

Tough Though Thought and we call it correct spelling!

by Stanley Gibbs

Note: This leaflet makes use of the five spelling reforms that are described later on.

English has the great benefit of a rich vocabulary and freedom from the complex grammatical rules of other European languages. However it suffers from a very illogical spelling, a legacy of its diverse origins.

English was first written around 600 AD and for most of its history the spelling varied widely. Shakespeare wrote his name in several different ways while the spelling used by Queen Elizabeth 1 varied in the same letter. It was with men like Mulcaster that the idea of 'correct' spelling came in. They sought to establish a consistency of spelling based not on fonetic principles but insted on the historic origin of words and on the need to distinguish between homofones (words pronounced the same but spelt differently).

By 1700 English spelling had become fixed in its present form and Dr Johnson's dictionary of 1755 merely served to record these spellings.

Efforts to reform English spelling started not long after this time. Benjamin Franklin advocated reform in 1768 while Noah Webster introduced his American dictionary in 1828, a book which produced the variant American spellings of colour, centre etc. In 1842 Sir Isaac Pitman (of shorthand fame) developed an extended alphabet called Phonotype for spelling reform, while in this century George Bernard Shaw campaigned vigorously for spelling reform. His will provided for the creation of a new alphabet Shaw-script, which attracted some interest.

The Simplified Spelling Society developed Nue Speling (1941) and Dr Axel Wijk the less radical Regularised English (1959) but the emfasis now is on gradual stage by stage reform rather than such sweeping changes.

Sir James Pitman developed the initial teaching alphabet (i.t.a.) with an extended alfabet which was put to the test in the 1960s. It showed that children could learn much more quickly to read and write using a more fonetic alphabet of this sort.

Why Reform?

There are several advantages to reforming spelling:

1. Children can learn to read and write English faster and mor easily, speeding up their whole educational process. So too can adults learning English as a foreign language.
2. Reformed spelling is a mor efficient means of communication for adults and children alike.
3. Reformed spelling is usually more economical: it uses fewer letters.
4. Difficulties in maintaining correct spelling are greatly reduced by the mor logical system.

Nonetheless the idea of spelling reform does produce fears and strong resistance in many people and for a number of reasons:

1. There is the fear of spoiling a wonderful language. In practice, of course, the language would not change, only the spelling.
2. There is the fear of losing the historic origin of words. In practice the historic development of the individual words is very well-documented. Moreover many words have changed the spelling considerably over the time, only to get fixed today in a spelling which is a poor guide to their origin.
3. There is a dislike of the 'look' of reformed spellings. This view is understandable; spellings have become attractive through familiarity. The spellings used by Shakespeare or Queen Elizabeth 1 look odd, much as reformed spellings do. Only through familiarity and use would new spellings become fully acceptable.

Some Proposals

Rather than promote a whole new system, the Simplified Spelling Society has instead drawn up a series of modest reforms with the aim of starting to bring about change gradually.

Totalling five in number they could be used either together or individually. Although only a modest reform they provide a guideline for use, particularly in notes and personal correspondence.

The reforms are entitled: SR1, SR:ph, SR:augh, SR:ough, and SR:DUE.

SR1

Developed by Harry Lindgren in Australia, SR1 (Spelling Reform One) calls for the sound /e/ as in bet to be spelt with 'e'.

Hence:

eny meny frend alredy ses tred jelous hed

SR:ph

This is probably the least controversial of all reforms, the change of 'ph' to 'f' when it is sounded as /f/.

Hence:

foto telefone fysical elfant safire

SR:augh

Words with 'gh' include some of the most absurd spellings in English. In this reform 'augh' is changed in one of two ways:

1. Delete 'gh' when there is the sound /au/ as in caught.

Hence:

caut fraut dauter nauty

2. Replace 'ugh' with 'f' when there is the sound of /f/.

Hence:

laf draft

SR:ough

There are so many different pronunciations of 'ough' that it is changed in one of five different ways, depending on the word:

1. Delete 'gh' when there is the sound of /ou/ as in bough.

Hence:

bou drout plou

2. Change 'ough' as in bought, to 'au'.

Hence:

baut aut thaut faut saut

3. Change 'ough' to 'of' or 'uf' (depending on the pronunciation).

Hence:

cof trof enuf tuf

4. Cut back 'ough' as in though to 'o' (or 'oe') .

Hence:

tho altho (but doh for dough and thurra for thorough).

5. Change 'ough' to 'u'.

Hence:

thru

SR: DUE

Many words end with an 'e' that is not only useless but misleading. This is corrected with SR: DUE (Spelling Reform: Drop Useless E's). The situation arises when the *preceding* vowel is short and includes many common words.

Hence:

ar wer hav serv giv liv opposit negativ massiv activ involv curv
(but not the adjective live)

[According to Pamphlet 12, p9, the SSS agreed this 5-strand proposal in 1984.]