

0. Introduction .....	2
1. Signs and spelling: Some theory on written language.....	3
2. From Ælfric to Ackroyd: A brief history of English spelling .....	4
3. Radical regularization: Why and how .....	6
3.1. Regularization reasons: .....	6
3.2. Regularization recipes: Some proposals on spelling reform .....	7
4. Preservation of the present: No need to change .....	9
5. Conclusion: Partly post-modern prescription problems .....	11
6. Literature .....	12

## 0. Introduction

Known as the new lingua franca, the English language has to face multiple prejudices concerning its acquisition, reception and learnability as a second language. English as the language of business, science and technology should be easy to learn and comfortable to deal with. It's preferred because its mostly strict grammatical structure. However, many people complain about English spelling, which indeed is very hard to learn as well for foreigners as for native speakers. A spelling reform is demanded by many – but a spelling reform is also disliked by a large number of people. In this essay I will discuss under which circumstances such a reform is necessary or irrelevant, how former proposals looked like and why they didn't take place.

Before dealing with Pro and Contra on an English spelling reform, it is necessary to have a closer look at the history and the systems of English spelling. Therefore, on the following pages I will try to give a very brief introduction to the history of English orthography<sup>1</sup>, including some general features and systems of the development of spelling in alphabetically written languages. Afterwards I will list a few earlier proposals and comments on English spelling.

In the end you should see that English as a natural language has its own rules and structure: any ambiguous feature has its explanation, any lexical item or its derivative has developed in a certain way. Nevertheless, it is unavoidable for a written language to keep step with its spoken counterpart. Touching the question whether a written language is a separate part or just a component of one basic, originally spoken language, it will hopefully become clear, that no prescription is necessarily perpetual.

---

<sup>1</sup> In the following passages I will use orthography and spelling system synonymously.

## 1. Signs and spelling: Some theory on written language

Regarding the history of language, written language is obviously a derivation from spoken language, an attempt to conserve information on stone, leather, paper or nowadays on compact discs. Spoken language exists since 150.000 years, written language since 5.000 years<sup>2</sup>. The first written languages were Egyptian, Babylonian and Chinese. All these languages are logographic languages, they represent a lexeme with a symbol.

English, as all recent European languages, was basically a phonographic language: christianized monks in the Anglo-Saxon period started to fix their spoken language with the use of the roman alphabet (plus <æ><sup>3</sup>, <ð> and <þ>) and its representations of phonological items. Nevertheless, written English also has its logographic elements, namely symbols like <@>, <☺> or <☹><sup>4</sup>. Disregarding these elements, Old English mainly follows the phonological principle: phonemes are represented by graphemes<sup>5</sup>, one symbol (segment) represents one phonological segment. Some modern languages are following this system, namely Turkish (reintroduced since 1928) and Serbo-Croat (reintroduced since 1850).

Another orthographic principle of importance is the etymological or morphological one: Spelling is oriented on relative words, mostly the morphological stems, a series of symbols represents one morphological segment (e.g. <heard> /η↔δ/ vs. <hear> /η \ /). This principle is very common in many European languages; it also had a very large influence on English spelling.

---

<sup>2</sup> Drosdowski, G., ed., *Duden Grammatik der deutschen Gegenwartssprache*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Mannheim: Dudenverlag, 1995), p. 57.

<sup>3</sup> Graphemes will be written in <>, phonemes and phonological segment chains in //. Phonological description is based on the IPA, but I will not provide a phonetic transcription, as it is undoable for a general language.

<sup>4</sup> For the discussion on logographic graphemes in phonographic systems see Gallmann, P., *Graphische Elemente der geschriebenen Sprache: Grundlagen für eine Reform der Orthographie* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1985), Heller, K., 'Zum Graphembegriff', in *Theoretische Probleme der Orthographie* eds. D. Nerijs et al. (Berlin, 1980), pp. 74-108 and Wiebel, D., *Das autonome Graphem als subversives Element der Graphemisch-Phonologischen Korrespondenzregeln*. Available on the internet at: [http://www.linguistics.de/wiebel\\_graphem.htm](http://www.linguistics.de/wiebel_graphem.htm) (10.01.2000).

