The Enigma of English

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One of the most baffling hurdles English language learners are confronted with is the complete lack of logic when it comes to the spelling and pronunciation of certain words. Why, for instance, should 'ough' at the end of a word be pronounced in so many ways. If 'tough' sounds like 'tuff' why isn't a 'doughnut' a 'duffnut'? Similarly if rough is 'ruff' why can't a ruffian be a 'roughian'? And if 'laughter' is 'lafter' why isn't 'daughter' 'dafter'? It just doesn't make sense.



The French have no doubt, made a carnival of this by introducing zillions of silent letters in their words along with accents (sorry axos). Some of them have crept into English lingo; which is why it is so jarring when people pronounce the 'g' in champagne and cognac and literally say coup-dé-tat. And what about reservoir and rendezvous – who would have thought...?

The French, however, can get away with their eccentricities, being stylish and all. The aplomb and flair with which they say the most mundane things entitles them to a bit of snootiness. But what happened to the logical, stoical, practical English? Did they really have to make life so difficult for the rest of the English language - loving world by having such discrepancies in the way they say words?

There is little justification, for example, for a Colonel to be called 'kernel' and a lieutenant to be 'leftenant'. Brownie points for the Americans who say it like it's spelt though why they insist on saying 'erb instead of 'herb' is a mystery. Perhaps they just want to be different from their once-upon-a-time colonial masters. Hence the rejection of the 'u' in colour, honour, favour etc.

The function of the letter 'b' in subtle which is pronounced 'suttle' for no reason at all and in doubt or debt is utterly bewildering.

If the 'h' is silent in honour or honest then home and hose should be pronounced 'ome' and 'ose' . Then you have completely incomprehensible words like victual which is pronounced 'vittle' while actual is just the way it is spelt.

It gets even more complicated on our own turf where there is an unfathomable confusion over sounds produced by 'j' and 'z' (which technically doesn't exist in the Bengali alphabet) – in other words 'zay' and 'jed'. This is compounded by another phenomenon (which, by the way, could easily have been spelt fenomenon) – the substitution of 'v' for the Bengali letter 'bha', which unfortunately does not have an exact English equivalent. Thus you may get text messages like this:

'Zunaid Vaiya and Jerin Vabi, please come to our house 9/1 Zigatola for vat, vaji and vorta. Onek valovasha niyo. Jubair and Zahanara.'

Stranger still is the fact that while we have no problem pronouncing the 'v' in 'vabi', when it comes to saying 'violence' and 'vocation' we will say 'bhiolence' and 'bhocation'.

Translations are indeed a tricky business especially when it comes to expressions or phrases that have evolved without much care for logic. This may lead to a host saying 'Eat shamelessly' or a guest saying she cannot eat anymore as she is 'fed up' and feeling 'fullish'.

It's also hard to keep up with all those English words that have found modern meanings and the archaic use of which have been abandoned in English speaking countries but tenaciously held on to in the post colonial world. You are not supposed to say for instance, 'I feel so gay today' unless you are declaring your sexual orientation. Nobody is anybody's 'bosom buddy' anymore, nor is it appropriate to have an 'intimacy' with one's boss and boast about it. It is completely unacceptable to say 'negro' when referring to someone who is of African or African American origin but okay to say they are 'black'.

It is also crass to just say in public that one has an 'affair' when one means relationship and refer to a significant other as 'my lover'.

If you are intimidated by the idiosyncrasies of the English language, don't be. The fact that you have accepted the p in psychology and the different pronunciations of 'read' and 'live' indicates your high threshold for accepting the bizarre and carrying on. You can now move on to English names and wonder why Worcester is pronounced 'Wooster' and why if people from China are Chinese those from Bangladesh are not Bengalese. ■