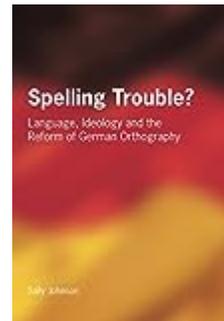




**Sally Johnson.** *Spelling Trouble? Language, Ideology and the Reform of German Orthography.* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd., 2005. viii + 208 pp. (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85359-786-2; \$49.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-85359-784-8.



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### Spelling Rules More than Words?

Sally Johnson, Professor of Linguistics at the University of Leeds, might convincingly have replaced the question mark in her title with an exclamation mark. For while the question mark may lure readers and buyers, a simple period or even an exclamation mark would nail down her thesis in a nice two-word nutshell. The author, a sociolinguist with a strong interest in language politics, as the bio-blurb on the book cover confirms, clearly answers her title question in the affirmative. She regards the recent and still very much debated spelling reform for the German-speaking regions of Europe at least politically and socially as a failure: “Moreover, if one of the key measures of ‘success’ [why in quotes?—D.P.] where language planning is concerned is the criterion of public acceptance, then the 1996 reform can hardly be seen as a particularly successful instance of policy implementation—even allowing for the fact that it is by no means atypical for spelling reforms to incite such vociferous public opposition” (p. 119).

In fact, Germans always had trouble dealing with spelling reform, as Johnson shows in her fine historical overview in chapter 2. She attributes this difficulty most

fundamentally to the fact that Germans were so spread out and disparate in their dialects that they were desperate for some unifying conformity, which they could only hope to achieve through written language (*Schriftsprache*). This state of affairs, she reckons, led to excessive attachment to orthography, the absolute rules of right and wrong spelling. (At least this reader wondered at this point how she would explain the equally adamant French determination to keep their language pure—in its historical spelling.) Herder, who regarded national language and tradition as indispensable foundations for cultural progress, is appropriately cited here, while Luther and the impact of his Bible translation are curiously absent. The emphasis on written language, according to Johnson, coupled with an exaggerated respect for the state by a people ever frustrated in their desire to gain a common national house by their dispersal and ultimately by the Prussian-Austrian Dualism, which was sealed in 1871, led to repeated drives for *control* over spelling first by teachers, who saw themselves as the shepherds of the nation, and later by various hegemonic cultural and linguistic state elites. These are fascinating and sweeping arguments, whose premises readers will not always read-

ily accept—for instance, that there are greater differences among German dialects than those of other nations. But she presents solid historical evidence for the repeated and consistently foiled efforts at spelling reform—with the 1901 reform as the one with the greatest practical effect, primarily thanks to the ascendance of the *Duden* as the hegemonic authority on spelling—the “Kaiser” of spelling in an authoritarian imperial state.

The first climax of the modern drives for orthographic reform, Johnson shows convincingly, took place in 1876, which saw philologists and teachers gather together at the new national center of Berlin—later dubbed the “First Orthographic Conference.” Although Reich founder Bismarck was characteristically hostile to this show of sentimental nationalism, the conference’s impact was felt perhaps even more powerfully in the German-speaking regions that had been excluded from the *kleindeutsch* state. Written language and the “people’s schools,” *Volksschulen* became the beacons of the national. Journalists throughout the far-flung German-speaking regions of Central Europe “took a keen interest in the 1876 discussions,” as Johnson found in her research (p. 21). A good example is an article from March 1876 in *Neue Zeit*, the preeminent newspaper in the erstwhile university town of Olmütz/Olomouc in Habsburg Moravia. The daily cited a paper presented by a Professor Raschke to the pedagogical *Verein* of Teschen in Austrian Silesia, “welches sich der Schreibweise des Vortragenden bedient.” It is a gem worth citing here:

“Das theoretische zil der schreibungsreform.

“Wie die beste deutsche schreibung beschaffen sein mus, ergibt sich aus den febern der gebräuchlichen. Beseitigen wir alle diese feler, so haben wir das gewünschte.

