

VARIATION *in* SPELLING
and the
SPECIAL CASE
of
COLLOQUIAL CONTRACTIONS

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Colloquial contractions — spelling variants such as *kinda*, *hafta*, and *ya* — are widely used to represent informal speech. They are examined here against a background of other sorts of variation in our writing system. Variation in spelling that is independent of variation in speech includes abbreviations, regional spellings, the adaptation of loanwords, brand names, and eye dialect. Variation tied to speech includes forms marked for region, social identity, and colloquial style. Colloquial contractions are described here with respect to their morphological identity, their characteristic spelling patterns, and their significance in print.

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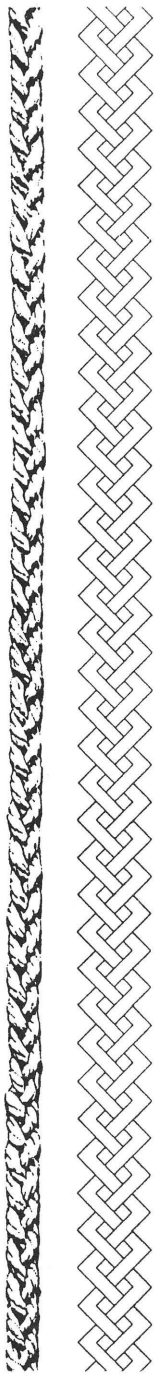
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The present-day system for spelling English is remarkable for its stability and consistency. All over the English-speaking world, in spite of differences in pronunciation, educational systems, and traditions in publication, English is spelled the same way — except for a handful of items and rules. This stability has been secured and maintained through the authority accorded dictionaries, schools, and publishers, whose practice and standards have converged. With this standardization has come the consistency with which individual forms are spelled.

Given that the history of English has created a range of possibilities for representing the same sound sequences in our alphabetic system, consistency is not inevitable. The system allows for choices, e.g., in the representation of [o] as *o* or *oe* or *oa* or *ow*. In colonial America spelling rules were “beautifully vague,” to use Mencken’s phrase (1937, 379), and writers could choose one or another form with inventiveness and impunity. It was in the nineteenth century that consistency and correctness, especially in writing (Traugott 1981), become predominant in attitudes about American English; they remain so today. In these times of unrelenting print and widespread literacy, deviation from the standard is hardly tolerated. Having been set, the spelling of a particular word stands. It will not do to spell *broke* as *broak* or *stow* as *stoe*. Nor will it do to interchange *Rome* and *room*, *flow* and *floe*, *show* and *shoe*. The principle that a given word has a single representation in letters is reinforced by the general tendency for a morpheme to have a single representation within words, in spite of alternating forms in speech, e.g., *feroc-* in *ferocity*/*ferocious*, *geograph-* in *geography*/*geographical*, and *-ed* in *walked*/*jogged*/*strutted* (Francis 1958; Venezky 1970; Chomsky 1970).

Consistent forms in writing may be difficult to learn. Writers must master a great deal of detail in learning to spell, and sorting out by morpheme identity as well as by graphical patterning and sound-letter correspondence may be especially burdensome. But consistent forms are important for readers. Given that a word has a single representation, readers can apprehend meaning directly under many circumstances and so bypass an internal phonological representation (Henderson 1982). We can sense how much we ordinarily use the orthographic identity of a word when we try to work through a text that abandons one conventional set of spellings for another. For instance, Frank Smith’s sentence: “The none tolled hymn she had scene a pare of bear feat inn hour rheum” (1973, 72) forces us to slow down and deliberately pronounce the words, although not necessarily aloud, in order to identify them and determine their place in the meaning of the sentence. It may be that the consistency of English spelling contributes enormously to the efficiency with which skilled readers can survey unending pages of print for work and pleasure.



