

## Similarities and Differences on English and French Spelling

par

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### Abstract

This paper addresses the issue relating to English and French spelling. Thus, it will be a question of talking about the historical origin of the spellings of the English and French languages. One of the major concerns of didacticians is spelling. This consists of writing a word correctly without errors. It is difficult for learners to master, which has caused significant upheaval in everyone's lives in recent years. And this remains a complex judgment for didactics specialists. The latter consider it to be an important point for the learner because if they cannot write correctly, they will be blamed and badly judged. Indeed, French has never finished revealing its many exceptions and surprising spellings. Its mastery is the main goal that every language learner seeks to achieve. It is the elementary criterion which determines language performance.

Spelling is the way of writing words following a set of rules defined as standard for a given language; it belongs to writing. Spoken language is made up of phonemes while written language is made up of graphemes; not everything that is written can necessarily be pronounced. The number of letters in a word is not always equal to the number of sounds: for example the word (hospital) has seven letters and we pronounce six letters, the number of graphemes is higher compared to the phonemes.

The practical FLE teaching dictionary by Jean-Pierre ROBERT (2002: 122) gives us the following definition: “the term spelling takes its origin from the Latin orthographia, a word itself coming from Greek [...] “correct writing” ([...] “right/fair”, [...] “I write”). Spelling is therefore the way of writing a word considered to be the only correct one. Consequently, [...] spelling obeys linguistic norms, that is to say precise rules, the famous spelling rules.

### 2. Theoretical models

Different aspects are decisive in the development of good spelling skills. In order to determine them, it is essential to present to you the developmental models described more than 30 years ago and to which we still refer today. Most studies on the development of spelling rely on the famous two-way reading model (orthographic and phonological) described by Frith (1985) and adapted to spelling by numerous authors: Barry (1994), Ellis & Young (1988),

Roeltgen & Heilman (1984) and Tainturier & Rapp (2000). Indeed, there would be, as with reading, two processes for writing a word. On the one hand, a phonological transcription (non-lexical route) for regular and unambiguous words and on the other hand, an orthographic transcription (lexical route) for irregular words which can only be spelled correctly if they are in memory. Access to the different orthographic forms stored in memory can be done with or without access to the semantic system (word meaning).

Furthermore, developmental models of spelling suggest that the acquisition of writing occurs through three successive stages, each characterized by the use of a specific strategy. They postulate the existence of three stages: logographic (stage during which the child becomes familiar with writing and attempts to write a few words without being aware that he is using an alphabetical code), alphabetical (the child becomes aware of the units present in the different words and of this redundancy in speaking and writing and then makes the link between the sounds (phonemes) and the letters (graphemes) and orthographic (the child becomes aware of the fact that the rules of conversion do not allow all the words to be written and certain forms must be stored in memory). The alphabetic and orthographic stages correspond, respectively, to the non-lexical and lexical pathways described above. Once these routes are completely automated, the writer then reaches the expert level.

Today, authors agree on the independence of these two paths but this was not always the case. This was a highly debated subject but it is now clear that the use of each pathway can be done independently despite the fact that the development of the orthographic pathway is mainly based on that of the phonological pathway.

In addition, they also did not agree on the organization of the different stages of acquisition (logographic, alphabetical and orthographic). Thus, Ehri (1991) postulated a succession of these stages justified by the fact that they can only develop once the lower level has been mastered, while others, like Mousty & Alegria (1996), questioned this succession because it would not take into account the complexity of the spelling acquisition processes. These authors therefore rather advocated a coexistence of the two procedures.

Many studies have also been conducted to link reading and spelling skills. Thus, many of them have highlighted a strong correlation between these two skills at the beginning of learning written language (Caravolas, Hulme, & Snowling, 2001; Ellis & Cataldo, 1990; Juel, Griffith, & Gough, 1986; etc.). Indeed, according to Ehri (1997), these two skills are based

on common bases: the alphabetical principle and knowledge of specific spelling allowing rapid recognition of words.

