

Fanatic About Phonetics

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I

Welcome to the world of phonetics,
Just hope you don't turn too frenetic,
Nor end up too lunatic,
But only just be kind-of fanatic -
In attempting to understand
This universal language of man
Try not to have too much *elan*
But just hope that your mind 'll expand.
The unpredictability of sound and symbol
Makes language-learning not too simple -
Take 'cough', 'tough', 'bough', 'although' and 'through'
Each spells 'ough' but sounds individually new.
Then how about 'bush' and 'rush'
You really can't compare them much.
Then there's 'break', 'beak', 'read' and 'reed' —
For some sanity there is much need.
'Isles', 'aisles', 'beguile' and 'mile' —
Can we ever easily smile
And say 'we'll bear it' - just for a while?
Oh no then there's 'women', 'orange' and 'business'
When orthographic o, e, a, u, are pronounced /i/,
'Knew', 'hour', 'pneumonia', 'psychology'
Have an unnecessary piece of orthography
The 'silenced' one they often call it,
Why in the first place ever use it?
'Hour', 'our', 'grower' and 'bower'
Aren't these enough to make one cower
In fright and with no respite
Mind you, not really with delight
'High', 'buy', 'bye' and 'lie',
Can easily make a new learner cry
One surely cannot deny
That some sanity is due well nigh.
There's also 'reign', 'rain' and 'rein'
'Fare', 'fair', 'tear' and 'rare'
Compare these with
'Tear', 'here', 'seer' and 'tier'
'Sound', 'cow', 'bough' and 'row'
Could all have been spelt with an /au/

Then there's 'bird' 'hurt' and 'heard'
 That add to this menagerie of words
 How about 'ninth' and 'plinth'?
 Surely, this is a 'phonetic labyrinth.*'
 'Blood' and 'flood' but 'food' and 'foot'-
 Are they alike to 'mould' or 'would'?
 The double 'o' that looks like /u/
 Has a lot of variety for you-
 Like 'brook' and 'school'
 Seem near to 'full' and 'shoe'?
 It's 'police', 'chalice' but 'lice',
 Which hardly looks like 'lies'
 'Wait' and 'gait' but 'plait' and 'plate' -
 How do we get up-to-date?
 There's also not much choice
 Between 'voice', 'buoys' and 'boys'.
 With this confusion we can deal,
 If all of us have more zeal,
 I really, truly, sincerely feel,
 A knowledge of phonetics will reveal
 How variant orthography can be
 It's not just a matter of A, B, and C.
 Although we don't necessarily teach it,
 We must definitely try to reach it.
 Things will be clearer you'll see
 For those in the language-teaching industry

II

In Bahasa, things are not so crazy,
 It's quite easy for both diligent and lazy -
 It's always /a/ for 'hari' and 'lari',
 And always /i/ for 'mari sini'
 The only poser is 'e' *pepet* and *taling*
 Which has now been given the fling.
 If at all there's any confusion
 It mainly arises from loan-renditions -
 Like 'fail' from English 'file'
 May sometimes look like 'fail' (/feil/).
 Then there's 'pensel', 'pos' and 'bas'
 Can we sori these out quite fast?
 Or don't forget words like 'universiti',
 'Hospital', 'dokter', 'ambulan' - cause *komplikasi*.
 In any case, we must all remember
 Language learning is not really a puzzler.
 It's our enthusiasm and attitude
 That can add some latitude
 To this tool of communication
 That links all the various nations

Tamil too is not that tedious
 For the enthusiastic and the zealous.
 In Romanised script 'tis obvious to us
 That sound and symbol are well in focus,
 It's only the original script that's a twister
 That can confuse a new-learning mister.
 The lines and curves of orthography
 Need constant practice for full mastery
 The 2 r's, 3 n's and 3 l's
 Can sometimes turn you merry-hell,
 But otherwise it's just a matter,
 Of getting used to retroflex chatter

* Anthony Bladon in 'Chaos' 1976. Lecturer of English Phonetics, U.C.N.W Bangor (University of Wales, U.K.).