

## Notes on the History of English Spelling

Richard L. Venezky

To introduce non-specialists in English linguistics to the diversity and complexity of influences which have shaped Modern English spelling, three problems in the history of English spelling are presented. The first traces the evolution of the hard and soft pronunciations of word-initial *c* and centers on historical reconstruction of proto-Old English forms, Old English, Old French, and Latin sound changes, and soft pronunciations of word-initial *c* and centers on reconstruction of pre-historic Old English forms, Old English, Old French, and Latin sound changes, and Anglo-Norman scribal practices. The second problem concerns the avoidance of sequences of short down strokes (minims) as a motivating factor in certain role of the English chancery scribes in reforming English spelling along classical lines is examined.

A history of English spelling is first a history of those events which directly influenced the relationship between spelling and sound. Of these there are three: sound change, lexical borrowing, and changes in scribal practices. Yet a history of spelling which stops with these internal influences, while filling, is far from satisfying, since it fails to account for how spelling changes were related to the broader political, social, and technological milieu from which they emerged. For English spelling especially these concerns are important, in that unlike other countries where strong language academies have existed, no single authority has ever been empowered to legislate over our spelling.

For students and specialists in English linguistics several excellent sources on the history of English spelling are available. The most important among these are the letter entries and occasional word entry notes on spellings in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a chapter entitled "Letters and Sounds: A Brief History of Writing" in T. Pyles, *The Origins and Development of the English Language* (1964), and a recent book by D. G. Scragg, *A History of*

351 Venezky : *English Spelling*

*Visible Language*, X 4 (Autumn 1976), pp. 351-365.

© 1976 *Visible Language*, Box 1972 CMA, Cleveland, Ohio USA 44106.

Author's address: Dept. of Educ. Foundations, University of Delaware, Newark, DE 19711.

*English Spelling* (1974). But for the psychologist, graphic artist, or educator there is no single work which gives a full flavoring of the richness and variation in the history of English spelling without also giving the full history itself.

English spelling, more so than that of any other language, reflects both the internal and the external history of the language. Spellings such as *sure*, *then*, and *nation* reveal as much about sixteenth-century printing conventions and the classical enthusiasm of the Renaissance as they do of palatalization, voicing of initial consonants, and French borrowings. To understand even the most regular correspondences between spelling and sound in Modern English often requires attention to such matters as phonological reconstructions from pre-historic Old English; Latin, and French sound changes; the habits of Anglo-Norman scribes; and the language attitudes of the major centers of political power and scholarship in Anglo Saxon England.

The notes which follow attempt to sample this diversity by presenting three isolated problems in this history. First is the evolution of the hard (/k/) and soft (/s/) pronunciations of the letter *c*. This seemingly simple dichotomy of pronunciations derives from sound changes in three different languages, changes in scribal practices, and analogical extensions of new spellings.

The second problem, that of the role of short downstrokes (minims) in certain spelling innovations of the Middle English period, requires attention to the consistency of scribal practices, as well as to sound changes which occurred in the late Old English and early Middle English periods. The last problem differs radically from the first two in its emphasis on the institutions which promulgated certain spelling changes.

Together these three vignettes cover nearly the full range of influences which must be examined in a thorough treatment of English spelling. By themselves they represent neither a comprehensive presentation of the evolution of English spelling practices nor a totally original contribution to this history. To the contrary, they draw heavily upon the sources cited above as well as others which are acknowledged throughout. For those whose interests go beyond the notes presented here, both Pyles and Scragg are recommended; the former for a brief but comprehen-

sive treatment of letter-sound relationships from Old to Modern English, the latter for a more detailed treatment of the spelling conventions of different periods in the history of the English language and the institutions which were responsible for the most important spelling changes.

PROBLEM I: *Pronunciations for the Letter c*

The letter *c* in word initial position has two pronunciations: a fricative, /s/, which occurs when *c* is followed by *e*, *i*, or *y*; and a stop, /k/, otherwise. This pattern holds for *c* in other positions, but is complicated by the palatalization of /s/ to /š/ in certain phonological environments (e.g., *ocean*, *social*, *gracious*).<sup>1</sup> Behind the simplicity and regularity of this pattern, however, is a complicated mixture of sound changes, lexical borrowings, and changes in scribal practice which involve not only spellings for /s/ and /k/, but for /č/ as well. How these processes interacted to produce the existing *c* pattern demonstrates how intentional change (i.e., scribal modifications) can combine with random change (i.e., sound change and lexical borrowing) to produce a highly regular pattern. In other circumstances, such as with some vowel pronunciations, similar circumstances have yielded less orderly results.

By the time of the earliest English writings the letter *c* represented two phonemically distinct sounds, /k/ as in present day *king* and a phonemically distinct palatalized form before most occurrences of front vowels. This latter sound has evolved into modern /č/ as in *church* (OE *cirice*). The evolution of /k/ and /č/ began in prehistoric OE with the development of allophones for /k/: a palatal form before front vowels and a velar form otherwise. After this change, a process now called i-umlauting led to the change of back vowels to front vowels when the former were followed by a high front vowel or glide in the following syllable. These latter sounds, reconstructed as /i/ and /j/ respectively, were either lost or changed into /e/ before the historic period of English, so that by the time of the first English records the palatal and velar allophones of /k/ had become separate phonemes.

As pointed out by Penzl (1947), the shift from allophones to phonemes for the variants of /k/ did not occur with the develop-

ment of the palatal variant, but with the merging of the unlauted back vowels with earlier front vowels, thus allowing the velar /k/ to contrast with palatal /k/ before front vowels. Thus, OE *cennan* (*beget*) had a velar /k/ while *cest* (*chest*) had a palatal /k/ which developed into MnE /č/. According to Vachek (1959), the functional yield for this phonemic opposition, particularly in the OE dialect which Penzl (1947) bases his argument on (Early West Saxon) was quite low. However, with late Old English and early Middle English sound shifts, and with a heavy importation of loan words into Middle and early Modern English, the functional load for this contrast increased markedly.

