

CHANGING ENGLISH

Spelling pronunciation in English

David Deterding and Nur Raihan Mohamad

Changing English aims to illustrate the diversity of English in the world today and to ask whether, and how, ELT practitioners might accommodate such variation. Focusing on a particular language issue in each article, the series will explore how English varies between places and spaces, over time, and between groups of speakers, and will reflect on the possible implications of this for ELT practitioners.

In this article, David Deterding and Nur Raihan Mohamad consider some of the ways pronunciation is changing to reflect spelling in differing contexts around the world, and discuss the implications of 'spelling pronunciation' for language teachers and learners.

Introduction

Spelling pronunciation involves pronouncing a word in a way that reflects its spelling in cases in which the standard pronunciation deviates from what is expected from the spelling. For example, in standard British pronunciation 'falcon' once had no [l] in it, but is now more often pronounced with [l], and 'waistcoat' was once pronounced as [weskət], but is now usually [weɪstkəʊt]. As the latter example shows, the process sometimes involves reverting to a previous way of pronouncing a word, as we will see when we consider the different kinds of spelling pronunciation. However, first let us briefly consider historical and current changes in the pronunciation of English.

The pronunciation of English has undergone many changes throughout its history. For example, one thousand years ago the pronunciation of words such as 'knot' started with [kn], but then changed so that [kn] at the start of a word no longer occurred (Schreier 2005). Other changes were due to the Great Vowel Shift (Algeo 2010: 144). For instance, the vowel in 'bite' changed from [i:] to [aɪ] (Davis 2010: 30). In fact, changes in pronunciation continue today. Wells (2008) includes 69 charts showing how the pronunciation of certain words by native speakers of English is undergoing change, and in 15 of these words, the shift in pronunciation seems to be influenced by their spelling. Examples of this include the use of [eɪ] rather than [e] in the second syllable of 'again' and also in 'ate'. Wells (ibid.: 15) states that 20 per cent of people in Britain now have [eɪ] in 'again'; and for 'ate', Wells (ibid.: 54) reports that 45 per cent of people in Britain have [eɪ], this preference for [eɪ] being about 65 per cent among younger speakers, suggesting that it is in the process of becoming the norm.

Spelling pronunciation in English

Changes in language and pronunciation are inevitable. The introduction of printing at the end of the fifteenth century led to spelling becoming more established; and dictionaries, such as Dr Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) and Webster's *The American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828), gave a further impetus to the standardization of spelling, often fixing the spelling of words to represent pronunciation at a particular point in time. However, though spelling became relatively stable, pronunciation continued to change, with the result that the pronunciation of many words increasingly diverged from spelling over time. It is worth noting that, while some countries have institutions empowered to try to regulate the standard language, such as in France with the Académie Française, there is no such organization for English, which means that norms of English pronunciation and usage are relatively unstable.

Yet as more people became literate in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, spelling has sometimes influenced pronunciation. We will now discuss four basic ways in which the pronunciation of English is changing to reflect spelling:

- reversion to an original pronunciation
- etymologically based changes
- anglicization of borrowed words
- pronunciation of the letter 'o'.

As a reference, we will use Received Pronunciation (RP), the prestige accent of English in Britain (Hickey 2014: 263), though we should acknowledge that the pronunciation of some of the words differs in regional varieties of English as well as in so-called non-native speaker contexts.

Reversion to an original pronunciation

Perhaps the most common category of spelling pronunciation is when a word reverts to its original pronunciation. Originally, 'forehead' had a medial [h], as is suggested by the spelling. Then, after spelling in Britain had started to undergo standardization following the establishment of the printing press in the late fifteenth century, the [h] was dropped and the word was pronounced as [fɔːrɪd], rhyming with 'horrid'. Now, however, the most common pronunciation of this word is [fɔːhed], which reflects the spelling more closely than [fɔːrɪd]; thus, we can say that in the last century the [h] has reappeared. Wells (op.cit.: 317) reports that 65 per cent of his British RP respondents now prefer an [h] in the word.

A similar process is affecting the pronunciation of 'often'. Originally, it had a [t], as is suggested by the spelling, which, in the seventeenth century, was dropped. However, now some people once again pronounce the word with a [t] (Algeo op.cit.: 46). Indeed, Wells (op.cit.: 560) reports that 27 per cent of people in Britain have [t] in 'often', so we can see that although reversion to the original pronunciation is not yet complete for either word, it is more advanced for 'forehead'.

Other examples of the restoration of a letter include [w] 'swollen' and 'swore', as the original 'w' became silent in these words only to be subsequently restored (Upward and Davidson 2011: 193). However, the

restoration of [w] has not yet affected some other words such as ‘sword’ or ‘answer’. One word that currently has variable pronunciation is ‘towards’, Wells (op.cit.: 833) listing [təwɔ:dz] and [tɔ:dz] as alternatives.

