

Chapter 14

The Spelling Gap in English: Economy of Rules and Resolution of Puzzles

Blasius Achiri-Taboh
University of Buea, Cameroon

ABSTRACT

Spelling is a major item on the topic of language gap. Since the 1950s, English spelling has been an attraction to scholars. What this implies is that there is need for increased research on rules of spelling in the language. This chapter examines how the rule for choosing between -tion and -sion works in a bid to render it more economical as one way of bridging the language gap. Specifically, it is demonstrated that base-words that take the t-form have a smaller set of conditions that can more easily be mastered than do those that take the s-form, thus forestalling the latter.

INTRODUCTION

In his essay *How to bridge the language gap* on the online forum everyday-democracy.org, Elenes (n.d.) points out that “[m]any kinds of people make up a community, and often times a significant proportion of the population speak a language other than English,” that is, as English is generally considered to be a global lingua franca. In terms of the languages and/or dialects that people speak, Elenes’s use of the word “kinds” can be taken to mean the presence, in a given society, of people with different levels of competence in the language skills. Elenes also points out that “[f]or a community dialogue to be inclusive, it’s important to offer interpretation services.” Such services are required, not only when people can neither speak nor understand the language in use, but also when people can only do so at a (very) low skill level. Offering such services is one way of bridging the language gap.

Apart from listening and speaking which can take place either in a face-to-face speech act situation or in a telephone conversation (with great distances between), reading and writing are essential for effective communication in a world of great distances between people who need to share ideas, with the advantage of writing over speaking being that ideas can more adequately be coordinated, given the possibility of ed-

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iting. In other words, if anything, all four essential language skills are to be taken seriously. The idea of a language gap is now all too common – see Johnson & Zentella (2017) and relevant citations there. Strauss (2013) states that “[w]e hear a lot about how children from low-income families often enter school with a ‘word gap,’ meaning they have heard and know[n] fewer words than their more affluent peers, a reality that puts them at a disadvantage from the very beginning of their education.” In the case of reading and writing, therefore, appropriate spelling is required, other aspects of writing aside. Thus, although it might controversially be asked, as in Woods (2004), if society should place so much value on correct spelling, users of English around the world generally agree that appropriate spelling is important for appropriate written communication and/or correspondence. Poor spelling typically reflects a lack of writing skills. Bilchik & Cole (2012, p. 124), for instance, state that “on the topic of written communications, be aware that how you write reflects on you. Poor spelling and grammar can quickly spoil a professional image.” Richards (2002, p. 186) also points out that “it is easy to spoil a piece of written work with poor spelling [and that] some people will not take what you have written seriously if you haven’t spelled it correctly.” What this means is that poor spelling which, as we see in the next few paragraphs, is all too common among users of English – natives and non-natives, is a major contributor to the language gap, in this case, a spelling gap.

The much attention paid to the existence of a word gap for many children of school-going age is suggestive of the need for proper language policy and political will. But this alone will not be adequate enough, as the nitty-gritty of any given language involves the entirety of its grammar and orthography. Following the case made by Taylor (1981), therefore, that English spelling is not as unsystematic as many would see it to be, Achiri-Taboh (2018b) has demonstrated the need for increased research on issues of English spelling, for example, and shown (p. 42) that users of English are generally good at following spelling rules when such rules are readily available. An increase in research is necessary, if effective bridging of the language gap is to be achieved, as the use of words in writing is not enough if there is no proper and convenient way of spelling them correctly. In this chapter, therefore, the author takes on the issue of English spelling as a problem that is intrinsic to the concept of “language gap.” Specifically, the author seeks to show that effective research on English spelling can be profitable in bridging the language gap by enabling English spellers generally to spell better.

English spelling has been in the spotlight since the 8th century. This is because it is not so easy a thing to grapple with. In LearningExpress (2006, p. 15), for example, it is pointed out that

[in] the English language, if you simply wrote words the way they sound, you’d come up with some very peculiar spellings. If you tried to sound out every word and pronounce it exactly the way it’s written, you’d come up with some pretty odd pronunciations too.

Flare-up of anger like in the epigraph that precedes this introduction by Andrew Carnegie in the early 20th Century, as cited by Gauld & Lubin (2016), is totally expected in this situation, not least because English has since been such a widely used language on a daily basis as an international lingua franca. Thus, the question is often triggered why English words do not always get written the way they are spoken, with the effect that English spelling has been at the center of scholarly debates since the 1950s. For example, see West (1955; 1965), with a recent surge among scholars, including Carney (1994), Upward & Davidson (2011), Crystal (2012), Ekundayo (2014), Farlex International (2017), and Achiri-Taboh (2018a; 2018b). From the epigraph, it is clear that even the spelling of *weird* is undeniably weird, to say the least, talk less of those like *enough*, *queue* and *yacht*, whose reading (i.e., pronunciation) as /eˈnaʊg^h/, /ˈkwe.we/, and /jæt/ by (fresh) learners at first meeting leaves only experienced language

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