

In Hertford, Hereford and Hampshire, hurricanes hardly happen.

Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady*, 1964

Heavens, there is a lot to say about H!

Perhaps only surpassed in importance by E, it is indispensable in spelling English today. Individually, H denotes a certain sound (the breathy start of *hand* and *horse*). It is also the constant second member of common pairs of letters, namely the TH, SH, CH and WH in *then*, *she*, *chin* and *what*. We take it for granted that H functions like a signal to read the previous letter differently. Without it, we would struggle to spell many sounds of spoken English. These were sounds that did not trouble the mouths of Romans and Ancient Greeks. They have therefore lacked their own dedicated letter. But why was humble H assigned the heavy burden of spelling them? And what phonetic mischief is going on with the changeable CH in *chocolate*, *choir* and *chef*, or the alternating WH in *when* and *who*?

What's more, the letter is also unusual in its name, not called 'hee' to match the previous letter *gee*, but instead bearing the very distinct name *aitch*. This doesn't even include the consonant for which H on its own stands! It's not surprising that some people, since the 19th century, have called it *haitch*. Then there is also the fact that H's sister letter in Greek today is used for a vowel.

The story of H is a complicated one, but we can get off to a good start by rejoining the Phoenicians.

The Phoenicians' writing included the letter ~~the~~ . They called this letter *hēt*, and used it for the consonant /h/. This is not a consonant present in English, and it is extremely rare across European languages.⁴³ Suffice to say, it is a **pharyngeal** sound, produced in the space behind the tongue at the very

back of the mouth, known as the pharynx. It's present in Arabic, such as in the name *Muhammad*.

The letter 𐤅 made its way to Greece, where the Greeks repurposed it for their sound /h/ (as in *hat*). They later simplified its box-like shape to just H, perhaps to avoid confusion with the letters Θ and E. Keeping with its Semitic history, the Greeks called this letter *heta*.

Quite quickly, then, we have reached a point where this ancient letter both looks like and sounds like our modern H. See for example (over page) this bit of pot from Athens in the fifth century BCE, which bears the word 'HIPPOKRATOS', meaning 'son of Hippocrates'.

It's with this function and with its archaic shape that the letter first appears in our early Italian sources, in Etruscan and Latin writing. Ultimately, the simpler H shape won out in Italy too, and the rest, as we'll see, is history. So, let's return later to its journey from the Latin to the English alphabet, and stick a little while longer with the Greeks.



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► Description

A complication in the story of H occurred when one of the dialects of Ancient Greek, Ionic, lost the sound /h/. This was not an unusual sound

change. H-dropping has happened in many languages of many eras, including in some varieties of English. H-less pronunciations are typical of London English, as exemplified by the flower seller Eliza Doolittle in the musical *My Fair Lady*. This is an interesting link between the Aegean Sea and the banks of the Thames.

This process is known as ‘psilosis’ (ψίλωσις), meaning ‘stripping bare’. This is in fact a Greek concept that we previously met in their name for the letter E: *e-pylon*. Through psilosis, the letter *heta* became *eta*. The loss of a consonant from Greek speech meant that there was a symbol going spare. Rather than abandon (h)eta, the Ionians chose to create another vowel letter, in addition to A, E, I, O and Y. The letter came to be used for the common long vowel /ε:/, like the vowel in *air* or *head*.

The Ionian way of using the alphabet had a certain prestige, and this new use for H spread to other regions and dialects, even those that still had the sound /h/. One such dialect was Attic, the local language of Athens. It lay to the west of Ionia, across the Aegean Sea.⁴⁴ Together, Attic and Ionic spelling formed the basis for standard Greek spelling.

Speakers of Modern Greek will know that there is one more step in the story of the Greek letter H. The letter still stands for a vowel today, but it’s not /ε:/. Beginning in the second century BCE and slowly progressing over centuries, Greek sounds experienced their own vowel shift. The once separate sounds spelled with I, EI, H, Y, OI and YI all merged and converged, so that today all these Greek letters and digraphs sound like /i/ (as in *sheep*), which was once only written with I. This shift is known as ‘iotacism’. The name of the Greeks’ H today sounds like ‘*eeta*’.

It was with this ‘iotacised’ vowel that H left the Greek orbit in the early medieval era, and got involved in the creation of a new script: Cyrillic. This set of letters and family of alphabets has its origins in post-classical Greek writing. After its creation by the acolytes of St Cyril (c. 826–869 CE) and St Methodius (c. 815–885 CE), and naming in Cyril’s honour, Cyrillic is today used to write down languages like Russian, Ukrainian, Bulgarian and Kazakh. If you put Cyrillic side by side with Greek, the genealogy becomes clear. The letters share similar shapes and positions in the alphabet, and knowing one script is very helpful for learning the other.

The Greek letters I and H, homophonous thanks to iotacism, were adopted into Cyrillic as I and H. The two co-exist today in the alphabet of Ukrainian, and historically did so with Russian until 1918. The radical

programme of the Bolsheviks extended to language and literacy, and their post-revolutionary reforms of Russian writing had no time for redundancies like the equivalent letters И and I. One was purged, the other promoted. I was out, in favour of И. It seems strange to remember that Russian И, which spells a vowel in words like чипсы (*čipsy*) ‘crisps’ or президент (*prezident*) ‘president’, is the graphic cousin of English H. Their separation in sound goes back to the throats of the Ancient Greeks.

We’re in a position now to track the development of H as it makes its way through the minds, pens and chisels of ancient Italy.

Italian writers were unaffected or unbothered by Ionian innovations, and H continued to stand for the older value of /h/. We find it in evocative Latin words like haruspex (‘soothsayer’) and hostis (‘enemy’). As Rome burst its boundaries and bullied its way to being master of all Italy, this once-provincial language came into increasing contact with Greek. The Greeks were undeniably linguistically superior in prose and poetry, with a literary tradition that began with the mighty Homer. The Romans, by comparison, were uncultured upstarts. It is hardly surprising then that many Greek words were adopted into Latin, and for those words that contained the sound /h/, the Romans’ letter H could fulfil its archaic purpose. One such word was ἱστορία (*historía*), originally referring to an inquiry or scientific study, but known to us today as *history*.

Yet there was a noticeable difference between the Greek and Latin languages, which would call H to a new duty. Ancient Greek made use of the phonetic quality of aspiration – a kind of added breathiness. For example, Greek had the sounds /p/ and /p^h/. The second was a breathier version of the first, sounding a bit like in the English words uphill and upheaval. To the Greeks, they were two separate sounds.

Consequently, the Greeks would write /p/ with the letter Π, and /p^h/ with Φ. For example, a πύλη (*púlē*) was a gate, while a φυλή (*phulé*) was a tribe. There were three aspirated consonants in Ancient Greek: /p^h/, /t^h/ and /k^h/. To write these, the Greeks either repurposed or invented three letters: Φ, Θ and Χ.

The Romans, however, did not care so much about aspiration. It wasn’t a significant feature of their language, and they may even have struggled to hear the difference between a πύλη and a φυλή. Because of this, they had originally abandoned the aspirated letters Φ and Θ. In our early Latin texts,

Greek loanwords containing /p^h/, /t^h/ and /k^h/ are simply written P, T and C. However, as time marched on and contact with Greek intensified, a way to write aspiration became desirable, either for the sake of graphic practicality or for societal sophistication. Perceived differences between Latin and the fancier and breathier Greek are reflected in a mocking poem by the Roman poet Catullus (c. 84–c. 54 B.C.E.). Catullus makes fun of a certain Arrius, who had the annoying habit of speaking Latin with extra aspiration to sound more Greek.

