

The Dieresis in Sweet Briar's Historical Documents

Sarah W. Collins
History of the English Language
Independent Project
11.18.02

For this project, I focused on researching the changes in written language throughout the 20th century using admissions materials here at Sweet Briar. I soon learned that these materials were not as available as I had first assumed. I turned to yearbooks, but I found little concrete examples of changes in the actual spelling or grammar of English. Finally, I discovered that the language used in the Sweet Briar academic catalogs and student handbooks held several examples of specific changes in language over time. I used catalogs from 1910 to the present and focused primarily on those up to 1950 as these showed the most specific evidence of the change in written language. I focused on student handbooks from 1917 to the 1940's.

It was obvious that not a great deal in terms of format changed from catalog to catalog and this was particularly helpful because the same descriptions of courses and areas of knowledge were used year after year. I do believe that because the school most likely used the same publisher for decades at a time, this does play a factor in the timeliness of these changes. However, most of these changes occurred within the same period: from the late 1920's to the early 1940's. In one case, the same word was actually spelled two different ways on the same page, and in the next year's catalog the change had been completed.

I have focused on the orthographical changes in words exhibiting certain qualities and will provide descriptions and offer quotes that illustrate these changes. I have copied some examples from the actual catalogs and will refer to them throughout.

2

The course descriptions in the academic catalogs were obviously 'recycled' from year to year with only a few changes made between editions, much like our most recent catalogs. There were obvious changes in format through the decades, and most seemed to come about because of a change in printing. The change in orthography during this time was probably as much a result of a modernized typeset, as it was a sign of the changes to the written language.

The most interesting features I found were within the word zoology and cooperation. The word zoölogy was found repeatedly in the academic catalog and coöperation was found in the student handbooks. The marking above the second double vowel appears, at first, to be an umlaut which would symbolize a mutation in vowel sound to the front of the mouth. However, this mark is more accurately defined as a dieresis. The dieresis is a diacritical mark from the Greek 'diairein' meaning to divide (Encyclopaedia Britannica). Gideon O. Burton of Brigham Young University defines dieresis as "dividing one syllable into two (especially the pronunciation of two contiguous vowels)." As a symbol, it may have been acquired by the vast amount of French vocabulary present in English. The symbol is presently used in French as well as Spanish.

The dieresis used in the term zoölogy was once a helpful orthographic feature but has since disappeared because of the simplification of written English. This simplification over time can be illustrated by a few examples from the Sweet Briar College Student Handbooks from 1917 to 1932. The opening words of the handbook, a message from returning students to entering first years presented the term.

“To the old students, we extend the greeting of acquaintanceship. It is a great joy to renew our friendship sealed in Alma Mater’s hall. But let us make our friendship this year such a living vital thing that in no way will we lose anything from the true glory of friendship, *coöperation* with one another in all that is big and fine and noble”

-Sweet Briar Student Handbook 1917-1918

Here the dieresis is present and can be found in the 1926-1927 handbook as well. “It is your spirit and *coöperation* which will help uphold the ideals and standards of the college.” In the 1931-1932 handbook a different spelling altogether appears.

“To you who are entering college, we send this word of welcome. Sweet Briar looks to you for loyalty to the ideals for which she stands, and for co-operation and interest in every part of your college life”

-Sweet Briar Student Handbook 1931-1932

This hyphenation of the word seems to take on the intermediate phase of this change in orthography, when typists may have been unsure of the correct spelling themselves. The hyphen served the similar purpose of making the distinction between the separation of the double vowel and the lengthening of it. The Columbia Guide to

Standard American English defines the dieresis and as perfect illustration to the orthographical changes present in Sweet Briar's handbooks, uses a familiar example and offers some reasoning for such a change in orthography over time. "Today American editors frequently specify a hyphen rather than a dieresis in some words (co-opt instead of coöpt) that might otherwise confuse; in others, they often drop the dieresis and let context distinguish." It seemed as though no one was quite ready to let this feature of written language go for fear that the word may be mispronounced without some diacritical mark to guide the reader in the right direction. The hyphen emerged immediately after the dieresis was dropped. Eventually the hyphen was dropped altogether, giving us the more streamlined English language in print.

Zoology is represented in similar ways in the academic catalogs but is more short-lived than cooperation. Used in the body of the academic text, zoölogy's dieresis was almost completely eliminated by 1921. In one case, the word was written both with and without the orthographical mutation. The transition in written language is evident on these pages and marks the changes happening in orthography at this point in Modern English. For terms like coöperation (found in one of the earliest student handbooks) and zoölogy, the diacritical symbol known as the diaeresis is now implied but nearly forgotten.

Other symbols were found throughout the catalogs. The Æ in Ædipus and the æ in Cæsar and mediæval are perfect examples of orthographic symbols that were once thought to be necessary, a bit fashionable and possibly representing a certain institution's intellectual capacity. These symbols, unlike the dieresis, did not perform such a specific duty in the orthography of the word. They were not to be taken as literally as the dieresis,

but it seemed as if they acted more as residual characters. In other words, the function of these words did not necessarily help pronounce the word. Their presence was more for appearance than for orthographical directions. With the simplification of English as a written language, the phonemic features represented by these diacritical marks were incorporated into the verbal language and pronunciation of the language and thus became unnecessary.

