INCONGRUENCE OF ENGLISH LETTERS AND SOUNDS AS COMIC MATERIAL FOR SOCIAL MEDIA SKITS

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Abstract

This study examined the non-correspondence of English spelling and pronunciation as material for skits in Nigeria. The objectives are to assess the specific English phonemes commonly employed for comedy, and how their pronunciation evokes laughter in the audience. Data for the study were sourced from the Facebook channel of *Mc Chibex Comedy,* popularly known as *Chibuike*. Five videos containing the pronunciation of some English words were purposively selected and analysed using the phonological concept of Spelling Pronunciation. The results showed that the English consonants /p, h, r, g, s, ʧ, k, w/, and the vowels /ʊ, aɪ, eɪ, æ, ɪ, əʊ, e/ are used by the skit maker for comedy. The comic effect derived essentially from the awkwardness of the pronunciation of the comic character, based essentially on the spelling of the words. The resultant comic effects are epenthesis, syllable multiplication, elision and 'silence' of the comic character where a word should be sounded. Based on the Incongruous Theory of humour, the pronunciations violate English language users' expectations, evoking laughter. It is concluded that comedy is a veritable tool for drawing attention to the illogicality of English spelling, which in turn poses pronunciation challenges for English users, especially in a non-native context such as Nigeria.

Keywords: Incongruence, English Letters, English Sounds, Skit, Comic Material

Introduction

The English language is arguably the most unpredictable, irregular, inconsistent, and 'illogical' language in the world. These qualities derive essentially from the aspects of grammar, spelling, and pronunciation. For example, a popular Brazilian stand-up comedian Rafael Bastos Hocsman (Rafinha Bastos) has the following to say about English verb conjugation in one of his jokes:

> I hate verbs in English. I dance, you dance, he dances. Why? Is he dancing more than me? I don't think so. Six hundred and forty people dance and he dances? How much is this mother****** dancing?

One thing the quote above demonstrates is the illogicality of English grammar. Generally, the suffix 's' is a plural marker in English (as well as indicating possession). So, we have a *car* and two or more *cars*; a *boy* and two or more *boys*; *Mary's* dress, *Thomas's* house, etc. But this works differently in marking plurality with verbs. While verbs in their base forms generally marked plural in English, their inflections such as the addition of 's' make them singular. So, *he dances*, while *I dance*; *they dance*, and *we dance*. In addition, 'you' which can be used either as singular or plural (another illogicality) takes only the plural forms of verbs. Therefore, based on Bastos' observation, *you dance*; not **you dances*, even if one person is the referent.

What has been noted above about the grammar of English also applies to its spelling. As Jowitt (37) notes, most languages that use an alphabet for writing purposes adhere to the phonemic principle. In this principle, one letter of the alphabet (or a digraph – a combination of two letters) represents one distinctive sound or phoneme. For English however, the phonemic principle is far from being adhered to, partly due to the uneven number of English letters and phonemes. The language has twenty-six letters in its alphabet and at least forty phonemes. This linguistic fact of English implies that the tabulation of its spelling rules is cumbersome; in addition to many exceptions.

The irregularity noted with English grammar and spelling inevitably affects its pronunciation. It can be argued that the non-conventional spelling system of English is at the root of the unpredictable nature of its pronunciation. Thus, English pronunciation appears illogical to native and non-native speakers alike, causing all sorts of challenges and difficulties, especially for the latter. It has also become a subject of jesting for both native and non-native speakers. For instance, Leo Anthony Gallagher an American stand-up comedian jested about the illogicality of English pronunciation thus:

> Get down, check it out, B-O-M-B [bɒm], T-O-M-B [tɒm]? No, [tu:m]… that's [bɒm,] that's [tu:m]. Get ready, is this [kɒm] (COMB) or [ku:m]? No that's [kəʊm]. And that's why spelling bees are only won by introverted little ugly girls; because they are the only ones that got enough time to memorize this. C-O-M-B [kəʊm], P-O-M-B [pəʊm]? No. [pəʊm] is P-O with E with M. Now P-O-E-M [pəʊm] H-O-E-M [həʊm]? No. [həʊm] is H-O with M with E. H-O-M-E [həʊm], S-O-M-E [səʊm]? No, that's [sʌm]. S.O.M.E [sʌm], N.O.M.E [nʌm]? No, that's N-U-M-B. The whole … thing is DUMB.

Gallagher in the comedy excerpt above obviously references the illogicality of English pronunciation with the use of the word 'dumb'. Although this feature of English has been employed in comedy, it is not 'funny' for many users of English, especially to formal English usage. It can be argued that mispronunciation arising from the mismatch between English letters and sounds is one of the greatest hurdles many non-native speakers have never managed to cross, or will never cross. It appears that the unwritten canon of English pronunciation that native speaker tacitly know, and that all other speakers ought to know is that 'letters are not sounds. This study examines this incongruity using data from an ESL context.

