THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPT

EPISODE 89:
‘I BEFORE E’ AND ALL THAT

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 89: 'I Before E' and All That. In this episode, we're going to continue our look at Middle English vowels – and we'll see how scribes tried to represent those sounds with a limited alphabet. They had to figure out how to stretch the letters to represent different sounds. In the process, they came up with a lot of spelling innovations that we still use today. So this time, we'll look at those innovations.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com – and you can reach me by email at kevin@historyofenglsihpodcast.com. I'm on twitter at englishhistpod.

Also, I have a couple of quick announcements before we get started. First, I want to tell you about a new podcast that focuses on the etymology. It's called animology, and its put together by Collen Patrick-Goudreau. The theme of the podcast is the history of animal-related words and expressions. I thought many of you might find that interesting. Just look for that podcast wherever you get your podcasts.

And I also wanted to give all of you a quick update about this podcast as well. Some time back, I mentioned that I had a general plan to tell the story of English in about 100 episodes. And apparently, quite a few of you remembered that statement, because several of you have reached out to me recently to inquire if that was still the plan. After all, I'm only about 10 episodes away from that goal. Well, the good news – or bad news depending on your perspective – is that I no longer have a specific number of episodes in mind. Obviously, I can't really complete the story in the next 10 episodes. So we'll just move forward with the story, and let it take its course. A few months back, I introduced the Patreon site as a way to provide some bonus content and to help me dedicate more time to the podcast though listener support. Well, I wanted to thank all of you who have signed up at Patreon. And thanks to your support, I've met the goal that I stated there. So I'm committed to producing 20 new episodes this year – all of them ad-free. So by the end of this year we should be up to around Episode 108 or so. And we'll see where it goes from there. So that's the update, and with that, let's turn to this episode.

Last time, we looked at the difference between long vowel sounds and short vowel sounds – and we saw how those sounds sometimes shifted within certain words. This time, I want to examine how scribes tried to spell those sounds with a very limited alphabet. Many of their spelling innovations are still with us today. So we'll try to make some sense out of the mess that is Modern English spelling.

As we saw last time, English had a lot of different vowel sounds, but it only had a handful of letters to represent those sounds. In Old English, each vowel letter could represent either a long sound or a short sound. Initially, the difference was one of length, but over time, the sounds became more and more distinct in terms of tonal quality and sound. But both sounds were represented with the same letter. So the long A sound and a short A sound were both spelled with letter A.

That made writing easy, but it created problems if you wanted to distinguish those two sounds. That was the problem that Orm ran into when he composed the Ormulum. He wanted to distinguish those sounds because he wanted the text to be read aloud. And since each vowel letter had a long sound and short sound, he had to invent a way to make that difference clear. So as we saw last time, he decided to represent a short vowel sound by doubling the consonant letter after that short vowel sound – just like we do today to distinguish the pronunciation of ***diner*** and ***dinner***, and ***hoping*** and ***hopping***, and ***write*** and ***written***. We use double consonants to mark the short vowel sound. But Orm's spelling innovations didn't gain widespread acceptance at the time. So as English documents started to reappear in the 1200s and 1300s, scribes had to come up with other ways to distinguish those sounds.

Now I should remind you that spellings were very fluid in Middle English. Dictionaries didn't exist yet, so scribes had to spell words as best they could. They were left to their own devices. They had to spell words phonetically using the traditional sounds of the various letters.

And this actually presents one of the greatest challenges in reading Middle English documents. You have to figure out all the spellings. So we find a common word like ***name*** spelled N-A-M-E like today, but we also find it spelled N-A-A-M and N-A-Y-M, among others.

And a word like ***queen*** also had various spellings, including modern Q-U-E-E-N, as well as Q-U-E-A-N and Q-U-E-N-E and Q-U-E-I-N-E. And you could find the word ***heaven*** spelled H-E-O-F-O-N-E, H-O-U-E-N-E, H-E-U-I-N and many, many more. The scribe just spelled it the way it sounded to him at the time. And even within the same document, the spelling often varied.

In fact, scholars have found that the word ***though*** was spelled over 500 different ways in Middle English documents.

Much of this variation was due to the vowel sounds. It was difficult to represent all of the various vowel sounds with a small handful of vowel letters. First of all, those vowel sounds varied from one regional dialect to the next. So many scribes used different vowel letters because they pronounced the words differently. But even when two scribes spoke the same dialect, they didn't always agree how to represent those sounds in writing.

