

Modernizing English Spelling

(By J. M. Tadlock)

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THIRD STUDY.

It is not the sole aim in modernizing the English language merely to shorten words to save time in writing them, or to save printer's ink. It is of far greater importance to reduce the irregularities and inconsistencies that have grown into it in the course of years, to correct the errors in borrowed words, and more particularly to amend the spellings of words so that each letter used has its commonly accepted power. But in some words of Anglo-Saxon origin there still are retained certain letters or combinations of letters which have either lost their sonant value entirely, or else the sound of the spoken word has so changed that the original combination no longer represents the actual sound. In these words the useless letters should be dropped in the interest of simplicity as well as of regularity. Likewise when the sounds have radically changed, the proper letters should be substituted, so that the sounds of the word shall be represented according to modern usage, just as the word is spoken today. The old Anglo-Saxon was full of harsh, throaty sounds, which orthoepists call gutturals. It is chiefly these harsh, choking sounds that have been eliminated from the pronunciation of modern English words, either by dropping them altogether, or by softening them to more euphonious sounds.

In our first study we considered four words of this group, which formerly contained gutturals, namely, though (thoh); through (thruh), thought (thoht), and thorough (thoroh). They were placed in the first study instead of this one for two reasons. First, because they resemble each other so closely that they are easily mistaken one for another. Second, because they are so often used, and so many attempts have been made by the piecemeal reformers to shorten them, all of which have been un-English, and therefore have resulted in a mutilation of the language instead of a simplification. They are of sufficient importance, because of these reasons, to justify separate treatment, tho, of course, they belong to the classes of words we are now taking up in this study. We drop the guttural combinations in these words, leaving only one silent letter, the use of which is to modify the vowel sound in the word. In the second study we considered regular verbs, discovering their rules for past tense forms, and simplifying the same by strictly English methods. We also added a valuable bit of knowledge to the subject of English grammar by discovering that English verbs have three regular conjugations, and setting forth the rules of inflection for each. It shall be our study this time to examine a small group of verbs once regular in the old Anglo-Saxon but now irregular, which contained guttural sounds now no longer pronounced.

In an Anglo-Saxon lexicon look up the words "bring", "think", "work", "seek", "beseech", "catch", and "teach". You will find their present and past tense forms as follows:

| | |
|-----------------|------------------|
| bryngan brohte | secan sohte |
| thyncean thohte | besechan besohte |
| bygean bohte | caechan cahte |
| wyrcan wrohte | taecan tahte |

The perfect tenses had an augmenting prefix, y—as in yclept, ybroht, ythoht, yboht, ysoht, etc., but since that feature of the language entirely disappeared with early Middle English, it is negligible in this discussion. In the later Middle English these words appear considerably changed, the past tenses having taken on the guttural combinations presumably to conform with other words similarly pronounced. The ruf, throat-formed sound was represented by "ough" and "augh" to put them in accord with "through", "though", and "thorough". Thus came the forms "brought", "thought", "bought", "caught", etc., to replace the older forms as given above. Since we wish to drop the useless letters, nothing is easier or more scientific than to spell these words as the original Anglo-Saxon forms were spelt, omitting, of course, the final silent e, which is now useless because no longer pronounced. This modernizing gives us the beautiful simplicity and regularity which you see in the following correct orthography:

| | | | |
|-------|-------|---------|--------|
| bring | broht | each | caht |
| think | thoht | teach | taht |
| buy | boht | seek | soht |
| work | wroht | beseech | besoht |

The silent h in the past tense form saves them from being pronounced with a short vowel sound, and makes them conform to the recognized rules of English pronunciation.