At the same time, variation in the spelling of words in written English is a common enough matter. Although only a relatively small proportion of English words have conventionalized variants, many of these occur frequently in print. Graphic variants may take forms independent of speech, such as *September/Sept.*, or may reflect variation in speech, such as *sort of/sorta*. From the perspective of the reader, being able to identify forms as variants of one another is an important part of being literate. Of course, learning and dealing with this variation is a relatively minor task, given the complexity of the entire writing system and our preparedness for variation from our experience with speech.

This paper will present an overview of the variation found in English spelling, giving special attention to variants that have not received recognition in dictionaries and the American school curriculum. First, variation in spelling that is independent of variation in speech, including abbreviations, regional variants, the adaptation of loanword, brand names, and eye dialect will be briefly surveyed. Then the variation that is tied to variation in speech will be considered, not only established contractions but spellings that have come to represent forms marked for region, social identity, and colloquial style. In particular, the spelling patterns that are regularly used to represent reduced, colloquial speech will be analyzed in detail.

Written English, as far removed as it often is from sound, also includes forms that have developed independent of spoken forms. Given the special purposes that written language may serve, especially in organizing and keeping information, the existence of its own conventions such as abbreviations is to be expected. But the potential that written language has for representing values such as national identity, American know-how, receptivity to foreign patterns, and humor is also apparent in the types of variant spellings that have become widespread and conventionalized.

VARIATION INDEPENDENT of SPEECH

The distinctiveness of written English shows itself in abbreviations, the shortening of the written form of a word or words without concomitant shortening of pronunciation. Typically, an abbreviation includes several letters from the full word and ends with a period, as in *Sept.*, *km.*, *doz.*; British convention does not require the period when the abbreviation and the full word end with the same letter, as in *Dr*, *ft*, and others. In many circumstances, such as on signs or tables, the period is omitted. The letters of some abbreviations such as *lb.*, *cwt.*, and *i.e.*, do not relate directly to sounds in the full spoken word, in this case *pound*, *hundredweight*, and *that is*, and so they approach the status of visual morphemes, as Bolinger (1946) termed numerals and other conventional signs in our written language.

Abbreviations

Other shortenings traditionally classified as abbreviations involve phrases and, after all, implicate speech. The spelling of the abbreviation corresponds to a shortening in pronunciation of the original phrase. But the spoken shortening is based on the written abbreviation. One type is the pronunciation of initial letter names, such as *MLA* for *Modern Language Association* and *MIA* for *missing in action*. It is a frequent and favorite device, especially for proper names. Another type is the pronunciation of the abbreviated set of letters as a word. Such acronyms, for instance, *NATO* for *North Atlantic Treaty Organization* and *AIDS* for *acquired immunodeficiency syndrome*, are not so favored in English, but are hardly rare. These abbreviations for phrases have come to outnumber the prototypical shortened spellings. As names for modern institutions and technical matters like *MLA* and *AIDS*, they are proliferating, while the numbers of shortened spellings like *Sept.* and *doz.* are holding steady.

It is notable that these shortened spellings occur in only restricted contexts. *The Britannica Book of English Usage* (Timmons and Gibney, 1980), for example, recommends that it is best to avoid all abbreviations in formal writing, except for some standard forms such as courtesy titles. This practice is rarely violated. Names of states, days, months, and units of measure, for instance, are fully spelled out in both formal and informal printed text, and usually appear abbreviated only on tables, in reference works, and generally in material where space is limited and information tightly packed. The regular, modern use of only full forms in extended texts contrasts with practice in handwritten manuscripts and inscriptions through European history. As Bradley (1919) remarked, many medieval manuscripts had nearly every word abbreviated.

Regional Variation in Spelling

The well-known differences between British and American spelling are notable in that they do not follow differences in pronunciation between British and American speech. The spellings *cheque*, *civilise*, *defence*, *neighbour*, preserve conventions that have changed in the United States. In Canada, where American pronunciation generally holds and American spellings often appear, such British spellings remain. It is worth noting that some American variants have not entirely displaced traditional British forms, which suggest a more refined tone here, e.g., *theater/theatre*; *catalog/catalogue*.

