The History of English Spelling

Christopher Upward
and
George Davidson

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In Memoriam
Christopher Upward
1938–2002

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Preface

In his novel *Three Men on the Bummel*, the writer Jerome K. Jerome says of English spelling that it 'would seem to have been designed chiefly as a disguise for pronunciation'. Certainly, no one who reads any passage of modern English can fail to notice the frequent mismatch between the sounds of English and the letters used to record them, as, for example, in the well-known set of -OUGH words *cough, rough, though, through, thorough, plough*, or in the case of -OW as in *now, know, knowledge*. Given that in many languages there is a clear and predictable relationship between speech-sounds and the written characters that represent them, one might well ask why this is not the case with English.

The answer lies in the history of the English language, and the purpose of this book is to trace that history in so far as it pertains to the development of modern English spelling and its relationship to modern English pronunciation. We begin with the Old English base and trace the development through the centuries, describing in turn, and in detail, the contributions made to English spelling by Old Norse (the language of the Vikings), French (both Norman and Parisian), Latin, Greek and the many other languages from which English has borrowed vocabulary. These chapters form the bulk of the book, and are its main contribution to the study of English spelling. We also note the internal developments in the language, such as the Great Vowel Shift, the contribution of the early Civil Service (the Court of Chancery) and the printers, and the work of lexicographers and spelling reformers.

The original idea for this major study of English spelling was Christopher Upward's, and the greater part of the material contained in this book was written by him before his untimely death in 2002. Some

time after her husband's death, Mrs Janet Upward commissioned the present writer to edit and complete her husband's work and to see it through to publication. It then remained for us to find a publisher, and we are very grateful to Professor David Crystal, the general editor of the *Language Library* series, and to Danielle Descoteaux of Wiley-Blackwell for their willingness to include this book in that series.

Of course, in a book of this length much must remain unrecorded and undiscussed. By the time of his death, Christopher Upward had written a great deal more material than could be included here, much of it based on his own exhaustive study of the Old English, Franco-Latin and Greek elements in present-day English. (For example, the Franco-Latin chapter alone as originally written by Christopher amounted to over 150,000 words – considerably longer than the whole of this book as it now stands.) A general introductory chapter on writing and spelling and another on the origin and development of the alphabet were also felt, with regret, to be outside the scope of the present book. In order to make the results of Christopher's immense work of scholarship available to all those who have an interest in English spelling, all the material that could not be included here is now available on a website (www.historyofenglishspelling.info) hosted by Aston University in Birmingham, UK, and we are very grateful to them for being willing to offer us this facility.

Bibliographical references to books and articles are omitted from the text, but for the benefit of readers who might wish to follow up particular points they are provided in the chapter end-notes.

I would like to thank Julia Kirk of Wiley-Blackwell for her advice and support throughout this project, and Fiona Sewell and the two anonymous readers of the typescript who provided many helpful suggestions and necessary corrections. Any remaining errors are, of course, my responsibility.

Finally, my thanks are due once again to David Crystal and Danielle Descoteaux, and also to Janet Upward and her family, and not least to my wife Nancy, for bearing with me while I made my best efforts to produce a book worthy of the work Christopher Upward had put into it, a task which took rather longer than originally expected.

George Davidson
Edinburgh

Abbreviations and Symbols

Abbreviations

AmE	American English	OE	Old English
ANorm	Anglo-Norman	OFr	Old French
BrE	British English	ON	Old Norse
EModE	Early Modern English	VLat	Vulgar Latin
Eng	English	WSax	West Saxon
Fr	French		
Gr	Greek	BCE	before the Christian era
Ital	Italian	CE	of the Christian era
Lat	Latin	d.	died
LGr	Late Greek	GVS	Great Vowel Shift
LLat	Late Latin	poss.	possibly
ME	Middle English	prob.	probably
MFr	Middle French	s.v.	at that word
ModE	Modern English	ult.	ultimately
ModFr	Modern French	usu.	usually
ModGr	Modern Greek	vs.	versus

Symbols

> ‘becomes’
< ‘is derived from’
* indicates a hypothetical reconstructed form
~ indicates an alternative or variant

Letters, letter-groups and word-elements under discussion are generally printed as small capital letters (e.g. GH, -OUGH, -ITY). However, where necessary for clarity in particular contexts, letters and letter-groups may be printed between angle brackets (e.g. <g> rather than G).