However, although reading promotes the emergence of spelling, these two skills do not account for the same cognitive processes. Reading is based on a recognition process while spelling is based on a recall process, which is why its acquisition is more tedious (Bosman & Van Orden, 1997). It is therefore clear that, despite the certainty of the existence of an orthographic lexicon common to spelling and reading (Burt & Tate, 2002; Holmes & Davis, 2002; Perfetti, 1997; Share, 1995), the simple fact of reading a word does not allow one to integrate its spelling (Perfetti, 1997; Share, 1995; Treiman, 1998).

A study by Conrad (2008) also highlighted a greater contribution from the transfer of spelling practice to reading compared to the reverse transfer. This discovery supports the idea of an interaction between these two skills during their development. However, it is important to keep in mind that they involve different mechanisms.

Thus, children must rely on basic conversion rules, usage rules and morphology in order to write a large number of words. However, in French, many words must be memorized in order to be written correctly (Bousquet, Cogis, Ducard, Massonnet & Jaffré, 1999). Indeed, French is a complex language when it comes to spelling...

## **2. Historical origin of language spellings**

To arrive at the current spelling, it was necessary to go through phonetics and pronunciation, because human beings first learn to speak and then to write. Nowadays, writing occupies an important place in various fields, such as the field of teaching. In French, we use the alphabet to form words, sentences and even write texts, works, articles, etc. To write correctly, we use spelling. This in linguistics refers to a system of rules concerning the writing of a language in relation to which the forms that users create when writing this language are judged as correct or incorrect.

Indeed, didactics and linguists attach particular importance to spelling. They took stock of the problem of spelling which arises among French-speaking users, particularly its written form; the individual is biologically predisposed to speak and possibly but not necessarily to write. However, writing serves to fix the spoken word by using sounds and phonemes. The receiver, sometimes, cannot understand the messages of the sender, which presents homophones which are words that are pronounced the same way but which are written

differently. This leads to misunderstandings and misunderstandings, and therefore communication problems (failure of communication between individuals). For this, mastery of spelling is more than necessary. This requires knowledge of its history.

In fact, the history of spelling dates back to the 8th century. At that time, the only conceivable spelling was that of Latin: those who knew how to read and write the substance in this language. French is almost exclusively spoken and when we have to write we naturally resort to the traditional alphabet. Over the years, French spelling has emancipated itself and freed itself from its Latin model. The graphics are becoming more systematized and simplified.

In the 11th and 12th centuries, this trend developed and flourished under the influence of jugglers. Indeed, *chanson de gestes* are almost the only form of literature that is written in the common language. From the 9th century onwards, jugglers constituted rich epic material of great importance which was distributed in long poems. “The few manuscripts prior to the 12th century which remain to us as small “pocket manuscripts” – give rise to an important observation: they have a relatively perfected and unified graphic system, which is all the more surprising given that the jugglers came from four corners of a France divided into very distinct dialects.” (BURNEY Pierre, 1959: 08).

The jugglers who travel throughout France and even abroad sought to give a common language to the songs of gesture; this unification effort continued to take place in the schools where the manuscripts were written (BEAULIEUX Charles, 1927). They retained control of the French language and spelling in the 11th and 12th centuries despite some hostility from the church, because they were not learned like the priests who had created French writing in the 9th century; this is a requirement of their profession (note the bible).

“It is, in our opinion, the jugglers, directly interested in perfecting spelling, who, little by little, pruned away everything superfluous that the first writers had left, thus creating a spelling made for the ear and not for the eye, which was to leave, in the memory of the jugglers, sounds. We also find in pocket manuscripts, writing that is already phonetic in broad outline, since everything that is written is pronounced” (BURNEY Pierre, 1959: 09).

From the 13th to the 15th century, linguistic power changed hands. Indeed, public writings begin to multiply in unimaginable ways. It is therefore no longer in the manuscripts of literary works that we must look for the explanation of the changes occurring in spelling, but in the royal administration which requires writings to operate its judicial bodies. This is why it

could not give up Latin writing, therefore the royalty needed to preserve it as the only language capable of being understood by all the scholars of the country with multiple dialects.

The Latinization of French spelling is an ordinary phenomenon because the men of the Middle Ages were truly bilingual and Latin enjoyed a great privilege in these times: the language of the church and scholars, heir of antiquity, it is the only spiritual vehicle common to all the elites of France. The French language only imitated this great model. Children learn to read from Latin texts and legal jargon is also common to all who write.

