

Spell it out:

the singular story of English spelling

David Crystal

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Introduction

I have wanted to write a book on English spelling all my life, but the prospect has always scared me. There is simply so much of it. With well over a million words in English, affected in myriad ways by some 1,300 years of history, the task of attempting to find some order in the chaos, as linguists like to do, seemed well nigh impossible. In 2005 I compiled a *Pocket Spelling Dictionary* for Penguin Books, and that reinforced my feeling about the vast scale of any such enterprise.

What has changed is that sophisticated tools to help carry out this task have now become available. Chief among these is the online *Oxford English Dictionary*, which makes it possible to see the spelling history of any word at the click of a mouse. And two huge item-by-item surveys have taken place – the first by Edward Carney, published in 1994 as *A Survey of English Spelling*; the second by Christopher Upward, published in 2011 in association with George Davidson as *A History of English Spelling*. It was my privilege to edit the latter book as part of the Blackwell/Wiley Language Library, and it was in the course of this exercise that I began to realise that

most of the required hard linguistic graft – the collection and arrangement of copious examples, letter by letter, period by period – had been done.

Bridges now need to be built between this solid academic linguistic foundation and the curiosity of the general English-using public, whose common cry in this connection is ‘Why on earth is — spelled like that?’ A huge number of words can fill that blank, and this book deals with quite a few of them. The bridges are especially needed by teachers, who have the unenviable task of introducing their students to the English orthographic world. The student constituency is twofold: children learning to read and write English as a mother-tongue; and the vast number of children and adults who are learning English as a foreign language. The complaint from all of them resounds around the globe: can anything be done to facilitate the task of learning to spell English words? I believe the answer is yes, though a new pedagogy will take a while to implement. The present unsatisfactory teaching situation is the result of several centuries of evolution, and it will take some time to replace this by a more efficient approach based on sound linguistic principles. I make some suggestions about such an approach in the final two chapters of the book.

Nowhere is the old saying ‘I can’t see the wood for the trees’ more applicable than in the case of spelling. We are dealing with thousands of words whose orthographic character has been shaped by sets of

factors that often defy generalisation. We search for rules, and just when we think we have found some, we encounter a host of anomalies, variations and exceptions. How, under these circumstances, do we find a road map to take us through the spelling wood?

I believe the best way into the wood is chronological. To understand the complexity of English spelling, we first have to understand when and how the language was originally written down. So our story begins with the Anglo-Saxon monks, using our knowledge of Modern English to give us a sense of the scale of the task they faced (Chapters 2–3). The system they devised was a good one, but it had weaknesses, and these are the source of many modern spelling difficulties (Chapters 4–7). The arrival of the French in 1066 brought a new set of attitudes and practices: a French approach to spelling was grafted onto the Anglo-Saxon system. This, along with the changes that were taking place in the spoken English of the time, brought a radical transformation in English spelling (Chapters 8–15).

The Middle English period, from the 12th to the 15th centuries, is hugely different from its Old English predecessor. Thousands of words entered the English language, especially from French and Latin, and they all had to be spelled. Words began to influence each other in unexpected ways (Chapters 16 and 17). A fundamental change in English pronunciation had to be handled (Chapter 18). And

the introduction of printing introduced a new perspective which had both strengths and weaknesses (Chapter 19). By the 16th century, the demand had grown for spelling reform, but this proved difficult to implement (Chapter 20). Writers turned increasingly to the history of words (etymology) as a means of regularising spelling, and although this perspective brought its own complications, an etymological approach does explain a great deal of the irregularity seen in Modern English (Chapters 21–3).

Since the 17th century, people have searched for other ways of coping with the vagaries of English spelling. Some have put their faith in rules (Chapter 24); some in dictionaries (Chapters 25–6); some in publishers' house styles and printers' manuals (Chapter 27). But the huge growth of English vocabulary, fuelled especially by the global spread of the language and the arrival of the Internet, has greatly increased the amount of orthographic diversity (Chapters 28–9). Commercial, literary and domestic settings have used spelling variation as a means of expressing their identity (Chapter 30). Further dimensions to the character of English orthography are seen in the idiosyncratic spellings of personal names and place names (Chapter 31), the continuing growth in exotic loanwords (Chapter 32–3), the spelling of interjections (Chapter 34), and the use of abbreviations and symbols (Chapter 35). Only a linguistic perspective, I conclude in Chapters 36 and 37, can bring some degree of order into the resulting

chaos, as we look towards the future. And for teachers, I argue in two appendices, this perspective is essential.

The nature of the problem

English spelling is difficult, but it is not as chaotic as is often claimed. An explanatory perspective can make the learning of spelling easier.

Why is English spelling so difficult? Why do we have spelling bees and competitions? Why do children spend so much time learning lists of spellings off by heart? Why do so many people feel they are bad at spelling, and worry so much about it? And why are good spellers so proud of their achievement that, when they see a misspelling, they condemn the writer as sloppy, careless, lazy or uneducated?

Spelling is evidently important. Society says so. When people notice spelling mistakes in a newspaper or poster, they react – with emotions ranging from mild amusement to horrified disgust. Publishers employ proofreaders to prevent such things happening. Some employers have told me that if they see a job application with spelling mistakes, it goes into the bin straight away. We are under similar pressures online: to access an Internet address, we have to get the spelling exactly right.

