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## **JEZIK, KNJIŽEVNOST, ALTERNATIVE LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, ALTERNATIVES**

**JEZIK, KNJIŽEVNOST, ALTERNATIVES**





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## AN ALTERNATIVE SPELLING FOR ENGLISH: CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES AND SIMPLIFICATION CRITERIA

**Abstract:** The history of English spelling is characterised by periods of discontinuity and a slow and relentless shift from a phonemic orthography to a morphophonemic system. There have been two periods when spelling reform of the English language has attracted particular interest: the first was from the middle of the 16th to the middle of the 17th century, when a number of publications and dictionaries outlining proposals for reform were published; the second was between the 18th and early 20th centuries and linked to the development of phonetics as a science. For example, Noah Webster's dictionary included an essay on the oddities of modern orthography and his proposals for reform (some of which would become hallmarks of American English spelling). The purpose of this study is to review proposals for English-language spelling reform since the 1950s – New Spelling, Regularised English, Spelling Reform 1, Cut Spelling, Shavian, Interspel, and the Petersonian English Alphabet – to identify their main common traits by highlighting the underlying ideas of simplification. All the models under consideration show a preference for a phonemic spelling system as an ideal in the direction of linguistic simplicity.

**Keywords:** English spelling, history of English, spelling reform, simplification

### 1. Introduction

Since the Second World War, English has arguably become the major *lingua franca* in international communication and the most extensively studied second language (L2) in the world. Despite its relative lack of complexity (the notion of simplicity in this respect will be explored towards the end of this paper), one of the main difficulties encountered by both native and non-native English speakers is its spelling, which is characterised by “a lack of system and consistency in the relationship between the sounds of the spoken language and the symbols of the written language” (Upward & Davidson, 2011, p. 1). Anyone who possesses even basic proficiency in contemporary standard English will likely discern the mismatch between the written form and the pronunciation of words, such as in *cough*, *rough*, *though*, *through*, *thorough*, and *plough*, which are spelt with the same *-ough* ending but are phonetically actualised by a variety of different phonemes. Based on such observations, the English spelling system has historically drawn criticism from multiple sources (linguists, writers, scholars, scientists, etc.). It has been

characterised as “a disguise for pronunciation” (Jerome, 1889, in Jespersen, 1905, p. 246), a “pseudo-historical and anti-educational abomination” (Jespersen 1905, p. 246), “the world’s most awesome mess” and “the soul and essence of anarchy” (Pei, 1953, p. 310–311), “a chaotic concoction of oddities without order or cohesion” (Follick, 1965, p. 1), “an insult to human intelligence” (Wandruszka, 1990, p. 104), and, in layman’s terms, “quite crazy” (Weekley, 1965, p. 11). Spelling reform for the English language was championed as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century by authors such as John Hart, who concluded that “in the moderne and present maner of writing [...] there is such confusion and disorder, as it may be accounted rather a kind of ciphing [...] a long and tedious labour, for that it is unfit and wrong shapen for the proportion of the voice” (1569 in Vallins, 1965, p. 94), and lexicographer Thomas Sheridan, who emphasised the impact of spelling on literacy:

Such indeed is the state of our written language, that the darkest heiloglyphics [sic], or most difficult cyphers which the art of man has hitherto invented, were not better calculated to conceal the sentiments of those who used them from all who had not the key, than the state of our spelling is to conceal the true pronunciation of our words, from all except a few well educated natives. (Sheridan, 1780, p. 13)

Despite the century-long tradition of advocacy for a new orthography, English has never undergone a comprehensive process of spelling reform as other European languages have, such as the post-Revolution Russian orthography reform of 1917, the Portuguese Language Orthographic Agreement of 1990, the French “rectifications” of 1990, the German orthography reform of 1996, and the Dutch spelling reforms of 1996 and 2006 (see Murray, 2017). The last successful, albeit partial, English spelling reform was laid out and popularised by Noah Webster in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. It applied, however, only to US English and involved a relatively small number of lemmas, although Webster’s proposal was originally much more radical (Upward & Davidson, 2011, pp. 302–305). This is the reason why today’s US and UK spellings are still intelligible to readers of every English variety.

Some of the reasons underlying the failure of more recent proposals for spelling reform are listed in Rogers (2005, pp. 195–197): (1) the extent of the so-called anglosphere – i.e. the large number of English-speaking countries with their own language varieties – prevents a radical unitary approach; (2) the natural conservatism of people inhibits speakers from learning another spelling system; (3) the absence of a centralised body for matters pertaining to the English language (such as the Académie Française for French and the Real Academia Española for Spanish) makes it politically challenging to persuade all English-speaking countries and publishers to use the same revised spelling; and (4) the enormous amount of (past and present) literature to transliterate makes change unviable.