Etymologically based changes

Some changes in pronunciation to reflect spelling are not related to the early pronunciation of the word in English. For example, there was no [l] in ‘fault’ in the original form of the word. However, prescriptive lexicographers felt that ‘fault’ should be related to the Latin word *fallitus*, so they introduced an ‘l’ into its spelling, with speakers subsequently starting to pronounce this ‘l’ (Hickey op.cit.: 297). Similar examples of the introduction of [l] in the pronunciation because of reference to Latin can be seen in ‘assault’, ‘cauldron’, ‘falcon’, ‘herald’, and ‘realm’ (Upward and Davidson *ibid.*: 137).

Anglicization of borrowed words

Throughout its history, English has borrowed words from many other languages, particularly French, and in some cases, the pronunciation of these loan words has changed to reflect their spelling. One example of this is insertion of [h] at the beginning of words. For instance, ‘hospital’, ‘human’, ‘habit’, and ‘history’ all came from French, originally without their initial [h] phoneme. However, use of [h] at the start of these words gradually became the norm (Mugglestone 2003: 101), and there are now just four common words in which an initial ‘h’ is silent in modern RP British English: ‘hour’, ‘honour’, ‘honest’, and ‘heir’, and one more in American English: ‘herb’. It is uncertain if these words will follow the pattern of the others and one day be pronounced with initial [h].

Some other words that originated in French and then adopted an English pronunciation to reflect their spelling are ‘author’ and ‘throne’ (Upward and Davidson op.cit.: 192). In French, ‘th’ in these words is pronounced as [t], but it is now pronounced as [θ] by RP speakers of English. In contrast, one word that has not changed in this way is ‘thyme’, which still retains the original [t].

One other shift that might be included under anglicization involves the word ‘garage’. In the original French, the stress is on the second syllable, but Wells (op.cit.: 332) notes that only 6 per cent of people in Britain now have final stress. The other 94 per cent all stress the first syllable, with 25 per cent opting for [ˈgæɾɑ:ʒ], 31 per cent preferring [ˈgæɾɑ:dʒ], and 38 per cent using a fully anglicized [ˈgæɾɪdʒ], so that for the last group, the word rhymes with ‘marriage’ and ‘carriage’. In fact, for younger speakers, the preference for [ˈgæɾɪdʒ] is about 65 per cent, so clearly this fully anglicized version is becoming more common, and we might expect that, within 50 years or so, ‘garage’ will rhyme with ‘marriage’ for most speakers in Britain.

Pronunciation of the letter ‘o’

One final trend in spelling pronunciation involves the letter ‘o’. Scribes up to the fifteenth century wrote in cursive handwriting and preferred not to use ‘u’ next to ‘n’, ‘m’, or ‘v’ to avoid a sequence of small vertical lines that would be difficult for readers to decipher (Algeo op.cit.: 118). As a result, ‘o’ rather than ‘u’ was used in words in which the vowel is [ʌ], such as ‘son’, ‘won’, ‘honey’, ‘monk’, ‘come’, ‘some’, ‘love’, and ‘dove’. These are all common words, and RP speakers generally still pronounce [ʌ] in them. However, in some less common words with ‘o’ in the spelling, such as ‘combat’, ‘comrade’, and

'conduit', the vowel in the first syllable that was traditionally pronounced as [ʌ] is nowadays generally [ɒ]. One word which is currently variable is 'constable', as some people have [ʌ] while others have [ɒ] (Upward and Davidson op.cit.: 193). The variability affecting this word reflects instability that often results in changes in pronunciation, and while future trends cannot be predicted with certainty, it seems likely that spelling pronunciation will prevail and [ɒ] in 'constable' will one day become the norm.

Trends in World Englishes

Brown (1991: 27) suggests that spelling pronunciation may be more prevalent in 'non-native' speech, as people acquire English at a later time, usually after literacy, and therefore base their pronunciation more on spelling. Mesthrie (2005: 127) urges caution in making this assumption, but he acknowledges that instances of spelling pronunciation inevitably occur in Black South African English, particularly in unfamiliar proper nouns.

