SQUIBS AND DISCUSSION

References


AN ENGLISH SPELLING CONVENTION
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There is no more striking believer of the atheoretical view of language than spelling. At first glance, it seems the only logical course to spell language as it is said: [f³netikliy]. 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.¹ Their pointing of the Biblical Hebrew text provides a complex representation in which are combined minute surface detail,

¹ 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.2

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.3

2 Minute surface detail is indicated by the hatef, which represents variation in the coloring of reduced [a], usually depending on neighboring segments; dagesh haqaz represents geminate segments that arise morphologically and phonologically; dagesh qal marks the absence of phonologically conditioned aspiration; the use of schwa for both reduced vowels and φ is motivated by constraints on Hebrew syllabic structure.

3 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, őrem. One suffix formed nouns of condition, mostly from intransitive verbs in ĕre (Latin error, liquor, etc.). The other is the agentive suffix, formed on the supine stem (Latin factor, censor, 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. 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/lour 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. This coalescence has led to a recent trend to write or as er: advisor/adviser, impostor/imposter, supervisor/supervisor, sponsor/sponsor, adjustor/adjuster, conjuror/conjurer, etc. Now, if the spelling

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

5 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, *behaveier, *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 bacheler(e)
    chancellor ME chanceler
    sailor (up to the 16th C.)ailer

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 sailorsailer. 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

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References


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.

\[ K \text{ is a P-marker of } Z \text{ if and only if there is an equivalence class } \{D_1, \ldots, D_n\} \text{ of } p_1\text{-derivations of } Z \text{ such that for each } i \text{ } D_i = (A_{i_1}, \ldots, A_{i_m}) \text{ and } K = \{A_{i_j} | j = m(i), i \leq n\}. \text{(Chomsky (1955, 183))} \]

\( p_1\)-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