Statement of Problem

Much research has been conducted on the difficulty English pronunciation poses for its speakers, particularly non-natives. These range from phonemic to prosodic aspects of the language. English stress in particular has received much attention in this regard, both in native and non-native contexts. However, not many research efforts have been directed towards the assessment of the mismatch between English letters and sounds as a source of material for modern social media comedy, with specific reference to the Nigerian context.

Aim and Objectives

This study aims to investigate how the non-correspondence of English spelling and pronunciation provides material for comedy. The study has the following objectives:

1. To identify the English phonemes which are commonly mispronounced, and which provide comedy material.
2. To assess how their pronunciation evokes laughter.

Research Questions

This research hopes to answer the following questions:

1. What are the common phonemes of English which are commonly mispronounced and used for comedy?
2. How does the pronunciation of these sounds evoke laughter in the audience?

Scope of the Study

This study is limited to some English phonemes which are employed by comedians due to their peculiar pronunciation patterns. Thus, only sound segments (consonants and vowels) constitute the study focus. Consequently, no prosodic feature is included in the investigation. Also, the study used a Nigerian social media comedy platform *Chibuike*. Thus, no stand-up comedian was used for the study since only skits were used, not live or stage performances. The key

variables of the study are therefore selected phonemes, comedy, social media, skits, and entertainment.

Conceptual and Literature Review
English spelling and pronunciation

Spelling is simply the way words are formed or structured visually using letters of the alphabet. An alphabet is a set of symbols called letters used to form words. The English alphabet has 26 letters, comprising five vowel letters (a, e, i, o, u) and 21 consonant letters (b, c, d, f, g, h, j, k, l, m, n, p, q, r, s, t, v, w, x, y, z). The combination of these letters brings about the formation of words. Pronunciation on the other hand is the formal or informal way in which a word is made to sound when spoken. When applied to a specific language such as English, pronunciation is how the words of such language are made to sound when speaking it.

Words of a language are pronounced using special symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). This makes the representation of the sounds of a word different from that of its letters which are used to spell it. The meaningful sounds of a language used for its pronunciation by both native and non-native speakers are known as phonemes. The British Received Pronunciation (RP) has 44 phonemes, among which are 24 consonants and 20 vowels. Other accents of English have different phoneme inventories. Generally, the phonemes of English are almost twice the number of its letters, resulting in pronunciation difficulties as the fewer letters are given more pronunciation tasks.

David Jowitt (2023) critically evaluated English spelling reform proposals. In the paper, he shows the importance of writing despite the domineering influences of speech and visual communication, especially in an era of unprecedented technological advancement. According to him, spelling is as important as writing. Jowitt points out that words are spelt according to certain conventions in any language, and writing requires conformity to these conventions. He cites Horobin who notes

that having a single system used by everyone ensures maximum efficiency in communication. This assertion, according to Jowitt, holds for all written languages but not so for the English language due to what he considers the inconsistency and illogicality of its spelling. He observes that even though the world has experienced revolutionary changes in several domains in the past two hundred years, English spelling has remained the same.

Jowitt goes on to explain that the irregularity of English spelling becomes obvious when we consider vowel sounds and vowel letters. He provides several examples of such cases. For instance, the vowel sound [ɛ] has many spelling representations: the letter 'e' in *bed*; letters 'ea' in *dead*; 'ai' in *said*; 'eo' in *leopard*; 'ie' in *friend*. Also, the letter 'e' in *the* and *me* represents a different sound [i:]. The same sound is represented by double 'e' in *keep*, 'ea' in *bead*, 'ie' in *yield*, 'i' in *machine*, and 'ey' in *key*. Other examples include 'ey' in *they* which is no longer [i:] but a diphthong [eɪ]. This sound is also represented by 'ai' in *pain*, 'ay' in *say*, and 'a' in *hate*. The final 'e' in this word shapes its pronunciation as 'a' is realized as a diphthong which is a different case for the vowel in *hat*. Also, the vowel in *hat* is short and front but is long and back in *fast*. Furthermore, the 'o' represents one vowel in *pot* which is [ɒ], a different one in *go* which is the diphthong [əʊ], a different one in *son* which is [ʌ], another one in *word* [ɜ:], and yet another one in *or* [ɔ:], a sound that can be spelt in many other ways, such as *-or, -oor, -our, -ou, -au, -aw*. Jowitt then makes a general statement given the inconsistency of English letters and sounds: "…in English, each vowel letter has several functions; conversely, every vowel sound is represented by more than one letter or combination of letters" (2023:37).

Extending the same argument to the English consonants, Jowitt observes that the "consonant system is somewhat more logical" (2023:37); as the letter 'b' stands for the voiced bilabial plosive [b], 'l' for the lateral [l], 'm' for the bilabial nasal [m], and so on. He notes that the consonants are frequently doubled due to the quality of the

preceding vowel sound, as in *rubble, battle, miss*, etc., even though the doubling makes no difference to the quality of the consonant. Despite the seeming logicality of the consonant system compared to vowels, there are still many inconsistencies associated with it. For instance, the letter <s> has one sound in *so [s]*, another in *rise [z]*, another in *sure [ʃ]*, and yet another in *vision [ʒ]*. Also, the letter 'x' usually stands for two consonant sounds, [k] and [s]. In addition to this, most consonants can be 'silent', such as 'b' in *lamb* and *plumber*, 'h' in *heir* and *honour*, 'k' in *know* and *knock*, and 'n' in *hymn*. Also, the letter 'r' occurring in the syllable-final position is 'silent' in British Received Pronunciation (RP), but not in General American; and 'w' has a consonant sound when syllable-initial, but not when syllable-final.

