

# Journal of the Simplified Spelling Society J27, 2000/1.

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## 1. Editorial Chris Upward

### Strategy options

The new edition of the Society's *Principles & Practicalities* leaflet circulated with this issue of *JSSS* should perhaps be considered in the following context.

The Simplified Spelling Society has always operated on two levels, the theoretical level of orthographic design and the practical level of public representation. At certain points in its history it has been able to take at least a first step toward combining the two, applying an orthographic design to the teaching of literacy: New Spelling in a few schools in the UK in the first half of the 20th century, and the Initial Teaching Alphabet (organized by SSS members, though not an SSS project as such) in thousands of schools in several countries for a couple of decades in the second half of the 20th century.

Landmarks though these projects were, providing crucial evidence and a high public profile for the advantages of simplified spelling, ultimately they failed to advance the cause of simplifying the way the English language is written. By implication the SSS last year acknowledged an underlying reason for this failure, when a majority of members voted against promoting any 'big bang' spelling reform (such as NS and the i.t.a. in effect were) that attempted to right all the

wrongs of today's spelling at one fell swoop. Such schemes, it was recognized, could neither be publicly acceptable nor implementable on a world scale.

This had already been recognized by some, at least since the 1950s, and had motivated partial reform concepts over the years such as Regularized English (Axel Wijk), SR1 (Harry Lindgren), Cut Spelling (Yule/Upward), LOJIKON (Govind Deodhekar) and others. Currently in preparation is a further proposal, known by the acronym RITE, being created by a group of SSS-members through a process of email voting on a score of suggested mini-regularizations. Accompanying all these possibilities is the continuing question for the non-American-spelling world of whether the adoption of American in place of British variants could offer a worthwhile reform too.

So with a handful of possible Stage 1 reforms in its quiver, how should the SSS deploy them? It appears likely that a 'best' Stage 1 proposal will never be found and perhaps can never exist: all have pros and cons. One purpose of the enclosed leaflet is to provide a guide, both for SSS members and for the public, through the many types of reform that might lend themselves to promotion in different circumstances. For instance, an opportunity for promoting American spellings has just arisen in New Zealand, as we shall report in [JSSS 28](#). With such a menu of different reform schemes, the SSS should be in a position to respond to whatever opportunities arise.

### **Some features of this issue**

This issue celebrates the millennium, or rather the turn of the century, with two distinctive items, one harking back to the early 20th, the other casting a prophetic eye forward to the turn of the 21st–22nd centuries.

William Archer's 'Etimolojikaj Arguement' first appeared in 1909, but was judged important enough in 1941, 17 years after its author's death, to be re-issued as the SSS's Pamphlet No.3. It offers a rich reading experience. Written in the substantially phoneticized Nue Speling system (developed by Archer with Walter Ripman), it provides valuable experimental material on which to test the 'forward compatibility' (ie, readability) of a 'big bang' reform. Readers may like to note how long it takes before fluent reading sets in (if it does), and whether certain spellings remain stumbling blocks to the end (and if so, which?). In addition, the pamphlet both gives and is itself determined by historical context: it delves into the history of English word-forms and of ideas for their reform, but is itself a historical document, reflecting British social, cultural and educational conditions in the first decade of the 20th century and the kind of spelling reform the SSS then thought feasible.

By contrast, Ed Rondthaler's sci-fi compilation of alternative literacy reports from a *New York Times* of 2100 gives plenty of scope for the imagination.

Adam Brown's critical appraisal of the role of phonemes as a basis for spelling reform gives a useful corrective to the assumption that all that written English needs is for a given symbol to be allocated to the consistent representation of each sound. He reminds us that the concept of the phoneme was devised as a tool for analyzing how languages are pronounced and cannot be considered (least of all in English with its huge variety of accents) as a necessarily objective, absolute feature of the language that can be pinned down alphabetically. This point is abundantly reinforced by differing views on pronunciation aired in recent email discussion by SSS members.

The report on how news agencies have handled the recent German reform gives a useful view of one of the practical consequences of spelling reform: the way in which the press can help (or hinder) reform, while itself being driven along by the reform.

The text of the Society's recent submission to the British Parliamentary Sub-Committee on Education appears under our 'Lobbying Literacy Authorities' rubric. It was perhaps a long shot, as the sub-committee's brief chiefly concerned pre-school education; but at least it gave the SSS the opportunity to make its views known to politicians in the UK.

[Journal of the Simplified Spelling Society, J27, 2000/1 pp3–10 in the print version]

[[Pamphlet 3](#) is included in the pamphlet section.]

## 2. SSS Pamflet Nr. 3 edited by Chris Upward

We here reprint (with some typographical changes, corrections of *is*, *of*, *will* and voiced *th*, to *iz*, *ov*, *wil*, *dh*, and minor bracketed comments from the present editor) a classic SSS publication from the early years. An outline of its author's life (William Archer 1856–1924) appeared in the Society's *Newsletter* of [August 1995](#) (Item 5, 'Founding Fathers: who were the men who launched the SSS?'). In his day Archer was an influential theatre critic and co-author (with Walter Ripman) of the Society's original *New Spelling* scheme, which, with periodic amendments, constituted the Society's flagship reform proposal for many decades (development of the system continued into the 1990s). Archer wrote several [pamphlets](#) for the Society (Nos. 2, 3, 4, 5) in which he distinguished himself by practising what he preached, his pamphlets being published in his original *New Spelling*. We here present Pamphlet No.3 not merely for its compelling, if for today's tastes over-Latinate, rhetoric and the examples of doubtful etymology, but to give readers experience of the 'phonetic' English orthography that probably had most influence on spelling reformers through the early and middle decades of the 20th century. Readers may like to record how easily they adjust to its quite radically altered spellings (noting words they may hesitate over), and how far the ideas have stood the test of time (certainly Archer's cultural and educational assumptions give a strong flavour of a bygone age).

*The main regularized sound-symbol correspondences used by Archer in SSS Pamflet Nr.3 are seen in the following transliterations: name/naem, where/whaer, after/aafter, water/wauter, can/kan, back/bak, Dutch/Duch, add/ad, any/eny, mean/meen, here/heer, her/hur, different/diferent, off/of, single/singgl, hypocrisy/hipocrisy, by/bie, highest/hiëst, suggest/sujest, allied/alied, little/litl, common/komon, was/woz, old/oeld, how/hou, enjoy/enjoi, happen/hapen, antiquity/antikwity, thorough/thurro, wrong/rong, essence/esens, possess/pozes, forms/formz, suspicion/suspishon, measure/mezher, better/beter, the/dhe, does/duz, other/udher, wonderful/wunderfool, through/thruu, should/shood, superfluous/suepurfluüs, do/duu, of/ov, twelve/twelv, one/wun, language/langgwej, six/siks, exact/egzakt, obvious/obvyus, is/iz, thousand/thouzand.*



Foto of William Archer

Inside front cover [Sum Opinyonz](#).

*Inside back cover of 1941 edition.*

**THE SIMPLIFIED  
SPELLING SOCIETY**

Founded in 1908 by  
The Rev. Professor W: W. Skeat and Dr. F. J. Furnivall

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SIMPLIFIED SPELLING SOCIETY

WALLSEND-UPON-TYNE

S.S.S. Pamflet 3.  
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## DHE ETIMOLOJIKAL ARGUMENT BIE WILLIAM ARCHER

"CETTE raison qu'il faut garder aux mots tout leur appareil afin de maintenir leur etymologie est parfaitement vaine; car pour une lettre de plus ou de moins, les ignorants ne sauront pas mieux reconnaître l'origine du mot, et les hommes instruits la reconnaîtront toujours." — *Sainte-Beuve*.

IN dhe yeer 1569, "J.H., Chester Heralt" (hiz naem woz John Hart) publisht a book entietld: "An Orthographie, conteyning the due order and reason how to write or paint thimage of mannes voice, most like to the life ov nature." On dhe tenth paej ov hiz kueryus litl treetis, Hart sets forth dhe objekshonz to simplifikaeshon komonly urjd, eeven in dhat distant dae, bie dhoez huu "maintaine our superfluitie of letters in writing." He atribuets to dhem "foure arguments wherein is some likelyhood of reason"; and dheez arguements he staets az foloez —

"The first is under pretence to shew the derivation and spring of some wordes borrowed or taken forth of strange tongues.

"Another is that it should he lawful to abuse some letters to put a difference betwixt equivoces or wordes of one sounde.

"The thirde is for the time of vowels.

"But their strongest defence (which comprehendeth all) and that wherein they most triumph is use."

Dhus we see dhat dhe etimolojik al arguement iz noe nue wun. If antikwity wer a mezher ov truth, dhis opinyon wood at leest be respektabl. Unfortuenetly it haz nuthing but antikwity to komend it.

John Hart's replie iz not, from dhe modern point ov vue, very efektiv. He understandz dhe objektorz simply to meen (az indeed dhae probably did meen) dhat eech wurd aut to karry about widh it dhe baj ov its nashonality, "even as every Gentilman is knowne by his armes, which are duely belonging to him." It duz not enter hiz miend dhat dhe nolej ov a wurd'z history mae giv us an egzakter aprehenshon ov its meening, and enaabl us to uez it widh mor akuerasy and fors. Yet dhis iz surtenly dhe hoel strength ov dhe arguement az uezd in our dae. It wood undoutedly pozes a surten validity if it wer truu, az a mater ov fakt, dhat simplifikaeshon wood imperil, or eeven restrikt, etimolojik al nolej. But, az we hoep to shoe, dhis iz not truu.

It iz skaersly wunderfool dhat dhe siksteenth-sentuery reformer did not atempt to meet dhis aspekt ov dhe etimolojik al arguement. Dhe filolojik al siens ov dhat tiem woz soe ruudimentary dhat dhe derivaeshonz aksepted eeven bie a skolar liek Hart wer ofen kalkuelaeted to leed to an inakueret raadher dhan to a mor akueret ues ov wurdz. For instans, he ashuurz us dhat dhe naem ov hiz oen profeshon, "Heralt," az he spelz it, "is wholly a Dutch word compounded of Herr and Alt, which is Olde Maister... Yet some doe compounde it with one Dutch word and another French, writing Herhault, signifying a high Maister." It need skaersly be sed dhat niedher etimolojy wil baer egzaminaeshon.

Our nolej ov dhe history ov wurdz haz advaanst enormusly sins Hart's dae; and it haz enaebld skolarz to realiez mor and mor kleeerly dhe fuutility ov dhe etimolojikal arguement. Dhe averej man, huu haz noe filolojikal nolej wurth menshoning, stil fiendz in dhe blesed wurd "etimolojy" a konveenient ekskues for hiz instinktiv repugnans to reform. He hoeldz dhat our konvenshonal speling kontaenz sum trezher ov historrik instrukschon which wood be lost to dhe wurld wer it amended; and he paez noe heed to dhe fakt dhat not a singgl kwolified stuedent ov dhe history ov langgwej atachez dhe smaulest importans to dhis arguement. Dhe apeel to living authorritiz he meets bie a referens to Archbishop Trench and Deen Alford, huu surtenly gaev sum kountenans to dhe historrikal or etimolojikal falasy. Let us, dhen, look breefly into its merits.

We mae thank Archbishop Trench [2] for giving dhe antidoet along widh dhe baen — dhat iz to sae, for staeting very admirably dhe arguement he profest to kontrovurt. Nuthing kood be beter dhan dhe sentens in blak tiep in dhe foloing pasej. It antisipaeted bie thurteen yeerz dhe fraez ov Sainte-Beuve'z kwoeted at dhe begining ov dhis paeper, and serpaasez it in pointed kondensaeshon —

"It iz urjd, indeed, az an aanser to dhis, dhat dhe skolar duz not need dheez indikaeshonz to help him to dhe pedigree ov dhe wurdz widh which he deelz, dhat dhe ignorant iz not helpt bie dhem; **dhat dhe wun noez widhout, and dhe udher duz not noe widh dhem**; soe dhat in iedher kaes dhae ar profitabl for nuthing. Let it be freely graanted dhat dhis in boeth dheez kaesez iz truu; but between dheez tuu ekstreemz dhaer iz a multitued ov pursonz niedher akomplisht skolarz on wun sied, nor yet hoelly widhout dhe nolej ov aul langgwejez saev dhaer oen on dhe udher, and I kanot dout dhat it iz ov graet value dhat dheez shood hav aul helps enaebing dhem to rekogniez dhe wurdz which dhae ar uezing, whens dhae kaem, to whot wurdz in udher langgwejez dhae ar neerly relaeted, and whot iz dhaer properest and striktest meening." — *English Past and Present*, 9th edishon, p.316.

To dhis dhaer iz a very plaen aanser — naemly, dhat dhe Archbishop iz prefuring a very smaul gaen, afekting a very limited klaas ov peepl, to an enormus gaen, afekting aul dhe kuming jeneraeshonz ov Inglish-speekerz thruout dhe wurld. We mae admit dhat nuthing iz to be had for nuthing, and dhat agaenst dhe graetest advaantej dhaer iz aulwaez sum disadvaantej to be set of. But in dhis kaes dhe draubak iz aulmoest infinitesimal kompaerd widh dhe gaen. Dhaer ar noe dout sum thouzandz, perhaps eeven tenz ov thouzandz ov eduekaeted peepl huu okaezhonaly taek sum plezher in having dhaer etimolojikal memoriz jogd bie a suepurfluüs leter or a kumbrus kolokaeshon ov leterz. But dhis plezher, raet it at dhe hiest, iz a very trivyal and ineshshal afaer; kan it for a moement be held wurth purchasing at dhe kost ov from wun to tuu yeerz ov unnesesary toil inflikted on aul lurnerz ov Inglish, naetiv-born or forren, duering aul dhe sentueriz to kum? Waed in dhe balansez ov reezon, whot iz dhe okaezhonal plezher ov a fue thouzandz agenst dhe inevitabl and teedyus toil ov inuemerabl milyonz? Remember dhat we hav not to konsider dhe interests ov wun jeneraeshon or tuu, but dhoez ov an ilimitabl multitued. It iz hard to see hou eniwun huu pozesez an imajinaeshon, and iz not pozest bie a bliend spirit ov egoistik pedantry, kan relie for a moement on dhe etimolojikal preetekst.

Even if simplified speling wood obskuer dhe etimolojy ov evry wurd in dhe langgwej, its manifoeld advaantejez wood stil enormusly outwae dhis disadvaantej. But, az a mater ov fakt, it iz oenly in a very smaul persentej ov wurdz dhat eny sort ov obskueraeshon wood taek plaes. Look at dhe laast tuu sentensez we hav riten; dhae kontaen 47 wurdz, choezen widhout eny thaut ov dhaer individueal baering on dhis arguement. In hou meny ov dhem duu we fiend dhe etimolojy in dhe slietest degree disgiezd? In presiesly wun: to drop dhe L from *would* wood noe dout render it a litl les eezy to remember its relaeshon to *wil*. [1] It wil skaersly be pretended dhat if we substitueted I for dhe furst Y in *etymology*, eniwun huu had ever noen its derivaeshon

wood dhaerfor fiend graeter difikulty in remembering it. Let dhe reeder, sinseerly and faethfooly, aplie dhe sujested test to dhis paej, or to eny number ov paejez. Let him noet (*a*) in hou meny wurdz pekuelyarritiz ov speling realy giv dhe edukaeted man (az distinkt from dhe speshal stuedent) eny etimolojikal informaeshon wurth having; and (*b*) in whot persentej ov dheez wurdz dhat informaeshon wood be obskuerd bie eny rashonal simplifikaeshon ov dhaer speling. He wil fiend dhe persentej very smaul indeed; and if he wil dhen aask himself hou ofen, az a mater ov fakt, dheez etimolojiz ar realy prezent to hiz miend, or hav eny apreeshyabl value for him, he wil shuurly aanser (if he be kaepabl ov intelektueal sinserity) dhat dhe gaen to him and hiz klaas implied in dhe retenshon ov dhe irashonal spelingz iz az nuthing kompaerd widh dhe gaen dhat wood akruu from dhaer amendment to inuemerabl jeneraeshonz ov Inglish-speekerz, aul dhe wurd oever.

Az regardz dhe relaeshon ov speling to etimolojy, dhe wurdz ov dhe langgwej seem to faul into three klaasez —

- (1) Dhe smaul klaas in which a simplifikaeshon ov speling wood aktuealy maek it a litl mor difikult to remember dhe derivaeshon.
- (2) Dhe imens klaas in which simplifikaeshon wood leev dhe etimolojy presiesly az kleeer, or az obskuer, az befor. Dhis klaas mae be konsiderd under tuu subhedingz: (*a*) dhoez wurdz in which dhe Latin, Greek or Tuetonik sors iz, and wood remaen, faerly kleeer to eny eduekaeted purson; (*b*) dhoez wurdz ov which noe wun kood posibly divien dhe orrijin widhout speshal study, and which simplifikaeshon wood render niedher mor nor les obskuer.
- (3) Dhe konsiderabl klaas in which dhe speling iedher sujests a fauls etimolojy, or iz founded on a misspeling ov dhe Latin orijinal.

(1) It wood not be difikult to maek out a kompleet list ov dhe wurdz in which simplifikaeshon wood, in fakt, render dhe etimolojy les apaerent. In such a wurd az *daughter*, for instans, dhe omishon ov dhe GH wood render a litl les obvyus dhe relaeshonship to dhe Jurman *Tochter* and dhe Greek qugavthr. Soe in *night* dhe omishon ov dhe GH wood maek les kleeer dhe relaeshon to dhe Latin stem *noct-* and dhe Greek nukt-. Agaen to spel *pneumonia* and *pneumatic* widhout a P wood maek dhe Greek orrijin ov dhe wurdz slietly les perseptibl; but *neume* (a muezikal turm) iz, and aulwaez haz been, spelt widhout dhe P, dhoes dhis wurd reprezents dhe substantiv itself, from which *pneumatic* iz a meer derivativ. *Paeen*, noe dout, jogz our memory ov dhe Greek form ov dhe wurd, az *pean* duz not; but we hav long agoe seest to spel "pedagogue" *paedagogue* and "phenomenon" *phaenomenon* widhout having dhaerbie lost aul rekolekshon ov dhaer orrijin. In nun ov dheez wurdz, ov kors, duz dhe speling releev eniwun ov dhe trubl ov asertaening dhe etimolojy. It kan at moest remiend: it kan not inform. Hou ofen, in rieting dhe wurd "night" duu we think ov *nox* and *nux*? And when we hav wuns lurnt dhe history ov dhe wurd in its simplified form (whotever dhat may be), shal we be very much mor liekly to forget it for lak ov dhe GH?

### *Inside and outside back cover of 1941 edition*

Even az regardz dhis very smaul klaas ov wurdz, dhen, dhe etimolojik al arguement maeks a mounten out ov a moelhil. Fue ov us gaen enithing at aul bie dhe retenshon ov dhe suepurfluüs leterz, and dhe gaen to dhoez fue iz very sliet indeed.

