

A Diachronic View on the Irregularities of the English Spelling System

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英語の文字体系における不規則制についての通時的概観

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Claiming that the irregularities of the English spelling system cause reading and writing difficulties among learners, many theorists have made numerous proposals for reforming English spelling over the past four hundred years. However, no one has yet been successful, and any serious proposal for reform is now a more remote possibility than ever. This fact leads us to think that the English spelling system must have some social functions even though it is inconvenient and complicated.

Social Functions of English Spelling

In English-speaking communities, an ability for spelling correctly has often been regarded as a sign of full literacy and a good education. That is to say, spelling has been regarded by many people as a social skill, and a good speller often has high social prestige. However, this was not really true before the sixteenth century.

Before that time, spelling was changeable, even in printed books, but by about 1650 printers had begun to use a stable spelling system which is very similar to our present-day convention. By 1700, stabilization was completed, and the norms set by printers were recorded in Johnson's Dictionary of 1755.¹⁾ The concept of a "spelling mistake" is largely an invention of the period after 1770.²⁾ Although spelling conventions had been established in printed materials before then, there were still divergences in spellings in handwritten materials, but dictionaries like Johnson's provided a norm for personal writing after that time. In fact, by the end of the eighteenth century, the publishing of spelling-related books had grown into a big business. In the U.S., for example, sixty-five million copies of Noah Webster's "The American Spelling Book" were sold in the hundred years after it was published in 1783.³⁾

Nowadays the English spelling system is very stable and is embedded in a powerful social network which has complicated interrelationships. This powerful social network could consist of: the attitudes of its millions of users, educational systems and libraries, the demands of machine printing in publishings, international communications and the important role of English as a world language, and the relationships between English and other language and writing systems. As a result, it is nearly impossible to change the present English spelling system, which has a lot of irregularities and complexities, to a new reformed system.

In addition to the above, simple conservatism and inertia of human habits and tradition must also be a part of the reason why we still have not been able to reform the English spelling system in practice. Most people invent consid-

Spelling substantially stabilized before the completion of the GVS, and permanently left behind information about former pronunciations in thousands of words which do not have synchronic alternate pronunciations in different environments. Thus the major mark that the GVS left on English is the non-phonemic spelling of vowels.

The Great Vowel Shift also left another mark on English in the form of vowel alternations, which occur in the pronunciation of a portion of the Romance vocabulary. Among those words, the single free morpheme in isolation underwent the vowel shift, while an allomorph of it, which occurred with a derivational morpheme and therefore had a short (lax) vowel of the same quality, did not satisfy the conditions for the vowel shift. Thus, today a single free morpheme may have two pronunciations, differing with respect to the vowel, and depending on suffixes. For example, the free morpheme “divine” historically underwent the vowel shift (parallel to “bite” above), while “divinity” did not, resulting in different pronunciations for the same morpheme (synchronically).⁹⁾ There are several other examples of this kind:

/aɪ/ — /ɪ/	/eɪ/ — /æ/	/ij/ — /ɛ/
line — linear	profane — profanity	serene — serenity
derive — derivative	explain — explanatory	meter — metric

Thus, the Great Vowel Shift was the cause of some irregular spellings in English.

English Spelling and Loan Words

Besides the Great Vowel Shift and other sound shifts, borrowing of foreign words is another major cause of inconsistent graphemephoneme correspondences in English. That is to say, in English, the spelling of words which were from foreign languages are often spelled differently.

Historically, foreign spellings have been retained in English orthography since the Middle English period.¹⁰⁾ Venezky gives the following example:

/č/ changed to /š/ in French in the thirteenth century although French orthography retained the “ch” spelling. At the time when the first French words with “ch” corresponding to /š/ were borrowed in English, the native orthography was still dynamic, yet English “sh” was not generally substituted for French “ch”. Some French spellings were altered, but seldom without prompting by a parallel alternation in French orthography.¹¹⁾

Thus, some of the inconsistent spellings in English were intended to contrast native spellings with foreign ones by leaving intact foreign spellings.

In addition to the above, some inconsistent English spellings were due to intended spellings changes by scribes in the past to mark them as being of foreign origin. For example, two rules of English spelling do not permit words to end in the letters “u” and “i”. And to prevent this, “e” is often added to the final “u” in those words as a dummy letter, and similarly the letter “i” is replaced in word-final positions by “ie” or “y” in English orthography, as follows:

“argue, clue, true, vague” and “die, lie, by, dry”¹²⁾

Therefore, the several words in English which do not follow the rules and end in those letters (i.e. irregular spelling in English orthography), are makes as being of foreign origin or are coined words, like:

“flu, haiku, gnu, guru”

“khaki, timpani, ski, taxi, chili”

The familiar word “ski”, for example, was originally borrowed from Norwegian as /ši·/, according to Strang’s

explanation.¹³⁾ It occurred with the spelling “she-running” in English in the 1850’s. But then the general European spelling pronunciation arose of /ski-/, and the earlier pronunciation and spelling were displaced. On the other hand, “taxi” is an American coined word which came into being in the early twentieth century.¹⁴⁾

