

The Anti-Phonetic Alphabet

The concept for this screwy idea came from a business trip that I had to take some years ago by automobile with a co-worker to visit a contractor whose plant was located in College Station, Pennsylvania. The only convenient way to get there was by auto and this fellow who I was going with, named Larry, volunteered to drive. Well, it turns out that Larry was a big, but I mean BIG, radio ham hobbyist; his entire car was stuffed with shortwave radio equipment that he could broadcast and receive with -- thousands of dollars worth of equipment. He could even tie his broadcasts through certain relay stations, called repeaters, and have the repeater call a given phone number thereby enabling him to talk to whoever answered, and this is many, many years before the advent of cellular phones. As a matter of fact, on our way home from College Station, he parked on a convenient Pennsylvania mountain top, raised a repeater that he knew of in Northern, Virginia, and had us patched through to my home phone so that I could talk to my wife Jo and tell her I was on my way home and about what time I'd arrive. However, I digress. While we were driving, Larry was constantly activating his equipment and talking to other enthusiasts worldwide. One conversation I remember was with somebody in Argentina. As you may know, short wave tends to be rather static filled (at least it was with Larry's equipment). So when Larry was trying to tell his listener some cogent point, he would often use a phonetic alphabet to spell out the important word or words to ensure his listener was getting the message. For example, "Hello, my name is Larry as in Lima-Alpha-Romeo-Romeo-Yankee."

Well, to be truthful with you, I was rather bored by this entire continuing scenario. First, I didn't particularly like this fellow to begin with (he once invited me along with a bunch of our co-workers to his house for a party and when we got there, it turned out to be a Tupper Ware party). However, because of the work related trip, I was forced into spending a few days with him. Then, as we were driving, to be continuously subjected to his playing with his radio equipment, often to the lack of attention to his driving, was frustrating and anger provoking, and I couldn't get away from it; I was a prisoner in his car. And the use of this so-called phonetic alphabet seemed to be particularly annoying. So to divert myself from all of this, I started to think that maybe a kind of funny and amusing diversion would be to construct an anti-phonetic alphabet, i.e., an alphabet that somebody could employ to confuse the message to the listener as opposed to making the message more understandable.

For each letter of the alphabet, I therefore need a word whose spelling starts with that letter but that is pronounced like it begins with a different letter and, the first word that came to mind that has this property is the word "pneumatic," i.e., it starts with P but is pronounced like it starts with N, the P is silent. P as in pneumatic. This pleased me, and I mentally started trying to add additional letters and their associated words to my so called anti-phonetic alphabet. As I did so, I came across some words that are not only pronounced like they begin with a different letter, but are pronounced like an entirely different letter altogether, such as E as in eye. The entire associated word itself sounds like one is saying a different letter. This is even more confusing and certainly adds to the effectiveness of any anti-phonetic alphabet. This, by-the-way, emphasizes an obvious but

basic tenet for constructing an anti-phonetic alphabet, that is -- *wherever possible, the anti-phonetic alphabet should be composed of words that maximize the confusion of the listener.* If words that don't entirely pronounce as a different letter cannot be thought of, the word should probably be as short as possible, as this also adds to the confusion. Of course the most confusing circumstance of all is when the word is pronounced exactly like the letter, such as B as in bee, since no additional information whatsoever is conveyed to the listener. However, this doesn't seem quite fair; it's certainly not intellectually challenging for the person constructing the alphabet. Alternative words are sometimes possible, as I also came up with many that corresponded to letters I had already included in my list, such as E as in eye or ewe.

Well, I certainly didn't finish composing this anti-phonetic alphabet while on this horrible trip with Larry, however, it kept me amused during my time driving with him. When I got home, I told Jo about the whole incident and her comment was that the idea of an anti-phonetic alphabet sounds like something one would only think of when one is stoned. We never have finished the damn thing. Words for the letters F and R have been extremely elusive. Furthermore, many of the words are borderline satisfactory. I guess we will have to keep trying to improve these marginal words and hopefully come up with an F word (no pun intended) and a good R word. The only solution that we've found for some letters is a word requiring a foreign pronunciation, while other words proffered as solutions require the second and least preferred pronunciation or spelling. Anyway, here is the anti-phonetic alphabet in its current incarnation:

A as in are or aye	N as in ngala (Bantu people--eñ gäla)
B as in bdellium (gum resin--the b is silent)	O as in ouiji-board
C as in cue, cay, or chi	P as in phlegm, pharoah, psi, or phi
D as in Djakarta	Q as in quay
E as in eye, ewe, em, en, or el	R as in ?
F as in ?	S as in sea or see
G as in gnu	T as in tsar or Tao
H as in herb	U as in Uele (we lâ -- African river)
I as in Iwo Jima	V as in veldt (fîlt)
J as in jai lai or jabot	W as in why, wry, wye, or who
K as in knead or knew	X as in Xerox
L as in llama (Spanish pronunciation)	Y as in you
M as in mnemonic	Z as in Zapata (säpätä)