

An Explanation of Sound and Orthographic Inconsistency in Modern English by Investigating the Diachronic Origins of Final Silent e

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■ Abstract:

This study sheds light on the inconsistency between Modern English orthographic forms (spellings) and their representation in Modern English pronunciation. The study concentrates on one example of this phenomenon which is the presence of the final silent *e* in several English words to try to find an explanation for this phenomenon from a historical perspective by analyzing the history of 12 English words which are; bake, nose, lore, pole, sake, rake, hone, poke, more, sore, wake, and rope. The study concludes that this inconsistency is a result of the fact that sound changes which affected English language during history did not happen accompanied by spelling changes all the time. In some cases, sound changes led to spelling changes, but in other times, they did not and spellings remained stable. The final *e* is not really silent as it represents a preceding long vowel.

Keywords: spelling and pronunciation, inconsistency, final silent *e*, diachronic changes.

■ المستخلص:

تسلط هذه الدراسة الضوء على عدم الاتساق بين الأشكال الإملائية للغة الإنجليزية الحديثة (التهجئة) وتمثيلها في نطق اللغة الإنجليزية الحديثة. تركز الدراسة على مظهر واحد من مظاهر هذه الظاهرة وهو وجود حرف *e* ساكن في نهاية بعض الكلمات الإنجليزية الحديثة لإيجاد تفسير لهذه الظاهرة من منظور تاريخي.

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من خلال إجراء تحليل لتاريخ 12 كلمة إنجليزية. توصلت الدراسة إلى استنتاج مفاده أن هذا التناقض هو نتيجة لحقيقة أن التغييرات الصوتية التي أثرت على اللغة الإنجليزية خلال التاريخ لم تحدث مصحوبة بتغييرات إملائية طوال الوقت في بعض الحالات، ولكن في أوقات أخرى، لم يحدث ذلك وظلت التهجئة مستقرة. حرف *e* في نهاية الكلمة ليس صامتاً تماماً لأنه يشير إلى وجود حرف علة طويل قبله.

● الكلمات المفتاحية: التهجئة والنطق، عدم التماسق، حرف الصامت في نهاية الكلمة، تغييرات تاريخية

1. Introduction:

The continuous change which happens during the history of a language is a natural phenomenon affecting all natural languages. Many changes happen to affect a language concerning its morphology, syntax, as well as its vocabulary, and pronunciation. English language is one of these languages that have undergone very noticeable changes during the last centuries. Those changes affected every aspect of it and they have been an indication of its development.

One of the most striking and apparent changes was the sound changes that happened during the history of English. Cruttenden (1994:64) talks about this kind of change saying, 'The pronunciation of a language seems to be subject to a continuous and inevitable process of change' He insists that this change comes as a natural result of handing in the language to another generation of its speakers 'Indeed, it would be surprising if a means of communication, handed on orally from one generation to another, showed no variation over the centuries' (ibid: 64).

This process of sound changes according to Lehmann (1992: 183) leads to 'the introduction of new phonological elements in a language, to loss or to realignments of old elements'. This can be one of the reasons which led to the fact that there are inconsistencies between how some English words are pronounced in Modern English and how they are represented orthographically in writing. In other words, it has been observed that the spelling of English is irregular as the same letters often represent different sounds, and the same

sounds are sometimes represented by different letters.

1.1 Research Questions

This study investigates the diachronic reasons behind the inconsistencies between spelling or orthography and pronunciation of Modern English. The study tries to find answers to the following questions:

1. Did these inconsistencies between pronunciation and spelling happen as a result of the fact that English spelling was fixed in the fifteenth century during the era of Early Modern English while sound changes continued after this period?
2. Did sound change lead to changes in spelling or what happened is the opposite and changes in spelling led to changes in pronunciation?
3. Can the presence of the final *e* in some English words be considered as a piece of evidence regarding the fact that these inconsistencies between spelling and pronunciation happen as a result of the fact that spelling and pronunciation did not have similar changes during the history of English language?

