A SURVEY OF ENGLISH SPELLING

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Preface

Page for page, most of what has been written about English spelling has had a particular and often practical aim in view – to show how the writing system has evolved over the centuries as an integral part of the history of the English language, to advocate some reform of the writing system, to lay down a framework for the teaching of literacy or to provide the foreign learner with a guide to pronunciation. Few people have set out to describe the English writing system in its present state as a working system. Yet there does seem to be a need for more insight into how our writing system actually manages to function. Unhappily, the spelling literature is beset with disagreements based on ignorance and with controversies fuelled by prejudice.

If we take a radical reformist standpoint, the present English writing system is simply not worth describing:

> Our present spelling is just a chaotic concoction of oddities without order and cohesion.
>
> (Follick 1965: 1)

Present-day reformers are equally insistent:

> proper analysis of the synchronic and diachronic evidence shows rather that [English spelling] is unplanned, phonographically highly inconsistent, and historically, pragmatically and geographically fluid. Its lack of coherent system and its unpredictable deviations from the spelling of other languages are detrimental to its role as a medium of international communication, while to native speakers of English it has proved a serious obstacle to the acquisition of literacy.
>
> (Upward 1988: 3)

Such a view has been frequently stated. Ever since English spelling settled down in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the consensus seems to have been that the conventions we have inherited are ill-suited:

> Such indeed is the state of our written language, that the darkest hierogliphics, or most difficult cyphers which the art of man has hitherto

> invented, were not better calculated to conceal the sentiments of those who used them from all who had not the key, than the state of our spelling is to conceal the true pronunciation of our words, from all except a few well educated natives.
>
> (Sheridan 1780: 13)

Happily, rather more than a few well-educated natives seem to cope with the present system, though after a heavy investment of time and effort. Linguists today are even prepared to concede that, in spite of its imperfections, the English writing system has some virtue:

> our orthography is possibly not the least valuable of the institutions our ancestors have bequeathed to us.
>
> (Sampson 1985: 213)

The extreme statement of this point of view is the provocative declaration by Noam Chomsky and Morris Halle that:

> English orthography turns out to be rather close to an optimal system for spelling English.
>
> (1968: 184)

Nor does a linguistic analysis of the writing system necessarily end in a pessimistic outlook for the educational task of teaching literacy:

> most English speakers learn our writing system, to one degree or other, without much explicit analysis of it to guide them. They do not do this by learning each item separately, but by making some sort of analysis themselves. If they can do so well without much explicit description, the system need not be beyond anyone when understood and presented systematically.
>
> (Albrow 1972: 51)

It is part of the recently established national curriculum for British schools that 'the rules of spelling' in traditional orthography should, and presumably can, be learnt. What these rules might be and how they should be taught is another matter.

Public concern about falling standards of literacy is reinforced by the national press. In the educational debate, spelling mistakes provide powerful ammunition:

> She had spent 'houres' over her essay but she had no 'apptitude' and no 'flare' for spelling. Even after a 'brake' for lunch, it was still 'suprisingly' bad, though you could see what she 'ment'. An 'independant' girl, she did not find it 'forefilling'. Despite 'baring' a good 'refrence' and a respectable 'adress', her hopes of college 'enterance' were dashed because she was not 'apreciated'.

(All those spelling mistakes were taken from an essay written by an

18-year-old student of English literature and reassembled in this concentrated form by Peter Wilby as copy for an article in the *Sunday Times* 3 February 1985.)

Faced with frequent statements that there are no rules for traditional English spelling and with curricula which require that the rules should be learnt, we may conclude that there must still be scope for neutral explorative studies of the English writing system. We still do not seem to know enough about it. This present study tries to deal equally with the problems of the writer and the reader, which are rather different.

