

## A Stand for Standardization

Anne Trubek published “Proper Spelling? Its Tyme to Let Luce” in *Wired* magazine, arguing that it was time to give up on trying to standardize English spelling. The following is my response to her.

Dear Prof. Trubek –

I am not a reader of *Wired*, but one of my buddies is, and since he knows that I am morbidly interested in English spelling, and he enjoys making trouble, he passed on your article to me. The attached pdf is a somewhat hasty response. (I converted it to pdf because it contains a couple of special characters that surely would not survive the normal email trip through cyberspace.) Take it for what it is: the somewhat testy musings of a retired English professor.

Sincerely,

D. W. Cummings  
Emeritus Professor of English  
Central Washington University  
Ellensburg, Washington

When you argue that it is “wrongheaded” to reinforce a traditional spelling standard and that “English spelling is a terrible mess,” I suspect you know you are repeating complaints that go back at least 600 years and usually reduce to the plaint that English spelling should be more phonetic. You also argue that our spelling system is laced with “arbitrary contrivances and exceptions that outnumber rules.” The first part of that charge is true, as it is of any evolving system: Consider the human body and its many arbitrary contrivances. The second part of your charge, reinforced in your final sentence, is demonstrably not true. The rules and regularities of English spelling, if described in detail greater than that of the comic-book treatment they get in language arts textbooks and most classrooms – and in the folk-lorish arguments of spelling reform -- though remarkably complex, are far from being a wrongheaded mess.

It is true that before the spread of printing “English words were reproduced by scribes in scriptoria,” but they were more widely reproduced by men and women at home writing letters, diaries, and religious expostulations or at their job doing whatever writing their job required. Because English spellings back then were basically phonetic (unlike Latin) and because of dialect differences in pronunciation, the English spellings varied widely. As you point out with the example of poor, long-suffering *through*, differences in speech led to great variation and thus confusion – which, I suspect, would recur if we could realize your call to “loosen our ideas of correct spelling.” Imagine what 114 variants of *through* would do to today’s silent speed readers.

That early confusion made it clear that English spelling must do more than spell

sounds. It also has to be systematic and predictable. As the Elizabethan schoolmaster and language arts teacher Richard Mulcaster said, in addition to the demands of Sound, it also has to be regulated by Custom (that is, history and tradition) and Reason.

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century Written Standard English was developed in large part due to the need for the legal and government documents coming out of London's Chancery to be understood in the far reaches of the kingdom. By Mulcaster's century, the 16<sup>th</sup>, standardization was well along, aided hugely by the spread of printing, the availability of cheap texts, and thus the spread of literacy. Written Standard continued to evolve as a way of ensuring widespread comprehension among writers and readers.

As you point out, English is an evolving system, and, like, say, a biological system, it must adapt to dramatic changes in its environment. But I would suggest that your plea to loosen up on our ideas of correct spelling would be a bad adaptation. We must remember that the rise of Written Standard was itself an adaptation to a perilous situation and that to chuck traditional standardized spellings would almost surely bring back that same peril. In fact, the peril would be much greater since English is today a true *lingua franca*, a worldwide language no longer restricted to one tight little island.

Obviously someone needs to develop more intelligent and less irritating, or at least less risible, spelling checkers and autocorrecters. Perhaps the melodious Siri is the answer. But rather than chucking the whole system, a better adaptation, it seems to me, would be to accept the abbreviations and rebus-like strategies of electronic texting for what they are: A way of saving wear and tear on texters' time and thumbs, a kind of written argot. People master many different registers and styles of speech: A fellow does not speak to his golfing buddies the way he speaks to his minister or sweetie pie. I see no reason why the same thing could not go for spelling registers and styles.

I don't know much of anything about text-speak – never having done any texting, not even owning a cell phone, smart or stupid. But I suspect that there is something to be learned from this new written argot: Consider, for example, “str8t,” which avoids that time- and thumb-consuming <aigh>. Comparing it with *straight* at least brackets the difficulties in the standardized spelling, the <str> and final <t> being perfectly phonetic and hard to vary. But why the bothersome <aigh>? Part of the answer is that in Old English and early Middle English *straight's* ancestor, *strazt*, contained a short vowel and a velar fricative pronounced much like the <ch> in the German *Bach*. This fricative was originally spelled with yogh, <Ʒ>, later with <g> (which looked much like yogh), still later with <gh>, the <h> apparently intended to mark the fricative-ness, as in <sh> and <th>. In time that sound dropped out of English and the <gh> fell silent. But in the process the <gh> tended to lengthen vowels in front of it, staying in words as a kind of diacritic. So modern *straight* ends up with long [ā] spelled with the common medial digraph <ai> in front of a silent <gh>, a pretty good example of Mulcaster's Custom and Reason at work.

Now this is not offered as something to be taught to a roomful of squirming third graders. It is meant simply to suggest that there has been and is still a lot going on

behind and in our spelling standards. I probably should ask the obvious question: If we loose the dogs of spelling, what happens to all those libraries and archives and filing cabinets filled with standardized spellings? A single generation of loosening up would probably be enough to make all those texts less or even in- accessible to readers. That could create problems. But this screed is already long enough.