

THE REFORM OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE¹

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MOST varieties of English have come into existence without any deliberate action on the part of those who use them, but some are the result of the deliberate acts of reformers. It must sadden reformers to realize that varieties created in this way have on the whole been much less permanent than those that have come into existence without conscious effort. It is often said that the first reformer of the English language was the thirteenth-century versifier Orm, but Orm did not set out to convert others. At a time when uniformity of spelling was not considered a virtue, he devised for his own use a remarkably consistent system of spelling, the most obvious feature of which is the freedom with which he uses double consonants, but, so far as we know, he had no imitators.

I

It is not always easy to say whether those who write about the English language are reformers or not. Swift was a great writer of English prose with a passionate interest in the English language, but when he wrote about it, it was usually to protest about the changes that were taking place; the reform that he advocated was to keep the language unchanged, and it is only in rather a special sense that such a man can be called a reformer. Swift thought of himself as a reformer, and his best-known proposal was for the establishment of an academy "in order to reform our Language". He proposed that "a free judicious Choice should be made of such Persons, as are generally allowed to be best qualified for such a Work". They would follow the example of the French Academy:

Besides the Grammar-part, wherein we are allowed to be very defective, they will observe many gross Improperities, which however authorized by Practice, and grown familiar, ought to be discarded. They will find many Words that deserve to be utterly thrown out of our Language; many more to be corrected, and

¹ A lecture delivered in the John Rylands University Library on Wednesday, the 10th of October 1973.

perhaps not a few, long since antiquated, which ought to be restored, on Account of their Energy and Sound.

But what I have most at Heart, is, that some Method should be thought on for *Ascertaining* and *Fixing* our Language for ever, after such Alterations are made in it as shall be thought requisite. For I am of Opinion, that it is better a Language should not be wholly perfect, than that it should be perpetually changing; and we must give over at one Time or other, or at length infallibly change for the worse.¹

This passage has aroused the derision of historians of the English language because of its assumption that any body of men could halt the process of change which inevitably takes place in any living language.

Most reformers have found one feature of the language which has particularly aroused their anger. The feature which annoyed Swift was the English tendency towards monosyllabism, which works in two ways, by the dropping of every syllable after the first, as in *mob*, from *mobile vulgus*, and by the loss of lightly-stressed vowels in the middle of a word, as in *fledg'd* and *disturb'd*. We now take for granted the loss of *e* in pronunciation in such words, though we generally keep it in spelling. Swift blamed the poets for these curtailments:

These Gentlemen, although they could not be insensible how much our Language was already over-stocked with Monosyllables, yet to save Time and Pains, introduced that barbarous Custom of abbreviating Words, to fit them to the Measure of their Verses; and this they have frequently done, so very injudiciously, as to form such harsh unharmonious Sounds, that none but a *Northern* Ear could endure.²

II

The most active of the reformers who sought to free the English language from its loan-words was the Dorsetshire poet William Barnes (1801-86). He presented his case in an article published in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1832.³ Here he argues with faultless logic from an unsound premise. He begins with an assumption that the use in English of words derived from the classical language is wicked, and then goes on to

¹ *A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue* (1712) in *A Proposal for Correcting the English Tongue, Polite Conversation, Etc.*, ed. by Herbert Davis with Louis Landa (Blackwell, 1957), p. 14.

² *Op. cit.* p. 11.

³ Reprinted in Giles Dugdale, *William Barnes of Dorset* (Cassell, 1953), Appendix Three.

demolish the arguments of those who use them. He claims that English words exist, or could be coined from English elements, to express the ideas expressed by loan-words. He denies that loan-words are more elegant or more meaningful than words of native origin, and he denies too that the use of words derived from Latin or Greek distinguishes the learned from the ignorant. We may accept all these claims without accepting Barnes's primary claim that words of classical origin are "corruptions" that should never be used in English.

Barnes points out that we already have words of native origin side by side with loan-words expressing similar ideas: *yearly* beside *annual*, *underground* beside *subterranean*, *heavenly* beside *celestial*, *to behead* beside *to decapitate*; *to foretell* beside *to predict*, *brotherhood* beside *fraternity*, *Almighty* beside *Omnipotent*, and so on. What he does not point out is that the words of each pair are not completely interchangeable; they differ slightly from each other, and such slight differences enrich the language by increasing its power of expressing subtle shades of meaning.