(2a) In dhe vaast majorrity ov wurdz simplifikaeshon wood not in dhe leest tend to obskuer whotever etimolojik al informaeshon dhae mae, az a mater ov fakt, konvae. It must be rememberd, in dhe furst plaes, dhat under eny rashonal sistem ov simplifikaeshon a larj number ov wurdz wood remaen kwiet unchaenjd; and it iz manifest dhat in uezing dheez wurdz our etimolojjezerz kood enjoi at dhaer eez dhe raptuerz ov ruut-rekognishon. In aul probability, noe chaenj wood be maed in wurdz kompoezd ov whot mae rufly be kauld short vouelz and ov dhoez konsonants ov which dhe value iz unambiguous. We hav aulredy uezd in dhe prezent parragraaf a konsiderabl number ov wurdz ov dhis klaas: *in, it, not, tend, must, remember, under, number, an, and, at, manifest*. Dhe wurd *unambiguous* hapenz (bie puer chaans) to be dhe hundredth wurd ov dhe parragraaf: twelv wurdz out ov dhe hundred, dhen (or nienteen if we kount repetishonz), wood aulmoest surtenly remaen unchaenjd. But, for dhe purposez ov dhe prezent arguement, it iz mor important to obzurv dhat dhe majorrity ov dhe chaenjez kontemplaeted under eny reezonabl sistem wood be ov a kiend which wood leev dhe esens ov dhe wurd kwiet unaulterd. Dhis iz truu ov hoel klaasez ov simplifikaeshonz. For instans, whot etimolojik al obskuerity kan ariez from dhe substitueshon ov -T or -D for -ED in preterits and paast partisiplz — *mist* for *missed*, *hamperd* for *hampered*? Dhis chaenj mae, indeed, obskuer a point in dhe history ov gramar; but dhat iz a toetaly diferent mater. Dhe hipokrisy ov konservatizm duz not goe soe far az to pretend dhat dhe eevolueshon ov English aksidens iz prezent to dhe miend ov eny apreeshyabl number ov dhoez huu uez dhe langgwej. Agaen, iz dhe etimolojy ov *definit* obskuerd bie dhe dropping ov dhe E? When dhe tiem kumz for dhe konsistent ues ov Sfor dhe voisles and Z for dhe voist sibilant, whot etimolojiz wil dhaerbie be konseeld? If we spelt *surprize* az we spel *prize*, or if we spelt *rize* and *wize* az we spel *size*, wood eniwun be dhe les wiez az regardz dhaer etimolojy? Instansez miet be indefinitely multiplied. Dhe plaen fakt iz, az we staeted in dhe preevyus sekshon, dhat oenly in a smaul mienorrrity ov wurdz wood simplifikaeshon plaes eny nue difikulty in dhe wae ov dhe amatuer etimolojist. Oenly in a fue skor wurdz wood he run eny risk ov mising dhat joi which he fiendz (it wood seem) in being remiended ov dhaer derivaeshon bie dhaer "ruudimentary" leterz. Hou monstrus, dhen, iz hiz klaem dhat, for dhe saek ov dhe plezher he taeks in dheez fue skor signifikant aberaeshonz, dhe English-speaking wurld shood be burdend for aul tiem widh ten thousand sueperfluitiz and anomaliz which hav noe etimolojik al signifikans whotever!

Heer it mae be wurth whiel to drau a distinkshon which iz ofen oeverlookt: dhe distinkshon between etimolojik al history and dhe history ov speling. It iz kleeer dhat simplifikaeshon wood duu awae widh inuemerabl evidensez ov dhe shifts to which oeld rieterz and printerz wer poot in order to reprezent dhe soundz ov dhe langgwej widh an impurfekt alfabet, and dhe meny inkonsistent deviesez dhae adopted to dhat end. Dheez shifts and inkonsistensiz ar very interesting and hav been thurroly studid bie meny skolarz — espeshaly bie stuedents ov dhe history ov pronunnyaeshon. In remuuving or minimiezing dhoez which serviev in modern English, we shal noe dout luuz a surten element ov kwaentnes in our langgwej, which sum peepl fiend pleezing. But dhat kwaentnes haz nuthing to duu widh etimolojy, and duz not eeven pozes such value az mae rashonaly be blaemd for anomaliz ov etimolojik al signifikans. Dhis noe wun wood theoretikaly denie; but meny peepl oeverlook dhe distinkshon, and think dhae ar argueing for dhe prezervaeshon ov etimolojik al evidensez, when in fakt dhae ar meerly klinging to dhe haphazard or obsolete fonetik deviesez ov our ansestorz.



(2b) In sekshon 2a we konsiderd dhe wurdz ov which dhe derivaeshon iz faerly kleer to eniwun huu pozesez eeven "smaul Latin and les Greek," and wood remaen soe aafter simplifikaeshon. For egzaampl, it needz noe graet lurning to traes *simplifikaeshon* to *simplex* and *facio*, and eeven to karry a step fardher dhe analisis ov *simplex*. Soe, tuu, in dhe furst sentens ov dhis parragraaf, dhe orrijin ov dhe wurdz *konsider*, *derivaeshon* and *remaen* iz paetent to eniwun huu haz a smatering ov Latin, and remaenz soe under eny reezonabl sistem ov simplifikaeshon. But dhaer iz aulsoe a larj klaas ov wurdz (dhe subjekt ov dhe prezent sekshon) ov which dhe orrijin kan be asertaend oenly bie speshal study, and wood be az eezily asertaend aafter simplifikaeshon az befor.

It iz difikult to selekt from dhe sueperabundans ov egzaamplz. If *assassin* wer spelt *asasin*, wood its relaeshon to *hashish* be in eny wae obskuerd? If *allow* wer spelt widh one L, wood dhaer be eny graeter difikulty in traesing it to dhe Oeld French *alouer*, and in remembering dhat dhis wurd reprezents a blending ov Latin *ad-laudare* and *ad-locare*? If *allay* and *alloy* dropt dhe sekond L, and soe returnd to dhaer urlyer form, wood dhaer very kompleks history be eny mor difikult iedher to traes or to remember? If *bronze* dropt its E, shood we noe eny les ov its orrijin, which, az a mater ov fakt, iz unsurten? If *buccaneer* dropt its suepurfluüs C, wood its relaeshon to dhe French *boucanier*, and ultimety to a Brazilyan or Karrib wurd *boucan*, a barbekue, be in eny degree konseeld? Spel *buttress* az it woz spelt in dhe 14th sentuery, *butres*, and U duu not disgiez its probabl konekshon widh dhe French *bouter*, to poosh. Spel *cabbage* widh wun B, az it woz komonly spelt in dhe 15th, 16th and 17th sentueriz, and U surtenly duu not disgiez its konekshon widh dhe Latin *caput* Spel "hammock" *hamok*, and U obvyusly duu not obskuer its derivaeshon from dhe Karrib-Spanish *hamaca*. Spel *harbor* widhout its U, and its konekshon widh dhe Jurman *herberge*, widh our oen *harbinger*, and ultimety widh *here-beorg*, a shelter for an army, iz in noe wae disemblid. Indeed, our etimolojik al enthuezyasts aut to insist on dhis chaenj, in order to distinggwish dhe wurd from dhe *labour* and *favour* grup, in which dhae kling to dhe U az a sien ov French orrijin. Spel *scourge* az it iz pronounst, and its ultimet konekshon widh dhe Latin *excoriare* iz niedher mor nor les obskuer. Spel *shallow* widh wun L and U surtenly duu not disgiez its relaeshonship to *shoal*, Jurman *scheel* and *schielen*, and (kueryusly enuf) to dhe Greek wurd familiar to skuulboiz in dhe turm "scalene trianggl." (*Archer was mistaken as to these German and Greek links with 'shallow'.* — Ed.)

Udher egzaamplz wil okur to eniwun huu haz maed eny study ov etimolojy. Unfortuenetly dhis klaas duz not inklud dhe pursonz huu ar loudest and moest persistent in advaansing dhe etimolojik al arguement.

(3) We kum nou to dhe nuemerus wurdz in which dhe kurrent speling, far from afording a gied to etimolojy remiendz us oenly ov dhe eroenyus theoriz which obtaend when etimolojik al siens woz in its infansy. Dhe insinseerity, or at eny raet dhe perfunktorines, ov dhe etimolojik al arguement bekumz apaerent when we fiend dhat dhoez huu relie on it kling kwiet az rezoluetly to spelingz which sujest a fauls, az to dhoez which sujest a truu etimolojy. Soe long az dhae kan retaen a suepurfluüs leter, in fakt, dhae kaer very litl whedher dhe derivaeshon it impliez be riet or rong.

We shal giv in alfabetikal order a list ov wurdz in which dhe kurrent speling iz iedher baest on, or inevitably sujests, an eroenyus derivaeshon, a fauls analojy or a misreeding ov history. Dhe list duz not pretend to be egzaustiv, but mae neverdheles be uesfool for purposez ov referens.

ACHE: Eroenyusly derievd bie Johnson from Greek a[co]. Dhaer woz an oeld verb *ake* and an oeld substantiv *ache*, and it woz dhe pluural ov dhis oeld substantiv which Shakespeare uezd in dhe lien "Fill all thy bones with Aches (aechez), make thee rore." Dhe pronunsaeshon ov dhe verb haz servievd and dhe speling ov dhe noun. Manifestly *ake* iz dhe mor historrikal, and les

misleading, form. It may be noted that the English substantiv which is really connected with a[co] is not *ache*, but *awe*. (*Here too Archer's Greek connection is unfounded.* — Ed.)

AGHAST: See *Ghost*.

AISLE: Originally from the Latin *ala*, a wing, Old French *ele*, *eele*. The S has come in through confusion with *isle*, Latin *insula*. Even Johnson, who usually is correct, derives it from *ala*, or from *allée*, a path, suggesting that it ought to be written *aille*.

CINDER: The C in this word erroneously suggests derivation from the French *cedre*. It is really from the Old English *sinder*, dross or slag of iron.

DEBT: The B in *debt* and *doubt* suggests, not exactly a false etymology, but a false history. The Middle English forms were *dette* and *dout*. *Detter* occurs in Coverdale, Latimer, Shakespeare and the English Bible (1611), *dettor* in Milton; *dout* occurs in Latimer, Spenser, etc. The B was gratuitously inserted under the mistaken impression that the word came directly from the Latin.

DELIGHT: Here the GH is quiet meanings. The New English Dictionary (*ie, the future Oxford English Dictionary.* — Ed.) says: "The current erroneous spelling after *light*, etc., arose in the 16th century and prevailed about 1575: the Bible of 1611 occasionally retained *delite*." The Middle English substantiv was *delit*, the verb *deliten*.

DOUBT: See *Debt*.

FOREIGN: Here the G is entirely meaningless. In Chaucer's translation of Boethius, the word is spelt *foreine* or *foreyne*. It comes through the Old French *forain* from *foraneus*, applied to a canon who is not in residence, or to a traveling pedlar. The insertion of the G was a pure blunder.

GHOST: In this word, as in *aghost* and *ghastly*, the H is perfectly gratuitous, and has no etymological value. It did not make its appearance until the 15th century, when Caxton introduced it, probably on the analogy of the Flemish *gheest*; and it was not thoroughly established until the end of the 16th century. Langland spells the word *goste*, Wycliff *goost*, Chaucer *gost* and *goost*. *Agast* occurs in Wycliff, in Chaucer and in Shakespeare. The same intrusive H, due to Dutch influence, is found in *gherkin*, which, according to both etymology and common sense, ought to be spelt *gurkin*. The H has already been simplified away in *ghuest*, *ghospel*, *ghossip*, etc.

HAUGHTY: The GH is a mere corruption, suggesting a Teutonic origin. As a matter of fact the word comes from the French *haut*, and the GH was dragged in late in the 16th century, on the false analogy of *caught*, *taught*, etc.

ISLAND: The S has crept in because the word was believed to be derived, like *isle*, from the Latin *insula*, whereas the I really represents a quiet independent Old English word, which survives in *ey-ot*, *Batters-ey*, *Angles-ey*, etc.

NICKNAME: We have here a curious instance of an intrusive and delusive C (*Archer must have meant N.* — Ed.), which merely serves to obscure the fact that the word was originally *eke-name*, a name added or tag on.

POSTHUMOUS: This word is in reality the Latin *postumus*, the last, applied especially to a last-born child. The H is due to a false belief that the origin was *post humum*, "after the ground," and that the word meant a child born after its father's death.

REDOUBT: Dhis wurd iz derievd thruu dhe French from dhe Italyan *ridotto*, eksplaend bie Florio (1611) az a "widhrauing plaes." Dhis agaen iz a substantiv ues ov dhe paast partisipl *ridotto*, which Florio translaets az "reduced ... brought back safe and sound againe." Dhe word was orijinally *ridutto*, paast partisipl ov *ridurre*, to bring or leed bak. *Redoubt* haz noe konekshon widh *doubt*.

SCENT: Heer dhe C iz intruusiv and misleeding, az it uest to be in dhe nou simplified *scite* and *scituate*. *Sent*, from dhe Latin *sentire*, iz korekltly spelt in dhe Furst Foelyoe Hamlet: "I sent the mornings ayre." Our etimolojjezerz miet az wel riet *scense* az *scent*.

SCHOONER: Dhe H in *schooner* iz due to a fauls impreshon dhat dhe wurd iz derievd from dhe Duch. Az a mater ov fakt, dhe Duch wurd iz derievd from dhe English. Dhe silabl *scoon* iz in reality a Nue Inghland wurd, imported from Skotland, whaer *scoun* meenz "to maek flat stoenz skip along dhe surfes ov dhe wauter." It iz alied to Oeld Inghlish *scunian*, to shun, to flee awae. Dhe naem *skooner* iz sed to hav orijinaeted at Gloucester, Mass., in 1713. Az a vesel went of dhe stoks into dhe wauter, a biestander kried out, "Oe, hou she skuunz!" — dhat iz, gliedz, skimz along — whaerupon dhe bilder replied "A skuuner let hur be." Such etimolojik al anekdoets ar jeneraly to be regarded widh suspishon; but dhis wun wood seem to be truu.

SCISSORS: Dhaer iz absoluety noe etimolojik al justifikaeshon for dhe C in *scissors*, which haz krept in bekauz ov a fauls beleef dhat dhe wurd woz derievd from dhe Latin *scindere*. Its truu baesis iz *caedere*, to cut (kp. *caesura*). Dhe Oeld French form iz *cisoires* (Latin *cisoria*). An alied form iz *ciseau* (Latin *cisellus*, whens aulsoe our *chisel*).

SCYTHE: Dhe C in dhis wurd iz meeningles, eeven if it duz not, az in *scissors*, sujet dhe fauls derivaeshon from *scindere*. It iz spelt *sithe* in Piers Plowman, *sythe* in dhe Furst Foelyoe Shakespeare.

SOVEREIGN: Dhe G haz krept into dhis wurd from a mistaeken dezier to konekt it widh *reign*, Latin *regnare*. It iz realy from dhe Loe Latin *superanus*, and iz spelt bie Chaucer *souerein*, bie Milton *sovrän*.

SPRIGHTLY: Heer dhe GH haz not dhe slietest etimolojik al justifikaeshon. Dhe Midl Inghlish formz ar *sprit*, *sprite* or *spryte*, French *esprit*. Dhe GH haz krept in on a fauls analoij, and "jogz dhe memory" oenly to sujet sumthing kwiet eroenyus.

SURROUND: Dhe dubl R in dhis wurd kanot but sujet, on dhe analoij ov *surreptitious* and *surrogate*, dhat dhe furst silabl standz for dhe Latin *sub*. It kumz in fakt from Oeld French *suronder*, Loe Latin *superundare*, meening "to oeverfloe." "By the increase of waters divers landes and tenementes in grete quantite ben surrounded and destroyed." — *Statuet ov Henry VII*, 1489.

VICTUALS: Dhis speling sujet a fauls history. It disgiezez dhe fakt dhat dhe wurd kumz to us, not from dhe Latin *victualia*, but from dhe Oeld French *vitaille*. It iz soe spelt in Chaucer; and dhe pronunsaeshon rekordz dhe history which pedantik speling obskuerz. Dhoez huu kling to dhe U in *labour* az a sien dhat it kaem to us thruu dhe French aut to maek it a point ov onor to riet *vittles* (or *vitz*) in plaes ov *victuals*.

Dheez ar perhaps dhe moest flaegrant egzaamplz ov spelingz which hav noe historrikal or etimolojik al justifikaeshon — which sujet iedher sumthing untruu or nuthing at aul. To dhis list

aut to be aded dhoez wurdz ov which dhe kurrent speling iz founded on a misspeling ov dhe Latin or Greek orijinal. What duu our konsurvativz sae to such enormitiz az *tyro* for *tiro*, *style* for *stile*? We hav aulredy — aul ov us huu kaer about orthografy — korekted in our Latin teksts dhe speling ov *sylva* to *silva*, ov *lachryma* to *lacrima*, and *lymph* to *limpha*; but in Inglish *sylvan*, *lachrymal*, and *lymph* stil lingger on. Whie shood we not oenly toleraet but defend, in our oen langgwej, dhe "houlerz" — dhaer iz noe udher wurd for dhem — which az skolarz we hav aulredy diskarded in our edishonz ov dhe Latin klasiks?

Agaen, an interesting list miet be maed ov wurdz which ar sorsez ov etimolojikalkonfuezhon, inazmuch az dhe saem ruut iz reprezented in tuu or mor arbitrarily diferent formz. Whie, for instans, shood *receipt* (Latin *receptus*) be spelt widh a P, whiel *deceit* (Latin *deceptus*) haz dropt dhe sueperfluity? Whie spel *convey* rashonaly and *inveigh* irashonaly? Whie flout etimolojy bie dhe spelingz *deign* and *disdain*? Dhaer iz noe lak ov authorrity for spelingz which shood remuuv dhe inkonsistensy. Chaucer riets *deyne*, Greene *daine*, Shakespeare *deine*, whiel on dhe udher hand Spenser givz us *disdeign*. Az dhe wurdz ar derievd from dhe Latin *dignari* (*dignus*), our etimolojiezertz aut to adopt widh enthuezyazm dhe Spenseeryan form.

### *Inside front cover*

We shal beleev in dhe sinserity ov dhoez huu taek dhaer stand upon dhe historiko-etimolojikalkonfuezhon, when we fiend dhem ajitaeting for a revizhon ov speling from dhat point ov vue — for dhe ejakshon ov leterz which kan remiend dhem oenly ov dhe blunderz ov ded pedants and printerz. Az a mater ov fakt, dhae ar kwiet az much opoezd to chaenjez which iluemin etimolojy az to dhoez which obskuer it. Not, ov kors, dhat we hoeld dhem to be wilfooly and konshusly insinseer. Dhae ar oenly tuu laezy, tuu weded to konvenshon and habit, to giv seeryus thaut to dhe mater. Dhae seez upon a fasiel fraez, and uez it widhout egzaminaeshon, az a preetekst for dhaer instinktiv konsurvativizm. Aul we aask iz dhat dhae shood realy giv sum urnest thaut to dhe kwestyon, and espeshaly dhat dhae shood bring into plae dhaer sens ov proporshon. We admit — for it wood be foly to denie — dhat no graet chaenj kan posibly be efekted widhout sum sliet diskumfort to dhoez akustomd to dhe oeld order ov thingz, and perhaps eeven a surten mezher ov aktueal los. But kan eniwun, waing dhis temporary diskumfort and trivyal los agenst dhe enormus gaen to aul fuetuer jeneraeshonz ov Inglish-speeking peepl, deklaer on hiz onor and konshens dhat dhe balans deflekts on dhe konsurvativ sied? It iz liek waing a split-pee agenst a kanon-baul.

[1] It iz oenly faer to remiend dhe reeder dhat Trench'ez *English Past and Present* daets from mor dhan aety yeerz agoe (1856 — Ed.), and dhat he himself telz us dhat he woz obliejd to prepaer dhe lektuerz "in haest, on a breek invitaeshon, and under dhe presher ov udher engaejments." It bie noe meenz foloez dhat he wood nou stand to hiz arguement.

[2] And if dhis fakt afordz a sort ov ekskues for dhe L in *would*, the L in *could*, on dhe udher hand, oenly survz to obskuer its relaeshon to *can*.

