THE SPELLING OF VERBS ENDING IN -ISE OR -IZE

1. The -ize has it!*

by H. Macfarlane

There are few points in written English as contentious as the use of the verbal suffixes -ize and -ise. Preference for the one or other verb ending is defended vociferously, even acrimoniously, but the defenders seldom use their preference consistently, and in the same piece of work 'organize' rubs shoulders with 'organise', 'dramatize' with 'dramatise', 'apologize' with 'apologise'. The Oxford English Dictionary gives only one spelling of 'epitomize', although the less authoritative Chambers and Hamlyn admit 'epitomise'. 'Advertise' is the only spelling recognized by the OED, and even American lexicographers, who, to a man, are ardent protagonists of the -ize affix, do not give the alternative spelling 'advertize'.

Who is right - the users of the -ize ending or the -ise ending? There is no simple, clear-cut answer, but a rather better case can be made out in favour of -ize than -ise.

As in the case of so many other things, it all started with the Greeks - not the modern ἐχοντας καφεντο types, but the classical variety, who used the verbal formative ζειν, which is the origin of our -ize verb ending. It is to be doubted if the Romans when they borrowed the formative -izein from the Greeks and made it the Latin suffix -izare, knew what mischief they

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were working. This verb ending came over into Italian as *-izzare* and into Spanish as *-izar*. But trust the French to be contrary - the termination in the case of French verbs is *-iser*. It is this spelling which has bedevilled the *-ize/-ise* issue.

The OED declares: 'The suffix, whatever the element to which it is added, is in its origin the Greek -ιςαν, Latin -izare and, as the pronunciation is also with z, there is no reason why in English the special French spelling in *-iser* should ever be followed.'

In the Oxford dictionaries the termination is uniformly written *-ize*. The main word groups with this suffix (The Shorter Oxford Dictionary, Third Edition. Oxford: Claredon Press, 1973, p. 1122) are:

1. Words derived from Greek, or formed with Greek elements -
   (a) with the transitive sense of 'make or conform to', or 'treat in the way of' what is expressed by the root word, as *baptize* and *monopolize*;
   (b) with the intransitive sense 'to act some person or character', 'to do' or 'follow some practice', as *apologize* or *philosophize*.

2. Words based on Latin adjectives or substantives, mostly having the transitive sense 'to make as' *actualize* (to make actual), *colonize* (to make a colony), *satirize* (to make, in the sense of writing, a satire), and those words having a transitive or intransitive sense, such as *cicatrize*, *moralize*, or which, occasionally, are only intransitive, as *temporize*.

3. Words from later sources, as *bastardize*, *jeopardize* (transitive), *gormandize* (intransitive).

4. Verbs (mainly transitive) formed from ethnic adjectives - *Americanize*, *Germanize*.

5. The verbalization of names of persons, sometimes with the intransitive sense in Greek of 'to act like', or 'in accordance with', as in *bowdlerize*, *macadamize*, *galvanize*.

6. Nonce-words (i.e. a word invented and used for a particular occasion, or for the nonce), for example, *Churchillize*.

7. From names of substances in the transitive sense of
'to change', 'impregnate', 'treat' or 'affect with', as oxidize.

Although the OED lends the not inconsiderable weight of its authority to the use of the -ise verb termination, and although -ise is the form accepted by the Oxford University Press, the Cambridge University Press, that paragon of newspapers, The Times, and sanctified by American usage, there are some, like the late G.H. Vallins, who persistently use the -ise suffix, despite Eric Partridge's dictum that '... to employ -ise is to flout etymology and logic'.

In Vallins's view 'the artificial distinction based on an etymological subtlety that cannot be known to the ordinary man is an unnecessary archaism, and ought to be abolished forthwith'. Were one to use the figment of the 'ordinary man' (like the 'reasonable man' in law, or that most peculiar of all creatures, the 'economic man'), and what he is supposed to know, or, more usually, does not know, as the criterion for the condemnation of 'etymological subtleties' there would be almost nothing in language which would escape disapproval. Certainly English orthography would not, since the 'ordinary man' cannot spell.

In An A.B.C. of English Usage (London: Oxford University Press, 1936, p. 107) Vallins (presumably with the acquiescence of his co-author, H.A. Treble) attempts to justify his preference for the -ise suffix on the grounds that it is impossible to tell which English verbs end in -ise and which in -ize without a fairly intimate knowledge of English, Greek, Latin and French etymology. And since, he says, 'there are some English verbs which must end in -ise, not in -ize (e.g. advertise, comprise, exercise)' his advice is to end them all in -ise.

