On the limits of etymology

Haberland, Hartmut

On the limits of etymology

Hartmut Haberland

ABSTRACT

Using the classical example of *-ize* vs. *-ise* in English as a case study, this article argues that insight into etymology, contrary to an assumption implicit in some dictionaries, cannot be of much help in guiding spelling, nor can arguments concerning spelling be meaningfully substantiated on the basis of knowledge of etymology. In building this argument, I compare the original Greek senses of -ίζω *-izɔ·* to the usage of this suffix when borrowed into Latin, showing how Latin language users have made creative use of elements taken from Greek, integrating them into the language specific structure of Latin. English speakers have reinterpreted and integrated the suffix *-ize/-ise* in language usage and structure in similar creative ways by drawing on Greek, Latin and French, meaning that a modern English verb spelled with *-ize* or *-ise* can neither be identified as 'Greek', 'Latin' or 'French' by the ordinary language user. Hence, a reference to a word's origin is not a safe guideline for deciding how it should be spelled.

1. *The problem of etymology*

Etymology is "the study of the origins and development of words and their meanings" (New Oxford Dictionary of English s.v. *etymology*) and was originally the search for the 'true meaning' of a word. The Greek word ἔτυμον *étumon* means 'the true sense of a word according to its origin, its etymology' (Liddell & Scott s.v. ἔτυμον), derived from the adjective ἔτυμος *étumos* 'true'. The idea that language history reveals the true meaning of a word – which would imply that the present meaning is less true or even a distortion of the true meaning – is hardly taken seriously today. Etymology is rather considered to provide insights into processes of language contact and change, although many of its findings are conjectural, doubtful or contested.

One function of etymology is to clarify relationships between languages and to provide information about which words are cognates and which not. It will surprise many people to learn that Latin *habeō* 'have' is not related to English *have*, German *haben* etc. and that a link of *habeō* with Old English *giefan* 'give', German *geben* is possible, but not established beyond doubt. On the other hand, Germanic verbs like English *have*, German *haben* and Dutch *hebben* are definitely related to Latin *capio* 'catch'.

Often etymology informs us about cultural history: Danish *birkes* 'poppy seed' goes ultimately back to a Hebrew expression meaning 'blessed' (familiar from Hebrew and Arabic names like Baruch, Barack, Mubarak, and Barak). Lithuanian Jews fleeing the 1905 pogroms in Russia brought with

them to Denmark a kind of bread roll made from unleavened dough (for consumption on the Sabbath, hence considered 'blessed'), which was usually covered with poppy seed. The Danes adopted this type of roll with the name *berkes*, since 1955 (adjusting to a general phonetic development) spelled *birkes* (Brink and Lund 1975: 153f.), and transferred the name from the bread roll to the poppy seed that covered it.

These examples show that etymology can provide us with interesting, though sometimes conjectural, insights into language history and, through history of borrowing, into cultural history. Many such insights constitute specialist knowledge and are not always accessible to the ordinary language user.

A related argument can be, and has been, made for the distinction between 'core' and 'alien' (Mathesius 1967 [1934]) or 'peripheral' (Vachek 1966) elements of a language. Although language history can be used to distinguish different layers of vocabulary in a language, the decisive criterion for distinguishing between core and borrowed vocabulary in a language has to be synchronic[1], i.e. related to the common speakers', not the professional linguists', awareness of a word's structural properties. In his study of loans in German, Eisenberg (2011) refers to ordinary language users' largely intuitive knowledge of their own language as the only working criterion for the distinction between words of the core vocabulary and loans. Words like *Forelle* 'trout', *Hermelin* 'ermine' and *Wacholder* 'juniper' are made up of inherited Germanic elements, making them candidates for inclusion in the core vocabulary of German. Yet, they *look like* and are likely to be *perceived as* loans because they have patterns of stress and vowel quality not otherwise found in words of the core vocabulary,[2] but only in loans like *Libelle* 'dragonfly'. On the other hand, German has loans like *Butter* 'butter'. This word has all characteristics of a core vocabulary word like *Mutter* 'mother'. Since it looks like a core lexical item, it must be considered part of the core vocabulary of German and cannot synchronically be treated as the loan which it actually is (from Latin *butyrum*, itself a loan from Greek βούτυρον *bó·tyron* '[cow milk] curd'; Kluge 1999 s.v.).

