

***Simplified Spelling Society Pamphlet No. 10.***

[William Reed: see Anthology and Bulletins.]

## **SPELLING REFORM AND OUR SCHOOLS**

**BY W. J. REED**

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“Never teach a child anything of which you are not yourself sure; and, above all, if you feel anxious to force anything into its mind in tender years - that the virtue of youth and early association may fasten it there - be sure it is no lie which you thus sanctify . . . Better that it should be ignorant of a thousand truths than have consecrated in its heart a single lie.”

JOHN RUSKIN (*Time And Tide*, XVI).

### **THE CASE FOR SPELLING REFORM**

Language consists of words, and when words are written down, they consist of letters. The arrangement of these letters to form words is what we call spelling. Spelling is the basis of all reading and all writing and so is deserving of our most careful consideration.

Ours is a living language, and therefore it is developing and changing. We do not normally read Shakespeare in the spelling of Shakespeare's time, nor do we read the Authorized Version in the spelling of 1611. Why then do we persist in printing everything in the spelling of 1755, and making our children struggle with its inconsistency?

The spellings we use today are almost entirely those as published by Dr. Johnson in his dictionary of 1755. The serious study of philology, etymology and phonetics had hardly begun at that time. It is impossible to justify the continued use of many of his spellings more than 200 years later. The worthy doctor did his best in the light of what was then known. We ought to be able to do very much better in the light of all that has been discovered since his time. Yet many people do little to solve the problem of how best to improve our spelling conventions. Some behave as though they were unaware that the problem exists.

If British democracy is to resist the challenge of industrialized and highly efficient totalitarian states, then it must be as an educated democracy. Yet the facts at present are not altogether encouraging. Investigations, such as those of Prof. Vernon and Dr. Watts, have shown a disappointing proportion of backward readers, and even non-readers. Even at the secondary stage, spelling and the related problem of literacy continue to be matters for concern, especially in the case of the less academically gifted children. About 25 per cent of the child population are selected at 11 plus as being capable of an academic grammar school course; but of even these selected children, less than half succeed in passing G.C.E. at Ordinary level in five subjects. We must not overlook the incidence of other contributory factors, but perhaps the most important cause of educational failure is in the use of language - the failure to read quickly and with understanding and to write accurately. Our out of date and inefficient spelling conventions are chiefly responsible for a standard of literacy which is lower than it should be.

Letters are symbols representing the sounds of actual speech. Signs and symbols should be used as consistently as possible. If road safety signs meant different things at one place from what they meant further along the road, there would be not only confusion but, very shortly, an outcry from road users. But see how inconsistently we use letter symbols. Our letter *a*, instead of representing

one particular sound, may represent any one of at least nine, as in the words AT ALL ASK AGE ABOUT MANY WAS AREA and COTTAGE. The letter o stands for quite different sounds in the words OLD ON DO OTHER WOMAN and WOMEN. There are 17 [1] different ways of representing the sound usually spelt *sh* (RUSH SPECIAL MISSION NATION, etc.). I. J. Pitman has listed no less than 22 different ways of spelling the long *i* sound, and 20 different ways of spelling the short *i* sound.

This chaotic use of letters results in the failure of many children to master their own language. We could not honestly expect anything else. It is possible, of course, to use these out of date and inefficient spelling conventions, and yet succeed in teaching a good number of children to read and write. We must, however, remember two points in this connexion. First, more consistent and therefore more efficient spelling conventions would enable more children to reach a higher standard of proficiency; and, second, children would do this with less expenditure of time and effort. The time and effort thus saved could be devoted to important subjects which are at present receiving much less than we would like to give them and which urgently need more.

Children depend on us. They have no power of themselves to improve the conditions in which they are brought up. A few generations ago, when they were compelled to work long hours in difficult and dangerous occupations - in mines, factories and chimneys - it was only through the devoted efforts of enlightened men and women that their lot was improved. Success was at last achieved, but only after long years of cruelty and suffering for the children, and often frustration and disappointment for those who were trying to help them.

