THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 185:
SPELLING SAYS A LOT
(Part 2)

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Explanation of Transcription Symbols Used in This Transcript:
[r] - used to represent a letter of the alphabet as used in writing;
'r' - used when describing a sound by reference to the letter that represents that sound;
/r/ - used to represent a specific sound or word as pronounced and demonstrated in the podcast.

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 185: Spelling Says a Lot (Part 2). This time, we're going to continue our look at the pronunciation of English in the early 1600s as English was starting to become a global language. And like last time, we'll also continue to focus on the way words are spelled, since spelling was becoming standardized around this time, and English spelling often reflects the way words were pronounced in earlier centuries. So by looking at the way words are spelled, we can trace how the pronunciations changed over time. And whereas last time we looked at letters [a] through [j], this time we'll complete the alphabet and look at [k] through [z].

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.

Now let's continue with our look at the alphabet and the way it was applied to the sounds of English in the early 1600s. And let's pick up with letter [k]. Believe it or not, the letter [k] was rarely used in English before the 1200s. During the Old English period, scribes generally used the letter [c] for the /k/ sound, and of course, the letter [c] is still used for that sound today. But during the Middle English period, the letter [k] became more common in English writing. Since its adoption, it has represented the /k/ sound, and hasn't really changed within English, so there isn't a lot to say about the overall history of the letter [k] in English. The main comment to make about this letter is that it has become more common over time, and today it is used to spell many Old English words that were once spelled with a [c] like ***king***, which was originally spelled [c-y-n-i-n-g], and ***kiss***, which was originally spelled [c-y-s-s-a-n]. The use of letter [c] created a problem in Middle English because the letter [c] had acquired its soft 's' sound in addition to its hard 'k' sound. That was a problem for those Old English words like ***king*** and ***kiss*** because, if you spell those words with a [c] as [c-i-n-g] and [c-i-s-s], it could imply that the words should be pronounced as /sing/ and /siss/. So Middle English scribes decided to bring back the rarely-used letter [k] from the Latin alphabet, and use it in place of letter [c]. That prevented any confusion and made it very clear that it initial sound was a /k/ sound. So the expanded use of letter [k] was partly a reaction to the confusion created by the 'soft' and 'hard' sounds of letter [c] that emerged in the early Middle Ages.

The use of letter [k] in Modern English is still pretty straight-forward, but the primary exception is the silent [k] at the beginning of many words like ***knife***, ***knee***, ***know*** [k-n-o-w], ***knight*** [k-n-i-g-h-t] and ***knot*** [k-n-o-t]. Of course, those [k]'s are there because there was once a 'k' sound at the front of those words. So a word like ***knife*** was /k-neef/, and ***knee*** was /k-nay/. Remember that English spelling largely reflects the way words were pronounced in the mid-1500s, so that

confirms that those words were still had that /k/ sound at the front at that time, though it was rapidly disappearing.

Interestingly, it was still around in the late 1500s and early 1600s in conservative speech, especially among educated speakers who had been trained to use the older, more traditional pronunciations. The spelling reformer John Hart writing in the 1560s and Alexander Gil writing in 1619 both indicated a 'k' sound at the front of those words in their phonetic spelling systems. But when we look at Shakespeare's poems and plays, it is clear that he didn't pronounce those initial [k]'s because he used [n-o-t] and [k-n-o-t] as puns, and he did the same thing with [n-i-g-h-t] and [k-n-i-g-h-t]. Shakespeare's language usually reflects the common ordinary speech heard at the time on the streets of London. He was writing for a general audience who came to see his plays. So from all of the surviving evidence, we can conclude that the [k] at the front of those words was largely gone in ordinary speech by the second or third decade of the 1600s, but it could still be heard in the speech of some people, especially those who were older or who spoke in a more formal, educated manner. That sound was barely hanging on though. By the end of the century, those initial [k]'s were completely silent, even in formal, educated speech.

So with that, let's move on to letter [L]. Of course, letter [L] represents the /l/ sound. It's a sound made in part by lifting the tip of the tongue to the ridge above the upper teeth. The sound has been represented with letter [L] since the alphabet was adapted to English, and in most English words, the letter [L] represents that /l/ sound. And that's especially true when the [L] is located at the beginning or end of a syllable, in words like ***lull***, ***love***, ***lovely***, ***lily***, and ***balloon***. But things get a bit more complicated when an [L] occurs in the middle of syllable, specifically when it is wedged between a vowel on one side and a consonant on the other side, so a vowel, then [L], then a consonant. In that environment, the 'L' sound has had a tendency to disappear in a lot of English words. That generally happened after the mid-1500s – after the spellings had started to become fixed. So those words shave a silent [L] today which reflects an older 'L' sound that has been lost.

For example, we find this scenario in a lot on words that have the [a-l-k] spelling like ***talk***, ***walk***, ***chalk***, and ***balk***. Of course, in that situation, we have the vowel letter [a], then the [L], then the consonant [k]. And notice that in all of those words, the [L] isn't pronounced. We don't raise our tongue to that ridge above the upper teeth to make the 'L' sound in those words. So we don't say /tal-k/ or /wal-k/. We simply say /tɔk/ and /wɔk/. The vowel sound has become more of an /ɔ/ sound or an /a/ sound, depending on your accent. But the 'L' sound after it has disappeared.

So what was the status of the 'L 'sound in the early 1600s at the current point in our overall story of English. Well, it appears that the 'L' sound in a lot of these words was lost in the north of England first, perhaps as early as the 1400s. And then that loss spread southward. By the late 1500s, we find that classic distinction that we keep encountering during this period. Older, educated speakers tended to retain the older pronunciation with the 'L' sound as /tal-k/ for example, whereas the average person on the streets of London would have dropped the 'L' sound like we do today, and they would have said /tɔk/ or /tauk/ or something similar. This is confirmed by Alexander Gil, who was writing at the current point in our overall story in the year 1619. In his phonetic spelling system, he included the [L] in the words ***talk*** and ***walk***, suggesting

that the [L]'s were still being pronounced in his formal pronunciation guide, but he also noted that most common people dropped the [L] when they pronounced the words in ordinary speech. We also see this same inconsistency when we look at the phonetic spellings of other spelling reformers during the late 1500s and early 1600s. Some include the [L] and some don't. So it was a sound that was disappearing in those words in the early 1600s.

The same thing was also happening to many words spelled with [a-l-m] like ***calm***, ***palm*** and ***balm***. Now some people do pronounce those words with a slight 'l' sound today, but that is mainly due to the influence of spelling.

Again, Alexander Gil confirms that the [L] in words like ***calm*** and ***balm*** were being lost in the early 1600s, with older, educated speakers retaining the [L], but most common people dropping it. He specifically included the word ***balm*** in his discussion about the disappearing [L] in single-syllable words.

So we've looked at the silent [L] in words spelled with [a-l-k] and [a-l-m]. And the same thing happened is a lot of words spelled with [a-l-f] – like ***half*** and ***calf***. Again, we don't say /hal-f/ and /cal-f/, even though the spelling of the words suggest that we should. The [L] in those words also became silent during the early Modern period.

