

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPTS**

EPISODE 161: Y U AND I HAVE A PROBLEM

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Explanation of Transcription Symbols Used in This Transcript:

Y - used to represent a specific letter of the alphabet

[Y] - used to represent a specific spelling;

'y' - used when describing a sound by reference to the letter that represents that sound;

/y/ - used to represent a specific sound or word as pronounced and demonstrated in the podcast.

Also the transcript represents the 'y' sound in words like year and young as /y/, not the traditional IPA symbol of /j/. That designation was chosen to prevent confusion since most readers are not familiar with IPA.

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 161: Y U and I Have a Problem. In this episode, we're going to continue our look at the sound and spelling of Elizabethan English, and specifically, we're going to focus on a group of sounds that are historically related. These are the sounds traditionally represented by the letters I, U and Y. And of course, the letter U is the ultimate source of the letters V and W. And I is actually the source of our modern letter J. So we have a lot on our plate in this episode. But as we explore the connection between those letters and sounds, we can start to understand why English spelling is so weird – like how a Y sometimes has the sound of I, and why a U is sometimes used for the W sound, and why some people call W and Y consonants, while other people call them semi-vowels. As we explore the history of these sounds and letters, all of that will start to make sense. But it's not an easy journey. There's a lot of history to explore. So buckle up and get ready for a trip that will take us from the ancient Greeks who invented our modern vowel letters, to Roman scribes who applied those letters to Latin, to medieval scribes who became frustrated with a writing script that caused those letters to disappear, and finally, to an Elizabethan writer who proposed the final two letters to be added to our alphabet.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can sign up to support the podcast and get bonus episodes at Patreon.com/historyofenglish.

By the way, this is the third and final episode dealing with the pronunciation of Elizabethan English. These last three episodes have focused on consonant sounds, and the way they were represented in writing. And if you combine these three episodes with the three episodes I did about the Great Vowel Shift earlier, I think you'll have a good overview of the sound of Elizabethan English. But any time I do these episodes about the evolution of certain sounds and letters, I know that it can be a little hard to follow at times. So if you find that to be the case, you can always check out the transcript of the episode at the main website – historyofenglishpodcast.com. Just go to the entry for this episode – Episode 161. And that way, you can digest this information at your own pace.

Now over the past few episodes, we've looked at the writings of John Hart who developed a phonetic writing system in the mid-1500s. He published two works using that system – the first in 1569 and the second in 1570. His works are important to modern scholars because they provide the first detailed description of English pronunciation at the time.

Well, in the same year that Hart's final work was composed, another important text was published. That particular text was called 'A Booke Containing Divers Sortes of Hands.' And it's important to our story because it was the first writing manual published in English. So what do I mean by writing manual? Well, it was literally a guide to writing by hand. It explained how to make ink, and to cut a quill for writing, and how to hold the pen. And it also contained illustrations of 15 common scripts or handwriting styles that were used at the time. Those illustrations were printed from wood blocks, and they provided examples of the different types of scripts that were in common use. And that book proved to be very popular, going through many different editions over the following decades.

Now it may seem a bit odd that a book on handwriting would be so popular during the age of printing, but we have to keep in mind that the printing press encouraged a widespread interest in reading and writing. And of course, people wrote by hand. That included letters, diaries, journals, business records, and all kinds of other documents. So people wanted to know how to write properly. And at the time, the shapes of the letters still varied quite a bit depending on the specific script that one chose to use.

This particular guide to writing gave the reader several different examples to choose from, but in general, they can be divided into two groups. There was a common family of scripts used in northern Europe known as Gothic or Blackletter. These scripts were bold and straight and blocky. The other group of scripts were used in southern Europe (especially in Italy), and they were more curvy and modern looking. And those southern scripts were more modern looking because they were really the source of the scripts we use today. Their Italian origin is still reflected in modern terms like Italics and Roman script. And thanks to books like that writing manual that appeared in 1570, those Italian scripts gradually overtook the old blocky Gothic scripts that had been used in northern Europe for more than four centuries.

The appeal of those new Italian scripts was even reflected in the writings of Shakespeare about three decades later. In his play Twelfth Night, composed around the year 1600, one of the characters receives a forged love letter which he believes to be from the countess he is serving, and he states that he believes it to be from her because of the handwriting. The character says, "I think we do know the sweet Roman hand." Well, that was a reference to the Italian scripts that had become so popular by end of the Elizabethan period when Shakespeare composed the play.

As the new rounder Italian scripts became more popular, the old stodgy Gothic scripts started to fall out of use, but they left a legacy that we're still dealing with today. And that's because the design of that traditional Gothic script made it very difficult to keep track of letters like I and U in any given word.

Now I would love to show you why that was the case, but this is a podcast, so I can't show you a picture or a video. But I think it's important to understand what that Gothic script looked like in order to understand why scribes had a problem with those two letters.

The first thing to understand is that scribes in the Middle Ages wrote with a quill, which usually had a flat tip like a calligraphy pen. So if you think about a modern pen or pencil, it has a pointed tip. So when you write with it, it makes a consistent line. The width of the line remains the same no matter what direction you write or draw. But if you have a quill with a flat tip, the width of the line varies depending on how you hold the tip and what direction you move the pen. If you hold the pen so that the tip is horizontal to the page and move it up or down, it makes a wide bold line. But if you move it left or right, it makes a very thin and narrow line.

Well, that's essentially how scribes wrote the Gothic script. The pen tip was usually held at more of a 45 degree angle, and to write an I, the scribe would just make a single bold vertical line often with a small flourish at the top and bottom. And the same approach was basically used to write the letter U. The scribe would make a straight bold vertical line, then make another straight bold vertical line beside it, and the two vertical lines would be connected by a single thin flourish at the bottom. So instead of a curvy shape, the U actually looked like two I's next to each other – connected with a thin little line. The same approach was used to make an N as well. The scribe made a bold vertical line, then another, and would connect them with a thin little flourish at the top. And the letter M was the same way, except it had three vertical lines – each connected with a thin line at the top. That's why this script looked so blocky. And when a series of these letters were put together, they just looked a bunch of vertical lines in a row connected at various points with little thin lines or flourishes at the top or bottom.

