

Ready to be read?
The Spelling Reformers Dilemma

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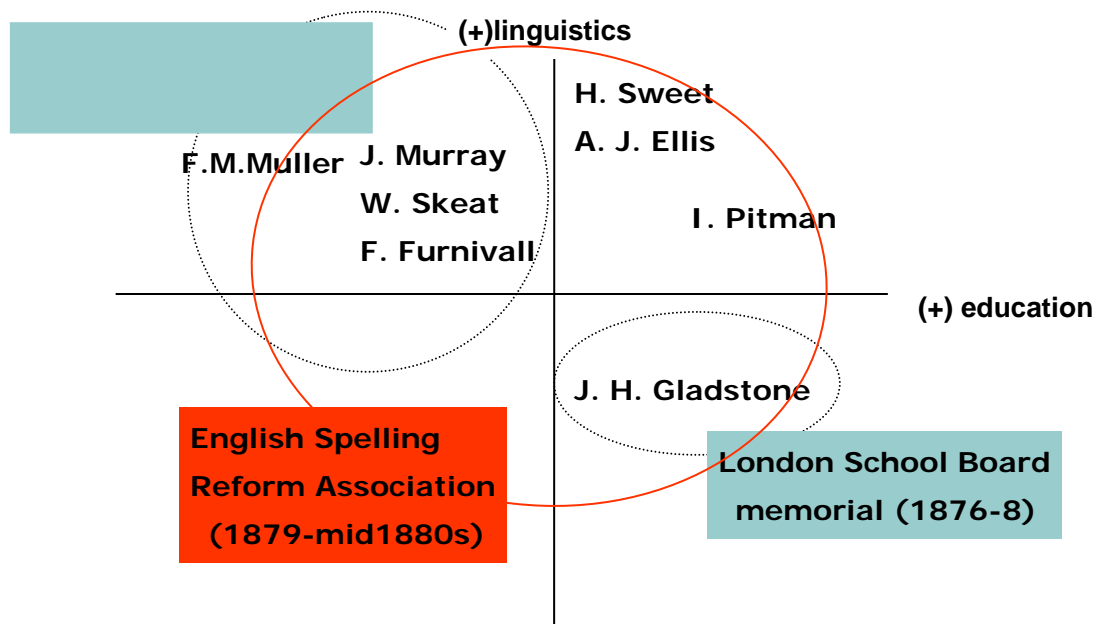
1 Introduction

1.1 Aim of this paper

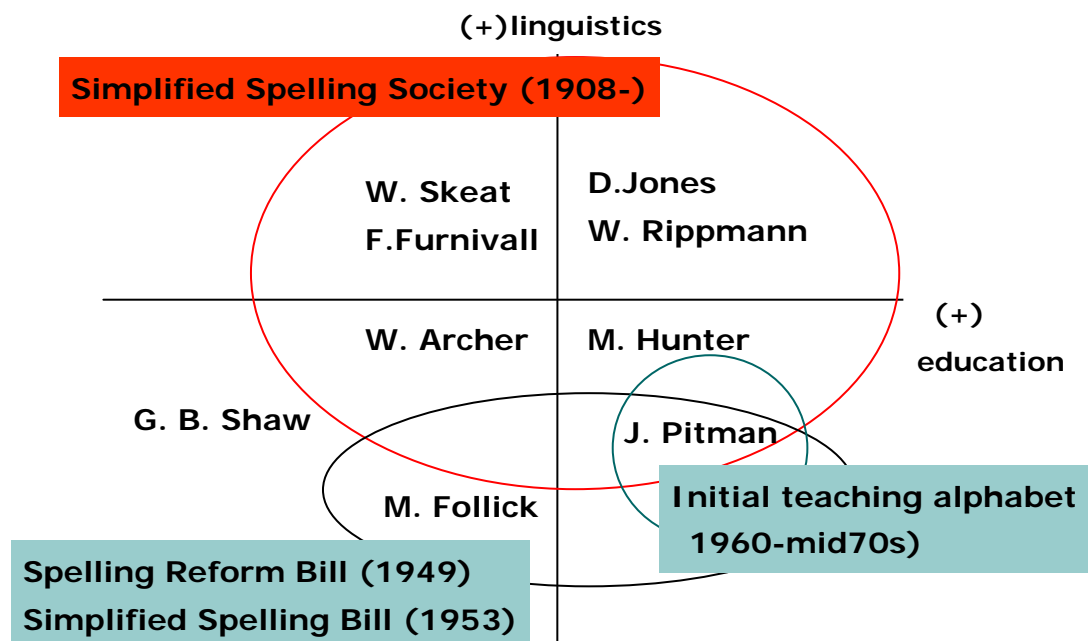
This paper addresses the question, “How have the spelling reformers of English coped with the dilemma of writing about spelling reform, while still using the conventional orthography, instead of their own phonetic spelling?” This is related to one of the PALA 2007 conference topics on Style and Communication: “How do writers or speakers exploit language variation to communicate their intended message?” I will address the question by discussing the activities of the Simplified Spelling Society in the first two decades of the twentieth century as a case study.