The large majority of spelling differences apply to morphologically complex words, as observed in the doubling of *l* with the addition of suffixes, as in *grovelled* and *jeweller*, and as seen especially in the representation of endings such as *-ize/-ise*, *-or/-our*, and *-er/-re*. The differences, when examined closely, sometimes reveal that the spelling patterns encode unexpected morphological information. Aronoff (1978) has pointed out that the *-our* in British spelling occurs by and large in inanimate nonagentive nouns without lexical stems, as in *vigour*, *colour*, and *odour*.

Many names for products and services are familiar words whose spellings depart from the standard by a letter or two, taking advantage of the choices that English offers to represent sounds. In this way spelling can attract the eye without disrupting pronunciation, as in *Kleenex*, *Troy-Bilt*, *Sunkist*, *Gleem*, and *Playskool*. As Jaquith (1976) notes, the majority of such names are made up of a shorter sequence of letters than their conventionally spelled counterparts, since the names frequently involve the reduction of vowel digraphs and consonant blends, e.g., *view/vu* and *block/blok*; a favorite reduction is erasing *gh*, as in *delite* and *lite*. Many other such names involve the substitution of one letter for another; a favorite is *k* for *c*, as in *kool* and *krazy*. Jaquith points out that such spellings tend to be chosen for products and services that attract for their high volume, quick turnover, and expendability, for example, fast foods, household cleaning and maintenance products, and automobile supplies. In contrast, there are spellings which suggest bygone days and traditional values, such as *Publick House* or *Ye Olde Inne*.

Brand Names

A rather significant aspect of variation in our spelling stems from the diversity of loanwords in English. For many loanwords there may be a choice between a spelling that accords with the spelling in the source language and an English adaptation that accords with English spelling patterns and pronunciation. Thus we find *spumone/spumoni* from Italian, *aficionado/aficionado* from Spanish, *omelette/omelet* from French, *fjord/fjord* from Norwegian. Although we might expect a loanword to settle into a single, standard spelling with time, it is worth noting that variants may exist over a long period of time. *Omelette* and *fjord*, for example, entered English in the seventeenth century. The details of subpatterns sometimes reveal analogies based on English notions as to how loanwords from a particular language should be spelled. English has borrowed *macaroni*, *spaghetti*, *pep(p)eroni* from Italian, and has shaped *spumoni* to that pattern. In the case of languages with no written tradition, the patterns of an intermediate language may intervene, as shown by the French-based variant *Esquimau* next to Danish *Eskimo*. In the case of languages that use a script other than Roman, differing traditions of transcription into Roman script have influenced their appearance in English. Thus we find *tsar/czar/izar* from Russian, *sumac/sumach* from Arabic, and *maharajah/maharaja* from Hindi.

Loanwords

Competing forms for loanwords make up a significant proportion of variant spellings. An estimate of that proportion was made by examining a sample from the approximately 2700 words with variant forms given in Emery's *Variant Spellings in Modern American Dictionaries* (1973). In this compilation of the variant spellings from five dictionaries published around 1970, the tenth word of each tenth page was identified and checked for the source of variation. Of the 101 words, 25 had variants that reflected the spelling of their source language, ranging from Afrikaans to

Sanskrit. Other, more casual estimates of word lists showing variant spellings confirm as well that about a quarter of the variant spellings that we meet present choices related to the source language of a loanword.

Eye Dialect Another type of variation that the resources of English writing make possible is what has traditionally been called eye dialect (e.g., Bowdre, 1982). This is the spelling of a familiar word in a nonstandard form, while maintaining the standard pronunciation. Recurrent examples include *wimmin*, *sez*, *bisness*, and *enuf*. The words that are susceptible to eye-dialect spellings are those whose standard spellings are irregular, as common words so often are. The writer usually substitutes a letter that more regularly corresponds to a given sound than does the standard spelling, e.g., *u* in *frum*, *cum*, *tu*, *yu*, and *ur*.