There were over a dozen different vowel sounds in the language, together with several different diphthongs. But there were only 7 letters to represent those sounds. Those letters were A, E, I, O, U, Y and that Old English vowel letter called 'ash.' The Æ represented the /æ/ sound, but that quickly disappeared after the Norman Conquest. The Normans didn't like it because it wasn't used in French. And it was gone by the mid-1200s. So that just left the other 6 letters.

That meant that the scribes had to make the most of those few letters. They had to figure out how to make 6 letters represent about 20 different vowel sounds and diphthongs.

Of course, they could have invented new letters, but that almost never happened. Throughout the history of the alphabet, scribes tended to work with what they had rather than create new letters. The

creation of new letters would have required a broad consensus among scribes and academics at a time when such a consensus was virtually impossible. It's still virtually impossible.

Another option was to use the existing vowel letters and do what some other European languages did – and that was to use accent marks to represent different vowel sounds. These little markings or accent marks are sometimes called diacritics. For example, French uses a small upward sloping accent mark over the letter E to represent the /ay/ sound. You often see it above the E in the word ***café***. That mark is called the "accent aigu" in French – literally "the acute accent." And many European languages adopted this technique of using accent marks to distinguish specific vowel sounds.

And some English scribes also experimented with accent marks. Even Orm used them in the Ormulum. In addition to his double consonants to represent short vowel sounds, he also occasionally used accent marks above certain vowels. For example, the word ***out*** was ***ut*** in Old English – spelled U-T. In the Ormulum, Orm spelled also spelled it U-T, but he put two of those acute accent marks above the U to confirm that it was pronounced with a long /oo/ sound. And he also used a few other accent marks in the document.

But for whatever reason, those accent marks never really caught on in English. They were only used sparingly, and they never gained widespread acceptance.

So that meant that English writers had to work with the existing letters of the alphabet. Each scribe spelled words as best he could. And those various spellings didn't really become fixed until the introduction of the printing press in the 1400s and the first dictionaries in the 1600s. At that time, printers and lexicographers started to pick and choose among those various spelling innovations. Unfortunately, there wasn't much consistency in their decisions. So it left English with a lot of random spelling rules. And almost every rule has numerous exceptions.

Generally speaking, most of these spelling rules were based on techniques that had developed in Middle English. So in order to understand why we spell words the way we do today, we need to go back and see how the Middle English writers dealt with these issues.

So let's begin with the basic problem of how to distinguish short vowel sounds from long vowel sounds. As we saw last time, Orm solved this problem by doubling the consonant after a short vowel. So he focused on words with short vowel sounds. Words with long vowels were generally left as the were.

Well, as I noted last time, this technique didn't really catch on, and it failed to gain widespread acceptance. And in fact, most Middle English writers took the opposite approach. They actually decided to leave words with short vowels as they were, and they elected to change words that had long vowels. So most spelling innovations from this period involved the long vowels.

Last time, I gave the examples of ***god*** and ***good*** – and ***is*** and ***ice***. Notice that the versions with the short vowels – ***god*** and ***is*** – retain their original simple spellings. There are no double consonants. No extra letters. Just simple straight-forward spellings. But the versions that had long vowel sounds

were modified. ***Good*** got a double O, and ***ice*** got a silent E at the end. We'll look at these techniques in detail a little later in the episode, but I wanted to make the point here that most of those spelling innovations were focused on the long vowels – not the short vowels.

Even today, when we have a short simple words with simple straight-forward spellings, they tend to be pronounced with a short vowel – ***hat***, ***pet***, ***dog***, ***cat***, ***cup***, ***pad***, ***hit***, ***ham***, ***wed***, and so on. All of those words have short vowel sounds. And if we had never seen any of those words before, we would probably pronounce them with a short vowel sound because the general rule in English is that a word with simple straight-forward spelling is pronounced that way.

Now of course, there were exceptions. In certain situations, scribes felt the need to clearly indicate that the vowel sounds were pronounced short. Some of those exceptions make sense because they were designed to prevent potential confusion. And those exceptions will make more sense when we get to the long vowels, so I'll discuss those a little later. But some of the exceptions seem completely random, and its not really clear why scribes used them.

