REVIEW

Why spelling matters

Simon Horobin, *Does Spelling Matter?*
Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2013.
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Reviewed by Valerie Yule, formerly of Monash University

Does spelling matter? Simon Horobin says that it matters because spelling shows 'the richness of our language and its history'. He argues for retaining spelling unchanged as a testimony to the 'richness of our linguistic heritage and a connection with our literary past'. His book shows that until the last two hundred years it was constantly changing, but 'rather than lamenting the inconsistencies and complexities of English spelling', Horobin traces 'how these developed and what they tell us about the fascinating history of our language'.

Most of the book, then, is about much that is common to histories of spelling such as Scragg (1974), Carney (1994), Sebba (2007), Upward & Davidson (2011) and Crystal (2012). The 'richness' is in the changes in English spelling, from Old English, the Norman invasion, the etymological reforms of the Renaissance and the 18th century, and the gradual fixing of English and American spelling - not all shown in modern spelling. 'The basic principle of the English spelling system is that sounds map onto letters, albeit often in complex ways', and Horobin describes the 'complex ways' that make 25% of spellings not fit any system.

It would be possible to compile from Horobin's appended list of words a Dictionary of Awkward Spellings that gave the historical explanations of why thousands of English spellings are awkward. 'An important principle of a writing system is that it should only encode features that are of communicative significance', but Horobin shows that 'standard English spelling comprises a variety of different forms that have developed in an erratic and inconsistent manner over a substantial period of time'. He explains, for example, how in early manuscript handwriting there was confusion of minims - *i n m u* - so that letters such as <y> or <o> were often used to replace them; how some similar words' spelling depends upon guessing as to whether their origins were French or Latin; and how many silent letters bear witness to pronunciation that has been lost.

The account of reformers goes from the monk Orm to Christopher Upward, but none later, except for Masha Bell (2004). Some of their ideas were adopted, although other practical ideas are still not taken up. Horobin supports the concept of correct spelling because consistency is important for clear communication, noting that spelling is easier to regulate than other features of language. Spelling proficiency is widely taken as a measure of goodness, industry and a badge of social status. People think of 'correct spelling as an index of intelligence, moral fibre and general trustworthiness'. The literate want to keep what they are good at, present readers have invested time and effort learning it, and there are vested interests. Changing spelling may have unforeseen consequences, make past literature inaccessible, suppress regional accents, and obscure correspondence between a few words like *sign* and *signature*. These are all common arguments, which reform of spelling can take account of (Yule, 2011; and see also *Writing systems* which contains the material.). New to the debate are Horobin's international examples, with details of furore and failures of change in some other languages.

Horobin makes some bold statements. Language is confused with its spelling, which is the tool to write it. For example, 'the crucial feature of a standard language is its uniformity and resistance to change', which is hardly true of a living language. Phonemes – the small set of units, usually about 20 to 60 and different for each language, which make up the basic distinctive units of speech sounds in the words of a language – are confused with our different regional speech sounds so that dialects are offered as a reason why reform of spelling is impossible. Yet standard spelling represents phonemes – there are at least six ways that *dog* is pronounced – but, like

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most people, Horobin assumes that any reform must show pronunciation closely, that is, phonetically. I can only assume that Horobin is not aware of the large body of research supporting spelling reform. An account of spelling research that includes experimental evidence from 1908 onward published at <www.valerieyule.com.au/spellresearch1.htm> includes Seymour et al. (2003), Paulesu et al. (2001), Thackray (1982), Thorstad (1991) and Upward (1992). Although the claims of many reformers are 'frequently made without reference to research' (because they regard it as self-evident that spelling is a barrier to literacy for the uneducated), Horobin describes the evidence he has not seen as 'ambiguous at best that spelling is easier to learn with close relationships of sound and spelling', and he ignores morphophonemic reforms.

Horobin concludes – from the fierce opposition to even trivial spelling changes in a few other countries – that 'any attempt to overturn such views and to introduce a reformed spelling of any kind seems doomed to failure'. He fails to record many protracted campaigns that have ended in recent successful reforms and makes no reference to the 38 countries that have updated their writing systems in the past 150 years, usually in more than one step (see <http://www.valerieyule.com.au/writsys.htm>). But then few English speakers are aware of this.

