

Early Modern English (c. 1500-1800)

Expansion of Vocabulary (1500-1650)

The English Language Comes into Its Own

The transition from Middle English to Modern English began in the sixteenth century when several factors came together to produce a period of extraordinary vitality and progress in the development of the language. During this period—the Renaissance—a great revival of interest in learning swept over England and much of Europe, leading people to become more aware of the importance of language as they studied the writings of the past. Furthermore, many words from other languages (especially Latin and Greek) were introduced into English as a result of this growing interest in the writings of antiquity. We have already seen that the growing availability of printed books made more and more people aware of the need for clarity and consistency in spelling and usage.

Until the sixteenth century, French continued to be the prestigious literary language, and Latin remained the international language for serious scholarly work well into the seventeenth century. However, the influence of other languages gradually diminished as the English language continued to develop. A sense of literary nationalism swept over England as an increasingly large reading public came to realize that English could assume its place among the major languages of the world.

The work of the poet John Skelton (1460-1529) shows how important the English language had become and how rapidly its vocabulary was expanding in the sixteenth century. Skelton is credited with introducing about 1500 new words into the English language, many of them derived from his study of Latin. A few of the many new words contributed by Skelton are these:

accumulate (L *accumulare*)
attempt (L *attemptare*)
celebrate (L *celebrare*)
concern (L *concernere*)
describe (L *describere*)
economy (Gk *oikonomia*)
gravity (L *gravis*, heavy)
imitation (L *imitatus* from *imitari*, to copy)
lucky (ME *lucke*, from Middle High German *gelücke*)
miserable (L *miserabilis*)
seriousness (Fr *serieux* [from L *serius*] + OE suffix *-nes*)
steadily (OE *stede*, place)
variety (L *varietas*)

These words illustrate principles of Anglicization that are found throughout the history of the language, especially the change or elimination of Latin verb suffixes and the mixture of German and Latin elements (as in *seriousness*).

The Search for Spelling Conventions: Mulcaster's Elementarie

The hybrid nature of the English language has been the source of many questions about the spelling of words, not only those retained from Old English but also those taken over from other languages. Our alphabet of 26 letters must represent at least 44 different sounds, or *phonemes*. If we are puzzled today by some of the varied spellings of the same sound and by the use of the same letter or letters to represent different sounds, then the writer and reader of the sixteenth century must have been even more mystified.

A giant step toward standard spelling and usage was taken in 1582 with the publication of Richard Mulcaster's *Elementarie*, one of the earliest attempts to deal with the English language as it was actually spoken and written. Some of the spelling principles established by Mulcaster are these:

1. Remove all unnecessary letters. In earlier days, simple words with short vowels were spelled with extra consonants at the end (*tubb*, *bedd*). Mulcaster established the Consonant-Vowel-Consonant (CVC) pattern as the norm for spelling words or syllables with short vowels (*tub*, *bed*).
2. Include letters that are needed to indicate correct pronunciation (the *t* in *catch*, for example).
3. Use a final silent *e* to mark long vowels and to distinguish them from short vowels (e.g., *hop* for the short vowel and *hope* for the long vowel). Mulcaster called this the *qualifying E*: "I call that E, qualifying, whose absence or presence, sometime altereth the vowel, sometime the consonant going next before it" (Campagnac, 1925, p. 123).

Mulcaster established other spelling principles as well, but these three are particularly significant. The third item helped to establish a guideline that eventually brought order to the varied and chaotic spelling of short and long vowels that made sixteenth-century English confusing.

Instability in Early Modern English

Although one of Mulcaster's goals was to bring order to English spelling, several features of his use of the language appear archaic to us today. Some of the unusual spellings of his time resulted when printers varied the spelling of words in order to make lines of print come out the right length in different locations. One common practice in the early sixteenth century was the use of *mo* and *moe* to mean "more in number" with plural nouns whose individual elements could be counted, such as *mo horses* or *mo cattle*. The word *more* was at first used to mean "greater in quantity" with singular, abstract nouns that did not contain individual quantifiable elements, as in *more art* or *more honesty* (Barber, 1976, p. 230).