When these facts about the inconsistency and illogicality of English spelling about pronunciation are considered based on Jowitt's submission, "a case for the reform of English spelling seems undeniable" (2023:37). He proceeds to review some general arguments for and against English spelling reform, and outlines some particular reform proposals which he labels as 'moderate', because generally they make use of the existing alphabet only. These include the Initial Teaching Alphabet (ITA), SoundSpel, Cut Spelling, Wijk's Regularized Inglish, Spelling Reform Step One (SRI), Marshal Bell, Simpel-Fonetik, SaypU (Say as you pronounce universally), UNIFON, and Shavian.

The insights from Jowitt's paper which essentially concerns spelling reform proposals have several implications for this study. First, the data used for the study border on the mismatch of English spelling and pronunciation. Second, the mismatch poses much pronunciation difficulty for 'uniformed' users of English which evokes laughter in the 'informed'. Third, the 'uniformed' can be enlightened through comedy as no one wants to be an object of jesting, not even with a non-native language such as English. On the whole, the mismatch of spelling and pronunciation will remain with us for a while as all the spelling reforms proposed through the years seem elusive. As Jowitt submits in his conclusion,

> …even if the reform of English spelling were generally agreed to be desirable, it would not, in the immediate future at least, be attainable. The present system is therefore likely, for now, to remain in place. (2023:13)

This sounds like a resignation to the present spelling and by extension pronunciation form of English, which also implies that the challenges of pronunciation occasioned by an illogical spelling system will continue to persist. We can only say "This is how English works", and we must accept this reality and use it that way.

Chandra Sekhar Rao (2018) carried out a "brief study" of English spelling and pronunciation. He presents five remarkable quotations bordering on the mismatch between English spelling and pronunciation in his essay. The quotations are reproduced here because of their relevance to this study:

1   "If we know the sounds of a word (in English), we can't know how to spell it; if we know the spelling, we can't know how to pronounce it." (Otto Jespersen, philologist, Essentials of English Grammar, 1905, page 11).

2   "English spelling is almost divorced from its pronunciation and forms hardly any guide as to how words should be pronounced." (Mont Follick, The Case for Spelling Reform, 1964, page 87).

3   "The English language has the worst system of spelling of any major language." (Robert C. Pinckert, Pinckert's Practical Grammar, 1986, page 22).

4   "One cannot tell how to spell an English word by its pronunciation or how to pronounce it by its spelling." (Professor Albert C. Baugh, A History of the English Language, 1959, page 13).

5   "The English Language, for all its variety and richness, is illogical. There is no way to learn its orthography (spelling)." (Vermont Royster, editor, The Wall Street Journal, Mar. 5, 1975)

The issues discussed in Rao's paper revolve around the above quotations. Among them is the author's observation that the letters of the English alphabet are always inadequate to represent the sounds as

English has 26 letters but 44 sounds. According to him, the English spelling system "is notoriously illogical and un-phonetic", making it difficult to learn the language as there is no one-to-one correspondence between the letters and the sounds (2018:1). The scholar also maintains that most of the letters of the English alphabet produce multiple pronunciations because a large number of words were borrowed from other languages of the world. Rao made several suggestions for mastering the complex spelling and pronunciation system of the English language, including the use of the English Pronunciation Dictionary. He concludes that learners of English need to understand that there is no one-to-one correspondence between English letters and sounds as a letter can represent many sounds.

Skit

A skit is a short, funny play that makes a joke of something. Skits are more commonly called "sketches" in stand-up or improvisational comedy. The word *skit* is from the now-obsolete Scottish 'skit' which means "a vain, frivolous, or wanton girl'. It later became "a satirical remark" in English, and then "a piece of light satire" (vocabulary.com). Comic skits have become popular nowadays, particularly on social media due to technological advancement. It is also a convenient and creative means devised by comedians to reach their audience since the outbreak of Covid-19. Consequently, many social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have become a hub for comedians to disseminate comic content to their audience.

Comic skits are generally in video formats which take an average of five minutes. In Nigeria, social media is awash with all sorts of skits, including the ones produced by non-professional comedians. Popular Nigerian skit makers, according to the Leadership newspaper include Bukunmi Adeaga-Ilori (aka Kie Kie), Sydney Egere (Sydney Talker), one of the pioneers of skit-making in Nigeria, Nas Boi who is famous for mimicking music star Davido, and Chukwuemeka Emmanuel

popularly known by his stage name as Brain Jotter. Others are Aloma Isaac Junior also known as Zicsaloma, Maryam Apaokagi (aka Taaooma), Emmanuel Chukwuemeka Ejekwu popularly known as Mr Funny or Oga Sabinus, Samuel Animashaun Perry (aka Broda Shaggi), Adebowale "Debo" Adedayo, popularly known as Mr Macaroni, and Nosa Afolabi also known as Lasisi Elenu, reputed as one of the most famous skit makers in Nigeria.

