Making Sense of ‘Irregular’ Words

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These words are often categorized as “irregular”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>says</th>
<th>gone</th>
<th>they</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>been</td>
<td>said</td>
<td>what</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>does</td>
<td>there</td>
<td>move</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>goes</td>
<td>where</td>
<td>of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>done</td>
<td>their</td>
<td>is</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Let’s start with these:

- says
- been
- does

Why are these considered irregular?
What is actually driving their spelling?

The spelling of <says>

- say
- drive
- play

The spelling of <says>

- drive + s --> drives
- play + s --> plays
- say + s --> says
The spelling of <been>

I will _____.
- take
- rise
- fall
- eat
- drive
- be

past participle
- take/ + en
- rise/ + en
- fall + en
- eat + en
- drive/ + en
- be + en

I have _____.
- taken
- risen
- fallen
- eaten
- driven
- been

Many “irregular” words are complex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>do</th>
<th>ing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>go</td>
<td>es</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ne</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*bin?*
*ben?*

do + ing --> doing
do + es --> does
do + ne --> done
go + ing --> going
go + es --> goes
go + ne --> gone

See Pete Bowers’ work for more on this

Why do we consider these words irregular?

Assumption: The purpose of the spelling system is to represent pronunciation directly

speech --> text

What does the evidence show?

say + s  do + es  go + ne
be + en  do + ne  go + es

Assumption: The purpose of the spelling system is to represent pronunciation directly

speech --> text

We teach frequency of grapheme usage right away; we teach morphology later
Why do we consider these words irregular?

Assumption: The purpose of the spelling system is to represent pronunciation directly.

"...the simple fact is that the present orthography is not merely a letter-to-sound system riddled with imperfections, but, instead, a more complex and more regular relationship wherein phoneme and morpheme share leading roles."

Homophone Principle

When two or more words in English are pronounced the same but mean different things, whenever possible they will be spelled differently.

Source: Venezky, Richard L.
The American Way of Spelling, The Guilford Press, 1999
The synchronic etymology of &lt;there&gt;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>hear</th>
<th>here</th>
<th>their</th>
<th>possessive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>heard</td>
<td>there</td>
<td>them</td>
<td>object</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>herd</td>
<td>where</td>
<td>they</td>
<td>subject</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Buy one word, get lots more free”
We can **make sense of**
“irregular” words
“easily confused words”

---

**whence** | (h)wensing | *(also from whence)*
---
adverb formal or archaic
from what place or source: *whence does Congress derive this power?*

**thence** | ðensing | *(also from thence)*
---
adverb formal
from a place or source previously mentioned:
*they intended to cycle on into France and thence home via Belgium.*

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**Etymology drives grapheme choice**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>hear</th>
<th>here</th>
<th>prey</th>
<th>move</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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Clarification questions?
Multiple spellings for /ʊə/- /uː/:  
- <oo> food  
- <ew> flew  
- <u> tuba  
- <u-e> prelude  
- <ou> you  
- <ue> clue  
- <ui> juice  
- <eu> neutral  
- <o> do, to, two

We can make sense of  
“irregular” words  
“easily confused words”

IF we study them  
in relationship to words that  
share structure and meaning.  
That is how English spelling works!

of   off

ONLINE ETYMOLOGY DICTIONARY

Search:  
A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X

off (adv.)  
by c. 1270 as an emphatic form of Old English of (see of), employed in the adverbal use of that word. The prepositional meaning "away from" and the adjectival sense of "further" were not firmly fixed in this variant until 1700, but once they were they left the original "of" with the transferred and weakened sense of the word. Meaning "not working" is from 1866. Off the cuff (1840) is from the notion of speaking from notes written in haste on one's shirt cuffs. Off the rack (1869) is from 1935: off the wall "crazy" is 1968, probably from the notion of a lunatic "bouncing off the walls" or else in reference to mortar shots in squash, handball, etc.

off (v.)  
"to kill," in igo, from off (adv.). Earlier verbal senses were "to defer" (1430s), "to move off" (1882). Related: Offed.
Conventions

• Function words can be written with as few letters as phonology allows, often 2 letters:
  <as>, <in>, <on>, <go>, <by>, <I>, <a>

• Content words must be at least 3 letters:
  <egg>, <odd>, <ebb>, <awe>, <err>, <dye>

• When function and content words are homophones, content word will be longer when possible

  Source: realspelling.fr

Function and content words

“The gift that keeps on giving”
  - Gina Cooke, Linguist-Educator Exchange

What about:

is, has

No English function word contains a <z>

Why do we consider these words irregular?

• Assumption: primary purpose of spelling is to represent pronunciation directly

• What does the evidence in our writing system show us?
Written English

- Is an ordered system that is logical and understandable
- Is morphophonemic - phonology essential, and is understood within morphological framework

What are the implications for instruction?

- Start with the written form
- Systematic, direct, explicit study and instruction
- Study words with meaningful relationships - expands and deepens comprehension of words along with spelling
- Start with meaning, morphology, etymology and THEN phonology

Meaning
Morphology
Etymology
Phonology

Orthography

1. morphology
   - structure and sequencing of meaning
2. etymology
   - signifying interrelation of meaning
3. phonology
   - representing pronunciation of meaning

human thought made visible as text

source: realspelling.fr

Webinars at ida-umb.org

- Structured Word Inquiry
  - Pete Bowers, Word Works Kingston
- Insights into ‘Sight Words’
  - Gina Cooke, Linguist-Educator Exchange

Resources

Websites:
- realspelling.fr
- wordworkskingston.com
- linguisteducatorexchange.com
- etymonline.com

Teacher blogs:
- Lyn Anderson’s Early Years Blog - Beyond the Word: http://wordsinbogor.blogspot.com
- Scott Caldwell’s Grade 1 Blog (archived): https://smallhumansthinkbig.wordpress.com
- Mary Beth Steven’s Grade 5 Blog: http://mbsteven.edublogs.org
- Dan Allen’s Grade 5 Blog (archived): http://blogs.zis.ch/dallen/category/languagespellingword-study/
- Ann Whiting’s Grade 7 Blog: https://wordinquiry.wordpress.com

More info on spelling:
realspellers.org
soundliteracy.com/blogs/ - and see Sound Literacy on Facebook

Books/Study Resources
- LEX Grapheme cards, linguisteducatorexchange.com
- LEX Word Matrices and InSight Word Cards, linguisteducatorexchange.com

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Questions?