<sup>5</sup> For the definition of graphemes see Pulgram, E., 'Phoneme and Grapheme. A Parallel' in: *Word*, Vol. 7:1.(1951), pp. 15-20. In this context I agree to Pulgram's theory of parallel phonemes and graphemes, but regarding the full features of any written language the definition of grapheme is insufficient, see Gallmann.

## 2. From Ælfric to Ackroyd: A brief history of English Spelling

Considering the orthographic principles mentioned before, this section should briefly sum up how the English spelling system developed. As mentioned before, christianized monks in the Anglo-Saxon period were the first writers of English. The basis for their spelling was the Roman alphabet, to which some of the older runes were attached. The spelling system of the West Saxon Standard was based on very strict rules of parallelism between Old English phonological values and Latin symbols or symbol constructions (e.g. <th> for /þ,ð/ instead of Greek theta <Θ,θ>). Therefore, this principle of phonographic writing can be assumed as the basic principle of the English language. (However, there have always been logographic elements such as numerals, punctuation signs and icons.) In the following example (Ælfric, *Heptateuch*, *Genesis 22:1*) it should be shown how closely written and spoken language are linked in Old English – nearly perfectly each grapheme has its parallel phoneme:

<God wolde þā fandian Abrahames gehīersumnesse and clipode his naman and cwæð him þus tō: [...]><sup>6</sup>  
/god wald.: ða fantjan abraham.: s g.: hið.: rs]mnes.: and kl)þd.: h)þ naman and kw—€him ð]σ  
t)ð/

In the Middle English Period, after the Norman Occupation, written and spoken English developed in different ways. While the segments of spoken English follow the rules of the Great Vowel Shift, written English still keeps the symbols formerly long vowels. Unfortunately, Old English used the same symbols for long and short vowels. The same phenomenon seen with the Great Vowel Shift can be observed later on during the process of Glide Addition: There is a tendency for written language to be more conservative than spoken language.

Besides the development of “original English” another large influence towards both written and spoken English language is seen in French/Romance and Latin borrowings. According to Wijk, the 20,000 most common English words are about one third of Germanic and two thirds of Romance

---

<sup>6</sup> Taken from Fichte, J. and Kemmler, F., *Alt- und mittlenglische Literatur. Eine Einfuehrung*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Tuebingen: Narr, 1994), p. 126.

or/and Latin origin.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, Wijk didn't publish his statistical methods and/or the corpora he used. Nevertheless, such an estimation seems to be generally credible, assuming the "average" English in meanings of regional and social context. Consisting of such a mixture of vocabulary, English has grown a poly-systematic language, not to say a non-systematic language in terms of writing. To make the system worse, another trend developed towards the end of the fifteenth century – the reflection of the etymological origin. Having a mixture of several absolutely different basic languages and an orthography based on the etymological principle, English became very much idiosyncratic and irregular: Some writing standards derived from French borrowings (e.g. <colour>, <double>, <conscious>), others from Germanic words (e.g. <wonder>, <mother>, <under>). Some of the writings are even influenced by foreign orthographic tendencies, e.g. <ghost>, in which the <gh> was a Dutch convention introduced by Caxton<sup>8</sup>. Looking at the grapheme <e> in the following example also taken from the book Genesis, you can see that it represents four different phonemic values, namely /e/, /ɪɔ/, /i:/ and a zero value:

“Go to the flock, and fetch me two good kids, that I may prepare from them savory food for your father, such as he loves.”<sup>9</sup>

Even if all of these values have their explanation and can be justified, they cause a kind of irregularity within English spelling. Another example to show the irregularity of English spelling are homophones with different spellings:

<allowed> vs. <aloud>

<awes> vs. <oars> vs. <ores>

<c's> vs. <seas> vs. <sees> vs. <seize>

<cawed> vs. <chord> vs. <cord> vs. <cored>

To sum up , in Modern English there are four major problems with English orthography<sup>10</sup>:

---

<sup>7</sup> See Wijk, A., *Regularized English. An Investigation into the English Spelling Reform Problem with a New, Detailed Plan for a Possible Solution* (Stockholm: Almquist and Wiksell, 1959), p. 37.