Analytical Framework

This study adopted Spelling Pronunciation as its analytical framework, drawing insights from David Deterding and Nur Raihan Mohamad (2016). According to them, "spelling pronunciation involves pronouncing a word in a way that reflects its spelling in cases in which the standard pronunciation deviates from what is expected from the spelling" (2016:1). They identified four kinds of spelling pronunciation, namely, reversion to an original pronunciation, etymologically based changes, anglicization of borrowed words, and pronunciation of the letter 'o'. They explain reversion to an original pronunciation using the word *forehead*. According to them, the word was formerly pronounced with a medial /h/. Then after spelling standardization in Britain, the /h/ was dropped and the word was pronounced as [fɒrɪd]. Presently, it is pronounced with the /h/ as [fɔ:hed], which reflects the spelling more closely than [fɒrɪd]. Others are *often* /t/, *swollen* (w), and *swear* (w); but *sword* and *answer* are exceptions, while *towards* is in-between.

In etymologically based changes, pronunciation relates to spelling in the root or origin of the word. For example, there was no 'l' in the original form of the word *fault*. However prescriptive lexicographers felt it should be related to the Latin word *fallitus*, thereby introducing 'l' into its pronunciation. Others are *assault*, *cauldron*, *falcon*, *herald,* and *realm*. In the anglicization of borrowed words, it is noted that the pronunciation of some of the words loaned to English from other languages has changed to reflect their spelling. An example is the

insertion of /h/ at the beginning of French loan words such as *hospital, human, habit, and history*. There are just four common words in RP and one in American English without an initial /h/ sound: *hour, honour, honest, heir,* and *herb*. Conversely, the words *author* and *throne* from French have adopted English pronunciation as /t/ with which the letter combination 'th' is pronounced in French has changed to /_θ/. But *thyme* still retains that French initial /t/. The last kind of spelling pronunciation involves the letter 'o'. According to Deterding and Mohamad:

> Scribes up to the fifteenth century wrote in cursive handwriting and preferred not to use 'u' next to 'n', 'm', or 'v' to avoid a sequence of small vertical lines that would be difficult for readers to decipher... As a result, 'o' rather than 'u' was used in words in which the vowel is [ʌ], such as 'son', 'won', 'honey', 'monk', 'come', 'some', 'love', and 'dove'. These are all common words, and RP speakers generally still pronounce [ʌ] in them. (2016:3)

Deterding and Mohamad's four kinds of spelling pronunciation are used to analyse this study's data, as all the pronunciation errors which constituted the comic material used for the study are associated with each of the four spelling pronunciation types.

Methodology

Five videos purposely sampled from Facebook constituted the primary data for this study. The videos are skits from the Facebook Page of *Mc Chibex Comedy*. The comedy is branded *Schoolboy Chibuike*, with 145,000 followers on Facebook at the time of this study. The videos generally parody the typical school interactions between students and teachers in Nigeria. The interactions are mostly between a not-too-intelligent student named Chibuike and a male teacher. The comedy generally revolves around the teacher, who is only heard but not seen in the videos, asking the students questions on different subjects, especially English Language, Mathematics, and Current Affairs.

Chibuike has a classmate named Samuel to whom the duo often reference, but usually not seen in the video. Chibuike often appears in the videos with a 'wide mouth' disguise filter, like Lasisi's comic skits. The scene of interaction sometimes moves to the 'school clinic' where the same question-and-answer method is used for interaction between Chibuike and the school doctor.

The selected videos for this study comprise those in which Chibuike is required to pronounce certain English words. Usually, the words are displayed for Chibuike (which are also seen on the screen), while the teacher asks him to pronounce them. Chibuike's pronunciation is the source of humour in the videos. Sometimes he argues with his teacher over the pronunciation of some of the words, which often border on the non-correspondence between English letters and sounds.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The data from the five videos are presented and analysed in this section, after which they are discussed. Each video is numbered and presented with a short description.

1. **Video Description: Chibuike Argues with His Teacher**
   Teacher: Pronounce the words on the board. (Among the words displayed are PHYSICS and PRIDE)
   Chibuike: [pʊhaɪsaɪks…pʊ..pʊ…]
   Teacher: That word is [fɪzɪks]
   Chibuike: [fɪzɪks]?
   Teacher: Yes, [fɪzɪks].
   Chibuike: But there's no F here o.
   Teacher: Whenever you see the letters P and H together, it takes the place of F.
   Chibuike: Okay this one and this one (pointing to letters P and H) is [fɪ]?
   Teacher: Yes.

