

FONETIC ENGLISH

by Harry Dunn

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Before Caxton introduced England to Gutenberg's printing press in the late 1400s, English writers devised their own spelling for words large and small, and generally spelt each word as they thought it sounded, ie they spelt *phonetically*.

With no set rules to bother them, they were inclined to vary their spellings from one line to the next, with a single word sometimes spelt several different ways in the same sentence. William Shakespeare was said to have spelt his own surname at least six different ways, and nobody was troubled by that little inconsistency.

Over the next two centuries, the printing press encouraged writers to standardise their spelling, and the age of imaginative spelling was over. This left us with a raft of standardised but illogical spelling of words borrowed from many sources, including the revered Latin and Greek roots, also French, German and other languages, from which English had developed, without anyone having a suitable vehicle to amend the spelling and ensure that it still echoed the way the words were/are now pronounced. Early dictionaries, including Samuel Johnson's, followed the existing spelling and punctuation habits, so the spelling inconsistencies continued down to the present day.

English spelling lacks consistency. Some languages - Italian, for example, have rules which ensure that the spelling and pronunciation of a word, once learned, can be used to write similar words or syllables.

Not so in our beloved language - a word or a single syllable might be pronounced many different ways, although the spelling is the same. And so the meaning of many English words bears little resemblance to the spelling of the word - and vice versa..

For example - that troublesome *OUGH* spelling can be pronounced at least five different ways: *O* as in dough *OO* as in through *OW* as in plough *OFF* as in trough *UFF* as in tough

The word Colonel is pronounced Kernel, but Colonial is not pronounced Kernel-ial.

Wood is pronounced *WOOD* but Could has redundant letters *L* and *D* in place.

We don't pronounce the *P* in Pneumatic, or the *K* in Knight, or the *G* in Gnome. These letters are now silent. Those now-redundant letters were actually voiced in earlier times, but remain in our spelling today although we dropped them from the spoken language hundreds of years ago. And why do we

spell Dia-rea (my phonetics) with that mysterious combination of vowels and consonants which ends up as DIARRHOEA.

Try pronouncing that one if you didn't already know how to say it. Pity the poor arrivals fresh off the 'plane, when they need to explain their condition to a local doctor, or the linguistically-challenged Aussie who would still like to improve his/her communication skills, but could never come to terms with our archaic spelling method. So, many such writers gave up and remained illiterate or only semi-literate, at considerable disadvantage for the rest of their lives.

It is hard enough for educated Australians to remember that I comes before E, except except after C (and who gives a rat's, anyway) *Should* rhymes with *Wood*, but still has that mysterious *UL* combination in place.

We still live with that redundant *K* in *Knight*, the *G* in *Gnome* and the *K* in *Know*, and thousands of words with these "silent" letters.

We might even lose the apostrophe from that troublesome little word *its* where it serves no purpose when spoken, and is so often mis-placed by writers that we would be better without it, an opinion endorsed by Kate Burridge, Australia's best-known university professor of Linguistics. Removing the apostrophe from *its* might reduce its attractiveness to those illiterate *sign-writers* who feel that it looks nice in many strange places, including on the windows of many a fish-and-chip shop offering *HAMBURGER'S*, *FISH AND CHIP'S* and even those exotic *KEBAB'S*.

So - Why don't we re-introduce a limited form of *PHONETIC SPELLING* to assist newly-arrived non-English-speakers, and linguistically-challenged native speakers (many of us) to write and to be understood - never mind the niceties of 'proper' English spelling at this stage. A simple guide book, with first-language translations, would help these new chums to get started.

The desire to learn is a natural human trait, so the old fall-back "Me no ennerstan" might be heard less and less in this migrant-friendly nation of ours. Or so we might hope!

Many of us from earlier generations learned to read for pleasure by our exposure to comic books - those corny old Westerns, Battle comics, True Romances, Disney characters etc. Our parents never approved of comics, but their simple story lines, enlivened by the illustrations, introduced us to the wonderful world of reading when we were starting out.

Those old comics were a boon to the reading-impaired. And where are they now? Never mind - we could still cut our teeth (our reading teeth?) on other phonetically-spelt stories, with or without the illustrations.

When their written communications are well-enough understood, many *FONETIC* spellers would soon move on to formal education, and to self-

education, and in time would be able to express themselves in Standard English. Of course they would need to gradually un-learn their PHONETICS as they phased in Standard English spelling and punctuation.

They would soon recognise the need to master conventional English spelling if they are ever to be considered wholly literate in this difficult but strangely rewarding tongue.

But simple, forgiving, Phonetic English would be the spring-board for many - especially those with the desire and the capacity to move on to bigger and better things, as those old comic books were the spring-board for so many older Australians who also moved on to more serious reading as they matured and learned to enjoy the world of the written word.

And, of course, the writing experience. Or should that be the Reading and Writing Experience.

So, what would it look like - a few lines penned by a newly arrived citizen, knowing only the language of his/her birth, which might have been Urdu, Cantonese, Parsi, Swahili, Arabic or whatever, when he/she is asked to write something FONETIC'LY.

PLEASE REED ON:

FONETIC ENGLISH

Ritten as its spoke and spoken as its rit

I been heer just wun yeer, in this land of Oz;
I'm Abdul, Chang, or Gupta, Fatima or Maria
And I cum from enny place yu care to name,
Enny place with too mutch peepl, orl look mutch the same,
Bak there I liv'd my life in poverty and feer;
So that is wy I emigrated; that is wy I'm heer.

My frends orl sed 'Don't emigrate down thair,
Yool never lern to reed and rite and spal;
Ostraliens orl speak in tungs, yu no,
Mostly thru thair nozes, and uther orifii as well;
Wun old frend sed; " Did Yu no thay eet thair kangarooz,
Drinking lots of beer - thay liv on smokes and booze,

Thay'll corl yu 'bluddy Wog' and giv yu bluddy hell, "
But wot had I to looze?

And werst of orl, my old frends sed,
If yu lurn sum English werds
From them down there that speak it,
Yu won't no how to rite them down
Becoz English spalling's so absurd
For those hoo need and seek it.

But thay wer rong, my homeland frends,
Of corse thay did not no,
Thay teech Fonetic Spalling now- a bettr way to go,
So fokes like us lern qwickr
How to rite down werds from Britten
But without the silent lettrs - like the 'w' in 'ritten'

And wen we reed it back
We use the same tekneek,
We pronounce eech werd foneticly -
And spell it as we speak.
So heer I am, just wun yeer on
Reeding, riting English - I'm even riting verse, mate
Just like a locl langwidge freek -
No better and no werse, mate.