For example, some scribes picked up that old idea of doubling a consonant after a short vowel. But they only tended to do that with certain consonant letters. So they tended to double an F, an S, an L and a Z (or zed). But they didn't tend to double other letters. Again, it isn't clear why those particular letters stood out, but they were routinely doubled, and those double consonants are still common in Modern English.

So for example, we see that double F in words like ***cliff***, ***sniff***, ***off***, ***staff***, ***stuff***, ***bluff***, ***puff*** and so on. Again, all of those words have short vowels, and those vowels are followed by a double F. We don't really know why scribes felt the need to double that F to indicate those short vowels – but they did.

The same thing happened with words ending in L. Again, it was common to double the L when it followed a short vowel. So we see those double L's in words like ***fell***, ***smell***, ***hell***, ***ill***, ***pill***, ***still***, ***full***, ***pull*** and many others.

They also tended to double the S after a short vowel. That gave us the modern spellings of ***mass***, ***class***, ***mess***, ***chess***, ***miss***, ***kiss***, ***loss***, ***cross***, and many others. Again, these double S's became a standard spelling technique to represent a short vowel sound.

And also, as the 'z' sound became more popular, the letter Z was doubled in words like ***jazz***, ***fizz***, ***whizz***, ***fuzz*** and ***buzz***.

So all of that means that the letters F, L, S and Z were often doubled – just like Orm did in the Ormulum. We don't really know why those letters were given special treatment, but it became a standard spelling convention. I should also note that F, S and Z all represent fricative sounds. So that might have something to do with it. Apparently, scribes felt the need to double a consonant if it represented a fricative sound. But again, for whatever reason, those letters got special treatment and were routinely doubled.

Scribes also felt the need to give a special treatment to words with a short vowel that ended in a 'k' sound. They essentially doubled the consonant in those words as well, but there were two different letters for that 'k' sound. There was the traditional letter C and the newly introduced letter K. In Middle English, those words sometimes ended in a C and sometimes ended in K – depending on the scribe. And apparently later scribes felt the need to double that letter as well, just like they did with F and L and S and Z. But which letter did you double – the C or the K? Well, ultimately they decided to use one of each, and that gave us our modern CK spelling.

So take the word ***back***. In Old English, it was often spelled B-A-C. But during the early Middle English period, many scribes spelled it B-A-K. By the time of late Middle English, the spelling was B-A-C-K. So scribes felt the need to double the consonant, but rather than use double C or double K, they just used CK.

And that explains the modern spelling of words like ***back***, ***hack***, ***neck***, ***check***, ***pick***, ***sick***, ***sock***, ***lock***, ***suck***, ***luck***, and many others. Again, that CK is basically a double consonant, and it is another example of using a double consonant as a marker to tell you that the preceding vowel sound is pronounced short.

So we have these few situations where scribes and early printers used double consonants to indicate a short vowel sound, but these were very much exceptions to the general rule. As a general rule, they just left a single consonant in place after a short vowel. The kept the spellings short and simple unless there was long vowel sound. But what if there was a long vowel sound? Well, as I noted, that's where they focused most of their attention. They came up with a variety of ways to represent a long vowel sound and to distinguish that sound from a short sound. So most of the spelling innovations concerning vowels involved long vowel sounds.

One technique that scribes used to represent a long vowel sound was simply to double the vowel. And that actually makes sense if we think about it. If you want to represent a short vowel, just write the vowel letter one time. And if you want to represent a long vowel sound, then double the vowel letter. Visually, you can see the difference in writing. So words like ***tree*** and ***flee*** and ***see*** all got double E's. And ***soon*** and ***moon*** – and ***fool*** and ***tool*** – all got double O's.

This also explains the example I gave last time of ***god*** and ***good***. ***God*** kept its simple straight-forward spelling since it had a short vowel. But ***good*** – which was pronounced as /goad/ – got a double O to reflect that it had a long vowel sound.

This also helps to explain why Orm's spelling system didn't really catch on. Using Orm's system of doubling the consonant after a short vowel, ***God*** would have been G-O-D-D. And ***good*** would have been G-O-D. Now both spellings have a single O. What distinguishes them is the D or double D at the end. But you're not trying to show a difference in the 'd' sound. You're trying to show a difference in the 'o' sound – the vowel sounds. So why modify the D? Why not just modify the letter O? After all, that's the letter sound we're concerned about. So just double the O when its pronounced long. Thus, G-O-D for the short vowel – /god/, and G-O-O-D for the long vowel – /goad/ – or /good/ today.

