**Mark:** [00:00:00] Welcome to the Endless Knot Podcast,

**Aven:** where the more we know,

**Mark:** the more we want to find out.

**Aven:** Tracing serendipitous connections through our lives

**Mark:** and across disciplines.

**Aven:** Hi, I'm Aven,

**Mark:** and I'm Mark.

**Aven:** And today we're talking about spelling , not on the face of it, the most exciting thing in the world,

**Mark:** but it is a topic that gets people riled up.

**Aven:** Yeah, there's strong emotional responses, I think, to spelling possibly more really a response to educational systems. But anyway, we'll get to that

Before we do though, that's a video that we're gonna be talking about, so we'll get to that. But first of all, we want to say thank you to a new Patreon supporter that's Masha Leyfer or Leyfer. So sorry about the last name. I hope one of those was correct. But thank you so much for your support.

Woohoo. And then turning to our cocktails, we are starting with anyway a [00:01:00] cocktail called an A B C cocktail, which may technically not be spelling, but mostly the alphabet.

**Mark:** But we will be talking quite a bit about the alphabet because of its role in how things are spelled

**Aven:** and why English is so terrible.

Hmm. . Okay. So this is a cocktail, we're using the Difford's Guide recipe and

the ABC cocktail is mint leaves, Tawny port, cognac maraschino liqueur and sugar syrup. and then garnished with lemon zest and cherry. So, cheers. Cheers.

Hmm.

That's

**Mark:** tasty. Yeah. Oh, and the mint comes out nicely. Mm-hmm. , that

**Aven:** fresh mint, even, even though it's not in it, like it's strained out, so there's nothing there. But yeah, it actually like, really gives it a, a strong freshness. Mm-hmm. , or as the review on the website says: "wonderfully delicate. Mint gives subtle freshness to the classic port brandy combo".

There [00:02:00] you go. They're exactly right. So this is a cocktail apparently from 1935 from the Bar La Florida cocktails. Mm-hmm. . And it is, it's really nice. So with that as our prelude, shall we turn to the video or do you want to tell us anything about this video?

**Mark:** Well, the only thing I think I'll say in advance is it Investigates why the English spelling system is the way it is.

But in doing so, it has to go right back to the writing system that English uses. And to do that, it goes back through many languages because our alphabet is not just secondhand, but third, fourth, fifth hand with a couple of many hands have been in between. Yeah.

**Aven:** With a lot of other alterations on the way.

Yeah. Fingers in the pie, shall we say, as well. . All right. Well then let's listen to the audio for that and then come back and talk about it some more.

**Mark:** [00:03:00] When I was a kid, I really struggled with spelling. Other kids seemed to pick it up so easily, and I was told to just memorize lists of words, but no one would ever tell me why words were spelled the way they were. It was only when I learned some history of the language in university that it finally start to make sense. At first glance, English seems to have a downright chaotic spelling system, causing difficulties for young native speakers and adult second language speakers alike. Why is it ‘circus’ not ‘serkis’? Why are we so confused about whether it’s Gif or Jif? And why can a rough, dough-faced ploughman stride, coughing thoughtfully, through the streets of Scarborough?! Can’t we just simplify English spelling? Well, as we’ll see, English may not be quite as irregular as it seems, and there may actually be some benefits to those peculiarities; and maybe the problem isn’t so much the spelling as the way it’s taught, unconnected to the fascinating story of its development. Now, that’s a fairly complicated story, so I’m going to pick a few key examples, and I’ll also be filling in a lot of details later with some other videos about specific letters and sound changes. But for [00:04:00] now, let me try to help make things make sense for you, as they finally do for me!

What is spelling anyway? Well, it’s putting the letters of words in the so-called right order. But what does that mean? You might be surprised to know that the word spelling didn’t have that meaning until the early modern period, which is when spelling first really started to be standardized in English; before that you just wrote words the way you said them depending on your own particular dialect or accent. The Old English verb spellian, from the Proto-Indo-European root \*spel- “say aloud or recite”, meant “to tell or speak” and the noun spell meant “narrative or story” as well as “message or news”. That sense is clear in the second element of the word gospel which literally means “good news”. Spell could also refer to a magical incantation, a sense we still have today. But the Germanic root that lies behind the word spell also made it into French via the Franks, and there it took on a new meaning. The Anglo-Norman and Old French forms of the word espeler or espelir meant “to read out loud” as well as “read out letter by letter”. After the [00:05:00] Norman conquest of England, the French and English words merged, and it’s from the French senses that we get the modern sense of spelling. But spell isn’t the only language word that has magical connections. The word grammar comes from the Proto-Indo-European root \*gerbh- meaning “to scratch”, and in fact also gives us the word carve as well as graph, the idea being that writing was originally carved into wood or stone. From the word grammar we also get the word glamour, first appearing in Scots English ,which originally implied magic, meaning “enchantment” or “spell”, from the notion of arcane learning. Glamour then gains its modern sense from the idea that someone who is glamorous kind of casts a spell on people. So I suppose it’s not surprising that I found the English spelling system mystifying!

So one big problem is that there isn’t a consistent letter-to-sound, one-to-one correspondence in the English writing system. Some sounds require multiple letters, like the /θ/ in thin, or the /oʊ/ in oak. And some letters or letter combinations can make multiple sounds as in the words streak and steak, now and know, here and [00:06:00] there. This makes English spelling harder to learn, so why haven’t we got rid of them to make thing easier? Part of the answer, surprisingly, has to do with the mathematics of information! But you’ll have to head over to my friend Jade’s channel, Up and Atom, to get the full story on that and why the redundancies are really useful information! In the meantime, in order to see how those redundancies and complexities of spellings came about in the first place, we need to look at the history of the alphabet.

So an alphabet is a writing system in which individual characters, at least theoretically, represent individual distinct sounds. By the way, that word character ultimately comes from another Proto-Indo-European root that implies the original carving of writing, \*gher- meaning “scrape, scratch”, which came into Greek as kharassein “to make sharp” and kharakter which after passing through Latin and French give us not only the word character, but also gash. The word letter, on the other hand, is a bit of a mystery. It comes through French from Latin littera “letter”, but before that [00:07:00] it’s uncertain. One suggestion is that it came through Etruscan [and we’ll be talking about that language in a minute], from Greek diphthera “writing tablet” originally “prepared hide, piece of leather”, which I suppose might suggest another medium of writing with ink on animal skin. Interestingly, this Greek word makes it into French and English again, as a more direct borrowing from Greek, when physician Pierre Bretonneau named the disease diphtheria on account of the leathery false membrane which forms in the throat of someone who has the disease.

But as I was saying, an alphabetic writing system theoretically can have a one-to-one sound-to-letter correspondence, but obviously that isn’t the case in English, and to understand why we have to take a look at the journey the alphabet took to get to English. And when I say the alphabet, I really do mean THE alphabet. With only a few exceptions, such as the Hangul script of Korea which was developed independently, all the alphabets used today descend from one original alphabet. The story starts in ancient Egypt with their famous hieroglyphics. This was a logographic system in which characters represented words. However, [00:08:00] sometimes the hieroglyphs could be used phonetically to represent the consonants of the word the picture depicted, and this could be particularly useful for writing things like foreign names. Around 2000 BCE a Semitic group in Egypt borrowed from the Egyptians the idea of using pictures to represent individual consonant sounds. They borrowed the pictures from the hieroglyphics, such as a hand, but ignored the Egyptian word they represented, substituting their own Semitic word for hand, in this case kaph, and used that character to represent the consonant at the beginning of that word, in this case the /k/ sound. And that hand character eventually became our letter k. Now at this point there were only letters for the consonants, which is why that Semitic alphabet is sometimes referred to as an abjad, an acronym made from the names of the first four letters of the Arabic alphabet, rather than a full alphabet with consonants and vowels. This was fine for the Semitic languages, which tended to have relatively more consonants than vowels, so writing down the consonants is generally enough to tell you the word, and this is basically still how the writing systems work in modern semitic languages [00:09:00] like Hebrew and Arabic. And this was the beginning of the alphabet’s journey to English, because another closely related Semitic group known as the Phoenicians picked it up. Not that they called themselves the Phoenicians—that’s the Greek word for them, literally meaning “purple people”, because they were the source of a prized purple dye extracted from sea mollusks, which they sailed around the Mediterranean selling, and also, it seems, spreading their alphabet.

