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Should English Spelling be Reformed? A History of English Spelling

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Abstract

This paper explores the deep, and surprisingly informative, history of English spelling. It is a well-known fact that English spelling is confusing and troublesome for native speakers and non-native speakers alike. Its history is a winding road that ventures into various languages, picking up rules and idiosyncrasies along the way. The question facing linguists and other English language scholars is whether the system that is worth keeping or if reformative measures are needed. In its history, English has overcome invasions, subjugation, and conversion efforts to become what it is today. In the past many individuals have suggested reforms and have had varying degrees of success. The position of many today is that wholesale reform would be lead to more problems than it would solve. They instead propose looking at the history and formation of the English language as a whole in the hope that understanding how words came into the language and how they changed since arriving can provide a method for making sense of spelling. This paper answers the question: Should English spelling be reformed?

Should English Spelling be Reformed? A History of English Spelling

“Our English, I think you will all agree,
Is the trickiest language you ever did see.
When the English tongue we speak
Why is break not rhymed with freak?”
--Anon

English spelling has long been a topic of much discussion in linguistic circles. Many have expressed their dissatisfaction with it and have bemoaned its irregularities. G.B. Shaw famously declared, “English can’t be spelt” (as quoted in Kessler & Treiman, 2003, p. 268). In the past, linguists have described English orthography as hopelessly irregular. They say it is far from the alphabetic ideal because it lacks a one-to-one correspondence between letters and phonemes (Solati, 2013). By simply looking at English spelling, these conclusions make sense. But is English spelling really that chaotic? Many linguists suggest that it is not nearly as irregular as people think. W.A. Craigie suggests that English orthography’s chaotic appearance is a false impression caused by a lack of organization (as quoted in vos Savant, 2000). Brengelman (1980, p. 334) states that it is “a highly ordered system taking into account phonology, morphology, and etymology and providing rules for spelling.” So, which side is right? Is English spelling a complete mess that deserves to be thrown out or an organized system that is worth continuing? The answer lies in the history of the current orthography.

English spelling is more involved than a list of rules or a book of dos and don’ts. It tells a story that encompasses many individuals, each of whom left their individual fingerprints on orthography. It is a product of history, where each word is the protagonist in its own story. To get to spelling, it is necessary to first have a method of writing. Writing has always been considered somewhat magical because it allows for the transmittance of information from one person to another, from one time to another. The history of the word *spell* brings that nature to

mind. It comes from the Germanic word *spel* which meant a recital or tale. In Old English *spel*, taken directly from Germanic, meant narrative or story (Essinger, 2006). But where does the idea that spelling is the letters in a word come from? That meaning did not enter the language until around 1300 AD. It came from the Old French *espeller* (also derived from the Germanic *spel*) and means the process of reading or writing letter by letter (Essinger, 2006).

The history of English spelling starts before English was a language. The land that is now known as Great Britain was first home to the Celts. They spoke Celtic, of which little is known. When the Romans came in 43 AD, they brought Latin to the island. Harassment by Germanic tribes forces the Romans to withdraw, leaving behind only a slight linguistic influence (Medubi, 1999). The next invaders were Germanic tribes. The Jutes, Angles, and Saxons brought with them various dialects of Germanic languages (Crystal, 2012). The invaders were not illiterate and imported their runic writing system as well as their language. Their runic alphabet, now called ‘futhorc,’ was descended from the Vikings’ futhark alphabet (Rosen, 2013). Their writing system operated on an alphabetic principle, with each symbol representing a sound (Essinger, 2006). While they were literate, they did not write extensively. Runes were used to inscribe charms on swords, for business, for private correspondence, and to write spells (Crystal, 2012; Essinger, 2006). Only 5,000 short runic inscriptions survive, and only seventy of them are in Anglo-Saxon (Essinger, 2006).

Runic writing survived until missionaries arrived in the sixth century and introduced the Roman alphabet. Scribes were tasked with learning Anglo-Saxon and writing it down. They did not want to use the runic system because of its strong connection with “magic, dark forces, and the pagan practices” to be eradicated (Crystal, 2012). The word rune itself comes from the Old Norse *runar* which meant secret or hidden lore or magical signs (Essinger, 2006). Hence, the

scribes adopted the Roman alphabet with its strong connection to Christianity (Crystal, 2012). The story of English spelling starts in 597 AD with the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons by Saint Augustine (Essinger, 2006). Almost immediately the Roman alphabet was adopted.

