

HEADACHES IN G

A Puzzling and Overworked Symbol

Written for "The Listener" by PROFESSOR ARNOLD WALL

AMONG the major difficulties which confront the poor foreigner who tries to learn English must be the glorious muddle we have made with the letter g. What can he make of such pairs as "gimcrack" and "gimlet," "get" and "gem," or of such groups as "finger," "singer" and "ginger," "harbinger" and "malingering"? It is not surprising that we ourselves often go wrong when following so misleading a guide. Generations of innocent scribes, during the pre-printing era, each one spelling more or less as he pleased, and driven to adopt different tricks or devices from different languages, have succeeded in making, let us say, "a pretty kettle of fish."

An Overworked Symbol

We use the letter g to represent the "hard" sound in "get," for the "soft" sound in "gem," for another soft sound in "message" and as a part of the combination "ng," a different sound again. At one time or another writers of Eng-

lish have made feeble attempts to improve matters by introducing alien devices. The sound of hard g is represented, for instance, by "gh" in "ghetto," an Italian device; by "gu" in "guest" a French form. Soft g is represented by plain g in "gem," by j and "dg" in "judge," by "ge" in "pigeon" and "George," and even by "dj" in "djibbah" and sometimes in "djinn" or "djinn." In "gill" it is either hard or soft according to the meaning. In the brief discussion which follows hard g will be represented by "gh" and soft g by j. The other "soft" sound, which it has in some French words like "massage" and "mirage," can only be represented by "zh," the sound of the s in "pleasure" and "measure," for which we have no single symbol. When adopting the foreign devices above-mentioned we have usually confined their use to a small number of words, and, further, we have used them in positions where they were not required, as when we write "ghost" or "ghastly,"

for nobody would be tempted to pronounce "ghost" as "jost." The h may improve the look of the word, and I think it does make it more uncanny, but it is quite unnecessary as a guide to the sound. Occasionally, in old times, writers and printers would use more than one of the safeguards at once; our old writers spelt "guess" as "gess," then as "guess" or "ghess," and sometimes as "ghuess."

When the symbol j came into use, about three hundred years ago, it might well have been made to do duty for all the cases where "soft" g was the sound. A sort of start was made indeed, and a surprising number of words which we now spell with j were formerly spelt with g, such as "gelous," "gelly," "gig," for our "jig," "get" for our "jet," "gest," "geer," "gessamine," "getty," "Giu" for our "Jew," "gib" (of a horse) and "gingle." While we were about it what a pity that we stopped short!

Again, we had two different forms of the letter g in old handwriting, the one

we still use, which is a typically French form, and another which looked rather like z, the typically English form, named "yoch." As, however, the sound represented by the English form normally developed into y, not into soft g, it was discarded as a symbol for g, but left its mark in such Scottish names as "Menzie" and "Dalziel," readers of old manuscripts having mistaken the ancient "yoch" for z. Well, there was an alternative symbol at hand but the opportunity was thrown away.

Not Quite a Rule

The solid fact which underlies much of this confusion is that, in many languages besides English, there has been a general tendency to "soften" the guttural consonants g and k before the vowels e, i, and y—the so-called "front" vowels—while these consonants tend to remain "hard" before the "back" vowels, a, o, and u. This is why the French, when they have to represent the soft sound of g before a back vowel, such as o, insert the letter e between the g and the vowel, as in, for instance "mangeons," where the e is not to be pronounced at all, but stands declaring that the g is here to have the sound which it normally has before e. We actually used this same device in very old English, or Anglo-Saxon, but allowed it to pass out of use. Similarly, the Italians use the letter i for the same purpose as we see it in words like "arpeggio" and "adagio," where the i, not really pronounced in Italian, performs the same function as the e in French. But in English, owing to the accidents of its history, this tendency, though quite as active as in other languages, is no more than a very general tendency, nothing like a rule. Modern Standard English does not represent any one of the various dialects of the medieval period, for though the East Midland dialect is its basis, other provincial forms, especially the Northern, play no inconsiderable part in it. Now in Northern English, as in the old Scandinavian languages, g and k tended to resist the tendency to melt before the front vowels, so that when they had become soft in the South and Midlands they were still hard in the North, and many of these hard forms have become the modern standard forms, such as "get" and "give," which seem to rebel against the general trend. A great many words, too, especially in the North and North-Eastern districts, were adopted in English from the Norse, and these always tend to have the hard sound, even before the vowels e and i. Hence the complications, or some of them; and as English has been steadily borrowing words from other languages for centuries, in some of which the gutturals would be hard and in others soft, the kettle of fish is now full to the brim. I will extract some of these fish and subject them to a short examination with the intention of being of some use to those who wish to speak English correctly and find that the spelling by itself often leads them astray. In my next article I will arrange these examples under heads: Vulgarisms or Solecisms; Doubtful or puzzling cases; and Names.

(To be continued)

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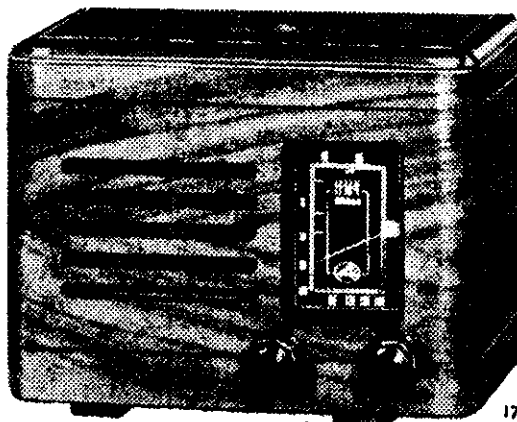
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