“Aus der entwicklung der schreibung in unserem jahrhundert lässt sich das zil zimlich genau erkennen, dem sie zustrebt. In folgenden geben wir nichts subjectives, sondern eben disen gang der reform und die daraus erkennbaren zile.

“Der standpunkt, fon dem aus unter den aufgestellten prinzipien das richtige zu wählen ist, kann nicht die gewonheit sein, denn sie wird täglich fon fielen ferlezt, ist nicht einig; - kann auch nicht die geschichte der deutschen sprache sein, denn die schreibung soll eine neuhochdeutsche sein und die althistoriker geben fon ihrem ursprünglichen program ein Stück ums andere preis. Diser standpunkt kann nur das bedürfnis des lesen- und schreibenlernenden sein, das bedürfnis der

folksschule.

“Fon disem standpunkt aus ist unter den aufgestellten prinzipien nicht schwer zu wählen. Weder das gewonheitsprinzip, noch das althistorische, noch das auf [Johann Christoph] Adelung [1732-1806, author of the standard German grammar of the Enlightenment era - D.P.] zurückgehende entspricht dem bedürfnis der folksschule, sondern das fonetische, beschränkt durch das etymologische mit dem zusatz: Gebrauche die einfachsten mittel. Es lautet dann so: Schreib, wie zu lesen ist, doch mit rücksicht auf die ableitung, soweit sie in der jetzigen schriftsprache nachweisbar ist und gebrauche die einfachsten mittel.”[1]

The statement nicely illustrates the continuity of the issues raised by the Berlin orthographic conference down to the Vienna discussions between 1886 and 1994, which laid the foundations for the 1996 reform. Recent reformers have been much more careful and moderate, but the principles are remarkably similar. Many of us, especially those of us frustrated by the chaotic spelling rules of English, would prefer a maximally phonetic spelling system like the Spanish one, where phonemes and graphemes correspond fully, thus, for instance, eliminating the German “v” and replacing it with “f” or “w” according to the pronunciation. But even our Teschen linguist wished to limit this central phonetic principle with the etymological, in which the derivations were still apparent. But like the 1996 reformers, he rejected the *Gewohnheitsprinzip* (go by what people are used to), which has motivated most of the opposition to sensible reform in 1876 and since 1996. He rightly considered it unreliable because it was “violated daily and not uniform.” Instead he proposed to use as a guide the most common mistakes made by students and average users of the language. Here Johnson confirms that “early proposals for re-standardization tended to be driven by ‘social’ or ‘educational’ concerns” in the 1996 reform as well (p. 45). In doubt, Professor Raschke advocated the simplest spelling, again the intention of the new reform. Clearly the creators of the new German orthography would essentially identify with Raschke’s overall maxim: “Write the way it sounds, but take into account derivations still evident in contemporary written language, and use the simplest ways.”

To be sure, the experience of 120 years of reform efforts foiled by the inertia of old spelling habits made the 1996 reformers far more cautious and pragmatic than their predecessors. They did not touch such hallowed traditions as capitalization of nouns (surely the source of the

largest number of spelling errors by German elementary-school students), the ambiguous “v,” most of the ph- and th-spellings (rather than f and t), etc. This caution may well have increased confusion and added arguments for some opponents, but will probably also be the key to the success of the latest effort. While the new spelling rules aim at greater phonemic-graphemic consistency (using the same letters or combination of letters for the same sounds) to make pronunciation and spelling more predictable for readers and writers, the reformers were guided primarily by what German speakers and writers would consider most logical by the traditional structure of the German language—or, especially for those learning to read and write, to make largely accepted rules more consistent. Here the maximal correspondence of phonemes and graphemes (“write the way it sounds”) in practice often clashes with assumptions based on derivation, e.g., *Hand*–*HÄnde* vs. *Hende*, but then what about *behende*, which is therefore now spelled *behÄnde*. Similar issues arise with capitalization, compound spelling, hyphenization, and punctuation, as well as spelling of foreign words, which have entered the language at very different times. Chapter 3 on “Linguistic Details” does a marvelous job of explaining these spelling features in only 26 pages (preceded and followed by more highly theoretical *Fachsimpeln*), which are most rewarding for anyone seeking more clarity about the new spelling rules. It is more concise and thus handier for average users than the introductory section in *Duden*. In fact this chapter, together with the historical background in chapter 2 and the analysis of the key court cases following in chapter 4, make this work the standard source on the German spelling reform in English.