Degrees of suffering are hardly comparable; but children now do undoubtedly suffer from the bad spelling conventions they are compelled to use. Many of them fail to become good readers, and the glories of English literature are denied them. An even larger number fail to write correctly and confidently, because writing words, with accurate spelling, is much more difficult than reading them. Some of these children become frustrated and apathetic, or even resentful and anti-social. This may happen to children of above average intelligence. An intelligent child is one who can see relationships between things, who notices patterns, and who can rationalize to some extent the mass of information his senses are constantly giving him. Our Tommy learns that *hat* is pronounced with a short *a* sound, and that *hate* is pronounced with a long *a* sound; so also with *mat* and *mate*, *fat* and *fate*, and many similar examples. Then he sees the letters *have*; and, being an intelligent child, and having observed that final *e* makes the preceding vowel long, he says *have* with a long *a* sound, and he is wrong. He is wrong similarly with *gone*, *done*, *give*, and *live*. He may only register a little disappointment with his elders for not playing quite fair; or he may, after many more such failures, form the opinion that his elders are either stupid or unkind to allow such illogical spellings to obstruct his educational progress. This opinion has, of course, to be repressed and so it becomes more dangerous to himself and to everybody else. Apart from the intellectual loss then there is the possibility of emotional and even delinquency troubles, which indeed have a high correlation with educational failure. Our inconsistent spelling is an obstacle to the progress of even intelligent children: it is a really formidable barrier to those of sub-normal intelligence. For teachers, the most important argument in favour of spelling reform must always be that it will ensure better education for more children.

## HOW REFORM WILL HELP TEACHERS IN THEIR WORK

There are two aspects of reading - word recognition and comprehension. Spelling affects both of them. In languages which have fairly consistent spelling, word recognition gives little trouble; but with the present unsatisfactory spelling of English, this process takes many years to master. By using more consistent spelling conventions, we could greatly reduce the amount of time and effort

spent on word recognition, and so we could devote much more to comprehension. Spelling reform would thus give us not only better word recognition but also better comprehension.

Our present spelling hinders the all-important matter of written composition. The difficulty of spelling words correctly prevents children from writing freely and with confidence. Constant reference to a dictionary is a nuisance when a child has something important to write or an interesting story to tell. But unless a child frequently stops writing to consult the dictionary, there will be many spelling mistakes. From the teacher's point of view, the marking of spelling errors distracts his attention from the composition. So our unreformed spelling often spoils composition for the child, who is prevented from expressing himself freely, and frequently has his book disfigured by coloured pencil or ink marks. It tends to spoil composition for the teacher, whose attention is diverted from more important matters to the marking and correcting of spelling mistakes. There is in consequence a temptation to fall back on the one-word-answer type of exercise, so beloved of the standardized testers and the compilers of "complete English courses." The one-word-answer has its place in the educational scheme of things, but English teaching ought not to be restricted by it (as it sometimes is).

Spelling reform would help speech training. When a child is reading aloud and a new word is met, he is tempted to mutter something indistinctly. He hopes that if he is wrong (and page 4 § 1 shows that there are long odds against being right!) his mistakes will not be heard distinctly, and so he may get away with it. Experienced teachers may not be deceived in this way, but, in the case of children, hope springs eternal! By indistinct speech, children do sometimes secure the benefit of the doubt, and such children have little inducement to develop better enunciation. Reformed spelling should make it possible for them to read unfamiliar words confidently, and so there would be no inducement to mumble indistinctly. Words are often mispronounced because the conventional spelling does not indicate what the pronunciation should be. Reformed spelling would much more effectively indicate the pronunciation, and so would be conducive to better speech.

Teachers are always trying to develop children's reasoning power, but at present learning to spell (and this affects both the reading and the writing of our language) is not a matter of reason at all. It could be and it should be. More consistent spelling conventions would give children better opportunities to exercise and develop their reasoning powers.

