

***THE EVOLUTION OF ENGLISH WRITING SYSTEM: A REVIEW OF
SPELLING REFORM***

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Abstract

Today English is an extremely popular international language in the world. The issue of English writing system has been brought up by certain researchers in recent years. As Cook (2004, p. 1) puts, “English writing system is connected to our lives in many ways, not something that is an ancillary to other aspects of language but vitally important to almost everything we do, from signing our wills to sending a text message.” Therefore, this article will review the evolution of English writing system, focusing on English spelling in particular. It begins with historical changes in the English writing system, variation in the English writing system comes next, and English spelling reform is discussed in the end.

Key words: *English writing system, Old English, Middle English, Modern English, spelling reform*

Introduction

What is a writing system? There are two distinct meanings in ‘writing system’: one attached to general ideas of writing and the other to specific languages (Cook and Bassetti 2005). According to Coulmas (1999, p. 560), in the first sense, a writing system is “a set of visible or tactile signs used to represent units of language in a systemic way” and related to the terms of ‘script’ and ‘orthography’. A script is “the graphic form of the units of a writing system” (Coulmas 2003, p. 35), namely, its actual physical form – letters or characters; on the other hand, ‘orthography’ is the set of rules for using a script in a particular language (i.e. the English orthography for Roman alphabet) like symbol-sound correspondences, capitalization, hyphenation, punctuation, and so on. The second sense of writing system overlaps with orthography by means of referring to the set of rules used in a particular language for spelling, punctuation etc., that is, ‘the English writing system’.

There is no doubt that today English is an extremely popular international language in the world. The issue of English writing system has been brought up by certain researchers in recent years. As Cook (2004, p. 1) puts it, “English writing system is connected to our lives in many ways, not something that is an ancillary to other aspects of language but vitally important to almost everything we do, from signing our wills to sending a text message.” Therefore, this article will describe the



evolution of English writing system, focusing on English spelling in particular. It begins with historical changes in the English writing system, variation in the English writing system comes next, and English spelling reform is discussed in the end.

Historical changes in the English writing system

Before English

It's uncertain when humans first started using language and how it spread. There is a large gap between 50, 000 years ago, when humans probably started using language, and the time from which we have historical evidence for language in the form of writing (Gelderen 2006). Three types of writing systems are as follows: the first type of writing system, where one word is expressed in one symbol, is named logographic; the second type of writing system is syllabic, where the symbol represents the pronunciation of a syllable; the third type of writing is phonetic or alphabetic – one symbol stands for one sound. Some languages use a combination of writing systems, such as Egyptian using three systems. English is also starting to include some syllabic symbols, for example, *CUL8R* for 'see you later'.

It is believed that the sound-letter correspondence has started in the Semitic languages of the eastern Mediterranean about 1700 BC, leading to scripts for Hebrew, Arabic and Phoenician that used letters to correspond only to consonants and were

written from right to left. We can see that English is influenced by some early alphabets. Take the Phoenician alphabet as an instance, the letters have been rotated 90° clockwise,  as A and  as B.

Old English (450-1150)

The English language had its start about 449 when Germanic tribes came to England and settled down there. They pushed some of the native inhabitants westwards; however, initially they co-existed with them and adopted some customs and possibly linguistic features. There were Latin influences on English by missionaries from Rome as well as French influences after the Norman invasion in 1066 during this period. Some works in Old English are shown in the following Table 1.

Table 1. Some works in Old English

<i>Beowulf.</i>	Mixed dialect Northumbrian / West Saxon; manuscript from c. 1000 but based on earlier version.
<i>Lindisfarne Gospels.</i>	Northumbrian interlinear gloss; c.950.
<i>Rushworth Glosses.</i>	Interlinear gloss; c. 970. Matthew is Mercian; Mark, Luke and John are Northumbrian.
<i>The Junius Manuscripts.</i>	Written between the 7th and 10th centuries (some argue partly by the Caedmon poet); compiled towards the late 10th; contains <i>Genesis</i> , <i>Exodus</i> , <i>Christ and Satan</i> .
<i>The Exeter Book.</i>	Early poetry; contains <i>Riddles</i> , <i>Wulf and Eadwacer</i> , <i>The Wanderer</i> , and <i>the Seafarer</i> .
<i>Gregory's Pastoral Care.</i>	Early West Saxon, late 9th century, ascribed to King Alfred.