Such eye-dialect spellings are generally restricted to invented speech, as in regional humor. They serve to hint that the overall tone of speech should be interpreted as different from the tone of conventional speech, usually in the direction of rustic and uneducated, often jocular and even grotesque. As Ives (1971) remarks, eye dialect spellings deliberately overstate the ignorance or illiteracy of a character. Even though they themselves do not represent a particular pronunciation, they often appear in texts next to dialect spellings that do.

VARIATION as a REFLECTION of SPEECH

Spelling variation in English sometimes serves to reflect differences in pronunciation that are regionally, socially, or stylistically marked in the spoken language. Such forms appear, for the most part, in direct representations of speech in fiction, nonfiction, and especially one-liners such as cartoons and advertisements. In general, our standard, largely invariant orthography ignores differences in speech. Spellings are sufficiently abstract to accommodate linguistically and stylistically conditioned variation as well as regional and social differences, so that variation in speech is rarely represented. When a pronunciation is indicated in writing, given the broad-gauged neutrality of standard spelling, it must have special significance to the writer.

Although speech can be seen to vary by region, by the social status of the speaker, and the immediate situation, many variables in pronunciation do not fall neatly into these domains. A single feature which is regional may also vary by social group and with the context of the situation. In his detailed studies of variation, Labov (1972) verified this multiplicity of roles that a variable may play when he described the patterning of r-lessness in New York City speech. This feature, characteristic of the area, appears with greater frequency in the speech of lower and working classes than in the upper middle, but it also appears more frequently in the casual style than the careful or reading styles of the upper middle class. Other possible examples come to mind quickly, such as the alternation between [ŋ] and [ŋ] for *-ing* and between *going to* and *gonna*. When it comes to representing such differences in texts,

regional variants represented in spelling as a rule entail social differences, usually suggesting inferior social status and education, since regional features in the speech of educated persons is not ordinarily represented in dialectal spelling (Ives 1971). In the same way, casual variants in writing, when set in relatively formal contexts, often imply the social distinctiveness of the speaker. Interviews with rock musicians in the magazine *Rolling Stone*, for instance, often show colloquial speech forms in quotations, suggesting that such entertainers set themselves apart by speaking in an informal style when others would tighten up.

In the sections below, variant forms in writing that correspond to variant forms in speech will be reviewed, first with a brief comment on standard contractions. Then, in the light of the overlap between regional, social, and stylistic variation, a somewhat artificial distinction will be drawn between variant spellings as they have appeared in literature, usually to represent regional and closely associated social differences, and stylistic variants as they appear in everyday print, usually to indicate colloquial style.

Standard contractions are taken for granted in our common practice and are recognized in dictionaries, handbooks on usage, and the school curriculum. They involve the combining of two words into one with an apostrophe, *let's*; *not* attached to auxiliary verbs, as in *can't*, and *didn't*; and forms of *be* and the auxiliaries *have*, *will*, and *would* attached to pronouns, as in *they're*, *we've*, *she'll* and *who'd*. They comprise a limited set and result, curiously enough, in doublets such as *they aren't/they're not*, *we haven't/we've not*. The set also includes ambiguous forms, such as *he's* and *he'd*, which as in speech are resolved in their syntactic context, as in *he's singing/be's sung*. The standard contractions have come to be conventionalized since they first appeared in texts during the Elizabethan period, along with many other forms that did not survive (Partridge 1964; Jespersen 1961). Their spelling hardly represents the range of their variation in speech nowadays, which is subject to further rules of deletion and reduction.

The apostrophe appears in the place of the letters corresponding to a vowel or consonant + vowel sequence. In the negative forms, the apostrophe appears medially in *not* and the *n't* is attached directly to the auxiliary verb, which itself shows some irregularities, not only in sound (**willn't*), but spelling (**cann't*). In the other cases, the apostrophe appears at the morpheme boundary.