There is, however, another fundamental reason: the current spelling system works better than expected by reform proponents. One study (Hanna, Hodges, & Hanna, 1971) revealed that, in a computer-based analysis of 17,000 lexical items, 84% were spelt according to regular, predictable patterns, and only 3% were inconsistent and idiosyncratic in their orthographies. This study concluded that

the apparent irregularity of English spelling results from the fact that the majority of the 3% most irregular words are also among the most frequently used lemmas. Therefore, the frequency of unpredictable spellings, not their number, can accentuate the impression of the irregular character of the English orthography. Unfortunately for all ESL learners, orthography is made by and for the native speakers of a language; in the words of Chomsky and Halle:

Orthography is a system designed for readers who know the language, who understand sentences and therefore know the surface structure of the sentences. Such readers can produce the correct phonetic forms, given the orthographic representation and the surface structure, by means of the rules that they employ in producing and interpreting speech. It would be quite pointless for the orthography to indicate these predictable variants. (1968, p. 49)

The success of a spelling reform not only depends on the inherent properties of an orthographic system but also is determined by cultural and political factors that often have little to do with linguistic considerations, as observed by Bunčić (2017, p. 41).

Starting from the assumption that spelling reforms are aimed at making orthography more regular, more predictable and, thus, simpler, the purpose of this paper is to analyse the most recent spelling reform proposals of the last two centuries to explore their main tendencies and approaches. This will lead to a final remark on the broader notion of linguistic simplicity. Rather than advocating for any specific spelling reform (or any spelling reform at all), this study investigates the core traits of seven spelling proposals to establish the main simplification principles.

## **2. A brief history of spelling reforms**

For the purposes of this study, this section will focus on the latest stages of the history of English spelling to explore the reform proposals discussed in the next section from a historical perspective of linguistic attitudes and traditions; therefore, the highlights that follow are not meant to cover this complex topic exhaustively. Perhaps the greatest and most recent contribution to this subject is Upward and Davidson (2011); other works with a historical focus are Scragg (1974), Lass (1987), Millward (1988), and Wakelin (1988); English spelling is also discussed in Carney (1994), Deighton (1972), Parkes (1993), Haas (1969), and, for the development of American spelling, Venezky (1970, 1999).

Towards the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, as a result of the conflicts with France and of social changes, the English nobility began to speak English, which would officially replace French as the language of the government in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century. By this time, huge phonological changes had occurred in English, and its vocabulary was enriched by an enormous number of Norman French and French borrowings. While Old English spelling was somewhat uniform, Middle English spelling was hugely diversified, often following local pronunciation and spelling conventions (Rogers, 2005, p. 186). Since most chancery clerks were trained in French, they tended to



apply the same orthographic conventions to English. For example, <c> came to be used for both /k/ and /s/ in borrowed words like *cellar* but also in native words such as *mice* and *lice*, the Latin and French <qu> was used in English words like *queen*, the digraphs <ch> and <sh> started to represent the sounds /tʃ/ and /ʃ/, and <gh> for the now extinct phoneme /x/. One of the main phonological changes that affected spelling at this stage was the shift of unstressed vowels, especially in word-final syllables, towards /ə/, which went finally lost in Late Middle English. This change in pronunciation was not reflected in the spelling; on the contrary, final silent *es* became common practice to represent a preceding long stressed vowel as <VCe>: this first occurred in French loanwords, such as *spine* and *cape*, then in native words, such as *made*, *broke*, and *hate*. By the time printing came and was established in Britain, spelling practices had already been standardised, and the systematic connection between written sign and spoken sound had been lost. At this stage, various scholars and intellectuals started noticing these discrepancies and advocating for reform.

Stevens (1965) highlights that there were two periods when the orthography of the English language stood out in the linguistic debates of scholars and intellectuals, and the breakpoint between these two periods is the emergence of modern phonology. The first took place between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, when a number of works dealing with English spelling came out, e.g. *De recta et emendata linguæ anglie scriptione* by Thomas Smith (1568), *An Orthographie* by John Hart (1569), *Booke at Large for the Amendment of English Orthographie* by William Bullokar (1580), *Logonomia Anglica* by Alexander Gill (1621), and *Grammar* by James Howell (1662). These proposals failed to reach the mainstream because of their radical character and insufficient understanding of phonology. However, as Mensel (1926) pointed out, a few simplified spellings involving minor changes during this period succeeded in attaining standard status, including *sin*, *war*, and *logic* versus the older versions *sinne*, *warre*, and *logique*.