The word *and* was often represented by the ampersand (&), and the *tilde* (~) was placed over a letter to indicate that the following letter was not written out but could be inferred

from context. This sign was often used to represent the letters *m* or *n*, as in *fr̃* for *from* and *cã* for *can*. Mulcaster always had all the letters written out in words such as *number* and *then* when listing proper spellings in tabular form, but printers often set these words with the *tilde* in place of *m* and *n* in the text itself.

Although Mulcaster did establish the final silent *e* as a marker for long-vowel words (*face*, *hope*, *mine*), other vowel spellings remained less clear. Words that we now spell with vowel digraphs (*need*, *soap*, *see*) were either spelled with the final *e* (*nede*, *sope*) or had no marker of any sort (*se* for *see*). Some other words could be spelled several different ways: *childeren*, *childern*, or *children*, for example. Mulcaster also included the following words in his list of proper spellings:

bycause (because)	quik (quick)
duble (double)	som (some)
hir (her)	theie (they)
pece (piece)	throthe (throat)
peple (people)	tung (tongue)

These few examples show that many of the conventions we use today were still far from settled in Mulcaster's time.

Language in Shakespeare's Day: The Great Vowel Shift

During the lifetime of William Shakespeare (1564-1616), most of the simplification of Old English inflections and the other grammatical changes of Middle English had already been accomplished. Changes in pronunciation continued, however, and the earlier practice of articulating all consonants had all but disappeared by the beginning of the seventeenth century. Pronunciation of vowels in Old English words had already begun to change by the fifteenth century: for example, the final vowel in *nama* (name) had diminished to the *schwa* sound before disappearing entirely. Even greater changes in the pronunciation of long vowels occurred during the period of Early Modern English and continued through the eighteenth century. These changes, taken as a whole, were so extensive and important in the development of the language that they have been called the **Great Vowel Shift**.

Some idea of the extent of this vowel shift is suggested by the following description of how the words *house*, *wife*, *he*, *her*, *wine*, and *moon* were pronounced in the fourteenth century:

Chaucer lived in what would have sounded like a *hoos*, with his *weef*, and *hay* Would romance *heer* with a bottle of *weena*, drunk by the light of the *moan*. In the two hundred years, from 1400 to 1600, which separated Chaucer and Shakespeare, the sounds of English underwent a substantial change to form the Basis of Modern English pronunciation. (Yule, 1985, p. 174).

Some of these changes in long-vowel sounds were well established by the time of Shakespeare. For example, in Chaucer's day the word *beet* would have been pronounced

bait, and the word *boat* would have been pronounced *boot*; by the seventeenth century, both words had assumed their present-day pronunciation. Other words changed pronunciation from Middle to Early Modern English, and then changed again into present-day English. As Yule pointed out, the word *house* (spelled *hūs* in Old English) would still have rhymed with *goose* in Chaucer's day, but by the sixteenth century it had changed first to *hose* (rhyming with *dose*) before changing again to its present pronunciation. We have given examples of only some of the vowel sounds that changed during the period from 1400 to 1800, but even these few show how important and extensive these changes were.

Orthography and Printing in Shakespeare's Day

The written language of Shakespeare's day retained a number of archaic features of *orthography*-the writing of words with proper letters following the accepted standards of the time. For example, the letters *u* and *v* still represented either the vowel or consonant, a practice that was not arbitrary even though it might appear so to us. Barber explains that "for the first letter of a word, the printer invariably selects *v*, and in other positions he invariably selects *u*" (1976, p. 15). This practice was normally followed by printers in Shakespeare's day but was not used so consistently in manuscripts.

