

‘Write as we speak’: On the question of spelling reform today

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English has been characterised by the variability of its spelling throughout history, since it was only standardised by the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Other than its history of unstability, the resulting orthographic system would be marked by two events. On the one hand, the original spelling of the borrowed lexicon was adopted and incorporated into the system, which would provide the English language with orthographic input from disparate sources (Cook 2004; Salmon 1999). On the other hand, the standardising process was completed before the end of the Great Vowel Shift, which means that phonological changes thereafter would not be reflected in spelling (Nevalainen 2006; Cook 2004). These circumstances would eventually influence the orthographic depth of the language. Indeed, the English is a deep orthographic system that constantly violates the one-to-one principle (Cook 2004). Such a state of affairs fueled the protests that Milroy and Milroy (2012) dubbed as the ‘Complaint Tradition’ and which addressed the lack of transparency of the new orthographic system. On the premise that “it is so hard to spell English” (Yule & Yasuko 2016: 414), countless attempts at spelling reform have surfaced in dribs and drabs since the sixteenth century until today (Crowley 2012). Though the present state of English orthography corroborates that these proposals have remained largely unsuccessful, the simplification exercise in words like *colour/color*, *anaesthesia/anesthesia* or *kilogramme/kilogram* (Gramley et al. 2021) is often employed as an argument to justify the aforementioned proposals. In light of this discussion, the coexistence of both forms in Present-day English raises the following questions: How are the competing forms distributed today? Do speakers show preference for the simplified forms? If so, is this simplification indicative of spelling reform or are phenomena like Americanisation responsible?

To answer these questions, the present paper puts forward a corpus-based investigation on the distribution of several spelling variants. The linguistic material corresponds with the following eight instances of variation: *-ae/-e-* as exemplified in, but not limited to, *anaesthesia*, *-amme/-am* as in *kilogramme*, *-ction/-xion* as in *connection*, *-dgement/-dgment* as in *judgement*, *-ll/-l-* as in *traveller*, *-logue/-log* as in *dialogue*, *-oe/-e-* as in *foetus* and *-ou/-o-* as in *colour*. In the end, the analysis counted with 126 lexical bases and nearly 4 million tokens. The data comes from the *Global Web-based English* (or *GloWbE*) corpus, which contains 1.9 billion words sampling English online in twenty different varieties. The size of the corpus, its text types and the array of varieties included make the *GloWbE* an ideal tool to study the configuration of English spelling today. As a matter of fact, it does not only provide sufficient data for analysis, but also facilitates a multifaceted investigation in Computer-Mediated Communication and World Englishes. The preliminary evaluation of the results shows that there is a general inclination to using the simplified variants in the ecosystem of World Englishes, even if some varieties continue to remain conservative. Though further analysis is due, there seems to be a correlation between the most widespread simplified spellings and those which are distinctly American. In light of these results, the phenomenon of Americanisation ought to be analysed more carefully.

References

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