English III

Being a history of English spelling.

**Some consequences.**

*Student: Well, we’ve talked about etymology.*

Tutor: We have.

*Quite a bit.*

Yes. Quite a bit.

*We saw that the Celts were here first.*

More than 2,000 years ago.

*Yes.*

But not many Celtic words remain in English today.

*Odd, really.*

I suppose it was a long time ago.

*Well, it was.*

Then the Romans invaded.

*Yes.*

Almost 2,000 years ago.

*But they left after about 500 years.*

Back to Rome.

*I suppose.*

Then the Anglo-Saxons invaded.

*Speaking Anglo-Saxon.*

They settled down.

*Became English.*

And everyone began to speak Anglo-Saxon.

*Which became Old English.*

And we still use lots of Anglo-Saxon words.

*Good, plain words.*

Everyday words.

*Nice, simple words.*

Words everyone likes.

*Old English.*

Then the Vikings invaded.

*This was about 1,000 years ago.*

Yes.

*The Norsemen.*

Speaking Norse.

*Well, Old Norse.*

Yes.

*They settled down, too.*

Up north.

*Yes.*

Became English.

*Yes.*

Old Norse and Old English began to mix.

*Especially up north.*

We still use quite a lot of Norse words.

*True.*

And then another invasion.

*The Norman invasion.*

In 1066.

*The Normans won the Battle of Hastings.*

And took over England.

*All of it.*

Yes.

*All speaking French.*

And so the elite spoke French, too.

*But ordinary people went on speaking English.*

Which was good for the language.

*It became a nice, simple language.*

Vigorous and robust.

*But with a lot of words from other languages.*

Oh, yes.

*Words from loads of different languages.*

A bit of this.

*And a bit of that.*

Latin.

*Anglo-Saxon.*

Norse.

*French.*

Even some Greek.

*Yes. Even some Greek.*

All sorts of languages.

*Yes. All sorts of stuff.*

About half of our words come from other languages.

*They’re called loan words.*

The words which come from other languages.

*Words we’ve borrowed, I suppose.*

Exactly! Loan words.

*Interesting.*

Yes. I think so.

*But it makes English spelling a bit whacky.*

Well, sometimes.

*Coming from all those different languages.*

I suppose so.

*I mean what about those whacky big words?*

Whacky big words?

*Like television!*

Mmmm…

*Or telephone!*

Oh these are fairly simple.

*Simple?*

Well, fairly simple.

*How?*

Well, they’re invented words.

*Invented words?*

Yes. Names we have invented - for things we have invented.

*They look like invented words, in fact.*

Yes.

*How are they invented?*

Well, often using Greek or Latin roots.

*What about telephone, for instance?*

That comes from ‘tele’ and ‘phone’.

*Right.*

‘Tele’ is from Latin.

*OK. But what does it mean?*

Far off. Far away.

*Right. And what about ‘phone’?*

Greek.

*‘Phone’ comes from Greek?*

Yes.

*And what does it mean?*

It means sound.

*So telephone means ‘far away sound’.*

Sort of, yes.

*A mix of Latin and Greek.*

Yes.

*Makes sense, I suppose.*

Well, yes!

*What about television, then?*

Well, ‘tele’ we know about.

*Yes.*

And vision comes from ‘videre’.

*Right.*

In Latin.

*And what does it mean?*

It means ‘to see’.

*So television means ‘seeing from far away’?*

That’s right.

*All in Latin.*

That’s right.

*Mmmm…*

You can tell they’re invented words, really.

*You can see that, somehow.*

Mmmm…

*But the ‘p h’ in ‘phone’ is very strange.*

Oh?

*The ‘p h’ is whacky.*

Do you think so?

*Yes.*

Why?

*Well, it’s p and h but makes an ‘f’ sound.*

Oh, I see what you mean.

*It’s very peculiar.*

It’s quite common in fact.

*Mmmm…*

The word ‘photograph’ does it twice!

*I suppose it does.*

The Greeks used p and h to make the ‘f’ sound.

*Oh. That explains it, I suppose.*

Well, yes. It does.

*Is the word ‘photograph’ Greek?*

The two halves of it are.

*How do you mean?*

Well, ‘photo’ means light.

*In Greek?*

Yes.

*Right.*

And ‘graphos’ means writing, or drawing.

*So it means drawing with light?*

Pretty much.

*Mmmm…*

So if you see p and h like that you know it comes from Greek.

*Like the word catastrophe?*

Exactly. Or catastrophic.

*Which sounds like a Greek word.*

Because it is.

*Elephant. That has p and h in it.*

Yes. ‘Elephant’ is Greek for elephant.

*There are a lot of difficult spellings in English.*

Well, there are some.

*I think there are quite a lot.*

But there are also a lot of ways to make it easier.

*Are there?*

Ways to think about spelling.

*Like*?

Well, like etymology.

*That’s what we’re talking about at the moment.*

Yes.

*Mmmm…*

Tell me about a spelling which bothers you.

*Well, words which aren’t spelt the way they sound.*

Like?

*Like the word sign.*

And?

*Well, there’s a silent letter in there.*

That ‘g’?

*It’s difficult to remember.*

Quite a lot of words have silent letters in.

*But you can’t hear them.*

Well, no. They’re silent!

*But that means you don’t know they’re there.*

Well, yes, I suppose that’s true sometimes.

*Sometimes?*

Yes.

*How do you mean ‘sometimes’?*

Well, often the silent letter is sounded in another form of the word.

*Sounded in another form of the word?*

Yes. So you can hear it’s there.

*Right.*

It’s often worth looking around a bit.

*How do you mean?*

Well, take sign for an example.

*OK.*

And signal.

*Signal?*

Yes. You can hear the ‘g’ in the word signal.

*Well, yes, I suppose you can.*

Which helps you remember the ‘g’ in sign, too.

*I suppose so.*

Come on! It does!

*That’s only one example, though.*

Well…

*That’s only one example.*

Well, there’s doubt and dubious.

*The silent ‘b’ in doubt, you mean?*

Yes. Exactly.

*I suppose there’s crumb and crumble.*

Exactly! Another silent ‘b’ sounded in another form of the word.

*Mmmmm…*

And some silent letters come from other languages.

*Do they?*

Yes.

*Give us an example.*

OK.

*Come on!*

Ascend and descend.

*Ascend and descend?*

Yes. To go up and to go down.

*I know that!*

Well, they both have a silent ‘c’ in them.

*Oh. So they do.*

But…

*But?*

But they both come from a Latin root.

*And what is that?*

Scendere. [note: pronounced ‘skendearay’]

*Scendere?*

Yes. And you can hear the ‘c’ in there.

*Scendere. So you can.*

Scendere means to climb.

*So ascend means to climb up.*

And descend means to climb down.

*And the letter ‘c’ has become silent in English.*

But in Latin you can hear it.

*Fair enough, I suppose.*

Well, I think so!

*Why don’t we sound the ‘c’ any more?*

Habit, I suppose.

*Habit?*

Well, people get into different ways of saying things.

*I suppose languages change all the time.*

Of course they do.

*We pronounce things differently.*

Of course we do, over all those years.

*So some letters become silent.*

Over time, yes.

*We don’t say them any more.*

No.

*But we still write them.*

Yes.

*Even if we don’t pronounce them.*

Lots of silent letters used to be pronounced, in Old English and Norse too.

*Really?*

Absolutely.

*But that’s for another time, right?*

Right.