Why no mips?

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Monosyllabic possibilities in English

This article is about some very short words: the permutations for monosyllables in common use in standard British English having the phonetic pattern: single consonant + short vowel + single consonant. It is similar, therefore, to my article 'Consonantal beginnings' (*ET*80), in which I looked at what pairs of consonantal sounds could be found at the beginnings of English words. The pronunciation is to be taken as that given in the OED for British English.

The vowels here are those of *hat*, *let*, *pit*, *hot*, *shook* and *rub*. The schwa vowel does not appear, as the only monosyllabic words containing it are weak pronunciations, as of *was* or *have*. For the consonants, the voiced version of 'sh', as in the middle of *vision* (phonetic symbol ʒ) is absent, as there are no normal English words of this pattern that begin or end with it. This does not seem to be from any intrinsic phonetic difficulty, as native English speakers who can speak French, for example, do not seem to find anything strange in pronouncing French words like *tige* or *jupe* or, to take one that both begins and ends with that sound, *juge*. Consonantal *y*, as well as *h*, *r* and *w*, appear only as opening sounds and *ng* only as a closing one. Where there are homophones, such as *jam* and *jamb*, I have given only one of the words.

To refer to the sounds, I have mostly used alphabetic representation, occasionally adding IPA symbols. I felt that, with the limited range of the topic, things would be clear that way both for phonetic experts and non-experts alike. I apologize to any phoneticians who may be irked by the inexactitude. With the IPA system, it is perhaps regrettable that the symbols ʧ and ʤ look as if they refer to two consonants each. Clearly, the word *itch* has only one consonantal sound, as has *edge*. We are not concerned here with details of pronunciation either. So, for example, whereas some speakers make the 'i' sound in *chill* slightly, but markedly, different from that in *chin*, here the 'i' sound, as with the other vowels, is taken to be the same for all the words containing it, whatever the preceding or following consonant.

In the tables, the words are divided into 'normal' (Roman type) and 'dubious' (italic). The latter are judged dubious for various reasons: slang (*shill*), infantile (*tum*), abbreviation (*deb*), too foreign (*kitsch*), part of a two-word expression (*ding*) and so on. You may think I have been too strict in some cases to judge a word 'dubious' or not strict enough not to in others. To decide whether a word is in common use or should be counted as a genuine word, I have simply used myself as the test-bed. I have not included proper names, acronyms or words of technical jargon. You are free to disagree with any inclusions or exclusions. An empty box does not imply there is no word beginning with that combination of sounds. There is no **sull*, for example, but there is *sully*. The concern here, then, is solely with monosyllabic words beginning and ending with the sounds indicated. An asterisk indicates that the vowel is pronounced long by some speakers, as in *path*. I have counted *wh-* as sounding the same as *w-* in words such as *whim*,

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though I am aware that some speakers prefer to distinguish between them.

When it comes to the opening consonant, there is one special case: the voiced version of 'th' (phonetic symbol ð). Words beginning with that sound are of a limited group. Here they are represented by *that*, *than*, *them*, *then*, *this* and *thus*. A native English speaker hearing a word beginning with that consonant will know instinctively that it will not be a common noun or a descriptive adjective, for example. It is therefore a subconscious aid to understanding. It is unlikely, then, that a new verb or common noun could come into English beginning with that sound. Apart from that, there is no outright reason why any of the blanks should not be filled. This article will look at what seem to be the preferences for English and whether there are any particular reasons why English has not, at present anyway, the words *gom*, *chack*, *leb* or *mip*. For some potential words, it might just be a case of phonetic overload: having *back*, *bag* and *pack* already, could we really cope with a *pag* as well? For others, aesthetic factors may come into play. Perhaps the absence of any 'ch?tch' words is because the English ear simply does not like the quick repetition of that sound. A voiced equivalent exists, though, in the word *judge*.