As the scribes were working to represent the Anglo-Saxon language with the Roman alphabet, they ran into some problems. There were some sounds that Latin did not have. The twenty-three letters in the Roman alphabet were not enough to cover the approximately thirty-seven phonemes in Anglo-Saxon (Crystal, 2012). In order to account for the extra sounds, scribes had a few choices: make up a new letter, borrow one from another language, use an existing letter in a new way, use two or more letters, join two letters together, or use a diacritic (Crystal, 2012). In the beginning each scribe made different choices to depict the foreign sounds. Eventually a consensus was reached and most scribes used the same letters. Letters were borrowed to represent the *th* and *w* sounds (eth ð, thorn þ, wynn ꝥ) and one was created for the sound between *a* and *e* (æ) (Crystal, 2012). The Old English alphabet was based on the Irish version of the Roman alphabet and became standardized as (Crystal, 2012, p. 24):

a, æ, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, k, l, m, n, o, p, q, r, s, t, þ, ð, u, ꝥ, x, y, z

Although the alphabet was standardized, usage and spelling were not. Thorn (þ) and esh (ð) were used interchangeable to represent the *th* sound. In *Beowulf*, the word for since (*sithan*) is seen as *syþþan*, *syþðan*, *syðþan*, and *syððan* (Essinger 2006).

During the time these changes were occurring, the language changed into what is now known as Old English. The writing system of Old English was not perfect, but it served its purpose. Although there was an alphabet, not all the letters were used consistently (Bregelman 334). The letters *h*, *c*, *g* all had multiple pronunciations that were not always indicated by spelling (Crystal, 2012). Nothing in the orthography marked the length of vowels. Some scribes

experimented with doubling vowels to using diacritics to reduce confusion, but nothing was adopted island-wide (Crystal, 2012). In the early years of the Old English period the presence of four separate dialects led to regional spelling variations (Baugh & Cable, 2002; Medubi, 1999). But, by 1050 AD, most regional variations were gone and the West Saxon dialect was established as the standard (Essinger, 2006). Once a standard had been established, Old English spelling was fairly consistent. The West Saxon dialect had a reasonably consistent link between sounds and spelling which was closer to a one-to-one relationship than modern English (Solati, 2013). Spelling was largely phonetic with all letters pronounced (Crystal, 2013). Overall, the weaknesses and variations present in Old English did not have a significant impact on reading due to the small vocabulary; most words could be determined by context (Crystal, 2012).

Old English developed, but kept its same character, until the French arrived in England and brought their language with them. The Normans, under William the Conqueror, defeated the English in 1066 AD. This signaled the beginning of the end for Old English. The Normans began arriving in England and soon French became the language of the upper class (Baugh & Cable, 2002). English ceased to be the language of government and dropped in prestige due to the establishment of French (Solati, 2013). English was considered an uncultured language, but no real hostility was shown to English speakers (Baugh & Cable, 2002). Some English speakers learned French for economic or social reasons (Baugh & Cable, 2002). Early on, French speakers showed no desire to learn English, but gradually speakers of both languages mingled and intermarried and the two languages began to mix.

It is hard to chronicle English spelling from 1100 to 1300 due to the dominance of French. English essentially went underground. The output of written English diminished as fewer and fewer people knew how to read or write it. English became a mostly spoken language

(Essinger, 2006). There is evidence that the West Saxon standard was maintained in the beginning but it eventually fell out of use (Essinger, 2006). When English was written during this time, spelling was governed by regional dialects and preferences (Solati, 2013). Just when it seemed that French might take over, a series of events coincided that helped English regain its previous prominence. In 1204, King John lost his holdings in Normandy which led to a gradual cultural and linguistic separation from French (Baugh & Cable, 2002). English nationalism was growing. The Bubonic Plague increased the importance of the laboring class and their language—English (Baugh & Cable, 2002). Through these events, English became well-known again.

Despite its reappearance, the English that emerged from the Norman Conquest had a new look. Gone were the Anglo-Saxon letters *ð*, *þ*, *ƿ* and spellings *sc*, *cw*, *c* (Crystal, 2012). French scribes replaced them with *th*, *w*, *sh*, *qu*, and *ch* (Crystal, 2012). English's vocabulary was changed. Many French words were adopted by English speakers and used in daily life (Essinger, 2006). Others were introduced by French scribes who had trouble writing the language down and resorted to substituting French words when they did not understand (Medubi, 1999). The Norman influence replaced English spelling conventions with French ones and orthography was adapted to fit both languages and in the process became unsuitable for either (Perkins, 1977; Solati, 2013). The uniform spellings found in the West Saxon standard had disappeared, leaving a spelling with no standard. There were many variations and each scribe spelled however he saw fit. Often scribes wrote and spelled how they spoke, but differences between dialects ensured variations in even the most common words. The Oxford English Dictionary has over sixty variants of the word *night* (as quoted in Crystal, 2012, p. 110):