And that’s how the Greeks picked it up. Now Greek was a very different language from Phoenician, not a Semitic language, but from the completely unrelated Indo-European language family. It had many more vowels, and fewer consonants. So what the Greeks did was use some of the letters that represented consonants they didn’t use for their vowel sounds. Like the first letter in the alphabet. The Phoenicians called it aleph, which meant “ox”, and the letter form was meant to represent the head of an ox with its two horns. It stood for a consonant sound that wasn’t used in Greek, but they did need to represent the vowel /ɑ/, so that character became Greek alpha, and eventually English’s letter <a>. To round [00:10:00] things off, the next letter in the Phoenician alphabet, bayt meaning “house” and representing /b/, became Greek beta and English <b>, and together those first two letters, alpha and beta, give us the word alphabet, appropriate since the Greek alphabet is the first full alphabet including vowels as well as consonants.

The next stop for the alphabet was the Etruscans, a group of people who lived in the part of Italy known today as Tuscany. The Etruscan language is not Indo-European, and in fact is not related to any other known language, what linguists call a language isolate. So again, this language had a rather different sound system compared to Greek, and so some adaptations had to be made to fit the letters to the language. And from there the alphabet rolled down into Rome, where it became the basis of the Latin alphabet, which in turn spread around Europe and ended up as what we write English with today, with a few extra letters added in and some tweaks to the sounds some of the letters make; and that’s why the English alphabet is often called the Roman alphabet.

Now why is it so important to know all of this to understand English spelling? Well, each time the alphabet moved from one language to [00:11:00] another, it produced redundancies and quirks in the letter-to-sound correspondences. For example, the /k/ sound. As we saw before, this was represented in the original Semitic alphabet as kaph. But the Semitic languages had more varieties of consonants produced at the back of the throat than Greek did, so the Greek alphabet didn’t need all those distinct characters. Kaph it kept, which became kappa, and later English <k>. The Greeks also initially kept the letter qoph, forerunner of our letter <q>, although it was redundant for them, and they later dropped it. The Phoenicians also had a /ɡ/ letter, called gimmel, which became Greek gamma. /ɡ/ and /k/ are similar sounds, but it’s an important distinction in Greek [as it is in English]. But in Etruscan it wasn’t, although that language had a number of other varieties of back of the throat sounds. So they didn’t need that Greek gamma, and assigned another type of K sound to that letter, in addition to keeping both <k> and the <q> from early Greek. And notice that the gamma looks a lot like the letter <c>? Well that’s how we got the letter <c>, making a /k/ sound, not the hard /ɡ/ [00:12:00] sound of Greek gamma. And then when the Romans got their hands on the alphabet, there was no longer a letter to represent the /g/ sound, which Latin DID have, so initially they used the letter <c> to represent both /k/ and /ɡ/. They eventually invented the letter <g> by putting an extra stroke onto a <c>, but that was only later. That’s why the common Roman name Gaius was abbreviated with the letter <c>. For whatever reason, the Romans didn’t uses the letter <k> very much, though it hung around as a quaint redundancy. As for the letter <q>, for the Romans it also represented a /k/ sound, but was restricted to the letter combination <qu> followed by a vowel sound, which was common in Latin. And that’s why English has the redundant letters <k>, <c>, and <q>, often the target of those who complain about the English spelling system. We’ll come back to the letter <c> and the multiple sounds it can represent in Modern English later.

Now this problem of new languages using this old system came up again when Old English speakers started to use the Latin alphabet to write down their Germanic language which has sounds not present or distinguished in Latin. [00:13:00] The Anglo-Saxon scribes coped by adding in some letters from their own earlier runic writing system or modifying existing letters in the Latin alphabet. Later on, after Viking invaders conquered and settled in large parts of the country, there was an influx of Norse loanwords. At least Old Norse and Old English were related languages, but there are some significant differences, which led to further adaptations of the spelling system. But the biggest shake up came after the French-speaking Normans conquered the country. In addition to a vast amount of French vocabulary with its own sounds and spellings that came into the language, the Norman scribes didn’t like the barbaric Old English spelling conventions and began spelling the Germanic-derived English words in new ways. So it’s this mashup of different spelling conventions, and a bunch of snooty scribes, that made my life so hard as a kid!

For example, /dʒ/, a sound not in Latin, had been spelled in Old English as <cg> as in the word ecg, but under the Normans was now spelled <dge> as in the modern spelling, and that convention was eventually carried over to some words of French origin as well such as judge. But what about the /dʒ/ [00:14:00] sound at the beginning of that word? What about the letter <j>? Well it hadn’t really been invented yet. In fact it’s the most recent addition to the English alphabet. In Latin the letter <i> did double duty representing both the vowel /i/ sound and the closely related consonant /j/. But as the various local dialects began transforming into what would become the Romance languages, that /j/ sound began to shift to a /dʒ/ sound in early French. But it was still spelled with the letter <i>. So Latin Iupiter became Jupiter, though still spelled with an <i>. The <j> letter form did grow out of the letter <i>, but it wasn’t at first used to differentiate between the two sounds, it was really just a fancy way of writing the same letter. It wasn’t until 16th century French that the letter <j> started to be used systematically, and not until the 17th century did it arrive in English. In fact as late as the 18th century, when Samuel Johnson wrote his famous Dictionary, though he did use the letter <j>, he interfiled all the <i> and <j> words together. It wasn’t until later lexicographers such as Noah Webster that the [00:15:00] letter <j> got its own section in dictionaries. So that explains the two /dʒ/ sounds in judge which came from Latin iudex. If only they’d taught me etymologies in school I’d have won all the spelling bees. Not that I’m judging.

But you can also spell /dʒ/ with a <g>, so what’s up with that? Well in Latin the letter <g> always made the so-called hard /ɡ/ sound. But again as French developed out of Latin, the letter <g> when it came before a front vowel, that is vowels produced towards the front of the mouth such as /i/ and /e/, it came to be pronounced /dʒ/. A similar sound change had already happened in Old English with /ɡ/ in some contexts becoming /j/ which Norman scribes started to spell with the letter <y> as in yard. Confused yet? Don’t worry, it gets worse. So we see French loanwords in English like gentle, following our hard-G soft-G rule that we’re taught in elementary school. But there are exceptions, I hear you say. What about words like get and give? Well here’s where we see the influence of Old Norse. Get was a loan word from Old Norse, where /ɡ/ hadn’t changed at all. [00:16:00] And though give did exist in Old English with that /j/ sound as giefan and should have become \*yive, the word also existed in a related Old Norse form in the north of England with a hard-G and therefore give has the pronunciation it does today. So neither word is subject to the hard-G soft-G rule derived from French, and you can generally identify a word as coming from or influenced by Old Norse if it breaks that rule. So the important question is: gif or jif? Norse or French? Well as far as I’m concerned it’s an English word so it should be yif!

Now Old English did of course also have a hard /g/ sound so that mapped easily onto the Roman letter <g>. But it also had a couple of guttural sounds that didn’t exist in Latin, which the English scribes spelled with either <h> or <g>, in addition to still using those letters for their previous Latin sounds. But again the Norman scribes turned their noses up at that double use of letters, and instead often used the combination <gh> to represent those guttural sounds. But why, then, is <gh> pronounced in so many different ways in Modern English?

