



Riddle of English Phonology? A Research Probe into /h/-Dropping at Word Initial Position

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ABSTRACT:

English phonology is one of the most intriguing junctions of the English language. The absence of phonological realization of certain symbols which are orthographically present in the lexeme is sufficient to signpost this intrigue. Realizing the significance of this issue, present study is launched to analyze the phenomenon of /h/-dropping at word initial position in English. The data of 22 words comprising of CVC and CVVC sequence with 'h' at word initial position were selected for analysis. The methodology of the study is descriptive qualitative as the data were analyzed in form of words. The in-depth analysis reflects that /h/-dropping at word initial position is not haphazard. Rather it is rule based and consistent. The role of the consonants following the vowel/vowels in CVC and CVVC contexts is critical in this regard. The study recommends that just phonic teaching is not sufficient for teaching English phonology as there is no one-to-one relationship between alphabets and the sounds associated to them. The learners should also be taught about the contexts where a letter is not represented by a certain phonetic sound such as /h/-dropping at word initial position in particular context.

Key Words: English Phonology, h-dropping, Syllable Structure, Initial Position

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1. Introduction

The English language is a rich and dynamic source of communication. It has become one of the most widely spoken languages and is known for its flexibility, adaptability, and extensive vocabulary. Its extensive usage has led it to be greatly influenced by other languages due to the factors such as colonization, global trade, rapid transportation, etc. Consequently, it incorporates words and phrases from Latin, French, German, Dutch, and many other languages of the globe. In teaching-learning continuum of English as Second/Foreign Language, pronunciation has long been considered pivotal. English being not a phonetic language, the non-native learners of English are unsure, reluctant, or inaccurate to articulate certain sounds accurately (Al-Hamzi et al., 2021; Ababneh, 2018; Jabali & Abuzaid, 2017; Hassan, 2014). Grasping the phonological system of English requires thorough understanding to achieve high level of accuracy (Tuan, 2010; Taqi et al., 2018). The phenomenon of dropping certain sounds exacerbates the complexity of English phonology (Podhaizer, 1998; Carney, 2012) as discrepancy between phonological realization of a phoneme and its orthographic representation in a word perplexes the learner leading him/her brood over the rules that work behind the phenomenon of inserting or dropping a phoneme in varying context.

In case of dropping a phoneme in spite of its orthographic presence, the role of ‘h’ is very alluring and plays a critical role in the rich tapestry of English phonology. Its phonological realization at word initial position exhibits a perplexing variability wherein it is sometimes audibly pronounced and, at other times, it is dropped instead of being orthographically present in the words (e.g. *house* and *honor* respectively). This inconsistency has been a source of confusion for the learners, communication barrier for non-native speakers, and an intriguing linguistic puzzle for scholars. Understanding the underlying factors that work behind the resolution either to pronounce or drop the /h/ sound at word initial position is essential for attaining knowledge of phonological intricacies leading to successful communication in the English language.

Several hypotheses have been proposed to explain this phenomenon including historical linguistic shifts, regional dialect variations, and borrowed words from languages with different phonetic rules. The influence of the Norman Conquest and the Great Vowel Shift might offer insights into the origins of this inconsistency in English phonology. However, whatever factors are involved in shaping this enigma of /h/-dropping, it is imperative to discover the patterns and rules that work behind the scene so that the discrepancy between phonological and orthographic realization may make some sense. But before jumping to the review of the relevant literature and methodology of the study, it is desirable to state the research questions to be addressed in this study.

2. Research Questions

- Is /h/-dropping at word initial position systematic in English phonology?
- What are the rules that govern /h/-dropping at word initial position in English phonology?

3. Literature Review

Orthographically, ‘H’ is the eighth letter in English alphabets. The letter ‘H’ is often paired with other consonants like *ch*, *sh*, *wh*, and *gh*. Phonetically, /h/ is a voiceless glottal fricative that



marks phonemic distinction between certain words such as *hat* and *at* shaping their semantic interpretation. /h/ is categorized as a voiceless fricative in the IPA Chart and by the phoneticians (Ashby & Maidment, 2005; Cruttenden, 2008; Fromkin et al., 1999; Ladefoged & Johnson, 2011; Roach, 2009; Robb & Chen, 2009; Shriberg & Kent, 2003). However, /h/ is different from other English voiceless fricatives in that it does not involve a constriction in the oral cavity. The place of articulation of /h/ is glottis as the friction of /h/ is created between the vocal folds (Fromkin et al., 1999; Johnson, 1997; Roach, 1991). The only required movement of the approximation of the vocal folds is ‘controlled by the laryngeal abductors’ (Borden, Harris & Raphael, 2003). According to Wells (2009) and Ladefoged (2005), though there is absence of upper vocal tract constriction during the production of /h/, yet the air turbulence is found all over the vocal tract and, consequently, the sound is articulated like a noisy vowel.

