

Is Spelling Reform, Ten Years Old, a Success?

Professor Brander Matthews Finds That the Public Has Had a Change of Heart and Is No Longer Contemptuously Hostile

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IT was on Aug. 27, 1906, exactly ten years ago today, that President Roosevelt issued his order to the Public Printer directing him thereafter to use the briefer orthographies in a list of 300 words recommended a few weeks earlier by the newly organized Simplified Spelling Board. Although this act of the President was overridden a little later by Congress, it instantly aroused the interest of the world and it served to focus attention upon the chaotic condition of English spelling.

The characteristically courageous act of the Chief Magistrate immediately awakened resentful opposition. This naturally surprised those who had already given consideration to the subject and who were convinced that the time had come when a concerted effort was needed to ameliorate the orthography of our noble tongue. Of course, this surprise, however natural it may have been, was unreasonable. The attack on President Roosevelt and on the Simplified Spelling Board was not only violent, it might fairly be described as rancorous. Many estimable persons were outraged by the suggestion that the spelling of English, which they had acquired painfully in their youth, was no better than it should be, and they were the more vehement because they believed themselves to be defending their reasoned opinion, whereas, in fact, they were only expressing their unreasoned prejudice.

Even if the Simplified Spelling Board had been newly established, the movement for the amelioration of our orthography was no new thing, and it had had the support of many distinguished men. In 1875 the American Philological Association, which contained the foremost linguistic scholars of the United States, expressed its desire for an improvement in our unsatisfactory orthography; and as a result a Spelling Reform Association was started in 1876. In England the Philological Society (the British equivalent of the American Philological Association) also took up the question; and in 1883 these two bodies of experts in language, one in Great Britain and one in the United States, joined in proposing a long list of orthographic improvements. Unfortunately, these suggestions of two learned societies made no impression upon the general public on either side of the Atlantic, perhaps because they were too many, perhaps because they seemed at first sight a little too radical, and more probably because there was no enterprising organization to call attention to them and to push them into use.

Later support came from a new source. While linguists were offended by the unscientific condition of our spelling, and while men of letters were shocked by its chaotic absurdity, teachers were perplexed by the problem of imparting this chaotic and unscientific spelling to children of tender years. These teachers knew better than any one else how much valuable time was wasted in getting by heart long lists of words; and they also could not help seeing that this not only imposed a needless task on the memory, but also compelled the child to surrender the use of his reason. After he had learnt *ceed*, he had to learn *preceed* and *proceed*; and no analogy from *leave* would help him to the spelling of *believe*. So it was that action was next taken by the National Educational Association, probably the largest and most comprehensive organization of teachers anywhere in the world.

For fear of getting too little because of asking too much, the National Education Association chose only a dozen simplifications for immediate adoption. The Twelve Words put forth by the N. E. A. in 1898 were *program*, *catalog*, *decalog*, *prolog*, *pedagog*, *tho*, *altho*, *thoro*, *thoroly*, *thorofare*, *thru*, and *thruout*. Of these *program* was probably the least offensive to the Old Guard, as it was already widely used. *Catalog* was also fairly familiar; and it carried with it *decalog*, *prolog*, and *peda-*

gog. *Tho* and *altho* were not uncommon in unceremonious correspondence; they were of a highly respectable antiquity; and they had been used by Tennyson in the final edition of his poems. *Thoro*, *thoroly*, and *thorofare* were also not exactly novelties, even if they might appear strange to many. But *thru* and *thruout* aroused the most excited protests. They were denounced as diabolical specimens of orthographic mayhem. This exacerbated irritation again confirmed the justice of La Rochefoucauld's assertion that "our vanity is less tolerant of the condemnation of our tastes than of our opinions."

Hitherto spelling reform had been advocated chiefly by scholars. Professor Francis A. March of Lafayette, twice President of the American Philological Association, had declared that it was "of no use to try to characterize with fitting epithets and adequate terms of oburgation the monstrous spelling of the English language," and Professor Francis J. Child of Harvard insisted that "one of the most useful things just now is to break down the respect which a great, foolish public has for the established spelling; some have a religious awe, and some an earth-born passion for it." Similar opinions were expressed by Max Muller, Murray, Napier and Sayce of Oxford, by Skeat of Cambridge, by Hadley, Whitney and Lounsbury of Yale, by Barnard of Columbia, and by White of Cornell. But the discussion had been academic; and the action of the National Education Association brought spelling into the sphere of practical politics. The adoption of the Twelve Words showed that something could be done—showed, indeed, that something had been done.