Phonetic symbols

Consonants

p as in *paw*
b as in *bow*
t as in *to*
d as in *do*
k as in *cow*
g as in *go*
tʃ as in *chew*
dʒ as in *jaw*
f as in *foe*
ɸ an F-like sound made with the lips close together
v as in *vow*
θ as in *thin*
ð as in *the*
s as in *so*
z as in *zoo*
ʃ as in *show*
ʒ as in *regime*
m as in *my*
n as in *now*
ŋ as in *song*
ɲ as in French *signe*, Spanish *señor*
l as in *low*
ɬ an L-like sound with audible friction, as in Welsh *llan*
r as in *row*
h as in *how*
w as in *woe*
j as in *you*
ɟ a G-like sound formed at the hard palate
x as in *loch*
ɣ voiced equivalent of x
ç as in German *ich*

Vowels

iː as in *sea*
ɪ as in *him*
ɛ as in *get*
e as in Fr *été*
æ as in *cat*
a as in French *patte*
ɑː as in *car*
ʌ as in *sun*
ɒ as in *cot*
ɔː as in *cord*
o as in French *côte*
ʊ as in *put*
uː as in *do*
ɜː as in *bird*
ə as in ***a****bout, fath****er***
y as in French *tu*
eɪ as in *hay*
aɪ as in *high*
ɔɪ as in *boy*
əʊ as in *so*
ɑʊ as in *how*
ɪə as in *here*
ɛə as in *air*
aɪə as in *fire*
ɑʊə as in *our*
ʊə as in *poor*

Where vowel symbols with ː are not specifically listed above, the vowels are to be considered longer equivalents of vowels without ː. Similarly, where vowel symbols without ː are not listed above, they are to be considered shorter equivalents of vowels with ː.

/. . ./ indicates a phonemic transcription (i.e. a transcription of contrasting speech-sounds)

[. . .] indicates a phonetic transcription (i.e. actual sounds as pronounced)

ˈ precedes the syllable which carries the main stress in a word, e.g. /ˈdɪstrɪkt/ *district*, /dɪˈstrækt/ *distract*

Language Periods Referred to in the Text

(Dates given are, of course, approximations; see comments *passim* in the text.)

Old English (5th century–c.1150)
Middle English (c.1150–c.1476)
Early Modern English (c.1476–c.1660)
Modern English (c.1476–present)
Old Norse (8th century–1350)
Old French (8th century–1400)
Middle French (14th and 15th centuries)
Modern French (16th century–present)
Late Latin (200–600)
Vulgar Latin (the spoken Latin of the classical period)
Late Greek (200–700)

1

Introduction and Overview

English has frequently been criticized for the complexity of its spelling rules and for a lack of system and consistency in the relationship between the sounds of the spoken language and the symbols of the written language. In the Preface we have already noted Jerome K. Jerome's thoughts on English spelling as a 'disguise for pronunciation'. Others have made similar criticisms.[1] The Danish linguist Otto Jespersen, for example, refers to English spelling as a 'pseudo-historical and anti-educational abomination'; an American linguist, Mario Pei, has described it as 'the world's most awesome mess' and 'the soul and essence of anarchy'; Mont Follick, a former professor of English who as a British Member of Parliament twice, in 1949 and again in 1952, introduced bills into Parliament advocating the simplification of English spelling, said of our present-day spelling that it is 'a chaotic concoction of oddities without order or cohesion'; and more recently the Austrian linguist Mario Wandruszka pronounced it to be 'an insult to human intelligence'. Only slightly gentler in its reproach is Professor Ernest Weekley's opinion that the spelling of English is, in its relationship to the spoken language, 'quite crazy'. One could quote many other similar remarks.

A now classic lament on the state of English spelling, written from the viewpoint of a foreign learner, is the poem *The Chaos* by a Dutchman, Gerard Nolst Trenité, an amusing 274-line (in its final version) catalogue of about 800 English sound–spelling inconsistencies such as *verse* and *worse*; *oven* and *woven*; *Susy, busy, dizzy*; *how, low, toe*; *nature, stature,*

The History of English Spelling, First Edition. Christopher Upward and George Davidson.

mature; and *font, front, wont, want*.[2] Nolst Trenité's complaint is much the same as Jerome's: it is not so much the spelling as such that is lamented as the mismatch between spelling and pronunciation, with the consequence that learners of English cannot predict the pronunciation of many words they encounter in writing.