Again, Alexander Gil confirmed that at the current point in our overall story in 1619. He included the word ***half*** in his discussion about words losing their 'L' sound during this period, especially in colloquial speech. We also have evidence from Shakespeare that also confirms this state of affairs at the time. In Love's Labour's Lost, his pedant schoolmaster Holofernes says that he hates it when he hears people say /hauf/ instead of /hal-f/ and /cauf/ instead of /cal-f/. So that newer pronunciation was around at the time.

Now, before we move on from letter [L], let me quickly mention a few words that didn't originally have an [L], but got one during the 1500s based on the etymology of the word. These are words that ultimately come from Latin where there was an 'L' sound in the distant past, but the sound was lost as the words passed through French. So when English speakers borrowed the words from French, they didn't have the 'L' sound anymore. But in the 1500s, scholars started to add an [L] to the spelling to reflect that sound that had been lost. That's what happened with ***salmon***, which is still usually pronounced without an 'L' sound. The same thing happened with words like ***fault***, ***vault*** and ***assault***. Those words were borrowed from French as ***faute***, ***vaute*** and ***asaut*** without an [L] in either the spelling or the pronunciation. But when scholars added the [L] back in to reflect the ancient history of those words, it affected the way people pronounced them. Over time, ***fault***, ***vault*** and ***assault*** all started to acquire a slight 'l' sound in their pronunciation based on the influence of the spellings. By the way, Alexander Gil writing in the early 1600s said some people pronounced an 'L' sound in the word ***fault***, but most people didn't. He actually spelled it both ways, so once again, the pronunciation was variable at the current point in our overall story in the early 1600s. [*SOURCE: Shakespeare's Pronunciation, Helge Kokeritz, p. 310*.]

Now that's a lot of information about letter [L]. We can now move on to letters [m] and [n], but I don't really have anything specific to say about those letters. The sounds those letters represent have been pretty consistent in English, and haven't changed very much over the centuries. So I'm going to move on to the letter [o], which is a bit more complicated because, of course, it's a vowel letter.

Like all vowel letters in English, the letter [o] has a two common sounds – one of which is called its 'short' sound the other is called its 'long' sound. The short sound is /ah/ as in ***lot***, ***pot*** and ***stop***, and the long sound is /oh/ as in ***hope***, ***bone***, and ***ozone***. So let's focus on the 'short' sound first. The interesting thing about the 'short [o]' sound is that is very similar to – or identical to – the 'short [a]' sound found in a lot of words. As I noted in the last episode, the original sound of letter [a] was /a/. And even though that sound has tended to evolve and shift within English over the past few centuries, much of that original /a/ sound is preserved in words like ***what***, ***swan***, ***watch***, ***waffle***, ***quality***, ***yacht***, ***spa***, ***lava***, ***lager***, and the America pronunciation of words like ***taco*** and ***pasta***. In all of those words, we hear an /a/ sound, which was the original sound of letter A. That's not to say that all of those words had that sound in the distant past. Some of them acquired that sound during later periods of English, but the letter [a] in those words today represents an /a/ sound which was the original sound of the letter.

And now let's compare that 'short [a]' sound to the sound in words that are spelled with the so-called 'short [o]' like ***hot***, ***pot***, ***stop***, ***rock***, ***mob***, ***posh***, ***body*** and so on. As you can probably hear, in Standard American English, that 'short [o]' sound is essentially same as the 'short [a]' sound in a lot of words. So why is that? And since the sounds are largely the same, why are some of those words spelled with an [a] and some spelled with an [o]? Well, of course, the answer is that those two groups of words didn't always have the same sound. They once had distinct sounds – and they still tend to have distinct sounds in British English. But in American English there was essentially a merger of the sounds in those words.

In order to analyze what happened there, we need to go back in time and consider what the 'short [o]' sound originally sounded like. In Old English, the 'short [o]' sound was literally a short /o:/ sound. So it was /o:/ pronounced as a quick short vowel as /o/. So ***pot*** would have been more like /pot/. And ***stop*** would have been /stop/, or /stoppen/ in Old English. That 'o' sound is made by raising the back of the tongue a bit, and also by rounding the lips. So this /o/ sound is sometimes called a 'rounded' vowel sound because the lips are rounded when it is pronounced.

Well, during the Middle English period, people started to lower the back of their tongues a bit when they pronounced that sound. And by the 1500s and 1600s, it has shifted down from/o/ to /ɒ/. And that's still the sound used in the standard English of southern England. So that ***hot*** is pronounced more like /hɒt/, and ***stop*** is pronounced more like /stɒp/. Again, the lips are still rounded a bit when making that sound. But things are a little different in American English. American English uses essentially the same basic vowel sound, except that the lips are not rounded. So /ɒ/ becomes /ɑ/, and /hɒt/ becomes /hɑt/, and /stɒp/ becomes /stɑp/ And that's really the main difference between the 'short [o]' sound in British English and American English. In Britain, the lips are still rounded a bit, while in North America, they're not.

But here's the important point. Lip rounding is historically what distinguished that 'short [o]' sound from that 'short [a]' sound that we encountered earlier in words like ***what***, and ***spa***, and ***lava***. So when American speakers stopped rounding their short [o]'s, those short [o]'s essentially became short [a]'s. And that's why words like ***spa*** and ***pot*** use the same vowel sound in American English, but tend to have slightly different sounds in British English.

So all of that explains why those words are spelled with different vowel letters, even though the sounds are essentially the same in American English. But when did that pronunciation change take place? When did speakers stop rounding their lips when pronouncing that 'short [o]' sound? Well, it appears that the change was underway before the American colonies were even established. It was a feature that had started to occur by the late 1500s and was apparently brought to North America by the early settlers.

I explored this issue back in Episode 175, and I noted in that episode that evidence of that un-rounded [o] can be found during the Elizabethan period. In fact, Queen Elizabeth herself spelled the word ***stop*** with an [a] as [s-t-a-p] in one of her letters. That implies that she had a tendency to un-round her short [o]'s. There is also some evidence from Shakespeare like in A Midsummer Night's Dream where he rhymed the words ***crab*** and ***bob***, presumably as /crab/ and /bab/. He did the same with ***cough*** and ***laugh***, presumably as /caf/ and /laf/. This type of evidence suggests that those short [o]'s were sometimes pronounced as short [a]'s.

And all of that is confirmed by Alexander Gil who published his book on spelling reform in the year 1619 at the current point in our overall story of English. He mentioned the speech of certain people in London who he called Mopseys. The Mopseys were apparently female speakers who came from lower class or modest backgrounds, but had recently acquired some degree of wealth, so they were part of a rising middle class in London, and they had a particular way of speaking. And according to Gil, they sometimes un-rounded their short O's. He wrote that instead of saying the word ***scholars***, they said '***skalerz***,' which he spelled phonetically as [s-k-a-l-e-r-z]. [*SOURCE: The Cambridge History of the English Language, Vol. III, Roger Lass, Ed., p. 87.*] That's essentially the same as the modern American pronunciation. So it appears that Queen Elizabeth and Alexander Gil's Mopseys all had this feature in their speech. Gil hated it by the way. He hated any pronunciation that wasn't traditional. But it was apparently prominent enough that it traveled with settlers to North America over the course of the following century or so, and it eventually became the dominant pronunciation in American English.