This argument for a synchronically, not historically based distinction between core and borrowed vocabulary points at a limit of etymology: speakers' intuitions about structural properties of words are immediately accessible to them; decisions about what is 'core' and 'periphery' should be based on this knowledge and not on etymologies which are specialist knowledge.

Mathesius refers to Luick (1921) who distinguishes between two layers of vocabulary in English on the basis of structural properties. The first layer consists of the Germanic core together with early Latin, Celtic, Scandinavian and a few French loans. These words are either monosyllabic or formed

---

[1] Mathesius (1967: 399) talks about 'associative analysis' as opposed to 'etymological analysis'.
[2] The specialist can reconstruct them as opaque compounds from partly obscure elements, for the non-specialist language user they are unanalyzable as any loan from a language they are not familiar with.

from a stressed stem with a restricted number of affixes; the stems are etymologically not analyzable. The second layer consists of the rest of the loans from French together with most Latin and Greek loans. They are polysyllabic, often stressed on a suffix, and semantically opaque (Mathesius 1967: 398f. quoting Luick 1921: 74f.).

In the following, I want to discuss a case where it has been proposed that a particular problem of spelling within Luick's second layer can be resolved by resorting to etymological rather than structural arguments.

The problem in question, which puzzles many L1 writers of English and even more non-L1 users, concerns the choice between the spellings *-ize* and *-ise* in a rather large group of verbs. Should it be *socialize* or *socialize*, and *agonize* or *agonise*? And why only *surprise* and only *capsize*? In trying to sort out this issue for the concerned language user, reference is often made to the history or etymology of the words in question. However, although the history of the *-ize/-ise* suffix is interesting and tells us a lot about processes of language contact and borrowing, I argue that this history is in fact not useful in resolving the spelling problems that modern language users are facing. The reason for this is that the language user will intuitively be aware of the structural differences between Luick's first and second layer of English vocabulary, but not of differences *within* the second layer. These differences are only accessible through etymological investigations – which are not always conclusive anyway.

2. The spelling issue: -ize vs. -ise

For many, but not all of the verbs concerned, the spelling with *z* is generally associated with American English. As a representative for the American view on the issue, we can take Webster's dictionary (1991) which states s.v. *-ize*:

> **-ize, -ise** *suffix* indicating to act on, subject to, or affect in the way indicated, as in 'hypnotize', 'christianize', or to become as indicated, as in 'crystallize' or to do something indicated, as in 'fraternize',

and laconically, and therefore maybe even more tellingly, for the alternative spelling,

> **-ise**, *-IZE.

Here '*' "refers the user from one main entry to another that is synonymous and is judged to be the more current and 'normal' term" (1991: xxvi). In other words, according to Webster, *-ize* is generally "more current and 'normal'" than *-ise*, at least in the USA.

Noah Webster, the founder of Webster's Dictionary, was a staunch but not always consistent supporter of the principle that spelling should be phonetic. In his *Dissertations on the English*

Language of 1789 he had *proposed* (but not *used*) spellings like *ment, bred, greeve, laf* and *dawter* (Logan 1937: 19; Webster 1789: 394), but later he lost his rebel zeal and resigned to advocating consistent spellings only, especially where British spellings were not. In 1789 he still used the spelling *surprize*, but he did not promote this spelling later on, and he did not use in his Dictionary. The dictionary simply has entries for those verbs in *-ise* (like *surprise, comprise, despise* or *exercise*) that it considers *not* to contain the suffix *-ise* that is a spelling variant of *-ize*. By excluding verbs like *surprise* from the *-ize/-ise* variation, although no explicit reference to etymology is made, the dictionary implicitly applies etymological criteria anyway.

