Sounds Fascinating

How do you pronounce biopic, synod, and Breughel? – and why? Do our cake and archaic sound the same? Where does the stress go in stalagmite? What’s odd about the word epergne? Pontcysyllte is obviously Welsh, but Penge is Welsh too! How cool is Caol in the Highlands of Scotland? What can Wesley’s hymns tell us about sound change in English? How do people pronounce Wroclaw in Poland? How can anyone manage to say Gdynia as just two syllables? Why is the village of Frith in the island of Montserrat usually pronounced as if spelt Frits? What embarrassing faux pas in English did a Russian conglomerate make? Should Ibild a cubbard instead of building a cupboard? How should we capitalize an exclamation mark, and why might we need to? What’s a depressor consonant? As a finale, the author writes a letter to his 16-year-old self.

J. C. WELLS is Emeritus Professor of Phonetics in the University of London and a Fellow of the British Academy. His interests centre on the phonetic and phonological description of languages but also extend to lexicography and language teaching. For seven years he wrote a daily phonetic blog. Based in Britain at UCL throughout his career, he has lectured in many countries around the world. He enjoys walking, speaking different languages (including Esperanto), singing, and playing the melodeon.
Sounds Fascinating
Further Observations on English Phonetics and Phonology

J. C. WELLS
Emeritus Professor of Phonetics, University College London

Illustrations by Lhinton Davidson
## Contents

*Preface*  
*page xi*

**PART I  WORDS, NAMES, PEOPLE, AND PLACES  1**

1 **Unusual Words**  
1.1 Ask Your Gardener  
1.2 Zhoosh It Up  
1.3 Speleothems  
1.4 Netsuke  
1.5 Abseiling  
1.6 Mayoral Elections  
1.7 Keirin  
1.8 Biopic  

2 **Food and Drink Words**  
2.1 Flummery  
2.2 Conchology  
2.3 Kumquat  
2.4 Lychee  
2.5 Physalis  

3 **Interesting Words**  
3.1 Obstruent  
3.2 Rowlocking Fun  
3.3 Jewellery, Jewelry  
3.4 Synod  
3.5 Algebraic Ordinals  
3.6 Remuneration and Anemones  
3.7 Sojourn  
3.8 Seismic  
3.9 Mandragora  
3.10 Quasi-  
3.11 Allegedly Aged  
3.12 Than  
3.13 Ha’p’orth  
3.14 Diamond  
3.15 Epergne
## Contents

3.16 Antimony 25  
3.17 Canine 27  
3.18 Met a What? 27  
3.19 Stress Changes 28  
3.20 Sainthood 29

4 Names  
4.1 Israel 31  
4.2 Laocoön 31  
4.3 Bombardier 32  
4.4 Ulysses 33  
4.5 Mysterious Derived Forms 34

5 People  
5.1 Boris and His Great-Grandfather 36  
5.2 Poets and Archangels 36  
5.3 Joe Mc-What? 37  
5.4 Eugenie 38  
5.5 An Archiepiscopal Mnemonic 38  
5.6 Coetzee 39  
5.7 Breughel 40  
5.8 Kim Jong-Un 40  
5.9 Voldemort 41

6 Places  
6.1 Liverpool Suburbs 43  
6.2 An Unwritten Possessive 43  
6.3 Pontcysyllte 44  
6.4 Bessacarr 45  
6.5 Slaugham 45  
6.6 Abingdon Grove 46  
6.7 Caol 46  
6.8 English Places 46  
6.9 Where Was That Again? 48  
6.10 Penge 49  
6.11 Machynlleth 50  
6.12 Acres 50  
6.13 Beguildy 51

7 Abroad  
7.1 Sichuan 52  
7.2 L’Aquila 52  
7.3 Rock Law 53  
7.4 Duisburg 53

8 Home from Abroad  
8.1 Agrément 55  
8.2 An Italian Wine 55
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>Ginkgo</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>Liebestod</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>Women’s Tennis</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>Raw Fish</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>A Heavenly Haven</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>Muchas Gratsias</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>The Letter z</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.10</td>
<td>Greek Politics</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>PART II  SOUNDS AND LETTERS</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Allophones</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>Mysteries of Existence</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>? ≠ 0</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>Is Our Cake Archaic?</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>Bedroom Wardrobe</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>Incomplete? Unreleased?</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Phonetic Processes</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>But . . .</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>Spinach Sandwiches</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>Corn Beef and Fry Rice</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>The Irish Sea</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>Aitches</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>Nonfinal Syllabic Consonants</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>Classical Elision</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>Initial Clusters</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>I Must Haplologize</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Spelling</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>Phrasebooks</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>Spanish Phonetics for the Layman</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>Going Awry</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>Yoo-Hoo</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>Habeas Corpus</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>Curly or Kicking?</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>A Spelling-Based Faux Pas</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>Sh!</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.9</td>
<td><em>rh</em> and <em>rrh</em></td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.10</td>
<td>Prusiking Around</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.11</td>
<td>The Digraph /h</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.12</td>
<td>Speech and Writing</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.13</td>
<td>Pronunciation and Spelling</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.14</td>
<td>Latin Double Velars</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.15</td>
<td>Bilding a Cubbard</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.16</td>
<td>Stenotypy</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.17</td>
<td>Final mb and mn</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
11.18 Keeping Shtoom 100
11.19 Faustian 101
11.20 Digraphs in the Alphabet 102
11.21 English Spelling: What Should We Do? 103
11.22 Romeo Papa 104
11.23 Going Up 105
11.24 Family Words 106
11.25 Casing Clicks 107

