

An English Spelling Convention

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AN ENGLISH SPELLING  
CONVENTION  
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There is no more striking belier of the atheoretical view of language than spelling. At first glance, it seems the only logical course to spell language as it is said: [fənetiklij]. Yet the attempt to do so quickly reveals that the phonetic form of an utterance is a very elusive thing. This revelation may lead to linguistics, as has happened several times in the history of spelling. The best-known example of the interplay of linguistics and spelling is the theory of phonemics of the American structuralists. Its basic relation to spelling is most clearly revealed in Sapir's psychological reality experiments and such titles as Pike's *Phonemics: a Technique for Reducing Languages to Writing*. Less well-known, perhaps, but impressive in its insights, is the spelling system of the Masoretes.<sup>1</sup> Their pointing of the Biblical Hebrew text provides a complex representation in which are combined minute surface detail,

<sup>1</sup> The Masoretes should not be confused with the Grammarians. Several centuries separate them. The latter based much of their thought on that of the Arab Grammarians. A good deal of their work (see W. Chomsky (1952)) can be construed as an attempt to rediscover the theory of the Masoretes, who did not think it necessary to preserve in any explicit form the principles of their system, leaving us only the result of its application.

Chomsky–Halle morphophonemic alternations, and syllabic structure.<sup>2</sup>

The inconsistencies of the English spelling system are often railed against. Of late, however, various people (Chomsky and Halle (1968), C. Chomsky (1970), Venezky (1967), Weir and Venezky (1968)) have begun to notice that, despite its irregularities, there are many cases where the design of English spelling permits insightful treatment of nontrivial matters, such as vowel alternations due to vowel shift and vowel reduction. It may be argued that such phonological insights as the English spelling system demonstrates are not due to some design on the part of its users, but rather merely to the accidents of history: since the spelling system changes more slowly than the language, and since synchronic and diachronic phonology are so similar, it follows that the spelling system at a given point in time will represent a more abstract form of an utterance than the phonological surface. Therefore, if we wish to demonstrate that some part of a spelling system is based on a nontrivial linguistic observation, we must choose an example that does not involve phonology. In addition, it should be a case in which it can be shown that the spelling system itself was constructed or changed specifically in order to better reflect a linguistic observation. The following case meets these criteria.

In British spelling, there are a number of words that end in unstressed [ər], spelled *our* (*rumour*, *colour*, etc.; a list garnered from Walker (1936) is given in the appendix). In American spelling, this *our* is spelled *or*. There are also a number of words that are spelled with *or* in both British and American usage: *mayor*, *liquor*, *agitator*, etc. There is no phonetic or other phonological distinction between the two classes, and the American usage would therefore seem much the more sensible of the two. Yet there is something very systematic about the British *our* words, as opposed to British *or* words. Consider that *or* is in general a deverbal suffix, usually agentive (*mediator*, *oppressor*, *governor*). By contrast, of the *our* words in the appendix, only four have lexical stems at all: *armour*, *saviour*, *behaviour*, *misbehaviour*; and only three are animate: *saviour*, *paviour*, *neighbour*. Thus, *our* words are inanimate nonagentive nouns without lexical stems.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Minute surface detail is indicated by the *hatef*, which represents variation in the coloring of reduced [ə], usually depending on neighboring segments; *dagesh hazaq* represents geminate consonants that arise morphologically and phonologically; *dagesh qal* marks the absence of phonologically conditioned aspiration; the use of *schwa* for both reduced vowels and  $\phi$  is motivated by constraints on Hebrew syllabic structure.

<sup>3</sup> The implication holds only one way.

It might be thought that this is a historical accident, that at some earlier time there were two phonologically and functionally distinct suffixes that have merged in Modern English, resulting in the purely morphological distinction we have found. However, history reveals no such explanation, though it is a little complicated. Basically, *or* and *our* are reflexes of two Latin suffixes, both of the form *or*, *ōrem*. One suffix formed nouns of condition, mostly from intransitive verbs in *ēre* (Latin *error*, *liquor*, etc.). The other is the agentive suffix, formed on the supine stem (Latin *factor*, *ensor*, *victor*, etc.). Though the former died out, the agentive suffix was productive in both Old French and Anglo-French. Both suffixes were spelled *eur* in Old French, *our* in Anglo-French, and *our(e)* in Middle English, and were thus homographs all the way up until the sixteenth century; they are still homographs in French. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the etymologically correct Latin spelling *or* was introduced into English, and Latinate agentives formed since then are spelled with *or*. However, the introduction of the new spelling had further repercussions. As we have seen, all but two of the earlier agentives were converted to the new *or* form.<sup>4</sup> The inanimates fared differently. Though some of those that were more common Latin words with recognizable bases (*error*, *tremor*, *horror*) were restored to their proper shape, the class as a whole was much more resistant to the new spelling. There was even a difference in the speed of the spelling change. The agentives were won over very quickly, while the inanimates that did change were much more slow in doing so. There are still even a few words in which we find free variation: *rigor/rigour*, *vigor/vigour*. The difference in the scope and pace of the change supports our claim; the spelling system encodes directly a morphological distinction, and this is no accident of history.