Believing that the time was ripe for a forward movement, a little group of advocates of amelioration succeeded in securing the financial support of Andrew Carnegie; and early in 1906 they organized themselves into the Simplified Spelling Board and invited scholars, men of letters, and men of affairs to join them. It is scarcely too much to say that all the leaders of linguistic science, American and British, accepted membership in the board. Very notable was the fact that its list of members included the editors of the six most important dictionaries of the English language—Sir James Murray and Dr. Bradley of the Oxford, Professor Skeat of the Etymological, Dr. Wright of the Dialect, Dr. Harris of Webster's, Dr. B. E. Smith of the Century, and Dr. Funk of the Standard. The first President of the board was Professor Lounsbury of Yale, who was in time succeeded by Professor Grandgent of Harvard. And among the men of letters who showed their approval by accepting election to the board were John Burroughs, G. W. Cable, R. W. Gilder, William James, T. W. Higginson, Theodore Roosevelt, Mark Twain, and Andrew D. White.

Knowing the dislike of the English-speaking peoples for any sweeping system of correcting ancient abuses, and knowing also the liking of those peoples for tentative and piecemeal improvement, the new body refused to commit itself to any scheme of radical phonetic reform. It planned to move along the line of least resistance and to begin the simplification of our spelling by striking out letters hopelessly superfluous—as the National Education Association had done in the Twelve Words and as our forefathers had done when they shortened *phaenomenon* to *phenomenon*, *phantastie* to *fantasy*, *aera* to *era*, *fysse* to *fish*, *sunne* to *sun*. So desirous was the Simplified Spelling Board of arousing as little opposition as possible that in its first list of Three Hundred Words in simpler spelling it did not include a single novelty of its own. It chose all these 300 examples from the "words spelt in two or more ways" ordinarily listed at the back of the dictionary; and it urged everybody to use al-

ways the simplest form—*honor*, (and not *honour*;) *gipsy*, (not *gypsey*;) *controller*, (not *comptroller*;) *anesthetic*, (not *anaesthetic*;) *dram*, (not *drachm*;) *check*, (not *cheque* or *checque*;) *hiccup*, (not *hiccough*;) *jail*, (not *gaol*;) *maneuver*, (not *manoeuvre*;) *plow*, (not *plough*;) *steadfast*, (not *steadfast*;) *wo*, (not *woe*.)

The first list of Three Hundred Words issued more than ten years ago did not contain any simplifications due to the board itself, which soon found that it had better not undertake a widespread propaganda until it had made a sifting of the words which could be simplified either by the omission of needless unsounded letters or by a respelling in accord with the prevailing usage of the language. And this was found to be a task of unexpected difficulty, demanding a consideration of a large proportion of the immense vocabulary of our language. Certain omissions were obviously easy; others were possible, but doubtfully expedient; and yet others were inadvisable. In 1908 a second list was published, in which many of the apparent novelties were actually revivals of the older form corrupted often by ignorant printers—*gost* and *agast*, for example, (into which Caxton had inserted a needless *h*;) *det* and *dout*, (into which the sixteenth century had inserted a misleading *b*.) A third list followed in 1909; and a fourth appeared in 1913.

Two or three years ago, however, the board found that it had gone about as far as it could in this direction and that it had better refrain from any more advanced suggestions until it could succeed in arousing a wider and deeper interest in the public at large. For the moment it stopped manufacturing goods and resolved to concentrate all its force on selling the goods it had in stock. The more active members of the board were aware that no very wide impression had been made. Indeed, many persons believed that the movement for simplified spelling had died out. As a matter of fact, the number of adherents had been swelling year by year, steadily if slowly; and the board was encouraged to believe that a more vigorous campaign would be productive of satisfactory results. To prepare for this new work it reorganized its office and enlisted the aid of field agents—travelers sent out to show goods and to sell goods.