Society expects us to spell perfectly. And yet we are all aware that there are some words in the language that we don't know how to spell, and have to look them up before we write them. There are no exceptions. Nobody knows how to spell every word in the language. Even the brilliant spellers who win the prizes in spelling bees get some words wrong.

People provide aids to help us achieve that perfection: dictionaries and spelling checkers. But there are problems with both. To look a word up in a dictionary, we have to know how to spell it – which rather defeats the purpose of the exercise. We'll find it eventually, of course, but it isn't the most obvious way to deal with the difficulty. And spelling checkers are useful only to a limited extent. They spot spellings that don't exist; but they won't highlight a word if it's misspelled yet does exist. The first two stanzas of an ode to a spelling checker, by Mark Eckman and Jerrold H. Zar, illustrate the problem:

*I have a spelling checker,
It came with my PC.
It plane lee marks four my revue
Miss steaks aye can knot sea.*

*Eye ran this poem threw it,
Your sure reel glad two no.
Its vary polished in it's weigh.
My checker tolled me sew.*

A spelling checker wouldn't spot anything wrong here.

One day spelling checkers will be more sophisticated, taking the context of the word into account; but for now they can let us down badly. One day there'll be even better labour-saving spelling devices. We will speak into a machine and it will spell the words out for us, or type them for us. Devices of this kind already exist, using voice-to-text software, but they're far from perfect. They don't like broad regional accents. They don't like fast speakers. They don't like background noise. They especially don't like proper names. Eventually these problems will be solved – but not for another generation or so.

So in the short term we need to spell as best we can – and maybe even in the long term. After all, none of these devices will work at all if our computer or phone runs out of power. And if we want to write when we've no electronic equipment to hand, the responsibility remains with us.

What can we do to make the task of learning to spell easier? My answer is in a word: EXPLAIN it. I believe the first step in solving a problem is to see why the problem exists. If we understand why English spelling is apparently in such a mess, we remove part of the barrier. Explaining why words are spelled the way they are can help us remember them. The stories behind the spellings are often fascinating, and interest adds motivation. I've told some of them to young schoolchildren, and their comments warm my linguistic heart. 'I'll never forget there's an *h* in *ghost* now,' said one to me, with a big smile on her face. Yes!

Note I say ‘apparently in such a mess’. English spelling isn’t as bad as most people think it is. They describe it as ‘chaotic’, ‘inconsistent’, ‘irregular’, ‘unpredictable’, ‘unlearnable’. Thomas Sheridan, the 18th-century elocutionist, went so far as to say that the state of our spelling system is worse than ‘the darkest hieroglyphics or most difficult ciphers which the art of man has hitherto invented’. The impression is fuelled by writers who have gone out of their way to draw attention to the irregularities.

A famous example dates from the middle of the 19th century, and came to be associated in the 20th century with George Bernard Shaw: *ghoti* is said to spell *fish*, because *f* is spelled *gh* as in *cough*, *i* is spelled *o* as in *women*, and *sh* is spelled *ti* as in *nation*. This is complete naughtiness. The spelling *ti* is NEVER used with this sound at the end of a word in English, and the spelling *gh* is NEVER used with this sound at the beginning of a word. But people have been taken in by this sort of nonsense. And the feeling that English spelling is a mess has been reinforced by the clever creations based on irregular forms, such as ‘Though the rough cough and hiccough plough me through, I ought to cross the lough.’ All good fun, but hugely misleading as a summary of the English spelling system. It’s a bit like listing eight accident blackspots in a country, and saying all the roads are like that.

English spelling isn’t as chaotic as Shaw suggests. It isn’t ‘unlearnable’. You, reader, have learned to

decode it, otherwise you wouldn't even be reading this. And there are thousands of English words that you have no trouble spelling at all. So how did you manage it? You probably have a vague memory of spelling tests and lists, but how did you actually get from that stage of early learning to your present level of competence? Somehow, over several years, you worked out the system and took on board the exceptions. You have quite a powerful 'spelling engine' in your head, which enables you to see a new word and make a reasonable shot at how to pronounce it (text to speech) and hear a new word and make a reasonable guess about how to write it down (speech to text).

But not all words are easy to say and write. And it takes several years to get to the stage where our spelling engine purrs along nicely. So anything we can do to make learning to spell easier – both for children learning their mother-tongue and foreigners learning English as a foreign language – must be a good thing. Some people think spelling reform is the best way forward. But whether we believe in spelling reform or not, the first step is to understand the present English spelling system. And that's what this book aims to do. It explains why English spelling has come to be the way it is. It isn't the whole solution. We still have to work at it, to become a good speller. But it's half the battle.

And we begin, as all good explanations must, at the beginning.

Pooh and his friends on spelling



Pooh said to Piglet: 'It's all right, Piglet. Spelling is easy once you get started.'
Piglet nodded. 'Getting started is the worst bit.'

...

Christopher Robin jumped onto the tree stump and made an announcement. 'Friends, the Spelling Bee has been cancelled, because spelling is difficult enough at the best of times, and impossible in the rain.'

(David Benedictus, *Return to the Hundred Acre Wood*, 2009, Ch. 2, 'In which Owl does a crossword, and a Spelling Bee is held')

You can't help respecting anybody who can spell TUESDAY, even if he doesn't spell it right; but spelling isn't everything. There are days when spelling Tuesday simply doesn't count.

(Rabbit of Owl, in A. A. Milne, *The House at Pooh Corner*, 1928, Ch. 5)