The second period can be traced back from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of the most conspicuous proposals for spelling reform of this period was by Benjamin Franklin, who, while living in London, wrote *A Scheme for a New Alphabet and Reformed Mode of Spelling* (1768); in this “scheme,”<sup>1</sup> Franklin proposed a system inspired by pseudo-phonetic principles (phonetics as a discipline had not yet taken shape). Based on the idea of “one symbol one sound” (Upward & Davidson, 2011, pp. 302–305), his system consisted of all Latin in the Latin alphabet minus <c>, <j>, <q>, <w>, <x>, and <y>, which he assumed redundant, plus six new letters for vowels and consonants which he believed lacked unambiguous orthographic representation and corresponding to /ɔ:/, /ʌ/, /ʃ/, /ŋ/, /θ/, /ð/. From the perspective of today’s phonology, we can notice the shortcomings of this system (Malone, 1925): there is a general confusion between vowel pairs such as /ɔ:/ and /ɒ/, /e/ and /ɛ/, /i:/ and /ɪ/, and /u:/ and /ʊ/; also, the letter <s> is still used to represent both /z/ and /s/ in the plural of nouns and in the third person singular of verbs in the

<sup>1</sup> A sample of text printed in this system can be found on WikiMedia Commons: <https://bit.ly/3yb8b0r> (last accessed 4 August 2021).

present tense. The same phonetic principles that inspired Franklin were taken up a few decades later by Alexander John Ellis in his *Plea for Phonetic Spelling* (1848). While his studies were initially intended to revolutionise English orthography, they represented a milestone into the investigation of English phonology, so much so that a number of the symbols he used, e.g. <ɟ> and <ʒ>, were passed on to the International Phonetic Alphabet.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the interest in spelling reform grew in both the UK and the US, which resulted in the founding of the Simplified Spelling Board in New York in 1906 (Hodges, 1964) and the still extant Simplified Spelling Society in Britain in 1908 (Crystal, 2019, p. 277), which promoted lists of words that could be simplified by removing unnecessary or redundant letters, e.g. *tho/though*, *thru/through*, *gard/guard* (Upward & Davidson, 2011, p. 307). The movement later gained momentum and found political backing from President Roosevelt and the *Chicago Tribune*, which adopted a number of simplified spellings for a few years, but never reached the consensus required for such a vast endeavour.

As observed by Venezky (1999, p. 115), since the Early Modern English period, only minor revisions have been made to the English orthography, the only major exception being Noah Webster's dictionary of 1806, which established a different written standard for the English language in the US. Although Webster initially promoted a more radical revision of orthography inspired by Benjamin Franklin, the number of words affected by these variations is relatively small, and besides its symbolic value in terms of national identity, US spelling does not tackle the overall inherent complexities of the English writing system, which will be highlighted in the Conclusions section of this study.

### 3. Contemporary Approaches to English Spelling Reform

Since the peak period between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the spelling reform movement has gradually lost impetus. The century-old English Spelling Society (formerly known as the Simplified Spelling Society) in Britain is the only international body left to advocate for a substantial revision of English spelling (the society's motto is "English spelling is broken. Let's fix it!"), on the grounds that the current orthography is alleged to have an economic and social impact on both native speakers and L2 learners. Since the 1950s, the society has never endorsed only one specific reformed system; however, over the years, the society's members and supporters have proposed a few reformations of traditional spelling. Most of the proposals discussed in this section have a more or less direct connection with the society.

The methodological framework used to analyse the spelling reform proposals here comes from Sproat (2000). Instead of categorising writing systems in a traditional hierarchical classification (cf. DeFrancis 1989), he put forward a two-dimensional typology: the first dimension is the type of phonography (consonantal, polyconsonantal, alphabetic, moraic, syllabic); the second dimension is the amount

of morphography, i.e. the amount of logographic elements involved in a writing system. In addition to this, Sproat adds an extra aspect of phonography – orthographic depth, which can be either shallow or deep. In shallow orthographies, the spelling–sound correspondence is (mostly) direct, as in those of Latin, Spanish, Finnish, and Serbian/Croatian. In contrast, in deep (opaque) orthographies, the relationship is less direct because of the many heterophonous allomorphs, which are spelt similarly. The spelling reform proposals selected for this study can be further divided into three categories: those using the basic set of Latin characters as in traditional spelling, those extending the English alphabet (mainly with diacritics), and those replacing the Latin character set with a new one.

### 3.1 New Spelling

New Spelling (also known as Nue Speling) is the last spelling reform proposal put forward by the English Spelling Society. Based on previous versions in 1940 and 1948 (Fennelly, 1992) and influenced by another spelling reform proposal called Anglic by Swedish scholar Robert Eugen Zachisson in 1930 (Upward & Davidson, 2011, p. 309), this system came out in 1991, and the authors claim it is “consistent and logical, and valid for all dialects and pronunciations” and constitutes “the only complete statistical analysis of English spelling” (Fennelly, 1992, pp. 1–2). Table 1 shows the letters and digraphs diverging from the traditional system and their phonemic values.

