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Kristian Berg, Mark Aronoff

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SELF-ORGANIZATION IN THE SPELLING OF ENGLISH SUFFIXES: THE EMERGENCE OF CULTURE OUT OF ANARCHY

KRISTIAN BERG

MARK ARONOFF

University of Oldenburg

Stony Brook University

English spelling is unphonetic: the same sounds can be spelled in various and often idiosyncratic ways. It is also ungoverned: there is no authority guiding its development. However, it is not as arbitrary as one might conclude. Investigating the spelling of four derivational suffixes, we show that the spelling of English suffixes is quite consistent. Homophonous endings of morphologically simple words are spelled differently, keeping the suffix spelling distinct (cf. e.g. <nervous> vs. <service>/*<servous>). English spelling thus provides morphological cues for the reader. Diachronically, we show that this system emerged without explicit regulation, but as a result of self-organization. We use the Helsinki corpus to show how variation was gradually reduced for each of the suffixes. The regular spellings of today emerged gradually, through a sorting-out process of competition between alternate spellings.*

Keywords: English spelling, morphology, derivation, homophony, self-organization

1. INTRODUCTION. The English language has never been regulated. The founding of the Accademia della Crusca in Florence in 1582 and the Académie Française in 1735, both devoted to overseeing language, led such British scientific and literary luminaries as Robert Boyle, Jonathan Swift, and Joseph Addison to propose a similar governing body for English. Strongly opposed by Samuel Johnson on the grounds of ‘English liberty’ (Martin 2008:197), the idea quickly fell out of fashion, leaving the language with no government or police.¹ Nonetheless, as we will show, just like a spoken language, English spelling has arrived at a system despite the lack of any overt guidance.

Textbooks (e.g. Scragg 1974) suggest that three communities influenced the standardization of English spelling: printers, grammarians, and dictionary makers. Detailed investigation of sets of actual early books from individual printing houses, those of Caxton and his immediate successors Wynkyn de Worde and Richard Pynson (Brenghelman 1980, Aronoff 1989, Horobin 2001), show that, while there are tendencies toward house style in the works of de Worde, the last of the three, Pynson, who should have been the most consistent, was in fact the least. Furthermore, these printers’ spellings are idiosyncratic and appear to have had no effect on later books. Similarly, while modern scholars may admire the budding popular prescriptive grammarians of the time for their early linguistic insights (Scragg 1974), there is no evidence that these ‘orthoepists’ were more than a curiosity or that they had much influence on actual practice. And by the time Johnson’s (1755) dictionary appeared, English spelling was well on its way to its modern incarnation. No single group seems to have played a notable role in the movement of English spelling toward greater consistency. We show in this article that the system gradually became more consistent over a period of several hundred years, start-

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¹ A British Academy was eventually chartered by royal decree in 1902. According to its own official history, the academy ‘was first proposed in 1899 in order that Britain could be represented at a meeting of European and American academies’ (because it had none!). This academy, however, has never had any jurisdiction over the English language.

ing before the advent of printers, orthoepists, or dictionary makers, presumably through the simple interaction of the members of the community of spellers, a sort of self-organizing social network (Granovetter 1973).²

No nation or authority of any sort owns English and neither the United Kingdom nor the United States has an official national language. This permits anyone in the world to use English as they will, making up their own words and constructions with no official interference. There remains today no official body anywhere in the world governing how English is spelled. Present-day English spelling varies from country to country, enforced only by local editorial practice, which may differ from one publisher or organization to another.

English spelling, in any of its current incarnations, appears to be as lawless as it is un-governed, anarchy run amok. It is notoriously unphonetic, rivaled in that regard only by French spelling, and examples abound of the same sound spelled in different ways. The major consistency is lexical, in the spelling of individual words: a given word will be spelled in one way within a given national tradition. Word spellings may differ from one tradition to another, sometimes in complex ways: US spelling uses <judgment>,³ while the usual British spelling is <judgement>, except when the British tradition uses <judgment> to specifically denote a judicial decision.

Homophones that are not homographs, distinct words that sound the same but are spelled differently, provide a striking example of lexical consistency at all cost. Each of the three identical-sounding words *pare*, *pair*, and *pear* has a consistent but distinct spelling. Among alphabetic writing systems, the use of distinct spellings to differentiate words visually is most pronounced in English and French. The origins of this strategy are unclear, though both systems were fixed at about the same time, in the half-century or so after 1650. The downside of the strategy is that it wreaks havoc with sound-spelling correspondences, as some critics of French and English spelling have noted (cf. Venezky 1999:210–29).

This article is a study of the middle ground between the spelling of sounds and the spelling of words: the spelling of affixes, specifically suffixes. We show here that the spelling of any given English suffix is quite consistent across words, despite the absence of any external authority making it so; we look specifically at the derivational suffixes *-ous*, *-ic*, *-al*, and *-y* in this article. This observation is not entirely new. It has often been remarked (Carney 1994:18ff.) that the two most common English inflectional affixes, *-s* and *-ed*, while they vary in form depending on their phonological environments, do not vary in spelling. *-s* can be pronounced as either [s], [əz], or the default [z], depending on the sound at the end of the word to which it is attached, while *-ed* is either [t], [əd], or [d]. In both cases the spelling remains the same despite the different pronunciations (which are admittedly predictable). The suffix *-s* is also polyfunctional. It can represent either the plural of nouns (*cats*), the third-person singular present of verbs (*tends*), or the possessive of nouns (*men's*), but the possessive is orthographically distinct, carrying an apostrophe before it, so that the plural *cats* and the possessive

² We do not provide a formal model here of how the system became organized, only historical proof that it did. Nor can we show that classes of actors played no role in the organization, only that such classes of actors have yet to be identified. Two individuals have had a recognized but later role in setting the forms of present-day English words: Samuel Johnson (1755) and Noah Webster, though Webster's influence, which was largely through his early (1783) best-selling speller, extended only to American English.

³ We use angled brackets to highlight actual spelling (e.g. *<servous>, <ick>); we use italics for types of written words or affixes (e.g. *service*, *-ic*); and we use slashes and square brackets for phonological and phonetic representations in the usual way.

cat's differ from one another in form, though the plural noun *dogs* and the singular verb *dogs* are indistinguishable.⁴

Chomsky and Halle (1968) have famously noted that lexical consistency extends even to derived words, citing such sets as {*sane, sanity*}, {*sign, signify*}, and {*electric, electricity, electrician*}. In each case, the spelling of the base word remains the same throughout, despite the phonological changes consequent on suffixation. Although they both signal some sort of constant, there is a subtle difference between the constant spelling of lexemic stems despite differences in pronunciation in cases like *electric/electricity/electrician* and the constant spelling of suffixes that is the object of our study here. The lexemes are spelled in the same way despite differences in pronunciation in different environments. A given suffix is spelled the same way across different words that contain it, and this constant spelling differs from that of the same phoneme sequence in instances where this phoneme sequence does not represent the suffix.

Put another way, the spelling system follows the general pattern of distinguishing homophones, peculiar to English and French spelling, that we already saw in examples like *pair/pear/pare*, but it extends the pattern beyond words to word endings. As mentioned above and as we will show, affixes are spelled differently from homophonous sequences that happen to fall at the ends of lexical words. The system spells the denominal adjectival suffix <ous> consistently, while all other words that end in the same sequence are spelled differently. The words *nervous*, *office*, and *tennis* all end in the phonological sequence [əs], but only *nervous* contains the suffix.

We have arrived at the two larger questions that we address here. First, to what extent does present-day English spelling encode individual affixes consistently, beyond the two inflectional suffixes? Second, how did it reach its current state? The answer to the second question bears on the larger and much more interesting general question of how a system can emerge in the absence of any stated principles or guiding hand, how English spelling came to take on the shape that it has today. We will show that affixal constancy is characteristic of the current state of English spelling, but that matters were not always so. Overall, our study reveals that Matthew Arnold (1869) was wrong in contrasting culture and anarchy. Culture, at least in this case, arose out of anarchy.

As for graphemics, we treat it as a system in its own right; it has regular correspondences to other levels of linguistic description, but it needs to be analyzed autonomously, without recourse to phonology or morphology, before we can begin to ask if, and then how, graphemic units correspond to phonological or morphological units. In structural linguistics, there is a tradition dating to at least de Saussure (1959 [1916]) of regarding writing as secondary to spoken language. We take no stance on that question. We are interested solely in the extent to which correspondences can be found between regularities in the writing system and those in the spoken language.

Similarly, we take no a priori stance on the question of whether the diachronic changes we expect to find are instances of conscious standardization (change from above; Labov 1966) or of an ungoverned, unconscious process (change from below; Labov 1966). If such a question can ever be answered satisfactorily for diachronic data, it is only after an analysis like the one presented in the following. Accordingly, we discuss this question in the last section, and we frame our findings in terms of general principles of competition. In the meantime, we have settled for analyzing only change in consistency over time, which is objectively clear.

⁴ The regular genitive plural marker is -', a silent apostrophe, since the genitive suffix does not occur after the plural -s on account of hapology. This may be the only case of a true mark of zero in English spelling.

This article has two major aims: to show that present-day English writing refers to morphology in subtle ways, and to show how the system we witness today came to take its current form. We first investigate whether the relation between the written form of a suffix and the occurrence of that suffix is consistent. Thus, if a word ends in <ous>, what are the chances that <ous> is the suffix that derives adjectives from nouns? We then determine whether this relation is an accidental reflex of phonology or whether it is exclusively graphemic/morphological. How many words end in the phonological sequence [əs] and could potentially be spelled with final <ous>, but are not? Compare, for example, <nervous> and the noun <service>, which does not contain the suffix in question. Why is the latter not *<servous>? Do any of these words form classes of their own? Is there an overall pattern?

Our overall linguistic approach is word-based (Matthews 1972, Aronoff 1976, Anderson 1992, Blevins 2013). This means that we pay attention to whole words and to at least somewhat productive word-based morphology. We treat the word *service*, for example, as a morphological whole and not as consisting of a root or stem and a suffix, because there is no productive suffix [əs] in English that forms nouns from verbs. By contrast, *nervous* is analyzable because the suffix [əs]/<ous> does form adjectives from nouns (Marchand 1969a). Because the morphology is word-based, in our framework the word *nervous* both stands as a lexeme in its own right and contains the suffix we are interested in. We can have our cake and eat it too.

