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DID JOHNSON FIX ENGLISH SPELLING?

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David Crystal is honorary professor of linguistics at the University of Bangor, and works from his home in Holyhead, North Wales, as a writer, editor, lecturer, and broadcaster, primarily with reference to the history and present state of the English language. Among his 100 or so books are 'The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language' and 'The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language', as well as a number of texts on specific themes, such as Shakespeare, the King James Bible, and of course Johnson. He was president of the Lichfield Johnson Society in 2005. He edited the Penguin Classics abridgement of Johnson's 'Dictionary', and Johnson looms large in several of his recent books, such as 'The Story of English in 100 Words' (2011) and 'Spell It Out: the Singular Story of English Spelling' (2012), which provides the immediate stimulus for today's talk.

IN THE PAST FEW DECADES we have seen a resurgence of interest in English spelling, with several major surveys of the orthographic system, popular competitions in the form of spelling bees (especially in the USA), and a renewed focus in relation to the teaching of reading and writing in schools. I had always wanted to write a book on English spelling, but had been put off by the amount of donkey-work which the enterprise would involve. It is a much harder task than writing a book on English pronunciation (for there are only 40 or so vowels and consonants to deal with) or on English grammar (where the number of constructions, word-endings, and so on, is only a few thousand). For spelling, we are dealing with the entire vocabulary of the language – well over a million words. Each word has to be spelled. Each word has an individual spelling history. The task would scare even the most courageous linguist.

Fortunately, the cavalry arrived, in the form of the online edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which collates the spelling history of each of its words, ordering the variants chronologically. This makes it immensely easier to find patterns and work out explanations. In 2011 I therefore stood on the shoulders of the *OED* etymologists and began to research the book which came out a year later as *Spell It Out: The Singular Story of English Spelling*. It will be no surprise for this gathering to learn that Johnson looms large in it, appearing in six of the chapters, and with a whole chapter devoted to himself.

Spelling is an index of class and education now. People readily condemn mistakes in spelling as a sign of a poor education or carelessness or laziness – forgetting that often it can be a symptom of a genuine language handicap, such as dyslexia. It was not the case in Shakespeare's day, when spelling variation was widely encountered – Shakespeare's own name is spelled in dozens of different ways, both by himself and by his contemporaries – and there was no notion of a 'correct' spelling. But all this changed in the eighteenth century. Lord Chesterfield writes, in one of his letters to his son (19 November, 1750):

You spell induce, *endue*; and grandeur, you spell *grandure*; two faults, of which few of my house-maids would have been guilty. I must tell you, that orthography, in the true sense of the word, is so absolutely necessary for a man of letters, or a gentleman, that

one false spelling may fix a ridicule upon him for the rest of his life; and I know a man of quality, who never recovered the ridicule of having spelled *wholesome* without the *w*.

Spelling, accordingly, was a major aim of Johnson's dictionary project. His initial Plan explored each of the areas which the Dictionary would deal with. Spelling was the first point to be addressed:

When all the words are selected and arranged, the first part of the work to be considered is the ORTHOGRAPHY ... in which ... there is still great uncertainty among the best critics.¹

How much uncertainty? It is possible to track the way spelling began to standardise by comparing the spellings of different periods with those we know today. What one does is to take a text published at a certain date, count up all the words, and work out how many of those words have a spelling which is different from one we would see today. In 1672, there was one variant spelling per 50 words; in 1712, it was one per 150 words; and in 1747 it was one per 400. Clearly the orthography was getting closer to Modern English, but it still had some way to go.

The spellings in the *Dictionary* are still some way from modern spelling, as a list of Johnson's own usages shows. There are over 40 points of difference, such as:

CK

academick, characteristicks, criticks, domestick, energetick, epick, excentrick (eccentric)
exotick, fabrick, Gallick, Italick, phlegmatick, physick, publick, Teutonick, tropick

OU

authour, but author (Plan), controul, croud (crowd), crouding (crowding), errorrs, superiour, tenour

C/S

chace /chase, licenses, recompence

A/E

appendant, dependance

Y

chymical, chymists, stile but style (Plan), synonimes, synonymous

S/Z

enterprize, surprize

DIGRAPHS

hyæna, oeconomy, phænomena

HYPHENS

ground-work, to-morrow

MISCELLANEOUS

pionier (pioneer), registred, shew/shewn, subtile/subtilty, desarts (deserts)

'Thus have I laboured [to settle] the orthography', he writes in his Preface, adding 'but I have not always executed my own scheme, or satisfied my own expectations' (Yale XVIII: 99). When he

¹ *Johnson on the English Language*, eds. Gwin J. Kolb and Robert DeMaria, Jr., The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), Vol. XVIII, p. 35.

first thought of compiling his Dictionary, Johnson had a grandiose aim: 'one great end of this undertaking is to fix the English language' (Yale XVIII: 38). After the project was over, he realised how naive he had been, and writes in his Preface that 'with this consequence [i.e. fixing the language] I will confess that I flattered myself for a while'. A lexicographer should be derided, he adds, if he thinks that 'his dictionary can embalm his language'. Those who form themselves into Academies 'to guard the avenues of their languages' are working in vain, for 'sounds are too volatile and subtle for legal restraints'. It is like trying 'to lash the wind' (Yale XVIII: 104, 105).

Johnson died in 1784. One of life's great ironies is that, the year before, across the Atlantic, a young Noah Webster published a textbook which would become the standard introduction to English spelling for generations of American readers: *The American Spelling Book*, usually called (from its cover) 'the blue-backed speller'. It was the year in which the American War of Independence ended. A new nation wanted a new language to express its new identity, and Webster took on the job, introducing the simplifications that we now know as American spelling. 'A difference between the English [he means British] orthography and the American', said Webster, 'is an object of vast political consequence'. Not quite overnight, but certainly over decades, a huge amount of new variation entered the English writing system. Johnson could never have anticipated that.

So the answer to my question, 'Did Johnson fix English spelling?', is a definite no. He certainly helped to standardise the writing system, for several of his decisions did have a permanent influence. But we only have to look at English spelling today to see the extent to which he failed to settle the orthography. For a range of reasons – notably, variation in publisher practice, the rise of English as a world language, and the arrival of the Internet – a remarkable 20% of words (including proper names) have variants in spelling, capitalisation, and hyphenation. Think of all the verbs which end either in *-ise* or *-ize*, the many words which have *ae* or *e* (*encyclopedia*, *pediatric*), the compounds with uncertain hyphenation and spacing (*flower-pot* or *flower pot* or *flowerpot*), the words with variable capitalisation (*Moon* or *moon*, *Bible* or *bible*), names with uncertain apostrophes (*St Paul's* or *St Pauls*) or where company policy has changed (*Waterstone's* > *Waterstones*), and hundreds more. The house-styles of publishing houses testify to the extent of this problem. Johnson is one of the greats in the history of the English language, but the story of English spelling is by no means over.