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The history of English: of what avail is it to the acquisition of English as a second language?

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In his preface to *Pygmalion*, G. Bernard Shaw states the following about the learning of English:

The English have no respect for their language, and will not teach their children to speak it. They cannot spell it because they had nothing to spell it with but an old foreign alphabet of which only the consonants -and not all of them- have any agreed speech value. Consequently no man can teach himself what it should sound like from reading it.[1]

The attitude reflected in these lines towards the learning of English spelling is still widespread nowadays. As D. Leith puts it (1983:35), "it is not uncommon to find many people, including some historians of English, describe our spelling as arbitrary, illogical and even chaotic."

Theoretically speaking, an ideal system of spelling would be that in which each phoneme is represented by one and only one grapheme and each grapheme stands for only one given phoneme. As is well known, present-day English (henceforth PDE) is rather far from attaining this ideal. This has led to the general belief that PDE spelling is inconsistent and anarchic. The frequent lack of correlation between the spelling of a given word and its pronunciation also constitutes one of the main problems for the learner of English as a foreign language, specially if she/he is a native speaker of Galician or Castilian, languages in which there is a much closer one-to-one relationship between phoneme and grapheme. This aspect of language acquisition is no less of a problem for the teacher of English, who often feels at a loss when trying to explain the discrepancies between spoken and written English.

The present paper aims to show that the apparent 'anarchy' in English spelling is not really such when diachronic evidence is taken into account. We are of the opinion that past frequently explains present and that, therefore, some knowledge of the history of English may lead us to a proper understanding of the 'regularities' and 'irregularities' of PDE. With such an aim in mind, in what follows we shall go into the history of a number of English phonemes and graphemes in an attempt to explain some of the apparent inconsistencies between phonology and spelling.

One of the problems that a Spanish learner of English has to face is the appearance in PDE of some letters which have no phonological realisation. By contrast, in Old English (henceforth OE),[2] where the one-

[1] From Shaw, G.B., 1916/1978. *Pygmalion*. Middlesex: Penguin.

[2] Although we are well aware of the arbitrariness of periodisation, fou our purpouses we shall adopt here the conventional chronological división of the English language into three main periods: OE (up to the 11th century), Middle English (11th-15th centuries), and Modern English (from the 15th century onwards).

to-one correspondence between graphemes and phonemes was much closer, there were none of the 'silent' consonants that are so frequent nowadays (cf Scragg 1974: 11-2). Thus, in the OE word *cniht* [kniçt] all five letters were pronounced, whilst in its PDE counterpart, *knight* /nait/, there are six letters but only three phonemes. The foreign learner of English may find no reason for the presence of the sequence <gh> in the PDE word *knight*. It is precisely the history of the language that helps us to explain this apparent inconsistency.

Originally, the letter <h> in the OE item *cniht* was used to represent one of the allophones of the fricative phoneme /h/ (cf Fernández 1982:184). This allophone [ç] occurred after front or palatal vowels, always in word-final position or before the voiceless dental plosive /t/. In the course of the Middle English period (henceforth ME), and due to the influence of Anglo-Norman scribes, the spelling of this allophone came to be either <ȝ> (known as yogh or open <g>), as in *kniȝt*, <gh> as in *knight*, or <ch> as in *knicht*,[3] all of them pronounced [kniçt]. It was towards the end of the ME period that this allophone began to be lost in pronunciation in some dialects, while its graphic representation was maintained.[4] In such cases, the phonemic loss of the fricative was compensated by a lengthening of the immediately preceding vowel. The resulting lengthened vowel /i:/ is the origin of the diphthong /ai/ found in the PDE word *knight*. It should be noted, however, that the fricative allophone under consideration here was preserved in careful speech until well into the 17th century and, consequently, the use of the grapheme sequence or digraph <gh> was fully justified (cf Görlach 1991:75). Although the loss of the allophone was finally generalised except in Scotland (cf Leith 1983:162), its orthographic representation has continued to be used.[5] Therefore, the presence of such a digraph in the PDE spelling can be accounted for on the basis of the existence of the fricative allophone in earlier stages of the language. At the same time, <gh> seems to serve as an indicator of the phonological realisation of the preceding letter, thus enabling a foreign learner of English to establish a difference in pronunciation between *knit* /nit/ and *knight* /nait/.

Obviously enough, there are many other examples of letters which lack phonological realisation in PDE. One of the most outstanding cases is that of the so-called final mute <-e>, as in *cane*, *mete*, *pine*, *bone* and *rune*, all containing either a long vowel or a diphthong. It is generally accepted that the presence of such a letter in PDE serves as an indication of vowel length. Thus, the set of forms just mentioned contrasts with one in which there is no final <-e>: *can*, *met*, *pin*, *son* and *run*, all of them with a short vowel. Once again, the explanation for the presence of the silent letter in the first set of words must be sought for in earlier periods of the English language. According to Scragg (1974:80), the use of final <-e> as a marker of vowel length originates in the early ME process of lengthening of short vowels in open syllables of disyllabic words. Many of these words contained a final etymological /-e/ <-e> in the second syllable, which later underwent a process of weakening, thus becoming the neutral vowel /ə/. Although this weakened vowel ceased to be pronounced towards the end of the ME period, its graphic representation continued to be used. The retention of this letter in writing after its phonological loss "paved the way for the association of mute final <e> in spelling with a preceding long vowel" (Scragg, 1974:80). As a consequence, <-e> was analogically transferred to words without a final etymological vowel, as ME *life* < OE *lif* (cf Wright & Wright, 1928: #17; Lass 1992: 38).

