

# Re: URL: Paper on English spelling reform – the case against in the Internet age

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*Source:* <http://sci.tech–archive.net/Archive/sci.lang/2005–08/msg00910.html>

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- *From:* [naddy@xxxxxxxxxxxxxx](mailto:naddy@xxxxxxxxxxxxxx) (Christian Weisgerber)
  - *Date:* Thu, 18 Aug 2005 17:07:59 +0000 (UTC)
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Peter T. Daniels <[grammatim@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx](mailto:grammatim@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx)> wrote:

>> So we would kindly like to ask the native speakers of English  
>> to please make their speech conform to the orthography...  
>  
> Okay by me! We'd just have to undo the Great Vowel Shift (which Chomsky  
> & Halle suggest would be no problem at all, since our underlying forms  
> are pretty much what Chaucer would have said) and the various reflexes  
> of /x/, right?

I don't know much about Middle English pronunciation, but either the GVS proceeded in a rather irregular fashion or the starting point was already confusing.

There's "wild" but "wilderness". If that reflects underlying long/short vowels in ME, I still wouldn't be able to tell from the spelling.

And how did the GVS manage to create a mess like "food", "hood", "blood"?

The outcome of "ea" is entirely unpredictable as epitomized by the homographs "read"/"read" and "lead"/"lead". "ow" suffers similarly, e.g. "bow"/"bow".

Short "u" is tricky. "bush" and "push", but "gush", "hush", "lush", "mush", "rush". Labials? But how about "cushion"? And then there's "put" but... "but". A while ago some people discussed how to pronounce PuTTY (a popular SSH client program). I immediately suggested like "putty", only to realize that I didn't know that word's pronunciation.

"Love" and "clove".

There is "wind" and "to wind", whose past tense "wound" again differs from "to wound".

Some words are just plain irregular. "Busy" doesn't pose a problem in practice because everybody learns that word, but nobody will

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guess the correct pronunciation of "thyme" when encountering it first in writing.

How to tell whether "g—" before a front vowel is hard or soft? Everybody guesses wrong for "gill"—even if they get it right for the fish organ, they will invariably fall into the trap posed by the liquid measure (and vice versa).

"To contradict" but "to indict". Spread throughout the lexicon there are words with unexpected silent letters, e.g. "aisle", "sword", "solder". And the occasional monster such as "coxswain" or "gunwale".

(I'll graciously leave out the problems posed by semi-integrated French loans. "Lingerie" takes the cherry.)

It might be instructive to look at words non-native speakers always get wrong. For example, from movie/game titles, approximately everybody in Germany mispronounces "predator" and "tomb". And just how do you say "Excel" (as in the spreadsheet)? Everybody says /'Eksl-/ around here, but I would expect it to be like "to excel". Which takes us to the problem of unpredictable stress placement...

The opposition between /T/ and /D/ is ill expressed by the spelling, but there is a semantic/positional pattern, sort of, to /D/. However, "s" serves variously for /s/ and /z/ and quite unpredictably so.

—  
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• *Follow-Ups:*

- ◆ ***Re: URL: Paper on English spelling reform – the case against in the Internet age***  
◇ From: Spiritual Anarchist
- ◆ ***Re: URL: Paper on English spelling reform – the case against in the Internet age***  
◇ From: Brian M. Scott

• *References:*

- ◆ ***URL: Paper on English spelling reform – the case against in the Internet age***  
◇ From: Christopher Rollason
- ◆ ***Re: URL: Paper on English spelling reform – the case against in the Internet age***  
◇ From: Peter T. Daniels
- ◆ ***Re: URL: Paper on English spelling reform – the case against in the Internet age***  
◇ From: Christian Weisgerber
- ◆ ***Re: URL: Paper on English spelling reform – the case against in the Internet age***  
◇ From: Peter T. Daniels

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