



## You write 'ghoughpteighbteau' and I write 'potato'



Janet Holmes

### WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

**A**DRIAN MOONAN wrote recently to *The Dominion Post* about spelling reform, pointing out that claims that English has the most random spelling in the world are unsustainable. He is right.

Nevertheless, it is true that English spelling presents many challenges. Even native speakers find it difficult to learn, and it is a nightmare for those studying English as a second or foreign language – especially if the orthography of their native language closely reflects the spoken language, as with Maori, Spanish, Finnish and Italian.

Consider how gh is pronounced (or not) in cough, ghost, hiccough and though, and the problems posed for learners by the fact that sight, site and cite are spelled differently but pronounced the same.

A recent article in *The Economist* reported that a British study has demonstrated that it takes more than twice as long to learn to read English compared with most other west European languages.

First there are letters in the English alphabet which are redundant. Qu can always be replaced by kw (queen) or k (torque), x can be replaced by ks (fox) or z (xylophone), and c can be replaced by s or k, depending on what follows it (cider, cellar, cat, cot).

Then there are letters which one could argue are strictly redundant in the spelling of many words. So the b is redundant in dumb and limb, and the k could be dispensed with in knife, knock and knit, and the g is unnecessary to the spelling of gnaw and gnat.

Negative reactions to dum, lim, nife, nock, nit, naw and nat are simply based on conservatism and a reluctance to adopt new usages.

In an era of global warming when conserving trees is important, perhaps we should be willing to broaden our views.

There are many instances where one

sound has a range of spellings. In Maori or Italian, if you meet the letter i, you can be pretty sure it will be pronounced with a sound something like the vowel in the English word bee. But in English this sound is spelt in many different ways: for example, see, be, grieve, receive, amoeba, people, treat, caesarean, sadly. How is a learner to know how to pronounce such words?

We can read Finnish and Italian out loud pretty accurately, even when we do not understand every word, but that is not possible in English.

But there are also some pluses from a spelling system which is not too closely tied to pronunciation. It doesn't matter if we come from Scotland, Las Vegas, Cape Town Singapore, Adelaide or Wellington, we all agree to write house and writer and bad, regardless of the very different ways we pronounce these words.

Moreover, our archaic spelling system preserves some of the history of the language, as Adrian Moonan notes and Laurie Bauer illustrated in an earlier column: knight and knife reflect older pronunciations; "nationalise" records the meaning to create something relating to a nation; and the silent letter in resign suddenly becomes relevant in the noun resignation. We would lose these links if we reformed the spelling system.

People have been trying to reform English spelling for centuries. Professor John Wells, president of the British Spelling Society, and a respected phonetician from University College London, is the latest in a line of would-be reformers.

He argues that reforming English spelling will raise reading levels. Electronic messaging patterns show us how to simplify the English spelling system, he suggests.

"Text messaging, email and internet chat rooms are showing us the way forward for English," he argues.

"Let's allow people greater freedom to spell logically. It's time to remove the fet-



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ish that says that correct spelling is a principal mark of being educated."

And he agrees with me that the apostrophe should be abolished. "Have we really nothing better to do with our lives than fret about the apostrophe?" he says.

Good luck to him.

I don't fancy his chances of persuading

people to change their beliefs in this area, much less their habits – even with text messaging to help.

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