SAN ANTONIO TALK

I am wondering why GHOST is spelled with GH. I do not know the linguistic background. Can you help? Kris West

Historical linguists can trace most European languages to a single common language, Indo-European. As Indo-European grew into separate dialects and then eleven separate languages, certain sound changes occurred. Many of those changes centered on the Indo-European sound that historical linguists write as GH. As near as we can tell that GH sounded something like the breathy [gh] in our modern word UGH.

All of the Germanic dialects of Indo-European started pronouncing [gh] as a [g] sound. The Old English dialect of Germanic adopted the word *gaast* to mean "a spirit."

So, for starters, the Indo-European word started out with a GH spelling, but the Old English folk changed the GH to a simple G.

What was the Indo-European root word? Hmm. Nothing is simple in tracing spelling conventions and sound changes. The truth is that we don't know the Indo-European root word for Old English *gaast*. The most obvious root, *ghosti*, became the Old English word *gast*, our modern English word *guest*.

We do know some other Old English words and their Indo-European roots: *gall* came from *ghol*, *get* came from *ghed*, and *goat* came from *ghaido*, for example. But we don't know the original form of *gaast*.

What's more important, we still have not answered our original question. We did explain that our modern word *ghost* came from the

Old English word *gaast*. OK. *Gaast*, then, came from some unknown Indo-European word that began with GH. So? So then why did the GH disappear and come back again?

Well, the GH originally disappeared because the Old English scribes wanted the spelling to reflect sound. They chose not to write *ghaast*; instead they chose *gaast*.

The GH started to come back during the Middle English times. Their scribes experimented a lot with some Celtic letters not found in the Roman alphabet. One of those symbols was something called a yogh; it looked a bit like the number 3. Those scribes just started spelling lots of old words with the 3, instead of the G. *Gaast*, then, became *3aast*.

Well, not exactly. You see another sound change had taken place between Old and Middle English. This time several of the vowels had changed. And that long [aa] sound had become [o]. So our Middle English spelling for "spirit" really became *3ost*.

Step two in the return of the GH occurred in modern English. The Roman Alphabet regained favor among scribes. All of the experimental symbols disappeared: lost was the cute little 3 for [g]. But did the modern scribes return to the G spelling? Are you kidding? We modern types decided to return to the Indo-European GH. Thus, Old English *gaast* became Middle English *3ost* and then became Modern English *ghost*.

And that was a *gaastliic*, *3astly*, *ghastly* question to ask.

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3/12/95