That system was much more logical, and some Middle English scribes came to prefer that spelling technique. So why didn't that technique become the accepted standard? I mean it makes sense, so why didn't everyone just follow that rule?

Well, there were a couple of problems with it. And those problems were the letters I and U. When you doubled those letters, the words became very difficult to read. We have to keep in mind that scribes tended in write in a flowing style – very much like our modern cursive letters. So one letter tended to flow into the next. And at the time, the letter I didn't have a dot over it.

So imagine you are writing two back-to-back I's in cursive. Try spelling the word ***skiing*** without putting a dot over the I's. Those two I's end up looking like a U. It looks like 'skung' instead of ***skiing***. And what if you double the U. Try spelling that word ***equus*** – E-Q-U-U-S – in cursive. You end up with a bunch of vertical strokes that look like a bunch of I's – or maybe IU's – or UI's. And if those letters were followed by an M or an N or an L, all those basic up and down strokes started to blend together. It was hard to distinguish the individual letters. And then in later English, the letter W emerged as a separate distinct letter for the /w/ sound. It was literally a double U. So if you were using double U's for the long U sound, now they looked exactly like the letter W.

So all that created problems for scribes who preferred to double the vowel letters. So they rarely used a double I or a double U to represent long vowel sounds. And that's why we have very few words today with a double I or a double U.

That also means that the technique of using double vowel letters was pretty much limited to double A, double E and double O. The double A was actually common at one time. If you read back through Middle English documents, you'll find words like ***case*** spelled C-A-A-S, and ***mate*** spelled M-A-A-T, and ***hate*** spelled H-A-A-T. But those double A's soon fell out of use.

So that left double E and double O. And most of the examples I gave earlier have those letters. So for double E, we have ***tree***, ***flee***, ***see***, and we can add in words like ***keep***, ***seek***, ***seed***, ***sweet***, and so on.

Double O is little more complicated. We still have it in a lot of words, but the pronunciation of that double O varies in Modern English. Remember that the original long O sound was /oh/. But during the Great Vowel Shift in the 1400s and 1500s, the sound changed from /oh/ to /oo/ in most words. So it switched from the long O sound to the long U sound. So today, when we see that double O, it usually has the modern /oo/ sound – the long U sound. So ***moon***, ***fool***, ***tool***, ***boot***, ***school***, and so on.

But in some words, that sound changed to a short U sound – /u/. And that resulted in the pronunciation of words like ***good***, ***hood***, ***look***, ***book***, and so on. And in some words, it shifted to the /uh/ sound – ***blood***, ***flood***, and so on. So today we find that those double O's have different sounds, but those double O's were adopted back when those pronunciations were more consistent.

So this double vowel technique was used, and it still survives, but it was only used for certain letters. That limitation allowed other techniques to emerge to accomplish the same goal – to represent a long

vowel sound. One of those techniques was to combine two different vowel letters rather than simply doubling the same letter. The French-trained scribes really liked this technique. And they especially liked to use the letter I in this way. So they would add an I to another letter like A or E or U to indicate that the other letter was pronounced long. This technique was especially popular in the north of England and in Scotland, but it has survived into Modern English as well. So let's break that down and see what they did.

To indicate a long U sound, they would add an I to it. That created a 'UI' spelling which still exists in Scotland, but was never really adopted in the south of England. That's why the Scottish word ***guid*** (/good/) is spelled G-U-I-D.

They also added an I to the letter A to indicate that the A was pronounced long. That gave us the 'AI' spelling that we have today. So when we come across words like ***rain***, ***raid***, ***saint***, ***drain***, ***maid***, and ***sail*** – that I is telling you to pronounce the adjoining vowel A as a long A. It's just a trigger. It's technically a diacritic, just like putting an accent mark over the A to indicate that its pronounced long. But in this case, it's putting an I beside the A to tell you the same thing.

Now Middle English scribes also used this technique with the letter E. To represent a long E sound, they would put an I beside it, and that gave us the 'IE' and 'EI' spellings that we have today. Again, that I was a trigger that told you to pronounce the E as a long E. And today, most of the words with the 'IE' or 'EI' spelling have that long /ee/ sound. So we see that in words like ***grief***, ***chief***, ***relief***, ***believe***, ***field***, ***niece***, ***piece***, ***receive***, ***ceiling***, and so on. That I is telling you pronounce the adjacent letter E as a long vowel.