2. METHODOLOGY.

2.1. SYNCHRONIC INVESTIGATION. The basis for the synchronic investigation is the CELEX database (Baayen et al. 1995). This database contains 52,447 English lemmas. Each lemma comes with a graphemic and phonological form, and many also contain information about the morphological structure and lexical category. We use this corpus to answer the questions about the relation between spelling and morphology.

The way CELEX is structured creates five problems for our investigation. First, for 8,490 entries (16% of the total), the morphological structure is dubbed ‘obscure’ (words like *amorous*), ‘irrelevant’ (e.g. *arctic*), ‘may include a “root” ’ (e.g. *brandy*), or ‘undetermined’ (e.g. *causerie*). As a consequence, these words do not have a lexical category assigned to them. To solve this problem, we use the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) to look up missing word categories and then add them to the database.

Second, conversions between word categories are separate lexical entries in CELEX: the verb *run* is one entry with its own graphemic, phonological, and morphosyntactic information, and the noun *run* is another one. For our goals, this is problematic. We want to be able to determine the ratio of words with a given graphemic ending that are possible members of a lexical category; for example, how many words that end in <ous> are potential adjectives? To do so, we need to treat two (or more) entries with the same form as just that—one form—and note which possible word categories this form can appear in.

Third, some lemmas have incomplete word-category information. For example, *victual* is tagged only as a verb in CELEX, while it can clearly also be used as a noun (cf. *OED*). While this is a potential source of error, we stick to CELEX’s classification whenever available. Otherwise, we would have to check every lexical category in CELEX against the *OED*.

Fourth, there are many cases where a given lemma also occurs as a part of another, more complex lemma. If, for example, we are interested in words ending in [ɪk], we find the lemma *music*, but we also find *canned music*, *country music*, *chamber music*, *inci-*

dental music, piped music, programme music, sheet music, and soul music. We would, however, like to treat all of these cases as instances of one lemma, namely *music*, which is modified by a second stem. Accordingly, we exclude all entries that consist of more than one stem.

Fifth and maybe most importantly, some of the phonological transcriptions appear to be inconsistent when it comes to suffixes and word endings—or more generally, to reduced syllables. Take the phonological minimal pair *nervous/service*, for example. While *nervous* is transcribed in CELEX with a schwa in the second syllable ([ˈnɜ.vəs]), *service* has a near-front near-close unrounded vowel ([ˈsɜ.vɪs]). This distinction is not justified phonetically in many varieties of English. As Flemming and Johnson (2007) show, there does not seem to be a difference in the realization of nonfinal reduced vowels in American English (although there is a difference if the vowel is stem-final, as in the famous pair *Rosa's/roses*). Flemming and Johnson propose to transcribe all reduced vowels in nonfinal position as close central unrounded vowels ([ɪ]), and we follow this suggestion. The phonological transcriptions in CELEX are modified accordingly: *nervous* and *service* are now [ˈnɜ.vɪs] and [ˈsɜ.vɪs], respectively.

Additionally, we exclude some entries from the analysis. The first group is proper names. The spelling of proper names can be much more idiosyncratic than the rest of the lexicon (cf. e.g. Carney 1994:443ff.). The second group is abbreviations like *anon.* or *usu.* (for *anonymous* and *usually*, respectively). As abbreviations, they do not have a corresponding phonological structure (other than that of the full word they refer to).

We have investigated four derivational suffixes.⁵ Each of these suffixes consists of an unstressed syllable rhyme that can be spelled in several ways in English. Our question is whether one of the available spellings for each of these phonological rhymes is particularly associated with the suffix rather than with a morphologically unanalyzable, word-final, unstressed rhyme. For each suffix (*-ous*, *-ic*, *-al*, *-y*),⁶ we did the following:

- (i) We determined how many words in CELEX end with the graphemic form of the suffix and could be confused with it. Take the word-final letter sequence <al>, for example: how many words are there that end with these letters? Lemmas like *pal* have to be excluded, since <al> in this word does not run the risk of being interpreted as a suffix. The following well-formedness constraint applies to what we call the ‘stem’ (the lemma stripped of its word ending): it contains at least one graphemically closed syllable (e.g. <leth> in <lethal>, but not <re> in <real> or <vi> in <vial>). Although this constraint may seem unmotivated and ad hoc, there is actually evidence for it from the psychology of reading (cf. e.g. Taft 1979).
- (ii) Of these, we determined the ratio of words that can be argued to bear the suffix. Take *-ic*, for example: this suffix forms adjectives. Any word that ends in the letter sequence <ic> and is a potential adjective in this sense bears the suffix. Words with final <ic> that are not adjectives do not contain the suffix (e.g. *panic*). In more theoretical terms, we use the output of word-based

⁵ Berg et al. 2014 provides a similar analysis of the two most common inflectional suffixes.

⁶ We have chosen to use (italic) spelling without angled brackets for the suffixes in question, in order to distinguish the suffixes from the letter strings and the phonological sequences that they each correspond to. This use of spelling rather than phonological notation is traditional in the word-formation literature (e.g. Marchand 1969a). A given letter string may or may not instantiate the corresponding suffix. So, *-ic* designates the adjectival suffix, but <ic> designates the word-final letter string and [ɪk] the phonological sequence. A word like *music* contains the letter string and the phonological sequence but not the suffix.

word-formation rules (Aronoff 1976, 1994) as constraints that determine group membership.

- (iii) We determined how many words could POTENTIALLY be spelled like those ending in the suffix, judging solely from their phonology. For this, we took the phonological form of the suffix as a basis and searched for all words that end with this phonological sequence. Note that by phonology we do not only mean the occurrence of some word-final phonemes, but also prosodic patterns: the suffix [ɪk] is never stressed, and in each word where it occurs, there is always at least one more syllable. Neither *sick* nor *sic* would qualify by this definition.
- (iv) We determined the pattern of distribution and correlated different spellings with different morphological features. For example, the words in [ɪk] fall into two classes: those that can be adjectives (i.e. those that bear the suffix), and those that cannot. As it happens, this particular functional distinction is mirrored closely by spelling: almost all words that can be adjectives end in the letter sequence <ic>, while almost no word that cannot be an adjective does.

2.2. DIACHRONIC INVESTIGATION. To determine how the spelling system we find today evolved we use the Helsinki corpus (Helsinki Corpus of English Texts 1991). This corpus is a collection of extracts from continuous texts that date from between 750 and 1700 and contains 1,572,800 words. It is divided into eleven time spans of seventy to 100 years, which subdivide the traditional historical periods of English, as in Table 1.

HISTORICAL PERIOD	TIME SPAN	WORD COUNT
	–850	2,190
Old English	850–950	92,050
	950–1050	251,630
	1050–1150	67,380
	1150–1250	113,010
Middle English	1250–1350	97,480
	1350–1420	184,230
	1420–1500	213,850
	1500–1570	190,160
Early Modern English	1570–1640	189,800
	1640–1710	171,040

TABLE 1. Overview of the relation between traditional periods of English and time spans in the Helsinki corpus, plus the number of words in each time span.

The vast majority of the texts included in the corpus are public in nature, such as handbooks, treatises, biographies, and proceedings, but there are also some private letters and diaries (for this and the following, see also the Helsinki Corpus of English Texts 1991). The corpus is not morphologically or syntactically annotated, and it does not contain a tier with normalized orthography. The fact that, for example, <cite>, <cit-tee>, and <city> (among others) are all spellings of one lexeme (*city*) is information that is not contained in the corpus but must be gathered manually.

One potential problem with the Helsinki corpus is that it was not explicitly compiled for the investigation of spelling. Orthographic faithfulness was, in other words, not a priority. While the Old English texts had previously been digitized (for the *Dictionary of Old English* project at the University of Toronto), the other texts were keyed in from editions or early imprints. When possible, modernized editions were avoided, and if several editions existed for one text, they were compared to find the most reliable one (Merja Kytö, p.c.).

Diachronically, we ask how the system of suffixes we find today came into existence. That means we want to find every instance of every word spelled with a given suffix today and investigate the formal changes to that suffix over the time span covered by the Helsinki corpus. For a list of possible spellings, we used the *OED online*. For example, the *OED* gives (among others) the following spelling variants for *-ous*: <ose>, <ows>, <is>, <owse>, <ys>, <es>, <ouse>, <us>, <ous>. All words that end in one of these forms were therefore searched in the Helsinki corpus. As a first approximation, we used a constraint on word length: the word stripped of the word ending had to be at least three letters long. This step excludes hits like <this> and <his> when searching for <is>, for example. In a way, it is a rough counterpart to the conditions on minimal ‘bases’ mentioned above.

The last step involved mapping all of these instances of spelling variants to words as types. This leads to a crucial definition: in graphemic variation, what are types, what are tokens, and which measure is best suited to evaluate graphemic variation? In part, the answer to this question depends on the kind of linguistic unit we are interested in. In this article, we are concerned with suffixes, and the relevant units are (graphemic) words (as opposed to letters, noun phrases, sentences, etc.). On this basis, tokens are easily defined: every individual occurrence of a word in our corpus is a token. On a more abstract level, we can then form sets of similar tokens; we call these sets *GRAPHEMIC TYPES*. All occurrences of the ten tokens <dangerous> in the Helsinki corpus, for example, are instances of the graphemic type <dangerous>. Because we are specifically interested in suffix variation, we can then abstract away from (put less politely, ignore) different stem spellings and subsume the respective graphemic types under *STEM TYPES*. For example, the graphemic types <dangerous> and <daungerous> are members of the stem type <dangerous>, while the graphemic types <dangeraus> and <daungerus> are members of the stem type <dangeraus>. The last level of abstraction is reached with the grouping of stem types to lexeme types, where the variation in the suffix is normalized. Accordingly, the stem types <dangerous> and <dangeraus> are members of the lexeme type {dangerous} (the abstract morphological nature of this level is indicated by curly brackets). The relation between tokens, graphemic types, stem types, and lexeme types is illustrated in Figure 1 for a small number of tokens.