Such opinions are not new. As early as the late 1500s, scholars such as Sir Thomas Smith, John Hart and William Bullokar put forward proposals for reforming English spelling,[3] recognizing that, as Hart put it, 'in the moderne and present maner of writing . . . there is such confusion and disorder, as it may be accounted rather a kind of ciphring' that one can learn to decipher only after 'a long and tedious labour, for that it is unfit and wrong shapen for the proportion of the voice' (i.e. spelling does not accurately reflect the sounds of speech). A century and a half later, the actor and lexicographer Thomas Sheridan wrote in his *General Dictionary of the English Language* that:

> Such indeed is the state of our written language, that the darkest heiogliphics [*sic*], or most difficult cyphers [*sic*] which the art of man has hitherto invented, were not better calculated to conceal the sentiments of those who used them from all who had not the key, than the state of our spelling is to conceal the true pronunciation of our words, from all except a few well educated natives.[4]

But do the above remarks constitute a fair assessment of English spelling? Is it really nothing more than a 'chaotic concoction of oddities'? There are some linguists who have expressed rather more positive judgements on present-day English orthography.[5] Geoffrey Sampson, for example, has suggested that 'our orthography is possibly not the least valuable of the institutions our ancestors have bequeathed to us'. The eminent lexicographer Sir William Craigie, in the preface to his *English Spelling, Its Rules and Reasons*, pointed out that the impression that 'English spelling is a hopeless chaos' is quite false, and Joseph Wright, one-time professor of comparative philology at Oxford University, was of the opinion that 'English orthography . . . far from being devoid of law and order . . . is considerably more systematic than would appear at first sight' and that one would be quite wrong to think of it as 'existing by pure convention without rhyme or reason for its being, or method in its madness'. The linguists Noam Chomsky and Morris Halle are famously of the opinion that, in fact, 'English orthography turns out to be rather close to an optimal system for spelling English'. And in his discussion of the systematization of English orthography in the 17th century,

Brengelman affirms that the spelling system that developed during that period 'is not a collection of random choices from the ungoverned mass of alternatives that were available at the beginning of the century but rather a highly ordered system taking into account phonology, morphology, and etymology and providing rules for spelling the new words that were flooding the English lexicon'.

So how irregular, in fact, is English spelling? While it is very easy to home in on examples such as *streak* and *steak*, *now* and *know*, *blood* and *stood*, *here* and *there*, and of course the infamous -OUGH words mentioned in the Preface, the question must also be asked: how typical are such irregularities of English spelling as a whole? Analyses of English vocabulary suggest not nearly as much as the above critics, and others, seem to believe. English spelling is often perfectly phonetic, representing with absolute clarity and consistency the actual sound of many words by appropriate strings of letters. One study in the United States found that in a computer analysis of 17,000 words, 84 per cent were spelled according to a regular pattern and only 3 per cent were so irregular and unpredictable in their spellings that they would have to be individually learned,[6] a state of affairs very far from a supposed 'chaotic concoction of oddities'. One figure that is often quoted is that English spelling is about 75 per cent regular. (The statistics gained from such studies depend, of course, on what is or is not included in the analysis and how it is carried out. Are personal names and place-names to be included in or excluded from the study? And if, for example, a word such as *plough* is deemed irregular, are *plough* and *ploughs* to be counted as one irregular word or two? There is also the question of what should or should not be considered an English word for the purposes of a study of English spelling, a matter to which we will give some consideration below.) What makes English spelling *appear* to be very irregular is simply that the majority of the 400 or so most irregular words are also among the most frequently used words. It is their frequency, not their number, that creates the impression of great irregularity in English spelling.