So once again, we have encountered another sound that was changing at the current point in our story in the early 1600s.

Now having looked at the 'short [o]' sound in words like ***hop*** and ***rob***, let's look as the 'long [o]' sound in words like ***hope*** and ***robe***. As we saw in the last episode, we often distinguish the short and long sounds of a vowel letter by adding a silent [e] to the end of a word if the sound is the 'long' sound – in this case the /o:/ sound. So ***hop*** without the [e] has the short sound, and ***hope*** with the [e] has the long sound. We find the same distinction in ***rob*** and ***robe***, ***glob*** and ***globe***, ***doll*** and ***dole***, ***cloth*** and ***clothe***, and so on.

So one way to spell the 'long [o]' sound is with [o] and silent [e]. The other way we represent that sound is with [oa] as in ***boat***, ***goat***, ***roam***, ***moan***, ***loaf***, ***oak***, and so on. This [oa] spelling became common in the 1500s.

But what about [oo]? Shouldn't double [o]'s also represent the 'o' sound? Well, they should, but they don't. In fact, double [o]'s almost never represent an 'o' sound in Modern English. They usually have an /u:/ sound like ***pool***, ***school***, ***room***, ***boot***, ***mood***, ***choose***, and so on. That's really a 'u' sound, not an 'o' sound. And some of them have an /u/ sound like ***foot***, and ***took***, and ***book***. Again, that's really a short 'u' sound, not an 'o' sound. So what's going on there? Why do we use the letter [o] for a completely different vowel sound when we double it?

In case you didn't follow that, let me put it this way. If I want to use the letter [o] to represent an 'o' sound in a word, I can add a silent [e] to the end of the word like in the word ***hope***, or I can combine the [o] with an [a] like in the word ***boat***, but I can't double the [o] because that would give me a completely different sound. I can't spelled ***hope*** with double [o]'s because that would be give me ***hoop***, and I can't spell ***boat*** with double [o]'s because that would give me ***boot***. So why do double [o]'s take us away from the /o:/ sound and lead to us to the /u:/ sound.

Well, you probably know the answer by now. The answer is the Great Vowel Shift. Remember that the Great Vowel Shift affected all of the so-called 'long' vowel sounds in English, and that included the 'long [o]' sound. But that's only part of the answer because it doesn't really explain why words spelled with double [o]'s have one set of sounds, whereas words spelled with [oa] and [o] and silent [e] have a different sound. So why do we have that distinction? Well, there's also an answer to that question. There's always an answer, but it requires a little effort to follow it.

In this case, the modern distinction can be traced back to Middle English because in Middle English the letter [o] was used to represent two different long vowel sounds. This was one of those cases where the scribes didn't have enough letters for all the vowel sounds in English, so they had to figure out a way to use the letter [o] to represent two closely-related, but slightly different, vowel sounds. The result was different spelling conventions which are still with us today.

The two sounds in question were /o:/ and /ɔ:/. The sounds are very similar, but the tongue is slightly flatter when making the second sound – the /ɔ:/ sound. English had those two different sounds, but Latin didn't. Or if it did, it didn't have a way to distinguish them. Latin gave us the letter [o], which was applied to the /o:/ sound, but it didn't have a letter for the nearby /ɔ:/ sound. So English scribes had to figure out a way to make the letter [o] represent both of those sounds. For the /o:/ sound, which is made with back of the tongue slightly raised, the scribes tended to double the O. That's a long vowel sound and it was common to represent long vowels sounds by doubling the vowel letter. And that is the sound that shifted during the Great Vowel Shift to the /u:/ sound, which is basically a 'long [u]' sound. And that's why so many of those double-[o] words have that /u:/ sound today like ***room***, ***boot***, ***mood***, ***choose***, and so on. And in some of those words, the vowel later shortened and changed again, thereby producing the pronunciation in words like ***foot***, ***took***, ***book***, ***good*** and so on. So when we encounter those double-[o] words

today, we are usually looking at words that were once pronounced with a ‘long [o]’ sound, but the sound changed in the 1400s and 1500s as part of the Great Vowel Shift. So instead of cleaning your ‘room’ with a ‘broom,’ you would have once cleaned your /ro:m/ with a /bro:m/. But the vowel changed. And the double-[o]’s remind us that those words once had that /o:/ sound.

But remember that English not only had the /o:/ sound, it also had the closely related /ɔ:/ sound. And it needed a way to represent that sound as well. So scribes tended to spell that sound with a single [o], and they later added that silent [e] to the end when that became a fashionable way to indicate a long vowel sound. Another spelling technique arose in the 1500s, and that was the [oa] spelling. Again, that was another way to representing that /ɔ:/ sound and distinguishing it from the slightly higher /o:/ sound.

But the Great Vowel Shift also affected this /ɔ:/ sound, causing it to be raised slightly as well. And when it shifted, it shifted up to the /o:/ sound. Remember all of these vowel sounds shifted around like a game of musical chairs. So as one vowel shifted up, the vowel behind it moved in and took its place. And that’s what happened here. So if you had a boat and were trying to secure it with a rope, you would have once said that your tying your /bɔ:t/ with a /rɔ:p/. But after the Great Vowel Shift, you would have said that you were tying your boat with a rope.

And that’s why those words spelled with [oa] or with [o] with a silent [e] tend to have that /o:/ sound today. Most of them once had that slightly lower /ɔ:/ sound, but it shifted to the modern /o:/ sound in the 1400s and 1500s. And again, that’s also why they don’t have double-[o]’s. The double-[o] spelling was used for a separate set of words that originally had that slightly higher /o:/ sound, which shifted to /u:/ as part of that same series of changes.

So if you followed all of that – and I realize that that’s a lot to follow – you can now see why we have different spellings conventions that use the letter O to represent two different sets of vowel sounds. They represented distinct vowel sounds in the 1500s, and even though those sounds changed, they have remained distinct to this day.

By the current point in our overall story in the early 1600s, those two vowel shifts were mostly complete in the south of England, but were still probably underway in the north of England. And in fact, the changes were never fully completed in parts of the north where the older pronunciations can still be heard in some regional dialects.

So that’s a lot to know about letter [o]. But now, let’s move on to the next letter – letter [p]. I don’t have a much to say about this letter because it has been consistently applied to the same sound since the Old English period. I should note that we do have a few words with a silent [p], like the word ***receipt***. And that’s because the original Latin root word passed through French where it lost its ‘p’ sound. English scholars then added the [p] back into the word in the 1500s to reflect the original Latin pronunciation of the word. The ‘p’ sound can still be found in other versions of the same root word, like ***reception*** and ***receptacle***. That’s why it was added back into the word ***receipt*** – to reflect the common origin of those words. But other than the occasional anomaly like that, the letter [p] is pretty straight-forward in English.

