

Exploring the Influence of French on the Pronunciation of the Letter *h* in English Words

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Abstract. In English learning, what are the reasons behind when to not pronounce the letter *h* and when to pronounce it in English words? These are the questions that English learners struggle with. In this essay, the author will investigate the influence of French on the change of English pronunciation of the letter *h* in English words through a chronological approach: Old English, Medieval English and Modern English. In this way, the author hopes to help English learners further understand the influence of French on the pronunciation of English words with the letter *h*, and from there to help English learners to memorize the pronunciation of the relevant words.

Keywords: Diachronic Research; Evolution of the Pronunciation of Letter *h*; Influence of French; British Pronunciation.

1. Introduction

For English learners, correct pronunciation and spelling are the foundation of English learning. Although in English pronunciation, the pronunciation of most words is regular, some words still have no trace of pronunciation and only rely on rote pronunciation. For example, the letter *h* is sometimes pronounced and sometimes not pronounced in the pronunciation of words, and sometimes it is combined with other letters to make other sounds. For such words with difficult pronunciation rules, how do they arise, and do we have strategies to deal with them? This paper will discuss this.

First of all, the reason why some words are not pronounced according to the normal pronunciation rules is because they are foreign languages that are not Anglicized but retain the original pronunciation characteristics after being introduced. Therefore, they are different from the phonetic system established in the development of English.

Secondly, looking back on the history of British development, foreign languages were introduced into the United Kingdom during different historical periods, which promoted the development of English vocabulary and pronunciation, enriching its content, such as Greek, Latin, Italian, Mandarin, Japanese, French, etc. Among the 1,000 English words that are most used, French accounts for 11%, Latin accounts for 2%, and other foreign languages only account for 4%; among the 2,000 English words that are most used, French accounts for 46%, Latin accounts for 46%. Among the 3,000 most commonly used words in English, French still accounts for 46%, which is much larger than that of other foreign languages (Wang, 1997: 293). From this, among other foreign languages, French has a huge influence on English pronunciation.

Therefore, from the perspective of the French intruding English, this paper uses a diachronic research method to explore the effect of French on the pronunciation of letter *h* in English words. The purpose is to help English learners gain a deeper understanding of the pronunciation of letter *h* in English words—how the pronunciation of the letter *h* changes, and what role French plays in this process—so as to let English learners turn to the pronunciation of French vocabulary when encountering words with the letter *h*, remember the pronunciation of such English words, and have a better understanding of the method in English learning.

It should be noted that there are many chronological divisions in the history of English development. Zhang (1995) applies the division method by Crystal: Old English, Middle English, Early Modern English and Modern English. This paper also uses this division, but the author combines Early Modern English and Modern English together because the influence of French on English pronunciation in these two periods tends to be saturated and can be combined.

In addition, the paper is divided into two parts: the first part is illustrating that during the Old English period, French during the Middle English period and the modern English period influences the British pronunciation of the letter *h* in English words (British pronunciation henceforth); the second part to summarize the previous text and provide suggestions on how to pronounce it correctly.

2. Literature Review

Through data collection, the author finds that there is no literature on the influence of French on the pronunciation of the letter *h* in English words, but most scholars have mentioned related content. Current research on the influence of French on English pronunciation can be divided into the following categories:

The first category: instead of studying the impact of French pronunciation on English pronunciation, it starts with analyzing the impact of French loanwords on English vocabulary. Also, because vocabulary includes pronunciation is included, when analyzing French loanwords, the research will mention the changes in English pronunciation influenced by French loanwords (Lian, 2010; Li & Peng, 2007; Zhong, 2013; Gao, 1997; Wang, 2011). All research talks about the French impact on various stages of English development, the reasons for the impact, the areas being impacted, and the way English borrows French vocabulary. When it comes to the part of English borrowing French vocabulary, it will talk about the influence of French pronunciation on English pronunciation. Li & Peng and Lian mention that the French vocabulary with letter *h* retains the original pronunciation characteristics, thus enriching the pronunciation of the letter *h* in English words.

The second category is to compare English pronunciations with French pronunciations, or sorting out French loanwords with letter combinations that retain French pronunciation (Qi, 2013; Li, 1999).

The third category is from the perspective of inconsistency between English pronunciation and spelling, analyzing the evolution of English pronunciation, which will also mention the impact of French pronunciation on English. This is because in the history of English development, French plays a pivotal role in it (Lin, 2002; Gao, 2004). Gao uses a diachronic research method to describe the changes in English pronunciation from Old English to Middle English and later periods, including the influence of French borrowed to English.