*‘Chommoda’ dicebat, si quando commoda vellet
dicere, et insidias Arrius ‘hinsidias’ ...*

... hoc misso in Syriam requierant omnibus aures ...

cum subito affertur nuntius horribilis,

Ionios fluctus, postquam illuc Arrius isset,

iam non Ionios esse, sed ‘Hionios’.

Hadvantages Arrius would say, whenever he meant
to say *advantages*, and *ambushes* were *hambushes* ...

... with this man sent off to Syria, everyone’s ears rested ...

when, suddenly, horrible news arrived:

the Ionian Sea, after Arrius had been,

was now not Ionian, but *Hionian*.

~ Catullus, 84

The Romans’ solution was simple: to use H. This letter, which already stood for the glottal breathiness of /h/, could in combination with another letter write down all these Greek aspirates. So, words written Φ, Θ and Χ by the Greeks were spelled PH, TH and CH by the Romans from the second century B.C.E.

This practice remains a part of our own spelling. The Roman ‘transliteration’ of three Greek sounds with H explains English words like *philosophy*, *photograph*, *theatre*, *authentic*, *character* and *archaic*.⁴⁵ This practice of course also endures in the word *alphabet*. However, how we pronounce them in English is a mixed bag of historical sounds.

It seems that maintaining these Greek loanwords with their original aspiration did not catch on. While it may have remained a prestigious pronunciation for aspirational Romans like Arrius, it was dropped in

everyday speech. Latin merged the aspirates with its regular P, T and C sounds. For example, Greek borrowings with the aspirate /t^h/ (written with Θ, called *theta*) were pronounced instead with a plain /t/. This is how Greek θέατρον (*théatron*) became *teatro* in Italian.

Likewise, the Greek letter X (*chi*) was transliterated into Latin as CH. The Romans may have initially pronounced it as an aspirated /k^h/, but it too lost out in favour of unaspirated /k/. This foreign pronunciation of Greek loanwords is behind the way English reads the CH in the words *chorus*, *chronic*, *school* and *orchestra*. Yet the spellings PH, TH and CH endured. Even though they were now interchangeable with P, T and C, they remained part of the toolkit of Latin writers.

Back in Greece, the pronunciation of the three aspirates was changing. The three aspirated sounds became three fricatives. One of these three shifts went on to affect Roman pronunciation, and our own too. The aspirate /p^h/ shifted gradually into a /f/ sound. Since /f/ was already a sound in spoken Latin, the general pronunciation of the Latin digraph PH later changed to keep up with the Greeks. This is why we pronounce English words like *photo* and *elephant* as we do, and not like ‘*poto*’ or ‘*elephant*’. Likewise, Θ shifted from an aspirated /t^h/ into a fricative /θ/. English has always had this consonant, so English speakers at least pronounce the TH in Greek loanwords like *theatre* and *theory* as the Greeks themselves did and still do.

It should be noted that the Romans may not have been the first to pair H up with other letters. In some early sources, we find the Greek letter H (at that time still used for /h/) combined with their letter P (*rho*). It seems that their P stood for two sounds in Greek: either a /r/ or its voiceless version at the beginning of words. This voiceless sound in Greek was spelled by the Romans as RH. English acknowledges it still in words of Greek origin like *rhinoceros*, *rhetoric*, *rhyme* and *rhododendron*, and also in that orthographic oddity of annual nativity plays: *myrrh*.⁴⁶

Let’s pause to catch our breath and take stock. So far, we can account for two uses of the letter H in English spelling. The first is the older use: to spell the sound /h/ in words like *hope* and *hero*. The standalone letter has had this function since the early days of the Greek alphabet, although Greek writers no longer use it this way. The sound /h/ is a consonant so simple and weak, just a slight breathiness, that it’s quite restricted in where it can appear in English words. The sound and therefore the unaccompanied letter

H don't occur at the end of words. Even at the beginning, as we have seen, it has a tendency to disappear.

The second use of H is to spell words that ultimately come from Greek, and that once had aspirated sounds that the Romans reasonably wrote with an H. The original aspirated sounds have long since changed and are not part of words like *photo* and *philosophy*, but English retains the Roman spelling. English does not have to do this, I should add. Some languages instead sensibly spell such words with an F. In Czech, the image is a *fotka* and the subject is *filosofie*. Once again, we encounter English spelling's love for the past.

The full tale of H is not yet complete, though. More changes in sound and spelling are still to happen. This chapter needs to address all the English words with WH and SH, which are not of Greek origin. It also needs to explain the letter's strange name.

The cold crypts beneath the church of San Clemente al Laterano in Rome contain artistic and linguistic treasures. One such gem is a large and still colourful fresco, painted onto a wall of an older church in the 11th century CE. As you stand before it, your eye is naturally drawn to the central figure of St Clement himself, enrobed and haloed, and taller than the many other characters depicted. This main image is pretty typical for a church, but if you cast your eye down, you will see the strange cartoon-like panel of three men lugging a black column, while another man shouts at them to put their back into it.

This is a story in the life of St Clement, in which his enemy Sisinnius, the commanding man, orders his goons to seize the saint, only for them to be miraculously confused and arrest a stone column instead. The panel shows Sisinnius shouting '*fili de le pute, traite*'.⁴⁷ This is different in sounds and grammar from what we think of as Latin. It is therefore one of the earliest examples of the new languages that eventually emerged out of everyday Latin. These include Italian.

One of the noteworthy features is the lack of an H in the verb *traite*. Once, it would have been *trahite*. It is also absent in the speech of the saint, even though Clement talks in a more classical register of Latin: '*duritiam cordis vestris, saxa traere meruistis*'.⁴⁸ For Cicero and Caesar, the fifth word would have been *trahere*. This fresco at San Clemente therefore gives evidence for the loss of the sound /h/ in Late Latin. Like Ionians before

them, and Londoners long after them, Latin speakers in the Roman Empire started dropping their Hs. A Latin word like *honor* was increasingly pronounced like 'onor. This post-classical development explains the H-less pronunciation of the English word honour/honor. Respect for the classical world meanwhile explains its H-ful spelling.

This loss had implications for the alphabet. Previously, the Romans' name for the letter H had been *ha*, shortly and succinctly communicating its function like the preceding letters. With /h/ dropped, its name became *a*, identical with the name of the first letter, A. To keep the letters distinct, the Romans came to name H as *acca*. The reasons behind this new label are unclear; it may have originated as a doubling of *ha*, or as an approximate sound comfortably nestled between two vowels. *Acca* remains the name for H in Italian, while to the north it became French *ache*. Thanks to French and the Great Vowel Shift, English calls it *aitch*.

The sound /h/ may have disappeared from the Late Latin scene, but the letter H did not. The phonetic loss freed up the letter to be put to new uses. Roman writers were already using it for the old Greek aspirates in PH, TH and CH. In the post-classical world, we see its extension to words not of Greek origin. CH and TH found a new lease of life in Ireland and in the massive Frankish Empire, following the fragmentation of Rome. The Old Irish and Frankish languages needed CH and TH to spell certain fricative sounds that the Roman alphabet was not equipped for. It was either the Irish or the Franks who inspired early English writers to spell common words like *this* and *that* with a TH.