With respect to the next letter [q], it's use is also very regular in Modern English. It is almost always used together with letter [u] to represent the /kw/ sound. That's really a French spelling, and it arose after the Norman Conquest under the influence of French-trained scribes. The letter [q] wasn't really used in Old English. As I've noted before, the Anglo-Saxons relied almost exclusively on the letter [c] to represent /k/ sound. That was largely true for the Romans as well. But when the letter [c] acquired its soft 's' sound in words like ***civil*** and ***cease***, it became a less reliable letter in spelling. Scribes started to turn to the letters [k] and [q] when they wanted to make it clear that they were representing the /k/ sound. So both [k] and [q] became more popular in English after the Norman Conquest. And even native words like ***queen*** and ***quick*** had their original [c]'s replaced with [q]'s under that French influence. Beyond that, I don't really have much to add about letter [q].

That takes us to letter [r], which is a much more complicated letter. In fact, I dedicated a large part of Episode 160 to that particular letter and the sound it represents. I should say the 'sounds' it represents because, as we saw in that episode, the letter is sometimes pronounced as trilled or rolled [r], and sometimes, it is pronounced as a quick tap. So there is some variation in Modern English, though the most common pronunciation today is the sound we hear in words like ***runner*** and ***roller***.

Again I'll refer you back to Episode 160 for a more detailed discussion about the 'r' sound, but there really four (4) issues related that sound that we need to address here because they all involve some sort of change involving the letter [r] that was occurring in the early 1600s.

The first issue concerns the point I just raised – the specific pronunciation of the 'r' sound. Most historical linguists agree that the letter [r] was generally trilled or rolled in Old English and Middle English. So instead of saying ***rat***, people were more likely to say /rrrat/. It's hard to trace the evolution from that trilled [r] to the modern English [r] since the same letter represented both sounds, but as I discussed in Episode 160, the evidence suggests that the change was underway in the late 1500s and 1600s. This comes from descriptions of the sound from that period, though those descriptions tend to be a bit ambiguous and subject to differing interpretations. There is also another linguistic development related to the 'r' sound which also suggests that the change from the trilled 'r' to the modern 'r' was taking place around this time, and I will elaborate on that in a moment. But for now, it's safe to assume that anyone walking around London in the early 1600s would have heard both types of 'r' sounds – sometimes from the same speakers and sometimes perhaps even in the same word. For example, a well-known description of the sound by the famous playwright of the period Ben Jonson suggests that the sound was often trilled at the front of a word and pronounced in the modern way at the end. So words like ***runner*** and ***roller*** would have been pronounced more like /rrrunner/ and /rrroller/ at the time. But again, there was probably quite a bit of variation.

The second issue concerns whether people would have pronounced the 'r' sound at all in certain words. Today, many English accents drop the 'r' sound in certain words, especially where it appears after a vowel sound in the middle or at the end of a syllable. So a word like ***birth*** becomes /bəth/ and a word like ***fear*** becomes /fiə/. This is a feature of most English accents in England, though not all, and also a feature found in the English spoken in Britain's later colonies

like Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. The feature can also be found in some dialects of American English and a few other places as well.

The tendency to pronounce the 'r' sound in those situations is called 'rhoticity.' So Standard American English as said to be 'rhotic,' whereas the Standard English of southern England tends to be non-rhotic. But when did this distinction occur?

Well, the fact that most of the words with a 'r' sound today are also spelled with a letter [r] indicates that the [r] must have been generally pronounced in the mid-to-late-1500s when spellings started to become standardized, at least in and around London where the print shops were located and where most of the prominent writers of the period lived and worked. But out to the east of London, in the region known as East Anglia, it appears that the 'r' sound after a vowel had been in decline for some time.

Again, I laid out the evidence of that development in that earlier episode – Episode 160, so I'm not going to go back through that evidence here. But it is revealed in spellings found in letters and other documents from that region where the letter [r] was often omitted in words that normally contain an 'r' sound.

At the current point in our overall story in the early 1600s, that disappearing 'r' sound after vowels was apparently still confined to the easternmost parts of England, but it was slowly spreading westward. By the end of the century, it had probably reached London, but it didn't really become common there until the 1700s. Over the course of the 1700s and 1800s, it continued to spread westward and northward throughout much of the country. By that point, English was already entrenched in North America, so North American English retained the original pronounced [r]'s, though there was – and still is – quite a bit of variation. Since this is one of the key features that distinguishes English dialects, we'll keep a close eye on this development as we move forward. But for now, in the early 1600s, those silent [r]'s were mostly confined to East Anglia in the far east of England.

The third major issue concerning the letter [r] and the sound it represents has to do with a specific sound change that had occurred in the Middle English period and continued to linger into the early Modern period. This involved situations where the 'r' sound was preceded by the 'short [e]' sound (/ɛ/) as in ***pet*** and ***bed***. Together, that 'short [e]' sound and the 'r' sound produced the /ɛr/ sound spelled [er]. And I make that point because, today, we tend to associate that [er] spelling with the /ər/ sound, but originally, it was pronounced /ɛr/. So the word ***verb*** was originally pronounced /vɛrb/, ***term*** was originally pronounced /tɛrm/, and ***person*** was originally pronounced /pɛrson/. This type of pronunciation still exists in some places like parts of Scotland.

Well, during the Middle English period, this pronunciation shifted from /ɛr/ to /ar/ in many parts of England. So a word like ***serve*** (pronounced /sɛrv/ at the time) was also sometimes pronounced 'sarve.' And a word like ***clerk*** (pronounced /clɛrk/ at the time) was sometimes pronounced as 'clark.' Again, I discussed this sound change back in Episode 128 as part of the discussion about Middle English, and also in Episode 160 which focused on the 'r' sound. So I'm not going to go back through all of that again. The main point here is that you could hear both pronunciations in

and around London in the early 1600s. So the [er] spelling in many words could be pronounced as either /ɛr/ or /ar/.

Of course, this feature still persists in some words to this day. That's why Americans say /clerk/ and /derby/ and most Brits say /clark/ and /darby/.

Now as I mentioned, this change occurred during the Middle English period, and in some words, that newer /ar/ pronunciation had become so common by the 1500s that it effectively replaced the older /ɛr/ pronunciation. That included words like ***farm***, ***dark***, ***yard***, ***carve***, ***star*** and ***harvest*** – all of which originally had the /ɛr/ sound. But since that sound change was so widespread by the mid-1500s, all of those words came to be spelled with [ar] instead of [er], and that ensured that the /ar/ pronunciation in those words became the standard pronunciation over time.

So what about all of the other words that retained the original /ɛr/ sound? Well, that takes us to the fourth development concerning the letter [r] and the sound it represents. Around the current point in our overall story of English in the early 1600s, that original /ɛr/ sound started to shift again, but this time, it shifted to a different sound. And of course, that new sound was our modern /ər/ sound. That's how /clɛrk/ became ***clerk*** (/clərk/), and /vɛrb/ became ***verb*** (/vərb/), and /sɛrv/ became ***serve*** (/sərv/), and so on. Again, in some places, like parts of Scotland, that second change never really occurred, so you can still hear the original pronunciations there. But in much of England, our modern /ər/ sound emerged in the early 1600s.

