

Vowel Speling Sitem Urged

Teachers Say We've Been Doing It All Wrong Since the Days of Good Queen Bess.

By PAUL PHELAN.

Doun widd speling teachers! Dhæ ar tierants! Free-childhuud the shaklz of daemoniakl wæez of lerning too spell!

If members of the Simplified Spelling Board carried picket signs, that's what might be printed on them. They are girding their inkwells and typewriters this week for an intensified onslaught on orthographical oracles. Dictionaries, teachers and learned societies have foisted on Americans an unreasonable system of spelling, they say.

Fishy Orthography.

For example, says Dr. Frank Laubach, the letters "g-h-o-t-i" could be pronounced as "fish." Give gh an f sound as in tough; o an i sound as in women; ti an sh sound as in nation.

Dr. Laubach is an individual reformer, but he's joined forces with the SSB. So, too, has the Spelling Reform Association and the Simplified Spelling Society of Great Britain, thus presenting, for the first time, a united front.

Their aim is "a middle of the road policy" which will lead to gradual adoption of the simplified spelling system. "This system is nothing new. It's been modified here and there and varied here and there and various proponents, but basically the movement got started in 1876 in this country when the SSB came into being.

Back to Queen Elizabeth.

"Spelling reform goes back centuries," Dr. Godfrey Dewey, of the SSB, declares. "Ever since English got away from spelling words as they sound there have been attempts to make signs and sounds conform."

English left the straight and narrow about the time of Queen Elizabeth, scholars believe. Words like sunne, warre, dogge had quit using their last syllables when pronounced, but had held onto the syllables when spelled. Early reformers went around with spelling scapels add cut off the appendages, leaving sun, war and dog.

The whole trouble arose from the fact that English swallowed gobs of words from other languages. It assimilated them into its pronunciation system, but got an intense pain in its spelling system, because the letters of the words were left in the same state as in their original language.

Discrepancies Creep In.

For instance, the word "logique" came over with the French to England in 1668 and was pronounced as it is today, but for many years the "que" remained in its spelling.

Many such hybrids still are with us. Take the word "ghost." That's in the language because English got in Dutch. Or rather vice-versa, for it was due largely to the Hollandizing of English during the reign of William and Mary in the seventeenth century.

The word needs no "h" in English. That's a carryover from the Dutch.

Another main cause of discrepancy in our spelling was the clinging to the original spelling of words derived from Latin and Greek, even though the English pronunciation made this look silly. Thus the word "doubt," derived ultimately from the Latin "dubio," kept its "b," even though silent, because scholars wanted to show its Latin derivation.

Liquid Spelling Rules.

The results of these forces have left the language very much under the influence of a highly liquid set of spelling rules, say the reformers.

Take the vowel sound contained in the word "cries." That sound can also be spelled as it is in high, height, type, and aisle, to mention a few. That definitely is the kind of thing that leads to the reformers' cries. They'd spell that sound the same in all those words, cries, tiep, iesl, heit, hie, also dropping the letters not pronounced at all.

That's really the epitome of their system, one sign for one sound, no matter what word the sound occurs in, plus the elimination of all unpronounced syllables, and the corner-stone of their system consists of taking the most common way of spelling a sound and using this spelling as a basis for their alphabet. In this instance they decided "ie" was the most common way of representing the sound exemplified in "cries."

Wasting Too Much Time.

The reformers say we waste too much time on the reading part of the three r's, as far as spelling is concerned. They say each schoolchild spends 1,000 hours learning to spell. That's quite a spell, if true, and staggering if applied to the whole group of English-speaking people. It would mean some 500,000,000 would spend 500,000,000,000 hours learning to spell. The reformers claim their system would cut this time 83 per cent.

The reformers don't want to add any letters, nor to use any new diacritical signs, such as the dot over the i. Of course, they feel that a few new combinations are necessary. To distinguish the soft "th" as in thought from the harsh "th" as in "the" and "with", they use "th" for the first and "dh" for the second. This is called a diagraph.

As far as English goes, organized spelling reform is something comparatively new. In America, the American Philological Society started the ball rolling in 1875, with the result that the Spelling Reform Association was formed the next year. At the same time, Charles Darwin, Alfred Lord Tennyson and others were pushing reform in England.

The SSB was formed in 1906 and the SSS of Great Britain in 1908.

Carnegie and Roosevelt.

Andrew Carnegie backed the SSB and President Theodore Roosevelt indorsed a list of 300 of their words, but despite such support, little headway has been made. The SRA began in 1876 with a modest list of suggested changes, ar, catalog, definit, hav, liv, giv, thru, wisit. In 1898 the National Education Association adopted tho, altho, thru, thoro, catalog, pedagog, decalog, program and a few others. Some of these have stuck, so the score isn't entirely negative.

Modestly the reformers claim that, in addition to saving time that their system will make for better speech, facilitate learning foreign languages, help illiterates, and help establish English as a world language.