Since the loss of /h/ in spoken Latin, the letter H has been ready to do whatever writers and languages have needed it to. It basically became a diacritic, informing readers to pronounce a letter differently to how they would without it. H allows us to keep the alphabet as it is, without creating new letters.

To give an example, in modern-day Italian, H is silent, but appears to ensure that a previous C or G is pronounced hard. We see this in the borrowed word *ghetto*. Without H, it would be said like 'jetto'. Moreover, H helps Italian to tell common homophonous words apart, distinguishing *anno* 'year' from *hanno* 'they have'.

H was put to good use in the emerging literature of French. It accompanied the letter C in spelling a recently developed sound. One of the distinctive features of Old French, which it does not share with all Romance

languages, is how by the eighth century the sequence of sounds /ka/ (as in camp) in Latin had undergone a change into /tʃa/ (as in champ). The kind of fortress known to the Romans as a castellum became a chastel in Old French, while a vaulted room called a camera turned into an Old French chambre. The Latin word campania, generically referring to the countryside, is behind the alcoholically associated French region of Champagne.

Spelling this post-Latin sound with CH was one of the writing habits brought after 1066 to England. It continued to spell all the Frenchified words of Latin origin above, but was in time extended to native English vocabulary too. Old English had had the sound /tʃ/. This is the sound at the start of cheese. This needs two letters for us today, but Old English could write it with C alone. Alfred the Great liked to pray in a cirice, which Chaucer centuries later would have known as a chirche. Today, it is a church.⁴⁹

All these common words today with CH (child, chap, chin, chapter) therefore owe their spelling to a Continental innovation in a post-Roman world, and they sit awkwardly with the older CH still written in Greek loanwords like chronic – the same two letters, but with different origins and different sounds.

We should remember another use for CH. In words like chalet and moustache, the two letters stand for the /ʃ/ sound in shoe or in shushing someone. This reflects a change within the French language. What had been once pronounced /tʃ/ in Old French came to be pronounced simply /ʃ/ by the time of Middle French. Hence, an old word like chastel acquired its modern form of château.

English words that use CH to spell this sound are later acquisitions, often taken into English in the modern era. Moustaches, for example, make their first appearance in English in 1585. The different uses of CH in chance and chauffeur are therefore the fruits of English's long-lasting and intense contact with French. It has been so intense that sometimes the same French word has been borrowed into English twice, the second time with the shifted sound. From Norman/Old French, English got the word chief; from Modern French, it then got chef. Similarly, the male name Charles maintains the sound of Old French. The female name Charlotte arrived a few centuries later.

We can summarise the uses of CH with a rough three-part rule, according to a word's origin and route into English:

- CH used for /k/ (as in cow) = generally from Ancient Greek, e.g. chorus, school, stomach
- CH used for /tʃ/ (as in chew) = generally from Old English, e.g. cheese, or from Old French, e.g. champion
- CH used for /ʃ/ (as in shoe) = generally from Modern French, e.g. chef, nonchalant

Elsewhere in the Middle English language, H was increasingly combined with S and T to spell the sounds in ship and think. Their standard status in English today was by no means a given. Over the course of the Middle English period, SH had to compete with SC, SCH, SS and simply S. Meanwhile, TH fought off two non-Latin symbols that had been the typical spelling in Old English (see [Chapter T](#)).

A combination of prestige, history, efficiency and the nature of printing eventually culminated in the victory of SH and TH over their rivals. The two joined French CH in the new English system of using H to modify the previous letter, to signal a different yet somewhat similar sound. The same principle is also occasionally applied to spell the consonant in the middle of measure and usual. Since Latin and French didn't supply English spelling with a letter for this sound, its spelling is usually left up to context (certain Ss before certain Us in the middle of a word). But it can also be written as ZH, as a voiced counterpart to SH. Just the other day, I noticed in a set of subtitles the phrase *the usual* being shortened to '*the uzhe*'.

What about WH, though? What's the purpose of the H in *what*? Unlike the H in *that*, *chat* and so on, is it not redundant?

Well, no – at least not yet. It's true that in many flavours of English including my own, WH generally stands for the same sound as W. For me, *whether* sounds the same as *weather*, *whales* are like *Wales*, and *whetting* my whistle could just as well be *wetting* it.

It's only right though that I acknowledge my dialectal bias. For many speakers of English, *whether* and *weather* are not identical in pronunciation. In some conservative accents of Scotland, Ireland and the USA, the digraph WH serves to write down /w/, a single sound like 'hw'. In the USA, it's

thought of as stereotypically southern. My English, from southern England, lacks /ɹ/, having swapped it for the more common /w/ in a historical shift called the ‘wine-whine merger’. *Wine* and *whine* now sound the same for me, but not (yet) for everyone else. English speech is by no means monolithic, and there is therefore a good and current reason for still spelling these words with WH.

The origins of WH go back to Old English, in which we actually find the two letters reversed. Words like *who* and *what* are spelled *hwa* and *hwæt*.⁵⁰ The thing to note is that their H at that time was not yet functioning like a modifying letter. The sequence of HW was originally supposed to be read like a sequence of two sounds. At a very early point in time, *hwa* and *hwæt* would have begun with a fricative /x/ (as in Scottish *loch*). By the time of late Old English, this had become a breathy /h/, followed in those words by the sound /w/ in *water*. So, *what* was once pronounced like ‘hwatt’, rhyming with *cat*.

At least by the end of the Old English period though, the two sounds were increasingly fused into one, namely the /ɹ/ consonant that, as mentioned, some conservative speech still uses. This bequeathed to Middle English a pair of consonantal counterparts: voiced /w/ and voiceless /ɹ/.

HW therefore came to stand for one sound. That is, the H in words like *hwæt* no longer stood for its own separate sound, but now worked as part of a digraph with W to spell /ɹ/. To bring it in line with the digraphs CH, SH, and TH, we find the order of HW being reversed into WH by Middle English writers, one of whom we will meet in Chapter N.

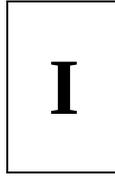
But why the difference between the WH in *what*, *why*, *when* and *who*, *whom*, *whose*? In the first group, WH spells /w/ (in my accent), whereas it represents /h/ in the other. Lippy what is anatomically rather distant from throaty who.

Vowels, as usual, are to blame. The reason why the WH in *who* stands for /h/ and not /w/ is all to do with the specific vowel that the pronoun had in Middle English. That vowel shared certain properties with the old /ɹ/ sound of WH, also having **rounded** lips and a high tongue. Their phonetic similarity led speakers to drop the labial quality of WH in *who*, leaving behind only an H-sound. In other words, it went from ‘hwoo’ to just ‘hoo’. The same reduction before certain vowels is behind the modern pronunciation of *two*. This number has a silent W too, which puts it at odds with related words of duality, like twice and twin.⁵¹

Note that the loss of labiality in *who* must have happened around the 15th century, when a standard spelling for English finally began to emerge (see [Chapters E](#) and [V](#)). If it had happened earlier, we would not expect the older WH combination to have made it into our modern spelling. There is in fact a related word that went through the same process of reduction, except much earlier in time, and so is not spelled with WH today: *how*. As early as Old English times, we find *how* written with a solitary H, namely ‘*hu*’. The Great Vowel Shift would later turn this into our modern *how*. Compared with *who*, *how* lost its labial consonant centuries earlier, and their difference in spelling reflects that.