<sup>8</sup> see Scragg, D. G., *A History of English Spelling* (Manchester: English Universities Press, 1974) p. 66.

1. Some letters do not represent any phonological segment: <through>, <sign>,<knight>
2. One letter represents a cluster of two phonological segments: <saxophone>,<exile>
3. The same letter represents different phonological segments: <on>,<bone>,<one>
4. The same phoneme can be represented by different letters: <rude>,<loop>,<new>,<too>

### 3. Radical regularization: Why and How

#### 3.1. Regularization reasons

Fixing these irregularities is one of the major aspects why people demand a radical reform. There are multiple reasons for the return to a more regular spelling system. On the one hand computer based language processing becomes more and more important; speech recognition and speech synthesis work well with Dutch texts but not with English ones. This is indeed a very interesting fact regarding that most research in computational linguistics is done in English and not in Dutch.

But not only computer programs would improve with a new, more systematic orthography: it could also be of a great importance in the field of writing acquisition. Wijk reports in his preface of *Regularized English* how much faster reading acquisition works with Swedish (following mainly the alphabetic/phonographic principle) than with English (learning with the ‘whole word method’).<sup>11</sup> According to Goswami and Bryant<sup>12</sup> phonic based method is superior to whole word method in teaching reading, even when it doesn’t only teach parallel phonemes and graphemes in isolation.

---

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 27:9, *The holy Bible, Revised Standard version*

Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library. Available on the internet at: <http://etext.virginia.edu/rsv.browse.html> (10.01.2000).

<sup>10</sup> See O’Grady, W. et al., *Contemporary Linguistics. An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), p. 486. I didn’t mention bigraphs as problematic items, because they occur in nearly every language based on alphabetical principle representing phonemes which didn’t exist in the alphabet’s original language (e.g. /ð/ didn’t exist in Latin) and can be seen as graphemes as minimal distintional units of a language.

<sup>11</sup> See Wijk, p. 13f.

<sup>12</sup> See Goswami, U. and P. Bryant, *Phonological skills and learning to read* (Hove: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1990), pp. 118-21.

Hence a regularized English would also play an important role on second language acquisition. English as a general auxiliary language all over the world has many advantages in meanings of learnability. Wijk sums up the positive features of English as a second language:

“For its role as the principal auxiliary language in the world English is exceedingly well equipped in several respects. Its greatest merit, in comparison with other living languages, lies undoubtedly in its comparatively simple grammatical structure, which makes the language easy to learn from this particular point of view, especially at the lower and intermediate levels. [...] English has further the advantage of an enormously rich vocabulary, which covers all existing fields of knowledge and thought and enables us to express every imaginable shade of meaning. [...] Two other important features of the English language should be emphasized, the international character of its vocabulary and its extraordinary capacity for absorbing and evolving new linguistics material.”<sup>13</sup>

However, the orthography of English is “hopelessly antiquated and confused”<sup>14</sup>. If English had a regular spelling, it would be nearly perfectly learnable as a second language, easier than Esperanto and other artificial languages which were made up to be an easy-to-learn lingua franca.

### 3.2. Regularization recipes: Some proposals on spelling reform

Fixing this deficit was also the purpose of all the past proposals towards an English spelling reform. Already in 1596 Coote demands “to write truly”<sup>15</sup> and postulates: “follow mine advice, and I warrant the successe”<sup>16</sup>. However, Coote’s own spelling is not very much oriented on pronunciation, although he claims to “undertake to make thee write the true Orthography of any word truly pronounced”<sup>17</sup>. Nevertheless, even in that days he must stick to “those words, whose writing is determined: for there are many wherein the best English men in this land are not agreed”<sup>18</sup>.