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[Adam Brown: see [Journals](#), [Book](#)]

### 3. The number of phonemes in English: not a simple answer to a simple question

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#### 0 Abstract

The alphabetical principle states that the letters in the spelling should represent the phonemes in the pronunciation. This presupposes that the number of phonemes is agreed. This article highlights various factors which make this a problematic procedure for English: historical change, sociolinguistic variation, and differences in analysis.

#### 1 Introduction

The alphabetic principle which underlies the spelling system of English, states that the letters in the spelling should represent the sounds (phonemes) of the pronunciation. Ideally, the correspondence would be one-to-one, as in phonemic transcription. However, while the correspondence in some languages like Finnish and Malay is close to one-to-one, in others (and English is perhaps the worst culprit) it is many-to-one and one-to-many. Nevertheless, that is the underlying principle.

This then begs the question of whether we can establish how many phonemes there are in English. Bett (1999) notes that "in her letter to *The Express*, Masha Bell said 'We have 256 ways of representing the 45 basic sounds of our language.'" In Allan Campbell's letter to *The Press* (Christchurch, NZ), he said "There are 41 sounds in English..." In PV7, Steve Bett said "there are 41 significant speech sounds or phonemes." Godfrey Dewey (1970) listed examples of 561 ways that 41 English sounds could be spelled. Bett himself (1999) concluded that "the minimum number of pure phonemes required to accurately transcribe English speech is 34 (12 vowels + 22 consonants)."

The purpose of this article is to elucidate various factors leading to these differences in opinion, and to show that one cannot give a global figure for the number of phonemes in English. These factors are of three types: historical change, sociolinguistic variation, and differences in analysis.

#### 2 Historical change

It is an axiom of linguistics that languages change over time. This is as true of phonology (including the number of phonemes) as of grammar and vocabulary. Two examples of ongoing changes in British pronunciation will be enough to make the point.

The first concerns words containing the diphthong /ʊə/, which are increasingly changing to /ɔ:/. Wells (1982 : 237) labels this the CURE-FORCE merger, "whereby the /ʊə/ of CURE undergoes a lowering, sometimes via intermediate stages such as [oə] and [ɔə], to [ɔ:], which is identical phonetically with the /ɔ:/ of FORCE, NORTH, THOUGHT. Thus *sure* comes to be a homophone of *shore*." Wells (1990 : 547) states that of a panel of 275 British speakers, 57% preferred /pɔ:/ for *poor*, and 43% /puə/, whereas for other words including *curious*, *gourd*, *tourist*, the /ʊə/ pronunciation is given in blue print as recommended for learners of English.

The second example concerns pairs of words such as *bored* and *board*. In some British accents, there is a difference, the first being pronounced [bɔəd] and the second [bɔ:d]. This difference has been described by many writers. Jones (1956) treated /ɔə/ as a separate centring diphthong phoneme alongside /ʌ, eə, və/. Wells (1982 : 311) writes that "Minimal pairs such as *bored* — *board* may be considered diagnostic for a 'modified London' accent as against non-regional RP [Received Pronunciation]... Accordingly I have treated the opposition as established in London English and I have recognized /ɔə/ and /ɔ:/ as distinct phonemes." The distinction between /ɔə, ɔ:/ seems to have died out in RP, both having become /ɔ:/.

### 3 Sociolinguistic variation

Pronunciation varies across geographical accents, perhaps more so for English than for any other language. One major division in English accents is between those (including General American: GA) that pronounce syllable-final /r/ as in *car park*, and those (including RP) that don't (rhotic vs. non-rhotic). As a result, words such as *near*, *square* and *cure* hold implications for the number of phonemes. In rhotic accents, these words contain a final /r/ preceded by a vowel which is identified as the same phoneme as occurs before other consonants. Thus, *kit*, *dress*, *foot* contain the vowel phonemes /ɪ, e, ʊ/ followed by the consonants /t, s/, while *near*, *square*, *cure* contain the same /ɪ, e, ʊ/ followed by the consonant /r/. In non-rhotic accents, on the other hand, there is no final /r/, and three new vowel phonemes have to be posited: the centring diphthongs /ʌ, eə, və/.

Differences between accents may also take the form of the differentiation in one accent of sounds (especially vowels) which are not differentiated in another (known as differences of phonemic or phonological system: Wells 1982 : 76). A good example of this is the Scottish English pronunciation of low and back vowels. Most Scots do not distinguish *pull* and *pool*, and many also conflate *Sam* and *psalm*, and *cot* and *caught* (Abercrombie 1979). However, these vowels are distinct phonemes in most other accents of English. These Scots therefore have three fewer phonemes here than other accents do.

A GA example is the pronunciation of the words *bomb* and *balm*. These are identical (homophones) for GA, whereas in other accents they are distinct, eg, RP /bɒm, bɔ: m/. Other accents therefore have one more phoneme in this area than GA does.

From the above three examples, readers should not jump to the conclusion that RP has more vowel phonemes than other accents of English, and that these other accents are merely simplified versions of RP. Indeed, there are accents which have more phonemes than RP in certain areas. For instance, in the accent of East Anglia (northeast of London), pairs such as *moan/mown*, *sole/soul*, *nose/known* and *toe/tow* are not pronounced as homophones, as they are in other accents. Instead, they constitute minimal pairs, the contrast being that the first member of each pair is pronounced with a [vu] vowel, while the second has [ʌu] (Wells 1982 : 337). East Anglian English thus has one more phoneme than RP, etc, in this respect.

### 4 Differences in analysis

Even where the pronunciation being investigated is a single accent at a single point in time, there may be differences of opinion as to the number of phonemes, owing to differences in analysis. These differences are often of the British-school vs. American-school type (Ladefoged 1993 : 75). An example of this is (what in British school are considered) long vowels and diphthongs, as in *bee*, *boo*, *bay*, *buy*, *boy*, (violin) *bow*, *bough*. In British school, these are analysed as long monophthong vowel phonemes, or diphthong vowel phonemes, thus /bɪ:, bu:,

beɪ, baɪ, bɔɪ, bæʊ, bau/. However, in American school (eg, Prator & Robinett 1985), they are usually considered sequences of a vowel phoneme followed by the same consonants that appear at the beginning of *yet* and *wet* (for which the symbols /y, w/ are used), thus /biy, buw, bey, bay, bɔy, bow, baw/. In such an analysis, there are no long vowel or diphthong phonemes, and the inventory of vowel phonemes is therefore much smaller.

Another problem in analysis relates to final unstressed vowels. The solution adopted by many reference books and dictionaries nowadays is a compromise which contravenes phonemic theory.

How should we transcribe the words *easy* and *busy* as pronounced in RP? ... The possibilities, using our phoneme symbols, are the following: [i:z i:] or [i:zɪ], [bɪz i:] or [bɪzɪ]. Few speakers of RP seem to feel satisfied with any of these transcriptions. There is a possible solution to this problem, but it goes against standard phoneme theory. We can symbolise this weak vowel as [ɪ] that is, using the symbol for the vowel in *beat* but without the length mark, thus [i:zɪ, bɪzɪ]. The [ɪ] vowel is neither the /i:/ of *beat* nor the /ɪ/ of *bit*, and is not in contrast with them. We can set up a corresponding vowel [ʊ] for words like *value*, or unstressed *to* that is neither the /u:/ of *shoe* nor the /ʊ/ of *book* but a weak vowel that shares the characteristics of both. If we use [ɪ] and [ʊ] in our transcription as well as /i:, ɪ, u:, ʊ/, it is no longer a true phonemic transcription in the traditional sense. However, this need not be too serious an objection, and the fact that native speakers seem to think that this transcription fits better with their feelings about the language is a good argument in its favour. (Roach 1991 : 77–8)

The vowels of words like *fire* and *tower* (in non-rhotic accents) may also be analysed differently. As triphthongs [aɪə, aʊə], they may be judged to be one syllable (and thus one phoneme /aɪə, aʊə/) or two syllables (and thus two phonemes /aɪ, aʊ/ + /ə/). Perceptions of this may be affected by the fact that these vowels often undergo a process known as smoothing (Wells 1982 : pp238–242), resulting in the monosyllabic pronunciation [faə, tə] or [fa:, tə].

A final, and consonantal, difference in analysis relates to the velar nasal [ŋ]. This is undoubtedly a single sound, and the existence of minimal pairs such as *sing* vs. *sin* allow the taxonomic phonemic view of phonology to establish a /ŋ/ phoneme. However, some analysts in generative phonology, in particular Chomsky & Halle (1968), have given arguments for positing that surface occurrences of [ŋ] are derived by rule from an underlying sequence /n/ + /g/; in other words, there is no /ŋ/ phoneme — it is only a surface manifestation of different underlying segments.

## Conclusion

All of the above instances are situations leading to differences of opinion as to the number of phonemes in English. In short, one cannot give a simple answer to the question. Three other points ought to be made before we close.

Firstly, problems such as the above have always been problems in the taxonomic approach to phonemic theory, partly because the phoneme was not originally established as a theoretical construct. Although several analysts — including such eminent linguists as Isaac Pitman, Edward Sapir, Henry Sweet, Ferdinand de Saussure and Baudouin de Courtenay — used the phoneme as a concept and as a term before him (Abercrombie 1991a), it was Daniel Jones who made the phoneme more widely known. However:

Jones always said there was no such thing as phonology as a subject separate from phonetics (he never used the word phonemics). His phoneme concept was unpretentious and unadventurous. Its purpose was to be of service to applied phonetics, especially in the

making of transcriptions for language teaching. As Jones wrote in 1931: 'The main object of grouping the sounds of a language into phonemes is to establish a simple and adequate way of writing the language'. Nothing more ambitious was expected of the concept.  
(Abercrombie 1991b : 45)

Secondly, while an ideal spelling system for English could be expected to create a one-to-one correspondence between letters and the phonemes of a standard native accent such as GA or RP, it is worth remembering that the majority of speakers of English worldwide nowadays are not native speakers. Moreover, the phonologies of many of these non-native speakers represent simplified systems (ie, contain fewer phonemes) than GA or RP. An ideal spelling system for native speakers may therefore contain significant redundancy for such speakers. Their phonologies represent another factor in establishing the number of phonemes in English.

Thirdly, we may question whether the alphabetic principle (ie, a strict one-to-one correspondence between graphemes and phonemes) is a realistic goal or rather an unattainable ideal for the English spelling system in its current state. There is no denying that certain common features of reformed systems (eg, the elimination of redundant letters) is a move towards a one-to-one correspondence. However, there are other features (eg, the treatment of magic E and of doubled consonant letters) which are attempts primarily to regularize spelling rather than to achieve a one-to-one correspondence. There are clearly other factors than a one-to-one correspondence that need to be taken into account in a reformed system. For instance, /θ, ð/ are undoubtedly separate phonemes, but many reformed systems do not feel obliged to differentiate them in spelling, since they carry a low functional load. A one-to-one correspondence (and its logical prerequisite, knowledge of the number of phonemes) therefore need not necessarily be the sole driving force of spelling reform.

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## 4. Writing reforms in other languages

### Edited by Chris Upward

JSSS has reported over the years on reforms of writing systems in other languages as follows:

- Chinese**, 1956 (mainland, plus now Hong Kong, but not Taiwan nor Singapore) [JSSS 13, 1992/2](#), Item 6.
- Czech**, early 1950s, [JSSS 17, 1994/2](#), Item 11.
- Danish**, 1948, [JSSS 21, 1997/1](#), Item 6; [JSSS 25, 1999/1](#), Item 6.
- Dutch**, 1815, 1934, 1954, [JSSS 19, 1995/2](#), Item 7
- Finnish**, 16–18th century, [JSSS 25, 1999/1](#), Item 3.
- French**, 1740, 1835, 1878, [JSSS 10, 1989/1](#), Item 4; 1990, [JSSS 15, 1993/2](#), Item 2.
- German**, 1901–2, 1996 (for Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and German-speakers elsewhere, mainly in E Europe), [JSSS 21, 1997/1](#), Item 8, 36; further in [JSSS 22, 1997/2](#) Item 8; also [JSSS 23, 1998/1](#), Item 7.
- Irish**, 1957, [JSSS 22, 1997/2](#), Item 7.
- Italian**, 1612, [JSSS 20, 1996/1](#), Item 6.
- Japanese**, 1946, [JSSS 19, 1995/2](#), Item 13.
- Malay/Indonesian**, 1972, [JSSS 11, 1989/2](#), Item 3
- Portuguese**, 1912 (Brazil), 1915 (Portugal), [JSSS 21, 1997/1](#), Item 7.
- Norwegian**, 1907, [JSSS J1, Autumn 1985](#), Item 5.
- Romanian**, 1860, 1904, [JSSS 11, 1989/2](#), Item 8.
- Russian**, 1918, [JSSS 2, Spring 1986](#), Item 3, §13.1, 13.2.
- Spanish** 1815, [JSSS 15, 1993/2](#), Item 8; also 1959.
- Turkish** 1928, [JSSS 18, 1995/1](#), Item 5.

Reforms are also known to have taken place in

**Afrikaans**, 1925.

**Albanian**, 1909.

**Swedish**, 1906/7.

Further information on these and other reforms is sought.

**American** English spelling reform is associated with:

Noah Webster's dictionary (1st edition, 1828),

Theodore Roosevelt's instructions (1906, [JSSS 23, 1998/1](#), In Item 4/Government), and the Chicago *Tribune's* campaign 1934–75 (Pt.I, [JSSS 24, 1998/2](#), Item 2, Pt.II, [JSSS 25, 1999/1](#), Item 2; Pt.III, [JSSS 26, 1999/2](#), Item 4).

For an overview of Anglo-American differences, see [JSSS 21, 1997/1](#), Item 12.

[*Journal of the Simplified Spelling Society, J27, 2000/1 pp14,15 in the print version*]

[Edward Rondthaler: see [Bulletins](#), [Anthology](#), [Journals](#), [Newsletters](#), [Personal View 8](#)]

## 5. Alternative Scenarios for the Year 2100

### Edward Rondthaler

Dr Rondthaler, President of the American Literacy Council and Vice-President of the SSS, here celebrates the new century by combining his typographical expertise with a little crystal-ball gazing...

A clever tongue-in-cheek page in the New York Times on 1 January 2000 purported to be page 1 of its issue on 1 January 2100 with articles reporting the news of the day in the distant future. Included was the announcement of statehood for Cuba, a solution for garbage disposal by shipping it to the sun, the misuse of weather-controlling satellites by a politician to prevent rain at a fund raising garden party, a report on Atlantaland's population of 40 million and New York's decline to ninth place.

The forecasters, however, did not address an item vital to all. No mention was made of the state of literacy in 2100.

English speaking countries will have experienced dramatic change in literacy — for good or for bad. The text below, (presented as a double-page spread in the printed journal) redresses that omission with appropriate text and orthography.

In the second text,

the long vowels    A    E    I    O    U  
ar speld            ae   ee   ie   oe   ue

### The New York Times

NEW YORK, FRIDAY, JANUARY 1, 2100

#### **2100 CENSUS WILL SHOW BIG DROP IN LITERACY**

*Secretary of Education Has New Plan Involving Chinese Team of Experts at Yale L. A. Campus*  
By TONG MEI KUEN

WASHINGTON, 17:06 E.S.T.

The Census Bureau will today forecast that its 2100 statistics will show that literacy in the United States has dropped alarmingly with only 24% of the adult population able to write and read above 4th grade level. This compares with 29% in 2090 and 78% in 2000.

The announcement was made in the offices of the Department of Education where Secretary of Education John Maynard explained that the drop was less than in the preceding decade.

While it is recognised that dependency on tapes and other audio means of communication had made inroads on reading and writing, plans are afoot to reverse this trend by providing children with Fun-a-Spell ear phones to be used during play.

Secretary Maynard explained that Fun-a-Spell is expected to end the persistent illiteracy problem of all English-speaking peoples. It was developed on the Los Angeles campus of Yale University by a team of Chinese psychologists under the leadership of Prof. Hing Yu Seng.

It is claimed that research by the team shows a remarkable similarity between the skills required to write and read Chinese and those required to write and read English.

The 308 rules of English spelling developed in 1969 by Dr. Paul Hanna at Stanford University have been compressed into 240 to match the new 240-day school year. One rule and a few typical words illustrating it will be broadcast continuously each day from a facility to be set up in mid-Kansas specifically for that purpose. All Fun-a-Spell earphones will be tuned to the broadcast wavelength.

Secretary Maynard explained that these broadcasts are expected to enable learners to absorb the rules, and bring our reading and writing up to levels found in fully developed countries where a word's spelling matches its pronunciation.

One of the unique features of Fun-a-Spell is that at the end of each 30 minutes of use it delivers a small candy bar.

An almost invisible earphone for use by adults in the workplace and home will be available in 2101. It will not provide candy bars.

## The New York Times

NEW YORK, FRIDAY, JANUARY 1, 2100

### **2100 SENSUS WILL SHOW BIG RISE IN LITERACY**

*U.S. Reading and Writing Ability Now on Par With Literacy in Other Developed Countries*

By TONG MEI KUEN

WASHINGTON, 17:06 E.S.T.

The Census Bureau today forecast that its 2100 statistics will show adult literacy in the U.S. at a new high of 98%, a figure said to match that of developed countries speaking other languages. The new figure compares with 96% in 2090 and 78% in 2000.

The announcement was made in the offices of the Department of Education building where Secretary of Education John Maynard saw the 98% figure as evidence of the wisdom of teachers and others who, in the early 2000s, fought an uphill battle for a logical English spelling.

In recounting the history of spelling reform the Secretary explained that a simple, workable spelling was developed in 1910, but no feasible way to implement it was found until computers made the transition from normal spelling effortless and automatic early in the 2000s.

When test scores indicated that U.S. students were falling behind their peers in non-English speaking countries, President Mildred Diaz ordered that all White House computers be equipped with automatic simplified spelling translation software. She is said to have realized that this would cause controversy if she made an issue of it, so she simply did it unannounced.

The change was widely accepted. Schools, colleges, publishers, and others quickly fell into line, impressed by the ease of change and aware that our spelling, not having been updated for hundreds of years, was far out of sync with present speech.

Last to accept the spelling we now take for granted were the etymologists. They reluctantly agreed that a spelling's chief purpose is to mirror speech.

Undersecretary of Education Kim Wu pointed out that when, in the early 2000s, it became clear that logical English spelling was permissible, many important international businesses began to use it. This boosted the popularity of English far beyond expectations, making it indisputably the world's "lingua franca".

## 6. Compromise Spellings and World English

### Edgar A Gregersen

Edgar A Gregersen is professor of anthropology and linguistics at Queens College and the Graduate School, City University of New York. He has a PhD from Yale University and long-standing interests/specialties in African languages and Norwegian. He is at present doing a cross-linguistic study of insult topics, and has used/will use reformed spellings of obscenities in the published accounts.

#### 0 Abstract

Reformed spelling, it is argued, should not undermine traditional pronunciations and should try to accommodate as many varieties of English as is feasible with compromise forms for major classes of words. Some variant spellings will have to be admitted but they should, as much as possible, be kept to a minimum — more or less on the order of the variation found at present.

#### 1 The need for compromise

In a recent e-mail survey of SSS members' views on particular points of English spelling (Langscape, 1998), the question arose about the desirability of reducing AE and OE to E in words such as *aeon*, *mediaeval*, *phoenix*, *amoeba*, *oenophile*, *oecology*, and the like. Apparently, most members approved of such a change (which is already common in the United States). I did not. My argument then — as now — was that such a change would tend to destabilize the pronunciation.

The traditional pronunciation of such words is with a so-called 'long E' as in *bee* (/i:/ or /ij/). In the US the reduced spelling has led to many pronunciations with 'short E' and this may have influenced speakers elsewhere as well. The result is that we find at least two pronunciations in the English-speaking world for words such as (*a*)*esthete*, *p(a)edophile*, (*o*)*ecumenical*, and possibly also the variation in *economics* (formerly spelt *oeconomics*).