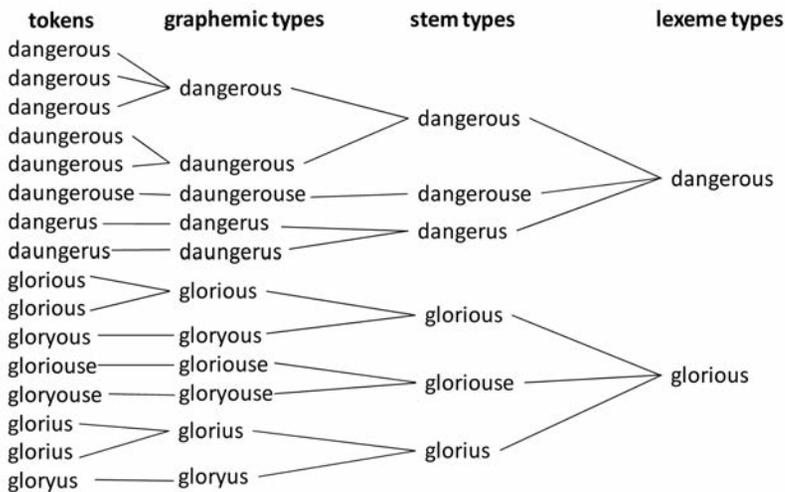


FIGURE 1. The relation between tokens, graphemic types, stem types, and lexeme types.

This article focuses mostly on the token counts. This does not mean that type counts are irrelevant; token counts are just easier to operationalize. However, token counts can be biased by a small number of high-frequency items that skew the data disproportionately. Therefore we also take type counts into account to some extent. Accordingly, we determine for each suffix spelling how many stem types there are with this suffix spelling. In the example in Fig. 1, for example, there are two stem types for each of <ous>, <ouse>, and <us> (<dangerous>, <glorious> for <ous>; <dangerouse>, <gloriouse> for <ouse>; and <dangerus>, <glorius> for <us>, respectively).⁷

For each time span and suffix spelling, the absolute number of tokens with a given spelling is determined (e.g. all words in a given time span ending with <ous>), and the same is done for stem types (e.g. how many different stems occur with <ous>?). The ratio of token suffix spellings is determined from the absolute numbers, and the results are plotted as area plots over time. Additionally, we provide further measures to gauge the amount of variation for each suffix. We determine how many lexemes occur with one, two, three, or four stem types in each time period. For example, in the 1420–1500 period, there are three stem types for {gracious}: <gracious>, <graciouse>, and <gracius>, but only one stem type for {religious}, namely <religious> (lexemes that occur only once in a given period are excluded from this measure because, by definition, they cannot show variation). On this basis, we can also calculate the mean number of stem types for each lexeme type, and the amount of lexeme types with more than one stem type.

3. RESULTS.

3.1. <OUS>. Synchronically, *-ous* is a good example of how a difference in spelling mirrors a difference in morphological structure. The suffix *-ous* forms adjectives from nouns (cf. e.g. Marchand 1969a:339f.). Accordingly, the output of the word-formation rule states that phonologically, the complex word contains the stem plus [is], and the resulting word is an adjective.

There are 346 words ending in <ous> in CELEX—and they are all adjectives that end in [is]. That means there is a very consistent relation between spelling and the morphological structure. Whenever readers encounter a word with final <ous>, they know it is an adjective.

Keep in mind that this may still be a reflex of phonological structure. If there were no other words that end in [is], then we would basically have the same situation in phonology: all words that end in [is] are adjectives; [is] signals adjectivehood. Interestingly, this is precisely not the case. There are many words that end in phonological [is] but not in orthographic <ous>. If we exclude the suffixes *-less*, *-ness*, *-itis*, and *-osis*, which are of the form CVC or longer, there are 666 words that end in [is] in the CELEX corpus. The most prominent graphemic patterns among them (apart from <ous> with the above-mentioned 346 words) are given in Table 2.

We stated above that all instances of <ous> words are potential adjectives. Of the 320 other words in Table 2, only six can be used as adjectives.⁸ If we thus cross-classify word ending (\pm <ous>) and lexical category (\pm A), we get the distribution seen in Table 3.

⁷ As a consequence, the stem-type numbers for the different suffix spellings do not add up to the total number of types. In the example above, there are three suffix spellings that occur with two stem types each, which is a total of six stem types—but there are only two lexeme types.

⁸ The six non-<ous> adjectives are *apprentice*, *novice*, *primus*, *bogus*, *emeritus*, and *traverse*. The status of the first three as adjectives is not clear. The only adjectival use of *apprentice* the *OED* cites is from 1400, while the later entries are marked as ‘attributive use of the singular noun’. Something similar may hold for *novice*, where all cited instances could also be analyzed as nominal attributes (e.g. ‘targets for novice users’). *Primus* as an adjective is only attested as a postmodifier (for the elder of two persons with the same last name, e.g. ‘Jones primus’). These three cases are at least dubious with regard to their status as adjectives, and *primus*

WORD ENDING	# OF WORDS	RATIO	EXAMPLES
<ous>	346	52%	hazardous, nervous
<us>	117	18%	bonus, genius
<is>	72	11%	glottis, tennis
<ess>	53	8%	hostess, princess
<ice>	38	6%	office, service
REST	40	6%	

TABLE 2. Words in the CELEX database that end in [is] (but not in <less>, <ness>, <itis>, <osis>), sorted according to their graphemic word ending.

	+<ous>	-<ous>
+A	346	6
-A	0	314

TABLE 3. Cross-classification of word ending (\pm <ous>) and lexical category (\pm A) for all words in CELEX that end in [is] (but not in <less>, <ness>, <itis>, <osis>).

We find a very stable relation in both directions. Words in <ous> are always adjectives, and the other words that end in [is] almost never are; adjectives that end in [is] are almost always spelled with <ous>, while nonadjectives never are. Apart from the six adjectives that are not spelled with <ous>, we have a bidirectionally unique relation between the spelling of the suffix *-ous* and the function of the suffix (formation of adjectives).

What is more, <ess> is the spelling of a separate suffix denoting female persons or animals (cf. Marchand 1969a:286ff.). Of the fifty-three words that end in <ess>, forty-seven actually refer to females (89%); there are only six exceptions (*mattress*, *fortress*, *proress*, *buttress*, *abscess*, *cypress*). The relation between the spelling of this suffix and its function is also very consistent.

The English writing system makes morphology visible: you can think of <ous> as a tag attached to words that flags ‘adjective’, while <ess> signals ‘noun, female person/animal’ (see Fuhrhop 2011 for similar phenomena in German). Crucially, this is information that the phonological system does not provide—it is a distinct feature of the writing system.⁹

How did this strikingly clear system evolve? To answer this question, we searched the Helsinki corpus for the following spelling variants from the *OED*: <ose>, <ows>, <is>, <owse>, <ys>, <es>,¹⁰ <ouse>, <us>, <ous>. The first way to look at the data is to determine how many different spellings of *-ous* there are for each lexeme, that is, to determine the number of stem types. Table 4 shows the number of lexemes with one, two, three, and four stem types and the mean number of variants for all lexemes (lexemes that only appear once cannot show variation; they are grouped under the heading ‘— (hapax legomena)’).

is rare, as is *traverse* as an adjective. This leaves us with *emeritus* and *bogus*. The first is a Latin participle, and the origin of the second is very unclear (see *OED*).

⁹ As noted above, linguists use this orthographic fact as a convenient shorthand. Linguists call the English adjectival suffix [is] by its orthographic form <ous>, although there are many words that end in phonological [is] that do not contain the suffix, precisely because linguists have unconsciously absorbed what we have just now shown to be true: (almost) all and only words ending in <ous> are adjectives.

¹⁰ For <es>, searching for the word ending was not a feasible option. There are 28,488 word tokens that have at least three letters plus <es>, which makes a manual classification far too time consuming. The vast majority are plurals (e.g. *all my synnes*, *some thinges*, etc.). Here we adopted the following strategy: after searching the corpus for the other spelling variants, we used the list of 340 graphemic types of this search (e.g. <advantageous>, <advantagious>, <affectuouse>, <ambicious>, <ambitious>, etc.) as a basis for the search for <es>-forms.

# OF VARIANTS	1250–	1350–	1420–	1500–	1570–	1640–
	1350	1420	1500	1570	1640	1710
— (hapax legomena)	5	17	30	35	40	50
one stem type	2	10	14	25	35	49
two stem types	2	11	5	13	5	2
three stem types		4	8	1	1	
four stem types		2	2			
mean # of stem types per lexeme	1.5	1.93	1.93	1.38	1.17	1.04
ratio of lexemes with more than one stem type	50%	63%	52%	36%	15%	4%

TABLE 4. Number of stem types, mean number of stem types per lexeme, and ratio of lexemes with more than one stem type for words spelled with <ous> today.

Before the 1250–1350 period, there are no useful data in the corpus. This is in line with Marchand's observation that *-ous* is an English formative from the fourteenth century on (Marchand 1969a:339). The height of variant spelling for this suffix is the 1350–1420 period, with 63% of lexemes having more than one stem type, and every lexeme having (on average) almost two different stem types. From then on, variation was gradually reduced, and by 1640–1710, it is marginal.

The next question is how the attested variants are distributed. Table 5 shows the number of word types and word tokens for each suffix variant, and Figure 2 visualizes the ratio in tokens between the most frequent variants, <ous>, <ouse>, <ows>, and <us>.

	1250–1350		1350–1420		1420–1500		1500–1570		1570–1640		1640–1710	
	types	tokens										
ous	6	13	33	116	43	146	63	193	75	205	100	291
ouse	2	6	15	38	17	29	13	17	2	2		
us	2	3	9	20	13	33	10	13	2	2	1	2
ows			6	6	5	11	1	2	5	6		
os			5	5	3	3	1	1	1	2	1	1
ose	1	1	2	2	6	8					1	1
owse					1	1						

TABLE 5. Number of types and tokens for different spelling variants of words spelled with <ous> today.

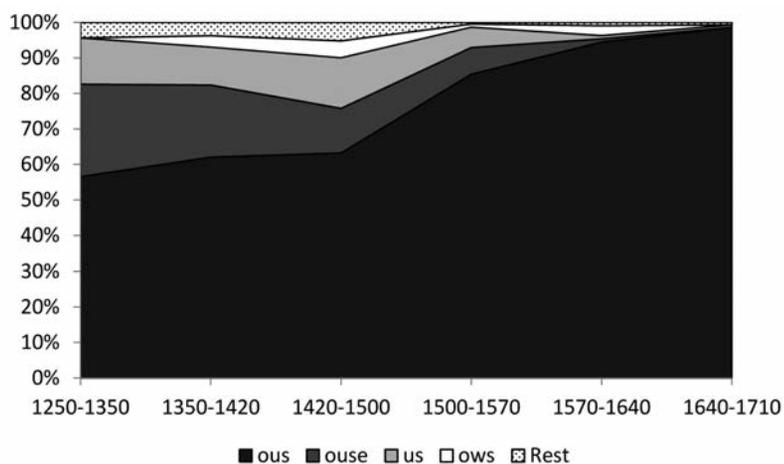


FIGURE 2. Ratio of tokens in the Helsinki corpus with the suffix spelling variants <ous>, <ouse>, <us>, <ows>, and all other spellings, plotted over time. Basis: all tokens in the Helsinki corpus that end in <ous> today.

