

Simplified Spelling Society

Founded 1908

Working for planned change in English spelling for the benefit of learners and users everywhere

Newsletter April 1996 [N10]

Published by the Secretary, Bob Brown

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IN BRIEF

Subscription time again. Members who have not already paid will find a slip enclosed with this Newsletter reminding that subscriptions for 1996 are now due, at a rate of £10 or US\$20. Please send your cheque/check or bank draft to the Secretary at the address below as soon as possible. If sending a non-sterling cheque/check, please remember to enclose a generous amount for bank handling charges.

AGM

The Annual General Meeting of the Simplified Spelling Society will be held on Saturday May 11 1996 followed by a Committee meeting to which members, as always, are cordially invited.

1. LECTURE

[Style guides as vehicles for spelling reform?](#) Chris Upward presents an analysis of the style guides issued by newspaper and magazine publishers and reflects on their possibilities as a path towards reformed spelling.

The talk precedes the AGM.

Should the SSS try to become a registered charity?

As the accounts show, this Society is not a registered charity, so pays tax like any other 'business'. We have sought tax-free status before — and failed. Should we try again?

Considering this question raises wider issues about both the role and style of the Society, and its finances. These will all be debated at the AGM on 11 May. The views of all members are actively sought, whether or not you can make it to the meeting. Bob Brown explains — and explains what he wants you to do.

2. Annual General Meeting — May 11 1996

May 11 will involve a combined annual general meeting, which elects the coming year's Committee, and the first meeting of that Committee, which elects the Officers.

As usual, all members are very welcome to both. Start time is 10.45, with a preceding lecture. There will be a lunch break at some appropriate point. The venue has a reasonably-priced cafeteria.

AGM Agenda

1. Minutes of last AGM
2. Matters arising, if any
3. Secretary's report
4. Treasurer's report and approval of Accounts
5. Appointment of auditor
6. Subscription for 1997
7. Editor-in-Chief's report
8. Research Director's report
9. Media Relations report
10. Chairman's round-up
11. Election of Committee
12. The Society's role and its funding into the future
Bob Brown will lead a discussion on what kind of Society we want for the next millennium, and how it should be funded. Should we try to become a registered charity?
13. Any other business

Committee Agenda

1. Minutes of last meeting
2. Matters arising, if any
3. Co-options to Committee
4. Election of Officers
5. Meeting dates for next year
6. Speakers for future meetings
7. Any other business

INCOME AND EXPENDITURE ACCOUNT

for the year ending 31 December 1995 (£) [not included]

[Bob Brown: see [Journals](#), [Newsletters](#), [Pamphlet13](#), [PV1](#)]

3. AGM Key Topic: What kind of Simplified Spelling Society for the next century? And how should we fund it?

The Secretary writes —

Your Committee has been considering for some time what to do about our legal status. The accounts show we pay tax on our income, which has amounted to over £1,000 a year in recent history. If we were to realise some of the latent profit in our investments (currently over £30,000) — for example, to fund some major initiative — then we would lose a substantial proportion to tax. The only way for voluntary organisations like us to obtain tax-exempt status under British law is to become a Registered Charity. That means satisfying a number of stringent conditions in an appeal to the Charity Commissioners. And that is not just a matter of filling out a form ...

There is a history at work also; let me explain at least some of it. The Society notoriously sued the Inland Revenue in the High Court in the 1940s over the tax status of the funds bequeathed by Sir George Hunter that still form most of our endowment. We lost. Hoping that the passage of 50 years might have healed the wounds, we applied afresh in 1991 to become a charity under current laws. We were rejected, principally on the grounds that campaigning organisations cannot be charitable. During 1992 we consulted a leading counsel on charity law for a legal opinion on the way forward (see [box 1](#)). This would involve making careful, legally-sound approaches to the Charity Commissioners, preferably through a specialised solicitor. Recently, we have consulted such a specialist, and her advice is that we would need to change the "objects" clause of our Constitution to be more educational and less reformist. The current clause appears in [box 2](#) and the suggested re-draft in [box 3](#). As the "simplified" epithet may prejudice impartiality, we may also need to change our name to something more neutral, as indeed our American colleagues did in becoming the American Literacy Council. They were originally the Simplified Spelling Board. We may also need to separate campaigning activities from those, such as research and publication, of a charitable nature.

In correspondence with a new member recently, I realised that we need to face up to the reality. The SSS has only a handful of ACTIVE members. Currently we have no-one willing and able to organise a membership drive, an international conference, *publication sales ... Should we continue in this minimalist way, or should we really try to make an impact? If so, who's going to do the work?

The Committee is NOT suggesting a change to the Constitution at present, but seeks the opinion of all members on these issues. What should the Society be doing in future? How can we increase our funds, or make best use of them? To what extent should we be prepared to redefine ourselves to optimise our finances? Should we hire staff for duties that no-one appears to want to do voluntarily? Please come to the AGM and/or send your views to the Secretary before 11 May.

Box 1

What Counsel said we need to show to be judged "charitable":

- that the society is not a campaigning organisation trying to change the law;
- that it disseminates information rather than campaigns;
- that it undertakes genuinely open research rather than research merely to prove original views;
- that it is a widely held belief that simplified spelling is a public benefit.

Box 2

Current Constitution

A1 The name of the society is "The Simplified Spelling Society".

A2 its aim is to bring about a reform of the spelling of English in the interests of ease of learning and economy in writing.