At the same time that *c* was used in OE for the velar and palatal /k/ phonemes, the sound /s/ was spelled almost exclusively with the letter *s* (e.g., OE *mys*, *lys*, *sinder*; MnE *mice*, *lice*, *cinder*).<sup>2</sup> The letter *k*, although not unknown to OE scribes, was infrequently employed until after the conquest. When it was used, nevertheless, it represented the velar /k/ phoneme almost without exception.<sup>3</sup>

Had the writing of Middle English not been dominated so fully by Anglo-Norman scribes and had French and Latin words not been imported wholesale into Middle English, the subsequent histories of *c*, *k*, and *s* might have been no more than a continuation of the OE practices. But the Norman Conquest brought not only a new view of how native words should be written, but an influx of French and Latin words of such magnitude that many of their spellings became the dominant models for English.

One of the earliest spelling changes made by Anglo-Norman scribes was to substitute *k* for *c* to represent the velar /k/ phoneme before front vowel spellings. By this change such OE forms as *cent*, *cyng*, and *seoce* were rewritten as *kent*, *kyng*, and *seoke* in Middle English. In addition, by at least as early as 1160, *ch* assumed the duties of *c* when it represented the palatal /k/ phoneme, which by the Middle English period is assumed to have completed its shift to /č/ (Mossé, 1952).

With this realignment, *c* in native words had only one sound, /k/ as in *callen* (call) and *cole* (coal). But in Latin and French, a sequence of sound changes paralleling those in English for /k/ produced a second major pronunciation for *c*. Late Latin /k/ before /e/; and /i/; palatalized, giving /č/ in Italian and /ts/ in French.

Thus, *c* in Old French as in Old English represented both a velar stop and a phonemically distinct, palatalized or affricated derivative of this stop.<sup>4</sup> By the end of the thirteenth century French (and Latin) /ts/ was reduced to /s/, thus giving the correspondence *c* → /s/ in a large number of words which were later borrowed into English; e.g., *cease, ceiling, cement, cider, circle, civic, cist*. By analogy, *c* then replaced certain *s* spellings in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in English, e.g., *ice, mice, lice, cinder*. The resulting pattern for *c* pronunciations gives /s/ in MnE for *c* before *e, i* or *y*, and /k/ otherwise.<sup>5</sup> As stated earlier, this pattern is obscured somewhat in medial position for those occurrences of /s/ which palatalize to /š/ (e.g., *ocean, special*). Nevertheless, the basic correspondences for *c* are almost totally predictable.

#### PROBLEM II: *The Minim Problem*

According to some writers (e.g., Mossé, 1952) a series of orthographic changes were instituted in the thirteenth century to make handwritten documents easier to read. In each case the major concern was to avoid a sequence of downstrokes or minims, since in the carolingian script which was used at that time such successions were difficult to read. A sequence of three downstrokes, for example, could be read as *in, ni, m, iii, ui, iu, or w*. Some of the indicated changes such as the use of *y* as a variant of *i* resulted from similar Norman practices; others like the inversion of *hw* were devised especially for English. In the latter change a more phonologically accurate spelling (*hw*) was sacrificed for a more legible one (*wh*). Thus, OE *hwaet* (*what*) was respelled *whaet* in Middle English (ME).

Several purely graphic changes also occurred at this time and in each the avoidance of minim sequences was clearly a motivating factor. One such change was the addition of the dot over the lower case *i*, which according to Pyles (1964) developed from a "faint sloping line" which ME scribes introduced to distinguish *i* from contiguous *m, n, and u*, and to distinguish *ii* from *u*. A second change involved the distribution of the curved and angular forms of *u* (*u* and *v*) which were used in OE and ME indiscriminately for both consonant and vowel values. Middle English scribes tended to use *v* initially and *u* elsewhere, regardless of whether they

represented consonants or vowels. However, when *u* would be adjacent to *m* or *n*, an exception was made for legibility through the substitution of *v* (Pyles, 1964).

In these changes the desire to increase legibility appears to be the major concern. However, the role of legibility in four other spelling changes requires closer examination. These are: (1) *y* used as a variant of *i*; (2) *hw* inverted to *wh*; (3) *o* substituted for *u* in the vicinity of *u* (*v*, *w*), *m*, and *n*; and (4) *k* replacing *c* before *i*, *e*, *n*, *l*.

*y as a variant of i*

In early OE the graph *i* represented both long and short forms of a high front unrounded vowel, while *y* represented phonemically distinct high front rounded vowels (long and short). By late OE, at least in the dominant OE dialect, unrounding merged these four vowels into two high front unrounded vowels: a long one and a phonemically distinct short one. Both *i* and *y* were used in late West Saxon for these vowels and while some scribes preferred one symbol over the other, others used both of them seemingly without discrimination.

In Middle English the Anglo-Norman tradition brought the letter *u* for high front rounded vowels, which occurred in native words in certain dialects (up to about 1200) and in French loan words. The symbol *y* therefore remained available for breaking up sequences of minims, as claimed by Mossé (1952). As plausible as this hypothesis appears, no convincing evidence has ever been adduced in its favor.

To the contrary, an inspection of the better known Middle English texts shows a clear lack of such practice. In the *Owl and the Nightingale* (c.1250) and Layamon's *Brut* (c.1250), for example, there is no use of *y* at all, while in *Handlyng Synne* (c.1400) *y* is preferred to *i* in all positions. In *King Horn* (c.1260?), *Ayenbite of Inwyrt* (1340) and *Sir Gawayn and the Grene Knyght* (c.1380-1420) both *i* and *y* are used without apparent concern for minim sequences.

