

# Why Do You Spell That?

— A Brief History of the Evolution of English Orthography —

なぜこのように綴るのか

— 英語正字法進展の略歴 —

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**要旨**：綴りは英語を学ぶ上で最も難しいものの一つである。ネイティブスピーカーさえ手を焼くほどであるため、間違いを防ぐためにしばしばスペルチェックや自動修正など現代的なツールに頼る。このような難解な正字法に関して、「なぜ英語の綴りはそれほど複雑なものになったのか」とよく問われる。本稿では、英語の綴りに見られる明白な矛盾と不明瞭な英語正字法に与えた大きな影響について統合的に考察する。

**Abstract** : Spelling is one of the most challenging aspects of learning English. Even native speakers have difficulty with it and often rely on modern tools such as spell check and autocorrect to minimize mistakes. With such a challenging orthography, people often ask how it is that English spelling became so complex. This paper is synthesis of some of the more apparent discrepancies in English spelling and some of the larger influences on its less than transparent orthography.

**Keywords** : English Orthography, Spelling, Dictionary, Printing Press, The Great Vowel Shift

*I have nothing but contempt for anyone who can spell a word only one way.*

- Mark Twain (apocryphal)

## 1.0 Introduction

Unlike most other languages, English spelling and pronunciation is so difficult and complex that even native language speakers struggle with it. This goes beyond confusion with homophones such as *then / than, to, too, and two, or their, they're, and there*. English language spelling is so challenging that there is a worldwide contest for it – The Scripps National Spelling Bee (despite its name, contestants come from around the world to compete).

According to Michelle Tsai, no other language in

the world has a spelling bee. Other countries do host English language spelling bees. And some countries host similar competitions involving vocabulary and grammar. Some noteworthy examples:

**French**: Perhaps the closest thing to a spelling bee in another language is Quebec's *Dictée des Amériques*. This competition, which started in 1994, challenges participants in both spelling and grammar. Would-be participants must first pass a locally held grammar test before progressing on to further rounds. In the final round, contestant hear a passage read out loud four times.

Contestants must then write down the passage word-for-word with no grammar or spelling errors. The contestant with the lowest number of errors wins.

**Chinese:** In languages which do not have alphabets, like Chinese, there are contests where participants look up Chinese characters as quickly as possible. It is difficult (if not often impossible) to know how to pronounce a Chinese character simply by looking at it. So, participants are challenged to look up as many characters as possible in a given amount of time. The challenge then comes not from spelling, but instead comes from knowing *how* to look up unfamiliar characters in Chinese.

**Japanese:** In Japan, which uses a mixture of two native alphabets – hiragana and katakana – as well as a selection of Chinese characters called kanji, people take the Kanken – a kanji proficiency exam. There are ten levels to the exam, with level one – the hardest level – requiring knowledge of approximately 6000 kanji.

The orthography of many languages is so transparent, one can know how to spell a word simply by hearing it. But English orthography, with Latin, Greek, French, and Germanic roots, is much deeper (Tsai, 2007). As a result, English is the only language with spelling bees.

Because of its loan words from other languages, English spelling is difficult to master. In fact, I have my own struggles with spelling – I often need to rely on spellcheck for words like *maintenance* and *necessary*.

## 2.0 The Peculiarities of English Spelling

To quote Edward Rondthaler – the father of modern day American spelling reform – “We have 42 different sounds in English and we spell them 400 different ways.”

A commonly used example to demonstrate the depth and confusion surrounding English orthography is the “animal” *ghoti*. Unless a reader is familiar with the various English language reform movements, he or she may not know which animal this is supposed to be.

If we take the *gh* from *cough*, which gives us the phoneme /f/ as in *foxtrot*, then the *o* from *women*, which gives us the phoneme /ɪ/ as in *igloo*, add to these the *ti* from *nation*, which gives us the phoneme /ʃ/ as in *show* you will see that *ghoti* is an alternate spelling for the world fish.

But that is not how English orthography and pronunciation really works. Despite its multitudes of influences, there is some amount of logic to how English spelling works.

There are rules:

I before E.

And exceptions to these rules:

I before E, except after C.

And exceptions to these exceptions:

I before E, except after C, or when spelling /ei/ as in *neighbor* or *weigh*.

And, of course, exceptions to the exceptions’ exceptions:

I before E, except when your foreign neighbor Keith receives eight counterfeit beige sleighs from weird, feisty, caffeinated weightlifters.

At this point, one might begin to feel like they are in an orthographical version of the movie *Inception*.

But what causes these irregularities in spelling? Why are there so many ways to create the same sounds in English?

There are a number of factors. English borrows heavily from other languages. Sometimes the spelling of a loan word was changed to match what was, at the time of the word’s introduction, English spelling – but this was not done consistently. Another factor which has heavily influenced English spelling is attempts by printers and scholars to codify spelling.

One of the greatest influences on English spelling has been The Great Vowel Shift.

The Great Vowel Shift occurred between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. During this time, all the main long vowels had a change in their pronunciation. The shift alone should not have affected English spelling and pronunciation as much as it did. The catalyst here was that as English pronunciation changed over this relatively short period of time, the printing press was invented. As printers were attempting to codify spelling based on sounds, the sounds themselves kept changing. This explains why certain words like “lice” (which was part of English vocabulary since Old English) does not sound like similarly spelled “police” which entered English from French in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. (Schmitt and Marsden, pp. 130 – 133, 2006)

### 3.0 Scribes, Typesetters, The Printing Press, and English

These influences, rules, and exceptions raise an obvious question: what caused a specific irregularity? What are the stories behind English having such a variety of ways to spell different phonemes and to pronounce different letter groupings?