Computer analysis has provided some statistical insights, especially on the interrelationship of text frequency and lexical frequency. The present account is also different in that it covers in some detail the spelling of names. I have not made excursions into the general theory of writing systems, but I have made some comparisons with the Swedish writing system to show the workings of spelling reform in a more 'managed' system and a different approach to the spelling of loan-words. I have drawn attention to differences between British and American spelling. I have taken Southern British Standard pronunciation as the basis for analysing spelling correspondences with selective cross-reference to American English and other accents

I am shy of calling this study 'a survey', since some aspects of the English writing system deserve a far more detailed treatment than I have been able to give them. It is, however, something of a survey in the sense that I have trawled through a fairly large database to find what regularities I could in the English writing system and to see how they might best be described. This is a strictly functional approach. My main object has been to see how traditional orthography works, or fails to work. I have not been concerned with tracing the development of the present system over the centuries. Only occasionally have I referred to the past to explain the present.

To make the book more accessible as a work of reference, I have provided a detailed list of contents and five different indexes. I have also tended to repeat brief glosses of technical terms in the text to save the reader from interruptions. There is also some repetition of data, where variant pronunciations are logged under different phonemes and spellings. In quotation, I have preserved the writer's idiosyncratic spellings, such as Shaw's spelling of <Shakespear>. This does not, of course, imply any recommendation.

Occasionally, I have strayed from my descriptive brief to make prescriptive comments on features of traditional orthography that seem inconsistent or undesirable. Spelling reform as it has been implemented in the United States and as it has been variously planned in Britain has been dealt with selectively in §7.3. Detailed proposals for spelling reform in Britain have been discussed for many years through the publications of the Simplified Spelling Society and it is to them, or to their American and

Canadian counterparts, that anyone interested in that aspect of literacy should turn.

The current addresses of some active associations, to which any enquiries should be made, are as follows:

1 The Simplified Spelling Society, 39 Chepstow Rise, Croydon CR0 5LX, England
2 American Literacy Council, 106 Morningside Drive, New York City 10027, USA
3 BEtSS, 24034 Bingham Pointe Drive, Birmingham, Michigan 48010, USA (BEtSS = 'Better Education thru Simplified Spelling')
4 The Internasional Union For The Kanadian Langwaje, 94 Glenholm Avenue, Toronto ONT M6H 3B1, Canada

I have tried to leave a few warning signs on entrenched heresies that still thrive in works on reading, writing and spelling. In §2 particularly, I have sought out some examples of how not to describe English spelling. My excuse for this missionary zeal is that all too often the literature of literacy is taken up by non-arguments about non-problems.

Conventions, symbols and technical terms

SBS stands for **'Southern British Standard'** and refers to the speech of educated English speakers from London and the surrounding counties and across southern Britain generally (Wells 1982: 117). This is the accent of standard British English used here as the basis of the description of spelling correspondences. Other accents are referred to when there are differences that affect spelling.

I have used the term 'Southern British Standard' in preference to **'RP'** (or **'Received Pronunciation'**) for several good reasons. It is not merely that the term 'Received Pronunciation' has a Victorian stuffiness. SBS is a much wider concept. I wish to prevent an assumption that all the phonetic detail of the pronunciation of RP, or of any other accent, is relevant in tracing the correspondences between spellings and phonemes. What is important for literacy is the number of contrasting phonemes in the accent and their distribution, not the minutiae of how they are pronounced (their phonetic realization).

However, RP is simply a socially defined subsystem within SBS. Readers used to the term 'RP' may, for our purposes, regard them as equivalent. The two terms refer to speakers who have the same number of phonemes with essentially the same distribution. To refer restrictively to RP in describing English spelling, rather than the wider notion of SBS, would be to accept a narrow social irrelevance:

> Socially, [RP] is characteristic of the upper and upper middle class . . . Occupations perhaps most typically associated with RP are barrister, stockbroker, and diplomat. . . . Typically [RP speakers] belong to families whose menfolk were or are pupils at one of the 'public schools' (exclusive private schools standing outside the state education system)
>
> (Wells 1982: 117)

AmE stands somewhat naively for **'American English'**. I have used this as a loose cover term for general features which distinguish the speech of most Americans from Southern British Standard in phoneme contrasts and in the distribution of phonemes in words. These are the main factors that

affect the description of spelling correspondences. It would have been unwise to use the term 'General American', claiming it to be a standard American accent, since its definition, and indeed existence, is a matter of some controversy. What is here taken to be 'American' may well not be valid for Eastern or Southern accents of American English. For instance, AmE is here taken to be 'rhotic' speech which has not lost //r// before a consonant in words such as *farm*. So, AmE does not here refer to any strictly definable accent of American English, but to features of pronunciation shared by many Americans.