Table 1. New Spelling

| vowels |                | consonants |             |
|--------|----------------|------------|-------------|
| a      | /ɑ:/ and /æ/   | ch         | /tʃ/        |
| ae     | /eɪ/           | g          | /g/         |
| e      | /ɛ/ and /ə/    | j          | /dʒ/        |
| ee     | /i:/           | k          | /k/         |
| i      | /ɪ/            | kw         | /kw/        |
| y      | /aɪ/           | sh         | /ʃ/         |
| o      | /ɒ/            | th         | /θ/ and /ð/ |
| oe     | /əʊ/ or /oʊ/   | ks         | /ks/        |
| u      | /ʌ/            | y          | /j/         |
| ue     | /ju(:)/        | z          | /z/         |
| oo     | /u(:)/ and /ʊ/ | zh         | /ʒ/         |
| au     | /ɔ:/           |            |             |
| ou     | /aʊ/           |            |             |
| oi     | /ɔɪ/           |            |             |
| er     | /ɜ:(r)/        |            |             |
| or     | /ɔ:(r)/        |            |             |

This system uses only the basic set of Latin characters, introducing one new digraph <zh> for /ʒ/ and limiting vowel combinations in a fairly intuitive way for English speakers; however, a few inconsistencies can be noticed: the use of <e> for

both /ɛ/ and /ə/, <y> for both /i/ and /j/, and <oo> for both /u(:)/ and /ʊ/ is potentially confusing. Though the vowel digraphs are already present in traditional English spelling, when they are systematically applied to writing, they result in a great departure from the current spelling, with a possible estranging effect, as can be seen in the sample text below.

It woz on the ferst dae ov the nue yeer that the anounsment woz maed, aulmoest simultaeneusli from three obzervatoris, that the moeshen ov the planet Neptune, the outermoest ov aul the planets that w(h)eel about the sun, had bekum veri eratik. A retardaeshen in its velositi had been suspected in Desember. Then a faent, remoet spek ov lyt woz diskuverd in the reejen ov the perterbd planet. At ferst this did not kauz eni veri graet eksytment. Syentifik peepl, houeever, found the intelijens remarkabl enuf, eeven befor it bekaem noen that the nue bodi woz rapidli groeing larjer and bryter, and that its moeshen woz kwyt diferent from the orderli proegres ov the planets. (Fennelly, 1992, p. 3)

In this excerpt, there are some questionable spellings: *w(h)eel*, where the <h> between brackets can appear overzealous compared to other phonemic distinctions that tend to be oversimplified; *enuf*, which assumes a standard /əˈnʌf/ instead of /ɪˈnʌf/ (and can be phonemically confused with *eni*); *suspected*, whereby <c> is not consistent with the systematic use of <k> for /k/ (cf. *bekum* and *diskuverd*). Finally, /ə/ in word-ending position does not seem to be rendered consistently, e.g. *peepl* but *retardaeshen*.

### 3.2 Regularised English

In 1959, Axel Wijk, a Swedish linguist of the Simplified Spelling Society, published a book proposing a “regularised” spelling (which he called “Regularized English”). Wijk advocated for a reform compared to New Spelling and maintained that his system retained “over 90 percent of traditional spellings, whereas New Spelling altered the traditional spelling in about 90 percent of English words” (Wijk [1959] in Scragg, 1974, p. 112). According to Wijk, two separate standards were to be established for the American and British orthographies based on “the dialect of its cultivated circles” (Horobin 2012, p. 175), but no other variety of English deserved its own spelling. Below is an example of text in Regularised English:

At the first glaance a passage in eny reformd spelling looks ‘queer’ and ‘ugly’. This objection iz aulwayz the first to be made; it iz perfectly natural; it iz the hardest to remoove. (Wijk [1959] in Scragg, 1974, p. 112)

Excluding the change in the use of the letter representing the consonant /z/, this passage highlights that this reformed system only attempts to make written vowels slightly more predictable (e.g. *glaance*, *aulwayz*, *remoove*).

### 3.3 Spelling Reform 1

In his book *Spelling Reform: A New Approach* (1969), the Australian engineer and amateur linguist Harry Lindgren promoted a gradual reform based on multiple stages, the first of which was called Spelling Reform 1 (or SR1). This first step included the following changes: (1) words containing /ɛ/ in a large variety of spelling

need to be consistently re-spelt to <e>, e.g. *eny, meny, agen, sed, jeopardy, redy, bery, gess, hefer, and frend*; (2) useless *es* should be dropped, e.g. *hav, liv, giv, com, som, leav, opposite, sleev*; (3) <ph> should be replaced with <f>; (4) words with the diagraph <gh> should be written according to pronunciation, e.g. *thru, tho, baut, thaut, cof, and enuf*. In order to emphasise the importance of reducing the complexity of the spelling of words containing /ε/, he created a poem that was published in a newsletter of the Simplified Spelling Society:

Draw a breth for progress,  
Tred abrest ahead.  
Fight agenst old spelling,  
Better “red” than “read”.  
Spred the words at brekfast,  
Measure them in bed,  
Dream of welth and tresure,  
Better “ded” than “dead” (Simplified Spelling Society, 1982, p. 2)

The most striking element of this poem is that the spelling of *fight* is preserved in the traditional spelling, possibly because this change was involved in later stages of the Spelling Reform. This approach achieved some success in Australia: in 1975, the Australian Teachers’ Federation was interested in the reform as a policy to improve literacy; however, the Federation dissolved in 1987, and the reform was never applied to teaching curricula (Brown, 2018, p. 260).

