

## Making Sense of 'Irregular' Words

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Structured Language Tutor

These words are often categorized as "irregular"

says	gone	they
been	said	what
does	there	move
goes	where	of
done	their	is

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These words are often categorized as "irregular"

says	been	to	the
does	there	too	any
goes	where	two	answer
done	their	of	people
gone	move	is	
said	prove	a	

Let's start with these:

says  
been  
does

Why are these considered irregular?

What is actually driving their spelling?

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The spelling of <says>

say  
drive  
play

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The spelling of <says>

drive + s --> drives  
play + s --> plays  
say + s --> says

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## The spelling of <been>

I will _____.	<i>past participle</i>	I have _____.
take	take/ + en	taken
rise	rise/ + en	risen
fall	fall + en	fallen
eat	eat + en	eaten
drive	drive/ + en	driven
be	be + en	been
		*bin?
		*ben?

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## Many “irregular” words are complex

do	ing
go	es
	ne

do + ing --> doing                  go + ing --> going  
do + es --> does                  go + es --> goes  
do + ne --> done                  go + ne --> gone

See Pete Bowers' work for more on this

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## Why do we consider these words irregular?

says	does	gone
been	done	goes

Assumption: The purpose of the spelling system is

\_\_\_\_\_.

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## Why do we consider these words irregular?

Assumption: The purpose of the spelling system is  
to represent pronunciation **directly**

**speech --> text**

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## Why do we consider these words irregular?

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*speech --> text*

What does the evidence show?

say + s	do + es	go + ne
be + en	do + ne	go + es

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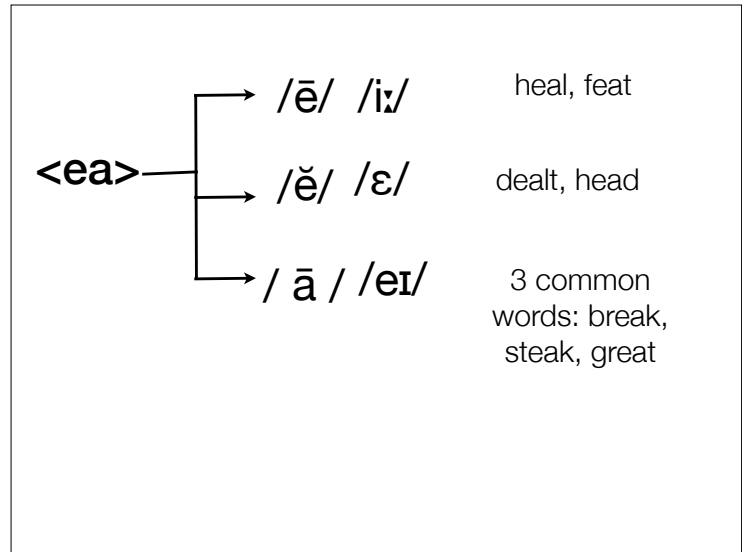
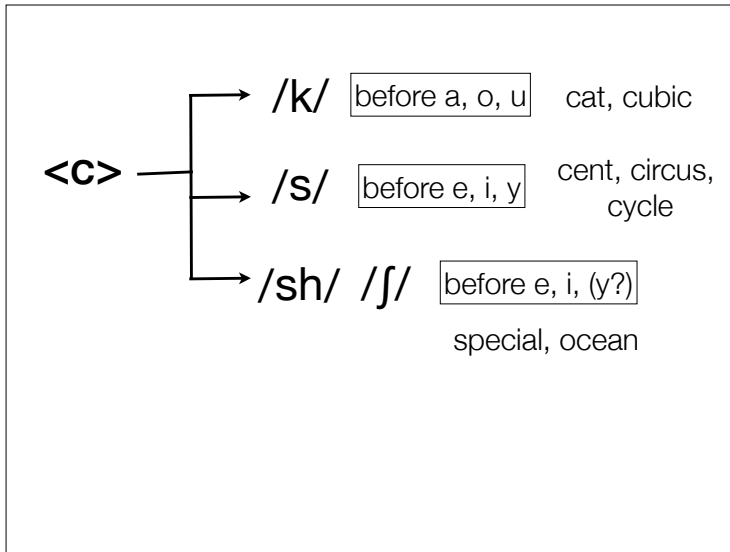
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*speech --> text*

**We teach frequency of grapheme usage right away;  
we teach morphology later**

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Why do we consider these words irregular?