Although Barnes's theories are based on prejudices, the prejudices are shared by large numbers of people who speak English and write about it. Barnes's distinctive contribution, which has caused much amusement to many who would have been ready to accept his theories, was to coin large numbers of compound words from native elements with the suggestion that they should be used instead of familiar words derived from Latin or Greek. He went further than this and showed that it was an easy matter to coin compound words expressing ideas for which English had hitherto had to use phrases rather than single words. On the pattern of *lovelorn* he coined such words as *hopelorn* "having lost hope", *waylorn* "having lost one's way", *glorylorn* "having lost one's glory", and *reasonlorn* "having lost one's reason". From *rich* he coined *shiprich* "having much shipping", *landrich* "having much territory" and *wordrich* "copious in words". The inclusion of such words as *reasonlorn* and *glorylorn* among these coinages shows that Barnes, unlike some reformers, had no objection to loan-words as such or even to hybrids; it was words derived from Greek and Latin that annoyed him.

One of Barnes's arguments against words of classical origin is that many of them are little used :

But the learned, in their earnestness to enrich our language, have brought in words for which we have scarcely any use—which are scarcely ever wanted. How often do we use such [words] as ponderal, sciolous, anthropophy, pre-gustation, preoccupate, prescind, transfretation? Are poets killed so often that we want the word vaticide? Or is venetate often used for the verb to poison? Or what great difference is there between a spherule and a globule?

(Dugdale, op. cit. p. 272)

Here, too, we may admit the facts put forward by Barnes without necessarily drawing the same conclusions from them. If these words are little used, there is no problem. It was surely the chief aim of Barnes's writings on the English language to increase the number of words of classical origin which are little used. The words of which he complained must have their place in a complete dictionary of English, but if Barnes had had his way, they would have become mere linguistic curiosities like the rare words that he holds up to scorn.

Barnes was unhappy not only about the use of words of classical origin but about the meanings we give to them. Here, too, he is typical of many reformers, who regard any kind of semantic change as a personal affront. As an example of Barnes's insistence that words must be used only in their original senses, we may instance his objection to the use of *subscription* in the sense "contribution" :

when an object is written on paper, and people write their names underneath with the sum they mean to give towards it, they subscribe ; but giving money without underwriting one's name, is not a subscription.

(Dugdale, op. cit. p. 273)

Barnes suggested that we should make more use of the adjectival ending *-en*, found in such words as *woollen*, *golden* and *wooden* : "Nor do I know why it should be less elegant to say a silken apron, than a woollen cloth, or to talk of a floweren wreath, a strawen bonnet, a metallen spring than of the golden age" (Dugdale, op. cit. p. 273).

In this article Barnes writes with moderation. He is careful to say that he does not wish to get rid of loan-words altogether : some of your readers may be ready to ask whether I would alter the English tongue so much as to put out every Greek, Latin and French word, and take a Saxon one in its stead. Surely not. It is neither possible, nor to be wished.

I mean to show that it might be much purer, and yet not less elegant than it is now, and that there is no need of corrupting it further.

(Dugdale, *op. cit.* p. 274)

But as he grew older Barnes became less moderate. In 1878 he published *An Outline of English Speech-Craft*, and here he advocates the rejection of words of foreign origin and their replacement by coinages whose value is by no means self-evident, although, when we know the answer, we can see how he arrived at his neologisms. We can understand *fore-say* for "preface" or *thing names* for "nouns" without much difficulty; *free-breathings* for "vowels" and *breath pennings* for "consonants" are rather more difficult; *pitches of suchness* for "comparison of adjectives" has its own charm, but *time-words* for "verbs" and *thought wording* for "syntax" are misleading. Most of Barnes's coinages are now merely curiosities and are quoted chiefly by those who wish to discredit his theories. They include *ware-store* "emporium", *folk-wain* "omnibus", *folkdom* "democracy" and *soaksome* "bibulous". Not all compounds of this type were coined by Barnes. Some of them occurred in Old English and some are the work of imitators or parodists of Barnes. It was a parodist who spoke of a man who had made a gold-hoard in the soap-trade.

