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## ENGLISH VERB-MARKERS SERVING AS AN ACCURATE PREDICTOR OF ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION: THE CASE OF A VERB-MARKER ‘-FY’

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### ABSTRACT

This article deals with English spelling in relation with its segmental and suprasegmental realizations. The reciprocal relationship between English spelling and its pronunciation is mostly arbitrary, and thus unpredictable. However, a closer observation on certain verbal markers, one of which is a verb-marker ‘-fy’ indicates that to some greater extent its segmental and suprasegmental realizations are highly predictable. Firstly, English verbs ending in ‘-fy’ must be segmentally realized as [-faɪ]. Secondly, English verbs ending in ‘-fy’ must be stressed on the antepenultimate syllable. A minor exception exists, but a high degree of accuracy is recorded. Owing to the high degree of predictability of its segmental and suprasegmental realizations, the verb-marker ‘-fy’ lends itself to be a predictor of accurate pronunciation. Therefore, teachers as well as students of English as an SL or FL can improve their pronunciation by relying on this observation findings.

**Key Words:** segmental, suprasegmental, realization, pronunciation, stress, accuracy, and predictor

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### INTRODUCTION

A lot of non-native speakers of English, i.e. Indonesians, demonstrate fluency whenever they speak English. In order to be able to do this, they have to articulate English sounds properly. In other words, they have to master the pronunciation of English. For native speakers, English pronunciation poses no problem at all. However, for learners of English, pronunciation is a burden. A question arises ‘Why do English learners find English pronunciation problematic? One of the reasons is that pronunciation is one of the components of English which is

the most neglected. The skill of pronunciation is not well-groomed in the classroom. Another question appears, that is ‘Why is English pronunciation neglected in English classes? One of the answers of this question is that English teachers who are supposed to be the agents or the guardians of instilling good pronunciation are themselves not good in pronunciation. This is proved from what always happen in-service trainings for English teachers or Pendidikan dan Latihan Profesi Guru (PLPG). The participants are teachers of English who undergo the certification program.

During every peer-teaching activity in every batch, their weakness in pronunciation is exposed and brought to notice. They make mistakes in pronouncing common words which they always use in their everyday teaching.

Their mistakes cover not only segmental but also suprasegmental realizations. In segmental pronunciation, for example, they pronounced the word *giraffe* as [dʒɪrɑpɪ] instead of [dʒɪrɑ:f] BE or [dʒɪræf] AE. In suprasegmental pronunciation, for example, they stressed the word ‘*classify*’, ‘*realize*’, and ‘*demonstrate*’ wrongly. Their mistakes are that those words are wrongly stressed: ‘*classi'fy*’, ‘*re'alize*’, and ‘*de'monstrate*.’ Why do our fellow English teachers make such pronunciation mistakes? One of the answers is that most of them lack the knowledge of the characteristics of spellings of English words vis a vis its pronunciation.

There are more mistakes than what had been documented in the above paragraph. However, in this article I intend to limit my discussion to just the pronunciation mistakes of the words ending in a verbal marker ‘-fy.’ The above word group is some of the collections of ‘English cyclic word groups’ (Sukrisno, 2015). As a matter of fact, the above mistakes in pronouncing words having this verbal marker could have been avoided if learners of English know how the words containing this verbal morpheme behaves in their phonological realizations. In fact, under close scrutiny this cyclic English word group demonstrates characteristics which help English learners as a second/foreign language to find ease in pronouncing this particular group of English words.

The ‘-fy’ ending of the above-mentioned English word group can serve as an accurate predictor in pronunciation both segmentally and suprasegmentally. By being capable of recognizing what prediction is in store for this verbal marker, one will be able to reduce the possibility of making unnecessary pronunciation mistakes and thus subsequently able to improve his/her segmental and suprasegmental pronunciation on the cyclic words ending in ‘-fy.’ To show readers, how any predictor of pronunciation helps them to pronounce, we can take one word randomly from another cyclic word, for example the word group ending in ‘-ize’; let say the word ‘*eternalize*.’ The verb-marker ‘-ize’ in this word means a lot in our determination in how to pronounce the word. Segmentally pronounced, the ‘-ize’ must always be pronounced as [-aɪz], thus ‘*eternal*[aɪz]. Suprasegmentally pronounced, we can predict that this word must be strongly stressed on the ‘antepenultimate’ syllable (or third syllable of the word counted backwards) (Sukrisno, 2015); thus ‘**e'ternalize**.’ This stress pattern will generate another pattern or it will serve as another predictor in segmental realization. The mute letter ‘-r’ in the second syllable can be a predictor that this particular syllable must be pronounced with a certain length; thus ‘e'[tə:]nal[aɪz].’ The segmental pronunciation of [-aɪz] and the antepenultimate stress pattern hold true for any words ending in the verbal marker ‘-ize.’ Therefore, someone encountering any word of this type, will be able to accurately pronounce it not only segmentally but also suprasegmentally. Such characteristic is also possessed by the verb-marker ‘-fy.’

