

Historical Linguistic Studies of Spoken English

edited by
Antonio Bertacca

*Papers read at the 11th Italian Conference
on the History of the English Language (Pisa, 5-7 June 2003)*

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SPELLING VS. PRONUNCIATION DEBATE IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH ENCYCLOPAEDIAS

ELISABETTA LONATI

The aim of this paper is to discuss one of the most controversial aspects of eighteenth-century English linguistic debate, that is the divergence between orthography and pronunciation, as well as the attempts to solve their disagreement. The analysis is based on some linguistic entries from Chambers' *Cyclopaedia* (Cy: 1728) and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Br: 1768-1771) to outline the way the compilers deal with the contentious relationship between writing and speaking, signs and sounds. The choice to ground the research on these two works depends on the very nature of this new textual genre. The encyclopaedic text – which appears and develops throughout the century – represents the ideal site to popularize eighteenth-century scientific principles and fosters the circulation of new opinions. These encyclopaedias offer the occasional but educated reader the possibility to know diverse and manifold points of view about a given topic: they record the scientific progress and mirror the state of the art in almost every branch of knowledge. For this reason, they have – or may have – practical outcomes, urging to find solutions to the questions they treat.

- Such premises done, two are the main concerns of the debate:
1. the topic general discussion, that is to say to what extent and how the two encyclopaedias handle the matter;
 2. the metalanguage used to describe the two linguistic levels, orthographic and phonological.

My starting point is the entry ORTHOGRAPHY, one of the four branches of GRAMMAR¹: in the Cy ORTHOGRAPHY is said to be "the art of writing, or spelling justly, and with all the necessary letters. See WRITING and SPELLING", while the Br declares that "ORTHOGRAPHY [...] teaches the nature and affections of letters, and the just method of spelling or writing words with all the proper and necessary letters, making one of the four branches of grammar. See Grammar".

Both encyclopaedias express the idea of 'propriety', the exact meaning of which is however not clear. The Br refers to some "just method" and "necessary letters" without any other specifications: but given the fact that a method has been mentioned, it may be supposed to exist and to be considered the 'correct' or, rather, the 'appropriate' system to refer to. However, it is not clearly expressed: neither rules are mentioned, nor definite information is given the reader to single it out.

The "letters" referred to should be those established by the above-said "method". Yet, the concept is not definitely stated, and a certain ambiguity transpires: it is not clear whether the

¹ Cy 1728: "Grammar is divided by some Authors, into four Parts, Orthography, Prosody, Etymology, and Syntax"; Br 1768-71: "[...] grammarians have usually divided this subject into four distinct heads, viz. ORTHOGRAPHY, or the art of combining letters into syllables, and syllables into words; ETYMOLOGY, or the art of deducing one word from another, and the various modifications by which the sense of any one word can be diversified; SYNTAX, or what relates to the construction or due disposition of the words of a language into sentences or phrases; and PROSODY, or that which treats of the quantities and accents of syllables, and the art of making verses".

"just method" takes – or does not take – into account the phonological evolution while speaking of "necessary letters".

In the *Cy* the entry ORTHOGRAPHY foreshadows that of the *Br* but it is much longer: the concept of "rightness–propriety" – expressed in this case as well by "justly" (*Br* "just") – does not refer to any method, more or less specified, but it is clear that "spelling justly" involves the use of "necessary letters". Here, as elsewhere, the ambiguity of "necessary" remains.

The debate gets to the heart of the matter when it is stated that modern languages are difficult to learn because of the disagreement between spelling and pronunciation: in fact, "That Diversity found in most of the modern Languages [...] between the Pronunciation and Orthography, makes one of the principal Difficulties in acquiring 'em, yet does it arise from the same Source as the Languages themselves" (*Cy* ORTHOGRAPHY).

Hence, the divergence between sign and sound – or signs and sounds – is not bound to a particular historical language but to the nature of language as such and to the changes it undergoes.

This is the reason why such natural inconsistency needs a quick and certain answer: some grammarians believe that the "ancient Orthography" should be maintained so that "the Origin and Etymology of Words borrow'd from the *Greek* and *Latin*" can be distinguishable because

it does not matter what Characters are used to express Sounds in writing, provided one know the relation between those Characters and the Sounds they represent [...]. [How-ever,] Attempts have been since made to reduce the Writing to the Pronunciation, or to make us write as we speak. Which has occasion'd great Disputes [...]. What is alledged for the new Orthography, is, its being more commodious, natural, easy, short, &c. (*Cy* ORTHOGRAPHY).

