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 uitspraakoeefeningen. 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 "admiré",
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 reverend 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, gool, 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.
   "Soldier, 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 manti-(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, paean, 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,
Bowling, 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 deafer,
Feoifer does, and zephyr, heifer.
Dull, bull, Geoffrey, George, ate, late,
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,
Crevise, 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 scourging;
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.
Liable, 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 rather, 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!

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Three Doublets

One of the best in the tradition of Gardner and Lehrer, those who mixed mathematics with language and had endless fun with both, Lewis Carroll invented a now-common type of puzzle known as a word-ladder, but which he dubbed “doublets.” Altering one letter at a time, change one word into another:

Farewell country and bluegrass,
Your banjoes that go ‘strum’:
Just listen to that swelling brass,
The woodwinds’ fluid hum.
Come on maestro, raise the heat!
Tap your dress shoes in your seat!
Toot the sousaphone and BEAT
the DRUM. (5 links)

To catch a snare before all’s lost,
Rehearsal’s where it’s at.
For playing out-of-tune on stage?
No one would care for that!
Worry like a dog a bone,
Wear out your every gramophone
If it will help avoid a TONE
that’s FLAT. (10 links)

A true musician fins it hard
To languish low, forlorn,
While chappies file into the aisle
With peanuts and popcorn.
The date’s arrived: it’s Concert Day!
I wonder what critics will say?
It’s time blow the flute and PLAY
the HORN. (17 links)