

Necessary Herculean Task: Re-Writing the English Orthography

Sotiloye, B. S.

Bodunde, H. A.

Department of Communication and General Studies
Federal University of Agriculture
Abeokuta, Nigeria

Abstract

It is widely known that the orthography of the English language lacks accuracy and consistency which often results in ambiguity and redundancy. English has been described as the world's worst spelt language and this has been of great concern to most users especially where it is learnt as a second language. The discrepancies between the sounds and their graphemes have made writing a Herculean task for many. This paper identifies the divergent spellings of some English words that have resulted from the intuition of the second language learner and the danger it portends. It also proposes a phoneme-grapheme correspondence for the English language. It advocates a collaborative work by teachers of and researchers in English, linguists, orthography designers, aided by the government in bringing to fruition the desires of the generality of users of the English language to reduce the great task of spelling and writing the language.

Introduction

The orthography of a language is the set of symbols (glyphs and diacritics) used to write the language. It shows the relationship between sounds and letters, that is, the way letters and diacritic symbols represent the sounds of a language in a spelling system. This includes the set of rules describing how to write correct spellings, and arrange the letters in a sequential way to form words that can be easily pronounced.

Orthographies, however, differ from each other depending on the principles on which they are based. Some are phonetic in orientation while some are phonemic. Some other principles in orthography writing which will not be our concern in this paper, are 'adphonemic', 'equi-phonemic', 'neo-phonemic' according to Capo (1982). These are, however, useful when considering languages not yet subjected to writing and most importantly those with dialectal variations.

The phonetic principle involves assigning a grapheme to each sound of the language including allophonic variations. In other words, if a language realizes twenty phones (sounds) it must have twenty graphemes in its orthography. Some languages like German, Spanish and most African languages are spelt with a high degree of phonetic accuracy. However, an orthography based on phonemic principle assigns a grapheme to a phoneme. A phoneme consists of a distinctive sound and its allophonic variations. A language with twenty-five phones but twenty phonemes must have twenty graphemes such that the allophones and their basic phonemes are represented by only one grapheme.

Whichever principle of orthography is employed in writing a language, the following characteristics, 'Accuracy', 'Consistency', 'Convenience', 'Familiarity' and 'Harmonisation' must be manifested. These are briefly discussed below.

'Accuracy' demands that the sounds or phonemes and graphemes must agree in number.

An orthography is said to be consistent if it represents a sound or phoneme by the same grapheme all the time. This makes learning to read and write the language a simple task.

The graphemes must be convenient to write and even type. It must be one which does not task the language user unnecessarily. Language users accept easily symbols or graphemes with which they are familiar. In writing a new orthography, it is expedient to find out the systems learners are already used to and present such to them.

‘Harmonisation’ is very important when designing orthographies for languages with dialectal variations. As the name suggests, it requires blending the rules of otherwise two separate orthographies into one by identifying their similarities and harmonizing them into one.

In essence, in our task of re-writing the English orthography we must bring to bear some of these principles and characteristics of a good orthography.

Brief History of English Orthography

The English orthography dates back to the 5th century. It has undergone various developments such as the influence of Norman French, which introduced a whole new language which co-existed with the more Anglo-Saxon dialects of Middle English. There was also the influence of Latin, and to some extent of Greek, as the prestige written language of the Middle Ages. To a sizeable extent, the mix of Anglo-Saxon, Norman French and classical languages underlies some of the oddities of English spelling. Moreover, shifts in pronunciation are a major contributor to the spelling problems of the English language. Three main stages of this have been reported by Baugh (1993) as

- (i) the Anglo-Saxon stage AD 449-1066 or 1100
- (ii) Middle-English stage from 1066 or 1100 to 1450 or 1500
- (iii) Modern English stage from 1450 or 1500 to present time

The third stage is further divided into

- Early Modern English from about 1500-1660, and
- Late Modern English from 1600 to date.

