

Spelling Reform

Noah Webster



OVERVIEW

In "An Essay on the Necessity, Advantages, and Practicality of Reforming the Mode of Spelling," Noah Webster, the lexicographer, laid out some of his ideas for an American system of spelling that would appear later in his *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828). (A lexicographer is an author or editor of a dictionary.) Excerpts from the 1789 essay appear here.

GUIDED READING

As you read, consider the following questions:

- What reason does Webster give for establishing a national language?
- Who do you think was Webster's intended audience?

It has been observed by all writers, on the English language, that the orthography or spelling of words is very irregular; the same letters often representing different sounds, and the same sounds often expressed by different letters. For this irregularity, two principal causes may be assigned:

1. The changes to which the pronunciation of a language is liable, from the progress of science and civilization.
2. The mixture of different languages, occasioned by revolutions in England, or by a predilection of the learned, for words of foreign growth and ancient origin.

To the first cause may be ascribed the difference between the spelling and pronunciation of Saxon words. The northern nations of Europe originally spoke much in gutturals. This is evident from the number of aspirates and guttural letters which still remain in the orthography of words derived from those nationalities; and from the modern pronunciation of the collateral branches of the Teutonic, the Dutch, the Scotch, and German. Thus, *k* before *n* was once pronounced as in *knave*, *know*; the *gh* in *might*, *though*, *daughter*, and other similar words; the *g* in *reign*, *feign*, etc...

In this progress, the English have lost the sounds of most of the guttural letters. The *k* before *n* in *know*, the *g* in *reign*, and in many other words, are become mute in practice; and the *gh* is softened into the sound of *f*, as in *laugh*, or is silent, as in *brought*.

To this practice of softening the sounds of letters, or wholly suppressing those which are harsh and disagreeable, may be added a popular tendency to abbreviate words of common use. Thus, *Southwork*, by a habit of quick pronunciation, is become *Suthark*; *Worcester* and *Leicester* are become *Wooster* and *Lester*; *business*, *bizness*; *colonel*, *curnel*; *cannot*, *will not*, *cant*, *wont*. In this manner the final *e* is not heard in many modern words, in which it formerly made a syllable. The words *clothes*, *cares*, and most others of the same kind, were formerly pronounced in two syllables ...

When words have been introduced from a foreign language into the English, they have generally retained the orthography of the original, however ill adapted to express the English pronunciation. Thus, *fatigue*, *marine*, *chaise* retain their French dress, while, to represent the true pronunciation in English, they should be spelt *fateeg*, *mareen*, *shaze*. Thus, thro an ambition to exhibit the etymology of words, the English, in *Philip*, *physic*, *character*, *chorus*, and other Greek derivatives, preserve the representatives of the original Φ and X ; yet these words are pronounced, and ought ever to have been spelt, *Fillip*, *fyzsic* or *fizzic*, *karacter*, *korus*.

But such is the state of our language. The pronunciation of the words which are strictly *English* has been gradually changing for ages, and since the revival of science in Europe, the language has received a vast accession of words from other languages, many of which retain an orthography very ill suited to exhibit the true pronunciation.

The question now occurs: Ought the Americans to retain these faults which produce innumerable inconveniencies in the acquisition and use of the language, or ought they at once to reform these abuses, and introduce order and regularity into the orthography of the AMERICAN TONGUE? ...

The principal alterations, necessary to render our orthography sufficiently regular and easy, are these:

1. The omission of all superfluous or silent letters; as *a* in *bread*. Thus *bread*, *head*, *give*, *breast*, *built*, *meant*, *realm*, *friend*, would be spelt, *bred*, *hed*, *giv*, *brest*, *bilt*, *ment*, *relm*, *friend*. Would this alteration produce any inconvenience, any embarrassment or expense? By no means. On the other hand, it would lessen the trouble of writing, and much more, of learning the language; it would reduce the true pronunciation to a certainty; and while it would assist foreigners and our own children in acquiring the language, it would render the pronunciation uniform, in different parts of the country, and almost prevent the possibility of changes.