Those straight bold lines were such a fundamental part of this script that they actually had a name. They were called *minims*. And that word *minim* is actually the source of our modern words *minimum* and *minimal*. *Minim* mean the smallest, most basic part of something. And those vertical lines were the smallest, most basic part of these letters.

But think about the word *minim* spelled 'm-i-n-i-m.' Each of those letters would have been drawn in this same manner with a series of minims or thick straight lines. So when spelled out in Gothic script, the word *minim* actually looked like 10 vertical lines in a row – some of them connected with those little flourishes.

That's why the letters I and U were such a problem for scribes in the Middle Ages. When one of those letters appeared beside the other, or beside an M or an N or an L, it just looked like a bunch of vertical lines. It was difficult to tell where one letter ended and another began.

As we'll see, medieval scribes came up with a variety of solutions to deal with that problem. And those solutions shaped the way those letters work in English to this day. For example, it explains why the letter I has a dot over it. It explains why the letter Y was often used as a vowel in place of an I. And it explains why English words rarely end with an I or U today. All of those quirky features stem from the various solutions that scribes invented to deal with that problematic Gothic script. And we'll explore those developments over the course of this episode.

Now that Gothic script was one of the culprits behind the weird rules that still apply to the letters I and U, but there was also another problem with those two letters. And that was the fact that scribes tended to overuse them to the point of exhaustion. The letters I and U didn't just represent vowel sounds. They were also used to represent consonant sounds and were sometimes used to represent multiple consonant sounds. Those two letters were unique in that regard.

The use of those vowel letters for consonant sounds goes all the way back to the Romans. The letter I was sometimes used for the /y/ sound that we associate with letter Y today. And the letter U was sometimes used for the /w/ sound that we associate with letter W. But why? Why did the Romans make those letters serve a dual purpose? Well, the answer to that question lies in the fact that those two consonant sounds – /y/ and /w/ – have strong vowel-like qualities. And that takes us back to the concept of approximants which I discussed in the last episode.

As we saw last time, English has several sounds that exist somewhere in the gray area between vowels and consonants. These sounds are made with a very slight constriction of the vocal tract. So they don't have the typical friction that we associate with consonants. But they're not completely open like vowels either. Again, they are somewhere in between. Those approximant sounds include the 'l' and 'r' sounds which we looked at last time, as well as the 'w' and 'y' sounds – /w/ and /y/. And in fact, the 'w' and 'y' sounds have such strong vowel-like qualities that they are often called semi-vowels.

So let's look a little closer at each of those sounds. And let's start with the 'w' sound (/w/). We make that sound by rounding our lips and raising the back of our tongue a little bit. But interestingly, that's also how we make the traditional U vowel sound (/oo/). In fact, if you say /woo/, you'll notice that there is very little change in the mouth between that initial 'w' sound and the vowel that follows it. In that context, the lips are a little bit tighter or more constricted when making the initial 'w' sound, but that's the only real difference. And that's why the /w/ sound is considered an approximate. It is very similar to a vowel, but sometimes, it's just slightly more constricted.

Many times, there's no real difference at all between the two sounds. If you pause the 'w' sound at the beginning of a word like *we*, you get /www/. Now if pronounce the vowel sound at the beginning of the word *Uber*, you get /ooo/. It's basically the same sound. And many linguists just think of the 'w' sound and 'u' sound as the same sound, just articulated in different places. When the sound is pronounced at the front of a syllable before a vowel – like in *we*, and *why*, and *way* – they think of it as the 'w' sound, but when it's pronounced after a consonant at the peak of the syllable – like in *you*, and *blue*, and *do* – they think of it as a vowel. So from that perspective, the 'w' and 'u' sounds are essentially the same sound, but it sometimes functions as a consonant and sometimes as a vowel. Again, that's why it is sometimes called a semi-vowel. It's actually kind of mind-blowing when you think of it like that. The clear distinction that we have between vowels and consonants starts to break down a little bit when we get to this /oo/ sound, and the way we use it.

Well, Roman scribes recognized this same connection, so they used the same letter U for both sounds. And that connection was reinforced by the fact that the /oo/ vowel sound often turned into a /w/ consonant sound in many words. Specifically, when the /oo/ sound appeared before another vowel sound, it often became a /w/ or ‘w’ sound. It tended to happen naturally, and it still happens in Modern English.

Think about the name *Louis* – spelled ‘L-o-u-i-s.’ In the middle of that name, the /oo/ sound is immediately followed by the /i/ sound. Vowel next to vowel. And in that context, we often pronounce that name with a slight ‘w’ sound in between. We often say /loo-wis/. And in fact, we even have an alternate spelling – ‘L-e-w-i-s’ – which reflects that pronunciation. And that happens because the lips are rounded when we make the /oo/ sound, and that rounding is carried over into the following vowel sound. So the /oo/ sound extends over and becomes the first part of the second syllable, and remember that in that position, that becomes the ‘w’ sound. So if I put a little break between those sounds, they remain distinct – /loo-is/. But if I let them run together, I get that /w/ sound at the front of the second syllable – /loo-wis/.

This happens all the time in English. Think about the word *duo* – ‘d-u-o’ – which is often pronounced as /doo-woh/ with a slight ‘w’ sound in the middle. And think about words like *nuance*, *fluent*, and *doing*. Again, that ‘u’ or /oo/ sound often bleeds over into the following vowel sound and becomes the first part of that second syllable, and ‘Voila!’ there’s the ‘w’ sound. That’s why those two sounds were fundamentally connected in the minds of many classical scribes and writers.

Now let’s think about the ‘y’ sound (/y/). We make that sound by slightly raising the tongue toward the palate. And in fact, we put the tongue in a position that is very similar to the position we use to make the /ee/ sound. Remember that the /ee/ sound was the traditional long sound of letter I like in *elite*, and *police*, and *piano*, and *pizza*. So if you say /yee/, you’ll notice there isn’t much difference between that initial /y/ sound and the /ee/ sound that follows it. In fact, if you pause the /y/ sound, you get /ee/. So again, it’s almost the exact same sound as the /ee/ sound. Now when we say /yee/, we might constrict that initial sound a little bit more to create a contrast between /y/ and /ee/, but most linguists point out that the relationship between I and Y is essentially the same as the relationship between U and W. The ‘i’ sound and ‘y’ sound are essentially the same sound, they just appear in different parts of a syllable. And that’s why the ‘y’ sound is also considered to be a semi-vowel. And classical scholars recognized that connection, so they used the letter I for both sounds.

