

10 English

The English language has arguably become the most important international language and the most widely studied second language in the world today. In view of its world importance and also by the fact that as a reader of this book you obviously have some familiarity with and interest in English writing, we will devote some time to exploring the English writing system. English orthography is interesting in its own right, particularly because of its reputation for complexity. We will investigate the nature and development of this complexity.

10.1 Background and History

Britain was conquered by the Romans in 43 NEW and became the westernmost region of the ancient Roman Empire. The British inhabitants at that time spoke a Celtic language, the ancestor of modern Welsh. Although the senior Roman soldiers were literate, there is little evidence that the Britons borrowed writing from the Romans. In the early fifth century NEW, the Romans had difficulties at home and recalled their troops from Britain, with the withdrawal completed by 426 NEW. In the ensuing political vacuum, Germanic-speaking peoples invaded from the continent, taking over the area we now call England and southern Scotland. Their language came to be known as English.

Latin-speaking Christian missionaries reintroduced the Latin language and the Roman alphabet to England around 600. Somewhat later the Norse invaded parts of Britain. Many runic inscriptions (chapter 13) have been found in England in the Norse language as well as a few in Old English. Although the early Middle Ages are sometimes called the ‘Dark Ages’ in reference to the collapse of learning after the fall of the Roman empire, this term is somewhat misleading, especially for England. Winchester emerged as the capital of England at this time, and with the sponsorship of King Alfred, its monastery became a recognized centre of learning in Europe with a large library. Other monasteries throughout England followed Winchester’s lead.

During the Old English period, Latin held sway as the preferred language for writing. Documents of both church and state were normally in Latin, as was the case throughout western Europe; nevertheless, English was written to a limited extent in fairly early times. Portions of the Bible, prayers, and other religious material were translated into English for the devotional needs of the people. Wills were

sometimes written in English; presumably, people were more comfortable if the arrangements for their inheritance were made in their native language. Certain other works were also either written in English, such as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, or translated into English from Latin, such as the Venerable Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. The best-known Old English literary work is *Beowulf*.

In 1066, England was conquered by William of Normandy, who quickly installed his own French-speaking people into positions of authority. Latin remained the language for much writing, but Norman French emerged as the court language, and many documents came to be written in French. The nobility spoke French, but ordinary people continued to speak English. For about 200 years, until 1250, very little was written in English.

By the late thirteenth century, the nobility had begun to speak English. English began gradually to replace both Latin and French in almost all contexts. By 1350, English was used in schools, and in 1384, Wycliffe's English translation of the Bible had appeared. In 1420, English replaced French as the official language of Parliament. English survived as the ordinary spoken language of England, but it had changed considerably. As well as changes in the phonology and grammar, an enormous number of French words had been borrowed into English: often words of government and warfare – *duke, judge, government, county, general, army*, but also very ordinary words – *table, very, single, beef*. London was the capital, and the dialect of the London court became the standard spoken form of Middle English although there was considerable variation throughout the country. Whereas Old English spelling was relatively uniform, following the Winchester standard, Middle English spelling was quite diverse, often following the local pronunciation. The best-known literary work in Middle English is Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

In the fifteenth century, a standard form of English, based on court usage, emerged as the official style of writing for government and spread throughout Britain. It also became the standard form used for all types of written communication, gradually displacing local variation.

The English language is usually divided into three periods:

500 NEW–1100	Old English or Anglo-Saxon
1100–1500	Middle English
1500–present	Modern English

The boundary between Old and Middle English is marked by the Norman conquest and the introduction of French; the boundary between Middle and Modern English is less dramatically marked by a set of sound changes. In the mid-fifteenth century, English underwent what is known as the Great English Vowel Shift (described in more detail below) which affected the quality of all long vowels. Shakespeare is the best known of the early Modern English writers.

