The 'i before e' rule and its exceptions

These paragraphs are adapted from Chapter 24 of my *Spell it Out* (2015).

The original linguistic point was a sensible one: the norm is indeed '*i* before *e*'. The historical processes we've been talking about in this book have resulted in hundreds of words which are spelled with *ie* – not only everyday words, but many names of people, place, and objects. The usual sound that *ie* represents is /i:/, as we see and hear in *achieve, believe, grieve, retrieve, field, grief, thief, belief, piece, shriek, diesel, genie, Brie, Gielgud*, and many more. Sometimes other sounds are represented, such as the /I@/ of *alien, audience*, and *spaniel* or the /aI/ of *pie, die*, and *lie*. In a few cases the two letters each represent a sound – /aI@/ in *client, quiet, science*, and *anxiety*, or /i:e/ in *siesta, serviette, concierge*, and *Vienna*. In *view, lieu*, and *adieu*, the sound is /ju:/. And in the solitary case of *friend*, it is /e/. But *ie* = /i:/ is undoubtedly the norm.

And this is the point to note if we were trying to make the rule work. If we listen to the way we say the main class of so-called 'exceptions' to the rule, we notice something straight away. These too are all pronounced /i:/: *deceive, perceive, ceiling, conceit, conceive, receipt*, and *receive*, along with all their derived forms (*conceiving, misconceive*, etc.). At the very least, the rule would have to be '*i* before *e* except after *c*, when the spelling represents /i:/'). But that's not enough to handle all the exceptions.

The *ie* visual pattern was reinforced when this spelling appeared as the result of something going on in English grammar. Nouns ending in *y* become *ies* in the plural (*party > parties*); verbs ending in *y* become *ies* in the third person and *ied* in the past tense (*cry > cries, cried*); adjectives ending in *y* change their form in the comparative and superlative (*happy, happier, happiest*). This means that an *ie* spelling is never very far away in a piece of writing.

The important thing to note about suffixes is that they are added to words on the basis of the meaning people want to express. The letter the words happen to end with is a side-issue. So we form the plural of *baby, body, lily, lorry, daisy*, and so on by simply changing the *y* to *ies*, regardless of the fact that these words have respectively a preceding *b, d, l, r*, and *s*. And if the noun happens to end in *c* before the *y*, then that will stay too - hence *agencies, policies, lunacies, vacancies, fallacies, democracies*, and many more. There are also a few adjectives and verbs in the same group (*racier, pricier, juciest, fancied...*). So, if we wanted to keep the rule, we would have to add something like '*i* before *e* except after *c*, unless that *c* appears before an ending which shows a change in the form of a noun, verb, or adjective'.

The same principle obtains when we build up words by adding a suffix, as in *consist, consistent, consistently, consistence, consistency...* Here, the root of the word happens to end in a *t*. But what if it ends in a *ce*, as in *suffice*? Now we get *sufficient, sufficiency, sufficience, sufficiently...* And when we think of all the words that have these endings after *c*, we can see that quite a large number of 'exceptions' are involved: *ancient, efficiency, conscience, proficient...* So now we would have to add to the rule something like '*i* before *e* except after *c*, unless that *c* appears before an ending which builds up a larger word'.

We can now turn to the other big group of 'exceptions' – those where we get *ei* without a preceding *c*. These are a small group by comparison with those in *ie*. Most of them show the influence of French spelling, which the scribes kept when the words were borrowed into English in the Middle Ages. There was some variation at the time between *ei* and *ai* (or *ey* and *ay*) spellings for these words, which lasted for a

while before the *ei* form prevailed. That's why we have *forfeit* (French spelling *forfait*), *heinous* (*haineux*), *leisure* (*leisure*), *seize* (*seisir*), *vein* (*veine*), *veil* (*veile*), *beige* (*beige*), *rein* (*rein*), *heir* (*heir*), and *reign* (*reigne*). *Reign* is particularly interesting, as it seems to have been the model for *sovereign* (*souverein*) – which incidentally picked up its *g* in the fifteenth century – and *foreign* (*forain*), which added its *g* in the sixteenth. In modern times, we see French influence again in several scientific terms, such as *codeine* and *protein*.

If we are aware of how French spelling affected English, we could argue that none of these examples are really exceptions after all. But there's no arguing that for *weird*, which is indeed weird. It was *wyrd* in Old English, where it meant 'fate' or 'destiny'. It emerges in Middle English especially as an adjective in the phrase *weird sisters*, where it refers to women who can control human destiny – that is, the Fates, and is especially well known in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1.3.31), where the three witches describe themselves in that way:

The Weird Sisters, hand in hand,
Posters of the sea and land,
Thus do go, about, about...

(In this context we have to remember to ignore the modern meaning of 'odd' for *weird*, which is a nineteenth-century development.) Typical Middle English spellings are *wird* and *werd*. The first sign of an *ie* is in the sixteenth century, where we find both *weird* and *wierd*, especially in texts coming from Scotland. It looks as if the unusual spelling of *weird* is an example of Scottish influence. And *weird* may have influenced the spelling of *weir*, originally spelled with such forms as *wer, weer*, and *wear*. An *i* appears in the sixteenth century, and stays.

Either and *neither* are two more exceptions. The *i* seems to have replaced a *y*, which earlier had replaced an Old English yogh. The pronunciation of these words varies today: some people say 'ee-ther' and some say 'eye-ther' (as in the Gershwins' song, 'Let's call the whole thing off'), and this variation goes back centuries. The *ei* spelling was a good representation of the 'ee' pronunciation, given its frequent use in other /i:/ words at the time. *Ai* was also a common Middle English spelling, presumably reflecting an 'eye' pronunciation, but as *ai* and *ei* were often used as alternative spellings (as Mulcaster noted), *ei* would certainly have come out on top. An additional push would again have come from Scotland, where the *ei* spellings were preferred in any case.

Heifer – *heahfore* in Old English (a 'high-goer', though why this should apply to heifers isn't at all obvious) – had a variety of spellings in Middle English, one of which was *ei*. It seems to have been the influence of the Bible that led to its popularity, in which it appears several times. It was *heyffer* in the translations by William Tyndale and the Bishops' Bible, and *heifer* in the Geneva and Douai-Rheims versions. Once the King James translators settled on it, its future was assured.

What about *eight*, along with *eighty, eighteenth*, etc.? It's an important Old English word, as all numerals are, appearing in such spellings as *ahta* and *eahta*. The Middle English equivalents included *eyȝte*, and the letter yogh was replaced by *gh* in due course. Here too, Bible translations probably hastened its acceptance. It is spelled *eight* in Coverdale's translation (1535), and soon became the norm.

The remaining *ei* words are all easy to explain. Many are the result of an *e* occurring before a suffix beginning with *i*, along the same lines as in the *ie* examples above. We find *atheism, atheist, deify, nucleic, cuneiform*, and a few more. Prefixes

ending in *e* before a word beginning with *i* are illustrated by *reinforce* and *pre-install*. In *albeit*, each of the letters is pronounced separately. Foreign spellings (and sometimes pronunciations) have been quietly introduced in such loanwords as *reveille, Eid*, and *rotweiler*, as well as in such names as *Heidi* and *Rheims*.

The total number of *ei* spellings is small in everyday language. There are rather more in the vocabulary of science and technology, through such coinages as *narceine, codeine, buddleia, batoidei, clupeiformes*, and *ploceinae*. But even here we are talking about only a few dozen words, compared with the hundreds where '*i* before *e*' is the norm.

So, it's not that the various *ie* and *ei* spellings don't have an explanation. They do. But the factors are too great to reduce to a simple rule.