Coote, as most of his contemporaries (Sir Thomas Smith, John Hart/Chester Herald, William Bullokar, ...), didn’t really provide a systematic English spelling reform but a standardization. He based his orthography on already existing conventions, he selected the most frequent forms in print, simplified and standardized writing for a large amount of people. Also in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Mulcaster tried to

---

<sup>13</sup> Wijk, pp. 36f.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 37

<sup>15</sup> Coote, E., *The English Schoole-Maister (1556)*, Facsimile, (Menston: The Scholar Press Ltd., 1968), p. 2

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 4

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

invent standards for English writing. Both of them can be seen as founders of a fixed spelling convention. Initialized by Coote and Mulcaster, the stabilization of written English was complete by 1700, according to Scragg.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, when the most popular early dictionaries were written by Nathaniel Baley and Samuel Johnson, the conventions were already established. To underline this, Scragg quotes Johnson's Preface: "But the truth is that Johnson was powerless to do more than record the already established convention. As he admitted in his Preface: '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.'"<sup>20</sup>

The first step backwards to an alphabetical principle was done on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean by Noah Webster. Even if he didn't support spellings like <honor> and <favor><sup>21</sup>, he made them popular in American English by publishing them in his *American Dictionary of the English Language* in 1828. Some transatlantic spelling conventions also became general in Britain, for example Webster's omission of the final <k> in <musick> and <publick>.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a new tendency rose: Industrialism needed as well workers as people being able to read and write. The demand was now to teach the written language fast and efficiently to large amounts of people. From this time on, many new linguistic societies were founded. In 1876 the American Spelling Reform Association was founded, in 1879 the British Spelling Reform Association, later, in 1906 the Simplified Spelling Board and in 1909 the Simplified Spelling Society. With the beginning of those societies on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, the trend goes (back) towards an phonemic orthography. Proposals were for example: dropping of superfluous letters<sup>22</sup>, abolishing some digraphs (<phonetic> vs. <fonetic>, <photo> vs. <foto>) and simplifying vowel qualities (<above> vs. <abuv>). In the twentieth century the tendency towards phonological writing continued. R. E.

---

<sup>19</sup> Scragg, p. 80.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>21</sup> He preferred „onur“ and „favur“, cf. Scragg p. 83.

Zachrisson's "Anglic", the "Nue Speling"(1941) of the Simplified Spelling Society and A. Wijk's "Regularized English" (1959) were all based on an orthography more convergent to spoken language. Last but not least G. B. Shaw should be mentioned in the context of spelling reforms: After proposals by T. Roosevelt, which Shaw heavily criticized, Shaw composed a "new"<sup>23</sup> alphabet in 1914 consisting on non-latin letters. However, this system, like most of the other proposals during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was never asserted.

### 3. Preservation of the present: No need to change

After most of the spelling reforms during the last 150 years supported more or less one scheme the question rises, why these proposals never came to an effort. After multiple changes written English seems to be stuck at a point around 1700 a.d.

One answer to the fixed writings could be the immense spread of English all over the world. Map 1 shows the areas where English is spoken either as native or as administrative language. This causes several problems: A spelling reform nowadays has to be introduced by the government, but the English - speaking countries are not ruled by a single government (anymore). Even to bring Germany, Austria and Switzerland together in order to create a common orthography (as it happened in 1996) caused many problems. Imagine how difficult it would be to connect Britain, Ireland, the USA, India, etc.

Another problem caused by the world wide spread of English are dialect and regional differences in pronunciation. All the latest spelling reform proposals were based on phonological-orthographic parallelisms. Even in England there are several different dialect. What would be the right orthography for <butter>? <ba'a> or <buta>? Imagine the problems with Pidgin English or Scottish English<sup>24</sup>.

---

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Chapter 2.

<sup>23</sup> The idea was in fact not new: Pitman's „initial teaching alphabet“ (i.t.a.) did also consist of many non-latin letters.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Irvine Welsh's novel „Trainspotting“. This novel is written in „Scottish English“ and very hard to read, especially for non-native speakers of English.

Moreover, written language (especially English) is also very much in use nowadays. Changing orthography would mean to change all English computer software in the world, to change all English traffic signs, all English manuals, each documentation and every book press. Such a change would cause enormous costs – and who should be responsible for it?