There is a small group of contractions that are not in common written usage: *'tis*, *'twas*, *e'en*, *e'er*, *me'er*, *o'er*. They are considered archaic or poetic in the OED (see, for example, entry under letter *v*) and mock-poetic today. They have the curious history of having been dialectal forms adopted in verse to fit meter, but not conventionalized in standard speech; rather, they have lost their rustic and familiar tone and become associated with literary language of the past (Partridge 1964, 11).

Standard Contractions

Linguistic and stylistic constraints on contraction in speech are complex and remain to be thoroughly examined (Labov 1969). In writing contraction is generally chosen less frequently than in speech, although this observation might be undermined by systematic quantitative analysis that would take the different functions of written and spoken language into account. It is generally well-received by commentators on usage. Evans and Evans (1957), for example, remark that uncontracted forms make for a somewhat didactic or quarrelsome tone.

*Regional and Social
Variation in Literary
Dialect*

In their attempts to create small worlds with words on a page, writers sometimes chose to represent speech in a way that marks it socially or regionally. Along with touches of nonstandard syntax, uncommon vocabulary, and local turns of phrase, they may introduce deviations from standard spelling. Mark Twain, Edgar Allan Poe, and Hart Crane are among the American writers who, through special orthographic gestures, give their characters accented speech that contributes to their identity and their part in the action. Some writers set great store in the value of their characters' speech, making the style much of the story, especially the humorists such as George Washington Harris, Finley Peter Dunne and, closer to our own days, Robert Glover.

Those who have studied literary dialect with care point out that its representation is deliberately incomplete (Ives 1971; Page 1973; Traugott 1981). Not only must it be comprehensible to a wide spectrum of readers, it must be comprehensible at a glance. A faithful, detailed representation of speech can prove to be tedious, even for skilled readers. The special touches may present a page that deviates too sharply from what they are used to seeing, both in graphic form or frequency. With this in mind, effective writers decide on the peculiarities that they can use to suggest speech rather than transcribe it.

There are few definite rules for suggesting dialect through spelling, however. Among recurrent strategies apart from outright substitution of letters close to pronunciation, writers insert apostrophes to indicate omitted sounds, as in *some'ers* for *somewheres*, or to indicate a shift in pronunciation, as in *mout'* for *mouth*. They also may use *b* to indicate r-lessness, as in *caht* for *cart*, or to mark the quality of the preceding vowel, as in *mab* for *my*. Individual writers have experimented in their own ways within the framework of the English writing system.

*Colloquial
Contractions*

There are also contracted or shortened forms in writing that reflect colloquial or rapid pronunciations. Even though they occur commonly in print, they do not enjoy formal recognition. These include, for instance, *hafta* for *have to*, *sorta* for *sort of*, and *ya* for *you*. As a general rule they do not figure in the English curriculum

of our schools. Furthermore, they do not appear in our dictionaries, even though the dictionaries may give reduced pronunciations that they represent. For example, *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (1984) notes "in 'have to' meaning 'must' usually haf," under the entry *have*, but it does not mention the spelling *hafta*.

By and large, such variant spellings have become conventional for a limited set of words and phrases that occur very frequently in the language. They appear almost exclusively in written discourse representing direct speech. They can be found, for example, in comic strips, jokes, interviews representing direct quotation, transcriptions of extended speech, and dialogue in prose fiction and plays. Writers apparently choose them to reflect the informal or casual quality of the speaker's style in a given situation, suggesting affection, insouciance, anger, and the like. The marked spellings help to set the tone of the moment. As might be expected, they also serve to indicate and even create a speaker's social identity, reflecting the pronunciation of individuals who are uneducated, provincial, generally defiant of authority, or studiously casual. It is reasonable to suppose that in extended texts the frequency of such colloquial forms contributes to our social judgment of a speaker as it does in speech (Labov, 1972).