It was in 1470 that the first work came out of the Sorbonne presses. This made it possible to make the spelling simpler, more coherent and closer to the phonetic ideal. Indeed, the printers of the time (Geofroy Tory, Robert Estienne) called for the introduction of accents, the use of the cedilla and the apostrophe. They advocated the improvement of French spelling through stricter imitation of Latin. This is how “the French-Latin dictionary” was published in 1539-1540 by Robert Estienne and republished in 1544 for use in classes in the form of a reduced format lexicon; it soon became the basic book, the working instrument of students, scholars and printers. “Estienne has been considered by several generations as a sort of spelling bible” (BURNEY Pierre, 1959: 26).

From the 17th century, spelling gradually became established and it was not until the 19th century that a decree imposed the spellings recommended by the French Academy. Since then, the spelling has only undergone minimal changes. In fact, a decree from the prefect of police dating from November 22, 1799 orders citizens of the Paris region to reform and correct on signs, boards, placards anything that could be found there that is contrary to the laws, morals, and rules of the French language. The Imperial University made spelling compulsory in its programs and exams. In 1832, primary education made knowledge of spelling compulsory for access to all public jobs.

Currently, spelling is characterized by its intellectual aspect. Etymologically, it retains traces of its Latin and Greek origins. On a grammatical level, it marks the agreements which link the elements of the sentence. The signs she uses are generally for the eye and not for the ear. It differentiates homonyms because it pursues clarity. The non-correspondence between phonetics and spelling required the use of the phonetic alphabet which is used to transcribe sounds. In fact, the same sound translates several different letters for example science, sixty, mason, etc. The same letter transcribes several sounds for example (x) in axes, (s) in six, etc.

Spelling has become, because of its ambiguities, the fundamental source of the instability generated by pronunciation. Therefore, it is up to the spelling to follow the pronunciation and not the opposite. We know to what extent the spelling error is dramatized; it is a moral sanction which is accompanied by a social sanction: a mistake can cause you to fail an exam or a future. In the classroom, spelling is an essential educational criterion. It determines the success or failure of learners.

### **English sounds**

English pronunciation varies greatly in its phonology, primarily due to its history, through different distinct historical periods, and its geographic expansion. However, variation in English pronunciation can be categorized into four main groups, the first based on its history (Old English, Middle English, Early Modern English and Modern English); the second, its geography (British English, American English as well as other regional varieties); the third, sociological characteristics, for example, age, gender, social group, English pronunciation of foreign languages notably studied by Snježana Kordić in Croatian or the pronunciation of English by non-native speakers notably studied by Christopher Hall (Jean-Pol Madou, 2001).

The English language does not have a uniform pronunciation pattern that can be considered "correct", but Received Pronunciation and General American are most often cited as standards, particularly in language learning. Apart from these standardized forms of English, there are many different but mutually understandable forms of pronunciation.

The number of sounds used in spoken English varies from one dialect to another, and also depends on the linguist who lists them. For example, John C. Wells' Longman Pronunciation Dictionary, using the symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet, highlights 24 consonants and 23 vowels used in Received Pronunciation, plus two additional consonants and four vowels used exclusively in foreign words. The American Heritage Dictionary, meanwhile, suggests 25 consonants and 18 vowels (including rotaceous vowels) for American English, as well as one consonant and five vowels for non-English words.

English pronunciation is also called prosodic, phonotactic and tonic. Each of these characteristics modifies the signified and the signifier, that is to say the meaning of the message as well as its transmitted form. Writers and poets, notably French-speaking ones like Stéphane Mallarmé according to Jean-Pol Madou and Michael Edwards, describe English as a

“structurally modern language1” which sounds, poetic and allows one to “play with language with genius”.

### **Spelling versus audio system**

In France, there can be no question of spelling without mentioning that which was at the origin of the very first work on the subject. From 1973, in *Research* (1973a) then in *Langue française* (1973b), she proposed a theoretical analysis popularized under the name of graphic plurisystem. This terminology is unambiguous: drawing inspiration from the structuralist approach, and in particular work on phonology, N. Catach describes French spelling as a conjunction of systems from which she develops a complex definition of the grapheme. It considers that our writing is made up of subsystems, the main ones of which depend on the correspondence with phonemes (phonograms), with morphology and with the lexicon (morphograms and logograms). To which is added a certain number of spellings without synchronic justification, whose links with the current system of the language are more or less loose (1973b).

