English IV

Being a history of English spelling.

**All is not lost.**

Tutor: Do you remember what we were talking about?

*Student: More or less.*

I remember talking about invented words.

*Telephone and television.*

Or ‘computer’.

*Is that an invented word??*

From Latin: ‘com’ meaning with and ‘putare’ meaning to calculate.

*So a computer is something you calculate with?*

That’s right. In Latin.

*But they didn’t have computers!*

No.

*So why did they have the word ‘computer’?*

They didn’t.

*Oh.*

We invented the word after we invented the computer.

*Mmmm…*

We talked about silent letters, too.

*And you said look at another form of the word.*

Where you might hear the silent letter.

*That’s right.*

We used the word ‘sign’ as an example.

*Yes. And you can hear the ‘g’ in signal.*

Then we were in Latin for a while.

*We were.*

Looking at the Latin root of the words ‘ascend’ and ‘descend’.

*And you can hear the ‘c’ in the Latin root.*

Scendere, meaning to climb. [note: pronounced ‘skendairay’]

*We were going to look at other languages.*

But we never got that far, did we?

*No. We didn’t.*

Shall we do that now?

*OK.*

Right.

*You said a lot of silent letters used to be pronounced.*

Yes, indeed. They did.

*A long time ago.*

Way back in history.

*Yes.*

In Old Norse.

*And Old English.*

The silent ‘k’, for example.

*Like?*

Well, as in knife, or knee, for example.

*You mean the ‘k’ wasn’t always silent?*

Not back then it wasn’t.

*Are you sure?*

Absolutely.

*You mean people said the ‘k’ aloud?*

Yes.

*How?*

They said ‘kuh – nife’ and ‘kuh – nee’.

*You’re joking!*

No I’m not.

*‘Kuh – nife’?*

Yes.

*‘Kuh – nee’?*

Yes.

*Sounds mad.*

No. It sounds Norse.

*Norse?*

That’s how the Norsemen said it.

*Are you sure?*

They still say it like that in Scandinavia.

*Really?*

Yes.

*You’re pulling my leg.*

No I’m not!

*People still say the ‘k’?*

In Denmark, a knee is a ‘knæ’. [Note: this is pronounced ‘kuh – nay’]

*You’re kidding!*

And a knife is a ‘kniv’. [Note: this is pronounced ‘kuh – new’]

*That’s amazing!*

But true.

*So the sound changed in English.*

Yes. But not in Danish.

*But the spelling stayed the same.*

That’s a good way of saying it.

*What is?*

“The sound changed but the spelling stayed the same.” That’s very good.

*Thank you.*

You’re welcome.

*There are other strange spellings, too.*

Like?

*Many and any, for example.*

The words many and any?

*Yes.*

They’re Viking words too.

*Are they?*

Norse words.

*Why are they spelled like that?*

Like what?

*With an ‘a’?*

How should they be spelled?

*Well, maybe ‘m e n n y’.*

‘M e n n y’?

*Yes.*

*Why?*

*Like penny. ‘P e n n y’.*

Oh.

*Why are they spelled with an ‘a’?*

Because the Vikings did.

*Why?*

Because they pronounced it as a short ‘a’.

*A short ‘a’?*

Yes. Like the ‘a’ in ‘man’ or ‘land’. A short ‘a’.

*Are you sure?*

Or Annie. Yes, I am sure.

*So they pronounced it to rhyme with “Annie”?*

That’s right.

*Do they still do that?*

Well, more or less.

*What is ‘many’, in Danish?*

‘Mange’. [Note: pronounce this to rhyme with ‘clanger’.]

*With a short ‘a’.*

Yes.

*Right.*

From Norse.

*Cool.*

I think so.

*Mmmm…*

And both words are Viking words.

*Many and any?*

Yes. They came over on those longboats.

*1,000 years ago.*

In Norse.

*Old Norse.*

Words often sounded different, back then.

*In the olden days.*

All those words with ‘o u g h’ , for example.

