# Spelling Pronunciation in English

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*In this paper, we will present an analysis of some of the ways pronunciation is changing to reflect spelling. We will also briefly consider emergent trends in the pronunciation of English in Singapore and Brunei, and finally we discuss the implications of spelling pronunciation for language teachers and learners.*

## Introduction

Spelling pronunciation involves pronouncing a word in a way that reflects the spelling in cases in which the standard pronunciation deviates from what is expected from the spelling. For example, *falcon* once had no [l] in it, but now it more often is pronounced with [l], and *waistcoat* was once pronounced as [weskət], but it is now usually [weɪstkəʊt]. The process sometimes involves reverting to a previous way of pronouncing the word, as we will see when we consider the different kinds of spelling pronunciation. But 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 words such as *knot* started with [kn], but then the pronunciation 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 [iː] 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 the spelling. Examples of this include the use of [eɪ] rather than [e] in the second syllable of *again* and also in *ate*. Wells (2008: 15) states that 20% of people in Britain now have [eɪ] in *again*; and for *ate*, Wells (2008: 54) reports that 45% of people in Britain have [eɪ] and the preference for [eɪ] is about 65% for younger speakers, suggesting that it is in the process of becoming the norm.

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Changes in language and pronunciation are inevitable. The introduction of printing at the end of the 15th century led to spelling becoming more established; and dictionaries, such as Dr Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) and Noah Webster's *The American Dictionary of the English Language* (1812), 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 pronunciation increasingly diverged from spelling. It

is worth noting that, while some countries have institutions empowered to try and control spelling, such as in France where the Académie Française acts to regulate the standard language, there is no such organization for English, which means that norms of English pronunciation and usage are relatively unstable.

As more people became literate in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, spelling 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; and 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 15th century, the [h] was dropped and the word was pronounced as [fɒrɪd], and it rhymed with *horrid*. Now, however, the most common pronunciation of this word is [fɔːhed], which reflects the spelling more closely than [fɒrɪd], so we can say that in the last century the [h] has reappeared. Wells (2008: 317) reports that 65% 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, then in the seventeenth century the [t] was dropped, but now some people once again pronounce the word with a [t] (Algeo, 2010: 46). Wells (2008: 560) reports that 27% 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 and then was subsequently restored (Upward & Davidson, 2011: 193). However, the restoration of [w] has not yet affected some other words such as *sword* or *answer*. One word that is variable is *towards*, as Wells (2008: 833) lists [təwɔːdz] and [tɔːdz] as alternatives.

**Etymologically-based changes**

Some pronunciation changes to reflect the 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 English word. However, prescriptive lexicographers felt that *fault* should be related to the Latin word *fallitus*, so they introduced an 'l' into the spelling of *fault*, and subsequently speakers started to pronounce this 'l' (Hickey, 2014: 297). Similar examples of the introduction of [l] in the pronunciation because of reference to Latin can be seen in *assault*, *cauldron*, *herald* and *realm* (Upward & Davidson, 2011: 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 the 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, and originally there was no initial [h] in them. However, use of [h] at the start of these words gradually became the norm (Mugglestone, 2003: 101). There are now just four common words in English 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 came from French and then adopted an English pronunciation to reflect the spelling are *author* and *throne* (Upward & Davidson, 2011: 192). In French, the 'th' in these words is pronounced as [t], but it is now pronounced as [θ] by RP speakers of English. 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 (2008: 332) notes that only 6% of people in Britain now have final stress. The other 94% all stress the first syllable, with 25% opting for [ˈgæraːʒ], 31% preferring [ˈgærɑːdʒ], and 38% using a fully anglicized [ˈgærɪdʒ], so that for the last group, the word rhymes with *marriage* and *carriage*. In fact, for younger speakers, the preference for [ˈgærɪdʒ] is about 65%, so clearly this fully anglicized version is becoming more common, and we might expect that, within fifty years or so, *garage* will rhyme with *marriage* for most speakers in Britain.

**Pronunciation of '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 to decipher (Algeo, 2010: 118). As a result, 'o' rather than 'u' was used in words in which the vowel is [ʌ], such as *son, won, money, monkey, come, some, love* and *dove*. These are all common words, and RP speakers generally still have [ʌ] in them. However, in some less common words with 'o' in the spelling, such as *combat*, *comrade* and *conduit*, the traditional [ʌ] in the first syllable is nowadays generally pronounced as [ɒ]. One word which is currently variable is *constable*, as some people have [ʌ] while others have [ɒ] (Upward & Davidson, 2011: 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 win and [ɒ] in *constable* will one day become the norm.

**Trends in World Englishes**

Brown (1991, p. 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 is observed in *salmon* as it is usually pronounced 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 pronouncing the [l] in *salmon* is the norm. 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 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 best way to pronounce words.

Access to a modern dictionary, such as the *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* (Wells, 2008), is invaluable in providing extensive information about variants, and it is 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 quite common and acceptable.

In some cases, learners of English need to be made aware of when their pronunciation deviates from native-speaker norms to the point where they risk becoming unintelligible in some situations. In such cases they might need to adjust their pronunciation, and teachers should provide guidance on this. 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.

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