## **4. Spelling of English words**

The French language does not know it, but English applies the omission of the article to talk about a general situation, for plural countable nouns and abstract uncountable nouns. It's the zero article, or the empty set: in the sentence I don't like cats (for example), we don't put an article because we mean disgust for cats in general.

Examples:

- I go to work: I go to work, implied “the job”,
- I love speaking about politics,
- I like school (I like school, in the sense of learning at school) / I like the school (I like this school, in the sense of this establishment).

### **4.1. Spelling of English adjectives**

Some adjectives in English contain double vowels, but we often keep the rule of not doubling the consonant at the end of words (for example, in French, we would double the consonant before a suffix). Examples:

- happy → happiness

- fancy → fanciness
- early → earlier

## 4.2. Spelling of articles in English

The big difference between French and English is that most English nouns have the same masculine and feminine form. There are two types of articles: the definite article (the) and the indefinite article (a/an). These do not vary in gender. It sometimes happens that we use a noun without an article.

In English, nouns are generally preceded by an article. The big difference between French and English is that most English nouns have the same masculine and feminine form. There are two types of articles: the definite article (the) and the indefinite article (a/an). These do not vary in gender. It sometimes happens that we use a noun without articles.

## 5. Classification of speech sounds

The classification of speech sounds is a central topic in phonetics, which is the branch of linguistics that studies the sounds of speech. Speech sounds are mainly divided into two main categories: “vowels” and “consonants”. However, these categories can be subdivided based on various criteria. Here is an overview of the different possible classifications:

### 5.1. *Vowels (vocalic sounds)*

Vowels are sounds produced without significant obstruction of airflow. Their classification is mainly based on:

- Pitch (or “tonal pitch”): This corresponds to the position of the tongue in the oral cavity, measured in terms of height (high or low) and the part of the mouth where the tongue is placed (front or back).
- Rounding of the lips: Vowels can be rounded or not rounded, depending on the configuration of the lips.
- Duration: Some languages, such as Finnish, distinguish long vowels from short vowels.
- Timbre: Vowels can also be classified according to their sound quality, that is to say if they are lighter or “darker”.

Examples:

- “Closed” (or high) vowels: [i], [u]
- “Open” (or low) vowels: [a], [ɛ]
- Unrounded vowels: [i], [ɛ]

## 5.2. Consonants (consonantal sounds)

Consonants occur with partial or complete obstruction of airflow in the vocal tract. They are mainly classified according to several criteria:

- The mode of articulation: This indicates the way in which the air is modified by the organs of speech.
- The place of articulation: This indicates the part of the oral cavity where the air is obstructed.
- Sonority: Consonants can be sonorous (with vibration of the vocal cords) or deaf (without vibration of the vocal cords).
- Orality or nasality: Some consonants are nasal, that is to say that the air passes through the nose (like [m] or [n] in French).

### 5.3. Mode of articulation:

- Occlusives (or plosives): There is a total closure of the air, followed by a rapid release. Examples: [p], [b], [t], [d], [k], [g].
- Fricatives: Air passes through a small opening, creating a friction sound. Examples: [f], [v], [s], [z], [ʃ] (ch), [ʒ] (j).
- Nasal: Air passes through both the mouth and the nose. Examples: [m], [n], [ɲ] (gn), [ŋ] (ng in English).
- Liquids: These are sounds produced by a partial obstruction, allowing smoother air flow. Examples: [l] (l), [ʀ] (French r, pronounced at the back of the throat).
- Vibrating: Consonants vibrate during their production. Example: [r] (r rolled in Spanish, but different from [ʀ] French).

### 5.4. Place of articulation:

- Bilabiales: The two lips come together. Examples: [p], [b], [m].
- Labiodental: The lower lip touches the upper teeth. Examples: [f], [v].
- Dentales: The tongue touches the upper teeth. Examples: [θ] (as in English “think”), [ð] (as in “this” in English).
- Alveolar: The tongue touches the area just behind the upper teeth. Examples: [t], [d], [s], [z], [l], [n].