But such a distributive would raise – as the compiler states – "great Disputes". Possibly, the best solution is a compromise between the two parties, "a middle Course between the two Extremes; retrenching the Letters² where they are absolutely useless" (*Cy* ORTHOGRAPHY).

The entry ends with some considerations about the utter confusion between spelling and pronunciation in English, stating that

In the *English* the Orthography is more vague, and unascertain'd, than in any other Language we know of. Every Author, nay almost every Printer, has his particular system. Nay, 'tis scarce so well with us as that: We not only differ from one another: but there is scarce any that consists with himself (*Cy* ORTHOGRAPHY).

Hence, if language necessarily changes and, for this reason, the disagreement between spelling and pronunciation is almost certain, authors and printers should not be allowed to choose their orthographic conventions according to their own needs, or rather their fancy.

The concepts expressed so far are better understood in the light of the entry PRONUNCIATION. The opening definitions are practically the same in the two works: in the *Cy* "PRONUNCIATION, in grammar, [is] the Manner of articulating or sounding the Words of a Language

² It is not clearly said that if "letters" are "useless", probably the corresponding phonemes have already been lost. Here, once more, the use of the term "letters" is not suitable, it would be better "graphemes".

represented to the Eye by Writing and Orthography"³, while the *Br* simply states that "PRONUNCIATION, in grammar, [is] the manner of articulating or sounding the words of a language".

In the case of the *Br* – which is always extremely concise and essential – the definition and the entry overlap perfectly; on the contrary, Chambers continues to stress what he had already discussed under ORTHOGRAPHY, that is the divergence between writing and speaking. However, if in the entry ORTHOGRAPHY the compiler's attitude seems to balance – "take a middle Course between the two Extremes" – between the "ancient Orthography" and a "new Orthography", under PRONUNCIATION the idea is clearer:

From the Definition it would seem, that the *Pronunciation* were only the Image of the Orthography. But as we pronounce before we write, and only write to express what we pronounce, 'tis more just to lay down the *Pronunciation* as the Rule, and Model of Orthography. See ORTHOGRAPHY (*Cy* PRONUNCIATION).

Hence, the elusive statement "spelling justly, and with the necessary Letters" (see *Cy* ORTHOGRAPHY) seems to be grounded on pronunciation or, at least, on both linguistic realities: speaking and writing. However, Chambers denounces the fact that there is neither rule, nor proper terms to explain and assist speakers to make a "suitable" choice, but it is almost certain that writing cannot act as the only model for pronunciation because: "*Pronunciation* makes much the most difficult Article of a written Grammar. In Effect, a Book only expressing itself to the Eyes, in a Matter that concerns the Ears; the Case seems next a-kin to that of teaching the blind to distinguish colours" (*Cy* PRONUNCIATION).

In Gulliver's Travels, while visiting "the Grand Academy of Lagado" Gulliver meets "a Man born blind, who had several Apprentices in his own Condition: Their Employment was to mix Colours for Painters, which their Master taught them to distinguish by feeling and smelling"⁴. Chambers may have known, remembered and used such an episode to describe English phonological system; in fact

there is no Part so defective in the Grammar, as the *Pronunciation*, for the Writer has frequently no Term, whereby to give the Reader an Idea of the Sound he would express; for Want of a proper Term, therefore, he frequently substitutes a vitious and precarious one. To give a just and precise Idea of the *Pronunciation* of a Language, it seems necessary to fix, as nearly as possible, all the several sounds employ'd in the *Pronunciation* of that Language (*Cy* PRONUNCIATION).

The aim should be the creation of a system of signs, generally accepted because agreed on, to represent the different and manifold sounds in any language, avoiding the fault of the French grammarians who "ordinarily tell us, that the Vowels *a, e, i, &c.* are pronounced in *French* the same as in *Latin*, never considering that there is not any known and determinate *Pronunciation* of the *Latin*" (*Cy* PRONUNCIATION). Actually, every nation pronounces the Latin "characters" exactly as those of its own language: "Hence, it appears that the Relation between Sounds and

³ The *Cy* expresses such a concept under ARTICULATION, where it is stated that: "ARTICULATION, ARTICULATION, in Grammar, [is] a distinct Pronunciation of Words and Syllables. See PRONUNCIATION, &c. *Articulation*, is that part of Grammar which treats first of Sounds, and Letters, then of their Combination, for the composing of Syllables and Words. Hence he who pronounces his Words clearly, and distinctly, is said to pronounce them *articulately*. See LETTER, SYLLABLE WORD, &c."