1.2 Research interests in the spelling reform movement

The history of the spelling reform movement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Britain can be studied from various viewpoints. Firstly, those who support spelling reform have recorded their predecessors efforts. For example, Harrison (1964: 29-91) offers a detailed record of the reformers’ activities from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. One of Harrison’s purposes when he wrote the book was to promote the initial teaching alphabet devised by James Pitman, which had been experimented with at some schools since 1961, and the section on the history of spelling reform provides a context in which the cause should be pursued. Secondly, the diachronic and synchronic studies of English spelling often devote a chapter to the spelling reform movement and proposals, as is the case with Bourcier (1978: Ch.5) and Carney (1994: Ch. 7). Thirdly, the spelling reform movement can also be seen from a socio-cultural point of view and can be analysed as activities that reflect people’s attitudes towards the language. For example, Richard Bailey’s *Images of English: A Cultural History of the Language* discusses spelling reformers’ discourse in Chapter 7 “English Improved,” together with other attempts to “improve” English (Bailey 1991: 179-213). My research interest in studying the history the English spelling reform movement is similar to the third (Yamaguchi 2002, 2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2007). Figure 1 and Figure 2 show the main spelling reformers, their interests and bodies that they belonged to. For biographical notes, see endnote .



Figur 1. Spelling Reformers' Interests in the Nineteenth Century



Figur 2: Spelling Reformers' Interests in the Twentieth Century

2 The Simplified Spelling Society

2.1 From the English Spelling Reform Association to the Simplified Spelling Society

The Simplified Spelling Society was established in London in 1908, and its objects stated at the inaugural meeting were:

- (1) to recommend simpler spellings of English words than those now in use, to further the general use of such simpler spellings by every means in its power, and to co-operate with the Simplified Spelling Board of the United States of America, founded and incorporated in New York [in 1906] .

Both the Simplified Spelling Society (SSS) and the Simplified Spelling Board (SSB) were sponsored by the industrialist and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, who requested that they should avoid the phrase “spelling reform” (Wiegand 1996: 247) .The first president of the SSS was Walter Skeat (1835-1912), an eminent philologist at Cambridge University, and the treasurer was Frederick Furnivall (1825-1910), the founder of a number of academic associations including the Early English Text Society. A theatre critic William Archer was the secretary.

The SSS was not the first organization to promote spelling reform in Britain. In 1879, about thirty years before the SSS was established, the English Spelling Reform Association (ESRA) was founded ‘with strong backing from well-placed members of the philological, educational and scientific branches of the Victorian establishment’ (MacMahon 1985: 106). There was a growing interest in the spelling reform in Britain in the 1870s and 1880s, following the introduction of the Elementary Education Act 1870. On January 18, 1878, the London School Board, supported by the Society of Arts and more than one hundred local school boards, submitted a memorial to the Committee of Privy Council on Education to ask for a Royal Commission on spelling reform, after over a year’s preparation including a conference open to public held on May 29, 1877. The ESRA was established based on the organising body of the conference.

