

BRITAIN

English spelling

You write potato, I write ghoughpteighbteau

Aug 14th 2008

From The Economist print edition

The rules need updating, not scrapping

GHOTI and tchoghs may not immediately strike readers as staples of the British diet; and even those most enamoured of written English's idiosyncrasies may wince at this tendentious rendering of "fish and chips". Yet the spelling, easily derived from other words*, highlights the shortcomings of English orthography. This has long bamboozled foreigners and natives alike, and may underlie the national test results released on August 12th which revealed that almost a third of English 14-year-olds cannot read properly.

One solution, suggested recently by Ken Smith of the Buckinghamshire New University, is to accept the most common misspellings as variants rather than correct them. Mr Smith is too tolerant, but he is right that something needs to change. Due partly to its mixed Germanic and Latin origins, English spelling is strikingly inconsistent.

Three things have exacerbated this confusion. The Great Vowel Shift in the 15th and 16th centuries altered the pronunciation of many words but left their spelling unchanged; and as Masha Bell, an independent literacy researcher, notes, the 15th-century advent of printing presses initially staffed by non-English speakers helped to magnify the muddle. Second, misguided attempts to align English spelling with (often imagined) Latin roots (debt and *debitum*; island and *insula*) led to the introduction of superfluous "silent" letters. Third, despite interest in spelling among figures as diverse as Benjamin Franklin, Prince Philip and the Mormons, English has never, unlike Spanish, Italian and French, had a central regulatory authority capable of overseeing standardisation.

Yet as various countries have found, identifying a problem and solving it are different matters: spelling arouses surprising passions. Residents in Cologne once called the police after a hairdresser put up a sign advertising *Haarflege*, rather than the correct *Haarpflege* (hair care). Measures to simplify German spelling were rejected by newspapers such as the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, and defeated in a referendum in Schleswig-Holstein (though later endorsed by its legislature). A similar fate befell the Dutch, when opponents of the government's 1996 Green Book on spelling (*Groene Boekje*) released a rival *Witte Boekje*. French reforms in the 1990s didn't get off the runway, despite being presented as mere "rectifications", and attempts this year to bring European and Brazilian Portuguese into line were denounced in Portugal as capitulation to its powerful ex-colony.

There are linguistic reasons too why spelling reform is tricky to undertake. Written language is more than a phonetic version of its spoken cousin: it contains etymological and morphological clues to meaning too. So although spelling English more phonetically might make it easier to read, it might also make it harder to understand. Moreover, as Mari Jones of Cambridge University points out, differences in regional pronunciation mean that introducing a "phonetic" spelling of English would benefit only people from the region whose pronunciation was chosen as the accepted norm. And, she adds, it would

need continual updating to accommodate any subsequent changes in pronunciation.

Yes despite these concerns, some changes are worth considering; it takes more than twice as long to learn to read English as it does to read most other west European languages, according to a 2003 study led by Philip Seymour of Dundee University. Standardising rules on doubled consonants—now more or less bereft of logic—would be a start. Removing erroneous silent letters would also help. And as George Bernard Shaw observed, suppressing superfluous letters will in time reduce the waste of resources and trees. In an era of global warming, that is not to be sniffed at.

*Fish: gh as in tough, o as in women, ti as in nation (courtesy of GB Shaw). Chips: tch as in match, o as in women, gh as in hiccough.

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