Children should think of their native language as a living thing, but instead they are often brought up to regard it as a sort of embalmed corpse, which has no power to improve itself, and which they must accept without presuming to think about it, and without question. Words are really most interesting things. There is no more interesting or more important study than that of words and how their pronunciations and their spellings came to diverge. As Henry Bradley [\[2\]](#) wrote: "A generation of people who had learned at school to analyse correctly the sounds of speech and to observe how far and from what causes the existing spelling comes short of representing the pronunciation, would certainly consider the question of reform with less of irrational prejudice and greater insight into the conditions of the problem than is at present commonly to be found." We should not cling to Dr. Johnson's 18th century spelling after it has been shown to be etymologically unreliable and educationally harmful.

That our spelling is unsatisfactory and urgently in need of reform has been emphasized by the greatest authorities on the English language, including Prof. W. W. Skeat (author of the *Etymological English Dictionary*), Dr. F. J. Furnivall (for 17 years principal editor of the *Oxford Dictionary*), Sir James Murray (for 37 years principal editor of the *Oxford Dictionary*), Prof. H. C. Wyld. (editor of the *Universal English Dictionary*, and Merton Professor of English Language and Literature at Oxford), Prof. Daniel Jones (author of the *Pronouncing English Dictionary*), and Prof.

Gilbert Murray, O.M., D.C.L., LL.D., D.Lit., F.B.A. They have been supported by eminent authorities on education such as Prof. C. E. Spearman and Sir T. Percy Nunn.

Former proposals to bring our spelling up to date in the light of modern scholarship were revised in 1940 by a committee consisting of Prof. Gilbert Murray (Chairman), Prof. Lloyd James, Prof. Daniel Jones, Prof. Harold Orton, Mr. I. J. Pitman, M.A., and Mr. Walter Ripman, M.A.

Our present spellings have been condemned by those who are best qualified to judge them; better spellings have been agreed on by specialists of unimpeachable scholarship. Why is it then that these have not yet been accepted by the general public?

## REASONS FOR DELAY IN REFORM OF SPELLING

Spelling is something of a blind spot in our education. Many children go through school without fully realizing that, in an alphabetical language such as English, letters are supposed to represent the sounds of actual speech. That was the great advantage of alphabetical writing over the primitive picture writing which it superseded. When we look at any page of printed English it is obvious that the purpose of spelling is to represent the sounds of the spoken words. The spelling of many words fulfils this purpose quite well, but that of many others is not so good. All spelling is phonetic inasmuch as letters represent the sounds of speech, but *good* spelling needs to be phonetically *consistent*, or approximately so (ours is not as consistent as it should be). Many people have not been made sufficiently aware of this, and so popular demand for reform has not so far been strong enough to overcome apathy and prejudice.

There is strong emotional resistance to all changes in established habits. This is especially true in the case of habits which have childhood associations. What we learned as children we tend to want to keep even though it may be less than the very best. Many of us like to sing hymns to the tunes we sang as children, and not to what we perhaps call new-fangled tunes (ask a church organist). There is strong emotional resistance to changes in language habits, and these include spelling habits. Henry Bradley for instance had a certain antipathy to reformed spelling, and this is understandable in a man whose whole life's work had been devoted to the study of unreformed spelling. But he was wise enough to see that children ought not to be made to suffer because of the prejudice of their elders. He wrote, "The waste of time in education caused by the want of consistent relation between the written and the spoken word is a serious evil which urgently calls for a remedy. After all, it is the interest of the learner, not that of the person who has mastered all the difficulties that has the first claim to consideration." (*Op. cit.* p. 13, lines 24 *seq.*) It is not wrong to like the spelling we ourselves have, but it is wrong to prevent present and future generations of children from having something better.

## SOME OBJECTIONS TO SPELLING REFORM CONSIDERED

### ***Appearance***

Some people say that reformed spelling looks wrong or looks ugly. Generally speaking, we suspect what is new and unfamiliar, and often call it ugly. This is true in painting, sculpture, poetry, music and elsewhere; but we must observe that the resented innovations of one generation often become the accepted and approved conventions of the next. It would be so with spelling reform, as it was true of numeral reform, when the simple Indo-Arabic figures were introduced in the face of long and bitter opposition from those who wanted to keep the Roman figures. We find it hard to understand people who refused to use 1066 and 1888 but insisted for so long on keeping MLXVI and MDCCCLXXXVIII. Future generations will find it hard to understand those who now want to

keep the chaotic spellings illustrated above in preference to more effective spellings. Reformed spelling will look right enough when we use it and realize how much better it is.