There are some striking cases. For example, the only word of this pattern that ends with the voiced 'th' is *with*. Dictionaries also offer the pronunciation of *with* with the unvoiced 'th', the OED suggesting it is less standard. That is why it appears twice in the tables that follow. It is perhaps, though, the contrasts *p*/*b*, *t*/*d*, *k*/*g* that provide the most interesting cases, as they are the sounds that produce the sharpest and shortest of these words, whereas the nasals, fricatives, liquids and sibilants produce softer or longer ones. The tables appear on pages 37–47.

I wondered whether this exercise would be more valid if it included long vowels, and even diphthongs, as well. It was not so much that the amount of information might then be daunting that I decided against it, as that there are reasonable doubts whether standard British English really has pairs of short/long vowels. To have included the 'long' vowels might then have seemed to imply a matching relationship between such pairs. For teaching English as a foreign language, one could propose short/long pairings along the lines of *cat*/*car*, *let*/*hair*, *slip*/*sleep*, *lot*/*law*, *book*/*zoom*, and *cup*/*fur*. That is expedient, but is there really the same relationship between the vowels of *cat* and *car* as between those of *slip* and *sleep*? I would say not, and would acknowledge that the pairing *cup*/*fur* was stretching things a little. It seems to me, then, that the pronunciation of the sequence C + short V + C is a sufficiently independent phenomenon and that the presence in English of the word *pick*, for example, need not be considered phonetically in relation to that of *peak*.

One might wonder, too, whether it was valid to distinguish monosyllables of the form C + short V + C from those beginning or ending with more than one consonant. We may not have **lut* or **lus*, but we have *glut* and *lust*. Is it not enough, then, to say that English accepts the sequences /lʌt/ and /lʌs/ even though there are no words consisting solely of those sequences of sounds? Granted, when we speak we pause between words only rarely, but the monosyllables of the type I have proposed here (C + V + C) can be heard individually, with silence before and after them. I think, then, that there is an important phonetic difference between being able to begin or end a monosyllable with a particular single consonant and that consonant's launching or being launched by another within a monosyllabic word. So I would say that the existence of *rub* in English is not necessarily phonetically validated by that of *grub* nor the possibility of **fiss* by that of *fist*.

For those of you with a competitive streak, here are the winners in some categories (counting only the 'normal' words). For opening consonant – *h*; closing consonant – *t*; opening C + V – *wi*; closing V + C – *it*; for the vowel alone – *a*. For initial unvoiced/voiced pairs, such as *pat*/*bat* or *tuck*/*duck*, the winner, again excluding 'dubious' words, was *p*/*b* with 25, well ahead of *t*/*d* and *k*/*g* with 15 each, and with *s*/*z*, *f*/*v* and *ch*/*j* (= ʧ/ʤ) miles behind, with only 6, 3 and 3 respectively.

Of the 36 possible pairings of initial unvoiced/voiced consonants, there are 14 that do not produce any pairs of words of the pattern *tuck*/*duck*. For example, for *ch* + *a* there is *chap*, *chat* and *chaff*, and for *j* + *a* there is *jab*, *jack*, *jag*, *jazz* and *jam*, but there is no *chab*, *chack*, *chag*, *chazz*, *cham*, *jap*, *jat* or *jaff*. There are some C + V beginnings that make a drastic contribution to that total of 14, however, in producing no words at all. Examples are *zo*- and *vo*-, and the *ch*/*j* (ʧ/ʤ) pairing gives no words with the 'shook' vowel following them. Again, the cause does not seem to be intrinsically phonetic, as in some accents of northern England, ones in Yorkshire, for example, a word such as *chuck* is pronounced with the vowel of standard British English *shook*. The cause may, then, have more to do with an opposition between the 'shook' and 'rub' vowels in such contexts, for it provides the fewest pairs of words

