



## Distinguished Scholars Lecture Series in Linguistics

### Lecture One

# The depth of English Orthography: Lexical and Morphological Factors



#### Prof. Mark ARONOFF

Distinguished Professor of Linguistics,  
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**Date:** 2 April 2019 (Tuesday)

**Time:** 4:30 - 6:15p.m.

**Venue:** Room 220 of Fung King Hey Building,  
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

#### Abstract:

Writing systems have been classified as deep or shallow. Successful writing systems always represent some aspects of the sound of the language that they encode. A writing system that encodes nothing more is called *shallow*. Italian and Finnish are very shallow systems. A system that encodes grammatical, lexical, semantic, or morphological information is called *deep*. Chinese, for example, contains a great deal of lexical information. English has been characterized as deep on the basis of grammatical, lexical, and morphological encoding. For example, one-syllable lexical words in English are normally at least 3 letters long, while grammatical words can be shorter: *I, a, an, we* (vs. *wee*), *be* (vs. *bee*), or (vs. *ore*), *in* (vs. *inn*), etc. In recent work, Kristian Berg and I have shown that English spelling encodes morphological distinctions. For example, if an English word ends in the unstressed sound [əs] and is an adjective, it will be spelled *-ous* (e.g. *callous*). If it is not an adjective, it will be spelled otherwise, (*callus*). The spelling thus serves as a morphological cue, sometimes for phonologically identical words. It has often been noted that sets of phonologically identical but lexically distinct morphologically simple words are similarly systematically differentiated: pair, pare, pear. We will present a comprehensive study showing that cases like this most often result from a conservative spelling that has not caught up with the sound changes in the language (e.g., *cite, sight, site*). The evidence for a systematic use of spelling to differentiate monomorphemic lexical homophones that is not a result of historical accident is vanishingly small.

#### Speaker:

Mark Aronoff is Distinguished Professor of Linguistics at Stony Brook University, State University of New York. He has been on the Stony Brook faculty since receiving his Ph. D. from MIT in 1974. His research touches on almost all aspects of morphology and its relations to phonology, syntax, semantics, and psycholinguistics. He has used a wide variety of methods in his work, ranging from traditional morphological analysis of both primary and secondary data from a wide variety of languages to lexical decision experiments to dictionary-based counting. He maintains a research interest in writing systems, especially how they relate to spoken language and linguistic awareness. For the last fifteen years he has been a member of a team studying a newly-created sign language, Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language. Mark Aronoff is author or editor of ten books and more than 100 scientific articles. He has served as Editor of *Language*, the *Journal of the Linguistic Society of America*, and as President of the Society. He is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and LSA. He is a member of the United States National Commission on Language Learning.

#### Enquiries:

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