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PRESENT-DAY <w>, ITS FORM AND FUNCTIONS IN PRESENT-DAY ENGLISH

Josef Vachek

Three years ago we commented in the present series (Vachek 1990. 11-20) on the functions and forms of the graphemes <y> and <h> in the written form of Present-Day English (further on, PDE). The two graphemes appear quite isolated functionally in the graphemic system of PDE because the phonemes originally represented by them were either totally lost or so radically transformed that the resulting phonemic values are now very distant from those which they originally possessed. One can thus justly characterize them as peripheral elements of the graphemic system of PDE. Still, as we have demonstrated in the paper quoted above, the established peripheral status of <y> and <h> was not to result in their cancellation: the two graphemes were to uphold in the graphemic system of PDE rather important functional parts. The price they had to pay for their retention in the graphemic system was their functional revaluation; in other words, their establishment of new links with some other elements of the graphemic system of PDE (for further particulars the reader may be referred to our above-quoted paper).

In the present paper we want to turn our attention to another graphemic item of PDE presenting some particular features, the grapheme <w>. However, its particular place in the written norm of PDE is rather different from those analysed in our preceding paper. Unlike them, the grapheme <w> as a rule has never lacked its phonemic counterpart /w/, and in addition it mostly has its particular phonetic implementation of the phoneme corresponding to the said grapheme: its characteristic phonetic quality is, as a rule, the bilabial consonant whose articulatory formation is in some way closely similar to that of the vocalic sound [u]. From it the bilabial consonant [w] differs mainly in its inability to function as the bearer of the syllable (one might, indeed, transcribe it in many situations as [u]).

In the graphemic system of PDE the grapheme <w> is rather closely related to <v>, whose phonemic counterpart is /v/. The phonetic implementation of the latter, however, very clearly differs from that of /w/. Unlike the last mentioned, it is not articulated as a bilabial but as a labiodental sound (roughly the same as the /v/ of PDGerman, of PDFrench

and, last but not least, of PDCzech). One of the main tasks of the analysis of <w> in all these languages will necessarily be the functional comparison of the two graphemes <w> and <v> in their written norms.

In our work we analysed, first of all, PDE written words beginning in <w-> as well as those beginning in <v->, and then made a comparable analysis of the materials found in other linguistic communities. Since we are interested, above all, in the situation in PDE we analysed first of all the said lexical material in that language. On the basis of the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1978) one finds that the PDE words beginning in <w-> appear to belong to a stylistic zone rather distinctly differentiated from those beginning in <v->. While the former more or less clearly represent expressions ranking as items of everyday word-stock, the items found in the latter group, in conformity with their prevaillingly Norman or Latin origin, generally tend to be items of a different stylistic category, belonging to a more refined zone of the PDE word-stock. In PDCzech, however, one finds, on the basis of an authoritative dictionary of Standard Czech (Filipec 1978), that the items beginning in <w-> are very distinctly stamped as loans taken from some other language (mostly from PDE). The interesting thing is that in PDFrench one discovers an analogous relation to the one just found in Czech: there, too, grapheme <w-> ranks as a characteristic feature of a loanword, mostly characterizing the lexical item as taken over from German or English, while the domestic lexemes start, as a rule, with the initial grapheme <v->.

In PDGerman the situation is not as simple as in the languages discussed here so far because in addition to <w> with its phonemic partner /v/ there also exists the grapheme <v> whose phonemic partner is /f/; besides, there is also an important phonetic difference in the implementation of /v/ in German and English. While in the latter the grapheme <w>, phonemically /w/, is regularly phonetically implemented with a bilabial sound, in the former language the implementation of both /v/ and /f/ is labiodental. Another complication of this sphere in PDGerman is also, of course, the existence of the grapheme <v->.

Finally, there is one particular formal feature that concerns both PDE and PDGerman: the technical term 'double u', meaning in fact 'double v' (in PDGerman the correspondig term is not very common – sometimes one may find the expression *Doppel-We* but it is used more in the domain of practical orthography than in that of the theory of written language). However trifling this terminological item may appear, it may be pinpointed here because its analysis may throw some light on the functional aspects of the given grapheme both in English and in German and even on the gradual development of its functional specificity.

In tracing the history of registration of the graphemic ancestor of the PDE (and even of the PDGerman) grapheme <w>, one must go back as far as the furthestmost stage provided in the earliest documents of the two languages – to the runic letter which in the Germanistic tradition is usually termed 'wen' (cf. Schauflier 1912, Mossé 1945). The runic script was later replaced by the ordinary letters of the medieval alphabet,

based on alphabetical symbols drawn from Latin. But, as is well known, even in Latin the oldest inscriptions originally used one and the same grapheme <v> both for the vowel /u/ and for the bilabial consonant /v/ (as is sometimes still done in modern times if there is an intention to make the text look more archaic). This ancient Latin practice, however, came up against the need to distinguish the vocalic and the consonantal implementation of the grapheme <V>. In such situations, medieval scribes sometimes indicated the vocalic value of the grapheme <V> by doubling it, i. e. by <VV>, referring thus both to the labial implementation of the consonant and to the articulation more or less identical with that of the vocalic /u/.

