

Early Modern English Etymological Respellings and Their Influence upon Pronunciation

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1. INTRODUCTION

The relation between spoken and written systems has been dealt with by different scholars. Some of them defended the predominance of one mode over the other, although this is not considered acceptable any more. The most widespread opinion nowadays is that of those who claim they are two independent systems with their own characteristics each.¹

These two codes are closely related, but it is usually the written variety the one that must be adjusted to reflect the changes undergone in the spoken medium. Nevertheless, the spelling of a word can exert influence on the pronunciation of it and make it change. The influence of writing on the spoken language is a condition of literate societies, thus the more literate the culture is, the more influential writing will be on the spoken language. Throughout the history of the English language some graphical forms were modified by analogy with some other words presumably related to them or some unhistorical spellings were reinserted. After some time, this new spelling, whether etymological or not, might have had influence on the pronunciation of the word. In some other cases the introduced graphs were never pronounced, though. It is difficult to assess which circumstances or which factors helped the new spelling give rise to changes in pronunciation. In this article, we will discuss some of the cases in which Early Modern English orthographic conventions were altered and analyse the effects of these changes.

2. INTERACTION BETWEEN SPELLING AND PRONUNCIATION

There is no questioning about the fact that spelling and pronunciation interact. The interaction is produced in different ways, so we can have what Anttila calls (1989: 43):

- 1) *Pronunciation spelling* or remodelling of the spelling to get a more phonetic form. That is the kind of spelling one can find in present-day English in *nite*, *blu*, *sox*, etc.;

¹ The bibliography on the subject is really abundant: for some traditional views, see Householder (1971: 248-250). For more recent opinions, see Scragg (1989: 5-6) or Blake (1995: 6).

- 2) *Spelling spelling* when the spelling of a particular word, like *doubt* or *could*, is influenced by the spelling of others or
- 3) *Spelling pronunciation*, or the pronunciation of words as they are spelled.

In the present article, we will concentrate on the last two, as the first one is not relevant for our study. As we are going to focus on the influence of spelling upon pronunciation, we also exclude other examples where the alteration of the graphic form had different effects on the lexical system, such as the emergence of homonyms, as in *fantasy-phantasy*. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the respelling was influenced by the Greek etymon until both terms tended to be apprehended as separate words.

But, why are these processes especially significant during the Early Modern English period? On the one hand, because they are also clearly influenced by the spread of literacy. With the introduction of the printing press in Britain and the advent of cheaper writing materials on the one hand, mass literacy became “both feasible and desirable”, as Scragg points out (1974: 56). On the other, the Early Modern English period was a witness of the restoration of orthographies by analogy with Latin, Greek or French. In order to attain a more etymological spelling many lexical items were reshaped, some of them even erroneously, according to their original source. Some of these remodellings had a short life, as they were discarded soon after. Buchman (1940: 236) reckons half of the spelling pronunciations of present-day English are due to the artificial respelling that took place during the Renaissance period. Even if these phenomena are not exclusive of that time, the Early Modern English period contributed to increase both *spelling spelling* phenomena and *spelling pronunciations* on a large scale. The former entails the reshaping of Middle English forms on etymological principles. However, the new spelling did not exert any influence on the pronunciation. In this group we can mention some examples such as the introduction of:

b in *debt*, *doubt* and *subtle* based on its original classical forms *debitum*, *dubitum* and *subtilis*. The first two were adopted through French and attested in the Middle English period without *b*, as it had already been lost in French. In the case of *subtle*, in the First Folio of Shakespeare it appears with *b*, while in the first editions of Milton’s poems the spelling *suttle* is the only one, except in *Paradise Regained*, which has *subtle*;

c was introduced in *indict*, *victual*, *scythe*;

g in *sovereign* and *foreign*. We can very clearly trace the history of some of the terms as the writers of the period provide instances of the word with or without the spurious letter. In this way, we can find Mulcaster uses *foren* in his *Elementarie* (1582) (Görlach, 1991: 226-231), while some other later scholars will use the form with *g*; *gh* started to form part of *delight* and *spright* by association with words like *light*;

h is not etymological in *anchor*, *harbour*, *heir*, *honour*, *myrrh*, *rhetoric*, *rhyme* or *school*;

l was introduced in *could*, *salmon*, *adultery*, *psalm*, *palm*;

p in *receipt*, *concept*, *deceit*;

s in *isle*, *island*, *aisle*, *scissors*;

t in *listen*, *glisten*;

w in *whore*, *whole*.

The story of most of the above-mentioned words is widely acknowledged and needs no further explanation, as it is a similar one in most of the cases: alteration of the orthographic form invoking its ultimate classical origin.