As answers to the previous questions, the study hypothesizes that the inconsistencies between English pronunciation and spelling happen as a result of the fact that changes did not affect pronunciation and spelling at the same time and to the same degree. As an answer to the second question, the study hypothesizes that the fact that English spelling and pronunciation are not consistent is a result of the fact that sound changes happen and they sometimes lead to changes in spelling and the presence of final silent *e* in some English words can be considered as evidence regarding this phenomenon, while at other times they do not result in changes in pronunciation.

2. Literature Review:

2.1. 1 Inconsistency of pronunciation and spelling in Modern English

Graddol (1996: 72-73) was one of the researchers who talked about the fact that the orthography of Modern English ‘falls a long way short of representing the pronunciation of Modern English’. He explains the reason

behind this by illustrating that ‘spelling in Old English manuscripts was based largely on practice in Latin, with modifications required to accommodate the different sound systems of English’. He refers to the fact that during that Old English spelling was more consistent with Modern English pronunciation than Modern spelling. He refers to this fact by saying that during the Old English era, ‘spelling seems to have been fairly standardized, and Old English spelling provided a more accurate representation of current pronunciation than present-day orthography does’.

Adopting this historical explanation of the fact that Modern English spelling and pronunciation are not consistent, Pink and Thomas (1974: 5) clarify the idea that ‘Modern English spelling was fixed in the fifteenth century and so it represents the spelling of that century’. This means that they adopted the idea that English spelling was fixed and was not changed after the era of Early Modern English while sound changes continued to happen which according to their point of view, can explain why the two systems are not consistent.

Another explanation for the fact that Modern English spelling and pronunciation are not consistent is mentioned by Umera-Okeke (2008: 64) who refers to the detail that ‘with the spread of literacy and the invention of printing came the development of written English with its confusing and inconsistent spellings become more and more apparent’. He explains this point of view by illustrating that the letters with which English was written were not enough to represent its sounds. A similar point of view which blames written language for this inconsistency was also mentioned by Gramley and Patzold (1992: 115) who say that ‘since written conventions are not sufficient to express all the information which the spoken word transmits and because the written language has a long tradition and a set of irregularities of its own, the two systems, that of speech and that of writing correspond only imperfectly’.

The question which comes to be raised now is which of these two systems affects the other; does pronunciation change spelling or does spelling alter pronunciation? Pyles and Algeo (1993: 59) illustrate their point of view which

is their belief that the two options are possible and the first possibility is that ‘knowledge of spelling has been responsible for changing the pronunciation of certain words’. They provide evidence of this possibility which they refer to as spelling pronunciation by saying that ‘when a word’s spelling and pronunciation do not agree, the sound may be changed to be closer to the spelling’. The other possibility happens in cases when ‘a word’s spelling is changed to agree with its pronunciation, the result is a pronunciation spelling’.

Any speech sound could have been subject to such a natural changing process and in English, this change affected both the consonant and the vowel speech sounds. However, such change can be noticed more clearly among vowels than among consonants. Cruttenden (1994: 65, 66) was one of the researchers who said that English vowels have had more changes than consonants because of the fact that ‘a consonant articulation usually involves an approximation of organs which can be felt; such an articulation tends to be more stable, in that it is more easily identified and transmitted more exactly from one generation to another’. On the contrary, vowels seem to be subject to more changes because the change can be a result of a very slight change in the shape of the lips or the position of the tongue.

2.1.2. What a process of sound change is:

Every process of sound change must have a starting point and an endpoint. The change happens as a result of replacing a speech sound with another different sound. Researchers call the sound that undergoes the change process the input of the process and the other sound that comes as a result of the change as the output of the change process. This process happens during the history of a language, as a sound change affecting some sounds, and ends as a phonological rule. McMahon (2000: 9) says, ‘It is assumed that a sound change, once implemented, is inserted as a phonological rule at the end of the native speaker’s rule system’.

