

IT'S KAOS. GET SMART!

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Following the second world war a little ditty began circulating amongst NATO staff to assist them with the barrage of difficulties, inconsistencies and general chaos in the spelling and pronunciation of English. A copy had been found in a girls' high school in Germany in 1945 by a British soldier. It seems it had also been used in English teaching at universities in South Germany. However no information on the author was available from any source.

As the poem was disseminated more widely, curiosity intensified as to its origin, which seemed shrouded in the mists of time.

Then in 1972 in his introduction to *Elements of English Phonology*, published in Paris, Hubert A Greven quoted 48 lines of the poem stating that the author "would like to pay a suitable tribute to Mr G Nolst Trenité for permission to copy his poem *The Chaos*" though unable to find out his whereabouts. Sadly, Nolst Trenité had died more than 25 years earlier.

A fuller version was excerpted & modified by Willard Espy in his *Alamanc of Words at Play* (the entry for February 7) and included 20 years later by David Crystal in his 1995 *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the English Language* (p. 273). It was here that I first came across it and treasured it immediately. What a gem of insight and articulation!

From the mid-1980s onward parts of the poem had begun surfacing more frequently and in countries scattered across Europe. Linguists and other academics from Britain, Germany, Canada and Spain sought to uncover its provenance and establish a complete version. It was around this time that a fragment even graced these venerable pages when Leonard Ashley submitted it for 'The Poet's Corner' in August 1988 (p. 165)

In the 1990s more definitive source-work was performed by members and associates of the then "Simplified Spelling Society" (now the English Spelling

Society). This led to their locating a nephew of Nolst Trenité who was able to fill out the story of his uncle and the poem, and furnish more complete versions.

Born in 1870, Dr Gerard Nolst Trenité was a Dutch writer and traveller who for some 35 years wrote a linguistics column for an Amsterdam weekly paper under the pseudonym *Charivarius*.

The first known version of *The Chaos* appeared as an appendix to the 1920 4th edition of Nolst Trenité's schoolbook *Drop Your Foreign Accent: engelsche uitspraakoefeningen*. This version gave words with problematic spellings in italics, but it had only 146 lines – which he expanded over successive editions of the popular and widely-used textbook until it reached the 274 we now have. It is not surprising, in view of the numerous editions and the poem's steady expansion, that so many different versions have been in circulation in so many different countries.

English Spelling Society researcher Chris Upward aptly declares that “*The Chaos* represents a virtuoso feat of composition, a mammoth catalogue of about 800 of the most notorious irregularities of traditional English orthography, skilfully versified (if with a few awkward lines) into couplets with alternating feminine and masculine rhymes.” (*Journal of the Simplified Spelling Society*, 1994/2).

Written now almost a century ago by one for whom English was not his first language, “*The Chaos*” still stands as an edifice, no, as THE supreme dissertation on the dysjunction between English spelling and pronunciation.

The version given below is essentially the author's own final text. Following earlier practice, words with clashing spellings or pronunciations are here printed in italics.

The Chaos

by Dr Gerard Nolst Trenité

Dearest *creature in creation*
Studying English *pronunciation*,
I will teach you in my *verse*
Sounds like *corpse, corps, horse* and *worse*.
I will keep you, *Susy, busy*,
Make your *head* with *heat* grow dizzy;
Tear in eye, your dress you'll *tear*;
Queer, fair seer, hear my *prayer*.

Pray, console your loving *poet*,
Make my coat look *new*, dear, *sew it!*
Just compare *heart, hear* and *heard*,
Dies and *diet, lord* and *word*.
Sword and *sward, retain* and *Britain*
(Mind the latter how it's *written*).
Made has not the sound of *bade*,
Say – said, pay – paid, laid but *plaid*.

Now I surely will not *plague* you
With such words as *vague* and *ague*,
But be careful how you *speak*,
Say: *gush, bush, steak, streak, break, bleak*,
Previous, precious, fuchsia, via
Recipe, pipe, studding-sail, choir;
Woven, oven, how and *low*,
Script, receipt, shoe, poem, toe.

Say, expecting fraud and *trickery*:
Daughter, laughter and *Terpsichore*,
Branch, ranch, measles, topsails, aisles,
Missiles, similes, reviles.
Wholly, holly, signal, signing,
Same, examining, but mining,
Scholar, vicar, and cigar,
Solar, mica, war and *far*.

From “desire”: *desirable* – *admirable* from “admire”,
Lumber, plumber, bier, but brier,
 Topsham, brougham, renown, but known,
 Knowledge, done, lone, gone, none, tone,
One, anemone, Balmoral,
Kitchen, lichen, laundry, laurel.
 Gertrude, German, wind and wind,
 Beau, kind, kindred, queue, mankind,
Tortoise, turquoise, chamois-leather,
Reading, Reading, heathen, heather.