The fourth category is to use synchronic research methods to study the influence of medieval French on English (Deng, 2020).

The fifth category is to use diachronic research methods to describe the changing characteristics of English pronunciation in each period of English development history, and give a lot of examples (Zhang, 2014; Li, 1991).

3. Investigation on the French Influence on the Pronunciation of Letter *h* in English Words

This chapter will describe the influence of French on the pronunciation of *h* in English words during the Old English period (AD 449-1066), the Middle English period (AD 1066-1489), and the modern English period (AD 1489-present).

3.1 Old English Period (AD 449-1066)

3.1.1 Background

Old English, also known as "Anglo-Saxon English", is a language synthesized by several Germanic dialects brought to Britain from Europe continent by Germanic tribes such as the Anglo-Saxons and Jutes (Zhang, 2014:20). Therefore, the pronunciation of the letter *h* in words in this period has not been influenced by French. But we still need to sort out the pronunciation of the letter *h* in the words of this period to compare with the pronunciation of the letter *h* in the subsequent historical period.

3.1.2 Pronunciation Changes of Letter h in Words

Zhang (1991: 43) points out that every letter in Old English words is pronounced. The letter *h* is pronounced as [h] in a word, but it has different changes when combined with different letters. The details are as follows:

(a) The letter *h* is pronounced [h] before a vowel, as in:

hālij ['ha: lij] (*holy*, “神圣的”);

hūs [hu:s] (*house*, “房子”)

(b) The letter *h* next to the front vowel [e] or [i] is pronounced like the German *ch* in *ich* as [ç] (Mitchell et al., 2005: 15), eg: *niht* [niçt] (*night*, 夜晚)

(c) The letter *h* is pronounced as [x] when it is close to the back vowels [ɑ], [ɔ], [u], such as: *pēah* [θe:ax] (*though*, “尽管”) (Hu, 2007:647)

3.2 Middle English Period (AD 1066-1489)

3.2.1 Background

Middle English period began with the Norman Conquest. The Duke of Normandy from France invaded England and became King of England. Since then, French has become the official language of the United Kingdom, and the government, courts, schools and other social institutions must use French (Li, 1991: 6-7). The 300 years of Norman rule was the first climax of French borrowed into English. About 10,000 French words entered English, and about 75% of them are still in use today (2010: 294). Some of these French loanwords have not been assimilated by English, retaining the French pronunciation, thus enriching the pronunciation of the letter *h* in English words.

3.2.2 Pronunciation Changes of Letter h in Words

During this period, due to the influence of the official language—French, in addition to maintaining the original pronunciation of the letter *h* in English words, new changes have also occurred. Details are as follows:

A. The letter *h* is silent in a word

(a) Reason: French belongs to the Latin family. Among the French words derived from Latin, some words have no aspirated vowels at the beginning, but in order to commemorate their Latin form, letter *h* is added at the beginning of the word, but it is not pronounced, such as: *homme*, (people, formerly: ome). Its original Latin form is *homo* (Gu, 2013: 21). This letter *h* is called mute *h*, and most French words with a mute *h* at the beginning of the word retain the French pronunciation characteristics after being introduced into English, thus enriching the pronunciation of the letter *h* in English words.

For example:

(1) *hour* (Date: 1100-1200; Language: Old French; Origin: *heure*): /'aʊə/

(2) *honest* (Date: 1200-1300; Language: Old French; Origin: *honeste*): /'ɒnɪst/

(3) *honor* (Date: 1100-1200; Language: Old French): /'ɒnə/

(4) *heir* (Date: 1300-1400; Language: Old French): /eə/

(All the vocabulary information is excerpted from Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English)

B. Letter combination *ph* pronunciation [f]

After consulting considerable journals and English history books, the author found that in Old English, only the letter *f* is [f], and the *ph* letter combination is rare. For example, in the third chapter of Li's *History of English*, only *fenix* (phoenix) is pronounced [f] in old English vocabulary.

In French, the letter *f* and the letter combination *ph* are both pronounced [f]. During the Middle English period, the French brought many words, including political, economic, cultural and medical fields, among which *physician* (from Anglo-French, from *phisique*) was introduced to the United Kingdom at this time (Gao, 1997: 68), so the *ph* letter combination was also pronounced [f] in English.

3.3 Modern English Period (AD 1489-Present)

3.3.1 Background

From the 16th century to the present, there have been three large influxes of French words into England:

The first time French borrowed into English arose in the European Renaissance. Under the cultural baptism of ancient Greece and Rome, the British bourgeoisie express new things, new ideas and new feelings. British writers and scholars used a lot of Latin, French and other vocabulary in their literary works, and a large number of French words flowed into the United Kingdom.