Printing came to Britain in the late fifteenth century and was established by the mid-sixteenth century. The Reformation encouraged every English family to read the Bible; printing made Bibles widely available, if not to every family, at least to those of moderate means. The Renaissance, with its interest in the classical world,

<h>	/h/	[h]	<hat>	/ha:t/	[ha:t]	'hot'
		[x]	<riht>	/riht/	[rixt]	'right'

The letters <c>, <g>, and <s> were used with their expected Latin values to represent /k/, /g/, and /s/, but they were also used to represent other sounds not present in Latin. The letters <c> and <g> were also used to represent /tʃ/ and /j/ respectively; further, the digraphs <cg> and <sc> were used for the sounds /dʒ/ and /ʃ/.

<c>	/k/	<corn>	/korn/	'grain'
<c>	/tʃ/	<ceap>	/tʃe:ap/	'cheap'
<g>	/g/	<guma>	/guma/	'man'
<g>	/j/	<geard>	/jeard/	'yard'
<s>	/s/	<sæ>	/sæ/	'sea'
<cg>	/dʒ/	<brycg>	/brydʒ/	'bridge'
<sc>	/ʃ/	<scip>	/ʃip/	'ship'

The sound /θ/ which was not found in Latin was first written as <th>. Later, however, the symbols <þ> and <ð> were used more or less interchangeably for /θ/. The symbol <þ> is 'thorn' from the runic alphabet (chapter 13), and the symbol <ð> is a modified form of <d>.

<þ ð>	/θ/	<þancian, ðancian>	/θankian/	'thank'
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In early Old English, a runic symbol <p>, known as 'wynn', was used for <w>. Later, wynn was replaced by <u>, <uu>, or <w>. Note the three similar symbols: thorn <þ>, wynn <p>, and modern lower-case <p>.

<p>	/w/	<pæpen>	/wæ:pen/	'weapon'
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Vowel length was not marked in Old English. The ligature <æ> was used for the low front vowel. In later Old English, the vowels /y, y:/ merged with /i, i:/ and were written as <i>.

		<i>short</i>		<i>long</i>	
<i>	/i/	<sittan>	'sit'	<wif>	'woman, wife'
<y (i)>	/y (i)/	<yfel (ifel)>	'evil'	<fyr (fir)>	'fire'
<e>	/e/	<bern>	'barn'	<swete>	'sweet'
<æ>	/æ/	<fæder>	'father'	<hælan>	'heal'
<a>	/ɑ/	<wacian>	'be awake'	<gan>	'go'
<o>	/o/	<god>	'god'	<mod>	'heart, spirit'
<u>	/u/	<lust>	'desire'	<þu>	'thou'

A portion of the Lord's Prayer is shown in figure 10.1. The first line is in Latin; the next two are in Old English. Note that the upper-case form of <ð> is <Ð>.

PATER NŔ. QVIES IN CELIS	pater n[oste]r qui es in celis
ÐV VRE FÆDER.	Ðu ure fæder
þe eart on heofenu seo þin nama	þe eart on heofenu seo þin nama

Figure 10.1 The beginning of the common Christian prayer known as the Lord's Prayer. The first line is in Latin; and the next two lines are in Old English (eleventh century)

Table 10.2 The phonemes of Middle English

p b		t d	tʃ dʒ k g	i i:	u u:
f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ h	e:	ə o:
m		n		ɛ ɛ:	ɔ ɔ:
		l			a a:
		r			
w			j		

10.3 Middle English

The phonemic inventory for Middle English is given in table 10.2.

Unlike Old English, the fricatives in Middle English had contrastive phonemes distinguished by voicing: /f v/, /θ ð/, /s z/. The letters <f> and <v> were used for the phonemes /f/ and /v/ respectively. Both /þ/ and /ð/ are spelled <th>; thorn <þ>, however, was retained in a few common words: <þe þat þou þen> 'the, that, thou, then'. This limited use of thorn survived into the eighteenth century, giving the quaint forms such as *þe olde shoppe*. Commonly, the thorn was written as a superscript: <^þe>; the thorn was later misunderstood as <y>, and this antiquated writing of *the* is commonly misread today as /ji/.

