

The Chaos by Gerard Nolst Trenité

This is a classic English poem containing about 800 of the worst irregularities in English spelling and pronunciation. [Will Snellen](#) wrote [a PDF version using the phonetic alphabet](#). You can hear some of it pronounced mostly correctly in videos here:

- [The Chaos Of English Pronunciation by Gerard Nolst Trenité](#) on YouTube.
- [English Pronunciation - "The Chaos" by Dr. Gerard Nolst Trenité](#) on YouTube.

You can also [skip down to a more complete introduction at the bottom of this page](#).

Gerard Nolst Trenité - The Chaos (1922)

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 *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 *deafer*,
Feoffer 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,
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 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 *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!

Notes on The Chaos

"The Chaos" is a poem which demonstrates the irregularity of English spelling and pronunciation, written by Gerard Nolst Trenité (1870-1946), also known under the pseudonym Charivarius. It first appeared in an appendix to the author's 1920 textbook *Drop Your Foreign Accent: engelsche uitspraakoeefeningen*. (From Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Chaos)

Chris Upward introduces The Classic Concordance of Cacographic Chaos

<http://www.spellingsociety.org/journals/j17/caos.php>

[*Journal of the Simplified Spelling Society*, 1994/2 pp27-30 later designated J17]

This version is essentially the author's own final text, as also published by New River Project in 1993. A few minor corrections have however been made, and occasional words from earlier editions have been preferred. Following earlier practice, words with clashing spellings or pronunciations are here printed in italics.

A number of readers have been urging republication of *The Chaos*, the well-known versified catalogue of English spelling irregularities. The *SSS Newsletter* carried an incomplete, rather rough version in the summer of 1986 (pp.17-21) under the heading "Author Unknown", with a parallel transcription into an early form of Cut Spelling. Since then a stream of further information and textual variants has come our way, culminating in 1993-94 with the most complete and authoritative version ever likely to emerge. The time is therefore now truly ripe for republication in the *JSSS*.

Our stuttering progress towards the present version is of interest, as it testifies to the poem's continuing international impact. Parts of it turned up from the mid-1980s onwards, with trails leading from France, Canada, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and Turkey. The chequered career of the first version we received was typical: it consisted of a tattered typescript found in a girls' High School in Germany in 1945 by a British soldier, from whom it passed through various hands eventually to reach Terry De'Ath, who passed it to the SSS; but it did not mention who its author was. A rather sad instance of the mystery that has long surrounded the poem is seen in Hubert A Greven's *Elements of English Phonology*, published in Paris in 1972: its introduction quoted 48 lines of the poem to demonstrate to French students how impossible English is to pronounce (ie, to read aloud), and by way of acknowledgment said that the author "would like to pay a suitable tribute to Mr G Nolst Trenité for permission to copy his poem *The Chaos*. As he could not find out his whereabouts, the author presents his warmest thanks, should the latter happen to read this book". Alas, the poet in question had died over a quarter of a century earlier.

For the varied materials and information sent us over the years we are particularly indebted to: Terry De'Ath of Newcastle-upon-Tyne; Tom McArthur (Editor of *English Today*) of Cambridge; Benno Jost-Westendorf of Recklinghausen, Germany; Professor Che Kan Leong of the University of Saskatchewan, Canada; the Editor of *Perfect Your English*, Barcelona; and SSS committee member Nick Atkinson for the French reference. From them we learnt who the author was and that numerous versions of the poem were in circulation; but many tantalizing questions remained unanswered.

Three contributions in 1993-94 then largely filled in the gaps in the picture. The first of these contributions was due to the diligent research of Belgian SSS member Harry Cohen of Tervuren which outlined the author's life and told us a good deal about the successive editions of the poem. The second came from Bob Cobbing of New River Project (89a Petherton Road, London N5 2QT), who sent the SSS a handsome new edition (ISBN 1 870750 07 1) he had just published in conjunction with the author's nephew, Jan Nolst Trenité, who owns the copyright. This edition had been based on the final version published by the author in his lifetime (1944), and must therefore be considered particularly authoritative. Finally, Jan Nolst Trenité himself went to considerable trouble to correct and fill out the details of his uncle's biography and the poem's publishing history which the SSS had previously been able to compile.

The author of *The Chaos* was a Dutchman, the writer and traveller Dr Gerard Nolst Trenité. Born in 1870, he studied classics, then law, then political science at the University of Utrecht, but without graduating (his Doctorate came later, in 1901). From 1894 he was for a while a private teacher in California, where he taught the sons of the Netherlands Consul-General. From 1901 to 1918 he worked as a schoolteacher in Haarlem, and published several schoolbooks in English and French, as well as a study of the Dutch constitution. From 1909 until his death in 1946 he wrote frequently for an Amsterdam weekly paper, with a linguistic column under the pseudonym *Charivarius*.

The first known version of *The Chaos* appeared as an appendix (*Aanhangsel*) to the 4th edition of Nolst Trenité's schoolbook *Drop Your Foreign Accent: engelsche uitspraakoeeningen* (Haarlem: H D Tjeenk Willink & Zoon, 1920). The book itself naturally used the Dutch spelling current before the 1947 reform (see *JSSS* 1987/2, pp14-16). That first version of the poem is entitled *De Chaos*, and gives words with problematic spellings in italics, but it has only 146 lines, compared with the 274 lines we now give (four more than in our 1986 version). The general importance of *Drop your foreign accent* is clear from the number of editions it went through, from the first (without the poem) in 1909, to a posthumous 11th revised edition in 1961. The last edition to appear during the author's life was the 7th (1944), by which time the poem had nearly doubled its original length. 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.

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. The selection of examples now appears somewhat dated, as do a few of their pronunciations, indeed a few words may even be unknown to today's readers (how many will know what a "studding-sail" is, or that its nautical pronunciation is "stunsail"?), and not every rhyme will immediately "click" ("grits" for "groats"?); but the overwhelming bulk of the poem represents as valid an indictment of the chaos of English spelling as it ever did. Who the "dearest creature in creation" addressed in the first line, also addressed as "Susy" in line 5, might have been is unknown, though a mimeographed version of the poem in Harry Cohen's possession is dedicated to "Miss Susanne Delacruix, Paris". Presumably she was one of Nolst Trenité's students.

Readers will notice that *The Chaos* is written from the viewpoint of the foreign learner of English: it is not so much the spelling as such that is lamented, as the fact that the poor learner can never tell how to pronounce words encountered in writing (the poem was, after all, appended to a book of *pronunciation exercises*). With English today the prime language of international communication, this unpredictability of symbol-sound correspondence constitutes no less of a problem than the unpredictability of sound-symbol correspondence which is so bewailed by native speakers of English. Nevertheless, many native English-speaking readers will find the poem a revelation: the juxtaposition of so many differently pronounced parallel spellings brings home the sheer illogicality of the writing system in countless instances that such readers may have never previously noticed.

It would be interesting to know if Gerard Nolst Trenité, or anyone else, has ever actually used *The Chaos* to teach English pronunciation, since the tight rhythmic and rhyming structure of the poem might prove a valuable mnemonic aid. There could be material for experiments here: non-English-speaking learners who had practised reading parts of the poem aloud could be tested in reading the same problematic words in a plain prose context, and their success measured against a control group who had not practised them through *The Chaos*.

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pronunciations are here printed in italics.