

Simplified Spelling Society

Founded 1908

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

Newsletter November 1993 [N6]

Published by the Secretary.

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Officers 1993/4

President: Dr Donald G Scragg

Vice-Presidents: Dr W R Lee OBE, Lord Simon of Glaisdale, Professor John Wells, Dr Valerie Yule

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, Govind Deodhekar, Paul Fletcher, Ron Footer,
Jean Hutchins, Frank Jones, Rev Nick Kerr, Stanley Weatherall

Trustees: Stanley Gibbs, Elsie Oakensen, Dr Donald Scragg

1. AGM Report

Real progress by the end of the century?

The Society's Annual General Meeting found its officers in bullish mood

A well-attended AGM took place on 24 April. Combined as usual with elections, and the first meeting of the newly-elected Committee, it also turned out to be something of a marathon — starting at 10:30 and eventually closing at about 5pm.

Everyone was pleased to welcome in person the Treasurer, Alun Bye, whose health had prevented his attendance for several years.

The meeting began with a review of the past year from the Secretary, Bob Brown. He noted that we had produced two issues of the Journal, three Newsletters and three Personal Views during the year, with plenty more material for further publications when time permits. He drew attention to a large number of active and potential initiatives open to us, reflecting his feeling — shared by many others — that "times are changing". We are being taken more seriously and people seem more willing to listen to our message. The key to seizing the opportunities will be finding enough members willing to help. (The opportunities mentioned are listed in below.)

Chris Upward presented a report as Editor-in-Chief, and was warmly congratulated for his role in achieving significant exposure for the Society. Most notable was his contribution to the authoritative *Word Companion to the English Language*, which deals with spelling issues accurately, fairly and in considerable detail. In terms of gaining new members and contacts, Chris' article on spelling reform in a Sunday Times supplement in April had tremendous impact. Chris praised Kenneth Ives who has done a remarkable job in editing the *Journal* from Chicago.

Chris was thanked warmly for his role in coordinating production of the Society's submission to the British National Curriculum Council.

Alun Bye, assisted by Frank Garnett as auditor, presented the Society's accounts in some detail. Our finances continue to be healthy despite increased spending on publications over the last year.

The Committee elections took place next, noting the retirement of Mona Cross and Laurie Fennelly due to advancing years. Both have contributed much to the Society and the Secretary was asked to thank them formally.

A colloquium then took place to provide ideas on how the Society is (or can be) of public benefit. This was to provide input for Bob Brown's work with our solicitor on preparing a new submission to the Charity Commissioners, who have twice rebuffed less formal applications for charitable status in the last year or so.

Our Chairman, Chris Jolly, rounded off the meeting with a summary. Like many others, he too was increasingly confident and positive about the future. He stressed that we cannot act parochially in seeking spelling change. English is a world language and thus not simply our "property." We must continue to extend ourselves internationally. His view of the Sunday Times article was that it demonstrates the strength of our pluralist stance on individual reform schemes. "No-one will ever ask us for a complete system off-the-shelf, so it is right that we should continue to experiment and develop ideas".

The meeting of the new Committee considered a wide range of details. It authorised the new stationery design which is discussed elsewhere in this issue, and a reprint of the Cut Spelling Handbook, which is almost out of stock.

Initiatives actual and potential

Here is a list of the topics presented by Bob Brown to the AGM, some of which are under way, others awaiting someone willing to drive them along.

1. Approaches to educational officialdom (continuing)
2. Contacts with educational advisers and influential people on language issues in the Commonwealth Secretariat and the EC (actual and potential, respectively).
3. A research programme aimed at quantifying the benefits of simplified spelling in educational use (active planning).
4. Selling the concept of active spelling change to the Press (planning).
5. Putting across the idea of managed spelling evolution to young people directly (ideas at present).
6. Use of simpler spellings in teaching English as a foreign language (ideas).
7. Possible involvement in the development of varieties of English for special purposes (ideas).
8. Hosting an English Language Forum — as discussed elsewhere — or similar round-table conference on language issues (ideas).

2. Lecture: Genetic influences on spelling disability.

A presentation by Dr Jim Stevenson of London University's Institute of Child Health

Dr Stevenson will talk about his work and answer questions. This is a fascinating opportunity to hear about experimental work demonstrating that "linking letters with sound is much more genetically controlled than recognising words as units." As many members as possible are urged to attend.