Now I should note that this spelling was typically applied to words that came into English from French. And scribes did that because French also used that spelling. In fact, the 'IE' and 'EI' spellings are ultimately from French. But by the 1400s, this spelling had become so popular that it was extended to some native English words as well. So Old English words like ***fiend*** and ***thief*** got their modern 'IE' spellings during that period.

Now today, some of those words I mentioned are spelled with an IE and some are spelled with 'EI.' And in fact, we even have a general rule today to try to keep track of those spellings – 'I before E except after C.' But if we were to go back to Middle English, we would find that those spellings hadn't been fixed yet, so that rule didn't work back then. In fact, words like ***brief***, and ***relief***, and ***niece***, and ***chief***, and ***receipt*** – they could be spelled with either an 'IE' or an 'EI' depending on the scribe. And they could also be spelled with double E's – remember that technique? So all of these spellings innovations were in use at the same time, and they were somewhat interchangeable.

But after the invention of the printing press, and then the production of the first dictionaries, the spellings started to become fixed. And in most cases, the printers and lexicographers settled on IE as the standard spelling. However, there were a small group of words – literally about 5 words – that had a C before those letters. And in those words, the spelling went the other way. Those words were ***ceiling***, ***receive***, ***deceive***, ***conceive***, and ***perceive***. And of course, there are variations of those words like ***receipt*** and ***conceit*** and ***deceit***. Those were the words where the dictionary makers went with C-E-I instead of C-I-E. And it isn't entirely clear why they did that.

You'll notice that outside of ***ceiling***, all those words are variations of the root '-ceive' which meant 'to take.' And there is some evidence that those words were sometimes pronounced with an /eh/ sound instead of an /ee/ sound. So ***receipt*** and ***receive*** were sometimes pronounced /re-set/ and /re-sev/, and ***conceit*** and ***conceive*** were sometimes pronounced /con-set/ and /con-sev/. Even Shakespeare sometimes based his rhymes on those alternate pronunciations. So that may have been why the printers and dictionary makers reversed the spelling in those words to indicate a slightly different pronunciation. Of course, over time, all of those words came to be pronounced with a long /ee/ sound. So any difference in pronunciation was lost over time.

So today we have that rule – 'I before E except after C.' But the problem with that rule is that there are so many exceptions to it that it barely works at all. To make the rule work, the first thing we need to do is limit it to words that have the long /ee/ sound which was the original context in which that spelling evolved. If we do that, then the rule works pretty well. The problem is all of those words that don't have the /ee/ sound – like ***freight***, and ***neighbor***, and ***weight***, and the number ***eight***. All of those words use 'EI,' instead of the usual 'IE'. And the 'EI' doesn't follow a C in those words. So the rule doesn't work there. In fact, this is such a common exception that some of you may know a longer version of that spelling rule – 'I before E except after C, or when sounding like A, as in neighbor or weigh.'

But it doesn't stop there. In fact, what about the word ***their*** – T-H-E-I-R. That's another exception. And what about words like ***forfeit***, and ***seize***, and ***vein***, and ***either***, and ***heir*** – as in 'the heir to the throne.' Those are also exceptions. They're all spelled with an 'EI' – not 'IE.' And even when we have a C, it's not always followed by 'EI' as the rule suggests. What about the word ***ancient*** – A-N-C-***I-E***-N-T. And we have ***sufficient***, and ***proficient***, and ***conscience*** – all with a C-I-E which violates the rule. So welcome to English spelling. It's never as simple as it seems.

The main point here is that the 'IE' and 'EI' letter combinations have their ultimate origins in French. And it came into English when French-trained scribes used those spellings for French words that were entering English during the Middle English period. And the 'IE' and 'EI' originally represented the long sound of letter E because the I was used as a marker to indicate that vowel next to it was pronounced as a long vowel.

So 'UI,' 'AI,' 'EI,' and 'IE' all emerged as standard spelling innovations in Middle English. Sometimes, scribes combined other vowel letters as well. For example, they put E and A together to represent a long /eh/ sound. So today, we see that spelling in words like ***peace*** – P-E-A-C-E. And the word ***sea*** – S-E-A. But notice that the vowel sounds in those words have changed over time. Today, they're pronounced ***peace*** and ***sea***, but in Middle English they would have been /pehhs/ and /sehh/.