The bearing of accent and dialect on spelling is discussed in §2.7.

IPA stands for **The International Phonetic Association**, particularly with reference to their system of phonetic symbols.

Phoneme symbols

The phoneme symbols here used for representing Southern British Standard are the IPA symbols used in Gimson's *Pronunciation of English* (Cruttenden 1994). They are shown in table 1 below. Alongside I have given the spelling-based letter symbols of Cummings *American English Spelling* (1988), which are derived from the symbols used in the Webster dictionaries (W3NID).

Table 1 Vowel phoneme symbols

	Keyword	*IPA*	*Cummings symbol*	
Short vowels				
1	bit	ɪ	i	('short *i*')
2	bet	e	e	('short *e*')
3	bat	æ	a	('short *a*')
4	full	ʊ	ú	('high short *u*')
5	dull	ʌ	u	('low short *u*')
6	bomb	ɒ	ä	('low short *o*')
Long counterparts of the short vowels				
7	bite	aɪ	ī	('long *i*')
8	beet	iː	ē	('long *e*')
9	bait	eɪ	ā	('long *a*')
10	bout	aʊ	aù	
11	boat	əʊ	ō	('long *o*')
Long vowels and diphthongs wholly or partly associated with //r//				
12	bard	ɑː		(see note 2 below)
13	board	ɔː	ôr	(see note 3 below)
14	bird	ɜː	ur	
15	beard	ɪə	êr	
16	bear	ɛə	âr	
17	boor	ʊə	ûr	
18	fire	aɪə	īr	

	Keyword	*IPA*	*Cummings symbol*	
19	flour	aʊə	aůr	
Other long vowels and diphthongs				
20	booty	uː	ū	('simple long *u*')
21	beauty	juː	yū	('complex long *u*')
22	boy	ɔɪ	ȯi	
Reduced vowel				
23	about	ə	ə	('schwa')

Notes on the vowel phonemes and their symbols

1 The group of short vowels, (1) to (6) in Table 1, are sometimes called 'checked' vowels, because of their distribution. They do not occur in final open syllables, so /kæt/ *cat* is a possible English word, but there can be no English word */kæ/. Long vowels and diphthongs have no such restriction and are in consequence 'free' (/kaʊl/ *cowl*, /kaʊ/ *cow*). Since the length difference between 'short' and 'long' is less marked in some accents of English, the terms 'lax' and 'tense' may also be used. The short vowels vary with their long counterparts in some morphemes:

/aɪ/ – /ɪ/ *sign – signal mime – mimic line – linear*
/iː/ – /e/ *redeem – redemption plenary – replenish serene – serenity*
/eɪ/ – /æ/ *vain – vanity mania – manic inflame – inflammatory*
/aʊ/ – /ʌ/ *renounce – renunciation South – Southern abound – abundance*
/əʊ/ – /ɒ/ *tone – tonic omen – ominous know – knowledge.*

2 In SBS the vowel /ɑː/ occurs not only before //r//, but also in words such as *after, bath, cast, dance,* where many other speakers, including AmE, would have /æ/. (See §3.3.3.1 pp. 177ff.) In AmE the vowel /ɑː/ also takes in the vowel of *bomb* (= *balm*), *box, dodge, stop, watch*, which in SBS is 6 above, the short low back rounded /ɒ/.

3 In SBS, the vowel /ɔː/ occurs in both *caught* and *court* as /kɔːt/, since //r// has been lost before a consonant. In rhotic accents, as in most AmE, they will differ as /kɔːt/ and /kɔrt/. A halfway stage may keep *caught* and *court* distinct as /kɔːt/ and /kɔət/.

4 In SBS and some other British accents unstressed /ɪ/ can end a word such as *city*, *happy*, where other accents including AmE have /iː/.