The situation is more complex in British English. The traditional, conservative stance is that *-ize* is the only reasonable spelling of the suffix, which surprisingly, perhaps, is in complete accordance with the 'American' way. This preference for *-ize* is made clear in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) s.v. **-ize** where the *-ise* variant is attributed to French:

> In modern French the suffix has become *-iser*, alike in words from Greek, as *baptiser, évangéliser, organiser*, and those formed after them from Latin, as *civiliser, cicatriser, humaniser*. Hence, some have used the spelling *-ise* in English, as in French, for all these words, and some prefer *-ise* in words formed in French or English from Latin elements, retaining *-ize* for those formed < [i.e. from, HH] Greek elements. But the suffix itself, whatever the element to which it is added, is in its origin the Greek -ίζειν, Latin *-izāre*; and, as the pronunciation is also with *z*, there is no reason why in English the special French spelling should be followed, in opposition to that which is at once etymological and phonetic. In this Dictionary the termination is uniformly written *-ize*. (Oxford English Dictionary, on-line)[3]

On the other hand, for the alternative spelling with *-ise*, this dictionary just states,

-ise, *suffix*[1] A frequent spelling of -IZE *suffix*, suffix forming verbs, which see. (Oxford English Dictionary, on-line)

Thus, while the American norm represented by Webster considers *-ize* both more current and 'normal', the Oxford norm also favours *-ize*, but admits that *-ise* at least is "frequent".

This suffix *-ise*[1] is different from another suffix, *-ise*[2], which never has the alternative spelling, *-ize*. This suffix would not concern us here (since it forms nouns, not verbs), if not some of these nouns (e.g. *exercise, franchise* and *merchandise*) did occur as verbs as well; these verbs do not contain *-ize*, but go back to Latin nouns with suffixes like *-itium*[4] and others. They are never spelled with *z*, not even in America.

---

[3] Greek -ίζειν *-ize·n* and Latin *-izare* are the (active) infinitives; except in quotes, I cite the verbs in the following in their 1st person singular present active in -ίζω *-izɔ·* and -izo, resp.
[4] *exercise* as a noun goes back to Latin *exercitium* (cf. Latin *exercitus* 'a (trained) army')

A problem is not so much that spellings in *-ise* are very common in British English (even the conservative London "Times" started using them in the 1980s), but that there are quite a number of verbs never spelled with *-ize*, neither in British nor in American English, simply because they do not contain the suffix that has been traced back to Greek -ίζω *-izɔ·*[5] or Latin *-izo*. In other words: how do we distinguish words that end in [-aɪz], but do not contain a morpheme *-ize/-ise*[1], from those that do contain a morpheme *-ize/-ise*[1]?

Schematically, we can distinguish two groups of verbs that are both relevant to consider:

1. The first group comprises words that do not contain *-ize/-ise*[1]. This group consists of three subgroups:

1.1 a large number of verbs like *advertise*, *advise*[6], *despise*, *disguise, improvise, supervise* and *surprise*, which are commonly based on Latin or French roots but have varying stories; some are verbs derived from nouns containing the suffix *-ise*[2], as e.g. *exercise*,

1.2 the verb *analyse*, which is related to, but not formed directly from *analysis*[7]; in America, the spelling *analyze* is the common one, though,

1.3 the verb *capsize*, which is never spelled with an *s*[8].

2. The second group (the one with alternative spellings) consists of verbs mostly but not exclusively based on Greek roots, like *agonize, baptize, galvanize, jeopardize,* and *ostracize*.

An often referred to undated web resource that has been around for at least ten years tries to cut the cake along the lines of Latin/French vs. Greek (with quite clear inspiration from OED):

> The difference between 'ize' and 'ise' is that the 'ize' spelling is derived from the Greek '*izein*' while 'ise' is the French version which comes from the Latin '*izare*'.

> To summarize, in modern French, the suffix has become '*iser*' for words derived from the Greek such as '*baptiser, évangéliser* and *organiser*' as well as for those formed from the Latin such as '*civiliser, cicatriser, humaniser*'. On this basis, historically, some have chosen the spelling 'ise' for all of these words in English, while others have reserved 'ise' for those derived from Latin and 'ize' for those from Greek, such as '*analyze*' or '*theorize*'. The origins of some words ending in the 'ize' sound have nothing to do with Greek and have thus remained exempt from the controversy. For example, the following are always spelled with 'ise': *advertise, advise, apprise,*