In general, there are several constraints in English orthography that tell which sequences of letters may not occur in different word-positions. Some sequences of letters do not occur because the corresponding phoneme sequences do not occur in English. According to Chomsky (1964), and Chomsky and Halle (1968), knowledge of these constraints on phoneme sequences is responsible for the fact that native speakers of English have a sense of what “sounds” like a native word and what does not.¹⁵⁾ For example, the word “brick” is an English word familiar to all speakers of the language, and the word “blick” is equally acceptable in its phonological structure, but happens not to be a word of English.¹⁶⁾ Similarly, there are also graphotactic constraints on letter sequences. In English spelling, for example, geminate letters which correspond to consonants can occur only in medial and final positions, except for the word “llama” which was actually borrowed from Spanish.¹⁷⁾ The reason why the word “llama” is spelled that way, in spite of its irregularity, is simply to mark it as being of foreign origin.

Thus, loan words in English are very often spelled irregularly (i.e. they do not follow regular English spelling rules), but we cannot say simply that they are irregular spellings of English because those irregular spellings function as markers of loan words. In fact, if people know precisely how those loan words were marked depending on their origins in the past, they usually can identify the origins of the loan words. However, in real situations, it is a fairly hard task for many people, especially for non-native speakers of English, to identify the origins of many loan words in English. Therefore, for those people who are not experts in English etymology, irregular spellings which were actually purported to mark their foreign origins still seem irregular.

Note

- 1) c.f. H.L. Mencken. *The American Language*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1979, p. 480.
- 2) Barbara M.H. Strang. *A History of English*. Methuen, London, 1970, p. 107.
- 3) Mencken. op. cit., p. 402.
- 4) The linguistic terms, “diachronic” and “synchronic”, were introduced first by Ferdinand de Saussure (c.f. *Course in General Linguistics*, p. 81). A diachronic explanation is used to explain the present state of a language by pointing to the varying forces at work on it in the past. A synchronic explanation is an explanation of how a language system works at one particular point in time, such as the present.
- 5) c.f. G.H. Vallins. *Spelling*. Andre Deutsch, London, 1965, p. 11 and p. 68-9.
- 6) Josef Vachek. “Review of R. Venezky, “The Structure of English Orthography””. *Language*, Vol. 47, No. 1, 1971, p. 216.
- 7) Otto Jespersen. *A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles: Part 1; Sound and Spelling*. Bradford and Dickens, London, 1954.
- 8) Ibid. p. 232.
- 9) In this case, a diachronic explanation, the GVS, is responsible for the vowel alternations. But it can be explained by a synchronic explanation. Such synchronic explanations can be found in Chomsky and Halle’s works, “The Sound Pattern of English” (1968), and in Venezky’s work, “The Structure of English Orthography” (1970).
- 10) Venezky. op. cit. p. 121.
- 11) Ibid., p. 121-2.
- 12) c.f. Vallins. op. cit. p. 45, 54, 68-9.

- 13) c.f. Strang. op. cit. p. 28.
- 14) Venezky. op. cit., p. 59.
- 15) c.f. Noam Chomsky. "Current Issues in Linguistics" in *The Structure of Language: Readings in the Philosophy of Language*, Ed. J. Fodor and J. Katz. Prentice-Hall, Englewood, 1964, p. 64, and Chomsky and Halle. op. cit. p. 380.
- 16) Larry M. Hyman. *Phonology: Theory and Analysis*. Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, New York, 1975, p. 19-20.
- 17) Venezky. op. cit., p. 106.

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[要 約]

英語のスペリング体系が持つ不規則な特性から、これまで400年以上にわたってその体系をより合理的な内容に改めようと数々の提言や試みがなされてきたが、未だにその不規則性は存在したままとなっている。

その理由をこれまでの歴史的なときの流れの中で考えてみると、1650年頃には既に本の出版者の間には今日と同じように確りとしたスペリングについての規範ができていた。そして、1770年以降には「ミススペリング」という概念も生まれてきたのであるが、個人の書く手書きの文章にはかなりの多様性が見られたようであった。しかし、それらのスペリングについての規範は次第に社会に定着し、今日に至っているのである。

今日、我々が使っている英語のスペリング体系の中に存在する不規則な部分は主に二つの原因から発生していることが、数々の文献で述べられている。その一つは、1400年から1600年を中心にして起こった「大母音変換」(Jespersen による名称)で、これによって、母音字とその発音の関係が非常に複雑になってしまったのである。そして、もう一つ原因はヨーロッパ言語を源とする外来語によるものであり、その語源を示すためにあえて不規則なスペリング体系を残しているのである。

これらの原因を考えて今日の英語のスペリング体系をみてみると、その不規則性に存在するかなりの部分を理解できるといえる。