⁴ Swift 1726: ch. v, 152-154.

Characters, as well as between Things and Words, is purely arbitrary and national" (Cy PRO-NUNCIATION).

So, the written signs cannot represent the same sounds everywhere, but they can in one and the same linguistic community provided that the spelling/pronunciation relationship is established according to plain criteria known and accepted – and, as a consequence, also used – by the speakers/writers of that particular language. Moreover, under ALPHABET Chambers says that

as there is a much greater Number of different Sounds in our Language; 'tis not without Reason that some Grammatians maintain, that there ought to be a greater Number of Letters; as also, that the double Letters, x and y, and the superfluous ones, k and g, should be retracted [...].

Bishop Wilkins charges the *Alphabets* exant with great Irregularities, with respect both of the Order, Number, Power, Figure, &c. – As to the *Order*; it appears inartificial, precarious, and confused; in that the Vowels and Consonants are not reduced into Classes [...].

As to *Number*, they are both redundant, and deficient: Redundant, either by allotting several Letters to the same Power, and Sound [...]. Deficient in divers respects, especially in regard of Vowels [signs or sounds], of which there are seven or eight kinds commonly used [...]. Add that the Difference among Vowels [sounds] in respect of long and short, is not sufficiently provided for [...]. The ways used in *English* for lengthening and abbreviating Vowels, viz. by adding *e* quiescent to the End of a Word, for prolonging a Syllable; and doubling the following Consonants, for the shortening of a Vowel [...] are all improper; in that the Sign ought ever to be where the Sound is.

As to their *Powers*, again, those are not always fixed to the same Signification: The Vowels, [signs] for instance, are generally acknowledged to have each of 'em several Sounds [...]. (Cy ALPHABET).

The general problem of the inconsistency between spelling and pronunciation is due both to 'Redundancy' (different signs to represent the same sound) and 'Deficiency' (the same sign to represent different sounds). The divergence belongs to the phonological evolution of sounds not followed by a correspondent adaptation of orthography, even though "the Sign ought ever to be where the Sound is".⁵

As far as the metalanguage used by grammarians – and, as a consequence, by compilers – is concerned, it reveals how the lack of clear and established terminology brings about some descriptive and explanatory ambiguities. One of the examples is given by the previous entry for the term *Vowel* (see Cy ALPHABET): it can refer to sounds or written signs in "Deficient in divers respects, especially in regard of Vowels, of which there are seven or eight kinds commonly used"; it refers to sounds in "Add that the Difference among Vowels in respect of long and short, is not sufficiently provided for"; and, finally, it means written signs in "The Vowels, for instance, are generally acknowledged to have each of 'em several Sounds". All of that, in addition to the shift from the phonological level to the orthographic or spelling level in the expressions "the

⁵ Cy ALPHABET: "As to their *Powers*, again, those are not always fixed to the same Signification: The Vowels, for instance, are generally acknowledged to have each of 'em several Sounds [...]. Thus the Power of the Vowel *e* is expressed in writing no less than six several ways, viz. by *e*; as in *he, me, she, yet*; – by *ee*, in *thee, Fee*; we; – by *ie*, in *field, yield, shield, chief*; – by *ea*, in *near, dear, hear*; – by *eo*, in *people*; – by *i*, in *privilege*. So is the Power of the Vowel *a*, as in *all, ait, aw, fault, caught, brought*; which are only various ways of writing the same long Vowel; besides the other distinct ways of expressing the same Vowel when used short: Again, the Power of the Vowel *o* is written five ways; *o*, as in *to, who, move*; – *oe*, in *doe*; – *oo*, in *shoo, moon, noon*; – *ou*, in *could, would*; – *wo*, in *now*; and so of the rest".

Difference among Vowels in respect of long and short, is not sufficiently provided for [...]. The ways used in *English* for lengthening and abbreviating Vowels, viz. by adding *e* quiescent to the End of a Word, for prolonging a Syllable; and doubling the following Consonants, for the shortening of a Vowel" instead of "for representing in writing long and short vowels".

The ambiguity in the use of terms is far more explicit in their individual entries: under *VOWEL*, for instance, the Cy says that a "VOWEL, in Grammar, [is] a Letter [= sign] which affords a complete Sound of it self, or a Letter [= sound] so simple as only to need a bare opening of the Mouth to make it heard, and to form a distinct Voice. See *Letter*"; the *Br* replicates Chambers' definition exactly, a "VOWEL, in grammar, [is] a letter [= sign] which affords a complete sound of itself, or a letter [= sound] so simple as only to need a bare opening of the mouth to make it heard, and so form a distinct voice".