Chris Upward has suggested that because of the vacillation between 'long' and 'short' E's in such words, the spelling with E alone could be seen as a compromise, because speakers from various regions would interpret it in their own way. He has himself incorporated this reduction in [Cut Spelling](#) (Upward, 1996).

Even H W Fowler (1958), usually a champion of the most ridiculous traditional spellings, generally went along with the reduction:

It seems desirable that ... all words in common enough use to have begun to waver between the double letter and the simple E ... should be written with the E alone...

It must be remembered, however, that Fowler was opposed to a general spelling reform:

English [spelling] had better ... not be revolutionized but amended in detail, here a little & there a little as absurdities become intolerable ... [*op. cit.* p554]

In Fowler's scheme of things, vowel length would not be consistently shown because the present system doesn't do it. So a few more ambiguous E's would pose no great problem.

With Upward's Cut Spelling the situation is not so clear. Only if Cut Spelling in more or less its present shape is to be the final stage of spelling reform could the reduced forms be considered as compromise spellings. Upward has never conceded that he holds to this view. In thoro-going systems of reform they could not possibly be, because 'long E' and 'short E' would have to be distinguished everywhere: no spelling reformer to my knowledge has wanted to write both *dead* and *deed* as *\*ded*. (I hope no one ever will.) But this is precisely what pushing for reductions of AE and OE would imply. This cannot function as a compromise in the final stage of the orthography and intermediate use will only obscure the goal of a basically phonemic system.

No matter how much one might wish it, two or more spellings for at least certain words are inevitable in a thoro-going reform of English, altho at the present one form suffices for them because of the great ambiguity of a large number of symbols — especially vowel symbols — have in the traditional orthography. Thus, *tomato* (Klasik Nue Speling, *tomaatoe* or US *tomaetoe*), *either* (*iedher* or *eedher*), — even consonants, as in *greasy* (*greezy* or *greesy*), *nephew* (*nevue* or *nefue*), as well as a considerable number of words ending in *-sia*, *-sian*, *-sial*, etc (more on these later).

## 2 Acceptable compromises

What legitimate 'compromises' could be built into an ideal spelling? One that virtually all modern reformers agree on is the retention of R in words like *far*, *start*, *port*, *ladder*, etc, despite the fact that all Australians, New Zealanders, many New Englanders, and many people in England and Wales do not pronounce it. Some American reformers might believe that the R must be written because it is 'correct'. But all respectable dictionaries admit that (if they do in fact indicate such R's in their pronunciation guide) readers may or may not pronounce the R according to their own dialect.

Now, it is perfectly reasonable to argue that everyone should be able to write his own dialect. Henry Sweet, the famous nineteenth century phonetician and possibly the prototype of Bernard Shaw's Professor Higgins, apparently would have taken such a position. In fact he proposed that in England, unpronounced R's should not be written so that we find *faam* 'farm', *wəə k* 'work' in his ideal orthography.

But at present, such an extreme approach is generally rejected because it would tend to break up the English-language community. Publishers would find it exorbitant to publish the same books in many versions. As a matter of fact, critics of spelling reform almost always play up this difficulty.

## 3 Attempts at World English

To keep the English-language community together, then, is a serious goal reformers must keep in mind. To do so, with as few regional variations as possible showing up, several compromises would have to be made — and, I think, could be made. The end result, an 'ideal' English spoken by no one natively, I call World English.

In a little known article by the American linguist Martin Joos (1960) a few interesting compromises are suggested. They deserve consideration by all reformers.

He starts out by establishing the necessity for compromise: 'there is no single standard of English pronunciation... Instead of ... a single ideal [more or less as in French], the English-speaking world has at least half a dozen' (p256).

A decent orthography for English, Joos rightly insists, must do what the traditional spelling does: 'serve[ ] as an automatic translating machine between standards of English speech' (p256) — something like what traditional Chinese writing does for dialects so different they are probably separate languages.

Some proposals of reform do not meet this criterion, or do so only in part. For example, altho the great majority of native speakers of English (in Scotland, Ireland, Canada, and America) differentiate between *which* and *witch*, *whale* and *wail*, and the distinction is recognized in the OED, Cut Spelling ignores the existence of the WH/W contrast and permits only W (except in *wher*). Practically all schemes preserve a distinction between *balm* and *bomb*, but one American proposal (made by Abraham F Citron) lumps them together as *bom* and even writes *fother* for *father*.

The American Literacy Council (ALC) has proposed a scheme (formerly called American Spelling) that restricts itself to representing one variety of American English only. For example, it requires showing the palatalization of T, D, S, Z in unstressed syllables: -TU- and -DU- are to be written as -CHOO- (or -CHUR) and -JOO- (or -JUR). Thus, *actual* becomes *akchooal*; *obituary*, *obichooerry*; *gradual*, *grajooal*; *individual*, *indivijooal*; *literature*, *literachur*. Similarly *sexual*, *issue* become *sexshooal*, *ishoo*. No variation is allowed. But it is conceded that 'reformed British and Australian orthographies will [likely] differ from some of the above' (Rondthaler & Lias, 1986, p296).

In a way, the adoption of these forms goes against the ALC American Spelling strategy of keeping the appearance of words as close to their traditional shape as possible. For this reason, the TH/DH distinction is unfortunately ignored (*thigh* and *thy* are *thi*, *wreath* and *wreathe* both become *reeth*). Furthermore, (hard) C, Q and X are all preserved. And *glory*, *historian* keep their present spelling despite the fact that the majority of American dictionaries indicate the most common pronunciation that would be expected as *gloery*, *histoerian*.

Klasik Nue Speling (Ripman & Archer, 1948) the SSS's proposed orthography of 1948 [slightly adapted from Archer's version used on Item 2 of this issue — Ed.], is more tolerant — it permits both *glory* and *gloery* — and also provides forms that could serve as compromise spellings. For example, it writes *aktueal*, *obitueary*, *gradueal*, *individueal*, *literatuer*, *seksueal*, *isue* (but also *ishuu*). If it incorporated a rule that unstressed -*tue-*, -*due-*, -*sue-*, etc, are pronounced either with a 'real' T, D, S, etc, or with 'palatalized' correspondences, CH, J, SH, we would have genuine compromise spellings that could be used for all dialects of English.

Walter Ripman, the formulator of Klasik Nue Speling, did not develop this compromise consistently. But in an even more thoro-going way, Joos did. He believed that the most elegant solution to a variety of problems would be to use J to mean a Y sound (as in German, Skandinavian, all Slavic languages that use the Roman alphabet, and the International Phonetic Alphabet). Then, CH, J, SH, ZH could be reinterpreted as TJ, DJ, SJ, ZJ, in line with the assimilations usually heard in *meet you*, *did you*, *miss you*, *please you*. Joos suggests that in unstressed or weakly stressed syllables, TI, DI, SI, ZI could be interpreted as either variants of CH, J, etc, or TY, DY, or TI, DI — depending on dialect. For example, *Christian* would be rewritten as *Kristian* (this is not his example) but interpreted variously as *Kristian*, *Kristyan* or *Krischan* (all of these forms are reported from modern RP). The example Joos does give is *bestial* which would not be rewritten but could be interpreted as *bestial*, *bestyal*, or even as *beschal*.

Joos goes further. He proposes that 'long U' as in *use* (ie, /ju:/) both stressed, unstressed, even reduced) be written as *iu*. Thus, *use* would be *ius* or *iuz*. But *statue*, *mutual*, *individual*, *gradual* would similarly become: *statiu*, *miutiual*, *indiviidual*, *gradiual* — with the understanding that a number of different pronunciations would be accommodated.

Doing something of the sort is necessary if only because of the great variety some classes of words exhibit. In Daniel Jones' *English pronouncing Dictionary*, *negotiate*, *amnesia* have 4 possible pronunciations each; and *an(a)esthesia*, 5; *mutual* 6; *Asian* 8; *Polynesia(n)* 10.

The case for compromise in these instances is strong but details of Joos's proposal are so unlikely to be accepted that they must be somewhat recast. The major problems are the introduction of J to mean Y (no matter how laudable), and the way palatalization is handled. We will probably have to stick with CH, J, SH, ZH. But with somewhat less elegance Klasik Nue Speling forms like *bestial*, *Kristian*, *muetueal*, *individueal* can preserve the compromise. This means *issue*, not *ishuu*, *negoesiaet* not *negoshyaet* — the Klasik Nue Speling variants cannot be followed strictly if we are to be consistent.

#### 4 Maximum differentiation

A few other areas of compromise can be suggested. Following the strategy of writing R's everywhere with the understanding that some speakers will drop them, we can set up the general strategy of writing the maximally differentiated form as the compromise. That means keeping the WH in *when*, *where* (which Klasik Nue Speling does, but not Cut Spelling). As well as (1) showing a difference between *or* versus *oer* in words like *for* vs *four*, *horse* vs *hoarse* (which Klasik Nue Speling permits as an option but ALC's American Spelling does not); (2) differentiating the vowels in *fir*, *fern*, *fur*, as is often done in the Standard English spoken in Scotland (one pamphlet issued by the SSS. — *Braeking dhe spel* [1942] — permitted an optional two-way distinction as indicated by the first edition of the OED, separating *fur* from *fir/fern*, both written with ER; Cut Spelling leaves the traditional spelling unchanged in these instances); (3) differentiating the vowels in *aunt* and *ant*, *class* and *classic*. This is no longer a popular distinction to make and recent SSS proposals have dropped it — along with too many other distinctions. Unfortunately, no consistent way of indicating this distinction occurs in the traditional spelling, but if we follow the general strategy outlined above, the distinction must be made, as Klasik Nue Speling does: *aant* vs *ant*, *klaas* vs *klasik*. Speakers who do not observe such a distinction would simply learn that there are two ways to write an A sound (as speakers who drop R's have to learn two spellings for AA, say, as in *father* and *farther*).

The most vexing problem of all involves the so-called 'shwi', not a separate sound comparable to the 'shwa', but a cover term for different phonemes used in various dialects: (4) for example, the final vowel variously written -Y, -EY, -IE, -I in words such as *lady*, *money*, *hippie*, *taxi*. In some dialects this is always a short I (the traditional pronunciation listed in pre-1961 dictionaries); in others it is a 'long E'. Some English people, speaking a democratized RP, use 'long E' at the end of a word but 'short I' before endings and in compounds such as *ladies*, *taxis*, *anything*. Aristocratic RP uses I always (and sometimes a very much lowered variety, approaching the E in *pet*). Americans (except in the south) tend always to use 'long E'. Klasik Nue Speling writes -Y at the end of words, but -I elsewhere — leaving the Americans out: an unfortunate omission to say the least. Rondthaler's American Spelling generally writes Y everywhere for 'shwi', which is a possible compromise but abandons international values for Y. Furthermore, its use is inconsistent for at least some words: *beauty*, *beauties*, *beautify*, where Y, I(E) represent a 'long E', are all written with Y (*buety*, *buetyz*, *buetyfi*) but so is *beautiful* (*buetyful*) where such a pronunciation is non-standard. Joos suggests another solution: where American English has 'long E' in unstressed syllables, write I; where it has 'short I', write E. This

means that *candied* becomes *kandid*, but *candid* becomes *kanded* (and so also *meret* for *merit*, *hored* for *horrid*). Rondthaler's American Spelling would write *candyd* and *candid*. Klassic Nue Speling has *kandid* for both. I think another solution is called for: *kandi'd* or *kandi.d* vs *kandid* — a position I have previously proposed (see *SSS Newsletter* 1986 Spring pp14–17).

But this paper has become too long for me to repeat my argument for solving the shwi problem. I can only hope that a case has been made for various compromises in an acceptable orthography for English as a world language.

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[*Journal of the Simplified Spelling Society*, J27, 2000/1 p18 in the print version]

## 7. Notice.

**Richard P Mudgett**

**Donuts aren't UGHly eny mor Simpler Speling for th' 2,000'z**

1997, 131pp.

The author of this book has generously donated 10 copies for distribution to members of the SSS. It offers a lighthearted account of a variant on NS (Nue Speling), WES (World English Spelling) and Soundspel (American Literacy Council), and is recommended as an easy introduction to the NS tradition of spelling reform.



## 8. Spelling Reform — arguments against and for Justin B Rye

Justin B Rye has an MA in Linguistics from the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. He still lives in that city, and is currently a computer systems administrator at Datacash Ltd. A somewhat longer version of this article appears on his website. See Links.

### Foreword

I believe that the flaws of the standard orthography are indefensible — but I recognize that it has the advantage of an extensive Installed User Base. Thus, it can afford to ignore criticism, in exactly the same manner as Fahrenheit thermometers, QWERTY keyboards, and certain software packages, which rely on conformism, short-termism, and laziness for their survival.

That said, though, just what is wrong with the idea of switching to something better? Anti-reformists come in thirteen basic flavours, which I summarize below, along with possible replies:

### Objection 1: The Status Quo Fan

Our spelling system is traditional; if it was good enough for my grandparents, it's good enough for everybody! I refuse to learn any new system, whatever its supposed merits!

*Reply:* I'll have to try to persuade you it's a good thing. The old style gives GH over a dozen pronunciations: CallaGHan, cauGHt, doGHouse, EdinburGH, eiGHth, ginGHam, hiccouGH, houGH, KeiGHley, lonGHand, louGH, bouGH, straiGHt, touGH, yoGHurt. The new version is quicker, easier, more logical, and less cruel to children (or indeed the billions of adults doomed to learn English as a world language). Please try to be a bit more open-minded!

### Objection 2: The Fonetics Phreak:

Giving English a phonetic script, with one symbol for each sound, would produce a range of ridiculous ill-effects, such as: compound sounds like J (which is phonetically D + ZH) would have to be clumsily spelled out in full (so *jay* becomes *dzhey*). Trivial phonetic distinctions, as between the two kinds of A in *champion's swag*, or of T in *tea strainer* would require distinct spellings; and subtle dialectal vowel distinctions — as between Glaswegian and Bronx versions of *cat* — would further confuse matters. *Do you want to?* would have to be spelt the way it's pronounced — as one word, *dzhawonnuh?*

*Reply:* Who said anything about a phonetic system? All we need is one that's roughly graphemic ("one reading per grapheme") and preferably phonemic ("one spelling per phoneme") and/or morphemic ("one spelling per morpheme").

In a phonemic system, the compound phoneme /dʒ/, which functions as a unit in the English sound system, can conveniently be spelt with the letter J. Phonetic variants of /a/ or /t/ are no concern of a well-designed script; dialectal cases — especially ones as inconsequential as that quoted above — are easy to handle (see Objection 11). If the individual words are pronounced in isolation as 'du, yu, wont, tu', nothing forces us to put the reduced versions in the dictionary (any more than we need glottal stops in the alphabet).

### Objection 3: The Homophonophobe

If we spelled words as they're pronounced, confusion would reign (or rain) since homophones like *fisher/fissure*, *minor/miner*, *two/to* and *session/ cession* would become indistinguishable.

*Reply 1:* These words already are indistinguishable when spoken, but when did this fact last cause you any inconvenience in conversation? People naturally avoid ambiguities in speech unless they're trying to contrive a pun, so if you write as you speak homophones are no problem. Contrariwise, ambiguous spellings like *bow*, *close*, *does*, *lead*, *live*, *minute*, *read*, *use*, *wind*, *wound* currently are a problem; and such misleading homographs (or do I mean heterophones?) could be sorted out by the most moderate of spelling reforms.

*Reply 2:* There will be plenty of slack in the system to distinguish between *fisher/fisyur*, *maynor/mayner*; and as for *cession*, what does it mean, anyway? I'm not making these examples up, you know.

### Objection 4: The Remington Salesman

Any phonemic script would need to provide distinct graphemes for each of the forty or so phonemes of English, which means seriously expanded typewriters! We'll need either ugly diacritics or entirely novel letters — for instance, *shown* (three phonemes, /ʃ/ + /ou/ + /n/) will have to become something like \$Ūn!

*Reply:* At present, almost every letter of the alphabet is overstrained — A as in *beAuty*, B as in *numB*, C as in *musCle*, D as in *hanDkerchief*, E as in *siEvEd*, F as in *oF*, G as in *Gnomonic*, H as in *Hour*, I as in *business*, J as in *Jaeger*, K as in *Knee*, L as in *coLonel*, M as in *Mnemonic*, N as in *damN*, O as in *peOple*, P as in *Pneumonic*, Q as in *Quay*, R as in *comfoRtable*, S as in *iSle*, T as in *husTle*, U as in *bUild*, V as in *Volkslied*, W as in *Wry*, X as in *rouX*, Y as in *mYrrh*, Z as in *capercailZie*! But in a reform, why not use two-letter graphemes (as in 'sh-ow-n!)? That way there are more than enough possibilities; we can even retire Q, X, and that ugly diacritic, the apostrophe! One new vowel symbol would be handy; I'd go for Scandinavian-style slashed Ø as in *Bjørk*.

### Objection 5: The Culture Vulture

This revised spelling scheme looks completely alien to English orthographic traditions. If schoolchildren are taught only the new version, we'll lose touch with our literature; our cultural heritage will be lost unless kids can read Shakespeare in the original!

*Reply 1:* Aren't you overreacting? We'll phase it in slowly, so there's plenty of time to reprint the classics — most of the editing required is simple search-and-replace work. Compare the gradual process of metrication. Other languages manage spelling reforms once a generation; and the Japanese manage several very different writing systems in parallel.

*Reply 2:* Try to read Shakespeare "in the original". Henry VI Part 3 (III/2 91–2) goes:

I am a subiect fit to ieast withall,  
But farre vnfit to be a Soueraigne.

The sixteenth-century pronunciation was:

"OY AHM UH SOOBJEK FIT TOE JAIST WITHAL  
BOOT FAR-ROONFIT TOE BEE UH SAWVA-RAYN."

And remember, he never once spelt his name *Shakespeare*!

### Objection 6: The Speed-Reeder

Adult readers recognize whole words by their overall silhouettes, not by decomposing them into the sounds. What's the point of improving the correspondence of sounds and symbols? It'll only mean we have to relearn the silhouettes! (And then of course we'll have to go through the whole thing all over again the next time the language changes...)

*Reply:* Fluent reading involves three skills:

- (1) Word-anticipation, guessing what will come next on the basis of context. This is what speed-reading really depends on, and it's essentially independent of the writing system involved.
- (2) Word-recognition, treating words (or occasionally syllables) as arbitrary units to be memorized. This can be a useful skill once mastered, but a painful one to acquire — ask any Japanese kid. The way the current orthography forces learners to handle many common words as single arbitrary glyphs (*doesn't one though?*) is a stumbling-block many schoolchildren never really get over.
- (3) Word-analysis, handling words as collections of sounds. Even though English makes it unreliable, this is the basic strategy for beginners, and still a constituent of any truly literate adult's reading skills — does the word *squilliform* give you any trouble? You may not consciously spell out (eg) the word *handbag* as H-A-N-D-B-A-G, but if it was just a silhouette you'd have to learn it separately from *handbag* (look closely at those letter shapes!).

The upshot is that spelling reform might be briefly awkward for word-recognizers, but would eventually help even them — if only because it allows more hieroglyphs on a page! For children (and many, many adults), it would be a huge, immediate, and permanent improvement. Or at least, as good as permanent: the current orthodox system has already outlived its best-before date by half a millennium, so we can leave the next reform for Buck Rogers to worry about.

### Objection 7: The Crossword-Puzzler

What about a spelling reform's incidental effects on word-games, abbreviations and so on? If the dictionary contains more K's and Z's than D's and H's, the scrabble-players are going to riot!