Well, first of all, there [00:17:00] were actually three slightly different guttural sounds in Old English and the sounds diverged in different ways, and some scribes changed the spellings to reflect that and some didn’t. In some contexts, the guttural sound became a /w/ sound and came to be spelled <w> in Modern English, as in the Old English word boga becoming Modern English bow. But notice that Old English plog, sometimes spelled with a <g> and sometimes spelled with an <h>, is spelled in Modern English as either plow or plough. Similarly we have Modern English words with a <gh> spelling like dough and bough, which were spelled with a <g> in Old English, and through and though, which were spelled with an <h> in Old English. In some cases, such as when following a front vowel, the guttural sound of <gh> just disappeared, as in high and night. And in one surprising sound change the guttural sound became /f/ as in rough, particularly in northern dialects of English. This one’s so weird I’ll have to cover it in a separate video! As for the different vowel sounds of the various words spelled <ough>, they often represented quite different [00:18:00] vowels in Old English which all got lumped together under the one spelling and therefore developed in very different ways.

So to summarize, this train wreck is the result of the shifting spelling conventions in Middle English and subsequent sound changes that happened. Unfortunately the <gh> spellings became standard even though we no longer pronounce those guttural sounds.

Now let’s return to the letter <c> again and consider another sound it makes. Why do we have soft <c> and hard <c>? Well, this is a sound shift that happened as Latin became French. In Latin, <c> always indicated /k/. But as the various Romance languages developed out of Latin, as with the letter <g>, when /k/ came before a front vowel it changed, eventually becoming /s/, and the French-speaking Normans brought that with them to England, so we now have the hard-C/soft-C rule.

And these are just some of the different spelling conventions that influenced English spelling. In addition to the various French conventions, English has also grappled with spellings from Greek, filtered through the Latin system of transliterating Greek words, as well as loanwords from languages from around the world, such as Dutch, Hindi, and Arabic. But that’s a journey for another [00:19:00] video—for now, let’s look at another source of my scholastic struggles, namely sound changes in English itself.

Sound changes are of course a natural part of all languages over time, so this is always a potential problem for phonetic writing systems. If you have a one for one letter-for-sound correspondence, then over time you either have to change the way you spell things or live with the fact that the letters stop matching the sounds. We’ve talked about a number of changes that happened to consonants so far, and there have been A LOT of changes to vowels too. But I’m going to focus on the most important one in terms of its effect of spelling, which has to do with the short and long vowels. Originally short and long vowels in Old English, as in Latin, were just that, short and long in terms of duration, with the quality of the vowel sound more or less the same, and I’m simplifying slightly here to make this a little easier. The letter <a> represented /ɑ/ and was pronounced quickly /ɑ/ or held longer /ɑ:/. So it wasn’t too much of a problem representing both the long and short versions of a vowel with the same letter. And if you speak other continental European languages like French or Italian, you know that’s still roughly true in them. But something weird [00:20:00] happened in English, right around the time that Middle English was becoming Early Modern English, gradually changing the sounds of those long vowels over a few hundred years. But it didn’t affect the short vowels, so we ended up with the vowel letters representing quite different sounds. Again, I'm simplifying a bit here as there were some more minor sound changes that did affect the short vowels in Middle English. So the short /ɑ/ in swan remains basically the same from Old English to Modern English, but the long /ɑ:/ in Middle English name became name in Modern English. This change is called the Great Vowel Shift because it affected the whole system of long vowels, with each vowel in turn moving in its position in the mouth. So /ɑ:/ became /e:/, /e:/ became /i:/, /i:/ eventually became /aɪ/ and so forth. And again, I swear I’m simplifying here! But that’s why today we often say to children learning to spell that the long vowels say their name, A, E, I, O, U. This is also why it’s become more important in Modern English to indicate long and short vowels in the spelling system. There actually had been earlier attempts at that, well before the Great Vowel shift. In the 12th century a little [00:21:00] while after the Norman Invasion, a monk named Orm, who is now only remembered for his spellings not the literary quality of his work [yes it’s that boring], was unhappy with the way people were pronouncing English, and developed his own system of spelling. This included using a doubled consonant to indicate that the preceding vowel was pronounced short. We do that today as in the words write and written, but we don’t do it because of Orm. No one actually picked up on Orm’s spelling reforms, but the same idea was reinvented by later scribes. Poor Orm. Also, in the Middle English period, many of the Old English inflectional endings, basically word endings that indicated the grammatical functions of words, began to become reduced or disappear altogether, with different vowel sounds becoming an indistinct /ə/ or schwa sound spelled simply with the letter <e>, and over time those <e>s stopped being pronounced altogether. But they stuck around as the so-called silent E, useful for marking the preceding vowel sound as long.

But what’s really crucial here is the timing of the Great Vowel Shift, along with the other sound shifts that were taking place at the end of the Middle English period, since this was right around when standard spellings started to be [00:22:00] fixed. Since the pronunciation of English at that time was so radically in flux, the spellings that became fixed reflected sometimes older and sometimes newer forms, leaving us with the mixed bag of spellings we have today. There had been earlier attempts at standardized spellings, but in the 15th century, there were two factors that fundamentally influenced the standard spellings that we have today.

The first is the development of the so-called Chancery Standard, which was used in official government writings in the first half of the 15th century. It actually started with King Henry V, who in August of 1417 decided to communicate with his officials in English rather than French. The Signet Office, which was in charge of his personal communications, developed standard spellings based on the Central East Midland and London dialects. From there it spread to the other government offices, and as official documents were sent around the country other professional scribes began to adopt this standard.

The other major factor is the arrival of the printing press. William Caxton, born in Kent, relocated to Bruges [in what is now Belgium], working in the textile industry. He wrote an English translation of a French account of the Trojan War, and, after he picked up [00:23:00] the technique of printing during a trip to Cologne, printed the first book in English, his own translation, in 1475. Then in 1476 he moved back to England and set up his printing press in Westminster, near all those government offices, and began his printing business. Caxton was well aware of the problems posed by the variety of dialects around England. For his books to sell, they had to be widely understandable. In the prologue to one of his books he tells a story which really shows the scope of the problem. A certain merchant from the north of England, visiting London, tries to buy eggs from a local southern woman. He asks for egges and the woman replies that she can’t understand him because she doesn’t speak French. The merchant gets upset, his egg craving being unsatisfied, since he also could speak no French, until a bystander steps in to translate telling the woman that he wanted eyren. This slapstick comedy story of a food order gone wrong is based on the fact that the northern form egges, which comes from Old Norse, and the southern form eyren, which comes from Old English, are so different. And if you can’t do something as simple as order some eggs, how are [00:24:00] you going to publish books understandable by all? Caxton’s solution was to publish in the London standard, rather than his own native Kentish dialect, which he considered crude, and other printers soon merged this with Chancery English and spread those spellings even further. Of course it wasn’t all smooth sailing. Early printed books were often inconsistent in their spellings such as the silent <e> being dropped or added to equalize line lengths, and odd things sometimes crept in like the <h> in the spelling of ghost from the influence of Flemish printers [possibly introduced by Caxton himself]. But in the end Chancery English and the printing press give us the modern English spelling system we’re stuck with today.

There have been many attempts and proposals over the years at reforming the English spelling system, in fact almost since standard spellings arose. An early one worth noting is Sir Thomas Smith’s who in 1568 proposed a system involving a 34 character alphabet which for instance reassigned the redundant <c> to the /tʃ/ sound, added characters, and used diacritics or accent marks to show short and long vowels. Others were more conservative such as William [00:25:00] Bullokar’s 1580 proposal which stuck to only the already existing characters plus diacritics. He also wanted to drop unnecessary double consonants and silent <e>s, and objected to the so-called etymologically based spelling. This is when, for instance, the silent letter <b> is added to words like debt and doubt because it shows they came from the Latin words debitum and dubitare, even though they were never pronounced that way in English. In another example, the <s> was added to island because of the mistaken belief that it was connected to the Latin derived word isle, from Latin insula, when in fact island came from the unrelated Old English iegland and never had an <s> in there to begin with. I’ll admit that if only this one suggestion had been taken up, my life would have been much easier! But spelling reformers over the years more or less split into either conservatives or radicals, either tidying up the worst inconsistencies or reforming the whole system. What the more conservative reformers realised was that radical proposals were unlikely to be accepted and would create the difficulty of learning a whole new system. But that didn’t stop the proposals.

