

**Press Release:**  
**Revised Spelling System Commended for Use**  
**21 November 2022**

*After many years of discussion, The English Spelling Society has endorsed a new spelling system which they hope will eventually replace the current highly irregular system for relaying English communication in written form around the world.*

Over 70 years have elapsed since George Bernard Shaw encouraged a competition to find a new spelling system; the English Spelling Society has now agreed to give support to such a revised scheme.

The new system 'Traditional Spelling Revised' (TSR) was previously voted as the preferred alternative to our current spelling system during the International English Spelling Congress in 2021; now the English Spelling Society has agreed to give provisional endorsement to this system, which will be promoted to run voluntarily alongside traditional spelling in the hope that it will eventually gain wide acceptance and thereby accelerate access to literacy.

Jack Bovill, Chair of the Society says: "The English Spelling Society hopes that in lending support to the new system of Traditional Spelling Revised, this will move forward the debate on the need for reformed spelling and also help children and young adults who struggle to learn to spell."

**Why does English spelling need reform?**

English spelling is significantly more difficult to learn compared with most other spelling systems based on the alphabetic principle. Although English is basically phonemic – with spelling reflecting the pronunciation of words – that correspondence is very hit and miss and English is accordingly described as having a 'deep orthography' (spelling system), causing learners particular trouble. Languages such as Spanish and Finnish by contrast, where such correspondence is much more marked, are described as having a 'shallow orthography.'

Additionally, the current system hasn't undergone an overhaul for over 600 years, meaning that children today are struggling to learn to spell with a code that was set down

by their ancestors many generations ago! In many cases the pronunciation has changed but the spelling has not. Examples <flood>, <glove>.

### **Written in history**

Since modern English evolved in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, various attempts have been made to formalise spelling as text. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century the British scholar Sir John Cheke (who incidentally taught King Edward VI Greek), was a spelling reformer; he ended up in the Tower of London, but not for his zeal for annotating clear and concise spelling.

Other spelling reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century included Thomas Smith and John Hart who also set their sights on making English spelling easy to learn. Hart had a zeal for letting go of superfluous letters and he had the support of Elizabeth I.

In 1662, the Royal Society was formed and they set up a committee to improve English spelling which included among others John Dryden.

Not much happened with spelling reform for another 200 hundred years until Sir Isaac Pitman proposed reform in 1873. Part of the reason was the conservative approach of the early lexicographers, including Samuel Johnson, who, despite his many other achievements, had little concern for correspondence between pronunciation and spelling.

Set up in 1908, The English Spelling Society sought to find solutions to bring about reform of our highly irregular spelling system, which the Society believes has significant economic and social costs compared with phonetic systems. Founding members of the Society included Andrew Carnegie, the Pitmans and George Bernard Shaw. Shaw (who wrote in Pitman's shorthand) left money in his will for the advancement of spelling reform as well as a competition to find a system to replace the current one.

Despite the formation of the Society in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the most successful period of activity around spelling reform came in the 1950s. The Society came close to persuading the case for reform when the Spelling Reform Bill of 1953 led by parliamentarian and Spelling Society member James Pitman went before parliament - however, the bill ultimately failed to elicit change. Similar efforts were made in the USA in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by President Theodore Roosevelt, but these were frustrated when they were blocked by Congress.

## **Why is spelling reform still important?**

Jack Bovill, Chair of The Society said: “Compared with other languages, English has relatively simple grammar and punctuation, which can be mastered by learning the rules. However, English spelling is a different matter. The spelling of up to 35% of the commonest English words is to a degree irregular or ambiguous; meaning that the learner has to memorise these words.

“Such a need to memorise irregularity has traditionally been regarded as a minor and inevitable inconvenience for successive generations of school children. But there is growing evidence that this is not just an inconvenience - it costs children precious learning time, and us (as a nation) money.

“A study carried out in 2001 revealed that English speaking children can take over two years longer to learn basic words compared with children in other countries where the spelling system is more regular. Around 20% of primary school leavers have not achieved the reading and writing skills expected of them by that stage. This has a knock-on effect for secondary education, where inadequate reading and writing skills can impede learning across the board. The KPMG Foundation in 2006 estimated the cumulative costs of this failure to master basic literacy skills in the primary school years at up to £2.5 billion a year.