*Reply:* Ah, yes, a much more intelligent point. (OK, I admit it, it's a plant; I've never seen it considered before, but I thought it deserved airing.) Scrabble-players will have to choose between "historical" or "recalibrated" Scrabble; the rest of us will just have to get used to *E.U.* as the *Y(uropian)*. *Y(union)*, *K.O.s* as *N(ok)-A(wt)z*, the *C.I.A.* as the *S(entral) I(ntelijens) E(yjensi)*, and a *G.H.Q.* as a *J(eneral) H(ed)-K(wortertz)*. *A.I.D.S.* may still be *A.I.D.S.*, but this is no longer the same as the word *eydz*. Since any serious reform would also change the names of the letters, even the unaltered initialisms may be hard to recognize in speech. *A.I.*, for instance becomes, Ah Ee. If you think that's confusing, count yourself lucky I'm not reforming the Phoenician-derived alphabetical order!

Incidentally, *I.D.*, *O.K.* and many others (especially tradenames) are already anomalies, not standing for any particular real series of English words; and acronyms such as *laser*, *quango* or *ufo* are effectively independent of their original forms too. Do we make it *aydi*, *leyzer* or *I.D.*, *L.A.S.I.R.*? And as for *G.N.U.* ("Gnu's Not Unix"), I don't particularly care what happens in these cases; but the marketing director of I.C.I. might.

### Objection 8: The French Teacher

The orthodox system, which spells *qualifications* and *changes* exactly as in French, is very useful for those who know French and want to learn English, or vice-versa. Writing those words as, say, *kwolifikeysyonz*, *ceynjiz* will make polyglottism even rarer!

*Reply:* True, our Norman-influenced orthography is a bridge between English and French. But why force everyone to learn it as the only spelling system for English? Most Asian (or even Scandinavian) learners of English care little for French; and Texans would be better off with a bridge towards Spanish. Personally, I would have been happy to learn a bit about Anglo-Norman during French O- and A-level, but nobody wanted to tell me anything about it then!

Additionally, remember that:

- (1) Medieval French isn't Modern French. The pronunciation of the two examples above are barely recognisable: "Kali-Feekass-Yawng, Shahngzh".
- (2) Mediaeval English isn't Modern English. The biggest change is the Great Vowel Shift, which is responsible for our pronunciation of A E I O U as "Eh Ee Eye Oh Yew" (as in no other writing system on the planet), rather than approximately "Ah Eh Ee Oh Oo" (as in Old English, Finnish, Latin, Indonesian, Swahili... etc). The first hurdle for Latin teachers is usually to persuade pupils that (eg) *dei* is "Day-Ee", not "Dee-Eye". A spelling reform that made English less insular would be a great help here.

Some medieval Norman spellings did not make sense even at the time, by the way. Witness the Norman scribes' use of: Cosmetic O in place of U in *cOme*, *IOve*, *tOngue*, and many others where they thought a U would look ugly in clerical handwriting (too many consecutive vertical strokes). Even worse was the way the Normans applied Romance spelling habits to a Germanic language. "Soft C" as in *Cell* would make sense in French, because the hard Latin C had come to be pronounced /s/. Germanic /k/, represented by C in Old English, didn't soften like this. This gave us confusions such as *Celt*, *sCeptic*, *Coelacanth!* The list goes on.

### **Objection 9: The Bon-Mot Aficionado**

English is full of vocabulary items borrowed from other languages — some fully naturalized, some just temporary visitors. This is largely because its anything-goes attitude to spelling places no restrictions on words like *cinquecento*, *Fräulein* or *connoisseur*. If we reform these, their sources will become unrecognizable! Besides, what are we going to do with names like *Einstein*, *Munich*, or *Caesar* (and come to that, *Rye*)?

*Reply:* English is hospitable to immigrant words because it has simple morphology, rich phonology and a cosmopolitan tradition. Spelling is irrelevant — witness the words *fatwa*, *glasnost* and *futon*, taken from languages that don't even use the same writing system as we do. My policy on imports would be:

- (1) Words that retain foreign citizenship are immune to English spelling rules, and are spelt as in the source language, but italicized to tell naive readers that (for instance) *Fräulein* isn't pronounced "Fraw-Leen". They may not be able to guess the pronunciation, but that problem will if anything be reduced by the reform. Some imports may have debatable transcriptions, either because of changes Back Home (technically it's *chateau* — no circumflex accent since the recent French reform) or doubt about the best roman form (*Koran* or *Qur'an*? *Shinto* or *Sintoo*?).
- (2) Words which have made English their permanent home must conform to its rules. If there really is such a word as *connoisseur*, it's an English one with no special right to a funny spelling — the French say *connaissance*. The same applies one way or another to all the "French" words and phrases in the following list: *blancmange*, *bon viveur*, *double entendre*, *epergne*, *locale*, *morale*, *nom-de-plume*, *papier-mâché*, *resumé*, *table d'hôte*. Foreign-language placenames can ignore the reform, but many places have English names

independent of the forms used by their inhabitants. *Spain, Munich, Peking* are English words, and so get reformed (*Speyn, Myunik, Piykinh*) no matter what the locals call them.

- (3) Archaisms can be treated as foreignisms, and personal names can be included in this class. Your birth certificate may be regarded as definitive. Mr *Geoffrey Ewan Quinn* won't necessarily have to re-monogram all his possessions as the property of Mr *Jefri Yuan Kwin*. However, new names should be spelt sanely; and anyone who wants to avoid constantly telling people "Well, okay, it's pronounced "Fanshaw" but it's spelt Featherstonehaugh should switch. I for one would be perfectly happy to become a romanized *Ray*.

### **Objection 10: The Etymological Determinist**

Spelling *wrestling* as we do is a useful guide to the word's provenance. In its Old English form, the word was indeed pronounced with an audible W, T and G. If we change our spelling, we'll lose all these clues!

*Reply:* If etymology is so important that primary school children are forced to master a Medieval Reenactment writing system on this basis, why are they never actually taught even the basics of linguistic history? Surely any kid who has gone to the trouble of learning an etymological spelling for *wrestling* (etc) should be entitled to go on and take the subject at GCSE level! But somehow I suspect that most people find etymology supremely unimportant in their lives. If anyone ever needs to know the origin of the word *resling*, there will still be dictionaries about. Come to that, they will be easier to use (you can find the word under R) and have more room for etymologies. (They will need less room for pronunciation guides!)

Besides, the "etymologies" in English spellings are often wrong, in addition to misleading readers about pronunciation. Consider the list *aChE, agHast, aiSle, aLmond, anchOr, bUry*, (musical) *chOrds, coLonel, couLd, crumB, deliGHt, dingHy, foreiGn, gHastly, gHerkin, gHost, hauGHty, iSland, lachHrymose, postHumous, Ptarmigan, QUeue, rHyme, rHumb, roWlocks, Scissor, sCythe, sovereiGn, sprighTly, thumB, tongUE, Whole, Whore*. All the capitalized letters are spurious, having often been deliberately added as "improvements" by incompetent scholars. I'm not saying we should necessarily wipe out such etymological traces as the specific unstressed vowels in *nonadministrative* or even the 'Greek' Phs in *philosopher* (which can all convey useful morphological information); just that etymology isn't one of an orthography's main concerns.

### **Objection 11: The Cockney Patriot**

The trouble with a more phonologically representative spelling system is that it would reveal how nonstandard dialects interpret the graphemes of written English. *Tutor* for instance is "TOODUR" to a Nebraskan, "TEWTRR" to an Aberdonian and "CHOO'AH" to a Cockney; woe betide any speaker of BBC English wanting to impose a lah-di-dah "standard spelling dialect" on the inhabitants of the East End!

*Reply:* At last we're getting to the non-trivial arguments! Yes, there's an important problem here that the system has to deal with carefully. But its nature is still obscured by several layers of misunderstanding, which I'll try to handle quickly:

*Misunderstanding 1:* This is a spelling reform, not a speaking reform!

*Misunderstanding 2:* Currently, everyone has to learn a "standard spelling accent" that has been dead for centuries. (If it's only pronunciation we're talking about, rather than grammar, the linguistics term is "accent", not "dialect".) At least becoming bilingual in Cockney and BBC English might be useful.

*Misunderstanding 3:* Why assume the spelling accent would be a posh one? It would have to be a sort of artificial "Highest Common Factor" archiphonology everyone could agree on.

There are four ways in which accents can vary, all of which can be accommodated in a reasonably phonemic spelling system:

- Phonetic (or "realizational") variation. Trifling but obvious features like the way Cockneys pronounce *bay* almost as "BUY" (while *buy* becomes more like "BOY" and *boy* like "BOOY"). Cockneys have no trouble distinguishing them and lining them up correctly with the written forms, so this is irrelevant to the orthography.
- Phonemic (or "systemic") variation. Added or lost distinctions, such as between "TH" and "F" (Cockneys pronounce *thin* like *fin*). If the spelling makes more distinctions than you do, you can ignore them while reading, and your difficulties in learning to write will be nothing new or serious ("Hmm, is it spelled Theft or Feft?"). On the other hand, if the system makes fewer distinctions, you'll have serious trouble reading ("Hmm, does it mean *three* or *free*?"). The lesson I draw from this is that the spelling system should make all the available phonemic distinctions — and not just the ones the Queen makes.
- Phonotactic (or "distributional") variation. This is variation dependent on the phonetic context, like the way Cockneys — and in fact the English generally — drop any R-sound that isn't followed by a vowel (so that *larder* = "LADA"). Again, the orthography should side with those who keep the distinctions clear, which in this case means spelling a lot of words with an R omitted by BBC newsreaders.
- Lexical (or "selectional") variation. Where these are real regional standards rather than merely outbreaks of "spelling-pronunciation" (like saying "CUP-BOARD" for "KUBBERD"), they have as much right to be tolerated as alternative spellings as they have to be tolerated as alternative pronunciations. Obviously, you ought to be consistent, but if your recipes refer to *tomeyto* they will communicate at least as effectively as if you anglicized it to *tomahto*.
- In summary, then: as long as people understand how accents vary (a body of knowledge which will clearly be one of the main influences on the system's rules, but which any Cockney already needs for communication with non-Cockneys), there is no reason to imagine any insurmountable problems here — how many of the people who claim that creating a pandialectal scheme is impossible have ever even tried?

### **Objection 12: The Morphophonologist**

A purely phonemic system (obeying the principle of One Spelling Per Phoneme) would often mean giving divergent spellings to different forms of a single morpheme, concealing relationships between words in contexts such as:

- *Cats* and *dogs*, which would have to become *kats* and *dogz*, with two different plural markers;
- Stress-shifting: Photograph — photoggrapher — photographic (or less dramatically, REal — reALity);
- "Softening": critic/critiCism, analogue/ analoGy, fuse/fuSion etc.
- Vowel-shift: sanity/sAne, obscenity/obscEne, divinity/divlne, conical/cOne, punish/pUnitive, etc.;

One of the few merits of the old style is that it makes obvious the connection between *nation* and *national*, which will be disguised if they're respelt *neyshn* and *nash'nal*.

*Reply:* Absolutely — the morphemic principle (One Spelling Per Morpheme) conflicts with the phonemic system and is worth making concessions over. Affixes that still work as productive processes, like plural -S or past tense -ED, should be given consistent single spellings wherever possible (including words such as *pianos/potatoEs*, *publicly/toxicALly*, *forty/foUrteen* where the conventional spellings are flagrant breaches of this principle). Likewise, compromises can be found for the stress-shift and consonant-softening cases, though there is room for debate about how far it should be allowed to complicate things.

Foreign languages — even those with exemplary orthographies — flout this principle all the time. Portuguese doesn't exactly signpost the link between *nação* and *nacional* — and Welsh doesn't even enforce stable initial letters: *nation* is *enedl*, but *in a nation* is *yng nghenedl*! Stress-shift is troublesome only if the unstressed "schwa" sound is treated as a phoneme in its own right needing to be uniformly represented with a special unique symbol. But accents vary widely in where they use schwas — for instance mine keeps the l-sounds in *blzarre*, *pidgln* distinct from the schwa-sounds of *bAzaar*, *pidgeOn* (a distinction rarely allowed for in US spelling reform proposals).

It makes more sense to write unstressed syllables with the normal range of vowel symbols, and rely on the reader to apply appropriate schwaing rules. While I'd be happy to compromise on *fuSion* and its many relatives, which are easy to accommodate, I am unconvinced by the idea of special treatment for "softening" C and G. Are they really live phonological processes? The suffix -IC hardly deserves a special spelling rule of its own to cover "IKAL/ISSITY".

Vowel-shifted doublets in particular need no special privileges. With so many cases — I could also quote *natural/nAture*, *recess/recEde*, *senility/senlle*, *colony/ colOnial*, *humble/hUmility* — it should be self-evident no matter how we spell it that (eg) "short l" is often related to "long l". It would be a step forward if English-speakers recognized this explicitly, rather than just vaguely taking the two sounds to be "the same thing". Where do we stop? There are plenty of morphemic links that are concealed by the Anglo-Norman orthography. Should we insert rules into the spelling system to connect such crypto-doublets as *abound/abundant*, *destroy/destruction*, *fool/folly*, *join/junction*, *ordain/ordination*, *receive/reception*, *solve/solution*, *voice/vocal*?

### **Objection 13: The Politician**

All this talk is pointless. The Anglophone nations are too lazy, ignorant and superstitious; even if you were world dictator, you'd never get them to cooperate on a project that involved this much work and was this insulting to all their ludicrous national traditions. Americans think any attack on their *honor* is un-American, Brits are still stuck in the Middle Ages, and Australians of course think literacy's for poofs... Besides, none of them can think straight about phonological issues, largely because their brains are hopelessly clogged with Anglo-Norman delusions.

*Reply:* Well, I'm certainly glad I didn't say that ...

## 9. German news agencies adopt (some) reformed spellings

### Edited by Chris Upward

[JSSS 26](#) (Item 5 [Augst], Item 8 [do Rock]) referred to the key role of the German News Agencies in ensuring widespread public adoption of the reformed spellings promulgated in 1996. We here summarize (with the occasional comment) a report on this development by Jürgen Dittmann, Professor of Germanic Philology at the University of Freiburg, that appeared in *Sprachreport* (4/99, pp17–19), the quarterly journal of the Institut für deutsche Sprache (Mannheim), which is the lead authority for questions of German spelling reform.

#### A crucial step

On 1 August 1999 the leading German-language news agencies began systematically using reformed spellings in their reports. This was a crucial step, as agency sources determine the practice of newspaper editors, and the press will therefore now ensure the widest possible public familiarity with the new forms which had already been used in schools for two-and-a-half years. We here examine how the news agencies implemented the new spellings.

The decision to adopt the new spellings was taken by a working party representing a dozen leading German, Austrian and Swiss news agencies. A number of reasons were given: clients (the newspapers) needed orthographic uniformity; electronic text searches were more straightforward if every word had a single unvarying spelling; and newspaper readers, who skim many articles without reading them carefully, find the task easier if words are instantly recognizable in a fixed form. The agencies also published a list of the spellings to be used.

#### Eliminating alternatives

One feature of the reform is that both old and new spellings are allowed for a wide range of words. The news agency working party's criteria required a choice to be made in such cases — so which alternatives did it adopt?

One set of alternatives concerns triple letters, which the reform allows to be written solid or broken by hyphens (eg, *Balletttänzer* or *Ballett-Tänzer* 'ballet-dancer'). The greater visual transparency of the hyphenated forms has much to be said for it, yet inexplicably the working party recommends hyphens only to break up triple vowels (eg, *See-Elephant*, not *Seeelephant* 'elephant seal'), but not triple consonants (so *Balletttänzer* is preferred).

Another set of alternatives allowed by the reform were the old endings -TIELL (eg, *substantiell*) alongside the new form -ZIELL (eg, *substanziell*) which sensibly aligns with the noun *Substanz* (cf, a reformed English *substancial* with C aligning with *substance* by analogy with *financial/finance*). The news agencies are now sensibly committed to using only the new ending -ZIELL.



For a number of foreign loanwords, the official reform allows regularized, germanized variants (eg, *Ketschup*, *Portmonee*, *Spagetti*) alongside the traditional foreign spellings. Here the news agencies are committed to keeping foreign forms derived, like *Ketchup*, *Portemonnaie*, *Spaghetti*, from modern, living languages, but they say that those from ancient, dead languages should adopt the reformed alternatives. The difficulty of knowing whether foreign words are of modern or ancient derivation is partially resolved by the rule-of-thumb that Greco-Latin PH, RH, TH become F, R, T — except that the official reform had compromised by keeping silent H in a few long-established words such as *Philosophie*, *Rhetorik*, *Theater*.

### **English compounds**

The reform attempted to bring some order to the haphazard patterns of separation, hyphenation and consolidation found in numerous loanwords from English. The news agencies' working party on the other hand seemed rather to go its own way. It amended the reform recommendations in preferring to hyphenate compounds consisting of pairs of nouns such as *Cash-flow* instead of merging them (reform *Cashflow*); but where the second element is an adverb, the position is often (though not always) reversed, the agencies writing *Comeback*, as against recommended *Come-back*. For combinations of adjective plus noun (eg, *smalltalk*) the working party decrees complete separation (*Small Talk*), where the reform recommended consolidation (*Smalltalk*). Altogether, consistency appears to be the loser.

### **Other deviations**

The news agencies' working party also adopts a number of other deviations from the official rules. Some of the old, strict rules for placing commas are retained. Adjectives are still to be capitalized in certain fixed phrases (eg, *Erste Hilfe* 'First Aid') and when derived from proper names (cf, English *Newtonian physics*). And the pronoun *du* is to remain capitalized when used in personal correspondence.

### **Verdict**

Professor Dittmann concludes that most of the working party's preferences for one spelling alternative over another have some justification, and it is certainly a positive development that they reinforce a particular standard. But the working party's thinking must be questioned where it has gone against the official spellings introduced by the reform. Such cases conflict with the spellings now taught in schools and given in dictionaries, and will therefore cause confusion. The news agencies themselves will find such deviations declared wrong by computers when run through computer programs for old-new spelling conversion and for spell-checking.

*[Journal of the Simplified Spelling Society, J27, 2000/1 p24 in the print version]*

[John Gledhill: see [Journals](#), [Newsletters](#), [Media](#)]

## 10. Real-World Spelling Dilemmas

John M Gledhill

Dr Gledhill is Academic Registrar of Coventry University, UK, and Membership Secretary of the SSS.

Being in a position that involves interviewing applicants for clerical and secretarial jobs, whilst at the same time supporting simplified spelling, presents interesting challenges, intellectual and moral. How do you treat spelling mistakes in the written application? On the one hand the spelling reform instincts are intrigued by the variants and their causes, yet on the other the manager has to accept that 'accurate' spelling is still expected by those to whom we write. This is a particular problem for UK universities. The rapid expansion of higher education in the UK over the past 6 years has led to many public accusations of lowering standards and 'dumbing down' degree level studies. When the central administration of a University writes to students, parents, and members of the public, deviating from currently accepted normal spelling is too risky for the institution's reputation; letters with 'bad spelling' would very likely be forwarded to the press as an example of lowering standards — "even the administration cannot spell properly".

So, despite great sympathy with those who exhibit spelling variation, I have to eliminate most of them from the short-list. This is hypocrisy, even cowardice. But the time is not yet ripe for taking the risk. Placed in this position, one has to reassure oneself that this is a conscious decision taken with regret, and not simply a knee-jerk reaction against 'bad spelling'. Not all managers suffer this anguish. There are ample instances of interviewers doing the preliminary shortlisting by simply rejecting poor spellers as 'illiterate', just as applicants who have laid out their applications badly may be rejected as 'disorganized'. One can sympathize with the manager who has received perhaps 400 applications for a junior clerical post: it is difficult to find the energy to read them all closely and all may be very similar in content, so some quick and easy preliminary criterion may be used. The content of the application form may not even be considered. As a sifting mechanism it is simple and effective, but as a defensible criterion it is challengeable.

