

Waistcoats in Cirencester: A Corpus-Driven Investigation of Spelling Pronunciations in the History of English

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A common assumption in modern linguistics is based on the Saussurean notion of the ‘primacy of the spoken word’: As Coulmas points out, writing is generally considered to be a secondary instance of speech by linguists, while laypeople tend to believe the opposite (2003: 12). Spelling pronunciations, that is, words that come to be pronounced to match what their spelling suggests (Deterding & Mohamad 2016), are an interesting phenomenon in this regard. The pronunciation of these words is directly affected by their written representation, which means that a core level of human language changes based on what is frequently considered a ‘mere technology’ (Coulmas 2003: 10).

One key hypothesis with regard to spelling pronunciations is that infrequent words are more likely to be affected (Fromkin et al. 2007: 561). Since their pronunciation may not be well-known (and English spelling is considered by many laypeople to be erratic), people use their conscious and subconscious knowledge of grapheme-phoneme correspondence to guess the likeliest pronunciation. This paper presents the first results of a corpus-driven study investigating the claim that a lower frequency means a higher chance of spelling pronunciations to occur. The etymological development of the pronunciation of selected words that are particularly infrequent in historical corpora such as ARCHER and the Helsinki corpus and more recent corpora such as the BNC1994 is traced by considering their entries in the OED and the Webster Dictionary. It is shown that, indeed, infrequent words tend to be affected, but they are typically also morphologically and/or phonologically complex. Examples include words such as *waistcoat*, which changed from [ˈwɛskət/] to [ˈweɪstkəʊt/], and the city of Cirencester, which is now commonly pronounced [ˈsaɪrənsɛstər] rather than [ˈsɪsɪstər].

Other factors apart from frequency, such as prescriptive commentary on how to pronounce words, are also taken into consideration. Overall, it is shown that complex writing systems of languages such as English can indeed influence pronunciation if certain criteria are met. English is shown as a special case in this regard, since the lack of a spelling reform has had a significant impact on the pronunciation of many words.

References: Coulmas, F. (2003). *Writing systems. An introduction to their linguistic analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Deterding, D. & N. R. Mohamad (2016). Spelling pronunciation in English. *ELT Journal* 71(1), 87–91. Fromkin, V., R. Rodman & N. Hyams (2007). *An introduction to language*. Ninth Edition. Boston, MA: Wadsworth.