

## History of English Spellings

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### Assignment history of spelling

#### History

Modern English spelling developed from about 1350 onwards, when after three centuries of Norman French rule English gradually became the official language of England again, although very different from before 1066, having incorporated many words of French origin (battle, beef, button, etc.). Early writers of this new English, such as Geoffrey Chaucer, gave it a fairly consistent spelling system, but this was soon diluted by Chancery clerks who re-spelled words based on French orthography. English spelling consistency was dealt a further blow when William Caxton brought the printing press to London in 1476. Having lived in mainland Europe for the preceding 30 years, his grasp of the English spelling system had become uncertain. The Belgian assistants whom he brought to help him set up his business had an even poorer command of it.

As printing developed, printers began to develop individual preferences or “house styles”. Furthermore, typesetters were paid by the line and were fond of making words longer. However, the biggest change in English spelling consistency occurred between 1525, when William Tyndale first translated the New Testament, and 1539, when King Henry VIII legalized the printing of English Bibles in England. The many editions of these Bibles were all printed outside England by people who spoke little or no English. They often changed spellings to match their Dutch orthography. Examples include the silent h in ghost (to match Dutch gheest, which later became geest), aghast, ghastly and gherkin. The silent h in other words such as ghospel, ghossip and ghizzard—was later removed. There have been two periods when spelling reform of the English language has attracted particular interest.

#### 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries

The first of these periods was from the middle of the 16th to the middle of the 17th centuries AD, when a number of publications outlining proposals for reform were published. Some of these proposals were:

- De recta et emendata linguæ angliæ scriptione (On the Rectified and Amended Written English Language)[7] in 1568 by Sir Thomas Smith, Secretary of State to Edward VI and Elizabeth I.
- An Orthographie in 1569 by John Hart, Chester Herald.
- Booke at Large for the Amendment of English Orthographie in 1580 by William Bullokar.
- Logonomia Anglica in 1621 by Dr. Alexander Gill, headmaster of St Paul's School in London.
- English Grammar in 1634 by Charles Butler, vicar of Wootton St Lawrence.

These proposals generally did not attract serious consideration because they were too radical or were based on an insufficient understanding of the phonology of English. However, more

conservative proposals were more successful. James Howell in his Grammar of 1662 recommended minor changes to spelling, such as changing logique to logic, warre to war, sinne to sin, toune to town and tru to true. Many of these spellings are now in general use.

From the 16th century AD onward, English writers who were scholars of Greek and Latin literature tried to link English words to their Graeco-Latin counterparts. They did this by adding silent letters to make the real or imagined links more obvious. Thus det became debt (to link it to Latin debitum), dout became doubt (to link it to Latin dubitare), sissors became scissors and sithe became scythe (as they were wrongly thought to come from Latin scindere), iland became island (as it was wrongly thought to come from Latin insula), ake became ache (as it was wrongly thought to come from Greek akhos), and so forth.

William Shakespeare satirized the disparity between English spelling and pronunciation. In his play Love's Labour's Lost, the character Holofernes is "a pedant" who insists that pronunciation should change to match spelling, rather than simply changing spelling to match pronunciation. For example, Holofernes insists that everyone should pronounce the unhistorical B in words like doubt and debt.

### **19th century**

An 1879 bulletin by the US Spelling Reform Association, written mostly using reformed spellings ([click to enlarge](#)). An 1880 bulletin, written wholly in reformed spelling ([click to enlarge](#)).

The second period started in the 19th century and appears to coincide with the development of phonetics as a science. In 1806, Noah Webster published his first dictionary, A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language. It included an essay on the oddities of modern orthography and his proposals for reform. Many of the spellings he used, such as color and center, would become hallmarks of American English. In 1807, Webster began compiling an expanded dictionary. It was published in 1828 as An American Dictionary of the English Language. Although it drew some protest, the reformed spellings were gradually adopted throughout the United States.

In 1837, Isaac Pitman published his system of phonetic shorthand, while in 1848 Alexander John Ellis published A Plea for Phonetic Spelling. These were proposals for a new phonetic alphabet. Although unsuccessful, they drew widespread interest.