Having this principle of simplifying words of Anglo-Saxon origin well established, namely, that of dropping the letters which represented those sounds in guttural combinations which are not now sounded, let us examine another group of words, not all verbs, but which contain the guttural combinations "augh", "ough", "igh", and "eigh". Consult the Anglo-Saxon lexicon once more, and you will find there that the words with "augh" and "ough" were formerly spelt without the "ug". If we follow our established principle of dropping the letters not sounded, reverting to the original Anglo-Saxon spellings, we shall have the corrected words as follows:

| | |
|-------------------|---------------------|
| (blight) bliht | (weigh) weh |
| (bright) briht | (weight) weht |
| (fight) fiht | (deign) degn |
| (light) liht | (reign) regn |
| (might) miht | (feign) fegn |
| (night) niht | (bough) bow |
| (plight) pliht | (plough) plow |
| (sight) siht | (dough) doh |
| (slight) sliht | (doughty) dohty |
| (wight) wiht | (though) thoh |
| (high) hiht | (slough) sluh |
| (nigh) niht | (through) thruh |
| (sigh) siht | (fought) foht |
| (height) hiht | (nought) noht |
| (sleight) sliht | (ought) oht |
| (eight) eht | (aught) aht |
| (freight) freht | (haughty) hahty |
| (neigh) neh | (naught) naht |
| (neighbor) nehbor | (naughty) nahty |
| (sleigh) sleht | (slaughter) slahter |

The old forms "height" and "sleight" kept the silent "e" to distinguish them from "high" (now obsolete) and "slight". This distinction is not now regarded as necessary. "Degn", "fegn", and "regn" are included here for convenience, tho they are not Anglo-Saxon words, but of Latin origin.

Still another group of words with similar combinations of letters has not lost the guttural sound completely, but it has softened into labio-dental sound. In these words the guttural combination "ugh" is now replaced by the labio-dental "f" following a short sound, and by "ff" following a broad sound, after the analogy of the words "of" and "off", "pat" and "pall", etc.:

| | |
|----------------|-------------------|
| (cough) coff | (slough) sluf |
| (trough) troff | (tough) tuf |
| (enough) enuf | (draught) draft |
| (rough) ruf | (laugh) laf |
| (sough) suf | (laughter) lafter |

There are a few words in which the guttural "ugh" has changed to the palatal "k", or the labial "p"; there are now spelt in accordance with modern usage:

| | |
|--------------|------------------|
| (hough) hock | (hicough) hickup |
| (lough) lock | |

The words discussed in this study may seem to the reader somewhat disguised by following modern methods of spelling, but even a cursory examination of them will show that every single word of the groups we have had under consideration is easily recognized in its modern form, and after one becomes even slightly accustomed to them they appear to much better advantage than the old forms, and more sensible than the mutilated

forms "tho", "thru", "thot", etc.

The chief value, however, in these modern spellings lies in the fact that they conform to the established usage of letter values to be found regularly in more than nine-tenths of English words that need no adjustment or reform. Thus they contribute to regularity in spelling, and regularity is simplicity. The only scientific method of simplifying is to reduce irregularity and exception to rules. Newspapermen, text book writers and others whose use of language is accurate and technical should be most interested in making the outward forms of the language regular and scientific. The general public will readily take to the process of shortening words, both spoken and written, particularly if exceptions to rules are reduced to the minimum.

In our next study we shall take up final silent "e", and the rules which custom has decreed for its use.



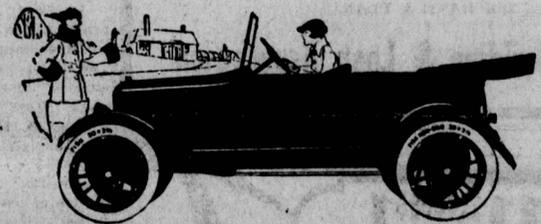
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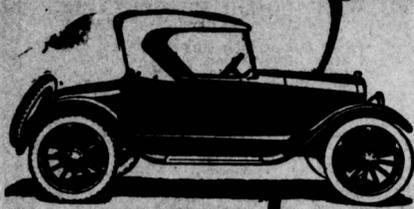
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Change in Name.

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