



Not all of our English spellings are without rhyme or reason



WOULDn'T it be nice if we didn't have to worry about spellings like bought, if we didn't have to spell tomato and potato as if they rhymed, and row didn't have two possible pronunciations? Wouldn't it be a good idea to change our spelling system so that it reflected the way we talk?

Isn't it nice that when we write English, we can communicate with people in Canada, Scotland, Ireland, Australia or even Fiji and Nigeria without having to make any changes to our spelling and grammar?

The trouble is that these two aims are incompatible. If we want to write the same way for all the people who currently think they speak "English" (even if some of that "English" is not mutually comprehensible with other varieties of "English" elsewhere in the world), we cannot reflect the way we speak in the way we write.

Take a simple example: John Key says shtrong, I say strong. If we both want to write the way we speak, we will have to spell the word strong differently. If we spell it differently, it will be that bit harder for us to understand each other. The unity of written English will start to vanish.

Geoff Robinson pronounces mourning differently from morning, but I pronounce them the same way. Are we each allowed our own preferences of spelling?

Of course, there are words that can have more than one spelling: labour or labor? Fulfil or fulfill? Judgment or judgement? Center or centre? But those spellings have little to do with the way we pronounce, and are very minor exceptions to the general rule. Aluminum or aluminium? That does reflect a difference of pronunciation, but the number of such cases is extremely small. If we really wrote the way we pronounce, the differences would soon overwhelm us.

Scots pronounce cot and caught the same way, they also pronounce would and wooed the same way, and many of them pronounce Sam and psalm the same way. The differences affect not only

these individual words; they affect whole swathes of our vocabulary.

Many Americans pronounce dock and dog with different vowel sounds. On the other hand, they may pronounce dog and thought with the same vowel sound. For me, dog and cot have the same vowel sound, and thought is different. For an increasing number of North Americans (including, especially, Canadians) pa'd (as in Pa'd decided we were going to Wellington) pod and pawed may all sound just the same, while for me, they are all different.

Many New Zealanders pronounce beer and bear and bare the same, some do not. Many New Zealanders pronounce throne and thrown differently, while others do not. Some New Zealanders still pronounce whether and weather differently, most have ceased making that difference. Most young Kiwis pronounce Ellen and Alan the same, a few still keep them distinct. Do we really want half-a-dozen different spelling systems within New Zealand?

Back in the 15th century, you wrote the way you pronounced. But the publishing industry could not cope with such variation, and gradually got us used to the idea there should be one "right" way of spelling any given word. This is the model we are still presented with, at least once we get past the very early days of school.

Perhaps now it doesn't matter so much, and we can afford to go back to the variable spelling of the 15th century; but if we want to keep mutual understanding alive, we probably have to be very wary of the idea that spelling doesn't matter.

Of course, we could get rid of those stranger spellings: do we really need the "k" at the start of knight, knock, know and so on, which has not been pronounced for several hundred years? Could we make do with enuff and throo, instead of enough and through, which reflect a pronunciation that hasn't been heard in England since before Shakespeare? (Scotland is different in this regard) But a complete overhaul of our spelling based on how we talk is almost