Then, the term *vowel* actually refers to two different levels of linguistic description and consequently leaves room for misinterpretation⁶, even though this ambivalent use is not arbitrary at all. The evidence of that is documented by the definition of the cross-referenced term used to describe *vowel*, that is *letter*: The Cy states that

LETTER, [is] a Sign or Character either in Print or in Writing, by which any People have agreed to express the several Sounds [see *VOWEL*], used in conveying their Thoughts to each other in Speech: Or a Letter may be defined, A simple uncompounded Sound of the Voice, that cannot be subdivided into any more simple [see *VOWEL*], and generally marked with a particular Character (Cy LETTER).

On the contrary, the *Br* gives only one of the two meanings – and uses – proposed by Chambers, that is:

LETTER, [is] a character used to express one of the simple sounds of the voice; and as the different simple sounds are expressed by different letters, these, by being differently compounded, become the visible signs or characters of all the modulations and mixtures of sounds used to express our Ideas in a regular language (*Br* LETTER).

⁶ Interestingly enough, the 'opaque' meaning and use of terms emerges in the entry *Diphthong* as well, in particular in the Cy. In this case it is said that: "DIPHTHONG, in Grammar, [is] a double Vowel, or the Union, or Mixture of two Vowels pronounced together, so as only to make one Syllable" (Cy DIPHTHONG); "DIPHTHONG, in grammar, [is] a double vowel, or the mixture of two vowels pronounced together, so as to make one syllable" (*Br* DIPHTHONG). The definitions are identical in the two works but the Cy offers additional information by distinguishing between two kinds of diphthongs and matching, once more, the two linguistic levels: "Diphthongs with regard to the Eyes, from *Diphthongs* with regard to the Ears. A *Diphthong* with regard to the Eye, is form'd of two Vowels meeting in the same Syllable, whether the particular Sound of each of them be heard in the Pronunciation, whether the Sound of one of them be drawn'd, or lastly, whether a new Sound different from either of them result from both. In the two latter Occasions, 'tis with some Impropriety, that we call them *Diphthongs*" (Cy DIPHTHONG). "Diphthongs with regard to the Eye" are nothing else than digraphs, hence it is not possible to define them as "form'd of two Vowels meeting in the same Syllable", unless we interpret vowels as vowel *graphemes*. Such linguistic incoherence is partially admitted by the compiler himself when he says that "In the two latter Occasions, 'tis with some Impropriety, that we call them *Diphthongs*". The first only are real *Diphthongs*, as being such both to the Eye, and Ear". So, the discussion has come back to the phonological level making clear that "true diphthongs" are sounds – and not written signs, or not only written signs – even though the couple Ear-Eye establishes a correlation not actually existing [= sounds/signs], meeting in the same Syllable, or whose Sounds are severally heard, or of three Vowels [= signs] in the same Syllable, which only afford two Sounds in the Pronunciation" (Cy DIPHTHONG). The overlapping of the two linguistic levels, due to linguistic ambiguity in the use of the term *vowel*, is still present. In the first case *vowel* could refer to sound – and probably it does; instead in the latter, *vowel* clearly refers to a written sign.

So, if *letter* may be used for *sign* and *sound* — at least in the *Cy* —, a vowel — according to its definitions — may be identified with a letter; what is odd is the fact that the *Br* singles out only one meaning of *letter* (signifying that a certain classification and order in metalanguage might be done between the publications of the two works) but, under *VOWEL*, *Br* uses the term as Chambers does, that is as an equivalent for both *sign* and *sound*.

In the *Cy*, the discussion shifts repeatedly from one level of linguistic description to the other: the identity *Letter-Sign-Character* fades when, further on under *LETTER*, it is affirmed that "*Letters* make the first part of Elements of Grammar, [and] an assemblage of these make Syllables". Two possible interpretations may be suggested: (1) if *letter* matches with *sound(s)*, the proposition is satisfactory (because syllables are clusters of sounds); (2) if, on the contrary, *letter* is referred to *sign/character* the statement merges two different levels of language, moving from spelling to sound(s). In any case, further on, the term *letter* returns to be identified with graphemes when the general problem of spelling vs. pronunciation incoherence is put forward again:

The Alphabet of every Language consists of a certain Number of these *Letters*, which ought each to have a different Sound, Figure, and Signification [...] one *Letter* was originally intended to signify only one Sound, and not, as at present, to express sometimes one sound, and sometimes another; which Practice has brought a great deal of Confusion into the Languages, and render'd the Learning of the modern Tongues infinitely more difficult than it would otherwise have been (*Cy* LETTER).

