

## ENGLISH SPELLING

It is no secret that English words are not spelled phonetically. In fact, lists of spelling nightmares like the following can be found in every student's notebook:

- (1)
  - a. rafter / laughter / slaughter
  - b. slay / sleigh / sleight / slight
  - c. ear / earn / urn / earth / hearth
  - d. though / thought / through / tough
  - e. for / fore / four / fourteen / forty

Often, the same sound has many different spellings:

- (2)
  - a. heard / word / bird / curd / nerd
  - b. rays / raise / raze / weighs / phase / obeys
  - c. weird / feared / veered / adhered
  - d. birth / berth / worth / earth
  - e. lose / choose / booze / fuze / news / muse / hues / who's

Likewise, similar spellings can signify widely different sounds:

- (3)
  - a. beard [bird] / heard [hɔ̃d]
  - b. comb [kom] / tomb [tum] / bomb [bam]
  - c. meat [mit] / great [gret] / threat [▶ rɛ] / heart [hart]
  - d. cough [kɪf] / bough [baw] / dough [do] / rough [r f] / through [▶ ru]
  - e. dose [dos] / rose [roz] / lose [luz]

One frequently hears desperate cries for reform of the English spelling system. While there are many peculiarities, it is clear that a system of phonetic spelling would undermine the considerable regularity between English spelling and English morphology. For example, consider the various spellings of the reduced vowel schwa (ə) in the second syllable of *fallacy*, *remedy*, *family*, *history*, *industry*. In these, as in other cases, the spelling derives from the spelling of the root word as comparisons reveal:

- (4)
  - a. Spelled *a*: fallacy/fallacious; comparable/compare; legacy/allegation
  - b. Spelled *e*: remedy/remedial; manager/managerial; competent/compete
  - c. Spelled *i*: family/familial; president/preside; immigrate/migrate
  - d. Spelled *o*: history/historian; consolation/console; janitor/janitorial
  - e. Spelled *u*: industry/industrial; illustrate/illustrative

Similarly, *silent* letters frequently show up in related words:

- (5)
  - a. Silent *n*: hymn/hymnal; column/columnar, columnist; damn/damnation
  - b. Silent *g*: resign/resignation; sign/signal, designate; phlegm/phlegmatic
  - c. Others: muscle/muscular; bomb/bombard; soften/soft; know/acknowledge

There are also many regularities. For example, consider the vowel alterations in (47) where the *silent e* indicates that the preceding vowel must be tense.

(6) Lax/Tense Vowel Alternations

- |    |            |       |   |
|----|------------|-------|---|
| a. | <b>[v]</b> | [ay]: | divinity, divine; ignition, ignite; width, wide; typical, type    |
| b. | [æ]        | [ey]: | profanity, profane; sanity, sane; bath, bathe; shadow, shade      |
| c. | <b>[e]</b> | [iy]: | serenity, serene; redemption, redeem; slept, sleep; metric, meter |
| d. | [ ]        | [aw]: | profundity, profound; abundant, abound; southern, south           |
| e. | [a]        | [ow]: | verbosity, verbose; knowledge, know; nostril, nose; phonic, phone |

These vowel alternations are rule governed as are the consonant alternations in (7) and (8).

(7) Stop/Fricative Alternations

- |    |     |      |   |
|----|-----|------|---|
| a. | [t] | [s]: | democrat/democracy; president/presidency; pirate/piracy                 |
| b. | [k] | [s]: | electric/electricity; public/publicity; medical/medicine                |
| c. | [s] | [š]: | express/expression; digress/digression; race/racial; space/spatial      |
| d. | [z] | [ž]: | revise/revision; infuse/infusion; excise/excision; confuse/confusion    |
| e. | [t] | [š]: | relate/relation; ignite/ignition; native/nation; president/presidential |
| f. | [k] | [š]: | logic/logician; magic/magician; practical/practitioner                  |
| g. | [d] | [ž]: | persuade/persuasion; corrode/corrosion; decide/decision                 |
| h. | [d] | [s]  | persuade/persuasive/; corrode/corrosive; divide/divisive                |
| I. | [z] | [s]  | abuse (verb)/abusive; diffuse/diffusive                                 |

(8) Stop/Affricate Alternations

- |    |     |             |  |
|----|-----|-------------|--|
| a. | [d] | <b>[ʒ]</b>  | grade/gradual; residue/residual                                      |
| b. | [t] | <b>[.ʃ]</b> | right/righteous; Christ/Christian; quest/question                    |
| c. | [g] | <b>[ʒ]</b>  | allegation/allege; regal/regicide; rigor/rigid; gregarious/egregious |

Basically, changing English spelling to a system that is phonetic would obscure many of the regular allomorphic variations in the language. A much better approach would be to teach students something about English phonology and morphology pointing out that English spelling reveals underlying regularities. Discussion of the rules governing these alternations requires considerable technical mastery and is beyond the capabilities of elementary school children trying to cope with English spelling. However, it would certainly be both possible and helpful to point out the regularities as the words entered children's vocabulary studies.