

# Does Spelling Matter?

Simon Horobin, *Does Spelling Matter?* Oxford U.P., 2013, ISBN 978 0 19 966528 0

This book has much interesting information, is a good entry into the subject, and gives useful pointers to earlier discussions. But it reads like a draft. There are repetitions, clumsy phrases; the page of phonetic symbols omits a number of the symbols used, and so on. (Oxford seems to have given up copy- and sub-editing. They should have told Professor Horobin that Lazamon's *Brut* is not a chronicle, that there are many more manuscripts of the *Ancrene Wisse* than one, that Norse was spoken in England well after 1066, etc.) It may be a more significant mark of incompleteness that Horobin is in two minds about the answer to his question. Does spelling matter? The answer will depend on an understanding of what spelling does, and about this, Horobin has not made up his mind.

Spelling reformers generally want, with varying degrees of simplicity, to make English spelling indicate sound more simply; and on the one hand, "The basic principle of the English spelling system is that sounds map onto [*sic*] letters," says Horobin (p. 16). It was, of course, the great innovation of alphabetic spelling, as against logograms, pictograms, symbols (some of which survive, like <&> and numerals: <3> = <three>, <tres tres tria>, <trois> etc. depending which language one wants), to give this aid to reading. The subject gets interesting when one asks how, with what degree of accuracy spelling represents sound, and even more interesting when one notices how many other things writing does which differentiate the written from the spoken language. For on the other hand Horobin gives (necessarily) much attention to many things besides sound which the written language indicates, and he is unsure about whether they are a good thing or not.

In this short review I shall not consider the difficulties of trying to reform spelling in the direction of phonetic clarity beyond noticing that the proposed reforms Horobin reports mostly offer much more complicated alphabets, presumably harder to learn, and beg the question whether the phonetic alphabet is to spell words in a standardised pronunciation or words as they are actually and variously sounded.

The very interesting thing is how much more grammatically and syntactically informative our written language is (unlike, for instance, the scripts of Biblical Hebrew, or the Greek and Latin of the first century A.D.) than any phonetic replacement could be. For us, to learn to read and write is itself a good introduction to English syntax. Our written words are divided by spaces. A sentence begins with a capital letter and ends with a full stop. There is no way of speaking a capital letter. Whether people speak in sentences is an open question, but if they do not write in sentences they are corrected.

Spelling can carefully mark what is *not* sounded, for instance quotation marks (not developed until the eighteenth century), hyphens and apostrophes. The inverted comma used as apostrophe deliberately tells the reader *not* to sound something, that a letter is not there. This looks perverse if we are persuaded that writing only represents sound, but is informative if it tells us the difference between, say, <lion's> and <lions'>.

Spelling will also often give strong hints of a word's etymology; Johnson often preferred a more etymologically informative spelling. The phoneticists argue not unreasonably that this complicates spelling; but it may also be argued that it gives us something of the character of a word to know, for instance, that it originates in Greek, which initial <ps> reliably indicates.

The different spelling of homophones is phonetically redundant, but can make senses impossible to the spoken language. Henry Bradley, perhaps the most cogent defender of English spelling, gives the example "We must consider Oxford as a whole, and what a whole it is." (p. 168)—or one could cite the old dictum "History is one whole seen from another hole."

Written English *is* a system, though with anomalies. The system is a product of the republic of letters. Unlike some nations including the U.S.A. we have no authority to rule on the correctness of spelling, unless one counts the OED, which is increasingly unreliable. This great system has been built by common judgement: the common judgement, that is, of the educated classes. Its use is one of the things that maintains English as the language of a great culture, not only the international language of science.

Professor Horobin, however, gave a lecture at the 2013 Hay Festival, and as it was reported in *The Independent* he has come down, for instance, against the importance of the apostrophe. "Is the apostrophe so crucial to the preservation of our society?" In his book he steadily reports the opponents of spelling reform as emotional fanatics. At the same time he not only reports but himself uses the objections to spelling reform: that it would complicate not simplify, that it would remove grammatic/syntactic clarifications, that it would impede the reading of old authors. He even compares our spelling to a cathedral—though in a way that again brings out his unreservations.

Our spelling system could be likened to a cathedral church whose origins lie in the Anglo-Saxon period, but whose structure now includes a Gothic portico added in the Middle Ages, a domed tower added in the Early Modern period [I'm trying to think of one], and a gift shop and café introduced in the 1960s. The end result is an awkward mixture of architectural styles which no longer reflects the builders' original plan, nor is it the ideal building for the bishop and his clergy to carry out their diocesan duties. (p. 249)

But the successive rebuildings and alterations of a cathedral are all intended to make the building serve its purposes better, and the present result is often a thing of great beauty as well as utility. "Is the apostrophe so crucial to the preservation of our society?" Well, yes, it is!

We declare an interest. Michael Wallerstein read the *Independent* report and wrote a reply giving examples of the logic of English spelling as we have it. We plan to publish this later this year, the third of Wallerstein's short books about the present state of the English language and the decay of the clerisy.