In more recent times some writers on the English language have developed antipathies just as arbitrary as those of Barnes. One of these is to the use of hybrid words, words made up of two or more elements borrowed from different languages. Even so well-balanced an author as T. H. Savory, author of *The Language of Science* (Deutsch, 1953), takes antipathy for granted. After quoting words like *haemoglobin* and *micronucleus*, of which the first element is Greek and the second Latin, he says :

These words are called hybrids, and their appearance, their use and their persistence cannot be described as anything but lamentable.

(T. H. Savory, *The Language of Science*, p. 54)

Other reformers have allowed a knowledge of etymology to go to their heads. If *cinema* goes back ultimately to a Greek word beginning with kappa, they will say that the *c* should be pronounced [k], forgetting that the immediate etymology is often more important than the ultimate etymology. If the word is

immediately borrowed from the French, then [s] is a more reasonable pronunciation. Whatever the etymology, there is a lot to be said for a pronunciation that accords with the usual conventions of English spelling without introducing anomalies. It is fairly certain that Plato did not pronounce his name [pleitou], but that is no reason why we should call him [pla:to:]. Similarly, the pronunciation of classical loan-words with the vowel-length they had in Greek or Latin is often the result of insufficient knowledge. The absurdity of such a practice can be demonstrated by examples of the frequency with which the rules are broken, for example by listing the hybrid words in a short passage or by the reply which Fitzedward Hall gave to his instructor who had unwisely taken him to task for saying '*doctrinal*':

If others, in their solicitude to *propagate* refinement, choose to be *ir'ritated* or '*excited*', because of what they take to be my *genu'ine ig'nōrance* in *ora'tōry*, they should at least be sure that their discomposure is not *gratu'itous*.¹

III

The Society for Pure English was founded in 1913 by a group of enthusiasts, chief of whom was the poet Robert Bridges. The founders made it clear that the word "pure" in the name of the Society did not mean to suggest that words of foreign origin are impurities in English: they used the term "Pure English" to mean "Good English". The aims of the Society were based on the belief that the use of the English language was spreading all over the world, and that it was therefore the duty of those who speak English to make it as good a means as possible for the intercommunication of ideas.

With some reformers we feel that their aims are misguided by antipathy to hybrids or to shortening of words. With the S.P.E. we feel that their aims are excellent, but the expression of these aims is liable to seem rather smug today. The founders did not show enough realization of the magnitude of the task they had undertaken. To reform a language is not an easy task. This does not mean that the task should never be attempted, but

¹ Quoted by O. Jespersen in *Growth and Structure of the English Language* (Blackwell, fifth edition, 1927), p. 109.

the aims should perhaps be stated less ambitiously. Whenever a user of a language expresses himself well, he is reforming the language, but the effect of any individual or group on the whole language is minute, unless he happens to appeal to the popular imagination for some non-linguistic reason, as Winston Churchill did. The founders of the S.P.E. took themselves too seriously. There is an air of cosy dilettantism about some of their activities.

Another consideration that called the Society into being was the desire to prevent speech from growing out of touch with literature :

Now the history of language shows that there is danger lest our speech should grow out of touch with that literature, and losing, as it were, its capital, and living from hand to mouth, fall from its nobility and gradually dissociate itself from apparent continuity with its great legacy, so that to an average Briton our Elizabethan literature would come to be as much an obsolete language as Middle English is to us now, or as Homer or Æschylus to a modern Greek.

(S.P.E. Tract 21, p. 5)

Two aims are expressed here, neither of them either practicable or desirable. The first is to retard the process of linguistic change, to preserve English as far as possible as it was in the Elizabethan period. Experience has shown the difficulty of such an attempt. A language should change to meet changing needs, and change is not necessarily decay. If the process of change means that readers of Elizabethan literature have to study Elizabethan English as a reader of Chaucer has to study Middle English, the price is not an exorbitant one. The second doubtful aim is to model the spoken language of today on the written language of the past. Spoken and written language have their own traditions, and it is no good service to either to try to make people of today speak as other people used to write.