### ***Etymology***

It is sometimes objected that reformed spelling would obscure the etymology of words. The short answer here is that the greatest authorities on English etymology have been devoted advocates of spelling reform. Dr. Henry Sweet [3] wrote, "The old fallacy that phonetic spelling destroys etymology and the history of the language is hardly consistent with the fact that all philological experts agree in regarding unphonetic spelling as a monstrous absurdity both from a scientific and from a practical point of view." Sir James Murray wrote, "My Dictionary experience has shown me that the ordinary appeals to etymology against spelling reform utterly break down upon examination." It may be added that most English words have such a long history that no spelling could possibly show all of it. A word may have come to us from French; the French word probably came from a Latin word, which in turn may have come from a Greek word, which itself may have been derived from a Persian word. It is surely ridiculous to expect the spelling of a word today to indicate all the many words from which it has been derived. Those who are interested in etymology know how to set about discovering the history of English words, but it is quite unreasonable to expect this history to be contained in the letters which form the contemporary spelling.

Etymology does not necessarily enable us to understand and use words correctly now. The word PREVENT now means something quite different from what it meant when the prayer "Prevent us O Lord in all our doings . . ." was written. Some knowledge of etymology would suggest that noon is 3 p.m., and that a matinee is a morning performance; it could hardly help us to understand and use in contemporary English such words as CHURL VARLET LEWD IDIOT and SAVAGE. Moreover, conventional spelling often conceals the true etymology and may suggest a false one, as in such words as ISLAND SOVEREIGN AISLE FOREIGN and SCENT.

### ***Homophones***

We are told that our numerous homophones are a serious obstacle to reform. If for example KNOWS and NOSE were spelt the same, would not readers be confused? When a person is speaking, it is not likely that a listener would think he meant NOSE in a sentence when he really meant KNOWS; and if he writes with a reasonable amount of care, there need be no confusion even though both words were spelt the same. Henry Bradley has shown that confusion would not be caused by the adoption of phonetic spelling. He says that writers like speakers now, would choose their words carefully in order to avoid confusion, and he quotes amusing examples of speakers who failed to do this, e.g. "Oxford must be considered as a whole, and what a whole it is!"

If we are really looking for possible causes of confusion, we might look at our many homographs such as MINUTE (60 seconds) MINUTE (very small) and BOW (tie) BOW (to the Queen). With reformed spelling these words would be spelt differently so that any confusion which might conceivably exist now would be impossible. If opponents quote homophones as an argument against reform, others can with equal justification quote such homographs as an argument in favour. But with the care which we expect speakers and writers to use in their choice of words, there is really no need for confusion in either case.

### ***Reform not permanent***

It has been objected that no reform could be permanent, and that after a time there would be further changes in pronunciation, and spelling would need to be reformed again. Nothing is permanent in this life. The British steel industry has recently been re-equipped at a cost of

hundreds of millions of pounds and some dislocation; but this is no guarantee that it will not need to be re-equipped again in fifty years' time. So with spelling; it is not likely that we should need to reform it at frequent intervals, though, on the other hand, there could probably be no excuse for neglecting it for 200 years as we have done since Dr. Johnson's time. It is important to notice also how broadcasting and education tend to maintain the standard of spoken English, and to reduce both the amount and the rapidity of change.

### ***Perhaps we are not a logical nation***

Some have said that we are not, and therefore do not need a consistent orthography! The rules of logic surely are no more than the rules of honest thought. If we want to find the truth about any matter, we must think logically. There are some arenas of human experience where thinking is inappropriate, but these do not concern the British more than they concern the French, the Dutch, the Portuguese or any other nation. Wherever thinking is appropriate - and nowhere is it more so than in education - we must think logically if we really want to find the truth. Surely we do.

