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## A miniscule question: orthography and authority in dictionaries

*ABSTRACT: Dictionaries are quick to record neologisms and changes in the meaning of established words. But when a change emerges in the spelling of a word, the tendency is for dictionaries to ignore it. Semantic change and lexical innovation are recognized as integral parts of the evolution of language. But orthography is a far more static element of language, with the weight of several hundred years of written and printed tradition behind it. Any departure from convention can be stigmatized as illiterate, legitimizing its exclusion from dictionaries. The paper discusses the issues raised by this.*

"The idea that a linguistic form can be uniquely correct and other "equally good" forms incorrect is ... seen at its clearest in spelling (Milroy & Milroy 1991, 67).

A timebomb is waiting to go off under lexicography. Its source is the placid and apparently uncontroversial field of orthography.

Spelling is the most resistant to change of all the features of a language. Pronunciation is incorrigibly fluid; lexis is subject to a constant stream of newcomers (and has a much less well publicized obituary list); slowly but surely grammar evolves. But developments in spelling have over the centuries gradually slowed down to a point at which they appear virtually to have stopped. If the American academic Francis Fukuyama can confidently announce that recent world events have led to "the end of history", a linguist might come to the conclusion that the latter part of the 20th century has seen "the end of orthography".

As is well known, the seeds of the standardization of English spelling were sewn at the end of the 15th century, with the introduction of the printing press. Printers wanted to, and were able to, impose a certain amount of order on the spelling in the texts they produced. Uniformity amongst different printers was given an impetus by the model of the Authorized Version of the Bible (1661). But what is perhaps not so widely appreciated is that spelling in private handwritten documents – letters, diaries, and the like – remained relatively free to vary, and by present-day standards appears fairly chaotic.

Scragg (1975, 88) notes that "public censure of the bad speller has a long history", and he quotes the undertaking in the preface to Coote (1594) to teach "the true orthography of any word" to all men and women "that now for want hereof are ashamed to write vnto their best friends". A century and a half later Lord Chesterfield, in a letter dated 19 November 1750, suggested that "orthography, in the true sense of the word, is so absolutely necessary for a man of letters, or a gentleman, that one false spelling may fix a

ridicule upon him for the rest of his life"; but Scragg (1975, 90) comments "Chesterfield certainly exaggerated ... for adherence to the printers' norm was the aim rather than the achievement of his contemporaries, as private documents of the period demonstrate".

Order was further, and powerfully, promoted by the great dictionaries of the 18th century – notably Bailey's and Johnson's – which established and codified the norms. But these norms did not exert an immediate grip on the private domain of the written language. It does not seem to have been until the late 19th century, following the introduction of universal education in England in 1870, that the notion of a general inviolable written standard became established. Strang (1970, 107) noted that the conception of the spelling mistake is largely the invention of the past two hundred years; Scragg (1975, 91) makes a further distinction, suggesting that "whereas in the eighteenth century [departure from standard spelling] attracted only ridicule, in the nineteenth, as the modern emphasis on qualification by examination came into being, the bad speller might find his livelihood threatened by his disability", so one might with some justice narrow Strang's assessment down to the last hundred years.

The spellings adopted by Johnson for his dictionary are for the most part immediately recognizable to us today. His choice was actuated not by a desire to impose a consistent system, but by a wish "not to disturb ... the orthography of [our] fathers" (Johnson 1755, Preface). He seems not to have allowed his own views on what the "correct" spelling of a word should be to prevail over the dictates of current usage (at *outrageous*, for instance, he notes "It should, I think be written *outrageous*; but the custom seems otherwise"). So we may regard the differences from modern spelling as significant. Many appear to be one-offs: *bawble* for *bauble*, *poize* for *poise*, *seeth* for *seethe*. But some are systemic: final /-ik, in modern English -ic, is consistently spelled -ick (*arsenick*, *authentick*, *hectick*, *periodick*, *poetick* – ic is one of the few changes suggested by Noah Webster that caught on in British English); words of Latin origin ending in -rrou are spelled -rroure (*errour*, *horroure*, *terrour*); there is even some tendency to go further than subsequent usage has sanctioned in reducing *oe* (from Greek *oi*) to *e* (*cenobitical*, *phenix*) – although, despite his comment at *economy* that "*oe* being no diphthong in English, it is placed here with the authorities for different orthography", Johnson stays with *oe* for *diarrhoea*, *oecumenical*, *oedema*, *pharmacopoeia*, *subpoena*, and indeed *oeconomicks* – presumably following contemporary usage. Johnson also recognizes variant forms for a large number of words that in modern English have only one spelling – among them *abbey/abby*, *petard/petar*, *porpose/porpus*, *rye/rie*, *satchel/sachel*, *skate/scate*, *skull/scull*, *soap/sope*.

