

Standardizing Spelling: From Script to Print

Scholars have long assumed that the decisive factor in the standardisation of written English was the introduction of printing using movable type by William Caxton in 1476. The importance of this date for linguistic history is apparent from its use as the dividing line between Middle English and Early Modern English by the Cambridge History of the English Language volume 2 (1066-1476) and volume 3 (1476-1776). The most recent historical survey of English spelling concludes that printing was the means by which a standard system was established and that Caxton's role in the process was 'crucial' (Upward and Davidson 2011: 84).

However, other scholars have claimed that the practical demands of the printing process, whereby compositors were required to 'cast off' a text in advance, requiring an estimate of the amount of text per page, and to justify lines of prose so that the text exactly filled a line of print, promoted variation in spelling. David Crystal (2012: 137) has called flexible spelling 'a gift for printers trying to make their pages look good to the eye'. Furthermore, compositors, who were themselves often recruited from the continent and not native English speakers, have been shown to preserve the spellings of their exemplars or to impose their own preferences, promoting variation in spelling rather than homogeneity.

The reason for this scholarly disagreement is that there has been no systematic study of the spelling of Caxton's printed output in order to determine whether he did indeed impose a consistent orthography across his works, or whether he exploited spelling variation for practical reasons. This paper reports on the first stage of a larger project that will analyse the spelling of Caxton's entire output in order to answer the following questions: to what extent did Caxton's press impose a consistent spelling system? How closely does this system reflect the preferences associated with an emerging London standard? To what extent did compositors impose their own spelling habits on the text they printed, and what can these preferences tell us about their training and the practices adopted in Caxton's print shop?