Despite his attempts at proselytizing, Vallins admits that in this book (he is referring to his own An A.B.C. of English Usage) 'the reader will nevertheless notice that ... the -ise ending is used for many verbs; and the reason is that the Oxford University Press, together with many other printers, prefers the -ize in those verbs whose etymology demands it'.

letter of the English alphabet: "Thou whoreson zed! Thou unnecessary letter!" (King Lear. Act ii, scene 2, line 62). Or perhaps Vallins was in revolt against the rather too free way in which -ize is added to a word or stem to make a verb, although this practice is a venerable one. The Greeks started the process and we have followed them enthusiastically. In the latter part of the nineteenth century there was a marked increase in the creation of verbs by the addition of the -ize suffix. 'To make standard' became 'to standardize' in 1873, with the meaning of bringing to a standard or uniform size, strength, form of construction, proportion of ingredients, or the like. By 1881 it had acquired the meaning of testing by a standard.

The word 'standard' has always had the connotation of criterion, gauge or yardstick - something established by authority, custom or general consent as a model or example. In 1477 the meaning attached to standard was an authoritative or recognized exemplar of correctness, perfection, or some definite degree of any quality (The Shorter Oxford Dictionary on Historical Principles. Third Edition. London: Oxford University Press, 1973, p.2107). In 1563, standard had the meaning of criterion of measure - no different from that attaching to it nearly a hundred years earlier.

1683 - A commodity, the value of which is treated as invariable, in order that it may serve as a measure of value for all other commodities.

1711 - A definite level of excellence, attainment, wealth, or the like, or a definite degree of any quality, viewed as a prescribed object of endeavour or as the measure of what is adequate for some purpose.

Many other -ize verbs have come into vogue - summarize (first encountered, according to The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, in 1871), maximize and minimize (1802), hospitalize (commonly used, but which the SOED does not recognize), institutionalize (which the SOED does recognize), finalize (to complete, bring to an end - which is to be found in the Concise Oxford Dictionary, but not in the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary) and so on ad infinitum.

It is the Americans who have taken the laurels for -ize verb creations. Apart from their overweening tendency (particularly in the literature concerned with the pretentious new sciences, such as business manage-
ment and economics), to press otherwise innocuous sub-
stantives into service as verbs, the Americans have 
preserved the suffix intact and are unmoved by the 
specious arguments of the -ize protagonists.

They would be equally unmoved by Sir Alan Herbert's 
comparison of -ize verbs to lavatory fittings - useful 
in their proper place but not to be multiplied beyond 
what is necessary for practical purposes.

Apart from the etymological justification, there is 
a good practical reason why we should use the -ize verb 
form exclusively, and that is our considerable depen-
dence on American literature and works of reference.
This is true, especially, of the great body of writing 
on management, business administration and allied sub-
jects which was stimulated by the product inventions 
and technological advances made in America early in the 
twentieth century. The concept of management which 
then emerged contributed to the development of the most 
productive economy in the history of the world, and 
strongly influenced management thinking in all indus-
trialized countries.

South Africa, with its burgeoning industrialization, 
has had to pay increasing attention to the management 
of large-scale enterprises, and has been heavily in-
fluenced - not to say indoctrinated - by American pu-
lications treating of management lore and business 
practice. And although a good deal of what the Yan-
kees write on these subjects is poor stuff - laced with 
grammatical imperfections and barbarous neologisms - it 
has one saving grace - it is at least orthographically 
consistent. This is more than can be said about the 
turbid prose produced by many an academic author - 
particularly those who profess the ostentatious new 
sciences - which is spattered with suffixal incongruit-
ies: sometimes they use verbs ending in -ize and some-
times in -ise.

Perhaps, in South Africa, the apparent preference 
for the -ise termination can be attributed to the im-
pact of Afrikaans on English. The z is practically 
unknown in Afrikaans. Of the 34 words which start 
with z in the Tweetalige Woordboek (Sewende, verbeterde 
uitgawe, p.937) more than half are names, place-names, 
or words based on names, such as Zarathoestra, Zeus, 
Zambia, Zanzibar, zeppelin, Zwinglianisme. People 
whose habitual language is Afrikaans, when writing in 
English, rarely use the -ise verbal suffix even when it 
is mandatory - as in the case of pressurize (which the
Shorter Oxford English Dictionary disdains to mention) pasteurize, urbanize, finalize, publicize, none of which has (in The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English) the alternative -ise spelling.

While the evidence indubitably supports those who use verbs ending in -ize and makes the preference for -ise an etymological aberration, to end verbs in -ise is not incorrect. But whatever verb ending is employed, it should be used consistently.