In their book *Why Is English Like That?* Schmitt and Marsden (2009) talk about how English scribes and printers have tried to codify spelling and give clues to changes in spelling and pronunciation. For instance, the silent E came from scribes signifying a change in pronunciation of the preceding letters in the word. This signifier was used for both consonants and vowels. Some examples:

- A *g* followed by an *e* showed that the pronunciation of the *g* changed from /g/ to /dʒ/. For instance: stag and stage
- A preceding vowel is lengthened or turned into a diphthong. For instance: fat and fate, pet and Pete, kit and kite, not and note, cut and cute, etc.

As is clear from the first example, the silent E can do both in the same word: signify a change in

the pronunciation of the preceding consonant and a change in a preceding vowel.

One very interesting holdover from the time of typesetters and scribes is the rise of the word *ye*. The Old English letter þ (pronounced “thorn” or /θ ɔn/) was used to signify the dental fricatives /ð/ and /θ/. Eventually the digraph th replaced it. (Oxford Dictionaries Online) When it did, printers used the letter Y to represent the digraph. As such, the word *ye* when used as an article, should be pronounced *thee* /ði:/. Of course, it is important to realize that *ye* as a pronoun has a different (and unrelated) origin to that of *ye* as an article. (ibid)

### 4.0 Loan Words

English language owes its orthographical variety to the contribution of loan words from other languages, with French, German, Latin, and Greek being the four largest. They are the benefactors that gave English a trove of words, as well as the culprits guilty for its multiplicity of spellings.

In looking at how other languages have influenced English spelling and pronunciation, one need look no further than the silent G (think *gnu* or *gnome*) and the silent K (think *knight* or *knock*). Both of these silent letters are holdovers from their Germanic cognates. In their original Germanic forms, each letter is pronounced. When they came over to Old English, they retained aspects of their original spelling and pronunciation; but as English evolved, the K and G fell silent, and KN and GN became /n/. The KN became /n/ in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and GN became /n/ in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. (Schmitt and Marsden, pp. 134 – 137)

Some silent letters were never pronounced in English. For example, PN (think pneumonia) and PS (think psychology) both come from Greek, but in both cases, in English, PN was always /n/ and PS was always /s/. (ibid)

The list of silent letters and silent clusters in

English is lengthy. But, as one can see, silent letters were not always silent. With the exception of the silent e, the occurrence of silent letters consistently follows the same pattern:

- The letters were pronounced in their language of origin.
- The words are imported into English.
- The pronunciation changes (either immediately or over time).

Languages change – it is a natural and ongoing aspect of linguistics. There is no way to explain *why* letters go silent in English. We can only trace the changes in spelling and pronunciation and discuss the *how* of their changes.

The history behind changes in English spelling and pronunciation is interesting, but one might wonder why these variations in spelling have persisted, which then leads us to ask if there has been an effort to simplify English spelling. Before looking at that, let's review what has contributed to English's orthography:

- Since the time of Old English, there have been many loan words added to the English vocabulary. Often times, instead of changing the spelling of the word to match English pronunciation, the rules of pronunciation changed to include different spellings for the same sounds.
- The advent of the printing press coincided with The Great Vowel shift. As vowel sounds went through a reassignment, spelling was codified via printers. Spellings for certain vowel sounds would be codified via printing, but those sounds would continue to shift, and thus multiple spellings for the same sounds arose.
- Sometimes, holdovers from typesetting

remained in a word's spelling.

## 5.0 The Influence of Dictionaries

What sealed the fate for English spelling was the creation of dictionaries. There were many dictionaries created after the invention of the printing press. Each had its own spelling to fit the region from which it came – or the whims of the printer.

But in 1755, Samuel Johnson published his *Dictionary of the English Language*. His efforts set the rules and guidelines for spelling. But Johnson put off his normal pragmatic tendencies – which might have led to him standardizing spelling and pronunciation. Instead, he took a descriptive approach to his dictionary and recorded the spellings in use at the time instead of using uniform spelling and standardized pronunciation. (ibid, 161)

Further complicating English orthography is the split between American English spelling and British English spelling. After the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, there was a desire among American patriots to distance themselves from Britain specifically and European thought in general. There was a movement among Americans – led by Noah Webster – to rationalize (that is, make sense and simplify) English spelling while also developing a spelling method that was noticeably distinct from British spelling. This resulted in spelling differences between the two versions of English which persist to this day. Some examples:

- -or / -our: color / colour, honor / honour, favor / favour, etc.
- -er / -re: center / centre, liter / litre, theater / theatre, etc.
- -ize / -ise: realize / realise, finalize / finalise, organize / organize

There are many other difference, this is just a small sample. (ibid, pp. 163 – 166)

There have been attempts to reform and simplify English spelling, but these attempts rarely garner widespread support – whether that is due to organized resistance or lack of interest. Some have argued that spelling reform would mask the origin of words. Other have argued that the cost of spelling reform would be prohibitive. Further, English is the only one of the top ten used languages worldwide that has no regulatory agency with the authority to coordinate a new system of spelling. (ibid, pp. 156 – 166)

Whether or not English language spelling will change and simplify over time remains to be seen. But as English becomes an increasingly global language and as technologies exert their pressure on communication – it is safe to assume that English language spelling will continue to change. Whether it will be simplified or further complicated through this process – only the future holds the answer.

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