> **Chibuike**: So why do they now waste their time and put these two? Why do they like to be wasting letters?
> **Teacher**: Keep your mouth shut and pronounce P and H.
> **Chibuike**: [fɪ]... So if I want to spell 'fish', I'll spell it as, like this P-H-I-S-H *fish*.
> **Teacher**: Where did you learn this ...? Who taught you?
> **Chibuike**: Uncle but you said this thing is pronounced as [fɪ]...
> **Teacher**: Keep your mouth shut my friend... Pronounce the last word.
> **Chibuike**: [prɪdeɪ]...
> **Teacher**: What do we call a group of lions?
> **Chibuike**: lioness... Lionel Messi...Plenty lion...Lion of Africa...Lion of the tribe of Ju.
> **Teacher**: Chibuike keep your mouth shut. A group of lions is called a pride [praɪd].
> **Chibuike**: [praɪd]...Okay, pride because they are wild animals so they have pride. That's a group of goat is...is humble. So we can say 'a humble of goats'.

The English phonemes used for comedy here are /p, ʊ, h, aɪ, ɪ, and eɪ/. From the comic persona's realization of *physics* as *[pʊhaɪsaɪks], the consonants /p/ and /h/ are added to the pronunciation of the word, the same way as /ʊ/ and /aɪ/. Consequently, /p/ is realized for the letter 'p', /ʊ/ is inserted between 'p' and 'h', giving the word an extra syllable (three instead of two), and /h/ is realized for the letter 'h', which ought to have been articulated with 'p' as /f/. These insertions are cases of epenthesis.

The first comic effect is derived from the insertion of the vowel /ʊ/ after 'p', which is realized as [pʊ]. The second effect is the realization of /h/ with /aɪ/ as [haɪ] in the subject's second syllable. These together make the realization awkward and incongruous with English pronunciation. This spelling pronunciation is based on the etymology of the word *physics* which has a Greek origin in which the

letter combination 'ph' is realized as /f/ from the Greek sound /Φ/. Since the pronunciation violates the expectations of English users, it evokes laughter. The third comic effect is derived from the use of vowels in *physics*. The vowel in the two syllables of the word is /ɪ/, represented by the letters <y> and <i>. However, the comic persona realized both as the diphthong /aɪ/. Fourthly, the consonant /z/ in the word represented by letter 's' is realized as /s/ by the subject. All these pronunciations are spelling-based and incongruous with normal English usage.

In the second word *pride*, the subject realises the diphthong /aɪ/ as / ɪ/ and adds an extra vowel /eɪ/ to the word in the place of letter 'e'. Generally, an 'e' at the end of an English word is 'silent' since it affects the quality of the vowel in it, such that the vowel is realized as a diphthong instead of a monophthong. Silent 'e' generally serves to elongate a vowel sound (compare *glide*, *ride* to *lid* and *rid*)*.* These realizations are also based on spelling pronunciation and violate the pronunciation norms of English. Consequently, they evoke laughter.

2. **Video Description: Chibuike vs. Doctor**
    Doctor: Ok, just to be sure you can see well, you need to pronounce some of these words…
    Chibuike: (Given a placard with the word ENERGY written on it) [enærægaɪ].
    Doctor: That word is [enəʤi]…
    Chibuike: But there's no 'J' here o.
    Doctor: That's how it's pronounced - [enəʤi]. Now pronounce this next word.
    Chibuike: (Given another cardboard with the word PARASITE) [pæræsɪteɪ]…
    Doctor: That word is [pærəsaɪt].
    Chibuike: But doctor there's E here.
    Doctor: You don't have to voice out the E. The E is silent…
    Chibuike: So why did they now put it?
    Doctor: The E has to be there, of course.

Chibuike: No now. They're wasting letters now. If they know that they'll not use the E, why did they now put it there?
Doctor: Ok young man, that's not why we are here…

The sounds used to evoke laughter in the above conversation are /r, æ, g, aɪ, ɪ, and eɪ/. Three comic effects are identified in the subject's pronunciation of the word *energy* as *[enerægaɪ]. First is the subject's realization of the consonant /r/ and the vowel /æ/ which are absent in the pronunciation of the word; obviously in keeping with its spelling, especially with the use of /r/ for the consonant letter 'r'. This gives the word an extra syllable /ræ/. Second, the /ʤ/ sound in the letter 'g' is realized as /g/. In the argument arising from the correction, the comic subject demonstrates that only the letter 'j' should be realized as /ʤ/. Third, the pure vowel /ɪ/ in the last syllable, represented by the letter 'y', is realized as a diphthong, /aɪ/. All these pronunciations are derived from the letters of the word and violate the expected pronunciation of it. Although the schwa sound /ə/ in the second syllable is realized as /e/, it is not remarkable to evoke laughter since it is expected in Nigerian English pronunciation.