If we look at the OED side by side with Johnson's dictionary, we find that the former has eliminated nearly all trace of spellings that would not now be regarded as standard. The period between the publication of Johnson's dictionary (1755) and the OED (1884-1928) saw a small but significant shift, particularly in the reduction of the number of acceptable variant spellings, which brought English virtually to its current orthographic status quo.

Compare this small but significant shift with the near orthographic immobility that apparently obtained in the years separating the first edition of the OED from the second (1989). The very few concessions to change (*artefact* takes over from *artifact* as the main form, for instance, and *ecumenical* replaces *oecumenical*) serve merely to emphasize how much has remained the same. Indeed, any change in the orthographic standard which the OED sees itself as embodying is such a solemn undertaking that it is usually accom-

panied by an explanation. At *ecumenic*, for example, we are told that "*ecumenic, ecumenical* [etc. are] now more usual forms of OECUMENIC, OECUMENICAL, etc." And the entries for *ax(e)* in the two editions make for a fascinating comparison. The first edition makes *ax* the main form, for British as well as American English, and comments "The spelling *ax* is better on every ground, of etymology, phonology, and analogy, than *axe*, which has of late become prevalent" (the volume containing *ax* was published in 1885). The second edition substitutes *axe* as its main form: it *retains* its backing of *ax* as "better on every ground ... than *axe*, which became prevalent during the 19th century", but, bowing to the pressure of usage, it concedes that *ax* "is now disused in Britain", and transfers its imprimatur to *axe*.

What picture emerges of the current state of the English spelling system from the development of dictionaries over the past two hundred years? On a superficial level, it might appear that it is moving irrevocably towards a state of perfect equilibrium, with all but a few relatively trivial wrinkles ironed out. But one need not really look below the surface to see that in truth there is still a considerable amount of "sanctioned" variability within the system. All but the smallest dictionaries give alternative spellings for considerable numbers of their entries. Some of these may reflect systemic variation: the still undecided contest, for instance, between the *-ise* and *-ize* ending for verbs, the still fluid status of *ae/e* and *oe/e* spellings in British English in words such as *arch(a)eology*, *medi(a)eval*, and *f(o)etus*, or the eternal dilemma of the in-out *e mov(e)able*, *judg(e)ment*, etc.). Others may affect single lexical items. A recognition of valid alternatives is one thing, and would seem not to dent dictionaries' normative role too severely. But a comparison of different dictionaries quickly reveals that consensus is far from complete. Of a random clutch of ten potentially variable words, three were given an identical range of spellings in CHAMBERS ENGLISH DICTIONARY (Ch), COLLINS ENGLISH DICTIONARY (CED), the CONCISE OXFORD DICTIONARY (COD), the LONGMAN DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE (LDEL) and the READER'S DIGEST UNIVERSAL DICTIONARY (RD): they were *bo(a)tel*, *bur(r)*, and *buhl/boul(l)e*. In the remaining seven cases, at least one dictionary broke ranks: for *bawbee*, LDEL offers the variant *baubee*; for *bed(o)uin*, Ch comes up with an unexpected *bedawin*; in place of *biriani/biryani* Ch suggests *biryani/biriyani*; LDEL and Ch give *blim(e)y*, while the others offer only *blimey*; all are agreed on *burk/berk* except LDEL, which allows additionally *birk*; the tricky *cardamom*, *-mum*, *-mon* is supported by all except COD, which will countenance only *-mom* and *-mum*; and with *cabala*, anarchy reigns – only CED and RD agree, offering *cab(b)ala* and *kab(b)ala*, while LDEL also admits *cabbalah* and *kabbalah*, COD plumps for *cab(b)ala*, and *kabbala*, and Ch varies the options with *cab(b)ala*, *kab(b)ala*, and *kabbalah*.