The talk will be followed by a Committee meeting to which (as usual) all members are invited to attend if they wish.

3. SoundSpeler

The long-awaited software arrives from the American Literacy Council

New York-based sister organisation, the American Literacy Council, has now issued its SoundSpeler software, which is "a computer-based tutor program that teaches writing, reading and pronunciation."

SoundSpeler allows the user to enter text using either traditional spelling, or the ALC's phonics-based American Spelling, or a phonic guess. The program interprets the guesses and displays two lines of text — traditional spelling and American. For example, it changes *Meny have trobl with rittun werk* into *Many have trouble with written work* on the top line and *Meny hav trubl with riten wurk* on the second.

SoundSpeler has wide application in both first literacy teaching and in remedial situations, being especially useful with adults, due to its self-teaching method of operation.

Some members of the Committee are currently evaluating the effort involved to adapt the software for British English spelling and pronunciation. Members interested in this program are asked to contact the Secretary in the first instance, who will advise on progress towards a British English version. The American version costs \$68 including postage from: American Literacy Council, 680 Fort Washington Ave., New York, NY 10040.

4. A Changing Face

Image update

Bob Brown explains

Over recent years, a major objective of the Committee has been to improve the image of the Society. We rightfully should be seen as *the* expert body on spelling matters. But if we are to gain the respect of the people we seek to influence — educational authorities and academics with a voice on literacy issues, as well as teachers and parents — we must be professional, that is, eschew amateurism. This is hopefully reflected in the quality of our public output of late. Another aspect is that to be regarded as a learned Society, we have to *look* like one!

Various actions have been taken recently by the Committee which, individually, do not represent enormous change. But taken cumulatively they effect a considerable update of our external image.

Some of the actions will already be familiar — more regular *Journals* and *Newsletters* (time permitting!), a range of professionally-produced publications that will continue to grow and improve over the next few years, better information for enquirers, and so on. Some other recent initiatives are explained in the rest of this section. Taken with other forthcoming activities, such as a more vigorous press campaign, serious attempts to build a parliamentary interest group, and action in the House of Lords, I have taken to calling this a "relaunch" of the Society. Excuse my hyperbole, but marketing is my profession!

New Vice Presidents

The sad loss of Professor Abercrombie last year led the Committee into appointing not one but three new Vice Presidents. We are delighted and honoured now to have at our side:

Lord Simon of Glaisdale

Amongst other facets in a busy life, Lord Simon has been an MP, a minister, a senior judge and latterly a lawlord. He has a very long association with the Society.

Dr W R (Bill) Lee OBE

Bill Lee is often described as the doyen of the EFL teaching profession, and I hope he will not mind me using this useful handle again! He was the founder chair (and leader until his retirement) of IATEFL, the most significant professional organisation for teachers of English to non-native speakers.

Professor John Wells

John Wells is the present incumbent of the chair of phonetics at University College London, and thus the direct successor of Daniel Jones and A C Gimson. We are delighted that he has also followed them in supporting the Society.

Dr Valerie Yule

Val is an Australian psychologist and a lifetime spelling reformer and supporter of the Society. She is now at Monash University in Melbourne.

Leo Chapman is producing a rather more detailed portrait of our President and Vice Presidents, which will appear as a separate publication in due course.

A new Profile

We are now using a new *Profile* — or summary of the Society's history, aims and activities, if you prefer — in responding to enquiries about our work, in conjunction with a series of pamphlets explaining about membership and our main publications. Its text is reproduced elsewhere in this Newsletter for the benefit of members. Any comments would be welcome before we produce it in a rather more permanent version.

New style and slogan

You will have noticed from the mast-head on the front page that we have adopted a new style for the name of the Society. This is primarily for use on letterhead, but it will be carried through to our other publications as opportunity arises. We are indebted to Trevor Sylvester for donating his time in providing the design, and advice on graphics issues.

The masthead and stationery also carry a simple sentence which took much debate to get right. We are now happy that it neatly encapsulates what we are about.

The English Language Forum

Various members, your Secretary included, feel that the time may be ripe for a bold initiative — a "round table" international conference of all having an interest in the future development of the English language. Spelling would be just one aspect of a meeting designed to test the willingness to consider language planning. Increasingly I am persuaded by the view that spelling change may not necessarily be considered in isolation.