5 Some writers on AmE merge the stressed vowel [ʌ] of *dull* together with the unstressed schwa [ə] of *about* in a single phoneme, using /ə/ as the symbol for both, since they are phonetically very similar.

6 Cummings (1988), uses W3NID symbols, slightly modified. This system tries to help the reader by choosing phoneme symbols which mirror the most common spelling. In the vowel symbols, there may be some

advantage in using terms and symbols such as 'long *i*' /ī/ and 'short *i*' /i/ for the /aɪ/ and /ɪ/ of *mime* and *mimic*. It draws attention to the phonological relationship. It cannot, however, entirely free the reader from the task of remembering different phoneme symbols. (See pp. 8f.)

7 There are minor differences of phonetic detail between SBS and other accents which are reflected in the SBS phoneme symbols, but which have little bearing on spelling. For instance, the /əʊ/ vowel (11 above) starts without lip rounding in SBS: *coat* is [kəʊt], but before a dark [ɬ] SBS does have rounding as in *coal* [kɒʊɬ]. In other accents lip rounding remains as [oʊ], or as a pure vowel [oː]. Similarly the vowel length marker [ː] for /iː/, /ɑː/, /ɔː/, /əː/ and /(j)uː/ may be inappropriate for accents in which the difference between 'short' and 'long' vowels is more a matter of vowel quality than length. The quality differences are indicated by the vowel symbol itself /u/ – /ʊ/, /i/ – /ɪ/, etc. However, I have kept Gimson's redundant and sometimes misleading length marks for a practical reason: simply to make the symbols appear different to the rapid reader.

More detailed comments will be found under each vowel phoneme in §3.3.

Table 2 Consonant phoneme symbols

Stops	p pan	t ten	k cap	ʧ choke
	b ban	d den	g gap	ʤ joke
Fricatives	f ferry	θ thin	s sat	ʃ ship
	v very	ð then	z zeal	ʒ measure
Nasals	m met	n net	ŋ long	
Liquids	l late	r rate		
Glides	h hat	w wet	j yet	

Notes on the consonant phonemes and their symbols

Unlike the vowels, the system of consonant phonemes shows little difference across accents. SBS and AmE, for instance, are here identical. Usually the symbol reflects a common spelling, as in the case of /p b t d k g f v s z h m n l r w/.

The symbol /ŋ/ does not include a following /g/: in SBS *finger* and *singer* differ as /ˈfɪŋgə/ and /ˈsɪŋə/; in Northern British English they may both have /-ŋgə/.

The glide /h/ is traditionally classed as as ninth member of the set of fricatives (as in §3.3.7), though unlike them it does not enter into a voicing contrast (/f/ – /v/, /s/ - /z/, etc.). The glides /w/ and /j/ are traditionally referred to as 'semivowels' (as in §3.3.10).

Some alternative symbols in common use for English consonants are shown below in Table 3. The standard IPA use of /j/ for the semivowel in *yet* (not the affricate in *jet*) needs noting.

Table 3 Alternatives to the IPA consonant symbols

	IPA	*Non-IPA*	*Cummings*
thin – then	θ ð		th th
choke – joke	ʧ ʤ	č ǰ	ch j
ship – measure	ʃ ʒ	š ž	sh zh
yet	j	y	y

Other phonetic symbols used

[-] is sometimes used to show a syllable boundary, as /u:-ɪ/ in *fruition*.
[ʔ] is the symbol for a glottal stop sound.
[ˈ] placed before a symbol indicates that the following syllable is stressed, as in /təˈmɒrəʊ/.
[̩]placed underneath a symbol indicates that a consonant is syllabic, as in [litl̩].

Other phonetic symbols found occasionally in the text are briefly explained where they occur.

Types of bracketing

[ ] – square brackets with phonetic symbols enclose **sounds** or strings of sounds without necessarily assigning them to any particular English phoneme (thus, [ʔ] represents a glottal stop sound and [l̥] represents the voiceless variant of the /l/ phoneme found after voiceless /p/ in /plɒt/). For 'phoneme' see p. xxvii.

/ / – single diagonal slashes with phonetic symbols enclose **phonemes** or strings of phonemes (thus, *box* ends in /ks/ and *seraph* ends in /f/). These are traditional 'surface' phonemes, which are directly represented by a sound.