Although originating in phonetic harmony, the words *who*, *whom* and *whose* are now at odds in speech with other WH-words. However, their WH can still serve a purpose – as a signal to the reader of their function as a question word, one of a group with *what*, *when* and *where*.

I can only hope that this chapter ~~successfully~~ tells the historically and linguistically complex story of H. It has a very full cast, including Phoenicians, Ionians, Russians, Romans, Normans and the English, and this symbol has borne witness to many changes in sound. It has been well utilised over the centuries not only because of the sound that it stands for, but also because of the repeated loss of that sound. Each time, it left H free for new purposes. Perhaps this history of H, from the *И* vowel of Russian to the WH digraph of English, was inevitable. Ever since the Greeks first connected the letter to the consonant /h/, clearly a sound that is so easily lost from a language, H was in for a bumpy ride.



*For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away,
not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is
accomplished.*

~ Gospel of Matthew, 5:18 (English Standard Version)

The letter I is a letter of contrasts. In its shape, it is the simplest letter of the English alphabet, usually no more than a single vertical stroke when capitalised. When lower case, though, the short stump is almost uniquely crowned with an additional dot. It is straightforward in spelling the vowel sounds in *bit* and *bite*, yet also capable of enormous phonetic mischief – notice how the I in *special*, *controversial* and *station* make the preceding C, S and T sound the same. (Since both U and I can cause this chaos, we'll return to this topic in [Chapter U](#).)

In its functions, the letter I also stands out from most of the alphabet. Not only is it extremely common in the spelling of vowels within words, it is in itself a complete word. I is of course one of the first-person singular pronouns in Modern English, along with *me* and *my*, which have the vital job of allowing English speakers to talk about themselves. Only A has also achieved this whole-word status. When used as a pronoun, the customs of English spelling tell us to capitalise it. But why? And when did its diminutive counterpart receive its defining dot?

Despite rhyming with *eye*, the origins of the letter I lie in another body part: the hand. Far from the simple stroke of today, early I was more detailed and bendy, modelled on the Egyptian hieroglyph depicting a hand and forearm:



The common Semitic word for a hand was **yad-*, as it still is in Hebrew today. Following the acrophonic principle, this member of the early alphabet stood for the consonant /j/, as in English *yo-yo*. It appears for example as the first letter on the Lachish comb encountered in [Chapter A](#), still clutching between its teeth the lice of long ago.

By the later era of our Phoenician sources, the old arm and grasping hand has been somewhat abstracted. In Phoenician, it has the shape . This nonetheless still contrasts with the simplicity of the English I. Clearly the letter still had some further simplification to go through.

This occurred in Greece. In the most archaic examples of the Greek alphabet, the letter has the shape of a three-lined lightning bolt.

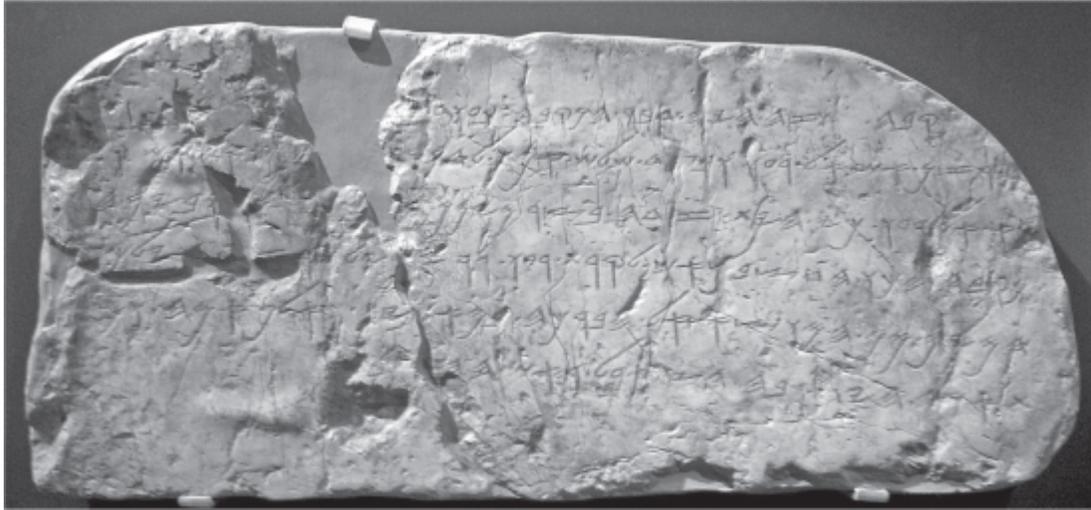


The Greeks redefined its function, changing it from the consonant /j/ (which Ancient Greek had little of) to the vowel /i/ (which Ancient Greek had plenty of). This was a sensible alteration. The sounds /j/ and /i/ have the same relationship as /w/ and /u/, discussed already in [Chapter F](#). One is a semivowel, the other a vowel. In time, the Greeks also straightened the crooked letter out, turning it into simply I.

The Greeks at least continued the letter's Phoenician name *yōd*, by calling it *iota*. This name you might know as a word for some very small thing or amount, used in phrases like *not one iota*. When we consider the uncomplicated Greek letter I, the sayings make sense; *iota* is a simple letter. Yet the use of *iota* in this way may have its origins beyond Greek, in the writing of Hebrew.

Like most of our letters, I has a Hebrew counterpart that also descends from Phoenician . Just like English's, the modern Hebrew alphabet has been on its own journey through the centuries. In our earliest records for the Hebrew language, the script is very much like the Phoenician, really just a regional variant that we call Paleo-Hebrew.⁵² In this, the letter  looks very much like what their Phoenician frenemies to the north were using. One fantastic example of Paleo-Hebrew is the Siloam inscription, dated to the late eighth century BCE. It commemorates the completion of a water tunnel beneath Jerusalem, and celebrates the two groups of builders who had

tirelessly picked away rock and eventually joined up their two tunnels underground.

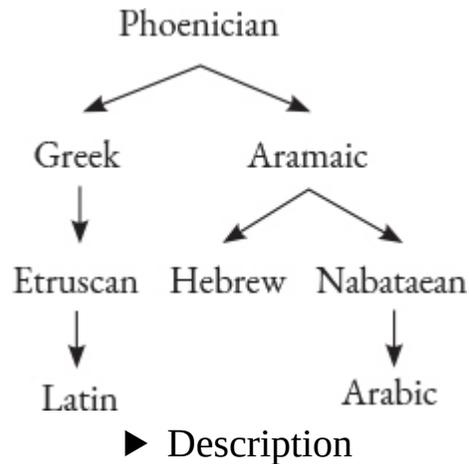


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The manner of writing is very fluid, like cursive. This style, and the absence of a mention of any commanding king, suggest that the text was written by the workmen and for the workmen. Literacy in Iron Age Jerusalem was apparently widespread.

Yet Hebrew writing today is not a direct descendant of Paleo-Hebrew. It comes instead from the Aramaic style, an ancient sibling script. Aramaic was another Semitic language, which originated in Syria and attained great prestige and wide usage through the imperial politics of the region. It's generally believed to have been the mother tongue of a certain teacher called Jesus of Nazareth.

