

The Letters English Left

Behind

A linguistic thought experiment on the alphabet we abandoned, and why it might've worked better



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Modern reconstruction of an Anglo-Saxon village, in West Stow. Image by [Colin Park](#) on [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Those who have studied English as a foreign language will almost universally tell you that the most difficult aspect of the English language is its seemingly bizarre system of spelling and pronunciation.

Just look at words like “trough,” “rough,” “bough,” and “through” to get an idea of just how strange and unpredictable our spellings can be. In comparison to most other languages, these irregularities can seem erratic. And for those who learn English as a second language, this is more than just an oddity: it’s a challenge that can take years to overcome.

So why does the English language have such a weird system of pronunciation and spelling?

As I researched this question, I also began to wonder if it would be possible, in some way, to rewrite the English language in a way that would eliminate most of these irregular spellings. Would it be possible to find letters that could regularize English, in a way that would make it more accessible?

I believe that the answer can be found in the roots of the English language.

But before I begin, I feel that it is necessary to mention, first and foremost, that this is *merely a thought experiment*. The English language will not change in the way I outline, nor should it. Rather than look at this as a *prescription*, look at it as a *playful hypothetical*.

Second, for those with a deeper knowledge of Old English, it's important to note that I will be taking the creative liberty of mixing letters from Anglo-Saxon runes from the 5th to the 9th centuries CE, the Insular cript from the 9th to 11th centuries CE, and even some later Latin letters.

Having gotten that out of the way, let's take a look at how Old English could potentially reorganize the spellings we use today.

Old English

English has an incredibly mixed and, at times, convoluted history.

Anglo-Saxon, Old Norse, Old French, Latin, and even languages as distant as Arabic and Mandarin have, in some way or another, helped to create the form of English that we speak today ([source](#)).

This is one of the main reasons that English has such strange spellings (although certainly not the *only* reason).

The words “sky” and “window” come from Old Norse ([source](#)), the words “deja vu”, “denim,” and “fiancé” come from French, and the word “tea” comes from the Min Nan dialect’s pronunciation of a Chinese word: 茶, which sounds like “tê” ([source](#)).

However, despite the wide variety of historical influences on the English language, there is still *one primary* language which we can identify as our closest ancestor: Old English.

As the primary ancestor of our language, it contained many of the same sounds that we use today, despite a wide variety of changes throughout history.

Before the introduction of the Latin alphabet by Christian missionaries around the 7th century CE ([source](#)), Old English speakers had access to a unique alphabet, known as the Anglo-Saxon “Futhorc”, which closely matched the sounds used in the language until today.

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A chart representing Anglo-Saxon runes. [Source](#).

Now, while these runes are already of great historical interest, they could hypothetically be useful in our endeavor of organizing English spelling.

For instance, the *voiceless* dental fricative “th” used in many of our words, like “think” and “thrift,” was represented by a single letter, “þ,” known as “thorn,” while the *voiced* dental fricative “th” that we use in words like “this” and “the”, was written like “ð.”

There are many other letters which more concisely represent the sounds we use today, such as “ć” (used for the “ch” in

“church”) and “æ” (used for the “a” in “cat,” as opposed to the “a” in “plate”).

For instance, take the sentence: “The weather is getting rough throughout the day.” If we were to approximate this using the Old English alphabet, it would look something like: “ðe wæðer is geting ruf þruot þa dæi.”

To those of us who are familiar with English, this might seem like an unnecessary, and even dramatic, step to take in order to standardize spelling rules.

However, imagine trying to learn the difference between a non-voiced “th” and a voiced “th,” or the difference between the short “a” in “cat” and the long “a” in “plate”!

Most other languages, from Belarusian to Italian, have a high degree of what is referred to as “phonemic orthography”: in other words, their spelling generally matches their pronunciation.

Imagine if the word “trough” were written as “trof,” the word “rough” as “ruf,” and the word “through” as “þrū.”

Would this not inherently create a far easier system of spelling and pronunciation for English learners, whether it be children or adults?

Will It Ever Happen?

Ultimately, this is incredibly unlikely to ever occur. The English language and its spelling system is an integral part of modern culture, from Silicon Valley to Hollywood and beyond.

And despite the pronunciation hurdles faced when learning English, they often pale in comparison to the grammatical challenges faced in languages like Ukrainian and Portuguese, or the orthographic challenges faced in languages like Mandarin and Arabic.

However, for those who love the history of the English language, studying the possible union of an ancient alphabet

and our modern pronunciation serves as an interesting thought experiment.

And even beyond this, for those who write fantasy novels and seek to create fictional languages, Anglo-Saxon runes can serve as a useful starting point.

The legendary author J. R. R. Tolkien famously used runes from various scripts, including Old English and Old Norse, to create many of his fictional languages ([source](#)).

Ultimately, the oddities in our spelling system are merely fossil remnants of its convoluted history, but the English language will forever remain deeply connected with its Anglo-Saxon origins, and the study of this history can be useful for anyone who wishes to have a better understanding of exactly why our language is the way that it is.

Old English
Conlang
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