Neght, neghte, ney3t, ney3te, ney3th, neyth, neyht, nich3, nicht, nichte, nicst, nict, nieht, nig, night, nighte, nig, nih, nihht, niht,

ni3ht, nihte, nihtt, nij3t, nikte, nist, ni3st, ni3t, ni3te, ni3th, ni3tt,
 nite, nith, nithe, nipt, noy3th, nycht, nygh, nyght, nyghte, nyghth,
 nyghtt, nygt, nygth, nygthe, nygtt, nyhet, nyht, nyhte, nyhyt, nyt,
 nyte, nyth, nythe, nyt3, nyught, ny3, ny3ht, ny3t, ny3te, ny3th,
 ny3the, ny3tht, ny3tt.

Many variations crop up once or twice as scribes experimented with how to indicate sounds. Out of this seeming chaos, some rules were beginning to emerge. The East Midlands dialect was gaining ground as the standard for spoken and written language (Baugh & Cable, 2002). It became a commonly accepted practice to indicate short vowels by doubling the following consonant. This generally worked, but led to some cumbersome spellings such as *fishshe* (Crystal, 2012). Awkward spellings led to exceptions to the rules, something English spelling is now known for. Two-letter consonants were left undoubled (*fish*) and ‘foreign-looking’ combinations such as *xx*, *jj*, *ww*, and *hh* never occurred (Crystal, 2012). Gradually a standard of sorts was established and most spellings were subjected to it.

Just as English spelling was settling into a somewhat-standard state, something happened to permanently separate pronunciation and spelling. Starting in the 1400s and continuing until nearly 1700, the manner in which people pronounced their vowels changed (Harbeck, 2015). Otto Jespersen was the first to recognize that changes as a unified phonological phenomenon, describing it as, “a general raising of all long vowels with the exception of the two high vowels [i] and [u], which could not be raised further without becoming consonants and which were diphthongized into [ei, ou], later [ai, au]. In most cases the spelling has become fixed before the shift, which accordingly is one of the chief reasons of the divergence between spelling and sound in English” (as quoted in Wang, 1968, p. 698). David Crystal has devised a sentence to illustrate the vowel changes: “**So** it is **time** to **see** the **shoes** on the **same feet now**.” Before the Great

Vowel Shift this sentence would have sounded like: “**Saw** it is **team** to **say** the **shows** on the **sarm fate noo**” (as quoted in Essinger, 2006, p. 219).

During the middle of this period of spelling standardization and pronunciation fluctuation, came the invention of the printing press. William Caxton first introduced the printing press in London in 1476 (Baugh & Cable, 2002). It is commonly believed that Caxton and the printing press are responsible for the complete standardization of English spelling. While the printing press did eventually have an impact on standardizing spelling, it did not come until later. In fact, spelling became less regular in the decades following Caxton’s printing debut. Caxton himself was not very interested in spelling as long as the word was recognizable (Crystal, 2012). F.H. Brengelman (1980) raises some doubts that Caxton did anything beneficial for spelling, saying that he had a small zone of influence because he printed very little, his spelling was extremely inconsistent and relied heavily on French conventions, very few of his spellings became standard, and his spelling is often more archaic than his sources. The backgrounds of many printers made it hard for them to make educated choices regarding spelling. Many were self-taught and came to the profession from varied backgrounds such as textile dealers and fishmongers (Brengelman, 1980). Instead of immediately fixing English spelling, printers often added irregularity. Caxton’s assistants were Flemish and, speaking poor English, added Flemish spellings to English words (Crystal, 2013). Other ways they introduced irregularities includes choosing spellings that would best justify the right-hand margin, spelling rhyming words alike, and allowing dialectical differences to show (Brengelman, 1980). Writers of the time regarded printers as unreliable spellers with a tendency to perpetuate irregularities (Brengelman, 1980).

It was not until the 1500s that printers became aware of their responsibility to standardize spelling. Even so, most spelling reforms are not credited to printers. According to Brengelman (1980) printers had three actual contributions: the elimination of ligatures and abbreviations symbols in order to reduce the number of characters needed, making possible the wide dissemination of texts with a particular spelling, and reinforcing standardization by modernizing reprints. Spelling at the end of the sixteenth century still was not considered an optimal system. While most consonants were spelled fairly consistently, vowels were less consistent, the final *-e* was used after both long and short vowels, borrowed words reflected varied influences, and most words allowed at least two spellings (Brengelman. 1980).