Box 3

Possible revision to Constitution

A1 The name of the society is "The Simplified Spelling Society" [change desirable to something neutral].

A2 The object of the Society is to educate the public in the knowledge and appreciation of the role of spelling in the teaching and acquisition of literacy skills. In furtherance of the above object but not further or otherwise, the Society may:

- (1) Promote or carry out, or assist in promoting and carrying out, research on the causes of literacy problems and possible solutions and on the role of spelling in literacy teaching and may make available the results of such research to its members and to the public at large.
- (2) Arrange or provide for, or join in arranging and providing for, the holding of lectures, meetings and conferences on such topics open to the public and the Press.
- (3) Respond to enquiries on spelling and literacy issues and provide information and materials by way of further clarification of the object of the Society.

[Harry Cookson: See [Journal 21](#). Item 7, [Newsletters](#)]

4. How far can we go in English?

Harry Cookson

SPELLING REFORM IN EUROPE has generally been based on the idea of making spelling agree with pronunciation. This has worked very well for the countries of Western Europe, where children learn to read and write much more quickly than children in English-speaking countries.

But English can follow the reformer-countries only to a limited extent. There is a problem. English has an exceptionally large number of homophones and this will create an exceptionally large number of homographs — words with different meanings that are spelt the same. This might make reading more difficult than it is now; even perhaps make spelling reform counter-productive.

A random count in over 20 books and newspapers showed that almost all of them had 7–11 percent of words that were homophones which would result in homographs. A few of the samples were in the 5–6 percent range, others as high as 18–25 percent. In this count, proper names were omitted, as was the very common word "to" as it has different pronunciations in different parts of the sentence. Also omitted were words such as "nor" and "gnaw" which are homophones in r-dropping counties but not in Scotland and North America.

This level of homographs after a reform would result in one or two words spelt the same but with two, three or four different meanings in every line in most books and in every couple of lines of a newspaper. This is only an average, of course. In practice there will be several lines with no homographs, then suddenly a line with three, four, or more. This will make gibberish of the sentence concerned.

When I try to persuade people to support spelling reform they are immediately put off by new homographs. To them "red" is a colour and they will not accept it as the past tense of the verb "to read". We must also remember that vast numbers of readers of English do not have English as their first language. English is taking the place that Latin had in the Middle Ages but on a world scale. Homographs are not helpful to such people. Also, we must not create spellings that are homographs with old ones (current spellings), such as "wander" becoming "wonder" and "wonder" becoming "wunder". This will cause misunderstanding. People read by habit and such words would cause a lot of misunderstanding and re-reading.

So what can we do about the homograph problem?

The present stage of the spelling reform movement is that of persuading people to adopt spelling reform. So we must not do anything that will put people off. This means that we must not introduce new homographs, as it is known to put people off reform.

When spelling reform has been accepted and put into practice for a few years, we can consider the possibility of introducing a few homographs that are different parts of speech, and thus may not cause confusion. But we must be careful. Now and for ever we must accept that we cannot go the whole phonic way. Our language will not permit it.

I shall be pleased to have opinions and advice on how the problem affects New Spelling 90, Cut Spelling and other suggested reform methods. Note that postage from the UK to Portugal is the same as first-class inland mail.

5. PLATFORM!! ADDRESS YOUR FELLOW MEMBERS

Readers are invited to submit short topics for an airing on this 'soap-box' page. Please respond to the writer at the address given, or to the Secretary for possible publication in a response column.

A first reply

Taking the editorial advantage of being able to get in first, I must say that I do not agree with Harry that homographs could be a 'show-stopper'.

We are all familiar with Homophones in speech and do not find them a problem, primarily because context makes clear the meaning: 'to', 'too', for example, where is the problem?

I will admit there is a transitional one — until people already literary become familiar with a reform spelling, of course they are going to moan about it looking strange, and complain of spurious 'confusion'. The 'argument of unfamiliarity' against spelling reform was effectively debunked by our predecessors in the society's 1909 pamphlet the aesthetic argument. In general I don't care about putting off the already-literate — spelling reform isn't for them!

Bob Brown

6. Simplified spelling on the Internet

Bob Brown goes surfing

IF ALL THIS BUSINESS in the press about the Internet, the World Wide Web, cyberspace, surfing the information superhighway, and a host of other metaphors — mixed or otherwise — remains a mystery to you, then I hope this column may shed a little light, to risk metaphor — overload by introducing yet another one. My aim is to explain simply for the novice what some of this means, and then move on to tell you where to find spelling-related items on the 'Net. First, what is the Internet and how can you gain access to it?

Making a start

The Internet is a huge collection of computers all around the world, connected into a network. No-one owns the Internet, and there is no central authority controlling it, although there are several organisations responsible for registering new computers. These computers are servers — each stores information and makes it available, with varying degrees of interaction, to anyone who has its address. Servers are sponsored by many kinds of organisations: universities, government or other public agencies, companies, clubs, private individuals, anyone. A subset of the servers comprising the Internet react to users in a friendly way, often with images and illustrations, and is known as the World Wide Web, or just the Web for short. The jargon for a particular organisation's presence on the Web is a site, and a new visitor usually arrives at its home page. The Simplified Spelling Society's Web site actually resides on a server at Aston University. We have a home page

(address at the head of the article), from which anyone viewing can branch to see various other pages of information by clicking on high-lit text and prompts. So how can you get at this?