In the second word *parasite*, realized as *[pæræsɪteɪ], the subject played on the vowels /ɪ/ and /eɪ/ for comic effect. First, the subject's realization of the diphthong /aɪ/ in the last syllable is a pure vowel /ɪ/. Second, an extra vowel /eɪ/ is added to the word as a realization of the vowel letter 'e' which ought to be 'silent'. This resulted in an extra syllable (four instead of three). To justify the vowel epenthesis, the subject argued that the letter 'e' has to be realized, otherwise it would amount to a 'waste' of letters. Consequently, his pronunciation of the word is awkward, being based essentially on its spelling.

3. **Video Description: Chibuike Joins the Challenge**
   Teacher: …Pronounce this word. (CORPS displayed on the screen)
   Chibuike: [kəʊrʊpesɪ…kɒrʊp…]
   Teacher: The word is [kɔ:]…

Chibuike: Sir there's P and S here o.

Teacher: The P and S are silent.

Chibuike: So why do they now put it?

Teacher: Chibuike keep shut and don't argue with me.

Chibuike: Sir why are they wasting letters? All these things, all these things can cause depression, because if you are saying all these letters are silent when their mates are talking, these letters can commit suicide, because they will feel that they are useless.

From the above exchange, the phonemes /əʊ, r, ʊ, p, e, s, and ɪ/ are employed for comedy. The comic effects derived essentially from vowel epenthesis in the realization *[kəʊrʊpesɪ]. The word *corps* is monosyllabic but the subject's pronunciation makes it a four-syllable word. First is the realization of the only vowel in the word /ɔː/ as /əʊ/. Then /r/ is realized for the letter 'r' which ought to be 'silent'. Also, the vowel /ʊ/ is inserted between letters 'r' and 'p' and /e/ between 'p' and 's', while /ɪ/ is added where the letter 'e' is 'silent'. Etymologically, the word comes from the Latin term *corpus*, which means 'body'. Its current form and pronunciation come from the French word for body *corps* which is pronounced with a silent 'p'. Thus, the comic effects are the results of the word's etymology and the violation of the expected pronunciation. The subject only argued about the non-realization of the consonant letters 'p' and 's', being ignorant as well as his teacher about such details of English words. His argument about the 'silent letters' being susceptible to 'depression' and 'suicide' because they are not 'talking' while others are doing so, is also a source of humour in the video.

4. **Video Description: English Language Teacher**

Teacher: Pronounce this word (CHAOS displayed on the screen)

Chibuike: [ʧæəʊs]...

Teacher: It is [keɪɒs].

Chibuike: [keɪɒs]?

Teacher: Yes. C-H is pronounced as /k/.

Chibuike: Okay sir...

Teacher: Pronounce the next one (CHOIR displayed on the screen).

Chibuike: [ʧʊaɪeɪ]...

Teacher: You are wrong. It is [kwaɪə].

Chibuike: [kwaɪə]?

Teacher: Yes. I just told you the C-H is pronounced as /k/...

Chibuike: Ok sir...

Teacher: Pronounce the next word (CHAIR shown on the screen).

Chibuike: [kɪər]...

Teacher: What's wrong with you? It is *[ʧɪə]...

Chibuike: But sir you just said that C and H are pronounced as /k/?

Teacher: Shut up! Pronounce the word.

Chibuike: *[ʧɪə]

Teacher: Pronounce the next word (OWE displayed on the screen).

Chibuike: [əʊweɪ].

Teacher: What is [əʊweɪ]? That word is [əʊ]...

Chibuike: Sir but after O there's W-E; that's [əʊweɪ].

Teacher: It is [əʊ]. The W and E are silent.

Chibuike: Okay, the W and E are silent?

Teacher: Yes.

Chibuike: Sir but if they are silent, why do they now put it? They are just wasting letters.

Teacher: Will you shut up? W and E are silent...

Chibuike: Okay sir.

Teacher: Pronounce the next word (WE displayed on the screen).

Chibuike: (No response from Chibuike).

Teacher: Chibuike why are you silent?

Chibuike: …But you said W and E are silent. That's why me too I'm silent.

Five words (*chaos, choir, chair, owe* and *we*) are used to achieve comedy in the video extract above. In *chaos*, realized as ∗ [ʧǽəʊs], the phonemes /ʧ, æ, and əʊ/ constitute the comic signals. First, the 'ch' letter combination in the word is pronounced as /ʧ/ by the subject instead of /k/. Even though the combination can be realized as such in other words (as *chair, child*, etc.), it is not the case with *chaos*. Also, the diphthong /eɪ/ in the first part of the word for the letter 'a' is realized as a monophthong /æ/ by the subject. Conversely, the monophthong /ɒ/ in the second part of the word is realized as a diphthong /əʊ/. These resulted in a 'chaotic' pronunciation of the word based on its spelling.

In the second word *choir,* which is realized as *[ʧʊaɪeɪ], the use of four sounds /ʧ, ʊə, r, and eɪ/ by the subject constituted the comic signals. Interestingly, none of the sounds used by the subject occur in the pronunciation of the word, which heightened the comic effect. The 'ch' letter combination in the word is again realized as /ʧ/ by the subject, whereas it is the consonant cluster /kw/. Also, the only vowel in the word which is the triphthong /aɪə/ is replaced with a diphthong similar to the English /ʊə/. Then the subject realized the /r/ sound from the letter 'r' in the word, to which is added an extra vowel /eɪ/ at the end, making the word disyllabic instead of monosyllabic.

