**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, and this is a slightly different opening just because if you didn't catch last week's episode, it was the first part of a very long recording about the word spelling. so this week we are releasing the second half of that same episode. So there's no big intro.

We just launched straight in with our second cocktail of the evening and go on with talking about spelling and the kinds of problems people have and why they might be explainable, sort of. so if you've missed the first half, you might wanna go back and listen to that, but you don't have to. And enjoy.

Okay. So we're back with our new [00:01:00] cocktails and this is the X.Y.Z. Cocktail.

**Mark:** So we've gone from ABC to XYZ, the full alphabet.

**Aven:** And this, we're also using the Difford's Guide version. It's slightly different than the original one from the Savoy cocktail book. But it's basically a daiquiri, it's rum and lemon juice, not lime,

it's rum and lemon juice and Triple Sec. And in this version, a little bit of sugar syrup and a little bit of Angostura Orange and a tiny bit of salt.

**Mark:** And it is very tasty. Mm-hmm. ,

**Aven:** it's a classic. Mm-hmm. type of

**Mark:** cocktail. I initially said Oh, well one of ,the ABC or XYZ is more interesting than the other.

But this is not a bad

**Aven:** cocktail ? No, the other one's more interesting. It's more unusual. More

**Mark:** unusual. But this is tasty. Yeah, no, it's a good cocktail. It's very well balanced

**Aven:** and it's a nicely done cocktail. Yeah. And we used a new to us rum, which I think is also part of the tastiness. It's got some good mm-hmm.

good flavor to it. An Angostura rum.

**Mark:** And of [00:02:00] course we said X, Y, Zed

**Aven:** because that's right. We're

**Mark:** Canadian .

**Aven:** No, because that's right. If we're moving into the peeves section of the, podcast, then I feel quite able to just say No, it's cuz that's right.

**Mark:** I mean, I will say the cocktail's kind of an American thing. I dunno.

But the just cocktails, it's all wrong. But you said the original recipe was the Savoy, so that's Harry Craddock, that's British. So X, Y, Zed. He would probably have said X, Y, Zed. Yeah. And anyway, the point is

**Aven:** it's right. All right, . Alright, well, fortified with this. What do you wanna talk to us about?

**Mark:** Well, let's start with one of the classics.

I before e .

**Aven:** I mean, this one's pretty easily dispensed with, right? Because it's not a rule. No. .

**Mark:** So that's the main problem here, is that the I before E except ever C rule [00:03:00] has more exceptions.

**Aven:** Literally not actually Rule literally has more exceptions than it has Yes. Words that follow it.

**Mark:** it's a mnemonic that was invented in the 19th century.

It doesn't reflect any reality about the phonological histories or etymologies of the word. It's just meant to work in many, but not all circumstances

**Aven:** with common words that people have problems with.

**Mark:** Yeah, yeah. And the common formulation of the mnemonic isn't complete anyways. You have to say the whole thing for it to even work slightly.

So, the full form should be something along the lines of I, before E except after C or when sounded as A as in neighbor and weigh. Or the other version is I, before E except after C when the sound is E. Which is less fun to say, but

**Aven:** Works and doesn't help by giving you two more words that you could memorize

**Mark:** So these fuller forms catch [00:04:00] some of the exceptions, but not all such as "sufficient" . Mm-hmm. , c i e and plurals of words that end in c y like frequencies, .

**Aven:** But of course, and this is where your point about it being a mnemonic comes, those are not the words people have trouble spelling. No, nobody's confused.

Or not nobody, but in general, things that bother people like are not, whether you say frequencies or sufficiency even though maybe sufficient is a problem for some people, but it's not the one I get. that's one of my spelling problems. Mm-hmm. And I'm good at spelling. I spell very well, but I have, as everyone does, certain blind spots.

Yeah. And the e i i e one is one. And I think it really is the fact that there are these rules that has messed me up. Right. I think if I had just learned the words individually,

**Mark:** so you would've preferred the rote learned by rote method? Well, or

**Aven:** just learned by exposure. Mm-hmm. . I mean, why am I a good speller?

Not because I've learned how to spell mm-hmm. , but because I've read a whole [00:05:00] bunch of text and so I've seen the correct spelling, air quotes or not, a lot .Mm-hmm. but with words like, receive and their, ceiling and stuff like that. I know there's an e i issue.

Right. And so I have become incapable of remembering which way it goes because I know there's an issue. And that I think has actually blocked me. If no one had ever told me there was a problem with ei's and ie's, I think I would've just learned them and not worried

**Mark:** about it. Okay. But what about, so the other place it doesn't work is with words like seize, where EI is pronounced E not A.

**Aven:** Yeah.

Right.

**Mark:** Well, the underlying problem here is that a number of different vowel sounds are represented by these two letter combinations, vowel sounds that changed in different ways over time and came from a number of different source languages. Mm-hmm. . So we're dealing with the fact that we're getting a lot of input and, there's no reason that they should be consistent with each [00:06:00] other, which is probably

**Aven:** why it's sufficient, for instance, doesn't bother me because I know where that comes from.

Mm-hmm. , I know where that word comes from and I know what the underlying spelling is in Latin there. Yeah. So I'm not gonna, I have no problems. Exactly. You're helped

**Mark:** by knowing Latin.

**Aven:** Yeah. And whether that's conscious or unconscious mm-hmm. , it isn't a problem to me.

Whereas receive, even though that does come from Latin the ei part is later. Mm-hmm. , that's a French problem. there's no I in the Latin. Right. So it doesn't help me. And French messed it all up. Yes. . Which is gonna, I suspect we're gonna come back to that particular problem more than once.

**Mark:** Lot of problems Yes. Have to do with the French. It is true. So You know, vowel sounds, as I said, that changed in different ways over time came from a number of different source languages. And this is in part a function of the English language having contained over its long history, far more distinct vowel sounds than the vowel letters to represent them.

Mm-hmm. so that [00:07:00] the same couple of vowel combinations were introduced again and again in different eras, different times, different contacts, all these different sounds to Yeah. To, to handle all these different sounds.

**Aven:** And then we went and changed all our vowel sounds, As they changed.

**Mark:** Yeah. Yeah. So for instance, the word eight comes from Old English, eahte or æhta which was spelled either e a h t e or Ash.

That's that ae ligature.

**Aven:** H meaning ae written together,

**Mark:** ae the ligature, meaning rammed together.

And that became ehte in middle English, spelled e h t e.

**Aven:** Nice and straightforward. Mm. Look at how simple that is.

**Mark:** And then, but then it became dipthongized to eighte, because in our vowels changed, our vowels changed. We produced all these diphthongs, these vowel sounds that have actually two different vowel sounds in them, merged

**Aven:** without a glottal stop. Mm-hmm. .

**Mark:** And then later in middle English, [00:08:00] that would be spelled E I g h t e, representing that, that sound?

Yeah. Followed though, at that point, followed by a guttural sound. So echteh, which was then dropped to leave us with the modern English E I G H

**Aven:** T, which though people complain about the, inconsistency of is not actually a word that at least people who grew up speaking English have any problem spelling, because they've seen it six bazillion times.

Yeah. Since they were small. So, easy enough with the common words. Yeah. We don't, nobody spells that i e and gets confused. No. except for

**Mark:** maybe young

**Aven:** children. Yeah. Yeah. Well, young children are, or very new learners of English, of course. Mm-hmm. . But, but you know, in general it becomes pretty easy to, to memorize mm-hmm.

