



# *The case for an International Commission on English Spelling*

VALERIE YULE

## **Summary**<sup>1</sup>

The case for an International Commission on English Spelling has six aspects. Improvement of English spelling to make it more user-friendly is both more urgent and more feasible today. An International Commission on English Spelling is needed to monitor investigations and research, to consider whether orthographic repair or any drastic changes or completely new system reform is more advisable, and to oversee implementation, while individuals and groups remain free and encouraged to also investigate and experiment. For too long spelling reform has been a segregated province for hundreds of individual schemes often uninformed by modern communications research and global practicalities. Also to be considered is the composition of the Commission, drawing on international expertise in all relevant fields and the interest and co-operation of governments; its auspices, funding and sponsors; its means of operation; and possible directions. It can learn from the mistakes as well as the successes of past and contemporary national orthographic commissions and the modern design and implementation of hundreds of new writing systems for languages with none. An epoch-making and timely outcome from the 2005 Mannheim Conference on English Spelling would be a public call for the International Commission and initiating a Working Party to work for its establishment.

---

<sup>1</sup> Occasionally some spellings of words may drop surplus letters or rationalise the spelling of /f/. Readers can observe their initial responses and, indeed, whether they notice all modifications.

*'I am speaking in English because it is the modern Latin.'*

Pope John Paul II reported in the *Sunday Telegraph*, 1 December, 1985.

*'The greatest barrier to the wider spread of English lies in its spelling.'* R. E. Zachrisson, Upsalla, Sweden, 1931. Foreigners have always been keen to reform English spelling.

An International Commission on English Spelling under international auspices would have been impossible and even unthinkable, until very recently. Now it is feasible and more urgent, and its spin-offs would extend beyond spelling repair itself.

Some spelling reformer groups and individuals may think that such an official organisation is superfluous, that global improvement of English spelling can be achieved without it, that the solutions are known already and require only to gain acceptance, and that a Commission would be expensive, bureaucratic, dilatory, and ineffectual except to postpone reform or impose disastrous dictates by whimsy. This paper sets out the necessity for a Commission, its potential functions, and how its possible defects can be prevented.

In the 19th century Anglo-American 'Great Leap Forward' in industrialization, scientific advance and social reform, a natural part of this wave was to seek reform of English spelling. The movement was supported by thousands of eminent people. In post-World War II, the wave of reconstruction and reform included two Spelling Reform Bills that narrowly missed being passed in the British Parliament.

However, during both periods, enthusiasm was not matched by knowledge. Unchallenged and fallacious assumptions were held among reformers as well as among conservatives (Yule 2001) The media attitude of ridicule was often understandable. The practical and financial difficulties in implementing any systematic change were enormous, and the vested interests with power saw no benefit to themselves. Most people regard what everyone else accepts as normal and right. Two hundred years ago, most people regarded slavery as normal and right, and believed that to stop slavery would wreck the economies of Britain and America. A spelling barrier to literacy is a lesser oppression, but a barrier still widely regarded as normal and right, and impossible to alter.

Yet in today's electronic age, great technological changes in printing, publishing and communication make transliteration cheap, efficient and accessible. Global inter-communication can be instant. A simple Google search raises thousands of web pages about all aspects of spelling and literacy. Education in literacy, including self-help, is facilitated by access to electronic resources. Data-bases can be collated and public, and research and debate open to all. The internet is wide open for extensive and cheap experimentation.

p3 The ownership of the English language is now in the international arena, because people not native-speakers who use English now outnumber those born to it. Now that English spelling is communications technology for the world's lingua franca, its purveyors have no right to continue nursing spelling antiquities and 'conspicuous consumption' in the orthography that handicap education and communication internationally as well as at home. Because English spelling now belongs to the world, an International English Spelling Commission is a necessary body to collate, promote, monitor, deliberate and implement changes in spelling to make it user-friendly for the world. Individual reformers may be unaware how much their schemes may represent their own local dialect<sup>2</sup> and that more than phonology is involved in a efficient writing system, while even the ownership of English speech may be moving offshore (Jenkins, 2000). Over 150 years spelling reform has got nowhere in large part due to isolationism from the communications research that is making such advances in other areas of its technology.

There have been such rapid and extensive changes in the world in the past two decades that English spelling is like a stick in the sands before the tide. In the communications technology of which it is a basic element, hardly anything else has remained unchanged over the past 150 years, including the writing systems of other modern languages, which have mostly all been reformed to a major or minor degree, including international systems such as Spanish and Portuguese. There are those who claim that it does not matter that English spelling is unpredictable.

