VIEWPOINT

The "ize" have it - reflections on spelling and its rules

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Abstract
A brief discussion is presented of the use of "ize" rather than "ise" in most current day journals. The need for editors and authors to be consistent in their spelling remains an issue.

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Some say there are two countries divided by a common language, but there seems to be a continuing divergence, otherwise one would not have to select English (United Kingdom) versus English (United States) on the computer keyboard. I wish to discuss the preference for "ize" rather than "ise", the former usually being assumed to be the American choice. Having been told by my copy editor at Cambridge University Press to change many "ise" words to "ize" in my manuscript of a book, I was reluctant; as an English grammar school boy (appropriate word in this context), I was born and bred on "ise". Of the many manuscripts written in UK English and US English from all over the world we deal with at BioMedES UK (www.biomedes.biz), the majority use "ize". No matter which is it, we should to be *consistent* in spelling (a point I will return to below). Therefore a word like *agonise* should not be used, and needs to be changed to *agonize,* as would many others. Being uncomfortable about it, I was worried about my book would not progress from the copy editor to the print editor. Do I have to agree with CUP's instruction or could I insist on my preferred spelling. Who is in charge, and should this ruling being imposed?

While many nouns that have now become verbs seem to attract an "ize" ending (factorize, atomize), I decided to look deeper into this matter more out of curiosity and for etymological reasons. Furthermore, the issue must be one that confronts many editors in countries using English as a lingua franca (not an English expression!) where their first language is not English. On a purely a numerical basis, is there a preference for "ise" rather than "ize"? Some feedback on this matter from EASE members would be welcome. My own research has indicated that in many countries, notably many that had been at one part of the vast British Empire, "ise" continues to be used (even Canada differs in this respect from the US to some extent).

I have about 4 different editions of the Oxford English dictionary, including the complete form in cryptic script, and about 6 dictionaries from other publishers. It was apparent that "ize" is indeed generally preferred. Checking through the OED starting with the letter "A", the first two relevant entries are *advertise* and *advise;* however, in a little box tagged to them it states categorically that "Unlike **most** verbs ending in -ise, advertise (advise) **can't** be spelled with an -ize ending" (my stresses). Going through the whole dictionary, there are hundreds of words ending in "ize", eg humanize, televize, with the "ise" version being put afterwards in parentheses as being permissible. "Most" perhaps ought to read "many", and "can't" might well be changed to "should not". The use of "can't" by the OED clearly indicates that some ruling has been agreed (oddly, Oxford University - not the Press - right on "home turf", does not agree). We should therefore ask: (i) who legitimately makes these rules - has there been a convention; (ii) (how) can they be enforced; and (iii) where do we go from here on this tetchy matter, with "ise" actually being predominant worldwide?

Further research
I then consulted Wikipedia, which discusses the issue briefly with some the clarity and depth, but the situation turned out to be even more complex. If I could get my hands on an original copy of a Shakespearean play, it seems the "izes" would have it. We have to fall back on etymology for more insight - for English and other European languages, the stems are largely Greek or Roman, and "iz(e)" was the Greek spelling that prevailed for centuries. As our Western languages evolved and different tongues influenced them, spelling started to change. So the truth of the matter is that there is absolutely no reason why most words ending in "ise" should not be spelled "ize", i.e. the spelling is not an Americani*zation*! But if "ize" can have predominance on etymological grounds, why is there any antipathy about using *advize* rather than *advise*? Why have some words been changed and others not? WiKi lists a number of words that aren't spelled with "ize" as in this pair. My perusal through 3 different dictionaries suggests there are many more (eg demise, excise, exercise, reprise, revise, and so on) sticking with "ise".

Phonetics is also involved. *Compromise* could be written as *compromize* (but isn't); *promise* would never be *promize*, since phonetically there is a clear difference. But why do we have wise (not wize - likewize, otherwize, etc.) and size (not sise)? I was sur*prise*d that this *can't* be surpri*zed*. The word "prise"- to lever something apart - has been changed in the US to "prize"; while a homophone, this spelling looks wrong in the written context. If we select "ise" endings to "ize" throughout a text using "Replace All", we end up in a mess - consider words like *raise,* even *noise* (pointed out by my copy editor).

Coming back to *consistency*, to what extent do we adopt one spelling of a word rather than the other, eg author*ize* vs

author*ise*. Editors and publishers have to adopt, or adapt, to some acceptable spelling, and, if as it seems there is no authority that can truly impose any rules, do we have to take the OED as gospel? Things could progress further; imagine what would happen if we now change "s" to "z" in endings such as "ase", "ese", "ose" and "use". Would "use" become "uze" (ie as in utilize) when used as a verb, but "use" as a noun, on phonetic grounds!?

Final remarks

This inconsistency in spelling does not, however, exonerate editors from being inconsistent in allowing both spellings of a word (eg agonise/agonize) to appear throughout a text, although the reader would not be confu*se*d (would probably not even notice). In the final analysis, does it really matter? In answer to this question, it is usually usage that determines the choice (as long a choice might exist). Languages are fluid and constantly evolving. However, our dictionaries do seemingly keep us appraized (sorry, appraised) of these matters. But "*rulings*" (such as I have been given by CUP on the basis of it preference) *still need a rational basis,* and as in this case we need to know who makes them. The evidence is that, as of today, there *is no* rational basis*, as I have been advized (sorry again, *advised* - even using in UK English my laptop is making the decisions for me). Do not take this essay too seriously; it has been fun looking deeper into our versatile language (UK English).

*[Note added in proof]:
Since submission I have found Simon Horobin's book takes up this matter of who makes the rules in some detail. It is a complicated because much depends on bodies which have come together to try to maintain consistency and to decide whether new words can be adopted in dictionaries, citing Samuel Johnson, L'Académie Française, OED, Webster and even The Royal Society. In the end it is *usage that rules.* (Simon Horobin. How English became English - a Short History of a Global Language. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016. ISBN 978-0-19-875427-5).

Competing interests

The author has declared no competing interests.