// // – double slashes enclose a more abstract 'underlying' phoneme. Thus //r// does not necessarily refer to present-day SBS /r/, but effectively to the /r/ of early Modern English, which in SBS and many other dialects does not now survive finally (*far*), or before a consonant (*farm*). In SBS the word *far* has an 'underlying' final //r// but no actual 'surface' /r/ unless a vowel follows immediately (*far away*). In AmE and other 'rhotic' accents //r// has not been lost in these contexts, so, as captured in the spellings, *far* is /fɑr/ and *farm* is /fɑrm/.

< > – angled brackets enclose **letters** or strings of letters (thus, *box* ends in <x> and *seraph* ends in <ph>).

/ /≡< > – indicates a spelling **correspondence** between a string of one or more phonemes and a string of one or more letters: at the end of *box* we have /ks/≡<x> and at the end of *seraph* we have /f/≡<ph>. The order of

the two sides depends on the topic: speech-to-text /ks/≡<x> or text-to-speech <x>≡/ks/. Often the order is not critical. These are often referred to as 'phoneme-grapheme correspondences'.

{ } – curly brackets enclose **morphemes** (minimal units of word structure) cited in ordinary spelling. Thus the word *photograph* contains the morphemes {photo} and {graph}, *unreliably* contains the morphemes {un-}, {rely}, {able} and {-ly}. {photo} and {graph} are **free morphemes**: they can form a word on their own. {un-} and {-ly} are **bound morphemes**: they do not appear on their own, but are always attached to other morphemes. The phonetic form of a morpheme often varies from context to context: {photo} varies as /fəʊtəʊ/, /fətɒ/, /fəʊtə/ in *telephoto*, *photographer*, *photographic*. The English writing system contains spelling correspondences with whole morphemes such as {-ed}≡<ed>, where {-ed} varies phonetically as /ɪd/ (*wanted*), /d/ (*begged*), or /t/ (*washed*).

Notational symbols

≠ 'is not equal to', 'contrasts with'.

* – an asterisk attached to a written form, may denote either a wrong, unconventional, reformed, hypothetical or dialect spelling, such as *<stoopid>, *<sed>, *<woz>. An asterisk is also used in formulae to indicate some specific restriction which is indicated in the following text (e.g. '<C>*' may exclude some letters specified in a note).

0 – **zero**, as in <h>≡**0** for the initial spelling in *hour*, where <h> has no phonetic counterpart.

\# – a word boundary, possibly followed by suffixes that can attach to free forms (see pp. 269ff). So the context ' –<e> #' would apply not only to *care*, but also to *carer*, *caring*, *careful*, *careless*, *carelessly*, *carelessness*. The text-to-speech rules of §4 include a 'compound-guesser', which tries to find a boundary in compounds such as *carefree*, *careworn*, by using possible letter sequences.

The following capital letters will be found in rule formulae with particular uses:

/V/ any vowel phoneme.
<V> any vowel letter, any letter from the set: < a, e, i, o, u, y >.
/C/ any consonant phoneme (including glides /h, j, w/ and liquids /l, r/).
<C> any consonant letter, any letter from the set: < b, c, d, f, g, h, j, k, l, m, n, p, q, r, s, t, v, w, x, y, z >.

The letter <y> belongs to both the <C> and <V> sets.

<C_0> zero or more consonant letters.
<C_1> one or more consonant letters.

<C>* the asterisk indicates some specific restriction which is indicated in the explanation that follows.

<C>-doubling refers to the doubling of a consonant letter as in *matting* compared with *mat*.

TF, LF refer to the text frequency and lexical frequency of words in the database described in §3.1.1. The percentage figures quoted for word frequency in §3 exclude grammatical words such as pronouns, auxiliaries, articles, and only refer to the frequency of lexical words.

F+, F- are used in the description of speech-to-text correspondences in §3 to draw attention to a difference between the text frequency and lexical frequency of a particular spelling. 'F-' indicates a tendency to occur in low frequency words, where the per cent share of lexical frequency for a particular spelling is notably higher than the per cent share of text frequency. 'F+' shows a tendency to occur in high frequency words, where the per cent share of text frequency for a particular spelling is notably higher than the per cent share of lexical frequency.