Both type and token counts show a clear trend toward consistency, and there is no mismatch between them: ordering the spelling variants according to type frequency leads (with very few exceptions) to the same result as ordering them according to token frequency. Variation is reduced gradually over a period of 400 years, and <ous> is the only spelling that survives. It is very unlikely that this was the effect of a conscious effort to unify the writing system. We certainly have no evidence of such a conscious effort, even among grammarians. Instead, this is an instance of a system organizing itself.¹¹ One may be tempted to think that the presence of words like *bonus*, *status*, and *campus* led to the demise of the <us> variant in favor of <ous>. However, these words of Latin origin were not for the most part borrowed into English before 1550.¹² So <us> as a word ending for nouns became popular only after <us> as a spelling variant of *-ous* had gone.

3.2. <ic>. Like *-ous*, the suffix *-ic* is an adjectival suffix operating on nominal bases (cf. e.g. Marchand 1969a:294ff.). The *OED* notes frequent conversions between adjectives in *-ic* and nouns (e.g. *alcoholic*, *arctic*, *classic*, *lunatic*). The word-formation rule for *-ic* states that the resulting word ends in [ɪk] and is an adjective.

There are 646 words in CELEX with final <ic>, and 628 of them are adjectives—which is a ratio of 97%. The remaining eighteen words are nouns (e.g. *attic*, *critic*, *republic*, *logic*), some of which can also be used as verbs (e.g. *fabric*, *panic*, *traffic*). All in all, the relation between the occurrence of <ic> and the morphological structure of the respective word is very consistent: with a high probability, <ic> tells the reader that the word is an adjective.

Taking the phonographic perspective, there are 684 words that could potentially be spelled with final <ic>; the most frequent patterns are given in Table 6.

WORD ENDING	# OF WORDS	RATIO	EXAMPLES
<ic>	646	94%	allergic, demonic
<ock>	14	2%	buttock, haddock
<ick>	8	1%	derrick, rollick
<(n)ik>	5	1%	beatnik, kibbutznik
REST	11	2%	barrack, eunuch

TABLE 6. Words in the CELEX database that end in [ɪk], sorted according to their graphemic word ending.

Apparently, there are not many words that could be spelled with <ic> but are not, compared to the great number of words that are spelled in <ic>. Still, those thirty-eight words that end in [ɪk] but not in <ic> show a remarkable distribution: only one is an adjective (*elegiac*). The other thirty-seven words are mostly nouns (e.g. *bannock*, *gimmick*, *mattock*). This leads to a very clear distinction: 97% of [ɪk] words ending in <ic> are adjectives, and only 3% of those not ending in <ic> are (see Table 7).

	+<ic>	-<ic>
+A	628	1
-A	18	37

TABLE 7. Cross-classification of word ending (\pm <ic>) and lexical category (\pm A) for all words in CELEX that end in [ɪk].

¹¹ This statement omits the central role of the users of the system and should be taken as shorthand for the forms and their users.

¹² *OED online* lists about 1,400 nouns ending in <us> and not <ous>, of which only 200 first occur before 1550.

Viewed from the perspective of the lexical category, almost every adjective that ends in [ik] is spelled with <ic> (except one, *elegiac*). For the nonadjectives, this correlation is not so strong: a third of them are spelled with <ic>, and two thirds are not. Overall, however, we find a consistent relation between spelling and morphology. Additionally, with *-(n)ik* (e.g. *beatnik*, *alrightnik*, *kaputnik*) we have another suffix with a distinct function and a unique spelling.

To investigate the emergence of this system, we searched the Helsinki corpus for the forms <ic>, <ick>, <icke>, <ik>, <ike>, and <ique>. Table 8 shows the mean number of suffix variants that each lexeme has and the ratio of lexemes with more than one variant (relative to all lexemes with more than one occurrence).

# OF VARIANTS	1350–1420	1420–1500	1500–1570	1570–1640	1640–1710
— (hapax legomena)	7	9	9	10	9
one stem type	3	1	2	8	5
two stem types	5	4	4	6	4
three stem types	1		1	1	4
four stem types		1	1	1	
mean # of stem types per lexeme	1.78	2.17	2.13	1.69	1.92
ratio of lexemes with more than one stem type	67%	83%	75%	50%	62%

TABLE 8. Number of stem types, mean number of stem types per lexeme, and ratio of lexemes with more than one stem type for words spelled with <ic> today.

There are no relevant data before 1350–1420 in the corpus. For this suffix, variation is not reduced; the last time span still features almost two suffix spellings for each lexeme. Reduction of variation must have arrived after 1640–1710. The ratio of lexemes with more than one spelling peaks at the 1420–1500 period but remains relatively high afterward. The reason for this becomes clear when we look at the type and token counts of the individual suffix variants in Table 9 (Figure 3 plots the ratio of tokens over time, with <y>-variants and <i>-variants merged for the sake of clarity).

	1350–1420		1420–1500		1500–1570		1570–1640		1640–1710	
	types	tokens								
ic	5	10	1	1					7	18
ick			1	1	2	3	6	8	20	76
icke					3	5	15	29	1	1
ik	9	28	3	9			1	1		
ike	2	3	2	2	11	29	5	6		
ique	1	2	6	6	4	9	10	30	6	15
ycke			1	1	1	1				
yk	4	4	5	5	1	2				
yke	2	2	3	4	4	9				

TABLE 9. Number of types and tokens for different spelling variants of words spelled with <ic> today.

Compared to the development of *-ous*, there is much less uniform movement in the data. Variation is not gradually reduced (like it was for *-ous*); on the contrary, new variants are introduced in different time spans: <ick> appears 1420–1500, <icke> is first attested 1500–1570, and <ic>, today's spelling, resurfaces just in the period 1640–1710 after two dormant time spans. These variant spellings take the lead one after the other: for 1350–1420, <ik> is the major variant, then it gradually fades out. For the period 1420–1500, <ique> takes over (at least for the types); for 1500–1570, <ike> is the most popular spelling; and for 1570–1640, it is <icke>. In the last time span in the Helsinki corpus, <ick> is dominant.

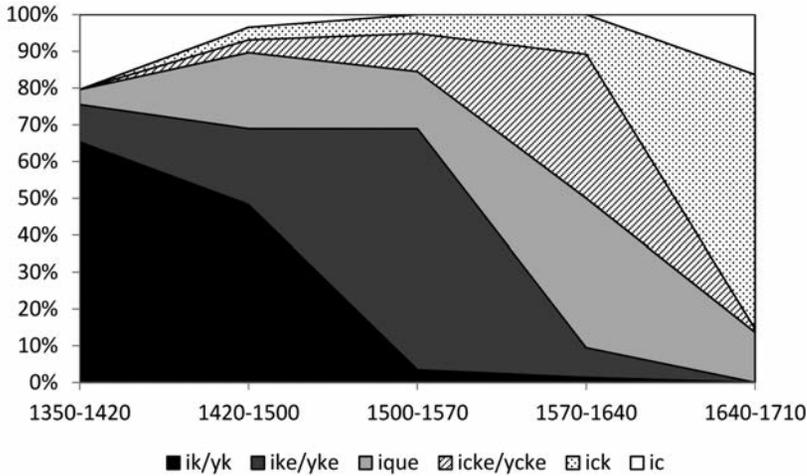


FIGURE 3. Ratio of tokens in the Helsinki corpus with the suffix spelling variants <ik/yk>, <ike/yke>, <ique>, <icke/ycke>, <ick>, and <ic>, plotted over time. Basis: all tokens in the Helsinki corpus that end in <ic> today.

So, in contrast to one variant gradually gaining strength and the other variants diminishing, we find a quick succession of variants that emerge gradually, peak, and then decline. The sequence is interesting and is discussed in the conclusion.

(1) <ik> → <ique> → <ike> → <icke> → <ick>

Today's spelling, <ic>, is a minor variant in the last period. To find out when the shift from <ick> to <ic> occurred, and how quick it was, we used the Google Books corpus, British section, via the interface <http://googlebooks.byu.edu/>.¹³ To make the data comparable, we searched for all of the thirty-nine lexemes in <ic> that occurred in the two last periods in the Helsinki corpus. We concentrated on the <ic>, <ique>, and <ick> variant of each word, leaving the minor variants aside. Of course, Google Books is a much larger corpus than the Helsinki corpus. In the last time span in the Helsinki corpus, there are 110 tokens; in the next seventy years of the Google Books corpus, there are almost 300,000 tokens. This is not surprising, considering that the Helsinki corpus has about 1.5 million words, while the British subcorpus of Google Books encompasses 34 billion words. However, the two data types seem to be roughly connectable (compare the last time period in Fig. 3 and the first in Fig. 4). Because the temporal resolution that <http://googlebooks.byu.edu/> provides is much higher, we get a finer-grained graph. Figure 4 picks up where Fig. 3 above leaves off.

The variant <ique> is marginal in all but the first time span, yet it does not fully vanish. The respective words could actually be French words cited in Google Books. The variant <ick> gradually declines, and the crossover point by which <ic> becomes dominant is the decade 1740–1750. After that, <ick> is still attested, but it is very slowly washed out of the system, with <ic> the only remaining variant.

3.3. <AL>. Two suffixes *-al* can be distinguished. One is nominal *-al* (type *arrival*; see Marchand 1969a:236f.), and the other is the more frequent adjectival *-al* (type *acci-*

¹³ This interface is convenient because, while it operates on the Google Books data just like Google's own NGram viewer, its output is actual frequencies (not just graphs or ratios), which can then be added up for each of the words that were searched. One disadvantage is that initial minuscule and majuscule spellings have to be searched for separately and combined in a later step.