Even in education there are those who write articles claiming that print literacy is no longer essential for the masses, because it is upstaged by Hypertext, voice-overs, graphics and logo-language. But to abandon the hope of universal book-literacy is to abandon hopes of working democracies, of citizenship as part of being a full human being, of informed governments, of full access to our world heritage of civilization (so much of it in English, regardless of its origin), of contact with minds and hearts distant in time and space, and of full equipment to face the unparalleled challenges and dangers of our time. There are voices aware of the vital need for localism to co-exist with globalism, that are angry that there should be any lingua franca all. They do not see its advantages in how it can save cultures and share them with the world, and how local languages might still co-exist rather than be extinguished by drowning. A global lingua franca does not ensure peace, but it can help to make peace work in every area of life and science.

Tremendous advances in communications, cognitive psychology, linguistics, sociolinguistics and neuropsychology now provide solid research findings to collate in considering reforms. It is shown how a writing system must

---

<sup>2</sup> A Chinese scheme for English spelling reform uses one letter for both /l/ and /r/, considering any difference to be imperceptible and unnecessary.

p4

facilitate reading processes as well as learning processes, that learning to read requires more than simple sound-symbol relationships, that phonology can in fact be difficult for beginners, and that real improvement of a writing system requires understanding of the actual needs and abilities of all categories of learners and users. Anglo parochialism about English orthography is being broken down by awareness of so much to be learned from other writing systems of the world, and how they change, and how they facilitate or impede learning to read. The International English Spelling Commission would be informed by the knowledge and experience of those who have been involved with writing system reforms in their own countries and regions, their successes and their failures. We also know more about how people want to spell, and about ongoing informal spelling trends not yet recognized by dictionaries. We know more about adjusting to change, and the psychology of resistance.

### **Functions of an International English Spelling Commission**

A proposed manifest: To prepare, authorize, promote and monitor repair of English spelling that can quickly benefit all users and learners, while remaining compatible with all currently in print. More radical reforms can also be considered, but this is the most urgent and immediate task.

The International Commission on English Spelling would not be aligned with any reform organization. It would not come to the task with any rigid unchangeable convictions about what type of change was desirable, and all options would receive attention - radical character changes, augmented alphabets, completely phonemic systems, making lists, a phonemic writing system used and introduced as dictionary key that would initially run parallel with traditional spelling, intuitive changes for difficult words, and principles that could update present spelling to make it predictable with minimum change to its visible appearance, plus looking forward to a future breakthrough to a writing system that can cross languages, like Chinese but without its difficulties.

International organizations already work effectively and cheaply to ensure the efficient working of international communication in many fields – as in SeaSpeak, airport language and telecommunications. The Spelling Commission can have similar status and prestige; its work will however be more complex.

The nature and effects of English spelling must be clearly set out and the record set straight, for misinformation and fallacious assumptions are rife and resist clearing up. The Commission will require public openness, and encourage academic and technological research, with pilot experiments that can quickly extend into action research and can be the first steps in implementation of change.

p5

while monitoring and taking into account the informal changes that are occurring in English spelling across the world. Universities and grant-giving bodies that currently reject English spelling improvement as a legitimate topic for R&D would rapidly turn to it as a field ripe for study, including for students' projects and theses.

### **Membership**

It is possible and essential to ensure that an International Commission on English spelling does not fall prey to bureaucracy, overspending, over-publishing of weighty documents, such as can happen with inadequately competent managers and personnel

The secretariat would be very small, and work chiefly with honorary staff and consultants holding positions in organizations, such as governments, Universities and research. The members and corresponding members would have the pre-requisite of readiness for change, rather than resistance; they must be aware why improvement is urgent rather than paddling along with some vague future in mind. Between them, they would cover a range of qualifications in relevant areas, from writing systems and communication to the socio-politics of international changes and the roles of governments, education and publishing. The members would be keen to become as informed as possible about the knowledge and research that is already out there.

Action research in change and implementing spelling change, wherever and by whoever would be welcomed, and all reports investigated. It could start in the first week of meeting, leaving administrative detail for the next week. The Commission is to be a means to promote spelling repair, not to postpone it. From its on-line pages and occasional publications, all reformers and conservatives could be informed on all the issues, instead of as at present operating in fogs of fallacious assumptions and even misinformation. The format of publications would aim at conciseness and clarity, with a summary under 500 words, the basic contents under 5000 words, books under 300 pages, and the remainder available online or by special request.