This phonetic labyrinth
Gives *moss, gross, brook, brooch, ninth, plinth.*
 Have you ever yet *endeavoured*
 To pronounce *revered* and *severed,*
Demon, lemon, ghoul, foul, soul,
Peter, petrol and patrol?
 Billet does not end like *ballet;*
 Bouquet, wallet, mallet, chalet.

Blood and *flood* are not like *food,*
Nor is *mould* like *should* and *would.*
 Banquet is not nearly *parquet,*
 Which exactly rhymes with *khaki.*
Discount, viscount, load and broad,
Toward, to forward, to reward,
 Ricocheted and *crocheting, croquet?*
 Right! Your pronunciation’s OK.

Rounded, wounded, grieve and sieve,
Friend and fiend, alive and live.
 Is your R correct in *higher?*
 Keats asserts it rhymes with *Thalia.*
Hugh, but hug, and hood, but hoot,
Buoyant, minute, but minute.
 Say *abscission* with *precision,*
 Now: *position* and *transition;*

Would it tally with my *rhyme*
If I mentioned *paradigm*?

Twopence, threepence, tease are easy,
But *cease, crease, grease* and *greasy*?

Cornice, nice, valise, revise,
Rabies, but lullabies.

Of such puzzling words as *nauseous,*
Rhyming well with *cautious, tortious,*
You'll *envelop* lists, I hope,
In a linen *envelope.*

Would you like some more? You'll *have it!*
Affidavit, David, davit.

To *abjure, to perjure. Sheik*
Does not sound like *Czech* but *ache.*

Liberty, library, heave and *heaven,*
Rachel, loch, moustache, eleven.

We say *hallowed, but allowed,*
People, leopard, towed but *vowed.*

Mark the difference, moreover,
Between *mover, plover, Dover.*

Leeches, breeches, wise, precise,
Chalice, but police and *lice,*
Camel, constable, unstable,
Principle, disciple, label.

Petal, penal, and canal,
Wait, surmise, plait, promise, pal,
Suit, suite, ruin. Circuit, conduit
Rhyme with "shirk it" and "beyond it",

But it is not hard to tell
Why it's *pall, mall,* but *Pall Mall.*

Muscle, muscular, gaol, iron,
Timber, climber, bullion, lion,
Worm and storm, chaise, chaos, chair,
Senator, spectator, mayor,

Ivy, privy, famous; clamour
Has the A of *drachm* and *hammer*.

Pussy, hussy and *possess*,
Desert, but *desert, address*.
 Golf, wolf, countenance, lieutenants
 Hoist in *lieu* of flags left *pennants*.
Courier, courtier, tomb, bomb, comb,
Cow, but *Cowper, some* and *home*.
 “*Solder, soldier! Blood is thicker*”,
 Quoth he, “than *liqueur* or *liquor*”,
Making, it is sad but *true*,
In bravado, much *ado*.

Stranger does not rhyme with *anger*,
Neither does *devour* with *clangour*.
 Pilot, pivot, gaunt, but *aunt*,
 Font, front, wont, want, grand and *grant*.
Arsenic, specific, scenic,
Relic, rhetoric, hygienic.
 Gooseberry, goose, and close, but *close*,
 Paradise, rise, rose, and dose.

Say *inveigh, neigh*, but *inveigle*,
Make the latter rhyme with *eagle*.
 Mind! Meandering but *mean*,
 Valentine and *magazine*.
And I bet you, dear, a *penny*,
You say *mani*-(fold) like *many*,
 Which is wrong. Say *rapier, pier*,
 Tier (one who ties), but *tier*.

Arch, archangel; pray, does erring
Rhyme with *herring* or with *stirring*?
 Prison, bison, treasure trove,
 Treason, hover, cover, cove,
Perseverance, severance. Ribald
Rhymes (but *piebald* doesn't) with *nibbled*.

Phaeton, paeon, gnat, ghat, gnaw,
Lien, psychic, shone, bone, pshaw.

Don't be *down*, my *own*, but *rough it*,
And distinguish *buffet, buffet*;
 Brood, stood, roof, rook, school, wool, boon,
 Worcester, Boleyn, to *impugn*.
Say in sounds correct and *sterling*
Hearse, hear, hearken, year and *yearling*.
 Evil, devil, mezzotint,
 Mind the z! (A gentle hint.)

Now you need not pay attention
To such sounds as I don't mention,
 Sounds like *pores, pause, pours* and *paws*,
 Rhyming with the pronoun *yours*;
Nor are proper names *included*,
Though I often heard, as *you did*,
 Funny rhymes to *unicorn*,
 Yes, you know them, *Vaughan* and *Strachan*.

No, my maiden, coy and *comely*,
I don't want to speak of *Cholmondeley*.
 No. Yet *Froude* compared with *proud*
 Is no better than *McLeod*.
But mind *trivial* and *vial*,
Tripod, menial, denial,
 Troll and *trolley, realm* and *ream*,
 Schedule, mischief, schism, and *scheme*.