And just like we saw a moment ago, the /ee/ vowel sound often turned into /y/ consonant sound when it appeared before another vowel. Again, the /ee/ sound would tend to bleed over into the following syllable, which would put the /ee/ sound at the front of the syllable, and therefore produced a ‘y’ sound. Again, that was a natural phenomenon, and it still happens in Modern English.

Think about names like *Lydia* and *Olivia*. They end in [IA] and are pronounced /ee-uh/. Well, they’re pronounced that way if we keep them distinct from each other. But in normal speech, we tend them blur them together, and that produces that ‘y’ sound in the middle. We say /Ly-dee-

yuh/ and /o-liv-ee-yuh/. Also, think about the word *brilliant*, which most people pronounce with a ‘y’ sound near the end as /yant/ – /brill-yant/. This same phenomenon converts *spaniel* into /span-yul/, and *happier* into /hap-ee-yer/, and *million* into /mill-yun/, and *companion* into /com-pan-yun/. So you get the idea. And again, that’s why the Romans used the letter I for both the vowel sound /ee/ at the peak of a syllable and the consonant sound /yee/ at the front of a syllable. Again, it’s essentially the same sound. The main difference is really where it appears in the syllable. And that what makes this a little mind-blowing when we break it down.

So all of that helps to explain why the Romans used vowel letters for those two approximant sounds – /w/ and /y/. But of course, they could have invented brand new letters for those sounds like we have today. In English, those sounds in that position at the front of syllables have their own letters – W and Y. So why didn’t the Romans just do that? Well, it’s partly because those two approximant sounds – /w/ and /y/ – were not very prominent in Latin. And the Romans felt that the letters I and U could handle all of those sounds without a problem. And that decision meant that the letters I and U now had to represent both vowel and consonant sounds, and as a result, those letters were destined to create a lot of confusion in the following centuries.

Now before we go any further, we should consider where the Romans acquired those two letters – I and U. Of course, the Romans borrowed the alphabet from their northern neighbors the Etruscans. And the Etruscans had borrowed the alphabet from the Greeks, who had borrowed it from the Phoenicians. But the original Phoenician alphabet only had letters for consonant sounds. So it was the Greeks who introduced specific vowel letters, including the original versions of the letters I and U.

The letter I began as the Greek letter iota. As I’ve noted, it was used to represent the long /ee/ sound and the short /ih/ sound. And the letter eventually passed into Latin representing the same sounds. Again, think about words like *pizza* and *pit* which still use the letter I in that same way.

As I noted, the letter’s Greek name was *iota*, and the letter was essentially a straight line, so it was the smallest and simplest letter of the alphabet. And that name *iota* eventually passed into English as *iota* meaning something very small. If someone doesn’t care ‘one iota’ about your opinion, they don’t care at all. And over time, the sound at the beginning of iota evolved into a ‘j’ sound. In early episodes of the podcast, I talked about how the Latin name *Julius*, and how it evolved from /ee-ulus/ to /yulus/ to /julius/. Well, the same sound change affected the name of this Greek letter *iota*. Within Latin, it became /yota/, and then in the Middle Ages, it became /jota/ or *jot*. That version of the word was also borrowed into English to mean something small that was written down, or the process of writing something down in a small or abbreviated form. And we still use that word today when we ‘jot’ something down. So both versions of that Greek letter’s name – *iota* and *jot* – have made their way into Modern English, and the letter itself passed through Latin into English as our letter I.

So what about the letter U? Was it also a Greek letter? Well, sort of. Latin needed a letter for its /oo/ vowel sound, but Ancient Greek didn’t actually have that sound. However, it did have a similar sound. It was the /ü/ sound. So if you say /ee/ and round your lips like you making the /oo/ sound, you get this in-between /ü/ sound. We don’t really use that sound in Modern English,

and Latin didn't really use it either. But Latin needed a letter for its /oo/ sound, and this /ü/ sound was the closest sound in Greek. So the Romans took the Greek letter for that sound, which was called epsilon.

But here's the interesting thing about epsilon. It is actually the original version of both our modern letter U, and our modern letter Y. So U and Y are really just two different versions of epsilon. And we have two different versions of that letter because the Romans actually borrowed the letter epsilon twice. The first version came in as U, and the second version came in as Y.

Here's what happened. The Greek letter epsilon looked like a modern Y. So it looked like a V on the top with a stem on the bottom. Well, when the Romans borrowed the letter the first time for the /oo/ sound, they just used the top part of the letter. So in Latin, the letter looked like a V, but it was the original version of letter U. As I've noted in prior episodes, the letter was sometimes written in an angular fashion like a V, especially when it was carved in stone with a chisel. But sometimes it was written in a curvy fashion like a U, especially when written in ink with a quill. But it was the same letter. The modern letter V didn't emerge as a distinct and separate letter until the 1600s and 1700s. So the top part of epsilon became our letter U, written with either two straight lines or one curvy line. And again, it was used as both a vowel and also for the consonant /w/ or 'w' sound at the front of a syllable.

But then, shortly after Roman Empire was established – around the second century AD or Common Era – the Romans began to borrow a lot of words from Greek. And as I noted, the Greek language had that /ü/ sound that didn't really exist in Latin. And that sound was spelled with epsilon. Since the Romans were borrowing Greek words with that distinct vowel sound, they decided to re-borrow epsilon to spell that sound in those Greek loanwords. So epsilon was borrowed for a second time, this time in its full form with its stem at the bottom. And that became the letter Y.

And in fact, a lot of those Greek loanwords eventually passed into English, and we still spell most of those words with a Y today. Think about all of those words we have that begin with 'S-Y' like *system*, *syllable*, and *sympathy*. And think about words like *cycle*, *lyric*, *type*, *hydrogen*, *oxygen* and *gymnasium*. They're all Greek words or based on Greek roots, and we spell the vowel sound in those words with a Y instead of an I because that's the way the Greeks spelled them – with epsilon which was the original Y-shaped letter. So when we preserve that Y in those Greek words, we're basically doing what the original Romans did. We're preserving a Greek spelling in Greek loanwords, which provides a clue that the vowel sound in those words was unique at one time.