Furthermore, every speaker (writer) of English would have to acquire the new orthography. Certainly there would be a large resistance against a new orthography. In my opinion this would cause the most problems towards a new spelling reform. Even the (relatively harmless) last German spelling reform has caused an enormous resistance with the effect, that the pupils of one county have to learn both old and new spelling conventions.

Another point against a spelling reform is that language is never stable. Spoken English might change a lot during the next fifty years. To be consequent, written English must be updated with every change, which would cause additional costs, conviction power and international problems. (On the other hand, this would cause countless jobs for linguists.)



Map1: Native and administrative languages. Taken from: Koenig, p. 36. Modified to emphasize the English-speaking areas.

## 5. Conclusion: Partly post-modern prescription problems

Whether an English spelling reform is necessary or not has been the topic of many congresses, books and issues. It is worth to be dealt with, but dealing with it one has to be aware of both advantages and problems of a spelling reform. On the one hand, as shown in chapter 3, a regularized English (in meanings of a return to the phonographic principle) would simplify writing acquisition, computational linguistics and the usage of English as an international auxiliary language. On the other hand, such an enormous reform as it would be required to make English spelling systematic is not doable: Even if all English speaking nations would support such a system, it would still cause immense costs and it would also produce a large resistance within the people which have to acquire such a new spelling.

Even if I would prefer a simplified English Spelling as a writer of English as a foreign language, I don't see a chance for the introduction of such a system. Even the development might be undoable under current circumstances: Our world (in meanings of culture, trade and business) has become a world based on information exchange during the last 50-100 years. Thus, too much communication systems rely only on written language in order to be changed. Written language has in a way separated from its spoken counterpart – it is obviously possible just to contact via written language disregarding any spoken word. However, it still has many connections to its basic spoken language. But it is hard to decide whether written English is more close to written French or to spoken English. This question depends as much on the discussion about form vs. function as the following: Should English orthography be a description of spoken English or should it be a prescription for written English? In fact, it is both in each case.

Fortunately, when dealing with language, no prescription stays forever, as it can be seen in the history of English orthography before 1700. Hopefully, one day written language will again play a minor role in communication. From this day on, intensive reforms will be doable as they were before the development of press.

## 6. Literature

*The holy Bible, Revised Standard version.* Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library. Available on the internet at: <http://etext.virginia.edu/rsv.browse.html> (10.01.2000).

Coote, E., *The English Schoole-Maister (1556)*, Facsimile, (Menston: The Scholar Press Ltd., 1968)

Drosdowski, G., ed., *Duden Grammatik der deutschen Gegenwartssprache*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Mannheim: Dudenverlag, 1995)

Fichte, J. and F. Kemmler, *Alt- und mitttelenglische Literatur. Eine Einfuehrung.* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Tuebingen: Narr, 1994)

Gallmann, P., *Graphische Elemente der geschriebenen Sprache: Grundlagen für eine Reform der Orthographie* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1985)

Goswami, U. and P. Bryant, *Phonological skills and learning to read* (Hove: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1990)

Heller, K., 'Zum Graphembegriff', in *Theoretische Probleme der Orthographie* eds. D. Nerius et al. (Berlin, 1980), pp. 74-108

Koenig, W., *dtv-Atlas zur deutschen Sprache*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1978)

O'Grady, W. et al., *Contemporary Linguistics. An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991)

Pulgram, E., 'Phoneme and Grapheme. A Parallel' in: *Word*, Vol. 7:1.(1951), pp. 15-20

Scragg, D. G., *A History of English Spelling* (Manchester: English Universities Press, 1974)

Wiebel, D., *Das autonome Graphem als subversives Element der Graphemisch-Phonologischen Korrespondenzregeln.* Available on the internet at: [http://www.linguistics.de/wiebel\\_graphem.htm](http://www.linguistics.de/wiebel_graphem.htm) (10.01.2000)

Wijk, A., *Regularized English. An Investigation into the English Spelling Reform Problem with a New, Detailed Plan for a Possible Solution* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1959)