But it then doesn't help us figure out other eis that don't get pronounced that way.

**Mark:** Mm-hmm. . So the commonly cited exceptions in that mnemonic ,neighbor and weigh, follow a similar path to [00:09:00] eight. A number of words with e i and ie. Spellings come from old French, ultimately from Latin with a number of different vowel sounds.

So Latin vena spelled v e n a with an E. Mm-hmm. in that vowel position becomes old French, veine spelled v e i n e and therefore English vein, v e i n. Mm-hmm. with the A pronunciation while Latin brevis becomes bref in old French and modern English brief.

**Aven:** Because of the vowel changemm-hmm. . Right. The E, the long E Becoming an E.

**Mark:** Bra-a-a-f. Becoming, becoming E. Yeah. Which

**Aven:** is counterintuitive that the word for brief would have a long E, but that's a separate issue. . Mm-hmm. And then being res, that's one of the ones where they [00:10:00] respell it i e instead of e E, which would've been much easier. Easier, yeah. But people were taking different tactics.

Yeah.

**Mark:** Yeah. Another example, Latin decipere, which is a prefixed form of capere. So already you've got that weird, but that happens all the time. But that already there in

**Aven:** Latin,

**Mark:** and that becomes old French decevoir, spelled D E C E V O I R and then English deceive with an e pronunciation.

**Aven:** Really the big problem is the people who wrote the E with an EI instead of ee. Yes. Because at the very same time, other people were writing it with an ee. And the e e is unambiguous and simple. Mm-hmm. . So those are the people we have to go back in our time machine and shoot and persuade Damn you to change their mind.

All right. Fine.

**Mark:** Also there's Latin Licer e which becomes old [00:11:00] French and Middle English, L E I s I R and modern English. Leisure, leisure, leisure or leisure. And there, there we got two different possible pronunciations. Mm-hmm. , but either way, spelled with ei. Mm-hmm. Latin sufficiens with two distinct vowel sounds diffic-ee-ens.

Mm-hmm. , right. Spelled i e. And then as it goes from old French to modern English we get sufficient with one vowel sound there, but still spelled i e mm-hmm . And finally, the Latin verb foris which produced the medieval Latin adjective foraneus which becomes old French foreign, f o r a i n, and has a number of middle English spellings, such as f e r r e n f o r a n f [00:12:00] o r e y n e before settling down as modern English foreign spelled with e i. And

**Aven:** and a G. For fun.

**Mark:** And a G. Yes. Foreign with a with a random G. Yeah.

**Aven:** You know what you haven't done

**Mark:** explain the French?

**Aven:** Helped.

Because what you've just said is there's a whole bunch of things and in each, it's a shit show. And in each case people made a different decision about how to represent that letter, which just gets us back to, there's no consistency in the spelling

So yeah, I think that one's an irrecoverable one, to be honest. And that still doesn't cover it all. No, there's more. I know.

**Mark:** So as one joke version of the saying goes, I before E, except after C, and when sounding like a, as in neighbor and weigh, and all throughout August and the month of May, you'll always be wrong no matter what you say.

**Aven:** [00:13:00] Yeah. But the point is it's not what you say, it's what you write. , you can all say them. , I have no problem saying the word receive, but to this moment in time, I don't know which way it's spelled. ,

**Mark:** I have to admit, foreign is a baffling one. Yeah. But I mean that,

**Aven:** but that I never have a problem writing foreign mm-hmm.

And then there's reign. Hmm. And I, I, I imagine reign may have affected foreign. , like, you know how these things how one word will affect the way another word is. Mm-hmm. , even though they're not related, because, so people may have seen a connection there. Yeah. And reign has a g for a reason, but foreign does not.

Yeah.

**Mark:** So I mean, with this one, I would just say, let's just forget about the I before E mnemonic. Stop teaching

**Aven:** people that rule, it's useless, messed me up completely.

**Mark:** Mm-hmm. . And if anything, learn something about the history of each individual word. And even that

**Aven:** will be, it won't really help though, because as I said, each time you get to a point where you're like, and so they [00:14:00] decided to represent this with this particular letter combination.

**Mark:** Another one that sometimes bothers people is you know, there's a group of words with an O spelling, but with basically a, U, pronunciation, right? A short U. A short U. So some, monk ,come, mm-hmm. And mom,

**Aven:** depending which one you are and how you spell it, .

**Mark:** And in, in these cases there used to be in old English a U spelling, right?

So they've gone away from the logical spelling for them. For some reason. Well, there is a reason I don't know. You

**Aven:** don't have a good track record yet. .

**Mark:** And then the other one that's sort of related to this is words that have a"ih" sound like busy, but are spelled with U The U, yeah.

Which is also again, the original spelling in Old English. The U is the original spelling. No, the I spelling. Oh, the i is the original. It was originally an "ih". And so we, you know, [00:15:00] these are all, these are words that have a spelling that change from their original, more obvious, more obvious spelling, kept their old pronunciations, but just have this new spelling for some odd reason.

Well, there is a reason for it. It's a reason that is no longer useful to us now, but it was useful at the time, . So it's, it's a case of, of, you know, short term thinking

But to explain what happened here, I'm gonna have to take us back to the Phoenicians and look at a number of letters because there is a bit of a domino effect in terms of what's going on. So let's, and believe it or not, I'm going to start with the letter F. Even though we're talking about vowels here, none of you can

**Aven:** see the sideeye I am giving him here.

**Mark:** I know we're talking about vowels, but we're gonna start with a consonant. Trust me, this

**Aven:** will help.

**Mark:** Really, it's related. We'll get there. Mm-hmm. . Okay, so the letter [00:16:00] f traces its ancestry back to the Phoenician alphabet and a character called wa, waw? W A W, I don't know

**Aven:** how as if I'm gonna start try to pronounce things at this point.

Yes. When you you're just talking about how letters don't represent the sound they're supposed to say.

**Mark:** This word meant peg in this, you know, early Phoenician language. But it it had a different sound then, more akin to English's W sound as opposed to the F sound. Okay. It looked like

**Aven:** an F. It looks like an F.

So when you say it's an F, it looks like an F. It looks like an F, but it doesn't

**Mark:** say F. It doesn't say F. It's closer to the Waw sound as I'm trying to pronounce it.

**Aven:** Like for those of you, and this is a small group of you for whom this will mean anything and be helpful. Like a digamma.

**Mark:** That's where it goes.

Yeah. So this letter was initially barred into Greek where it came to be called the digamma, because the symbol looked like two gamma letters [00:17:00] laid on top of each other, sort of over

**Aven:** like offset. But yeah. Yeah.

**Mark:** So for those of you who don't know, Greek, a gamma looks basically like if you're doing like a hangman Yeah.

It looks like the, the hangman. The gallows. And without the man. Without the man, yeah. Yeah. Just the, the gallow part. And then if you stack them one on top of the other, it looks sort of like an F when you think about it, right? Mm-hmm. . So it pretty much hasn't changed.

**Aven:** And in Greek, this was an old letter.

It

**Mark:** was an old letter. Yeah. It did not survive very long, even in ancient Greek. It certainly wasn't there in later ancient Greek, and certainly doesn't survive to modern Greek. Mm-hmm. . Eventually Greek dropped this letter as the sound itself in fact disappeared from the language, the Wuh sound, but not before it was passed onto the Etruscans.