Most computers sold for home use and billed as 'multi-media' have the built-in capability to connect to the Internet. An effective one will cost between one and two thousand pounds in the UK.

Although there are some technicalities involved, basically you only have to connect the modem of the computer to a telephone socket, dial one of many competing companies called Internet Service Providers, and sign up as a subscriber. With many of them, you can do this on-the-spot by credit card. It typically costs a £10–20 initial fee and about £10 per month thereafter.

You can then download a browser — software that is your 'window' into the Internet — and you then have access to any Internet site anywhere for the cost of a local telephone call while you are connected. You tap in the address of a home page you want to visit, and a few seconds later it appears, irrespective whether its server is physically near you or on the other side of the world. Most Web pages have many links to others. You click on one of them and off you go! Your browser allows you to retrace your steps, and to note sites that you may want to return to directly later. This process is known in the puerile jargon as surfing the Internet, although I prefer 'paddling' as you rarely experience the surge of adrenalin associated with surfing because — be warned! — the Web is often S-L-O-W.

If you just want to have a browse around the Web without the commitment of your own computer, there are various alternatives in Britain that I imagine are available in other countries too. Some of the more forward-looking public libraries are beginning to offer Web access facilities, naturally for a fee. Then there are so-called 'cyber-cafés' which are coffee-shops with computers and staff to help. Again for a fee, you can take a look around. If you are in London, Dillons bookshop in Gower Street has a basement bank of Internet computers which you can use for £3 for half-an-hour.

To find anything on the Internet, you need a starting point, meaning a site address. These usually take the form 'http://' and then a string of letters and symbols. Some spelling-related home pages — including ours — are reviewed below to get you started, or you can use a search engine. This is simply a Web site that lets you enter one or more keywords for a search that it will then undertake on your behalf. It will return in a few seconds with a list of sites, with some description of each, and you simply click on one you wish to visit. If it turns out to be irrelevant or uninteresting, you just back up to the search results and try another. There is one site that even acts as a common front for over 200 search engines. Find it at <http://wwwsearch.com> and enter your keywords into Alta Vista, Lycos, Yahoo, InfoSeek or others of the search engines offered.

Experiment, and I hope you enjoy. It can be exciting to be viewing information from the USA one moment, from Australia a few seconds later, then on to Germany or Japan ...

Electronic mail

Electronic mail, or 'e-mail' — the opposite of which is 'snail-mail' of course — is the ability to send messages to others, usually nowadays across the Internet. Most people with Internet access also have an electronic mailbox. That's the string of letters with an @ in the middle. You can reach Bob Brown and Chris Upward as for example. We find we increasingly correspond with members in North America and Australasia through e-mail messages rather than letters.

Spelling on the 'Net

The Simplified Spelling Society home page can be found at It gives the contact addresses and allows the visitor to branch to read the text of some of our introductory material. Also provided are contents lists for recent Journals. There is one forward link, to the German spelling planning organisation. The list of links will be extended as other relevant organisations gain a Web presence.

The Riggs Institute (<http://www.riggsinst.org/>) has an interesting and extensive web-site describing its work over 60 years in encouraging phonic-plus-traditional methods of literacy teaching. I have had an interesting e-mail dialogue with its director, Myrna McCulloch.

Given that Andrew Carnegie's generosity was instrumental in founding this Society, you may like to read an interesting paper from Purdue University at Indianapolis entitled "Andrew Carnegie and his gospel of philanthropy: A study in the ethics of responsibility" at <http://indiamond6.ulib.iupui.edu/cdm/ref/collection/PRO/id/28934> .

Relevant British government Web sites, all beginning <https://www.gov.uk> are the Department for Education (.....), the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (.....) and the inspectors at the Office for Standards in Education (<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/about-us>). Each provides a wide selection of information and there is a good word-search engine to help you find specific items.

For some reason, there are a lot of Mark Twain's *bon mots* about the English language and spelling on the 'Net. Any search engine will link you to several. And you can even get web-sites spell-checked free of charge — American style t.o. naturally!

If your surfing uncovers any other interesting sites, please let Bob Brown know for mention in later Newsletters. A less extensive "Internet Corner" is likely to be a regular feature. We would particularly like to know of more North American sites, or of members' surfing experiences.

[Chris Upward: see [Journals](#), [Newsletters](#), [Pamphlet](#), [Leaflets](#), [Media](#), [Book and Papers](#).]

7. Orthographic Ownership: an approach to winning support for spelling reform?

Christopher Upward

This item is ritn in Cut Spelling.

SYCLOJICL OWNERSHIP

Since World War II, originating in the USA but reaching its epitome in Japan, the concept of 'Quality' has acquired an almost legendary reputation as the embodiment of successful, modern management techniques. Although first applied to industrial production, it is now seen to have relevance in many other spheres of social organization. Prominent among the ideas subsumed by 'Quality' is 'Ownership', which implies that, in order to motivate people to embrace any particular enterprise, they must be inspired by a sense that the enterprise is their own and in their interests; for if they have this sense, they will naturally feel committed to the success of the enterprise. Within a company, one type of ownership is of course financial, perhaps taking the form of share options, with shareholders legally 'owning' part of the company. But the concept of ownership as a motivating factor can also be cyclojicl rather than financial. [1] When people can see that they have contributed something of themselves to a project, they develop a powerful sense of cyclojicl ownership and an emotional stake in its success. Such cyclojicl ownership can for instance be seen to motivate the supporters of a sports team in their continuing loyalty towards it, and it has much in common with Tony Blair's concept of a 'stakeholder society'.