---

[5] In Greek, there are also verbs with the mediopassive ending -ίζομαι *-izomai* with active meanings, e.g. ἀγωνίζομαι *agɔ·nízomai* 'contend, fight'. None of them seems to have reflexes in English.
[6] *advise* is said to go back via French *aviser* 'announce, advise' to a not-attested Latin *advisere* (Oxford English Dictionary s.v. *advise*, Baumgartner and Medard s.v. *aviser*)
[7] As a direct derivation from *analysis*, it would be *analysize*.
[8] its etymology is unclear, but possibly related to Spanish *cabo* 'head' and *capuzar* 'sink a ship by the head'.

chastise, comprise, compromise, demise, despise, disenfranchise, disguise, enterprise, excise, exercise, improvise, supervise, surmise, surprise. (O'Grady n.y., on-line)

As O'Grady herself admits, this is not of much help either. Stating that "the origins of some words ending in the 'ize' sound have nothing to do with Greek and have thus remained exempt from the controversy" is not very helpful as long as the language user is not told which words "have nothing to do with Greek" and how one can tell this. The argument thus becomes circular (how do we know that a verb is derived from a Greek root? Because it can be spelled with *z*) and sometimes plainly wrong (*jeopardize* is clearly based on a French expression, it is derived from *jeopardy* which is from French *jeu parti,* a technical term from chess, where it denotes a stage in a game that can go either way for the players). O'Grady's advice is to generalize the use of *-ise*: "The translation service of the [European] Commission advocates 'ise' for the reason that it avoids questions of exceptions […]. Etymological purists notwithstanding, this is probably the most convenient solution for non-native speakers." (O'Grady n.y., on-line)

The point seems to be that all attempts to sort out the issue are based on etymology – even the approach chosen in Webster to list verbs having "nothing to do with Greek" like *surprise* without comment with their correct spelling in *-ise* (and not pointing out why they cannot be spelt with *-z-*). But etymology is not the rock-bottom base on which the language users can rely on for their spelling choices.

3. From Greek to Latin

A particularly interesting part of the prehistory of the modern English *-ize/-ise* suffix is the story of how the suffix came into early Latin. This story tells us that it is a simplistic view of etymology to assume that elements just 'go back to' elements in another language, ignoring the complex ways in which language contact affects the loan-taking. It is exactly this complexity which makes etymology a doubtful tool for the clarification of criteria for spelling choices.

The original Greek affix -ίζω *-izɔ·* formed verbs, often with intransitive meaning: τυραννίζω *turannízɔ·* meant 'side with the tyrants', βαρβαρίζω *barbarízɔ·* 'play the barbarian'. Often it expressed a way of acting or speaking: ἀττικίζω *attikízɔ·* 'Atticize in manners, speak Attic', ἑλληνίζω *ellɛ·nízɔ·* 'do the Greek, act as a Greek, speak Greek', but also transitively 'make somebody or something Greek'. A few other verbs had transitive meanings: βαπτίζω *baptízɔ·* 'dip, plunge', also a number of mediopassives: ἀγωνίζομαι *agɔ·nízomai* 'contend, fight'.

The first traces of the Greek suffix -ίζω *-izɔ·* in Latin we find in the comedies of Plautus, who lived from 225 to 184 BC. Plautus coined verbs in *-issō,* which can have several functions. One of them is to mock the broken Latin of Greek slaves and immigrants, another to refer to practices considered

Greek (and possibly decadent), but the suffix can also just be a neutral means of derivation, possible after Greek models. Here are some examples:

1. Plautus uses verbs in *-issō* to make fun of the Latin language spoken by Greek slaves (like cooks). As pointed out by Fruyt, "Fréquents dans la bouche des esclaves de Plaute, ils sont, à notre avis, des xénismes, formes senties comme grecques et employées pour caricaturer la langue grecque." (Fruyt 1987: 249)

One case is:

MYRRHINA: in adulterio, dum moechissat Casinam, credo perdidit
'he left [cane and cloak] behind in adultery, fornicating with Casina, I think'
(PLAUTUS, *Casina*, V, 4)

Here Myrrhina, a Greek slave, uses a derivation from μοιχεία *moikʰé·a* 'adultery, fornication' with *-issō*; a verb probably coined by Plautus, since a Greek verb μοιχίζω *moikʰízɔ·* is not attested.