The third word *chair* is realized as */kɪər/ by the subject. In this case, the sounds /k/ and /r/ are the comic signals. The consonant /ʧ/ in the letter combination 'ch' is realized as /k/, obviously based on an earlier correction that 'ch' is pronounced as /k/. Also, the letter 'r' at the end of the word is realized as /r/, giving the word a rhotic pronunciation similar to General American. The use of /ɪə/ by the subject instead of /eə/ is not considered significant for comedy since it is a common pronunciation in the Nigerian context of English usage. This is evident in the supposed correction of Chibuike's teacher.

The fourth word in the video extract is *owe* in which two phonemes are significant for comedy. These are /w/ and /eɪ/. The letters 'w' and 'e' which ought to be 'silent' in the word were realized as /w/ and /eɪ/ respectively, which amounts to the spelling pronunciation *[əʊweɪ]. This is another case of epenthesis. Consequently, the subject realized it as a disyllabic instead of a monosyllabic word. In the last word *we,* there is a comic effect in the subject being completely 'silent' as the letters 'w' and 'e' in *owe.* The teacher had earlier corrected that 'w' and 'e' are 'silent' in the previous word. So the subject wrongly assumed that they ought to be silent in *we* as well, thereby leading to his own 'silence' with the word. Since this violates how English pronunciation operates, it evokes laughter.

5. **Video Description: Chibuike Wants to be a Lawyer**
   Chibuike: (To pronounce the word ETIQUETTE) [eɪtɪkwʊeɪteɪ]...
   Teacher: That word is [etɪket]...
   Chibuike: But sir there's U-E-T-T-E. That U-E is [ʊeɪteɪ]...
   Teacher: Now what's the ... word? (EWE being displayed)
   Chibuike: [eɪweɪ]...
   Teacher: The word is *[ɪu:]...Pronounce the next word. (KNOT displayed on the screen)
   Chibuike: [knɒt]...
   Teacher: Chibuike say [nɒt].
   Chibuike: [nɒt]...But sir there's K there.
   Teacher: In this context, the K is silent.
   Chibuike: The K is silent?
   Teacher: Yes.
   Chibuike: Why do they now put it?
   Teacher: My friend; pronounce the next word. (KING shown on the screen)
   Chibuike: [ɪŋg].
   Teacher: What is [ɪŋg]? Chibuike the word is *[kɪŋg].
   Chibuike: But you said the K is silent...

Teacher: Next. (CHRISTMAS on the screen)

Chibuike: [ʧraɪstmeɪs]

Teacher: *[krɪstməs]...The C-H is pronounced as /k/... Pronounce the next word (CHURCH on the screen).

Chibuike: [kɜːk]...

Teacher: The word is [ʧɜːʧ].

Chibuike: But you have said the C-H is pronounced as /k/...

Six words are used to effect humour in the above video extract. These are *etiquette, ewe, knot, king, Christmas*, and *church*. In *etiquette*, realized as *[eɪtɪkwʊeɪteɪ] by the subject, the phonemes /eɪ/ and /ʊ/, as well as the cluster /kw/ are comically significant. The sounds /eɪ, w, and ʊ/ which are absent in the word are introduced to its pronunciation given its spelling; a case of epenthesis. This also gives it two extra syllables (five instead of three). The simple vowel /e/ in the first syllable is replaced with the diphthong /eɪ/ in the subject's pronunciation. Also, the third syllable is realized with a consonant cluster /kw/ instead of a single sound /k/. Then the sound /ʊ/ is inserted as a realization of the letter combination 'ue' in the spelling. In addition, the short vowel /e/ which occurs in the last syllable of the word is realized as a diphthong /eɪ/. Finally, the 'silent e' which is the last letter of the word is also realized as a diphthong.

The word *ewe* is realized as */eɪweɪ/ by the subject, making it a disyllabic word instead of a monosyllabic one. None of the two sounds (/eɪ/ and /w/) used by the subject occurs in the correct pronunciation of the word. Thus, the subject's realization is strictly based on the spelling of the word, which sounds funny. The teacher who provided the 'correct' pronunciation also failed to realize it correctly by giving the word an extra syllable as *[ɪu;]. This also gives the word an awkward pronunciation. In the word *knot*, the subject realized the sound /k/ in place of the letter 'k'. This translates to the consonant cluster /kn/, which does not occur in English pronunciation.

Etymologically, the word *knot* is from the Old English word *cnotta*. In this period before the 15th century, the 'k' was pronounced. However, during the period of Middle English, speakers of English gradually stopped pronouncing the 'k'. The reason for this is not clear, but it has been suggested that the 'k' dropping was due to the influence of Latin and French during the period, as these languages did not include the 'kn' cluster. Other Germanic languages such as German, Dutch, and Swedish still pronounce the 'k'. This explains why words such as *knife, know, knob, knit, knight*, etc. have no 'k' in their pronunciation. The 'kn' phenomenon is similar to the cluster 'gn' in words like *gnat, gnaw, gnome, cologne*, etc.