ORTHOGRAPHIC OWNERSHIP NEGLECTED

Over the past 400 years and more, innumerable schemes have been proposed for making the spelling of English more orderly. Yet whatever their individual merits, almost all these schemes (Webster partially excepted) have failed even to reach the threshold of implantation. They failed not necessarily because of their inadequacies, but because they did not win over those who had the power to implement them. Such failure was thus a failure of persuasion, even though, in some cases at least, the schemes marshaled arguments of irrefutable logic in their favor.

One of the issues, therefore, that spelling reformers need to consider, if they are to have any prospect of eventual success, is how to persuade others, both the general public and the relevant policy-makers, to adopt their recommendations. Yet in the past, specific schemes have all too often not even persuaded other spelling reformers. While rejection by fellow-reformers commonly arises from perceptions of flaws in the schemes, one may surmise that the lack of any shared sense of ownership has frequently also been an alienating factor. Spelling reformers are by their nature likely to be individualists, since being able to see the defects of universally accepted conventions is what puts them on the reform trail in the first place; yet that very individualism may prevent them from anticipating and responding effectively to the reactions of those whose support they need. Worse still, reformers may appear to the outside world to present their arguments "in an evangelistic manner, which many find unappealing", as David Crystal diplomatically phrased it. [2] In terms of ownership, they often fail to give even other reformers, let alone the general public, a sense of having a stake in their proposed reformed spellings. Few spelling reformers have indeed begun to bridge the imaginative and practical gap between the initial devising of a reformed orthography for English, and its intended eventual adoption by the world.

SPREADING OWNERSHIP OF THE DESIGN

How, then, might the concept of ownership be applied to assist the process of persuasion? At the outset it is probably useful if a scheme can be presented not as the momentary inspiration of an individual, but in a broader historical and orthographic context. Future schemes are unlikely to contain many totally new insights

which will persuade the public on their own merits. Almost any new scheme is likely to have antecedents: certain of its features may already be found in schemes proposed 100 or even 400 years ago. By acknowledging such antecedents, a new scheme can show the public of today that English spelling reform, far from being just the fantastic brainchild of a wild-eyed science-fiction enthusiast of today, has in fact been a matter of ongoing concern for generations. Furthermore, antecedents may also be found not in English at all, but in other languages, in which case the concern to modernize writing systems can be shown to be universal, and by no means confined to English. By placing a new scheme in such a perspective spelling reformers can suggest that the ownership of spelling reform schemes belongs to all peoples at all times. In this way, they will by implication be including the public in on the scheme, rather than dousing them with it like a cold shower from without.

Collaboration and consultation are bound to play a key role in the development of a successful scheme, and are also ways of spreading its ownership more widely. Collaboration will be needed between spelling reformers jointly, in order to ensure a consensus among experts; and a consensus implies joint ownership. Consultation with users will be needed in order to maximize public and international acceptability. Each speaker of English has a unique perception of the language, depending on his/her dialect, education and life experiences, and a modern writing system needs to be devised to suit as broad a spectrum of people as possible (including non-native speakers). No single orthographer or small group of orthographers can alone take account of the immense variety of individual user-requirements in English worldwide, but international consultation can help cater for at least a representative range. If potential users' needs are not catered for, those users cannot have a sense of ownership and will not be easily persuaded to adopt a reformed orthography.

If the contribution of collaborators and consultants is acknowledged in the published reform proposal, they thereby acquire an explicit stake in its positive public reception, which they should in turn be the more motivated to promote.

OWNERSHIP THRU USE

So much for ownership of the design process. Ownership of the acceptance and implantation of a scheme is a separate matter. Certain categories of people are likely to be more centrally involved in the adoption of a new orthography than others. Modern experience of spelling reform in other languages suggests that the first recipients of reformed spellings are most likely to be initial learners in schools. Since it is initial learners who are most widely handicapped by the present spelling of English, their needs will presumably play a large part, and perhaps even be paramount, in the design of simplified spellings. However, initial learners cannot be directly consulted: their needs will have to be deduced from research, perhaps especially through analysis of errors and problems caused by the present spelling. But, if the reformed spellings are suitably presented to initial learners, they can quickly be given a sense of ownership.

It can be explained to them that they are a privileged generation, learning something better, easier and more modern than their unfortunate elders did, and that they can feel proud and lucky in consequence, indeed they will themselves be able to teach their elders. Their parents likewise can be treated as privileged, both through the benefits their children will derive, and through their own association with a momentous innovation. In this way, they too can be given a sense of ownership.

Another kind of user ownership arises through the learning process itself. People who make an effort to learn and master a skill typically then feel a sense of ownership: the knowledge and skill acquired henceforth belong to them, and, especially if they can see that they are benefiting from it, they may even fiercely defend it. If initial learners are taught simplified spellings in a positive spirit, as described above, they will naturally develop pride in its ownership.

But another potential category of learner, adults at present experiencing literacy difficulties, sometimes already express their eagerness for reform ("When can I start?"). Such learners can be expected positively to seize

ownership of whatever appropriately designed simplified spelling system is offered them: all they need is permission from some authority to use it. Another category of learners would be literate adults who are interested for whatever motive (e.g., intellectual curiosity, enjoyment of puzzle solving, desire to be seen innovating) in taking the reformed spelling system.

To win support from this category, the initial struggle to master the new spellings would have to be not too arduous, and the rewards in terms of achievement soon gained, at which point a sense of ownership would be established.