The letter <s> was used for both /s/ and /z/. Furthermore, two lower-case allographs of <s> arose: <s> and <ʃ>, with no set pattern for their distribution although there was a tendency to use <ʃ> word-initially and -medially, and <s> word-finally. Instead of double <ss> or <ʃʃ>, a form <ß> was common, a combination of <ʃ> and <z>. The long <ʃ> continued to be used into the early nineteenth century when it was replaced entirely by <s>.

As a result of the influence of French borrowings, such as *cellar*, <c> came to be used for both /k/ and /s/. The French use of <c> for /s/ was extended to some native words such as *lice* and *mice*. French <qu> replaced Old English <cw> for /kw/: OE *cwen* MidE *quene* 'queen'. The digraph <sh> was used for /ʃ/: OE *scamu* MidE *shame*; <ch> was used for /tʃ/: OE *ceap* MidE *cheap*; and <gh> was used for /x/: OE *riht* MidE *right*.

The letters <i> and <j> were in free variation: *tiim tijm* ‘time’, *iuge juge* ‘judge’, as were <u> and <v>: *up vp* ‘up’, *euen even* ‘even’. The letter <y> was considered an allograph of <i>.

One phonological change involving vowels also affected the relationship of language and writing. In Middle English unstressed vowels were neutralized to /ə/, and sometimes lost; the writing, however, retained the etymological vowel. Thus in writing today, one needs to know the etymological spelling of a word. For example, the first and third syllables of the words *serene* and *divine* were both unstressed and the vowel in these syllables became /ə/: Mid. Eng. /sə're:nə/ and /də'vi:nə/. The final syllable is spelled <e> in both cases, but the first syllable is spelled differently in the two words, <se-, di->, reflecting the history of the words. Today, English speakers often stumble over pairs such as *affect* and *effect*; both words are normally pronounced /ə'fekt/, but distinguished in spelling by the etymological vowel.

In Late Middle English, unstressed <e> /ə/ was lost in word-final syllables: /də'vi:nə/ > /də'vi:n/, and /sə're:nə/ > /sə're:n/, but again the spelling did not change to reflect this change in pronunciation. The situation of a long vowel being written as <VCe> was so common that in Modern English the convention has arisen that this is a normal way to spell tense vowels: e.g., *bite*, *made*, *rose*, *cute*.

10.4 Modern English

Between Middle and Modern English, various changes occurred in the language which altered the relationship between writing and pronunciation. During the Middle English period, a sound change known as trisyllabic shortening occurred (table 10.3), which shortened long antepenultimate vowels. This shortening resulted in many morphemes having different allomorphs with long and short vowels. Since the writing system did not distinguish long and short vowels, no change to the writing of these words was indicated.

Table 10.3 Trisyllabic shortening in Middle English. Antepenultimate vowels are shortened. The addition of the suffix (right column) to the root causes the long vowel to occur in the antepenultimate syllable and thus become shortened. Except in the first example, only the affected vowels are shown

MidE	Long		Short	
/i/	<i>divine</i>	/i:(dəv)i:(nə)/	<i>divinity</i>	/i:(div)i(niti)/
	<i>derive</i>	/i:/	<i>derivative</i>	/i/
/e/	<i>serene</i>	/e:/	<i>serenity</i>	/e/
	<i>supreme</i>	/e:/	<i>supremacy</i>	/e/
/a/	<i>sane</i>	/a:/	<i>sanity</i>	/a/
	<i>explain</i>	/a:/	<i>explanatory</i>	/a/
/u/	<i>profound</i>	/u:/	<i>profundity</i>	/u/
	<i>abound</i>	/u:/	<i>abundance</i>	/u/

Table 10.4 Great English Vowel Shift. The long high vowels became diphthongs, and the others shifted upwards

/i:/	>	/Δj/	/u:/	>	/Λw/
/e:/	>	/i:/	/o:/	>	/u:/
/æ:/	>	/e:/	/ɔ:/	>	/o:/
			/a:/	>	/ɔ:/

In late Middle English times, after trisyllabic shortening was complete, the long vowels, but not the short ones, underwent a sound change known as the **Great English Vowel Shift** (table 10.4) in which the high vowels became diphthongs, and the other long vowels were shifted upwards.