These forms can conveniently be called colloquial contractions in that they represent shortenings from standard spellings and, like the pronunciations that they represent, function to mark texts as relatively informal or socially charged. They differ from standard contractions, however, in that some are written without apostrophes and some are shortenings of only one word.

The list of forms given below is intended to present the most frequently occurring in contemporary everyday English. They were collected from various sources during the latter half of 1984. Three sources were regularly examined during this period and consistently yielded examples, specifically, the syndicated comic strips appearing in a daily newspaper, the *Knickerbocker News* of Albany, New York, including *Conrad*, *Doonesbury*, *Crock*, and *Wizard of Id*; stories and interviews in *Rolling Stone* magazine, recognized for its efforts to write well about entertainers bent on defying traditional values; and anecdotes in *Reader's Digest* that include quotations from people facing outlandish situations. Many other written materials were more casually scanned, such as humorous greeting cards, the lyrics of popular songs, and innumerable magazine and newspaper advertisements. The forms of colloquial contractions noted in these sources were confirmed by checking still others, such as the interviews in Studs Terkel's *Working* (1972), a book edited to reflect the voices of people in various occupations speaking plainly about their work.



The forms are given below by their syntactic and morphological identity. An alternative might have been to consider only the pronunciation that the spelling is intended to represent. Such an approach, however, would have bypassed the important fact that our writing system is morphologically as well as phonologically based.

*Progressive Verb
Forms*

-ing/-in'. The shortening *-in'* is a common marker of colloquial style. In extended texts it varies a good deal with *-ing*, even within sentences, as in *One guy's layin' on the floor and I'm crawlin', feeling along the base.*

going to/gonna. The spelling *gonna* is an especially frequent marker of informal style, as in *They're gonna demolish a lotta homes.* The shortening *goin' to* with the same meaning is scarce. Just as *be going to* is a touch less formal than *will* when either is possible, *gonna* is less formal than *'ll*, as in *It's gonna happen/It'll happen.*

Auxiliary Verbs

does, did, do/-'s, -'d, -da. Although forms of *do* occur in standard contractions with the negative, it is only the negative that is reduced, e.g., *doesn't*. In colloquial contractions, *does* and *did* are shortened to their final consonants and attached to *Wh-* forms, as in *What's that mean? What's shortening look like? and How'd it go, handsome? What'd he say?* It is noteworthy that *-s* for *does* falls together with the standard contractions for *is* and *has*, and *-'d* with the contractions for *had* and *would*. Yet the standard contractions do not fit with ease in comparable sentences such as **How'd it gone, *How'd be have done it*, either in speech or writing.

In construction with *What* and *you*, as in *What do you want?*, *do* is sometimes attached to the *what* or to both *what* and *you*. The spelling of the phrase has not been fixed, however, so that examples occur such as *Whatta'ya have to do to beat this guy? Whattya want from me? Whadda ya call a Nicaraguan MIG?*

have/-a. In verb phrases made up of "past" forms of the modal auxiliaries followed by *have* + past participle, *have* can be contracted to *-'ve*, as in *could've*. But colloquially it can be shortened further to bound *-a* corresponding to [ə] in *coulda, shoulda, woulda, mighta, musta*, as in *He coulda been hit.*

Catenative Verbs

got to, have to, want to/gotta, hafta, wanna. In these cases of a catenative verb followed by *to*, the *to* is attached and written as *-a*, representing unstressed [ə], as in *I gotta make a pit stop and Wanna see my baby picture?* The assimilation of [v] to [f] in *have* is represented in the colloquial spelling *hafta*. The deletion of the *t*'s in *wanna* reflects a regular informal pronunciation rule [VntV] → [VnV] as in *winter* and *bounty*; now and then *want to* is represented as *wanta*.

him, her, them ['im, 'er, 'em. These forms reflect the regular deletion of [h] preceding unstressed vowels in rapid and informal speech and, in the case of *them*, the very old variant without the spirant, as in *Stick 'em up*.

you/ya, yub, y', -cha. The most frequent colloquial spelling is *ya*, as in *I'm tellin' ya, kid*. Sometimes *yub* appears in comparable environments, as in *See yub*, but seems to be favored by only a minority of writers. *Y'* appears as the subject in conversational expressions such as *y'know* and *y'see*.