So if you have a hard day at work or school, you might want a little bit of peace and quite – a 'piece of peace' if you will. A PIECE of PEACE. Those are homophones today, they sound just alike. But in Middle English, you would have wanted a /pace/ of /pehhs/. The pronunciations were slightly different. So they were spelled differently. Eventually, those pronunciations merged into the modern pronunciation /peace/, and the words became homophones. But those original spelling differences remain.

And along the same lines, if you go to the beach, you ***see*** the ***sea*** with the homophones – S-E-E and S-E-A. But in Middle English, you would /say/ the /sehh/. Again, the pronunciations were slightly different, and the words were spelled differently. But again, over time, those vowel sounds converged, and instead of going to the beach to /say/ the /sehh/, you now go to ***see*** the ***sea***. But those old Middle English spellings remain, and they're telling us that those words were once pronounced differently.

So the 'EA' spelling was used in Middle English for the sound that linguists call the long Open E sound – the sound found in /pehhs/ and /sehh/.

Middle English scribes also began using the 'OU' letter combination. This was another spelling innovation that was imported from French. In Middle English, it was used for the long /u:/ sound of U. So the words ***house*** and ***mouse*** were originally Old English words – ***hus*** and ***mus***. ***Hus*** was H-U-S. And ***mus*** was M-U-S. Again, scribes looked for ways to represent that the U was pronounced as a long U in words like that. Remember that the double U created problems because it was difficult to read in the middle of a word. So some scribes began to use the French OU spelling instead. So Old English H-U-S became Middle English H-O-U-S. But it was still pronounced /hus/. And Old English M-U-S became Middle English M-O-U-S. But it was still pronounced /mus/.

And then the Great Vowel Shift happened. And /hus/ and /mus/ became /hoas/ and /moas/ – and then became /house/ and /mouse/. Now some English dialects still retain that intermediate pronunciation as /hoas/ and /moas/. But standard English shifted those pronunciations to the modern /ow/ sound. And those words retain that French 'OU' spelling which they acquired in Middle English.

Again, that OU spelling began as a way to indicate that there was a long U sound in those words. By the way, this is the same process that converted Old English ***hund*** into Modern English ***hound*** with its OU spelling, and Old English ***pund*** into Modern English ***pound*** with it OU spelling.

So we've seen how scribes put two vowel letters together to represent a long vowel sound. Sometimes it was two different vowel letters, and sometimes the same letter was simply doubled. And in all of the examples I've given so far, the two vowel letters were next to each other – side-by-side.

But in the late Middle English period, scribes came up with another way to represent a long vowel sound, and it also used two vowel letters. But this time, the two vowel letters were separated from each other. There was actually a consonant letter in between them. And this new method actually became so popular that is now the primary way we represent a long vowel sound in Modern English. This new method was the 'silent E' at the end of a word.

Even if you were never taught this in school, you may have noticed this technique just from observing how the silent E works in Modern English. Generally speaking, when we have a vowel and a consonant, we put a silent E at the end to show that the first vowel is long. So that silent E at the end is a marker, just like how the letter I was used as a marker beside the A in words like ***raid*** and ***braid***, and just like how the I was used as a marker beside the E in words like ***grief***, and ***chief***

and ***niece***. In this case, the silent E works the same way. It's also a marker to indicate that the other vowel in the word is pronounced long, but in this case the marker is separated from the vowel and stuck at the end of the word.

So we have ***hat*** with a short vowel. It has a simple straight-forward spelling. But we have ***hate*** with a long vowel and a silent E on the end. And we have ***bit*** and ***bite***. ***Cop*** and ***cope***. ***Mad*** and ***made***. ***Fat*** and ***fate***. ***Pin*** and ***pine***. ***Tub*** and ***tube***. And on and on. The word with the short vowel has a short and simple spelling. The word with the long vowel has a silent E on the end.

So where did it come from? Why did scribes and printers decide to use the silent E in the first place. Well, to understand that history, we have to start at the beginning – with Old English. As we know, Old English used a lot of different inflectional endings – endings like '-a,' '-as,' '-an,' '-e,' '-es,' '-en,' '-u-,' '-um,' and others. But after the Viking invasions, and the introduction of Old Norse, those inflectional endings started to break down in northern and eastern England. And that process was reinforced after the Norman Conquest.