We will say no more here about the pros and cons of English spelling, though we will return to the subject again briefly in the final chapter of this book. The main purpose of this *History of English Spelling* is neither to criticize nor to extol the current state of English spelling, but rather to describe its origins and development, to outline the factors, both linguistic and non-linguistic, that have led to its having the form it has today, and to analyse the complexities of its sound–spelling correspondences. For as Jespersen says,[7] referring in this instance to the pronunciation of

-OUGH in *though, through, plough, cough, enough*: 'However chaotic this may seem, it is possible to a great extent to explain the rise of all these discrepancies between sound and spelling, and thus to give, if not rational, at any rate historical reasons for them.' What holds true for these five words is equally true for many others in which the Modern English sound–spelling relationships are unsystematic and unpredictable, and in some cases seem to be almost beyond comprehension. To provide historical descriptive explanations for the facts of present-day English spelling is the chief purpose of this book.

The Development of English Spelling: A Brief Introductory Overview

The symbols used in spelling modern English are the 26 letters of the Roman or Latin alphabet as it is currently established for English. (When speaking about English, we can refer to this particular set of letters as the English alphabet, in order to distinguish it from the different sets of Roman letters used in writing other languages, such as the German alphabet or the Spanish alphabet.) As we will see, however, the English alphabet did not always consist of 26 letters.

The alphabet evolved very gradually,[8] being applied in various forms in ancient times to languages as different as Greek, Etruscan and Latin. Originally, each letter of the Roman alphabet stood for one (or in the case of X, two) of the speech-sounds of spoken Latin, and when it came to be applied to Old English, the broad sound–spelling relationships of the Roman alphabet were retained as they had applied in Latin; but since Old English contained sounds for which the Roman alphabet provided no letters, a few new letters were introduced from a Germanic alphabet known as the futhark or futhorc. Although there were still more phonemes[9] (that is, contrasting speech-sounds such as, for English, /p/ and /b/, /m/ and /n/, /s/ and /ʃ/) in the Old English sound system than there were individual letters to write them with, over some four centuries preceding the Norman Conquest, the Anglo-Saxons evolved quite a successful system for writing their language down, using a generally regular and predictable system of sound–symbol correspondences.

The sound-to-symbol/symbol-to-sound simplicity of that original system, however, was undermined by subsequent events, such as the Norman Conquest itself, after which French-speaking scribes applied some of their own spelling rules to English (replacing, for example, CW, as in Old English

cwen, by QU, as in Modern English *queen*), the introduction of printing from continental Europe (with Flemish printers introducing Flemish spellings for English speech-sounds, such as GH for /g/; compare Old English *gast*, Flemish *gheest*, Modern English *ghost*), and by the desire of many scholars in the 16th century to add into English words letters reflecting the Latin and Greek words from which the English words were derived (hence Modern English *doubt*, with a silent B reflecting the B of Latin *dubitum*, although *dubitum* had developed into *doute* with neither the sound /b/ nor letter B in Old French, whence Middle English *doute*).[10] Unfortunately, some of the spelling changes made at this time are based on false etymologies. A classic case is Modern English *island*, from Old English *iȝland* (*ȝ* is a form of G) written correctly without S in Middle English *iland* but now with an S reflecting a supposed but non-existent connection with *isle* (< French *isle* < Latin *insula*, the source of Modern French *île*). Moreover, while there is a universal tendency for the pronunciation of a language to change over time, the changes needed to maintain a match between sound and symbol are not usually carried out once a writing system has become established, and even less so after the introduction of printing. It is this that has led to much of the irregularity and unpredictability that characterizes the spelling system of present-day English.

The formative stage of modern English spelling began in the early 15th century when Henry V was on the throne. Between 1417 and his death in 1422, Henry wrote almost all his letters in English. From Henry's Signet Office (by whose clerks the king's personal letters were written), the use of English in an increasingly standardized orthography passed to the Chancery Office, and thence in legal documents throughout England. Not surprisingly, this 'official' English spelling was then copied by professional scribes across the whole country. The introduction of printing in 1476 also tended towards an increasingly standardized non-regional spelling. English spelling has never, however, been subject to any overall centralized plan, since England never established or authorized a body, such as the Académie Française (established in 1634) for French, by which such developments could be guided. Modern English spelling has, therefore, emerged by a slow process of increasing consensus among printers and lexicographers, reinforced by teachers, authors of literacy primers and published writers. (These matters will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 9.) Prior to this, spelling was, despite the above-mentioned standardizing tendencies, much more fluid, and words could be spelt almost according to a writer's whim, though the variety and inconsistency in spelling was not without limits: spelling varied more

between writers than within the writing of any one individual, and also varied according to the writer's education and temperament (consistency in spelling generally being the mark of someone of a scholarly frame of mind).[11] It is also the case that spelling was more consistent in published works than in private correspondence and diaries.[12]