The second time French vocabulary entered the United Kingdom occurred during the Restoration of the Stuart dynasty, when King Charles II set off a French craze. The French loanwords this time were mainly military terms. Although many borrowed words disappeared as the upsurge subsided, some loanwords were still retained, and some of them have not been completely assimilated and still retain some characteristics of French.

The third occurred in the 19th century. The borrowed vocabulary this time is mainly concentrated in the fields of literature, art, food, home furnishing and so on. The borrowing at this stage enabled French and French civilization to permeate English in all aspects of social life, leaving a deep imprint of French culture in English (Lian, 2010: 81-82).

Although there are historical events such as the third scientific and technological revolution that promotes the integration of countries, these three climaxes of French borrowed into English have a greater impact on the pronunciation of the letter *h* in English words, and are basically finalized.

3.3.2 Pronunciation Changes of Letter *h* in Words

The pronunciation change of the letter *h* during this period was mainly caused by the combination with other letter combinations: the letter combination *ch* is pronounced [ʃ].

A. letter combination *ch* is pronounced [ʃ]

In French, the letter combination *ch* is [ʃ], but not [tʃ]. In the Middle English period, the letter combination *ch* is pronounced [tʃ] in French loan words. This is the reason why the loan words were assimilated by English. Later, in the Modern English period, French loanword retains the pronunciation of [ʃ], so the combination of letter *h* and letter *c* is pronounced as [ʃ] (Li & Peng: 2007:85).

Table 1. French loanwords examples (Li & Peng, 2007:85)

Letter or letter combination	English pronunciation	Loanwords at early stage	French pronunciation	Loanwords at later stage
ch	[tʃ]	Chapel, cherish	[ʃ]	Chaperon, chef

As can be seen from the above Table, some French words were Anglicized after being introduced to the UK, while some still retain their original characteristics. It is these unassimilated French loanwords that enrich the pronunciation of English. There are other examples at the same time:

brochure: /'brəʊʃə/ (Date: 1700-1800; Language: French)

parachute: /'pærəʃu:t/ (Date: 1700-1800; Language: French)

champagne: /ʃæm'peɪn/ (Date: 1600-1700; Language: French)

(All vocabulary information is excerpted from Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English)

4. Conclusion

4.1 Pronunciation Changes of *h* in English Words

After exploring the influence of French intervention on the pronunciation of the letter *h* in English words in the three periods of Old English, Middle English and Modern English, the author found that the evolution path is roughly as shown in the following Table:

Table 2. The evolution path

Period	Old English (AD 449-1066)	Middle English (1066-1489)	Modern English (1489-present)
The influence of French on the pronunciation of the letter h in English words	French did not intervene in English during this period, and the letter h itself is pronounced in English words.	A. The letter h is influenced by French loanwords and is not pronounced in English words. B. Meanwhile, the new letter combination ph in English is pronounced [f].	New letter combination ch is pronounced [ʃ]

4.2 Suggestions on Pronouncing h in English Words Accurately

According to the research, the author finds that the pronunciation of words with the letter *h* in English is influenced by French to a large extent, so understanding the findings can also help English learners remember the pronunciation of such words, and feel less confused in the process of phonetic learning. The following suggestions can be used not only in learning English words with the letter *h*, but also in other learning.

4.2.1 Hold a Correct Learning Attitude

Mao Zedong once said that language is not something that can be learned casually, but must be worked hard. Therefore, first of all, a correct attitude of language learning must be held, do not shrink back when encountering difficulties, and do not be arrogant of making progress.

4.2.2 Learn to Transfer Knowledge

English knowledge does not exist in isolation, and finding connections with each other helps to consolidate old knowledge and deepen the impression of new knowledge (Xie & Peng, 2007: 129). According to the genealogical classification of languages, English belongs to the Germanic language family of the Indo-European language family as well as German, while French belongs to the Latin language family of the Indo-European language family (Zhang, 2014: 13). In addition to the content of Chapter 3, it is found that French and English are closely related. Therefore, in the study of English, some basic French pronunciation and vocabulary can be learned to promote English learning through the positive transfer effect of French.

4.2.3 Have the Courage to Speak

Mistakes are the beginning of making progress, and speaking English is essential for accurate pronunciation. While speaking in English, one can record and listen to it repeatedly to correct the pronunciation mistakes, so that the spoken language will improve. At the same time, some reward and punishment mechanisms can be formulated to strengthen learning motivation and form good study habits.

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