

Introducing
the Simplified Spelling Society
working towards the
MODERNIZATION OF ENGLISH SPELLING
for

- higher standards of literacy •
- more effective education •
- easier mastery of the language •
- a more efficient writing system •

SIMPLIFIED SPELLING SOCIETY

Past, Present and Future

Historical perspective

In Shakespeare's day English spelling was fluid, with no fixed 'correct' forms for words. In the 17th century printers came to prefer most of the forms we now consider correct, but they gave little thought to consistency (eg, they opted for *receive* but *relieve*, *speech* but *speech*, etc). Since then, eminent linguists, educationists and others (e.g., Benjamin Franklin, Noah Webster, Isaac Pitman) have called for reform, yet little has changed even by the end of the 20th century. Today's need to improve literacy and assist world communication in English gives a new urgency to calls for the spelling to be simplified.

New Spelling and the i.t.a.

The movement to reform English spelling reached a peak before 1914, with support in America from President Theodore Roosevelt and in 1908 the founding of the Simplified Spelling Society (SSS) in Britain. The SSS first proposed a fully phoneticized system (New Spelling), which radically changed the look of the language and implied a standard pronunciation. Its most positive outcome was its adoption by James Pitman (later SSS President) as a basis for the Initial Teaching Alphabet, a regularized spelling system with extra letters which was used in the 1960—80s in many schools in several countries. It showed the dramatic gains that regular spelling brings to the process of literacy acquisition, as well as the feasibility of co-ordinating spelling reform between countries.

New approaches

The later 20th century saw new approaches to the problem, aiming at partial regularization as a first stage. A Swedish proposal (1959) concentrated on helping readers rather than writers. Australian reformers (1969) proposed a series of small simplifications, from which the SSS (1984) derived a set of 5 changes giving forms like *hed*, *fotograf*, *caut*, *cof*, *giv*. Most recently, Lojikon (1995) proposed regularizing the spelling of consonants only, while Cut Spelling (2nd ed. 1996) removed the 10% troublesome redundant letters, so also creating the economic benefits of time and materials saved in writing and publishing.

The SSS thus now offers a range of reform possibilities.

What the SSS is, what it does, and what it offers.

Traditionally London-based, SSS members are found in all the main English-speaking countries and others beside. Email provides a forum for vigorous debate and a means of international co-ordination, with publications appearing both in print and on the Internet. Members include academics, administrators, business people, engineers, IT specialists, linguists, psychologists, publishers, teachers and plenty more. Many are content just to follow the SSS's activity, or enjoy experimenting with spelling, but others are actively involved in various facets of the SSS's work, such as: designing and testing spelling systems, encouraging, carrying out and publishing research, giving conference papers, raising public awareness of the problems of today's spelling and ways of overcoming them, and lobbying opinion-formers and policy-makers in education, government, the media, publishing. The SSS arouses lively interest wherever it presents its case, whether concerning everyday spelling controversies or points of abstract theory and technical detail. Its perspective extends to the history of writing as a whole and to spelling changes in other languages, with whose spelling authorities it tries to maintain contact. The SSS offers wide scope to members for developing their own interests and initiatives in promoting the simplification of English spelling. For more detailed information, visit the SSS website

WHY SIMPLIFY SPELLING?

The need to modernize

Spelling is a system of letters giving words recognizable written form. If the letters are used consistently to show how words are pronounced (as they are meant to), literacy is easily mastered. However, the spelling of words may become out of date as pronunciation changes thru the ages, and literacy then becomes more difficult. To avoid this, spelling needs to be updated to ensure sounds and letters still match. Many languages have updated their spelling in the past 100 years, but English has not done so systematically in the past 1000. English spelling today is therefore so antiquated that it presents a serious obstacle to education.

What's wrong with English spelling?

English spelling is full of contradictions. Letters may stand for the wrong sound, like o in *woman* or u in *busy* or gh in *cough*, and most are sometimes silent, like b in *doubt* or s in *island*. Consonants vary from single to double, like f in *afraid* but ff in *affray*, or t in *omit* but tt in *omitted*. Endings are unpredictable: compare *beggar*, *teacher*, *actor*. Success in the modern world depends on literacy, yet English spelling is so disordered that after 10 or more years schooling many people still have only a shaky command of it, and millions are functionally illiterate. Even in the hands of professional writers it is an uncertain and clumsy instrument. As a medium of world communication, English is learnt by hundreds of millions of non-native speakers, yet their access to the language is likewise obstructed by the mismatch between speech and writing, which arouses anger, ridicule and frustration. Native and non-native users alike would gain from simpler, more regular, more predictable spellings.

Introducing simpler spelling

Such a complex, worldwide system of communication cannot be revolutionized overnight. Awareness first has to be spread of the advantages of simplification: greater consistency would improve literacy, make written communication easier, and benefit all education. Society then needs to ensure that schools teach simpler, more regular spellings, and that publishers provide texts using the new forms, which would also have to be listed in dictionaries. In this way simplified spellings would gradually become accepted as a new standard.

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