We know that a certain sound change happened during the history of English

when we try to make a comparison between the pronunciation of a word in Modern English and how it was pronounced in the previous periods of Old and Middle English. Our knowledge of how a word was pronounced many centuries ago comes as a result of observing how that word was written in the old manuscript material that we have got from the previous centuries. While talking about the fact that we have no information about the pronunciation habits of English speakers other than the orthographic notations used to represent them, Jones (1989: 9) says, ‘We have to rely for almost our entire knowledge of the language’s phonology during this episode [Old English] upon the testimony of orthographic representation’

2.1.3. Changes that affected English vowels:

Many kinds of changes happened during the history of English vowels. The change can become a result of changing the height or the position of the tongue in the mouth which can cause a change in the quality of the vowel. Other changes may affect the length of the vowel which can alter its quantity. Consequently, it can be said that there are two kinds of changes that affect English vowels. The first are qualitative changes happening as a result of lowering or raising the tongue in the mouth or by shifting the tongue forward or backward in the mouth. The second kind of changes can be described as quantitative changes that happen as a result of changing the length of the vowel.

Concerning the phonetic environment in which they appear, vowel changes can be classified further as conditioned or unconditioned changes. Singh (2005: 6) explains the difference between these two kinds of change saying, ‘Sound changes which affect segments can either be conditioned, meaning that they only occur in specific phonetic environments, or unconditioned, meaning that they can affect all occurrences of a particular sound’

As was mentioned earlier, this study uses the presence of the final silent *e* in some Modern English words as a way to investigate the issue of inconsistency between spelling and pronunciation and to find out whether

this inconsistency which appears in using the letter *e* in writing while it is not pronounced happen because of historical reasons and which system; spelling or pronunciation affected the other during history and led to the fact that final *e* is silent in Modern English words.

2.1.4. Final silent *e* and the Great Vowel Shift:

It was mentioned earlier that Graddol (1996: 73-74) was one of the linguists who referred to the idea that Modern English spelling or orthography does not represent the pronunciation of Modern English. He mentions some consequences of this fact by saying that in English spelling, ‘you sometimes have to look at the end of a word to work out how an earlier vowel should be pronounced’ and he adds that ‘the most common example is the final silent *e* in words like *pine* (as opposed to *pin*), or *tape* as opposed to *tap*’. This means that the presence of the final silent *e* means that the preceding vowel is long as the difference in pronunciation between *hop* and *hope*. This pattern is often referred to as the vowel-consonant-*e* pattern or VCE pattern.

Burnley (2000:140) mentions the origins of this final *e* by illustrating that it is ‘the last remanent of Old English inflection [which] was puzzling to most scribes by the second half of the fifteenth century, and they used it in traditional spelling to make a long root vowel, or simply as a random decoration’. This explanation provides historical evidence that the silent final *e* was originally used for a grammatical function, and when it was no longer used for its original function, it was used as an indication of the length of its preceding vowel.

By making a comparison between Modern English pronunciation and that of Middle English (the era from the fifteenth to the mid-seventeenth century), Lehmann (1992: 186) sheds light on the fact that ‘vowels have changed considerably notably the long vowels’. He explains these changes which affected Middle English long vowels as ‘the most notable changes’ and that ‘all of which underwent change’. He adds that in historical linguistics, ‘the

change of long vowels between Middle English and the present is known as the Great Vowel Shift'. Wright (1996: 272) refers to the consequences of this process by saying that Modern English pronunciation actually 'represents the present-day consequences of a set of changes called 'the Great Vowel Shift' affecting vowel pronunciation in England from around the fifteenth century'.

Wright (*ibid*: 272) defines this phenomenon as 'a systematic shift affecting the long vowels of English. They became closer (i.e., articulated with the tongue raised higher in the mouth'. Concerning vowels that were already close as the tongue could not move any higher, he mentions that 'they became diphthongs'. As a result, the pronunciation of all Middle English vowels was changed and this can be one of the reasons that Modern English spellings often derive from how they represent pronunciation.

