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Abstract

This essay was written in History of the English Language (ENGL300) with Professor Inas Mahfouz in 2017. This research paper was for an assignment where we had to write an argument with or against George Orwell’s Spelling Reform Theory, and my thesis counters most of the major points to Orwell’s theory. Orwell provides six points where he talks of how each of them could benefit the linguistic formation of the English Language, but one should think of the economic and academic crisis that could occur if the language reform was taken to action, where billions of dollars would be spent on reprinting and unnecessary deforestation.

Dilemma of the Spelling Reform

“Is it Center or Centre? Is it Color or Colour?”

I am sure people around the globe had the same confusing question when spelling words in their letters and research papers, especially when American English spelling is completely different from British spelling. The English language is heavily diverse because of its deep origins in the British Isles, where the Anglo-Saxons and Romans took the chance to invade it; moreover, once the language developed from old to middle, then modern English, words began to be spelt based on pronunciation. Now the question lies in the English language, should it have a complete spelling reform from scratch or not? I however disagree with the proceeding of a language reform because of symbols not matching the sounds, variations of spelling
pronunciations with its irregularities; and the spelling reform would require all books to be reprinted at enormous cost.

The English language is distinctive based on its lengthy history of borrowing words from French, Latin and other Germanic dialects throughout its development. Irish writer George Bernard Shaw explains his scholarly opinion on reforming the English Spelling: “The English have no respect for their language…They cannot spell it because they had nothing to spell it but an old foreign alphabet of which only consonants…” (Gelderen 2; 15). If we first look at the symbols first and its matching sounds, there are 13 to 14 vowels in the language itself, differing in sounds in different words. One prominent example is the use of the (ough) sound, especially when using words like enough, although, though, bough and dough. A proof of that is how George Bernard Shaw gave an example on using another word for fish, “fish could just as well be spelled ghoti. The [gh] sound could sound like the last sound in enough, the [o] like the first vowel in women, and the [ti] in the middle part of nation.” (Gelderen 2; 15). Another thing would be how difficult it would be for foreigners to learn the language because of the number of vowels aforementioned. Next on the list is the fact how symbols are used differently in the United States versus Britain, antimoon.com gave examples on it:

“In American transcriptions, ɔː is often written as ɒ: (e.g. LAW = lɒː), unless it is followed by r, in which case it remains an ɔː.” And “In British transcriptions, ɒo is usually represented as əʊ. For some BrE speakers, ɒo is more appropriate (they use a rounded vowel) — for others, the proper symbol is əʊ. For American speakers, ɒo is usually more accurate.”.
So, in the end, reforming the phonetic symbols will cause more confusion and mess up the formation of phonetic tables in the language.

Moving on to pronunciations, American and British English are notorious for its variations of spelling, including words like [often, salmon, vitamins and privacy]. Pronunciations of spelled word have great importance, especially with voiced and non-voiced letters; an example how the word butter is pronounced in a British accent with voicing the letter ‘t’ compared to the American accent to which they don’t. Now the problem here is how especially foreigners who would sometimes mix pronouncing the words that are present in both British and American English; furthermore, an example of this would be how in American English they add the suffix [ize] on verb endings while British English use the [-ise] suffix instead. Author and member of the Understanding English Spelling society Masha Bell, was interviewed by BBC and talked about spelling reform, giving an example of how foreigners would have difficulty learning the English language, quoting: “The alphabetic unreliability of English spelling is a huge problem. Foreign learners can never be sure how to pronounce an English word without hearing it first [sun - sugar, and - ask, on - once]. That's why only English dictionaries have pronunciation guides” Bell also added other information on dilemmas of spelling: “The most serious disadvantage of English spelling lies in making literacy acquisition for Anglophone children exceptionally slow and difficult - roughly three times slower than the European average”

This is a result of how difficult the language it is for foreigners and new learners who have learn difficulties like dyslexia, so if we tried to do the reform, Bell’s statement should be spread to linguists who agree on spelling reformation.
Also, according to englishgrammar.org, they spoke about how not only foreigners alone have problems with spelling, where it quoted:

“Spelling words is not easy. In fact, even native English speakers often find it difficult to spell words correctly. This is mainly because the pronunciation of many English words has changed over the last few hundred years. The spelling system, on the other hand, has stayed more or less the same.”

Reforming the English spelling more than once would cause dire effects towards new learners of the language, especially with both verb-ending suffixes, making it frustrating to use in writing; therefore, this will cause trouble in the category of grammar.

Finally, the enormous cost of reforming the English Spelling system’s costs would be too high with the reason of massive wastage of paper, endangering the trees of rainforests as a result. Research director of Buffalo Business, David Bertola, wrote in his article:

“that only about 6 percent of one tree is used to manufacture a 5,000-sheet carton of paper…based on a mixture of softwoods and hardwoods 40-feet tall and 6 to 8 inches in diameter would take a rough average of 24 trees to produce a ton of printing and writing paper, using the kraft chemical (free-sheet) pulping process.”

Now imagine if we multiply the number of trees used to make books we need for the reform, which can exponentially destroy not only forests, but habitats of many animals around the globe; not only that, The Economist also talked about the negative effect of spelling reformation, quoting:
“English-speakers would have to unlearn thousands of them if the language were regularized. There might be rules of thumb for transforming grieve to greev, for instance, but given the number of reform proposals that exist, the rules would probably not be perfectly consistent, so in effect every new word would have to be learned afresh.”

The more proposals we create to reform the language the more confusion and difficulty to manage the spelling system in English, also a disastrous cost to create new books and dictionaries for students, foreigners, and writers. In conclusion, I am against spelling reform with the reasons I mentioned, with phonetic symbols, spelling pronunciations and the cost of reformation for the language.
Cited Work