In the word *king,* the obligatory /k/ sound is dropped by the subject in the realization of the word as *[ɪŋg]. This deliberate omission (or elision) obviously in response to the earlier correction by the teacher that 'k' is 'silent' in *knot,* creates humour as it violates pronunciation expectations. For the word *Christmas* which the subject realized as *[ʧraɪstmeɪs], the comic signals are the use of /ʧ/ for /k/ in the first syllable, the use of a diphthong /aɪ/ for the monophthong /ɪ/ also in the first syllable, and the use of another diphthong /eɪ/ in place of the weak vowel /ə/ in the second syllable. The /t/ realized for the letter 't', which is also attested in the teacher's corrective pronunciation, is a common feature in Nigerian English usage and not significant for comedy. In the realization of the word *church*, the comic effect is signalled by the use of /k/ in place of /ʧ/ for the 'ch' spelling combination. Again, this is in response to the teacher's correction that 'ch' is pronounced as /k/, as in the word *Christmas.*

Discussion of Findings

The discussion of the findings here is based on the two stated objectives of the study, namely: to identify the English phonemes which are commonly mispronounced, which provide comedy material, and to assess how their pronunciation evokes laughter. Firstly, the study found that the English consonants which were employed for comedy from the

data are /p, h, r, g, s, ʧ, k, w/, while the vowels used include /ʊ, aɪ, eɪ, æ, ɪ, əʊ, e/. These are in addition to the use of the consonant cluster /kw/ (used once in the word *etiquette*) and a pseudo diphthong /ʊa/ (also used once in *choir*). These are attested in a total of sixteen words pronounced by the comic subject Chibuike. The words are *physics, pride, energy, parasite, corps chaos, choir, chair, owe, we, etiquette, ewe, knot, king, Christmas,* and *church*.

    Of the eight consonants attested in the comic persona's pronunciation, /k/ and /r/ have the highest frequency of four occurrences apiece. These are followed by /ʧ/ with three occurrences and /p/ and /w/ with two apiece. The consonants /h/, /g/, and /s/ have one occurrence each. By this, /k/ and /r/ are the most frequently used consonants in *Mc Chibex Comedy*. For the vowels, the diphthong /eɪ/ has the highest frequency of seven, followed by /ʊ/ with four occurrences, and /aɪ/ and /ɪ/ which occurred thrice each in the various conversations. The diphthong /əʊ/ occurred twice, while /æ/ and /e/ recorded one occurrence each. This implies that the rising diphthong /eɪ/ is the most frequently used in the comedy *Chibuike*.

    Furthermore, the pronunciation of the various words included cases of syllable multiplication. This is principally as a result of epenthesis – the addition of one or more sounds to a word. Consequently, the word *physics* with two syllables is increased to three, *pride* which is monosyllabic is realized with two syllables, while *energy* with three syllables is made four. Others are *corps,* multiplied from one to as many as four syllables, *choir* from one to two, *owe* also from one to two, *etiquette* from three to five syllables, and *ewe* multiplied from one syllable to two. Also based on the spelling pronunciation of the words by the comic subject, it was found that the common spellings which were mispronounced for comic effect are 'ph', 'i', 'y', 'e', 'r', 'g', 'o', 'p', 's', 'ch', 'a', 'k', 'w', 'q', and 'ue'. From the analysis, the most frequent spellings used for comedy by *Chibex* are the letter 'e' and the combination 'ch'. Of particular interest is the realization of the

diphthong /eɪ/ in place of silent 'es' (as in *pride, parasite, owe, etiquette,* and *ewe*). This resulted in very awkward pronunciations, thereby evoking laughter.

For the second objective, the comic effect is essentially derived from spelling pronunciation, alongside the resultant epenthesis, syllable multiplication, elision and 'silence' of the comic character. Comedy in the selected videos is also based on the Incongruous Theory of humour, which holds that laughter is the perception of something incongruous – something that violates our mental patterns and expectations. In effect, humour is created through the violation of a rationally-learned pattern. By this, the pronunciation of the subject is humorous because it is incongruous with the rational pattern of English pronunciation. His pronunciation violates what English users – whether native or non-native – know about the pronunciation of English.

Conclusion

This study assessed the incongruence of English spelling and pronunciation as the subject of comedy using selected Facebook videos from the comedy channel of *Mc Chibex*. From the findings, it is revealed that spelling pronunciation, which is the pronunciation of a word according to how it is spelt, evokes laughter in that it violates the expectation of English users regarding the pronunciation of English. From the findings, spelling pronunciation results in sound epenthesis, which in turn results in syllable multiplication. On the whole, spelling pronunciation makes English sound awkward, and ultimately funny. It is concluded that comedy is a veritable tool for drawing attention to the illogicality of English spelling, which poses pronunciation challenges for English users, especially in a non-native context such as Nigeria.

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