By the 1870s, the philological societies of Great Britain and America chose to consider the matter. After the "International Convention for the Amendment of English Orthography" that was held in Philadelphia in August 1876, societies were founded such as the English Spelling Reform Association and American Spelling Reform Association.[14] That year, the American Philological Society adopted a list of eleven reformed spellings for immediate use. These were are→ar, give→giv, have→hav, live→liv, though→tho, through→thru, guard→gard, catalogue→catalog, (in)definite→(in)definit, wished→wisht.

One major American newspaper that began using reformed spellings was the Chicago Tribune, whose editor and owner, Joseph Medill, sat on the Council of the Spelling Reform Association. In 1883, the American Philological Society and American Philological Association worked together to produce 24 spelling reform rules, which were published that year. In 1898, the American National Education Association adopted its own list of 12 words to be used in all writings: tho, altho, thoro, thorofare, thru, thruout, catalog, decalog, demagog, pedagog, prolog, program.

### **20th century onward**

President Theodore Roosevelt was criticized for supporting the simplified spelling campaign of Andrew Carnegie in 1906. The Simplified Spelling Board was founded in the United States in 1906. The SSB's original 30 members consisted of authors, professors and dictionary editors. Andrew Carnegie, a founding member, supported the SSB with yearly bequests of more than US\$300,000. In April 1906, it published a list of 300 words, which included 157 spellings that were already in common use in American English. In August 1906, the SSB word list was adopted by Theodore Roosevelt, who ordered the Government Printing Office to start using them immediately. However, in December 1906, the U.S. Congress passed a resolution and the old spellings were reintroduced. Nevertheless, some of the spellings survived and are commonly used in American English today, such as anaemia/anæmia→anemia and mould→mold. Others such as mixed→mixt and scythe→sithe did not survive. In 1920, the SSB published its Handbook of Simplified Spelling, which set forth over 25 spelling reform rules. The handbook noted that every reformed spelling now in general use was originally the overt act of a lone writer, who was followed at first by a small minority. Thus, it encouraged people to "point the way" and "set the example" by using the reformed spellings whenever they could. However, with its main source of funds cut off, the SSB disbanded later that year.

In Britain, spelling reform was promoted from 1908 by the Simplified Spelling Society and attracted a number of prominent supporters. One of these was George Bernard Shaw (author of Pygmalion) and much of his considerable will was left to the cause. Among members of the society, the conditions of his will gave rise to major disagreements, which hindered the development of a single new system.

Between 1934 and 1975, the Chicago Tribune, then Chicago's biggest newspaper, used a number of reformed spellings. Over a two-month spell in 1934, it introduced 80 respelled words, including tho, thru, thoro, agast, burocrat, frate, harth, herse, iland, rime, staf and telegraf. A March 1934 editorial reported that two-thirds of readers preferred the reformed spellings. Another claimed that "prejudice and competition" was preventing dictionary makers from listing such spellings. Over the next 40 years, however, the newspaper gradually phased out the respelled words. Until the 1950s, Funk & Wagnalls dictionaries listed many reformed spellings, including the SSB's 300, alongside the conventional spellings.

In 1949, a Labour MP, Dr Mont Follick, introduced a private member's bill in the House of Commons, which failed at the second reading. In 1953, he again had the opportunity, and this time it passed the second reading by 65 votes to 53. Because of anticipated opposition from the House of Lords, the bill was withdrawn after assurances from the Minister of Education that research would be undertaken into improving spelling education. In 1961, this led to James Pitman's Initial Teaching Alphabet, introduced into many British schools in an attempt to improve child literacy. Although it succeeded in its own terms, the advantages were lost when children transferred to conventional spelling. After several decades, the experiment was discontinued.

In his 1969 book *Spelling Reform: A New Approach*, the Australian linguist Harry Lindgren proposed a step-by-step reform. The first, Spelling Reform step 1 (SR1), called for the short /ɛ/ sound (as in bet) to always be spelled with <e> (for example friend→frend, head→hed). This reform had some popularity in Australia.