But that specific sound change was part of a much larger development, and that larger development was very important to the development of Modern English. So I want to spend a bit more time on this last development concerning the letter [r] and the sound it represents.

The important thing to understand about the modern 'r' sound is that is has some vowel-like qualities. It is formed in the open cavity of the mouth, and the sound is shaped in part by the tongue. And due to that similarity to the way vowels are produced, the modern 'r' sound has a tendency to alter the way vowel sounds around it are pronounced – especially vowel sounds that come before it. It tends to tug and pull on those vowels, and cause them to shift a little bit over time. So very often, when we're looking at specific vowels sounds, the sounds are pronounced a little bit differently when they occur before an 'r' sound. And in the early 1600s, this influence was so strong that is affected several different vowel sounds that came before the letter [r] in a lot of words. That 'r' sound tugged and pulled on those vowels so strongly that they all came to be pronounced the same way – as /ər/. That /ər/ sound emerged as a new sound in the language, and thanks to those developments, it is an extremely common sound today. It was all the result of a vowel merger – rather than a vowel split.

So let me break that down for you a little bit. This development affected three specific 'short' vowel sounds when they occurred before the 'r' sound. The first was the 'short [e]' sound that we just looked at. Words like /clɛrk/ and /vɛrb/ – to the extent they retained that /ɛr/ sound – became /clerk/ and /verb/ with the modern /ər/ sound.

Meanwhile, words that had the 'short [i]' sound before [r] were pronounced /ir/ and spelled [ir]. So a bluejay was a type of /bird/, and the thing you wear on your upper body was a /shirt/, and the number one position was /first/, and the opposite of a boy was a /girl/. But that /ir/ sound also shifted to /ər/ in the early 1600s. And as a result, /bird/ became ***bird***, /shirt/ became ***shirt***, /first/ became ***first***, and /girl/ became ***girl***.

Around the same time, words that had the 'short [u]' sound before [r] also experienced the same change. Those words were usually spelled with [ur] and pronounced as /oor/. It was basically the sound we hear today in words like ***sure*** and ***lure*** [l-u-r-e]. This sound occurred in a lot of words. If something caught on fire, it would /burn/. If you killed someone intentionally, it was /murder/. If you injured yourself, you were /hurt/. And a medical care provider a /nurse/. But again, the 'short [u]' vowel in those words also shifted to that same /ər/ sound in the early 1600s. And as a result, /burn/ became ***burn***, /murder/ became ***murder***, /hurt/ became ***hurt***, and /nurse/ became ***nurse***.

This same change also affected a lot of words spelled with [w-o-r] because in that environment, the [o] was often pronounced as 'short [u]', so /world/ because ***world***, /worm/ became ***worm***, /word/ became ***word***, and /work/ became ***work***.

So all three of those distinct vowel sounds merged together into a common /ər/ sound in the early 1600s – giving us the shared vowel sounds in all of those words that have different spellings today. What had once been distinct pronunciations and distinct spellings in the mid-1500s became the same pronunciation by the mid-1600s. But of course, as we've seen so many times, the older spellings were retained.

As I've noted, this important vowel merger before the 'r' sound occurred in the early 1600s. So at the current point in our overall story of English around the year 1619, you would have both the older distinct pronunciations and the newer merged pronunciation as /ər/ if you were walking around London. There is some evidence that this change began in the north and east of England about a century earlier and eventually reached London in the late 1500s and early 1600s. [*SOURCE: An Introduction to Early Modern English, Terttu Nevalainen, p. 125.*] Some of the earliest evidence of the merger comes from an English schoolmaster named Edmund Coote, who I discussed back in Episode 174. Writing in 1596, he noted that words like ***dirt***, ***girth***, and the pronoun ***her*** were sometimes pronounced with the same vowel sound, which he spelled [ur]. He considered those to be bad pronunciations at the time, but his writings confirm that this change was starting to appear around London in the last decade of the 1500s. Some of Shakespeare's rhymes also seem to confirm the vowel merger. For example, he rhymed the word ***birds*** with ***herds*** – an [ir] word and an [er] word which traditionally had different vowel sounds. He did the same with ***curse*** and ***first*** – a [ur] word and an [ir] word which also had different vowel sounds prior to that point. Again, that would have been the early stages of this vowel merger. By the mid-1600s, English scholars were describing it in some detail, so it was definitely widespread by then.

So again, this change was underway at the current point in our overall story of English, and it is an important development not only in terms of spelling, but also for the general sound of the language. That brand new /ər/ sound is extremely common in the language today – not only in all of those words where the vowels merged, but also at the end of so many words that end in [-er] like ***runner***, ***higher***, ***smarter***, ***painter***, and so on. Of course, if you have a non-rhotic accent like in much of England, Australia and New Zealand, you probably don't pronounce the 'r' sound in those words, but you still have that vowel merger. The vowel in all of those words is that generic /ə/ sound that linguists call schwa. So instead of ***bird***, you might say /bəd/, and instead of ***earth*** you might say /əth/, and instead of ***nurse*** you might say /nərs/. Again, the vowel is still the same in all of those words. Of course, that's became the vowel merger occurred first in the early 1600s, then the 'r' sound was lost in those non-rhotic accents in the 1700s and beyond.

All of this points to that 'r' sound as the trigger for the vowel merger, but why did that merger occur specifically at this point in the early 1600s and not before?

Well, the answer takes us back to that original issue I addressed about the specific sound represented by letter [r]. Remember that the letter [r] probably represented a trilled or rolled 'r' sound in earlier periods of English. But as I noted, it appears that the trilled 'r' started to evolve into the modern English 'r' in the 1500s. And many linguists think that change from a trilled 'r' (/rrr/) to the modern /r/ sound led to the vowel merger.

Remember that all of those distinct vowel sounds merged into that somewhat neutral and generic 'schwa' sound pronounced as /ə/. Well, that neutral schwa sound (/ə/) and the modern 'r' sound (/r/) are pronounced with the tongue in similar neutral positions. So when that modern 'r' sound emerged and became more common over the course of the 1500s, there might have been a tendency for speakers to adjust the way the pronounced the vowel sounds that came before it. The idea is that people tended to slide those three distinct vowels sounds into the schwa sound on the way to the 'r' sound. And over time, speakers just started to cheat a little bit and substitute that schwa sound for the original vowel sound because it made it a little easier to pronounce. And that gave us the /ər/ pronunciation which is so common in English today. [*SOURCE: Shakespeare's Works and Elizabethan Pronunciation, Fausto Cercignani, p. 355-6.*]

This idea is supported not only by the phonology of the sounds, but also the general time frame in which the changes occurred. As we've seen, there is evidence that the modern 'r' sound became widespread in the 1500s, and this vowel merger followed along right behind it. Also, the situation in Scotland provides more evidence to support the idea. In Scotland, the modern 'r' sound didn't emerge until later. There the trilled 'r' remained in widespread use over the following centuries, and is still widely used there today. And in that region, this vowel merger didn't really occur or occurred on a much more limited basis. That is why those older short vowel sounds can still be heard before the 'r' sound there. [*SOURCE: A Historical Phonology of English, Donka Minkova, p. 277.*] So the timing of all of these linguistic developments makes sense if we assume that the emergence of the modern 'r' sound triggered the vowel mergers that followed. Again, it is just an idea or theory advocated by some linguists, but it provides a reasonable and logical argument for the way that newer 'r' sound shaped the way we speak today.