The two individuals most influential on [00:26:00] English spelling standards were the dictionary writers Samuel Johnson and Noah Webster. Dr Johnson started out initially as a language reformer, but soon realised this was impractical, and his ultimately conservative spellings used in his great Dictionary served to further entrench existing standards. The American Noah Webster, on the other hand, ended up being the only successful reformer of the English spelling system. In the various editions of his Dictionary of American English and spelling books, he started out rather conservative in his reforms, then later radicalized, and then gradually became more and more conservative again. But he is why the American spelling system to this day differs from the British system, which has in fact made things harder for all of us!

Now I know I said I wished some of these reforms had happened, but really what I wish is that I’d been taught some of this history way back in school. Because I think there are some real benefits to the spelling system as it now stands. First of all it tells us so much about the history of the language. And there are some advantages to having a spelling system that doesn’t have a simple one-to-one letter-to-sound correspondence. It helps us distinguish between “the rights of the Church” and “the [00:27:00] rites of the Church”, or more recently between “fishing” and “phishing”. And how would a strictly phonetic writing system work with the many different accents around the English-speaking world? If you based your system on only one of those accents it would be a highly political decision, favouring some and disadvantaging others. And it would obscure the relationship between many words such as nature and natural which currently use the letter <a> to represent quite different sounds. And finally a somewhat illogical spelling system gives so much scope for creativity from brand names like Flickr to text speak like gr8 to the unpronounceable pwn.

So first of all, I want to acknowledge some of the key sources that I used in researching that, the most important one of which is a very long and dense book by Christopher Upward and George Davidson called *The History of English Spelling*, published in [00:28:00] 2001. And in addition to the very long and dense book itself, there are bonus chapters which you can find online at www history of English spelling.info.

This is a book aimed at academics, really. And it goes into exquisite detail, about every little quirk. Quirk, and, you know,

know, element of change that happened from, you know, and including the various different sources Latin, all the various influences and things. Yeah, all the influences. So not necessarily a, a book for the the average reader, but I read it so that you don't have to, I guess I found it really fascinating.

It was, but I don't know that everyone will find it such a page turner that I did.

**Aven:** Right. Not necessarily for a casual fan of language, but yes, if you're interested, it's there. It is

**Mark:** there. And also a book by David Sacks called [00:29:00] *Letter Perfect,* published in 2003 which looks at the history of the alphabet, but in particular, I want to draw your attention to a book by Kevin Stroud.

Kevin Stroud is of course, the the mastermind behind the excellent podcast. The history of English. Now you may well know of his podcast.

**Aven:** He's also a friend of this podcast.

**Mark:** Yes, yes. I should say he is a friend. So, full disclosure, .

**Aven:** Oh, I was just trying to claim him as a friend. Cause he's cool. And I want people to know that we like him and he knows us,

**Mark:** And while you may know about his podcast, you may not know that he has an audio book called *The History of the Alphabet.* And it is excellent. Mm-hmm. . And if you want all the details about all the letters, I mentioned some of them there. But if you want to know all the details about the development of all the letters in the alphabet, this is a great place to go.

**Aven:** Yeah. Highly recommended.

**Mark:** And lastly well, another friend of [00:30:00] the show, NativLang has a video well it was originally published as a series of videos and then compiled into its full long form called T*oths Pill--an Animated History of Writing*. And so all the details about different writing systems and the quirks about different kinds of writing systems and how they work and how they evolved.

And

**Aven:** not just the ones that fed into English. Yes. A whole bunch of other scripts. Yes, exactly. Yeah.

**Mark:** So that is a, a good place to go, and we will have links for all of these things in the show notes.

**Aven:** I also want to just draw the link to the not so long ago discussion with the endangered alphabets with Tim Brookes.

Because for instance, at one point you say every alphabet except Hangul is comes from these alphabets. And that may be true, but that's certainly not true of every script. Many, many, many scripts. Yes. And so just a reminder that if you haven't listened to that episode with Tim Brookes, who talks about scripts around the world , do because it's a [00:31:00] fascinating other layer to this whole discussion.

**Mark:** And that is episode. I don't remember. No, I don't know. It was

**Aven:** earlier. This one, several episodes back. There'll be a link in the

**Mark:** description. Yeah, we'll put it, put a link. And I, I will be in a minute talking more about different kinds of writing systems beyond alphabets. So I'll unpack that a little bit.

But next I want to briefly talk about English's irregularity and ask the question how irregular is English. Exactly.

**Aven:** Mark , how irregular isn't .

**Mark:** Well, I mean, I suppose there are a number of ways that this could be. Quantified, but according to at least one survey of English as many as 84% of English words follow a regular pattern, only 3% of English words are so irregular that they have to be learned individually by rote.

**Aven:** Right. Okay. Yeah, no, I can understand that. [00:32:00] In terms of ones that just don't follow any pattern that can be connected to any other Yeah. Similar set of

**Mark:** Now the problem is that the irregular spellings are disproportionately common among the most frequently used

**Aven:** words. Right. So we run across them. Yeah.

Because for instance, Latinate words are really, really regular in their spellings because Latin is really regular in its spelling. And so all the fancy schmancy words may seem hard, but actually they're really easy to spell. Yeah. If you know the basic rules.

**Mark:** But when you think about it, this actually makes sense because that's part of the reason that words remain irregular and haven't become regularized over the years.

You use them a lot, so you're less likely to forget how you're supposed to do it. And I'm doing air quotes with my microphone here.

**Aven:** In the same reason, in the same way that irregularities in speech. Yeah. [00:33:00] Right. With the most common words. You don't forget how to say it because you say it all the time. Yeah.

So even though the verb to be is terribly irregular, nobody forgets how to say I am. You are because they say it every day So, so commonly. And same with things you spell every day, even though they don't make any sense. Because while there are lots of really not normal short English words, most people who grow up writing English, those aren't the ones they tend to complain about because they're used to doing them all the time and they know they're mm-hmm.

they know what they are. Nobody's gonna get confused.

**Mark:** So, yeah. So it's, it's therefore the words that you use less frequently, that are gonna get simplified to and regularized irregular to the standard pattern. but

**Aven:** the, because the most irregular ones are the most commonly used people notice them, and therefore, especially new learners complain about them.

**Mark:** Complain about, yeah. Now, I talked a bit there about the word spelling. Mm-hmm. , so, that's the sort of common [00:34:00] word. There is a more technical jargony word for spelling, and that's orthography, right. So I figure I should give the history of that word. The second part of this word is from that same root that gives us the word grammar, basically meaning carving.

So the graphe part, right.

**Aven:** Which we know from lots of other words for graph, for writing and drawing. .

**Mark:** And, you know, so we also see that, root in the word grapheme, which is another technical jargony word in linguistics that refers to the smallest unit in a writing system.

**Aven:** Right. So in an alphabet it would be a letter.

**Mark:** It'd be a letter, yeah. Or a digraph. So like two letters making one sound. So t h, s h, c h and so forth. The first part of the word orthography comes from Greek orthos, meaning straight or correct. So the English word orthography, and its Greek antecedent orthographia mean Correct [00:35:00] writing. Mm-hmm. . And of course that orthos element we see in words like orthodontics, getting your teeth straight and orthodoxy, orthodoxy getting your correct belief straight . Exactly. But of course as we've seen correct spelling, and again,

**Aven:** I'm, yeah, yeah, yeah. We get it, we get it.

**Mark:** scare quotes at the microphone correct spelling is a relative concept depending on either the pronunciation of particular dialect or an artificial literary standard or whatever.