Now those endings didn't just disappear. Initially, they were simplified. They merged into a somewhat generic '-eh' ending at the end of words. Linguists call the sound a 'schwa,' but it's basically just an 'eh.' So in the last episode, I discussed the original Old English version of words like ***bleed***, ***feed***, ***meet*** and ***hide***. In Old English, those words were ***ble-de***, ***fe-de***, ***me-te*** and ***hy-de***. They still had inflectional endings, but it was just that generic '-eh.' And that ending was spelled with an E.

So when you look at an Old English document, you see lots of different endings on words. But when you look at a Middle English document, you tend to see the same generic E ending over and over. Lots of words ended in an E in Middle English, and that E was still pronounced as /eh/. But that ending became so generic, that it no longer had any real meaning. Those different endings in Old English were markers that conveyed very specific information. But when they all became simplified to a generic 'eh' ending, that sound no longer served any purpose. So people started to drop it altogether because it wasn't really doing anything.

This happened first in the north of England and in Scotland. That was where Norse influence was the greatest, and that was where the breakdown of inflectional endings had started a few centuries earlier. So the trend always began there and spread south. And now, around the current point in our overall story – in the late 1100s and 1200s – people in the north stopped pronouncing those generic 'eh' endings altogether.

By the 1300s, that trend has spread to southern England. By the late 1300s, Geoffrey Chaucer was writing around London in the south, and his writings often used rhyming verse, and his rhymes suggest that the E at the end of words was sometimes pronounced and they were sometimes silent. So they were still in the process of disappearing around London in the late 1300s.

By the mid 1400s, those final E's were largely silent throughout England. And there is evidence of this silence in the documents produced in the late Middle English period. Since scribes still tended to spell words phonetically, many of them had started to drop the E at the end of words altogether.

But some of them retained the E as a marker for a long vowel – the same way we use it today. And it was used as a marker because a lot of those words had long vowel sounds.

In order to follow this, let's consider a word like ***side*** – S-I-D-E. It's an Old English word, and it was spelled the same way in Old English. But it would have been pronounced as /see-deh/. So it was basically broken down into two -syllables – S-I /see/ – and D-E /deh/.

You might remember from the last episode that when the first syllable ended in a vowel sound – like /see/ – it tended to be stretched out and pronounced long. It's called an open syllable. But then the E at the end became silent in Middle English, and the pronunciation shifted from /see-deh/ to /seed/. So it was reduced to a single syllable. But it still had that old long sound of letter I – /seed/. And when that I sound shifted in the Great Vowel Shift from /ee/ to /eye/, the pronunciation of the word shifted again from /seed/ to /side/. So again, from /see-deh/ to /seed/ to /side/. The vowel remained long, but the E became silent. The E was just sitting there at the end marking that long vowel sound.

Well that same process happened in a lot of words in English. And even though it isn't entirely clear, it appears that scribes started to treat that silent E at the end as a marker for those long vowels. And they began to add silent E's to other words as well to indicate long vowels. So this became a standard spelling innovation. And it became one of the most popular ways to indicate a long vowel in Modern English.

But it also created a lot of problems because that silent E was just left hanging there at the end. And sometimes, it tended to get lost. So scribes had to come up with ways to fix those problems.

It was especially a problem with verbs. If a verb was converted into a noun, the suffix '-er' was often added to the end. So ***jump*** became ***jumper***, and ***hunt*** became ***hunter***. And ***dine*** became ***diner***. But notice what happened in that word ***dine***. ***Dine*** had a silent E on the end, but when it became ***diner***, the silent E was lost. Now it looked like D-I-N with an '-er' suffix. And the E in that '-er' suffix was pronounced. Well, D-I-N would normally be pronounced as /din/. So D-I-N-E-R looked like it should be pronounced short – as /dinner/. But English already had the word ***dinner***. So scribes had to figure out how to distinguish ***diner*** and ***dinner*** – because the silent E didn't work in that situation. So they decided to shift their focus from the long vowel to the short vowel – from ***diner*** to ***dinner***. What they did is they decided to leave ***diner*** as it was and mark ***dinner*** with a double N. So they decided to mark the short vowel the same way Orm did it – by doubling the consonant after the vowel. And that produced the difference between ***diner*** and ***dinner***.