Such an explanation of the graphical practice appears fitting especially for those geographical areas in which the bilabial implementation of the phoneme /v/ was still preserved: one is informed about them in *Grand Larousse Encyclopédique*, vol. 10, s. v. *W*, which says that 'la double v' was created at the beginning of the Middle Ages for putting down the Germanic labial semiconsonant [w], which no longer existed in the Romance languages (in which the Latin [w] had been changed into a labiodental sound). In French, however, the said [w] was only found in northern and eastern dialects and in Anglo-Norman; in the other regions one finds it only in proper names and in loans accepted from German or from English. In the former (as in *Wagram*, *wolfram*) the sound is implemented as labiodental [v], while in the latter it preserves its bilabial quality. The data given by *Larousse* confirm our deduction that the Norman practice of putting down the bilabial [w] must have also influenced the Norman scribes when they copied not only Norman but also domestic pre-Conquest documents and used for this purpose the digraph <uu>, fairly well known to them from their own Anglo-Norman practice.

However, according to the evidence attested by J. and E. M. Wrights (1923, § 21), this practice was implemented only gradually because the OE rune wen 'continued to be used until the end of the thirteenth century' (i. e., before the new Anglo-Norman scribal practice could assert itself). Besides the digraph <uu> one can also find in ME texts the grapheme <w>, which was to become, later on, the uniform way of registering the bilabially implemented /w/. The new symbol of course arose through the fusion of /v/ plus /v/ known from Latin while the name of that new symbol was automatically transferred from the digraph <uu> and has been used in the form 'double u' ever since.

The graphical fusion of the graphemes <u> plus <u> was of course also accepted by the scribes of the OHigh German community, which also replaced the old runic symbol, using for it the digrapheme <uu>, alternating with <u> (cf. Braune 1912.88; Schaussler 1912.20), and later replaced by <w> (alongside of which there also existed the grapheme <v>, corresponding to the voiceless /f/-phoneme).

To go back now to the functioning of the grapheme <w> in PDE one should not omit to point out that its position within the central area of

the PDE written norm is very effectively underlined by the existence of a small but semantically very important group of short but very frequent expressions functioning as interrogative and/or relative words, all of which are graphically introduced by the digrapheme <wh>, usually corresponding to the phoneme /w/ in the spoken norm of PDE (and in some of its varieties to its voiceless implementation [ʍ]). An exceptional spoken partner of <wh> is /h/ in the pronominal form written <who> (phonemically /hu:/); a very special exceptional case is the very strongly emotionally coloured noun *whore* (phonemically /hɔ:/) (for a more detailed commentary on such irregular correspondences see Vachek 1976.22ff). Besides this graphemic combination one can of course find in PDE combinations of <w> with the preceding vocalic grapheme (the most frequently occurring combinations being <aw>, <ew>, <ow>, corresponding in spoken phonemic contexts to long or diphthongal vocalic phonemes; in the written utterances one finds these graphemic groups of <Vocal + W> especially before the following grapheme <n> and in word-final positions. It has been pointed out (see J. and E. M. Wrights 1924, §12ff.) that this practice was often motivated by the need for greater legibility of the written words; this motivation fully conforms with the task of written utterances to speak quickly and distinctly to the eyes (formulated as early as 1909 by the Czech phonetician Antonín Frinta, quoted in this series by Vachek 1990.12).

In commenting, once again, on the stylistic differentiation of some items of the written norms (mentioned here already in connection with the analysis of the lexical materials of PDE as well as of PDFrench), one should be mindful of the fact that the established differences must not only be regarded as language specific for the written norm of the examined language community but that, in addition to this, such stylistic evaluations may undergo important changes in the course of the community's history (political as well as cultural). For example, in making a stylistic evaluation of PDPolish, one notes that the grapheme <w> reflecting the spoken phoneme /v/ has been used and evaluated as a native item for a number of centuries, in PDCzech, on the other hand, its very rare occurrence in some (more or less jocular) contexts ranks it as quite exceptional, with some most exceptional motivation. The change of evaluation in the Czech written norm occurred, in fact, in the middle of the nineteenth century and was at that time motivated by the atmosphere of the national revival, which dominated the political and cultural life of the period. (One may also note here the curious fact that the Polish use of the grapheme <w> must have been adopted by the Polish scribes of the Middle Ages in imitation of the Czech orthographical practice of the period and was to remain, in this particular point, unaffected by the nationalistic atmosphere of the last century. More information on the change of status of the Czech grapheme <w> and its replacement by <v> in the middle of the nineteenth century in connection with the political and cultural atmosphere of the Czech linguistic community of that period can be found, again, in Vachek 1990,14-15).

In concluding these however scattered remarks on the form and functional evaluation of the grapheme <w> in PDE and the written norms of some other European languages, one is certainly entitled to assert that its formal and functional analysis as well as the tracing of its development have justified our earlier conviction (Vachek 1990.18) that further research in the field of the written norm of Present-Day English may be expected to discover further interesting results in the given field of research.

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