It was the Aramaic adaptation of Phoenician letters that produced the familiar 'square' look of Hebrew today. Altogether, the alphabetic family tree looks a little like this:



Like what the Greeks were doing to the west, Aramaic writing transfigured the letter 𐤀 into a tiny ^ . It is this shrunken symbol that is behind the current Hebrew letter, simply written י .

The Aramaic style is responsible for the letter's association with smallness. We know that Jesus of Nazareth, being a devout Jew, could read the sacred texts that contained the law, history and prophets' words that defined Jewish belief and identity. The language of those texts was mostly Hebrew, but written in the Aramaic script. It therefore contained the tiny letter י , no more than one or two brief strokes. It was this written letter that Jesus had in mind when he made the claim recorded in the Gospel of Matthew. By referring to the texts' most minuscule letter, his point was that nothing at all would be taken out.

Jesus may have said such things in Aramaic, but his claim was recorded in Greek, and the Greek name for this little letter was of course *iota*. Through this quote, the name *iota* made its way westwards out of the Greek-speaking world. In English, it became a word for a small written mark – that is, a *jot*.

Via the Greeks and Etruscans, I was handed down to the Romans. Like their letter V, mentioned in [Chapter F](#), the Latin letter I could stand for both a vowel and a consonant. It served the former function in key vocabulary like VINVM and VERITAS, and the latter role can be seen in illustrious names like IVLIVS CAESAR and IVPITER (remember: no lower case yet).

Throughout the modifications to the Latin alphabet that endured in the Roman and post-Roman world, I remained pretty constant. There was little need nor means to adapt a letter that was so simple. While some letters were

disfigured by the developments of cursive and minuscule handwriting (see [Chapter D](#)), I was largely unaffected. There was, though, a lengthened version of I, called *I longa*, which was used inconsistently by Roman writers. *I longa*, which usually stuck out taller from the baseline, was one way that the Romans could signify that the vowel was pronounced long in its duration.



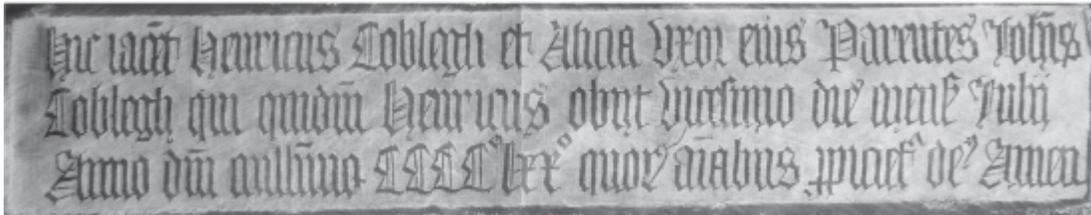
© Merryjack, Wikimedia Commons

► Description

As antiquity turned medieval, monks and monasteries churned out mighty books, and in them pushed Latin letters to new limits, for reasons of practicality and aesthetics. Out of the Carolingian minuscule developed perhaps the definitively medieval script: Gothic.

With origins in 11th-century France and Belgium, the Gothic style of writing is characterised by sharp angles, few curves and rows of vertical parallel lines. The script developed at the point of a quill, being well suited to the sharp edges of a tool used by writers who had a lot of text to get through. The thick weight of the shorter vertical strokes (known as minims) contrasted with the hair-thin connecting lines between them. This meant that multi-minim letters like m, n and u could be almost identical.

Confusion while reading was a potential problem. A dot-less minuscule *i*, one stalk in a forest of stems, could easily be lost to the eye. Try your own eye, and spot all the instances of the letter *i* in this memorial to Henry and Alice Coblegh, who lived in the English county of Devon in the 15th century:



© Unknown sculptor, Wikimedia Commons

However, medieval scribes had the solution to hand. One way was to swap *i* with another letter, namely *y*. In sound, this was considered the same. In its shape, its descending tail made the letter clearer to read. Another way was to augment the letter *i*.

For centuries, handwriting had come with an arsenal of additional symbols and pen strokes that complemented the basic letters. Whole words, if they were very frequent, might not be spelled out in full, but rather only with a simple and single dedicated symbol. Small dashes could be jotted above, below or across a letter. These very often signalled an abbreviation. To save costly ink and space on the page, certain letters might be omitted, with their presence in the word indicated only by a dash above one of the remaining letters. Such a dash was known in Latin as a *titulus*, which English borrowed as the term *tittle*. The dash and context would guide the reader to read *nō* as *numero* ‘in number’, or *£* as *libra* ‘pound’. These medieval abbreviations are still in use today as *No.* for ‘number’, and the symbol for pound sterling, £.

These dashes may have started out as optional, but as the Romans’ old letters came to be used to write down even more languages and even more sounds, they became invaluable. Some languages have made good use of them to spell sounds that the basic letters alone would struggle with. Jan Hus (c. 1370–1415), a Czech scholar and religious reformer, was a pioneer of the use of additional marks above letters (diacritics) to help distinguish between sounds, and therefore make Roman writing work better for the Czech language. What he started is still there today atop letters like Č, Š and Ř, now essential to various European orthographies. This allowed such

languages to stick closely to the principle of one letter for one sound. Czech writers had previously relied on digraphs containing Z, an archaic practice preserved in the English spelling of Czech.

Today, English speakers might look at languages like Czech, which have complemented the Latin alphabet with a plethora of diacritics, and think that these languages have gone down a different path to English spelling. This would be a fair impression. With the exception of some borrowed words (like *fiancée*), English spelling hasn't adopted the use of the medieval marks to modify old letters. However, one legacy of theirs lives on. To remedy the potential problems with reading a lower-case i, a dash was added above it, and later a dot. From the 14th century onwards, we see dotted i increase in usage. It was in circulation in time for Johannes Gutenberg's setting up of his printing press in the 15th century. Its inclusion in early printed texts like the Gutenberg Bible ensured its success. Ever since, we have dotted our i's.

What about capital I? When used to refer to oneself, this letter egotistically demands to be capitalised. This spelling is very old, going back to the early Middle English period.

With the first few examples in the 12th and 13th centuries, we find writers at that time spelling the all-important pronoun both as *i* and *I*. Its modern pronunciation, rhyming with *eye*, is a later development. It's yet another consequence of the Great Vowel Shift, introduced in [Chapter E](#). Before getting shifted, it would have been pronounced like the vowel in *meet*. With such a short but vital word, it's not surprising that *I* increasingly found itself capitalised; to avoid confusion and fusion with the following word in the mind of the reader, capitalisation ensured the pronoun's independent status.

Capitalising *I* was only desirable because of earlier changes to the pronoun *I*. In short, *I* used to be longer. In Old English, the word was *ic*. This was pronounced like *ick* in northern England, and like *itch* in the south. Our modern word emerges from the shortening of *ic*, as its final consonant came to be dropped. This was a natural change for such a frequent word, beginning in instances where the pronoun was unstressed.

Unstressed words, those that lack importance and usually serve grammatical purposes, are often reduced in their sounds as we rush through them on our way to more significant words. Compare, for example, English

to, *for* or *your*, which we most often pronounce as just *t'*, *f'* and *y'*. The possessive pronoun *our* has a stressed, emphatic version that rhymes with *hour*, and an unstressed form that sounds like *aah* or *aar*, depending on your accent. The unstressed, less complex *our* is more common, and may yet oust the other from speech entirely, just as simple *I* did.