### 3.4. Cut Spelling

Whereas New Spelling is a phonology-centred model to considerably change the English writing system, Cut Spelling has a reversed approach – i.e. it is meant to “simplify” the traditional writing system as it is. It was developed by Christopher Upward (1996), a member of the Simplified Spelling Society in the 1980s, by cutting out (hence *Cut* Spelling) redundant letters from the traditional English spelling to achieve the greatest possible regularisation with the least disruption to English orthography. Although Upward posits that an “ideal spelling system matches letters to speech-sounds” (Upward, 1996, p. 2), he also acknowledges the importance of continuity with the current written tradition:

English is so far from that ideal that we would need a totally new spelling system to make a perfect match. Even if such a drastic change were agreed, it would so disrupt the continuity of literacy, and the necessary worldwide re-education would be so costly, that it would be impracticable. (Upward, 1996, p. 2)

His methodology for modifying the spelling of words is based on two sets of principles, called “rules”: the reduction rules and the substitution rules. The reduction rules discard unnecessary letters by (1) removing letters irrelevant to pronunciation, especially silent letters, unless they help “indicate” pronunciation, e.g. *learn/lern, honest/onest, doubt/dout, friend/frend, could/cud, though/tho, build/bild, blood/blod, pitch/pich*; (2) removing unstressed vowels pronounced with schwa /ə/, e.g. *symbol/symbl, victim/victm, lemon/lemn, glamo(ur)/ glamr, waited/waitd*; (3) removing doubled consonants unless they help pronunciation, e.g. *committed/*

*comitd*, *innate/inate*, *travel(l)ed/travld*, but *furry* (not to be confused with *fury*). The substitution rules are meant to reduce unintuitive pronunciations: (1) the diagraphs <gh> and <ph> are changed to <f> when pronounced /f/, e.g. *tough/tuf*, *photograph/fotograf*; (2) the letters <g> and <dg> are changed to <j> when pronounced /dʒ/, e.g. *judge/juj*, *geology/jeology*, *ginger/jinjr*; (3) the letter groups <ig> and <igh> are changed to <y> when pronounced /aɪ/, e.g. *sigh/sy*, *sight/syt*, *sign/syn*. The excerpt below is a sample text in Cut Spelling:

Th secnd thing one notices is that CS is som 10% shortr than traditionl spelng. This has sevrل importnt advantajs. To begin with, it saves time and trubl for evryone involvd in producing ritn text, from scoolchildren to publishrs, from novlists to advrtisers, from secretris to grafic desynrs. CS wud enable them al to create text that much fast, because ther wud be fewr letrs to rite and they wud hesitate less over dificlt spelngs. Scoolchildren cud then devote th time saved in th act of riting (as wel as that saved in aqiring litracy skills) to othr lernng activitis. (Upward, 1996: 4)

Compared to New Spelling, the most relevant aspect from this excerpt is the strong relationship with English traditional spelling; this is why the text can be easily read even by untrained English speakers, although they can observe a few unusual consonant clusters (e.g. *ritn* [written], *dificlt spelngs* [difficult spellings], *lernng* [learning]). Since this reform does not apply a strict phonographic principle based on a shallow orthographic depth, it does not have to account for inconsistencies inherited from the traditional spelling, such as homophones, e.g. *syn* and *sine*, or homographs, e.g. *ther* corresponding to both *their* and *there*. Upward stresses the importance of reducing the number of letters to speed up the writing process and increase productivity; nonetheless, one may wonder whether the change is worth it, considering that the differences with traditional spellings may appear superficial.

### 3.5 Shavian

Shavian is by far the most challenging proposal for spelling reform of the last century, and it is named after George Bernard Shaw, who financed the creation of the alphabet. Shaw's interest in English spelling began when he served from 1926 to 1939 on the BBC's Advisory Committee on Spoken English. He considered the Latin alphabet unsuitable for writing English and advocated for a completely new writing system that could overcome all the inadequacies of the traditional spelling system. In his will, he dictated that a provision of £500 should be left for a competition aimed at creating a new writing system for English on the basis of three conditions: (1) it had to have at least 40 symbols, (2) it had to be as phonetic as possible, and (3) it had to be entirely different from the Latin alphabet (Brown, 2018, p. 267). Following Shaw's death in 1950, a worldwide contest was announced and won by four people, including Ronald Kingsley Read (1887–1975). Read was then appointed to merge the four designs into the final writing system, which was called Shavian.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the alphabet is a 48-character writing system written from left to right. The characters are divided into three types – tall, deep, and short – on the basis of phonological criteria (Brown, 2018, p. 269): short letters are vowels, liquids, and nasals; tall letters are voiceless consonants; a tall letter rotated or flipped becomes



ligatures for vowels followed by rhotic /r/ and function particles are used.

