

Simplified Spelling Society

Newsletter January 1993 [N5]

Issued by the Secretary, Bob Brown.

Contents

1. [Submission to NCC](#)
2. [Adult literacy](#)
3. [Research](#)
4. In brief: [Harry Lindgren](#), [Sunday Times](#), [Arnold Rupert](#),
[Professor David Abercrombie died](#)
5. [Personal View](#)
[Mostly for amusement](#)
[Oxford Companion to the English Language](#)

Ten Axioms on English Spelling

- 1 Alphabets provide the simplest way to write most languages.
- 2 The alphabet works by the principle that letters represent speech sounds.
- 3 Literacy is easily acquired if the spelling tells readers the pronunciation, and the pronunciation tells writers the spelling.
- 4 Pronunciation changes through time, undermining the match between spelling and sound.
- 5 Spelling systems need modernizing periodically to restore the sound-spelling match.
- 6 By not systematically modernizing over nearly 1,000 years, English spelling has lost touch with the alphabetic principle of spelling matching sound.
- 7 Neglect of the alphabetic principle makes English spelling exceptionally difficult.
- 8 The difficulty of English spelling wastes time and produces unacceptably low levels of literacy in English-speaking countries.
- 9 To improve literacy, English needs to modernise its spelling, as other languages do.
- 10 There are no quick or easy solutions. As a first step, the idea of "managing" English spelling, i.e. controlling it rather than letting it continue on its own arbitrary way, should be adopted.

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Paul Fletcher, Ron Footer, Jean Hutchins, Frank Jones.

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1. Recognition at last? SSS invited to make submission to National Curriculum Council

Last autumn the Society was formally invited to make a submission on spelling to the team in the NCC working on revision of the English Order, in turn triggered by the Government's commitment to "return to basics" in literacy matters.

The invitation mentioned our "expertise in the field of spelling" - recognition at last? - so we naturally felt this to be an important milestone, and therefore treated the opportunity very seriously. After discussion by Committee, Chris Upward took on the task of producing a first draft. This was circulated for comment and revision to the rest of the Committee and finally polished by Chris. It was submitted in October. The text will be published in full in a forthcoming Journal.

The Society decided to offer pragmatic suggestions, in particular on encouraging the notion that gradual evolution towards better spellings - as opposed to a major leap straight to an ideal orthography - can be accomplished as a by-product of setting the teaching curriculum, by managing the natural process of change in the language. We hope that the NCC can be persuaded to become the official body to take responsibility for spelling guidance, as an extension of its responsibility for defining how the topic is to be taught and examined.

The method adopted by the submission is to start from concepts that are either self-evident or easily justified - the Ten Axioms detailed in a separate box - and to lead the argument on step by step. We are satisfied that the resulting case is therefore cumulatively persuasive that something must be done, and that it is feasible within the present remit of the NCC.

We hope that the intellectual rigour of the case will encourage the NCC to take the small but vital step of accepting responsibility for spelling management. Its proposals are due for submission to the Secretary of State in February.

Subscriptions

Members are reminded that subscriptions are now due for 1993, unless recently paid or pre-paid last year. The rate remains at £10 or \$20, net of transfer charges if from overseas. Please send your remittance to the Secretary. A few recipients of this Newsletter (who will find a separate note enclosed) still have not paid their dues for 1992. This is a last warning. You will be deleted from the membership if we have not heard from you by the end of March.

2. Adult Literacy

"Five out of six can't spell.
Official: We are the spelling duffers
Adults fail to make the grade in spelling
Six words that can spell trouble in the search for a job."

The Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit (ALBSU), a government-funded group concerned with literacy in the adult population, launched two videos last November. These are called *Spell Well at Any Age* and *Punctuate Well & Write a Perfect Letter*, and aim to help people improve their spelling, grammar and letter-writing skills.

To prove that people really do have trouble with our written language, ALBSU commissioned Gallup to conduct a small spelling survey on 1,000 over-16s, which was carried out in October. Those surveyed were asked to spell six common words known to have troublesome spellings. They could respond "out loud" or on paper, as they wished.

The six words were: *necessary*, *accommodation*, *sincerely*, *business*, *separate* and *height*. Only 17% of the respondents could spell all six "correctly", that is, according to the conventions of our traditional orthography. One in ten of those surveyed could get none of them "right".