Plautus also coined a new word *drachmissō* 'slave for a drachma', used by a Greek cook

COCVS: illi drachmissent miseri
'these poor guys would work for a drachma'
(PLAUTUS, *Pseudolus*, III, 2)

2. The second use of these verbs is to refer to Greek customs or practices.

In a scene in Plautus' *Menaechmi* a cook meets the twin brother of his Greek master (of whose existence he is not aware) in a foreign city and blames him for not recognizing him:

CYLINDRVS COCVS: Non scis quis ego sim, qui tibi saepissime
cyathisso apud nos, quando potas?
'Do you not know who I am, who have filled the cups for you so many times at our house, when you have been drinking?'
[...]
MENAECHMVS II: Tun cyathissare mihi soles, qui ante hunc diem
Epidamnum numquam vidi neque veni?
'Are you in the habit of filling the cups for me, who, before this day, never saw nor have been to Epidamnus?'
(PLAUTUS, *Menaechmi*, II, 2)

The verb *cyathisso* 'fill the cups' is used twice here. It is a direct loan from Greek κυαθίζω *kuatʰízɔ* 'to ladle out wine', from κύαθος *kúatʰos* 'ladle'. Greeks of the well-to-do classes are lushes (so is the implication) and the only thing their servants can do for them is to keep them happy by filling their wine cups.

A few decades after Plautus, Terence also uses verbs in *-isso* to talk about matters Greek:

CHREMES: … pytissando modo mihi
                            quid vini absumpsit.
                            'the amount of my wine she wasted by spitting it out!'
                            (TERENCE, *Heautontimorumenos,* 3, 1, 48)

Chremes is Greek, but not a slave. He does not speak broken Latin, but uses a technical term borrowed from Greek (a Greek verb πυτίζω *putízɔ·* exists) in describing a young lady, Bacchis', behaviour while tasting herself through his wine cellar. Interestingly, the meaning of the word has shifted from 'spit frequently, spurt water from one's mouth' in Greek (Liddell & Scott s.v. πυτίζω) to 'to spit or spirt out wine in tasting' (Lewis & Short s.v. pȳtisso).[9] The term relates to a Greek habit obviously considered decadent. A translator's comment is helpful here: "the nasty practice of tasting wine, and then spitting it out; offensive in a man, but infinitely more so in a woman. … Doubtless Bacchis did it to show her exquisite taste in the matter of wines." (Riley 1853: 160).

3. Verbs in *-isso* are also used in Plautus' *Menaechmi* simply as loans from Greek, as here by the speaker of the prologue:

PROLOGVS: atque adeo hoc argumentum graecissat, tamen
                            non atticissat, verum sicilicissitat.
                            'And besides, this plot summary sounds Greek; although it does not sound
                            Attic, but heavily Sicilian'
                            (PLAUTUS, *Menaechmi*, Prologus)

4. In some cases, both Plautus and Terence use verbs in *-isso* which are not direct loans but either calques on a Greek model or derived from a Latin root, like *patrisso* 'take after one's father':

CALLIPHO: idne tu mirare, si patrissat filius?
                            'Are you surprised, if the son takes after the father?'
                            (PLAUTUS, *Pseudolus*, I, 5)

DEMEA: patrissas: abi, virum te iudico.
                            'you take after your father. Well, I pronounce you a man.'
                            (TERENCE, *Adelphi*, 4, 2, 25)

The verb *patrisso* has a Greek equivalent πατριάζω *patriázɔ·* 'take after one's father' from πατήρ *paté·r* 'father' but with another suffix than -ίζω *-ízɔ·*; *patrisso* could also be a Latin coinage from pater 'father', which would show that the suffix already at this point has become productive.

---

[9] Specialisation of meaning is often part of a loan process, cf. Danish *container* with the meanings of 'skip' and 'shipping container'.