If such uncertainty can afflict words that are relatively well established in the language, it should not be surprising if newcomers are even more variable. The problem seems particularly acute in the case of colloquialisms which lead most of their lives in the spoken language. Put them into print and, like a fish out of water, they flounder. Of the five above dictionaries to include the colloquial abbreviation of *biscuit*, LDEL spells it *biccief/bickie/bikkie*, CED *bickie*, and RD *bicky/bikky*. The colloquial abbreviation of the noun *present* has given similar difficulties, partly perhaps from a resistance to replacing orthographic *s* with *z* and the resulting anomalous spelling pronunciation /presi/. An isolated spelling *presee* is reported in the OED from 1937, but its orthographic history got properly under way in 1961, originally in Australia. The OED records the spellings *prezzie*, *pressie*,

and *pressie*. Of these, CED, COD, and LDEL give *pressie* and *prezzie* (in that order) and Ch only *prezzie* (RD does not include the word).

A similar dubiety attaches to the inflected forms of French past participles adapted as English verbs. Do they add *-d* or *-ed* in past forms, or should they have a zero past participle, as if they were not completely naturalized? Take the case of *sauté*. CED and RD offer only *-éed* (CED alone, and rather bafflingly, gives a choice of both *-éing* or *-éeing* for the present participle); COD suggests *-éd* or *-éed*; LDEL gives the same forms, but in the opposite order. Ch cannot bring itself to offer any recommendation – one feels a twinge of sympathy. LDEL is the only dictionary to enter the verb *flambé*, and it gives *-éed* as the past form, in contrast with the *-éed*, *-éd* of its *sauté* (Ch includes *flambéed* as an adjective).

If we add to this the vast variation in the orthographic treatment of compounds (open versus hyphenated versus solid), the image of the monolithic English spelling system as enshrined in the lexicographic record turns out to have quite a lot of cracks in it.

And if we move from dictionaries to the actual written language itself, the cracks widen. In a corpus of newspaper texts quoted in the MACQUARIE DICTIONARY OF NEW WORDS (1990, 241), *miniscule* outnumbered *minuscule* by 124 instances to 31, a ratio of 4:1. But from an etymological point of view it is simply and unequivocally wrong, an illiteracy: the word comes ultimately from Latin *minusculus* "rather small" (a diminutive form of *minor* "small"), and so any attempt, however logical, to remodel it on the analogy of *mini-* "small" is erroneous. So lexicographers face a dilemma: on the one hand they have statistical evidence pointing to a de facto acceptance of *miniscule* as a variant of *minuscule*; on the other they have the weight of traditional orthographic practice, still strongly urged in the case of *minuscule*:

"The hero of Proofs would be pained to learn that, on page six of the story in which he features, the word "minuscule" is misspelled as "miniscule" ... for, as George Steiner explains, the man is a master proofreader, famed for stringent accuracy", *Sunday Times, Books* 29 March 1992, p. 5)

What do they do? As far as our five British dictionaries are concerned, three of them (CED, COD, and RD) implicitly deny the existence of *miniscule*, by not including it. Ch does enter it, but describes it rather dismissively as "an alternative, less acceptable spelling of *minuscule*". LDEL enters it as an adjective in its own right, and in a note describing its increasing frequency, cites examples of its use by respected writers. This is considerable diversity, and points up the extent of the dilemma.