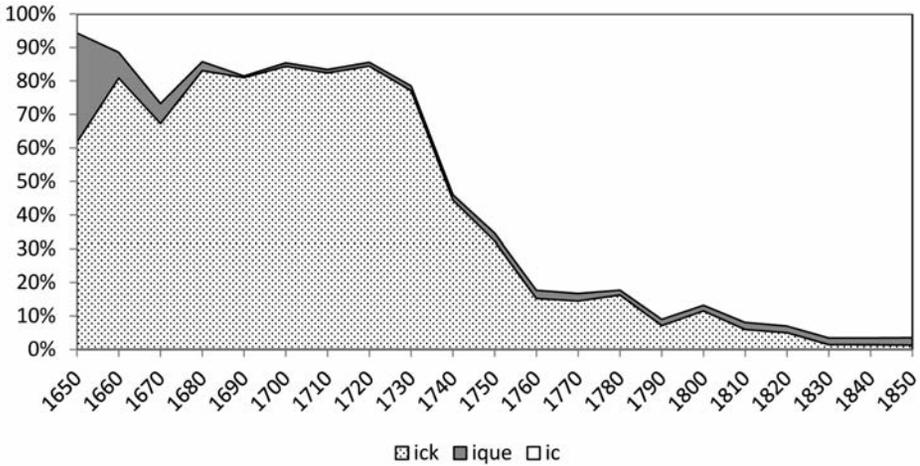


FIGURE 4. Ratio of the token count of thirty-nine word types in three spelling variants, <ick>, <ique>, and <ic>. Data source: Google Books, British subcorpus, via <http://googlebooks.byu.edu/>.

dental; see Marchand 1969a:238ff.).¹⁴ Accordingly, there are two word-formation rules, and the outputs state that the resulting word should end in [ɪl] and be a noun, or end in [ɪl] and be an adjective. This homophony of suffixes is obviously not resolved in spelling; the two suffixes are homographic. Additionally, we find frequent conversions between nouns and adjectives (e.g. *capital*, *final*, *vocal*). From this perspective, it makes sense to determine in how many cases words with *-al* are either nouns or adjectives (as opposed to other parts of speech).

There are 913 words in CELEX that end phonologically in [ɪl] and graphemically in <al>. Of these, only twenty-two can be used as verbs (e.g. *equal*, *local*, *metal*, *pedal*, *rival*, *spiral*). The majority of these twenty-two words are conversions of other word categories; only three words can exclusively be verbs (*outgeneral*, *outrival*, *victual*).¹⁵ Taking the most liberal stance (the worst case scenario, so to speak), there are twenty-two out of 913 words where spelling indicates a wrong lexical category (2%). In other words, we again find a consistent relation between spelling and morphology. Note that this relation does not involve a unique mapping of spelling and suffix: *-al₁* and *-al₂* are not differentiated. Rather, what is indicated in spelling is that the graphemic word in question bears either one of the two suffixes—or that it is probably not a verb.

The 913 words mentioned above are not the only ones that could potentially be spelled with final <al>; in total, there are 1,511 words that phonologically end with [ɪl] (excluding words that end in *-able/-ible* and *-ful*, where [ɪl] is part of a bigger suffix). Table 10 lists the most frequent patterns.

As is obvious from Table 10, a considerable number of words could be spelled with <al>, but are not. At least one of the spelling variants is a suffix in its own right, <yl>; it denotes chemical radicals (e.g. *acetyl*, *ethyl*, *methyl*, *vinyl*). <el> and <le> are spelling variants of a suffix that is no longer productive (cf. *OED*). Marchand (1969a) distin-

¹⁴ Etymologically, Latin had an adjectival suffix *-ālis*, which could also be used in the neuter plural form *-ālia* as a noun. In French, the two became quite distinct as *-el* and *-aille*, but eventually collapsed again in form in borrowings into English.

¹⁵ The last one can clearly be used as a noun (cf. e.g. *OED*)—it is just not annotated as such in CELEX. We stick to the methodology sketched out above (§2.1) and count all three as verbs.

WORD ENDING	# OF WORDS	RATIO	EXAMPLES
<al>	913	60%	liberal, regimental
<le>	410	27%	crumble, thistle
<el>	126	8%	channel, shovel
<il>	32	2%	devil, pencil
<yl>	9	1%	ethyl, vinyl
REST	21	2%	gambol, pistol

TABLE 10. Words in the CELEX database that end in [il], sorted according to their graphemic word ending.

guishes two types with distinct histories: iterative verbs of the type *sparkle* (Marchand 1969a:322f.) and mostly diminutive nouns of the type *spittle* (Marchand 1969a:324).

The *OED* states that <le> is the default variant, and that <el> appears ‘after ch, g soft, n, r, sh, th, and v’. Apparently, the two spellings are in complementary distribution. According to CELEX, there seem to be additional environments that trigger <el>. With minor exceptions, <el> appears after the single letters <m, n, r, s, v, w> and after the combinations <ch, sh, th>. The alternative <le>, by contrast, appears after the single letters <b, c, d, f, g, k, p, t, x, z> and after <ck>. Moreover, if <c> and <g> correspond to continuants (as in *cancel* or *angel*), they are always followed by <el>. This last fact is not surprising: in these cases <e> functions as a marker of the ‘soft’ fricative correspondence (cf. Venezky 1999:84).

From the discussion of the previous two suffixes one might expect a complementary distribution of word classes: words with <al> are adjectives and nouns, and words with other endings are neither adjectives nor nouns. The picture for *-al* is more complex, however. Only fifteen phonologically eligible words that do not end in <al> are adjectives (and cannot be used as nouns or verbs), for example, *ample*, *civil*, *feeble*. But nouns are quite common, and there are frequent conversions between nouns and verbs (e.g. *model*, *quarrel*, *trouble*). This situation is the mirror image of the <al>-words: there we had frequent conversions between nouns and adjectives (*capital*, *final*, *vocal*), and almost no verbs were spelled with <al>. For the non-<al>-words, we have frequent conversions between nouns and verbs, and almost no adjectives are spelled that way. Table 11 shows the distribution.

	+<al>	-<al>
+A	910	15
+N		583
+V	3	

TABLE 11. Cross-classification of word ending (\pm <al>) and lexical category (A, N, V) for all words in CELEX that end in [il].

Even though the distribution is more complex than for the last two suffixes, the relation between spelling and morphology is consistent: words with <al> are nouns or adjectives, but not verbs, and words with other endings (mostly <le> and <el>) are nouns or verbs, but not adjectives.

Diachronically, not only can we track the developments of <al>, but there is also sufficient data to investigate the development of <le> and <el>. Starting with <al>, we searched the Helsinki corpus for the forms <ale>, <alle>, <ell>, <el>, <al>, <all>. Table 12 shows how much variation there is in each time period.

Variation peaks in the 1420–1500 period and gradually declines afterward (the slight rise in the last period is due to the late emergence of today’s form; see Fig. 5 below). Until the 1500–1570 period, variation is the rule rather than the exception for lexemes

# OF VARIANTS	1350–1420	1420–1500	1500–1570	1570–1640	1640–1710
— (hapax legomena)	18	25	25	38	58
one stem type	15	6	11	37	36
two stem types	10	13	27	20	28
three stem types	4	7	5	1	
four stem types	2	2	1		
five stem types		1			
mean # of stem types per lexeme	1.77	2.28	1.91	1.38	1.44
ratio of lexemes with more than one stem type	52%	79%	75%	35%	43%

TABLE 12. Number of stem types, mean number of stem types per lexeme, and ratio of lexemes with more than one stem type for words spelled with <al> today.

	1350–1420		1420–1500		1500–1570		1570–1640		1640–1710	
	types	tokens								
all	8	21	32	145	53	305	85	422	38	119
al	32	168	27	71	47	141	30	70	111	456
el	12	37	6	14			1	2	1	2
alle	4	4	14	31	2	2	1	1		
ale	10	16	4	5	6	12	1	1		
ell	3	4	6	13	3	3	1	1		
ille	1	6								
ayle	1	1	1	2	1	1				
le	1	2								
yle	1	1								
aile			1	1						

TABLE 13. Number of types and tokens for different spelling variants of words spelled with <al> today.

with this suffix. This is mirrored in Table 13, which shows the distribution of the variants over time, for both types and tokens, and Figure 5, which plots the ratio of tokens over time (the minor variants are grouped together).

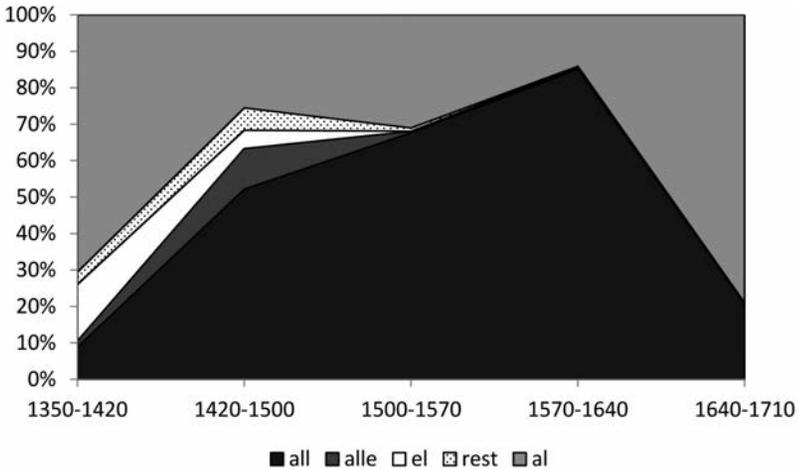


FIGURE 5. Ratio of tokens in the Helsinki corpus with the suffix spelling variants <all>, <alle>, <el>, <al>, and all other spelling variants, plotted over time. Basis: all tokens in the Helsinki corpus that end in <al> today.

In 1350–1420, today’s form, <al>, is the most frequent spelling. The relative amount of <all> rises steadily until the 1570–1640 period (where it reaches >80%), and then

quickly declines. By 1640–1710, <al> is the dominant form again. This final transition is rather quick compared to the one found for *-ous*. From 1500–1570 on, there are only two major variants, <all> and <al>. Note again that the succession of suffix spellings is in some ways similar to the one found for *-ic* (cf. §4.1 for further discussion).

(2) <al> → <all>, <alle> → <al>

For <el>, we searched the Helsinki corpus for the forms <el>, <le>, <ell>, <elle>, <ele>. As the main focus is on the evolution of <al>, we omit the discussion of overall variation for this word ending and only present the area plot (Figure 6), which tracks the distribution of tokens over time. The absolute numbers of cases per time span are provided in the caption.