- Palatal: The tongue is placed against the hard palate. Examples: [ʃ] (ch), [ʒ] (j), [ɲ] (gn).
- Velars: The tongue moves closer to the soft palate (velum). Examples: [k], [g], [ŋ] (ng).

## 6. Semi-vowels and glides

Semivowels (or glides) are sounds that share some characteristics with vowels, but occur in a consonantal environment. They are produced more quickly than vowels, but without total obstruction. For example :

- [j] as in "yes"
- [w] as in "we"

## 7. Diphthongs

A diphthong is a combination of two vowels that occur in the same syllable and change their sound as they are sounded. Example in English: [aɪ] as in "my", [eɪ] as in "day".

In phonetics, the classification of speech sounds is divided into several categories according to their mode of articulation, their place of articulation, their sonority and their orality. Understanding these different classifications helps to better analyze and describe the sounds of a language, and to grasp the phonetic nuances that exist between different languages.

### 4.2.6. English consonants

English consonants are sounds produced by partial or complete obstruction of air in the oral cavity. As in all languages, consonants in English can be classified according to different criteria: their mode of articulation, their place of articulation, and their sound (voiced or unvoiced).

### 4.2.7. Classification of consonants

The mode of articulation refers to the way in which the air is changed in the oral cavity.

- Occlusives (or plosives): The air is completely blocked, then released suddenly.
- [p] (as in "pat")
- [b] (as in "bat")
- [t] (as in "top")

- [d] (as in "dog")
- [k] (as in "cat")
- [g] (as in "go")
- Fricatives: Air passes through a small opening, creating friction
- [f] (as in "fun")
- [v] (as in "van")
- [θ] (as in "think")
- [ð] (as in "this")
- [s] (as in "sip")
- [z] (as in "zip")
- [ʃ] (as in "she")
- [ʒ] (as in "measure")
- Affricates: These are sounds that start as plosives then transform into fricatives

## 8. French sounds

In French, as in all languages, sounds are classified according to their type, depending on their mode of articulation, their place of articulation and their sound. We mainly distinguish between vowels and consonants, with specific subcategories for each type of sound.

### 8.1. Vowels in French

Vowels are produced without significant obstruction to airflow. In French, there are several vowels which are distinguished by the position of the tongue in the oral cavity, the shape of the lips, and the resonance of the sound (Henriette Walter, 2003). Below is the classification of French vowels:

#### ❖ Oral vowels

These are the classic vowels, produced without passing air through the nose.

Simple vowels:

- [i]: as in "si" (closed, front, unrounded vowel)
- [e]: as in "summer" (closed, front, unrounded vowel)
- [ɛ]: as in "mother" (open, front, unrounded vowel)
- [a]: as in "cat" (open, front, unrounded vowel)
- [o]: as in "water" (closed, back, rounded vowel)

- [ɔ]: as in “door” (open, back, rounded vowel)
- [u]: as in “fou” (closed, back, rounded vowel)
- [ø]: as in “fear” (closed, front, rounded vowel)
- [œ]: as in “sister” (open, front, rounded vowel).

❖ Nasal vowels:

Air passes through the nose in addition to the mouth. There are four main nasal vowels in French (Pierre Pican, 1994).

- [ɑ̃]: as in “without”
- [ɛ̃]: as in “bread”
- [œ̃]: as in “un”
- [ɔ̃]: as in “name”

## 8.2. Spelling and audio system

The spelling and audio system of a language (here French or English, for example) are two important aspects for understanding and analyzing how sounds are represented in writing and how they are produced during articulation (Jean-Pierre Dufresne 2011).

### 8.2.1. Spelling

Spelling is the correct way to write a word, following the rules of a language. The main problem with spelling in French (and many other languages) is that it is not always completely phonetic. This means that the way a word is written does not always correspond exactly to the way it is pronounced.

Example in French:

- The word *\*"cat"* is written with *\*"ch"*, but it is pronounced [ʃa] (the "ch" is pronounced like a [ʃ] in this case).
- The word *\*"eau"* is written with "eau", but is pronounced [o] without hearing the "e" written.

French spelling has been largely influenced by the history of the language, phonetic developments, and standardization decisions. Sometimes, the spelling remains fixed, even if the pronunciation has changed (Maurice Grevisse, 2021).