It was at this point that the idea of spelling reform became popular. Although many individuals put forth suggestions, very few were successful. There was a lot of debate during the 1500s over the inconsistencies of spelling and how they should be fixed (Rosen, 2013). Most reformers were aware of the work of others and built off of it (Brengelman, 1980). Because people believed they could influence spelling, they put a lot of work into developing new methods. Many individuals published rule books or guide books. For the most part there was a consensus on what a good spelling system would do. It would match the sound system reasonably well, use the Latin alphabet, and reduce redundancy as much as possible (Brengelman, 1980). The debates came from differences in the importance of each variable. Some advocated for close phonetic matches, saying we should “use as many letters in our writing, as we doe voyces or breathes in speaking” (Hart as quoted in Brengelman, 1980, p. 345). Others advocated more moderate reforms that took all speakers, existing forms, etymology, readability, and consistency into account. The theory of English spelling they settled on had

morphemes with consistent etymological spelling, morphemes spelled according to their most stressed pronunciation, and etymology indicated in traditional ways (Brenzelman, 1980).

A few reformers garnered more recognition than others. Those that are still remembered today are Sir John Cheke, Thomas Smith, John Hart, William Bullokar, and Richard Mulcaster. Each offered different reforms with varying degrees of success. Cheke advocated doubling long vowels, discarding the final *-e*, and using *i* for *y* at the end of words (Baugh & Cable, 2002). His system was never widely adopted. Smith advocated a thirty-four letter phonetic alphabet with long vowels marked (Baugh & Cable, 2002). He published his suggestions in *Dialogue concerning the Correct and Emended Writing of the English Language,*” but the book was in Latin and his method met with little success (Baugh & Cable, 2002). Hart also recommended phonetic writing and included special characters for *th*, *sh*, and *ch* (Baugh & Cable, 2002). He had no more success than Smith. Bullokar also made an attempt at phonetic reform through the use of accents, apostrophes, and hooks above and below letters (Baugh & Cable, 2002). Baugh and Cable (2002, p. 210) say, “if his innovations...had been more moderate, English spelling might have come to the use of accents such as were being adopted for French at this time, but one glance at a specimen page printed according to his system shows why it could not possibly win acceptance.” By far the most successful reformer was Richard Mulcaster. Motivated by national pride he based his reforms on usage, writing in his *Elementarie* that, “the use & custom of our cuntrie hath allredie chosen a kinde of penning wherein she hath set down her religion, hir laws, hir privat and public dealings” (as quoted in Baugh & Cable, 2002, p. 212). He suggested eliminating superfluous letters, using the final *-e* to indicate long vowels, and using analogy to regularize spelling (Baugh & Cable, 2002). The main reason his spellings caught on was because he published a list of suggested spellings for 7,000 words in his *General Table* (Baugh

& Cable, 2002). Mulcaster and other moderate reformers prevailed and in doing so they facilitated the reading of English. Brengelman (1980) lists five reforms that helped readers: rationalization of the use of final *-e*, rationalization of consonant doubling, standardizing the use of *i/j* and *u/v*, clarifying the use of *i/y/ie*, and regularizing morphemes borrowed from Latin.

During the Renaissance period of general spelling reform, there was also an emphasis on the spelling of loan words. Previously, no standard existed and whoever borrowed a word decided how to spell it. The oldest borrowed words had been completely Anglicized, others showed evidence of their original language, and French loanwords were spelled much the same as modern French (Brengelman, 1980). English has never had a consistent method of adapting spellings of loanwords. When words originate in other languages that use the Roman alphabet, English may adopt the pronunciation but change the spelling (*galosh* from the French *galoche*) (Harbeck, 2015). Sometimes English adopts the spelling but changes the pronunciation (*ratio* from the Latin *ra-tsee-o*) (Harbeck, 2015). And other times English keeps both the spelling and the pronunciation (*tortilla*, *pizzicato*) (Harbeck, 2015). Unadapted spellings are sometimes considered a nuisance, but can be helpful when a word is first introduced in English (Kessler & Treiman, 2003).