2.2 Related studies

Many studies addressed the issue of the inconsistency between English pronunciation and spelling from different perspectives. One of these studies was done by Ambalegin and Arianto (2019) who adopted the qualitative-descriptive method to investigate the inconsistent sound patterns in English words. They concentrate on the phenomenon that 'there is mostly no correspondence between [English] written word and spoken word' (p. 106). At the end of their analysis, Ambalegin and Arianto (2019: 122) conclude that there are four areas of English pronunciation inconsistency, the first of which is that 'the same letter of the English alphabet does not always produce the same sound', and the second area is that 'the same sound is not always produced by the same letter of the English alphabet'. The third area of inconsistency can be noticed in that 'some letters of English alphabet indicated in words are not produced by sounds', and the last cause of this inconsistency is that 'the sound is produced where there is no letter of English alphabet'.

That study is similar to this current study in that it adopts the qualitative descriptive method to analyze the reasons which make the pronunciations of

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some English words not consistent with their orthographic forms. However, the current study concentrates on just one area of this inconsistency between English pronunciation and spelling which is the final silent *e* in some English words, and traces the historical changes that led to the appearance of this inconsistency.

Another similar study was done by Ahar and Seember Nartondo (2018) which was also an investigation of the ‘irregular sound reflection in words, mismatching of sound to letters of English and abundance of silent letters among other inconsistencies’ (p.126). This study is similar to the previously mentioned study in that it is based on presenting and illustrating some areas which make English phonology inconsistent and unique. They consider that ‘all these inconsistencies have only succeeded [in] making English language uniquely different from other languages’ (p.31).

Another study done by Ehwas (2022), is also based on presenting examples and illustrations of how the fact that English has just 26 letters which are much less than the English 44 phonemes can lead to this inconsistency between English spelling and pronunciation. This study analyses a number of examples as evidence for this lack of correspondence between English pronunciation and spelling. At the end of this study, Ehwas (2022: 732) refers to an interesting issue which is similar to the concern of the current study which tries to address the historical reasons behind this inconsistency. He says that in the past ‘English spelling closely reflected the pronunciation of the writer. However, with the invention of the printing press, spelling gradually became standardized and fixed with the pronunciation continued to evolve’.

Some scholars address the issue of inconsistency between spelling and pronunciation as a confusing difficulty for English language learners. One of these studies was done by Rao (2018). In this article, Rao analyses a number of areas which cause difficulty for English language learners because of the fact that ‘the letters of alphabet used are always inadequate to represent the sounds’. (p.1). Rao (2018: 8-9) concludes that learners of English have to

understand that ‘there exists no perfect correspondence between the sounds (pronunciation) and letters (spelling) in English.

In an attempt to find an explanation to this phenomenon, Rao (ibid: 9) goes back to the history of English language. He describes English spelling system as ‘comparatively complicated and irregular because of the complex history of the English language’. He explains this point of view by saying that ‘most of the letters of English alphabet produce multiple pronunciations since a great number of words were borrowed from many other languages’

2. Research Methodology

This study is a qualitative descriptive study which is based on studying the history of the final silent *e* which appears at the end of some Modern English words. The existence of the final silent *e* is considered here as an example of the inconsistencies between spelling and pronunciation in Modern English. This represents an example of a letter (*e* in this case) that appears in spelling but does not appear in pronunciation. The study investigates the changes that affected the spellings and the pronunciations of 12 English words that end with a silent *e* which are: bake, nose, lore, pole, sake, rake, hone, poke, more, sore, wake, and rope.

Studying the histories of these twelve words is the method that this study uses to find out if there are any historical reasons behind this inconsistency between Modern English spelling in which these words end with the letter *e* and Modern English pronunciation in which this letter is silent. Also, studying the diachronic appearances of these words is done to find out the sound changes and the orthographic changes that led to this inconsistency. As a result of tracing the earlier forms of these words and depending on the similarities in their Modern English pronunciations, they were divided into two groups.