INTEREST v POWER

So far we have considered categories of people who have, or may be persuaded to have, a direct interest in simplified spelling: its designers and users. But strong though their motivation may be, they are weak in the influence they can exert in society as a whole.

Spelling reformers are small in number and mostly marginal to the centres of decision-making, while the main group of users of the new spellings, the initial learners, are by definition largely disenfranchised, as are adults suffering literacy difficulties. In the general theory of cyclical ownership of projects, the category of potential users of simplified spellings may be likened to the end-consumers of a process of manufacturing and marketing: they can exert little direct influence over the nature of the goods they ultimately buy. Similarly, learners and users of writing systems usually have little choice in the spellings they adopt.

Conversely, there are other categories who exercise considerable power, but who are likely to see little advantage for themselves in the simplification of spellings, and may indeed see actual disadvantages. These categories may then be described as having a negative interest in spelling reform, and they may even perceive an interest in preventing it. At the highest level are the politicians who would probably have to take the final decision as to whether a spelling reform should be introduced (and if so, which one); but considerations of electoral popularity are likely to act as a serious deterrent, since spelling reform calls into question some of the electoral prejudices about right language, and can thus be expected to generate controversy.

Behind the politicians stand the administrators, whose brief may include warning politicians against political risk-taking, and for whom the implantation of reform may represent an unwelcome disruption of established routines.

The politicians and administrators wield immediate, day-to-day power, but ultimate power in a democracy lies with the electorate, and the likely attitude of voters to spelling reform is a major factor to be taken into account. They may all too easily, unless properly prepared, jump to wrong conclusions, feeling that their language, culture, education and literacy skills are under threat, and oppose the reform from the outset. The decimalization of the British currency in the early 1970s, and the subsequent introduction of metric weights and measures in some English-speaking countries, have given experience of how such changes may be sensitively and effectively (or not so sensitively and not so effectively) handled. Those changes would repay study for what they can tell us about how best to 'sell' spelling reform to the electorate.

A third category of people, the teachers who more than anyone else would have to ensure that both they and their pupils master the new spellings, perhaps have more power to obstruct spelling reform than an interest (at least as most of them probably perceive the position at present) in promoting it. However, their position may prove to be rather ambivalent, for in fact they stand to gain significantly from the simplification of English spelling, which would enable their pupils to acquire and exercise their literacy skills faster and better than before. Yet many teachers currently appear mistrustful, sometimes even hostile when confronted with the idea of any change to traditional spelling. The British government has recently discovered to its cost that educational reforms require the co-operation of teachers if they are to be implemented, and the same would naturally apply to spelling reform. Teachers too would need to be sensitively prepared for change and given a sense of ownership in the process.

OWNERSHIP OF PROBLEMS/ SOLUTIONS

When applying the idea of ownership to an innovation that is intended to overcome an existing problem, an initial step in the process of persuasion may be to convince the target population first that they own, i.e., suffer from, the problem. Here the educational agenda of the spelling reform movement comes into play. One explanation for the failure of past spelling reform schemes in English has been that the public has not appreciated the seriousness of the difficulties of possessing them, and people who do not understand they have a problem are unlikely to be susceptible to proposals for its solution.

Conditions today may be rather different from those in the past, and are continuing to change. Concern with standards of literacy is now greater than it has ever been, thanks both to the educational demands of technologically advanced societies and to modern techniques for measuring educational standards. These techniques are now beginning not only to enable literacy standards to be measured within English-speaking countries, but they are allowing comparisons to be made with literacy acquisition in non-English speaking societies. Some of these comparisons are showing up severe deficiencies among English-speakers, but much more research of this kind is needed, in order to build up an overwhelming case for removal of the obstacles to literacy raised by the present spelling of English. Another perspective arises from the shrinking of the world and the requirements of English as a world language, with the complaints of non-native-English speakers about its spelling likely to grow. All these factors together may encourage a new awareness on the part of learners, users, teachers, and educational authorities that the way English is now spelled constitutes a serious problem crying out for a solution. They would then recognize their ownership of a problem, and be more open to suggestions for its solution, whose ownership they might then be keen to claim.

OFFERING OWNERSHIP TO THE AUTHORITIES

To what extent might the above target populations be won over by a calculated offer of 'ownership' in any proposed scheme? The Simplified Spelling Society's current message to the powers that be in Britain is in this respect distinctively different from its earlier stance. Between the two world wars and again in the 1950s the SSS presented its New Spelling (NS) scheme, under its banner of ownership, to the British Parliament and government, who were urged to impose it on the population. Apart from any genuine practical obstacles there might have been to the official adoption of NS, cyclical resistance to it may now appear to have been only natural in the circumstances. The SSS seemed to be implying it had monopoly control over the One True Orthographic Path, which it was trying to oblige the authorities to accept.

Today by contrast, as advertised in its 1994 leaflet *Modernizing English Spelling: Principles and Practicalities*, the SSS has developed a quite different approach. It no longer claims ownership of any particular scheme, but instead presents a panoply of possibilities and describes various criteria by which their pros and cons may be assessed. By inviting the authorities to make their own choice, it offers them the opportunity to claim ownership of a given reform strategy, for themselves. What the SSS does still insist on is its global historical and cyclical vision of the changing requirements of a writing system for English, because that is the fundamental rationale that must underwrite any reform in any language. The SSS feels free to offer a wide choice of possible schemes because it believes that some are self-evidently less practical than others, and that its criteria will subtly guide the selectors in more or less the right direction. But how can the authorities be persuaded that they need to address the issue at all? Perhaps by confronting them with two questions:

1) Are we (note how the ownership of the question itself is shared by use of the pronoun 'we') convinced that the present spelling of English, with all the problems it causes, is incapable of improvement?
(Expected answer, 'No!')