### **Sponsorship.**

The Commission would be a legitimate object for big philanthropy plus financial sponsorship on particular issues, and Government and NGO contributions as with other UNESCO projects.

### **Central location.**

Europe is most central to experiences of reforms in other alphabetic writing systems and other international relevant organizations. Correspondents would be located in all countries as far as possible, including within

p6

governments, so that all relevant experience within each country can be coordinated and reported.

### **Tasks**

At this stage, many devisers of spelling schemes may impatiently exclaim that all that is needed is to authorize a spelling scheme with phoneme-grapheme regularity. Why hassle around checking out other possibilities and desirabilities? The answer is to look at so many schemes that have been imposed in the past with It Seemed a Good Idea at the Time, without sufficient care for what may be needed, and what may be the consequences. Consider, for example, the metric system, with its theoretical perfection, but the practical flaws we regret today. The present German spelling reforms - how did some of them manage to miss the mark? Orthographers and educators such as the Summer Institute of Linguistics and George O'Halloran have been very aware of the importance of considering conditions in the field in devising and implementing written languages.

Hence the need for research and collating research that is directed to practical outcomes in a way that avoids repeating the history of the tons of spelling and reading research that have piled up and recycled over the last eighty years.

Questions requiring research would be publicized, so that students in many disciplines and workers in other organizations can be encouraged to investigate them and report back findings.

The data-base collated and built up by the Commission has two functions - a foundation for experiments, decisions and action; and for spreading public knowledge about the issues of English spelling and its reform.

### **Information that is needed**

Many issues require resolution by collating existing research and encouraging further research to fill the blanks. The on-going action research that is fostered to test the implementation of reforms itself can help to answer the questions.

### **Topics include:-**

Description of the current situation

Collating financial, educational social and personal costs of English spelling in English language and non-English language countries, especially in multilingual developing countries

The difficulties set by spelling unpredictabilities for dyslexic, disabled and disadvantaged learners, with comparisons with more predictable spellings and initial learning spellings.

p 7

The annual number and costs of publications about learning and teaching spelling, and the extent of the research literature

The efficiency of the English orthography for its many purposes. This includes cross-lingual comparisons.

How important is a standardized orthography for readers? For learners? For learners of spoken English? For writers? Does a degree of variation or permitted alternative spellings matter, and if so, to what degree? Could there be variations in the orthography for initial learning, personal writing and print?

The relationship of how learners learn to read and the efficiency of their adult reading strategies. How well do adults read? Does method of learning to read affect adult's reading strategies?

Readers' and writers' adjustment to spelling change. The electronic technology for change.

Consequences of initial learning spellings that are not the same as the final system to be used. Individual and group differences.

The time and money spent on spelling in English language classrooms and the degree of success relative to that.

Streamlining English spelling by dropping surplus letters in words would make reading easier to learn, faster to type, and save trees. Would it facilitate faster reading or does the redundancy serve a function by adding distinctiveness to words?

If grav accents, say were used as a diacritic for long vowels, what would be the responses of skilled readers - would they find them to be like punctuation signals but do not obtrude, or would their visual skimming for meaning be disturbed?

Classrooms where all learners have no problems in acquiring phonemic awareness - how can this be achieved?

Could skilled shorthand users read printed shorthand as rapidly, accurately and comprehendingly as normal print? (Hard to test this out today, perhaps.)

p 8

Collating findings and investigating other writing systems –e.g:

Comparisons of adult readers in different writing systems. (Tricky but not impossible, to match groups at educational level.)

Comparisons of writing system difficulty and its effects for different levels of ability and different types of handicap. What factors explain why learners in some very regular writing systems who learn to read quickly and easily appear to not maintain their superiority in later schooling?

What factors explain why school literacy learning rates are slow in some regions with very regular spelling systems?

Does variety of spelling patterns add to quick automatic visual recognition reading? i.e, would a predictable English spelling that retained many spelling patterns be more efficient for skilled reading than a spelling like Italian that has far fewer, or Hawaiian which has fewer still?

How do readers (and writers and learners) in other alphabetic spelling systems cope with diacritics? Are they always necessary? Could many diacritics be abolished except for helping learners with pronunciation or do they serve a purpose in distinctiveness as well?

What are the effects of exposure to different orthographies for English? - including different possibilities for change?

