

Simplified Spelling Society

Newsletter July 1992 [N4]

Issued by the Secretary.

Aims of the Society

To bring about a reform of the spelling of English in the interests of ease of learning and economy in writing. Specifically:

- To encourage the idea that spelling reform is possible.
- To foster debate on the possible nature of reform and how it might be brought about.
- To devise, publish and promote suitably serious potential reform schemes and other research materials, in contribution to debate. By definition the Society puts forward for consideration by the public and authorities any spelling reform proposals that it publishes.
- To persuade and campaign for spelling reform in general.
- To develop and maintain the Society's role as a source of expertise in spelling and relevant associated disciplines.
- To aim at producing a consistent and predictable spelling scheme with maximum benefit future generations.

Officers 1992/3

President: Dr Donald G Scragg

Vice-Presidents: Prof D Abercrombie, Lord Simon of Glaisdale

Chairman: Chris Jolly

Vice-Chairman & Public Relations Officer: Leo Chapman

Secretary: Bob Brown

Treasurer: Alun Bye

Editor-in-Chief: Chris Upward

Research Adviser: Dr Gwenllian Thorstad

Committee Members: Nick Atkinson, Mona Cross, Govind Deodhekar, Laurie Fennelly,
Paul Fletcher, Ron Footer, Jean Hutchins, Frank Jones.

Trustees: Stanley Gibbs, Elsie Oakensen, Dr Donald Scragg

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1. AGM Highlights.

Marathon meeting starts a new year

Saturday 25th April proved to be a long but memorable day for the 15 or so members who attended the Annual General Meeting. Beginning at 10.45, proceedings did not close until about 17.00, albeit with a break for lunch in the nick of time just before the restaurant closed!

An address by Dr Gwenllian Thorstad, expert educational psychologist at the Tavistock Clinic, preceded the formal meeting, and dealt with her important comparative study of literacy learning in Britain and Italy.

This work has paid special attention to the effects of the orthography on education, and seems to have led her inexorably to our point of view - something has got to be done about the spelling! The inevitable followed. At the right moment the Chairman asked Dr Thorstad if she would like to join the Society, and become our Research Adviser. With commendable decisiveness, Gwenllian accepted both invitations on the spot.

The role of Research Adviser remains to be more closely defined in later meetings but is broadly intended to help the Society in conducting, sponsoring and publishing research findings of suitable quality to support our cause.

Gwenllian's fascinating address, starting out as a talk but quickly becoming a discussion, was reluctantly drawn to a close about 12:15 to allow formal business to begin.

The past year & the next year

As usual, the principal officers reported on the last year, which has been an eventful and active one for the Society. It has seen the publication of three books, three newsletters and to everyone's delight - a Journal. In the coming year, regular Newsletters can be expected and the Journal will appear on a more frequent basis. Bob Brown reported that he was planning a less formal, newsletter-style publication to provide a platform for members who wish to address the rest of the membership. It is provisionally titled *Personal View*.

Bob commented that he believed the priorities for us next to address are:

- clarification of the aims of the Society, which have been a little fuzzy in recent years;
- continuing to build a professional and expert image;
- concentrating on research-based proof of our contentions rather than appeals-to-reason.

The meeting voted to congratulate Ken Ives on getting out our first Journal edited in the USA. Chris Upward will continue to act as Editor-in-Chief for our publications but will not have time himself to edit a Journal in the UK for the next year or so. It was decided to publish alternate Journals from the USA and Britain, if a suitable issue editor can be found on this side of the Atlantic.

Elections

The new Committee and Officers for 1992/3 were elected as shown above. The meeting was pleased to welcome Leo Chapman as Public Relations Officer. Leo is an Australian journalist who has lived in London for many years. He had been doing the job very effectively on an acting basis for several months.

Clarification of Aims

Bob Brown put a motion to amplify the aims as stated in the Constitution, in order to make it easier to foster our position as the serious, professional body in this field. He felt it was essential that, within a year or two, we should be recognised as the expert organisation on spelling matters. No Education Minister or other official should be able to consider action on spelling without consulting us. Sadly, that was not the position today.

After discussion, and voting on several amendments, the Aims were approved as they appear in above. *[In this form, they are now sent to all enquirers, along with our other leaflets. Sec.]*

The meeting also voted to rescind an AGM decision made almost a decade ago committing Officers to use of a "house style" in external correspondence. This was almost wholly ignored in practice and most people felt the idea inappropriate nowadays. Naturally, individual members or Officers remain free to correspond in whatever spelling system they wish, but the obligation to use a particular system has been removed.