12 Transcription 108
12.1 Explicitness in Transcription 108
12.2 Syllabic Plosives 109
12.3 hapPy Again 109
12.4 False Alarm 111
12.5 Ram’s Horn and Gamma 114
12.6 Constraints on Diacritics 115
12.7 Ban Legacy Fonts! 116
12.8 What [a] Means 118
12.9 Old Nonsense 120

PART III APPLYING PHONETICS 123

13 Classification 125
13.1 Fricative or Approximant? 125
13.2 VOT Is That? 126
13.3 Labiodentals 128
13.4 Unreleased 128
13.5 Implosives and Ejectives 130
13.6 Guttural 133
13.7 Trilling 134
13.8 Ooh! 135
13.9 A Multiplicity of Schwas 136
13.10 A Controlled Rolling Grunt 137
13.11 Initial η 138
13.12 The Palatal Nasal 139
13.13 Lateral Fricatives 140
13.14 Russian ж 142
13.15 Depressors 143
13.16 Gdynia Unmasked 145
13.17 Breathiness 147
13.18 Tap, Tap 147
13.19 Voicing Basics 149

14 EFL 151
14.1 Institutionalized Mispronunciations 151
14.2 English r 151
14.3 Ask Your Favour 152
14.4 Buttressing? 152
14.5 English ʒ
14.6 French/English Interference
14.7 Southern Country

15 Accents
15.1 Shadow of Death
15.2 An Epiphany
15.3 Kerry, Carrie, and Carey
15.4 -ing
15.5 Fronted GOOSE
15.6 The Quality of SQUARE
15.7 The Poet and the Phonetician
15.8 Fair’s Fur
15.9 Going on Twur
15.10 Double Affricates
15.11 EE RIP
15.12 A Four-Letter Word
15.13 Bajans
15.14 A Jamaican Allophone
15.15 He Nar Get None
15.16 Bawl and Ball

16 Lexical Stress
16.1 Prevalence
16.2 Europeans and Shakespeareans
16.3 Tautonyms

17 Connected Speech
17.1 Accenting the Unaccetable
17.2 Irritating Hamburgers
17.3 Impressed?
17.4 You Would Say That!
17.5 Open Wide, Please

18 Texts in Transcription
18.1 ə bəˈlɪtk kruːz
18.2 ærdn̩ˈstres
18.3 m ðə pæb
18.4 kænədər ən slæskə
18.5 strɔːk

PART IV ROUNDUP

19 Rhetoric
19.1 Presentation Techniques
19.2 I Can’t Help It: It’s Just the Way I Am
19.3 Sound Advice
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td><strong>Language Mosaic</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20.1 Ndjuka</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20.2 As We Were</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20.3 Miscellanea</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20.4 Vowel Colour</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20.5 False Friends</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20.6 Polish Spoken Here</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td><strong>Postscript</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21.1 Skills Now Useless</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21.2 Memory</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21.3 Letter to My 16-Year-Old Self</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Index of Words</em></td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>General Index</em></td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Preface

The success of my book *Sounds Interesting* (Cambridge University Press 2014) encourages me to offer a further similar volume. Like its predecessor, *Sounds Fascinating* is mainly a compilation from the phonetic blog I wrote over the years following my retirement.

I’ve assumed that the reader is familiar with basic phonetic concepts and with the International Phonetic Alphabet. If you’re not quite up to speed on the IPA, please consult the *IPA Handbook* (Cambridge University Press 1999) and the IPA chart (www.internationalphoneticassociation.org). To brush up on theory, there are various textbooks available. I particularly recommend *Practical Phonetics and Phonology* by Beverley S. Collins and Inger M. Mees (Routledge 2013, 3rd edition). Wikipedia is a useful and generally reliable guide, particularly since Peter Roach took the phonetics entries in hand. You may wish to refer to my own works: *Accents of English* (Cambridge University Press 1982, three volumes), *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* (Pearson Education 2008, 3rd edition – referenced below as LPD) and *English Intonation: an Introduction* (Cambridge University Press 2006).

In this book I put phonetic symbols in **bold**, without slashes or brackets unless it is relevant at that point to distinguish phonemes (in slashes /) from allophones or general-phonetic sound-types (in square brackets []). Note that in my IPA transcription of English I use the symbol e for the DRESS vowel, aʊ for the MOUTH vowel, and eə for the SQUARE vowel.

To indicate letters as opposed to sounds, I use italics.

The prosodic conventions I use are a vertical stroke (|) to show an intonation phrase boundary, underlining to show the location of the nuclear (tonic) syllable, and the marks \, /, and ∨ to show a fall, a rise, and a fall-rise, respectively. For fuller discussion see *Sounds Interesting*, 4.1–2.

Words written in capitals, e.g. DRESS, are keywords standing for the entire lexical set of words containing the vowel in question: see my *Accents of English*, chapter 2.2, or the Wikipedia article on ‘lexical set’.

I hope this further collection inspires readers to explore traditional general phonetics and make their own observations on how both English and other languages are pronounced. There’s always something new to be heard.