While the presence or absence of two small dots above a letter may seem trivial, the bigger picture of evolving language places the dropping of the dieresis in historical context. When historians look back at this stage in Late Modern English and discuss the changes within the language, this will provide a valuable clue that may help linguists trace the changes that have created the language that will be spoken centuries into the future.

Bibliography

Burton, Gideon O. "Silva Rhetoricae". 5 November 2002, Brigham Young University. 8 November 2002. <rhetoric.byu.edu>.

Encyclopaedia Britannica. 8 November 2002. <www.britannica.com>.

Sweet Briar Student Handbooks, 1917-1950. Located in Archives, Cochran Library

Sweet Briar Academic Catalogs, 1908-1950. Located in Archives, Cochran Library

Wilson, Kenneth G. The Columbia Guide to Standard American English. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

"el pledge"
Sarah W. Collins
11.18.02

Excerpts from Sweet Briar Student Handbooks

COLLEGE CALENDAR

1919

Sept. 15. Monday—Examinations for entrance.
Sept. 16. Tuesday, Registration of new students.
Sept. 17. Wednesday—Registration of old students.
Sept. 18—Thursday—First semester begins.
Oct. 24. Friday—Founder's Day.
Nov. 27. Thursday—Thanksgiving Day, a holiday.
Dec. 19. Friday—Christmas vacation begins.

1920

Jan. 7. Wednesday—The college re-opens at 8:40 A. M. Lectures and class work begin.
Jan. 26. Monday—Mid-year examinations begin.
Feb. 2. Monday—Second semester begins.
Mar. 26. Friday—Spring vacation begins.
April 6. Tuesday—College re-opens at 8:40 A. M.
May 22. Saturday—Final examinations begin.
May 30. Sunday—Baccalaureate sermon.
June 1. Tuesday—Eleventh Annual Commencement.

To the Incoming Student

Welcome to Sweet Briar! We old girls want you to know how glad we are you have decided to come to our Alma Mater. Sweet Briar is very dear to us and our sincerest wish is that you will be as happy here as we have been. We want you to find here a real spirit of friendliness. We need your new ideas, your co-operation in working out all our plans, and above all, we need your friendship. We are going to help you find your place here, for there is a place for each one of you.

Just a word of counsel. It is our desire to make Sweet Briar correspond to your finest ideas of what a college should be, but that is up to you, too. Stick to the very highest ideals you have and don't be afraid to let other people know just what they are. Know also that the blue triangle, which stands for the Y. W. O. A., wants to mean to you what the red triangle of the Y. M. O. A. has meant to boys in the army and navy. Count on us and we'll stand by you—ready to help at every turn.

Excerpts from Sweet Briar Student Handbooks

CALENDAR

1924

Sept. 16 and 17, Tuesday and Wednesday—Registration of students and examinations for entrance 9:00-12:30, 1:30-4:00.
Sept. 18, Thursday—First semester begins.
Oct. 23, Thursday—Annual Meeting of the Trustees.
Oct. 24, Friday—Founders' Day.
Nov. 27, Thursday—Thanksgiving Day. A holiday.
Dec. 19, Friday—Christmas vacation begins at 11:30 a. m.

1925

Jan. 6, Tuesday—The college reopens at 8:40 a. m.
Jan. 26, Monday—Semester examinations begin.
Feb. 2, Monday—Second semester begins.
March 20, Friday—Spring vacation begins at 6 p. m.
March 30, Monday—College reopens at 8:40 a. m.
May 16, Saturday—Senior examinations begin.
May 25, Monday—Final examinations begin.
May 31, Sunday—Baccalaureate Sermon.
June 1, Monday—Annual Meeting of Alumnae.
June 2, Tuesday—Sixteenth Annual Convocation.

TO THE NEW GIRLS

We are welcoming the Freshman Class of 1928! We are glad to have each one of you at Sweet Briar. It is your spirit and your cooperation which will help uphold the ideals and standards of the College. Since you are going to be a large part of it, we want you to feel that Sweet Briar belongs to the students and that only by our loyalty and love for it, our interest in its welfare and our earnest purpose to take and use the best that it can give us, will its highest aims be accomplished. You can do your part by giving your chosen college the best you have to give and by being prepared to enjoy your life here to the fullest by making it worth while. Sweet Briar must be proud of having every one of you.

Sweet Briar, Sweet Briar, flower fair,
The rose that on your crest you wear
Shall never fade, but always bear
Thy beauty, O Sweet Briar!

Sweet Briar, Sweet Briar, thy columns
white
Shine on thy hills a beacon light
Of truth, to burn with radiance bright
Forever, O, Sweet Briar!

Sweet Briar, Sweet Briar, we sing to
thee,
May thy foundations ever be
Strong as thy hills, thy purity
That of thy rose, Sweet Briar!

Excerpts from Sweet Briar Student Handbooks

TO THE NEW GIRLS

To you who are entering college, we send this word of welcome. Sweet Briar looks to you for loyalty to the ideals for which she stands, and for co-operation and interest in every part of your college life. Come prepared to give to Sweet Briar the best that is in you. Class of '35, she must be proud of you!