The next, and massive wave of Latin verbs, now spelled *-izo,* came about 100 or 150 years after Terence (Allen 1978: 45, 46; Weise 1882: 24). At that time a new letter *z* had been added to the Latin alphabet, taken from the Greek alphabet and probably already representing the sound [z] as was the case by then in Greek, too. [10] But, as Weise points out it is often not clear whether these words were borrowed wholesale from Greek, or formed in Latin with the now productive suffix *-izo*, like *apolactizo* 'to kick, to scorn', *catechizo* 'to instruct in religion', *citharizo* 'to play the cithara', *spongizo* 'to sponge'. In some cases it is clear that they were formed in Latin: *latinizo* 'to translate into Latin', *christianizo* 'to profess Christianity', *pulverizo* 'to reduce to dust' (Weise 1882: 24). Here we find a large number of new words within medicine and, a century later, words associated with Christian doctrine and ritual. An increasingly great number of words were formed within Latin, not from a Greek root. It was the suffix that was borrowed, not necessarily wholesale Greek words.[11] And while the Greek suffix mostly (but not exclusively) formed intransitive verbs, the distribution is more even in Latin than Greek. (Later, in French and English, transitive verbs are in the majority.)

To sum up: At the end of the classical period, the Latin language had integrated a suffix *-isso*, which originally came from Greek and was associated in different ways with matters Greek, as a productive suffix *-izo*, which no longer was specifically associated with anything Greek. In the process, Latin acquired a new letter z and a new phoneme /z/. Also, as is common with loans, the loan had not always the same meaning in Latin as the original Greek term.

4. The development of *-ize/-ise* in English

The *-ize* suffix has been productive in English for several centuries, as is beautifully documented in the Oxford English Dictionary in the 'etymology' section of the entry for *-ize*. Probably the oldest of these words in English (most likely borrowed from French) is *baptize* that is first found in 1297 in Robert of Gloucester's *Chronicle*, with perfective prefix *y*-: 'He was ybaptized þere.' In its

---

[10] There is some doubt about the pronunciation of the Greek letter ζ at the time of the earlier loans in the 2nd century BC, when it was probably still pronounced [zd] (Allen 1978: 46). That it was represented by *-ss-* in Latin is not so strange, since Latin had no letter *z* at that time. What *-ss-* exactly stood for, we do not know for sure, though. The double sibilant could be the local pronunciation in the Greek colonies in Southern Italy (e.g. the Spartan Colony of Tarentum). Some Greek words which have -ίζω *-izɔ·* in Attic Greek were written with -ίσσω *-issɔ·* in Tarentum, like σαλπίζω/σαλπίσσω *salpízɔ·/salpíssɔ·* 'blow the trumpet' (Weise 1882: 24, also Mignot 1968: 291).

[11] Funck (1886) mentions also an onomatopoeic verb *trutisso*, which represented the sound of a swallow.

Christian meaning, it bears only a faint resemblance to the earlier meaning of Greek βαπτίζω *baptízɔ·* 'dip, plunge', which we still find in Josephus (1st century AD): ὅλον εἰς τὴν ἑαυτοῦ σφαγὴν ἐβάπτισεν τὸ ξίφος *hólon e·s tε·n heautó· sp^hagé·n ebáptisen to ksíp^hos* 'he sheathed his entire sword into his own bowels'. In Greek, the modern sense of 'baptize' is attested since the New Testament.

From the 14th century AD, English took in more and more of words in *-ize*, often borrowed through French, but also often created locally from Greek and Latin roots. It is interesting to note, that according to Vachek (1966: 24) it was through loans from French that Early Middle English acquired a phoneme /z/; until then [z] only existed as a positional allophone of the phoneme [s].

This development resulted in the present situation, where the Oxford English Dictionary distinguishes (s.v. *-ize*) six groups of words (my summary):

1. Words that have come down from Greek, or have been at some time adopted from Greek, or formed on Greek elements.

a. transitive verbs, as *baptize, anathematize, anatomize, apostrophize, canonize, catechize, cauterize, characterize, christianize, crystallize, diphthongize, harmonize, idolize, monopolize, organize, phlebotomize, stigmatize, symbolize, systematize, tantalize*

b. intransitive verbs, as *agonize, apologize, apostatize, botanize, dogmatize, geologize, philosophize, syllogize, sympathize, theorize*.

2. Words formed (in French or English) on Latin adjectives and nouns, as *authorize, colonize, fertilize, fossilize, patronize, sterilize*.

3. Words from later sources, as *foreignize, jeopardize, womanize*

4. Words formed on ethnic adjectives, as as *Americanize, Latinize*.

5. Words formed on names of persons as *Bowdlerize, galvanize, mesmerize,*

6. From names of substances, chemical and other as carbonize, oxidize, …

Remarkable is the frequent reference to 'nonce-words', i.e. ad-hoc formations like *Londonize*.