The first group includes the Modern English words lore, pole, hone, poke, rope, sore, and more which had different forms in Old English. In their early stages, these words were written as lar, pal, han, pac, rap, sar and mara. As their orthographic forms suggest, these words were pronounced with the low,

back, long vowel [a:] in Old English. Because of a sound change process that happened in the Middle English period, the vowel sound [a:] was replaced by the sound [o:] as a result of shifting from the low position of [a:] to the mid-high position of [o:] which is an example of vowel raising. In this case, the input of this process is the vowel /a:/ and the output is the vowel [o:].

This process is known as /a:/ raising and it affected some Old English words which were pronounced with the long, low, back vowel /a:/ regardless of the phonetic environment in which it occurred which means that this sound change process was unconditioned or context-free. Another characteristic of this process is that it affected only long /a/ and wherever this sound was short, no change happened. Baugh and Cable (1993: 231) talk about this process as one of the changes that English vowels underwent in passing from Old English to Middle English. They describe the sound changes that happened at that period saying, ‘we may say that qualitatively they were slight, at least in comparison with those that occurred later’

Freeborn (1998: 116) explains the stages of the pronunciation change that these words underwent by saying that, ‘the long OE vowel [a:] had shifted becoming sufficiently rounded and raised to cause writers to use the letter o to represent a sound like [ɔ:]. The later development of this ME long half-open vowel [ɔ:], to MnE [o:] or [əʊ] and its variants is part of the later Great Vowel Shift’. He describes The Great Vowel Shift as a process of drifting upwards of the long vowels with the close or high vowels.

Concerning their later sound changes and depending on their Modern English pronunciation, these seven words can be divided further into two groups. The first group consists of the words pole, hone, poke, and rope which are pronounced with /əʊ/ in Modern English. According to Knowles (1987), the long [o:] to which the Old English [a:] was raised has become closer to the other long vowels, and as a result of becoming about half closed, the vowel tends to become a closing diphthong [əʊ] in which the second element is closer than the first.

The second group consists of lore, sore, and more which are pronounced with [ɔ:] in Modern English. It seems that the sound [ɔ:] has not had a similar change in the last stages of the change process. According to Baugh and Cable (1993: 230), [a:] was not replaced directly by [o:], but it was raised first to [ɔ:] which was replaced later as a result of the Great Vowel Shift by [o:]. They explain the stages of this change that the Old English [a:] underwent taking the word stone which is similar to words of the first group as an example. They illustrate that the sound [a:] in the Old English stan ‘became about 1100 a sound like that in law [stɔ:n]’. After that, this sound had a further change because of ‘the Great Vowel Shift that began to take place in all long vowels in the fifteenth century’. As a result of that change, they explain that this sound has become a close /o/ similar to its pronunciation nowadays.

The second group of the target words chosen as data for this study includes the English words nose, sake, rake, bake, and wake which are pronounced in Modern English with / ʊ / in the case of the word nose, or with /ei/ concerning the other four words. Even though these words look similar to the previous words in the first group in their orthographic forms, it appears that they underwent a different process of sound change. These words were written in Old English as nosu, sacu, racu, bacan, and wacan in different forms compared with their Modern English forms. These Old English forms were very related in that they are all disyllabic words with an open stem syllable in which the vowel is short (short stem vowel). Their syllable structures were *no.su*, *sa.cu*, *ra.cu*, *ba.can*, and *wa.can* which illustrates that they have the same features mentioned earlier. Their first syllables are all open since they all end in a vowel which is a short vowel in this case.

The change that these words had is known as the lengthening of short vowels in open syllables of two-syllable words. It is both a qualitative and a quantitative sound change because it lengthens and changes the positions of the affected vowels. This change happened during the Middle English period and it generally involved a lowering and a lengthening of the affected

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vowels. This process is conditioned because it appeared only in stressed open syllables of disyllabic words.