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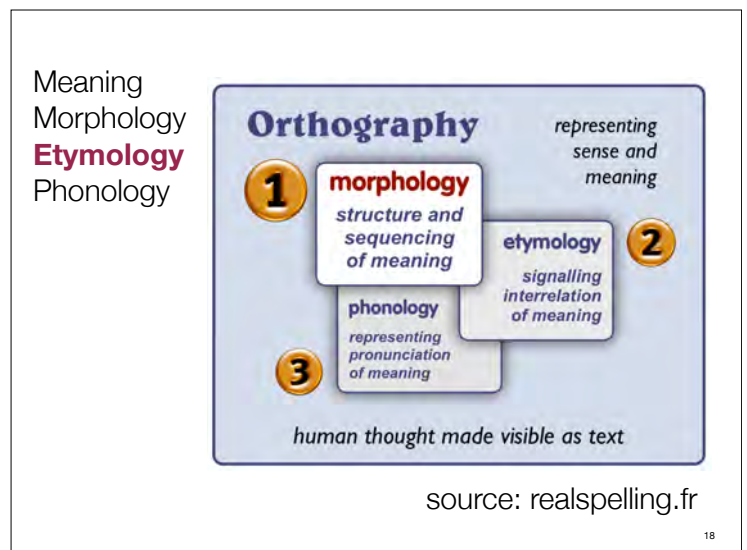
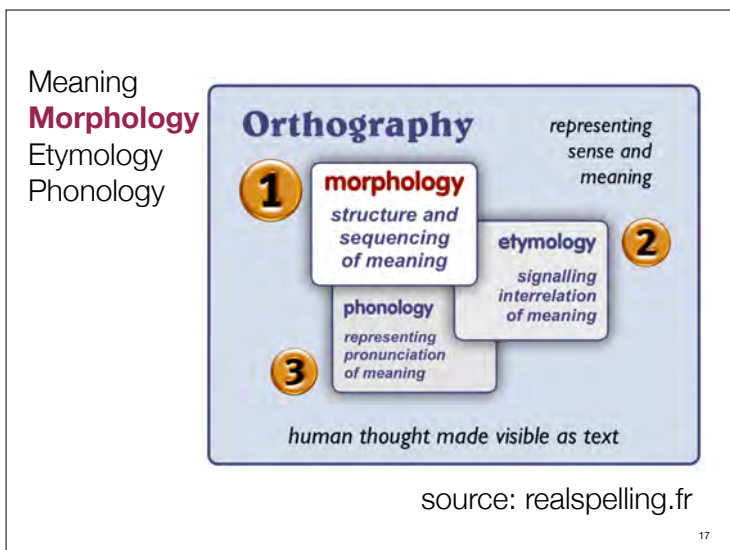
Assumption: The purpose of the spelling system is to represent pronunciation **directly**

*speech --> text*

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“...the simple fact is that the present orthography is not merely a letter-to-sound system riddled with imperfections, but, instead, a more complex and more regular relationship wherein phoneme and morpheme share leading roles.”

Source: Venezky, Richard L. “English Orthography: Its Graphical Structure and Its Relation to Sound” in Reading Research Quarterly, Vol 2, No. 3 (Spring 1967) pp. 75-105



## A better way to spell?

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- hEr
- here, hear

## Homophone Principle

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When two or more words in English are pronounced the same but mean different things, whenever possible they will be spelled differently.

Source: Venezky, Richard L.  
The American Way of Spelling,  
The Guilford Press, 1999

## Homophone Principle

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or	oar	ore
way	weigh	whey
aisle	I'll	isle
tax	tacks	
guest	guessed	
aloud	allowed	
praise	preys	prays
tease	teas	tees
tense	tents	
I scream	ice cream	
your analysis	urinalysis	

## A better way to spell?

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- hEr
- here, hear
- Homophones allow for rapid differentiation of meaning - comprehension
- Spelling connects us to meaning through morphemes **and graphemes**

prey	pray	obey
predator		they
		hey
		survey

obey  
obedient  
\*obay

## The etymology of <said>

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lay	pay	<ay>	say
lays	pays		says
laid	paid	<ai>	said
			*sed
			*siad
			*sez

The synchronic etymology of <there>

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hear	here	their	possessive
heard	there	them	object
herd	where	they	subject

“Buy one word, get lots more free”

We can **make sense of**

“irregular” words

“easily confused words”

When? Then.  
Where? There.  
Whence? Thence.

Source: Gina Cooke

**whence** | (h)wens | (also **from whence**)

adverb formal or archaic

from what place or source: *whence does Congress derive this power?*

**thence** | ðens | (also **from thence**)

adverb formal

from a place or source previously mentioned:  
*they intended to cycle on into France and thence home via Belgium.*

When? Then.  
Where? There.  
Whence? Thence.  
What? That.

Source: Gina Cooke

Clarification questions?

Etymology drives grapheme choice

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hear

here

prey

move

**Mini Matrix-Maker Results**

com de e pro re	<b>mote</b> "move"	ed ness				
		ile	ity			
		ion	al			
		ive	ate	ed ion or		
aut	o	or	<b>boat</b>			
			<b>man</b>			
			<b>mouth</b>			
			<b>way</b>			
			able ed s			
			al er ment			
			ie	go	er	s
			ing	ly		

re + move --> remove  
re + mote --> remote

Twin base  
from Latin <movere>

im re un	<b>move</b> "move"	able ed s			
		al er ment			
		ie	go	er	s
		ing	ly		

Multiple spellings for /ōō/- /u:z/

<oo> food  
<ew> flew  
<u> tuba  
-----  
<u-e> prelude  
<ou> you  
<ue> clue  
<ui> juice  
<eu> neutral

