

Simplified Spelling Society

modernizing english spelling: principles & practicalities

for

- * *higher standards of literacy*
- * *more effective education*
- * *easier mastery of the language*
- * *a more efficient writing system*

THE PROBLEM WITH SPELLING

Managing modernization

Like all human systems, the way a language is spelled needs occasional modernizing. To optimize literacy, spelling should show pronunciation, and pronunciation should determine spelling. But over time, as pronunciation changes and foreign words enter the language, the match between letters and sounds can break down. Then the spelling becomes confused, literacy is harder to achieve and all education suffers. Most languages with a long alphabetic history have therefore updated their spelling in the 20th century, but English has not systematically done so over the past 1,000 years.

The chaos of English spelling

Before the Norman conquest English spelling was relatively simple, but the following centuries saw a vast influx of French, Latin and Greek words and major changes in pronunciation (shifting vowels, consonants falling silent). The new words enriched the language, but the spelling lost its order and coherence. The advent of printing 500 years ago created some standards, but countless anomalies survived. America made some progress in the 19th century, e.g., separating L/ LL in *modeling/ compelling*, OR/ OUR in *favor/ devour* and SK/ SC in *skeptic/ sceptre*, but the improvements were few, and English spelling is today reviled and ridiculed worldwide ("one of the world's most awesome messes", "an insult to human intelligence", etc.) for its unpredictability.

The 40-odd sounds of English have hundreds of possible spellings, and one spelling can represent many sounds. Everyday words like *once* or *who* defy all logic. The same ending is differently spelled in *burglar, teacher, actor, glamour, acre, murmur, injure, martyr*. The same stem fluctuates between *high/ height, speak/ speech, precede/ proceed, defence/ defensive* (U.S. *defense* is more consistent). The *-ant/ -ent* and *-able/ -ible* endings switch bewilderingly. Consonants may be doubled, or else not - compare *inoculate/ innocuous, commit/ omit, afraid/ affray*. Letters are inserted for no good reason, eg, C in *scythe*, G in *foreign*, H in *Thames*, P in *ptarmigan*, S in *island*, W in *whole*. Words from other languages are carelessly altered, as when -ANCE/ -ENCE are reversed from French *correspondance/ connivence*, or Spanish M, RR are often written as MM, R in English *incommunicado, guerilla*. Several alternative spellings compete in exotic loanwords like *borschch, lychee, popadum, yoghourt*. Inconsistency is rife because English has no strategy for ensuring consistency. No other language tolerates such alphabetic chaos.

The price we pay

Yet learners must decode this chaos for reading, and memorize it for writing. Literacy is consequently far harder to acquire in English than in most languages, with many learners never mastering it properly and teachers struggling to find effective methods. Even the highly literate misread unfamiliar words, especially names of people and places, and hesitate over spelling. Is it *weird* or *wierd*, *commitment* or *comittment*, *precede* or *preceed*, *concensus* or *consensus*, *paralleled* or *paralleled*? Who has never misspelled *accommodate* or *receive*, or switched *there/their*? Non-native speakers face the further hazard of mispronouncing misleading spellings (eg, *who* sounded as *woe* or *woo*, *heart* aligned with *heard*, or *own* rhymed with *town*). Perhaps most serious of all: research suggests that irregular spelling may harm children's intellectual development more generally.

The human, social and economic cost of the unsystematic spelling of English is incalculable. All writing and publishing wastes time, materials, money. Learners spend years at public expense trying to crack an erratic code, when they could be gaining useful knowledge. Education standards are a matter of grave concern in English-speaking countries - unsurprisingly when unpredictable spellings raise such a barrier to correct reading and writing in the world's leading language.

DECORRUPTING THE SYSTEM

How radical a change?

The problem with English spelling is that the alphabetic principle (letters corresponding predictably to speech sounds) has been corrupted. Any reform will therefore move toward restoring the alphabetic principle, but less clear is how radical a change can or should be made.

Proposals for reform can be graded according to how much change they involve. Most radical is the proposal, associated with G B Shaw, for a totally new alphabet, on the grounds that the present Roman alphabet is ill-suited to English. Less radical variants on this approach keep most of today's letters, but introduce some new ones (eg, to replace the digraphs CH, SH, TH); alternatively, accent marks can allow some letters to stand for two or more sounds. Next come proposals that use only the present letters, but make sure that each spelling pattern always has the same pronunciation and each speech sound the same spelling. Other schemes try to avoid such wholesale respelling: one for instance ensures all spelling patterns are consistently pronounced, though speech sounds can still have a variety of spellings; another regularizes the spelling of consonants, but leaves most vowels unchanged. Less radical still is a scheme that concentrates on cutting unnecessary letters, but actually changes only a few. Least radical are schemes that, as a first step, regularize the spelling of a single sound (eg, short /e/), or remove a single anomaly (eg, GH). However, improvements can be made with no respelling at all, just by taking the best spellings among current alternatives as the standard (eg, always *jail*, never *gaol*); by this procedure most American spellings would be preferred to their British counterparts (eg, *favor* not *favour*, *plow* not *plough*).