There is a similar horror of perfectly natural linguistic developments in the apprehension expressed about the possible effects on the English language of its use by foreigners :

there is furthermore this most obnoxious condition, namely, that wherever our countrymen are settled abroad there are alongside of them communities of other-speaking races, who, maintaining among themselves their native speech, learn yet enough of ours to mutilate it, and establishing among themselves all kinds of blundering corruptions through habitual intercourse infect therewith the neighbouring English.

(S.P.E. Tract 21, p. 5)

Although this sentence was written in 1925, it reflects attitudes that were already becoming old-fashioned. There is real moral fervour in its denunciation of foreigners who make mistakes in the use of English, and there is possessiveness and a sort of linguistic imperialism in its attitude to English. It is no accident that it was published at about the time of the Wembley British Empire Exhibition.

The difficulty of changing a language by deliberate reform had been realized long before the foundation of the S.P.E., but Bridges brushed the objection aside as old-fashioned. He spoke of :

the general conviction that we may see growing up in all departments of science, especially in biology, namely, that man's mind is coming to emancipate itself from the material trend of blind natural evolution, and acquiring power to determine his future course consciously towards his spiritual perfection.

(S.P.E. Tract 21, p. 6)

He adds, rather naïvely, that everything is going to be different now that we have the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Bridges dismissed the traditional view too readily, and a dictionary, however good, is not likely to be very effective in resisting the forces which, for good and ill, shape the development of a language. What made the foundation of the Society for Pure English worth while, in spite of the likelihood that its effect on the language as a whole would be small, is that an improvement of standards is worth striving for even if what is achieved is only a minute fraction of what is theoretically possible. Some of the aims of the Society were mischievous and all of them were difficult, but in the pursuit of these aims, it encouraged the readers of its publications to think about linguistic matters, and some of its *Tracts* are important factual studies of various aspects of the English language, which have a value quite independent of the aims of the founders of the Society. Bridges was on firmer ground when he claimed that the Society performed a useful function in expressing an opinion on points on which writers and printers were anxious to have some ruling.

On spelling reform the founders of the Society were cautious and sensible. They realized that the fairly complete uniformity of present-day English spelling has advantages which would be

lost in any large-scale reform. They were anxious that English spelling should be reformed and simplified on scientific principles, but they believed that all necessary changes could be made gradually. They advocated, for example, such spellings as *redd* for the past tense of *read* to distinguish it from the infinitive *read*, and *hav* for *have*, to make it clear that it does not rhyme with *shave* and *wave*.

The influence of the S.P.E. was strengthened by the inclusion among the members and authors of tracts of such eminent philologists as Henry Bradley and Sir William Craigie. Among its lesser aims was the introduction of useful dialect words into Standard English and the encouragement of the coinage of new words to express new ideas.

The foundation of the Society was decided upon in January 1913 at a meeting at Bridges's house. Bridges was the only real enthusiast of the original committee of four. The others were Henry Bradley, Logan Pearsall Smith, who from the first had misgivings, and Walter Raleigh, who was openly mocking. He wrote to Bridges: "It's rather like proposing that everyone shall dress well and move gracefully". He never made any contribution to the Tracts but declared that the whole thing was good fun. The Society was nearly ruined at the start by the desire of Bridges and Raleigh to exercise a veto on membership. It was finally decided to accept as members all who paid an annual subscription of ten shillings, but the taint of cliquishness was never completely removed.

Quite apart from his work for the Society for Pure English, Robert Bridges was an active reformer of the English language. In 1910 he published an essay "On the Present State of English Pronunciation" in the *Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association*, and this was reprinted, with additions, as a separate tract in 1913. The primary object of this essay was "to urge that our phonetic spelling should be more conservative and less conversational than that which our phoneticians actually favour" (1913 edition, p. 5). This remark must be taken in conjunction with the statements in Appendix A that Bridges considers the transcriptions of Daniel Jones to be an absolutely faithful representation of the way in which Englishmen actually

speak, and it illustrates one of the chief problems that confront the spelling reformer. Should phonetic spelling indicate how people speak or how the reformer thinks that they ought to speak? Bridges was trying to carry out two reforms at the same time : the reform of spelling and that of pronunciation, and the task is too great for any man.