The same thing happened with ***bite*** and ***biter***. When that '-er' suffix was added to ***bite***, the silent E was lost in the spelling. So ***biter*** looked like it should be pronounced /bitter/. To avoid confusion between ***biter*** and ***bitter***, they doubled the consonant in ***bitter*** using that traditional technique. And ***bitter*** got is modern double T's.

So something very interesting was happening there. We saw that scribes generally felt no need to mark short vowels. They focused their attention on how to mark long vowels. But when they absolutely had to – when their spelling innovations for long vowels broke down and didn't work – they would go back and mark the short vowel. So that was what was happening here. When the

'silent E' technique broke down because the E got lost at the end, the scribes would just mark the short vowel instead – with double consonants.

So today, when we come across that double consonant spelling to mark a short vowel, it's often because scribes and printers needed to clear up some confusion that would have otherwise existed.

So that is why we have ***hoping*** with one P and ***hopping*** with two P's. And ***taping*** with one P and ***tapping*** with two P's. ***Hope*** and ***tape*** have those silent E's to mark the long vowel. But when ***hope*** becomes ***hoping*** – and ***tape*** becomes ***taping*** – the E is dropped at the end, and the '-ing' suffix is added. The silent E disappears altogether. And H-O-P-I-N-G looks like it should be /hop-ing/ – not /hope-ing/. And T-A-P-I-N-G looks like it should be /tap-ing/ – not /tape-ing/. So again, scribes solved this confusion by leaving the long versions as they were, and they marked the short versions with double consonants. So /hop-ing/ became H-O-P-P-I-N-G. And /tap-ing/ became T-A-P-P-I-N-G.

So where does all of this leave us? Well, let's summarize the rules we've covered in this episode. First, when a vowel doesn't have an obvious marker, it is usually pronounced short. However, we covered two major exceptions. First, the short vowel was marked with a double consonant when it was necessary to clear up some confusion as to how the vowel was pronounced. So when the spelling rules for a long vowel broke down, then the scribes would just mark the short vowel with a double consonant. The other exception was those words that ended in F, L, S or Z, which also tended to have double consonants, and also those words that ended in 'CK,' which was another type of double consonant that marked a short vowel.

Beyond those general exceptions, short vowels were left unmarked. And scribes chose to mark the long vowels instead. They did that by either doubling the vowel letter, or using two different vowel letters, or adding a silent E to the end. Again, all of these techniques existed side-by-side for much of the Middle English period.

So as I noted at the beginning of the episode, the word ***name*** was sometimes spelled with a double A – N-A-A-M. And sometimes with two different vowels – N-A-Y-M. And sometimes with a silent E at the end like we do today – N-A-M-E. And a word like ***queen*** was sometimes spelled with a double E like we do today – Q-U-E-E-N. And sometimes with two different vowels – Q-U-E-A-N. And sometimes with a silent E – Q-U-E-N-E.

All of this didn't get sorted out until the Modern English period, and when it was sorted out, it was a piecemeal process. There was no grand committee of English experts to apply a simple consistent set of rules.

And even when relatively straight-forward rules were adopted, they were confused by later events. Sounds continued to change within English. Foreign words were borrowed with unique spellings that didn't match the traditional rules – and those unique spellings were often retained. And later English scholars tried to reform English spelling. But they didn't reform the spellings to make them easier. They actually made them more complicated. They tried to change the spellings of many words to reflect the ultimate Greek and Latin roots of those words. So a word like ***debt*** got a new letter B in

the middle because it came from the Latin word ***debitum*** But the word ***debt*** has never had a pronounced ‘b’ sound in English.

So all of that contributed to the mess that is English spelling today. And I should note that I only scratched the surface in this episode. I’ll have a lot more to say about spelling in future episodes. But I think we’ve had enough spelling rules for the time being. So next time, I’m going to return to our overall historical narrative.

In the next episode, we’ll return to the events on the ground in England and France. Henry II’s son was now the ruler of the Angevin Empire. His name was Richard – officially King Richard I – but more well-known to history as Richard the Lionhearted. As his nickname suggests, he loved to fight. And after he became King of England and ruler of the Angevin Empire, he spent much of his time fighting in the Near East – in the Crusades. So next time, we’ll look at Richard’s reign. And we’ll see how influences from the Arab world started to filter into Western Europe. That included a lot of words as well. So we’ll look at those new influences on the English language.

Until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.