In the second half of the 18th century Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) became widely used as a source of reference by the literate section of the population and hence contributed to the general acceptance of a standard, and by the late 19th century there was a fair degree of unanimity among printers, dictionaries and private writers as to how most English words should be spelt. The consensus was, however, never totally formalized or formally applied to all words. When one begins to explore some of the less familiar corners – as well as a few familiar areas – of English vocabulary, one discovers that a surprising number of words still have accepted alternative forms (the figure has been put as high as 25 per cent; it depends, of course, on the size of the dictionary one consults – generally speaking, the smaller the dictionary the fewer the variants listed), and are thus testimony to a continuing element of fluidity in English spelling. Amongst the best known in Britain are *gaol*/*jail, despatch*/*dispatch, enquire*/*inquire, adviser*/*advisor*, and the endings -ISE/-IZE in verbs such as *organise*/*organize*. Many of the words in this category are borrowings from 'exotic' foreign languages (which will be the subject of detailed analysis in Chapter 8): the lack of an accepted, standard system of sound–symbol correspondences in English shows up particularly when it comes to transliterating or transcribing loanwords from languages that do not use the Roman alphabet, for which the 'correct' or 'best' spelling to use may not be at all obvious. Hence we find alternative spellings for foodstuffs such as *lichi*/*litchi*/*lichee*/*lychee* (from Chinese), *borsht*/*borscht*/*borsch*/*borshch* (from Russian), *poppadum*/*popadum*/*popadom*/*poppodom*/*poppadam* (from Tamil) and *yogurt*/*yoghurt*/*yoghourt* (from Turkish). And from Russian *tsar*^{j} we have the alternative forms *czar*/*tsar*/*tzar*.

Geographical and Historical Variation

The above examples show us that English spelling is not one single, clear-cut system with every word only ever being spelt in one way. But in addition to the type of spelling variation illustrated above, English spelling is subject to variations of two other kinds, geographical and historical:

- Geographical variation is seen in the spelling differences found in the different orthographic usages of Britain and the United States of America, such as *colour*/*color* and *plough*/*plow*. (These differences will be described in detail in Chapter 9.) Elsewhere in the English-speaking and English-learning world, either British or American norms are adopted, or occasionally (as in Canada) a mixture of the two. Within the British Isles, too, there can be some minor spelling differences: for example, Scottish lakes are *lochs* /lɒxs/, while in Ireland the spelling is *loughs* (with the same pronunciation).[13]
- The above geographical variations are also a manifestation of historical change, in that they have arisen in particular historical circumstances. Other, less dramatic, changes slowly accumulate over time, mostly without the average reader being particularly aware of them. Two changes that became general in the 20th century in Britain were the discontinuation of the form *shew* in favour of *show*, and reversion to the older form *fantasy*, replacing *phantasy*, which had been in common use for several centuries. These are isolated cases, however, and have not entailed corresponding changes to such parallel spellings as *sew* and *phantasmagoria*.
- Another form of historical change is the recognition as correct, or at least as acceptable in some contexts, of spellings that have previously been considered incorrect. One example is *miniscule* for *minuscule* (doubtless from the influence of words beginning in MINI-), still condemned as a 'common error' in *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* in 1998, for example, but earlier gaining a shade of respectability as an 'alternative, less acceptable spelling' in *Chambers English Dictionary* in 1988. Another example is *alright*, once rejected as an error but now increasingly accepted as an alternative to *all right*. The Internet is now a major disseminator of misspellings, at least some of which may through frequency of occurrence achieve a degree of acceptability in the future which they do not enjoy at present.

