

The Circumflex Accent: A Legacy of History, A Subject of Debate

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Historical Origins of the Circumflex Accent

Greek Origins

- Initially noted as a vocal inflection, rising, and then falling on the same syllable
 - The exclamatory *Ô!*
- Marking vowel length and syncope

Transition to Latin

- Used by grammarians to annotate examples, indicating vowel length and omitted sounds

Adoption by the Italians and the French

- Adopted by 16th-century humanist publishers to improve the readability of Latin texts
- Introduced in French by Sylvius (Jacques Dubois) in 1531 to indicate graphic diphthongs
 - bôis*

Integration into French Orthography

- Introduced by the Académie française in 1740 to replace the letter *s* pronounced as a long consonant
 - hostel* → *hôtel*



Image 1

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Common Use of the Circumflex Accent

Distinctive Mark Role

- Homonyms
 - Distinguishes words with different meanings
 - jeûne* "fasting" vs *jeune* "young"
- Verb Tenses
 - Appears in specific conjugations to differentiate past tense forms
 - passé simple* (past simple) in the first- and second-person plural
 - nous vîmes* "we saw", *vous fûtes* "you were"
- croître* vs *croire*
 - Prevents confusion between verbs with similar forms
 - Tu crois* plus vite que ton frère. (*croître* "to grow")
 - Est-ce que *tu me crois*? (*croire* "to believe")

Historical Role

Often a remnant of a lost letter or an historical phonetic feature

- hospital* → *hôpital*
- connaistre* → *connaître*

Phonetic Role (Pronunciation)

- â* → represents the back vowel [ɑ], usually a long vowel
 - pâte* "pasta"
- ê* → represents [ɛ], similar to *è* but often pronounced longer
 - bête* "beast"
- ô* → represents the closed [o], typically a long vowel
 - rôle* "role"



Highlights

Who: Académie française

When: December 6, 1990

What: *Rectification orthographique*

Why: Simplify and correct anomalies (~2,000 words)

Summary

Writing evolves to reflect spoken language. In 1990, the Académie française proposed a minor spelling reform to address inconsistencies, sparking a debate that persists today. Contrary to popular belief, these changes were not imposed but stemmed from public concerns. This presentation examines the history and functions of the circumflex accent, the impact of the reform, the arguments against it and the counterarguments.

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The Impact of the 1990 *rectification orthographique* on Circumflex Accent

Elimination on *i* and *u*

- Except when serving a distinctive function, the circumflex accent was removed from *i* and *u*
 - disparaître* → *disparaître*
 - fûté* → *futé*



Image 3

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Arguments Against *rectification orthographique* and Counterarguments

Alters the beauty of the French language → The beauty of a language lies in its use, not its spelling.

Erases historical traces → (1) Many errors and inconsistencies have crept into French spelling over centuries. (2) Old texts have been modernized for readability.

Forces unlearning and creates confusion with two coexisting spellings → (1) Changes are minimal, posing little risk of confusion. (2) The rectified spelling is not systematically taught. The traditional spelling remains acceptable and is not considered as a mistake.