For morphemes having allophones with long and short vowels, the Great English Vowel Shift greatly accentuated the phonetic difference between the two allomorphs. English orthography could have revised the spelling to reflect these sound changes, perhaps with forms like **serine-serenity*, **sene-sanity*. Such a change would have maintained the relationship between language and writing much as it had been, i.e., a fairly close phoneme-grapheme correspondence. However, this did not happen. The spelling of these words remained as before. The retention of these spellings greatly changed the relationship between English writing and pronunciation. For this type of alternation in Modern English, morphemes were given a single spelling, and allomorphic variations had to be supplied by the reader. The effect today of the Great English Vowel Shift is shown in the following examples:

	<i>serene</i>	<i>serenity</i>	<i>sane</i>	<i>sanity</i>
Middle English	/e:/	/e/	/a:/	/a/
Early Mod. English	/i:/	/e/	/e:/	/a/
Later Mod. English	/i/	/e/	/ej/	/æ/

Thus, we can see that from a relatively simple relationship between grapheme and phoneme in Middle English, various forces combined to create a much more complex relationship by Modern English times. In particular, it frequently became necessary to know which morpheme one was writing. Thus, Modern English spelling is deeper (cf. discussion of orthographic depth in chapter 9) than Middle English spelling because of the larger number of cases where the spelling is morphophonemic or morphemic.

One incidental effect of the Great English Vowel Shift was that English tense vowels today are pronounced differently from the way they are pronounced in the great majority of languages using the Roman alphabet: cf <a e i o u> in English /ej i aj ow u/ and in German /a e i o u/. English regularly uses a number of digraphs. Some digraphs like <ch> /tʃ/, <sh> /ʃ/, and <th> /θ, ð/ are used in a fairly consistent fashion. Other digraphs are used only in certain environments. The sound /dʒ/ is usually spelled <j> at the beginning of a word, but <dge> at the end, cf. *jay*, *edge*, *judge*. The sound /k/ is usually spelled <k> or <ke> after tense vowels or after two vowel sequences, but <ck> after lax vowels: *seek*, *eke*, *break*, *take*, *soak*, *smoke*,

Luke, like; lick, deck, rack, duck. The diphone <x> has the same value /ks/ that it had in Latin: *axe, six*; in the few words with <x> in word-initial position, it is usually pronounced /z/: *xylophone, Xavier*.

For most words borrowed into English in Modern English times from languages using the Roman alphabet, the original spelling has been retained. For example, from French, we have *soufflé, ballet, lingerie, cul-de-sac*; from German: *Kindergarten, Fahrenheit, Gesundheit, Umlaut*; from Italian *spaghetti, concerto, bologna*. Although the pronunciation of a borrowed word is regularly altered to fit English patterns, sometimes there are other unpredictable changes: *lingerie* /'lɒnzə, reɪ/, where one might expect a final /-i/, or *bologna* /bə'loʊni/ instead of /*bə'loʊnjə/; compare *Einstein* /'aɪn, stajn/ and *Holstein* /'hoʊl, stɪn/, both borrowed from German.

Spelling pronunciations (or **reading pronunciations**) arise by guessing at the pronunciation of a word by applying the regular orthographic conventions of English. This is common with foreign words. The surname *Samaranch* is pronounced /səmə'rɑŋ/ in Catalan, but it is regularly heard as /'sæmə'ræntʃ/ in English; French *déshabillé* /dezabije/ is sometimes heard as /'deɪʃəbil/.