Other features of earlier orthography included use of the long *s* (ſ), which looks like an *f* without the cross-bar. This form was used to represent the letter *s* at every point in a word except as an initial capital or as the final letter. Also, the letter *i* continued to serve for both the vowel *i* and the consonant *j*, as it had done for centuries. The elongated *i*, which was to become the letter *j*, had not been adopted consistently at this time. English printing of this period can be seen in the following passage taken from the first folio edition (1623) of Shakespeare's plays. These are the famous lines spoken by Marc Antony in Act III of *Julius Caesar*:

An. Friends, Romans, Countrymen, lend me your ears:
I come to bury *Cafar*, not to praife him:
The euill that men do, liues after them,
The good is oft entered with their bones,
So let it be with *Cafar*. The Noble *Brutus*;
Hath told you *Cafar* was Ambitious:
If it were ſo, it was a greeuous Fault;
And greeuoufly hath *Cafar* anſwer'd it.
Heere, vnder leaue of *Brutus*, and the reft
(For *Brutus* is an Honourable man,
So are they all; all Honourable men)
Come I to ſpeake in *Cafars* Funerall.

Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act III (Hinman, 1968, p. 729)

To a great extent our concept of earlier forms of written English has been influenced by the practices of printers in centuries past. For example, Caxton and others used the

Middle English spelling of words as they existed when they began their work in the late fifteenth century. However, as pronunciation continued to change throughout Early Modern English, the spelling of many words ultimately did not accurately reflect their sound. This is obvious in words such as *knee* and *write*, whose OE spellings *cnēow* and *writan* contained letters that were originally sounded and that were retained in their written forms long after the practice of articulating all consonants had been abandoned. This contrast between sound and symbol became even greater when printers from countries such as Holland and Belgium set out to print books in English, bringing their own concepts of sound-symbol relationships to a language that was not their own.

Shakespeare's efforts were devoted to writing plays in language that suited the requirements of comedy, history, and tragedy-his concern was with the *performance* of his plays, not with their publication.

And since Shakespeare evidently paid little heed to the printing of his plays, the printing house was more than a little involved in establishing texts of Shakespeare's works. If we assume that what we call Shakespearean was indeed by Shakespeare, then many of the puzzling aspects of the text, such as the varying styles of punctuation, can be solved only by a study of printing-house conditions, an identification of the compositors, and a reconstruction of the history of the transmission of the text-and for each work individually. (Spevack, 1985, pp. 343-44)

Spelling Conventions

Our concepts of spelling and usage have been influenced to a great extent by printers who first published the literary works and other documents that make up our heritage of the English language. We sometimes find that one or another of our present-day spelling conventions exists for no better reason than that some Norman scribe or Belgian printer first spelled an English word in his own way, based in large part on the sound-spelling principles of his native language, and the word has been spelled that way ever since. For example, the spellings of the OE word *gāst* (from the Old High German *geist*, meaning "spirit") and the ME *gost* clearly indicated the pronunciation in their respective periods. However, by the late sixteenth century the additional letter *h* began to appear in books printed in Dutch and Belgian printers (in fact, the word is spelled *gheest* in Flemish), and the spelling *ghost* has persisted since that time.

From the sixteenth century into the eighteenth, the spelling conventions for many words were determined by referring to their original forms as a guide. We have already seen that Old English words such as *sweord* and *cniht* contained consonant letters that were spoken in the tenth century but are no longer sounded in the modern spellings *sword* and *knight*. When consistent spelling patterns were imposed on words that had changed so drastically in pronunciation, the results sometimes represented an unusual mixture of old and modern practices.

This is especially true of the words *should*, *would*, and *could*, which obviously share a common graphemic base in their modern spellings even though the written pattern does not exactly match the sound. The Old English words *sceolde* (which became *sholde* in ME) and *wolde* (unchanged in ME) eventually assumed their current spellings *should* and *would*. In these cases it is possible to see that the letter *l* is a vestige of their original spelling and sound, even though the *l* became silent in Modern English. However, the OE word *cuthe* (later spelled *couthe* or *coude* in ME) never did contain an *l*, even though its modern spelling is *could*. At some point the decision was made to establish a consistent spelling pattern for these three related words even though the retention of the letter *l* was valid for only two of them.

The same rationale applies to words adapted from Latin. Frequently an effort was made to establish spelling conventions in English that mirrored some features of the original words even though pronunciation no longer matched written symbols. This can be seen in a word such as *debt*, which was spelled *dette* both in Old French and in Middle English. During the period of fascination with Latin words in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the spelling was changed to *debt* to reflect the original Latin *debitum*, a form of the verb *debēre* meaning “to owe.” The same thing happened with the verb *doubt*, spelled *douten* in ME and *douter* in Old French. The letter *b* was added to reflect the Latin source *dubitare*, “to doubt, be uncertain.”