This idea is in its infancy. A more detailed picture of how we might take the initiative in bringing a wide range of organisations together must wait for a later Newsletter in seeking members' comments.

5. In Brief

Cut Spelling, 2nd edition

A second edition of the Cut Spelling Handbook is in preparation at present, as we have now distributed or sold all copies of the first printing.

Members will be informed when it is available. It will then also be sent automatically to members who have joined since we ran out of the first printing.

Traugott Rohner

We were sorry to hear of the death in September 1991 of veteran American spelling reformer Traugott Rohner.

A magazine in a simplified spelling?

Australian member Carole Knight is keen on having some regular magazine or newsletter produced in a simplified spelling, for distribution (sale?) both within and outside the Society. If any member wants to produce such a publication, the Society would be pleased to assist. Contact the Secretary in the first instance if you think this is a good idea, and want to help.

6. Towards the millennium

A Profile of the Simplified Spelling Society in the 1990s

Origin

The Simplified Spelling Society was founded in 1908 by a group of leading linguistic academics of the day — Skeat, Jevons, Pollard, Gilbert Murray and others — to promote the idea of planned change to English spelling, "in the interests of ease of learning and economy of writing" as they put it. For several decades before this, pressure had been growing for the language to be modernized and simplified, in order to make it easier to teach and learn literacy skills. The archaic spelling was seen as an unnecessary barrier to literacy acquisition — and it still is today.

Two years earlier, the United States government had formally confirmed the use of many spellings that we now think of as characterising its version of the language: color, center, fetus, etc. Andrew Carnegie had funded an organisation in the US to continue the rationalisation work, called the Simpler Spelling Board (now the American Literacy Council). The Simplified Spelling Society was intended to mirror its activities in Britain and the Empire. We still have cordial relations with our American cousins today.

The Society has enjoyed support from many well-known people in addition to its founders. Past Presidents include Gilbert Murray, almost from inception to his death in 1946, Daniel Jones (influential in establishing phonetics as a discipline), John Downing (the educational psychologist), publisher and MP Sir James Pitman, and ship-building industrialist Sir George Hunter. Its officers have included such well-known academic names as AC Gimson and David Abercrombie, as well as Archbishop Temple, Mr Speaker Horace King and HG Wells.

The Society over the years

The years before World War 1 were a time of intellectual ferment and the Society had by 1910 developed an idealistic revised spelling system for English, as an example of what could be done, subsequently named New Spelling. New Spelling — still in print today — enables a good phonetic match between spoken and written English, independent of accent, by means of extending the principle of digraphs, the two-letter combinations already familiar in th, ch, ee, etc. New Spelling was promoted by the Society through its several thousand active participants and a permanently-staffed office. In the 1920s New Spelling was tested in schools and found a valuable aid to literacy acquisition.

But public opinion was shifting to take a more conservative position on language and teaching matters, so little headway was made in persuading people that change would be beneficial. The case was not helped by the rather radical change implied by a switch to New Spelling. Until fairly recently, authoritative opinion has tended to indifference, if not hostility, towards the concept of planned language change in English, despite it being successful in many other languages.

During the 1960s, a version of New Spelling using extra letters instead of digraphs was pioneered in schools in the main English-speaking countries as the Initial Teaching Alphabet (i.t.a.). This was intended as an introductory method of teaching children to read and write before switching them back to traditional spelling. The i.t.a. was shown to have many benefits but its use gradually dwindled during the 80s for a complex of reasons, such as lack of official support and changing fashions in teaching theory.

For many years the Society published New Spelling as its only model of a revised spelling system, but later came to realise that people also wanted to consider other approaches. Several other methods of spelling English have been devised and refined. For example, an important partial-reform approach called Cut Spelling — based on the principle of cutting redundant (and thus misleading) letters — was published in 1992 and has excited much comment because it achieves a far-reaching regularization with little disruption. Other approaches, with names such as System 2, Yurospel and Stages 1/2, have been experimentally devised and tested within the Society, which regards itself as a unique centre of expertise on writing systems for English.