Argil, gill, Argyll, gill. Surely
May be made to rhyme with *Raleigh*,
 But you're not supposed to say
 Piquet rhymes with *sobriquet*.
Had this *invalid invalid*
Worthless documents? How *pallid*,
 How *uncouth* he, *couchant*, looked,
 When for *Portsmouth* I had booked!

*Zeus, Thebes, Thales, Aphrodite,
Paramour, enamoured, flighty,
Episodes, antipodes,
Acquiesce, and obsequies.*
Please don't monkey with the geyser,
Don't peel 'taters with my razor,
Rather say in accents pure:
Nature, stature and mature.

*Pious, impious, limb, climb, glumly,
Worsted, worsted, crumbly, dumbly,
Conquer, conquest, vase, phase, fan,
Wan, sedan and artisan.*
The TH will surely *trouble* you
More than R, CH or W.
Say then these phonetic *gems*:
Thomas, thyme, Theresa, Thames.

Thompson, Chatham, Waltham, Streatham,
There are more but I *forget 'em* –
Wait! I've got it: *Anthony,*
Lighten your anxiety.
The archaic word *albeit*
Does not rhyme with *eight* – you *see it*;
With and *forthwith*, one has voice,
One has not, you make your choice.

Shoes, goes, does. Now first say: *finger*;
Then say: *singer, ginger, linger.*
*Real, zeal, mauve, gauze and gauge,
Marriage, foliage, mirage, age,
Hero, heron, query, very,
Parry, tarry, fury, bury,
Dost, lost, post, and doth, cloth, loth,
Job, Job, blossom, bosom, oath.*

Faugh, oppugnant, keen oppugners,

Bowing, bowing, banjo-tuners
Holm you know, but *noes, canoes,*
Puisne, truism, use, to use?
Though the difference seems *little,*
We say *actual, but victual,*
Seat, sweat, chaste, caste, Leigh, eight, height,
Put, nut, granite, and unite.

Reefer does not rhyme with *deaf*,
Feoffer does, and *zephyr, heifer.*
Dull, bull, Geoffrey, George, ate, late, [ate = 'et']
Hint, pint, senate, but sedate.
Gaelic, Arabic, pacific,
Science, conscience, scientific;
Tour, but our, dour, succour, four,
Gas, alas, and Arkansas.

Say *manoeuvre, yacht* and *vomit,*
Next *omit,* which differs from it
Bona fide, alibi
Gyrate, dowry and *awry.*
Sea, idea, guinea, area,
Psalm, Maria, but malaria.
Youth, south, southern, cleanse and *clean,*
Doctrine, turpentine, marine.

Compare *alien* with *Italian,*
Dandelion with *battalion,*
Rally with *ally; yea, ye,*
Eye, I, ay, aye, whey, key, quay!
Say *aver,* but *ever, fever,*
Neither, leisure, skein, receiver.
Never guess – it is not *safe,*
We say *calves, valves, half,* but *Ralf.*

Starry, granary, canary,
Crevice, but device, and eyrie,
Face, but preface, then grimace,

Phlegm, phlegmatic, ass, glass, bass.
Bass, large, target, gin, give, verging,
Ought, oust, joust, and scour, but scouring;
Ear, but earn; and ere and tear
Do not rhyme with here but heir.

Mind the O of *off* and *often*
Which may be pronounced as *orphan*,
 With the sound of *saw* and *sauce*;
 Also *soft, lost, cloth* and *cross*.
Pudding, puddle, putting. Putting?
Yes: at golf it rhymes with *shutting*.
 Respite, spite, consent, resent.
 Liabile, but Parliament.

Seven is right, but so is *even*,
Hyphen, roughen, nephew, Stephen,
 Monkey, donkey, clerk and jerk,
 Asp, grasp, wasp, demesne, cork, work.

A of *valour, vapid, vapour,*
S of *news* (compare *newspaper*),
 G of *gibbet, gibbon, gist,*
 I of *antichrist* and *grist,*
Differ like *diverse* and *divers,*
Rivers, strivers, shivers, fivers.
 Once, but nonce, toll, doll, but roll,
 Polish, Polish, poll and poll.

Pronunciation – think of *Psyche!* –
Is a *paling*, *stout* and *spiky*.
 Won't it make you lose your *wits*
 Writing *groats* and saying 'grits'?
It's a dark *abyss* or *tunnel*
Strewn with stones like *rowlock, gunwale,*
 Islington, and Isle of Wight,
 Housewife, verdict and indict.

Don't you think so, reader, *rather*,
Saying *lather, bather, father*?

Finally, which rhymes with *enough*,

Though, through, bough, cough, hough, sough, tough??

Hiccough has the sound of *sup...*

My advice is: GIVE IT UP!

Acknowledgement:

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