

The Chaos

of English Pronunciation

by G. Nolst Trenité

Dearest creature in creation,
Study English pronunciation.
I will teach you in my verse
Sounds like corpse, corps, horse, and worse.

5 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,
10 Dies and diet, lord and word,
Sword and sward, retain and Britain.
(Mind the latter, how it's written.)
Now I surely will not plague you
With such words as plaque and ague.

15 But be careful how you speak:
Say break and steak, but bleak and streak;
Cloven, oven, how and low,
Script, receipt, show, poem, and toe.

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

Billet does not rhyme with ballet,
30 Bouquet, wallet, mallet, chalet.
Blood and flood are not like food,
Nor is mould like should and would.
Viscous, viscount, load and broad,
Toward, to forward, to reward.
35 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
40 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.

45 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,
50 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.
55 Though the differences seem little,
We say actual but victual.
Refer does not rhyme with deafer.
Foeffler does, and zephyr, heifer.
Mint, pint, senate and sedate;
60 Dull, bull, and George ate late.
Scenic, Arabic, Pacific,
Science, conscience, scientific.

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

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

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

Heron, granary, canary.
 90 Crevice and device and aerie.
 Face, but preface, not efface.
 Phlegm, phlegmatic, ass, glass, bass.
 Large, but target, gin, give, verging,
 Ought, out, joust and scour, scouring.
 95 Ear, but earn and wear and tear
 Do not rhyme with here but ere.
 Seven is right, but so is even,
 Hyphen, roughen, nephew Stephen,
 Monkey, donkey, Turk and jerk,
 100 Ask, grasp, wasp, and cork and work.

Pronunciation -- think of Psyche!
 Is a paling stout and spikey?
 Won't it make you lose your wits,
 Writing groats and saying grits?
 105 It's a dark abyss or tunnel:
 Strewn with stones, stowed, solace, gunwale,
 Islington and Isle of Wight,
 Housewife, verdict and indict.
 Finally, which rhymes with enough --
 110 Though, through, plough, or dough, or cough?
 Hiccough has the sound of cup.
 My advice is: Give it up!

Explanations

aerie -- the nest of a bird on a cliff or a mountaintop; a dwelling on a height

ague -- a fever (as malaria) marked by recurring intervals of chills, fever, and sweating; a fit of shivering

aver -- to declare positively; to allege or assert in pleading a cause

ay -- ever, always, continually; used as "ay me" to express sorrow or regret

aye -- yes; affirmative vote

Balmoral -- a round flat cap with a top projecting all around; a laced boot or shoe (Balmoral Castle, Scotland)

billet -- an official order directing that a military person be provided with room and board; position or job

breeches -- short trousers fitting snugly and ending just below the knee; trousers

chaise -- a two-wheel horse-drawn carriage; chaise longue (long reclining chair)

chalice -- goblet

clangour -- a resounding loud ringing metallic sound or medley of such (clangs); to make a clangour

cloven -- past participle of cleave: split as if by cutting, to separate into distinct parts

deaf -- more unable to hear or unwilling to listen

dost -- archaic present second-person singular of Do

doth -- archaic present third-person singular of Do

efface -- to eliminate or make indistinct by wearing away a surface; to make oneself modestly inconspicuous

ere -- before

groats -- a grain exclusive of the hull

gunwale -- upper edge of a boat's side

hallowed -- holy, consecrated, sacred, revered

heifer -- a young cow that has not had a calf

loth -- loath: reluctant, disinclined

mauve -- purple, violet or lilac color

Melpomene -- Greek Muse of tragedy

nob -- head; jack of starter suit in cribbage; one in a superior position in life

paling -- a picket fence; a picket for a fence

phlegm -- mucus secreted in abnormal quantity in the respiratory passages

phlegmatic -- having a slow and stolid temperament; impassive
plait -- a braid; pleat
plough -- plow
privy -- one who shares in a secret; toilet
Psyche -- Greek princess loved by Cupid; mind; soul, self
reviles -- to subject to verbal abuse; to use abusive language
scourging -- to whip severely; devastate; to subject to severe criticism or satire
skein -- a loosely coiled length of yarn or thread
succour -- relieve; aid, help
sward -- the grassy surface of land; a portion of ground covered with grass
Terpsichore -- Greek Muse of dancing and choral song
transom -- the planking forming the stern of a boat
verging -- to be on the edge or border; to be in transition or change
vicar -- one serving as a substitute or agent (administrative deputy); an Episcopal clergyman
victual -- provisions; food; supplies of food
viscount -- a rank below an earl and above a baron in Great Britain
viscous -- having a glutinous consistency
wont -- accustomed; habitual way of doing
ye -- the
yea -- yes; affirmative vote; not only this, but more

(The annotations were originally available at <<http://apex.cudenver.edu/jody/EITS/eits.html>> - this page seems to have been taken off the Internet.)

The above version of "The Chaos" is a shortened one and has been annotated for use in the language classroom. The full version (274 lines) was published in the *Journal of the Simplified Spelling Society*, issue No.17, 1994/2, pp27-31 and can be found online at this URL:

<<http://www.les.aston.ac.uk/sss/jss942caos.html>>

This article also contains some biographical details on the poem's author:

The author of *The Chaos* was a Dutchman, the writer and traveller Dr Gerard Nolst Trenité. Born in 1870, he studied classics, then law, then political science at the University of Utrecht, but without graduating (his Doctorate came later, in 1901). From 1894 he was for a while a private teacher in California, where he taught the sons of the Netherlands Consul-General. From 1901 to 1918 he worked as a schoolteacher in Haarlem, and published several schoolbooks in English and French, as well as a study of the Dutch constitution. From 1909 until his death in 1946 he wrote frequently for an Amsterdam weekly paper, with a linguistic column under the pseudonym *Charivarius*.

The first known version of *The Chaos* appeared as an appendix (*Aanhangsel*) to the 4th edition of Nolst Trenité's schoolbook *Drop Your Foreign Accent: engelsche uitspraak oefeningen* (Haarlem: H D Tjeenk Willink & Zoon, 1920).

Layout: Peter Ringeisen

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on 15 April 2001.