Queen’s English

by Janice Weaver

The English language, now spoken by about half a billion people worldwide, was actually brought to England by invaders from northern Germany. In the mid-fifth century A.D., three seafaring tribes—the Angles, the Jutes, and the Saxons—saw their chance to fill the void left by departing Roman soldiers and launched their own assault on the southern and eastern coasts of England (or “the land of the Angles”). The language they carried with them across the cold and stormy North Sea developed into Old English, then Middle English, and finally Modern English, the most widely used language in the world.

English is often accused of being an impossibly complicated language, horribly difficult for nonnative speakers to learn. It is full of words like “eight” and “enough” and “feign,” which look as if they should be pronounced something like ey-get, en-oog, and fi-gen, but of course are not. In fact, though, people who study languages tell us that about 84 percent of English words are entirely straightforward and get pronounced exactly as they seem they should. Another 13 percent follow the rules closely enough that most people can sound them out without making too many mistakes. The problems lie in the final 3 percent, a small but troublesome group of words that don’t behave in any predictable fashion and simply have to be committed to memory. Unfortunately for anyone trying to learn the language, that 3 percent includes four hundred of our most commonly used words, such as “of,” “four,” “done,” and “love.”

English is probably the world’s most well-documented language, and this is one reason why so many illogical spellings have survived through to the present day. People began producing English-language dictionaries almost as soon as the printing press was invented in Europe, in the 1400s . . . and these dictionaries fixed, perhaps for all time, many of the spellings that make the least sense to us today.

Over the past four centuries or so, a number of people have argued for the simplification of English spellings. One of them, Noah Webster, the creator of the 1828 American Dictionary of the English Language, was successful enough in his efforts that, to this day, Britons and Americans spell many words differently (with Canadians, as always, trying to occupy a neutral middle ground). Webster gave the world -our spellings instead of -our (favor/favour), -er instead of -re (center/centre), and -yze instead of -yse (analyze/analyse). He also introduced many phonetic spellings—that is, spellings based on how words sound—including “skeptical” (for “sceptical”), “plow” (for “plough”), and “check” (for “cheque”). One theory is that Webster hoped to make the language more rule-abiding so that Americans, who tended to have less formal education, could more easily learn to read and write.
But Webster was, by all accounts, a grim, miserable man, and in the end, he was not able to talk people around to accepting some of his more radical changes, like spelling “women” as wimmern and “tough” as tuf. He learned that the more common a word is, the greater the resistance to changing it. There’s hardly an English-speaker on earth who won’t for example, oppose spelling “of” as ov, whether it makes more sense or not.

We hang on to many of our oddest spellings because, for one thing, they reflect the English language’s far-reaching linguistic ancestry. Though it began life as a Germanic dialect, English has, over 1500 years, picked up influences from all over the world. It is estimated, for instance, that when the Normans ruled England, from 1066 to 1154, they introduced ten thousand French-derived words into the language, a full three-quarters of which we still use today. We have also borrowed freely from Latin, Greek, Danish, Swedish, Spanish, and even Russian. In fact, many people have argued that one of the great strengths of English is its willingness to embrace words from just about anywhere. We adopt, without translation, terms like “macho,” “kindergarten,” “maitre d,” “and, more recently,” “smorgasbord” and “glasnost.” This gives our language a richness and an inclusiveness that others sometimes lack. (Although English, of course, has repaid the favor, infiltrating languages all over the globe, and sometimes creating hybrid monsters like Denglish, a mix of German and English, and Franglais, a mix of English and French.)

Today, most language experts agree that there are about 200,000 English words in everyday use. (French makes do with roughly half that number.) With a language so vast, we can often be more precise with meaning than non-English speakers, distinguishing between, for example, “earth” and “ground,” “house” and “home,” “story” and “history.” And the language continues to grow and evolve, transforming itself to meet the requirements of an ever-changing world. When the first English-language dictionaries were published, they listed about 3,000 words. Samuel Johnson’s landmark Dictionary of the English Language, published in 1755, contained 43,000 words, and the granddaddy of them all, the Oxford English Dictionary, has a mind-boggling 615,000. When you add all the scientific, medical, and technical terms that don’t get included in dictionaries meant for the general public, you’re probably talking about many millions of words, with perhaps tens of thousands more being coined with each passing year.
23 Which statement provides an objective summary of the selection?

A  The English language is spoken by half a billion people in the world and originated in Germany.

B  Modern English is considered the most widely used language in the world.

C  The English language is the world's most documented language because of the large number of English language dictionaries.

D  The English language has a long history of including words from many languages and continues to evolve to meet the requirements of an ever-changing world.

24 How does the author unfold her ideas in the first paragraph?

A  by describing the environment in which the English language was created

B  by describing the history of the English language in random order

C  by stating statistical information on how many people speak English

D  by listing ethnic groups that speak English

25 What does the phrase "a troublesome group of words that don't behave" mean?

A  The words are irritating.

B  The words are misunderstood.

C  The words follow no established rules.

D  The words create problems.
26 According to the selection, why is English one of the world’s most well-documented languages?
   A  It is a blend of so many other languages.
   B  There have been many publications of dictionaries.
   C  There are about 200,000 words in everyday use.
   D  It is spoken by a half billion people.

27 Why was Webster unable to convince people to accept his spellings of certain words?
   A  He was inaccurate with many of his spellings.
   B  People were unable to understand the words.
   C  He was not a good salesman of his ideas.
   D  The Queen did not agree with his spellings.

28 What does the author mean by linguistic as used in the sentence below?
   "We hang on to many of our oddest spellings because, for one thing, they reflect the English language's far-reaching linguistic ancestry."
   A  using a dialect
   B  pertaining to grammar
   C  using jargon
   D  pertaining to language
29 Which statement supports the author's claim below?

"English is often accused of being an impossibly complicated language, horribly difficult for nonnative speakers to learn."

A  "... Modern English, the most widely used language in the world."
B  "The problems lie in the final 3 percent, a small but troublesome group of words that don't behave in any predictable fashion and simply have to be committed to memory."
C  "English is probably the world's most well-documented language . . ."
D  "In fact, many people have argued that one of the great strengths of English is its willingness to embrace words from just about anywhere."

30 How does the author prove her claim that English users resist simplifying English spelling?

A  She uses examples of English and American spelling.
B  She uses examples of spelling changes that people did not receive well.
C  She explains how some words derive from foreign languages.
D  She explains how language users dislike dictionary writers.

31 How does paragraph 5 refine the author's idea?

A  It gives the cause of a problem and then the solution.
B  It spatially arranges the information, beginning in Europe and moving to Asia.
C  It provides a fact and then gives an example.
D  It presents dialogue from well-known dictionary creators and language experts.