*wh for hw*

Whether the conversion of OE *hw* to ME *wh* was due more to the minim problem or to analogy with the other h-diagraphs (viz., *ch*, *sh*, *th*, *ph*, and *gh*) cannot be answered with the available evidence. In early ME and particularly in Kentish, *hw* occurs alongside *hu*. The normal progression to *wh* passes through a *w*-spelling, indicating that the cluster /hw/ had been leveled, perhaps to /m/ or to /w/. *Wh* spellings occur as early as the eleventh and twelfth centuries, but do not become established until at least the middle of the thirteenth century (see *OED*, s.v. *wh*). If OE /hw/ remained unaltered in ME, the reversal of *hw* to *wh* would be unprecedented in that it would have reversed the order of pronunciation. The most plausible hypothesis is, therefore, that /hw/ was leveled to a single sound just as initial /hr/, /hl/, and /hn/ were leveled to /r/, /l/, and /n/ respectively in early Middle English. The occasional extension of *wh* in ME to /w/ words which were not /hw/ forms in OE (e.g., *wife*, *wild*, *willow*, *win*) seems to support a claim for /w/. But this leaves unexplained the retention of *h* in the *wh* spellings, as opposed to a simple deletion such as occurred with the *hn*, *hr*, and *hl* spellings.

If /hw/ had merged with /w/, we might expect many Modern *wh* spellings in words which were not historically /hw/ forms. However, except for *whelk* (OE *weoloc*) no such forms exist now, even though as noted above, occasional *wh* spellings did occur in Middle English in words which did not originally begin with /hw/. Furthermore, as noted by Scragg (1974), no old English *wh*-word which has survived into Modern English is spelled other than with *wh*. These facts strongly support a shift from the Old English cluster /hw/ to a phoneme which contrasted with Middle English /w/, that is, /m/.

It doesn't seem unreasonable to speculate, given the circumstances just stated, that Middle English scribes found *hw* no longer acceptable for the single sound /m/, but resisted employing *w* for both this sound and /w/. *Wh* would have been a logical substitute, based on analogy with the other consonant plus *h* spellings which they had introduced or reintroduced, especially since these latter spellings also represented single sounds, or in the case of /č/, a complex sound that evolved from a single sound. The desire to

avoid minim sequences may have been an additional factor in the adoption of *wh*, but there is little support for the minim problem as the sole justification for an *hw* to *wh* shift.

*o for u*

The strongest evidence for an overt attempt to avoid long sequences of minims appears to be found in the substitution of *o* for *u* in the vicinity of *m*, *n*, *u*, *v*, or *w*. By the middle of the thirteenth century a number of OE words which had either long or short /u/ (spelled *u*) had been respelled with an *o*; e.g., *above*, *come*, *honey*, *love*, *son*, *tongue*, *wolf*, *wonder*.

The convention of using *o* for earlier *u* begins in late Latin and is extended first to French and then to English. Anglo-Norman scribes, in contrast to their Old English counterparts, did not adopt distinct scripts for the languages they wrote (Scragg, 1974). Nevertheless, as Craigie (1942) points out, the change of *u* to *o* was probably not based entirely upon graphic considerations, in that a number of *um* and *un* words escaped permanent alteration; e.g., *crumb*, *dumb*, *dun*, *gun*, *hum*, *run*. Many such words did, however, have alternate *o* forms which did not survive.

Vachek also points out a second cause for variation between *u* and *o*, the graphical differentiation of homophones. For example, the native English and the Anglo-Normans. "Traditional scribal practice of English rendered such /u/-phoneme by the letter *u*, while the Anglo-Norman usage, guided by purely technical considerations of graphical clearness, regularly availed itself of the grapheme *o* in such situations."

Vachek goes on to point out that a second cause for variation between *u* and *o*, the graphical differentiation of homophones. Modern English *sun* and *son* both derive from identical OE noun stems, which were spelled *sun* in OE. However, since the fourteenth century, the current spelling distinction has been maintained.

Scragg (1974, p. 44) doubts that the *u-o* change was motivated by legibility, but bases his argument upon the assumption that "it is unlikely that English readers of the Middle Ages read letter by letter any more than modern readers do." This argument can be objected to on two grounds. First, the average reader in the Middle Ages probably read considerably less than the average

modern reader and may therefore have relied on different reading strategies, of which letter-by-letter reading is a likely candidate. Second, the word recognition strategies of experienced readers, while not letter-by-letter in the sense implied by Scragg, still require visual resolution of individual letters (Massaro, 1975). Any graphical device which broke up sequences of minims would therefore have aided in segmenting letters within a word, regardless of whether the words were recognized visually or through letter-by-letter decoding.

All-in-all, the minim problem as a basis for the *o-u* change is quite plausible, in spite of Scragg's reservation about Medieval word recognition habits. Yet, when viewed in light of the spelling changes themselves, as reflected in the orthography of representative Middle English manuscripts, the case for overt scribal interference is not totally convincing. The substitution of *o* for *u* in the vicinity of *v*, *u*, and *w* appears to be more consistent than in the vicinity of *m* and *n*. But in all of these cases, other considerations can not be entirely eliminated.

#### *k for c*

Mossé (1952, p. 9) claims that “[the letter *k*] was fairly regularly used before letters like *i*, *e*, *n*, *l* where *c* would have produced in the writing a succession of downstrokes or ‘minims’ difficult to distinguish.” Of these letters *i* and *e* represent a special case, in that a preceding *c* might be pronounced either hard or soft (see above). Thus, the use of *k* for an earlier *c* in these environments has a strong phonological basis (e.g., *kind*, *keep*, and *kitchen*; ME *kynde*, *kepe*, *kuchene*; OE *cynde*, *cepan*, *cycene*).