Women did better than men on all the words, and the older people slightly better than the younger, as you would expect after a lifetime of being picked up on their spelling!

ALBSU have suggested that not too much should be read into the survey, as the sample was quite small. They feel it does, however, indicate one glaring fact - that many people have problems with traditional spelling. Despite this, "good spelling" is still reckoned to be a very important skill, to avoid losing marks in examinations, and to employers, many of whom reject job applicants with poor spelling.

% "correct"	height	separate	business	sincerely	accommodation	necessary
male	81	46	63	58	23	51
female	87	53	65	64	30	63

Poorly spelt letters and forms continue to reflect negatively on the individual throughout life, whatever we may feel about the injustice of this when the spelling "system" is admitted by the educational authorities to be all-but unlearnable!

The headlines above reflect some of the press coverage that the survey provoked.

Number of "correct answers given (whole sample):

0	1	2	3	4	5	6
9%	11%	11%	14%	19%	19%	17%

3. Research

For the first time in several decades, the Society is organising an extensive research project into the use of alternative orthographies in teaching.

Members will recall that Dr Gwenllian Thorstad, an expert educational psychologist, joined the Committee as Research Adviser at the last AGM. Since then she has lead a Research Subcommittee in developing ideas for an extensive project.

The plan focusses on using an initial teaching orthography (ITO) for remedial teaching of literacy in secondary schools. It will involve a full-time teacher-researcher working with a large sample of children over two years, and then spending a further year analysing and documenting the findings.

A suitable school for the experiment has been identified in London and it is enthusiastic to participate. Discussions are active now on two further aspects:

- identification of a suitable researcher, expected to be a post-graduate student working for a PhD in educational psychology;
- a suitable ITO.

It is a precondition that the experiment will use the ITO for a limited period, probably one year, with each child, who will then "convert back" to traditional orthography. ITOs are therefore being examined that offer a compromise between regularity of sound-spelling correspondence and compatibility with TO.

The Society will organise and co-ordinate the project, and publish its findings. But it is not expecting to fund the effort alone. We will over the next few months be seeking the bulk of the funds from educational charities, and from individuals who want to help, of course. Our target is to start the project in January 1994.

Two of the new letter forms developed for Robert Bridges' <i>Collected Essays</i> published in a phonetic augmented alphabet c. 1930. David Abercrombie undertook the phonetic transcription for the edition.

4. In brief

Harry Lindgren

It is with sadness that we have to report another death. Doug Everingham recently notified us that Harry - the doyen of Australian spelling reformers - and his wife both passed away last year. Messages of condolence can be sent to their daughter: Judy Lindgren.

We still have a reasonable stock of Harry's lively book if any members would like one (£1 towards postage please).

Sunday Times

Chris Upward has been invited to write a substantial 3,000-word article on spelling for publication as part of a series on language issues being planned for the newspaper. We have no information on likely publication date yet, but watch out for it.

Arnold Rupert

The veteran (though young-in-heart) Canadian campaigner has kindly made available copies of two booklets describing his augmented alphabet approach to spelling reform. Please write to the Secretary if you would like copies, in return for postage/donation of £1.

When time permits, I will produce a consolidated list of available publications and back-issues soon and send to all members.

Professor David Abercrombie died on July 4, 1992 aged 82

David Abercrombie was Emeritus Professor of Phonetics at the University of Edinburgh, and a Vice-President of the Simplified Spelling Society. His interest in the work of the Society dates from the early 1930s, when he was a postgraduate student of phonetics under Daniel Jones and J R Firth at University College London.

The next 15 years after that found him lecturing (briefly) at the London School of Economics in English, and then with the British Council in Greece and Egypt where he spent the Second World War. He returned to the LSE after the war, before moving to Edinburgh in 1948 to found a phonetics department. Over the next 15 years the unit grew under Abercrombie's direction to a strength of ten members. He was appointed full professor in 1964.

Abercrombie's single most influential book is probably *Elements of General Phonetics* (1967). Other academic interests included the study of early writings on English phonetics, not just in an antiquarian sense but concerned to demonstrate the value of earlier traditions and evoke new interest in them. His paper *Extending the Roman alphabet: some orthographic experiments of the past four centuries** is particularly relevant for members and is built on his strong interest in writing systems for English.