A somewhat different situation involves the Chinese capital *Beijing* /,beɪ'dʒɪŋ/, which is often heard as /,beɪ'ʒɪŋ/. Note that <jing> is a perfectly ordinary spelling in English for /dʒɪŋ/; the syllable /ʒɪŋ/ is, in fact, unusual in English. Probably, the mistaken pronunciation /ʒɪŋ/ for the Chinese city is used in English because it sounds more foreign and exotic and thus more appropriate for a foreign word. Similarly, one occasionally hears *Copenhagen* /'kɒpən, heɪɡən/ pronounced with /-həɡ-/ (the Danish is quite different: *København* /køβənhavn/); presumably, the vowel /a/ is assumed to sound foreign. The television character named *Bucket* who insisted that her name was pronounced /,bu'keɪ/ gives us an example of manipulating the different spelling conventions of English in an attempt to achieve elegance.

10.4.1 Orthographic dialect variation

In the nineteenth century, particularly because of the spelling preferences of Noah Webster's dictionary, two standard spelling variations arose, which we may term **orthographic dialects**. Most of the English-speaking world generally follows what we can call 'British usage'; the United States, however, follows 'American usage'. The actual number of words affected is not large, but the differences often assume a patriotic and symbolic significance. Some examples of these orthographic dialectal variations are given in table 10.5.

These differences are never significant enough to impede anyone's reading; however, their symbolic significance is enough that popular novels are frequently re-typeset to reflect the appropriate market; film titles are also often similarly altered.

Canada, having an inherited tradition of British spelling, yet widely exposed to American media, often shows an interesting mixture of the two traditions. The word *cheque*, for the bank instrument, is almost never spelled *check* in Canada; *check* is the spelling everywhere for the meanings 'inspect, obstruct, intersecting pattern', etc. The *-re* words occur in Canada with British spelling fairly consistently. With the other types of words, there is a good deal of variation. The *-our* spelling is

Table 10.5 Examples of English dialect differences in spelling

American	British
<i>color, favor, honor, humor, glamor</i>	<i>colour, favour, honour, humour, glamour</i>
<i>center, theater, fiber, liter (but acre, ogre)</i>	<i>centre, theatre, fibre, litre, acre, ogre</i>
<i>(bank) check</i>	<i>cheque</i>
<i>traveling, leveling</i>	<i>travelling, levelling</i>
<i>enroll, enrolled, enrollment</i>	<i>enrol, enrolled, enrolment</i>
<i>license, practice</i>	<i>licence, practice (noun); license, practise (verb)</i>
<i>defense, offense</i>	<i>defence, offence</i>
<i>judgment</i>	<i>judgement (but judgment in legal contexts)</i>
<i>catalog, cigaret</i>	<i>catalogue, cigarette</i>

more widely used in Central and Eastern Canada and in British Columbia than in the prairie provinces (Pratt 1993). The spelling of other words takes on a somewhat random appearance. Most Canadian newspapers use some variant of British spelling; yet, despite the best efforts of editors, oddities still occur. Overcorrections are not uncommon. *Honour* and *honourable* both have a <u>; *honorary* is not supposed to have one – in any tradition – but Canadian newspapers have nevertheless recorded many an *honourary degree*. In the food section, one often sees a reference to the herb as *summer savoury*, which in all dictionaries is given as *savory*; *savoury* is the general adjective meaning ‘tasty’. Editors almost always get *Minister of Defence* right (cf. the American *Secretary of Defense*), but the sport section of newspapers often extols a strong *defense*. At my own university, the official document for examiners to register their decision for a PhD examination contained both spellings *defence/defense* on the same sheet of paper. By the same token, American editors complain that they have constant battles to keep the <e> out of *judgement* and the <u> out of *glamour*.

In the twentieth century, English became widely used in international affairs. The increase of political and economic importance of the United States in this period has led to an increasing use of American orthographic usage, not only in areas where English is a foreign language, but also in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, etc., and at times even in Britain itself.

10.4.2 Creative spelling

Since the Second World War, there has been a marked popularity of what Venezky (1999) calls **creative spellings**. Forms such as *Kids “R” Us*, *Molson Lite Beer*, *E-Z-Kleen* demonstrate playful, inventive spellings to give greater differentiation to the name; for marketing, this often gives greater brand recognition to a company or product. The umlauts in *Häagen Dazs* ice cream or the music group *Moxy Früvous* are apparently purely decorative. Spellings such as *nitelite* substitute a more common spelling convention for another slightly less common one. *Ye Olde Clocke Shoppe* uses (pseudo-)archaic spelling to suggest old-world charm and value (see discussion above in §10.3).