During the Renaissance there was a big push to respell English words according to their etymology. Brengelman (1980) goes as far as saying that Latinate respelling was the most important improvement to English spelling. Back then, all educated people were fluent in the classical languages and knowing the etymology led to greater understanding (Brengelman, 1980). Today, such spellings are troublesome, especially when pronunciation did not change with spelling. The word *debt* (from the Latin *debitum*) gained a silent *b* (Crystal, 2013). Other words also gained their silent letters this way: *salmon*, *subtle*, *receipt*, *indict* (Crystal, 2013;

Solati, 2013). Other words were respelled but have subsequently changed in pronunciation to match the spelling: throne (formerly *trone*), corpse (*cors*), admonish (*amonest*) (Essinger, 2006). Unfortunately, reformers went overboard on the etymological respelling and changed some words to reflect false etymologies.

Due to the high frequency of borrowed words in the English language, there arose a need to list and define words foreign to the average Englishman. Thus, the dictionary was born. Early examples, called dictionaries of hard words, simply explained words in foreign languages. The first dictionary of hard words was Robert Cawdrey's 1604 *Table Alphabeticall* in which he explained 3,000 terms (Baugh & Cable, 2002). So new was the concept that he had to explain how to look up words (as quoted in Essinger, 2006, p. 242):

If thou be desirous (gentle Reader) rightly and readily to vnderstand, and to profit by this Table, and such like, then thou must learne the Alphabet, *to wit*, the order of the letters as they stand....Now if the word, which thou are desirous to finde, begin with (a) then looke in the beginning of this Table, but if with (v) look towards the end.

Cawdrey's *Table Alphabeticall* was followed by various other dictionaries of hard words, but no one attempted to list all the words in the language until 1721. In that year, Nathaniel Bailey published his *Universal Etymological English Dictionary* (Baugh & Cable, 2002). His dictionary was the standard until Dr. Samuel Johnson published *A Dictionary of the English Language* in 1755 (Baugh & Cable, 2002). Johnson's dictionary is often cited as the final step in fixing spelling. While Johnson did not invent the standard, he should get credit for writing it down and cementing it in the minds of his contemporaries. In his Preface he explains the state of the English language, saying he found it "copious without order, and energetick without rules: wherever I turned my view there was perplexity to be disentangled...choice was to be made out of boundless variety (as quoted in Essinger, 2006, p. 253). So influential was Johnson's work,

that the spellings he chose often became standard. He was well aware of established spellings that would be pointless to change and concluded, “I have often been obliged to sacrifice uniformity to custom; thus I write, in compliance with a numberless majority *convey* and *inveigh*, *deceit* and *receipt*, *fancy* and *phantom* (as quoted in Crystal, 2012, p. 190). By making a choice to use one spelling over others, he effectively standardized them, bringing calm and stability to English spelling.

Now that the history of English spelling has been laid out so neatly, it is time to return to the original question: Is English spelling a complete mess that deserves to be thrown out or an organized system worthy of continuing? The current system of English spelling is not as irregular as people tend to think. Brengelman (1980, p. 332) states that it is “regular though not phonetic.” The main complaint with English spelling today is that it does not correspond to pronunciation. This may actually be a good thing. Noam Chomsky and Morris Halle write that, “conventional orthography is...a near optimal system” and that it will “have a very long useful life, for a wide range of phonetically divergent dialects” (as quoted in Emerson, 1997, p. 263). Despite the clamor for a more phonetic spelling system, changing to such a method would hardly be expedient. In the first place, phonetic writing never stays phonetic (Emerson, 1997). Sounds change and pronunciation no longer matches spelling. Secondly, English spelling currently allows for communication between speakers of vastly different dialects and variants of English. A single spelling covers a multitude of regional pronunciations and accents. Lastly, phonetic writing is not efficient. IPA (the International Phonetic Alphabet) has symbols for each sound, but it looks strange and foreign and takes effort to read. If English were to be majorly overhauled, the language would lose the rich history carried along in each spelling. There would be fewer stories to tell, less history to recount. English would be less interesting. “The historical

story of English spelling is an important and interesting part of our cultural heritage, and it seems a shame to lose it” (Essinger, 2006, p. 279).

By all practical standards, English spelling and writing is a success story. Everyday individuals are able to communicate and transmit information flawlessly through reading and writing. English spelling is not as illogical once the system is learned. A new way of spelling would deprive English users around the world of the rich cultural heritage that is the current spelling system. “The English writing system is, in effect, a daily reminder of the heritage of the English-speaking people, and we have every right to be extremely proud of it” (Essinger, 2006, p. 281). Let’s keep English the way it is and start being proud of the history that our orthography tells.

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