The ESRA was active with regular meetings and journals *The Spelling Reformer*, and *Journal of the English Spelling Reform Association* edited *Spelling Experimenter* for several years , but it could not, and would not, come to a single spelling reform proposal to promote as the Association.

At the ESRA meeting on December 16th, 1884, Henry Sweet described the situation as follows:

- (2) When we [=the ESRA] first began our deliberations there was a general belief that the reform of English spelling was really a very simple matter, and that all

that was wanted was a little common sense. When, however, common sense had gone on for years hatching one scheme after the other, it became necessary to try something else. We then began to see that an accurate knowledge of the facts of English pronunciation would be a help in settling the spelling of English sounds. (Sweet 1885:10)

Sweet pointed out here that the flood of new spelling schemes proposed by various members of the ESRA made spelling reform impossible, and that a new direction should be found in ‘an accurate knowledge of the facts of English pronunciation’, that is, the study of phonetics.

2.2 Simplified Spelling

One of the main differences between the ESRA and the SSS is that the latter succeeded in proposing a single spelling system as the Society’s official recommendation within a couple years of the launch of the Society. It was the Simplified Spelling devised in 1910 by the phonetician Walter Ripman and the Society’s secretary William Archer, and other phoneticians such as Daniel Jones helped to improve the scheme. The SSS started promoting Simplified Spelling as the Society’s official proposal. In this sense, the SSS was definitely a spelling reform body whose members managed to overcome the difficulties that the ESRA had to face previously.

3 Spelling Reformers’ Dilemma

3.1 *The Pioneer*

In March 1912, the first issue of *The Pioneer* was published as the journal of the SSS. *The Pioneer* was printed in Simplified Spelling. The very beginning of the first article of the first issue reads as follows:

(3) TU THE REEDER

WE recomend yu tu prezurv cairfully this furst number of “The Pioneer.” Oonly a limited edishon ov it haz been printed; and it mai wun dai becum a priesles rarity az the furst peeriodical publisht in rashonaly-spelt English.

This natyuraly striecs yu iether az a bad joec or az the profesi ov a monomaniac. But “wait and se.” (*The Pioneer*, Vo. 1. No. 1 March 1912)

If you had waited as the article suggested, you would have seen the following article six years later in *The Pioneer*, Vol 6 No.4 published in February 1918.

(4) That the publication of *THE PIONEER* should be suspended was decided by the Committee of the Simplified Spelling Society after long and careful deliberation. The cost of production has become very heavy, while our income has not increased (*The Pioneer* Vol.VI, No.4).

Publication was suspended in 1918 due to the financial difficulties especially during the war. It took as long as eight years for the Society to start publishing the journal again with a new title, *The Pioneer of Reformed Spelling*.

Eight issues of the journal were published in 1912, and ten issues in 1913, eight issues in 1914, six issues in 1915, four issues in 1916, three issues in 1917 were published before the final issue in February 1918. The spelling of the journal title changed from *The Pioneer* to *The Pyoneer* in March 1916, then back again to *The Pioneer* in the last issue.

As you can see clearly, for this last issue, they chose to use conventional orthography. The reason is given in the article as follows:

(5) We believe that the account of our Annual Meeting which follows will be found an effective means of showing what the Simplified Spelling Society stands for, and, in the order to secure for it an extensive circulation, even among the unconverted, we have decided to print this last number of *THE PIONEER* in the bad old spelling. The end must justify the means (*The Pioneer*, Vol.VI, No.4).

In the final issue, they decided to use conventional spelling “in order to secure for it an extensive circulation, even among the unconverted.” In other words, conventional spelling was chosen to make the message more accessible to a larger number of people.