So I realize that is a lot to take in, but as I noted, that vowel merger is an important development, and it helps to explain why so many words that are pronounced with the same vowel sound have different spellings today.

With that, we can turn to the next letter [s]. Of course, the letter [s] represents the /s/ sound, most of the time, but not always. Sometimes, it represents a 'z' or 'zed' sound. I'll just refer to it as the 'z' sound going forward. We hear the letter [s] representing that 'z' sound in words like ***easy***, ***busy***, ***music***, ***visit***, ***reason***, ***choose***, ***use***, and lots of other words. It also has a 'z' sound in simple basic words like ***is***, ***has***, ***as***, ***was***, and so on. Now, there are a couple of reasons why we use an [s] instead of a [z] in those words.

First of all, the letter [s] was once used for both sounds because English didn't use the letter [z] at all. Old English only had the letter [s] to work with. The [z] didn't really appear in English until the Middle English period. So that meant that English scribes had to use the letter [s] for both sounds. By the way, I've noted this before, but the 's' and 'z' sounds are basically the same sound. The only difference is that the vocal chords are activated when we pronounced the 'z' sound, so it creates a buzzing sound (/z/). But the vocal chords are silent when making the 's' sound, so there is no buzz there (/s/). So the sounds are phonetically related, and at one time the letter [s] was used for both sounds in English.

The letter [z] was adopted from French in the Middle English period, but even then, its use was limited at first. Only in the Modern English period did its use become more common. So we still have lots of words where the [s] is used for the 'z' sound.

The other reason why the letter [s] is sometimes used for that 'z' sound is because the sound often fluctuated in words in earlier periods of English. In some words, the sound was sometimes pronounced as an [s] and sometimes as a [z]. We know this in part thanks to the spelling reformers of the 1500s and early 1600s. Most of them showed that the pronunciation of the 's' sound varied because they sometimes rendered those words with an [s] and sometimes rendered them with a [z]. It appears that the sound fluctuated in large part based on the sounds that followed it. If a voiced sound followed it – so a sound where the vocal chords were engaged like a vowel sound – the [s] was usually voiced and therefore became a 'z' sound – so from /s/ to /z/. But if the following sound was unvoiced, the [s] was usually pronounced as an [s]. Those transcriptions confirm the people sometimes said ***is*** (/iz/), ***has*** (/haz/) and ***was*** (/wuz/) like today, but they also sometimes said /is/, /has/, and /was/, depending on the word that came after them.

It appears that the pronunciation of those words stabilized and became more consistent over the course of the 1600s, though the end result wasn't always consistent. Note the [h-i-s] in ***his*** with a 'z' sound, but [t-h-i-s] in ***this*** has an 's' sound.

To a certain extent today, the 's' sound can still vary, but today, it usually depends on the sound that comes before it rather than after it. I discussed this issue back in Episode 159, but in case you missed or forgot that discussion, the pronunciation of the plural 's' sound at the end of a noun varies depending on the sound that comes before it. So we say ***tacks*** with an 's' sound at the end, and ***tags*** with a 'z' sound at the end. That's because the 'k' sound in ***tack*** is voiceless, so

that lack of voicing carries over and produces the voiceless ‘s’ sound after it – ***tacks***. But the ‘g’ sound is pronounced with the vocal chords activated, so that voicing carries over and converts the ‘s’ sound into a ‘z’ sound – ***tags***.

The main point here is that the letter [s] represents both the ‘s’ sound and the ‘z’ sound in Modern English both due to the historical use of letter [s] for both sounds and also due to the fact that the sounds often switch back and forth in normal speech.

But the letter [s] not only represents the ‘z’ sound sometimes, it also can represent the ‘sh’ sound (/sh/) – and even the /ʒ/ sound. And this was actually a brand-new development at the current point in our overall story in the early 1600s. Now the ‘sh’ sound itself wasn’t new, but it emerged again in a lot of words that previously had a simple ‘s’ sound. So ***passion*** (/pæ-si-un/) became /pæ-shun/; ***sufficient*** (/su-fi-si-ent/) became /su-fi-shent/, ***impression*** (/im-pre-si-un/) became /im-pre-shun/, and so on. This sound change occurred when the ‘s’ sound was followed by [I] and another vowel – so usually [-ion] or [-ient] and something similar.

Meanwhile, when the letter [s] was pronounced as a [z] in the same context, it turned into a /ʒ/ sound. Those are just the voiced alternatives of the sounds we just looked at. So ***measure*** (/me-zi-ur/) became /me-ʒur/; and ***pleasure*** (/ple-zi-ur/) became /ple-ʒur/; and ***vision*** (/vi-zi-un/) became /vi-ʒun/.

Again, those sound changes were starting to occur at the current point in our overall story of English in the early 1600s. The spelling reformer Robert Robinson writing in the year 1617 is one of the first to record this change in his phonetic spelling of words like ***motion***, ***sufficient***, ***transgression***, ***measure*** and ***vision***.

So again, those changes were starting to occur in the early 1600s, and could have probably been heard in the speech of some people around London at the time, though it became much more common over the course of the century. As a result, the letter [s] can be used today to represent the ‘s’ sound (/s/), and sometimes the ‘z’ sound (/z/), the ‘sh’ sound (/sh/), and the /ʒ/ sound.

Now with that, let’s turn to the next letter – [t]. Again, this letter is pretty straightforward because it almost always represents the /t/ sound and has done so since Old English. Of course, there are a few French loanwords where the [t] is silent at the end, like ***ballet***, ***buffet***, ***filet***, ***gourmet***, ***debut***, and ***depot***. Those [t]’s are silent, at least in American English, because they were silent in French. Sometimes a [t] is silent in the middle of word, like in ***castle***, ***whistle***, ***wrestle***, ***listen***, and so on. Those are usually [t]’s that became silent at some point after the spelling became fixed.

But letter [t] also experienced a sound change that paralleled the development we just looked at concerning letter [s]. Just like with [s], when [t] was followed by [i] and another vowel, it produced the ‘sh’ sound (/sh/). This usually happened in words ending in [t-i-o-n]. So ***exception*** (/ex-cep-ti-un/) became ***exception*** (/ex-cep-shun/). And ***fraction*** (frac-ti-un) became ***fraction*** (frac-shun). And nation (/nah-ti-un) became ***nation*** (/nay-shun/). Again, this is essentially the same type of change that we saw in those words ending in [-sion] like ***passion***, ***impression***, ***confession***, and so on.

