the spoken word.¹

Syllables

The basis for correct pronunciation is to correctly understand the central importance of syllables. A syllable is a phonetic unit, a unit of pronunciation. Syllables occur in words wrapped around, so-to-speak, vowels. In English there is a nearly perfect correlation between vowels and syllables. English has some diphthongs – pairs of vowels that are pronounced as a single, different vowel – but unlike some other languages, they

¹ We can amplify our writing with all kinds of visual aids – charts, drawings, photographs, and the like – but they cannot substitute for the words. A picture may indeed be worth a thousand words, but it never substitutes for those words. One common mistake young writers makes is to pepper their writing with these visuals, leaving the reader to interpret them unassisted, and hoping that the reader gets the right point. Accept this as a rule: the pictures don't speak for themselves. If there is some point you wish to make with them, you have to tell the reader what it is.

are very rare. The double “o” in book is a true diphthong; it is not “o” or even “o—o,” is it the letter “oo.” Since our letter “u” is pronounced “yoo,” there is a need for some way to write the “oo” sound stripped of the “y.”

Without therefore questioning whether diphthongs are a part of the English language, I will largely ignore them as a phenomenon in what follows. I will have to address the pronunciation of vowel pairs like the “ea” in “great,” but as we will see, that pair is not a diphthong; it is actually the two letters, “e” and “a” next to each other. Actually, going forward I will rely on the following rule, accepting that it is not invariably correct: The number of syllables in a word is equal to the number of vowels therein.

The Vowels

Now we need to agree on what are the vowels. I will not try to list all the genuine diphthongs. There are seven vowels that appear as individual characters: “a,” “e,” “i,” “o,” “u,” “y,” and “mute e.” We do not have a distinct character for “mute e.” In ordinary writing we use the character for “e,” but in the dictionary it is represented by the “schwah” symbol, \eth . The letter “y,” as we know, can be either a vowel or a consonant. In either case, it is pronounced the same way, as “long e:” “ē.” It is no different from \bar{e} except in how and where it is used. The first five vowels have distinct long and short forms, with the long form being represented with a bar over the character and the short form represented by a “cup” over the character: \bar{a} and \check{a} , \bar{e} and \check{e} , \bar{i} and \check{i} , \bar{o} and \check{o} , and \bar{u} and \check{u} . In some languages the letter “r” can also be a vowel; in those languages the r is “rolled,” with the rolled form actually being a vowel. But we will settle for our seven, plus long and short versions.

Pronunciation of syllables

Now we can handle the fundamental rule of syllables and their pronunciation. Every syllable consists of a vowel and some number – possibly zero – of consonants.

If the vowel is the last letter of the syllable, it is long and if it is followed in the syllable by a consonant it is short.

Since y and \eth have only one sound value – no separate long and short sounds – this rule doesn’t apply to them in practice.

Example: “Final e”

Consider the word “fine.” Why do we pronounce it $\text{f}\bar{\text{i}}\text{n}$ instead of $\text{f}\check{\text{i}}\text{n}$? We have a word $\text{f}\check{\text{i}}\text{n}$, which signifies among other things the appendage of a fish. How then do we know that I feel $\text{f}\bar{\text{i}}\text{n}$ and not $\text{f}\check{\text{i}}\text{n}$. The part of the fish is a one syllable word of which the final letter is a consonant, n. So the i is short i, \check{i} . The way I feel is a two syllable word –

two vowels and therefore two syllables: fi—ne. Since the first syllable ends in the vowel i, it is long i. The second syllable ends in the letter Θ . To make a point, we could leave just a little breath left over for the second syllable, pronouncing it “fi—nuh.” In practice, in modern English the mute e is really mute: not breath left over. We actually pronounce the word “fine” as though it was written “fi— \check{e} n.” Those persons who speak Continental languages – French, German, Spanish, and the others – accuse English-speaking people of using “compound vowels,” unlike their “pure vowels.” That is to say, they hear the “i-e” sequence when we say “fi— \check{e} n,” but they mistakenly conclude that we are simply mispronouncing the “i.”

The example actually covers all cases of “final e.” The tortured nonsense that goes for an explanation of “silent e” in the schools is completely mistaken. It is treated as a sort of phonetic magic, acting at a distance to confer on some other vowel a long sound.

Example: Sara, meet Sarah

Why do we place an “h” at the end of names that end on the letter “a?” In the Continental languages, there is no “long a” or “short a;” the letter “a” is always pronounced as our “short a.” As a result, there is no need to clarify how it should be pronounced at the end of a woman’s name. In English however there is ambiguity. Who really is dear Sarah? Is she “S \check{a} r— \bar{a} ” or “S \check{a} r— \check{a} .” “Saray” or “Sarah?” The final “h” makes the second syllable into “ah,” so the “a” is short.

Example: potato and more potatoes

Why is a potato spelled that way, but when we decide to eat two of them each becomes a “potatoe?” “Potato is of course the three syllable word: “p \bar{o} —t \bar{a} —t \bar{o} .” Now, when we have two of them, we could just add a plural “s,” “potatos.” Potatos is still a three syllable word because it still has only three vowels but the last syllable is different. It is now “p \bar{o} —t \bar{a} —t \check{o} s.” The second “o” has become short because it is followed by a consonant. Hmmm. Not good. We wanted to be talking about our toes, not our toss. Aha! Try the four syllable version, “p \bar{o} —t \bar{a} —t \bar{o} — \check{e} s.” It is necessary to keep that “s” away from the “o,” so the short e comes in very handy. We could have used the silent e at the end instead, but that would obscure the role of the s, which is to pluralize our single lonely potato. It would be written “potatose” and pronounced “p \bar{o} —t \bar{a} —t \bar{o} —s Θ .”

