

## Section 2, Chapter 10

### A, Ma, Mag, Magi, Magic, Magician— What's going on here?

In the Russian language each letter represents a single sound. It is so close to being phonetic that Russian dictionaries don't bother with pronunciation guides. All they do is show where the accent falls. Each Russian word has only one syllable that's accented. So that's all that is necessary in Russian, but English spelling doesn't work that way. And what is *that way*? Single letter correspondences from left to right. Too many reading teachers drum into their children's heads that our language works strictly from left to right. It doesn't. Instead, it works by patterns.

The first word in our English dictionaries is also the shortest. It is pronounced “uh” just as the first sound you hear in the word about or the last sound you hear in Cuba.<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, most elementary teachers teach the first word in our dictionaries incorrectly as “AY.” It is only pronounced “AY” when we use it as the name of the first letter of the alphabet, as when we recite our AY BEE SEES. Normally, we pronounce the word “a” as “uh” as in about or above. If you came into my house, I would immediately offer you a (“uh”) cup of coffee. If I offered you a (“AY”) cup of coffee you would be insulted, because by saying “AY” cup of coffee I am also saying that's all you can have.

Put an onset (consonant, consonant blend, or consonant digraph) in front of the letter *a* and now instead of pronouncing the letter *a* “uh”, we pronounce it “ah” as in *fa, ha, la, ma, pa*, etc. But if we add the letter *t* to *fa* it doesn't rhyme with *pot*. Instead we have the *-at* pattern, which no matter what<sup>22</sup> onset we use, the *at* sound is there.

When we add *g* to *Ma* we get *Mag*, and the sound of *a* changes from “ah” to a short *a*. But notice that all words that end with the letters *ag* will rhyme with *tag, rag, flag*, etc.

Suppose we add just the letter *i* to *Mag*. Now what happens? The hard *g* turns into a soft *g* or /j/ as in *Magi*. Add the letter *c* to *Magi* and now the sound of the letter *i* changes from long to short when we have *magic*. Add the letters *ian* to *magic* and the sound of the short *a* changes to the ubiquitous schwa. The letter *c* no longer has the sound of /k/ but combines with the letter *i* following it to make the *ci* digraph which is pronounced “sh” as in *magician*.

The very fact that we have consonant and vowel digraphs should have been obvious proof to our teaching profession that the spellings of English words do not progress neatly from one letter to the next left to right. We have *sip*. We have *hip*. Yet, if we put an *s* in front of *hip* we get *ship*. We have to recognize the combination of *s* and *h* as a digraph having one sound. Furthermore, what should be obvious is that the endings of words determine how the beginnings of words are pronounced. How is the second letter of the following words pronounced? *Dem, demo, demon, democracy*, and *democrat*. How do we pronounce the second letter *i* in the following two words: *ridicule, ridiculous*?

What is important to know is that the ending patterns are consistent. Take for example the *-acious* and *-acity* patterns. If you are tenacious you have tenacity. A capacious room has ample capacity. If you commit an atrocity in spelling, your spelling is atrocious. Animals known for their ferocity are ferocious. Spelling becomes a whole lot easier when you recognize the patterns and spell using the correct patterns.

<sup>21</sup> If you automatically add the “r” sound in your dialect just like JFK did, then forget about Kyoobur. Stick with uh bow't.

<sup>22</sup> Okay, so I'm lying. When we add the “dyslexic” digraph *wh* to the letters *at* the sound is different. But that's an example of the *w*- control. Remember that *wh* digraph really represents the *hw* consonant blend. Go ahead, check the pronunciation given in your dictionary for words beginning with the *wh* digraph. See the *w*- control words on pp. 502-4 in *The Patterns of English Spelling*.