The different stages are characterized by changes in pronunciation and spellings. For example, the following is a piece from Geoffrey Chaucer’s 14th Century

The Canterbury Tales

weddyng (wedding)	;	sweete (sweet)
alle (all)	;	tender (tender)
housbondes (husbands)	;	fowles (fowls)
ofte (often)	;	myghte (might)

The above reveals that the language had undergone significant shift in pronunciation which also affected spellings. History has it that Middle English orthography was much more phonetic than Modern English. Most modern spelling conventions were established by lexicographers like Samuel Johnson in 1755 and Noah Webster in 1828. Just like any living thing, it is widely acknowledged and **natural** that language changes. Therefore, the 17th Century conventions of Johnson and Webster are inadequate to accommodate the development of the 21st Century English language. It is noticed that there is now little or no reliable relationship between the spelling patterns and their sounds. The absurdities observed in the spelling systems of these times need be corrected. The need for correction has generated a call for spelling reforms of the English language.

The English Orthography Today:

A poet, Richard Lederer (Hanna 1971), captured one of the absurdities of the English language in the following limericks:

A small boy when asked to spell yacht
 Most saucily said, “I will nacht”
 So his teacher in wrath
 Took a section of wlat
 And warmed him up well on the spacht

‘ach’ is one of the several ways of spelling the sound [ɔ] in the English language, therefore, taking a cue from that, ‘not’ can as well be written as ‘nacht’ and ‘spot’ as ‘spacht’.

This is a reflection of the kind of problems most users (both teachers and learners) of English encounter. The [u:] sound, for example, can be written in more than eighteen different ways. The following examples will suffice:

u	as	in	rule, ruby
ue	as	in	flue
ui	as	in	fruit
eu	as	in	maneuvoer
ou	as	in	group
ough	as	in	through
oo	as	in	moon
ooe	as	in	wooded
ew	as	in	grew
oe	as	in	canoe
wo	as	in	two
o	as	in	do

Examples like these make the spelling of the English language notoriously hard to master. A study of 17,000 English words reveals that “over 25% of the words have irregular spellings and 10% don’t fit any logical pattern whatsoever” (Hannah 1971). This corroborates Mark Twain’s (1899) submission on the English alphabet that “the heart of the trouble is with our foolish alphabet, it doesn’t know how to spell and can’t be taught”. That is why users jettison the difficult spellings for the much more easy orthographies as is the case in American English. They now adopt the less laborious American spelling of words like:

color for	colour ;	canceled	for	cancelled
traveler for	traveller ;	analog	for	analogue
jail for	gaol ;	labor	for	labour
catalog for	catalogue;	sulfur	for	sulphur

In instances where the user’s first language (L1) tends towards a ‘perfect’ orthography, the English language is often subjected to such adjustments, as the user transfers the easy spelling mechanism of his language into writing English. This has resulted in divergent spellings of some English words. These various ‘easy’ spellings are most evident in the language of advertisement. Just a few of these from the Nigerian (a West African country) situation will suffice as examples in this paper:

Chart 1:

S/N	British English Spelling	‘Easy Spelling(s)’
1	computer	komputa, komputer, computa
2	school	skool, skul
3	easy	izi, izzi
4	star	sta
5	great	grait
6	comforter	comfota, komfota
7	college	kollege
8	photo	foto, fotχu
9	ecstasy	ekstasy, extasi
10	unique	unic, unik
11	clinic	klinik
12	occasion	okeysion, okeision, okaytion
13	nourishment	nourichment, nourishment

These spellings are not based on any conventional principle of orthography. They tend towards being phonetic but the writers are deficient in the knowledge of phonetics. An analysis of some of the words made below.

The spelling ‘grait’ for example is derived from a combination of the alphabet ‘a’ with the phone [i]. A proper phonetic orthography would realize it as ‘gret’.

‘kollege’ has only one reflection of phonetic principle taking a cue from the English spellings of words like ‘kick’, ‘kitchen’ with which the first sound shares representation. A phonetic writing would have ‘college’ written as kɔlɪdʒ, kɔlɛdʒ.

The advertiser of ‘Bournvita’, a beverage, once had this inscription, “A – Z of nourishment” on some of its billboards. This was to bring out the fact that the product was ‘rich’ in its ingredients. The advertiser had the ‘audacity’ to use *ch* in the spelling of ‘nourishment’ because of the inconsistency in the pronunciation and spelling of English words. In ‘chassis’, ‘fuchsia’, ‘cache’, *ch* is pronounced the same way as the *sh* in ‘nourishment’. Therefore, interchanging *ch* for *sh* ought not to be any problem but this is actually not the case because the English language then frowns at spelling of ‘nourishment’ with a *ch*.

The repercussion of these divergent spellings on learners and users of English language in general is that it brings in more confusion. The second language learner of English is in a dilemma as to which grapheme would represent a sound correctly.