So yes, more details on writing systems. So an alphabet is just one type of writing system. And, and so when I said that there is one alphabet with a few other exceptions that only counts for writing systems that contain basically characters that represent phonemes of both consonants and vowels.

And then I said there is the which is writing systems that use only consonants. Only consonants, [00:36:00] but there are a whole bunch of other types of writing systems many of which, well, all of which are quite a bit older than the alphabet. The alphabet is relatively, well, not

**Aven:** all of which there are other, well, there are other scripts.

**Mark:** There are other scripts that are more recent maybe mm-hmm. , but but many of which are very much older Yes. Than the alphabet.

**Aven:** So the hieroglyphs that you started that story with,

**Mark:** there's the Chinese script mm-hmm. Which uses logograms, characters which represent whole words and can also be used as syllables.

Mm-hmm. ,

with the, the logograms the logogram system, this is good if the pronunciation of a word changes because you don't need to change the character. And also the logogram can be understood by different mutually unintelligible languages.

**Aven:** Yeah. You could use the same writing system for, in, in theory we could use the Chinese writing system to write English. Yes. That's, yep. Like there's no limit to it. Yeah.

**Mark:** And so that's, for instance, very useful in the case specifically with Mandarin and Cantonese. Yeah. They're not mutually intelligible to speak, [00:37:00] but they're both very big mm-hmm. language groups. And so, I mean, they're, there are a few, there are a few issues with the writing system being applicable to both, but for the most part you can, you can read right.

just fine. Mm-hmm. , whichever language you speak. Now, the big drawback is that there are many, many individual characters to be learned in order to become literate. Yeah. So it's

**Aven:** harder and typing is a pain in the butt. Yeah.

there are keyboards, but build a keyboard, it's very

**Mark:** hard.

It's difficult. Yeah. Another type of writing system is the syllabary, in which a character phonetically represents a whole syllable, as in the case with the Japanese hirogana script. This system works well in languages which have relatively simple syllable structures. Mm-hmm. Such as permitting only syllables made up of consonant sound, followed by a vowel sound, which is the case in Japanese.

Mm-hmm. and many [00:38:00] other languages. So English for instance, has a much more complicated syllable structure. You can have consonant, vowel syllable. You can have consonant clusters. Mm-hmm. , which is not possible in Japanese. Yeah. So, you know, it works really well with some languages.

It does not work well with others. Right. That's the beauty of the the alphabet, is that it it can represent these more complicated structures.

**Aven:** It's more

**Mark:** flexible. It's more flexible.

Now, in that voiceover, I mentioned that the first character in that early Semitic alphabet that was transformed into the ah sound in Greek to become the letter alpha. Mm-hmm. . It originally represented a consonant, but I didn't mention what that consonant mm-hmm. was. I noticed that. So I want to talk about that now.

It represents a sound that we actually do make in English and, well, I can't say for sure whether they made it in [00:39:00] Greek, but I'm pretty sure they would've in Latin

**Aven:** talk about it, and I will dis we will

**Mark:** discuss. It's the, it's the glottal

**Aven:** stop. Right. So we make it in English, but it's not a salient sound.

Yes. So it does not distinguish words,

**Mark:** so it does not form minimal pairs. Mm-hmm. there. It's, it's not a phoneme.

**Aven:** Mm-hmm. . So explain the glottal stop first of all.

**Mark:** So the glottal stop is a sound that in English we make between vowel sounds. So for instance and we do this naturally without noticing that we're doing it.

But for instance, if you say uhoh, there's a glottal stop between the and the Oh,

**Aven:** we stop, stop the air going through with our glottis . Yeah. That's why it's a glottal stop. Yeah, exactly. Yeah. We close a part of our back of our throat,

**Mark:** a bit of our, our mouth parts.

**Aven:** Mm-hmm. . And so it's, it's a consonant because consonants are things that either stop or impede the flow of air as opposed to a vowel, which only shapes the flow of air.

Mm-hmm. . And so uh, [00:40:00] oh, I. , I'm not breathing in. My air does not go completely through all the way through. Yeah.

**Mark:** When I say it, you can't find a minimal pair.

What I mean is you can't find two words that are distinguished only by the presence or absence of this sound. Yeah. So it is used in a number of dialects to replace consonant sounds, other consonant sounds where it, you know, it's so clear where it doesn't change the meaning. It doesn't change the meaning of the word. It's just a way that it's pronounced in some dialects. So for instance you can find it in the cockney pronunciation of water where they would say water. Mm-hmm.

so it's not a contrastive sound in

**Aven:** English So you don't need to be able to notice that one is being said, or the other. And therefore, since we're talking about spelling, you don't need to record the difference when you write it down. You don't, you don't need to write it down.

the only time you ever need to represent it is if you're trying to actually transcribe [00:41:00] dialect. Yeah. Either for linguistic reasons or to, you know, represent it in a novel or something

**Mark:** like that. Yeah. Then that's, yeah. We, we do these kinds of pronunciations naturally in certain contexts.

And you're not even aware of it. It's, mm-hmm. , it just naturally occurs in certain phonetic environments.

**Aven:** And so it doesn't need to be written down. It doesn't need to, doesn't to be written down. Be distinguished in writing. Yeah. And when you want to do it, we do it in English by, you know, putting in an apostrophe or something to show that there's something missing, but that's only an approximate, but we don't need it.

So our alphabet didn't need the aleph. Yeah. That's what you're saying. Yeah.

**Mark:** And well, presumably Greek didn't mm-hmm. need to record it anyways, whether or not they pronounced it.

**Aven:** Well, and whereas Phoenician and other Semitic languages have a glottal stop as Yes. A, a meaningful consonant. Yeah.

**Mark:** Yeah. Mm-hmm.

And so, yeah. In fact, the glottal stop is an important consonant in many like Arabic and many Semitic languages, Arabic and Hebrew and mm-hmm. . Yeah,

**Aven:** I [00:42:00] don't think Latin has any, it certainly doesn't have it as a meaningful

**Mark:** No, no, it certainly doesn't have as meaningful,

**Aven:** Whether people pronounce it again.

Yeah. Who

**Mark:** knows? Who knows. Now, sort of moving on from that to other back of the throat sounds, ,

**Aven:** there's so many of those. That's really, if, if we hadn't had the problems with the back of the throat, sounds a good 50% of the problems with English spelling would be gone. , at least I think the Cs, the Ks. The Gs, the Ghs, the chs, the, there's so many that all come from this multiplicity of gutterals.

**Mark:** Yeah. Though English and

**Aven:** the changing numbers of Gutterals Yeah. Through the different

**Mark:** English has, has dropped basically

**Aven:** all, all I know. But if we hadn't had them in the first place, yeah. We wouldn't have these spelling problems. Mm-hmm. , it was the existence and then lack. It used

**Mark:** to be there. They are no longer there.

Yeah. . So yeah, I talked about, k and g sounds and guttural sounds. So I want to sort of unpack this a little bit. That Semitic language, that early Semitic language that [00:43:00] had the first alphabet or Abjad really. And the, and the closely related Phoenician language had a couple of different sounds that we would loosely describe as K sounds.

In addition to a number of guttural sounds also produced at the back of the mouth. So the word guttural, it's not a very technical term in a way, but it's still kind of useful, but

**Aven:** it's nice and onomatopoeic, so it kind of gets the sense across .

**Mark:** That word guttural comes from Latin, guttur meaning throat and the g and k sounds are sometimes grouped with those guttural sounds but they're actually slightly more forward in the mouth.