For *c* before *l*, no *kl*-spellings have survived into MnE, and only a few can be found in earlier periods judging from *OED* data. For the OE spelling *cn-*, *kn-* is the regular ME form by the middle of the thirteenth century, but the number of words in this category is exceedingly small. This leaves as evidence the *c* environments in which *k* was not substituted, and in particular those which had a curved letter after *c*. But in this class, which includes such basic terms as *cow* and *care*, *k* spellings appeared occasionally from the middle of the thirteenth until the first quarter of the fourteenth century. In short, although words like *knight* and *knave* were

respelled with a *k* even though either *c* or *k* would suffice, they are hardly sufficient evidence for invoking the minim problem as a basis for the change.

In summary, it is difficult to establish the minim problem as the basis for any of the four changes introduced above. The strongest cases can be made for *o* in the vicinity of *u*, *v*, and *w*, and for *c* before initial *n*, but even these are not without question. The most plausible hypothesis is the one advanced by Vachek (1959); that is, that different scribal practices co-existed and that only the Anglo-Norman scribes made a strong effort to avoid minim sequences.

PROBLEM III: *The Influence of the Chancery Scribes*

The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries mark the peak of the Renaissance and the beginning of the modern period. It was the time of Machiavelli and Tasso, of Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael, of Luther and Calvin, of Rabelais and Montaigne, and of Erasmus. The study of man flourished, the classics were revived and education became a property of the middle class. Few, if any areas of human interest escaped renovation—art, religion, literature, education, all were affected. Mannerism and anti-Mannerism, the Reformation and the Counter-reformation, Humanism, and the reform of Greek and Latin pronunciation, all reflected the view that the noblest study of mankind was man. The Renaissance brought, along with an awakening nationalistic spirit, a new concern for education. For centuries education had been an ecclesiastical concern, open primarily to those entering religious orders. But now, for the first time in England, control of learning was placed in secular hands, and education soon became an essential concern of the intellectually liberated middle class. “So long as the monasteries furnished a safe and easy refuge from the struggle of existence, and monasticism forced celibacy on churchmen, who largely depended on the patronage of the monasteries for their chances of promotion, education made little impression on society at large. . . . The expansion of Elizabethan England . . . was due to the immense extension of lay initiative and effort in every department of national life; and not least in the sphere of education and the schools” (Leach, 1915, pp. 331f).

With the Renaissance came also a renewed interest in the English language. The first English grammars, the first English readers, and the first spelling reform tracts for English all appeared in the course of the sixteenth century.<sup>6</sup> Interest in the orthography reached a new height, and while John Hart was arguing for reform in the direction of phonetic spelling, the remainder of the populace quietly accepted reforms based upon etymology and morphology.

The flavor of the Renaissance is evident in the restoration of Latin spellings in hundreds of English words, but other influences were also present. Printing was an established force by the middle of the sixteenth century and the more consistent orthographic conventions of the early printers gained acceptance. The runic thorn (þ), for example, was not present in the Roman type stocks of the first printers of English, and therefore was replaced by *th*.<sup>7</sup> Caxton's *gh-* in *ghost* and *ghastly* (but not in *guest* and *geese*) and an increased use of *z* were adopted also and became permanent fixtures in the orthography. In addition, the mass production of books brought about a subtle change in the function of orthography. With limited production of handwritten documents, writing was intended in most instances for reading aloud. But with the rise of printing, the written appearance of words gained in importance. The graphic differentiation of homonyms and the graphic identity of allomorphs became essential. Such factors were also influential in French orthography, according to Pope (1934, p. 282): "The works written in the vernacular in the older period has been destined to be sung or read aloud, but the great mass of legal documents were composed to be read, and thus spelling came to be regarded more and more as a matter for the eye, a tendency that was increased when printing multiplied the number of readers. It became therefore more and more usual to use spelling both to distinguish homonyms and to link together related words wherever possible."

Classical influences worked on both ends of the spelling-sound relationship. On the one hand, reforms in Latin pronunciation occasionally led to reforms in the pronunciation of English words borrowed from Latin, without a corresponding change in the orthography. On the other hand, orthographic changes were made

to display classical origins, usually without changes in the pronunciation. The pronunciation reform came primarily in the relationships based on *s* and *x*. According to Dobson (1958, II, p. 929) "The English pronunciation of Latin . . . must . . . have used [z] for Latin intervocalic *s*; . . . but the 'reformed' pronunciation of the sixteenth century substituted [s] for [z] in the pronunciation of Latin *s*. . . ." Thus, for example, *asylum* and *desolate* have *s* corresponding to /s/ where we would expect /z/.

Both of these pronunciation reforms are unusual in that they represent sound change by fiat. Latin, however, was the basis of all school curricula in England. Students were weaned on Lily's *Carmen Monitorium*, cut their baby teeth on Aesop and Terence, and reached maturity on Lily's *Grammar*. Latin was also used in religious and legal proceedings. It seems natural, therefore, that changes in the pronunciation of Latin would be extended immediately to cognate forms in English. Why more Latin influence is not present or why under similar conditions other languages were not altered in a similar way cannot be answered. We know only that the sound changes appeared to be derived from similar changes in Latin pronunciations and that Latin was a thriving concern at the time.

The spelling reform was restricted mostly to changes that helped reflect the classical origins of certain words. The most important of these involved the addition of letters, e.g., *b* in *debt*, *doubt*, *subtle*, and *subject* (cf. ME *dette*, *dout*, *sutle*, *suget*); *h* in *heritage*, *hostage*, *hour*, *myrrh*, and *rhyme* (cf. ME *eritage*, *ostage*, *ore*; OE *myrra*, *rim*); and such substitutions as *c* for *s*, and *ch* for *c* (see above); *ph* for *f* in *pheasant*, *philosophy*, and *physics*; *t* for *c* or *s* before *ion* (cf. ME *nacion*); *dg* for *cch*, *ck* for *cc* (*kk*), and *dg* for *gg*.<sup>8</sup> In some cases, silent letters became pronounced, like the *b* in *subject* (cf. ME *suget*), the *c* in *perfect* (cf. ME *perfit*), and initial *h* in *hermit* and *hostage* (neither had initial /h/ in Latin or French). In other cases, however, the spelling change had no influence on pronunciation.