Computer usage has led to many creative spelling variations, such as *PostScript*, *theglobeandmail*, *DVORAK*. The internet revived the almost defunct @-sign as part of an internet address. The punctuation mark <.> traditionally has dialectal pronunciations, being known both as ‘period’ and ‘full stop’; in internet addresses, however, it is universally read as ‘dot’, as in *www.widgetville.com*. (Note: the @-sign arose in the Middle Ages as an abbreviation of the Latin word *ad* ‘to’ (Ullman 1980). The vertical stroke of the <d> was enlarged and curved over the <a>, eventually resulting in the present form. In later times, the abbreviation was used for English *at* in commercial phrases such as ‘10 apples @ 12¢ each’.)

10.5 Spelling and Sound Changes

Frequently, sound changes occur without a corresponding change in the spelling. We have already seen examples of this in trisyllabic shortening and the Great English Vowel Shift. In Middle English, the words *see* /se:/ and *sea* /sɛ:/ were written and pronounced differently. With the Great English Vowel Shift, the vowels were raised to *see* /si:/ and *sea* /se:/ in early Modern English, still pronounced and spelled differently. In the eighteenth century, *sea* /se:/ was raised to /si:/, neutralizing the pronunciation with *see*, but the spelling difference was maintained. This is an example of the later tendency of English to retain spelling differences where they distinguish morphemes.

Old English had initial clusters of /hl, hn, hr/ spelled respectively as <hl, hn, hr>. By Middle English times, the /h/ of these clusters had been lost and the spelling revised to reflect the change in pronunciation. This is an example of the earlier tendency of English to revise the spelling to reflect changes in pronunciation.

French, of course, is a descendant of Latin. Over the centuries, French has undergone many sound changes. By the eleventh century, the Latin words *debitum* ‘debt’ and *dubitum* ‘doubt’ had lost the /b/ and the final /m/ and were written in French as *dette* and *dout*. The Norman conquerors brought these words with them to England, and they were borrowed into Middle English as *dette* /det/ and *dout* /du:t/. In Renaissance times, scholars showed off their knowledge of Latin by inserting an etymological into the spelling, giving the modern forms *debt* and *doubt*. Here we have a spelling change with no sound change. These words have never been pronounced with a /b/ in English.

Similarly, the Latin *falconem* ‘falcon’ was borrowed into Middle English in its French form as *faucon* with no /l/. Note the proper name *Fawkner* (alongside *Falconer*); the <l> was added to the spelling following the Latin spelling *falcon-*, like the in *debt* and *doubt*. In modern times, falcons have not figured prominently in most people’s lives, although those who used the word usually pronounced it in the traditional way without an /l/ as /'fakən/ (or /'fɒkən/, depending on their dialect). In the twentieth century, the Ford Motor Company introduced an automobile with the name *Falcon*. By this time, the word was sufficiently unfamiliar that a spelling pronunciation /'fælkən/ became the norm, at least in North America. As a side note, automobile manufacturers seem to like fast birds. Toyota found a rather rare term for a kind of falcon – *tercel*. Dictionaries regularly give this word

with a stress on the first syllable /'təʊsəl/. Toyota, however, stressed the second syllable as /təʊ'sel/, perhaps thinking that this sounded more French, more exotic, and worth more money.

English place-names, notably in Britain, often have unusual spellings. Often, the spelling reflects an older pronunciation and has not kept pace with sound change. Some examples of these are *Thames* /tɛmz/, *Gloucester* /'glɒstəɪ/, *Towcester* /'tɔwstəɪ/, *Kirkcudbright* /kəɪ'kubɹi/, Cholmondeley /'tʃɒmli/, and my personal favourite *Featherstonehaugh* /'fæɪn,ʃa/.