Boethius and Orosius. Early West-Saxon, ascribed to King Alfred.
Homilies, by Aelfric. West Saxon, circa 1000.
Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Many versions, one composed in Peterborough that continues to 1154.

(Gelderen 2006, p. 48)

The manuscripts are copied and illustrated by the scribes who worked mainly in monasteries, and they are often exquisite work of art. Usually the originals were written on vellum, expensive thin leather, and thus books were owned by a monastery, a church, or a rich person and were typically versions of the Bible, prayer books, school books, manuals of various kinds, and music. Take Lindisfarne Gospels for example, it is written in Latin, using the Vulgate version made by St Jerome, who died in about 420. Lindisfarne Gospels contain the oldest surviving translation of the Gospels into the English language. In around 950-960 Aldred, a member of the Community of St Cuthbert, added his Old English translation between the lines of Latin.

The end of the Lindisfarne Gospels with the colophon was added by Aldred in the 950s or 960s. The script of the Gospels shown in the Figure 1 is a formal, time-consuming hand called 'half-uncial'. This was developed in the 7th century by Irish and Northumbrian scribes. The text is laid out per cola et commata, meaning that, instead of using punctuation marks, the length of the line is used to clarify the sense. If a sentence has ended, the rest of the line is left blank.

Figure 1. The text of Lindisfarne Gospels



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(Retrieved from <http://www.bl.uk/whatson/exhibitions/lindisfarne/text.html#>)

In addition, Aldred's word-for-word translation between the lines ('the gloss') is in a less formal style. He uses a tiny, pointed Anglo-Saxon Style of lower-case lettering named 'minuscule'. Some of his glosses comment on the text as well as translating it. They show a concern with monastic reform and the abuse of clerical power.

Middle English (1150-1500)

Middle English is considered to start about 1150 when the synthetic character of Old English begins to change. For example, a number of case endings simplify and become *-e* in Middle English and this loss of endings make Middle English look 'modern'. Baugh and Cable (2002) indicate that only after 1300 does English

reemerge as a language used for literature, the court and the church. In 1258, Henry III uses both English and French for an official proclamation and English gradually gains influence; in 1349, English is first used at Oxford University; and in 1362, Edward III opens Parliament in English. It is obvious that in the Early Middle English period, English is not viewed as a prestigious language and its use needs to be defended. After 1300, the situation changes and many texts on different topics are written in English. The following is a list of works in Middle English provided in the Table 2:

Table 2. Some works in Middle English

<i>The History of the Holy Rood Tree</i> : West-Saxon, 12th century.
<i>Ormulum</i> : East Midlands, 12th century.
Katherine Group (e.g. <i>Katerine</i> , <i>Margarete</i> , <i>Juliene</i> , <i>Hali Meidhad</i> and <i>Sawles Warde</i> , but also <i>Ancrene Wisse</i> and some other texts): various manuscripts; e.g. Bodley 34; South West Midlands, early 13th century.
Layamon's <i>Brut</i> : Caligula and Otho manuscripts, now both considered to be from second half of the 13th century, (N) Worcestershire.
<i>Cursor Mundi</i> : various manuscripts; e.g. Cotton Ms: northern, 1300.
<i>Gawain and the Green Knight</i> , <i>St. Erkenwald</i> , <i>Pearl</i> , <i>Cleanness</i> , and <i>Patience</i> : assumed to be by the Gawain Poet, NW Midlands, mid 14th century.
Langland's <i>Piers Plowman</i> : West Midlands, late 14th century.
<i>Morte d'Arthur</i> : East Midlands, late 14th century.
Chaucer's the <i>Canterbury Tales</i> , <i>Boethius</i> , and <i>Astrolabe</i> : Southern, late 14th century.
Wycliff and followers: Midlands, late 14th century.
Chancery Documents: Southern, 14th and 15th century.
<i>The York Plays</i> : Northern, 15th century.
<i>The Paston Letters</i> : Norfolk, 15th century.