Yet to reject an applicant simply for finding present spelling difficult is surely hypocritical? And morally indefensible? Probably. I yearn for the day when I do not need to do it. But even then, would I still have to reject those who did not follow the approved 'revised spelling' and had their own preferences? And so far I have not had to consider the dilemma of an application from someone actively using a revised spelling system of their own. The occasional letter from a spelling reformer seeking the university's support probably goes in the same direction as the letters we get about world peace, universal national anthems, levitation, eternal motion machines, and how to contact aliens.

## 11. Lobbying Literacy Authorities

We here publish the Society's submission to the UK Parliament's Education Sub-Committee Inquiry into Early Years Education. For previous submissions to Literacy Authorities, see [JSSS 24/1998/2](#), Item 9.

Secretary Masha Bell  
Dorset

Education Sub-Committee  
House of Commons  
7 Millbank, London SW1P 3JA  
14 January 2000

### Submission to the Inquiry into Early Years Education

#### Introduction

1. We submit evidence on how the difficulties of English spelling hinder children's acquisition of literacy and the development of logical thinking ... .
2. We do so by reference to the 45 words of List 1 as recommended for 'sight recognition' in the guidelines for the Literacy Hour — 'essential high frequency words which pupils will need, even to tackle very simple texts'. Children will also need these words to write very simple sentences, although this aspect of List 1 is not clearly stated. (*See Appendix C below for List 1.*)
3. Our other main reference points are 6 of the Early Learning Goals for Language and Literacy as just set out by the QCA [Qualifications & Curriculum Authority]:
  - hear and say initial and final sounds in words, and short vowel sounds within words,
  - link sounds to letters, naming and sounding the letters of the alphabet,
  - read a range of familiar and common words and simple sentences independently,
  - attempt writing for various purposes, using features of different forms such as lists, stories and instructions,
  - write their own names and other things such as labels and captions and begin to form simple sentences, sometimes using punctuation,
  - use their phonic knowledge to write simple regular words and make phonetically plausible attempts at more complex words.
4. English spelling makes it very difficult for young children to acquire 'phonic knowledge' and 'to make phonetically plausible attempts at more complex words' because large numbers of even the simplest essential high frequency words have phonetically implausible spellings.
5. English has a far greater number of such words than virtually all other European languages. (App'x C)

#### Phonics in English and other languages

6. In the introduction to List 1 it is stated 'Some of these words have irregular or difficult spellings and they are hard to predict from the surrounding text. Teachers should teach pupils to recognise the words in context when reading, particularly during shared text work with the whole class, but the words will also need to be reinforced through other practice and exploration activities so that they can be easily read out of context as well.'
7. This is very sound advice. It is misleading only in the implication that this kind of teaching and learning to read and write is something exceptional, something that is required only with a small number of peculiar words. It is not the case that just 'some' English words lack 'phonetically plausible' spellings. Over half of all English words have phonetically implausible elements in them.

8. We examined 4671 common English words for spelling predictability and found 2569 words with some element of unpredictability in them. We explain the reading and spelling problems that are caused by this unpredictability with reference to the two biggest problem areas: the doubling of consonants in Appendix A and the EE-sound in Appendix B. They alone comprise a total of 1161 words which require learning which goes beyond phonics.
9. In other European languages children do not encounter anything even approaching this much irregularity. A comparison of the vocabulary of List 1 translated into different languages shows this very clearly. German, Spanish and Italian translations of List 1 yield 63, 61 and 79 words respectively (because these languages have several genders for nouns and changing endings on verbs and nouns). However, among these basic words German has 7, Spanish just 5 and Italian only 4 words that demand slightly more than the grasp of simple phonics for their reading or spelling, ie, no more than 8%. (Appendix C)
10. In English 23 of the 45 words in List 1 have phonetically unpredictable elements in them for either reading or spelling. Once again, just over half of all words turn out to be spelt unpredictably on closer examination. Some spellings are contradicted by other words on the List itself, for others children will encounter common alternatives very soon afterwards as can be seen below (List 1 words are in capital letters, with problematic spellings underlined and contradictory graphemes in bold):

THE — HE, ME, SHE, WE — SEE — sea, tea  
gem gentle — GET, — SAID, friend  
THEY — AWAY, DAY, PLAY  
**ARE** car, far, care  
mess, kiss — YES — THIS — IS — buzz  
think, thump  
food, boot LOOK, COME, — MUM, UP  
OF — have  
blue, flew, through YOU — TO — NO GO GOING — slow, blow;  
DOG — WAS, MY — tie, high  
**ALL** — always, author, awful, awesome.

11. One cannot learn to read the 23 underlined words above by simply learning the sounds which are reproduced by individual letters or regular combinations of them — the phonic method which is used in nearly all other European countries. In English simple linking of sounds to letters is possible only to a very limited degree, and with vowels never completely reliably, as a closer look at the remaining 22 words of List 1 reveals.
12. Even the 8 words on List 1 which at first may seem phonically perfectly sound *a, am, and, at, dad; in, it; on* have their spellings contradicted in some other very common and frequently used words: *any, many, banana, ask; kind, mind; women, move, love*.
13. This lack of logic makes it far more difficult to acquire phonic knowledge in English than in languages with phonemic spelling systems, where identical letters, or regular combinations of them, can be relied on to produce identical sounds in nearly all words. Reading schemes for young learners can try to avoid unpredictable spellings, but it is impossible to write even the simplest of children's stories that includes only phonetically sound spellings, because unpredictable spellings abound at every level.
14. One cannot use the phonic method to teach children to read words in which identical letter combinations are pronounced in very different ways: *head, read, clear, great, lead, bread; over, mover, oven; pour, our, tower, lower; even, ever; liver, driver, driven; height, weight; tough, through, though*.
15. Children cannot read such words by simply using their phonic knowledge. They have to learn to guess substantial parts of them, intelligently using phonics and clues from context.

For vast numbers of English words, learning to read by just sounding out letters and joining them into words, as happens in most European languages, is simply impossible.

**16. This aspect of English spelling makes learning to read English far more difficult than other languages. This needs to be taken into account when comparing educational provision in the UK with practices in other countries where literacy acquisition is a much easier learning task.**

17. This is also the main reason why the Basic Skills Agency (BSA) has repeatedly reported in the past decade that about a third of English adults are functionally illiterate, irrespective of whether they left school recently or several decades ago. Sir Claus Moser reported in March 1999 that 7 million British adults are incapable of finding a plumber in the Yellow Pages. Large-scale surveys in the US have confirmed the findings of the BSA.

18. For children who do not speak English at home, or those who hear only a very limited vocabulary at home, this is particularly difficult, because such children do not know what the words they meet on a page are supposed to sound like. For example, it is impossible to 'read' the different sounds of OU in the words *pour, our, tough, through, bought* in the normal sense of 'reading', that of applying previously acquired phonic knowledge. One has to know already which different sounds those 2 letters are meant to represent in those 5 words in order to be able to read them.

### Teaching problems

19. Apart from having only limited application, basic English phonics are also much harder to teach. One can initially teach children to read another 14 words on List 1 easily enough: *I, like, big; dog, for; cat, can; away, play, day; the, went; up, mum*. But when it comes to applying the phonic knowledge acquired from learning them to the reading of other words, teachers have to be able to provide numerous explanations and qualifications:

A The letter I is unusual in that it sounds like its name when used on its own, not like it does in short words (*bit, fit*); whereas the letter A generally sounds as it does inside short words, even when it is used on its own (*a cat, a hat*).

B The I-sound is often spelt with a 'magic e' as in *like*, but at the end of words it is usually spelt -Y (*my, fly, sky*); or -IE (*die, tie*); but it has several other spellings as well: *buy, bye; sign, kind; high; eye*.

C The letter G spells the final sound of *big* and *dog*, but at the beginning of words it can spell the J sound as well. This is mostly before the letters E and I, but not always. You have to be careful with the pronunciation of G at the beginning of words (*get, give, gently, ginger*). At the end of words -GE (*page, age, sage*) and -DGE (which you find after a short vowel sound in a short word — *bridge, fridge*) make a soft G sound.

D The OR sound has 4 other common spellings: *more, door, oar, four*.

E The K-sound is mostly spelt C (*cat, cot*), but before I or E it is spelt K (*kite, like*), and at the end of short words it is usually spelt CK (*stick*), and if the letter before it is not a vowel it is also spelt K (*dark, pink*), but there are also quite a few exceptional spellings (*arc, school, chorus, chemistry*).

F At the end of words the long A-sound is usually spelt as -AY (*they, grey* and *whey* are exceptions).

G The TH combination spells 2 slightly different sounds (*think, that*).

H The E-sound of *the, get* and *went* is very often spelt EA instead (*bread, head, read*), but quite differently as well (*any, bury, said, leopard, friend*).

I The U-sound of *mum* is frequently also spelt as in *come, some, oven, none* but in other ways too (*country, couple, blood, flood*).

20. Such qualifications and limitations mean that in English children cannot easily derive general principles of reading by just learning to read a few words, as is the case with more regularly

spelt languages. This difference also requires that teachers have to be aware of all the above contradictions to enable them to teach English reading effectively, particularly when teaching reading to the many children who do not pick it up easily. This means that English literacy teachers need far more specialised training than with easier languages, where virtually any literate adult can teach children to read quite competently.

### Spelling problems

21. Although English reading presents much greater challenges than other languages to both teachers and pupils, they are easy when compared to the difficulties which stand in the way of mastering English spelling.
22. In languages with phonemic spelling systems children can both read and spell virtually any word in those languages once they have mastered their basic phonics. Italian children who start school at 6 have repeatedly been found to be able to read and spell most words one year later, whereas English children take 10 years to achieve an adult standard of spelling (Schonell & Schonell 1950; Vernon 1969, 1977; Thorstad 1991). Upward (1992) found that UK students of German made more spelling errors in their written English than when writing German. After 15 years of education, university graduates in the UK generally end up spelling fairly accurately and confidently, but not without exception, as any form tutor who has had the duty to check reports of secondary teachers before they go out to parents can testify.
23. Dr. Bernard Lamb, of Imperial College London and member of the Queen's English Society, who investigated the practices and opinions of English teachers and reported on them in 1997, collected many errors which teachers made when writing to him.
24. Prior to that Dr. Lamb had been appalled by the poor spelling standards of his students at Imperial College and decided to study them more systematically. His findings shocked the nation when he published his results in 1992. In 1998 even the spelling standards of quite a few undergraduates at Oxford University were found to be disappointing by Bernard Richards.
25. When Dr. Lamb looked at spelling ability and communication skills of entrants to industry and commerce who had not gone on to higher education, he found them worse still than those of undergraduates (1994). The 1999 national English tests for 14-year-olds and for 11-year-olds also showed that fewer than 60% reached the target expected for their age in these groups.
26. All the above findings make it very clear that it takes many years to attain competence in English spelling; that even well-motivated and intelligent students have frequently not reached that goal yet by the age of 18. Many individuals fail to become accurate spellers even by the time they graduate from university.
27. An international comparison of adult literacy and numeracy skills in 13 countries, published early in 1999, leaves no doubt that poor standards of literacy among adults are almost equally prevalent in all English speaking countries. The percentages of adults with very low levels of literacy and numeracy in each country, as published in *The Times* 26.3.99, are given below. The first figure is the percentage for illiteracy and the second for innumeracy:  
Poland 44/39, Ireland 24/25, Britain 23/23, United States 22/21, New Zealand 20/20, Australia 17/17, Canada 17/17, Belgium 17/17, Swiss Germans 19/14, Swiss French 17/13, The Netherlands 10/10, Germany 12/7, Sweden 7/7.
28. (Economic and historical circumstances may largely explain the particularly poor Polish results.)
29. We believe that the unpredictability of English spellings is the main cause of the remarkably similar illiteracy and innumeracy rates in all English speaking countries. They all score disappointingly badly, with Australia and Canada doing slightly better. It must be worth finding out why adults in these two countries outperformed other English speakers.

30. It is also interesting that in the 3 countries with 2 languages adults performed very similarly (Canada, Belgium and Switzerland).
31. German-speaking Swiss adults have the disadvantage of speaking a dialect which sounds very different from the one that German spelling was devised to represent, giving them a disadvantage over the other 2 bilingual countries.
32. What strikes us about the 3 countries that achieve far better standards of literacy and numeracy than all the rest is that all three last modernised their spelling systems this century. When we compared the vocabulary of List 1 for spelling unpredictability with its German translation, we found German to be far easier than English. We know that both Sweden and the Netherlands have succeeded in making their spellings easier to learn than they used to be in the past. It is therefore very likely that Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands attain higher educational standards quite simply because they have easier and more logical spelling systems.
33. It is therefore worth examining in detail what makes English spelling so difficult to master. We have demonstrated by means of List 1 that English spellings frequently contradict each other. When one looks at which words even very young children manage to spell accurately, and those which both large numbers of young pupils and older ones fail to get right, one can easily see what makes English so difficult to spell.

### **What children can and can't spell**

34. Ken Spencer, a lecturer in educational studies at the University of Hull, was given the opportunity to administer a 40-word spelling test to all 236 pupils in years 7 to 11 in a nearby primary school which attains average results in national tests. The test words were taken from SCAA's word lists for national tests; 20 words were from tests for 7-year-olds and the other 20 from tests for 11-year-olds.
35. In the test for 7-year-olds the best to worst spelt words (with percentages of pupils who got them right given in brackets) were as follows:  
*hat (97), net (91), hand (85), fish (84), flag (83), house (62), sock (61), boat (55), road (54), morning (41), holiday (40), spade (39), shout (39), because (35), smile (32), family (29), wait (27), friends (25), bucket (23), pictures (13).*
36. The order from least misspelt to most often misspelt word was almost identical when the results for each year group were looked at separately. The same words — *pictures, bucket, friends, wait, family* — were giving trouble to all age groups. The additional 4 years of practice made a difference: only 5 out of 46 in Year 2 spelt *pictures* correctly; in year 6 this was achieved by 30 pupils out of 40. Each age group showed some improvement, but the words which were most often misspelt by each class were identical.
37. Words that make phonic sense and have predictable spellings are mastered easily by nearly all. Those that make heavy demands on memory are only learned with repeated practice, spread over many years, but large numbers of children never manage to get them right.
38. We have already established that there are at least 2500 such difficult words in English out of 4671. These words represent the minimum of additional learning which is required for accurate spelling of ordinary English, after mastering phonics. Children who acquire literacy in easier languages never have to face this extra burden in their education.
39. It is difficult not to conclude that poor spelling standards among young and old in the UK, and all the other English speaking countries, are due more to the unpredictability of English spellings than insufficient grasp of phonics or inadequate teaching. With practice pupils do get better, but perfection is an almost unattainable goal, except for a handful of individuals who have an exceptionally good visual memory.
40. It is very easy to see why 15 words out of the 20 above cause pupils problems: most have at least some components which are contradicted by different spellings for identical sounds in

other frequently used words; others can only be spelt accurately with the help of special rules, or by ignoring rules which are supposed to apply generally but don't always:

house — *how, now, pence, fence*;

spade — paid, raid, stayed;

because — was, doors, course;

wait — hate, late;

friends — trend, lend, head, said;

smile — style, island, while;

sock — park, magic (the logic for the spelling of the K-sound at the end of words is hard to grasp, and the CK at the end of short words especially so)

holiday — holly, jolly — holy (*hollyday* is how many children spell that word)

morning — the R is widely not pronounced and then there are *bought, taught, awning, mourning* which spell the same sound differently.)

shout — *how now brown cow, fought, route* all make children uncertain about this spelling.

family — the I is rarely pronounced; besides, the word is not pronounced fay-mi-lee, so according to the rule for doubling consonants, this should have MM in it.

bucket — *blood, flood, country*. We pronounce it as 'buckit' and that is how children try to spell it — the spelling of unstressed vowels is a big spelling problem.

pictures — *pick, stick, chair, chess, farmers* (This spelling makes least logical sense and proves very resistant to learning.)

41. For young minds trying to make sense of the world as a whole, and not just spelling, such contradictions are extremely baffling. There are often no sensible explanations that teachers can provide them with. It comes down to having to suspend logic and just remembering.
42. Even for children whose parents are supportive, reassuring and articulate, coming to terms with all those contradictions is hard enough. For most others, this can easily start to look completely impossible, especially to those whose parents were defeated by the same challenge.
43. When one looks at how 9-year-olds performed in trying to spell words deemed more appropriate for 11-year-olds, it becomes even clearer that in English many words cannot be spelt by applying phonic rules. Children can typically only spell those English words which they have been taught or have at least seen before.
44. The list of 20 words below shows how many out of 38 children aged 9 (those from 2 classes, who were present to take the test on a particular day) spelt them correctly. The number of successful spellers for each word is given in brackets:  
still (29), replace (25), crept (22), heard (16), tallest (15), honest (11), notice (10),  
silence (10), shook (8), uncoiled (8), visitors (8), sneeze (7), piece (7), remained (7),  
beautiful (6), disturbed (6), echoed (5), slipped (3), sprawling (2), stretched (1).
45. Not a single child spelt all words accurately; only 8/38 spelt more than 10 words correctly; 21/38 spelt no more than 5 words correctly.
46. Just as with the words for 7-year-olds, children spelt words with logical spellings correctly, even when they had to remember some special rules (*still* — always doubling the final L, *replace* — magic E; the S sound being spelt mostly as -CE at the end of words). They misspelt words that have identically sounding parts of them spelt differently in other common words:



heard – bird, third; tallest – always, although, mist, fist; honest – on, bonnet, kissed; notice – promise, police; silence – cycle, sense; shook – put, push; visitors – brothers, painters; sneeze – cheese, please; piece – peace, fleece; remained – craned, framed; beautiful – dutiful, mutiny, cute; slipped – kept, slept; sprawling – author, caught, fought; echoed – the CH for K tripped up nearly every child; stretched – the surplus T defeated nearly every child; uncoiled – this was not recognised as a past tense word and so the E was left out; disturbed – ditto.

47. We confidently predict that if one translated those same 20 words into Italian, Spanish, Swedish, German or Dutch and tested 38 9-year-old children in any ordinary primary school in those countries, they would perform vastly better.
48. When one looks at how children misspell, one can see how they get tripped up by trying to be logical and applying previous knowledge. Having to remember which one of several possible spelling alternatives for a sound applies to a particular word, instead of being able to apply phonics logically, is what causes them problems. The mistakes included:  
*beautiful* – buetiful, butiful, butifull; *crept* – creapt; *disturbed* – disterbed, distirbed; *echoed* – ecoed, ecowed, echoad, ekoed, eccoed; *heard* – heard, herd, hurd, hered; *honest* – onist, onest, onised, honised; *notice* – notise, notess; *visitors* – visiters; *piece* – peace, peice, peass, pice; *remained* – remaned, remaind; *shook* – shuck, shouck; *silence* – silance, silense, silince, sielance; *slipped* – slipt, sliped; *sneeze* – sneez, snease, snese, sneze; *sprawling* – sprorling, sproaling, spraling; *still* – stil; *stretched* – streched, streached; *tallest* – tallist; *uncoiled* – uncoild, uncoyled, uncoield;
49. The majority of children’s misspellings make it perfectly possible to ‘read’ those words, in the sense of obtaining the sounds that these words make when spoken. The children are merely using alternative spellings for the same sounds which they have encountered in other words. Their misspellings give us an insight into the constant battle against logic which has to be fought and won in order to become an accurate speller of English.
50. Research carried out in the early 60’s by Sister John, a nun who taught in Liverpool, suggests that the experience of trying to become literate in English may impede not just mastery of spelling but logical thinking itself. She gave two groups of children aged four and a half a symbol-matching test. There was no difference in performance between the two groups at that age. One group was then taught reading and writing with a common, traditional scheme, the other using the far more logical Initial Teaching Alphabet. Six months later the symbol-matching skills of the ITA group showed gains on the same test, while the children who had been exposed to traditional spelling performed no better than they had a year earlier.
51. The ITA experiment in the 60’s and 70’s in which hundreds of primary schools in England and Wales took part proved that English children can learn to read and write English accurately in far less time than they normally need for this, when the texts that they are given to read use more logical spellings and if they themselves are allowed to spell more logically than is the case in standard English.