10.6 Spelling Reform

10.6.1 *The nature of reform*

Because of the complex relationship of writing and language in English, there have been many proposals for **spelling reform**, ranging from the scientific and well-thought out to the amateurish and confused. Various arguments can be made for spelling reform in English, but the strongest is that a phonemically based system would allow children to learn to read and write more quickly. Different spelling reformers have proposed different approaches to reforming English spelling, but certain themes recur.

Most of these schemes aim to spell English with a one-to-one grapheme–phoneme relationship in which each sound would be represented by a single symbol. Where the same sound is now spelled in different ways, only one spelling would be used, a single grapheme where possible. For example, the use of <c> for both /k/ and /s/ would be eliminated, by using either <k> or <c> consistently for /k/, and <s> for /s/. The sound /dʒ/ would be consistently spelled as <j>, eliminating spellings such as <dge>.

Silent sounds would be removed in such words as *debt*, *indict*, *right*, *hymn*, *sign*, *knee*, *sword*. Many schemes would eliminate the final silent <e> in words such as *kite*, *late*, *flute*. The digraphs <sh zh ch> would be used to spell /ʃ ʒ tʃ/; /θ/ would be written as <th>, and /ð/ as <dh>. These digraphs would be useful since no reasonable single symbol is otherwise available. The one diphone <x> would be replaced by <ks>. The large number of English vowels creates a problem since the Roman alphabet has only five vowel letters. However, doubled vowel symbols and vowel digraphs could be used.

A basic way to spell English phonemically would be to remove morphemically based heterography. Thus, pairs such as *blue–blew*, *scene–seen*, *wood–would*, *ring–wring*, *meat–meet* would each have the same spelling. Further, words with irregular spellings such as *is*, *was*, *of*, *one* would be respelled to reflect their pronunciation.

10.6.2 *Problems with spelling reform*

Despite the efforts of various people with a variety of schemes to reform English spelling, the last successful reforms were the minor reforms of Noah Webster some 200 years ago, and his influence outside the United States has been very limited.

Why has spelling reform in English not met with greater success, considering the number of proposals for reform? One reason is the natural conservatism of people. Reformed spelling looks strange. Some people, of course, are attracted to novelty, but more seem to be put off by unusual spellings. Millions of people have learned to spell English. Indeed, the expectation today for most native speakers of English is that they will become literate. We have little sense that English-speaking countries, in relation to others in the world, have been held back in science, the arts, or commerce because of any extra time spent in school learning to read and write English. With this success rate, the general public reaction is to invoke the adage: 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it.'

If we take a more scholarly, scientific view of spelling reform, other problems emerge. One, English is widely spoken with many dialects. Which dialect would be chosen as a standard? Should *car* be spelled with an <r> or without? English speakers can be divided into two large dialect groups: one which pronounces /ɹ/ in such a word, the other which does not. The present situation is that words like *car* are spelled with an <r>, and the large group of English speakers who do not pronounce the /ɹ/ have to learn when to insert the <r> in spelling. If the <r> were to be omitted in spelling, the large group of English speakers who do pronounce /ɹ/ would have to learn not to write a consonant which they pronounce. Either way, the fundamental notion of a simple one-to-one equivalence between phonemes and graphemes is violated. This problem becomes enormous as we go through the various other dialectal variations: most dialects distinguish the vowels of *cot* and *caught*, but many do not. Should *path* have the same vowel as *pat* or *palm*? Should *solder* have an <l> to reflect the British pronunciation, or no <l> to reflect the North American pronunciation? Quite simply, the dialectal variation of English means that no transcription system can be devised which would not require a large number of arbitrary rules and considerable memorization for many people, precisely the problem that spelling reform set out to avoid.

The second concern is that evidence from psychology suggests that some of the so-called irregularities of English actually serve to facilitate reading, especially for the experienced reader. Experienced readers tend to perceive words as single units and do not 'read' them letter by letter. Evidence suggests that we process the information slightly faster when homophonous morphemes are spelled differently: *pair-pear-pare*. On the other hand, when we see the word *well*, we have to spend a slightly longer time figuring out which morpheme is intended.