The second half of the book belongs to the sociolinguist. After a largely descriptive survey in chapter 4 of the two cases against the spelling rules, brought before the German Federal Constitutional Court by the lawyers Rolf GrÄschner and Thomas Elsner/Gunda Diercks-Elsner, plus a very brief summary of the referendum in Schleswig-Holstein (later annulled by the state parliament), the last two chapters launch into the language reform as “ideological debate.” This effort to understand social and ideological issues underlying the reform, the court challenges and decisions, and the claims and counterclaims of creators, defenders, and opponents of the reform yields interesting insights, but they remain necessarily speculative and often *terribles simplifications*. There is, for instance, a certain obvious truth in the assertion that language disciplines and therefore controls populations and especially children in school, but it becomes

tendentious, when this is translated into sweeping statements like: “all official policy geared toward (spelling) standardization remains nonetheless an inherently ideological project,” and “a useful means with which to shore up the privileges of already powerful social, regional, and economic groups, thereby legitimizing inequality” (p. 122). Her primary paradigm into which she casts the spelling-reform court and referendum battles is Ferdinand TÄnnies’s old *Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft* dichotomy. This usage offers interesting perspectives, especially on the arguments presented by GrÄschner and his student Wolfgang Kopke, but the application of an already highly questionable model (cf. Ralf Dahrendorf’s devastating judgment, which she fair-mindedly cites on p. 123) in the confrontation between the court and the reform opponents completely misapplies even TÄnnies’s categories.

In the end, Johnson is unsympathetic to the German spelling reform because she believes that, while granting the liberal intentions of the planners, “the reform served only to exacerbate orthographic insecurity within the education system as well as the wider speech community.” From the perspective of English spelling rules, which evolve rather unpredictably in the markets of autonomous spellers and dictionary publishers, she proclaims “any attempt to frame such an act [of language planning] within an autonomous, asocial view of orthography ... misplaced” and calls for “a reform process ... that *formally* acknowledge[s] language users as individuals and groups whose concerns must be explicitly addressed.” Unfortunately she does not specify how such a grand scheme of spelling by direct democracy might be accomplished, but only states the undeniable truth: “How this might be achieved and on what basis, however, is subject to different interpretations” (p. 156).

Oddly Johnson then links the characteristic German inclination toward “explicit state-sanctioned codification of orthography” and the (surely long overcome, D.P.) “emphasis placed within the German educational system on the declarative knowledge associated with a standard orthography” (pp. 171-171) to the poor showing of German students in the 2002 PISA (Program for International Student Assessment). Surely she must know that German students fared far better in similar international comparisons when their schools were far *less*, not more, flexible than they are now. To mention this fact is not to advocate a return to the older system under very different social conditions, but surely it invalidates Johnson’s argument, especially when there is clear evidence that it takes children far longer to learn English spelling than students of

more phonetic languages like Spanish and even German.

Far more sensible is the conclusion that Johnson shares with one of the members of the International Commission for German Orthography: "Given the historical difficulties surrounding the standardization and re-standardization of German Orthography, there was clearly a need for a sustained campaign of public relations (PR) with a view to communicating to the wider public the overall necessity, content, value, and purpose of the reform" (p. 156). In the context of her above arguments that the "declarative knowledge associated with a standard orthography" was the problem, this is at least

baffling. So is the assumption that the reform has failed. The PISA results are irrelevant in this context since those data long preceded the reform, as she acknowledges even while forging a link. More importantly, the recent agreement by all but two German states to have the new spelling rules adopted in all schools suggests that the new rules will, in fact, become fully accepted as the standard spelling within a generation with a few small changes and additional flexibility. Can it be long until H-German follows suit?

Note

[1]. *Neue Zeit* (Olm¼tz), March 14, 1876.

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