Figure 1. Shavian Alphabet (Source: <https://www.omniglot.com/writing/shavian.htm>)

|                      |       |      |         |        |       |      |       |       |       |
|----------------------|-------|------|---------|--------|-------|------|-------|-------|-------|
| peep                 | bib   | tot  | dead    | kick   | gag   | fee  | vow   | thigh | they  |
| [p]                  | [b]   | [t]  | [d]     | [k]    | [g]   | [f]  | [v]   | [θ]   | [ð]   |
| so                   | zoo   | sure | measure | church | judge | yea  | woe   | hung  | ha-ha |
| [s]                  | [z]   | [ʃ]  | [ʒ]     | [tʃ]   | [dʒ]  | [j]  | [w]   | [ŋ]   | [h]   |
| loll                 | roar  | mime | nun     | if     | eat   | egg  | age   | ash   | ice   |
| [l]                  | [r]   | [m]  | [n]     | [ɪ]    | [i:]  | [e]  | [eɪ]  | [æ]   | [aɪ]  |
| ado                  | up    | on   | oak     | wool   | ooze  | out  | oil   | ah    | awe   |
| [ə]                  | [ʌ]   | [ɒ]  | [əʊ]    | [ʊ]    | [u:]  | [aʊ] | [ɔɪ]  | [ɑ:]  | [ɔ:]  |
| are                  | or    | air  | urge    | array  | ear   | ian  | yew   |       |       |
| [ɑ:r]                | [ɔ:r] | [εə] | [ɜ:r]   | [əɹ]   | [ɪər] | [ɪə] | [ju:] |       |       |
| <b>Abbreviations</b> |       |      |         |        |       |      |       |       |       |
| and                  | for   | of   | the     | to     |       |      |       |       |       |

Figure 2 shows a sample text of Shavian, a rendition of Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Being a strictly phonemic system, there are a few issues regarding the variety or varieties of English represented by such a writing system. The excerpt below and the other texts available online show that there seems to be some consensus to use an orthography based on a rhotic version of standard British English. For instance, the word *are* is always represented as /a:r/ and, similarly, rhoticism can also be found in *born* /'bɔ:rn/, *towards* /tə'wɔ:rdz/, and *brotherhood* /'brʌðərhʊd/; *dignity* is transcribed as /'dɪgnɪti/ regardless of the fact that in many North American accents, the final /t/ can be a voiced consonant or a flap.

Figure 2. Sample Text in Shavian<sup>2</sup>

(Source: [https://www.omniglot.com/images/langsamples/udhr\\_shavian.gif](https://www.omniglot.com/images/langsamples/udhr_shavian.gif))

א האונקן וואס איז א יחיד נישט פארמאגט דע  
 17 אלץ א צוריקגעבן און גלייך פאר דעם.  
 און דערפאר זאל מען נישט דאס.

Therefore, despite Shaw's and Read's efforts and wishes, the Shavian writing system is still dependent on the Latin alphabet. Another problem that can be encountered

with this strict phonemic system is that the connection of vocabulary sharing the same root is lost in the transcription, e.g. *sign* /sain/ and *signature* /'signətfər/.

The Shavian alphabet is no longer promoted as a spelling reform, but it is still appreciated for aesthetic purposes by a community of supporters, mainly in the area of constructed languages, gathering around a website (<https://www.shavian.info/>) and a Twitter account (<https://twitter.com/shawalphabet>).

### 3.5 Interspel

Far from the revolutionary aspects of Shavian, Interspel is an example of spelling reform based on an extended Latin alphabet. Rather than a substantially new writing system, it is a set of criteria established by psychologist and current vice president of the English Spelling Society, Valerie Yule, to improve traditional English spelling, especially to help ESL learners and people with reading disabilities (Yule, 2007; Ivanov & Yule, 2007). The design of Interspel is a compromise, i.e. an attempt to apply consistent principles to English, while retaining the greatest possible similarity to traditional spelling. Based on the psychological aspects of how humans learn to read, Interspel works on three levels: (1) alphabetic sound-symbol correspondence for initial learning and pronunciation guidance in dictionaries; (2) consistent spelling patterns for vowels by retaining irregular traditional spellings for the most common English words to avoid a complete lack of connection with traditional spelling; and (3) alternative vowel spellings for long vowels for the purposes of “reading without traps” (Ivanov & Yule, 2007: 63–64). The most remarkable innovation of Interspel is the system of short and long vowels, shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Vowels in Interspel

| short vowel | ph. value   | long vowel | ph. value |
|-------------|-------------|------------|-----------|
| a           | /æ/, /ə/    | à          | /eɪ/      |
| e           | /ɛ/         | è          | /i:/      |
| i           | /ɪ/         | ì          | /aɪ/      |
| o           | /ɒ/         | ò          | /oʊ/      |
| u           | /(j)ʊ/, /ʌ/ | ù          | /(j)u:/   |

Other vowel sounds are obtained by combining short vowels with consonants, such as <ar> for /ɑ:/, <ur> and <er> for /ɜ:/, and <au> for /ɔ:/. By using diacritics, this system stresses the phonemic relationship between words sharing the same root, e.g. *finish* and *final*, *study* and *stùdent*, *serenity* and *serèn*.