Some of these changes occurred in the last quarter of the fifteenth century, but the majority became established in the first twenty to thirty years of the sixteenth century. How could so many spellings be overhauled so rapidly, especially without any recognized authority for such alterations? Who decided what the spellings were to be and how were the decisions disseminated?

The answers to these questions are found in the office of the English chancery at Westminster which was, next to Parliament, the highest court of judicature in England. According to Marckwardt (1975, p. xiv) "Standard English had its origin in the kind of language employed in the courts of law and the government offices of Westminster." From the tenth century on, the chancery (or secretariat) was responsible for the daily affairs of government, including the recording of acts and ordinances and the keeping of financial records.

The king's proclamations and other official documents were written by the royal scribes and distributed to the major towns where scribes and their apprentices made further copies. Until about 1430 these documents were written in Latin or French, but with the restoration of English as an official language early in the fifteenth century, the movement toward a standard English orthography began. "Not until a body of professional scribes with a close common bond appeared in London was a uniform orthography established there, and such a body was not supplied until the scribes of the royal chancery adopted English as their usual written medium" (Scragg, 1974, p. 34).

With the renewed emphasis on English and a nation-wide dissemination system, the royal scribes in the chancery were in a position to mold the course not only of spelling, but of vocabulary, syntax, and usage as well. The documents they produced, especially towards the end of the fifteenth century, demonstrate that they made full use of their power. "Starting with the documents of Henry VIII [1509-1547], the royal government exhibits an astonishing facility in its command of language. . . . The best of them have a felicitous Shakespearean ring, and in fact this excellence of language appears in sixteenth-century political documents before it is found in belletristic literature" (Cantor, 1972, pp. 296f).

Pending a thorough analysis of the spellings in royal documents of this period—which remains to be done—it seems justified to claim that the chancery scribes were the agents of orthographic change from the end of the fifteenth century until at least a century later. Printing probably played a role in consolidating what changes were made, but not until about the middle of the sixteenth century. From the inauguration of printing in England in

1476 until at least the 1530's, printers showed little interest in consistent orthography. Caxton, for example, spells the town where he spent the major part of his life before returning to England in at least six different ways: *brugges*, *bruges*, *brudgys*, *Brugis*, *bruggis*, *brudgis*. The other early English printers, in particular Wynkyn de Worde and Richard Pynson, were not English by birth and all three were, in the words of Scragg (1974, p. 67) "outside the mainstream scribal tradition."

Thus when classical learning was the vogue, the royal scribes were able to promulgate an extensive overhauling of English spellings based on Latin and Greek models. Who the particular scribes were who led this movement and how well trained they were in the classical languages remains to be discovered. Perhaps the answers to these questions still lie within the royal archives.

1. In general, /s/ palatalizes to /ʃ/ before a high front vowel or glide, but only when the primary word stress falls on the immediately preceding vowel. The /s/ which palatalizes is generally spelled *c* (*ocean*, *social*) or *t* (*nation*, *rational*). This latter spelling is a Renaissance replacement for an earlier *c* or *s*.
2. However, /s/ in the cluster /ks/ was usually spelled with the letter *x* while /ts/ in Biblical names and occasional English words was spelled with the letter *z* (Campbell, 1959).
3. The Runic alphabet differentiated the velar and palatal variants of /k/; but OE scribes failed to adopt similar mechanisms.
4. The use of *c* for the cluster /ts/ occurs in a few Middle English words but was not widely used (Mossé, 1952).
5. *ch* is assumed to be a spelling unit separate from *c*.
6. The *Ormulum*, a Northeast Midlands religious text written about 1200, contains the earliest example of a reformed spelling system for English. No information has survived, however, about the author (other than his name) or about the motivation for the spelling system.
7. *th* was used in the earliest English texts before thorn and eth were introduced. Thereafter it appeared occasionally in words of Greek derivation.
8. In some instances the change began at an earlier date but was not widely accepted until the Renaissance.

## REFERENCES

- Campbell, A. *Old English grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959.
- Cantor, N. F. *The English*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967.
- Craigie, W. A. Some anomalies of spelling. *Society for Pure English*, tract No. 59. London, 1942.
- Dobson, E. J. *English pronunciation 1500-1700*. 2 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957.
- Leach, A. F. *The schools of Medieval England*. New York: Macmillan, 1915.
- Marckwardt, A. H. Usage. In S. Landau (Ed.), *The Doubleday dictionary*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1975.
- Massaro, D. W. Primary and secondary recognition in reading. In D. W. Massaro (Ed.), *Understanding language: an information processing analysis of speech perception, reading, and psycholinguistics*. New York: Academic Press, 1975.
- Mossé, F. [*A handbook of Middle English*.] (James A. Walker, trans.). Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1952.
- Murray, J. A. H. (Ed.), *The Oxford English dictionary*. 12 vols. Corrected re-issue. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933.
- Penzl, H. The phonemic split of Germanic 'K' in Old English. *Language*, 1947, 23, 33-42.
- Pope, M. K. *From Latin to Modern French with especial consideration of Anglo-Norman*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974.
- Pyles, T. *The origins and development of the English language*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964.
- Scragg, D. G. *A history of English spelling*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974.
- Vachek, J. Two chapters on written English. *Brno studies in English*, 1959, 1, 7-34.

Thomas and Andrews's FIRST EDITION.



Noah Webster, jun. Esq.

THE  
AMERICAN  
Spelling Book :

CONTAINING  
STANDARD of PRONUNCIATION,

BEING THE  
FIRST WORD-BOOK

OF A  
GRAMMATICAL INSTITUTE

OF THE  
ENGLISH LANGUAGE.