(Gelderen 2006, p. 113)

Heer (1974) suggests that some Middle English works offer an idea of daily life in the towns and castles, churches and monasteries. They are written on vellum before paper is available sometime in the 12th century. Each Middle English text is somewhat unique. For instance, the *t* in words such as *Artur*, *Antony*, and *Katerine* changes to *th*, like *Arthur* in *Gawain*, remaining to this day. During Middle English, the *æ* and *ð* spellings are replaced relatively early by *a* and *th/þ* respectively. *þ* is replaced by the *th* used in French sources in late Middle English. Before *þ* is replaced, it looks like *y*, thus, the writing of *the* as *ye* in *ye olde shoppe*. More examples of the changes in spelling during the Middle English period are as follows: the *cw* in *cwene* and *cwic* changes to *qu* and the *u* in *mus* changes to *ou*, and both of these changes could be due to loans like *question* and *mountain* and by the influence of French scribes on the spelling. Table 3 summarizes the changes of spelling during the Middle English period.

Table 3. Some Old to Middle English spelling changes

OE	ME	OE	ME
cw	qu	c	ch, c, and k
hw	wh/w/qu	u	ou
þ/ð	th	h	3/gh
sc	sh		

(Gelderen 2006, p. 117)

Early Modern English (1500-1700)

This period is known as the Renaissance, an intellectual and cultural development initially inspired by the desire to revive Greek and Latin culture. It is a time of freedom of ideas. To language, it means freedom in creating and borrowing words. During this period, English goes on to become more analytic.

Take Shakespeare – Richard II transcribed in the Extract 1 as an instance:

Extract 1 Shakespeare – Richard II

This royall Throne of Kings, this sceptred Isle,
This earth of Maiesty, this seate of Mars,
This other Eden, demy paradise,
This Fortresse built by Nature for her selfe,
Against infection, and the hand of warre: 5
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone, set in the siluer sea,
Which serues it in the office of a wall,
Or as a Moate defensiuie to a house,
Against the enuy of lesse happier Lands, 10
This blessed plot, this earth, this Realme, this England,
This Nurse, this teeming wombe of Royall Kings,
Fear'd by their breed, and famous for their birth,
Renowned for their deeds, as farre from home,
For Christian seruice, and true Chiualrie, 15
As is the sepulcher in stubborne {Iury}
Of the Worlds ransome, blessed {Maries} Sonne.
This Land of such deere soules, this deere- deere Land,
Deere for her reputation through the world,
Is now Leas'd out (I dye pronouncing it) 20
Like to a Tenement or pelting Farme.
England bound in with the triumphant sea,
Whose rocky shore beates backe the enuious siede
Of watery Neptune, is now bound in with shame,
With Inky blottes, and rotten Parchment bonds. 25

That England, that was wont to conquer others,
Hath made a shamefull conquest of it selfe.
Ah! Would the scandal vanish with my life,
How happy then were my ensuing death? (II, i)
(Adapted from Gelderen 2006, p. 161)

In the Extract 1, it is clear that there is a *u* where Modern English has *v*: *siluer*. Besides, some word-final *-e*, as in *Moate*, *farre*, *ransome*, and *Farme*, and a few other minor points like double *-ll* in *royall*, *shamefull*, and *scandal*. [s] is also spelled either as *s* or resembling an *f*, which depends its position in the word. Furthermore, varied spellings of the same word are presented in this passage; say, dye (1.20) is elsewhere spelled *die* and *farre* (1.14) *far*. In Early Modern English, it is obvious that capital letters are employed more frequently than in Middle English, where they only occur at the beginning of the line. Shakespeare does capitalize nouns and sometimes adjectives.

Modern English (1700-present)

In general, the spelling is relatively stable in this period; nevertheless, there are still variant spellings in formal writing, such as honor and honour, iournal and journal, magic and magick, behaviour and behavior, and vnitie and unity. Webster's spelling books and dictionary published in the 1800s list forms which are sometimes different from the British ones. By the 1850s, spelling is standardized on both sides of the Atlantic. However, there are a number of attempts at spelling reform by the editors

of the Chicago Tribune, George Bernard Shaw, Mark Twain, and so forth. At present, we can say that spelling is relatively standardized; hence, it's not easy to get a letter shown in the Extract 2.

Extract 2

We instinktivly shrink from eny chaenj in whot iz familiar;
and whot kan be mor familiar dhan dhe form ov wurdz dhat
we hav seen and riten mor tiemz dhan we kan possibly
estimate? We taek up a book printed in Amerika, and
“honor” and “center” jar upon us every tiem we kum akros
dhem; nae, eeven to see “forever” in plaes of “for ever”
atrakets our atenshon in an unplezant wae.

