

# Should English Spelling be Reformed?

A History of English Spelling

Rachel Schloneger

“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?

Think of tomb and comb and bomb,  
Doll and roll and home and some,  
And since pay is rhymed with say,  
Why not paid with said, I pray?”

--Anon

# Irregularities in English spelling

- Why?
  - Lack of one-to-one correspondence of letters to sounds
- Does this mean reform is necessary?

# How English Came to Be

- English arose from a series of invasions and occupations of Great Britain
  - Celts—speaking Celtic
  - Romans—speaking Latin
  - Germanic tribes (Jutes, Angles, Saxons)—speaking various Germanic dialects and writing in runes
- Anglo-Saxon became widely spoken

# Runes

- Functioned on an alphabetic principle
- Lasted many years
- Many citizens were literate, but did not write extensively
- Primary uses:
  - Inscribing charms
  - Private correspondence
  - Writing spells

# Missionaries Arrive in Great Britain

- Runes abandoned because of connotations with pagan practices and dark forces
- Scribes used the Roman alphabet because of its strong Christian connections
- The history of English spelling starts here, in 597 AD, with the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity

# Problems

- Anglo-Saxon had sounds that Latin didn't
- The 23-letter Roman alphabet couldn't cover the 37 phonemes of Anglo-Saxon
- Scribes used different methods to account for the differences

# Variations in Spelling

- Four spellings exist for the word ‘since’ (sithan) in *Beowulf*
  - *syþþan*
  - *syþðan*
  - *syðþan*
  - *syððan*



# Characteristics of Old English

- Early on, regional spelling variations existed due to different dialects
- By 1050 AD, the West Saxon dialect became standard
- Spelling was fairly standard
  - a, æ, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, k, l, m, n, o, p, q, r, s, t, þ, ð, u, v, x, y, z
- Weaknesses were masked by small vocabulary

# French Invasion

- 1066 AD, William the Conqueror defeated the English and moved in, bringing French with him
- French grew in prestige
- English considered uncultured
- English went underground
  - Spelling is hard to chronicle because it became a mostly spoken language

# English's Resurgence

- Series of events that revived English
  - 1204—King John lost his land in France
  - Growth of English nationalism
  - Bubonic Plague

# Changes

- The English that emerged from the Norman Conquest was changed
  - Gone were the letters þ, ð, ƿ
  - Gone were Old English spellings
  - French words had been adopted
- Spelling rules changed to fit both French and English, becoming unsuitable for both

# Variations in Spelling

- Neght, neghte, ney3t, ney3te, ney3th, neyth, neyht, nich3, nicht, nichte, nicst, nict, nieht, nig, night, nighte, nigt, nih, nihht, niht, nizht, nihte, nihtt, nij3t, nikte, nist, nizst, nizt, nizte, nizth, niztt, 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.

# Early Spelling Conventions

- Indication of short vowels by doubling the following consonant
  - *Bitter* vs. *biter*
  - Cumbersome: *fishshe*
- Avoidance of awkward or foreign-looking spellings
  - *xx, jj, ww, hh*

# Great Vowel Shift

- “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.”

--Otto Jespersen

# Great Vowel Shift

- “**So** it is **time** to **see** the **shoes** on the **same** **feet** **now**.”
- **Saw** it is **team** to **say** the **shows** on the **sarm** **fate** **noo**.”



# Printing Press

- Introduced in London by William Caxton in 1476
- Spelling became more irregular until the 1500s
- Contributions
  - Eliminating ligatures and extraneous symbols
  - Making possible wide dissemination of texts with particular spellings
  - Reinforcing standardization by modernizing reprints

# Spelling Reform

- Goals
  - Match the sound system well
  - Use the Latin alphabet
  - Reduce redundancy

# Popular Reformers

- Sir John Cheke
  - Double long vowels, discard final *-e*, use *i* for *y* at the end of words
- Thomas Smith
  - 34-letter phonetic alphabet with long vowels marked
- John Hart
  - Phonetic alphabet with special characters for *th*, *sh*, *ch*

# Popular Reformers

- William Bullokar
  - Phonetic reform through the use of accents, apostrophes, and hooks above and below letters
- Richard Mulcaster
  - Elimination of superfluous letters, use of final –e to indicate long vowels, and analogy for spelling regularization

# How do we Spell Loanwords?

- No standard existed
- Conventions
  - Adopt the pronunciation, but not spelling
    - *Galosh* from French *galoche*
  - Adopt the spelling, but not pronunciation
    - *Ratio* from Latin ra-tsee-o
  - Adopt both spelling and pronunciation
    - *tortilla, pizzicato*

# Respelling Loanwords

- Many loanwords were re-spelled according to their etymology
  - *Debt* (from Latin *debitum*) gained its *b*
- Beneficial for people at that time because most were fluent in the classical languages
- Some words have had subsequent pronunciation changes to match spelling
  - Throne (*trone*), corpse (*cors*)

# Birth of the Dictionary

- Dictionaries of hard words—explaining words from foreign languages
  - The first one appeared in 1604
- Comprehensive dictionaries
  - 1721: Bailey's *Universal Etymological English Dictionary*
  - 1755: Dr. Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language*

# Is English Spelling Worth Keeping?

- The current system isn't as irregular as people think
- Complaint: little correspondence to pronunciation
  - “Conventional orthography is...a near optimal system” that will “have a very long useful life, for a wide range of phonetically divergent dialects.”  
—Chomsky & Halle



# Consequences of Reform

- New spellings would only match sounds for a short time
- Communication between speakers of different dialects would become more difficult
- Phonetic writing is not efficient
- Loss of history carried by each spelling

# Conclusion: Maintain Spelling

- It is a success story: allows for transmission of information between individuals
- “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.”

—James Essinger

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