---

BY NOAH WEBSTER, JUN. ESQUIRE.  
AUTHOR of "DISSERTATIONS on the ENGLISH LANGUAGE."

---

*Thomas and Andrews's* FIRST EDITION.  
With additional LESSONS, corrected by the AUTHOR.

---

PRINTED AT BOSTON,  
BY ISAIAH THOMAS AND EBENEZER T. ANDREWS.  
Sold, Wholesale and Retail, at their Bookstore, No. 45, NEWBURY  
STREET, and by said THOMAS at his Bookstore in *Worcester*.

MDCCLXXXIX.

Noah Webster's blue-back speller was the most popular spelling book in American educational history, and even rivals the Dick and Jane readers in influence on the teaching of reading. Noah Webster graduated from Yale in 1778 and began teaching school shortly thereafter in Orange County, New York. Due to the War, textbooks from England were scarce, so Webster compiled his own spelling book, which was printed in Hartford in 1783 under the cumbersome title *The First Grammatical Institute of the English Language*. A grammar and reader were issued soon after. By the time of Webster's death in 1842, the title had been changed, first to *The American Spelling-book* and then to *The Elementary Spelling-book*—and over 24 million copies of the text had been sold.

Due either to the popularity of Webster's text, or the spirit of the times, or some combination thereof, spelling had assumed by the beginning of the 19th century a major role in the elementary school curriculum. Daily and weekly spelling matches were common, as were awards for the top spellers. By the time of the Civil War, however, the Webster speller had fallen from favor, and in time spelling itself began a slow decline in curricular popularity from which it has never recovered.

The pages reprinted here (through the courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society) are from the introduction to a 1789 edition of the speller and reflect the state of the art in phonology at the end of the 18th century. Webster held that the letter *h* had no sound, but acknowledged that others classed it among the guttural letters. *W*, as in *will*, he classed as a vowel, forming a diphthong with the succeeding vowel sound. But Webster was not "strenuous in this opinion," as he states in a footnote on page 12, and conceded that *w* might in fact be a consonant. (Note also the variations in spelling for *diphthong*. These may be due to Webster, but are more likely attributable to Isaiah Thomas and Ebenezer T. Andrews, the printers of this edition.)

All-in-all, Webster's orthography was a reasonable pedagogical description, and his speller succeeded both in elevating spelling in the school curriculum and in providing his sole support through its royalties for the 20 years during which he wrote *The American Dictionary of the English Language*.

Richard L. Venezky



THE  
AMERICAN SPELLING BOOK.

ANALYSIS of SOUNDS in the ENGLISH LANGUAGE.

IN the English alphabet there are twenty five single characters that stand as representatives of certain sounds.

A, b, c, d, e, f, g, i, j, k, l, m, n, o, p, q, r, s, t, u, v, w, x, y, z. *H* is not a mark of sound\*, but it qualifies or gives form to a succeeding sound.

In order to understand these letters, or rather the sounds they represent, it is necessary to define the meaning of the words vowel, diphthong and consonant.

A *vowel* is a simple articulatē sound. A simple sound is formed by opening the mouth in a certain manner, without any contact of the parts of it. Whenever a sound can be begun and completed with the same position of the organs, it is a simple sound.

A *diphthong* is a union of two simple sounds; pronounced at one breath. To form a diphthong there are necessarily required two different positions of the organs of speech.

A *consonant*, or, as it was called by the ancients, a *close letter*, forms no distinct articulate sound of itself. In pronouncing most of the English consonants, there is required a contact of the parts of the mouth, and the union of a vowel; though some of the consonants form imperfect syllables of themselves.†

According to these definitions, let us examine the letters of the English alphabet.

The letters *a, e, o*, are vowels. With the same position of the organs, with which we begin the sounds of

\*It is, however, questioned by some critics, whether *b* may not be ranked among the guttural letters.

† This is the case with the semivowels in the words *feeble, baptisim*, and with almost all terminations in *ly*.

these letters, the sounds may be prolonged at pleasure; they are therefore simple sounds or vowels.

The letters *i* and *y* are either vowels, diphthongs or consonants. They are both characters for the same sounds, in different words and different situations. In the words *die*, *defy*, they are the same diphthong; we begin the sound with nearly the same position of the organs, as we do broad *a*, though not quite the same; but not being able to continue that sound, we run into *e*, and there close the sound. Two different positions of the organs are required; consequently two different sounds are formed, which being closely united in pronunciation, are denominated a *diphthong*.\*

In the words *fight*; *pit*; *glory*; *Egypt*, *i* and *y* are vowels. The sound of *i* in *fight*, would run into *e*, and so form a diphthong, if it were not prevented by the following consonant. But the short sound of *i* and *y*, as in *pit*, *glory*, is always a simple sound.

In the words *valiant*, *youth*, *i* and *y* have a liquid sound, which is formed by a contact of the tongue and upper part of the mouth, and certainly deserves a place, among the consonants.

*U* is a vowel or a diphthong. Its short sound, as in the word *tun*, is a vowel; its long sound in *truth* is a vowel; its long sound when it closes a syllable, as in *due*, is a diphthong, composed of its simple sound in *truth*, and the sound of *oo*. In a few words it answers the purpose of the consonant *y* before *u*, as in *union*, *unanimity*, which are pronounced *yunion*, *yunanimity*.

*W* is a vowel; its sound being nearly the same as *oo* short, in *root*. Before another vowel it is used to form a diphthong; as in *will*, *dwell*, which are pronounced *ooill*, *dozell*. Some authors contend that it is a consonant; but according to the foregoing definitions, it is rather a vowel.†

As these characters have different powers, so there are other vowels expressed by the same characters. The sound of *a* in *hall*, which is called broad *a*, is a distinct vowel;

\* This has been sometimes called a *double vowel*, which is in strict propriety absurd; for if a vowel is a *simple sound*, then a *double vowel* must be a *double simple sound*. Nor can we pronounce a compound sound; for in all diphthongal sounds, we pronounce one simple sound first, then the other, and each distinctly. The definition of a diphthong given above appears to me accurate.