**Aven:** Yeah. If you think about, if you, if you do them, you'll, you'll feel that it's your roof of your mouth touching the back, closing not the actual real back your throat like, or

**Mark:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. G G and K are, are sort of, Your, your tongue is touching in the soft palate. Mm-hmm.

**Aven:** basically the, the, the, the root of your [00:44:00] tongue

**Mark:** almost.

Yeah. Yeah. So the, the, your tongue is touching in the, in the soft part. The soft part of the roof of your mouth. There's a hard part and a soft part just behind it. You can kind of mm-hmm. , move your tongue around and find those soft. Whenever

**Aven:** you start talking about phonology, like this, all, everybody listening, because I do this when other podcasts do it, everybody listening, is making the weirdest faces as they move.

Mm-hmm. . So it's

**Mark:** the hard palate. That's the hard part of the roof of, of the, the part, the soft palate is the bit behind that. So when the alphabet was adapted by the Greeks, they didn't need all those K sounds.

**Aven:** No. They still had, they had several. They had a few. They had, they had more than English recognizes, more

**Mark:** than English does Now, now, yeah. Yeah. But they didn't need as many as the Semitic languages.

**Aven:** They had the kappa, the chi and the xi. Yeah.

**Mark:** And the, and they also had And the gamma. The gamma and the kappa. So the guh sound and the kuh sound are both what are called [00:45:00] velar stops that is they are produced by stopping the airflow with your tongue at the soft palate, as I said, towards the back of your mouth.

And the only difference between their articulation is that the G sound, with the guh sound, you vibrate your vocal chords and with the kuh sound you don't. So, and you can, if you wanna look weird on the bus while you're listening to this podcast, if you put your hand on your throat and go guh and kuh you will feel that when you say guh there's vibration there, you can feel with your fingers.

And when you go kuh, there's no vibration. Mm-hmm. . And so that is a distinction called voicing. So "g" is voiced, "k" is unvoiced, right? And otherwise they're both velar stops. So unvoiced velar stop, voiced velar stop. Now when the Etruscans borrowed the Greek [00:46:00] alphabet, since they also had multiple variants, loosely of a K, of a K sound they didn't mind the redundancy of K and q as letters.

Mm-hmm. . Mm-hmm. . And, and remember, I should point this out, the Greeks initially kept that Q letter even though it disappeared later. Mm-hmm. , but at that point,

**Aven:** and that's why it made its way, that's

**Mark:** why it made it to Etruscan because it hadn't been dropped by then. Mm-hmm. And what's more, since the Etruscan language didn't have voiced stops, so as a whole category, they had no voiced

**Aven:** stops.

So they only had "p" not "b" for instance. Yeah. And,

**Mark:** and "t" not "d". Right. And so therefore they had the "k", but not the "g" so they didn't need that letter. So they didn't need that. And so instead of using the Greek gamma for the voiced velar stop, they assigned that letter to another variant of the K sound that they had.

And that's how we got the letter C [00:47:00] making a K sound not a hard G sound. When the Romans got their hands on the alphabet, there was no longer a letter to represent the G sound so they used the letter C to represent both and G and they eventually, as I said invented the letter G by adding the extra stroke onto the C but that was only later right.

Moving on to the writing system in early medieval England. Mm-hmm. And in particular the adoption of the runic letters into the Roman

**Aven:** alphabet, the runic letters, which may probably see our other videos on runes about this, have actually come from the Etruscan version of the Greek letters way back.

Yeah. And been changed out of all recognition, but yeah. But they were not an independent invention as far as we can tell. Yeah,

**Mark:** we believe probably we don't have all the evidence [00:48:00] here,

**Aven:** but it's, it's, it's a little speculative, but yeah. .

**Mark:** So the so-called Anglo-Saxons, and again, I use scare quotes around this word since this term is kind of being deprecated, not useful.

But the, the sort of early English in Britain were basically illiterate. They did have this runic alphabet, which they

**Aven:** used for very, very focused purposes, mostly to do with magic and things, right?

**Mark:** Magic and inscriptions, right? So you would like write your name in an object that was yours, but it was never used for sort of free flowing text.

They gained actual literacy from Christian missionaries sent to convert them. And a little bit later, I'll talk more about the complexities of these Christian missionaries and who is who. But for the moment, let's just say Christian missionaries came and introduced the Roman alphabet.

And initially the Roman alphabet was just used to write in Latin for religious purposes in England, [00:49:00] but soon it was adopted to write in the English language. Mm-hmm. . And again, we've talked about this in previous, Episodes and videos in

**Aven:** particular to do with Alfred and to do with literacy programs.

Yeah. And, the development of English language. And when you talk about the future in that video, you talk about it mm-hmm. and Yeah. So yeah, it's been all over. I'm not sure I'll even necessarily link because it's all over the place, but yeah. We don't need to get into those details now.

**Mark:** It's first use was to write laws down, basically.

Mm-hmm. . Mm-hmm. English laws as opposed to laws in Latin. Now, I'll come back to this point here. It's important to remember that there were two sources of missionaries coming to England with slightly different traditions. So one was from, directly from Rome, and the other was from Ireland who had earlier been converted to Christianity and then had been kind of forgotten.

Isolated. Yeah.

**Aven:** Yeah. From Rome with the fall of the Roman Empire in, in Britain in so-called

**Mark:** Dark ages. [00:50:00] And so they both sent, you know, they both had this idea of convert, let's convert the,

**Aven:** The newly arrived Saxons newly arrived and Angles and Jutes mm-hmm. And the Germanic peoples who had conquered, or who had invaded England.

Yeah.

**Mark:** There were obviously phonological differences between Latin and Old English. That is always the case between two languages. So once again, a few adaptations had to be made. Latin didn't have the "th" or the "thuh" sounds that the two sounds that we in modern English represent with the letters th but English did mm-hmm.

And in fact, it is a very rare sound in languages worldwide. There's not a lot of languages in the world that have this sound, which is a kind of weird thing about English that it does

**Aven:** even other Germanic languages don't. Not all of them do. Yeah. Not, not necessarily. It's, it's not, it's not a universal Germanic feature.

Mm-hmm. , or at least not anymore.

**Mark:** So Latin had to deal with this problem. And this wasn't the [00:51:00] first time that they had to deal with this problem because these sounds sort of existed in in Greek. In Greek,

**Aven:** different versions what they were were aspirated stops. Yeah. So, "tuh" and "puh"

**Mark:** Yeah. Now it depends what dialect of Greek you're talking about.

**Aven:** It always depends what dialect of Greek you're talking about. But, but those kinds of sounds. Yeah. Sounds that had to be differentiated from A non aspirated P and t that's the important part. Right. T and d leave the pH out of this for the moment. Okay. But when we get back to that minimal pair issue, yeah.

It doesn't really matter how you pronounce the "thu" or "thu" or what matters is that it's different than a regular T And in Greek, a regular T and a tuh or thuh however it was pronounced made to, you could have the same word that meant something different, whether it had an aspiration or not. That's why you needed different letters for writing them.

That's why you have a theta and a tau. And that was true in English too. Yeah. And it doesn't really matter exactly how [00:52:00] they were pronounced in Greek .

**Mark:** So, yes. So the, the Greeks did have this letter theta, as you say. And so when the Romans transliterated Greek stuff into Latin, they used the th letter combination mm-hmm.

And so that was already there. And early on the Old English, you know, scribes used this th letter combination to represent that sound. But it was soon replaced by a new standard, a new spelling convention by adding a couple of new letters, one of which was from that Runic alphabet.

And so that's the letter thorn. And a thorn is basically a, perpendicular line with a kind of well thorn drawn on the side. A little triangle, a

**Aven:** little sticking out bit. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Like think of a, a simplistic drawing of a, of a rose stem. Yeah. Yeah.