2) If the answer is 'No', what steps should be taken to improve it?

If the authorities can be enticed to follow the logic of these two questions, a crucial preliminary hurdle may have been overcome and the authorities may be willing to consider the practicalities of introducing change.

OFFERING OWNERSHIP TO TEACHERS

Could the concept of ownership also be helpful in persuading teachers to embrace spelling reform? Some small groups of teachers have already been invited to state which simplified spellings they would find useful in the classroom, and the response has suggested that this could represent a positive approach that would enable teachers to claim their ownership of spelling reform at an early stage in its design. Their participation in error-analysis would similarly encourage their involvement. Clearly teachers would not by themselves be able to define the details of a reform, but enabling them to contribute in such ways to the development process could be an important step towards their acceptance of whatever simplifications were in due course decided on.

A reform of English spelling might need to appeal to different categories of teachers in different ways. Teachers imparting initial literacy skills to beginning learners are one category, and they would experience a general stream-lining of the learning process: reading fluency would come faster, correct writing would need less advice from the teacher, and there would be a general rise in self-confidence towards the levels enjoyed in other languages such as Italian [3], and in articulation, as more sophisticated vocabulary became more accessible. [4] A second category would be that of remedial teachers (for children and adults), who already perhaps need least persuading of the benefits of spelling reform. A third category would be that of teachers of English to non-native speakers, for whom the most immediate gain would be students' improved accuracy in determining the pronunciation of words from their written forms. Spelling reformers need repeatedly to demonstrate how these various benefits would accrue to the different categories of teachers, and so arouse in them a sense of ownership of the anticipated benefits.

OFFERING OWNERSHIP TO PUBLISHERS

An as yet scarcely explored aspect of spelling reform is its likely impact on publishing. If, however, we assume that reforms would be introduced gradually from the level of beginners upwards, then there would be no immediate, massive impact on publishing generally. Initially, only beginners' reading material in school and for sale to the home would necessarily be affected, although careful planning for extending the reform to higher levels of educational material in subsequent years, and eventually to non-educational publications, would be needed. One of the objections commonly raised to spelling reform is the cost of reprinting existing texts, but by the gradualist scenario just described, little additional expense would be incurred. New editions of existing texts would be issued as now, when the demand arose, and computerized spelling conversion programs could then be applied quite straightforwardly to texts already in electronic form. Some resetting of short text would be required, but the cost would be offset by the permanent economies achieved through a more efficient writing system. Spelling reformers need to present these permanent economies as a benefit to publishers, which would be an incentive to their claiming ownership of the scheme.

The specific case of dictionary publishing is more complex, since dictionaries today represent the only authority on matters of 'correct' spelling. For a transitional period at least they would need to list alternative spellings for many headwords, an undoubted complication to the lexicographic task. But here it must be remembered that at present dictionaries already list alternative spellings for many, especially rarer, words: for instance, *yogurt* may be listed at least as *yogurt*, *yoghurt*, *yoghourt*, and a brief examination of one dictionary [5] shows that, on the 107 pages listing words beginning with a, alternative forms are given for 137 different headwords (this by a conservative count, including each set of alternatives only once, and excluding numerous proper names). Thus the procedure of listing alternative spellings in English dictionaries is nothing new, and could presumably be extended quite easily.

What attractions might spelling reform offer to publishers? They could range from the crudely monetary to the idealistic. Spelling reform would instantly make all existing dictionaries out of date, and oblige their publishers to bring out new editions, for which enormous sales could be confidently forecast. Spelling

reform would therefore be a highly profitable enterprise — but before it is objected that this would reduce users to captive victims of predatory publishers, let it be pointed out that the purchase of new dictionaries with simplified spellings would also be a useful long-term investment for users. In any case, the new electronic technologies are increasingly opening up the possibility of access to dictionary information without necessarily incurring the expense of a traditional printed volume. Indeed, if there were the prospect of a succession of minor spelling reforms over a relatively short period of years, electronic distribution of repeatedly updated orthographic information might become positively attractive. Either way, dictionary publishers ought to recognize the commercial opportunities offered by spelling reform, and leap to claim ownership — for fear of being overtaken by their competitors, if for no other reason.

Yet whatever the motivating power of competition and profit, their compatibility with the idealistic aims of spelling reformers may seem questionable: the creation of a suitable uniform orthography for world English which is as far as possible based on consistent sound-symbol, symbol-sound correspondences, i.e. the alphabetic principle which is the foundation of the high standards of literacy the world needs. Such aims can only be achieved by worldwide co-ordination of spelling changes, and, without excluding competition, dictionary publishers could well play a leading role in the process. Profit and disinterested commitment to human progress need not conflict as far as spelling reform is concerned.

The idea that dictionary publishers could actually lead the way to spelling reform does however conflict with another favored scenario for reform: that of education authorities initiating and implementing change. We need not here proclaim either one or the other to be the natural vehicle of change. Nothing could be better than if the two were to compete for the ownership of a reformed orthography for English. A possible model for this kind of development may be seen in the Australian Style Councils, which, as suggested by Tom McArthur, editor of *English Today*, could conceivably evolve at some future date into a World English Style Council.

