

# Review

## Highly irregular: Why tough, through and dough don't rhyme (a review)

Original work by Arika Okrent published by Oxford University Press 2021

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This is a highly entertaining and informative book about oddities in the English language. The oddities explain why words spelt the same are pronounced differently, such as *tough*, *through* and *dough*, why English usage chooses some words to describe people and not others, why we say words like *eleven* and not *oneteen* to describe numbers from 1-19 and why similar words are formed in different ways, such as adverbs. And why is spelling so apparently not subject to strict rules? In short, why is the English language so unpredictable? The result is an absorbing read and work of reference, illustrated with cartoons by Sean O'Neill, and it will be of interest especially to language researchers and etymologists. However, it is also valuable for teachers as it answers many of the difficult questions English language learners sometimes ask about the peculiarities of English.

The book covers changes in the language caused by the influence of German and French and the influence of the printing press and social influences over the centuries which have led to

small changes in pronunciation, spelling and usage leading to differences in quite common words and phrases. As mentioned above, changes in social influence have also been important, such as the need to express a particular wish or requirement, impress others, make an emotional impact or send social signals. Pronunciation has drifted over the years and spelling with it so the English language today with its borrowings, adaptations and inventions is as marked by its exceptions as much by its rules.

The exceptions are what interests the author, Anita Okrent, who on the basis of her PhD in Psycholinguistics from the University of Chicago, writes on language issues for many language publications focusing on what we use, what we don't use and why.

She divides the book into six sections entitled *What the Hell, English?*, *Blame the Barbarians*, *Blame the French* (referring to the impact of the Norman conquest of 1066 on Britain and on the English language), *Blame the Printing Press*, *Blame*

*the Snobs* and lastly *Blame Ourselves*, dealing with forty anomalies that speakers of English and learners have to cope with.

As you can see from the section titles, the approach is light-hearted but also immensely informative, covering issues of borrowed words, spelling, pronunciation, choice of words and language use. The first section – *What the Hell, English?* – investigates the origin of the expression *What the hell* as in ‘*What the hell is going on?*’ The use of *What the hell...?* expresses a degree of frustration and exasperation. According to Okrent, the phrase itself dates from at least 1785 although the equivalent term *What the devil...?* dates back to Chaucer’s time and earlier, possibly originating in the French *Que diable?* (*What devil?*). All this leaves the adoption of *the* in *the devil* or *the hell* uncertain but, as Okrent says, some things we can explain and understand and some we just can’t.

The second section – *Blame the Barbarians* – explains why words spelt the same may be pronounced differently. For example, why do we say *tough*, *through* and *dough* differently although they are all spelt with the same ending *-ough*? First there is the *gh* sound, the velar fricative found in German, Dutch and other languages with the *ech* sound as in German *tochter* (*daughter*). Eventually, the French introduced the *ou* spelling for the *oo* sound which gave us the spelling *ough*. But what about the differences in pronunciation? The *-ech* sound died out but the words ending in *-ough* reflected the way people in Britain spoke English and pronounced words following the influence of French, Norse or German and Dutch.

Another related problem is why the spelling of English language words exists, apparently without consistent rules. The answer is the languages of the invaders of these islands from the Romans to the Anglo-Saxons and Vikings to the Normans in 1066 and the problems that translators and scribes experienced in translating their languages and dialogues to represent what they said and how they said it. So, as the saying has it, English spelling and pronunciation just ‘grewed’ and has resisted any attempt to impose consistency although many have tried.

English has gone through many changes since the ‘old English’, the language of the people, but changed to a degree under Roman rule from 55 BCE to around 450 CE. However, the influence of Anglo-Saxon, Germanic languages, prevailed in the remaining five hundred years before the Norman conquest in 1066 but was influenced by the languages spoken by Viking invaders from today’s Scandinavia. Latin was also important in Christian churches and in the new universities. One of the most famous manuscripts, the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, was written in Latin by the Venerable Bede, a monk and scholar in a monastery in the North of England. It was published in 731 CE.

Around 890 CE King Alfred the Great ordered a history of the Anglo-Saxons to be investigated, written in old English, and preserved and updated by monasteries. The document, entitled the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* became a standard source on Anglo-Saxon history. The latest updated version dates from 1154 CE.

However, a great change came with the arrival of the French in the Norman conquest. French was the language of the elite and the administration. Farmers and other workers spoke Old English (Anglo-Saxon). In time, however, more and more French words were incorporated into the English language and pronunciation changed. In 1085, William I (William the Conqueror) sent his agents out to investigate property and ownership in his new country. The resulting document, *The Domesday Book*, was written in Latin.

Latin was an important influence, spoken in the Christian churches and monasteries and used for writing. The Normans were influential in introducing Latin into religious affairs and Latin became the language of legal documents and also in the first universities. As the Normans integrated more and more into English society so they used English, which became the standard language but incorporated anglicised French words and spellings. By the 1300s CE English was spoken by everybody, even if French and Latin were still recognised as the language of the elite and used for record keeping and public activities. Also in

the 1300s literature was encouraged and Geoffrey Chaucer wrote his *Canterbury Tales* between 1387 and 1400 in what was now called, 'Middle English'. The result of this mixing is that English has a plethora of different words describing the same thing, reflecting different linguistic sources.

As Okrent explains in *Blame the Printing Press*, the spelling of words was dependent on individual scribes but by 1430, Chancery English, as it was called, introduced a degree of standardisation. This is when English, rather than Latin, became the language of the Court of Chancery for writing legal documents. However, the breakthrough came in 1476 when an English merchant called William Caxton introduced the printing press from Europe to Britain. However, there were problems. The setting of type by hand meant that spelling depended on the knowledge and language habits of the printers. The result was that the country was littered with homophones, homographs and silent letters. Old vowels and old consonants as well as French and Latin spellings of words were fossilized and preserved by their inclusion in widely circulated printed books.

English is of course still constantly changing, introducing words from Hindi and Tamil and from Spanish and French and other languages. Usage is changing according to the user community and travels across borders.

The typical Indian way of saying 'No issues' to mean 'Everything is OK' is travelling the world and a colleague was recently fascinated on a Zoom webinar with a group of Nigerians to hear, 'Thank you for giving me the right of way' when he invited a participant to ask a question. Most of us would probably just say, 'Thank you' or 'Thank you for the opportunity'. 'The right of way' normally refers to the priority given to cars coming from another direction at a roundabout or crossroads.

*Highly Irregular* has an index so as a teacher you can immediately find anything you want to check. It is both fascinating and informative about the English language and etymology, as well as being a useful aide to answering those difficult questions about English spelling, pronunciation and usage differences sometimes asked by learners in the classroom or in online lessons.

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