**Mark:** And in the runic alphabet that [00:53:00] made the th sound or the sound.

But the other way of doing it, and this is where it becomes important to, to remember that there's two groups of missionaries. Yeah. Right. The other way of doing it was to use the Irish way of writing the letter D and they put a stroke through that

**Aven:** to say, this is the the different D.

**Mark:** The the different D, yeah.

and that was referred to at the time as "that", the word "that", that was the, the name for the letter mm-hmm. But is now referred to by scholars as "eth". And these two letters were used interchangeably. Mm-hmm. There's,

**Aven:** so it wasn't that one represented the un vocalized and one represented the, yeah, the voiced and unvoiced.

**Mark:** Unvoiced, sorry. Yes. Yeah. The, and so if you, again, if you put your, yeah. You can say and

**Aven:** Yeah. But, but they weren't, they didn't map onto those. It was just about where the scribal tradition came from. Yeah.

**Mark:** Actually it seemed, what it seems to be is the way it looked on a line. So you would never use an [00:54:00] eth as the first letter on a line, cuz it hung over.

**Aven:** So it didn't look, it was, it was untidy. It, it looked untidy. But you could use it inside the line. Use it inside. So the same scribes used both, is what you're saying? Yeah, exactly. Right. So it's just madness. Yeah. .

**Mark:** And sometimes when you had a double, thorn or double F, they would use one of one and one of the other

There's no reason for it

**Aven:** at all. So like, people blame standardized spelling for things, but. Boy, it's always been a mess. Yeah. Is what you're saying. .

**Mark:** But when you're reading Old English, you get, just

**Aven:** get used to you just ignoring it. Cause it doesn't, cause it doesn't matter. Right. Whatever. And it, the important thing is if you wrote the word yourself, you could use any combination you wanted.

Nobody would care. who cares?

**Mark:** when I write Old English words, I never know when to use a, a thorn or eth. It's sort of random what I feel at the moment. Right. Which one I'm gonna use, but doesn't, probably, doesn't matter yet. Doesn't matter. Because for sure that word was written both ways.

[00:55:00] Yes. So those are two of the letters that were added to the

**Aven:** added and then dropped again. Added. They ne they didn't, they didn't make it to the end. Yeah.

**Mark:** and I'll, I'll talk about what the Normans did. Well, I already mentioned what the Normans did. They, you know, changed a lot of,

**Aven:** they just didn't, they just basically took them all out.

Yeah. All the runic letters

**Mark:** dropped all the, in fact, any letter that wasn't used in Latin. Yeah. Whether it was runic or Irish or whatever, they dropped it with one small exception, which I'll turn now to as well.

So there's a special middle English letter called the yogh or yogh, or yogh, depending on who you ask. It's the yo letter

**Aven:** the yo. It actually makes me think of yogurt every time, so try to say it. But anyway,

**Mark:** let's backtrack to Old English before we get to this middle English letter. Old English had the hard G sound, G and so that was very easily mapped onto the Roman letter G, no problem there.

But there were several different [00:56:00] forms of the letter G available in the Middle Ages, such as the majuscule

**Aven:** form, which you mean written

**Mark:** forms? Written forms, yes. Yeah, written forms. Different ways of writing it. So there's the majuscule form, which we now call the uppercase G. At first the so-called upper and lowercase forms were considered separate scripts, and they weren't mixed.

Mm-hmm. . So you would write a whole word in uppercase

**Aven:** or, yeah. The, the uppercase lowercase comes much later as terms. So you're talking majuscule and minuscule. Yeah. Were in the same way we might now talk about like Arial and. Times New Roman. And I mean, I know it's not quite exactly the same, but similarly, it was a different style of writing.

So you could write all in what we would call capital letters or all in what we would call lower case letters. Yes.

**Mark:** So you used the majuscule forms to write a title or heading or something like that. Or maybe the first word in a text or maybe even the first letter in, in a bit of text to, to give emphasis.

Mm-hmm. . But they weren't considered the [00:57:00] same, they were different texts. And that, that what's called the bicameral system of using capital letters within the same sentence, you know, going back and forth depending on the word or whatever. For proper names or whatever it is. That's a later convention.

So they had the majuscule form. They had the open G form, which is known as the Insular G that came from the Irish, hence insular.

**Aven:** Can you describe that in this audio format?

**Mark:** Yes. It sort of looks like the, the number three, but if you imagine the top of the letter three flat and then the rest of it just sort of hanging underneath.

**Aven:** And does it, is it a descender, does it go below the line of the rest of the letters, or is it all on

**Mark:** the same letter? Yeah, it's sort of, so if you imagine the bottom of that letter hangs below, just like the bottom part of a letter G generally hangs below the line,

**Aven:** but it's not, the open part is that it's not [00:58:00] closed.

There are no closed loops in it. No, there's no

**Mark:** closed loop, it's

**Aven:** like the three, because there's a lot of different ways of writing a lowercase G these days. Mm-hmm. . But there's no script form now there's no font that would use that. No. No. Yeah. Okay.

**Mark:** So that was the Irish form, and then there's the closed G known as the Carolingian G, which was invented at the Court of Charlamagne in his attempt to regularize all the different scripts that were hanging around out there.

**Aven:** And that is closer to what we think of as a small G Yes. Like one of the forms of the small G. Exactly.

**Mark:** So you have a kind of

**Aven:** circle of the top with a thing hanging under on some kind of loopy thing underneath Yeah. Of some sort. Yeah.

**Mark:** Right. So the early English used the Irish form, but later on, after the Norman Conquest the new French speaking, Norman scribes preferred the Carolingian form because it came from Charlemagne ,French.

However, the [00:59:00] insular g hung around for a while as a separate letter, so they became distinct, two different things. Right. And that was, the insular, the Irish form became the yog.

And you haven't

**Aven:** said what that sound is.

**Mark:** So it started to represent distinctly an a sound that was already there, but it was only in middle English, that it started to represent exclusively this sound as opposed to other G sounds. So,

**Aven:** um,and the sound is ,

**Mark:** so it came to represent the, the guttural sound.

Right. Now we, I talked about how in old English, the guttural sound could be represented by the letter G, or the letter G could also represent mm-hmm. , the hard G. So it's at this point that it becomes split so that you use only the open G to represent the 'grgg' sound. And you use the closed G to represent the G

**Aven:** sound.

So guttural here you are using in the more [01:00:00] specific sense of the,

**Mark:** the, the fricative sound as opposed to the stop. Yeah.

**Aven:** But. Haven't actually discussed yet, so I just wanted to,

**Mark:** well, I discussed it in the voiceover that there was, there were these guttural fricative sounds. So ative sound is where

**Aven:** you, that's a vibration, but not a complete closure.

**Mark:** Yeah. You don't completely close the, the passage, the air passage, you let some sound through, but it becomes turbulent because it's partially closed.

**Aven:** So yeah. The 'hhrh' is the guttural one, the obvious fricative in the word fricative is F, yeah, and V. They are both fricativess, for instance. Yeah. So at those front

**Mark:** ones. Th is a fricative as opposed to duh.

Mm-hmm. or, or ka, which are all stops. Those are all stops. Mm-hmm. . Yeah. So yeah, so we saw that that in old English you could have a bunch of different letters to represent that kind of sound. There was the H letter which did double duty representing both the [01:01:00] H sound and that fricative Guttural sound. Or the g doing again the same thing, representing two different sounds.

But the Norman scribes did not like the double use of letters. And instead they often use the combination G h to represent that sound. So in middle English, you'll see both strategies being used to represent the sound, either the yogh, the open, the

**Aven:** this

**Mark:** open Irish G mm-hmm. Or the gh sound And ultimately the GH spelling and ultimately the GH won out.

Mm-hmm. .