[\[6\]](#)

REFORM VIA ELECTRONIC MEDIA?

We should finally consider a development that some have been predicting could accelerate spelling reform through a quite different channel than the traditional ones discussed above. It may be traced back to the invention of the electric telegraph in the 19th century, but in recent years the technology has progressed by leaps and bounds, today leaving the teleprinter behind and bursting out into such concepts as the Information Superhighway, Internet, E-mail, and the WWW (the World Wide Web). What facilities these technologies will be able to offer in 10 years time beggars the imagination, but, far from making the right word redundant, as was sometimes professed with the spread of video systems a few decades ago, they seem likely to usher in new, undreamed-of opportunities for alphabetic communication.

Even in their early days, the new technologies subjected conventional English spelling to certain pressures, as when the limited capacity of the telegraph forced users to condense their text as much as possible (hence the term 'telegraphese'). The result was a certain semi-formalized vocabulary of abbreviated spellings designed specifically for telegraphic messages. Much more recently, the size of the video screen also imposed limits on the amount of text that could be displayed. Conditions now are different again, with virtually unlimited telecommunications capacity available and therefore no systemic need to condense. But with the ever-growing availability and convenience of the new communications media, novel orthographic practices are evolving. Whereas the mailed letter of old (now dubbed 'snailmail') always had a certain formality, requiring time and effort to compose, send, receive, decipher and store, the new media free users from many such constraints. The speed with which a message can reach its recipient is made by its ephemerality. While a letter writer traditionally took some care over the formal accuracy (grammar, spelling, etc) of what was written, such care has now typically yielded to informality and spontaneity. One-to-one email messages are therefore frequently spattered with misprints and misspellings which may be seen as representing a new orthographic culture: the writer appears almost to exult in the freedom of not having to check or correct what has been hastily keyed into the terminal.

Yet new disciplines are also emerging. Alongside the facility for totally informal one-to-one communication, more formal collective communications networks are appearing, with 'news groups' for the exchange of information among specialists in a given field. The right to post material to some news groups is controlled by a 'moderator', whose task is both to prevent information overload and to ensure that texts which are posted on the board and so opened up to worldwide scrutiny, meet certain standards. These standards may include orthographic accuracy, in which case authors will need to proofread or spellcheck their texts before transmitting them.

The effect such developments may have on the prospect for spelling reform is as yet difficult to assess, but they may offer unprecedented opportunities. To begin with, they enable ideas to be broadcast in quite new ways. For instance, advocates of particular spelling reform schemes are already using them on the network, and so disseminating notions of them to unknown numbers of people in unknown parts of the world. But it may also be that the new media, by creating a new orthographic environment, will create a demand for new orthographic standards, and so enable improved spellings to be introduced through electronic channels before they have any direct impact on the educational scene. Other initiatives are at present also under consideration, but are not yet ready to be publicized.

As far as the idea of 'ownership' is concerned, that too is in flux in this electronicized world. If one recommends a reformed spelling through the network, anyone can pick it up and make what they will of it, so that it escapes entirely from the control of its originator. The opportunities for spreading reformed spellings may seem boundless, but there is no guarantee that they will be put to proper use. The danger of orthographic chaos, so long postponed by spelling reformers, begins to seem more real. At this stage one can only speculate on what may happen in the future and it is perhaps important to take a positive view. Opportunities are there to be seized, rather than feared.

JENRATING ENTHUSIASM

This paper has presented a wide variety of ideas for stimulating moves towards a simplified orthography for English. Their common theme, 'ownership', is seen as a possible motivating force, whereby the current worldwide inertia that stands in the way of any reform, might one day be overcome.

[1] cf Mike Robson (1988) *The Journey to Excellence*, Wantage: MRA International, Ch8, pp56–60.

[2] David Crystal (1987) *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*, Cambridge University Press, p215.

[3] Gwennlian Thorstad (1991) 'The effects of orthography on the acquisition of literacy skills' in *British Journal of Psychology*, 82:527–37. See [Paper](#).

[4] David Moseley (1989) 'How Lack of Confidence in Spelling Affects Children's Written Expression' in *Educational Psychology in practice*, April 1989.

[5] Reader's Digest *Universal Dictionary*, London: The Reader's Digest Association Ltd., 1987.

[6] Tom McArthur, editorial of *English Today* 45, Vol. 12 No. 1, January 1996, p2.

8. OECD continues to focus on literacy standards in developed economies

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the Paris based club of developed economies, recently published another major report on adult literacy levels in seven countries. Entitled *Literacy, Economy and Society* (OECD, Paris ISBN 92-64-14655-5, E31.95 in UK), its compilation was a co-operative effort by the United States, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden and Switzerland. Ireland had participated in the study as the eighth country, but its results could not be included due to the untimely death of a key official. Irish data will be published separately later.

About 3,000 adults were given extensive tests, in their homes, in each country. The report describes in great detail the tests and the scoring levels — all carefully-designed to work across borders and cultures — and fascinating reading it is. The results are presented in fine detail, but summarised with clarity and elegance by the Canadian editorial team. The broad conclusions, sounding a little trite in high level summary but revealing in detail, are:

- The survey has proved that it is possible to compare literacy standards internationally.
- All countries have a wide spread of literacy abilities in their populations.
- Literacy skill deficits affect large numbers of people, and need remedial action, across all countries.
- The more literate people tend to be the more prosperous.
- Literacy level is not synonymous with educational attainment.
- Literacy needs practice, so some jobs lead to atrophy of skills over time.
- Many of those with low levels of skills do not acknowledge, and often do not recognise, that they have a problem.