The story is not quite ended. Though American spelling has rid itself of the *or/our* distinction, it still possesses two agentive suffixes, *or* and *er*. They are of different origins; *or* is our old Latin friend, and the history of *er* is obscure, though it is usually traced to Latin denominal *arius*. Whatever their provenience, they have quite decidedly merged in almost all linguistic respects in Modern English.<sup>5</sup> This coalescence has led to a recent trend to write *or* as *er*: *advisor/adviser*, *impostor/imposter*, *supervisor/superviser*, *sponsor/sponser*, *adjustor/adjuster*, *conjuror/conjurer*, etc. Now, if the spelling

<sup>4</sup> The two are *saviour* and *paviour*, both of which exhibit a peculiar epenthetic [i]. *Neighbour* is neither agentive nor descended from Latin.

<sup>5</sup> The only distinction between the two is that *or* is restricted to Latinate stems, while *er* is unrestricted.

were sensitive only to phonological factors, we would expect all instances of *or* to be affected by the trend. Instead, we find a close parallel to the British *our* situation: those *or* words that are nonagentive, inanimate, and without lexical stem, i.e. the *our* class of English spelling, are immune to the *er* change. So *\*coler*, *\*harber*, *\*behavier*, *\*splender*, *\*vaper*, etc. are impossible. *Armer* must be agentive. The class of *or* words that are animate, but without a lexical stem and without strong agentive force (*mayor*, *neighbor*), is also more resistant to the *er* spelling.

From the examples given so far, it might be concluded that (just as with morphophonemics) we are dealing with mere artifacts: *our* is distinguished from *or*, and *or* from *er*, simply by the fact that the words containing the former suffixes are more resistant to changes in spelling: this resistance is correlated with semantic and morphological opacity, an interesting correlation, but not startling. In the context of such a conclusion, consider the following examples from Jespersen (1974, 227) of words that have shifted into the *or* class:

(1) ancestor	ME ancestre
bachelor	bachelor(e)
chancellor	ME chanceler
sailor	(up to the 16th C.) sailer

In all of these, the spelling change mirrors a loss or lack of agentivity. The change demonstrates the reality of opaque *or* as a functioning part of the spelling system. We even have a minimal pair in *sailor/sailer*. Jespersen notes that we may write of someone/thing that sails well as *a good sailer*, and in writing of *a good sailer* we do not take *good* to mean virtuous.

These cases demonstrate clearly that spelling can be sensitive to subtle linguistic generalizations that are neither phonetic nor phonological. Whether one should conclude further and claim with Sapir that spelling provides privileged insight into the psychological nature of language is a separate question that I will not attempt to answer here.

## Appendix

### *Nouns of the Form Xour*

fervour	savour	flavour	favour	disfavour
endeavour	vapour	honour	dishonour	demeanour
misdeemeanour	tumour	rumour	humour	armour
glamour	clamour	parlour	dolour	colour
valour	saviour	paviour	behaviour	misbehaviour
vigour	rigour	ardour	odour	splendour
candour	rancour	succour	harbour	arbour
neighbour	labour			

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A MOTIVATED ALTERNATIVE  
TO PHRASE MARKERS

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In Chomsky (1955), transformations are defined on phrase markers (hereafter, P-markers), which, contrary to current parlance, are formally distinct from tree diagrams or bracketed strings.

$K$  is a P-marker of  $Z$  if and only if there is an equivalence class  $\{D_1, \dots, D_n\}$  of  $\rho_1$ -derivations of  $Z$  such that for each  $i$   $D_i = (A_i, \dots, A_{i_{m(i)}})$  and  $K = \{A_i \mid j \leq m(i), i \leq n\}$ . (Chomsky (1955,183))

$\rho_1$ -derivations are terminated phrase structure derivations. The equivalence class mentioned is tied by a series of definitions and constructs, which will not concern us here, to the notion of reduced derivation tree, which is defined on derivations. An example of a simple P-marker will be presented below.

Later formalizations, notably those of Peters and Ritchie (1973) and Ginsburg and Partee (1969), did away with the steps from derivation tree to P-marker, and defined transformations as operations on tree diagrams or, equivalently, on bracketed strings. Almost all subsequent work has followed this lead and dropped from discussion the spirit, if not the name, of P-marker.

This is perhaps not without some justification. P-marker is a fairly clumsy construct, depending as it does on many derivations, and being quite difficult to work with. It is difficult to list the elements of a possible P-marker of a given sentence, or to decide whether or not some given set is a possible P-marker in some particular grammar, or, in short, to