**Aven:** But at the same as the time as the GH was winning out, we also were stopping pronouncing it. Yes. But didn't stop quite in time. No. If we'd stopped just a little earlier the spelling, no one would've had

**Mark:** to write it standardize before this pronunciation went

**Aven:** away. Completely disappeared. Yeah. Yeah.

If it had been, that's why you say the timing is so important. Had we Yeah. Had we dropped that sound [01:02:00] just a little bit earlier mm-hmm. than we would've dropped the silent GHS that we have and we words like enough, we would've just put an F on it would've been fine. , but No, sadly.

**Mark:** So the last point I wanna make before we take a pause and drink more booze

**Aven:** Yeah. You thought he was gonna say before we ended this podcast? Oh, no, no. Oh no, no. .

**Mark:** But more booze is required and we'll suggest all of you take a pause for booze because you're gonna need it

**Aven:** unless you're on the bus.

**Mark:** or driving. Don't, don't drink booze if you're driving, is about writing standards, spelling standards.

Mm-hmm. . So there were in fact various sort of smaller scale written standards in English before, before the chancery ones, before we got the one that we, we have now. Such as, for instance, the, even in Old English, there was the West Saxon spellings during the old English period, which reflected the book [01:03:00] production and political influence of the West Saxon kingdom in the later Old English period.

So King Alfred and his successors, had enough of an influence put up of money into scribes and learning well, and, and produced a lot of books and

**Aven:** producing a lot of books. And you learn spelling by reading a bunch of books. So if you read a bunch of books, then that spelling becomes kind of a standard.

Yeah. Not that they were going around whipping people for writing it the wrong way. They were just monopolizing to some extent the, the production of books. Yeah.

**Mark:** And by virtue of the fact that most of the manuscripts that survive from, were from that production, from that book production, most of the old English texts that we have now are written in that standard.

It's pretty, it's pretty regular. Mm-hmm. .

**Aven:** Except for their inability to decide whether to use an eth or a thorn. It's

**Mark:** free variation . And there were many different written standards that emerged in the 14th century. But these were all regionally based and depended on dialect, which certainly at that point were very wildly different, different and [01:04:00] changed over time as centers of influence shifted.

And there were obviously later attempts at establishing a written standard different from the one that we've ended up with. So in other words, spelling reformers,

**Aven:** and some of that has been slightly effective American spelling is different than English spelling.

**Mark:** It's the one successful

**Aven:** attempt.

And it was only partially successful attempt. Only partially successful. Well, I mean, it's, it's, well, but lots of what Webster wanted to do didn't catch on. Yeah. It

**Mark:** depends which period of Webster you're

**Aven:** talking about. But not everything he proposed,

**Mark:** not everything is successful. Yeah. Certain, certain of his works were very popular and successful, some of them less so.

Mm-hmm. . But he wasn't the only one. And so there were many other reformers over the years. More or less, they sort of followed in one of those two molds. Either, you know, the conservative reformer tidying up some of the more [01:05:00] egregious inconsistencies or the more radical reformers of the spelling system where they reassigned letters or introduced new letters or, you know mm-hmm.

which would be much harder to learn. And what the more conservative reformers realized was that proposals that radically changed the system would never be taken up as it made too much of a break with the past and would create the difficulty of learning a whole new system. Not to mention the fact that adding new characters would present problems for printers, cuz I suddenly gotta make new

**Aven:** mm-hmm.

Well, and, and one of the big problems of changing the spelling. is you then need to learn new stuff. But that's only a transitory problem because mm-hmm. , the next generation's fine. But now you need to learn new stuff to read anything old. So the longer we get from, or reprint everything old, but, you know.

Yeah. But the longer, the longer we get with one system, the harder it is to change. Yeah. Because there's more generations and [01:06:00] more centuries of written production.

**Mark:** That makes sense. And once, once printing was in and there were so many copies of stuff, it just becomes, it became, yeah. You know, when it was only manuscripts, okay, who cares this?

Like, which is why

**Aven:** some of the copies, but some of the few countries that have been able to just change their scripts, some of them have very long literary traditions, but a lot of them don't. Yeah. That's one of the things that has made it successful. There are other, there are other stories too, but yeah, that's one of the things.

**Mark:** Nonetheless, the proposals for reform continued and included the support of some very famous people. For instance the simplified spelling board which is founded in 1906 and backed by the millionaire and philanthropist, Andrew Carnegie. Mm-hmm. And also supported by the likes of Mark Twain and the US President, Theodore Roosevelt.

Mm-hmm. . So these are big names.

**Aven:** It's the progressive era, right? Mm-hmm. , they figure they can change everything. They can fix it all. Mm-hmm. , fix the world. . [01:07:00]

**Mark:** And two years later in Britain there was the Simplified Spelling Society that was formed and included among its supporters, Sir James Murray, who is the editor of the Oxford English Dictionary.

Writer HD Wells. And Sir Robert Baden Powell, the founder of the Scout Movement, ,

**Aven:** who of all of them probably had the best chance of making it work.

**Mark:** Cause if you access to

**Aven:** children Yeah. . Exactly. If he could have persuaded all the scouts, , he'd have troops. Troops under his control.

**Mark:** Well, and the, the, the last point I wanna make against all of these Attempts at spelling reform is you know, about this sort of rigid sound symbol correspondence. It would eliminate some useful symbol meaning correspondences. So in other words, the graphic representation of a thing, regardless of how it's pronounced, could tell you something [01:08:00] useful in itself.

And so for instance, and this is the very simplest example, the plural letter S, we would have to spell the plural of cat with an S, but the plural of dog with a Zed. So Cats letter S, dog Z, letter Zed,

**Aven:** and what? And then we lose. That's insane. And we, yeah. So we lose the fact that they are the same thing.

Yeah. That we are doing the same thing to the same, that they have the same function in in grammar. Yeah. I mean the other huge, absolutely huge argument against it is the multiplicity of pronunciations.

**Mark:** Yes. Which is a point

**Aven:** I made in the yeah, you did. And I, but I just wanna bring it up again because everybody who complains about it just spend five minutes thinking about how differently somebody else pronounces things.

Mm-hmm. and both of you write it down what you think is phonetic and see if they [01:09:00] make sense to you. Just think about puns. Mm-hmm. , right? Like, it, it's, we, we don't speak the same language at a phonetic level. And the minute you have a phonetic representation, it falls apart English. That's true. I'm sure for every language to some degree.

But English at this point is so global, is so widespread, has so many different speakers. it's impossible that genie doesn't go back in that bottle. But

**Mark:** even if, if you were the ultimate, you know, language snob and you thought there was only one, RP speaker, that the only proper way to pronounce English is British RP and screw the Americans cuz they're barbarians.

Well, and all the rest of the Brits and screw all the rest of the Britons because they're just a bunch of poor

**Aven:** and everyone in India, nobody's and everyone in Singapore and all of that. And everywhere and everywhere and in Australia and New Zealand. Even

**Mark:** if you thought that you would have to be stuck spelling cats and dogs differently and that is [01:10:00] dumb

**Aven:** All right. Well on that you mentioned that this stuff raises people's dander, right? Like yeah, it's an emotional issue. Mm-hmm. . Okay, on that emotional note, let's get boozed up some more . Okay. So we are going to pause this recording and go make ourselves another cocktail and then we're going to return and tell you about the cocktail and you are going to talk about, and

**Mark:** then I'm gonna talk about some common spelling peeves that people have.

**Aven:** Right. So to do even more emotional venting.

**Mark:** Yes. Right. And I will try and explain them so that it maybe seems not so bad. I'll try and mitigate them to some extent, . We'll

**Aven:** see how well that works. All right.

Hey there, this is Aven from the future. As you may have noticed, this recording went really long, so we decided instead of putting out a three hour episode on spelling, we would divide it into two. So this is the end of the first half.[01:11:00] We're going to release the second half of the same episode next week, and it will start with another cocktail, the one we're making right now in the past.

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We'll be back soon with more musings about the connections around us. Thanks for listening.

**Mark:** Bye.[01:12:00]