This choice shows the spelling reformers’ dilemma. To promote spelling reform, they need to actually use the proposed spelling system to demonstrate its advantages. But that choice will limit the readability of their text . How have the spelling reformers coped with the dilemma of using conventional spelling while promoting spelling reform?

There are three points I would like to discuss in the following subsections concerning this dilemma. First, there is a direct solution to this dilemma: “The end must justify the means,” and the spelling reformers chose either conventional spelling or reformed spelling depending on the desired goal. Secondly, there is also a long-term solution, that is, to seek support from the Authority, so that the use of reformed spelling should be stipulated by the Authority. Thirdly, the dilemma is related to the structural difficulties inherent to the spelling reform movement. Let me expand on these points in the following subsections.

3.2 Direct solution: “The end must justify the means”

First, as the February 1918 issue of *The Pioneer* said, to secure a larger audience, “the end must justify the means”. The SSS was aware of this point, and strategically chose between the conventional spelling and their Simplified Spelling depending on the media and the readership. *The Pioneer* was principally published as the Society’s journal and was “sent gratis tu aul Memberz ov the Simplifyd Speling Sosyeti.” This justified the use of the Simplified Spelling. When seeking for wider audience in the 1918 issue, however, they chose conventional orthography.

The Society’s booklet called *Simplified Spelling* itself is a good example that shows the strategic choice of the spelling. This booklet was written in conventional spelling and apparently was sent to various magazines and newspapers for review. *The Pioneer* reported the media response to their activities in the column called “PRAIZ AND PREJOODIS: PRES NOETISEZ OV THE SOESIETY’ WURC ” and the March 1912 issue revealed that there were as many as 73 articles published in newspapers and journals in January and February 1912, mentioned their *Simplified Spelling*. The title of the booklet was later changed to *Breaking the Spell* and revised and partially rewritten but still in conventional orthography .

When revised in 1942, however, it was not written in the conventional spelling but in a proposed new spelling. The title was spelt as “*Braeking dhe Spel: An Apeel to Komon Sens.*” The new edition in reformed spelling had a different purpose at the time of publication. The SSS carried out a major revision of their Simplified Spelling, not as a booklet but as a proposed spelling system, and published as “New Spelling” in 1940. In order to promote this New Spelling, and to revitalize the Society, a number of previous publications were published newly in New Spelling. The publication of *Braeking dhe Spel* in New Spelling primarily seemed to have served this purpose.

3.3 Long-term solution: Appeal for official support

In order to solve the dilemma in a longer term, spelling reformers sought for some official support from government. Actually this was one of the most important activities of the spelling reformers since late 1870s, when the London School Board, together with the support of the Society of Arts and over a hundred and twenty local school boards, submitted a memorial to the Board of Education and asked for a royal commission on spelling reform in 1878.

In 1910s, one of the earliest appeals for official support can be found in the resolution adopted the first Imperial Education Conference in 1911. This resolution was not achieved as the SSS’s official activity, but the people involved were mainly the

Society's members. This reflected an important aspect of the SSS's activities in the 1910s, when they set up the South India branch and the Canadian branch.

The Imperial Education Conference of 1911 was convened from 25 April to 1 May in London by the British Government, through the Board of Education, the Colonial Office, and the India Office and 47 representatives of the Dominions were nominated and attended the conference. The following description on the conference is based on the *Imperial Educational Conference 1911*. The morning sessions were held in private among the official representatives, while many educational officials and experts were invited to the afternoon sessions and they were also open to the Press.