*Minu/iscule* is of course far from being alone in its dislocation between prescription and practice, although it remains the only word, as far as I am aware, for which a substantial corpus of printed texts shows the "incorrect" form outnumbering the "correct" one. And here I want to draw a distinction between the public written language of printed texts, whose producers may be expected to have a relatively high awareness of the "correct" form or to be sufficiently on their best behaviour to look it up in a dictionary if they are not sure, and the more private written language of handwritten letters, drafts, school essays, exam answers, etc., some of whose producers may be unaware of or unconcerned about some spelling conventions. To take the current temperature of the former, I looked at a corpus of the complete text of THE GUARDIAN for 1990, to see how a selection of commonly "misspelled" words fared. The locus classicus *minu/iscule* broke down *minuscule* 20 instances, *miniscule* 8, a ratio of 2.5:1. In a similar range were (the "correct" spelling precedes the "incorrect" in all cases) *rarefied* 23/*rarified* 9 (2.5:1) and

*millennium* 37/*millenium* 14 (2.6:1). Other “mistakes” to score well include *withhold* + inflections 73/*withold* + inflections 15 (4.8:1), *impresario* 49/*impressario* 7 (7:1), and *benefited* 229/*benefitted* 21 (10.9:1). (I am not, incidentally, unaware of the reputation of THE GUARDIAN for typographical errors, but in the 1990s it is more folk memory than actuality.)

Private, handwritten material might be expected to show a higher proportion of “spelling mistakes”. The findings of recent test conducted by the RSA Examination Board on office workers reveal some interesting comparisons with the GUARDIAN material (G). Two high-scoring G “mistakes” came out badly in the tests too: *withhold*, “misspelled” by 52% of those tested, and *benefited*, “misspelled” by 48%. *Occured* stumped 52% of those tested; in G, spellings of -rr-/-r- in derivatives of *occur* were in the ratio 20:1. *Accommodation* was “misspelled” by 32%, in G, the ratio of “correct” to “incorrect” was 25:1. But many items which showed poorly in the tests presented little or no problem for G: *innovate* 52% “misspelled” in the tests, no “errors” in G; *incur* 44% “misspelled”, no “errors” in G; *grievance* 40% “misspelled”, no “errors” in G; *concede* 40% “misspelled”, two “errors” out of 1251 instances in G; *transfer* 39% “misspelled”, 7 “errors” out of 703 instances in G; *competent* 37% “misspelled”, no “errors” in G; *acquire* 34% “misspelled”, six “errors” out of 1174 instances in G; *truly* 34% “misspelled”, one “error” out of 689 instances in G.

Clearly, in the language at large there is much more orthographic variation than is recognized in dictionaries. The traditional view of such variation is that it is “incorrect”: the theoretical basis of such a view is in most cases that the “misspelling” is at variance with the spelling of the word’s etymon, although the more unreflective critics might probably say simply “if it’s not in the dictionary, it’s wrong”, and ascribe any departure from traditional spelling to ignorance. But I would suggest that lexicographers need to start thinking carefully about how much longer they can continue to endorse this sometimes creaking status quo. Computerized corpora are putting vastly increased amounts of data into dictionary-makers’ hands, making such “misspellings” harder to ignore than hitherto, and the concern to capture “real” language is already increasing the quantity of non-print written texts used.

The inertia of “received orthography” is massive. Dictionaries have played a major role in establishing it, and are now trapped by it. Their iconic status in the culture – one writer linked the OED with THE TIMES and the BBC as “monoliths ... set up in order to protect the empire and create a model for what was correct or not” (Brathwaite 1984) – constrains them to reinforce “standards of literacy”, of which normalized spelling is seen as a cornerstone. But how long can they continue to play Canute? If, for example, it were to emerge, now or one day, that the proportion of *miniscule* to *minuscule* spellings in the language at large is the same as that in the Australian sample quoted above, how long could dictionaries continue to maintain the fiction that *minuscule* is the only “real” form and that *miniscule* is not a word in the language. Lexicographers have eagerly embraced a more descriptive approach in areas such as semantics and pragmatics. Perhaps the time is coming to let a little more light into orthography.

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