This is why a call is made for a systematic selection of symbols that correspond on a one-to-one basis with the significant sounds or phonemes of the English language to be offered the younger generations.

History has it that various reform proposals on the English language had hardly enjoyed political support. Spelling reform to the generality seems to be tantamount to tampering with the British constitution (Bett 2007). It is definitely going to be an expensive Herculean task which would require all hands on deck but it is achievable just like the Dutch and Norwegian reforms which were sponsored by the concerned governments.

In Nigeria, some indigenous languages had their orthographies reformed. For example, the Yoruba language which had its orthography partially based on the English orthography had to be reformed in the late 1960s and was fully integrated into the school systems by 1976.

Why not the English Language?

Our Proposal:

We dare not claim to propose a final optimal orthography for the English language in this paper but we are making bold suggestions in respect of the graphemes on which a viable orthography could be built.

Our proposal is a truly phonemic one in which each distinct sound has only one grapheme assigned it in all situations taking into consideration the importance of accuracy and consistency in any good orthography. It however, draws its changes from the phonetics using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) symbols where necessary. We have shied away from proposing a phonetic orthography also known in the literature as “pronunciation spelling” because this would create more problems for the user as all allophonic variations will have to be graphically represented. For example, the aspirated stops [p^h, t^h, k^h] in word initial and final positions will require their own graphemes distinct from the unaspirated stops [p,t,k] in word medial positions.

Moreover, the central sonorant / r / sound with tap [ɾ] and flap [ɾ̥] variants must have separate graphemes in a phonetic orthography.

In fact, phonetic orthography would require an indication of stress and intonation on English words and sentences respectively. This may become burdensome and unnecessary especially where its absence has no semantic implications and particularly when the major aims of the reform are to

- (i) make the language more useful for international communication proposing a consistent spelling system of one phoneme – one grapheme
- (ii) remove all superfluous graphemes such as double and silent letters where they do not manifest in pronunciations.

Consonants

There are twenty-four consonant phonemes in the English language and we are therefore expected to have same number of graphemes:

Chart 2: Proposed Consonant Graphemes

Phoneme	Grapheme	Suggested Spelling Samples (current spelling in brackets)
/p/	p	pat (pat), spit (spit)
/b/	b	bel (bell), dabl (double)
/t/	t	tap (tap), stap (stop)
/d/	d	deit (date), stadi (study)
/k/	k	kis (kiss), skip (skip)
/g/	g	gag (gag), stragl (struggle)
/f/	f	laif (life), graf (graph)
/v/	v	vain (vine), bihaiv (bee hive)
/s/	s	sλn (sun), gas (gas)
/z/	z	zink (zinc), uz (ooze)
/ʃ/	ʃ/sh	ʃaap/shaap (sharp), əʃn/əushn (ocean)
/ʒ/	ʒ	pleʒə (pleasure), garaaʒ (garage)
/θ/	θ /th	θin / thin (thin), eθiks / ethiks (ethics)
/ð/	ð /dh	ðis / dhis (this), wið/widh (with)
/tʃ/	ch	chalənj (challenge), təʃə (torture)
/dʒ/	j	jiniəs (genius), jak (jack), jinjə (ginger)
/l/	l	luz (lose), lus (loose), fəl (fall)
/r/	r	ram (ram), riip (reap), mari (marry)
/w/	w	wə (war), kwiin (queen), əwei (away)
/j/	y	yu (you), yild (yield)
/h/	h	haus (house), inheil (inhale), həbal (herbal)
/m/	m	matə (matter), kλmit (commit), dim (dim)
/n/	n	neim (name), went (went), dinə (dinner)
ŋ /ng	ŋ /ng	fiŋə / fiŋə (finger), haŋ / hang (hang)

Only five of the consonant phonemes / ʃ, ʒ, θ, ð, ŋ / need any 'reform' if it could be so called. / ʒ / which had been represented with letters 's' and 'g' can safely and consistently be represented with 'ʒ'. Alternative suggestion of monographic or digraphic representations has been made for the other four phonemes. Usually, digraphs are more cumbersome to write than monographs therefore, the single letter representation would be better. Howbeit, users are familiar with the letters of the digraphs and so should not pose any serious problem.