Spelling reform was discussed in one of the afternoon sessions, as an item on the Agenda Paper suggested by Alexander Howard MacKay, a representative of the Nova Scotia government. On 28 April, E. R. Edwards, an SSS member and Secondary School Inspector of the Board of Education, read a paper on "English Spelling and Spelling Reform." A. H. MacKay then read a paper on the question of whether Education Departments should tolerate any reformed spelling. At the conclusion of the discussion, the Conference unanimously adopted the following resolution:

(6) That this Conference is of opinion that the simplification of spelling is a matter of urgent importance in all parts of the Empire, calling for such practical steps in every country as may appear most conducive to the ultimate attainment of the end in view – the creation, in connection with the subject, of an enlightened public opinion and the direction of it to the maintenance, in its purity and simplicity among all English-speaking peoples, of the common English tongue. (*Imperial Education Conference 1911*: 18).

In actual fact this resolution did not have any official power and did not have an actual impact on the English spelling in the Empire, but the fact that spelling reform was discussed at the first imperial conference itself shows that the movement had certain momentum at that time.

The SSS also started discussing a petition to the Board of Education as early as 1913, and in 1916 they contacted a former President of the Board, Mr. Arthur Henderson and asked to include "spelling reform into the Bill which is in preparation for the reconstruction of education after the war" (Harrison 1964: 53). The SSS became more active in seeking the official support from the government in the 1920s and 1930s than in the early years. In 1924, the Society sent a deputation to the President of the Board of Education, C. P. Trevelyan. In 1926, they submitted a petition to the Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, and in 1933, another petition was submitted to the President

of the Board of Education, Lord Erwin.

3.4 Spelling reform for others

The spelling reformers' dilemma can be related to the structural difficulties of the spelling reform movement. That is, it is sometimes implicitly assumed that the spelling reform is mainly for "Others." Who are the "Others"? It can be children, working classes, speakers of non-standard English, subjects of the empire, or foreigners. And when the reformed spelling is for "Others," the parallel use of reformed spelling and conventional may be justified.

It is not difficult to look for spelling reformers comments on others who they think will benefit from their reform (underlines are mine):

(7) The ultimate aim being economy of the time and labour of learners (whether children or foreigners) by the substitution uniformity for confusion, the value of any simplification must be measured by the amount of time and labour which it is likely to save. (*Proposals for a Simplified Spelling of the English Language*, 1911, p 1)

(8) The majority of our own people never acquire mastery of the language. Even the educated man of business writes with a dictionary at his elbow. Correct spelling and pronunciation are the aristocratic privilege of the few. (*Simplified Spelling* 1912, "Foreword.")

(9) London secondary schools are successfully teaching these poor but clever children a kind of pronunciation which enables them to pass muster as speakers of a possible standard English. And the most useful way of carrying out this experiment is by the use of texts in phonetic script, accompanied by drill with phonetic sound-charts. (E. R. Edwards, at the *Imperial Education Conference*, 1911, *Report*, p.216.)

A similar reference can be found in a petition.

(10) Spelling and pronunciation are intimately related, and therefore an improved spelling and improved methods in teaching spelling, must make directly for the standardisation of the pronunciation of English throughout the Empire, and in the great English-speaking States beyond its confines. (SSS Petition to the Prime Minister, 1926.)

In spelling reformers discussion the “Others” who would benefit from spelling reform changes over time. In 1870s and 1880s, it was especially the children in the working classes, who should be now benefiting from universal education. After the introduction of the Elementary Education Act in 1870, elementary education had become a national concern. Whereas in the twentieth century, the view point of the spelling reform for the empire was mentioned more frequently.

4 Concluding remarks

In this paper I have discussed the spelling reform activities of the SSS in the early twentieth century, and discussed three points concerning the spelling reformers’ dilemma of using conventional spelling while promoting spelling reform. I have pointed out a direct solution, a long-term solution, and a related structural problem.

However, these three solutions are meant to explain only part of the spelling reformers attitudes and discourse. For example, I haven’t mentioned that some spelling reformers sometimes used their own system in a very private context. For example, the nineteenth century phonetician Alexander John Ellis wrote six letters to James Murray in his own Glossik when he was seeking Murray’s support of his system at the Philological Society in 1869 . The twentieth century phonetician Daniel Jones also chose to use his own World Orthography in replying letters concerning spelling reform.