-cha is the attached form that reflects the assimilation of the [y] after [t] in *gotcha* for (*I've got you; doncha* for *don't you*, as in *Doncha know, I love you so*; and *watcha* for what you, derived from *what are you* through deletion of the auxiliary *are*, an established colloquial rule in *wh-* questions with *you* (*When you going? How you doing?*) Unlike the other forms for *you*, *-cha* goes far toward representing the pronunciation and erases the letter that represents the identity of the pronoun in the standard spelling and other variant forms. A voiced counterpart of *-cha* is heard in speech, for instance, [wʌdʒə] in *What did you eat?* and now and then will appear with *j*, as in *Whaja eat?*

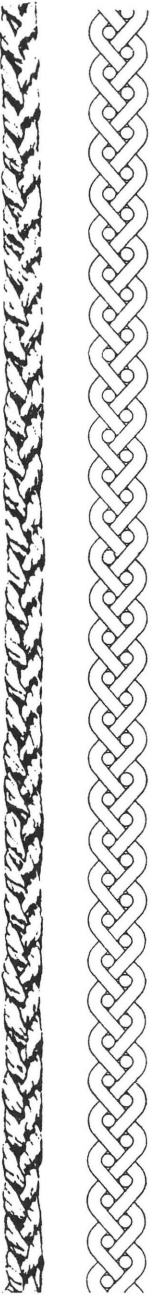
of/-a. Informal *of* is often spelled attached *-a*, reflecting [ə] in speech. It appears in noun quantifiers such as *lot of/lotta; couple of/coupla; bunch of/buncha*. *Sort of* and *kind of* are likewise written *sorta* and *kinda*, especially when they occur adverbially as hedges, as in *sorta rearranges things; kinda yellow*. Similarly, the phrase *out of* is written *outta* (sometimes *outa*), as in *outta sight*. *Of* also occurs unattached as *o'*, as in *He's afraid o' the dark*. This is a long-standing written form, as in *will-o'-the-wisp*, but appears relatively seldom. It tends to occur in contexts intended to reflect regional or rustic dialect rather than colloquial.

Others

give me, let me/gimme, lemme. The objective form *me* is attached to these verbs in the imperative. In pronunciation the final consonants of the verbs are deleted, while in the written form the *m* of *me* is doubled by the rule that serves to indicate that the preceding vowel is lax.

There are still other contracted forms that appear with regularity in written representations of informal speech. These include *ol'* and *an'*, which show the common deletion of [d] after homorganic [l] and [n] in speech. *'Cause* and *'bout* show the frequent aphaerisis of *because* and *about*. *C'mon* for *come on* is unique in its written shape, as is *li'l* for *little*. Words other than verbs that end in *-ing*, such as the indefinites that end in *-thing*, especially *something* and *nothing*, and nouns such as *building* and *footing*, occur with *-in'*.

Such colloquial written forms that reflect variation in pronunciation appear beside examples of so-called eye dialect that, as mentioned above, do not reflect a change of pronunciation as such, but suggest uneducated or rustic speech. Such eye-appealing forms occur in the representation of colloquial forms, too, and include *helluva, dammit, sez, and wuz*.