So as we move into the Late Latin period, the letters I, U and Y were all in place. I had its long and short vowel sounds /ee/ and /ih/, and it was sometimes used for the consonant sound /y/. U had its long and short vowel sounds /oo/ and /u/, and it was sometimes used for the consonant sound /w/. And Y was used for that rounded /ee/ sound (/ü/) that the Greeks had. So all three letters were in place, even though the sounds they represented were a bit different from the sounds they represent today.

Now we need to jump forward a bit to the Anglo-Saxon period to see how those letters were applied to Old English. For the most part, the letters were adopted into English with those same sounds that I just described. As it turned out, Old English had all of those vowel sounds, including the /ü/ sound represented by Y or upsilon. So the Latin letters were applied directly to the same vowel sounds in Old English.

But when it came to the consonant sounds /y/ and /w/, the Anglo-Saxons decided that English needed separate letters for those sounds. As I mentioned earlier, those sounds were much more common and much more prominent in Old English than they were in Latin. So if the letters I and U were used for those consonant sounds in English, they would tend to be overused. Those letters would appear all over the place, and it would be difficult for readers to keep track of which sound was being represented in any give word. So early Old English scribes decided to give those consonant sounds their own letters. And they ended up using old runic symbols for those sounds. The /y/ sound was usually represented with a letter called yogh that was actually used for several different sounds in Old English. And the /w/ sound was represented with a runic symbol called wynn. Of course, as we know, the later Normans hated those Germanic runic symbols. So those two runic letters didn't stand much of a chance after the Norman Conquest. So let's jump forward to see what happened after the Conquest in the period of Middle English.

The period after the Norman Conquest brought about several changes to the letters and sounds that I've been discussing. Let's first consider what happened to the vowel sounds, then we'll turn our attention to the two consonants sounds /y/ and /w/.

The first major development after the Norman Conquest concerned the letter Y and that rounded /ü/ sound that it represented. Remember that Old English had that specific sound, and it used a Y for the sound – just like the original sound of the letter in Greek. But within a century or two after the Conquest, that /ü/ sound became un-rounded. In other words, when people pronounced that sound, they stopped rounding their lips. They just let their lips relax a bit so that the sound was pronounced in a more open way. And remember how I described that /ü/ sound earlier. I said it was basically just the /ee/ sound with rounded lips. So when people stopped rounding their lips, the sound just became a regular /ee/ sound. And as we've already seen, that was the long vowel sound represented by letter I – like in the modern words *pizza*, *piano* and *elite*. So that meant that the letters Y and I were now both pronounced as /ee/. So the two letters acquired the same sound. And THAT was the point at which Y and I started become somewhat interchangeable in spelling – because they represented the same vowel sound.

This also points to something very interesting about the history of letter Y. I noted earlier that its original /ü/ sound was somewhere in between the sounds of letters I and U. It had the tongue position of letter I and rounded lips of letter U. That's why the letter was borrowed into Latin as the letter U, but in English, it became closely associated with letter I. And that association between Y and I in English is the next major development in our story.

As I just noted, those two letters came to represent the same sound in the Middle English period. And that convergence happened to take place at the same time as another development which was the adoption of old Gothic script that I described at the beginning of the episode. That script

with all of its straight vertical lines called ‘minims’ had emerged around this same time in the 1200s. And as I described earlier, it was already starting to create a problem for the letter I, which was hard to identify when it appeared beside a U or M or N or L or another I.

One solution was already being used by this point and that was to put a little mark above the I to make it stand out in the word. And that little mark eventually became the dot that we still use today above the lowercase I.

Another option was to extend the I below the line of text and give it a little curve or flourish at the bottom. That also helped the I to stand out in the word, and that curvy I eventually became our letter J, but again, that process took several centuries and wasn’t actually completed until after the Elizabethan period.

Well, now, with the merger of the ‘y’ and ‘i’ sounds, those Middle English scribes had a third option. They could simply replace the ‘hard-to-see’ I with a Y. And that substitution became incredibly popular over the course of the Middle English period. For example, a word like *mine* would have been spelled ‘m-i-n’ in early Middle English, but the I was hard to see in between the M and N. In the Gothic script, it just looked like six vertical lines in a row. So it became a common practice to replace the I with a Y, causing the word to be spelled ‘m-y-n.’ Even basic words like *is* and *it* were routinely spelled as ‘y-s’ and ‘y-t.’

The substitution of Y for I also led to another important development. Scribes felt that an I at the end of a word was particularly hard to read, so it became an almost universal practice to avoid an I at the end of a word. That final I could be avoided by simply replacing it with a Y. That’s how words like *my* and *by* got their modern Y’s. They were previously spelled ‘m-i’ and ‘b-i.’ But if the word had a suffix, the I could be retained because it was no longer sitting there at the end of the word. And that’s how we got the various rules that require us to drop the Y at the end of a word before adding a suffix with I.

For example, to make the word *city* plural, we drop the Y at the end and add ‘i-e-s.’ To change the verb *study* to *studies* or *studied*, again we drop the Y and add either ‘i-e-s’ or ‘i-e-d.’ To change *angry* to *angrier*, again we drop the Y and add ‘i-e-r.’ We use the same basic approach to convert *vary* to *variable*, and *apply* to *application*, and *beauty* to *beautiful*. We drop the Y and add the suffix with the I. And we do that because of that old spelling convention that limited the use of I at the end of a word. So when we say that we ‘drop the Y and add an I’ along with the suffix, that is actually the opposite of what really happened. It was the I that was dropped from the simple form of the word, and the Y was put in its place. Again, that basic spelling convention was largely the product of that hard-to-read Gothic script that was so common in the Middle Ages.

Of course, we do have a few words in Modern English that end in an I like *ski*, and *khaki*, and all of those Italian foods like *spaghetti* and *linguini*, but those are almost always recent loanwords that have been borrowed into English since spelling became standardized in the 1500s and 1600s. So they avoided the process that replaced the final I’s with Y’s.