So again, a lot of Greek stuff goes to the Etruscans very

**Aven:** early. Quite early. And that's the important point. Yeah.

**Mark:** And the Etruscans also had that wuh sound. [00:18:00] So it was good for them. And when it came to Latin, the Romans needed a way to represent their fuh sound. So the F letter or the die gamma was reassign to do that, right?

As for the wuh sound, well, the letter U did double duty representing both the vowel U sound, ooh, and the consonant sound, wuh, since both were very similar and sort of

produced very similarly in the mouth, made with the lips rounded. If you sort of, you know, when you're going Ooh, mm-hmm. , and you round your lips like that. So this was fine for Latin because, in Latin, those two sounds are, easily interchangeable. Interchangeable. So they had no problem with that. And in fact, if you're making this ooh sound, you may find it difficult to make the ooh sound without ending it off with a w sound.

When you say, Ooh, you're kind of, as you release your [00:19:00] exaggerating it there, but as you release the ooh

**Aven:** sound, the only way not to is to be very, very careful to stop the sound before you move your mouth at all. So mm-hmm. and, yeah.

**Mark:** Now it's important to keep in mind that the Romans wrote the letter U in two ways, as I mentioned.

So when inscribing it on stone, they formed it with straight lines like our modern letter V. But when written by pan or stylus, it was curved like our modern letter you for ease.

**Aven:** This is just about how, how it's easier to write things. Yeah.

**Mark:** It, it was exactly the same letter for them, it made no difference.

It was just the way you wrote it,

**Aven:** which is one reason why in modern editions of ancient Latin texts, there are two con, there are three, three conventions for how you use, wait a minute, let me sum up, how you print those letters. Mm-hmm. , there is one convention which uses U's for all of the vowels and consonants for all of them.

Yeah. So it's U's all the way through. [00:20:00] So veni vidi vici would be U E N I U I D I U I C I. There's another one which is used vs. For all of them. So Salvus would be S A L V V S. And then there's the most common, which is the V for Vs. And U's for U's. But I say most common, but there are some really prominent important texts that only use the U's for instance.

So you have to be able to kind of handle all of those when you're reading

**Mark:** Latin. Yep. And important to note, Romans didn't have the V sound. No,

**Aven:** this is why it's it I say Vs. For Vs and Us for Us. That's how we think about them. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. So Salvus was Salwus.

**Mark:** So as you say, Julius Caesar, I mean mm-hmm.

Julius Kaiser said

**Aven:** Weni weedy wiki . And he said it with great grawitas and he made everybody think what a [00:21:00] wonderful weer he was, man. And how much wirtus he had, how much virtue he had. Yes.

**Mark:** I still remember my undergraduate Latin prof

**Aven:** and he was trying to convince you that it sounded okay to say it like that.

No, no.

**Mark:** Quite the opposite because he, he preferred just pronouncing them as vs. And he said, you can't say Winnie weedy weeki.

**Aven:** But of course you can, you can, of course you can. I Our understanding of what, what sounds, make what you know have what connotations is entirely cultural, almost entirely cultural.

There are a few things that probably are cross-cultural, but very, very few. Anyway, he didn't say it. He wrote it. Yeah. W

**Mark:** So when the letters F and U came into Old English a few modifications happened. So first of all, the F had to represent two sounds, both the F sound, which it did in Latin. The Fuh sound and the, vuh sound, which old English did [00:22:00] have, but Latin had not, but Latin had not

**Aven:** until later. Until later .

**Mark:** Now these two sounds are another pair of voiced unvoiced sounds that are otherwise articulated in exactly the same way.

Placing your upper teeth on your lower lip and blowing air through what's called a Labio-dental fricative ,

**Aven:** when he says what's called not that many people call it that, but those as does. Yes, do.

**Mark:** So you have the voiced Labio-Dental fricative V and the Unvoiced Labio-Dental Fricative, F.

So this was not a problem in Old English since the phonetic environment determined, which sound to make. Okay.

**Aven:** Right. So that's why they could use the

**Mark:** F for both. That's why they could use the same letter for both. And,

**Aven:** you know, phonetic environment, meaning what letters and sounds are on either side of them.

You don't necessarily have to Yeah. Explain that. But,

**Mark:** So we can still see this [00:23:00] in modern English today, although we spell it differently. But we can see this, this fact sort of pattern, this pattern. Wife, wives, wife wives, wolf, wolves. We spell them differently to indicate that, but that's why we have that, that weird spelling.

So there explains another weird spelling thing. Mm-hmm. , why do you change the consonant? Or why does the sound change? Well, that's because in old English it was always predictable which way it should be pronounced, depending on what sounds come next to it. Mm-hmm. .

**Aven:** So you could use an F in both cases.

And because there's no, there's no possibility of having wifes, yeah, that's not a possible word. It's

**Mark:** not a possible sound that they would, they would just pronounce it Ys or Wolfs. Or wolfs,

**Aven:** yeah. Which is weird because in modern English we can wolf something down. So he wolfs it. Yeah, that's

**Mark:** true.

But that's a much

**Aven:** later. Yeah, no, I, I understand that, but it's just development. Yeah. And mm-hmm. , you know. Yeah. We, we have, we have developed the ability to [00:24:00] have that it is now a minimal

**Mark:** pair. Yeah. For us, we need to distinguish between

**Aven:** F and V and in many other contexts as well. I know.

**Mark:** Mm-hmm. But yeah. And we still see traces of the letter F making the V sound in modern English even.

So if you ever wondered why "of" isn't spelled O V,

**Aven:** which you probably haven't because even though that's weird of should be uv in fact, yeah. Uv, that's true. And yet nobody, nobody has ever complained about that because we use it so much that it has never even crossed our mind. The other one like that is one the letter, we'll get back to that.

Nobody's ever complained about it, or not recently anyway, because nobody even notices how

**Mark:** bizarre it's, except children. I think children's have trouble with that one. But but yeah, so that's why of is spelled of F. Even though that F does not make an F sound, we don't say uff. We don't say off, we say off, off.

But we spelled it, you know, with two Fs with there to make sure. Yeah. So that's a, a holdover from the old English spelling convention. As for the [00:25:00] letter U, initially, it was also used in English to make both the vowel and consonant sounds as in Latin. And in post-classical Latin there eventually rose a convention of writing to U's, UU in a row which is obviously a practice that eventually led to the letter w

**Aven:** if you think about it.

Yeah. When you say, sorry, just to remind people, when you say they used the letter U for the vowel and the consonant, they used it for the le vowel U and the consonant. Woo. Wha just as we said, yeah. We, we've got away from that, so I just wanna remind people.

**Mark:** Yeah. And so yeah, so,

**Aven:** so then they started using two u's to be a

**Mark:** w a double U.

Mm-hmm. As we call it. Now written with the pointed form of the letter. Cuz remember, you and V were the same well

**Aven:** thing and I mean sometimes it, it depends on the font. Yes. There's lots of W's that looked like two U's, I suppose. Yeah. Yeah. I mean, when I write a w mm-hmm. , I write a, we a small W in handwriting is to is, rounded, but a [00:26:00] capital is, is Vs.

Mm-hmm. . So yeah. We, we, we are completely inconsistent about that. Yeah.