In some other cases, the modification in the form of the word led some people to start pronouncing the word according to the new spelling. Although it is not unique, it tends to appear more often in languages where the correspondence between grapheme and phoneme is far from being a one-to-one relationship, as Kökeritz (1964: 138) remarks: “a fluid orthography tends to favour phonetic spelling, but a fixed, conservative mode of writing, especially one that approaches the ideographic stage, holds the seeds of spelling-pronunciation”. This very idea applies to English, where the gap existing between spelling and pronunciation is quite wide on some occasions. Buchman (1940: 1) states that most of the spelling pronunciation processes in English are due to this reason. And he continues referring to the real cause for this gap: the phonetic changes that took place during the Early Modern English period and the lack of orthographic adequacy to the changes.

Since graphemes do not always map onto phonemes in a clear and consistent way, speakers tend to rely on the spelling and use it as a guide to pronunciation. This is particularly the case of learners of English as a second language, but not only, as native speakers employ this mechanism as well, even if it is considered a contemptible habit by some scholars. There have always been voices against those that use the spelling as a guide to pronunciation. Probably one of the earliest ones is recorded by Shakespeare when Holofernes characterizes one of these users:

He draweth out the thread of his verbosity finer than the staple of his argument. I abhor such fanatical phantasies, such insociable and point-device companions, such rackers of orthography, as to speak dout, fine, when he should say, doubt, det, when he should pronounce, debt, -d, e, b, t- not d, e, t: he clepeth a calf, cauf; half, hauf; neighbour *vocatur* nebour, neigh abbreviated ne. This is abhominable, which he would call abominable. *Love's Labour's Lost* (V. i. 17-28)

Although such attitude is now condemned by some professional linguists, it still plays an important role among the general public, either because of people's snobbism or a deliberate attempt among the semi-educated to show their mastery of orthography. Whatever the reason might be, it seems to be a growing trend as Levitt remarks (1978: 61-62):

The increasing influence of orthography on phonology thus appears to us a normal and even inevitable development in an age of nearly universal literacy. It cannot be summarily dismissed as a 'monstrosity' because of the *a priori* assumption that language is speech alone while writing is supposedly an extraneous factor. It is not, in our opinion, the task of the linguist either to advocate or condemn the influence of graphemes on phonemes, but to recognize that influence as a fact and to evaluate its significance.

Following Levitt's view, it is not our aim to judge whether spelling should exert influence on pronunciation or not, but as spelling pronunciations are a fact, we will analyse under which circumstances the process happens. If we compare some texts written before the Early Modern English period with the spelling of some authors of this period, we can clearly trace the way in which the orthography of the word was altered. In some writers there is fluctuation between two forms, so they use the old one or the restored one even on the same page of their writings as a clear sign that the change in pronunciation did not occur overnight. In this respect, we find in *The Excellency of the*

English Tongue by Carew that the author uses *perfection* alongside with *perfitt* (Görlach, 1991: 240-45) or some others which can be consulted in the table appended at the end of this article.

The long-held view that the written form is the 'right' one and that the pronunciation should conform to it accounts for many of these processes. This attitude was strengthened by classical studies which played such an important role in the British education system for centuries. So, the restoration of these etymological spellings resulted in the gradually changing in the pronunciation of some terms, although it is difficult to ascertain why most of these respellings succeeded while others failed to have an effect on the spoken medium.

The following list does not intend to be a complete account of the phenomenon, but serves to illustrate some cases where the spelling pronunciation prevailed.² One can mention the introduction of:

b in *absolve* or *ascribe* which was altered to *ascribe* after Latin in the 16th century, though *ascrive* was occasionally used till late in the 17th. *February*, which was attested in ME as *feverel* appears to be of English origin, but the form *February* was refashioned after Latin;

c in *antarctic*, *arctic*, *conduct*, *interdict*, *lectern*, *perfect*, *sanctify*, *subject*, *verdict*

d in *administer*, *admiral*, *admonish*. In the group *adv-*, *d* was adopted in the Early Modern English period in: *advance*, *advantage*, *adventure*, *advice*, *advocate*;

g in *cognizance* - *cognisance*. The *g* appeared 15th century, and has here gradually affected the pronunciation. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* "the spelling with *s* is etymological, but that with *z*, which accords with the pronunciation, has long prevailed";

h in *amaranth*, *amethyst*, *amianth*, *anthem*, *apothecary*, *asthma*, *authentic*, *author*, *authority*, *catholic*, *fifth*, *forehead*, *Gothic*, *habit*, *harmony*, *hectic*, *hemisphere*, *herb*, *heretic*, *heritage*, (*inherit*, *heritor*), *hermit*, *history*, *horologe*, *horror*, *host*, *humble*, *hotel*, *hour*, *humour*, *hypocrite* and *hypocrisy*, *orthography*, *parenthesis*, *schedule*, *schism*, *sixth*, *theatre*, *theme*, *throne*, *thyme*, *twelfth*.