Bridges had another hobby-horse, which he rode with vigour in the second of the Tracts of the Society for Pure English, "On English Homophones" (1919). He reached a number of conclusions which he expressed in characteristically forceful language. His first conclusion "That homophones are a nuisance" is not likely to offend anybody, but he went on to apportion blame in further conclusions: "That the South English dialect is a direct and chief cause of homophones" and "That the mischief is being propagated by phoneticians". There is some truth in the first of these charges, though some of his readers might think that "the South English dialect" is no way to describe standard English, but the second charge mistakes the function of phoneticians; it is their business to record what people say, not what reformers think that they ought to say. The chief objection to the views of Bridges on homophones is that he over-states his case. Homophones are a slight nuisance, but the number of occasions when they cause real ambiguity is very small indeed, because the context usually makes it clear which of two homophones is intended. Certain sound-changes that have taken place in standard English but not in the North, such as the falling together of the sounds represented by *w* and *wh*, have tended to increase the number of homophones, but not to the point where they cause real difficulty. As Bridges pointed out, when the existence of homophones causes real difficulty in a language, one of the two words tends to become obsolete. But, although Bridges was often wrong-headed, he served a very useful purpose by making people think about the language that they use.

IV

No discussion on twentieth-century English pronunciation is complete without a reference to the part played by the B.B.C.

Whether they wish to do so or not, the B.B.C. authorities have exercised, and will continue to exercise, far more influence on the English language than any group of people has been able to exercise in the past. The indications are that they find this power rather embarrassing and they would be shocked to find themselves included among the reformers of the English language. But whatever their preferences, they cannot avoid exerting an influence. The appointment of an announcer, who may go on reading the news until he reaches the age of retirement, is going to encourage the spread of his pronunciations, especially if he is popular. The field in which the influence of the B.B.C. has aroused most controversy is that of variant pronunciations.

Variant pronunciations have always existed in English, partly because of the operation of sound-changes and partly because of the varying treatment of loan-words from foreign languages. They are most common among the less common words that are used more often in writing than in speech. They are among life's minor nuisances, which most of us deal with without losing much sleep, if we are conscious of them at all, changing our pronunciations if we find that we are heavily outnumbered by those who favour other variants. The radio announcer cannot adopt such an easy-going attitude, because he knows that details of pronunciation arouse passionate interest, and whichever variant he chooses is likely to be the subject of angry letters to the B.B.C. His great need is for someone to whom he can shift the responsibility. It was to meet this need that the B.B.C. in 1926 set up the advisory committee on pronunciation which has been the target of so many undeserved accusations of dictatorship. The position of the B.B.C. with regard to pronunciation was comparable with that of the great printing-houses towards spelling shortly after the invention of printing. They were not consciously reformers, but they achieved reforms by their attempts to solve purely practical problems. In both fields, of pronunciation and spelling, the reform resulted in a tendency towards standardization by the selection of one from two or more variants as the one to be used by printers or announcers; whether other people followed their example or not was their own business.

The chairman of the B.B.C.'s Advisory Committee on Spoken English was Robert Bridges. The other members were Sir Johnstone Forbes-Robertson, George Bernard Shaw, Logan Pearsall Smith, and two phoneticians, A. Lloyd James and Daniel Jones. This committee was replaced in 1933 by a larger committee under the chairmanship of Bernard Shaw. Four members (Daniel Jones, Lloyd James, H. C. Wyld and Harold Orton) had the task of preparing a preliminary report on the words submitted, which should take into account the history of the language. Their recommendations were considered by the full committee, representing many aspects of intellectual and artistic activity. These recommendations were not finally adopted until the general public had had a chance to express an opinion on them.

There is a difference between the B.B.C. and most other reformers in that the B.B.C.'s rôle as reformer was imposed upon it by circumstances whereas most other reformers are volunteers. The B.B.C. did not want to impose a standard; all that they wanted to do was to adopt the current usage of educated speakers. But on many points there is diversity of opinion among the writers of works of reference. An announcer, confronted by a word that has more than one current pronunciation, cannot just sit on the fence; he has to choose one of the variants, and it is reasonable that he should have the help of a committee to advise him which variant to choose. Others, beside B.B.C. announcers, are confronted by similar problems, and when the B.B.C. Advisory Committee published a list of its recommendations, the list was eagerly welcomed by many members of the general public. Since the B.B.C. had chosen its Advisory Committee well, it was natural that the Committee should enjoy a certain authority even if it did not seek it. The same sort of thing has happened with the various matriculation boards seeking to devise tests for candidates for admission to universities. These examinations have been found useful by employers and others who use their results for purposes for which they were never intended and then complain that matriculation boards exercise a stranglehold over the educational system of the whole country.