**Mark:** So obviously, yeah, in many cases it looks more like a double V and in fact, that is what the letter is called in French

**Aven:** and, and many other languages. And

**Mark:** many other languages. Yeah. But before these two, U's were joined together into a new spelling.

The two U convention could lead to some cumbersome spellings such as the old English spelling of the word wolf, which would, if you think about it, involve three U in a row. , U U U L F, . So the anglosaxon scribes didn't like that, and soon they developed a new solution to the problem by adding one of those Germanic Runic characters.

So mentioned two before, but here's another one, another Runic character that was borrowed into the old English alphabet. It was called winn and it made the w sound in the runic alphabet, so U [00:27:00] only had to represent the vowel sound. Once they borrowed that into, they use the winn for the winn for the consonant and the U for the vowel, and everything was good.

Until the

**Aven:** Normans .

**Mark:** Yeah. Now, in, in a later spelling shift that doesn't indicate a change in pronunciation, but just a scribal convenience, Since the Norman scribes didn't like those runic characters, they dumped the win and went back to the UU digraph. They thus were faced with the same problem again made even harder to read by the vertical strokes that were identical to two letter I's.

So,

**Aven:** yeah, this is, this is the gothic script. And this is really hard to do in an audio medium. But basically,

**Mark:** a lot of letters were made by just writing a downstroke, a downstroke mm-hmm. . Right. And when you think about it, like sometimes in a long string of letters, distinguishing between an M and an N is kind of difficult, right?

Yeah. And

**Aven:** you really [00:28:00] have to go Google Gothic script and minims and Google the word minim in gothic script, and you will see it, is basically they're all nuts. They're all downs, strokes with. Ticked at the top and a little tick at the bottom, and you just put them together. And whether they're technically joined up or slightly separated is whether it's an M or an I or an N.

And

**Mark:** sometimes it doesn't indicate anything just because they were writing fast

**Aven:** and no one cared, because of course it's very hard. Yeah. And so you can, you just get these like lines and lines and lines in a row of, of just,

**Mark:** and it's little

**Aven:** downstrokes, unless you already know what the word is. It's essentially illegible.

Yeah.

**Mark:** And so, yeah. So the letter U was made with two of these minims, as they're called, these little downstrokes. Indeed many letters as, as we said, were made with minims, such as n and m making for very confusing manuscripts, as we said. So to avoid the problem, Norman scribes would often change the letter U in English words [00:29:00] to the letter O. Because it

**Aven:** looked different. It looked like a circle. It's actually a circle. It's a circle, one of one of these stupid lines that all look the same.

**Mark:** And so by way of that whole circuitous path, that's why we've got wolf and monk and, and those, all of those words. So,

**Aven:** so the U becomes an O when it's next to a letter that looks, looks like a U when that has a bunch of minims.

**Mark:** Gothic script. Yeah. That has

**Aven:** a bunch of minims. And since we don't write in gothic script anymore, that won't help you at all. No, but if you remember that, if it's next to an M or an N or a double U, Especially if it's Next to both. Yeah. Like the monk. Monk, yeah. One really does

**Mark:** understand that one and an N on other side,

**Aven:** That that is where you're more likely to have this transformation from a U to an O. So it was super

**Mark:** helpful at the time. It makes no, no, it is not at any way helpful. No else. not at [00:30:00] all useful now, but at the time it was a really good idea, , short-term thinking. So wolf spelled the letter O the same goes for some with an M following.

Yeah. Which in old English was s u m , monk from old English munuc, which would be even worse. You just have a whole bunch of minims followed by a C. So how many minims do you have here? 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9. 9 little downstrokes and a C. Yeah. What word is that? . No idea. . And come, cuman. So again, followed by an am bunch of minims.

Now, not all Us were changed, of course, it was only when it was causing difficulties because of the minim confusion.

**Aven:** Hence my rule of think about what the letters on either side are. Yeah. And that's why there's os and U having the same Sound,

**Mark:** So old English full, still spelled with a U, no problem there.

Mm-hmm. They, they just left that as it was and we get modern English full. And of course there are some inconsistencies. So it turns out [00:31:00] to be kind of useful I guess, but old English sunu becomes modern English son with an O. But old English sunnu becomes sun with a

**Aven:** U because there was one more N and so they just were, they gave up and turned it into an, well, they left

**Mark:** it as a u I brought it actually doesn't make any sense that you think that would be the one that they changed to an o

**Aven:** It doesn't make any sense at all.

It doesn't make any sense

**Mark:** So yeah. So there it is. Now something even more complex happened with the word busy. So just for this one word, we're gonna go on a bit of a tangent

**Aven:** here. Oh, God forbid we go on a tangent in this two and a half hour long episode about the word spelling This.

**Mark:** Epic about spelling. And again, we'll have to go back to the Phoenicians, I'm sorry.

And in fact, that same letter wa because the Greeks actually got two letters from that. Waw. The Digamma, as we said , making the consonant W sound and the [00:32:00] upsilon for their EUU sound. So here's that oo which is a rounded front vowel that's made as if you were making an EE sound and then tried to

**Aven:** say U whilst doing

**Mark:** that.

But rounding your lips as if you are making an ooh sound. Mm-hmm. , E

**Aven:** anyone who speaks French knows how to do it. Anyone who speaks German kind of knows how to do it. That's the umlaut. And I'm sure there's many other languages that have that sound. Mm-hmm. . But if, if those are a language you have and it's the letter, it's the way we were told we should have been pronouncing the y I know you'll get to this in Greek.

Yes. Though most people who are like me and bad at pronouncing ancient Greek just pronounce it like y Yeah. Even though I can make that sound, it's not a problem making the sound, because I can say it in English. Give us your best French. Tu. I mean, there you go.

**Mark:** Well, as [00:33:00] a, as a brief aside, the letter was originally just called Ooh, or ooh, I suppose, in Greek. But this was later expanded to upsilon, meaning simple or naked. Ooh. Mm-hmm. To distinguish it from similar sounding digraphs in Greek. So it was only spelled with one letter as opposed to two letters. Like an ou.

Like an ou, yeah,

**Aven:** yeah. Or an eu. Actually, EU EU is very common in, in Greek. In Greek, yeah. Like, like eulogy.

**Mark:** So this letter later passed into Etruscan as so many letters did and from there into the Roman alphabet, by which point the character looked variously like a you or a V as we've seen, right? The sound it represented was also slightly different.

Latin didn't have that rounded front vowel, so the letter referred to the ooh [00:34:00] sound. But as the Romans began to borrow Greek vocabulary, they found they needed a letter to represent that Greek upsilon sound. So they simply re-borrowed the letter in the form it had in Athenian Greek at that time which was where we got the Y letter from.

Do you know

**Aven:** how old I was and how recently it is that I realized that the French letter y . Was just Greek U? Yeah. Or Greek I, Greek I, yeah.