In the case of colloquial contractions there is tension in our writing system between maintaining the identity of morphemes through a single set of letters — a predominant principle in the system — and recognizing the variant pronunciation by a set of letters that closely corresponds to it. Although there may be a good deal of variation in pronunciation of a given word in casual or rapid speech on one hand, and a range of possible spellings on the other, only one form tends to be conventionalized. In this handful of shortened forms, there are several noteworthy features. One is the prevalence of *-a*. Words of distinct form in their standard spelling — *of*, *have*, and *to* — are neutralized to attached final *-a*, corresponding to their neutralization as [ə]. Furthermore, *you* takes the form *ya* and *-cha*. The spelling *a* as a separate word for *of* and *have* goes back to Middle and Early Modern English in the language, as exemplified in the OED, but it was rejected in common practice. During much of this period, *-e* was still in effect as a letter representing [ə] rather than as a marker of preceding vowel quality. Final *-a* in words, on the other hand, came in through borrowings near the end of the period, especially from classical languages, and in later centuries as well, e.g., *agenda*, *bacteria*, *parka*, *sofa*, and *yoga*, and became common in names for people and places. The pattern is a strong one in English now and the colloquial contractions *gonna*, *musta*, and *sorta* conform to it.

Another notable feature is the use of the apostrophe, a long-established device (Partridge 1964) for indicating the omission of a letter corresponding to a sound or sound sequence deleted in speech. The apostrophe is required in standard contractions and occurs in similar colloquial contractions, namely, *'s* and *'d* for *does* and *did*. In other colloquial forms, it occurs chiefly in the shortening of single words, such as *ol'* and *'cause*. But in most colloquial contractions of two words or more, the forms are bound without the apostrophe and the contract takes the shape of a plain word, e.g., *kinda* and *gotcha*.

A third notable feature is that the written shapes of these new combined forms, many of them CVCV in speech, conform to familiar spelling patterns. Not only does final *-a* correspond to spoken [ə], but the intervocalic consonant letters, if not a cluster, are doubled and so mark the preceding vowel not tense, as in *gonna*, *wanna*, and *gotta*. Perhaps it is by this pattern that the doubling appears even in *outta*, where the tense vowel remains. *Gimme* and *lemme* follow the pattern but are unusual in that they retain the morphological representation of *me*, instead of shifting to the regular representation of the final vowel with *-y*.

As we might expect from our knowledge of variation in speech and in literary dialect, the incidence of colloquial forms in continuous discourse varies. There is no reason to expect that the social and linguistic factors that influence variation in speech do not enter into variation in writing. However, writing itself is an important factor; it is not at all clear how strongly the eye rules the ear in selecting one form over another. For the moment, examples rather than analysis will have to suffice. This paragraph is from an interview of a utility man at an automobile plant in Terkel's *Working*, where *might have/might've/mighta* alternate and *-ing/in'* vary in *working*, *grubbing* and *stumblin'*.

I might've been working in some small factory down south or I might have gone to Detroit where I worked before or I might have gone to Kalamazoo where I worked before. Or else I mighta stuck on a farm somewheres, just grubbing off a farm somewhere. You never know what you woulda did. You can't plan too far in advance, 'cause there's always a stumblin' block (1972, 33).

In addition, a quick count of colloquial forms in four other interviews in the book showed that *gonna* appeared instead of *going to* as a form for future time in all cases, while verbal *-ing* appeared in relation to *-in'* roughly 30 to 1 (woman felter); 2 to 1 (policeman); 1 to 2 (freight elevator operator); 1 to 3 (fireman). Note that the interviews were transcribed and edited to as to cut "the lean from the fat" (ix), but the principles the transcribers followed are not clear.

Colloquial contractions are now an integral part of American written English, conventionalized by common practice. They offer writers the possibility beyond standard contractions for making speech in print informal and charging it with emotional tones such as toughness, confidentiality, or ease. In extended prose texts it is possible to indicate such tones by setting the context and describing the manner of speaking — to mutter, speak low, drawl, and the like. But in the brief words that we meet in jokes, advertisements, and greeting cards, spelling can serve the function of suggesting the tone directly. Colloquial contractions number only a few, although they are certainly not a closed set, and are generally spelled consistently. They provide variation, yet hardly budge the fundamental stability and consistency of our writing system.

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