Considerations in choosing a scheme

The above range of schemes highlights a dilemma: the most radical improve the spelling most, but may be least practical, while the easiest to implement may offer least benefit. Radical schemes entail several difficulties: there may be no reason to prefer one system over another; vowel spellings may not suit speakers of different accents; a costly, worldwide programme of education and training would be needed; the transition would mean a typographical regulation; and the new spellings may be incompatible with the old. All reforms in fact have to consider the dangers of incompatibility, as would occur if today's readers faced *find* confusingly respelled as *fiend*, or if future readers were taught *kum* but could not read *come* (except perhaps as *comb*). At worst, future generations might even be cut off from anything written in the past.

Less radical proposals minimize such risks. They are flexible enough to be combined or introduced in stages. They may reinforce existing regularities rather than create new rules and patterns. They may target current difficulties (eg, I before E, etc) and take account of how English relates to other languages. They may be confined to elementary vocabulary. They may keep different spellings for some homophones (eg, *meat/ meet*). But they may imply that further reforms should follow at a later date, once the first stage has been digested, indeed that spelling modernization should be a continuing process.

A sample of *New Spelling* (1948) illustrates a more radical reform: "We shood surtenly not kontinue to riet with dhe prezent misleeding speling". By contrast the less radical *Cut Spelling* (1996) has: "We shud certnly not continu to rite with th present misleading spelng." Other schemes spell *bed*, *hed*, *lepard*, *frend* with regularized short E, or *sauser*, *majik*, *advize* with regularized consonants. Removing GH might produce *tuf*, *trof*, *tho*, *thru*, *thoro*, *caut*, *flyt* and simplifying doubled consonants could produce *abreviate*, *batalion*, *comitee*, *inoculate*, *inocuous*, *paralel*, *satelite*.

PRACTICALITIES

The peculiar situation of English

The practicalities of spelling reform have never been faced in English, and many basic questions need exploring. Who could introduce reforms, by what authority, by what means, to what effect? Reforms in other languages offer few parallels: their orthographies are often well ordered, many have institutions responsible for orthographic norms (eg, academies, dictionaries, educational authorities), and they relate to one country or just a few countries. English is in a very different situation. Its orthography is systematically disordered, and it lacks agreed standards. It currently has no machinery for planning or implementing improvements. It not only serves as a mother tongue in five continents, but is used worldwide as a lingua franca. And many of those who might have the power to organize reform do not at present appreciate the nature of the English spelling problem and/or have little will to tackle it. The hurdles on the road to reform are thus considerable, inertia not least among them. Yet the demand for higher levels of literacy guarantees continuing global dissatisfaction with the status quo, and research (eg, comparing literacy standards between languages) is increasingly demonstrating the harm done by the erratic spelling of English.

Possible routes

Various routes to reform are conceivable, and all need to be pursued, as they are likely to interact, with Government involvement likely in one way or another. One route might be spontaneous spelling simplifications by individuals, as in the new media such as e-mail, where formal spelling conventions are less strictly observed; but guidance would be required to ensure the trend was toward a common, more coherent system. Another route would involve educational authorities in different countries promoting simpler spellings in schools; but international co-ordination would be required to prevent written English fragmenting across the world. A third route might see a Style Council for World English set up by publishers and the press (led perhaps by dictionaries partly motivated by the prospect of increased sales), with the aim of simplifying the preparation of text. A fourth route might arise from the impatience of non-English-speaking countries with the spelling of *their* world language: they might commission an international organization, such as the UNO or the ISO, to design a simplified English spelling system to meet their particular needs.

Public opinion, professional opinion

The prerequisite for any formal simplification of English spelling is greater awareness of its present problems and how they might be mitigated. Children and adults struggling with written English need to realize that their difficulties are not primarily due to stupidity, but to an archaic orthography which they should protest against. Teachers frustrated by learners' endless battles with written English should lobby for the orthographic cause of their stress to be dealt with. Teacher trainers need to ensure that their students grasp both the phonic basis of alphabetic literacy and its pitfalls in English. Research into literacy standards should consider the effect of spelling irregularity both on learners' performance and on the time taken to become literate. Psychologists should examine the impact of irregular spelling on developing minds. Linguists should be identifying the irregularities of English spelling compared with other languages. Dictionaries should agree not just to reflect usage, but to promote better spelling by recommending simpler forms among variants in current use. The press and other publishers could then adopt dictionary recommendations in place of their present arbitrary and conflicting style-sheets. If such changes in understanding, attitude and practice can be achieved, the long-term rational management of spelling can become an accepted part of the culture of world English, to the lasting benefit of learners, readers, writers and print-producers everywhere.

Reassurances

The idea of spelling reform often provokes hostility, anxiety and questions, all requiring a reassuring response. Hostility is best disarmed by facts. Anxiety may arise from fear of being unable to handle change; but spelling reform can be a far gentler process than reforming currency or weights and measures which similar nations have taken in their stride. Small changes need scarcely affect reading, and few adults (teachers and print-producers excepted) would be obliged to master the new spellings - though many would welcome the greater simplicity, and most parents would want to follow their children's progress using easier spellings. Old books would not have to be reprinted, but today's technology allows publishers cheaply to introduce simpler, more economical spellings in newspapers, periodicals and books (both new titles and new editions). Many of today's spelling dilemmas (e.g., American or British forms?) would vanish, with the prospect of further improvements to look forward to in years to come.

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This was published as a 2-sided landscape leaflet folded into three columns.