**Mark:** you, you're always like, you anticipate me by exactly one sentence, .

**Aven:** Well, I'm, I'm just trying to be involved. , but I mean, like, it's genuinely baffling to me that I

**Mark:** Okay, but did you know about upsilon?

**Aven:** No. Well, I, I do, but only because people have told me about it. Yes. Naked U naked U, yeah. Smooth U is another [00:35:00] way. I've heard it talked about, but Yeah. But the, the i-grec just like genuinely, I mean, I grew up speaking French from the very,

**Mark:** but you just ran it together like a word. Well,

**Aven:** it's . So did I like, I mean, it's, a b c d e f g h i j, you know, like you do the alphabet.

Mm-hmm. you get to i-grec. I mean, like, w but No, but even in English. But even in English. W Yeah. W I mean, how many people have said w their whole life

**Mark:** and not realize and never stop me because

**Aven:** it doesn't look like a u Well, and you also don't write it out. Yeah. Well, you don't write out the word w u. Mm-hmm. . You write out a w , you say

**Mark:** W Yeah, but it doesn't, again, it doesn't look like a w u It looks like a

**Aven:** double V.

Yeah. But I, but I also just think like, nobody ever writes the. name for it out. Mm-hmm. . And so you aren't if you were confronted with the word double u mm-hmm. , which you'd have to spell as two, you couldn't put the U on the end of W you'd have to put it as a separate letter. Like once you tried to spell out the word W you'd [00:36:00] have to realize it was double U. But I don't think I've ever done that in my entire life.

Right. And i-grec, the same way like you just never spelled it. So, yeah, I was easily in my twenties, maybe my thirties . Like, I don't think it was until I, maybe it was Kevin Stroud's Let, like, I like really shockingly late , I realized.

**Mark:** When did you realize that there was O mega and O micron?

**Aven:** Omega, like five, three years ago.

Maybe. Like when I pointed it out? Yeah. Or somebody else. I mean, oh,

O

**Mark:** mega, the big O, and O micron, the small O.

**Aven:** No, because I mean, I learned freaking ancient Greek and we learned the alphabet. Did any of my teachers ever mention it? No. , they probably didn't know. They probably didn't think of it either. Like, I just, I, I point this out merely to say that how like convention blinds us to things.

Mm-hmm. Right? Mm-hmm. , you know, like you just don't notice stuff. Cuz why would you,[00:37:00] I

**Mark:** had so many people when I tweeted about Omega and Omicron so many classicists reply to that saying, mind blown.

**Aven:** Well, I'm, so, I, did I not see this? Because that's the one where I have, we do write out Omicron and Omega all the time.

Yeah. And literally all you have to do is put a space between O micron and O mega and like no classicist would ever not see it. Yep. Right. Like if you just put that space in, a hundred percent of classicists would see it. But you don't put the space in .

**Mark:** Nope. Nope. That was a good day on Twitter .

**Aven:** Anyway, please proceed to the sentence I usurped. Y-surped.

**Mark:** Well indeed the Romans called it i graeca. It's not just, you know, in French , the Romans called it that too. And yes, obviously that became and it was initially only used for words borrowed from

**Aven:** Greek. Yes. Yes. Which is when you're, when you learn [00:38:00] Latin, you realize that the Y is only there in

**Mark:** Greek words. So it had a distinct sound of its own.

It was, you know, presumably the Roman, the educated Roman. Anyways, new Greek, and could pronounce

**Aven:** it the right way. And in theory, when you're pronouncing Latin, you should pronounce the Y. Yeah. More like U than like an E, but mm-hmm. . , but who knows?

**Mark:** But eventually the pronunciation of the letter came to be indistinguishable from the letter I mm-hmm.

So it was just an e sound. And in medieval Latin it was sometimes used interchangeably with the letter I mm-hmm. . Especially to deal with that same minim problem. Yeah. You know, cuz an I gets lost in a bunch of m and s, you put Y in when it, you put a y

**Aven:** instead of an it's etymologically there, right?

Yeah. Right. Though they also later on dropped it from a whole bunch of places where there was a y in Greek words and placed it with a, an I because it made the same sound. So it just was

**Mark:** easier though. I think now mostly they've been

**Aven:** restored. Yeah. Because [00:39:00] etymological spelling mm-hmm. became a big thing in the 18th century, so mm-hmm.

Yeah.

**Mark:** So for instance, the Latin word invium, meaning impassable, and that's not a word that comes up very often, I don't think. I can't recall ever actually seeing it in the world, but

yeah. That's So that's only,

**Aven:** yeah. Minims, all minims.

Right. But if you stick a Y and then if you stick a y, it makes it vaguely possible to understand.

**Mark:** Yeah. And when the alphabet was adapted for old English, They found the letter Y useful because like Greek old English did have that rounded front vowel.

We no longer have it in English, but it did at that time. And here's where we finally get to the word busy because old English, busy with that y is sometimes written with a y and sometimes written with an I representing different regional pronunciations. Mm-hmm. The I sound was probably the original stem vowel sound, so it was probably busy.

But in the late West [00:40:00] Saxon dialect, this seems to have become rounded to an U sound and so buzy. Mm-hmm. And as old English became middle English, we ended up with the U spelling reflecting that rounded variant found in West Midland and southern dialects. But the, I pronunciation busy from the East Midlands dialect.

So a thoroughly confusing business.

**Aven:** Ha. Ha.

That was a long walk for that joke for

**Mark:** that. That's not one joke. Yeah. And one word explained in all of that, but you have to, sometimes you have to go deep to explain a weird

**Aven:** spelling. Yeah. That and the thing is fair enough. But also, is there anyone in the world who can't spell busy, busy ?

**Mark:** Well, I had the hardest time not with busy necessarily, but business.

with business, yeah. Yeah. Business. I just could not do well. And

**Aven:** that's one of those words where obviously [00:41:00] business is busyness. Mm-hmm. . But obviously like, is it obvious? Mm-hmm. , was it obvious to me as a child? No, it was not obvious to me as a child. The business was busyness. Mm-hmm. . And of course, busyness doesn't help because then you wanna stick a y in there.

But, but if you kind of understand it as busyness and then say, okay, but we don't put Ys in there when we, so the Y becomes an I. That's like, that's, that's not so hard then. But because we don't say busyness, we say business. Mm-hmm. Drop that whole,

**Mark:** and once you put it in your mind that there's an eye in there, you want it to be where the eye is making the eye sound.

**Aven:** Well, or also, yeah. And you're just upset because there isn't a syllable. Mm-hmm. , there's an eye in there, but there's no syllable for that eye. Cuz we say business. nobody says busyness. Busyness. Yeah. Like, like to, if you pronounce that, I you're wrong. . So, yeah. And it's a different word. Busyness, which we have recreated with a Y.

**Mark:** Yep. Bastards,[00:42:00]

But if you remember that long story that I just told you will have no problem spelling business going forward,

solution to your problem. There you go. Result .

**Aven:** So I already said this once, but you know what you haven't done yet.

**Mark:** helped.

Okay. Well, let's see if we can do better with the situations in which CH is sometimes pronounced ch, but sometimes pronounced sh . This may be a bit more successful.

So for this, again, we're gonna have to return to the letter C. So as we heard the soft C hard C rule in English came about because that hard K sound represented by the letter C in Latin eventually became a S sound in French when it appeared [00:43:00] before front vowels, when the vowels are pronounced with the tongue towards the front of the mouth.

But this didn't happen evenly or all at once. So initially c became palatalized to a ch sound like a ch sound when it came before a front vowel. And that's still how it's pronounced in modern Italian, right? So when you see in modern Italian a C followed by the letter E or I, it's pronounced ch.