Some technical terms

affix, prefix, suffix – these terms are normally applied to bound morphemes added to other morphemes in the process of word-formation: the added units have a distinct function or meaning. For example, the suffix <-ness> does not occur on its own, but only when bound to a stem, as in *goodness*, where it turns the adjective into a noun. In describing English spelling, it is sometimes convenient to refer to initial and final strings of letters that do not have an add-on meaning or a clear marking function. So, <-tion> in *suggestion* is often referred to as a unit, even though the division is then <sugges>+<tion>, with the <t> arbitrarily separated from <suggest>. The string <-ant> may be dealt with as a unit not only in *accountant*, but also in *covenant*, *elephant*. I have used the general terms '**beginning**' and '**ending**' when the letter strings referred to are not strictly affixes.

auxiliary, inert, empty letters refer to different functional types of letter. See §2.6.5 pp. 40ff.

bias, workload refer to the performance of text-to-speech rules in §4 and are explained in §4.2.2 pp. 270ff.

consonant, vowel refer only to sounds, not letters. A statement such as: 'the stressed vowel is followed by a single consonant' would apply to both *lemon* and *common*. There is a double consonant letter in *common*, but not a double consonant. See §2.2 pp. 9ff.

diphthong, digraph –'diphthong' is a purely phonetic term and refers to a vowel glide, as distinct from a relatively 'pure' vowel, within a single syllable. The words *cycle*, *omen*, *mouse*, *mice*, all contain diphthongs. The words *react*, *poet*, (with two vowels) and *head*, *brawn*, (with a single

'pure' vowel) do not contain diphthongs. 'Digraph' refers to a string of two letters: in *head* the digraph <ea> represents the vowel /e/; in *react* it represents the vowels /iːæ/.

divergence – a lack of one-to-one correspondence between phonemes and spellings shows divergence from the alphabetic principle of one symbol per phoneme and one phoneme per symbol (Haas 1970: 51). There may be divergence on the phonetic side of a correspondence: <th>≡/θ/ and <th>≡/ð/; or on the graphic side: /f/≡<f>, /f/≡<ff> and /f/≡<ph>. More often than not we find divergence on both sides: /iː/≡<ea>, /iː/≡<ee>, and <ea>≡/iː/, <ea>≡/e/, etc.

grapheme – this term has a number of different meanings in the study of writing systems. It is not used here as an abstraction of 'letter' (the set of different written shapes of 'the same' letter), but for any minimal letter string used in correspondences. So, <ea> in *head* may be referred to as a single (but complex) grapheme.

phoneme – this term is used in the traditional sense for contrasting units of sound. The words *exit* and *seraph* are each pronounced with three consonant phonemes and two vowel phonemes. Readers unused to phonetics will probably find that their notion of 'speech sound' is effectively the same as 'phoneme'. A phoneme may be realized by a range of slightly different sounds with different speakers and in different contexts.

lexeme – a word defined semantically. *Gaol* and *jail* represent the same lexeme.

long, short – vowels are referred to as 'long' and 'short', rather than 'tense' and 'lax'. The shortening of the vowel in words such as *sanity* (from *sane*), is here referred to as '**third-syllable shortening**'. It is otherwise known as 'trisyllabic laxing'.

rhotic, non-rhotic – a rhotic accent is one, such as AmE, Scottish or Irish English, in which underlying //r// survives in all contexts, so *a firm offer* is pronounced with two instances of /r/. A non-rhotic accent is one, such as SBS, in which //r// is lost before a consonant and in final position, so *a firm offer* has no instances of /r/ in SBS.

§Basic, §Greek, §Latinate, etc. refer to subsystems of spelling conventions in the English writing system, but not directly or by definition to the historical origin of words. The symbol '§' attached to such a label indicates 'subsystem'. The word *deacon* (of Greek origin) has the characteristics of a §Basic word as does *beacon* (of Germanic origin). See §2.9.

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