V

Most reformers of English are anxious to improve the language whatever the purpose for which it may be used ; the aim of C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, the inventors of Basic English, was more limited. They were anxious to devise a simplified form of English to exist side by side with what they called "unlimited English". The chief purpose of the simplified language was to provide an international language for those whose native tongue was not English, but its inventors claimed that it could be used "to improve and enrich understanding for those of us who are born to the language of Shakespeare and Milton". They regarded this function of Basic English as of paramount importance : "We should be poor servants of the future if in spreading the English language we impaired it. Happily the very constitution of Basic English makes it an influence leading in the other direction" (I. A. Richards, *Basic English and Its Uses*, Kegan Paul, 1943, p. vi). It was never intended that anyone should make Basic English his sole medium of expression ; foreigners who used it as an international language would go on using their own language in speaking to their fellow-countrymen.

The need for an auxiliary international language has often been felt and many attempts have been made to meet the need by the invention of artificial languages like Esperanto. The advantage of such invented languages over the existing world languages is the political one that their use is free from the charge of linguistic or cultural imperialism that might be made if an existing language were given a privileged position. Against this, the advantages of a language like Basic English are put by I. A. Richards :

If there is to be a common language it must be a simplified, but not denatured, form of one of the world's existing major languages. That would give the learner immediate access to innumerable speakers. It would lead into the parent language and so give the learner—up to the limits of his capacities—admission to a vast literature. Being part of the major language it would take from it the resourcefulness and interdependence, the hard-won mutual adjustment of its parts, needed if it is to serve the general purposes of mankind.

(op. cit. p. 13)

It is difficult for a speaker of any of the world's most widely-used languages to assess objectively the claims of that language to become an international language, but English undoubtedly has some claims. Perhaps the chief of these is the wide use which it already enjoys. This is not merely a matter of the number of speakers. Even more important is the geographical spread; in many countries English is either the main language or a widely understood second language, because of its use in administration or commerce. Other advantages of English are the large amount of reading material already available and the absence of a complicated system of accidence, a lack which makes English comparatively easy to learn. On the other hand, against the simplicity of English accidence, must be set the very complicated spelling system. Another feature of the English language, which adds to its richness but also to its difficulty, is its extensive vocabulary. It was the aim of the inventors of Basic English to make the language easier for foreigners by drastically restricting its vocabulary. The number of words in Basic English was limited to 850 and the number of rules for using them was cut down to the smallest number necessary for the clear statement of ideas. This was done without changing the normal order and behaviour of words in everyday English. In writing Basic English it is the writer's aim to leave the inexperienced reader in some doubt whether what he is reading is Basic or everyday English. Although the vocabulary is so limited, there is some truth in the claim that it is possible to say in Basic English anything needed for the general purposes of everyday life. It was realized that when we leave the field of general interest and deal with special branches of arts, science or trade, a wider vocabulary will be needed, but it was intended that the whole of this wider vocabulary should be capable of definition in words chosen from the 850 words of the Basic vocabulary. It may seem that Richards missed an opportunity of demonstrating the value of Basic English by not writing the whole of his *Basic English and its Uses* in Basic English. He claims that he could have done so, but his comment is revealing: "It would be clear but not very bright reading" (p. 21). Clarity is not the only aim of good writing.

Richards (p. 22) prefers to speak of the “discovery” of Basic English rather than its “invention” in order to stress the point that Basic English was a possibility inherent in the development of English, something that could be disengaged from full English, not something made up (p. 22). It had its origin in 1920 when Ogden and Richards were writing *The Meaning of Meaning*. The first publication on the subject appeared in 1928. The Basic Word List of 850 words consists of 600 names of things, 150 names of qualities, and 100 “operations”. These are words that put the others into significant relationship with one another. Eighteen of these are verbs.