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Table 1: p/b

	p	b	t	d	k	g	ʧ	ʤ	f	v	θ	ð	s	z	ʃ	m	n	ŋ	l
pa	pap		pat	pad	pack		patch				path*		pass*				pan	pang	pal
ba	bap		bat	bad	back	bag	batch	badge			bath*		bass		bash		ban	bang	
pe	pep		pet		peck	peg											pen		*pell*
be			bet	bed	beck	beg											ben		bell
pi	pip		pit		pick	pig	pitch				pith		piss				pin	ping	pill
bi		bib	bit	bid		big	bitch		*biff*								bin		bill
po	pop		pot	pod	*pock*		*potch*	*podge*							posh			pong	
bo	*bop*	bob		*bod*		bog	botch	*bodge*					boss			bomb		*bong*	
pu			put	*pud*			*putsch*						*puss*		push				pull
bu					book		*butch*								bush				bull
pʌ	pup	pub	putt		puck	pug			puff				pus				pun		
bʌ			but	bud	buck	bug		budge	buff				bus	buzz		bum	bun	bung	

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Table 2: t/d

	p	b	t	d	k	g	ʧ	ʤ	f	v	θ	ð	s	z	ʃ	m	n	ŋ	l
ta	tap	tab	tat	*tad*	tack	tag										tam	tan	tang	
da		dab		dad					*daff*						dash	dam			
te																	ten		tell
de		*deb*	debt	dead	deck				deaf		death						den		dell
ti	tip		tit		tick		*titch*		tiff								tin	ting	till
di	dip			did	*dick*	dig	ditch						*diss*		dish	dim	din	*ding*	dill
to	top		tot	*tod*	*tock*	*tog*			toff				toss		tosh	tom		*tong*	
do		*dob*	dot		dock	dog		dodge	doff				doss		*dosh*		don	*dong*	doll
tu					took														
du																			
tʌ	tup	tub	*tut*		tuck	tug	touch		tough							*tum*	ton	tongue	
dʌ		dub		dud	duck	dug	*dutch*		duff	dove	*doth*			does		dumb	dun	dung	dull

Table 3: k/g

	P	b	t	d	k	g	ʧ	ʤ	f	v	θ	ð	s	z	ʃ	m	n	ŋ	l
ka	cap	cab	cat	cad			catch	cadge							cash	cam	can		
ga	gap	gab	*gat*	gad		gag			gaff				gas		gash			gang	
ke						keg	ketch										ken		
ge			get										guess						
ki	*kip*		kit	kid	kick		*kitsch*				*kith*		kiss				kin	king	kill
gi			*git*			*gig*				give									gill
ko	cop	cob	cot	cod	cock	cog			cough						cosh		con		col
go		gob	got	god							*goth*				gosh		gone	gong	
ku				could	cook														
gu				good															
kʌ	cup	cub	cut	cud					cuff				*cuss*			come			cull
gʌ			gut						guff	*guv*					gush	gum	gun	*gung*	gull

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Table 4: ʧ/ʤ

	P	b	t	d	k	g	ʧ	ʤ	f	v	θ	ð	s	z	ʃ	m	n	ŋ	l
cha	chap		chat	*chad*					chaff	*chav*									
ja		jab			jack	jag								jazz		jam			
che					check								chess						
je			jet													gem	*gen*		gel
chi	chip		chit	*chid*	chick												chin		chill
ji		jib				jig										gym	gin		gill
cho	chop				*chock*														
jo		job	jot		*jock*	jog									*josh*		*john*		
chu																			
ju																			
chʌ		chub			chuck	chug			chuff							chum			
jʌ			jut			jug		judge											

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Table 5: f/v

	P	b	t	d	k	g	ʧ	ʤ	f	v	θ	ð	s	z	ʃ	m	n	ŋ	l
fa		*fab*	fat	fad		fag			*faff*						*fash*		fan	fang	
va			vat														van		
fe				fed			fetch						*fess*	fez			fen		fell
ve			vet				vetch	*veg*											
fi		fib	fit			fig								fizz	fish		fin		fill
vi														*viz*		vim			
fo	fop	fob				fog							fosse						
vo																			
fu			foot	food*															full
vu																			
fʌ			*phut*		fuck	fug		fudge					fuss	fuzz			fun		
vʌ																			