In brief, by studying the characteristics of '-fy' verbal marker, we will be able to learn that it can act as a good predictor of pronunciation. The result of knowing the characteristics of this verbal marker enables us to predict the pronunciation of this particular cyclic English words. The explanation above serves as an introductory background to the presentation of this article.

In order to talk about the topic of the discussion which is elaborated in the title of this article, there are a number essential issues underlining the development of this paper. These issues are concerned with the concept of pronunciation and the concept of the relationship between spelling and its pronunciation. These important issues will be discussed in the following sub-chapters.

### **ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION**

AMEP Research Centre (2002: 1) defines pronunciation as follows.

Pronunciation refers to the production of sounds what we use to make meaning. It includes attention to the particular sounds of a language (segments), aspects of speech beyond the level of individual sound, such as intonation, phrasing, stress, timing, rhythm (suprasegmental aspects), how the voice is projected (voice quality) and, in its broadest definition, attention to gestures and expressions that are closely related to the way we speak a language.

From the above definition, essentially pronunciation, especially English pronunciation, materializes itself in two phonetic features; segmental features and suprasegmental features. Segmental phonemes refer to features 'consisting of sound segments; hence, the vowel,

consonant, and semivowel sounds of a language' (Webster's New World College Dictionary, 2010). Meanwhile, Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2003) offers the definition of segmental phonemes as 'one of the phonemes ) as \k, a, t\ in cat, tack, act) of a language that can be assigned to a relative sequential order of minimal segments.' Segmental features involve three kinds of phoneme; vowels, diphthongs and consonants.

Suprasegmental features comprise several noticeable phonemes, such as stress, pitch, intonation, pause, length, etc. This definition complies with that of OALDCE's (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English), which refers segmental features as 'relating to features of speech such as stress and intonation as opposed to individual speech sounds' (OALDCE, 2010). Talking about English pronunciation cannot be separated from talking about suprasegmental features as a whole. However, for this particular discussion, what is meant by suprasegmental phonemes is limited to one kind of phoneme, that is stress. No other suprasegmental features will be highlighted here. Stress here is limited to strong or dominant stress.

In verbal communication, stress conveys a certain degree of importance, AMEP (2002) underlines the importance of stress at three distinguishable levels:

- Word level---multisyllable words have one or more syllables that are stressed,
- Sentence level---the most important words tend to be stressed, and
- Contrastive stress---the most important words carry greater stress.

In spite of the presence of those three levels of stress, this article is only concerned

with word level. The reason is that talking about point 2 and 3 must consider the intention of the speaker which is beyond the scope of this article to discuss. Meanwhile, stress itself is categorized into three degrees, strong, medium and weak stress. In this article, the type of stress being discussed is the strong or dominant stress. Following, Hornby (2010) the way of marking stress in orthography is by assigning the sign [-'] before the suspected strong syllable; for example,

- en'danger,
- 'phantom,
- exami'nee, etc.

There are other ways of marking dominant stress in writing, one of which is by giving a slanting sign inclining to the right direction, i.e. [-á-], on top of the vowel or diphthong of the stressed syllable (Ramelan, 2005). However, this paper adopts the stress symbolization for strong stress which is recommended by both Hornby (2010) and Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (CALD) (2013).

### **ENGLISH SPELLING AND ITS PRONUNCIATION**

In the English language, the concept of pronunciation represented by segmental and suprasegmental phonemes, cannot be separated from the concept of its spelling or orthography which is defined in the following way:

The word 'orthography refers to the rules for writing a language, such as conventions of spelling and punctuation. In an alphabetic script, such as English, this definition also includes its grapheme-phoneme (letter-sound) correspondences' (My English Language, 2014).

The function of spelling or orthography is to represent sounds. Unfortunately, in English, there is no one-to-one correspondence between the spelling of a word and its sound realizations. In other words, we can say that the pronunciation of English words is mostly arbitrary. For this, Upward and Davidson (2011) remark as follows: '... Modern English sound-spelling relationships are unsystematic and unpredictable, and in some cases seem to be almost beyond comprehension.' There seems to be a ground of truth in this statement. However, at a closer look, if we refer to Hill (1974), Sukrisno (2012a; 2012b; and 2012c), and Sukrisno (2015), out of this massive amount of unpredictability, there is a certain English spelling or at least the spelling of part of a word whose sound representation is regular and very much consistent. This can be proved in the verbal marker selected in this article; that is the verbal marker '-fy.'

