

Different spellings and questions of house style...

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The columns you see in this space on Monday mornings don't always appear word-for-word as I've written them. That's a fact of newspaper life. The EDP, like other newspapers, has a 'house style' with the aim of ensuring consistency of spelling and usage across its pages, and they sometimes amend what journalists and contributors write to fit in with this style.

This is a very interesting process from a linguistic point of view. For example, I always write "medieval". This was how I learnt to spell the word at school. The EDP prefers the more typically American spelling "medieval" and often, though not always, changes my spelling to fit in with their style. That's up to my sub-editors, and I have no strong objection, though I really can't see why they bother.

But sometimes changes due to house style affect not just the spelling of a word but its pronunciation. Changing the name of the well-known eastern European language Rumanian to Romanian – the spelling introduced by the dictator Ceausescu to stress his nation's supposed Roman heritage – implies a different pronunciation of the word.

So does changing my spelling "learnt" to



■ Ponies in the New Forest: The distinction between 'learned' and 'learnt' in English dates back almost as far back as the forest's creation. Picture: PA

"learned". This happened recently, ironically enough in a column I wrote about the Americanisation of British English. I say "ironically" because learned is much more strongly associated with American English, learnt with British.

Verbs like learn, dream, burn, lean, spell have two different past-tense forms. You can either say learnt, dreamt, burnt, leant, spelt; or you can use the more regular and more typically American forms learned, dreamed, burned, leaned, spelled. I normally use the forms with -t myself, but I explain to my Norwegian students that the forms with -ed are perfectly correct, and generally favoured by Americans.

When you get variability like this in a

language, it's often a sign that a change has taken place, with the alternation being between older and newer forms. In this case that's certainly true. Learned is the older version – Anglo-Saxon used past-tense endings with -d in these verbs – and learnt is new. But when I say "new", this is a rather special use of the concept of innovation. The new past-tense forms ending in -t started appearing in verbs like these in the 11th century! Like the New Forest, the new verb forms are a thousand years old. The alternation between learnt and learned has been going on for a millennium.

I must ask why Americans – and the EDP – favour the older form, while most British people favour the newer.