Together with the presence of letters lacking phonological realisation, another of the problems which a foreign learner of English has to face is the fact that, in many cases, one single phoneme may be represented in spelling by many different graphemes. One of the most conspicuous examples of such a lack of correlation between speech and writing is to be found in the PDE vocalic phoneme /i:/ and its corresponding graphic representations. The most frequent spellings for this vowel are: <ee>, <ea>, <ie>, <ei> as well as the so-called discontinuous grapheme <e-e>, as in *need*, *reason*, *brief*, *seize* and *mete*. Such a variety of graphemes for the same vocalic phoneme often puzzles the learner of English as a foreign lan-

[3] The spelling <ch> was specially frequent in Northern ME and Scots (cf Wright & Wright, 1928: #17).

[4] Cf Jordan 1974: 248-9; Barber 1976: 316; Görlach 1991: 69. In a few words, however, [x] became /f/, in final position after earlier /u/, as in PDE *enough*.

[5] In this respect, we must bear in mind that phonology and orthography do not always go hand in hand, since the latter is usually considered to be far more conservative than the former.

guage. Once more, a look back into earlier periods of English is undoubtedly of great avail to understand the current state of affairs.

The use of final mute <-e>, as in the discontinuous grapheme <e-e> found in *scene* has already been explained. However, such was by no means the only graphic indication of a long vowel in the earlier stages of the English language. In fact, the method with the longest tradition in English is that of the doubling of vowel symbols. This method of reduplication of vowels was already found in OE, although it was not practised in a regular way (cf Scragg 1974: 79). From the fourteenth century onwards, its use increases, specially for /e:/ and /o:/ in closed syllables, in an attempt to distinguish between long and short vowels in writing (cf Mossé 1952: #14). Thus, the presence of <ee> in a word such as *need* denoted, and still denotes, the long value of the vocalic element involved.

The use of the digraph <ea> in words such as *reason* goes back, once again, to ME. This grapheme sequence, English in origin,[6] was reintroduced into the orthographic system of English in the ME period by Anglo-Norman scribes. The main reason for the use of such a grapheme at that time was to establish a distinction in spelling between two different types of long /e/, one half-open and the other half-close.[7] Thus, the half-open vowel in ME *sea* /se:/ contrasted, both in phonology and in orthography, with its half-close counterpart in ME *feet* /fe:t/. Although at first <ea> was most frequently found in French loans, such as PDE *reason* (<Old French *reisun*), it was later extended to many native words, such as PDE *sea* (<OE *sæ*).

The digraphs <ie> and <ei> were incorporated into the English spelling system also during ME. Both of them were frequent Old French representations for the half-close and the half-open long vowel /e/, respectively (cf Scragg 1974: 49). Therefore, those French loans entering the English language in the course of the ME period, such as *brief* (<Old French *brief*) and *seize* (<Old French *seisir*), retained their original continental spellings. In the fifteenth century, <ie> also spread to many native words, as PDE *field* (<OE *feld*) and *thief* (<OE *δεof*) evince.

Another noteworthy example of the absence of a one-to-one relationship between phoneme and grapheme is that of PDE /Λ/, which is normally spelt <u>, <o> and <ou>. Typical illustrations of the use of these three spellings are PDE *such*, *month* and *country*. This phoneme originated in the seventeenth century as a result of the phonemic split of the vowel /u/ into /u/ and / Λ/ (cf Barber 1976: 296; Görlach 1991: 66). This split, however, was not accompanied by a corresponding spelling distinction between the two elements. Thus, for example, ME *pulle(n)* and ME *cuppe* -one phoneme, /u/, and one spelling, <u>- have become PDE *pull* and PDE *cup*, where the same spelling <u> stands for two different phonemes, /u/ and /Λ /, respectively. It seems then that the PDE spellings for / Λ/ have to be accounted for via the ME spellings for the ME vowel /u/.

Up to the thirteenth century, ME /u/ had only one possible spelling, namely <u>. In late ME, however, additional spellings were introduced into the system by Anglo-Norman scribes, mainly as a consequence of their confusion between English, French and Latin conventions. Thus, besides the historically correct spelling <u>, <o> and, occasionally, <ou>[8] came to represent ME /u/. The use of the spelling <o> for earlier <u> merits special attention. Such a practice seems to have been quite frequent in Late Latin (cf Scragg, 1974:43), and Anglo-Norman scribes, being highly influenced by Latin conventions, carried this use over into English. Apparently, the use of <o> was particularly helpful in those cases in which the vowel occurred in the vicinity of downstroke letters or minims in order to avoid graphical confusion in the reading of <u> with a neighbouring <m, n, v, w, i, ...> (cf Mossé 1952: #11 and Lass 1992:38, among others). It should be remarked, however, that <o> also replaces <u> in cases where there is no danger of confusion with minims (e.g. *borough*), a fact which has led Scragg (1974:44) to maintain that such a replacement has very little to do with easiness of reading.

To conclude, the aim of this paper has been to present just a few illustrative examples of the apparent anarchy which, according to many, characterises PDE spelling. It is precisely this seeming inconsistency that makes the learning of English spelling a somew-

[6] The digraph <ea> had been used to represent, among others, the OE diphtong /ea/.

[7] This distinction was lost in the seventeenth century (cf Görlach 1991: 69).

[8] The main use of <ou> in ME was, however, that of standing for ME /u:/. According to Scragg (1974:48,fn 1), from the fourteenth century, this spelling is also occasionally used to represent /u/.

somewhat up-hill task for the foreign learner. However, with these same instances we have tried to show that PDE spelling becomes less chaotic if certain aspects of the history of the language are borne in mind. Undoubtedly, taking into account diachronic evidence would lead to a better understanding of the present-day state of affairs, and, consequently, both teaching and learning of PDE spelling would become more meaningful.

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