Associated to its phonological realizations, the above verbal marker has particular characteristics. In turn, these characteristics can act as a prediction agent as to how the word ending in each word belonging to '-fy' cyclic word group should be segmentally and suprasegmentally pronounced. In order to prove the truth of the above statement, the characteristics of the above verb marker as an accurate predictor of English pronunciation will be elaborated in the following section.

### **VERB-MARKER '-FY' AS AN ACCURATE PREDICTOR OF PRONUNCIATION**

If we take a look at the relationship between English spelling vis a vis its phonological realization, we have to refer to the most

recent work carried out by Sukrisno (2015). Some of the phonetic phenomena dealt with in this work are concerned with the behaviour of 20 cyclic word groups; one of which is the cyclic word group ending in '-fy.' This cyclic word group offers a number of interesting phenomena worth discussing.

First, in terms of number, OALDCE (Hornby, 2005) exhaustively lists words belonging to this cyclic word group amounting to 85 words. The list begins with the word '*acidify*' and ends in the word '*yuppify*.' All of these 85 words are multi-syllabic, except for one word, i.e. '*defy*.' (Sukrisno, 2015: 132).

Second, in terms of its segmental realization, the pronunciation of the ending '-fy' is absolutely predictable. It must be pronounced as [-faI] with the degree of accuracy of 100%. This pronunciation does not change even if the word ending in this morpheme takes another morpheme, e.g. the present participial morpheme '-ing,' the past form morpheme '-ed,' and the inflectional morpheme '-s/-es'. Let's take one word randomly as an example, i.e. '*justify*' [dʒʌstɪfaɪ]. It becomes '*justifying*' [dʒʌstɪfaɪɪŋ]; '*justified*' [dʒʌstɪfaɪd]; and '*justifies*' [dʒʌstɪfaɪz]. The pronunciation of [-faI] remains intact whether the word functions as an infinitive, present participial, past form or as a third person singular. However, if the word ending in '-fy' takes a noun marker '-tion', it becomes a noun and its segmental realization changes. For example, the word '*justification*' is pronounced as [dʒʌstɪfɪkeɪʃn] instead of [dʒʌstɪfaɪkeɪʃn]. From this discussion, it can be concluded that the '-fy' of any word belonging to '-fy' cyclic word group must be pronounced as [-faI] when it functions as a

verb-marker. This means that the verb-marker '-fy' can act as a very accurate predictor of segmental pronunciation.

Third, in terms of suprasegmental realizations---in this case strong stress, all of the 85 words, save the word '*defy*' receive the prominent stress on the 'antepenultimate' (Sukrisno, 2015: 132) syllable or the third syllable by being counted backward. Let's take the word '*electrify*,' '*simplify*' and '*declassify*' as random examples. These words must be stressed on the antepenultimate syllable; thus '*e'lectrify*,' '*simplify*' and '*de'classify*.' The last example indicates whenever the word ending in '-fy' is prefixed, this prefixation does not change the stress pattern. The accuracy of this prediction gains 98.82%. If the word '*defy*' is removed from the list, the suprasegmental prediction accuracy becomes optimum, 100%. As noted earlier the word '*defy*' is bisyllabic so that it stands to reason that the rule does not apply to this word. In addition, this suprasegmental pronunciation rule applies when the '-fy' serves as a verb-marker, no matter whether it serves as a present participial or past form marker or as a third person singular marker. Based on the discussion in this paragraph, the verbal marker '-fy' can also accurately serve as a predictor of suprasegmental pronunciation.

## CONCLUSION

On the basis of what has been discussed in the previous paragraphs concerning the behaviour of the verbal marker of '-fy', two conclusions are available. First, whenever someone encounters any word ending in '-fy', this spelling must be pronounced as [-faI]. Second, whenever someone

pronounces any word ending in ‘-fy’, he/she must assign the strong stress on the antepenultimate syllable of the word. By referring to the first and second conclusions, one can derive a third conclusion, that is the

verb-marker ‘-fy’ is definitely an accurate predictor of English pronunciation.

Anyone abiding by the above two rules will certainly be facilitated in pronouncing English words, especially the pronunciation of the ‘-fy’ cyclic word group.

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