A comparative look at our proposal for the consonants and the traditional orthography (TO), shows

- (i) a difference of three in number. Though the TO has lesser number of graphemes, ours is consistent and accurate in that no two phonemes are represented the same way, and no grapheme represents more than one phoneme. It is invariably easier to use.
- (ii) three redundant letters c, q and x in TO. These are adequately taken care of in our proposal as words with
 - 'c' are written as k or s
 - 'q' are written as kw
 - 'x' are written as eks

Thus 'c' in

- 'cup' will be written as 'k'
- 'city' will be written as 's'
- 'ceremony' will be written as 's' (just as in sellotape)

Vowels:

The great task surfaces in the representation of the vowels. Hitherto, five letters have represented twenty vowel phonemes! In other words, at least fifteen more graphemes need be designed for a more consistent and accurate orthography.

Chart 3: Proposed Vowel Graphemes

Phoneme	Grapheme	Suggested Spelling Samples (current spelling in brackets)
ɔ	i	wind (wind), pig (pig), grisi (greasy), bild (build)
i:	ii	mariin (marine), fiit (feet, feat), kompliit(complete), risiiv(receive), kii(key, quay)
ɛ	e	red(red, read[pst]), bed (bed), helθ (health), eni (any), sed (said), beri (berry)
æ	a	man (man), bad (bad), plāt (plait), apəl (apple), plan (plan)
a	aa	klaas (class), haat (heart), klaak (clerk), laaf (laugh)
ʌ	ʌ	mʌst (must), sʌch (such), kʌm (come), blʌd (blood), yʌŋ (young)
ɜ	ee	eeli (early), see (sir), eeθ (earth), teen (turn), week (work)
ɔ	ɔ	hɔt (hot), stɔp (stop), frɔm (from), bikɔs (because), lɔrels (laurels), kɔf (cough)
ɔ:	ɔɔ	lɔɔ (law), nɔɔti (naughty), sɔɔd (sword), mɔɔ (more), rɔɔ (raw)
u	u	pudiŋ (pudding), wud (wood), ʃud (should), wuman (woman), kwɔɔtaa (quarter), wuf (wolf), put (put)
u:	uu	muud (mood), skuul (school), huuj (huge), buuti(booty), fuu (shoe)
ə	ə	əbʌv (above), ðə (the), əvə (over), kiŋdəm (kingdom), fivə (fever)
əu	əu	gəut (goat), bəut (boat), gəu (go), snəu (snow), depəu (depot)
au	au	taun (town), kau (cow), hau (how), haus (house), plau (plow)
ei	ei	teik (take), plei (play), reik (reik), beik (bake), rein (rain, reign, rein), eit (eight), geij (gauge)
ai	ai	bai (buy, bye, by), wait (white), hait (height), trai (try), ais (ice, eyes)
ɔi	ɔi	ɔil (oil), bɔi (boy), pɔi nt, (point), distrɔi (destroy), lɔitə (loiter)
iə	iə	tiə (tier, tear), diə (dear), wiəd (weird), θiəri (theory), sinsiə (sincere)
eə	eə	teə (tear, tare), kəmpeə (compare), eərəplein (aeroplane), weə (wear, where), veəri (vary)
uə	uə	puə (poor), piuə (pure), guəd (gourd), tuə (tour), məchuə (mature)

Because language is dynamic but not static, there are bound to be changes from age to age, and below we present an excerpt from *The Canterbury Tales* lines (859 – 871) (English Yesterday) re-written in Modern English (English Today) and Our Proposal (Inglijf Təuməurəu):

English Yesterday

Whilom, as olde stories tellen us
 Ther was a duc that highte Theseus
 Of Athenes he was lord and governour
 And in his tyme swich a conquerour
 That gretter was ther noon under the sonne
 Ful many a riche contree hadde he wonne
 What with his wisdom and his chivalrie
 He conquered ai the regne of Femenye
 That whilom was ycleped Scithia
 And weddede the queene Ypolita
 And broghte hire hoom with hym in his contree
 With muchel glorie and greet Solempnytee
 And eek hir yonge suster Emelye

English Today

Once as old histories tell us
 There was a duke who was called Theseus
 He was lord and governor of Athens
 And in his time such a conqueror
 That there was no one greater under the sun
 Very many a powerful country had he won
 What with his wisdom and his chivalry
 He conquered all the land of the Amazons
 That once was called Scithia
 And wedded the queen Ypolita
 And brought her home with him into his country
 With much glory and great ceremony
 And also her young sister Emelye

