The Influence of English Language History on English Spelling Irregularity

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Author’s Profile

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Abstract
The significant justification for irregularity of English spelling exists in the formation of the English language. In other words, English spelling is the product of its history. The current study is going to investigate the irregularity in English spelling historically. This investigation will include the influence of Norman French, the Great Vowel Shift, printing press, loan words, and the etymological respelling.

Keywords: English language history; English spelling.
Introduction

According to Rogers (2005, p. 1) "writing is one of the most significant cultural accomplishments of human beings. It allows us to record and convey information beyond the immediate moment". The issue of English writing system has been brought up by certain researchers in recent years. As Cook (2004) puts it, “English writing system is connected to our lives in many ways, not something that is an ancillary to other aspects of language but vitally important to almost everything we do, from signing our wills to sending a text message” (p. 1). As stated by Ida (2006, p. 5) "one crucial factor to take into account when discussing writing is spelling". Spelling is important for at least two reasons. First, a writer may not communicate well if s/he cannot spell; that is, a reader must be able to interpret marks on the page as meaningful words and s/he cannot do this easily when words are spelled. Second, contemporary societies consider misspelling a serious social error, marking a person as, at best, ‘illiterate’, if not outright ‘ignorant’ (Cronnell, 1979).

A frequently expressed complaint about English spelling is that it does not establish a one-to-one relationship between symbols and phonological segments. The main reason for irregularity of English spelling lies in the very formation of the English language, which has preserved or reintroduced the old historical spelling of the principal languages contributing most to it: Old English, Old French, Latin, and Greek. In other words, English spelling is a product of its history, both political and linguistic. The current study is going to investigate the irregularity in English spelling historically. This investigation will include the influence of Norman French, the Great Vowel Shift, printing press, loan words, and the etymological respelling.
Old English and the Influence of Norman Conquest

An excellent survey of the history of English spelling is provided by Scragg (1974) in his book "A history of English spelling". According to Scragg, the history of English spelling begins at the end of the 6th century, when Roman and Irish missionaries converted the Anglo-Saxons in the British Isles to Christianity and introduced the Roman alphabet. The Roman alphabet was much like the Modern English alphabet, except that Old English did not use the letters “j, k, v, or w”, and used “q and z” rarely. This represents the beginning of the era commonly referred to as the Old English period. “As a whole, Old English spelling as developed in the West Saxon tradition was much nearer a one-to-one relationship with sounds” (Scragg, 1974, p. 11). In the subsequent period, however, this one-to-one relationship between spelling and sounds was gradually lost.

A change with a greater impact on spelling happened after England had been conquered by William of Normandy in 1066. For over two centuries following the Norman Conquest, large numbers of French-speaking settlements were established in England. This was largely responsible for creating a country with two primary languages, with French being the language of the ruling class and the aristocracy and English being the language of the ordinary people. With English ceasing to be the language of the administration – and therefore no national standard to follow - spelling was governed by local dialects and conventions. During these two or three centuries, a large number of French words were adopted into English, with the estimates of French words in modern English being as high as 40 percent. Thus, the orthography was made to adapt to two spoken systems, English and French, and spelling became suitable to represent neither language (Scragg, 1974; Sampson, 1985; Rogers, 2005).

Furthermore, the vagaries of local dialects were responsible for creating additional disjunction between pronunciation and spelling. Generally speaking, loan-words adopted from one language to another are forced to accord with the sound patterns of the recipient language while retaining the borrowed spelling. For example, the words “heir, honor,
honest, and hour” have preserved the letter “h” from French, but have English pronunciation. Other examples of inconsistencies are “mouse and louse”, and their irregular plurals “mice and lice”, which were spelled “mus, mys, lus, and lys” in Old English (Scragg, 1974).

Under the Norman influence, many legal documents were written in Latin, which introduced yet another source of divergence between spelling and pronunciation. An example is the bi-consonant “ch.” Under the French influence, it is pronounced /sh/ as in “chauffeur” and “machine”, but under the Latin influence, it is pronounced /k/ as in “chorus” and “archive”.

The settlements of Vikings in England also contributed to the alienation of spelling from pronunciation. For instance, the sound /sk/ was spelled with “sk” as in “skate” and “sketch”, which are Dutch in origin, but was spelled with “sc” as in “scarce” and “scorn”, for words which are French in origin. With the dawning of the Renaissance, an increased awareness of Latin became evident and scribes were responsible for Latinizing spellings such as “debt, island, and receipt”, which can be traced to Latin words such as “debitum,” “insula,” and “receptum”. Even during the pre-Renaissance Middle English period, these words were spelled “dette,” “yland,” and “receite” (Scragg, 1974; Sampson, 1985).

