

Tire or tyre?

Depends on where you are

Americans write “tire,” while the British prefer “tyre.” Is one more correct than the other?

Etymologists have suggested two possible derivations of the word “tire/tyre.” One comes from the original function of the tire as the metal hoop or band of iron that “tied” or bound the wheel together. In this usage, referring to wagon wheels and the like, tire has consistently been spelled with an “i” on both sides of the Atlantic.

The other possible origin of the word and the one which has the greater etymological support is the word “attire,” from which the short first syllable was dropped over time.

In this sense, the tire is the attire or dressing of the wheel. As etymologist Webb Garrison explained in his book, “What’s in a Word?”

“For centuries, any type of dress or equipment was commonly known as attire. Careless pronunciation clipped off the first syllable so that it became customary to speak of both useful and ornamental coverings as ‘tire. This name applied to a multitude of objects from a woman’s frock to the curved iron plates used to ‘dress up’ wheels of carts and wagons.”

Two of the most authoritative dictionaries of the English language, “Webster’s Third New International” in the United States and “The Oxford English Dictionary” in Britain, agree with Garrison.

The Oxford dictionary, the British standard, says tyre is a variant spelling of tire (implying that tire is the more etymologically correct spelling). Regarding the spelling, the dictionary’s entry under “Tire” says:

“From 15th to 17th c. spelt tire and tyre indifferently. Before 1700 tyre became generally obsolete, and tire remained the regular form, as it still does in America; but in Great Britain tyre has been revived as the popular term for the rubber rim of bicycle, tricycle, carriage, or motor car wheels, and is sometimes used for the steel tires of locomotive wheels.”

In 1956, Philip Schidrowitz, writing in the “European Rubber Journal,” argued for the British spelling of tyre, by pointing out that the official spelling in the various classified publications of the British patent office has consistently been with a “y.”

Nevertheless, he also noted that the patent for the first pneumatic tire, that of R.W. Thomson in 1845, used the spelling “tire.” However, Schidrowitz contended that Thomson used the word as applying only to the rim of the wheel, referring to his own invention as an “elastic belt” or “elastic bearing.”

The British evidently resurrected the archaic spelling –tyre– to distinguish between the modern pneumatic tire, made of rubber, and its iron predecessor, used on wagon wheels.

In the United States, no such distinction was made and the more etymologically pure spelling, tire, was retained.

Given that the need for distinguishing between iron and rubber tires has largely disappeared, perhaps the British will give up their spelling of the word. This seems unlikely to happen soon.

For them it's likely a matter of honor – or, as they would put it, “honour.”