<o> do, to, two

remote  
remove

We can **make sense of**  
"irregular" words  
"easily confused words"

**IF** we study them  
in relationship to words that  
share structure and meaning.  
That is how English spelling  
works!

of                      off

ONLINE ETYMOLOGY DICTIONARY

Search: off      OK

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X  
Y Z

**off (adv.)**   
by c. 1206 as an emphatic form of Old English *of* (see *of*), employed in the adverbial use of that word. The prepositional meaning "away from" and the adjectival sense of "farther" were not firmly fixed in this variant until 17c., but once they were they left the original *of* with the transferred and weakened senses of the word. Meaning "not working" is from 1861. *Off the cuff* (1938) is from the notion of speaking from notes written in haste on one's shirt cuffs. *Off the rack* (adj.) is from 1963; *off the record* is from 1933; *off the wall* "crazy" is 1968, probably from the notion of a lunatic "bouncing off the walls" or else in reference to carom shots in squash, handball, etc.

**off (v.)**   
"to kill," 1930, from *off* (adv.). Earlier verbal senses were "to defer" (1640s), "to move off" (1882). Related: *Offed*.

of

off

**function  
word**

**lexical  
(content)  
word**

- Lexical (content) words:  
**nouns, verbs, adjective, adverbs**
  - “dictionary” words
  - carry **meaning** in text
  - **stressed** in connected speech
  - “open class” - new words added all the time

- Function words:  
**articles, conjunctions, pronouns, prepositions, auxiliary verbs**
  - “grammar” words
  - often **unstressed** in connected speech
  - “closed class” - English has roughly 300

## Conventions

- Function words can be written with as few letters as phonology allows, often 2 letters:

<as>, <in>, <on>, <go>, <by>, <l>, <a>

- **Content words must be at least 3 letters:**

<egg>, <odd>, <ebb>, <awe>, <err>, <dye>

- When function and content words are homophones, content word will be longer when possible

Source: realspelling.fr

of

off

function  
word

content  
word

to

too

in

inn

by

bye

buy

be

bee

do

due

dew

but

butt

## Function and content words

“The gift that keeps on giving”

- Gina Cooke, Linguist-Educator Exchange

What about:

**is, has**

No English function word contains a <z>

## Why do we consider these words irregular?

- Assumption: primary purpose of spelling is to represent pronunciation **directly**
- What does the evidence in our writing system show us?

## Written English

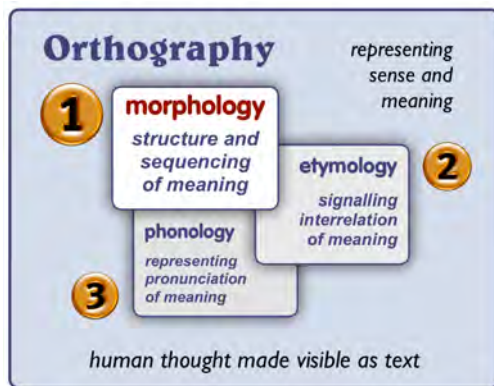
- Is an ordered system that is logical and understandable
- Is **morphophonemic** - phonology essential, and is understood within **morphological** framework

## What are the implications for instruction?

- Start with the written form
- Systematic, direct, explicit study and instruction
- Study words with meaningful relationships - expands and deepens comprehension of words along with spelling
- Start with meaning, morphology, etymology and THEN phonology

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Meaning  
Morphology  
Etymology  
Phonology



source: realspelling.fr

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## Webinars at ida-umb.org

- Structured Word Inquiry  
- Pete Bowers, *Word Works Kingston*
- Insights into 'Sight Words'  
- Gina Cooke, *Linguist-Educator Exchange*

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## Resources

### Websites:

realspelling.fr  
wordworkskingston.com  
linguisteducatorexchange.com  
etymonline.com

### Teacher blogs:

Lyn Anderson's Early Years Blog - Beyond the Word <http://wordsinbogor.blogspot.com>  
Scot Caldwell's Grade 1 Blog (archived) <https://smallhumanstinkbig.wordpress.com>  
Mary Beth Steven's Grade 5 Blog <http://mbsteven.edublogs.org>  
Dan Allen's Grade 5 Blog (archived) <http://blogs.zis.ch/dallen/category/language/spelling-word-study/>  
Ann Whiting's Grade 7 Blog <https://wordinquiry.wordpress.com>

### More info on spelling:

realspellers.org  
[soundliteracy.com/blog/](http://soundliteracy.com/blog/) - and see Sound Literacy on Facebook

### Books/Study Resources

LEX Grapheme cards, [linguisteducatorexchange.com](http://linguisteducatorexchange.com)  
LEX Word Matrices and InSight Word Cards, [linguisteducatorexchange.com](http://linguisteducatorexchange.com)  
**Morphology:** Henry, Marcia. *Unlocking Literacy: Effective Decoding and Spelling Instruction, Second Edition*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing, 2010.

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Questions?

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