Although the Oxford English Dictionary refuses to sanction the orthographic split between words from Greek and words from Latin or French, or formed in English, it maintains some etymological distinctions although it neither becomes clear how the user would get access to the etymological information nor what it should be used for.

It is obvious that groups 2 to 6 "have nothing to do with Greek" and should thus have "remained exempt from the controversy" (O'Grady, see above), which obviously is not the case. But even for groups 1a and 1b, it is the question how many of them actually "have come down from Greek, or have been at some time adopted from Greek" (whatever the difference is) and which ones have been

"formed on Greek elements". That the suffix itself originated in Greek but has come a long way since is possible of little relevance. What has come down from Greece is definitely at most the written form (not even the pronunciation). When it comes to the meaning of the suffix, even less has been preserved. While the Greek suffix mostly turned nouns into intransitive verbs, the modern English suffix has no particular preference as to the element it attaches to and forms mostly, although far from exclusively, transitive verbs.

If one compares Greek verbs in -ίζω -*ízɔ·* with modern English verbs in -*ize/-ise*, the lack of a direct link becomes even clearer. In Kretzschmers "Rückläufiges Wörterbuch der griechischen Sprache" (1944) more than 3,000 verbs in -ίζω -*ízɔ·* are listed (and an additional more than 500 with the mediopassive ending -ίζομαι -*ízomai*). Checking the list of examples given above for 1a and 1b, we find that roughly half of them are found in Kretzschmer to which ὀστρακίζω *ostrakízɔ·* and τυραννίζω *turannízɔ·* (and probably a few more) could be added.

But as we already remarked in connection with βαπτίζω *baptízɔ·,* we notice that most words that have come down to, or reappeared in, modern English, have done so with considerably changed or specialised meaning, as we also saw in Latin with the Terentian verb *pytisso*.

To take a few examples, the verb *anathematize* means 'pronounce an anathema against, consign to Satan, curse [sc. somebody]' (Oxford English Dictionary), while Greek ἀναθεματίζω *anaᵗʰematízɔ·* had the meaning 'devote to evil, curse [intr.]'.[12]

Another case is the Greek mediopassive verb ἀγωνίζομαι *agɔ·nízomai* 'contend, struggle' (as in ἀγωνίζου τὸν καλὸν ἀγῶνα τῆς πίστεως *agɔ·nízo· ton kalón agɔ́·na tɛ·s písteɔ·s* 'Fight the good fight of faith', 1 Timothy 6,12), but modern English *agonize* has a totally different meaning, probably through Middle French *agonizer* 'struggle against death, be in the throes of death' (attested since 1392). The relationship between the Greek and the French verb is not clear either.

There is a verb διφθογγίζω *dipʰtʰongízɔ·* 'write with a diphthong' attested in two late authors from the 12ᵗʰ century AD; it clearly refers to writing and not to spoken language as in modern English phoneticians, who write about 'turning something into' (or 'form') 'a diphthong'.

While *tantalize* is 'subject to torment like that inflicted on Tantalus', τανταλίζω *tantalízɔ·* is 'wave about, tremble'.

More examples could be offered. The upshot of this is that modern English verbs in -*ize* rarely, if ever, can be considered "having come down from Greek". They have at most been created on the

---

[12] The discrepancy becomes even greater if you look at occurrences-in-context of the word: where it occurs in the LXX (Greek Old Testament), the King James Version has the translation 'destroy' from the original Hebrew: 'I will utterly destroy their cities.' (Numeri 21, 2), 'they utterly destroyed them and their cities' (Numeri 21, 3) or 'And they utterly destroyed all that was in the city' (Joshua 6, 20; about the battle of Jericho after "the walls came tumbling down").

basis of, or in analogy to, Greek elements. But for the largest part of these words, these elements had become part of the English vocabulary already when the words were formed. The link to Greek is not straight inheritance on the basis of equivalence of denotation, but the indexical meaning component 'learned'.

