

Why The English Language Is So Hard To Learn...

[Bear with me. I'll tie this into matchcovers somehow!]

February's Trans Canada bulletin ran a funny little piece on "Why the English Language Is So Hard To Learn," which touches on what I happen to teach...so, I present the following, which has nothing to do with the hobby, but the real reasons why the language is so difficult to learn are interesting...

The English language, as we know it, didn't start developing until 1066. That's when the Normans (from the other side of the English Channel) invaded, conquered, and then settled down to rule the Anglo-Saxons. They mixed, and so did the languages. People on each side began borrowing words from the other. Now, the Anglo-Saxon language is classified as 'guttural [*no slight intended to all of our Anglo-Saxon readers*]' because so many of the sounds necessary to speak it originated from way down in the throat. The Norman language, meanwhile, was a 'nasal' language, because so many of the sounds necessary to speak it originated from the nasal passages. When the two mixed—it was chaos!

For example, we have an entire group of words ending in "gh" ('enough,' 'trough,' 'laugh,' etc.). Those were good old Anglo-Saxon words, and the 'gh' sound in Anglo-Saxon was one of the harsh, guttural sounds. The Normans adopted these words, but it was simply too hard and too foreign for them to pronounce that 'gh' sound...so, they adopted the Anglo-Saxon spelling, but changed the pronunciation to suit their Norman sensibilities = the 'gh' sound in those words were then pronounced as an 'f'. Thus, today we use these Anglo-Saxon words, but with the Norman pronunciation. There are many other such examples. But, pronunciation wasn't the only factor. Spelling was another. The Normans also adopted a bunch of Anglo-Saxon words that started in 's' ('sity,' 'senter,' etc), for example, but in the Norman language that 's' sound was always written with a 'c'. Thus, today we have these Anglo-Saxon words, but with the Norman spelling. This type of 'fusion' was very common.

We can't blame it all on the Normans and Anglo-Saxons, though. Some of the words we use today are just plain errors that have become the norm. The most famous example is 'island'. There's not a school kid in America that hasn't wondered, "What in the world is that 's' doing in there?" Well, it's a mistake! There was a Medieval scholar who, as a hobby, liked to trace the origin of words. He took a current word of his day, the Anglo-Saxon 'iland' and traced it to the earlier Latin word, 'insula'. Thereafter, whenever he wrote the word, he always spelled it 'island' as a reminder of its origins. Later, when dictionaries were invented (to help type-setters spell words uniformly, by the way), his spelling of the word was the one that was included. Later researchers, though, found that 'iland' actually came from the earlier Anglo-Saxon word, 'ea-land' (meaning 'water lily')...so the 's' is a mistake. Another was spelling Anglo-Saxon words such as 'gost,' 'gastly,' etc. as 'ghost,' 'ghastly,' and so forth. The early German printers were responsible for that. For a hundred years after Guttenberg invented the printing press, the only place you could get your manuscript printed was in Germany. When those German printers saw English manuscripts with the 'g' sound in the beginning, they typeset those words with 'gh,' since that's how they were spelled in German....and that's the way we spell them today.

Of course, changes in the language continue to take place all the time. The Pilgrims brought over English words such as 'school' and 'schedule,' for example, which they pronounced with a soft 's-h-h-h' sound, as the spelling would indicate. But, it wasn't long before their descendents had changed that 'sch' to an 'sk' sound...and on and on...

Today, these and a host of other language idiosyncrasies are called "Modern English." ...and that's why it's sometimes difficult to learn how to read American matchcovers! [*ha ha!*]