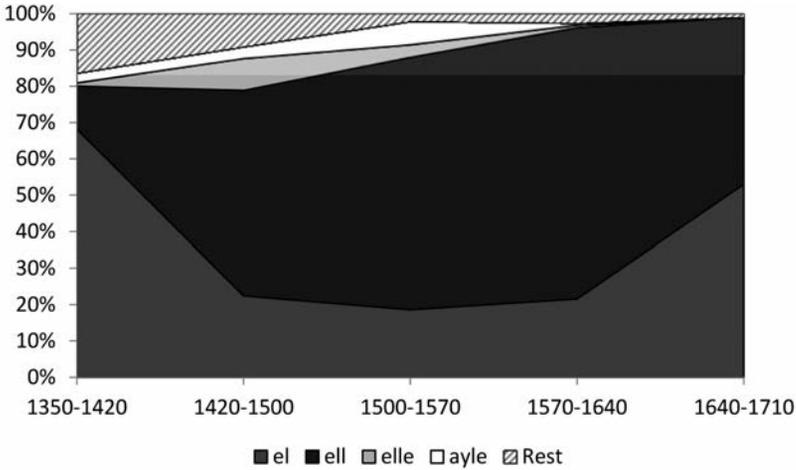


FIGURE 6. Ratio of tokens in the Helsinki corpus with the suffix spelling variants <el>, <ell>, <elle>, <ayle>, and all other spelling variants, plotted over time. Basis: all tokens in the Helsinki corpus that end in <el> today (1350–1420: $N = 110$; 1420–1500: $N = 241$; 1500–1570: $N = 223$; 1570–1640: $N = 153$; 1640–1710: $N = 100$).

The number of attested variants is much bigger for <el> than for the other suffixes we have investigated so far (e.g. <eyle>, <eille>, <yлле>, <aile>, all subsumed under ‘Rest’ in Fig. 6), but there are only two major variants, <el> and <ell>. Similar to <al>, today’s spelling was the dominant one in 1350–1420, but the variant with the doubled final consonant, <ell>, steadily rises until 1570–1640; in the following time period, <el> is again the major variant, although variation is far from resolved. Note again the similar pattern of spelling variants.

(3) <el> → <ell>, <elle> → <el>

Today’s spelling <el> is the dominant variant in the last time span, but only by a narrow margin. To track the shift from <ell> to <el> further, we used the Google Books corpus as sketched above in §3.2. Figure 7 shows the token count for the thirty lexemes in <el> that occurred in the two last periods in the Helsinki corpus. We concentrate on the <el> and <ell> variants of each word, leaving the minor variants aside.

<ell> as a variant spelling is marginal by 1670. The data show a decline that is much quicker for <ell> than for <ick>, and that happened about 100 years earlier (cf. Fig. 4 above).

For the last suffix, <le>, we searched the Helsinki corpus for the forms <le>, <ell>, <el>, <elle>, <yлле>. Again, we only present the area plot (Figure 8), which plots the

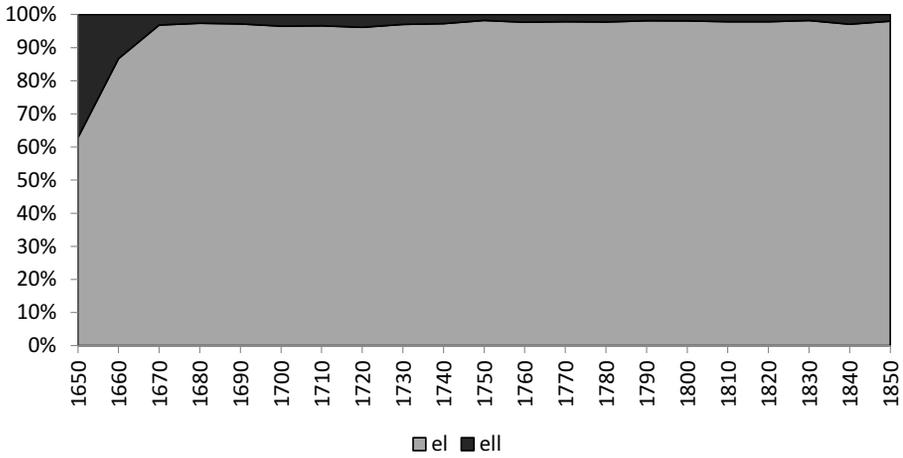


FIGURE 7. Ratio of the token count of twenty-one word types in two spelling variants, <el> and <ell>. Data source: Google Books, British subcorpus, via <http://googlebooks.byu.edu/>.

ratio of tokens with a given suffix variant over time (absolute numbers of cases are provided in the caption).



FIGURE 8. Ratio of tokens in the Helsinki corpus with the suffix spelling variants <le>, <ell>, <el>, <elle>, <yлле>, and all other spelling variants, plotted over time. Basis: all tokens in the Helsinki corpus that end in <le> today (1350–1420: $N = 865$; 1420–1500: $N = 794$; 1500–1570: $N = 1,021$; 1570–1640: $N = 999$; 1640–1710: $N = 1,024$).

For <le>, as many variants are attested as for <el>, and again most of them are marginal. Today’s spelling, <le>, was dominant throughout all five time periods, and it continued to become more frequent from 1420–1500 until 1640–1710. The other spelling variants were slowly washed out of the system.

3.4. <y>. There are several homophonous suffixes -y. Depending on the point of view, the precise number varies. The *OED* presents a list of six -y suffixes, mostly on an etymological basis. Bauer, Lieber, and Plag (2013), by contrast, posit three -y suffixes on synchronic grounds, and we follow their classification here.

- Adjectival -y (type *windy*, *choosy*): This suffix (on nominal and verbal bases) is ‘very productive’ (Marchand 1969a:352f.).

- Nominal <y> (type *harmony, family*): This suffix is ‘somewhat elusive’, as Bauer, Lieber, and Plag (2013:255) state; for many nouns with final <y>, it is unclear whether they actually are morphologically complex (e.g. *family*).
- A (nominal) diminutive suffix <y> (type *granny*), which has <ie> as a spelling variant.

Accordingly, there are three word-formation rules, and the outputs state that the resulting word should end in [i] and be a noun, or end in [i] and be a diminutive noun, or end in [i] and be an adjective. This homophony of suffixes is not resolved in spelling; all suffixes are homographic.

There are 1,249 words in the CELEX corpus that end in [i] and <y> (excluding <y> as part of the larger suffixes *-acy, -ary/ery/ory, -ancy/ency, -ey, -ity, -ly, and -ry*). Of these, 133 can be used as verbs, among other lexical categories (e.g. *belly, candy, lobby, ready*). For many of them, a verbal use seems to be the exception, and only eleven out of those 133 words are exclusively verbal and cannot be used as nouns or adjectives (e.g. *accompany, bury, embody, marry*).¹⁶ Again taking the most liberal stance, we end up with 133 potential verbs out of 1,249 words, or 11%. Another way to put it is that 89% of words that end in <y> cannot be used as verbs. In other words, the relation between spelling and morphology is quite stable, though there are some exceptions.

Looking at all words that could potentially be spelled with final <y>, we find that there are 1,511 words in CELEX. Table 14 lists the most prominent spellings for the unstressed phonological ending [i].

WORD ENDING	# OF WORDS	RATIO	EXAMPLES
<y>	1,249	83%	dreamy, harmony
<i>	74	5%	Israeli, spaghetti
<ey>	65	4%	chimney, money
<ie>	63	4%	brownie, sweetie
<e>	49	3%	recipe, karate
REST	11	1%	chassis, coffee

TABLE 14. Words in the CELEX database that end in [i], sorted according to their graphemic word ending.¹⁷

So 89% of words with final <y> are nouns or adjectives, and there are a number of words that could potentially be spelled with final <y> but are not. What about the lexical category of these words? Does the spelling convey information about lexical category? Correlating lexical category (A/N vs. V) and word ending (<y>) leads to the results given in Table 15.

	+<y>	-<y>
+A	1,116	34
+N		228
+V	133	

TABLE 15. Cross-classification of word ending (<y>) and lexical category (A, N, V) for all words in CELEX that end in [i].

As with <al>, the presence of <y> on the one hand has a negative value: it signals that the word is probably not an English verb. On the other hand, the absence of <y> (and the presence of other word endings that correspond to [i]) signals that the word is

¹⁶ It is striking that prefixation is involved in five of these eleven verbs (*remarry, intermarry, embody, disembody, miscarry*). Final <y> does not seem to be a good ending for English verbs.

¹⁷ Note that twelve words with final <ey> were analyzed as the suffix <y> on bases ending in <e> (e.g. *dopey, homey, pricey*); they thus appear in the <y>-category of the table.

probably not an adjective. The figures in Table 15 become even clearer when we look at the thirty-four adjectives that do not end with <y>. Half of them are words ending in <i> (e.g. *Afghani*, *Israeli*, *Qatari*; see below). We would not want to call these words exceptions—they bear a suffix that can regularly form nouns that can also be used as adjectives. Obviously, the word endings in Table 15 do convey some kind of morphological information, but this information is more complex than just lexical category membership. This becomes clear when we look at the two endings that are productive suffixes in their own right, <i> and <ie>.

The suffix *-i* is an ethnonym (cf. Marchand 1969a:354f., 1969b). It denotes people from Eastern or Near-Eastern countries. Only twenty-two of the seventy-four words with <i> bear this suffix (e.g. *Israeli*, *Bahraini*, *Kuwaiti*, *Pakistani*); the rest are mostly foreign words of Italian (*vermicelli*, *broccoli*, *ravioli*, *salami*) or Hindi origin (*sari*, *rani*, *kukri*). Yet *-i* is very regular and productive in this limited domain as an ethnonym. In combination with capitalization, words like *Pakistani* indeed indicate a certain morphological function—and what is just as important, a phonographically possible spelling like *<Pakistany> is not an option.¹⁸

The suffix *-ie* was introduced above as a spelling variant of diminutive *-y* (see *OED*, Marchand 1969a:298f.). Of the sixty-three <ie> words in CELEX, forty are classified as diminutives or hypocorisms in the *OED* (63%). The other 37% are words of mostly French origin (e.g. *brasserie*, *gendarmarie*, *patisserie*). What is more, this suffix is clearly productive. A very tentative search of the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA; Davies 2010–) reveals a great number of nonlexicalized ad-hoc formations, as the following randomly chosen examples show.