*Mmmm…?*

Words like ‘enough’.

*Or cough.*

Yes. Or through.

*They’re really hard!*

They are the ones everyone complains about.

*Well, they’re really hard!*

They do seem a bit odd.

*Oh come on!*

At first sight, anyway.

*They’re really weird!*

But they’re not all that strange.

*Aren’t they?*

Not if you know what’s really going on.

*Oh. And what is really going on?*

Well, they used to sound different.

*Did they?*

Yes.

*In the olden days?*

Yes.

*How did they sound?*

They sounded more like the way they’re spelled.

*How?*

Well, the ‘g h’ used to be sounded.

*You mean you could hear it?*

Yes.

*What did it sound like?*

Like the ‘c h’ in loch.

*When Scottish people say it, you mean.*

Yes. They say ‘loch’.

*Loch.*

And you can hear the ‘c h’ making a sound.

*OK. But what about the ‘o u g h’ words?*

Like?

*Well, enough, for example?*

People probably said ‘enoch’ to rhyme with ‘loch’.

*‘Enoch’ to rhyme with ‘loch’?*

Something like that, yes.

*So the ‘g h’ was pronounced?*

Yes.

*And ‘cough’ was probably ‘coch’?*

Yes.

*There are lots of words with a funny ‘g h’ in them.*

There are.

*Like night, or fight.*

Or daughter. Or laugh.

*Yes.*

Lots of them.

*Were they once pronounced ‘nichht’ and ‘fichht’?*

Something like that, yes.

*And ‘dauchhter’?*

Yes.

*And ‘lauchh’?*

Something like that.

*Weird!*

Well, in some parts of Scotland people still speak like that.

*Really?*

More or less.

*They say ‘nichht’ instead of night?*

Yes.

*Are you sure?*

They say “It’s a braw, brichht, moonlichht nichht the nichht”.

*What does that mean?*

It’s a beautiful, bright, moonlight night tonight.

*You’re kidding!*

No I’m not!

*Mmmm…*

I think knowing all that helps.

*A bit, I suppose.*

Once you know all that it’s not so strange.

*I suppose not...*

It all helps.

*Mmmm…*

Are there any other spellings which bother you?

*Well, there is the ‘ c ’ beginning.*

Does that bother you?

*Yes, it does.*

Why?

*Well, sometimes it sounds like an ‘s’.*

Like in centimetre. Or cent.

*Yes.*

OK.

*But sometimes it sounds like a ‘k’.*

Like in confident, you mean?

*Yes. Like in confident.*

The ‘c’ is making different sounds?

*Yes. Why is it doing that?*

You’ll have to ask the ancient Romans.

*Eh?*

They started it!

*How do you mean?*

Well, these words come from Latin.

*And that’s how they pronounced them?*

Centimetre comes partly from ‘cent’, meaning 100.

*Yes. There are 100 cents in a dollar, for instance.*

And the Euro, too.

*Really?*

Straight from Latin.

*And the ‘c’ was pronounced like an ‘s’?*

In ‘cent’ it was, yes.

*What about confident?*

The ‘con’ bit comes from contra, meaning ‘against’.

*And they pronounced the ‘c’ like a ‘k’?*

That’s it!

*Mmmm…*

Latin pronunciation.

*Mmmm…*

That’s all.

*There seems to be a reason for everything.*

If you know where to look.

*Even with spelling.*

Yes. Even with spelling!

*We don’t always know it.*

What?

*The reason.*

No, but we can usually find out.

*How?*

Look it up.

*Where?*

Well, a good dictionary will usually tell you.

*Where words come from?*

Yes. A good dictionary will tell you.

*Oh.*

Tell you the etymology of the word.

*Oh. Etymology again!*

I think it’s interesting.

*Well…*

Knowing how words came to be the way they are.

*Knowing where words come from.*

I think it helps.

*Sometimes…*

I think it often helps.

*And you could be right.*

Oh, I am!

*Mmmmmm…..*