Linguistic Society of America

American English Spelling by D. W. Cummings
Review by: Mark Aronoff
Language, Vol. 65, No. 3 (Sep., 1989), pp. 591-595
Published by: Linguistic Society of America
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/415225
Accessed: 10/05/2013 07:07

——. 1976. Kam's account of transitional unilateral code-switching. Anthropological Linguistics 18:1.27–28.

SALISBURY, R. F. 1962. Notes on bilingualism and linguistic change in New Guinea. Anthropological Linguistics 4:7.1–13. [Reprinted in Sociolinguistics, ed. by J. B. Pride and J. Holmes, 52–64, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972.]

SALZMANN, ZDENEK. 1971. Some sociolinguistic observations on the relationship between Czech and Slovak. The limits of integration: Ethnicity and nationalism in modern Europe (University of Massachusetts Department of Anthropology Research Reports, 9), ed. by Oriel Pi-Sunyer, 1–41. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts.

SCOTTON, CAROL MYERS. 1983. Negotiation of identities in conversation: A theory of markedness and code choice. International Journal of the Sociology of Language 44:115–36.

——, and WILLIAM URY. 1977. Bilingual strategies: The social functions of code-switching. International Journal of the Sociology of Language 13.5–20.

Department of Anthropology   [Received 7 March 1989.]
University of Virginia
Charlottesville, VA 22906-9024

American English Spelling. By D. W. CUMMINGS. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988. Pp. xxix, 555. $49.50.

Reviewed by MARK ARONOFF, SUNY, Stony Brook*

In recent years, the Johns Hopkins University Press has produced some excellent books on the borders of linguistics, of which this is the latest. My favorite among these is *Sensible Words,* by Murray Cohen (1977), a book that I return to frequently and that I always recommend with enthusiasm to anyone interested in the general subject matter; but this book by Cummings promises to rival that one. It is a book which anyone interested in writing systems, especially English writing, should own. It is also an extremely well-produced volume, of the sort that I haven't seen since *SPE*, and it should make its publisher proud. It has very few typos or stylistic infelicities. There are two excellent indices: a sixty-page word index and a comprehensive general index. The book is well bound and it has two tables of contents, one short and one detailed.

So much for form. In general content, Cummings' study is the latest in a line of research, beginning with the work of Ruth Weir and Richard Venezky in the mid-sixties, which seeks to analyze English orthography as a rational system. This was in reaction to the popular view of English spelling as simply ill-conceived, a view as old as the Modern English system itself (Hart 1569). In its comprehensiveness, this book most closely resembles Venezky 1970 and Albrow 1972, but it is very different from these in two explicit ways: first, C insists that 'this book is not the kind of modern linguistic science that speaks in algorithmic formal terms. It is offered, rather, as humanistic scholarship' (xxvi); second, 'Unlike ... nearly all works in orthography, this one does not

deal with spelling-to-sound correspondences. It deals instead with sound-to-spelling correspondences. It examines the problem from the standpoint not of the reader but of the writer—or at least the speller' (xxvii).

The book is divided into four sections: 'Analysis', 'Tactics', 'Procedures', and 'Correspondences'. The last, which occupies half of the main body of the book, is a detailed list of sound-to-spelling correspondences, organized by what C calls MORPHOPHONES, following Smith 1968. From a purely practical point of view, this may be the most useful part of the book, especially for the computationally minded. It is also largely independent of the rest of the book.

From a theoretical perspective, I have reservations about the novel sound-to-spelling perspective. Smith's morphophones are an attempt to bridge dialects, but they do not have a firm basis in any current phonological framework. I am also concerned that there are simply too many dialects for Smith's system to work well, regardless of theory. This emerges most clearly in C's discussion of the correspondences of low back vowels. Nonetheless, the novel viewpoint does bring out some aspects of English spelling that are obscured by the more usual emphasis.

The rest of the book is more theoretical. The first section consists of two chapters, one on spelling as a system and one on method. In the first chapter C lays out his general views on the nature of English spelling; they parallel those of Richard Mulcaster, author of the *Elementarie* (1582), who argued that a good orthography for a standard language with a variety of dialects must be governed by three major factors—sound, custom, and reason.

C characterizes English spelling as a self-regulating, self-reorganizing system. He asserts strongly that it is part of the English language. He thus aligns himself with those (most prominently Vachek, e.g. 1973) who treat writing as parallel to speech, and against the accepted dogma that writing is a secondary recording device. I have argued (Aronoff 1985 and elsewhere) that writing and spelling are in fact much closer to linguistic analysis than to language, and it seems to me that C's careful description supports my view rather than his own when looked at in detail, a point to which I will return below.