- (4) a. I must have looked puzzled, because she explained that a Cliffie is someone who goes to Radcliffe
 b. In this article, Marilyn shows a ‘flattie’ (that’s stereo photographer language for a non-stereo picture!)
 c. I can see the headlines: narco, trannie, and journalist crash on way TO FOREST OF THE WHORES [sic]

Intuitively, the spellings <Cliffy>, <flatty>, and <tranny> do not work as well in the given contexts; <ie> seems to be the preferred variant in these cases. Obviously, a lexical database like CELEX cannot capture these formations; we must conclude that they are more frequent than the ratio in CELEX (63%) suggests.

In addition to *-i* and *-ie*, there is a third productive suffix that can be pronounced [i], *-ee*. It is mostly stressed (Bauer et al. 2013), but in some cases, the stress shift is reversed, leading to unstressed final [i], for example in *employee*, which can be pronounced /əmˈplɔɪ(i)j/. In this respect, <ee> is a further case that could potentially be spelled <y>, but where the spelling indicates a certain special function.

Finally, <ey> must also be taken into account. Apart from those cases in which <y> has been added to words in <e> (e.g. *dopey*, *pricey*), the words it occurs in are mostly unanalyzable (e.g. *chimney*, *chutney*, *volley*). There seems to be no unique distribution of <ey> (as opposed to <y>), but there are two noteworthy observations. First, <ey> occurs mostly after <l> or <n> (e.g. *trolley*, *parsley*; *jitney*, *honey*). However, this position

¹⁸ There are no matches for <Pakistany> in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA; Davies 2010–). A Google search for <Pakistany> yields ‘Did you mean **Pakistani**’ but also yields about 350,000 results for <Pakistany>. While it is impossible to search the latter systematically, most of the top results lead to websites (many pornographic) based in non-English-speaking countries. This sort of problem extends generally to using the internet to study spelling variants.

is not specific to <ey> (cf. e.g. *early, jolly; pony, tiny*). Second, words that end with <ey> are only rarely adjectives. Of the sixty-five words with final <ey>, ten can be used as adjectives (e.g. *medley, motley, phoney*). In three of these ten cases (*clayey, gooeey, phooey*), <ey> is clearly isomorphic to adjectival <y>. This distribution can be captured with a graphemic rule that bans <y> after stem-final vowel clusters and demands <ey> instead. Summing up, <ey> may be interpreted as a nonadjectival spelling of [i].¹⁹

Diachronically, only the search for words spelled with final <y> today yielded enough results; there is not enough data for the potentially interesting development of today's *-ie, -i, and -ey*. We searched the Helsinki corpus for the following spelling variants of today's *-y* suffix: <y>, <ie>, <ey>, <ye>, <i>, <ee>, and <e>.²⁰ We excluded, as in the synchronic investigation, the other existing suffixes *-acy, -ary/ery/ory, -ancy/ency, -ey, -ity, -ly, and -ry*. Table 16 shows an overview of the amount of variation per time span (before the 1250–1350 time span, the data were too sparse to be useful).

# OF VARIANTS	1250– 1350	1350– 1420	1420– 1500	1500– 1570	1570– 1640	1640– 1710
— (hapax legomena)	26	54	65	59	89	119
one stem type	20	41	48	32	63	155
two stem types	23	32	47	61	84	25
three stem types	6	14	22	49	32	
four stem types	4	9	7	10	5	
five stem types			1	2		
six stem types				1		
mean # of stem types per lexeme	1.89	1.86	1.93	2.30	1.89	1.14
ratio of lexemes with more than one stem type	62%	57%	62%	79%	66%	14%

TABLE 16. Number of stem types, mean number of stem types per lexeme, and ratio of lexemes with more than one stem type for words spelled with <y> today.

The amount of variation is roughly the same for the first three time periods. It then peaks in the 1500–1570 period, before it almost fully declines over the next two periods. Table 17 shows the distribution of the variants over time, for both types and tokens, and Figure 9 plots the ratio of tokens with a given suffix variant over time.

	1250–1350		1350–1420		1420–1500		1500–1570		1570–1640		1640–1710	
	types	tokens										
y	31	220	74	821	141	1,684	156	1,303	210	1,764	288	2,941
ie	36	168	60	250	56	140	137	573	174	1,013	30	72
ye	15	29	42	231	71	202	97	350	42	80	2	2
i	33	343	31	192	19	43	9	11	4	4		
e	9	26	11	97	12	108	7	40	3	5		
ee	2	2	16	143	4	14	4	9				
ey			3	77	3	11	6	33	3	34	4	7

TABLE 17. Number of types and tokens for different spelling variants of words spelled with <y> today.

¹⁹ The *OED* formulates a similar rule: ‘When the suffix is appended to a n. ending in *y*, the convention of modern spelling requires it to be spelt *-ey*’. Note that this rule does not capture the spellings <gooeey> and <phooey>. It does cover cases like <skyeey, *skyy>, but these cases can also be captured with a constraint that prevents most vowel letters from doubling.

²⁰ For the variant <e>, we had to adopt a different search strategy. Simply searching for all words with final <e> in the respective time spans of the Helsinki corpus leads to more than 130,000 hits, far more than we could reasonably filter manually. Instead, we opted for the following strategy: after searching the corpus for the six other spelling variants, we used the list of 782 graphemic types from this search (e.g. <agony>, <albany>, <alle-myghtty>, <allemyghty>, <allmightie>, <allmyghty>, etc.) as a basis for the search for <e>-forms.

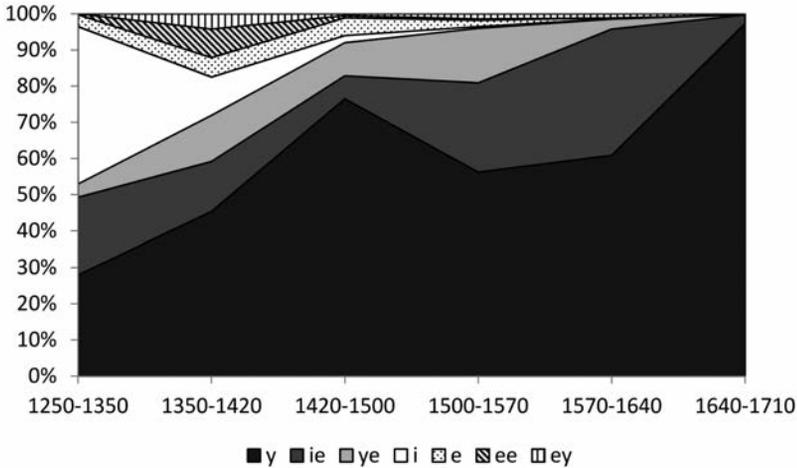


FIGURE 9. Ratio of tokens in the Helsinki corpus with the suffix spelling variants <y>, <ie>, <ye>, <i>, <e>, <ee>, and <ey>, plotted over time. Basis: all tokens in the Helsinki corpus that end in <y> today.

Based on the token count, we can see that the most frequent spelling in the 1250–1350 period is <i>, which then quickly diminishes; by 1500–1570, it is nearly gone. We can also observe an early tendency toward consistency until the 1420–1500 period: <y> was gradually becoming the most frequent variant. The next period, however, sees what were two rather minor variants in 1420–1500 gain weight, <ye> and <ie>. The proportion of <y> spellings declines to just above 50%. Interestingly, with the exception of <ye>, all spellings are actually still in use today, but mostly for different functions. As shown above, <i> is used to mark ethnonyms, <ee> marks patient formations, and <ie> marks diminutives.

This functionalization of leftovers supports the competition-based approach introduced earlier: in processes of variation reduction, only those spelling variants survive that can find distributional or functional niches. This is clearly the case for <ie>: as a spelling for today's adjectival or nominal -y, <ie> was marginal by the 1640–1710 period (see Fig. 9). As a spelling for the diminutive suffix, the *OED* cites as the earliest instances 1595 *dummie*, 1663 *grannie*, 1681 *dearie*, and 1693 *mousie*. It seems that <ie> was able to take on its new role as a spelling for the diminutive suffix at the very time it was discarded as a spelling for adjectival and nominal -y.

For <i>, much more time passed between its disuse as a variant for today's nominal or adjectival -y and its new function as the spelling for the ethnonym suffix. <i> was discarded as a spelling for today's -y by the 1500–1570 period at the latest (see Fig. 9), but the ethnonym suffix only became productive in the nineteenth century (see *OED* -i suffix²). Still, the fact that <i> was no longer in use as a spelling for today's -y at that time (e.g. *<windi>, <family>) must have been beneficial for the prevalence of the ethnonym spelling <i>.

On this basis, we can make a prediction about the future development of diminutive -y/-ie. Today, we find formal variation between both spellings (see above). But <y> is also the standard spelling for adjectival and nondiminutive, nominal -y; that is, we find functional variation for the spelling <y> (both as a diminutive and a nondiminutive suffix). On this basis, we predict that eventually <ie> will become the dominant spelling for the diminutive suffix. This is not to say that all functional variation in the system will be resolved at some point. But this case is special because a distinct spelling for diminutives

actually exists as a variant, and as we have shown throughout this article, the English writing system tends to mark morphology in spelling in comparable cases.

4. CONCLUSION. For each suffix we investigated, we found that the spelling marks morphological information in some way or other. Homography of suffixes and homophonous word endings is avoided in the majority of cases.

- <ous> signals that the word is an adjective. There is a very clear, almost complementary distribution. If a word ends in <ous>, it is an adjective (e.g. <nervous>); if it does not end in <ous> (but phonologically ends in [ɪs]), it is not an adjective (e.g. <service>).
- <ic> also marks words as adjectives, although the distribution is not as unequivocal. If a word ends in <ic>, it is almost always an adjective (e.g. <sonic>); if it does not end in <ic> (but phonologically ends in [ɪk]), it is (with one exception) not an adjective (e.g. <gimmick>).
- <al> signals that the word is an adjective or a noun; at the same time, there are frequent conversions between them (e.g. <capital>). Words that do not end in <al> (but phonologically end in [ɪl]), by contrast, are either nouns or verbs (but not adjectives)—and again, we find frequent conversions between these categories (e.g. <model>).
- <y> signals that the word is probably not a verb; words that do not end in <y> (but phonologically end in [i]) are probably not adjectives. Words that end in <i> are ethnonyms or foreign borrowings. Words that end in <ie> mark diminutives.

These features are unique to spelling; in phonology, this information is not encoded: the spelling distinguishes homophonous suffixes or word endings. This can be argued to serve the needs of silent reading: tagging words as adjectives, verbs, or nouns potentially enables readers to build up syntactic structure and access information more quickly.

