

History Reveals *Spoken* and *Written* English as Separate Languages

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5,800 spoken languages are recognized in the world today and only 2,000 of them have a written form. This is the way language works – speaking comes first and then the words are written down. Written languages use sets of symbols to represent sounds in order for the languages to be printed.

However, English does not work like this. The alphabet doesn't represent sounds, spelling is random, and grammar is a punishing set of rules that never lead to fluency. No other language suffers from such dissention between its written and spoken forms. The secret to how this disaster came about is in its history.

Around 450 AD, three German-speaking tribes (the Angles, Saxons and Jutes) crossed the North Sea into Great Britain. They overpowered the native people and drove them to the far corners of their island. Several hundred years later, Norse people arrived and again fighting ensued. This time there was no clear winner and Norse culture and language were added to the German and German speakers on the mainland could no longer understand their relatives across the sea. It was the beginning of two words for things, such as *ill/sick*, *anger/wrath*, *skin/hide*... It was also the beginning of the ridiculous "s" on the third person singular (she sings) and of a new language known as *Old English*.

In 1066, William the Conqueror arrived in *Angleland* and there was more fighting. The French were the undisputed winners. Thus began several hundred years of French rule in Britain. The effect on the language was profound. Suddenly there could be three words for things: the German, the Norse and the French. To this day, cow, pig and sheep are unavailable in the grocery store. Those were the peasant names for the animals the English tended in the field. When the same creatures reached the tables of the French aristocracy inside the castle walls, they were known by French names boeuf, porc, mouton, etc.

To ensure precision in the practice of law, French and English words were presented in tandem. The subsequent word pairs such as "breaking and entering," "fit and proper," "wrack and ruin" survive as fixed pairs today. The influence of French defined the 500-year *Middle English* period. With two or more words for many things, the trend for English to expand and accommodate other languages was well established.

By this point in its history, *English* had been evolving for a thousand years and was still predominantly oral. Any writing was undertaken by Roman Catholic monks who hand-copied religious texts using the Latin alphabet.

In 1476, one man changed the course of language and history. No, not Bill Gates; he came later. William Caxton purchased a printing press and set it up in London. For the first time, hundreds of copies of printed material were available to common people for as little as a penny/cent/copper.

Writing down the English language was a tremendous responsibility. With four dozen sounds regularly in use in English and only 26 letters in the Latin alphabet, poor Mr. Caxton wasn't sure what to do about spelling. He did the best he could. Sometimes he copied the words from their original language, but mostly he made them up. Overwhelmed by the task of reconciling 40 sounds with 26 symbols, the first thing Caxton printed was, "Don't copy me." No one listened, and copy him they did. In 1603, they put all his spelling mistakes in a big book and called it the *dictionary*, or as some of us like to call it, the Big Book of Mistakes (BBM).

The English spelling and grammar that Caxton printed remained in effect for the next five hundred years and is known as *Modern English*. William Caxton didn't just print the English language – he carved it in stone.

So there it is. English *speaking* and English *writing* don't go together – and they never did.

The Impact of a Divided Language

The impact on education of written English separate from spoken English is staggering. For English-speaking children, John Steinbeck describes learning to read as "perhaps the greatest single effort that the human undertakes." From *Children of the Code*, we learn:

"More American children suffer long-term life-harm from the process of learning to read than from parental abuse, accidents, and all other childhood diseases and disorders combined. In purely economic terms, reading-related difficulties cost our nation more than the war on terrorism, crime, and drugs combined."

English as a Second Language (ESL) learners are faced with a similarly daunting task. Hundreds of millions of ESL learners can read English, but the connection between letters and sounds is so remote there simply is not enough information in printed words to be able to speak. Learners can't guess that **R E D**, **S A I D** and **H E A D** sound the same, or that **DO** and **GO** don't.

The Solution

Thankfully, there is a simple solution. It doesn't have to be that big a deal. Simply acknowledge that English is two separate languages and deal with them accordingly. Keep the Latin alphabet for reading (because it's familiar) and use a special English

Phonetic Alphabet (EPA) for speaking. With a good phonetic alphabet, everything works. Writing looks like this: **red**, **head**, **said**, and speaking looks like this: **/red/**, **/hed/**, **/sed/**.

Summary

Long ago the German + Norse + French languages combined to form the basis of English. Since then every major language has contributed to English, making it the *biggest* language in the world. However, the unwieldy result is only one of the many problems with English. History forged English into a language where letters and sounds are so loosely connected that the written and spoken forms have evolved into separate languages. If you speak it, it is difficult to read. If you read it, it is impossible to speak.

English has a running total of more than a million words – and you can't tell how to pronounce any of them from their spelling.

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