Advantages and disadvantages of the Japanese 5-script system. What factors make Japanese adult 5-script orthography preferred over plain simple regular hiragana? What factors make Japanese kanji preferred over simple regular hiragana?

What can users and former users of Blissymbolics pictographic interlingual writing, Isotype, logos and other symbols tell us about the use of ideographic, pictographic and other alternatives in conjunction with alphabetic writing?

Learning from writing system reforms in other languages. How have they been carried out? How have they been successful and unsuccessful? What for example, was the weakness of the recent German spelling reform program? What is the difference between reforms when the populace are largely illiterate (as in Turkey) or literate (as in the Netherlands)?

### **Towards implementation of an International English Spelling.**

This is a matter for deliberation. Some initial steps are suggested:

*The Internet*, with pilot trials for responses of all types of users and learners and using transliteration software that is already easily available. Experiments can range from the most rigorous laboratory and other research conducted by University and other research establishments, to freelance explorations by anyone.

*Media*. Polls and experiments, include writing, reading and spelling abilities of adults.

*Publishing*. Encourage testing dictionary keys that can be a base for the standardized spelling system. Test texts, including experiments with a variety of spelling representations on the same page.

*Education*. Collating experiments in initial learning spellings, and encouraging pilot experiments. Testing the value of spelling systems for students with different types of learning disabilities.

### **Conclusion:**

Media publicity and public interest is needed for this initiative of an International English Spelling Commission. At present even teachers know hardly anything about English spelling except that it must be learnt, and bad spelling is regarded as the fault of the speller, not of the task. Miracles of scientific ingenuity now bring us the world's entertainment, explore universes and microcosms, means of healing and means of death. Scientific ingenuity can now apply human engineering to the tools for print communication on paper and on screen, for exchange and permanent record of knowledge, thinking and the means to face and deal with the challenges ahead. It will require organization and cooperation.

**References** - illustrating a variety of resources.

Bell, Masha. 2004. *Understanding English Spelling*. Cambridge: Pegasus Educational.

Frith, Uta. 1981. *Cognitive processes in spelling*. NY: Academic Press.

Feitelson, D. 1966. The alphabetic principle in Hebrew and German contrasted with the alphabetic principle in English. In P Tyler (Ed.) *Linguistics and Reading*. Newark,DE: IRA.

Frith, U. 1979. Reading by eye and writing by ear. In P Kolers, M Wrolstad & H Bouma (Eds). *The processing of visible language*.

Hanna, P R, Hodges, R, & Hanna, J S. 1971. *Spelling, structure and strategies*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Harrison, M. 1946. *The use of simplified spelling in teaching infants to read and write*. London: Pitman.

- Jenkins, J. 2000. *The Phonology of English as an International Language*. Oxford: OUP.
- Klima, E. 1972. How alphabets might reflect language. In J F Kavanagh & I Mattingly, (Eds.) *op.cit.*
- Lepsius, R. 1863/1981. *Standard alphabet for reducing unwritten languages and foreign graphic systems to a uniform orthography in European letters*. Edited by J Kemp. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Pitman, J and St.John, J. 1969. *Alphabets and Reading*. London: Pitman
- Venezky, R. 1999. *The American Way of Spelling: the structure and origins of American English Orthography*. London: The Guilford Press.
- Wells, J C . 1982. *Accents of English*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Yule, V C. 1986. The design of spelling to meet needs and abilities. *Harvard Educational Review*. 56.3. 278 - 297.
- 1994. Problems that face research in the design of English spelling. *Visible Language*. 28:1. 26-47
  - 1995. The politics of international English spelling. In D Myers & N Walker (Eds.) *The politics of Literacy in Australia and the Asian-Pacific Region*. Northern Territory University Press.
  - 2001. Why English spelling has resisted reform. *Australian Style*. 9.1.4.
  - 2003. Could English spelling be made regular without drastic change? *Journal of the Simplified Spelling Society*. 32-03/1.34-37.
  - 2005. *The Book of Spells & Misspells*. Sussex, UK: The Book Guild.

Links from <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~ozideas> include further unpublished papers on spelling and writing systems, and their reforms.

Valerie Yule, 57 Waimarie Drive, Mount Waverley, Vic. Australia 3149.  
[vyule@labyrinth.net.au](mailto:vyule@labyrinth.net.au) Researcher on literacy and imagination. Formerly of Melbourne, Monash and Aberdeen Universities, clinical child psychologist and teacher