Inglif Təuməurəu

WAns as əuld histəuriis tel əs
 ðərə wAs ei diuk hu wAs kəld θisiəs (Theseus)
 Hi wAs ləd ənd gAvənə əf Aθens
 ənd in his taim sAχ a kAnkərə
 ðət ðərə wAs nəu wAn greitə Andə ðə sAn
 Veri meni ə pəuwəful kAntri had hi wAn
 Wət wiθ his wisdAm And his ʃivlri
 Hi kAnkərəd əl ðə lænd əf ðə Aməzins
 ðət wAns wAs kəld Sciθiə
 ənd weded ðə kwɪn Ypɒlitə
 ənd brət hə hæum wiθ him intəu his kAntri
 Wiθ mʌχ gləuri ənd greit seriməuni
 ənd əlso hə jən sistə Emelye

Summary:

From this proposal, the following submissions are made:

- ✚ twenty four consonant phonemes represented by twenty four graphemes as presented in Chart 1
- ✚ there are twenty vowel phonemes represented by twenty graphemes as in Chart 2

These indicate that there are implications for learning and re-learning of both consonant and vowel phonemes and graphemes of the English language. It will also have implications on some hitherto homophones which will also become homographs, for example, 'sea, see' (si), 'piece, peace' (piis), 'tear, tier' (tiə) and 'tear, tare' (teə). However, the context of use determines the meaning.

It will also have implications on the teaching and learning of other subjects in the school system. Education managers need to organize workshops and seminars for teachers of English and other content teachers.

As highlighted before, this is the preliminary of a great work which requires the participation of everyone involved in the teaching and usage of the English language.

Conclusion

This work has provided an insight into some likely causes of problems faced by a second language learner of English language. The inconsistency in the pronunciation patterns that affect the writing ability of the L₂ learner constitutes both a great difficulty and makes for lack of interest in the language thereby causing low proficiency in language use. It is believed that if the critical issues raised in this paper are carefully and adequately addressed by a consideration of our proposals, better days lie ahead for second language learners of English language. As the hypothesis presented here is being tested, a theory will surely emerge tomorrow.

References

- Baugh, A.C and T. Cable (1993) *A History of the English Language* 4th Edition Prentice-Hall
- Bett, S.T (1996) *Conventional Spelling and Right Writing* Louisiana Middle School Journal, 5 (1) 25-36
- _____ (2007) 'The Nature of and Alternative to Standard English Orthography' Retrieved from <http://fortunecity.com/rapiddryty/Spell/trublspl2.html>
- Capo, H.B.C (1981) 'Towards Efficient Orthography for West African Languages' In *Cahiers Ivoiriens de Recherche Linguistique* 10:87-108
- _____ (1982) 'The Codification of Nigerian Languages' In *Journal of Linguistic Association of Nigeria* 1:129-139
- Chaucer, G *The Canterbury Tales* Retrieved from Benson, L.D ldb@wjh.harvard.edu
- Dewey, G (1971) *English Spelling: Roadblock to Reading* New York Teachers College Press
- Gimson, A.C (1992) *An Introduction to the Pronunciation of English* London Edward Arnold
- Hanna, P (1971) *Phoneme-Grapheme Correspondence as Cues to Spelling Improvement* Doc.OE32008 Washington, D.C.U.S. Government Printing Office
- Kolawole, C.O.O. (2004) 'Teaching the English Language in Nigerian Secondary Schools: The Teacher's Dilemma' In Owolabi, K and A. Dasyuva (eds.) *Forms and Functions of English and Indigenous Languages in Nigeria* Ibadan Group Publishers
- Laubach, F (1966) *Let's Reform Spelling – Why and How?* New York New Readers Press
- Lederer, R (n.d) 'Crazy English Books' Retrieved from www.amazon.com
- Shittu, O (2005) 'Which Variety Shall We Teach?: The Dilemma of Teachers of English in our Schools In *English Language Teaching Today* 4:2
- The Simpler Spelling Association (1959) *Fonetic Alfabet* SSA, New York Lake Placid,
- Twain, M.A *Simplified Alphabet What's Man* Essay No. XI, 1899 Illustrated Version How I would Spell It Retrieved from <http://members.fortunecity.com/rapiddryty/Spell/trublspl2.html>