“Other studies have indicated that English speaking dyslexics suffer disproportionately compared with those in other countries. The rate of adult functional illiteracy in English speaking countries continues to be a worry.”

## **What's the alternative?**

The search for a sensible alternative to traditional spelling has been going on for many decades. English has no equivalent of the *Academie Francaise* or *Real Academia* to lay down spelling rules. Also, there are a considerable number of countries where English is the maternal language of most of the population. All of these are sovereign states and democracies, making the pursuit of such a goal difficult: a top down approach to spelling reform by Government diktat seemed unlikely to succeed.

Another obstacle has been the continuing divide among spelling reformers as to what kind of alternative system would be the best. Some support a radical approach – while those

on the other side argue that a radical solution would never be accepted by the general populace and that the only way forward is via a conservative approach, perhaps one that changes just the more difficult irregularities. The IESC's proceedings suggest that among those broadly supportive of spelling reform the preference is for the latter approach.

### **The new system**

Traditional Spelling Revised (TSR) was conceived by former Chair of the Society Stephen Linstead. This minimal respelling approach to the reform of Traditional English Spelling (TS), is based essentially on identifying the underlying rules of English spelling and applying them more consistently.

The author says: "If you look at a page of text written in TSR, it is not too dissimilar to Traditional Spelling (TS). As for the number of changes required, this depends on the text – in a typical sample text it can range from about 8% to 18%. But the degree of change required overall is much smaller than that required by many alternative schemes. Another advantage is that by allowing a sound to be represented by more than one letter combination, it preserves different spelling of homonyms (words that have different meanings but which are pronounced the same and are often spelled differently)– this is traditionally one of the objections raised against spelling reform generally.'

Its core principles are:

- One sound can be represented by more than one letter or letter combination, BUT
- One letter or letter combination must normally only represent one sound – where that principle is not followed, there must be strict rules indicating which sound is indicated in any particular situation.
- If a rule in TS is reasonably dependable, it is normally carried over into TSR.
- Where a spelling cannot be brought within an existing dependable rule, it is normally respelled.
- A few words are retained with their irregular TS spelling. Their number is sufficiently small for them to be memorised without too much difficulty.
- Omission of clearly redundant letters: in words such as (k)night, (k)now, (g)nash, snor(e), (w)rong etc. But an apostrophe can be inserted in cases where respelling might lead to loss of meaning e.g our (possessive adjective) and 'our (unit of time).

- Where the doubling rule is applied incorrectly in TS – a common source of confusion – this is corrected: thus ‘committee’ is respelled ‘comittee’, and ‘accommodate’ is respelled ‘acommodate’ etc.

The result is a system that it is not as phonemic as Spanish or Italian but generally offers one-way phonemicity on the lines of German or French.

### **Examples of words changed:**

blue > bloo, cough > coff, love > luv, educate > eddicate, foot > fuut, good > guud, show > sho, wash > wosh.

### **The future:**

The English Spelling Society hopes that in provisionally endorsing the new system of Traditional Spelling Revised, this will move forward the debate on the need for reformed spelling and also help children and young adults who struggle to learn to spell. The new scheme will be reviewed at the end of 5 years to assess the extent to which it has become an acceptable alternative to traditional spelling within the English Speaking World. The Society’s support for TSR will be reassessed in the light of that review.

### **Notes to Editors.**

**1. Jack Bovill, Chair of The English Spelling Society, is available for comment as is Stephen Linstead - author of the new scheme “Traditional Spelling Revised” via [vikkirimmer@gmail.com](mailto:vikkirimmer@gmail.com) 07886673412 (editorial comment below of 800 words for use)**

The author of the scheme is Stephen Linstead. He spent most of his working life as a civil servant. He has studied several European languages. In his retirement, he lives in Solihull, West Midlands, and now has the opportunity to devote more time to his long standing interests in law and linguistics. His concern for the reform of English spelling is long-standing.