C's method is explained in Ch. 2. He calls it EXPLICATION, and he distinguishes it explicitly from both etymology and generative analysis—from the first because explication does not aim at historical reconstruction, and from the second because it neither confines itself to general rules of a synchronic system nor seeks to model a mental grammar. Explication thus asks 'why is this word spelled this way?' and accepts a variety of types of answers, so long as the answers 'provide information that is the most concrete and accessible for spellers' (50).

As an avowed formalist, and indeed as the one whose book, according to C, 'most starkly illustrate[s] ... the difference between explication and generative analysis' (51), I must say that, although C uses very little in the way of mathematical formalism, he is concerned with matters of form. He would surely be labeled a positivist, just as a philologist friend of mine was labeled a positivist by her colleagues in comparative literature because she deals with facts. We are all tarred with the same deconstructionist brush.

The middle sections of the book, 'Tactics' and 'Procedures', comprise the clearest account of what is systematic and interesting about English spelling that I have yet encountered. 'Tactics' consists of five chapters: 'Sequence and distribution'; 'String patterns and rules'; 'Suffix rules'; 'VCV in disyllables'; and 'The Third Syllable Rule'. The section on 'Procedures' contains only three chapters: 'Silent final *e* and its Deletion Rule'; 'The Twinning Rule'; and 'Assimilated prefixes'.

As I noted above, my major difference with C is in our views on the nature of writing. He sees it as a part of language, on a par with speech, whereas I see it as a form of notation, like music notation. I believe that orthography, like music notation, is important. It may affect a language in the way that notation has (perhaps more obviously) affected certain forms of Western music, but it is no more language than music notation is music. Both are mnemonic devices.

From my point of view, there are three distinct matters that must be kept apart when we seek to understand any writing system. The first is the language that the system encodes: many things about a given writing system are true not by virtue of the writing but by virtue of the language that it represents. For example, trisyllabic laxing is a part of English phonology, not of English spelling, although it affects spelling. Second, there are purely orthographic facts, such as the prohibition against final *v* in English that leads to such spellings as *give* and *have* instead of the expected *giv* and *hav*. Finally, there is the interaction between the two—the way in which the orthography represents the language. In English, the most interesting aspect of this last category, to my mind at least, is the fact that purely diacritic symbols are almost entirely absent, so that letters take on a variety of diacritic functions, leading to a similar variety of complexities. Because C does not distinguish these three separate facets of the system, his presentation is not always as clear as it might be. I will give some examples.

In Ch. 3, 'Sequence and distribution', C sometimes mixes sound patterns and spelling patterns. For example, the fact that members of obstruent clusters must agree in voicing (74) is purely phonological, but the various constraints on what C calls 'doublet consonants' (sequences of identical consonant letters) and their equivalents (*ck, dg, tch*) are purely orthographic or diacritic. On diacritic grounds, there are no initial doublets, because doublets signal a preceding short vowel; since no vowel precedes an initial consonant, no doublets ever occur in this position. Similarly, doublets do not occur word-finally (except for *ff, ss, ll*), because the lack of a word-final silent *e* is sufficient to indicate that the preceding vowel is short (*rod* vs. *rode, *rodd*). When otherwise prohibited word-final doublets do appear, as in *egg, odd,* and *err*, it is because they serve to preserve the purely orthographic rule that members of major lexical categories may not be two letters long. Other rules affecting doublets, such as the prohibition against doublets in clusters (*assert* from *ad + sert,* but *ascribe* from *ad + scribe, *asscribe*), also seem to lie solely within the orthography.

Ch. 4 is devoted to what C calls 'strings': a string, in this book, is not just

any string, but a sequence of letters beginning with a single vowel letter. The purpose of this chapter is to show how the system indicates vowel length. As I noted above, for reasons that have not been well explored, English spelling eschews diacritic marks. Instead, segmental letters are used diacritically. Their major function is to indicate whether a vowel is long or short (although, as we all know, these terms do not have any phonetic value in English orthography, they are so well ingrained as to be unquestioned).

An important feature of the system, which arises because it is a mnemonic notation, is the fact that letters are only used diacritically when an ambiguity arises in the primary notation. So, when the phonology dictates that a vowel must be long or short in a particular environment, then no diacritic is used to distinguish length. C's ideological perspective prevents him from seeing how pervasive this fact is, so that he is forced to treat all such cases as remarkable. For example, in a phonological sequence of two vowels, the first is almost always long. The spelling therefore does not mark length in that position. However, although C notes the obligatory length, he does not explain the absence of a marker. Similarly, C proposes a VC# rule, according to which the V is such a sequence is short. He points out that 'the only known holdouts to the VC# Rule are in disyllables ending in *ol*, which usually have a long vowel: *control, patrol, extol, enrol* (*enroll*)' (94). C notes that the *o* is usually long in this position, but does not make it clear that it is the expected length that makes the otherwise systematic final *e* unnecessary in this position and that even permits final *ll* in *enroll* and *extoll*.