Specificities of spelling in French:

- Accents: The acute accent (é), the grave accent (è), the circumflex accent (ê), and the diaeresis accent (ë) influence the pronunciation of vowels.
- Silent letters: For example, in "cat", the "t" at the end is silent, just like in "plant" or "man".
- Letter combinations: Certain letter combinations can produce specific sounds, such as "ou" in "fou" (which produces the sound [u]), or "oi" in "moi" (which produces the sound [wa]).

### 8.2.2. The audio or phonetic system

Audio system refers to the way sounds are produced and perceived in a language, i.e. audio-articulation. Phonetics and phonology are two sub-disciplines that study the sounds of language and their organization.

#### a. *The phonemes:*

Phonemes are the units of sound in a language that allow words to be differentiated. In French, there are approximately 36 phonemes (between vowels and consonants).

#### b. *The phonetic transcription:*

Phonemes are often transcribed using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). This allows sounds to be represented accurately, independent of traditional spelling. For example, the word "water" is transcribed phonetically in IPA as [o], which represents its actual sound, regardless of how it is written.

#### c. *Phonetic variants*

The same phoneme can be pronounced differently depending on accents, regions or individual variations. For example, French [r] can be pronounced uvular (at the back of the throat) as standard, but some regions pronounce a rolled [r] (alveolar).

Differences between spelling and pronunciation can cause learning difficulties because the same combination of letters can correspond to different sounds depending on the context. This is clearly seen in French with homophones (words that are pronounced the same way, but which are written differently and have different meanings) (Raymond Leblanc, 1997).

One of the main difficulties comes from the complexity of the French spelling system. For example, there are often several ways to write the same sound. This can be confusing for language learners.

Spelling and the audio system (phonetics) are two essential aspects in the study of a language. Spelling is based on historical conventions, while phonetics is based on the production of sounds. Phonetic transcription allows you to more accurately transcribe the way words are actually pronounced, regardless of spelling rules. Learning phonetic rules and spelling can sometimes be difficult because of the discrepancies between the two systems, but they are complementary for a complete understanding of the language (Jean-Pierre Boudet, 1992).

#### - **Spelling of French names**

French spelling is generally described as difficult and complex because there is no strict correspondence between oral and written; Homophone lexical units, indistinct in speech, can have entirely different spellings (are, sound, etc.), or even belong to different grammatical categories (me: personal pronoun, month: name, etc.). On a morphosyntactic level, various forms can also be pronounced the same way (disadvantage and advantages). There are few cases in which a phoneme is constantly transcribed by the same letter. A phoneme can be marked by several letters (f, ph, etc.), and conversely, a letter can be used to transcribe two phonemes: the “x” which corresponds to “ks” in the word “excellent”, and to “gz” in “execute”.

The most numerous, because they are torn on this subject, constantly repressed” (CATACH Nina, 1991: 25).

#### - **Spelling of French adjectives**

In the same vein, French spelling is largely phonetic despite the absence of silent letters, that is to say letters which are not pronounced like "p" in "sept" and many words are considered not in isolation but in a statement which are written as they are pronounced like

"mou" ([m] is always denoted "m" and [u] "or ù. In other words, French spelling is considered difficult because French has a poor alphabet, coming from the Latin alphabet. In fact, it only includes twenty-six letters to represent thirty-six phonemes. For example, the grapheme "c" corresponds to both the phoneme /k/ in "cartable" and the phoneme /s/ in "place".

French spelling fulfills several functions. The first is the transcription of sounds, that is to say it is the spelling which teaches us that the sound [ɛ] can take three different spellings: "ai" in "milk", "et" in "chalet", "e" in "merci". The second function is morphological. It allows us to distinguish, for example, the conditional of the future (I would sing/I will sing). The third function is lexical, that is to say everything relating to homophones like "fool" and "seal". The last function is syntactic. It governs the rules of agreement, for example between the noun and the adjective or between the subject and the verb.

## Conclusion

In summary, this research allows us to focus on English and French spelling. Thus, we talked about the historical origin of the spellings of the English and French languages. We also focused on English and French consonants with their classification. This is with the aim of understanding why students from the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences use French in their learning of English within the said faculty. In the following chapter, we will address the issue of linguistic interference.

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