As there was little likelihood that many grown men and women could be persuaded to change their orthographic habits, even if they were in hearty sympathy with the movement, wisdom dictated the policy of trying to get at the young before their habits had become indurated. This method of approach also took advantage of the fact that teachers were already more or less won over—the instructors in the grade schools because they suffered and saw their pupils suffer from the illogical absurdities of our present spelling, and professors of English in the universities because their researches had deprived them of any respect for the accepted orthography. And in this appeal to the institutions of learning the Simplified Spelling Board made progress with a rapidity as gratifying as it was unexpected.

As a result of the activity of the devoted field agents the Twelve Words of the N. E. A.—and often also the rest of the Three Hundred Words on the first list of ten years ago—are authorized by the Faculty or officially adopted in some one hundred and seventy-five normal schools, colleges and universities, from Nova Scotia to Oregon and from Minnesota to Texas. The number of instructors in these institutions is nearly ten thousand, and the number of students is only a little short of one hundred and fifty thousand. On this list are the State universities of Arkansas, Florida, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oregon, South

Carolina, and South Dakota. And at the meeting of the N. E. A. in New York in July, attended by 50,000 teachers, it was voted to adopt in all its publications one of the rules for simplification recommended by the board—the use of *t* in the place of *ed* when *ed* is sounded like *t* and when the change does not affect the pronunciation, i. e., *firt* for *fixed*, *blest* for *blessed*, *kist* for *kissed*. (These strong preterits, it may be noted, have always been preferred by the poets, especially Milton and Tennyson.)

The field agents were instructed also to secure the sympathy of the local newspapers and to urge their adoption of at least the Twelve Words. Until this special campaign was started very few daily newspapers had shown any sympathy for the movement, although simplified spellings had been adopted by certain weeklies, monthlies, and quarterlies. The example of *The Independent* had been followed by *The Literary Digest*, by *Current Opinion*, and by *The Pictorial Review*, and *The Educational Review* had been joined by *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* and by the *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association*. But not a single important daily paper had seen fit to take any steps in advance.

In July, 1914, less than forty periodicals had shown practical sympathy for the cause by the use of any of the simplifications specifically recommended by the board. But in July, 1916, the number using at least the Twelve Words of the N. E. A. had swollen to more than 250, with a circulation of over 14,000,000 copies. And this growth has been very largely in the field of daily journalism. Among these recruits are papers as well and as widely known as *The Philadelphia North American* and *The Chicago Evening Post*, *The Waterbury American*, *The Burlington Hawkeye*, *The Cincinnati Post*, and *The Cleveland Press*. In Denver *The Express*, *The Post*, *The News*, and *The Times* have all been converted and are all using at least the Twelve Words.

Quite as important as the adhesion of these dailies is the accompanying change of tone even in the newspapers which have not taken an affirmative stand. In 1906 when the Simplified Spelling Board issued its first list of Three Hundred Words and when President Roosevelt issued his order to the Public Printer, the attitude of a majority of American newspapers was hostile, to put it mildly.

Now, after ten years of discussion and enlightenment, this hostility has died down. Even if it can still be detected here and there, now and again, it is scarcely ever as violent as it was. Apparently what has happened is what Professor Child hoped would happen—the breaking down of that superstitious respect for the established spelling for which most people seem to have had either "a religious awe" or "an earth-born passion." The public as a whole has begun to see that the accepted orthography is only an accidental condition, due to a variety of causes; and that it is in no way sacred. It has discovered that our spelling has never been fixed, that it has varied from century to century, and that it is certain to be modified in the future as it has been in the past.

In other words, there are many signs that the public as a whole has experienced a change of heart. It is not yet very friendly toward simplified spelling; but it is no longer rancorously and contemptuously hostile. Its resistance is now passive rather than active. And to say this is to say that the advocates of simplified spelling have every reason to feel encouraged, even if comparatively few persons are now following all their recommendations. It is not by the circulation of the newspapers which have been converted, it is not by the number of teachers and students who have been enlisted that the success of the Simplified Spelling Board can best be gauged; it is by the very remarkable change in the attitude of the public.