The number of words (850) is misleadingly small. Many verbs and pronouns have irregular forms which must be learnt separately: *I, he* and *you* are included in the 850 words, but not *me, she* and *it*; *go* and *do* are included but not *went* or *did*. A few simple rules enable derivatives in *-er, -ing* and *-ed* to be formed from many of the nouns, and adverbs in *-ly* from the adjectives. Numerals, terms of measurement, currency and the calendar are outside the list, although they are in everyday use.

One consideration that underlies the designing of Basic English is that it must use only normal English sentence-patterns. This means that “if it is bad English it is bad Basic”. It would have been possible to simplify Basic further, without loss of intelligibility by such devices as the omission of the plural inflexion of nouns or the replacement of *am, is* and *are* by a single form *be*, but the resultant language would have been obviously unidiomatic English, and the designers of Basic English were wise to resist the temptation. It is not merely a question of making Basic English acceptable to users of normal English; if such unidiomatic devices had been used, they would have had to be unlearned if the student of Basic English wished to proceed to the study of a fuller form of English.

The claim that there are only eighteen verbs in Basic English is misleading, since many of the names of things in the Basic Word List are identical in form with verbs, and if we add endings like *-ing, or -ed*, as directed, to form derivatives we are treating them like verbs.

Some of the difficulties in the use of Basic English may result from the fact that from the first it has had two aims. The first is to provide an auxiliary international language; the second is to provide an introductory course for foreign students of English who intended to proceed from Basic to unrestricted English. The first of these aims is easier of achievement than the second.

One of the difficulties about Basic is that it has to be learnt even by those whose mother tongue is English, and it is often difficult for an Englishman to remember what is Basic and what is not. On the other hand, the translation of a piece of unrestricted English into Basic is a useful exercise in detecting the real meaning of polysyllabic words. It can help to overcome some of the shortcomings of English pointed out in Stuart Chase's *The Tyranny of Words* (1938).

VI

Not all the attempts to reform the English language are by academics. The correspondence columns of the better sort of newspapers contain ferocious letters from readers protesting about split infinitives, the borrowing of words from American English, the use of nouns as verbs and a hundred other features of the changing English language. The student of present-day English can learn a good deal about linguistic changes from these protests. They are often wrong-headed because they start from the assumption that all change is sinful, but many of them are pleas for the use of simple and straightforward English and the avoidance of vogue words and needlessly long words. The authors are often eminent men, skilled in controversy, and the protests gain from their authors' ability to present a point with wit and pungency. Such a man was A. P. Herbert, who contributed a series of articles to *Punch* which formed the basis of his book *What a Word!* (1935). His influence was salutary when he attacked the use of what he called "Jungle English" but, like all those who protest about the use of words, he was liable to forget that words can change their meanings quite legitimately.

One feature of the English language that has attracted the attention of numerous reformers is its spelling. A genuinely phonetic language would be one where a given sound was always represented by the same spelling and where a given spelling always represented the same sound. There is no need to pile up illustrations to show how far the English language of today departs from this ideal. There are three chief reasons for the lack of correspondence between sound and spelling. The first is that the number of phonemes in the language exceeds the number of letters. A one-for-one correspondence between sound and spelling would necessitate either the invention of about a dozen new letters or the use of diacritic marks, like accents or the cedilla, that would be a nuisance to printers, typists and writers alike. The second reason why our spelling is so unphonetic is that it has remained almost unchanged since the seventeenth century whereas the pronunciation has been constantly changing. We spell words as we used to pronounce them, and the many silent letters in a passage of present-day English bear witness to the refusal of the written language to follow the example of our speech in carrying out a process of simplification. The third reason for the complexity of English spelling is that we have borrowed words from many foreign languages, and we have generally allowed them to keep the spelling that they had in their native language. We thus have English and foreign spelling conventions side by side.