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Table 6: θ/ð

	P	b	t	d	k	g	ʧ	ʤ	f	v	θ	ð	s	z	ʃ	m	n	ŋ	l
tha							thatch												
dha			that														than		
the																			
dhe																them	then		
thi					thick												thin	thing	
dhi													this						
tho																		thong	
dho																			
thu																			
dhu																			
thʌ				thud		thug										thumb			
dhʌ													thus						

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Table 7: s/z

	p	b	t	d	k	g	ʧ	ʤ	f	v	θ	ð	s	z	ʃ	m	n	ŋ	l
sa	sap		sat	sad	sack	sag									sash			sang	
za	zap					zag													
se			set	said				sedge						says					sell
ze				zed													*zen*		
si	sip		sit		sick												sin	sing	sill
zi	zip		zit															zing	
so	sop	sob	sot	sod	sock													song	
zo																			
su			soot																
zu																			
sʌ	sup	sub		sud	suck		such						*suss*			sum	sun	sung	
zʌ																			

Table 8: ʃ

	P	b	t	d	k	g	ʧ	ʤ	f	v	θ	ð	s	z	ʃ	m	n	ŋ	l
sha			shat		shack	shag										sham			shall
she				shed															shell
shi	ship		shit														shin		*shill*
sho	shop		shot	shod	shock												shone		
shu				should	shook														
shʌ			shut							shove					*shush*		shun		

Table 9: h

	p	b	t	d	k	g	ʧ	ʤ	f	v	θ	ð	s	z	ʃ	m	n	ŋ	l
ha	hap		hat	had	hack	hag	hatch			have	*hath*			has	hash	ham		hang	
he	*hep*		*het*	head	*heck*			hedge								hem	hen		hell
hi	hip		hit	hid	hick		hitch						hiss	his		him			hill
ho	hop	hob	hot	hod	hock	hog	*hotch*	*hodge*											
hu				hood	hook														
hʌ		hub	hut			hug	hutch		huff				huss		hush	hum		hung	hull

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Table 10: m/n

	p	b	t	d	k	g	ʧ	ʤ	f	v	θ	ð	s	z	ʃ	m	n	ŋ	l
ma	map		mat	mad	mack	*mag*	match				*math*		mass		mash		man		
na	nap	nab	gnat		knack	nag			*naff*						gnash		*nan*		
me			met										mess		mesh		men		*mell*
ne		*neb*	net		neck								ness		*nesh*	*nem*			knell
mi			mitt		*mick*			midge			myth		miss						mill
ni	nip	nib	knit		nick														nil
mo	mop	mob	motte		mock	*mog*					moth		moss						*moll*
no		knob	not	nod	knock	nog	notch								*nosh*				
mu																			
nu					nook														
mʌ			mutt	mud	muck	mug	much		muff				muss		mush	mum			mull
nʌ		nub	nut					nudge								numb	none		null

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Table 11: l/r

	p	b	t	d	k	g	ʧ	ʤ	f	v	θ	ð	s	z	ʃ	m	n	ŋ	l
la	lap	*lab*		lad	lack	lag	latch		laugh*		lath*		lass		lash	lamb			
ra	rap		rat	*rad*	rack	rag									rash	ram	ran	rang	
le			let	led		leg	*lech*	ledge					less						
re	*rep*			red	wreck		retch		*ref*	rev						*rem*			
li	lip	*lib*	lit	lid	lick	*lig*				live						limb		ling	
ri	rip	rib	writ	rid	rick	rig	rich	ridge	riff							rim		ring	rill
lo	lop	lob	lot		lock	log		lodge					loss					long	loll
ro		rob	rot	rod	rock						wrath							wrong	
lu					look														
ru					rook											room*			
lʌ					luck	lug			luff	love					lush			lung	lull
rʌ		rub	rut		ruck	rug			rough						rush	rum	run	rung	