(Taken from <http://www.e-speec.com/new.htm>)

The fragment in Extract 2 is named ‘New Spelling’, suggested by a British and American spelling society and accepted as the standard by the British Parliament in 1949. It seems that there are not many serious attempts at spelling reform at the moment; as a matter of fact, spelling may be getting more codified because of spell checker on our computers.

Variation in the English writing system

British and American spelling styles

The English language is used by plenty of people all around the world, including native speakers and second language users. Therefore, English has adapted itself to different countries and different uses. It happens to the spoken English, but not to written English. For instance, the New York Times, the Star

(Malaysia), the Daily Nation (Kenya), the Herald Sun (Australia), it is impossible to tell where they come from in terms of the English writing system alone. Nonetheless, it does not mean that there is complete uniformity within the English writing system. The most obvious variation that people are aware of is that between British and American spelling (Cook 2004, p. 179-180). Some evidence is shown as follows.

British <-our> versus American <-or>

British spelling prefers the <-our> ending, American the <-or> (e.g. 'colour' and 'color', 'honour' and 'honor'). A similar rule applies to <oul> in some word. British spelling tends to keep the <u> while American to drop it, such as 'mould' and 'mold', and 'smoulder' and 'smolder'.

British <-re> versus American <-er>

British style uses <-re> but American chooses <-er>. Say 'centre' and 'center', 'theatre' and 'theater', and 'litre' and 'liter'. Carney (1994) points out that one advantage of the British <-re> is that it allows a distinction between 'agent' nouns like 'meter' (instrument for measuring things) and other nouns like 'metre' (unit of length). On the other hand, Venezky (1999) indicates that the American <-er> is not extended to derived forms such as 'central' ('central') and 'theatrical' (theaterical').

British <-ise> versus American <-ize>

British spelling uses both <-ise> and <-ize> where American prefers <-ize> in verbs and verb-derived forms. Usually American ‘apologize’ is ‘apologise’ in British spelling, ‘recognize’ ‘recognise’ and ‘criticize’ ‘criticise’. The <-ize> form is clearly American in many cases, but there are some American spellings with <-ise>, such as ‘advertise’, ‘improvise’ and ‘televisé’. Likewise, British style has <-ize> in ‘capsize’ and ‘seize’. As McArthur (1992, p. 43) puts it, among British publishers <-ize> “is preferred by Cassell, Collins, Longman, Oxford, <-ise> by the Readers’ Digest (UK); Chambers has <-ise> for its native-speaker dictionaries, <-ize> for EFL learners’ dictionary”.

British <-ce> versus American <-se>

British style has <-ce> in many words that have <-se> in American style. (e.g. British ‘defence’ and American ‘defense’, ‘offence’ and ‘offense’, and ‘pretence’ and ‘pretense’.) In some cases British English signals nouns versus verbs by the <-ce> / <-se> contrast, such as nouns ‘advice’, ‘practice’, ‘licence’ and ‘prophecy’ versus verbs ‘advise’, ‘practise’, ‘license’ and ‘prophecy’.

Individual words

Some words vary arbitrarily between British spelling and American one. One group of words alternates <-ogure> and <-og>. British ‘dialogue’, ‘prologue’ and ‘catalogue’ versus American ‘dialog’, ‘prolog’ and ‘catalog’. A list of other differences of the two styles of spelling is given in the box below.

Some differences between ‘British’ and ‘American’ spelling (tendencies rather than absolute)					
American	British	American	British	American	British
jail	goal/jail	mustache	moustache	airplane	aeroplane
check	cheque	sulfur	sulphur	karat	carat
curb	kerb	program	programme/	cozy	cosy
plow	plough		program	aluminum	aluminium
skeptic	sceptic	wagon	wagon/	ax	axe
draft	draught		waggon	pajamas	pyjamas
gray	grey/gray	tire	tyre	namable	nameable
judgement	judgment/ judgement	z (/zi:/)	z (/zed/)		
		carcase	carcass/ carcase		

(Taken from Cook 2004, p. 182)

Spelling reform

Generally speaking, spelling reform rests on a belief that ideal writing system conforms to the alphabetic principle which written letters correspond to phonemes, with its corollaries, the one-to-one principle that each letter links to a single sound and the linearity principle that letters occur in the same sequence as sounds. Venezky (1999, p. 4) addresses that “English orthography is not a failed phonetic transcription

system, invented out of madness or perversity. Instead, it is a more complex system that preserves bits of history (i.e. etymology), facilitates understanding, and also translates into sound.” Also, Sproat (2000) states that:

English is one of the few major languages that has been blessed not to have had any large-scale formally sanctioned spelling reforms during its history, this despite the numerous attempts on the part of various individuals for the past three hundred years.