Here, *letter* coincides with *Figure* (i.e. grapheme) which expresses *Signification* because it represents a *Sound* (i.e. phoneme).

As a consequence, the problem is not only grounded on the inconsistency between spelling and pronunciation, but confusion increases because of a similar inconsistency between a single term and the various linguistic realities it represents.

In conclusion, it may be argued that both encyclopaedias deal with the matter of orthography and pronunciation, but they pursue their different aims in a very different way.

The *Cy* aims at being exhaustive and at giving a vivid picture of the debate and its implications. Chambers discusses the general problem of writing/speaking incoherence in the individual entries suggesting that there should be a greater interest in those branches of Grammar. The divergence between orthography and pronunciation is not bound to a particular language, but it is a natural issue due to spontaneous linguistic change. What is not acceptable is the lack of a fixed and clear-cut relation between sounds and signs in a given community of speakers/writers. For this reason, grammarians should establish definite rules to describe and connect the two levels of language; such a description entails the creation of a suitable terminology to avoid the overlapping of meanings expressed by the same lexical items and, hence, to avoid that ambiguity attested in such entries as *ALPHABET*, *VOWEL*, and *LETTER*, analysed above.

On the contrary, the *Br* is characterised by very short entries only giving the definition of the terms. In addition, more often than not such essential information overlaps perfectly with Chambers' opening definitions. The *Br* is not interested in a detailed discussion of the topic and it is not involved in the debate concerning (a) the disagreement between spelling and pronunciation, (b) the necessity to establish rules for both these linguistic levels and (c) the need to single out a clear terminology to label them unambiguously.

Forty years intervene between the publication of the two works. The *Cy* deeply feels the need of definite and fixed rules to organize a huge and confused matter: whatever the choice, the aim should be to fix clear and unambiguous rules. Such an attitude is met again, twenty years later, in Johnson's "Plan of a Dictionary" (1747) where it is stated that

The great orthographical contest has long subsisted between etymology and pronunciation. It has been demanded 'on one hand, that men should write as they speak; but as it has been shown that this conformity never was attained in any language, and that it is not more easy to persuade men to agree exactly in speaking than in writing, it may be asked with equal propriety, why men do not rather speak as they write [...] WHEN a question of orthography is dubious, that practice has, in my opinion, a claim to preference, which preserves the greatest number of radical letters [...]. But the chief rule which I propose to follow, is to make no innovation, without a reason sufficient to balance the inconvenience of change; and such reasons I do not expect often to find. All change is of itself an evil [...]. CLOSELY connected with orthography is PRONUNCIATION, the stability of which is of great importance to the duration of a language [...]. A new pronunciation will make almost a new speech, and therefore [...] one great end of this undertaking is to fix the English language [...]. (Johnson PLAN 1747: 9-11).

However, the wish to govern English spelling and pronunciation completely weakens in the "Preface to the Dictionary" (1755). Here, Johnson, facing the practical problems of a lexicographer, states that it is impossible to get rid of all the irregularities in language; no matter how arbitrary some spellings established by use and custom are, they have — in some measure — to be accepted:

In adjusting the ORTHOGRAPHY, which has been to this time unsettled and fortuitous, I found it necessary to distinguish those irregularities that are inherent in our tongue, and perhaps coeval with it, from others which the ignorance or negligence of later writers has produced. Every language has its anomalies, which, though inconvenient, and in themselves once unnecessary, must be tolerated among the imperfections of human things, and which require only to be registered; that they may not be increased, and ascertained, that they may not be confounded: but every language has likewise its improprieties and absurdities, which it is the duty of the lexicographer to correct or proscribe (Johnson, PREFACE 1755: paragraph 6).

Perhaps, this is the "middle Course between the two Extremes" mentioned by Chambers under *ORTHOGRAPHY*.

If this is true, the spelling vs. pronunciation debate fades throughout the century and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* confirms this. Not only it does not discuss the topic in the individual entries but, even in the treatise *GRAMMAR*, the focus is on syntax notwithstanding the fact that *ORTHOGRAPHY* is said to be one of the four branches of *GRAMMAR*.

The incoherence between sounds and signs is an open question, it is the evidence — in Johnson's words — of the "imperfections of human things [...] which require only to be registered" and, to a certain degree, accepted.

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