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Table 12: w/y

	p	b	t	d	k	g	ʧ	ʤ	f	v	θ	ð	s	z	ʃ	m	n	ŋ	l
wa					whack	wag										wham			
ya	yap				yak											yam			
we		web	wet	wed				wedge									when		well
ye			yet										yes				yen		yell
wi	whip		wit		wick	wig	witch		whiff		with	with		whizz	wish	whim	win	wing	will
yi																			
wo	*wop*		what	wad	wok	*wog*	watch	*wodge*						was	wash		wan		
yo		yob	yacht	*yod*													*yon*		
wu				wood					woof				*wuss*						wool
yu																			
wʌ																	one		
yʌ					*yuck*											*yum*		young	

where that is the only difference, namely: *look*/*luck*, *put*/*putt*, *book*/*buck*, *could*/*cud*, *took*/*tuck*, *rook*/*ruck*, and *room* (pronounced with a short vowel)/*rum*. This contrasts with the opposition of *e* and *i*, for example, where there are 30 such pairs.

Of unproductive initial consonants, you only have to look at the last pages of an English dictionary to see that the language does not favour words beginning *z*-. For our words, there are only 7, and some of those only just squeezed into my classification of 'normal'. It may be relevant that, when people want to invent a nonsense word in English, *z* is favoured, as in 'the planet Zorg'. German goes the opposite way, which avoids words beginning with an unvoiced *s*, and where a word beginning with the spelling 's + vowel. . .' indicates a voiced sibilant, there being many such words, unlike the few 'z-' words of English. This sound does not fare much better in final position either, there being only 9 such words in the tables, with five of those being the grammatically 'special' words *says*, *was*, *has*, *does* and *his*, spelled with an 's' rather than a 'z'. More surprising, perhaps, is that these tables produce only five words beginning with 'v'.

For the other initial consonants, that do not form unvoiced/voiced pairs, we might note there are no words ending '-ng' or '-v(e)' for *m*/*n*, but a good number for *l*/*r*. For the semi-vowels *w*/*y*, there seems to be no problem following 'w' with its vocalic equivalent 'u' (the 'shook' vowel), as we have *wood*, *woof* and *wool*. The equivalent for *y* would be words beginning 'yi-', but I rejected the only candidate in my dictionary, *yid*. The next best, adding a consonant, is the golfers' affliction, *yips*. We could compare this with classical Latin, whose orthography does not distinguish between the consonantal and vocalic value of these two sounds, writing them, in upper case, as 'V' and 'I'. There are several Latin words beginning 'VV-', such as *VVLGVS*, meaning 'the common people', whose first syllable sounds close to the English *wool*, but for 'I-', although there are Latin words beginning 'IO-', 'IV-' and 'IA-', such as *IAM* (sounding like the English word *yam*), there are none beginning 'II-'.

Among vowels that reject following consonants, the 'shook' vowel is notable. It seems to allow only *t*, *d*, *k*, *sh*, *m*, and *l* after it. A long *u*, by contrast, as in *loom*, does not allow *k* after it for this pattern of words (C + V + C), but adds many more, as with *hoop*, *tooth*, *soothe*, *moose*, *lose*, *louche* and *moon*. Excluding voiced 'th' as a following consonant, the other vowels are reasonably tolerant. Anything goes after *a*. For *e*, there is no '-ng' and *rev* is borderline. For *i*, maybe *tiff* is slightly slangy. For *o*, there is no following 'v', and we should note that, apart from the dubious *guv*, *rev* and *chav*, the 'normal' words ending with the sound 'v' are spelled '-ve', as in *dove*, *give*, *shove*, *live*, *love*, *have*. For ʌ (the 'rub' vowel), *doth* is marginal, as being an old form. The opposition between the 'shook' and 'rub' vowels has already been mentioned, so that in every table that has '-ull', you will find it for either the 'shook' vowel or the 'rub' vowel, but never both.