In 2013, University of Oxford Professor of English Simon Horobin proposed that variety in spelling be acceptable. For example, he believes that it does not matter whether words such as "accommodate" and "tomorrow" are spelled with double letters. This proposal does not fit within the definition of spelling reform used by, for example, Random House Dictionary.

### **Arguments for reform**

It is argued that spelling reform would make it easier to learn to read (decode), to spell, and to pronounce, making it more useful for international communication, reducing educational budgets (reducing literacy teachers, remediation costs, and literacy programs) and/or enabling teachers and learners to spend more time on more important subjects or expanding subjects.

Advocates note that spelling reforms have taken place already, just slowly and often not in an organized way. There are many words that were once spelled un-phonetically but have since been reformed. For example, music was spelled musick until the 1880s, and fantasy was spelled phantasy until the 1920s. For a time, almost all words with the -or ending (such as error) were once spelled -our (errour), and almost all words with the -er ending (such as member) were once spelled -re (membre). In American spelling, most of them now use -or and -er, but in British spelling, only some have been reformed.

In the last 250 years, since Samuel Johnson prescribed how words ought to be spelled, pronunciations of hundreds of thousands of words (as extrapolated from Masha Bell's research on 7000 common words) have gradually changed, and the alphabetic principle in English has gradually been corrupted. Advocates argue that if we wish to keep English spelling regular, then spelling needs to be amended to account for the changes.

## **Ambiguity**

Unlike many other languages, English spelling has never been systematically updated and thus today only partly holds to the alphabetic principle. As an outcome, English spelling is a system of weak rules with many exceptions and ambiguities. Most phonemes in English can be spelled in more than one way. E.g. the words fear and peer contain the same sound in different spellings. Likewise, many graphemes in English have multiple pronunciations and decodings, such as ough in words like through, though, thought, thorough, tough, trough, plough, and cough. There are 13 ways of spelling the schwa (the most common of all phonemes in English), 12 ways to spell /ei/ and 11 ways to spell /ε/. These kinds of incoherences can be found throughout the English lexicon

and they even vary between dialects. Masha Bell has analyzed 7000 common words and found that about 1/2 cause spelling and pronunciation difficulties and about 1/3 cause decoding difficulties.

Such ambiguity is particularly problematic in the case of heteronyms (homographs with different pronunciations that vary with meaning), such as bow, desert, live, read, tear, wind, and wound. In reading such words one must consider the context in which they are used, and this increases the difficulty of learning to read and pronounce English.

A closer relationship between phonemes and spellings would eliminate many exceptions and ambiguities, making the language easier and faster to master.[32]

### **Undoing the changes**

The epitaph on the grave of William Shakespeare spells friend as frend. Some proposed simplified spellings already exist as standard or variant spellings in old literature. As noted earlier, in the 16th century, some scholars of Greek and Latin literature tried to make English words look more like their Graeco-Latin counterparts, at times even erroneously. They did this by adding silent letters, so det became debt, dout became doubt, sithe became scythe, iland became island, ake became ache, and so on. Some spelling reformers propose undoing these changes. Other examples of older spellings that are more phonetic include frend for friend (as on Shakespeare's grave), agenst for against, yeeld for yield, bild for build, cort for court, sted for stead, delite for delight, entise for entice, gost for ghost, harth for hearth, rime for rhyme, sum for some, tung for tongue, and many others. It was also once common to use -t for the ending -ed where it is pronounced as such (for example dropt for dropped). Some of the English language's most celebrated writers and poets have used these spellings and others proposed by today's spelling reformers. Edmund Spenser, for example, used spellings such as rize, wize and advize in his famous poem *The Faerie Queene*, published in the 1590s.

### **Redundant letters**

The English alphabet has several letters whose characteristic sounds are already represented elsewhere in the alphabet. These include X, which can be realised as "ks", "gz", or z; soft G (/d͡ʒ/), which can be realised as J; hard C (/k/), which can be realised as K; soft C (/s/), which can be realised as S; and Q ("qu", /kw/ or /k/), which can be realised as "kw" (or simply K in some cases). However, these spellings are usually retained to reflect their often-Latin roots.