### ***Dialect***

This is no obstacle to reform. Prof. W. W. Skeat, a tireless advocate of spelling reform, founded the English Dialect Society, and was later its president! Spoken language is always more variable than the written language can be. Although an orthography must have a phonetic basis, it can never be an exact phonetic transcription. Words cannot conveniently be spelt differently in different parts of a country, so, in all languages, orthography has to be something of a compromise. English spelling is at present a compromise, and not a very good one (nobody for instance sounds the / in *could* and it only serves to obscure the connexion with can). Reformed spelling must represent standard speech, and would be the same in all parts. Dialects would remain it is to be sincerely hoped. Uniformity of spelling does not require exact uniformity of pronunciation. It never has and there is no reason why it ever should.

### ***The value of difficulty per se***

It has been argued by some people that our present chaotic spelling is good for children simply because of its difficulty; but education is not something to hit a child over the head with (some people seem to have once thought that it was). Life presents children with so many difficulties that are necessary and unavoidable that it is wrong to put artificial and unnecessary difficulties in their way. We should not neglect to remove such an obstacle as 18th century spelling, which is now quite unnecessary, and also undesirable for many good reasons.

### ***Typographical difficulties***

It has been objected that spelling reform would cause trouble in the world of printing and typing. Any reform of course causes a certain amount of trouble to somebody. Every development in production means that new machinery must be installed and old machinery scrapped. But reform of spelling would cause very little disturbance. A high degree of consistency can be obtained by a better use of our present alphabet, and in that case printing presses and typewriters would need no alteration at all. Even if new letters were introduced, the technical difficulties would be less than those which manufacturing industries are overcoming with every major technological advance.

### ***Would not reform cut us off from existing literature?***

No. The present adult generation would have no problem. They would be bi-literate. If people of the next generation should want to read books in the old spelling, they would have little difficulty in

doing so. We can easily read Shakespeare's (or his printers') spelling of the 1623 Folio even though we are used to reading Shakespeare's plays in Dr. Johnson's spelling. For people who are interested enough to try, reading an obsolete orthography is fairly easy.

We have looked at the objections which some people have used to ease their consciences and to excuse their inaction. They are not serious obstacles, as has been briefly indicated here, and as has been very fully proved elsewhere by eminent scholars.

## **REFORM MUST PROCEED FROM INFORMED PUBLIC OPINION**

Spelling reform concerns other bodies as well as the teaching profession. It concerns the universities, the press, and Parliament. What is believed in the universities, in newspaper offices and in Parliament *tomorrow* depends on what is thought and taught in schools *today*. Teachers should, by our teaching and by our example, draw attention to the importance of the language problem, and to the possibilities of reform. Ruskin's words will remind us of our very great responsibility in this matter.

Knowing that children are entrusted to our care, we must see that they do not suffer by reason of any thoughtlessness or prejudice on our part. We must give them the best possible education - an education that is in accordance with common sense and with the best available scholarship. It is certainly not in accordance with common sense to have 22 different ways of spelling one speech sound, and to have nine different ways of pronouncing one letter. It is certainly not in accordance with the best available scholarship to ignore the findings of our most eminent etymologists and lexicographers.

What is to be done? Like any other reform, reform of the way we represent our language in print must proceed from informed public opinion. The chief obstacle to reform is always ignorance; because those who do not know what is wrong, and how wrong it is, will not care about measures to put it right. This calls for more education about spelling. [4] When people know the facts, they can be trusted to think sensibly and act accordingly. It is our responsibility to see they are taught the facts.

## **Footnotes**

[1] See page 357 of J. C. Nesfield's *English Grammar* (Macmillan, 1919)

[2] *Relations Between Spoken and Written Language* (O.U.P., 1913), p. 22, l. 25.

[3] Author of *Historical English Grammar*, *Student's Dictionary of Anglo-Saxon*, *History of Language*, etc. A Readership in Phonetics was specially created for him by Oxford University in 1901.

[4] Such as the many lectures given in recent years by Mr. I. J. Pitman, M.P., and Dr. H. M. King, M.P.