David Abercrombie leaves a wife, Mary, to whom the Society expressed its condolences immediately on hearing the sad news.

* In Asher, RE & Henderson, JA (eds.) *Towards a History of Phonetics*, Edinburgh Univ. Press 1980

5. Personal View

Bob Brown explains

Enclosed with this Newsletter members should receive the first three issues of a new series of Society publications called *Personal View*. The series has been established primarily for members to address other members - as a kind of "soap-box" from which to try out new ideas, or to publish views in a less formal way than in the Journal. There will be three or four titles a year if demand for them is sustained.

Issues of *Personal View* will be kept in print as standing publications,, when appropriate. Some are expected to be useful in responding to enquirers. For example, No. 1 will have such a role in dealing with my correspondents who ask about the link between spelling and literacy, or how reform could be achieved.

To summarise, the first three issues are:

1 **Literacy and the way we spell English** (Bob Brown)

This explains the probable link between traditional spelling and poor literacy levels in our working population. It also considers the practical aspects of introducing revised spellings.

2 **Yurospel** (Paul Fletcher)

Presents a digraphic spelling system based on a more international use of the letters than New Spelling.

3 **System 2** (Sinclair Eustace) Belatedly presents a spelling system devised within the Society in the 70s. It is basically digraphic but involves one extra letter for schwa.

No. 4 is already in production. In it Ron Footer explains some suggestions for further development of New Spelling.

Members with ideas for Personal Views should contact me, preferably before writing an article.

Further copies of Nos. 1-3 are available at 50p (\$!) each, including postage.

Mostly for amusement

The following exchange of correspondence was noticed in the pages of *The Economist* (October 7 and 21, 1989), triggered by reports of French spelling reform. It is presented mostly for amusement, but does anyone know Mr Starmer? We should invite him to join - I think!

Phonetic English

Sir - If French needs a phonetic alphabet, English needs one even more so. According to my calculations, there are only about 1,000 words that are phonetic in that they are spelled as they are pronounced, and vice versa. The rest are a horrible concoction that have to be learned individually. How else do we know that anger does not rhyme with danger, how with show, have with shave? How else can we make sense of "A rough, dough-faced ploughman thoughtfully strode coughing and hiccupping through the streets of Scarborough"?

Various people, notably George Bernard Shaw, have proposed phonetic alphabets. The problem with these is that they are based on symbols which are not available on a present-day typewriter or word-processor.

My solution, published in 1976 and called Starfon, is based on the existing alphabet, with the convention that the vowels a, e, i, o, and u are restricted to their short forms, as in pat, pet, pit, pot and put. G and y are pronounced only as in get and yet, respectively. A distinction is made between "the" in thin (symbol x) and "th" in then (symbol &), while "ch" is replaced by c and "sh" by \$. The long vowels are represented by q and the numerals 2 to 9, so that boat becomes bqt, boot b2t, beet b3t, bought b4t, bite b5t, Bert B6t, bout b7t, bait b8t and Bart B9t. "76 trombones" are differentiated from "76 (our) trombones" by underlining the numbers.

Philip Starmer, Ohio

Alfabet s2p

Sir - Xank y2 f4 &e let6r ab&t fqnetik Ingli\$ (Oktqb6 7x). It woz w6rx ev6r3 pen3 ov 76 subskrip\$on. B5 &e w8y, 5 dqn't xink 76 spelz 76. 5 xink it 4t t2 b3 7r. &is iz wot kumz ov fidling wi& &e Ingli\$ langwid\$.

Margaret Joachim, London PS - Have you tried typing this stuff?

Oxford Companion to the English Language

This 1,200-page volume - remarkably good value at £25 for language-lovers - contains masses of fascinating information on every aspect of English: its world-wide variations, its history, its grammar, the personalities and organisations that have affected it. It also deals not least with its spelling.

It includes substantial articles on the SSS, spelling reform, Cut Spelng, and a catalogue of the ways in which each letter of the alphabet is variously used in English. The most complex letter, by the way, turns out not to be E, as most people expect, but O. It requires almost three densely-printed pages to describe.

While the book is neutral on the pro- and anti-reform arguments, it at least does the cause of reform justice, and contains much ammunition for our campaigns.

Chris Upward contributed many of the spelling-related articles.

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