There are other orthographic features that reveal themselves more clearly in tables in this way. For example, all these types of words that end in the sound ʤ are spelled '-dge'. By contrast, if we replace the short vowel with a long one or a diphthong here, there are no '-dge' spellings, but only '-ge', as in *barge*, *forge*, *rage*, *surge* and *gouge*. For ʧ, the spelling '-tch' outnumbers '-ch' by 20 to 4. Yet '-tch' does not follow a long vowel or a diphthong. The nearest you get is *aitch*, but that does not begin with a consonant. The spelling '-ck' outnumbers '-k' but, if we discount *yak* and *wok* as perhaps a little too foreign, we see that all the '-k' spellings are preceded by 'oo', as in *look*, *took*, *cook* and so on. By contrast, there is no '-ck' if a long vowel or diphthong precedes. There is only '-k' or '-ke', as in *stake*, *broke*, *fluke*, *reek*, *talk* or *lurk*. This may be why, when a native English-speaker sees, on the menu in a French restaurant, the spelling 'steack', it looks particularly odd.

The reasons, of course, that certain combinations are more likely than others with these monosyllables can, for some cases, be found in the history of the language. But to approach the topic from that angle would be a quite different type of study. We must recognize also that people's deliberate and subconscious choices of pronunciation, and thus the development of the sound of the language, will not be much influenced by a knowledge of its history. In modern English, *none* rhymes with *run*. To know it used not to will have no effect on the pronunciation of the language. So, if it looks as if a new word, or a new style of pronunciation, may be coming into use, only a few demented historians of language will argue against it on the grounds that it does not follow accepted patterns. If some new technology, for example, invented something it wanted to call a 'sov', it would be irrelevant to object that this combination of sounds was historically anomalous. Indeed, if 'sov' became current, it could lead to other words ending in '-ov' and thus change the phonetic character of the language. To imagine

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otherwise would be rather like thinking that a composer of music would decide not to write in a certain way, as it would not follow the apparent development of music up to his time.

Here are a few more statistics. When the same sound begins and ends the word, as with *pip* or *cook*, the stop consonants come out top: 7 each for *p*/*b* and *t*/*d*, and 4 for *k*/*g*. The rest provide very few. We have *loll* and *lull* for *l*. There is only *judge* for *ch*/*j*. Perhaps the abnormality of *faff* is related to its sense. There is clearly an onomatopoeic influence in *shush* and for the nasals we have only *mum*, *none* and the dubious *nan* (only as a familiar word for grandmother, I think, as the Asian bread seems to have a long vowel). When the word begins with an unvoiced consonant and finishes with its voiced equivalent or vice versa, there are far fewer: *pub*, *bap*, *debt*, *dot*, *keg* and *cog*. For the sibilants, *says* seems an exceptional case and that may be why in humorous writing you often find it spelled *sez* as in '*sez 'oo?*'.

I have dealt with patterns that are not represented or are poorly so. Here, then, are some examples of easily feasible, but non-existent, words. I am not going to include those that are heard, but did not even make it into my 'dubious' status, such as comic book exclamations, like *bam*. There are also a good number that exist as proper names or abbreviations of them, such as *Pam*, *Bess*, *Ted*, *Kev*, *Geoff*, *Chas*, *Vic*, *Seb*, *Madge*, *Med*, *Ned*, *Len*, *Ross, Liz* and *Yop*, all of which sound quite normal for English and might, in other circumstances, have been common nouns or verbs. So, how about, as potential newcomers to the language: *goss*, *codge*, *chood*, *jeth*, *vem*, *fosh*, *thack*, *zeb*, *soll*, *ked* and, of course, *mip*?

I attempted above vaguely to claim that the preferences the language seems to have, within these types of monosyllabic words, are a distinctive feature of English, having a particular influence on its overall phonetic character, but I have not really been able to find a convincing phonetic or historical argument to support my position. It may be that it cannot either be supported or refuted. For the moment, it is just a feeling I have. My interest in such words goes back to a conversation I had many years ago with an Italian man in a hotel in Athens about the sounds of English and Italian. While we agreed on the clarity, fluidity and musicality of Italian, nearly all of the words in which end in a vowel, I said I was glad to be a native speaker of a language that could end some of its shortest words abrubtly with an energetic *b* or *g*. I said I thought it gave strength and vitality to the language. He was not so sure.

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