I should also mention that the introduction of the printing press in the 1400s, and the adoption of a more modern script in the 1500s, solved the problem of the disappearing I. So after that point, printers didn't need to use the letter Y as a substitute anymore. And that allowed the spelling of many words to revert back to their original I. So today, the use of the letter Y for the I vowel sound is much more limited than it was before the 1600s. But as we've seen, the Y was retained for the I vowel sound in two common situations. First, the Y was retained as a vowel letter in those Greek loanwords that I mentioned earlier like *system*, *cycle*, *type* and *lyric*. And it was also retained at the end of words to prevent words from ending in an I. And that accounts for most situations where the letter Y is used as a vowel today. And it's also why we say that the vowels letters in English are A, E, I, O, U and sometimes Y.

So let me give you quick example to illustrate those rules. Consider the sentence, "I like my typewriter." That sentence has the /ai/ sound five times. That /ai/ sound is the modern long sound of letter I thanks to the Great Vowel Shift. The pronoun I is spelled with letter I because it was a single letter and stood by itself in a line of text. So there was no need to replace it with a Y. The word *like* is an Old English word that was originally spelled with an I, but it was routinely spelled with a Y in Middle English because the L next to the I sometimes looked like a U. But after the Gothic script was abandoned, it reacquired its original I. The word *my* has the /ai/ sound at the end of the word, so the I was replaced with Y. The word *type* is Greek loanword, so it is spelled with Y to reflect its Greek origins and the fact that the vowel sound was originally spelled with upsilon – the original version of Y. And *write* is another Old English word that was originally spelled with I, then it was replaced with a Y in Middle English, and then it reacquired its original I after the Gothic script was abandoned. So as we work our way through words like that, and think about where they came from and how they would have looked in that older Gothic script, the spellings start to make sense.

Now so far, we've looked at how the letter Y became a substitute for I because the I was hard to read, but remember that the letter U was also hard to read in that old Gothic script. So scribes came up with similar innovations to deal with the disappearing U.

Just like with I, scribes didn't like to end a word with a U. So they often added an E after the U to ensure that there were no final U's. And that's why words like *blue*, *true*, *sue* and *accrue* are spelled with 'u-e' instead of a simple U. There are a few exceptions like *menu*, *tofu*, and *guru*, but again, those are recent loanwords that were adopted after spelling had become fixed in the 1600s.

Another solution to make the U stand out in the middle of a word was to replace it with an O. That often happened when a U appeared beside an L, an M, an N, or another U. Those were situations where the U was especially difficult to read in that old Gothic script. So words like *love*, *wolf*, *monk*, *come*, *tongue* and *honey* all got their modern O's thanks to that substitution.

So that covers the basic developments concerning the vowel sounds of Y, I and U in the Middle English period. Now we can turn our attention to those consonant sounds /w/ and /y/.

Remember that the Old English scribes felt that those sounds were prominent enough in English and they needed their own specific letters. So they had decided to use runic symbols for those sounds. But after the Norman Conquest, those letters fell out of use. The French-trained scribes didn't like those strange Germanic letters. They insisted on using the letters in the traditional Latin alphabet. So when those runic symbols were eliminated, they had to come up with another way to represent those sounds using their existing letters.

So first, let's consider what they did with that /y/ sound, previously represented with the runic symbol called yogh. In the mid-1200s, those scribes started to use the letter Y for that sound. But why did they do that? After all, as we just saw, they were also starting to use the letter Y as a substitute for letter I. So how did it also become a consonant letter?

Well, remember that letter Y originally represented that rounded Greek sound /ü/, and it was used exclusively in Greek loanwords with that sound. Well, as it turns out, people in the Late Latin period had started to do the same thing that later English speakers would do. They started to pronounce that sound without rounding their lips. So the letter Y acquired the same sound as letter I in the Late Latin period. Again, this a parallel development that took place in Late Latin and then again in English in the late Middle Ages. So Late Latin also acquired had the ability to substitute letter Y for I.

By the way, that explains the name of the letter Y in many Latin-derived languages like French and Spanish. The letter Y is called 'i grec' in French, and was traditionally known as 'i griega' in Spanish. Those names literally mean the 'Greek I,' and the letter was called that because it acquired the same sound as the Roman letter I. And since the letter Y had previously been used in Greek loanwords, it just became known as the Greek I, as distinguished from the Roman I.

Well, we also need to remember how the sound at the beginning of words like *Julius* and *Jupiter* evolved in Latin. They started out as /ee-ulus/ and /ee-upiter/ – both spelled with [IU]. But then they came to be pronounced as /yulus/ and /yupiter/. So the letter I had also acquired that consonant /y/ sound in Latin through that process I described earlier in the episode. But the spelling was still [IU], and as we've seen, scribes using the Gothic script hated to put an I beside a U. But now, the letter Y had the same sound as I. So the scribes could just replace the I with Y at the front of those words. And during the early Middle Ages, some scribes working in Latin had started to do that. And through that process, the letter Y started to be used for /y/ sound in Late Latin.

Well, scribes in England in the 1200s decided to adopt that same approach. They got rid of the old runic symbol yogh that had been used for the /y/ sound, and they replaced it with Y. Now had those scribes decided to limit the letter Y to that specific consonant sound, English spelling would be much more consistent today. But as we saw a moment ago, they were also using the Y as a more general substitute for I, including the vowel sound. So that's how Y acquired two different uses in Modern English, as both a vowel letter and a consonant letter.

So that leaves us with the other consonant sound /w/. As we saw, that sound was very common in Old English, and English scribes felt that that sound needed a specific letter for it. So they spelled with a runic symbol called wynn. It resembled a letter P with a much bigger loop. Well, after the Norman Conquest, the French-trained scribes got rid of that letter, but that meant that they had to come up with a new way to represent that /w/ sound.

As we know, that sound was represented with letter U in Latin, and some scribes just adopted that practice. But as we've seen, the prominent use of the /w/ sound in English meant that the letter U risked being overused in English if it was also used for the /w/ sound. Well, during the Roman period, some scribes had adopted the practice of doubling the U to represent the /w/ sound. That makes sense if you think about it. We've already seen that when the vowel sound of U appears before another vowel, it tends to produce a /w/ sound. So when two U's were put together, it could represent that same sound. And think about the Latin word for horse – *equus* spelled 'e-q-u-u-s.' In a common word like that, the two U's had the /w/ sound.