The passage below shows a sample of Interspel. In addition to the vowel system described in Table 2, we can identify a few segments in common with previous spelling reform proposals, including the disambiguation of words containing “soft” <c> and <g> with <s> and <j>, the respelling of words with the digram <gh>, and the deletion of silent letters such as <w> in *answer*.

Once upon a tim, the bùtiful dauter of a gràt magisian wonted mor perls tu put among her tresùrs. “Look thru the senter of the moon wen it is blu,” sed her royal mother in anser to her question. “Û mit find yur harts dezir.” The fair prinsess lafd, becaus she douted thès wurds. Insted, she ùsed her imajinàsion, and mùved intù the fotografy biznes, and took pictùrs

of the moon in culer. “I persèv mòst sertainly that it is almòst hòly whìt,” she thaut. She also found that she could màk enuf muny in àt months to bì herself tuw lovly hùj nu jùels too. (Ivanov & Yule, 2007: 63)

### 3.6 The Petersonian English Alphabet

In the community of constructed languages (also known as conlangs), David J. Peterson is hailed as the wunderkind who invented Dothraki and Vlyrian for the television series *Game of Thrones* and a significant number of other fictional languages for various films and TV shows. Along with his job as conlanger, he worked on his own English spelling reform, which was last revised in 2018 and published on his personal website (<https://dedalvs.com/petersonian.html>). On the webpage, he clearly states that the system that he devised is not meant to be a serious spelling reform proposal but rather a linguistic *divertissement* – i.e. how he personally would like English to be spelt. However, he firmly believes that “the English spelling system will – and should – never be reformed” (Peterson, 2018).

His writing system is based on the following principles: (1) no diacritics and (2) no new characters; a revised spelling should thus use only the standard set of Latin characters; (3) recognisability, which means that there should not be “funky looking” combinations of letters, and characters should “represent sounds that make sense to an English speaker”; (4) regularity, the new spelling needs to be extremely consistent, thus a phonemic system; (5) destandardisation, which is a unique principle compared to the other reform proposals analysed above; if the new writing system is to be phonemic, it requires different standards for different language varieties.

The system is therefore strictly phonemic, with a rich inventory of digraphs (to avoid new characters and diacritics). The most distinctive features of this spelling are listed in Table 3. Quite surprisingly, <c> is used to represent /k/ in all positions, as in Old English and Celtic languages, and <o> was selected for both /ʌ/ and /ə/.

Table 3. The Petersonian English Alphabet

| vowels |              | consonants |      |
|--------|--------------|------------|------|
| a      | /æ/          | c          | /k/  |
| aa     | /ɑ:/         | ch         | /tʃ/ |
| au     | /ɔ:/         | dh         | /ð/  |
| ay     | /aɪ/         | g          | /g/  |
| ey     | /eɪ/         | j          | /dʒ/ |
| e      | /ɛ/          | sh         | /ʃ/  |
| i      | /ɪ/          | th         | /θ/  |
| iy     | /i:/         | wh         | /w/  |
| o      | /ʌ/ and /ə/  | y          | /j/  |
| oa     | /ɒ/          | z          | /z/  |
| ow     | /əʊ/ or /oʊ/ | zh         | /ʒ/  |
| u      | /ʊ/          |            |      |
| ur     | /ɜ:(r)/      |            |      |
| uw     | /u:/         |            |      |

The only sample text in this writing system on Peterson’s website is the transliteration of the so-called Babel Text (Genesis 1–9), which is the sample

text commonly translated into constructed languages in the conlang community. Compared to other spelling systems described above, this is the most complex and least graspable by readers of standard spelling, despite the fact that the creator professed that recognisability was to be one of the cardinal principles of this reform. This difficulty is due to the fact that phonemic orthography is in contrast with the morphophonemic nature of traditional English spelling.

Dhiy intayur urth had won lenggwij with yuniform wurdz. Wen dho piypul maygreytid from dhiy iyst, dhey fawnd o valiy in dho land ov Shinar, end dhey setuld dher. Dhey sed to won onodhur, “Com, let os mowld brics end fayur dhem.” Dhey dhen had brics to yuwz az stown, end asfaalt for mortur. Dhey sed, “Com, let os bild arselvz o siti, end o tawur huwz taap shal riych dho scay. Let os meyc arselvz o neym, sow dhat wiy wul naat biy scaturd aul owvur dho feys ov dhiy urth.” (Ivanov & Yule, 2007, p. 63)

## 4. Conclusions

The individual analysis of the English spelling reform proposals in this study can be synthesised in Table 3. Using a modified version of Sproat’s framework (2000), the systems are placed in a Cartesian plane, where the horizontal axis shows the type of phonography, in this case, the Basic Latin character set, an extended Latin character set, or non-Latin-based writing systems (other options listed in Sproat, such as *consonantal*, *moraic*, and *syllabic* are not included, as they are not applicable to the writing systems under examination), and the vertical axis represents the continuum constituting the amount of morphography and orthographic depth of the spellings. The systems near the top of the chart are purely phonemic, whereas the more morphophonemic a system is, the lower it is placed on the chart. Substantially, if traditional English spelling were added to the figure, it would be at the very bottom of the Basic Latin column (possibly slightly tilting towards the extended Latin column, if we consider the spelling of lexicalised loanwords such as *fiancé[e]* and *naïve*). In the traditional English spelling system, the spellings of homophonous morphemes such as *write*, *right*, and *rite* add to the amount of morphography, and the large number of heterophonous allomorphs that are spelt the same, such as *sign* versus *signal* and *signature*, adds to the orthographic depth value.