A similar change occurred when the letter [t] was followed by [-ure], but in those cases, the [t] became a 'ch' sound (/ch/). So ***nature*** (/neh-tyur) became ***nature*** (/nah-chur/), ***picture*** (/pic-tyur/) became ***picture*** (/pic-chur/), ***creature*** (/kreh-tyur/) became ***creature*** (/cree-chur/), and so on. Again, these changes were probably taking place at the same time as those changes involving the letter [s] that I discussed a moment ago. So those changes were probably underway in the early 1600s, though the evidence showing the changes becomes more common over the course of the 1600s.

As a result of those sound changes, the letter [t] not only represents the /t/ sound, but also the 'sh' sound (/sh/) and the 'ch' sound (/ch/) in some words. By the way, if you want a more detailed discussion about this particular sound change and the similar change that affected the 's' sound, check out Episode 172.

OK, with that, let's move on to letter [u] – our final vowel letter (not counting Y, of course). As a vowel letter, we know that the letter [u] has at least two basic sounds – known as its 'long' sound and its 'short' sound. The long sound is /u:/, and the short sound is literally a shorter version of that – /u/.

Let's consider that 'short' sound first. Again, it's the /u/ sound heard in words like ***put***, ***push***, ***pull***, ***bush*** and ***bull***. The letter [u] has been used to represent that sound since the Old English period. But something very interesting happened shortly after the current point in our overall story in the early 1600s. By the middle of the century, many words with that /u/ sound started to shift to a new 'short [u]' sound – the /ʌ/ sound. That's actually the more common 'short [u]' sound today, heard in words like ***cup***, ***shut***, ***cut***, ***sun***, ***hunt***, ***luck***, ***skull***, ***mud***, ***judge*** and so on. Again, in case you missed the difference, it's the difference between the original vowel sound heard in the word ***put*** [p-u-t], and the newer sound heard in the word ***putt*** [p-u-t-t-]. While this newer sound may have been emerging in the early 1600s, none of the spelling reformers of that period indicate it. The first clear evidence comes from the 1640s – a couple of decades after the current point in our overall story.

Interestingly, this newer 'short [u]' sound didn't emerged in northern England, so even today, most speakers in northern England tend to use the older vowel in that second set of words – producing pronunciations like /cʊp/, /shʊt/, /sʊn/ and so on. It's a quick way to detect an accent from northern England.

Since this newer vowel sound had not yet emerged in English at the current point in our overall story in the 1600s, speakers in the south of England would have pronounced those words like northern speakers do today. So the words ***put*** and ***putt*** would have both been pronounced as /pʊt/ at the time.

One other quick note before we move on. You may have noticed that we not only use the letter [u] to spell those two sounds today, we also use the letter [o]. The original /ʊ/ sound heard in a word like ***put*** can also be heard in words spelled with double-[o]'s like ***foot***, ***wood***, ***good***, ***book***, ***look***, ***cook***, ***stood***, and so on. And the /ʌ/ sound heard in a word like ***putt*** can also be heard in

words spelled with either double-[o]'s or a single [o] like ***blood***, ***flood***, ***done***, ***glove***, ***love***, ***some***, ***tongue***, and so on.

So what's going on there? Why can we also spell those same sounds with letter [o]? Well, there are multiple reasons for that.

First, some of those words originally had a 'long [o]' sound pronounced /o:/. Remember that that sound shifted to /u:/ as part of the Great Vowel Shift, so it basically shifted from a 'long [o]' sound to a 'long [u]' sound. Then the vowel sound was shortened in some of those words. And than left those words with a 'short [u]' sound. So at that point, those words spelled with an [o] fell in line with all of those words spelled with a [u]. That's why words like ***hook***, ***book***, ***wood*** and ***good*** have that /ʊ/ sound of ***put***, even though they are spelled with double O's. And then when that newer /ʌ/ sound emerged, some of those same words spelled with an [o] fell in line with the words spelled with a [u], and as a group, their vowels shifted to that new /ʌ/ sound. That's what happened with words like ***blood***, ***flood***, ***glove***, ***love***, and so on. So all of those words experienced a great deal of change in a relatively short period of time. But if you can follow all of that, you can see why the merger of the vowel sounds in those words allowed the letters [o] and [u] to represent the same sounds in those words, and since those older spellings were retained, they contributed to the confusing spellings we have today.

I should note that in some cases, these words are spelled with an [o] for another reason. Sometimes two words were pronounced and spelled the same way, but meant something completely different, so scribes distinguished them by giving one of them a different spelling. That's what happened with ***sun*** and ***son*** ['s-u-n' and 's-o-n']. They were both originally spelled with a [u], but scribes decided to distinguish them by giving the word for a male child an [o] in place of the original [u]. So if you've ever wondered why those two words are spelled differently, it was intentional. It was a way of distinguishing them in writing. The same thing happened with words like ***some*** and ***sum*** ['s-o-m-e' and 's-u-m'] and ***ton*** and ***tun*** ['t-o-n' meaning a unit of weight and 't-u-n' meaning a large barrel]. They were originally the same word spelled with a [u].

And there is also a third reason why we use [o]'s to spell words with these 'short [u]' sounds. And this third reason was also part of a conscious decision to avoid confusion – though it produced its own confusion in the long term. In many words, the original [u]'s were replaced with [o]'s because letter [u] tended to get lost in the Gothic script that was used in early Modern English. I've talked about this before, but that script posed real problems for readers. Many curvy letters were actually written with straight lines. So a [u] was written with two bold straight lines, which were connected with a little flourish at the bottom. An [n] was the opposite. It was written with two bold straight lines connected with a little flourish at the top. And [m] had three straight lines connected with flourishes at the top. And [i] was just a straight line with a flourish at the bottom. In writing, all of those straight lines blended together. A word like ***minimum*** looked like fifteen straight lines connected by various flourishes at the top or bottom. All of that meant that a letter like [u] tended to get lost in the middle of a word, especially when it appeared beside another letter written with straight lines like an [i], or an [m], or an [n], or a [w] or another [u].

Given that problem, scribes looked for a way to make the vowel sound stand out in the line of letters, and one solution was to simply replace the [u] with an [o], which had a rounder shape and stood out better. And through that process, a lot of words that originally had a letter [u] now got a brand-new letter [o]. That included words like ***love***, ***come***, ***some***, ***monk***, ***tongue***, ***honey***, ***above***, and ***wonder***. That new [o] made the words easier to read, but it created more words where the letters [o] and [u] represented the same 'short [u]' sound.

So we've seen how the letter [u] has ceded some of its authority to letter [o], especially with respect to the so-called 'short [u]' sound. But something similar also happened to the 'long [u]' sound.