Example: great and greet

English pronunciation still has its lurking ambiguities, of which the vowel combinations “ea” and “ee” constitute important examples. The soft vowels, “e” and “i” have two different long pronunciations. In Old English and Scandinavian languages, long e is pronounced “ee,” but on the Continent it is “ay,” as in “say” or “day.” Long i in old English is “aye” but on the Continent it is “ee.” So now let’s consider “great.” It is a two

syllable word, “grē—ēt.” Note that the “e” and “a” belong to distinct syllables; they are not a diphthong. Okay, that’s understood, but how are we supposed to pronounce long e? Is it “gree” or “gray?” The choice is actually arbitrary. Not arbitrary for you and I – for us the correct pronunciation is fixed by the conventions of the language – but not fixed logically by any other rule. The chosen pronunciation probably derives from the history of the word, suggesting that the word did not derive from the Scandinavian roots of Old English, because we use the Continental pronunciation.

In any case, the surplus valid pronunciation is just the thing we need to differentiate “greet” from “great.” We can also use the fact the “āt” and “ēt” sound almost identical to differentiate between the phonetic spellings: “grē—āt,” and “grē—ēt.” It is tempting to conclude from this example that when the vowel is “ea,” we use the Continental pronunciation of the long e, but there are counterexamples to that rule. It is true on the other side, however, that the combination “ee” always sounds like “ee.”

Example: slippery “y,” “ay” and aye”

It is no fun having letters that can be either consonants or vowels. The letter “y” is however much more well behaved than we have any reason to expect. In Old English the character “y” was used to signify “short i” in words where the “i” should have been long. Thus, the man who forges iron into horseshoes is in Old English a “Smythe,” and not a “Smithe.” The difference is that either of the words is a two syllable word, with mute e at the end. The first syllable could be either “smy” or “smi,” but if it is the latter, the “i” would be long i. By convention, “y” is always short i. We don’t recognize that particular rule anymore, so we just bring our horses to the smith. On the way, the letter y became like long i, as it is pronounced in the Continental languages.²

Consider the word “day.” We have to ask ourselves how many syllables it has. If the “y” is a consonant it has one syllable, but if the “y” is a vowel it has two syllables. The way the “y” is pronounced gives no guidance. Both vowel and consonant are pronounced the same way. The answer comes from how we pronounce the rest of the word. If “y” is a consonant, the word is “dāy,” and the “a” would be short a. This spelling would more familiarly be pronounced like the coloring agent: “dye.”³ If the “y” is a vowel, the word has two syllables, and is pronounced “dā—y.”

Now for “aye.” In this case the “y” is a consonant, I can’t image any word consisting only of three vowels, so it is a two syllable word, “āy—ə.” The “a” is short because it is followed by a consonant. The final, mute e is there to signal that the “y” is the consonant.

² Note however that smith is still a two syllable word although we don’t bother with the mute e at the end. This is an example of a phenomenon I will talk about later: letting the written language be corrupted by bad pronunciation.

³ “Dye” is phonetically “dī—ə.” How the “y” came to be pronounced like long “i” is a mystery. If the word followed the unusual pronunciation/spelling rules, it would be spelled “daye.”

Double Consonants

These rules also explain the function of double consonants. We double a consonant not to change the pronunciation of the consonant, of course – the pronunciation of consonants is almost invariable – but to signal the pronunciation of the vowel that precedes it.

Example: Rabbit

Why is a rabbit having a double “b?” Spelled with a single b, we don’t know where to break for the syllables. Is the word “rāb—īt,” or is it “rā—bīt?” There is one simple way to resolve the confusion, by writing “rāb—bīt.”

Example: Cabin

Aha!, you say. What about “cabin?” Obviously this entails a different spelling rule, or an additional one. In the Gaelic root language that is one of the components of English – by way of the Britons – nouns generally end in the letter “n,” and the final syllable is some variant of “in,” “an,” “on,” or “oon.” These are the English counterparts of the Italian “ino” and “ina.” Everyone familiar with this practice would naturally and correctly assume that the final “in” on cabin was also the final syllable. In that case there is no confusion and no need for a second “b.” Actually, as in Italian, the suffix “in” is a diminutive. “Cabin” means a “little cab,” as in “cabinet.”

The syllable break is so important that in older languages it was sometimes forced by inserting a character that was not to be pronounced, but only signified the break. In Old English the character used was the letter “p.” It survives in a few words. The name Thompson, for instance, signifies the son of Thomas, but the obvious spelling Thomson is confusing because of the rule in “cabin.” Thomson would naturally be pronounced “Thoms—on.” While that is a nice name, it loses the meaning of “son of...” The extra, silent p forces us to say “Thom—son.” The same is true of the “p” in Simpson (“son of Simon”) and in pumpkin. Without the “p” in your pumpkin, the word would be “pumk—in,” which is not so bad, but in the old days the pair “um” was pronounced “un.” So lacking the “p,” pumpkin would be pronounced “punk—in.” We have all heard it pronounced that way.

Conclusion

No one ever said that pronunciation is easy, but it doesn’t have to be nearly as hard as our uneducated educators want to make it. For the most part, it makes sense. The key is syllables, recognizing in addition that very few vowel combinations in English are diphthongs.

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