Table 4. Overview of Spelling Reform Proposals

|                         | Type of phonography          |                       |                  |
|-------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------|
|                         | <i>Basic Latin</i>           | <i>Extended Latin</i> | <i>Non-Latin</i> |
| Amount of morphography/ | Petersonian English Alphabet |                       | Shavian          |
|                         | New Spelling                 |                       |                  |
| Orthographic depth      | Cut Spelling                 | Interspel             |                  |
|                         | SR1                          |                       |                  |
|                         | Regularised English          |                       |                  |

While the Petersonian English Alphabet and Shavian follow strict phonemic criteria and propose a completely new spelling (in the case of Shavian, a radically

new writing system), Regularised English puts forward only a few adjustments in the traditional orthography. In the middle of the table, the other systems tend to combine regularisation and continuity with traditional practices. In these reform proposals, a few common tendencies can be identified; the main issues that they aim to fix in the traditional orthography are (1) silent letters, especially of etymological origins, e.g. *debt*, *right*, *answer*, and *gnaw*; (2) disambiguation of spellings where the same sound is represented by multiple graphemes, e.g. <c>, <k>, <q> for /k/ and <g>, <j>, and <dg> for /dʒ/; (3) making the complex relationship between English vowels and their spellings more intuitive, considering that the Basic Latin character set has only five vowel symbols.

Despite individual idiosyncrasies, the proposals follow similar simplification principles that can be traced back to Franklin and Webster, discussed in this study. Simplicity in these spelling proposals is essentially meant as a shift towards a purely phonemic system, so much so that even the less phonemic proposals examined above are described in terms of a “compromise” between a supposedly simple phonemic writing system and the traditional English spelling for the sake of continuity with the past. As we can see in the trends over the last few centuries, the overall feasibility of a spelling reform has been evaluated exclusively based on graphematic criteria. The most important point here is the assumed notion of simplicity in writing systems, which proponents do not discuss exhaustively: whether we consider it in terms of a reduced number of graphemes, correspondence between grapheme and phoneme, or regularity intended as predictability, none of the solutions proposed so far accomplish the purposes of their premises. English-language spelling reformers might need to face the fact that the phonemic paradigm, which can work perfectly for many languages, is simply not applicable to English.

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**Daniel Russo**

## **АЛТЕРНАТИВНИ ПРАВОПИС ЗА ЕНГЛЕСКИ: САВРЕМЕНИ ПРИСТУПИ И КРИТЕРИЈУМИ ПОЈЕДНОСТАВЉЕЊА**

### **Резиме**

Историју правописа на енглеском језику карактеришу периоди дисконтинуитета и спорог и немилосрдног преласка са фонемског правописа на морфофонемски систем. Постојала су два периода када је правописна реформа енглеског језика изазвала посебно интересовање: прво је то било од средине 16. до средине 17. века, када је објављено више публикација и речника у којима су изнети предлози реформи; други је између 18. и почетка 20. века и везан је за развој фонетике као науке. На пример, речник Ноа Вебстера садржао је есеј о необичностима модерног правописа и његове предлоге за реформу (од којих би неки постали обележја америчког правописа на енглеском). Сврха ове студије је да прегледа предлоге реформе правописа на енглеском језику од 1950-их-Нови правопис, Регуларизовани енглески, Правописна реформа 1, Пресечени правопис, Шавијански, Интершпелски и Петерсоновски енглески алфабет-да се идентификују њихове главне заједничке особине истицањем основне идеје поједностављења. Сви модели који се разматрају преферирају фонемски правописни систем као идеал у правцу језичке једноставности.

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Više od jedne decenije naše *Jezik, književnost,...* imale su u fokusu književnoteorijskih nauka, kao što su značenje i razne značajne društvene fenomene kao komunikacija, vrednosti i marginalizacija. Iako koherentne, to ni u kom slučaju nije podrška pristupa, već se, naprotiv, težilo da se date perspektiva. Upravo želeći da podržimo iskustava sa reakcijama na fenomen covid-19, tema našeg skupa ostaje

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For over a decade, our conference *Literature,...* focused not only on the topics of literary studies, such as meaning, discourse, time, and space, but also on significant phenomena such as politics, values and marginalization. Although the topics were coherent, this never meant the uniformity of approach. On the contrary, the aim was to view the phenomena from different perspectives. In an attempt to support such experiences, the topic of our conference, necessary, the topic of our conference