Committee meeting

The meeting of the new Committee immediately after the AGM dealt with our investments, charitable status, establishment of student branches and other publicity and promotional activity.

Meeting dates were set for the rest of the Society's year, as advertised elsewhere.

Feature article

2. Can we learn from the French?

At least their politicians take language issues seriously

Bob Brown

I recently had opportunity to study a publication of the European Commission called *Terminologie & Traduction*.

This is a periodical appearing a couple of times a year and is, in effect, the professional journal of the EC's army of translators and interpreters. The issue concerned (1991 No. 2) mostly concentrates on *la francophonie*, or the state of the French language within the forty countries or territories where it has official status - within the EC, and in the wider inter-national community.

Like most English-speakers, I had tended to ascribe French attitudes to the English language - as reported in the British press anyway - as typical Gallic sour-grapes at their language being displaced by ours in diplomacy and other international fields during this century. In reading just a few articles I came to understand much better what it must feel like to have your mother tongue classified as a "minor language". And exactly why French-speakers are taking so much effort to make sure that their language does not ever sink into this category.

Minor languages

There are problems in arriving at a precise definition for this term, but these need not concern us here as the main points are clear. The principal characteristics of a minor language are:

- Relatively few speakers and little-used outside its native country.
- Within that country, one or several other languages play an important role.
- Few if any international organisations use the language.
- It is increasingly difficult to develop new terminology, especially in technical and scientific fields, because there is a strong tendency just to borrow new words from a stronger major language.

Nearby languages of significant countries - such as Dutch and Danish - illustrate well the features of minor languages in this sense. The French sense that their language is on a slippery-slope to minor status. Some examples to support this view:

- Most other countries are preferring to teach their children English as a second language rather than French, even their neighbours.
- English is becoming ever more prevalent within France (and even more so, Belgium). Five of the six top-attraction films in France last year were in English and subtitled.
- French TV shows ever more Anglo-American material.
- Fewer international organisations use French today.
- Even French multinational companies prefer to use English to communicate with their overseas subsidiaries.
- The rapid growth in scientific terminology is mostly an English terminology, even amongst French scientists. And so the examples multiply.

Le scénario catastrophe to be avoided is that France will be left only speaking to the poor Francophone African countries - because the rest of the world is speaking English!

Quoi faire?

Determined not to see their language pushed into minor status, the French government established a multi-level structure to combat these problems in 1989.

At the top is the *Conseil supérieure de la langue française*, chaired by the Prime Minister, no less, and including as *ex officio* members the Minister of Education, and the Minister for *la Francophonie* [what an interesting idea!] and the Secretary of the *Académie française*. The *Conseil supérieure* has 22 other members, the great and the good from academia, industry, journalism, publishing and the media. Its role is to study problems of education, usage, enrichment and diffusion of the French language, and to recommend action.

Those recommendations are then passed down to two other organisations for implementation - *the Comité de ministres consacré à la langue française*, which is effectively an interministerial body ensuring that the public sector takes action, and *the Délégation générale à la langue française*, responsible for promotion and co-ordination of language-related initiatives in the private sector and with the public.

Working groups

The *Conseil supérieure* has established eight specialist working groups. Four are concerned to "*développer la place du française ... dans le cadre du plurilinguisme européen*" in

- education
- science and technology
- the economy, and
- the audio-visual media.

A second group of subcommittees is concerned with education and the daily use of French:

- development of the orthography
- automatic text processing
- terminology and lexical enrichment, and
- the image of the language and its cultural status.

Naturally, we should be curious about the spelling-related ideas.

Spelling development

It seems to me a master-stroke to prefer to talk about the *development* (aménagement) of the orthography, rather than its reform. This gives a positive and forward-looking feel to the exercise. Languages develop over time - it is only natural that spelling should develop too, n'est-ce pas?

The spelling subcommittee is concerned with two aspects of spelling development:

- (1) to allow a more rational teaching of French, both to French children and foreigners, and
- (2) to provide rules for coiners of new words and authors of dictionaries.