### **Why other languages are easier to spell than English**

52. When in the early 60’s poor standards of literacy were much debated in the USA, the famous scientist Richard Feynman explained the difficulties that children face like this: “If the professors of English will complain to me that the students who come to the universities, after all those years of study, still cannot spell *friend*, I say to them that **something’s the matter with the way you spell *friend*.**”
53. This is still true today. Countries that now have spelling systems that are much easier to master than ours did not simply stumble upon them. They have repeatedly modernised the systems which they inherited from previous generations. Italian has been luckier than most

in that the sounds of its language are still closer to the sounds for which the Latin alphabet was devised, which nearly all other European languages now use, with various adaptations.

54. The alphabetic principle of using letters to represent sounds has become so corrupted in English mainly because English is an amalgamation of several languages. Words that have been imported from other languages gradually had their pronunciation adapted to fit in with English pronunciation patterns, but their spellings were often left unchanged. This has left us with many spellings that have little connection with the sounds which they are supposed to represent.
55. Printing brought about the need to standardise spelling. When Dr. Johnson compiled his dictionary which became the authoritative guide to English spelling after 1755, he often had to choose between several alternatives that were around at the time. He mostly chose what to him seemed the most logical alternative, but he was very keen not to obscure the origins of English words and so did very little to make English spelling more consistent or phonemic, in stark contrast to the Grimm brothers and their compilations of German fairy stories and folk tales, along with a dictionary for German and a German grammar. They already made a serious effort to devise a sensible system for the spelling of German and not merely record the spellings they found.
56. In the early part of the 18th century literacy for all was not an objective for society. Writing was still a privilege of the few. Those who were aspiring towards it would be learning Latin, Greek and French alongside English, and so the spelling of foreign imports would not have been such a problem to them.
57. Now that we place greater value on learning living rather than defunct languages, with French no longer the only living foreign language which children learn and with other subjects having replaced Latin and Greek on the school curriculum, most children have to learn English spellings with much less help from other languages. We also place far greater value on literacy for all than was the case in the past, partly because of changed job requirements, but also because true democracy is incompatible with mass ignorance.

### **Costs incurred by English spelling irregularity**

58. We want more children to become well educated than was the case in the past. But the unpredictability of English spellings makes it very expensive to achieve high literacy levels in English. It requires better trained teachers and children have to spend much more time on the acquisition of literacy than in other languages.
59. Because high standards of literacy in English cannot be attained without spending great amounts of time and effort, many other equally worthwhile subjects get squeezed for time. The English spelling system also ensures a high failure rate in literacy acquisition and so requires much more remedial intervention; most importantly of all, for large numbers of individuals, far more than in other languages, it is altogether too difficult to cope with.

### **Conclusion**

60. Making our spelling easier, as many other countries have repeatedly done, would make it more accessible to all, save enormous amounts of time and money and thereby allow expansion of the school curriculum, but it is not something that has ever been done in English in a planned way. English has simply been allowed to evolve into the difficult spelling mess that we now have. It need not remain so.
61. It all comes down to a stark choice: are we happy to continue spending vast sums on remedial action and waste endless hours of children's lives year after year, forcing them to learn something which is really quite pointless, or can we be bold enough to fix the problem by spelling reform so that this need not be repeated in the future? The latter would not be that hard or expensive to do.

62. The Literacy Task Force has provided a sound teaching framework for tackling the difficulties that our erratic spelling system presents, but without questioning whether what children are taught is either sensible or necessary. We recommend that an appropriate body be set up to look into reducing the amount of irregularity in English spelling and so reduce the amount of teaching and learning that this necessitates on a permanent basis, enabling future generations of children to derive more profit from their time in compulsory education than they do now.

The above submission to the parliamentary Sub-Committee on Education was followed by three appendices containing extensive tables. In outline they were as follows:

**Appendix A. The doubling of consonants**

Appendix A tries to explain in 9 word-tables why consonant doubling in English is so hard to master. It lists 623 words which do not follow the spelling rule that a consonant following a short stressed vowel in a multi-syllable word should be doubled (on the lines of *attic, butter, remittance, bigger, digging*).

In 302 words a doubled consonant indicates the wrong stress (*commit, occur, sheriff*), or serves no useful purpose (*rock, fuss, mess* vs. *wok, bus, yes*).

Another 279 words are listed because these would gain a doubled consonant if the consonant doubling rule applied consistently (We would write *attom, lilly, raddish* rather than *atom, lily, radish*). A further 42 words demonstrate that the doubling of L operates in a very peculiar fashion (*shall — ball, balance — ballad*)

The consonant doubling rule was found to operate properly in just 196 words among the 4771 examined (*ammonite, annual, antenna...*). These are also listed.

**Appendix B. Long E**

Of 342 words containing the long value of E, 116 were spelt with EA, 101 with EE, 70 with E + consonant + E or with E + vowel, 18 with IE, 6 with EI, and 5 with just E. In addition, several have unique or very rare spellings (eg, *key, people*). All this variation requires time-consuming learning of individual words, and is further complicated by alternative pronunciations for some of these spellings (eg, EA in *head, break*, and especially *read*).

**Appendix C. Equivalents in other languages**

The List 1 words of the National Literacy Strategy (below) were listed with their equivalents in German, Spanish and Italian to show how many items of basic English vocabulary are irregularly spelt, contrasting with the small number in those other languages.

a	all	am	and	are	at	away	big
can	cat	come	dad	day	dog	for	get
go	going	he	I	in	is	it	like
look	me	mum	my	no	of	on	play
said	see	she	the	they	this	to	up
was	we	went	yes	you			

## 12. Revelations of a Cross-Linguistic Perspective

### Christopher Upward

Chris Upward reviews eds. Margaret Harris & Giyoo Hatano (1999) *Learning to Read and Write. A Cross-Linguistic Perspective*, Cambridge University Press: Studies in Cognitive & Perceptual Development, ISBN 0-521-62184-4, 252pp. The review is reprinted in *Cut Spelling* (Upward, 1996).

#### 0. Contents of the book

Although the conclusions reached in this book are not new, the concrete examples and analyses it contains provide a wealth of new material that supports the case for English spelling to be simplified. Chapters cover the processes of literacy acquisition in several languages using the Roman alphabet, and in two which use other alphabets; further chapters deal with Chinese and Japanese which use non-alphabetic systems, while others again consider the representation of morphemes distinctly from phonemes, the role of phonological awareness, and the consequences for literacy acquisition in English of literacy previously acquired using predictable (Malay) or unpredictable (Chinese) scripts. Repeatedly these chapters demonstrate the benefits to learners of a predictable orthography and the disadvantages of English.

#### 1. Predictability of other writing systems

##### 1.1 Italian

This chapter, though somewhat obscured by jargon, tells how the key features of Italian orthography were established in 1612, though many small refinements were introduced since. Most letters always stand for the same sound, and most sounds are always represented by the same letter. The main complications are that, before E and I, the consonant sounds /k/ and /g/ require a following H (cf. *Chianti*, *ghetto*), and before A, O, U an I is inserted to palatalize a preceding C or G (cf. *ciao*, *Giovanni*). It is therefore unsurprising that, of the few errors made in Italian, most involve consonants in both reading and writing; errors of consonant-doubling were most common. Literacy acquisition is further assisted by the simplicity of Italian phonology (only 7 vowel sounds versus some 20 in English). Syllable structures are also simpler, with fewer consonant clusters than in English (one study showed the great advantage this gave to Italian preschool children). Learners are found to master this system to a high level of accuracy within months, though more slowly for writing than for reading. Dyslexia is rare.

This chapter offers no direct comparison between Italian and English; for this we have to go to Thorstad (1991), who shows how immensely more difficult literacy is in English.

##### 1.2 German

Symbol-sound correspondences in German are normally predictable, but a complication in the sound-symbol direction is that long vowels may have three alternative spellings: *Aa* 'eel', *Ahle* 'awl', and *Tal* 'valley' all have the same long vowel sound spelt as AA, AH or just A.

This chapter reports research in which English- and German-speaking children were tested in reading simple real words (eg, *hand*) and non-words of parallel structure (eg, *nand*). In every test the German children performed far better, in fact after one year they outperformed English children with four years of schooling in both accuracy and speed of reading. Yet the English tests contained no irregular spellings, and the children's poor performance therefore suggests they had not been taught phonetic attack strategies.

### 1.3 Greek

For readers Greek orthography is as predictable as Italian or German, but, as in German, there are alternative spellings for certain vowels. Like Italian, Greek phonology is simple, with only five vowel sounds, though seven letters and several digraphs can be used to spell them (/e/ can be spelt either ε or αι, /o/ either ο or ω, and /i/ either ι, η, υ, ει, οι, or υι). Sometimes the correct spelling depends on grammatical context (nouns end in ο, verbs in ω, though they sound the same), which takes longer to master than simple sound-symbol correspondences. A few words have exceptional spellings that require special learning. As one would expect, the research reported in this chapter shows that learners quickly become fluent readers, mastering the basic code within weeks, but accurate spelling takes longer, even as long as three years for the alternative vowel spellings.

### 1.4 Brazilian Portuguese

This chapter discusses several complications of Brazilian Portuguese spelling. Unstressed final O is pronounced /u/ and unstressed final E /i/, which leads to early misspelling and misreading, with misreading corrected before misspelling, and the O for /u/ mastered before the E for /i/. Another complication, common to other Romance languages and English, is that C and G are palatalized before /e, i/; to prevent this happening, /k/ and /g/ have to be written QU, GU. The letter R is also subject to certain conditions, for both pronunciation and doubling. Verbs can end in -IU, which is pronounced the same as final -IO and -IL in nouns. The correct application of these distinctions takes some time to master, but they cause few lasting problems.

### 1.5 Hebrew

Hebrew has its own Semitic alphabet written from right to left, the letters, as in Arabic, indicating chiefly consonants. For learners, vowels are shown by marks ('points') mostly below the consonant letters, but adult writing normally lacks these, leaving some 25% of words ambiguous. Pointed script allows unambiguous reading, but correct spelling is harder as several sounds can be spelt with more than one letter. Also difficult for beginners are the similar squarish shape of many letters, so that words lack the visual distinctiveness of the ragged up and lower 'coastlines' of ascenders and descenders characteristic of lower case Roman script; additionally, numbers are written left to right, as in the Roman alphabet, which learners also have to learn.

Thanks to the symbol-sound predictability of Hebrew, reading is mastered rapidly, with performance in the pointed script after one year matching that in English after five years. Writing is more difficult, as most words contain at least one letter for which an alternative letter would represent the same sound, and accuracy in the first two years of learning lags behind even that in English.

### 1.6 Scandinavian Languages

Danish, Finnish, Norwegian and Swedish have differing levels of literacy reflecting differing levels of sound-symbol predictability in those languages. Finnish, with the highest literacy standards, has the most transparent orthography (Finnish regularly tops tables of world literacy); Swedish, with literacy standards also very high, has a few areas of multiple sound-symbol correspondence; while Norwegian has more marked discrepancies of dialect, and Danish, with the lowest literacy standards, is known for the divergence of its pronunciation from letter values ('under-articulation').

This chapter also emphasizes the effect of literacy cultures on standards. Finland and Sweden have for centuries had high expectations of literacy for the whole population. It is also noted that a transparent orthography is no guarantee of high standards of literacy — contrast Spain and Venezuela which both use transparent Spanish, and Singapore achieves higher standards in English (though it is not the home language of most children) than is achieved in some native English-speaking countries.

## 1.7 Chinese

In mainland China and Taiwan learners first master a fonic system of representation (on the mainland *pinyin*, which uses the roman alphabet and in Taiwan the non-roman *Zhu-Yin-Fu-Hao* script) before taking the Chinese characters; but this is not so in Hong-Kong (at least before Hong-Kong returned to China in 1997) or Singapore, although pinyin would naturally also be a good basis for starting English there. These fonic scripts are a great help to children in learning the characters. Another factor investigated was the role of the phonetic component in many compound characters, which are likewise often found helpful for decoding unfamiliar words. However, these phonetic components are not used systematically — they are even more unpredictable than English spelling. Errors then arise especially when the phonetic components do not predictably represent a word's pronunciation. Overall, memorizing the thousands of characters needed for functional literacy is a major task, and makes heavy demands of children's visuo-perceptual abilities.

Contrary to what Western observers often assume, speech sounds play a significant part in skilled reading and writing in Chinese. Furthermore, the unpredictability of English spelling represents a point of similarity with Chinese in the burden it places on the visual memory of users.

## 1.8 Japanese

The Japanese writing system uses two syllabaries (kana) alongside Chinese characters (kanji). This chapter concentrates on the learning process for the hiragana syllabary which children face first. Since children become aware of syllables before phonemes, it is not surprising that most children learn most of the 71 hiragana letters before starting school. Less clear is whether, as is sometimes implied in this chapter, the children learn these letters spontaneously, or whether they receive direct help from mothers, kindergarten, literacy games, or other sources. As far as hiragana is concerned, the first year of formal schooling only needs to ensure that a few further subtleties are mastered, and a start can then be made on the task of memorizing the complexities of nearly 2,000 kanji which are the target by the end of full-time schooling.

## 2. Anglophone assumptions

### 2.1 Phonics out of favor — and back in

Both because of comparisons made with literacy acquisition in English and because of British input to some of the foreign language studies, parts of the book reflect views of literacy widespread in the UK (and other English-speaking countries) in the mid-1990s. These may be traced back to the 1970s and 80s, when Goodman (1982) and others advocated concepts of literacy which largely ignored the sound values of letters (eg, reading as 'a psycholinguistic guessing game'). Such ideas downgraded the teacher as a source of alphabetic knowledge for the learner and led to such non-phonics learning methods as 'whole language', 'real books' and 'look-and-say'.

In keeping with such views, some sections of the book describe literacy as 'developing', 'evolving' or 'emerging', as though it were an autonomous, natural process like the physical growth of the child. Similarly, we read (p51) that 'phonemic awareness ... develops as children learn to read', rather than being taught to *enable* children to read. Literacy is not presented as being mastered by the three stages of skill-acquisition (cognition, practice, automaticity [Downing, 1987]) under the guidance of a teacher trained in the most effective procedures for its achievement. Yet several chapters note, almost as with surprise, how in other languages just such an approach is the norm, and that instruction in phonics takes place at the outset.

In this respect the book appears to have been overtaken by events. By the 1990s reports were surfacing of declining literacy standards in the UK (Turner, 1990; Massey & Elliott, 1996), and the alarm thereby caused led to the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy from 1997. This succeeded in reversing the decline: phonics was made mandatory, and literacy standards started to rise again. The book contains no hint of this.

## 2.2 Logography and onset/rime

Before 1997 British research into literacy acquisition (the position in America was rather different), though not going to the extremes of Goodman and Smith, at least reflected their rejection of phonics. The present book features two authors (Uta Frith, Usha Goswami) whose work through the 1980–90s seemed to assume a non-phonetic approach.

Frith proposed three stages of literacy acquisition, logographic, alphabetic and orthographic. This perspective was taken up by many researchers and is mentioned in several chapters of the book (not only in the chapter with Frith co-authors). The proposed initial, 'logographic' stage envisages learners first recognizing words as wholes (a 'look-and-say' technique), instead of being taught the sound values of letters. The second, 'alphabetic' stage then has learners deducing letter values from their experience of text, while the third, 'orthographic' stage represents full literacy. Yet if phonics is the initial teaching method sanctioned by the UK National Literacy Strategy (with Frith's research from 1994–97 predating it), the 'alphabetic' stage surely comes first, and there is no reason to regard a 'logographic' stage as an essential preliminary (although more so when other languages, as made clear in this book, do not do so).

Goswami's analyses were also influential through much of the 1980s–90s. Her concern has been with the development of children's phonological awareness, noting that preschool children may be aware of syllables, but not yet of phonemes, which comes with literacy. She proposed an intermediate stage of phonological awareness, between syllables and phonemes, termed 'onset-and-rime'. This is seen when the child, already aware of *beak* as a syllable, next becomes aware of the 'rime' analogy with *peak*, *leak*, etc, with their differing 'onsets' P, L, etc. Yet her chapter describes how the 'rime' stage does not arise in Greek or other transparent writing systems, and as with Frith's 'logographic' stage, it is not clear that the 'onset/rime' concept is relevant to phonics-based literacy acquisition. Phonics would analyze a word like *beak* by its initial consonant B, its medial vowel digraph EA, and its final consonant K, so enabling learners to decode *bean*, *beat* as well as *peak*, *leak*, etc. We find that Goswami's approach has also been overtaken by the National Literacy Strategy, as her concluding paragraph states that 'there is a ... debate [in England] about whether ... methods, which avoid phonics, are more useful than a decoding approach based on teaching children grapheme-phoneme correspondences.' And her chapter is syndicated 1996, though the book appeared three years later.

## 2.3 Deep and shallow

Another recurring 'anglophone assumption' is implied by the term *deep* referring to phonemically unpredictable writing systems such as English, French and Chinese, and *shallow* referring to writing systems whose letters merely represent speech sounds, such as Finnish, Italian and German. This *deep/shallow* polarity has long been used by linguists loath to admit that English spelling is alphabetically defective, but it is hard not to associate *deep* with profundity and *shallow* with superficiality, i.e. to escape the value judgment that *deep* is better than *shallow*. Yet when so-called *deep* writing systems are so much harder than allegedly *shallow* systems, we must surely conclude that, if literacy is our overriding criterion, easier systems are superior to difficult systems. *Deep* and *shallow* are therefore inappropriate terms, and indeed some chapters in the book (e.g. Goswami's) use *non-transparent* and *transparent* instead.

## 3 Lessons from other languages

### 3.1 Phonics taken for granted

If substantial parts of the book are permeated by such assumptions, the studies it presents of other languages shed a very different light on the matter. The German chapter implicitly rejects those assumptions when it says (p34): 'The main limitation of psychological research on reading development and dyslexia is its focus on English orthography'. This limitation is blamed on the unpredictability of English spelling, which compromises phonics as the natural basis for alphabetic literacy.

The chapter does not ask whether phonics might nevertheless also be basic to literacy acquisition in English, even though the markedly inferior performance of English children in reading phonically regular nonwords is attributed to their weaker phonemic awareness. We must therefore wonder whether English children taught phonics via the National Literacy Strategy since 1997 would perform better than the cohort reported on, who were tested before 1997. Might the English tests now be re-administered to find this out?

Not only in German is phonics taken for granted as the basis for literacy. Other chapters say as much for Greek, Malay, the Scandinavian languages and Spanish (and in Italian, though the Italian chapter does not say as much). And comparative tests reported from those languages, again reveal serious underperformance by English children, catastrophically so in Goswami's chapter, where the most proficient performed worse (Tables 8.2, 8.3) than the weakest French, Greek and Spanish children. Furthermore, several other languages explicitly reject (as German did implicitly) the 'logographic' and/or 'onset/ rime' concepts as relevant to literacy acquisition (Brazilian Portuguese on p72, the Scandinavian languages on p167, Malay on p200). Such a consensus must surely cast further doubt on the validity of these concepts in English.