Literature exclusively on /h/ dropping at word initial position is not much pervasive. However, a number of research studies are launched on various silent consonants in English including /h/. One of these studies is Rosemarie and Veniranda’s (2022) research project that addresses the unpredictability of silent letters in general and highlights the challenges they pose to proper pronunciation and spellings in the students’ pronunciation of 2nd semester. This study effectively outlines the instances where /h/ is not articulated phonetically as a standalone phoneme and as a part of consonant digraphs in various positions i.e at the beginning, middle, and end of a word. The content provides clear explanations to aid understanding of the pronunciation patterns. The study concludes by acknowledging the complexities of English, particularly with regard to silent letters, and emphasizes on the application of writing assistance tools like Language Tool. It contributes to a comprehensive and informative overview of the topic.

Al-Hamzi and Musyahda (2022) focused on error identification in articulating silent letters including ‘h’ in English words by EFL novices. A sample of 05 EFL novices was selected from 1st level of the English Department, Sana’a University, Yemen. A list of different words with /h/ at three positions i.e. initial, medial, final position was given to the learners for articulation. The words with /h/ at word initial position were *hour*, *honor*, *hourglass*. The data were analyzed descriptively. Surprisingly, data of 15 words collected from the sample were mispronounced at initial level contrary to correct phonological representation/articulation of /h/ at medial and final position. This study indicates that the use of /h/ at word initial position is quite perplexing, mystifying, and enigmatic for non-native speakers of the English language.

Buchanan (2013) set his goal to examine the sound changes occurred to the /h/-phoneme in Modern English. He claimed numerous factors responsible for language change such as loan words, /h/-dropping, glide cluster reduction, loss of medial /h/, weak aspiration, and zero realization. The researchers also pointed out sociolinguistic implications such as split between upper and lower class, access to education, social status, and social taboos. Notably, distinctions between different dialects and writing systems were used to reveal the progression of the changes that occurred to the /h/-phoneme.

4. Research Design

This study is descriptive and qualitative in nature as it involves exploring and understanding a phenomenon in-depth, focusing on the complex experiences, and perspectives (Best & Kahn, 2007). According to Bogdan and Biklen (2006), qualitative research is an approach



to social sciences that emphasizes on collecting descriptive data in natural setting, uses inductive thinking, and stresses on understanding the subject's point of view. This type of research seeks to reveal the underlying patterns, processes, and meanings are emerged from in-depth analysis of words. It involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to examine a phenomenon in its natural setting, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret it in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The researchers selected 22 words with /h/ at word initial position from English Oxford Dictionary (3rd ed., 2010). Among the selected words, 11 words have representation of /h/ in their phonemic transcription in the dictionary entry. The other set of selected words have /h/ dropping at word initial level in their phonemic transcription. All the words selected for analysis have diverse orthographic word structure i.e. CVC..., CVVC... The logic for selecting words with different orthographic forms is to see the impact of varying orthographic contexts on the /h/-dropping at word initial position.

5. Data Analysis:

The data comprising of 22 words with 'H' letter at word initial position are listed in the following table along with their phonemic transcription.

Table 5.1. Words with 'H' letter at word initial position in English words

Sr. No	Words	Phonemic Transcription
1.	Hope	/həʊp/
2.	Holy	/həʊli/
3.	Honest	/ɒnɪst/
4.	Hear	/hɪər/
5.	Honesty	/ɒnɪsti/
6.	Heavy	/hevi/
7.	Hero	/hɪərəʊ/
8.	Honor	/ɑ:nə/
9.	Heart	/hɑ:t/
10.	Hide	/haɪd/
11.	Honorific	/ɒnərɪfɪk/
12.	Honorary	/ɒnərəri/
13.	Honorable	/ɒnərəbl/
14.	Hail	/heɪl/
15.	Hour	/aʊə/



16.	Heir	/eər/
17.	Happy	/hæpi/
18.	Hourglass	/aʊəglɑ:s/
19.	Hombre	/ɒmbrei/
20.	Holiday	/hɒlədeɪ/
21.	Hole	/həʊl/
22.	Haute	/əʊt/

Among the above given words, two categories are formed. The first category comprises of the words where the letter ‘H’ is necessarily followed by a vowel and a consonant forming an orthographic structure of CVC. This CVC is not terminal in the word as it can be followed by any letter either vowel or consonant. The second category consists of the words where ‘H’ is followed by two vowels and a consonant forming CVVC structure. This CVVC structure might be followed by any other letter in the word.