Well in England, after the Norman Conquest, scribes adopted that same practice, and they often represented the /w/ sound by putting two U's together. Originally, they were written as two distinct U's, but that only added to the problems created by letters like U and I in the Gothic script. It was hard enough for a single U to stand out in the script, but when two U's were put together, it made it even harder. So when the printing press was invented, it became a common practice to link the two U's together to make it appear as a more distinct letter. And that was really the point at which W started to emerge as a separate letter of the alphabet.

So that explains how the letters Y and W emerged as distinct letters for the /y/ and /w/ sounds in English. And most of those developments took place in the Middle English period. But things were still a bit unsettled around the current point in our overall story in the Elizabethan period. So in the last part of this episode, I want to return to the writings of scholars like John Hart to see how these developments were described and illustrated during the 1500s.

And it's here that we find something very fascinating. As we know from prior episodes, John Hart was an English scholar in the 1500s who felt that English spelling was a bit of a mess. And he wanted a strictly phonetic spelling system. So he devised a phonetic alphabet and gave us the first detailed transcriptions of English pronunciation.

Well in his commentaries about English and the need for a phonetic spelling system, he spelled words in the normal way that writers did at the time. And he used the letters W and Y when he did that. But when he wrote his phonetic transcriptions, he abandoned those letters. He only used U and I for the sounds that we've been exploring in this episode. So he used U and I the way the Romans did – as both vowel and consonant letters. When he transcribed a word like *word*, he spelled it with a U. He actually spelled it 'u-r-d.' And when he transcribed the pronoun *you*, he spelled it with an I. He spelled it 'i-u.' So just like the ancient Romans, and just like many modern linguists, he didn't really recognize the 'w' and 'y' sounds as distinct sounds. The /w/ sound was just a variation of the /oo/ sound represented with U. And the /y/ sound was just a variation of the /ee/ sound represented with I. So using this very strict phonetic approach, he abandoned the letters W and Y in his transcriptions.

Now that is one part of Hart's work that has elicited criticism over the following centuries. Some scholars have argued that Hart should have distinguished the 'w' and 'y' sounds with separate symbols because they function as separate consonant sounds in English. [See *English Pronunciation 1500-1700*, Vol. 1, E. J. Dobson, p. 86-7.] In fact, the modern International Phonetic Alphabet used by linguists has distinct symbols for those sounds. And Hart himself seems to have had some reservations about his approach. His final two works were published in 1569 and 1570. Those are the works with the detailed transcriptions. In the earlier work in 1569, he transcribed words that began with a /wuh/ or /woo/ sound with a simple U. So he didn't even distinguish the initial /w/ sound from the /uh/ or /oo/ sound that followed it. Again, in his system, they were just variations of the same sound. So as I noted, **word** was spelled 'u-r-d.' **Work** was spelled 'u-r-k.' And the word **would** – as in "I would like to do that" – was spelled 'u-l-d.'

But in his final work published the following year, he revised his approach. In that final work, he spelled words like that with two U's at the front. The first U was written with a little line over it to indicate that it had a distinct sound. So the word **work** received a revised spelling from 'u-r-k' the prior year, to 'u-u-r-k' in 1570. And the word **woman** was spelled 'u-u-m-a-n.' By making this change, Hart was acknowledging that the initial /w/ sound in those words was a distinct consonant sound separate from the vowel sound that followed it.

A closer look at Hart's phonetic spellings also confirm some other interesting developments concerning that 'w' sound during the Elizabethan period. In English, there were several situations where the 'w' sound came immediately before or after another consonant sound. For example, we have the 'sw' sound in words like **sweep** and **swipe**. And we have the 'tw' sound in words like **twin** and **twist**. And in earlier periods of English, the 'w' sound was sometimes immediately followed by an 'r' sound. And that pronunciation is still reflected in words that are spelled with [WR], like **wrong**, **wrist**, **wreck**, **wrestle**, and **write** ('w-r-i-t-e'). Of course, today we don't pronounce the 'w' sound at the front of those words, but Hart apparently did. In his phonetic spellings, he included a letter U at the beginning of those types of words. Since Hart used the letter U for the 'w' sound, that seems to confirm that those words were still being pronounced with both the 'w' and 'r' sounds at the front.

Even though Hart's spellings reflect that pronunciation with a /w/ sound at the beginning, that sound was probably already in the process of disappearing. By the end of the Elizabethan period, other writers were commenting on the loss of the 'w' sound in those words. The initial 'w' sound appears to have completely disappeared in those [WR] words over the course of the following century. [SOURCE: *Cambridge History of English*, Vol. 3, Lass, p. 122.]

There were also few other situations where a 'w' sound disappeared in a word, even though it is often preserved in the spelling. In words that had two syllables, a 'w' sound sometimes appeared at or near the beginning of the second syllable. Usually the first syllable was stressed in the pronunciation. So that left the 'w' sound at or near the beginning of the second syllable, which was an unstressed syllable. And in that environment, the 'w' sound tended to disappear. This development occurred at different times in different words. Some lost their 'w' sound in Middle English, and some lost it in early Modern English. So let's look at a few examples.

Think about the word *answer*. It's spelled 'a-n-s-w-e-r,' but we don't pronounce the W. It's not /an-swer/, it's /an-ser/. Well, this was one of those words where the 'w' sound appeared at or near the beginning of the second syllable, which was unstressed. And in that environment, the 'w' sound was lost.

By the way, the word *answer* is derived from the word *swear*. They're both Old English words. And in the Anglo-Saxon period, if someone accused another person of a crime, the accuser would swear an oath against the accused. The accused would then swear an oath in response denying the claim. That was the *andswaru* in Old English. It meant 'to swear against' or the 'swear in response.' And that word *andswaru* became our modern word *answer*. And notice that the original 'w' sound was preserved in the word *swear* because it is a single syllable word. But when the prefix 'an-' was added to the word, that put the 'w' sound in a position in that second syllable where it was prone to disappear.

Another example of this process is the word *conquer*. If we were to pronounce that word like it is spelled, we would probably say /con-kwer/ because [QU] normally represents the /kw/ sound. And in fact, that was the original pronunciation of the word in English. But that 'w' sound near the beginning of that second syllable was lost.

The same thing happened with the name of the town of *Greenwich* (/green-wich/), which became /gren-nich/. It's spelled 'G-r-e-e-n-w-i-c-h,' but we don't pronounce the 'w' today.