2. A substitution of a character that has a certain definite sound, for one that is more vague and indeterminate. Thus by putting *ee* instead of *ea* or *ie*, the words *mean*, *near*, *speak*, *grieve*, *zeal*, would become *meen*, *neer*, *speek*, *greev*, *zeel*. This alteration could not occasion a moments trouble; at the same time it would prevent a doubt respecting the pronunciation; whereas the *ea* and *ie* having different sounds, may give a learner much difficulty. Thus *greef* should be substituted for *grief*; *kee* for *key*; *beleev* for *believe*; *laf* for *laugh*; *dawter* for *daughter*; *plow* for *plough*; *tuf* for *tough*; *proov* for *prove*; *blud* for *blood*; and *draft* for *draught*. In this manner *ch* in Greek derivatives, should be changed into *k*; for the English *ch* has a soft sound, as in *cherish*; but *k* always a hard sound. Therefore *character*, *chorus*, *cholic*, *architecture*, should be written *karacter*, *korus*, *kolic*, *arkitecture*; and were they thus written, no person could mistake their true pronunciation.

3. Thus *ch* in French derivatives should be changed into *sh*; *machine*, *chaise*, *chevalier*, should be written *masheen*, *shaze*, *shevaleer*; and *pique*, *tour*, *oblique*, should be written *peek*, *toor*, *obleek*.

4. A trifling alteration in a character, or the addition of a point would distinguish different sounds, without the substitution of a new character. Thus a very small stroke across the *h* would distinguish its two sounds. A point over a vowel, in this manner, *â*, or *ó*, or *i* might answer all the purposes of different letters. And for the diphthong *ow*, let the two letters be united by a small stroke, or both engraven on the same piece of metal, with the left hand line of the *w* united to the *o*.

These, with a few other inconsiderable alterations, would answer every purpose, and render the orthography sufficiently correct and regular.

The advantages to be derived from these alterations are numerous, great and permanent.

1. The simplicity of the orthography would facilitate the learning of the language. It is now the work of years for children to learn to spell; and after all, the business is rarely accomplished ...

But with the proposed orthography, a child would learn to spell, without trouble, in a very short time, and the orthography being very regular, he would ever afterwards find it difficult to make a mistake. It would, in that case, be as difficult to spell *wrong* as it is now to spell *right*.

2. A correct orthography would render the pronunciation of the language, as uniform as the spelling in books. A general uniformity thro the United States, would be the event of such a reformation as I am here recommending. All persons, of every rank, would speak with some degree of precision and uniformity. Such uniformity in these states is very desirable; it would remove prejudice, and conciliate mutual affection and respect.

3. Such a reform would diminish the number of letters about one sixteenth or eighteenth. This would save a page in eighteen; and a saving of an eighteenth in the expense of books, is an advantage that should not be overlooked.

4. But a capital advantage of this reform in these states would be, that it would make a difference between the English orthography and the American. This will startle those who have not attended to the subject; but I am confident that such an event is an object of vast political consequence.

For the alteration, however small, would encourage the publication of books in our own country. It would render it, in some measure, necessary that all books should be printed in America. The English would never copy our orthography for their own use; and consequently the same impressions of books would not answer for both countries ...

Besides this, a *national language* is a band of *national union*. Every engine should be employed to render the people of this country *national*; to call their attachments home to their own country; and to inspire them with the pride of national character. However, they may boast of Independence, and the freedom of their government, yet their *opinions* are not sufficiently independent; an astonishing respect for the arts and literature of their parent country, and a blind

imitation of its manners, are still prevalent among the Americans. Thus, an habitual respect for another country, deserved indeed and once laudable, turns their attention from their own interests and prevents their respecting themselves ...

... America is in a situation the most favorable for great reformatations; and the present time is, in a singular degree, auspicious. The minds of men in this country have been awakened. New scenes have been, for many years, presenting new occasions for exertion; unexpected distresses have called forth the powers of invention; and the application of new expedients has demanded every possible exercise of wisdom and talents. Attention is roused; the mind expanded; and the intellectual faculties invigorated. Here men are prepared to receive improvements, which would be rejected by nations, whose habits have not been shaken by similar events ...

Let us then seize the present moment, and establish a *national language*, as well as a national government. Let us remember that there is a certain respect due to the opinions of other nations. As an independent people, our reputation abroad demands that, in all things, we should be federal; be national; for if we do not respect ourselves, we may be assured that other nations will not respect us. In short, let it be impressed upon the mind of every American, that to neglect the means of commanding respect abroad, is treason against the character and dignity of a brave independent people.