Table 5.2. /h/-insertion and /h/-dropping in orthographic CVC... Structure

Sr. No	Orthographic Form	/h/-insertion	Orthographic Form	/h/-dropping
1	H o p e	/həʊp/	H o n e s t	/ɒnɪst/
2	H o l y	/həʊli/	H o n e s t y	/ɒnɪsti/
3	H e r o	/hɪərəʊ/	H o n o r	/ɑ:nə/
4	H i d e	/haɪd/	H o n o r i f i c	/ɒnərəfɪk/
5	H o l i d a y	/hɒlədeɪ/	H o n o r a r y	/ɒnərəri/
6	H o l e	/həʊl/	H o n o r a b l e	/ɒnərəbl/
7	H a p p y	/hæpi/	H o m b r e	/ɒmbrei/

In table 5.2, two lists of the words with /h/-insertion and /h/-dropping having the identical orthographic CVC... structure are given. The in-depth analysis of the words shows that, instead of the identical CVC... order of graphemes/phonemes, nature of the graphemes/phonemes succeeding ‘h’ determines whether /h/ would be articulated or dropped at the word initial level. Table 5.2 illustrates that no particular pattern of vowels follows ‘h’ in words of both the lists. However, the consonant sounds employed at third position in the words are decisive for articulation or dropping of /h/. So, it is significant to observe the manner/place of articulation of the consonants succeeding the vowel in CVC frame. The study of Table 5.2 illumines that the list of the words with /h/-dropping comprises of all those words where the consonantal phonemes at 3rd position in CVC sequence are /n/ and /m/ which are nasal sounds. On the other hand, in the list of the words with phonological realization of /h/ at word initial position, consonant phonemes /p/, /l/, /r/, and /d/ succeed vowel and, henceforth, /h/. If we come towards the manner of articulation of /p/, /l/, /r/, and /d/, /p/ and /d/ are plosive sounds; /l/ is lateral; and /r/ is a trill sound. In the list



of the words with phonological realization of /h/, there is not a single word with a nasal sound at 3rd position. If we compare the words in both of the lists of phonological realization of /h/ and dropping of /h/, it emerges that nasalization of consonant sounds succeeding vowel in CVC template (consonant, vowel, consonant) is a factor for /h/-dropping at word initial level.

Table 5.3. /h/-insertion and /h/-dropping in CVVC... pattern

Sr #	/h/-insertion	Transcription	/h/-dropping	Transcription
1.	H a i l	/heil/	H o u r	/aʊə/
2.	H e a v y	/hevi/	H o u r g l a s s	/aʊəglɑ:s/
3.	H e a r t	/hɑ:t/	H a u t e	/əʊt/
4.	H e a r	/hɪər/	H e i r	/eər/

In table 5.3, two types of words with phonological realization of /h/ and dropping of /h/ are listed. The vowels immediately succeeding 'h' are not much different. However, the difference is marked in the second vowel and its subsequent consonant in the orthographic form. Comparison of the contexts of the above words makes it obvious that, in the list of the words with /h/-dropping, vowel at 3rd position is a close vowel either front vowel /ɪ/ or back vowel /u/ necessarily followed by a trill /r/ or a plosive phoneme /t/ at the final position in CVVC framework. On the other hand, the vowel at 3rd position either a close vowel or open vowel is followed by any type of consonant except a trill and plosive leads to phonological realization of /h/ at word initial position as in the words Hail and Heavy. So, in CVVC pattern, the nature of the vowel at 3rd position and its subsequent consonant determine whether the initial 'h' would be realized phonologically or it would be dropped.

6. Findings

The descriptive analysis of the data comprising of 22 lexemes orthographically initiated with 'h' gives ample evidence that the phenomenon of /h/- dropping in the English language is not random and haphazard. Rather it is rule based and has consistent orthographic pattern working behind this /h/- dropping. The comparison of the lexemes with identical order of alphabets with 'h' at word initial level asserts that the consonants succeeding the vowel/vowels after 'h' determines whether /h/ would be articulated or dropped in pronunciation. The analysis provides confirmation that if the vowel in CVC... orthographic sequence in a word is followed by a nasal consonant, /h/ would necessarily be dropped phonologically. If the vowel in the same orthographic context is followed by any consonant except a nasal, /h/ would confidently be articulated. Likewise, if the 2nd vowel is a close vowel following a trill or plosive in CVVC... orthographic context, /h/ would be dropped.

7. Conclusion

Language development is complex which makes it a fascinating phenomenon. The dropping of /h/ at word initial position gives a glimpse to this weirdness of language. Understanding the reasons operating behind /h/-dropping gives insights into the intricacies of English phonology. By



unraveling the /h/-dropping, our understanding of how language works and adapts the context is broadened. This study underscores the significance of linguistic patterns and their role in pronunciation. It claims that /h/-dropping at word initial position is rule based as the role of the consonants following the vowel/vowels in CVC/CVCC orthographic structure is critical in this regard. It is empirically observed that the nasal consonants /m/ and /n/ following vowel in CVC... orthographic format lead to /h/-dropping at word initial level. A close vowel followed by a trill or plosive consonant also causes /h/-dropping in CVVC... context. This study concludes that teaching of English should not be simply based on introducing the phonemes of English language to the learners as there is not one-to-one relationship between alphabets and the sounds associated to them. The learners should also be taught about the contexts where a letter is not represented by a certain phonic sound such as /h/-dropping at word initial position in particular contexts.

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