In discussing the VCV/VCC contrast, C notes that VCC marks short vowels much more reliably than VCV marks long vowels. This is because the second C in VCC is often a diacritic and will only be used when necessary. In VCV, by contrast, the second V is not diacritic (except in VCe#), so the first vowel may be short when the phonology dictates that it must be. Thus, the various shortening rules that C discusses in Ch. 5 ('Suffix rules') and Ch. 7 ('The Third Syllable Rule') create 'an immense number of holdouts ... to the VCV pattern' (112). C calls this creation by one rule of exceptions to another rule PREEMPTION, which it is, but he fails to explain the reason for the preemption, which lies in the interaction between the orthographic notation and the phonology.

The two major diacritic devices of English spelling are silent *-e* and consonant twinning. In his section on procedures, C devotes a chapter to each of these. The chapter on silent *-e* is especially well done (despite the absence of a reference to Schane 1977, my favorite paper on this topic). C lays out very clearly the logic both of silent *-e* and of its deletion. My only quibble here is with C's account of the failure to delete *e*. In particular, he does not point out that *e* fails to delete in many cases because it is not a diacritic: in *lineage* and *roseate,* the *e* is pronounced and hence undeletable; similarly with the final *-ee* in words like *treeing* and *foreseeable*.

C's discussion of twinning is also very clear, except again when he does not distinguish orthography from phonology. For example, C notes that, quite generally, twinning fails to apply before the shortening suffixes (e.g. *-ic* and *-ity*). He attributes this resistance to what he calls, after Jespersen, CONSERVATIVE

ANALOGY, a pervasive tendency in English spelling for elements to retain a single spelling despite phonologically conditioned alternation. But why do these particular suffixes induce failure of the twinning rule? The answer is that these suffixes force the preceding vowel to be short so that twinning, which is diacritic, is not necessary. The appeal to conservative analogy is therefore beside the point in this case. Another example: C points out very nicely that twinning is a matter of letters and not of phonemes or graphemes. The rule states that a single consonant letter is doubled when it follows a single vowel letter that marks a stressed vowel and a vowel-letter-initial suffix is added immediately after the consonant. Thus, there is no twinning in a word like *bloody* (**blooddy*) because the vowel in *blood*, although short, is marked by two letters, and similarly for consonant digraphs (**wisshed*); *-ed*, by contrast, triggers the twinning rule, even when the *e* is silent (*stopped, *stoped*). My point in both cases is that C's account, which is excellent, might have been even better if he had adopted a different perspective.

All in all, this is a book whose content is worthy of its form. I have two copies of it now and I am sure that they will quickly become as dog-eared and annotated as my two copies of *SPE*—well-bound and always worth the detour.

REFERENCES

ALBROW, K. H. 1972. The English writing system: Notes toward a description. (Schools Council Program in Linguistics and English Teaching, Papers Series II, no. 2.) London: Longmans, for the Schools Council.

ARONOFF, MARK. 1985. Orthography and linguistic theory: The syntactic basis of Masoretic Hebrew punctuation. Lg. 61.28–72.

COHEN, MURRAY. 1977. Sensible words. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

HART, JOHN. 1569. An Orthographie. London: William Seres. [Facsimile reprint published by Scolars Press, Menston, England, 1969.]

MULCASTER, RICHARD. 1582. The First Part of the Elementarie. [Facsimile reprint published by Scolars Press, Menston, England, 1969.]

SCHANE, SANFORD. 1977. Rule breaking in English spelling: A study of final *e*. Studies in descriptive and historical linguistics, ed. by Paul Hopper, 217–34. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

SMITH, HENRY LEE. 1968. The concept of the morphophone. Lg. 43.306–41.

VACHEK, JOSEPH. 1973. Written language. The Hague: Mouton.

VENEZKY, RICHARD L. 1970. The structure of English orthography. The Hague: Mouton.

Department of Linguistics   [Received 13 March 1989.]
SUNY at Stony Brook
Stony Brook, NY 11794-4376

Saussurean studies/Etudes saussuriennes. By KONRAD KOERNER. Avant-propos de Rudolf Engler. Geneva: Slatkine, 1988. Pp. xxii, 207.

Reviewed by JOHN E. JOSEPH, *University of Maryland*

Koerner's first book on Saussure in fifteen years is a collection of ten articles originally published between 1972 and 1987. Specialists are likely to know most of them already, since eight appeared in widely circulated journals and only two in Festschriften. But, as I shall discuss, these studies have a very timely