It is understood that major surveys are under way at present, intended to extend this work to other countries, including Britain. The British report should be published in Spring 1997. The Society awaits the results with interest.

Cut Spelling Handbook

Chris Upward, Simplified Spelling Society, April 1966, 339pp, ISBN 0 9506391 5 X

The first edition of the [Cut Spelling Handbook](#) has been out of print for over two years. After much work by Chris Upward, we now have a new, improved edition — a 340-page paperback, produced to the highest standards.

The Society's policy is that members should automatically receive a copy of all new publications, but — in view of the cost of producing such a substantial book — on this occasion we plan to restrict free availability of the new edition to newer members who have never had opportunity to own the book. Naturally, those who received the first edition will be very welcome to buy a copy of the second.

Pricing is: UK/EU £10 including postage; Rest of world £10 surface mail, £15 airmail.

9. IN BRIEF

Paul Fletcher, media star!

Committee-member Paul Fletcher appeared on national radio in New Zealand, and was interviewed for the Christchurch Press, while visiting on holiday recently. Our active members Allan Campbell and Ian Ascott deserve thanks for arranging this useful 'exposure'.

Professor Scragg

We are pleased to announce that our President, Donald Scragg, was elevated in December to a full professorship (of Anglo-Saxon Studies) at Manchester University. Congratulations, Don.

Bill Lee

We are sad to note the death of a Vice-President, Dr W R Lee, on 5 February 1996. A brief obituary appears elsewhere.

Mark O'Connor in India

Mark is an Australian member — and a renowned poet — and was interviewed at length about his views on spelling in the Times of India on 28 November last, thanks to the energy of our friend Mr Gogate. He deserves thanks for achieving a thorough mention of the Society in an article headlined "Dictionaries must encourage spelling reform, says poet". Hear, hear!

Finding us

One member wrote that she had difficulty finding how to contact the Society. We are in the London area business telephone book, so a directory enquiry from anywhere should find us. We are listed under both 'Spelling ...' and 'Simplified Spelling ...' We also appear in many listings, including the Directory of Associations which seems widely held by libraries. Basic details are on the front page of this Newsletter, and on our Internet home-page.

10. *The Times* of London and spelling

An unlikely ally seems to have emerged for us in recent weeks in the form of *The Times*.

Under the headline "Young spellers fall at the first fens", it first reported on 25 March 1996 that a third of seven-year old children recently tested in British schools had considerable problems with spelling.

It noted that long vowels caused the most difficulty, with only one child in five spelling *scream* according to traditional standards. "Most errors in all areas," it went on, "could be traced back to the misapplication of genuine spelling rules, such as *bred* for *bread* or *fens* for *fence*." (No comment, except that I know who I think is right. *Ed.*)

The newspaper went on to point out a howler committed by Department for Education officials in Hampshire, who had announced that "the Isle of White has been chosen as a site for a new literacy centre." (For readers unfamiliar with British geography, should be Isle of Wight.)

But *The Times* gave front-page prominence on 8 April to "a significant slide in teenagers' writing skills since 1980," as revealed in a comparative study of O-Level (junior high school) examination scripts.

The study was undertaken by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate. It concluded that students in 1994 were three times worse at spelling than their 1980 counterparts, and had a narrower range of vocabulary. There was a sixfold increase in the use of non-standard English, and the proportion of error-free sentences fell from 73 percent in 1980 to 47 percent in 1994. Punctuation appears not to be a strong point either — the colon was used three times in 1980, twice correctly, but no-one attempted to use one in 1994. The study was based on a sample of just 60 examination scripts. (No comment. *Ed.*)

11. Bill Lee, OBE

An obituary

Dr W R Lee, otherwise Bill, was widely recognised as the doyen of the profession of teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) — as an adviser, consultant, examiner, author and editor. Sadly, he died on 5 February 1996, aged 84.

He wrote on all aspects of language pedagogy, and put his own principles into practice with a range of textbooks. His authority was based, in part, on impressive academic credentials, but what made him influential was the way he could turn ideas to practical account. It also informed the policy of the English Language Teaching Journal which he edited from 1961–81. In 1967 he founded the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language, the premier professional body for what has grown into a large industry.

Earlier in his career, Bill was involved in work that paved the way for 'the i.t.a. experiment'. While at the University of London Institute of Education, he led a major four-year experiment and study (1953–57) "at the request of the Simplified Spelling Society" and partly financed by it. Our then chairman, James (later Sir James) Pitman, had just agreed to withdraw his Spelling Reform Bill in Parliament in return for some official co-operation or backing for a large-scale trial of simplified spelling in schools. Bill Lee's study paved the way for what became the initial teaching alphabet.

The results of the study were published by the National Foundation for Educational Research, in association with the Institute, as *Spelling Irregularity and Reading Difficulty in English* in June 1957. A summary of its findings — by no means unequivocally supportive of simplified spelling — must await a later article on the beginnings of i.t.a. and other Pitman projects.

Bill Lee truly made a life-long contribution to the cause of English language and literacy, and he will be sorely missed.

Partly extracted from The Guardian obituary by H G Widdowson of 29 February 1996, and extended, by Bob Brown.