We can now see the source of the conflict that has arisen over the centuries as people tried to establish standard English spellings that also reflected the original spelling and meaning of words from other languages. A knowledge of the etymology of words can certainly be helpful, and clues to this etymology often are imbedded in modern spellings. On the other hand, language reformers have advocated spellings such as *det* and *dout* that would establish a clear match between sound and symbol.

Some of the spellings we now use, complete with “silent letters” and other anomalies, were established in the first printed books and have remained the norm ever since, largely because it would have been all but impossible to change printed texts after they were published. Other spellings were established in the period of Early Modern English, when a concern for the derivation of words from Latin and Greek led to spellings such as those found in *debt* and *doubt*. Even though the spelling conventions of some words do require us to include letters that are not pronounced, a knowledge of why and how these spellings developed allows us to see that there is a reason for their seeming irregularities. In some cases, these spellings even give us clues to the original meaning of the words and can thus help us to understand their meaning more clearly.

The Need for an English Dictionary

Today we can easily turn to a dictionary to check the spelling or definition of any word, but at the beginning of the seventeenth century there was no true dictionary of the English language to provide writers with a guide to standard usage and spelling. Shakespeare did use Thomas Wilson’s *Art of Rhetorique* (1553), a well-known text that advocated clear, direct writing and opposed the use of obscure words contrived from

Latin elements. Other than this and Mulcaster's *Elementarie*, very little help was available to writers in the early period of Modern English.

Langland, Chaucer, and Malory at best had access to lists of "hard words" in certain subjects, usually glossed by Latin words which they were assumed to have learnt at school or university. Spenser and some other Renaissance writers appended explanations to some of their works so that readers would understand the more difficult words... The early plays of Shakespeare were written before the first English dictionary was published. It is self-evident therefore that English literature can proceed at the highest level of performance without the existence of elaborate lexicons and grammars. The spoken language has always proceeded without recourse to dictionaries. (Burchfield, 1985, pp. 77-78)

The earliest dictionaries in the seventeenth century were intended to define only difficult and unusual words, not every word in the language. One of the first books of this type was *A Table Alphabeticall*, published in 1604 by Robert Cawdrey. The purpose of this volume was to teach "the true writing, and vnderstanding of hard vsuall English wordes, borrowed from the Hebrew, Greeke, Latine, or French. &c." This was one of the first publications that could be considered a dictionary of any sort. It contained about 2,500 hard words "with the interpretation thereof-by plaine English words, gathered for the benefit & helpe of Ladies, Gentlewomen, or any other unskilfull persons."

The first book to call itself an English dictionary was a two-part work by Henry Cockeram, published in London in 1623 and entitled *The English Dictionarie: or, and Interpreter of hard English Words*. It claimed that it would not only help readers understand the more difficult authors but also lead to "speedy attaining of an elegant perfection of the English tongue, both in reading, speaking, and writing."

The first part of Cockeram's dictionary contained brief definitions of words that may have been important to the seventeenth-century lady or gentleman who wanted to impress polite society with a display of erudition. Some of Cockeram's words are of the "inkhorn" variety, obscure contrivances cobbled together from bits and pieces of Latin. For example, the Latin prefix *ab-* (away from), when combined with the Latin word *equus* (horse), yields the verb *abequitate*: to ride away on horseback. Not all entries are quite so humorously inventive, but in some cases the definition is as obscure as the word itself:

Acersecomicke. One whose haire was never cut.

Acyrologicall. An unproper speech.

Adecastick. One that will doe just howsoever.

The second part of Cockeram's dictionary reversed the process, listing everyday words and following them with more arcane terms meaning approximately the same thing. This was intended to show people how the words in the first part could be used to turn simple, direct statements into obscure, complicated ones that would presumably be more impressive. For example, the adjective *doubtful* could be replaced by *amphibological*,

and “to breath [sic] or blow on” something was to *adhalate*. Fortunately this fascination with more extreme inhorn terms eventually ran its course.