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 conten-
tious 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 'or-
ganise', 'dramatize' with 'dramatise', 'apologize' with
'apologise'. The Oxford English Dictionary gives only
one spelling of 'epitomize', although the less authori-
tative Chambers and Hamlyn admit 'epitomise'. 'Adver-
tise' 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 alterna-
tive 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 start-
ed with the Greeks - not the modern εχοντας καφεντο
types, but the classical variety, who used the verbal
formative ιζειν, 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 – ιζειν , 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 *-ize* verb termina-
tion, and although *-ize* is the form accepted by the Ox-
ford 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 usual-
ly, does not know, as the criterion for the condemna-
tion 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 Universi-
ty 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. adver-
tise, comprise, exercise)' his advice is to end them
all in *-ise*.

Despite his attempts at proselytizing, Vallins ad-
mits that in this book (he is referring to his own *An
A.B.C. of English Usage*) 'the reader will nevertheless no-
tice that ... the *-ize* 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'.

Perhaps - as H.W. Fowler has accused some English
printers of doing (*Modern English Usage*. Second Edition,
revised by Sir Ernest Gowers. Oxford: Oxford Univer-
sity Press, 1977, p. 314) - Vallins was influenced by
Kent's attitude towards the ubiquitous twenty-sixth

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 in-
crease in the creation of verbs by the addition of the
-ize suffix. 'To make standard' became 'to standard-
ize' in 1873, with the meaning of bringing to a stan-
dard 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 mea-
sure – 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 ade-
         quate for some purpose.

Many other *-ize* verbs have come into vogue – summar-
ize (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-

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ment and economics), to press otherwise innocuous substantives into service as verbs, the Americans have preserved the suffix intact and are unmoved by the specious arguments of the -*ise* protagonists.

They would be equally unmoved by Sir Alan Herbert's comparison of -*ise* 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 dependence on American literature and works of reference. This is true, especially, of the great body of writing on management, business administration and allied subjects 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 industrialized countries.

South Africa, with its burgeoning industrialization, has had to pay increasing attention to the management of large-scale enterprises, and has been heavily influenced - not to say indoctrinated - by American publications treating of management lore and business practice.   And although a good deal of what the Yankees 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 incongruities: sometimes they use verbs ending in -*ize* and sometimes in -*ise* .

Perhaps, in South Africa, the apparent preference for the -*ise* termination can be attributed to the impact of Afrikaans on English.   The *z* is practically unknown in Afrikaans.   Of the 34 words which start with *z* in the *Tweetalige Woordeboek* (Sewende,   verbeterde uitgawe, p.937) more than half are names, place-names, or words based on names, such as Zarathoestra, Zeus, Zambia, Zanzibar, zepplin, Zwinglianisme.   People whose habitual language is Afrikaans, when writing in English, rarely use the -*ize* 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.