Many of these Middle English loans come from French, where there was an <h> in the spelling which had never been pronounced in English, since it had been lost in French before the loan was made. In our period we can find both spellings without and with <h>, although the latter are commoner because of the influence of the Latin forms. The pronunciations with /h/, however, seem not to be established until the 18th century according to Buchman (1940: 183) or the 19th century according to Barber (1976: 316 and 1993: 202).

In some other words etymologically related, the refashioned spelling after Latin did not prevail, for instance in *able* and *ability* where the initial *h* was restored, but probably never sounded, and after a long struggle on the part of scholars like More, Ascham, Sidney, Hooker, Bacon, Browne, etc., to preserve this written link with Latin, it finally disappeared before 1700.

Other insertions are those of:

² Although clearly out-of-date and on some occasions questionable, one can consult two books which provide quite an exhaustive list of words which have undergone orthographic changes throughout the History of the English Language: Buchman (1940) and Koeppel (1901).

- l* in *altar, assault, baldric, balm, cauldron, default, emerald, falcon, fault, fealty, herald, moult, realm, scaffold, soldier, vault*;
- n* in *convent*. The form in Middle English from Anglo-French was *covent, cuvent, couvent*. However, the latinized spelling with *n* was introduced c. 1550, and by c. 1650 superseded the Middle English form;
- p* in *April, bankrupt, captive, corpse, empty, (im)pregnable, physiognomy, prognostic*;
- r* in *endorse*, which is an altered form of Middle English *endosse* assimilated to the equivalent medial Latin *indorsare*, from *in + dorsum*;
- s* in *baptism* that comes from Middle English *bapteme* and was assimilated to the Latin and Greek form in 16th century;
- u* in *language*.³ G. Douglas in his *Virgil's Aeneid* (1515) (Görlach, 1991: 263-264) shows *langage* without *u*, T. Wilson presents both forms (Görlach, 1991: 219-222), while many other later authors will show this epenthetic vowel;
- z* in *capercailzie, Dalzies, Menzies*. In Scotland printers replaced rune yogh with <z>, so the Scottish surnames happened to be pronounced with /z/ and even the <l̥> in *capercailzie*, which according to *Oxford English Dictionary* was a Scottish way of representing <l̥>. This replacement had an influence on the pronunciation of the word which is now heard with both pronunciations.

As mentioned above, this phenomenon cannot be limited to the Early Modern English period, as there are more recent instances where the pronunciation of a word was clearly influenced by its spelling. The significant fact, however, is the large amount of occurrences that happened in the afore-said period favoured by the trend of restoring etymologies, which go back to their ultimate origin regardless of the changes that had already taken place in the phonological system of the adopting or recipient language.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The influence of spelling upon pronunciation seems undeniable. This influence of writing upon speech is a natural tendency in literate societies, so the phenomenon is not restricted to the Early Modern English period. It continued to happen in the following centuries and it does so in present-day English bringing together two worlds which are quite apart in English: grapheme and phoneme. This process is particularly intense in the case of learners of English as a second language where the special relationship between spelling and sound in English demands a closer link between these inseparable aspects of the linguistic system. In this sense, some scholars have considered spelling-pronunciations as a way to narrow the gap between the written and the spoken modes.

³ Dobson (1968: 124) states the case of *language* cannot be considered *spelling pronunciation*, but many other authors consulted disagree with him and include the item in this group.

TABLE I. DIFFERENT ORTHOGRAPHIC CONVENTIONS FOUND
IN THE WRITERS SELECTED BY M. GÖRLACH (1991)

A.

	Douglas (1515)	Wilson (1553)	Harmann (1567)	Hart (1569)	Bullokar (1580)	Mulcaster (1582)
Author / authority				authoritie		autoritie
Advantage						
Adventure						
Concept						
Deceit						
Delight		delityng				
Doubt				doubt		
Foreign			forren			foren
Hability						
Island / isle	iland		iland			iland
Language	langage	lang(u)age	language			language
(Im)perfect(ion)	imperfite		perfection	perfite	perfect	
Orthography				ortographie	ortography	
Realm						
Reign			reigne			raigneth
Sovereignty						

(Continues on the following page)

B.

	Harrison (1587)	Puttenham (1589)	Carew (1595)	Bacon (1605)	Sprat (1667)	Dryden (1672)
Author / authority		author				
Advantage			aduantag	aduantage		
Adventure			aduenturuous			
Concept		conceits				
Deceit					deceipt	
Delight			delight	delight		
Doubt					doubt	doubt(less)
Foreign			forrayne			
Hability		habilitie				
Island / isle	Iland / ile					
Language	language	language	languad(g)e / langwadge	language	language	language
(Im)perfect(ion)			Perfection / perfitt			perfect(ion)
Orthography						
Realm		realme				
Reign						
Sovereignty			soueraignty			

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