5. Conclusion

In this article I have argued that to invoke the origin of a word (which is only accessible to specialists) as a guideline for correct spelling seems to be utterly misguided. Without access to the history of the word, the language user in need of guidance can only trust the lexicographer to have made the right decision on etymological principles. In the case of *-ise* vs. *-ize* in English most of the words in question are not borrowed from Greek, but from French (which should favour *-ise*) or have been coined in English, which makes it very unclear which etymological principles should be applied. At the same time, it is difficult to know for the language user which words should be kept out of the controversy (like *surprise, exercise*) since they do not contain any suffix or a different one. The only sensible solution seems to be a strictly synchronic one. And while such a synchronic analysis along the lines of Luick, Mathesius and Eisenberg (as discussed above) can be used to distinguish between clearly separate layers of vocabulary (core and periphery), it cannot be used to distinguish between different parts of the peripheral vocabulary if their difference has no synchronic reflexes. Referring to language history – fascinating as the story to be told is – does not seem to lead to a sustainable solution.

References

Allen, W. Sidney 1978. *Vox Latina. A guide to the pronunciation of Classical Latin*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 45-46

Allen, W. Sidney 1987. *Vox Graeca. A guide to the pronunciation of Classical Greek*. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 56-59

Eisenberg, Peter 2011. *Das Fremdwort im Deutschen.* Berlin: De Gruyter.

Brink, Lars and Jørn Lund 1975. *Dansk rigsmål* [Standard Danish], 2 vols. Copenhagen: Gyldendal.

Fruyt, Michèle 1987. "L'emprunt suffixal du latin au grec." *BSL* 82: 227-255

Funck, Anton 1886. "Die Verba auf -issāre und -izāre." *Archiv für lateinische Lexicographie* 3: 398-442.

Kluge, Friedrich 1995. *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* (23rd edition). Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Kretzschmer, Paul 1944. *Rückläufiges Wörterbuch der griechischen Sprache*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht

Logan, Conrad T. 1937. "Noah Webster's Influence on American Spelling." *The Elementary English Review* 14(1): 18-21

Luick, Karl. 1921. *Historische Grammatik der englischen Sprache. Teil 1.* Leipzig: C. H. Tauchnitz

Mathesius, Vilém 1934, "Zur synchronischen Analyse fremden Sprachguts", *Englische Studien* 70: 21-35 [reprinted 1967 in *A Prague School Reader in Linguistics,* edited by Josef Vachek, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 398-414]

Mignot, Xavier 1968. "Un cas d'adaption phonétique: le suffixe grec -ίζω en latin." *Word* 24:290-294

O'Grady, Kate n.y.: "'Ise' or 'Ize'?" http://www.translationdirectory.com/article142.htm. Accessed March 9, 2019.

Pergnier, Maurice 1981. "A propos des emprunts du français à l'anglais." *Information grammaticale* 11:26-28

Riley, Henry Thomas 1853. *The Comedies of Terence. Literally translated into English prose with notes*. London: Henry G. Bohn

Vachek, Josef 1966. "The Integration of the Peripheral Elements into the System of Language". *Travaux linguistiques de Prague* 2: 23-37.

Webster, Noah 1789. *Dissertations on the English Language.* Boston: Isaiah Thomas

Weise, Fr. Oscar 1882. *Die griechischen Wörter im Latein.* (Preisschriften gekrönt und hrsg. von der fürstlich Jablonowski'schen Gesellschaft zu Leipzig; Nr. XV der historisch-nationalökonomischen Section) Reprint 1964, Leipzig: Zentral-Antiquariat der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik

Dictionaries

Baumgartner, Emmanuèle, and Philippe Ménard. 1996. *Dictionnaire étymologique et historique de la langue française* [French Etymological and Historical Dictionary]. Paris: Le Livre de Poche.

[Lewis and Short] Charlton T. Lewis, Charles Short 1879. *A Latin Dictionary*. New York: Harper & Brothers and Oxford: Clarendon Press

[Liddell and Scott] Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott 1968. *A Greek-English Lexicon, new (9th) edition, with a Supplement.* Oxford: Clarendon Press [1843]

[Oxford English Dictionary] on-line

[New Oxford Dictionary of English] 1998. *The new Oxford English Dictionary of English.* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press [Webster] 1991. *The New Lexicon Webster's Dictionary of the English language*. New York: Lexicon Publications