As the 20th century moves to a close, we find the educational climate shifting again. There is widespread concern about poor literacy standards in English-speaking countries — witness the British government's current intent to "return to basics" in teaching it. At the same time, strong reactions against planning or managing the evolution of the language seem to be waning. We find today many more parents of young children willing to consider modernizing English than, say, in the 1970s — when the idea was thought plain daft — and even more striking when compared to the 50s, when it was though both potty and slightly subversive!

It is becoming clear that a gradualist approach to modernizing English spelling, not a huge upheaval, is both desirable and feasible. And today's Britain seems to have the institutions in place that, with a nudge, could organise it. Support is also beginning to emerge from all quarters. The Simplified Spelling Society is more buoyant about future prospects today than at any time in the last 60 years.

7. The Simplified Spelling Society today

1 What we stand for

The Society's constitutional aim remains "to bring about a reform of the spelling of English in the interests of ease of learning and economy in writing". We are much concerned by reports of poor literacy standards, because literacy is the bedrock for all other academic achievement.

There is also evidence that the English-speaking countries are developing large groups within the working population having impaired literacy skills — perhaps 10 million people in Britain — who are mostly not even aware that they are handicapped by inadequate reading and writing abilities. But the problem of constrained development potential remains, for them as individuals and for our economy.

We want to make learning English literacy skills easier for both native English-speaking children and those with other first languages. The Society is very aware that English is the pre-eminent medium for international communication.

2 Membership

This is a democratic membership society, with officers elected by the members. The annual subscription has been pegged at £10 for several years.

Current membership is about 130, with about 30 of those outside the UK. Teachers and others with a professional interest in literacy acquisition probably predominate but membership is actually very broad-based. In addition to the members, the Society maintains cordial relations with similar

organisations in North America (2) and Australia, and with academics world wide who have a special interest in the subject.

3 Officers and Committee

All officeholders are elected annually, except the President who is elected every three years. The current President is Dr Donald Scragg of Manchester University, who is a leading expert on the history of English spelling. Committee members represent a wide variety of backgrounds and interests: there is an educational publisher, a computer expert, a modern linguist, a journalist, a dyslexia expert and several teachers, amongst others.

4 Finances

The Society has an adequate endowment for the present level of activity but funds will need to be supplemented from grants and appeals if we are to bear the costs of a major research programme that is being planned at present.

5 Charitable status

The Society is not a registered charity, for a combination of historical reasons concerned with its overtly political campaigning earlier in the century. We are seeking to change that now and register as a charity.

6 Activities

The Society holds four regular meetings in London per year and occasionally organises international conferences. It publishes a scholarly Journal (usually two per year) and a less formal Newsletter (three per year). It also publishes books, pamphlets and discussion papers. It seeks to influence education policy by submitting statements to the teaching curriculum authorities and the like, which are usually invited. The Society is presently planning a research programme on the use of simplified spellings in remedial teaching.

We are working hard to increase membership out of which we hope more active campaigners will emerge. For example, we would like to participate more in relevant conferences and exhibitions but lack enough members at present able to sustain such commitments.

The above Profile is sent to anyone enquiring about the Society's aims and work. Any suggestions for improvement would be welcome, to the Secretary please.

8. General semantics: Experimenting with E-prime

The Society maintains a number of reciprocal memberships and information-sharing relationships with other organisations concerned with language matters. These include the International Society for General Semantics (ISGS) in the United States, with whom we have members in common.

General semantics concentrates on improving accuracy in the use of words so as to avoid confusion in both written and spoken communication. It owes much to the system of linguistic philosophy developed by the Polish-American scientist Alfred Korzybski (1879–1950). ISGS has about 2,200 members in more than 50 countries. It publishes a substantial quarterly called *Et cetera*, and a wide range of other books and educational materials.

The verb *to be* (in all its forms) comes in for particular criticism from the general semanticists, as encouraging absolutism and the idea that things always stay the same. As a result, they have a variety of English without *to be*, called E-prime.

Many ISGS members never write "I am . . ." or "He is . . ." Some very dedicated people have even trained themselves never to use forms of *to be* in speech, clearly a very difficult task. The sharp-eyed amongst you will have noticed that this short article has used E-prime.

Try it. You will find the exercise generally beneficial in improving the quality of written material — you cannot waffle by hiding behind the passive, for example!

Expect more about E-prime in subsequent issues. Membership of ISGS costs \$30 per year. Address: ISGS, PO Box 728, Concord, Calif. 94522.