Looking back, we traced the evolution of this system back in time for close to a millennium. For most suffixes, there was a considerable amount of variation in spelling at first, but variation was gradually washed out of the system. In the following, we discuss two interesting facets of this development: the patterning in the succession of spelling variants (§4.1) and covariants of this variation (§4.2).

4.1. PATTERNING OF VARIANTS. For three suffixes, we observed a characteristic succession of spelling variants. They are reproduced here as 5a–c.

- (5) a. <ik> → <ique> → <ike> → <icke> → <ick> → <ic>
 b. <al> → <all>, <alle> → <al>
 c. <el> → <ell>, <elle> → <el>

Common to all three suffixes is the employment of two different means, consonant doubling and final <e>. For <al> and <el>, final <e> does not occur without consonant doubling (there is no form *<ale> or *<ele>). Apart from this, the suffixes show a remarkable uniformity in their development: they start off as simple <VC>-structures, then go through stages of <VCC> and <VCCe> until finally returning to <VC>. Apparently, the concrete forms a given suffix appears in are not haphazard, but follow general trends in the writing system. The development in the spelling of suffixes is part of more general trends that the spelling of English words is subject to (like consonant doubling or the addition of final <e>).

At least for the double-consonant variants, a possible reason for their demise lies in the marking of prosodic structure. The effect of consonant doubling is visible in words from French: from ca. 1500, French words changed their spelling from single intervocalic con-

sonant in French to double consonant in English; for example, Old French <bagage> became Middle English <baggage>, which mirrors the change in foot structure from iamb to trochee [$\sigma^1\sigma$] > [$^1\sigma\sigma$] (cf. Upward & Davidson 2011:179). Under this view—that is, if double consonants are employed to mark the preceding syllable as stressed—spellings like <demonick> are dysfunctional because they imply a stressed ultima.

However, the concrete temporal progression of forms does differ: for example, the <VCC> form for today's *-ic* peaks 1640–1710 and then gradually declines, while the analogous forms for *-el* and *-al* peak 1570–1640. Likewise, <VCCe> forms for today's *-ic* peak later than those for *-el* and *-al* (1570–1640 vs. 1420–1500). This speaks against the hypothesis that double consonants and final <e> were used by printers only to achieve an even outer margin (cf. Scragg 1974:71f.): in that case, we would expect no effect of the actual suffix. Thus, while some general spelling principles seem to be at work guiding the inventory of possible forms, the unification of spelling—the emergence of culture out of anarchy—is different for each suffix, as Figure 10 shows.

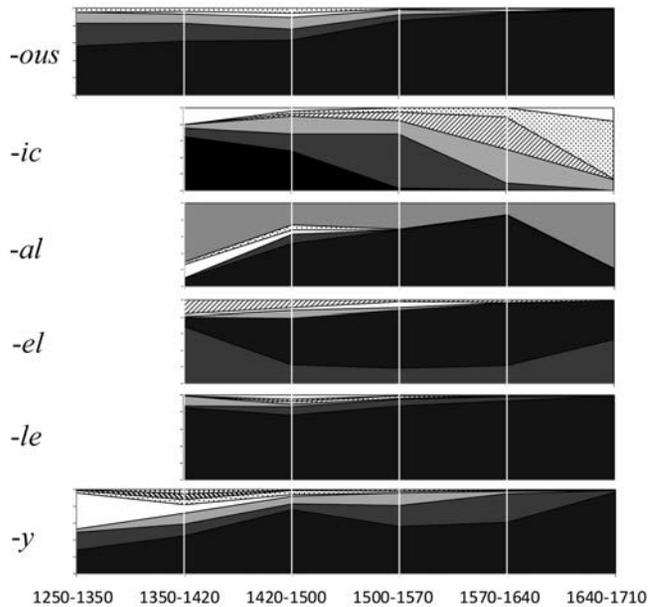


FIGURE 10. Summary of the trajectory of the six suffixes over time. Collated data from Figs. 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, and 9.

Each suffix has its own trajectory. The spellings of *-ous* and *-le*, for example, are homogenous relatively early on, while the spellings of *-ic*, *-al*, and *-el*, by contrast, are not resolved in the time the Helsinki corpus covers.

4.2. COVARIANTS OF DIACHRONIC VARIATION. An interesting question to ask is whether this diachronic variation covaries with other factors. One such factor could be lexemes. It is conceivable that the total amount of variation stems from different lexemes with distinct (but consistent) spellings of the suffixes. If, for example, *capital* was always spelled <capittal> and *natural* always <natural>, on the whole we would find variation between <all> and <al>, but this variation would be entirely explicable with reference to words. This example may seem a little far-fetched, but lexically based linguistic change has been widely discussed for over a century (Labov 1994).

The other possibility is that diachronic variation covaries not with lexemes, but with texts. It is conceivable that texts themselves are consistent, and the overall variation

arises from the investigation of many texts with different standards. For example, if *-al* is always spelled <al> in one text but <all> in another, on the whole we would find variation between <al> and <all>.

In a nutshell, the question we follow now is: what is more consistent, words or texts? To answer it, we take a closer look at one suffix, *-al*, and use a statistical measure for dispersion. Wilcox's (1967) VarNC is a measure to determine variance in nominal distributions. It ranges between zero (all instances are in one group, e.g. all spellings of today's *-al* are <all>) and one (all instances are equally distributed over the groups, e.g. each of the possible *-al* spellings has the same number of occurrences). If a spelling for *-al* only occurs once in a given text, or is attested only once with a given lexeme (within one time period), it is excluded. This way, we only investigate lexemes and texts that can potentially vary.

For each time period, we calculated the following three measures:

- VarNC overall: This measure is calculated over the total token counts for each period (cf. Table 13 above).
- VarNC lexemes: For this measure, a list of lexemes is generated, together with the absolute token counts for each suffix spelling. For example, *special* occurs in the 1420–1500 period with the spellings <al> (eighteen times), <all> (twenty-three times), and <alle> (nine times). For each lexeme, VarNC is calculated; the value presented in Table 18 below is the mean of all VarNC values for the given time period.
- VarNC texts: Analogous to the lexemes, a list of texts is generated together with the absolute token counts for each suffix spelling in these texts. For example, in 'The trials of Sir Nicholas Throckmorton' (1500–1570 period), <al> occurs thirty-three times, <all> thirty times.

	VARNC OVERALL	VARNC LEXEMES	VARNC TEXTS
1350–1420	0.60	0.23	0.43
1420–1500	0.72	0.42	0.27
1500–1570	0.52	0.36	0.27
1570–1640	0.28	0.13	0.13
1640–1710	0.37	0.19	0.17

TABLE 18. Wilcox's VarNC for the overall token count of *-al*-words (VarNC overall); VarNC for tokens grouped according to lexeme type (VarNC lexemes); VarNC for tokens grouped according to text (VarNC texts).

The results for the overall variation are in line with what we presented above using a simpler measure (see Table 13): variation peaks in the 1420–1500 period and then gradually declines, with a slight rise in the latest period.

Except for the first time period (1350–1420), variation within texts is lower than variation within lexemes (or equally low, as in the 1570–1640 period). That means that texts are more consistent than lexemes, and the pursuit of consistency was earlier for texts than for lexemes.

4.3. GENERAL CONCLUSION. The goal of this work was to present in some empirical depth two related findings about the spelling of English derivational affixes. The first and simpler finding is that a number of derivational suffixes in contemporary written English have remarkably regular distinct spellings that differentiate them consistently from homophonous strings, some of which are used for other suffixes. This finding extends previous research showing that English spelling is both lexical and morphological

to a greater extent than other alphabetical writing systems (Bolinger 1946, Chomsky & Halle 1968, Venezky 1999:197ff.). The second finding is much broader. We have investigated the history of these systematic regularities in suffix spelling through almost a millennium of the written language. Throughout this entire period, there is no evidence of an external authority having any influence on the spelling of these suffixes.²¹

From a much wider perspective than language, the emergence of systematicity in English spelling is an example of the workings of competition, the struggle for existence. English spelling from the Middle English period through the end of the seventeenth century was heteronomous in large part because history had provided numerous alternative ways to spell the same word. Queen Elizabeth, for example, who left a large legacy of autograph correspondence, had a single spelling for only half of the words that she used in the documents that have been preserved (707 out of 1,389), though she was not entirely unsystematic: 523 of the remaining 682 words showed only two variants (Evans 2012). The history of English spelling since 1600 shows what happened to many of the available variants: their distribution became lexically fixed, for both lexemes and suffixes.

In ecological terms, each variant spelling has now found its niche (cf. e.g. Aronoff & Lindsay 2014). What defines these niches, though, is not spelling. Spelling simply fills niches that are made possible by the phonology and morphology of the language. As one of us once noted, ‘written language is a product of linguistic awareness, the objectification of spoken language. Any orthography must therefore involve a linguistic theory’, albeit an implicit one (Aronoff 1985:28). Our work shows a clear implicit linguistic theory lying behind English orthography: a language contains lexicalized units, both free-standing lexemes and affixes. English spelling emphasizes these lexicalized units at the cost of the consistent representation of phonemic units that the original alphabet highlighted, which persists in most alphabetic systems to this day (de Saussure 1959 [1916]).²²

To the extent that regular spelling has become an integral part of the culture of the English language, it has truly emerged out of anarchy.

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²¹ Of the many people who have attempted to consciously reform English spelling almost since it was first recorded, the only one to have had any success was Noah Webster. It is worth noting that his greatest success involved a suffix of sorts: he spelled earlier *-our* as *-or* (*flavor* for *flavour*). Aronoff 1978 argues, however, that the original ascendance of *-our* over *-or* was precisely in words where the unstressed syllable was not analyzable as a suffix, making this a very peculiar case of undoing the encoding of a morphological distinction in spelling. Regardless, the reform did succeed.

²² Unlike Chomsky and Halle (1968), we remain silent on whether English spelling is or is not a good writing system, compared to a more phonologically consistent system. It is entirely possible that a writing system like that of English, which calls attention to lexical units, is more usable than one that is more phonologically grounded. It is clearly less easily learned (Treiman & Kessler 2014). It also makes sense to distinguish different ways in which an alphabet can be usable: phonologically consistent spellings are probably more useful if you are reading out loud, but spellings that prioritize standardized lexical access may be more useful for silent reading.

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[kristian.berg@uni-oldenburg.de]
[mark.aronoff@stonybrook.edu]

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