If you are a sailor, you're probably familiar with terms like *boatswain* (/boh-sun/) and *coxswain* (/cock-sun/). A *boatswain* (/boh-sun/) is a ship's officer and *coxswain* (/cock-sun/) is a helmsman. Well, if you see those words written down, they look like they should be pronounced 'boat-swain' and 'cox-swain.' And some people do pronounce them that way today because of the spelling. At one time, most people probably pronounced them that way. The second part of each term is 'swain' – 's-w-a-i-n.' But again, that is the second syllable, and it's an unstressed syllable, and in that phonetic environment, the 'w' sound was lost near the beginning of that syllable, giving us modern-day *boatswain* (/boh-sun/) and *coxswain* (/cock-sun/).

Spellings in the 1500s and 1600s indicate that the word *awkward* had also lost its 'w' sound in the second syllable. It was apparently pronounced as 'auker'd' in the Elizabethan period. We find spellings like 'a-u-k-e-r-d-' as recently as the late 1600s. But since the word retained the letter W in the spelling, that 'w' sound eventually reappeared because people often pronounced words like they were spelled. So today, we generally pronounce it with its original pronunciation as /awkward/.

To a certain extent, the same thing happened with the word *forward*. At one time, the 'w' sound had largely disappeared in that second syllable, and it was pronounced /ford/. But in recent centuries, that 'w' has started to reappear as /for-ward/. I think you can probably hear both pronunciations today.

Another situation where the ‘w’ sound was lost was when it appeared between a consonant and a rounded vowel. Let me explain what I mean. I noted a moment ago that English has sound combinations where the ‘w’ sound immediately follows an ‘s’ or ‘t’ sound. So that gave us the ‘sw’ sound in a word like *swift*, and the ‘tw’ sound in a word like *twist*. Well, sometimes those words were followed by an /oo/ sound spelled with a U or an /oh/ sound spelled with an O. Well, the /oo/ and /oh/ sounds are pronounced with rounded lips just like the ‘w’ sound. And in that environment, the ‘w’ sound just soft of disappeared into the following /oo/ or /oh/ sound.

So let’s look at a few examples where that happened. Think about the word *sword*. Here we have [SW] followed by [O], and in that situation, the ‘w’ sound was lost in the middle, and today, the standard pronunciation is /sord/ without the ‘w’ sound. The same thing happened in earlier centuries with the word *so* – ‘s-o.’ You might remember that it was *swa* in Old English, which we would spell today as ‘s-w-a.’ Well, had the vowel not changed, we would probably still be pronouncing that ‘w’ sound in the middle. But the vowel did change. In early Middle English, the vowel shifted from /swa/ to /swo/. So it shifted to one of those rounded vowels where we round out lips. And in that environment of ‘s-w-o,’ the ‘w’ sound was lost in the middle giving us the modern word *so*. By the way, that happened early enough in the history of English that the spelling of the word reflects the change. So it’s no longer spelled with a W.

But now let’s look a word with a similar history where the W was retained in the spelling. That’s the word for our number *two*. It was originally *twa* – ‘t-w-a.’ The vowel shifted from /twah/ to /twoh/, and that put the ‘w’ sound in between the consonant T on one side and the rounded O on the other side. And in that environment, the ‘w’ sound disappeared. And of course, the vowel later shifted from /toh/ to /too/. And that explains why the number *two* is still spelled with a W in it. But notice that other words with that same ‘two’ root still retain the ‘w’ sound like *twin*, and *twice*, and *twelve* and *twenty*. And the reason those words retain the ‘w’ sound is because the vowel sound is different in those words. It’s not a rounded back vowel like /oo/ or /oh/. So where the ‘w’ sound was followed by an E or I, the ‘w’ sound was retained, but where it was followed by a rounded O or U, the rounded ‘w’ sound tended to disappear into those rounded vowels. Again, this gets back to that idea that the ‘w’ sound is really a semi-vowel and sometimes acts like a vowel, or in this case, merges with a vowel.

There was also another word that was affected by this same process. So far, I mentioned words where the ‘w’ sound appeared after an S or T. Well, in Middle English and early Modern English, it was still common for people to pronounce an ‘h’ sound before a W as /hw/. Most of the words with that pronunciation were spelled with HW or H-wynn in Old English using that Old English letter wynn, but those letters were reversed in Middle English, thereby becoming WH. And of course, we have lots of words today that begin with [WH] like *what*, and *which*, and *whale*, and *while*, and many, many others. Again, those words were originally pronounced with a slight ‘h’ sound at the front like /hwat/ and /hwich/.

Well that was fine and well until you put an O or U after that initial /hw/ sound. That put the ‘w’ sound between a consonant sound on one side – /h/ – and that rounded vowel sound on the other side. And that caused the ‘w’ sound in the middle to disappear. That’s what happened to the word *who* spelled ‘w-h-o.’ It was originally pronounced /hwo/ – ‘h-w-o.’ But remember that the

spelling convention reversed those two first letters, giving us the modern spelling ‘w-h-o.’ So we have to disregard the spelling and focus on the actual pronunciation. Since the pronunciation was /hwo/ or /hwu/ with the consonant sound of H on one side the rounded vowel sound on the other side, the ‘w’ sound in the middle disappeared. And that left the ‘h’ sound at the front and gave us the modern pronunciation as /hoo/, even though the word is still spelled with [WH]. The same process also explains the pronunciation of the related words *whom* and *whose*, as well as the word *whole* (‘w-h-o-l-e’). They have also lost their ‘w’ sound.

So when we use the phrase “who, what, when, where and why,” they’re all spelled with [WH] and they’re all pronounced with a ‘w’ sound, except the word *who*. If you’ve ever wondered why it has the same spelling but a different pronunciation, well now you know. Because it’s the only one with that rounded /oo/ vowel, which was the trigger for the loss of the ‘w’ sound.

By the way, John Hart’s spellings indicate that the ‘w’ sound was still being pronounced in *who* and *whom* and *whose* in the Elizabethan period, but that sound was probably starting to disappear. For example, Hart’s spellings of the words *whole* and *wholly* are inconsistent, but he does show those words without a ‘w’ sound in some of his transcriptions. And the loss of the ‘w’ sound in all of those words is clearly attested in the following century.