† I am not strenuous in this opinion; it approaches so near a consonant that it can hardly be distinguished from one.

vowel; in *father*, *huzza*, it is another; *o* in *move*, is another; and the short *u* is also a distinct vowel. Several of the vowels have a short sound or quantity, and, what is very singular, the short and long sounds are in most instances represented by different characters. Thus,

Long	}	a in late, makes short e in let.		
		e in feet, makes short i in fit.		
		o in pool, makes short u in pull.		
		a in hall, makes short	}	o in holly, or
		a in father, makes short a in fathom.		a in wallow.

The short sounds of the four first, are almost always represented by other characters, as may be observed in the examples.

That *e* in *let* is the same vowel as *a* in *late*, is demonstrable by this consideration, that no more than one articulate sound can be formed by the same position of the organs of speech. The only difference in the sound that can be made by the same configuration of the parts of the mouth, is to prolong or shorten the same sound. According to this principle we observe, that *late* and *let*, being pronounced with the same aperture of the mouth, and with the same disposition of the organs, as nearly as the consonant *t* will permit, must contain the same vowel. The same rule will apply to the other examples.

All the long and short simple sounds in English are found in the following words:

Long.							
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
a	a	a	e	i	o	o	u
late,	ask,	hall,	here,	fight,	note,	move,	truth.
Short.							
2	1	4	9	7	3		
a	e	i	u	u	o	or	a
bat,	let,	fit,	but,	bush,	not,	or	what.

By these it appears that all the vowels, except the 5th, 6th, 8th, and 9th, have duplicates—that those vowels that are placed under the same figure, are only different qualities of the same sound—and that deducting the five duplicates, there remain nine distinct simple sounds or vowels\*.

\* *I* and *u* are vowels only when followed by consonants. The proper vowels are seven.

According to the foregoing theory of sounds, *oi*, *oy*, *ou*, and *ow*, are diphthongs. The two former are different combinations for the same sound, which is always composed of broad *a* and long *e*. The two latter are also representatives of the same sound, which is composed of a sound peculiar to itself, and that of *oo*. Example of the former we have in the words, *voice*, *joy*; of the latter in *loud*.

The other diphthongs in the language are attended with no difficulty, as a just pronunciation of them naturally results from the customary sounds of the letters that compose them.

The consonants are divided into mutes and semivowels.

The mutes are *b*, *d*, *g*, *k*, *p*, *t*. In pronouncing these syllables, *eb*, *ed*, *eg*, *ek*, *ep*, *et*, especially the three last, which are perfectly mute, the voice is wholly intercepted by the consonant. But in pronouncing the semivowels, *f*, *l*, *m*, *n*, *r*, *s*, *v*, *z*, in the syllables *ef*, *el*, *em*, *en*, *er*, *es*, *ev*, *ez*, we may observe the voice is not wholly intercepted at once, but the sound of the consonant is prolonged. Besides these there are five consonants, which for want of single characters we express by double letters: *sh* in *shall*; *th* in *think*; *th* in *thou*; *s* in *delusion*, and *ng* in *sing*. These are all simple consonants and semivowels. It would be well if they were called by the names, *esh*, *eth*, *ezh*, *ing*.

*H* is not a mark of sound, but only of a strong aspiration or emission of breath.

*C* is totally superfluous; being always sounded like *k* or *s*.

*Q* is always followed by *u*, and is the same as *k*.

*Z* is a mark of the sounds of *dzh*.

*X* is always sounded like *ks*, *gz*, or *z*.

The consonants therefore will stand thus;

Mutes; *eb*, *ed*, *eg*, *ek*, *ep*, *et*.

Semivowels; *ef*, *el*, *em*, *en*, *er*, *es*, *ev*, *ez*, *eth*, *esh*, *ezh*, *ing*.

Note; *l*, *m*, *n*, *r*, are distinguished by the name of liquids.

The sounds of our vowels are so exceedingly capricious and irregular, particularly in monosyllables, that they are hardly reducible to rules; for which reason, the learner is referred to the tables for his knowledge of them. A few general rules respecting the consonants, will be advantageous.

OF PRONUNCIATION. 15

B has one invariable sound, as in *bird*; before *r* and after *m* it is silent, as in *doubt*, *dumb*; as also in *subtle*.

C before *a*, *o*, *u*, sounds like *k*; before *e*, *i*, *y*, like *s*.

Thus,           ca ce ci co cu cy.  
                    ka se si ko ku sy.

It is useless when followed by *h* in the same syllable, as in *stick*. It is always hard like *k* in the end of words, as in *public*, pronounced *publick*. It sounds like *sh* in the terminations *ceous*, *cious*, *cial*; as in *cetacious*, *gracious*, *social*; pronounced *cetashus*, *grashus*, *sofnal*. It is sometimes silent, as in *incise*.

D has always the same sound, as in *rod*. It is sometimes silent, as in *handkerchief*.

F has always its own sound, as in *offer*; except in the word *of*, where it sounds like *v*, or.

G has two sounds; one, as in *go*; the other like *j*, as in *gentle*. It has its first or hard sound before *a*, *o*, *u*; in general its second or soft sound before *e* and *y*; and is either hard or soft before *i*. See table 35.

It is very frequently silent. *g*st, before *m*, as in *phlegm*; *gdly*, before *n*, as in *sign*; *gdly*, before *h*, as in *fight*; except when *gh* sound like *f*, as in *laugh*.

H is a mark of strong breathing, but is silent in *hair*, *hour*, *honest*, *honour*, and their derivatives.