Nonetheless, the dominance of *I* was not a given. Over the Middle English period, shortened *I* had to compete with many alternatives in both sound and spelling to achieve the status of standard. The southern *itch*-form seems to have survived as late as the 19th century in places like the English county of Somerset. It even fused with a frequent following word to create things like *chill* for *I will*.

Chill not let go, zir, without vurther 'casion.

~ William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 4.6

This chapter has now addressed the initial issues concerning the letter I, from its handy origins in the very early alphabet to its selfish status as an English personal pronoun. Yet the story of I is not complete. This letter was responsible for birthing a whole other letter, a daughter that now follows I in the alphabet and in the next chapter.

J

... for distinctiones of both sound and symbol, I wald commend the symbol and the name of i and u to the voual sound; ... the symboles of j and v to the Latin consonantes

~ Alexander Hume, *Orthographie and Congruitie of the Britan Tongue*, c. 1620

Compared with the preceding letters, the consonant letter J is a very recent addition to our alphabet, perhaps the most recent. Youthful J struggled for centuries to gain its independence from its parent, the letter I, behind which it still trails in the alphabetic order. Like I, J also bears a dot when lower-case, added to minuscule i before its split into two letters was widely acknowledged. Though the shape of J is of considerable age, it was long regarded by writers, scholars and students as simply a variant way of writing I. This worked much the same way as we might think of a and its hookless variant α as the same letter today. The slow separation of I and J takes our alphabetic adventure from ancient Rome to 18th-century England, specifically to one particularly prominent man of letters.

Despite its youth, the letter J is far from constant in its sound across languages today. How English pronounces J, as in a word like *jar*, is not at all how Spanish and German use it in their words like *fajita* and *ja*. Italians meanwhile barely use it at all. Like a Part II to [Chapter I](#), this chapter explores the gradual emergence of J. It has two parts: the story of emerging sounds, and the parallel story of how the letter J became a necessity for spelling those sounds. The Romans, though, with whom this story begins, would never have thought so.

* * *

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the letter I had two distinct functions in the days of Caesar. We should revisit what these were.

The first was to express a vowel sound. Fulfilling this is what I continues to do in English, in words like *this*, *is*, *continues* and *like*. The second was to spell the consonantal counterpart to that vowel (a semivowel). This is a sound that English instead usually spells with Y, as in *yes* and *yolk*. This was a reasonable dual function for the letter. It would have been clear to Roman readers which of the two functions a particular I was serving. However, spoken language makes a habit of messing up neat systems of spelling, in favour of something new.

The seeds of future letters were sown when the semivowel (officially referred to as /j/) began to change in later spoken Latin. Through this change, the vowel and the consonant drifted apart, beyond what one letter could spell. In the taverns, shops and bathhouses of Rome, Milan, Paris and Lyon, the consonant /j/ was shifting in the minds and mouths of speakers. At the beginning of words, /j/ became a sound pronounced with a bit more friction in the air, similar to the sound at the start of the English word *human*.

We cannot say for sure why this happened or where it originated, but we do at least know that the new pronunciation caught on over a large area of western Europe. This was an everyday or ‘vulgar’ pronunciation, barely acknowledged in our written sources, but it was responsible for how words of Latin origin are now pronounced in the modern languages of Italy, France and Spain.

Take Italian, for example. Latin words that started with /j/ turned into Italian words starting with /d͡ʒ/. These are the two sounds in English *yet* and *jet*. This shift is how Latin *iocus*, pronounced like ‘yokkus’, has transformed into Italian *gioco*. Likewise, the Roman quality of being *iustus* (‘yoostus’) is now Italian *giusto*, sounding much like English *just*. The Roman month of *ianuarius*, named after the two-faced god Janus, has transformed into the Italian month of *gennaio* (January).

The consonant developed the same way in the central region of France where the French language was born. There, *iocus*, *iustus* and *ianuarius* have become *jeu*, *juste* and *janvier*. These were also pronounced with /d͡ʒ/ in Old French, like Italian today. The consonant in French has since changed further into simply /ʒ/. This is the quintessentially French sound present in its pronoun *je*.

South of the Pyrenees, in the cradle of the Spanish language, Latin words that began with /j/ travelled down one of several avenues of possible phonetic change. *Iocus* and *iustus* at least were pronounced with a /z/ in the era of Old Spanish, but this sound itself underwent further merges and shifts. Their modern Spanish descendants, *juego* and *justo*, now start with the /x/ sound heard at the end of a Scottish *loch!*

A key thing to note here is that the Latin /j/ sound merged at an early point with the once-separate sound of soft G. Latin words like *iocus* and *genu* were once very different in their initial consonants, but post-Roman shifts and mergers have meant that French *jeu* and *genou* today begin with the same sound. Their spelling in French continues to point to their pronunciation pre-merger. Yet, over the border, in Italian, this too is gone. Italian now sensibly spells all such words with a G (e.g. *gioco* and *ginocchio*), regardless of whether in Latin they began with a G or an I.

This is all a lot of sounds and abstract information. The main point is that the sounds of Latin changed over the course of the Roman era, while the alphabet lagged behind through the Middle Ages. The letter I, which once served two similar sounds, was now caught between a vowel and a selection of quite different consonants. In time, writers of different languages would come to realise that these sounds really demanded two letters. For centuries, the solution hid under their noses.

As briefly mentioned in [Chapter I](#), the Romans had a lengthened form of I, called *I longa*. It visibly sticks out above its fellow letters, and it appears often but inconsistently in our Roman sources. This practice was maintained in cursive handwriting as Europe passed from the late classical to the early medieval period. *I longa* most often appears at the beginning of words, but writers in ninth-century Spain and southern Italy also pioneered its use for old and new cases of the semivowel /j/. The local word for ‘Italy’, pronounced like ‘*Ital-ya*’, might therefore be spelled *Itallia*, with two long Is.

Writing habits of this era began the association between *I longa*, the beginnings of words, and spoken consonants. It was useful to have a letter shape that reminded the reader that its sound was the consonant /j/, not the vowel /i/. A Latin word like *cuius* ‘whose’ could be written *culus*, to be pronounced like ‘*koo-yus*’, not ‘*kwee-us*’. As time went by and minuscule scripts developed further, *I longa* was lowered. Instead of standing taller

than other letters, it came to jut out below the baseline. This hanging tail is known as its descender, and was often swished or hooked to the left. From this leftward lean, the familiar shapes of J and j emerged.

It took a while for aspiring alphabetic reformers to realise the potential of this longer version of I. Antonio de Nebrija in Spain and Gian Giorgio Trissino in Italy were two Renaissance men who sought to help out their native languages, equipping them with a more appropriate system of spelling. Trissino, born not far from Venice in 1478, realised that Latin letters could not perfectly capture the various vowels of Italian. So, he argued for adopting extra letters from Greek. To win the highest approval in the land, he even submitted his reformed spelling in 1524 to Pope Clement VII – as Trissino wrote, ‘*al santissimo nōstro signore papa Clemente*’ (‘to our most holy lord, Pope Clement’). In this innovation at least, his reformation was unsuccessful.

However, Nebrija and Trissino left a lasting legacy with *I longa*. For their respective languages, the two scholars proposed that I and *I longa* should be assigned to separate sounds. No longer should the lengthened letter be an optional variant of I. Nebrija was the first (in 1492) to put forward that I ought to be used only for vowels, and *I longa* for consonants. Spanish spelling continues this practice to this day, although the specific consonant involved has changed. Italian writers would eventually decide that their need for J was not great enough; a joint effort from I and G could serve their purposes. Nonetheless, across Europe at this time the letter J was beginning to extract itself from I.