By the way, I mention those other words spelled with an initial [WH] spelling like *what*, *when*, *where* and *why*. Well, you probably noticed that those words don’t really have that initial ‘h’ sound anymore in most standard dialects. Most of us say /wat/ and not /hwat/. Well, that ‘h’ sound was eventually lost in those words, but it was a later development in the language. John Hart’s phonetic spellings indicate that the ‘h’ sound was still being pronounced in the Elizabethan era. The loss of that ‘h’ sound at the beginning of those words isn’t clearly documented until the 1700s. And today, that older pronunciation still survives in some regional dialects. But again, that’s was a later development, so I’ll discuss it further in a future episode.

In fact, the sounds we’ve been exploring in this episode were still very much in flux. There were several more important developments to come in the century or so after Elizabeth’s death. Again we’ll look at those developments in future episodes, but there are two future developments that I should mention before I conclude.

Those developments also concern the letters I and U, and the fact that they were about to give birth to two new letters – the letters J and V. Neither J nor V actually existing during the Elizabethan period. Now when I say neither letter existed, I mean that the shapes of those letters existed, but those shapes were not recognized as distinct letters. As I noted earlier in the episode, scribes sometimes gave the I a little curvy tail or flourish at the bottom to help it stand out in a line of text. Well remember that classic example of /ee-ulus/ becoming /yoo-lius/ and then becoming /julius/. Thanks to that development within Latin and French, English inherited a lot of words with that /j/ sound at the front like *Julius*, *Jupiter*, *judge*, *jury*, *jealous*, *join*, *jeopardy*, and so on. But all of those words were still being spelled with their original Latin letter I. Well, believe it or not, John Hart was the first English writer to suggest that the I with the curvy tail be used exclusively for that /j/ sound. Remember that he wanted a phonetic spelling system where each sound had its own letter. In his phonetic spellings, he actually spelled the /j/ sound with a

combination of the letter D and the Old English letter yogh. This required the use of two letters, but it was similar to the [DG] spelling used at the end of words like *bridge* and *ridge*. And it's actually the way most modern linguists represent the sound in formal transcriptions today. But after explaining his use of those two letters in his 1569 text, Hart wrote, ". . . we mought have vsed also this mark j." Of course, he didn't call it 'jay' because it wasn't a distinct letter yet. He just wrote down the symbol, which was the I with the curvy tail. And that was the first suggestion that the J-shaped version of I could be used exclusively for that /j/ sound. And about a half century later, shortly after the Elizabethan period, the letter J started to emerge as a separate letter exclusively for that purpose.

Something very similar happened with the letter U which gave birth to V. As I have noted many times throughout the podcast, the letter U could be written two ways – either with one curvy line like our modern U, or with two straight lines like our modern V. In fact, we saw earlier that the V-shape was actually the original shape of the letter U. And even during the Elizabethan period, the U had both shapes. And that letter with two different shapes could be used for the various vowel sounds of U, as well as the 'w' sound (/w/), and the 'v' sound (/v/). It represented the 'v' sound (/v/) because that sound had emerged out of the 'w' sound in Late Latin. Think about the words *wine* and *vine*. They come from the same Latin root word *winum*. The word was borrowed with the original 'w' sound in the Proto-Germanic period, and that gave us the word *wine*. Then in Latin, the sound changed from /winum/ to /vinum/, and English borrowed the word again after the change as *vine* and as the root of *vineyard* and *vintage*. So that's how the letter U came to represent all of those sounds. And the letter U had those two different distinct shapes. So it was really confusing. And that was another case where the letter U was being over-used.

Well, in that same 1569 text called 'The Orthographie,' John Hart specifically stated that he intended to use the angular version of the letter with two-straight lines for the /v/ sound. And in fact, that was how he transcribed all of his words with that sound like *very*, and *verb*, and *vowel*, and *view*. He used the V-shaped U for the 'v' sound. And again, Hart is the first known writer in Modern English to assign that specific shape to that specific sound. But other writers and printers didn't really adopt that practice at the time. It would take another half century or so for the letter V to emerge as a distinct letter. And even then, both of those new letters – V and J – were not fully accepted as letters in their own right until the late 1700s.

By the way, one last note about the letter V. Once the letter was accepted as a distinct letter, it passed into European languages like French and Spanish. But those languages still didn't have the letter W yet. Remember that they didn't have many native words with that /w/ sound. So the V preceded the W in those languages. But those languages had started to borrow a lot of words from English and other languages where that 'w' sound existed. So they did what the ancient Romans did. They borrowed a letter from those other languages to represent that sound in those newer loanwords. So the letter W finally passed into French and Spanish in the 1800s. But by that point, the shape of the letter had become fixed by printers in its modern form, which actually looks like two V's. So the name of the letter in those languages literally became 'double V' not 'double U,' like 'doublé v' in French. I think some Spanish speakers in Mexico and Central America now say 'double U' due to the influence of the English pronunciation to the north, but

the more traditional Spanish term meant ‘double V.’ So if you’ve ever wondered why English calls the letter ‘double U’ even though it looks like two V’s, or if you wondered by the name is different in those other languages, the answer is all a matter of timing. The name reflects the way the letter was written at the time it entered each language. English adopted the letter early on when most documents were written by hand, so the letter looked like two U’s. But Spanish and French borrowed the letter later after the printing press when the letter had acquired its new angular shape that looked like two V’s.

And that takes us back to where we began – with the important role of the written script on the development of language. As we’ve seen, the history of the letters I and U has been shaped by sound changes, and by overuse, and by writing styles, and by the technology of the printing press. Through that process those letters have changed shape, been combined with other letters, been substituted with other letters, and even given birth to new letters.

As we’ve seen, the Elizabethan writer John Hart was frustrated by these developments, and he wanted a simple straight-forward spelling system where each letter represented one sound. Of course, he never got his wish. But he did raise an awareness that English spelling was out of control, and needed to be fixed and standardized.

As we move forward with the story of English, we’ll see how other scholars contributed to that conversation and gave us the spelling system we have today – for better or worse.

We’ll explore their ideas in future episodes. But next time, we’re going to return to our chronological narrative, and we’re going to move the story in the 1570s where we’ll witness a growing threat to Queen Elizabeth’s crown, and an expanding English presence in the New World.

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