The Word-Stocks of English and their Contributions to Modern English Spelling

An examination of present-day English vocabulary shows that English consists for the most part of four main word-stocks: a Germanic base (mostly Anglo-Saxon but with some Scandinavian elements), overlaid with French and with some elements from Latin and Greek. Each of

these word-stocks has its own spelling system. A key feature of English spelling, therefore, is that it is *polysystemic*, a mixture composed of or based on the differing spelling systems of several languages: Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian, French (of at least two dialects – Norman and Parisian), Latin and (through a fairly standardized system of transliteration) Greek. The detailed analysis of the contributions that these languages and their spelling systems have made to modern English spelling forms the main part of this book (see Chapters 3, 5 and 7), the Latin and French elements being considered together in one chapter, with some overlap also between Latin and Greek.

The vocabulary of English is, however, not a closed set. The Roman alphabet is not peculiar to the English language and ever since it was first applied to English it has been the vehicle for an unceasing flow of vocabulary items between English and other languages, in both directions. Every language (whether or not written with the letters of the Roman alphabet) that has contributed one or more words to modern English vocabulary may thereby also have contributed to English orthography elements of its own particular sound system or sound–spelling system – directly, if the language is written with the Roman alphabet, as for example the GH of *spaghetti* or the GN of *bolognese*; via a system of transliteration from a non-Roman alphabet, as is the case with the BH of *bhaji* and *bhangra*, the KH of *khaki* or the Q of *qadi*; or from the phonetic transcription of words written in a non-alphabetic writing system, as in Chinese *taijiquan*, or of words from languages with (at least originally) no writing system at all, such as native languages of North and South America or Australia. The polysystemic structure of English spelling, to which it owes much of its apparently chaotic and unsystematic nature, derives therefore not only from the four major spelling systems (Old English, French, Latin, Greek) that underlie it, but also from a large number of minor ones (Spanish, Italian, Russian, Turkish, Malay, Chinese, etc.) that have each contributed some elements to English vocabulary and thereby to English spelling – 'major' and 'minor' to be understood only in the sense of the relative size of the contributions made.[14] The contribution made to English spelling by these minor languages will be analysed in Chapter 8.

English Spelling and English Words

If English spelling is, by definition, the spelling of English words, by what criteria can one decide what to include in the data for a study such

as this and what to exclude? Is every word that is or has been used by at least some English-speakers, even if only rarely or only in particular contexts or only in certain parts of the English-speaking world, to be included in the data for a history of English spelling, or are there words and phrases which, although found in otherwise undoubtedly English sentences, one may nevertheless exclude from a study of English spelling on the grounds that they are not actually English but foreignisms, i.e. foreign words or expressions which do not truly belong to the word-stock of English?

The question is not new. As Sir James Murray wrote in his introduction to the first edition of the *Oxford English* Dictionary:[15]

> English vocabulary contains a nucleus or central mass of many thousand words whose 'Anglicity' [i.e. 'Englishness'] is unquestioned . . . But they are linked on every side with other words which . . . pertain ever more and more distinctly to the domain of local dialect . . . and . . . the actual language of other lands and peoples. And there is absolutely no defining line in any direction: the circle of the English language has a well-defined centre but no discernible circumference.

Murray expects, therefore, that 'opinions will differ as to the claims of some [words] that are included and some that are excluded [in the dictionary]'.[16] In a similar vein, Serjeantson, in her study of foreign words that have entered English, admits that 'Probably no two people would agree entirely as to what words should be admitted to such a volume as this, especially when the words in question come from the more remote languages such as Chinese, Maori, and so on.'[17]

What applies to English lexicography and lexicology is no less applicable to the study of English spelling, and the issue remains as problematic today as it did in the last century. Of course, there are some guidelines and rules of thumb that can be applied. For example, if a word has been respelt as it has entered or developed in English, it is without question an English word: thus *shamrock* < Irish Gaelic *seamróg*. But if *taoiseach*,[18] also of Irish origin, appears in English sentences only in that form (rather than, for example, as **teeshock*), is it or is it not an English word? Should one, or should one not, include AOI = /iː/ in a list of English sound–spelling correspondences? By what criteria does one decide? Similarly, if a loanword has been given an English pronunciation even if the spelling is still 'foreign', it has fairly clearly become an English word: thus *eisteddfod*, usually pronounced /aɪˈstɛdfəd/ in English as opposed to the Welsh /əɪˈsdɛðvod/.[19] This rule of thumb would make

cynghanedd,[20] pronounced /kəŋˈhænɛð/, a less certain case although the word appears in several English dictionaries, its pronunciation not having been much anglicized from the Welsh, and in particular with a sound–spelling correspondence DD = /ð/ that is not normal in English. At the other end of the scale, words and phrases that are considered foreignisms are generally printed in italic type in English: thus

'Stamp collecting is my hobby, it isn't my *raison d'être*.'