Every spelling reformer had their own ambition and dilemma. Despite all the logical argument and rational phonetic principles they claim, spelling reform was often seen as a rather quixotic project, trying to change what most people are happy with, or at least settled for. And what I have been finding out by studying the history of spelling reform is that these ambitions and dilemmas are not completely personal or individual but they also reflect the ideas that are influential in the society at the time. They reflect the ideas about language and society, and language, style and communication.

Abbreviations: PS (the Philological Society), SR (spelling reform), SSS (the Simplified Spelling Society)

Archer, William (1856-1924) British theatre critic and journalist. First Secretary of SSS.

Ellis, Alexander John (1814-90) British phonetician and mathematician. Collaborated with I. Pitman to revise his “Phonotypy.” Proposed “Glossic,” when PS discussed SR in 1869-70. Also invented “Paleotype,” and other phonetic systems.

Follick, Mont (1887-1958) British educationist and Labour MP (1945-55). Submitted two private member’s bills regarding SR, that is, “Spelling Reform Bill” (1949) and “Simplified Spelling Bill” (1953).

Furnivall, Frederick J. (1825-1910) British Philologist. Supported Sweet and Murray in PS’s SR attempt in 1881. First Treasurer of the SSS.

Gladstone, John Hall (1827-1902) British physical-chemist. Sat on the London School Board (1873-94). Promoted a London School Board petition for a Royal Commission on Spelling Reform (1876-8).

Hunter, (Sir) Mark (1865-1932) British academic administrator of the Indian Educational Service. Set up a South India Branch of SSS. Activated SSS as the organizing secretary after his retirement in 1923.

Jones, Daniel (1881-1967) British Phonetician. Revised “Simplified Spelling” as “New Spelling”(1940, 48). President of SSS (1946-67).

Muller, Friedrich Max (1823–1900), German Sanskritist and philologist. Supported the SR efforts of I Pitman and Ellis in his *Lectures on the Science of Language* (1864). Was sometimes treated as a “pillar of strength” among SR enthusiasts.

Murray, (Sir) James A. H. (1837-1915) British lexicographer. Called for a SR plan as the president of PS in 1880, and supported Sweet’s scheme.

Henry, Sweet (1845-1912) British phonetician and philologist. Led an academic discussion on SR within PS in the late 1870s and the early 1880s. Wrote “Partial Corection of English Spelling” for PS (1880-1).

Pitman, (Sir) Isaac (1813-97) British shorthand inventor (“Phonograph”). Invented a phonetic alphabet “Phonotypy” and promoted “Spelling Reform” with “Phonograph” and “Phonotypy.”

Pitman, (Sir) James (1901-85) British publisher and Conservative MP. Grandson of Isaac Pitman. Invented and promoted the initial teaching alphabet in 1960s and 70s.

Rip(p)man(n), Walter (1869-1947) British applied linguist and inspector of schools.

Co-authored *Proposals for a Simplified Spelling* (1910) with W. Archer.

Shaw, George Bernard (1856–1950) Irish playwright. Criticised the English spelling with the famous “ghoti” example. Left a will to call for a new British alphabet.

Skeat, Walter W. (1835-1912) British philologist. Supported Sweet’s SR plan at PS (1881). First president of SSS.

“Minutes of the meeting held in the York Room, Holborn Restaurant, on Thursday 10th September, 1908.” <http://www.spellingsociety.org/news/min1908.php>

For the history of the society, see the website of the SSS at <http://www.spellingsociety.org/>.

The Spelling Reformer, and Journal of the English Spelling Reform Association was edited by F. G. Fleay, who stayed anonymous in the journal. It was published by monthly from July 1880 to possibly 1883 (MacMahon 1985: 107).

The Pyoneer ov Simplifyd Speling, Vol.VI, No.2. Joon, 1917.

Letters from Ellis to Murray: 23 November, 25 November, 29 November, 30 November, 1 December and 15 December 1869.

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