**Aven:** Like Ciao.

**Mark:** in French, that ch sound continued to change. So it stopped in Italian, but in French it kept going in that sort of trajectory, becoming a s sound like an S sound leading to our soft C, hard C rule in English. Mm-hmm. But there were other situations in which that Latin K sound changed into a ch sound in French and stayed that way.

As for [00:44:00] instance, when coming before the back vowel Ah, so Latin cantare became old French Chante or Chante rand eventually English chant. Old English, by the way, had undergone a similar palatalization. So this is what this is called when a K becomes a ch. So their letter C could represent both the K sound and the ch sound as in the word chicken in which it does both in old English, it's spelled c i c e n.

But the Norman scribes respelled that second sound with the combination ch to avoid the confusion as they were already using the ch spelling to represent the ch sound cuz it was in French. The ch Digraph, by the way, was invented by the Romans to represent a kind of different sound, a Greek sound again that didn't exist in Latin.

So [00:45:00] in eastern dialects of Greece, the letter, chi. How would you pronounce it?

**Aven:** Yeah, hi. Hi. I mean, that's not perfect. I'm not, I don't do that sound perfectly, but it's a Yeah. An aspirated gu ttural.

**Mark:** Yeah. So originally it, it represented this aspirated K sound but in western dialect it made a ks sound, k s basically together like an X,

**Aven:** like a Xi?

**Mark:** Well, yeah.

So, and, and that's what was borrowed into the Etruscan alphabet and eventually into Latin as the letter X. Right. So a chi, Right, right. Which looks like a letter X. That's where the letter X comes

**Aven:** from. Unlike the Xi, which made the letter X sound in other forms of Greek, which doesn't make it into the Roman alphabet.

It's a fun little curly thing. Yeah.

**Mark:** But when the Romans needed to represent that Eastern Greek sound in loan words, since they were [00:46:00] already using the X letter they had to invent a letter combination to represent Greek xh

**Aven:** so like Christus, right? Yeah. That, that being one of the ones they really had to use for.

**Mark:** And we still see that spelling in Greek derived words in English . Character. Yeah. For instance,

**Aven:** which would've been xh like that xhh, that yeah. Sound. Yeah. I'm not doing the best xh sounds. Mine is too rrr-y, I think. Mm-hmm. xxxhhhhhxxxx . I look forward to what the transcription software will do with that

**Mark:** Well, eventually the ch digraph was used to represent the new ch sound in French, in early French. And though as we've seen, before the back vowel A, became ch, this was only in the central French dialect. While in Norman, it remained as a [00:47:00] normal K sound. So English occasionally has pairs of words coming from two different dialects with different pronunciations such as cattle with a just straightforward K sound and chattel with that ch both coming through different dialects of French from the same Latin word.

Mm-hmm. . And in later French ch further developed from the ch sound into a sh sound. So, whereas French lone words that entered English in the middle English period the, c h sound is pronounced ch, in later French borrowings. The c h spelling indicates a sh sound in words like chef.

**Aven:** Right? And you're saying chef of course chief is the, so you have chief was borrowed earlier.

Chief was borrowed earlier. Chef is later. And you could go back, I'm sure we've got some [00:48:00] like captain. Yeah. It comes from the same Latin word. Yeah. So Captain, chief Chef. Yeah. All from the same Latin word, caput, which means head. and then like there's a whole bunch of those. Kevin Stroud has some really, really great, very, very detailed, slow explanation of that particular set of ones.

But you can really see that going on.

**Mark:** Yeah. So I mean, to sum it all up, you can tell when a word Well, not only when, but from what dialect, a Latin word made it into English through French depending on whether that original Latin C becomes a k, a ch or a sh. Yeah. So it's useful. Mm-hmm. to, to sort of date a word. As a side note, but kind of related.

The hard g soft g rule follows a similar trajectory. It's basically the same idea. So the hard G sound in Latin palatalized into the j sound before front vowels in French which we see in French loan words like gesture. [00:49:00] sound then continued to evolve in French into its current modern French sound

As in the second g in the French loan word garage, unless you pronounce it garage. But that change didn't happen until after the middle English period when when Anglo Norman French was adding all those words to English.

**Aven:** Right. So that ending that we have on tons and tons of English words, the a g E ending.

Mm-hmm. , right? Baggage. Yeah. I can't think of another, there's tons of them though, like luggage, baggage.

And voyage. Yeah. Words like that have, you know, that's from one particular period, period. When

**Mark:** it's still a juh. And Voyage is a good one because you've got voyage, but, well, this will only make sense to Canadians.

But you've got Voyageur,

**Aven:** which tells you that that's, I mean, really, that's still a French word in English, but Yeah. Comes into English much, much later. Comes in the 17th century

**Mark:** after that juh [00:50:00] becomes a zhe. Mm-hmm. . Yeah. So although the letter G in French loan words can represent different sounds it's again a useful way of telling when words came into English. So magic in middle English. Whereas garage later on,

all right. You mentioned the problem of one. Mm-hmm. . So let's deal with one . Why is the word spelled o n e pronounced like won, w o n?

**Aven:** And for all of you who are suddenly realizing that it's pronounced wrong, you're not alone again, I don't know that I'd ever thought about that, maybe since I was like five and learning to spell, but until I started listening to people explaining it, I was like, no, of course it's pronounced one.

That's a totally obvious way it's pronounced. That's completely right. Where's the, where's the, but, but like, but, but, but it's too, it's too, it's too basic a word for me to notice that it didn't make

**Mark:** sense. Why is there an E on the end? Shouldn't it be [00:51:00] won at the very least? Well, the funny thing about this word is that the spelling actually does make sense.

And it, you know, it's the pronunciation that's weird. The spelling is right. The pronunciation is weird.

**Aven:** I have things I'm gonna say, but they're gonna anticipate you by a sentence. So I'm not gonna say them. .

**Mark:** So there are actually two issues here. The sound of the vowel and the wuh sound at the beginning.

So let's take it back to old English. The Old English form is an, a n. Right. From which we get the word an,

**Aven:** the

**Mark:** article. The article, the indefinite article. An it's the same word. Now the vowel there is a long ah, so it's ahn, right. It's a long a and typically that corresponds to a modern English long Oh sound

**Aven:** because of the great vowel shift.

**Mark:** Well, no, this, this, no, this is before that. Okay. This is old English to, [00:52:00] this is the old English to modern English pronunciation. But yeah. Well, I guess you could say it's,

**Aven:** it's part of a big vowel shift, if not the great vowel shift. Yeah. It is a pattern of pronunciation changes.

**Mark:** So for instance, old English ban becomes modern English bone and old English ak becomes modern English oak.

And initially that's the path that old English an took with the spelling, o n e making this ought to be own Right,

**Aven:** which it is with, can I do one little anticipation: only?

**Mark:** That was the, you're one sentence ahead. Yeah. .

**Aven:** Perfect. Good. I'm holding myself back from some of these, but yeah. , right. So which is where we suddenly realize why one is wrong.

Yes. If you look at only then suddenly it all comes tumbling down. .

**Mark:** Yeah. So it makes perfect sense if we pronounced it own, And in fact, we see, still see that pronunciation in only as you say, [00:53:00] literally one-like . And alone is another example of that. Right, right. And lone. Yep. so al, all, on, one.