J is the mark of a compound sound, which is always the same, viz. that of *dzh* or soft *g*, as in *joy*. It is never silent.

K has but one sound, as in *king*. When it precedes *n*, it is always silent, as in *know*; and when united with *c*, at the end of words, either *c* or *k* is superfluous, as in *stick*.

L has one sound only, as in *lame*; and it is sometimes silent, as in *salmon*, *walk*.

M has but one sound, as in *man*, and is never silent.

N is also uniform in its sound; but is always silent after *m*, in the same syllable, as in *hymn*.

P has but one uniform sound, as in *pit*; and is silent between *m* and *t*, as in *contempt*, *sumptuary*.

Q has the power of *k*, and is always followed by *u*. In some words of French original it terminates the syllable, as in *pique*, *oblique*, *burlesque*, where *ue* are not sounded. It is never silent.

R has always the same sound, as in *barrel*; and is never silent.

S has four sounds; that of soft *c*, as in *so*; of *z*, as in *rise*; of *sh*, as in *mission*; of *zh*, as in *offer*, *braiser*. But these sounds can hardly be reduced to general rules. It is silent in *isle*, *island*. Its various sounds may be found in the 26th and 28th tables.

T has its own proper sound, as in *turn*, at the beginning of words and end of syllables. It has the sound of *sh* in all terminations in *tion* and *tial*; as *nation*, *nuptial*; except when preceded by a *t* or *x*, when it sounds like *ch*, as in *question*, *mixon*.

V has always the same sound, as in *voice*, and is never silent.

X has two compound sounds, viz. those of *ks* and *gz*. When followed by an accented syllable beginning with a vowel, it has the sound of *gz*, as in *exist*, *example*. See table 39. In almost every other situation, it has the sound of *ks*, as in *vex*, *exercise*, *exculpate*.

In the beginning of some Greek names, it sounds like *z*, as, *Xerxes*, *Xenocrates*, *Xenophon*.

Z has two sounds; its proper sound, as in *zeal*; and that of *zh*, as in *azure*. Its place is commonly usurped by *s*, as in *wisdom*, *reason*.

*Simple Consonants marked with double letters.*

Th has two sounds, aspirated and vocal. Aspirated in *think*, *bath*. Vocal in *thou*, *that*. For the different sounds of *th*, see the 12th and 32d tables, where the words are collected and the sounds distinguished.

Sh has but one sound, as in *shall*, and is never silent. But its sound is expressed by several other characters; by *c*, in *social*; by *t*, in *motion*; by *s*, in *passion*. The French *ch* has precisely the same sound as *sh* in English, as in *machine*, *chevalier*.

The sound of *s* in *diffusion*, *occasion*, &c. which is the French *j*, is best represented by *zh*. For the words in which this sound occurs, see table 28.

Ng form a simple sound, which at the end of words is always uniform, as in *sing*, *strong*. When the word ends in *e*, the *g* is soft like *j*, as in *range*. When a syllable is added, the sound of *ng* flows into the next syllable; as in *hang*, *hanger*. Except *long*, *strong*, *young*, the derivatives of which are pronounced, *strong-ger*, *young-ger*. Besides these we have several combinations of consonants, but one

OF PRONUNCIATION. 17

of which is pronounced; these Mr. Sheridan calls *digraphs*, that is, *double written*.

Sc before *a, o, u,* and *r,* are pronounced like *sk*; as, *scate, scot, sculptor, scribble*; before *e, i, y,* like simple *s*, or soft *c*; as, *scene, science, scythe*.\*

Sc before the several vowels are thus pronounced:

sc*a* sc*e* sc*i* sc*o* sc*u* sc*y*

sk*a* sk*e* sk*i* sk*o* sk*u* sk*y*

*C* in words originally English sound like *tsh*, as in *charm*.

In words derived from the Greek and Hebrew, and in technical terms, like *k*; as, *chorus, Melchisedech*.

In words derived of the French, generally *sh*, as in *chivalry*, pronounced *shivalry*. See the 33d and 34th tables.

*G* sound like *f*, as in *laugh*; or are silent, as in *light*. This rule admits of no exception.

*Ph* have invariably the sound of *f*, unless in *Stephen*, where the sound is that of *v*.

N. B. The sounds of the vowels digraphs, such as *ea, ai, &c.* can hardly be reduced to general rules; and it is rather unnecessary in this work; as most words where they occur are collected into the proper tables, where their sounds are distinguished.

R U L E S,

For placing the accent in words of more syllables than one, and for pronouncing certain terminations.

Accent is a stress of voice on some word or letter of a word, that distinguishes it from others. If it falls on a vowel, it renders it long, as in *glory*; if it falls on a consonant, the preceding vowel is short, as in *habit*.

Simple disyllables are generally accented on the first syllable: But there are many exceptions that are not reducible to rules.

In the following catalogue, the nouns are accented on the first, and the verbs on the last syllables.

<i>Nouns.</i>	<i>Verbs.</i>
A or an ab'stract	To abstract
ac'cent	accent
af'fix	affix
cem'ent	cement

\* More accurately spelled *sibs*.

THE ALPHABET.

Roman Letters.	Italic.	Names of the Letters.
a	A	a
b	B	be
c	C	ce
d	D	de
e	E	e
f	F	ef
g	G	ge
h	H	aytch or he
i	I	i
j	J	ja
k	K	ka
l	L	el
m	M	em
n	N	en
o	O	o
p	P	pe
q	Q	cu
r	R	er
s	S	es
t	T	te
u	U	u
v	V	ve
w	W	double u
x	X	cks
y	Y	wi or ye
z	Z	ze
&*	Ɔ	and

Double LETTERS.

α, ff, m, n, si, sk, sh, si, sb, ſi, ſi, ſi, ſt.

\* This is not a letter but a character standing for and. Children should therefore be taught to call it and; not and per se.