This practice is also found in some dictionaries.[21]

In the cline from clearly accepted loanwords to clearly non-absorbed foreignisms, there is no place where a definite dividing line between English words and non-English words can be drawn. This is an issue particularly in Chapter 8. It is our intention in this book neither to over-simplify the description of English spelling by excluding 'exotic' loanwords nor to over-complicate it by including obvious foreignisms. We have tried to strike a balance, even if it is necessarily subjective and open to criticism.[22] While we have concentrated as far as possible on words that have, regardless of their form or pronunciation, without doubt become fully naturalized in English, nevertheless some words whose 'Anglicity' might be questioned have also been included in order to illustrate a particular spelling, word-structure or sound–spelling correspondence.

Word-Origin Irrelevant after Integration

Once a word has been absorbed into the language, it joins the common stock of English words and regardless of its origin generally undergoes the same sound and spelling changes as other words with the same sound and spelling structure. (This process can, of course, therefore only be seen in older borrowings into the language, not in the more recent addition to our word-stock.) For example, the word *bishop*, which came into Old English in the form *biscop*/*bisceop* via Latin *episcopus* from Greek *'επίσκοπος* (*episkopos*), shows the same development of Old English SC > SH = /ʃ/ as do words of Germanic origin such as *ship* and *fish* (Old English *scip, fisc*). Similarly, both words of Old English origin such as *hus* 'house' and *hlud* 'loud' and words of French origin such as *flour* and *doute* 'doubt' underwent the same shift of vowel sound from /uː/ to /ɑʊ/ during the Great Vowel Shift of the 15th and 16th centuries. (Compare, on the other hand, the Modern English pronunciation of *group* (< French *groupe*), a

word which first entered English in the late 17th century, i.e. some time after the Great Vowel Shift was over, and in which the vowel therefore did not shift to /aʊ/. Other factors, of course, may influence the outcome in particular cases, such as the 16th-century etymology-based spellings of words such as *doubt* and *debt*, discussed in Chapter 6 (see p. 191).

Aim and Limitations of the Study

The focus of this book is very much on current English spelling, how it came to be as it is and, to a lesser extent, how efficient it is as a means of symbolizing English pronunciation. A book of this size cannot hope or pretend to provide a complete history of English spelling, and its relationship to English pronunciation, in all its facets from the earliest times to the present century. As we have noted in the Preface, much must remain unrecorded and undiscussed. The following points in particular should be noted:

- The provision of examples of Old French, Anglo-Norman, and Middle and Early Modern English spelling has inevitably required a great deal of selectivity. A full range of spellings, or anything approaching such, would have been quite beyond the bounds of this study. (The *Oxford English Dictionary* records, for example, three forms for the Anglo-Norman root of the verb 'maintain', and no fewer than 122 variant English spellings of the word recorded between Middle English and the 19th century.) It must be stressed, therefore, that for a complete spelling history of any particular word, one must have recourse to the *Oxford English Dictionary* to supplement such limited information as can be provided in this book or even on the website (www.historyofenglishspelling.info).
- The focus in this book is on the spelling of general vocabulary, with little attention being paid to personal names and place-names. These do, however, receive more coverage in the material on the website.

Notes

1 References for the following remarks are: Jespersen (1905: 246; also 1956: 231); Pei (1953: 310, 311); Follick (1965: 1); Wandruszka (1990: 104); Weekley quoted in Vallins (1965: 11).