The 'long [u]' sound was /oo/. And it was found in the original version of words like ***house***, and ***mouse***, and ***south***, and ***cow***. They were originally pronounced /hus/, /mus/, /suth/ and /cu/. Of course, that /u:/ sound was a long vowel sound, so it was affected by the Great Vowel Shift. Over the course of the 1400s and 1500s, the sound shifted to /əʊ/. And then eventually, in the 1600s and 1700s, the sound shifted again to /au/ in most standard dialects of English. So ***house*** went from /hus/ to /həʊs/ to /haus/. And ***mouse*** went from /mus/ to /məʊs/ to /maus/. Some regional dialects of English still retain one of those older pronunciations, but the English of southern England and the English of North America experienced both changes. At the current point in our overall story of English in the early 1600s, the vowel sound around London was probably that in-between sound /əʊ/. So you would have heard most people say /həʊs/, /məʊs/, /səʊth/, and /cəʊ/, instead of ***house***, ***mouse***, ***south***, and ***cow***. But again, there would have been some variation.

Also, notice that we don't spell those words with a simple [u] today. We spell them with [ou]. And the reason is partly due to that same problem with the Gothic script used in early Modern English. Again, the letter [u] was often hard to find in words written in that script. But French provided a partial solution. For the original long /u:/ sound, English scribes noticed that French scribes represented the sound with [ou]. We still find that spelling in French today in words like ***vous*** [vous], which is the French word for ***you***, and also in the word ***nous*** [nous], which is the French word for ***we.*** So English scribes and printers started to adopt that same spelling within English, in part due to the overall influence of French at the time, but also because it helped the [u] to stand out in the middle of a word. So most of those words with that original long /u:/ sound acquired that [ou] spelling in late Middle and early Modern English.

So we've seen that the letter [u] can represent a variety of vowel sounds in English, but I noted in earlier episodes that the same letter was also used to represent other sounds. It represented the 'w' sound as well, a spelling that we still find in words with [qu] like ***quick***, ***queen***, ***quiet***, and so on, and sometimes in other words, like the word ***suite*** [s-u-i-t-e]. And the letter [u] was also used to spell the /v/ sound – that's the sound we associate with letter [v] today. So it was really being overused at that point.

Since it became common practice to double the letter [u] when it represented the /w/ sound, printers created a specific letter for that purpose which consisted of two [u]'s put together, and that gave us a new letter which became known as [w] ('double-U').

But even after that development, the letter [u] was still being used to represent all of the vowel sounds of the letter and the consonant sound /v/. And that was still the case at the current point in our overall story in the early 1600s. Remember that this letter could be spelled with one curvy line like a modern [u] or with two straight lines like a modern [v]. Both versions were used for all of those sounds. So the letter had two distinct shapes and could be used for a set of vowel sounds and a separate consonant sound. It was only a matter a time before printers and scribes decided to dedicate one shape to the vowel sounds and the other shape to the consonant sound. And that's what happed in the 1630s and 1640s, so shortly after the current point in our story. That was at the same time that the letters [i] and [j] were being distinguished as I discussed in the last episode. So by the middle of the 1600s, the letter [v] was formally part of the English alphabet – around the same time that letter [j] was adopted for similar reasons. But again, that had not quite happened at the current point in our overall story.

So that covers letters [u], [v] and [w], and it takes us to letter [x]. I don't have much to say about [x]. It's a letter that goes back to the Greeks, and it represents the same sound that we normally spelled with [ks]. ***Tax*** as in 'a government fee' is spelled with an [x] – [t-a-x]. But ***tacks*** like thumbtacks are spelled with [ks] – [t-a-c-k-s]. Same pronunciation but different spelling. The same is true for ***box*** and ***socks***, which rhyme, but ***box*** is spelled with an [x] and ***socks*** is spelled with [ks]. So we don't really need a letter [x]. But we have it anyway. The Greeks also had that 'ks' sound at the beginning of words, but English doesn't. So when an [x] appears at the front of a word, we usually just pronounce it as 'z' or 'zed' sound instead, thus the pronunciation of words spelled with an [x] at the front like ***xylophone*** and ***xenophobia***. Those are mostly recent loanwords. For older words that have an [x] – like ***box***, ***ox***, ***axe***, ***flax***, and the Latin word ***exit***, the pronunciation and usage of the [x] has been pretty consistent over the centuries.

That takes us to letter [y], which of course has both vowel and consonant qualities. I discussed this letter is detail back in Episode 161, so I will refer you to that episode if you want to know the history and development of that letter over the centuries. The important thing to know about the letter is that it obviously represents the /y/ sound in many words, like at the beginning of ***yard***, and ***yellow***, and ***young***. That's a sound that some people describe as a consonant sound and other people call it a semi-vowel. But whatever you call it, the letter [y] has been used to represent that sound for centuries and would have been used for that same purpose in the early 1600s.

Meanwhile, the letter is also used to represent a series of vowel sounds. They are essentially the same vowel sounds as letter [i]. We hear those sounds in words like ***try***, ***fly***, ***city***, ***busy***, ***lyric***, ***system*** and so on.

Now I should note that the letter once represented a distinct vowel sound that no longer exists in the language. That was the /ü/ sound. But during the Middle English period, that sound merged with the /i:/ sound, which was represented with letter [i]. And from that point on, [y] basically became an alternate way of spelling the vowel sounds represented by letter [i]. Again, I discussed the circumstances in which [y] was retained in Episode 161, so check out that episode for that additional detail.

And lastly, that takes us to the final letter – [z]. As I noted earlier in the episode, the letter [z] was really introduced to English during the Middle English period. It obviously represents the /z/ sound, and as we saw earlier, the same sound is also sometimes represented by letter [s] which was the more traditional letter used for that sound in earlier forms of English. Other than that, the use of the letter [z] is pretty straight-forward in English.

So with that, we have completed our look at the all of the letters of English and the sounds they represented in the early 1600s at the current point in our overall story of English. I know this has been a lot of information, and it may have been too much to keep track of. But as I noted last time, my goal in preparing this episode and the last episode was to provide a baseline that we can use as we move forward and begin our look at the development of regional accents as English spread around the world. I also wanted to look at this issue through the lens of spelling because it illustrates why English spelling is such a mess today, but also provides answers to many of the common questions people have about specific spellings in Modern English.

I also hope you observed a recurring theme as we went through all of those letters and sounds. And that was the fact that most of the important sound changes between late Middle English and the English we speak today were underway at the current point in our overall story in the first few decades of the 1600s. There was an incredible variation in the way people spoke, not just from region to region and from one social class to another, but also side-by-side on the streets of London. Time and again, we saw that older, more educated, and more conservative speakers used pronunciations that had been around since the late Middle English period. The various spelling reformers of the period confirm that. But other evidence indicates that younger speakers, and people with less formal education, and those who simply preferred the newer, looser way of speaking, used pronunciations that we would recognize today. Again, there was an incredible variety of pronunciations in the region where standard English was emerging. That fact will play an important role in the development of English as we move forward as it fractured into a variety of new regional dialects.

And next time, we'll continue that story and look at the arrival of the Pilgrims in North America. We'll also look at the first Dutch settlements in New York, the ensuring Dutch contribution to early American English, and the overall influence of seafaring on the English language.

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