All one, literally. So there you go. There's where alone comes from all one. Right. However in one of the quirks of regional sound changes that occasionally happens, the,

**Aven:** yeah. See, when you have to get to quirks of regional sound changes, your explanatory power has completely fallen apart. Well see,

**Mark:** but what I'm saying is the, it's the pronunciation that's wrong.

The spelling is fine. You just need to change our pronunciation. . Oh yeah. That's gonna happen. We're pronouncing it. We're pronouncing it like a bunch of hicks. No,

**Aven:** we're

pronuncing

**Mark:** it all wrong. . We're pronouncing it like a bunch of, you know, Hicks. okay? Yeah.

**Aven:** go back to ain, like they say in Scotland.

**Mark:** Yeah. Yeah. So the non-standard pronunciation won arose in the southwest of England and eventually spread to all [00:54:00] of England. In addition to the vowel changing from, oh to, uh, this pronunciation developed a back glide before the vowel that wuh sound. Before the spelling became standardized, there were in fact spellings with w. Both pronunciations seem to have survived until as late as the 17th century, and as late as 1685, the school master Christopher Cooper called the won pronunciation, "Barbarous" in his grammar of the English language.

Mm-hmm. . So in the end we're left with the spelling of the once standard form, but the pronunciation of a regional form. Mm-hmm. .

**Aven:** Which is weird. Which is weird.

**Mark:** Yeah. Yeah. It's not getting around that. There's no getting around that. And by the way, similar shifts happened with other words, too, such as oak and oat, which have regional forms as wuk.

[00:55:00] And wut, so oak became wuk.

**Aven:** I mean, when you say they have regional forms, do they still?

**Mark:** Yeah. Or into, relatively modern times, into the 20th century. Let's say, into at least the 19th or maybe 20th century and maybe still, I don't know but into modern English, into what's right, considered modern English.

So oak becomes Wuk, and oat becomes wut. In this, what's

**Aven:** oat as in the, the grain.

**Mark:** Oat the grain.

**Aven:** Yes. Yeah, sorry. Yeah. It's not a, a top of the mind enough word for me to be sure what you're talking about.

**Mark:** But these didn't obviously become the standard pronunciations. They remained as regional pronunciations.

so maybe in those regions one isn't the loneliest number.

**Aven:** Oh my God. Oh my god.

**Mark:** on the other hand, if things had gone another way, we could be drinking wuk aged wine and eating [00:56:00] wutmeal for breakfast.

**Aven:** I'll give you, that one's fine. That's fine. It's just a thing. ha. I'll laugh at that one. Ha ha.

**Mark:** You know, one wouldn't be the loneliest number if it had

**Aven:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I got it.

I got it. Not the problem.

**Mark:** The question is, would wutmeal taste as good if it was called wutmeal?

**Aven:** And also what meal would you eat it at.

**Mark:** I wot not what meal to eat it at.

**Aven:** The audience needs to know that it is almost one o'clock in the morning now and I may not actually be fully sentient anymore. So what have we

**Mark:** got still? Well, fortunately we're down to one last sound change, but it's a biggie. Mm-hmm. . It's a, it's a toughie. And this is all to explain why g h makes the ff sound.

**Aven:** That's why it's a toughie.[00:57:00]

Well, it's gonna be rough, but go for it.

**Mark:** So, , I, I don't think I can describe in a family friendly video what gesture she just made. This

**Aven:** hasn't been family friendly for at least an hour and a half

**Mark:** So, as I discussed earlier words spelled with g h generally correspond to old English words that had a kind of guttural sound in them. Often spelled in old English with an H or sometimes a g. . So first of all, it should be noted that there were in fact three different guttural sounds in old English.

I said that there were multiple different ones, but can you pronounce

**Aven:** them all?

**Mark:** Yes, I can. And I will in fact not only pronounce them all, but describe them all. That's not what I

**Aven:** asked. I can describe many things I can't pronounce

**Mark:** So namely the voiced and unvoiced velar fricatives and the [00:58:00] unvoiced palatal fricative,

**Aven:** yeah. Three sounds. The description's fine. Okay. I wanna hear 'em.

**Mark:** So the voiced unvoiced, we, we've discussed. So it's either if it's voiced, it would be a kkrhh, if it's unvoiced, it'd be a chrrch. Okay.

And the velar fricative is slightly further forward in the in the mouth. And sounds like, and it's unvoiced, sorry. The palatal fricative is slightly forward in the mouth. The velar is further back, the palatal's further forward. And it would be more sort of a rhhrhh. rrrhrr?. Huh. Sorry. Or ha, sorry. Ha. Or sorry. Nope. Unvoiced.

Yeah,

**Aven:** this all just sounded like Rs. So you're just failing at all of this . That's what I wanted to hear. That's the fail I wanted on tape. Thank you very much. Proceed. Well,

**Mark:** the reality is, you know, if you hear [00:59:00] any I mean, except for the, a very small minority, you hear any old English scholar pronouncing these various different sounds, they're not very accurate.

I bet

**Aven:** the Dutch do it better. . They got all the glottals.

**Mark:** That's true. . So basically they're all produced with the tongue raised towards the roof of the mouth towards the back but not quite touching. So you get that fricative sound. So air is forced through the narrow opening, creating a raspy sound, which no longer exists in most varieties of modern English, though in some and can still be heard in words like Scots 'loch'.

Yes. Or German 'Bach'.

**Aven:** Bk. Bk. And the point being we're bad at those words. Yeah. Because we don't have that sound. Exactly.

**Mark:** In old English, those guttural sounds were spelled one of two ways, as I said, either H or G. When the letter H appeared at the beginning of a word before a vowel, it was [01:00:00] pronounced like a normal H sound, huh. But in other positions it was pronounced as either a voiceless velar fricative when the neighboring vowel was towards the back of the mouth, or a voiceless palatal fricative if the neighboring vowel was towards the front of the mouth.

After or between back vowels, the letter G was pronounced as that voiced velar fricative. So that's exactly the, context in which those sounds happened. After the old English period, the new Norman scribes decided that using H that way was confusing. And so they adopted that GH letter combination to spell this very Germanic sound that didn't exist in French.

But over the course of the middle English period, that guttural sound began to disappear from the English language. So that's why we have a bunch of words in modern English, like through, and though in which the GH is just [01:01:00] silent, it makes no sound at all. Mm-hmm. Some words that didn't originally have that guttural sound like delight and spritely began to be spelled as if they did by way of analogy.

So delight was spelled as if it were related to the word light, which is an old English word that had that GH sound. But

**Aven:** delight doesn't

**Mark:** actually have any delight is not at all related

**Aven:** to light, but the fact that it had a C there at one point probably kind of maybe helped cuz it's from delectare, right?

Yeah. So maybe that kind of. Makes it feel

**Mark:** more, but I mean, already in French it was, it was being spelled as delit d e l i T, but when they looked back, so that sound was long gone. That's true. By, by that point. So yeah. I mean maybe it was a, that's what

**Aven:** helps it stick on. Who knows.

**Mark:** Or, or maybe it was some attempt at a an etymological spelling, but those etymological spellings don't really crop up until the 17th century, so.

Right. Okay. But yes, as you say, delectare, [01:02:00] to allure, delight, charm, please is the original source. Mm-hmm. . Also the GH at the beginning of Ghost is the result of Flemish printers, you know, of English books on the basis of the spelling of their related word. And this spread by analogy to other English words like ghastly and aghast.