They are at pains to point out that their recommendations are not expected to affect the bulk of the adult population: "*Les rectifications recommandées par le Conseil ne seront pas imposées à l'ensemble des usagers adultes. Elles ont été établies por doter les français des générations à scolariser d'une graphie mieux adaptée à leurs besoins, comme il a été fait tout au long de notre histoire, et cela sans bouleverser les principes généraux sur lesquels est fondé notre système graphique.*"

The initial target therefore seems to be modest, aiming to affect only one or two words on a typical book page but still permitting "*de résoudre un certain nombre de difficultés dues aux incohérences de l'orthographe actuelle.*"

In due course, you can expect to read more in this Newsletter or our Journal about the French initiatives.

Can we learn from all this ?

I believe there is considerable food for thought here. Some suggestions triggered by the French initiatives can be found below.

Terminologie & Traduction 1991 No. 2 is available in the UK from HMSO Books PC16, 51 Nine Elms Lane, London SW5 5DR for £9.25 postage included.

We eagerly await the next issue as it is dedicated to exploring spelling reform in the EC languages. Chris Upward contributed the paper on English. We will keep you posted on its availability.

Euro-babel

Roughly two-thirds of the budget of the European Parliament is spent on translation interpretation and related activities. At least two more official languages will be added to the current nine when the three countries next in the queue join!

Some ideas for our politicians

- Appoint a Minister for English Language Affairs, to co-ordinate both in Britain and internationally. He would work with the main English-speaking countries, and the other forty or so countries who use English in an official capacity. We can all have fun deciding if he should report into the Dept. of National Heritage, or Education, or direct to the PM, as his brief would necessarily be inter-ministerial in the UK.
- Appoint an Advisory Council on the English Language - a collection of interested parties and experts, to study and recommend on similar issues to the French *Conseil supérieure*. Its rulings need not have force of law, rather they would serve to redefine "correctness" for most people.
- Take action during our Presidency of the EC to help the countries who feel threatened by the spread of English. We can afford to be magnanimous because we have already won the battle of the lingua francas, until the next swing of the pendulum anyway.

Or is privatisation the answer ?

On May 28, The Times published a letter from John Polling of Teignmouth suggesting that the new chair of Language & Communication at Oxford - endowed by Rupert Murdoch's empire, which includes *The Times* - could act as a focus for recommendations on language usage, including spelling. We have since been in correspondence with Mr Polling.

So if the politicians don't want another quango, the work of an Advisory Council on the English Language *could* be pushed into the private sector!

3. In brief

A visit to "Their Lordship's House"

Chris Upward and Bob Brown were recently entertained to a lunch at the House of Lords by Lord Simon of Glaisdale. Lord Simon has been involved with the Society for very many years and is a Vice-President.

His lordship was encouraged enough by the recent upsurge in our activity to get more directly involved. He made a wide range of suggestions for action, and for his own involvement. Expect to hear more in due course.

Topical Tapes

This is the title of a series of taped programmes sent out worldwide by the BBC World Service. Bob Brown recently participated in a 15 minute discussion about spelling reform with Edmund Weiner, Deputy Editor of the Oxford English Dictionary.

Not unsurprisingly, Mr Weiner did not agree to join us while on-air, although he was not totally negative about the prospects for reform. It is hoped that copies of the tape can be made available to members in due course.

Cut Spelling Handbook

Please note that stocks of the first edition are now running quite low.

Wanted: UK Journal Editor

As reported elsewhere in this issue, it has been decided in principle to issue alternate editions of the Journal from the USA (edited by Ken Ives) and Britain. Any interested member who feels him/herself qualified to tackle the UK role, under the supervision and guidance of Chris Upward, is asked to get in touch with Chris. Access to an Apple Macintosh computer would be desirable but is not an essential qualification.

Charitable status

The Simplified Spelling Society is not a registered charity and thus pays tax on its investment and other income. Tax costs us about £1,000 a year at present but the bill will be much higher if and when we realise profit in investments -there is no Capital Gains Tax allowance for bodies such as ours.

The Committee has resolved to try again to gain charitable (and thus tax-free) status. There is a considerable history of failing to do this, though the last time we tried was in the 1940s.

A preliminary re-application was recently rejected. The (in)famous case of Bernard Shaw's will was cited as one precedent!

The Secretary would be most pleased to hear from any member who is a solicitor, or otherwise skilled in charitable trust matters, to assist in furthering our case. Lord Simon, who is a Law Lord, has already agreed to help but "the more the merrier" applies!

Dates for the diary

The committee meetings for 1992/3, to which all members are cordially invited, are as follows: July 18, 1992, October 24, 1992, January 30, 1993, April 24, 1993 (AGM).