The Great Vowel Shift
The most dramatic change in the phonological system affecting spelling is the “Great Vowel Shift”, which began in the fifteenth century and lasted until the seventeenth century–over 200 years. A series of changes in the vowels of the English language brought about a significant reorganization of the system. Roughly speaking, the earlier lengthened vowels came to be produced at the highest tongue position became diphthongs. Thus, an item such as “sweet” changed from /swe:t/ to /swi:t/, “spoon” from /spo:n/ to /spu:n/, “ride” changed from /ri:d/ to /rald/, and so forth. This shift in the
pronunciation of the vowels was made without a corresponding shift in spelling (Rogers, 2005). The Great Vowel Shift is represented in Figure 1 (Barber 1993, p. 192).

![Figure 1: The Great Vowel Shift (Barber 1993, p. 192).]

Crystal (1987, p. 214) states that "the great vowel shift of the 15th century was the main reason for the diversity of vowel spellings in such words as name, sweet, ride, way, house. Similarly, letters that were sounded in Anglo-Saxon became silent, e.g. the 'k' of know and knight, or the final 'e' in stone, love, etc".

**The Introduction of the Printing Press**

The printing press was brought to Britain by William Caxton in 1476. At that time, a great diversity of spelling conventions had been in use all over the country, representing the different dialects. People spelled the words however they wanted, based mostly on education and temperament. William Caxton is largely responsible for establishing norms of spelling through use of the capital, London (Basler et al., 2008; Daniels & Bright, 1996; Baugh, 1965).

According to Crystal (1987), the printing process created additional problems for spelling consolidation. Many early printers were Dutch, and they used their own spelling norms and made several convenient abbreviations additions and deletions to account for the space in a line. The effects of this can be seen in words like ghost, which in Old English
was spelled gast, but which nowadays has an added <h> after the <g>, just as in the Dutch word gheest.

**Loan Words**

In the late 16th and early 17th centuries, many new loan words entered English from languages such as French, Latin, Greek, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese. As stated by Crystal (1987), loan words are one of the reasons behind the spelling varieties that exist in English today. According to Venezky (1970), "more irregular spellings in English are due to borrowings than to any other cause" (p. 121). Rogers (2005) also states that in addition to a change in the phonology and grammar of the language, English had also borrowed a huge number of French words. These were often related to government and warfare - duke, judge, government, county, general, army, but also very ordinary words - table, very, single, beef. Moreover, Rogers points out that for words borrowed from languages using the Roman alphabet, the original spelling for most words has been kept. For example, from French, there is soufflé, ballet, lingerie; from German there is Kindergarten, Fahrenheit, Umlaut; from Italian spaghetti, concerto, bologna" (ibid, p. 192).

According to Scragg (1974), during these two or three centuries a large number of French words were adopted into English. Thus, the orthography was made to adapt to two spoken systems, English and French, and spelling became suitable to represent neither language.

**Etymological Respelling**

Toward the end of the fifteenth century, yet another trend developed; the practice of spelling words in a manner that would reflect their etymological origin. Enduring examples of this influence are found in the spelling of the words debt, doubt, receipt, and salmon (formerly spelled dette, doute, receite, and samon), all of which were given a 'silent' consonant to make them look more like the Latin words from which they descended (O'Grady, et al. 1996, p. 615).
According to Culpeper (1997, p. 19), a few etymologically altered versions of words have survived. They can be arranged into two groups: words whose etymological respelling did not influence their pronunciation, and words whose pronunciations as well as orthography have been influenced.

Some examples of words that were altered according to their etymology but kept their former pronunciation include debt and doubt, which had formerly been written as dette and doute. The letter <b> was inserted to indicate that the words originated from the Latin ‘debitum / dubitare’. The same is true for the <p> in the word receipt and the <c> in indict (from Latin ‘recipere’ and ‘indictio’). The respelled words of the second group are significant as they show a change in their pronunciation. What was formerly written and pronounced as aventure was, after the etymological respelling, written and pronounced adventure. The same happened with assault (formerly assaut), describe (formerly descrease) and verdict (formerly verdit) (Barber, 1993, pp. 180-181).

Today, chatting on the Internet and the use of SMS also affect the spelling of English. Simplifications and abbreviations are used in order to speed up conversation, and one can find spellings like “GUD” instead of “Good”, just because it is easier to write the former. “C u” instead of _“See you”_ is another short form frequently used in chat rooms.

**Conclusion**

Modern English spelling developed over time. The history of the language provides many reasons for the irregularities of English spelling. In the above sections, we investigated changes affected by the influence of Norman French, the Great Vowel Shift, printing press, loan words, and the etymological respelling. The result of these changes is a system that is a mixture of different factors contributes to the irregular and sometimes incredibly inconsistent and confusing spelling of the English written language. In short, as Rollings (2004, p. 43) states the complicated English spelling is to a large extent due to “the evolution of the spoken language and conservatism in writing”.
References
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