So that's why there's GHs in those. And in some cases this spelling with the GH can be useful for distinguishing between homonyms such as sleigh, s l e i g H, and slay, s l a Y. So that's an argument for holding onto our weird spellings. And there are a few borrowed words like spaghetti and ghoul in which the GH represents another foreign sound.

Mm-hmm. . So that gh and spaghetti is a particular Italian sound that we don't have, but it was originally there to represent that and we just borrowed it wholesale. And [01:03:00] same, same thing with gh. The GH there is representing a sound from a, another language that that we don't have. But what about words like laugh, rough and cough in which the GH is pronounced fuh like an f sound?

Well, it turns out that there is a kind of connection between consonant sounds produced at the back of the mouth and ones produced with the lips. They seem like very different parts of the mouth are, you know, in terms of the, the mechanics of articulation. But there is a, an important connection.

Now we already saw that a bit with words like old English boga or bogha, B O G A, becoming modern English bow. So Bow the W is at the front, it's at the lips, but the original G sound kind of was in the back. Yeah. Towards the back. And it becomes, it, it moves towards the front and it's actually a fairly common sound shift that happens in many languages, such [01:04:00] as Latin aqua meaning water becoming Romanian, appa

oh, interesting. Yeah. So the quo becomes a P. Mm-hmm. .

Similar shifts can be found in other languages such as Irish, Albanian, Russian, and so forth.

Well, what happened in the case of words such as laugh and rough is another example of of this sound change called labial velar shifts. So labial the lips, lips, velar the soft palate. So labial velar shift, that's

**Aven:** really a velar labial.

**Mark:** Yeah. I suppose if you think about it, it should be in that order.

So another labial sound we have is usually spelled with an F in English.

It's a labio dental fricative made by putting your top teeth against your bottom lip and only partially closing off the passage of air, thus causing friction. As for velar sounds, they're, you know, made at that velum, that soft palate, the soft part at the roof of your [01:05:00] mouth towards the back. So originally words like laugh and rough were pronounced in in old English as hlahhan, h l a h h a n, all of it at the back.

All of it at the back . Mm-hmm. . And rough ruh. At the back, right, the sound. So they had a velar sound specifically the velar fricative made by partially blocking the air, by placing the tongue close to the soft palate. So the sound shift here is from one fricative to another. Just move forward in the mouth.

But why did the fricative move all the way forward in the mouth to the lips instead of stopping somewhere closer, like further forward on the tongue? Well, there's a good acoustic reason for that. there's a reason that the velar fricative, would become a Labio dental fricative. Friction in both these sounds is well below 4,000 cycles per [01:06:00] second.

So here's where we get into the, you know, processing the sound. Whereas for, for instance, the S sound, which is also a fricative the S sound is produced at 4,000 cycles per second or above. So Velar, figuratives and Labo Dental Figuratives actually sound more similar, even though articulation wise they're further away.

Right.

**Aven:** So they sound similar though you produce them differently. Yeah.

**Mark:** So acoustic similarity accounts for other shifts in fricatives too, such as the th sound in words such as three or through which is a dental fricative produced by the tongue and teeth becoming the Labio Dental fricative in some dialects of English and pronounced

**Aven:** I was so about to jump in.

Yeah. And then I thought, no, I won't, I'll let 'em do this one.

**Mark:** free and froo.

**Aven:** Yeah. So I'm going I'm, I'm going[01:07:00] froo. Yeah.

**Mark:** Or, you know, free pounds, or whatever.

**Aven:** Yeah, neither of us can do it because it is not in either of our language, in our dialects, but it's absolutely normal in a whole bunch.

And also with to wiv, right? Yeah. Going wiv him. Yep. It's very it's London. It's a London dialect, but it's also black American dialect, bunch of dial and a bunch of other dialects.

Like tons of places. Yep. Very, very normal in a whole bunch of places. So, yeah. So if you can imagine now that that's a, still a front of the mouth to a front of the mouth, third to the, but Yeah.

**Mark:** But it's still moving forward. Yeah. Yeah. Now in some cases, words that underwent this shift became respelled to more accurately represent the sound as in the word dwarf, which was in old English, spelled d w e O r g.

Mm-hmm. . So dweorg became dwarf. But in other

**Aven:** places they left it. Yeah. They left the spelling, but changed the [01:08:00] pronunciation.

**Mark:** And in the case of the word draft, sometimes spelled D R A U G H T, but sometimes spelled d r a

**Aven:** f t, that's one of the places that you see both

**Mark:** spellings. Yeah, yeah. But for the most part, the g h spellings reflecting that older pronunciation became standardized.

And so we're stuck with them. The thing is, the changes in pronunciation didn't happen at the same time in all parts of England, nor in the same way. And what we inherited in modern English is a bit of a mixed bag. So the shift to the f sound was particular to northern dialects. And so we see some middle English spellings with the letter F in words not pronounced F in modern English, such as thohf, for though.

Okay. And thourf for through

**Aven:** Hmm. That with the, with the [01:09:00] metathesis of

**Mark:** the U R, the U R. Yeah. And that metathesis was already there in old English, through

**Aven:** or thur, basically. Yeah. Yeah. No, and that's very, like, there's a ton, a ton of, ton of words in English. Yeah.

That's very common.

**Mark:** Yeah. And in at least one case the northern variant persisted eventually becoming a separate word, duff, a kind of steamed pudding. Yeah. Yeah. Was originally just the northern pronunciation of the word dough duff

**Aven:** a figgy duff. Yep. Is not that, that's, I mean, that's still a regional word.

Duff is not a common word elsewhere, but. .

**Mark:** And one last little footnote to this is, you know how the word hiccup sometimes spelled gh?, I knew

**Aven:** that's where you were going, . Yes, but that's because they thought it was cough.

**Mark:** That's because the false etymological connection with the word cough hiccup is not at all related to that.

Hiccup was always pronounced with the P sound. And so even when it's spelled with you know, as if it was [01:10:00] hiccuff, it is still should be pronounced.

**Aven:** Hiccup. That one was one, which to be honest has always confounded me in print because I wanna say it as hiccough. And I, I was like, I don't know, maybe, maybe some people say that, right?

Like, it's a weird word that's just an onomatopoiea. Who knows what people say. Yeah,

**Mark:** so, , you're done, right? What are your pet peeves everyone? . What are your pronunciation peeves?

**Aven:** Yeah. So what are your problems with how things are spelled and how that reflects how people do or do not say them. Would you like us to speak? When I say us, I mean him for another two hours on another night about these things.

If so, write in . If not, also write in .

**Mark:** Was there anything that I failed to cover that I should have? You know, I missed the obvious damn bastard spelling. Give it to me. I will attempt [01:11:00] to make it less painful or just talk about it for a long time. You will. Yeah. it could just be that.

**Aven:** Yeah, so let us know in the comments and we will see if this is one or two episodes when it comes out. I have views. But yeah, you know, it's English's fault really when you come right down to it. Our bastard

**Mark:** tongue, our, our magnificent bastard tongue. Yes, indeed.

**Aven:** And I think that is now time cause I have to get up for work tomorrow, Mark, in six hours. So good night all. I hope you've enjoyed this incredibly phonetic walk through an incredibly un phonetic spelling system,

**Mark:** nice.

**Aven:** And we'll be back next month with an episode all about other kinds of peeves, an interview.[01:12:00] Goodnight.

**Mark:** Bye-bye.

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**Mark:** Bye.