9. Help wanted!

Your Secretary admits elsewhere to sinking under the load of all that needs doing. Can you help? Specifically the Society presently seeks two volunteers to undertake some aspects of the Secretary's duties, working under Bob Brown's direction:

Publications & Mailing Secretary

This would involve holding stocks of standing and back-issue publications — so you would need some space for storage — and taking delivery of *Journals*, *Newsletters*, etc. from the printer. The main task would be to handle regular bulk mailings, using address labels provided by the Secretary. You would also send information to enquirers, and initial packs to new joiners.

Events & Speaker Organiser

This would involve invitations to speakers, and looking after the practical arrangements for meetings. At the moment we have far more possibilities for lectures and other events than the Secretary has time to organise himself. In principle, we would like to get into having more frequent meetings than quarterly, and also special events such as all-day seminars or even conferences spread over several days. We would also like to attend more exhibitions and conferences to "display our wares," but lack the time to do so at present.

The duties for this post would be light as first but it can become whatever the holder wants to make of it. The position would involve close contact with the Secretary and PRO. Please contact Bob Brown if you can help.

Apology. Bob Brown apologises to members for not being able to publish this Newsletter earlier, due to extreme pressure of work in his daytime employment.

[See other versions in [Spoofs](#).

10. Meihem in ce Klasrum

An extract (with some adaptation due to lack of space) from an article of this title in *Astounding Science Fiction*, Anthology 1946, by Dolton Edwards, courtesy of Nicholas Vince.

English spelling is much in need of a general overhauling and streamlining, but this plan can achieve it in a less shocking manner than Mr Shaw's proposals.

As a catalytic agent, we suggest a National Easy Language Week. Some spelling change would be announced, to be adopted in the coming year. All schoolchildren would be given a holiday, the lost time being the equivalent of that gained by the spelling short cut.

In 1946 we could eliminate the soft c, substituting s. This would be celebrated in all civic-minded circles. In 1947, we could substitute k for the hard c, as both letters would be pronounced identikally. So two years of this proses would klarify konfusion for students, and already we would have eliminated one letter from the alphabet.

By 1948 all skhool tshildren would be looking forward to the annual holiday, and, in a blaze of publicity, ph would be banned, henseforth to be written f.

By 1949, publik interest in the fonetik alfabet would allow a more radikal step forward — eliminating al unesesary double leters, whitsh, although harmles have always ben a nuisance.

The advance in 1950 would be to spel al difthongs fonetikaly. Though perhaps not imediately aparent, the saving in taim and efort wil be tremendous when we leiter elimineite the sailent e, meid posible bai the tsheinge.

In 1959 we would urg a greit step forward. As it would hav ben for yers sins anywun had used the leter c, we could substitut it for th. It would be som taim befor peopl would becom akustomed to reading buks wic sutsh sentenses in cem as "Ceodor cought he had cre cousand cistles crust crough ce cik of his cumb!"

So ce proses would go on, geting rid of y in 1952, allowing it to be reusd for sh from 1953. Kontinuing cis proses, we would eventuali hav a reali sensibli writen langug.

In fakt, by 1975, wi ventyur to sei, cer wud bi no mor uv ces teribl trublsn difikultis, wic no tu leters usd to indikeit ce seim nois, and laikweis no tu noises riten wic ce seim leter. Even Mr Yaw, wi beliv, wud be hapi in ce noleg cat his drims fainali keim tru.

[But wud he hav ben GBY? Ed.]

11. Where are the Shaw Alphabet typewriters?

In the early 1960s, a number of type-writers were made by the Imperial company for producing text in Kingsley Read's Shaw alphabet, and member Keith Seddon would like to track them down.

One typewriter was certainly used by Read himself in publishing his regular journal which used the alphabet. Another was probably used by Peter MacCarthy, lecturer in phonetics at Leeds University, who had major involvement with Read, the alphabet and production of Shaw's *Androcles* using it. MacCarthy was also active in the Society and held various offices over the years.

If any reader is aware of the present location of any of these unusual machines, please write to Keith, who will be delighted.

Meetings 1993/4

16 October 1993, 29 January 1994, 23 April 1994 (AGM)

These are all committee meetings but members are welcome to attend.

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