Similarly, in Singapore, an example of spelling pronunciation can be observed in 'salmon', which is usually pronounced there with [l]. Meanwhile, in Brunei, Deterding and Salbrina (2013) report that about half the undergraduates in their study had [ɒ] rather than the expected [ʌ] in the first syllable of 'company', and furthermore also pronounce the [l] in 'salmon'. In a recent study, Nur Raihan (2015) reports that 19 out of 20 secondary school students and 14 out of 20 undergraduates in Brunei had a medial [l] in 'salmon', and overall the secondary students had more instances of spelling pronunciation than the undergraduates for words such as 'often' and 'company'. This suggests that spelling pronunciation for these words is becoming the norm in Brunei, though we should note that direct comparison of the two groups is not straightforward as the undergraduates had a higher level of education. In addition, four of the secondary students and one of the undergraduates had [b] in 'doubt', though the relatively rare occurrence of [b] in this word could be explained by the difficulty of pronouncing [bt] at the end of it, as this probably inhibits the adoption of spelling pronunciation for it.

Implications for teachers and learners

Teachers need to be aware that the pronunciation of English is constantly changing, sometimes to reflect the spelling of words, and it is inappropriate to insist on an old-fashioned, RP-oriented style of pronunciation if a new way of saying a word is becoming prevalent in a particular context. Furthermore, it is valuable for teachers to have knowledge about how and why the pronunciation of words is changing, even if it is not always essential for such detailed knowledge to be passed on to their pupils. Awareness about the historical background can give confidence to teachers in providing explanations when required and also in offering suitable advice to learners about the most appropriate way to pronounce words.

Access to a modern dictionary, such as the *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* (Wells op.cit.), is invaluable in providing extensive information about variants, and it seems misguided for teachers to insist on a single standard pronunciation when, in fact, different ways of saying some words are often perfectly acceptable. It would, for example, be inappropriate to insist on no [t] in 'often' when so many native speakers nowadays

pronounce the word with [t]. Use of [t] in 'often' is currently the minority variant in Britain, but it is still quite common and regarded as acceptable.

In some cases, learners of English need to be made aware of when their pronunciation deviates from both native-speaker norms and their local norms to the point where they risk becoming unintelligible in some situations. For example, in Brunei, some speakers pronounce 'naïve' as [naɪv] (as is suggested by the spelling), and they should realize that this may not be understood in many parts of the world. At the same time, it is valuable for teachers to appreciate that achieving intelligibility is more important than imitating native-speaker styles of pronunciation (Jenkins 2000), and in some circumstances, it may actually be helpful to deviate from native-speaker norms, especially when non-native speakers are communicating with each other and using English as a *lingua franca*. For example, in order to be understood in Singapore, it is usually best to include an [l] in 'salmon', though it would be advisable to avoid use of [l] in this word in places such as Britain or America. It is helpful for teachers to make their students aware of issues like this to ensure that they can be easily understood.

Finally, it is always valuable for teachers of English to take a keen interest in different styles of speech, both how pronunciation is changing between the generations and also the ways in which words are produced around the world. Perhaps one day we will all be saying 'salmon' with an [l] in it.

References

- Algeo, J.** 2010. *The Origins and Development of the English Language* (sixth edition). Boston, MA: Wadsworth.
- Brown, A.** 1991. *Pronunciation Models*. Singapore: Singapore University Press.
- Davis, D. R.** 2010. 'Standardized English: the history of the earlier circles' in A. Kirkpatrick (ed.). *The Routledge Handbook of World Englishes*. London: Routledge.
- Deterding, D.** and **Salbrina S.** 2013. *Brunei English: A New Variety in a Multilingual Society*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Hickey, R.** 2014. *A Dictionary of Varieties of English*. Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell.
- Jenkins, J.** 2000. *The Phonology of English as an International Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mesthrie, R.** 2005. 'Putting back the horse before the cart: the "spelling form" fallacy in second language acquisition studies, with special reference to the treatment of unstressed vowels in Black South African English'. *English World-Wide* 26/2: 127–51.
- Mugglestone, L.** 2003. *Talking Proper: The Rise of Accent as Social Symbol*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Nur Raihan, M.** 2015. 'Spelling pronunciation: a new norm in Brunei English?'. *South East Asia: A Multidisciplinary Journal* 15: 36–42.
- Schreier, D.** 2005. *Consonant Change in English Worldwide: Synchrony Meets Diachrony*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Upward, C.** and **G. Davidson.** 2011. *The History of English Spelling*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Wells, J. C.** 2008. *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* (third edition). Harlow: Longman.

The authors

David Deterding is a Professor in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Universiti Brunei Darussalam, where he teaches Phonetics, Forensic Linguistics, Malay-English Translation, and the History of English. His research focuses on a description of the pronunciation and intelligibility of Englishes in South-East Asia.

Email: dhdeter@gmail.com

Nur Raihan Mohamad is studying for her PhD at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Brunei Darussalam. Her research is focusing on the pronunciation of school students, undergraduates, and English teachers.

Email: raihan.mohamad@live.com