This division of labour spread north, through France, the Netherlands and then Germany. Later in the 16th century, we start to see individual German writers using I and J for the two different purposes. J was and still is the German letter for the consonant /j/, as in *ja*, *jung* and *jodeln*. This was a clear break with earlier German practices. For centuries prior, we observe tremendous variation in how medieval writers in Germany and beyond used the letter. What was for them simply *I longa* could even stand for a vowel in the middle of a word, perhaps simply because of the preferences of a particular scribe. It had been especially common at the end of sequences of I, as in Roman numerals. A number like eight had often been written *viiij*.⁵³

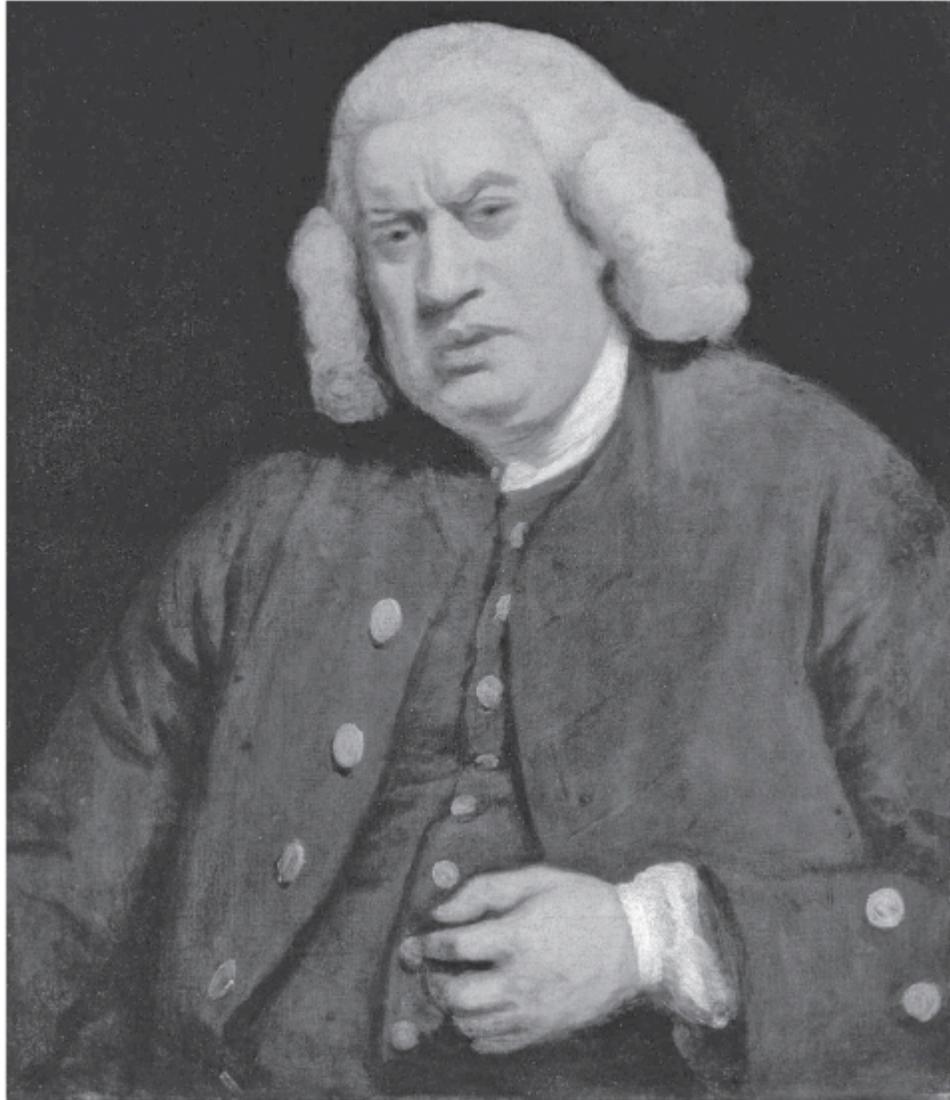
In time, the new system braved the crossing to Britain and was slowly adopted for spelling the English language. To be precise, *I longa* was already long established on the island, but medieval Britons would have

thought of it as simply a variant of I. In fact, some writers were signalling the consonant usage by combining *I longa* with an H. In some Middle English texts, *Jesus* is written *Jhesus*. If this alternative practice had taken off, we might tell *jhokes* and eat *jhelly*.

Instead, the long form of I came to be consonantal, although that sound differed from Continental practices. Rather than assigning J to the semivowel /j/, as in German, English writers from the 1630s onwards dedicated it instead to the consonant /d͡ʒ/, as in *joke*. Specifically, it was generally used for /d͡ʒ/ at the start of words adopted from Old Norman or French, themselves of Latin origin. There it remains in words like *jacket*, *jealousy*, *jewel*, *joy*, *judge* and *juice*.

Assigning J exclusively to this function was a very natural step. Most of this vocabulary went back to Latin words that began with a written I. Given the longstanding practice of using the lengthened I at the start of words, they had therefore been written optionally with an *I longa* for centuries. The consonant behind that letter I had changed long ago, becoming /d͡ʒ/ in Old French, and now at last the spelling had caught up. J was now distinguished in appearance from I, with its own dedicated sound to spell. Like any self-respecting member of the alphabet, J in time acquired its own name. Today, we call this letter *jay*, but it used to be *iy*, rhyming with I.

It would take a little more time for J to be thought of as a totally separate letter. To illustrate this, we can bring in a historical figure who looms large in the history of the English language. In 1755, a highly influential dictionary of English was published by one Samuel Johnson. Born in the city of Lichfield in 1709, Dr Johnson achieved considerable fame during his lifetime as a writer, speaker, thinker and larger-than-life character. Here he is, painted by Joshua Reynolds in c. 1772, and immortalised forever with a fearsome scowl:



© Tate Gallery, Wikimedia Commons

His dictionary, which took Johnson and his team nine years to plan and write, was by no means the first English dictionary, but its accessible style and meticulous (and sometimes humorous) quality made it a great success.

Even as late as the 18th century, a dictionary such as Johnson's listed words that began with I and J within the same chapter. After the pronoun *I*, the next word that his dictionary covers is *jabber*. Johnson did at least acknowledge the deep divide in both their functions and their shape:

I is in English considered both as a vowel and consonant; though, since the vowel and consonant differ in their form as well as sound, they may be more properly accounted two letters.

The great lexicographer recognised that he could no longer write his surname as *Iohnson*. The slow divorce of J from I, centuries in the making, was essentially complete.

J has an alphabetic rival in carrying out its phonetic duty. Because of that ancient merger of sounds in Latin, J stands for the same sound as the soft G in words like *genetic* and *gist*. It isn't a completely redundant letter, though; J is able to step in when the following vowel would lead us to read a G as hard instead. In a word like *got*, the O directs us to pronounce the G as a /g/ sound. Therefore, before A, O and U, the letter J helps us to spell words like *jaw*, *jot* and *jump*.