### 3.2 Difficulties in other languages

Although other languages in varying degrees lack the acute alphabetic unpredictability of English, some still face difficulties in literacy acquisition. The book reports most interestingly on the different teaching and learning methods used in non-alphabetic languages like Chinese and Japanese, whose characters demand feats of visuo-spatial memorization which those who have been alphabetically educated find hard to imagine. Multilingual Singapore offers a remarkable pedagogical testbed, since its children have to become literate in two languages from regular Malay, irregular English and non-alphabetic Chinese, and it seems that Singaporean educators have yet to discover the best methods especially for Chinese learning English. Then it seems that, despite a quite straightforward alphabetic system, Brazil's teachers may not have yet developed optimal teaching methods. Danish too has problems, resulting from the 'under-articulation' of its letters. Not much is said about French, and one would like to know more about literacy acquisition in that unique alphabetic system.

### 3.3 Spelling reform

For all the admitted difficulties of English, the book has little to suggest by way of remedy. It does not commit itself to systematic phonetic training (as in the National Literacy Strategy), though the benefits are repeatedly noted in other languages. And the idea that some of the difficulties could be removed is not even hinted at, just as there is no mention of the fact that nearly all the other languages have modernized their writing systems in the 20th century.

### 3.4 Downing and the i.t.a. experience

Another omission is any reference to John Downing (President of the SSS from 1972 until his death in 1987), although his *Comparative Reading* (1973), a collection of papers on literacy acquisition in some dozen languages, could have anticipated the title of the present book. Downing's 3-stage concept (outlined in §2.1 above) of literacy acquired as a skill accords better both with a phonetic basis for the learning process and with the findings of neuropsychology (synaptic learning, not mentioned in the book either) than do the Anglophone assumptions described above. But above all, if the purpose of the book is to draw lessons for English from other experiences of literacy acquisition, the Initial Teaching Alphabet experiment of the 1960s, which Downing directed and evaluated, provides a wealth of evidence from much nearer home. This writing system, designed for absolute beginners, and others like it going back to the mid-19th century (*New Spelling* [SSS 1942], Isaac Pitman's *Fonotypy* [see Pitman Sir J, 1969]), demonstrated that when learners are taught using a predictable orthography, the difficulties they have always faced with conventional, irregular English spellings just do not arise.



#### 4. Conclusion

There is much more of interest in the book which for lack of space cannot be discussed here. Its great value lies in the massive, fresh evidence it provides for the advantages of a predictable writing system for the easy acquisition of literacy skills. However, the book also has considerable limitations when it comes to applying that evidence to English. The Introduction tells us, as though this were a new discovery, that 'it has become clear that many of the difficulties that confront children who are learning to read and write English, are less evident, or even non-existent, in other populations.' Yet on what lessons this might suggest for English the book says little. The fact that much of its research material predates the National Literacy Strategy makes its silence on the need for phonics almost defining. A glimmer of hope for future research is therefore worth highlighting: the German chapter ends (p48) with the call for investigators to search for 'educational means of alleviating and circumventing the problem.' Let them begin by acknowledging that behind the advantages of other languages lies a history of spelling reform; and let them then examine how such reform might best ease the burden of English as the leading language of today's world.

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[These appear to be further notes. Perhaps there was no room for them in the journal.]

#### Distinguishing morphemes in English, Greek

The chapter by Bryant, Nunes and Aidinis shows the stages by which children come to master special morphemic spellings in different languages, with experiments reported in English and Greek. An interesting finding is the three stages that learners typically pass through in distinguishing, for instance, the final /t/ spelt T in *mist* and -ED in *missed*. First they tend to spell both phonemically as *mist*; second, when they are becoming familiar with the -ED past tense morpheme but don't yet understand when to use it, they may overgeneralize and spell both words *missed*; and in the third stage they have come to understand the function of -ED, and make the distinction between *mist* and *missed*.

However, the overall conclusion, that by three, older children to master these distinctions soonest, can only be described as banal. A key question that is not asked concerns the role of the teacher: did teachers try to assist children's learning of these points or not? And, most importantly, if not, could they have done so effectively if they had had appropriate methods available?

The latter question, it might be suggested, is what future research should concentrate on.

### **Greek**

Some of the underlying assumptions of this chapter deserve comment. The rapid acquisition of literacy skills in Greek is acknowledged, but is subjected to a series of experiments to elucidate the phenomenon. The role of phonics teaching and of the largely regular script is occasionally mentioned, but for much of the chapter literacy acquisition is presented as an autonomous process, with literacy 'developing' rather than being taught. Likewise, children 'rapidly develop an alphabetic strategy for reading ... after only a few weeks of reading instruction' — but this achievement is described as 'precocious' (p63) rather than normal.

One experiment reveals to us 'the importance of letter knowledge in learning to read an alphabetic script.' Research is referred to (p64) showing that 'French children's accuracy in spelling ... can be improved by specific training' (so we see that teaching can serve a purpose after all). Thus the basic psychology of the alphabet, which is sufficient to explain the easy acquisition of literacy in Greek, is here obscured by concepts and experiments such as have been devised in recent decades to investigate the mysteries of literacy acquisition in English but which appear irrelevant in a more regularly spelled language such as Greek. ... The fact that written Greek was relieved of its enormously complex system of diacritics by the 'monotonic' reform of 1982 (Mackridge, 1985), and that further simplifications are now under discussion, is not mentioned.

### **Brazilian Portuguese**

The conclusion reached from these findings is that 'some rules are easier to acquire than others, independent of social class and teaching method.' (p79) Yet p80 reports an experiment in which appropriate teaching is found to help children master the R-rule — results which are described as 'quite interesting'. Most schools, it is implied, don't teach the above spelling complications, but leave children to master them over time as best they can.

Portuguese (or Spanish). Even here the role of teachers is sidelined: children 'discover' the alphabetic principle rather than being taught it, literacy skills 'develop' rather than being practised and mastered.

p82 'Children's decoding development might be the outcome of particular methods of instruction'. Some subjects were taught by a 'whole word' approach, others by phonics.

p85 'After Brazilian children reach the alphabetic stage, both in reading and writing' — thereby implying there is a pre-alphabetic stage in reading and writing.

p86 — end of 1st para., puzzlement that passive, interpretative skill of reading should be mastered before the active, selective skill of writing.

Yet how these complications are taught is not explained, their mastery being described in terms of 'development'.

p87 teaching mentioned right at the end.

## **13. A new drive to improve adult literacy in the UK**

### **Gwenllian Thorstad**

Dr Thorstad reviews the report of the BSA working group chaired by Sir Claus Moser *Improving literacy and numeracy: A fresh start*, DfEE Publications, March 1999, ISBN 1 84185 005 5, 108pp.

#### **1. Launching the programme**

According to the British results of the International Adult Literacy Survey (OECD, 1997) 23% of adults had very low literacy levels and are not able to read, write and speak English at the level necessary to function at work and in society. As a result the Government launched the National Literacy Strategy for schools to prevent illiteracy in the future. In the meantime a Working Group was set up by David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education and Employment in June 1998 to discover how the basic skills of illiterate or semi-literate people can be given 'A Fresh Start' so that they can get jobs with prospects. Sir Claus Moser, Chairman of the Basic Skills Agency (BSA), was appointed Chairman, while the 12 committee members came from university Departments of Education and Economics, local councils, the Trades Unions, Directors of Education, with advisers from the Department of Education and Employment (DfEE) and the BSA. Written evidence was taken from a wide range of educational institutions including the Adult Dyslexia Organisation.

The purpose was to advise the Government how the present 70,000 adults receiving remedial education per year could be raised to 500,000 by 2002 and 750,000 by 2005 by appraising the effectiveness of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), Local Education Authorities (LEAs), programmes for the unemployed, as well as Work Place Basic Skills Development and other initiatives. Then, by 2010, 3.5 m. people should have received help, leaving another 3.5 m. older people still with the problem (p36, §5.9 in the report).

At present local action is fragmented partly due to their many funding sources. To remedy this the Government is proposing Local Learning Partnerships with responsibility for improving adult basic skills. They should be models of good practice in delivering and funding basic skills, and increase volume, quality and effectiveness. Nationally, there should be a National Adult Basic Skills Strategy Group, chaired by a Minister, while the BSA would continue to promote and disseminate good practice. It would work closely with the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and the DfEE Standards and Effectiveness Unit to develop curricula and qualifications with the Further Education National Training Organization (FENTO).

#### **2. What is to be done?**

The problem is now being addressed through the National Literacy Strategy. To help the younger half of the 7 million adults with a literacy problem, a National Strategy for Adult Basic Skills with ten elements has been designed: National targets, an entitlement to learn, guidance

assessment and publicity, better opportunities for learning, quality of teaching, a new curriculum and system of qualifications, teacher training and improved inspection, the benefits of new technology, planning of delivery.

The University of Industry (Ufi) will play an important role and agreement from employers will be needed. Teaching hours will need to increase from the current 2–4 each week in a wide diversity of places and programmes. The role of voluntary organisations and community schools is crucial. Family literacy, for parents and children together, needs expansion. Many interactive electronic teaching materials will be delivered on computer screen. Employers need to demand more skill from their employees. A publicly funded Workplace Basic Skills Development Fund should be established to help employers set up basic skills programmes. All individuals with basic skills problems should be entitled to free confidential assessment, whether they are employed or not.

Research by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies (CLS) for the BSA has divided the overall 19% with weak literacy skills into two categories, 6% judged very poor with a reading level below 7 yrs and a further 13% between 7–11 yrs. The percentage of adults with poor literacy increases with age. This affects not only their earning, but their ability to manage their affairs and help their children. They are more likely to be unemployed, to live with an unemployed partner, have children early who in turn struggle with basic skills, are less likely to own their homes and be in good health, and more likely to be homeless or in prison or young offenders institutions.

This National Strategy aims to provide a context in which adults with poor basic skills can choose from a range of study opportunities of assured high quality. The programmes will focus on all the needs and achievements of learners, embrace national targets, include a National Framework of Standards and Qualifications, incorporate funding arrangements only available for quality-assured programmes, and ensure that teaching is accessible throughout the country including industry, business and community contexts. They will ultimately be the responsibility of the DfEE together with the QCA, the BSA, the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), as well as local partners in Lifelong Learning Partnerships, such as Further Education Colleges, LEAs, the Careers Service and Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs), employers, trade unions and voluntary organisations. The ultimate target should be the virtual elimination of poor basic skills.

All adults with basic skills below Level 2, i.e. below GCSE standard, would be entitled to a confidential assessment of their skills with access to free information and guidance. Some 11,000 extra full-time teachers will be required above the present 4,000.

### **3. Chances of success?**

This proposal is as momentous as the Education Act of 1872 which brought in compulsory education for all children. LEAs already supply vocational training, but this implies that they must supply adult education in basic skills of literacy and maths. It does not occur to these authorities that the prime cause of illiteracy is the present spelling. It takes children of average ability from age 5–10 to attain an adult reading standard, unlike in Germany and Italy where that can be

attained by 7–8 yrs. Nor do they realise that most of the bottom 10% could be literate if the spelling was transparent, whereas now they are likely to be semi-literate for all their lives. Adults given identical nonsense-syllable tests in Germany and Britain attained only 12% low scores in Germany, but 23% in Britain (Wimmer & Goswami, 1994).

The Moser report now proposes (p17) that children should start learning to read at 4 years, although most children cannot reliably distinguish the sounds of consonants until 5 yrs. and vowels at 6 yrs. Those who learn easily by sight reading will manage, but the rest will become confused and miserable. The educationists Montessori (1912) and Froebel (1826)) advocated creative play, music, painting, model making until about 7 years. Children do not start formal schooling in continental Europe until 6 or 7 years, when most quickly learn to read. While Bernard Shaw and James Pitman wanted to introduce simplified spelling to help English-speaking children, Mont Follick, founder of the Regent School of Languages, now Westminster University, wanted to help those who were learning English as a second language (Pitman, 1969). The ultimate product mainly designed by Pitman was the Initial Teaching Alphabet (i.t.a.), which most of the children could read fluently by 6½ years and in which they could write long exciting stories, instead of the usual half page of repetitive diary (Downing, 1967). When Thorstad (1991) compared the same adult passage read by English and Italian children and in particular the same words, such as *perceptible*, *perseptibl* (i.t.a.) and *percettibile* (Italian), the Italian and English i.t.a. children could read and spell them, but the average English child could neither read nor spell them until 10 yrs. in traditional orthography.

Thus the misery of thousands of children unable to read and spell in school or as adults is unnecessary.

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## 14. LETTERS

Letters are welcomed on any matters raised by items appearing in JSSS, or on any observations or experiences relating to spelling that readers may wish to report.

### Pronouncing Cut Spelng

Since evrybody here seems to use watterver spellin' sistem suits dhem, I will enjoy dhe freedom too and apply a few ov dhe most urgent spellin' variants to dhis very text (I start alreddy enjojn' it!).

I'm mothertong italian and durin' my youth it took me only few months to get reazonably fluent in French and German: yet, after 5 years since I began lerning English I'm not quite sure how to pronounce dhis or dhat word. Once I realized dhat dhe problem laid in dhe krazy spellin' sistem (or "unsistem" ), I began thinkin' konstantly about a possible spellin' reform.

Few months ago I got dhe Internet and surfing dhe web I found dhat I wazn't dhe only one thinkin' about it and I wazn't alone having problems with dhe spellin' either (actually, I don't hav any problems spellin' words — in Italy I lernt Latin and ancient Greek — but I hav a lot of problems *pronouncing* dhoze words I spell very korrekty!).

Yet, ov all dhe proposals advokating a reform, none go outside the boundaries of the English language and none take in konsideration a wider European or even worldwide reform.

As you see, I approach the problem from an outsider point ov view; but English is becoming an international language, it will be the "lingua franca" ov dhe 3rd millenium and even right now many mor persons wood be fluent in English, if it had a konsistent spellin'sistem (that iz, one wich wood allow persons unable to travel, to lern it from a simple book, on dhe basis ov dher noledge ov dhe phonetic values ov dhe latin alfabet).

Dhiz "Cut-spelling" reform seems to be viewed by most as one of the most praktikal, most ingenious and most likely to take place, if any ever will.

I personally think it may make things as bad (if not worse) for foreners, and europeans in particular (dhat iz, for dhose hoo ar thinkin' ov an alfabet in terms ov *foneticity* and *consistency*).

Cut-spelling seems to me an arabik way to rite words: only konsonants!

And dhe vowels?

If you speek english and reed aloud a cut-spelng text, you will sherly know in between wich consonant letrs to pronounce a schwa. If you ar a forener you may not know it and even find it difficult to remember.

As a matter of fact, if you ask a mothertongue italian, spanish or french (and, I believe, greek, slav or indian also), to instinctively sound out (read) the word *vicr* or *doctr*, you will most likely pronounce the sequence of phonemes /vi'kr@/ and /dok'tr@/, and you would continue to do so even after hearing the correct pronunciation of those words from a mothertongue speaker (as I did in many other cases), since literate adult language learners tend to rely on the written forms and to memorize those only, having lost, probably by the age of 12, the skill of recognizing and acquiring new "phones" . If you add to that that many of them may not even ever get in contact

with a mothertongue english speaker, and just keep talking english between themselves, since it has become a lingua franca...

To be short, it is a *good idea indeed* to chop away all redundant letters (as a first step to a thoro reform). You may even introduce a rule that says: if there is a vowel missing, that's a schwa. But then you need to signal where that schwa should have been, maybe using an apostrophe, otherwise the poor foreigners will think: should the word "spelng" be pronounced /spel@n@g@/ or just /spel@ng/?

What about "consnnts" ? Is /kons@n@n@t@s/ the right pronunciation? And should "familiar" be said /familiar@/? For us foreigners it would be a little bit clearer: as "spel'ng", "cons'nnts" and "famili'r" .

Since I have been facing the problem of the english spelling I have been thinking that any reform whatsoever would be better than none at all: things couldn't get worse, anyway.

Cut-spelling may be for me the only exception.

**Corrado Monpetit, Niagara Falls, Ontario**

### Testing the -ite market

In order to test what the 'market' thinks, I asked 10 people each to spell five non-existent words: jite, dite, shrite, pite, and twite. I didn't ask them for what they thought was a simple way to spell these words, or what would be a logical way to spell these words. I just asked them how they thought the words should be spelt.

The results were as follows:

- ITE 76%
- YTE 12%
- IGHT 12%.

Interestingly, most of the -IGHT endings were suggested for the final word asked, *twite* (perhaps this was because it was reminiscent of the word *twilight*). If you exclude this word, the results for the remainder become -IITE 82.5%, -YTE 12.5%, and -IGHT 5%.

What this confirms is that, at least for the -IITE ending, people intuitively recognise the 'magic E' system of altering the sound of the previous vowel.

You can certainly argue that this is not the simplest way of constructing a language. It would be simpler, if one were starting from scratch, to have say *spit* and *spiet* rather than *spit* and *spite*, or even better to come up with a new character for the long I sound to give say *spit* and *sp\*t*.

However, we are not starting from scratch. We are building on the patterns of an existing language. I personally think that, regardless of the impact of SSS, the -IGHT -ending is likely to be largely archaic within 100 years. We already have growing use of *brite*, *nite* and *lite*. Myself, I come across *lite* so much on beer, icecream, etc, that when I see the spelling *light* it looks rather quaint.

There is a difference between simplicity and logicity. The spelling -ITE is not the simplest possible, but it is completely logical, as well as conforming to a very strong pattern that underlies the language. This is why people come up with it intuitively.

Improving spelling by cutting letters has its applications, but it also has its limitations. The -ITE spelling illustrates this. I notice that Cut Spelling writes *ryt* for *right*. Rigorous application of cutting letters would not produce a satisfactory result in this case, so a new pattern is introduced.

While I believe there is some scope for new patterns where the language is seriously deficient, I also believe that the only way we will get reform accepted is if we build on the existing patterns of the language. This should produce a result that is comfortably similar to the English we are all used to, and is easily readable by anyone familiar with the language.

**Peter Whitmore, Panmure, Auckland, New Zealand**

### **Spelling vs. morphology**

The article 'Wat can welsh teach english' in [JSSS 26](#) (Item 12) assumed that the more rational welsh spelling system was the important difference between Welsh and English. But I wonder.

The Welsh language has been less penetrated by foreign words than English, and its word formation is more regular. Thus the noun *land* corresponds to the unrelated adjective *rural* in English, while in Welsh *gwlad* has a clear derivative in *gwledig*. And there many more examples. The same is true of many other languages, for instance German has *Land* — *ländlich*.

English is unique not only in its spelling, but as being such a mixture of different languages. I wonder how important a factor this is? And how you could test it?

**Michael Bell, Hitchin, Herts, UK**

### **Airline abbreviations**

In our inter-office memos wich go to evry corner of the world (airline industry) for meny years now it's been common practise tu use the forms *cud*, *shud* and *wud*. It's been widely accepted as OK. Wun hardly sees them spelt eny uther way. Let's consider the uzij of those spellings.

I gess th main reezn orrijnly for using short forms of thees werds and meny uthers, mainly airline jargon, was the letter economy, space and timesavings in telegrafic communication. Othr examples: *pls adv* for *please advise*, *msg* for *message*, *adnok* for *advise if not okay*, *U* for *you*, *n* for *and*, *clofi* for *close file*. Interesting is the spelling of *you*.

Whereas the English speaking countries plus the Chinese favor *U*, meny uthers use *yu* particularly the European and American stations.

I became accustomed to thees riting conventions in 1965. The spelling usij is limited to our own airline group. Interline (between carriers) communication is more TO-formal.

**Jurgen Barth, Cammeray, NSW, Australia**