Phonemic transcription may be useful to the inexperienced writer in that the spelling can be accurately determined from the pronunciation. For the reader, however, especially for the experienced reader, the English tendency of spelling different morphemes differently is useful.

Other objections to spelling reform also have some validity. The amount of literature in the current English orthography is enormous. Most people, certainly university students, would have to learn to read both systems for at least 50–75 years; for scholars, knowledge of both systems would be required for much longer. Moreover, the political likelihood of persuading all English-speaking countries and publishers to use a single revised system is unlikely. Even if the political will for revision existed, it is not unimaginable that a hodgepodge of new standards would emerge.

Certain arguments against spelling reform are less persuasive. Sometimes we take false pride in difficulty: 'If I could do it, so can you.' A bad system need not be perpetuated just because it is workable. Having mastered a difficulty, we sometimes ascribe greater attributes to ourselves than is warranted: 'People who can spell *chrysanthemum* correctly are of a higher moral character and have a greater intelligence than those who cannot.' We should not forget the purported saying of Andrew Johnson, a president of the United States and a poor speller: 'It takes a poor mind not to be able to think of more than one way to spell a word.' Sometimes the argument is made that our current spelling system keeps us in touch with the past: 'Writing a <g> in *gnaw* keeps us aware of our glorious history.' Just exactly how much glory are we talking about here?

In summary, spelling reform in English would offer some help to writers and those learning to read; the present system, however, has virtues useful to the experienced reader. The extensive dialect variation, the complex international situation, and the enormous amount of material existing in the present system work to make change impracticable. There is a danger of fragmenting a stable system. At present, there is no viable movement to reform English spelling.

In other countries, writing reform has been successful. For Dutch, the social situation was very different. First, Dutch is spoken by many fewer people than English. Second, although it is spoken in two countries, the Netherlands and Belgium, there is a strong desire to maintain uniformity in linguistic matters wherever possible.

The character simplification in China succeeded for different reasons. Although Chinese is spoken by a very large number of people, China has been ruled by a strong central government for centuries with the authority to make significant changes. The communist government of the People's Republic of China imposed enormous changes on Chinese society, of which writing reform was simply one of many. In Táiwan and elsewhere outside the PRC, Chinese speakers have resisted character simplification, partly out of conservatism and partly because of a dislike of the communist government in the PRC. However, as more material is printed using the simplified characters, and with the handover of Hong Kong to the PRC, a slow drift of other users towards the simplified characters seems inevitable.

10.7 Further Reading

Lass (1987), Millward (1988), Wakelin (1988) are recent treatments of the history of English. English orthography is specifically discussed in Carney (1994), Deighton (1972), Parkes (1993), Scragg (1974), Vallins (1954), and Venezky (1970, 1999).

10.8 Terms

Anglo-Saxon
creative spelling
Great English Vowel Shift
Johnson, Samuel

language academy
 Middle English
 Modern English
 Old English
 orthographic dialect variation
 reading pronunciation
 spelling pronunciation
 spelling reform
 Webster, Noah

10.9 Exercises

- 1 Give the British/American alternative spelling for the following words.
 - (a) program
 - (b) pyjamas
 - (c) jail
 - (d) maneuver
 - (e) sulphur
 - (f) plow
 - (g) woolen
 - (h) kerb
 - (i) esophagus

- 2 Why would *acre* and *ogre* not be spelled *acer* and *oger* in the United States like *center* and *scepter*?
- 3 Find examples showing three different ways of spelling each of the English vowels: /i e j a ʊ/
- 4 Look up the standard pronunciation of the following words in a dictionary. Consider why each would be considered an unusual or problematic spelling. Where two different pronunciations are in common use, dictionaries typically give the one considered more standard first.
 - (a) boatswain
 - (b) brooch
 - (c) cotoneaster
 - (d) diocese
 - (e) dour
 - (f) gaoler
 - (g) gunwale
 - (h) stele
 - (i) victuals