(Sproat 2000, p. 192)

Since the 16th century, scholars have put forward alternatives to the current spelling of their day, going from John Cheke to George Bernard Shaw, working on a greater sound/symbol correspondence (Baron 2000).

The Cut Spelling system

Currently, the Cut Spelling system is advocated by the Simplified Spelling Society, modernizing English spelling by eliminating unnecessary letters. The advocates of spelling reform believe in the alphabetical principle “An ideal spelling system matches letters to speech-sounds” (Simplified Spelling Society 2001). The general idea of the Cut Spelling system is shown in the box below:

Cut Spelling system
Rule 1: Cut letters irrelevant to the sound: hed, dout, caut, wen, nife...etc.
Rule 2a: Cut unstressed vowels before L/M/N/R: pedl, womn, vicr, caml, systm, victm, pistl, fathm, reasn, consl, albm, glamr
Rule 2b: Cut vowels in regular endings: washd, washs, washng, washbl

<p>Rule 3: Write most double consonants single: eb, lok, wel, botl, hopd, hopng, acomodate</p>
<p>Substitute letters: <f> for <gh>/<ph>: ruf, fotograf <j> for ‘soft’ <g>: jinjr, juj <y> for <igh>: sy, syt, syn</p>
<p>Use fewer capital and apostrophes: Only proper names with capitals: <i>France/french, Paris/parisian, Satrn/satrdy</i>. Apostrophes for linking words: <i>she’d, it’s, we’l, let’s</i>, not for showing omission or possession: <i>oclok, hadn’t, Freds house, our neibrs houses</i>.</p>

(Based on the Simplified Spelling Society Handbook, Cook 2004, p. 173)

The Cut Spelling System would have to demonstrate that reduced forms are as easy and rapid to use through the lexical route as their spoken counterparts. There are some questions needed considered, such as whether losing the small number of lexical spelling is an advantage, whether the current accessibility of written English to people around the world regardless of dialect would not be sacrificed, and so on.

The Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)

Spelling changes, like anything else, with the modern technology developing. How does English writing adapt to the age of the computer? Baron (1998) proposes that “Computer-Mediated Communication as a force in language change.” The overall label for language used by means of the computer is Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). We start to use CMC in e-mails, chat-rooms and text messages. A pervasive convention in CMC is the use of letters or numbers as words.

For example, 'c u l8er' is for 'see you later'. Devotees of texting claim this shortens messages to get them within the permitted 160 characters and make it faster to key them in. Another notable convention is the use of initial letters of phrases – 'ASAP' 'as soon as possible', 'LOL' 'laughing out loud', 'BRB' 'be right back', and even 'TANSTAAFL' 'there ain't no such thing as a free lunch'. Moreover, the use of emotions is one of conventions in CMC. For instance, starting as sideways face cartoons made with punctuation marks :>), they have evolved in many chat-rooms to little cartoons ☺ appearing whenever the user types in 'happy face' etc – a totally new way to convey emotion in written English lacking the expressive powers of spoken intonation.

Conclusion

We can say that the English writing system has changed in complex ways over a thousand years. It may change because of phonological change, in response to new vocabulary introduced from other language, or to accommodate new technology like the printing press and the computer (Cook 2004). No matter how the system changes, the purpose of it remains the same, that is, communication. Baron (2000, p.1) puts that “the written word is an integral part of contemporary communication.” It tells how significant written language is. Apart from written system, spoken

language is another important factor to communication. In fact, some aspects of written language get involved in a relationship between written symbols and spoken sounds (sound-based writing) while other aspects of writing involve a direct relationship between written symbols and meanings (meaning-based writing). It shows the ties of written language and spoken sounds. Consequently, the link between the written and spoken language is the next area worth studying.

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