A thorough reform of English spelling to make the language completely phonetic would be such a major task that few reformers have advocated it. The most obvious objection to such an enterprise is that it would be necessary to re-write our existing literature in a new phonetic script. This drawback would be especially important in a language like English that has a large literature. A further objection is that the spoken language is constantly changing, and thorough spelling reform would necessitate constant changes in the written language to keep up with the changes in pronunciation. Then, too, dialectal differences in the spoken language would introduce a lack of uniformity into the written language. These objections are so great that they render insignificant such minor objections as the

loss of resemblance between etymologically related words that would follow on the adoption of phonetic spellings of such words as *nation* and *national*.

In spite of the need for more letters, we have allowed some letters to pass out of use. Anglo-Saxon had two letters, *þ* and *ð*, to represent the voiced and voiceless pre-dental fricatives that we today represent by *th* in *thin* and *then*, but even in Anglo-Saxon times there seems to have been no attempt to take the obvious step of using one of these letters to represent the voiced fricative while keeping the other to represent the voiceless, and since the early Middle English period we have dropped both letters in favour of the device of using *h* as if it were a diacritic : *th* represents a pair of phonemes that approach to *t* in their place of formation, just as *ch* does in relation to *c* and *sh* in relation to *s*. Another letter that we have dropped is *ȝ* to represent the palatal semi-vowel. On the other hand, we have kept three letters, *c*, *q* and *x*, that do not earn their keep in the language, since the sounds that they represent could be expressed perfectly well by other letters.

Since the complete refashioning of English spelling would be a hopeless and unprofitable task, reformers have had to be content with minor changes in spelling or with the choice of one from a pair of variants. Dr. Johnson preferred to spell *music* with a final *ck*, a spelling which may seem less phonetic than the spelling with *c*, but it leaves the reader in no doubt how the consonant should be pronounced whereas, next to a front vowel, *c* is often pronounced [s], as in *ice* and *practice*. A later lexicographer, Henry Bradley, favoured the dropping of the final *-e* in the suffix *-ive*, and he and his colleague Sir James Murray advocated the pronunciation of the initial *p* in *psychology*. They realized that there are two ways of bringing spelling and pronunciation more closely together : if you cannot spell a word as it is pronounced, you can pronounce it as it is spelt, and there are many English words, such as *forehead* and *waistcoat*, whose pronunciation has been altered in this way.

The arguments for spelling reform take it for granted that the only purpose of writing is to record pronunciation, but Henry Bradley showed in an important paper published more than sixty

years ago¹ that this assumption is no longer true. Bradley showed that practised readers have established a direct link between the written word and the idea expressed and they have cut out the intermediate stage of imagined pronunciation. We can see this direct link most readily in Arabic numerals, and there are many words with which we are familiar in writing of whose pronunciation we are uncertain.

George Bernard Shaw was a passionate believer in spelling reform and left a large part of his fortune to encourage the movement. In some of his polemical writings he made calculations to show the high cost of our inefficient spelling, but similar calculations could be made to show how enormous would be the cost of any far-reaching change.

It is well known that attempts at spelling reform have gone further in the United States than in the United Kingdom, but even there reforms have only touched the fringes of the problem. A few American spellings, such as *plow* and *ax*, are clearly more phonetic than their British counterparts, but *theater* and *center* are not much more phonetic than *theatre* and *centre*, since the *r* is usually silent. American usage keeps the ending *-or* more consistently than British spelling, which has *colour* and *honour* beside *author* and *governor*. The British treatment of these words illustrates the way in which inconsistencies in spelling arise, since Elizabethan English had both *-or* and *our* in most words of this kind. We have selected one variant in some words and the other variant in others.

Beside the well-known men who have sought to reform the English language, a large number of men and women with no special qualifications have lent a hand and are continuing to do so. The difference between the approaches of the eminent and the simple is not so great as one might expect, since the history of the English language has not been a compulsory subject of study for those who have themselves used the language very effectively. Those who write about the language are as a rule not so much anxious to propose changes as to resist them. One general conclusion can be drawn from the efforts of the many

¹ "On the Relations Between Spoken and Written Language, with Special Reference to English" in *Proceedings of the British Academy, 1913-14*, pp. 211-32.

reformers, and this is a matter which will cause disquiet to some while it brings consolation to others. The conclusion is that the language is capable of putting up very strong resistance to the efforts of those who try to change it or to prevent it from changing. By all means let those who find the language unsatisfactory try to improve it, but their efforts will have very little effect on the language as a whole.