2 *The Chaos* is quoted in full and commented on in Upward (1994).
3 Smith (1568); Hart (1569) quoted in Vallins (1965: 94); Bullokar (1580). For further remarks on these and other proposals for spelling reform, see Chapter 9.
4 Sheridan (1780: 13).
5 Sampson (1985: 213); Craigie and Wright quoted in Robertson (1936: 299–300); Chomsky and Halle (1968: 184, footnote); Brengelman (1980: 334). The opinion of Chomsky and Halle is frequently quoted in this incomplete form, e.g. Carney (1994: xvii), Vachek (1973: 67), and without reference to the context in which it was made. The full quotation reads: '*In this case*, as in many other cases, English orthography turns out to be rather close to an optimal system of spelling English' because 'it turns out to be close to the true phonological representation' (emphasis added). The specific case referred to is the spelling of *divine/divinity, serene/serenity, profane/profanity*. Since acceptance of Chomsky and Halle's opinion requires acceptance of the theoretical framework underlying their analysis and of their view on what constitutes the 'true phonological representation' of these and other words, one could readily echo the comment of Vachek (1973: 68) that 'as a piece of apology for present-day English spelling, the argumentation adduced by Chomsky and Halle is hardly convincing, and if it is mentioned here this is only done for the sake of completeness'.
6 Hanna et al. (1971).
7 Jespersen (1933: 61).
8 A detailed account of the origins of the Roman alphabet can be found in the material on the website accompanying this book, www.historyofenglishspelling.info.
9 Technical terms are fully explained in the Glossary of Technical Terms, pp. 315–19. An explanatory list of the phonetic symbols used in this book can be found on p. xii.
10 For the dates of language periods referred to in this book, see p. xiv.
11 Baugh and Cable (1993: 203).
12 Sönmez (2000: 407). Sönmez also questions the hitherto generally accepted belief that women's spelling was worse than men's, noting that comparisons have generally been made between examples of men's published writing and women's private writing.
13 *Loch* is from Scottish Gaelic *loch*; *lough* is from Middle English, from Old English *luh*, of Celtic origin, but with the pronunciation of Irish Gaelic *loch*.
14 In the figures for the second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* quoted by Hughes (2000: 370), English has 50,725 borrowings from Latin, 37,032 from French and 18,675 from Greek. Among what we are calling the minor languages, some are, not surprisingly, more minor than others: English has, at one end of the scale, 12,322 words of German origin, 7,893 from Italian, 6,286 from Dutch and 5,795 from Spanish, and, at the other end, twelve

from Korean, nine from Thai and Xhosa (a language of southern Africa), seven from Tahitian and Iroquois, six from Vietnamese and Tongan, and four from Hopi.

15 Murray et al. (1884–1928: xvii).

16 Murray et al. (1884–1928: xxvi).

17 Serjeantson (1944: viii).

18 The taoiseach is the prime minster of the Republic of Ireland.

19 Wells (1990: s.v.).

20 An eisteddfod is a Welsh festival of music and poetry. Cynghanedd is a complex system of rhyme and alliteration used in Welsh poetry.

21 Thus, for example, in *Collins English Dictionary* (6th edn., 2003: x, §2.4): 'Foreign words or phrases are printed in boldface italic type and are given foreign-language pronunciations only unless they are regarded as having become accepted in English.' The criteria by which such acceptance or non-acceptance is judged are not stated.

22 Carney (1994: 105) states that 'unassimilated' words of foreign origin were excluded from his study of English spelling, admitting that the choice he made was 'inevitably idiosyncratic'.

2

England and English from the Romans to the Vikings

Latin and Celtic in Roman Britain

At the time of the Roman invasion in the 1st century CE, most of Britain was inhabited by Celtic-speaking tribes referred to collectively as Britons. The British language, the ancestor of Welsh, Cornish and Breton, was spoken over the whole of the country as far north as central Scotland. During the period of Roman rule, from 43 CE until the early 5th century, Celtic continued to be spoken, but Latin was the medium of written communication for the administration of Britain and was used by educated Britons as well as by their Roman rulers. Latin continued to be the official language in Britain in the first half of the 5th century, even after Roman administration came to an end in or around 410, and was still used into the 6th century by the British upper class in the west and north of the country,[1] but, unlike on the Continent, it did not replace Celtic.

That, then, was the linguistic situation in Britain when and after the Germanic tribes began to settle in the country.

Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms and Old English Dialects

By the early centuries CE, there were Germanic-speaking tribes in territories along the North Sea coast of Europe, and it is these tribes,

The History of English Spelling, First Edition. Christopher Upward and George Davidson.