The fact that J and G can stand for the same sound has meant that some words have historically exchanged the two letters. In some cases, this variation obscures the connections between words with a common origin. To give an example, *gentilis* is a Latin word that originally referred to a Roman family or clan. In the post-Roman world, it came to be used for the qualities of the aristocracy and the airs and graces of the high-born (that is, the *gentry*). It's the origin of modern words like *gentle* and *genteel*. These English descendants of Latin *gentilis* maintain its G, but this is not the case with another descendant, transmitted via Modern French, and used for an air of gentlemanly style and an easy-going attitude: *jaunty*. Similarly, a medieval court *jester* told *jests*. These haven't always been funny; they could be stories of brave deeds. The word goes back to Latin *gesta*, referring to personal acts and achievements, and spelled with a G not an I. The G is still there in the related word *gesture*.

You might also have tried Italian ice cream, *gelato*. This Italian word descends from Latin *gelare*, meaning 'to freeze', which further north also gave rise to French *geler*. Ever since the 14th century, English speakers have known about the semi-see-through *gelatin* dish made by boiling and cooling animal bones and skin, and called in French a 'frost' (*gelée*). However, in Shakespeare's masterpiece *Hamlet*, written in c. 1600, the word is instead spelled with a consonantal I.

By them thrice he walkt,
By their opprest and feare-surprized eyes,
Within his Truncheons length; whilst they bestil'd
Almost to Ielly with the Act of feare,

Stand dumbe and speake not to him.

~ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1.2

Since the 17th century and the adoption of J as we know it today, we have spelled this dish *jelly*.

These historical fluctuations between J and G are really to be expected, when both letters can stand for the same sound. Spellings like *jest* and *jaunty* today have the official stamp of standard, enforced by our teachers or our spell-checkers, but they are products of a language that for centuries existed without a ruling authority. English spelling up to the 17th century has a very organic feel. There is plenty of order and convention, but there is also variation from region to region and writer to writer. An individual 17th-century writer still had a free hand to choose between *jelly* and *gelly*. What determined which spelling people opted for was custom and habit; you wrote how others around you wrote. If your mother had written to you praising a particularly delicious *jelly*, it would be strange to respond asking for the recipe for this famed *gelly*. While literacy among English speakers was by this time widespread, and printed and published materials travelled over whole countries, there was no one person or rulebook that might dictate that *gelly* will henceforth be *jelly*, or even get rid of the co-existence of J and soft G altogether.

Dr Johnson and his dictionary, in the 18th century, could have been that authority. He fully acknowledged the many competing rules and conventions at play in the written English of his day; in his preface to the dictionary, his impression was that the orthography of English was 'unsettled and fortuitous'. It was a hotchpotch of practices, adopted from different countries and even different regions within England, and Dr Johnson recognised that it was in his power to sort out some of the mess.

Every language has its anomalies, which, though inconvenient, and in themselves once unnecessary, must be tolerated among the imperfections of human things ... but every language has likewise its improprieties and absurdities, which it is the duty of the lexicographer to correct or proscribe.

By his own admission, dictionary writers have a normative role to play; how they spell words can influence how others do. A dictionary as

successful as Dr Johnson's could have reformed and revolutionised English, setting the standard not only for individual words, but for the whole relationship between sounds and the alphabet. It was not unusual for respected individuals or even official organisations to exert control over languages. Institutions like the Italian *Accademia della Crusca* or the *Académie Française* in Paris had for over a century not only studied how people were speaking and writing, but also told them how they ought to.

The circumstances of the era were also in reform's favour. Mass literacy and media could have helped a new system to be widely promoted and adopted. The new dictionary reached an appreciative American audience, having been published 20 years before the outbreak of the American War of Independence against Great Britain. A Johnsonian redesign of written English would have had the time to find favour in the newly independent United States, in a rare window of unity and opportunity, before new political borders divided up the English language and sent it down different national paths.

Dr Johnson, however, bottled it. While his dictionary definitely makes implicit and explicit judgements on how words should be spelled, it does not attempt to overhaul English orthography. He admits to and defends his conservative approach in the dictionary's preface:

I have endeavoured to proceed with a scholar's reverence for antiquity, and a grammarian's regard to the genius of our tongue. I have attempted few alterations, and among those few, perhaps the greater part is from the modern to the ancient practice. ... Change, says Hooker, is not made without inconvenience, even from worse to better. There is in constancy and stability a general and lasting advantage, which will always overbalance the slow improvements of gradual correction. Much less ought our written language to comply with the corruptions of oral utterance, or copy that which every variation of time or place makes different from itself, and imitate those changes, which will again be changed, while imitation is employed in observing them.

Johnson's self-justification here is very revealing. He holds his hands up to maintaining connections to written languages of the past. His 'reverence for antiquity' is the attitude that has preserved the two Cs in a Latin-derived

word like *circus*, despite their different sounds. Yet aside from a historian's interest in ancient Greece and Rome, Dr Johnson makes the valid point that as soon as we change our letters to suit our sounds, those sounds will inevitably shift again. English pronunciation has changed in many ways since the 1950s, let alone the 1750s, and a Johnsonian reform would likely be out of date again by now.

Perhaps the great man felt that a radical reformation was, even in 1755, fundamentally futile. It wasn't that scholars at the time were unable to mend English's relationship to the alphabet; early phoneticians already had a great grasp of the sounds of the language. Instead, Johnson's reluctance to progress beyond small corrections may have come from the sheer size of the task. A perfect alphabet for 18th-century English, whatever that might have looked like, could have ended up so different from current conventions that it would have been unrecognisable, and incomprehensible to the many people who had the misfortune not to be Dr Johnson. It would have been a great scholarly achievement, but unlikely to be appreciated by the (book-buying) public at large. Perhaps this outcome was what he had in mind when he wrote of change as an unavoidable 'inconvenience', even if for the better.

Whether he fully realised it or not, Samuel Johnson's dictionary is a monument in the history of English spelling, but also a massive missed opportunity. It existed at a critical moment in the development of English, when technology and politics could have collaborated to update English spelling. It was perhaps the final chance to do so. Instead, the great dictionary gave a seal of approval to the mishmash of spelling practices in current usage. It maintained Magic E, and continued the Roman-like reverence for Q.

More generally, dictionaries like Dr Johnson's have enshrined the attitude that we should not adapt borrowed words to work with English spelling conventions. Since 1755, the English language has adopted heaps of new vocabulary from other languages. Just think of all the culinary terms taken from Italian, with their spelling unchanged: *spaghetti*, *gnocchi*, *cappuccino*, *broccoli*, *fettuccine*. English menus do not tempt us with cheesy '*peetsas*', just as the head of a kitchen is not a '*shef*'. In 'the great orthographical contest' (the doctor's own words) between the history and the pronunciation of an English word, history wins.

This attitude applies to J-bearing words that have since entered the English lexicon. Some suit the usual English use for J. Words like *pyjamas*, *bhaji* and *raj*, adopted through British rule over India, are pronounced in the original Hindi-Urdu or Persian with the same /d͡ʒ/ sound in English *jaw*. Other words, however, have brought all-new uses for the letter J into English. The acquisition of Spanish vocabulary has taught modern English readers to know that, occasionally, J is to be read like a /h/, as an approximation of the Spanish sound /x/. This is how the letter is used in loanwords like *fajita* and *jalapeño*.

All this is not to say that English spelling hasn't changed since Dr Johnson's day, nor that writers have followed his approved spellings to the letter. We disagree with him today on at least one word mentioned multiple times in this chapter, and included in his dictionary as follows:

JELLY. *n. f.* [*gelatinum*, Latin. See GELLY, which is the proper orthography.]