In Middle English, the Old English vowel [a] that appeared in most of the Old English forms of the words in question (except nosu) was simply lengthened without being lowered since it is a low vowel and cannot be lowered further. So as a result of Middle English Open Syllable Lengthening, the short vowel [a] was lengthened to the long vowel [a:]. Freeborn (1998: 119) argues that ‘The evidence for this lengthening is not in the spelling of the ME words, which still used letter <a>and did not mark vowel length, but in their later MnE pronunciation [e:]’

Concerning the word nose, the lengthening of short vowels in open syllables of disyllabic words also affected the Old English words with [o] and it was lengthened and lowered to [ɔ:] in Middle English. As a result of the Great Vowel Shift later, the output of the lengthening process [ɔ:] was raised to [o:]. Collins and Mees (2003) explain that the diphthong / əʊ / has moved from a back vowel [o:], to a central starting point [əʊ]. The different forms that these words had during the different periods of English language are shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Different forms of some final silent e words during history

Old English	Middle English	Modern English
Nosu	Nose	Nose
Sacu	Sake	Sake
Racu	Rake	Rake
Bacan	Baken	Bake
Wacan	Waken	Wake

Knowles (1987: 52) illustrates the changes that happened to the long /o:/

in nose and the long /a:/ in the other words in the group mentioned above to become the diphthongs / əʊ / and /ei/ respectively in Modern English. He illustrates that [a:] became a closer and a frontier vowel because of the sound change rule that says that ‘long monophthongs become closer’. As a result of further changes, the vowel has generally diphthongized to /ei/ because ‘when monophthongs have become about half closed, they tend to become closing diphthongs’. Concerning the long [o:] that appears in nose, he illustrates that it has become closer and then diphthongized and that the first element of the diphthong has become more central to be pronounced as / əʊ / in Modern English pronunciation.

It seems clear as it can be noticed from Table 1 above that the spelling forms of Middle English reflect the sound change that happened during this period and were therefore different from the Old English forms. The previous fact clearly reflects what Collins and Mees (2003: 174) mean by saying that ‘We can derive a great deal of information from the orthography’. It seems, though, that the forms did not have a similar change in spelling because of the Great Vowel Shift in Middle English and their spelling remained the same in Modern English. Baugh and Cable (1993: 234) explain this phenomenon saying, ‘The spelling of English had become fixed in a general way before the shift and therefore did not change when the quality of the long vowel changed’.

3. Results and discussion:

The results of analyzing the histories of 12 Modern English words which are similar in spelling, but different in pronunciation can explain this inconsistency between Modern English pronunciation and spelling. During their transformation from Old English to Middle English, the spellings of these words were changed as a result of sound changes. After that, and during and after the era of Middle English, sound changes continued to occur, while the words’ spellings were fixed and stable. Our knowledge of Old English pronunciation depends on studying their orthographic forms which does not result in exact representations of their Old English pronunciations and this

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cannot provide clear answers to the inquiry about which leads to the other sound change or orthographic change.

The appearance of the final silent *e* represents a preceding long vowel in these words which leads to the result that this final *e* is not essentially silent and that it performs a phonological function even though it is not pronounced. This kind of change which led to inserting the final silent *e* is very complicated and difficult to trace as Cruttenden (1994: 66) says, 'It is particularly difficult to assess the rate and phonetic route of change in the case of those internal independent vowel changes which affect a phoneme throughout the language'

4. Conclusion:

English vowels underwent many noticeable changes during the history of English Language as a part of the changes that affected English sounds which can be considered as a developing and changing system. Trying to trace vowel changes during history may shed light on many events and sound shifts that played a very great role during the history of English language. The fact that English had more sound changes than orthographic changes during history led to the inconsistency between Modern English spelling and pronunciation.

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