From a sociologist's point of view, a major criticism is that Horobin presumes a world without any who are disadvantaged. Hence he dismisses Masha Bell's (2004) 'exaggerated and unfounded claims about the difficulties of English spelling'. Horobin claims that reformers have 'no consideration of complex socio-economic factors'. They do – learners and struggling adults are directly affected, with spelling just one more burden to overcome. Reformers focus on the unnecessary difficulties of English spelling today, many recorded usefully here by Horobin, which present barriers to literacy for children, disadvantaged and dyslexic non-readers and for foreigners seeking to learn the world's lingua franca. It is a pity that Horobin does not acknowledge the considerable research about the intrapersonal defects of those millions, adults and children, who fail the task, and the research which seeks to address the task they fail.

Horobin confines himself to the world of those who master spelling with ease. 'Many readers of this book will find the acceptance of erratic spelling as impossible to support and will consider the maintenance of our English spelling system a highly desirable and necessary activity, more than compensating for the hours of classroom time dedicated to learning its numerous complexities and exceptions.' 'Spelling is the most easily defined and regulated aspect of linguistic usage and therefore the domain with the greatest attention of prescriptivists.' He gives them a disproportionate share of his attention. He observes the derision given to those not using standard spellings, citing Lord Chesterfield's warning to his son: 'One false spelling may fix ridicule upon (a gentleman) for the rest of his life' (Horobin, 2013: 1). He describes how misspellings are ridiculed, like Dan Quale's *potatoe*, once a legitimate variant, and notes how errors on a website are likely to produce huge loss of revenue. Horobin discusses non-standard spellings by the young, online, brand names and novel first names, but sees them as corruptions rather than signs of change. Yet some linguists, notably David Crystal (2012), are beginning to acknowledge that some spellings could be improved with no problems for the literate.

This reviewer, as a schools and clinical child psychologist, thinks that spelling matters because it is a barrier to literacy for millions that can, however, be made a more efficient tool for communication (Yule 2011, 2013). Scientific experiment, not the old arguments recycled, is able to challenge all the old assumptions and arguments, including those of previous reformers, and to re-examine every aspect Horobin discusses. Spelling change is something that everyone can experiment with today. This book is a useful review of spelling history, explains the present concern with keeping spelling as it is and adds some new international aspects – but it makes a disappointingly one-sided conclusion to the arguments for or against any change.

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REVIEW

Having fun with words while taking them seriously

Geert Booij, *The Grammar of Words. An Introduction to Linguistic Morphology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. xvi + 353, Paperback, £24.99, ISBN 9780199691838.

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This is the third edition, revised and updated as well as greatly embellished with a number of additional attractive features, of a book first published in 2005. This fact alone speaks volumes for the book's immense popularity amongst its target readership primarily composed of students with no specialist knowledge about its subject matter. As part of the series "Oxford Textbooks in Linguistics," of which there already are over a score of widely appreciated titles on the market, the book is true to the stated objective of the series which is to cater to "second and third-year undergraduate, and postgraduate university students" who "have completed a first-year introductory course in general linguistics."

Presented in 6 parts, entitled "What is linguistic morphology," "Word-formation," "Inflection," "Interfaces," "Morphology and mind," and "Conclusions" respectively, the book walks the reader through the basic notions of morphology. The language used, as well as the informal, often conversational style of discourse adopted to conduct discussion make the book extremely user-friendly. Each chapter is rounded off with a summary. This is followed by a set of 10 questions, designed to test the reader's comprehension of the discussion in the chapter, but also to goad them into indulging in some problem-solving on their own, an activity destined to whet their intellectual appetite and arouse interest in the field. The questions are duly answered at the end of the book in a separate section, so that the reader may judge their own performance. At the end of each of the chapters, the reader is also given some useful tips for further reading, should their curiosity be sufficiently aroused. At the end of Chapter 1, there is a brief section entitled "Resources for morphology" where the reader is directed to important sources of additional information that include Linguist List, the websites of the Summer Institute of Linguistics and Ethnologue and so forth, important journals in the field and some introductory textbooks and classic handbooks. The book has, in addition, a 27-page long glossary of technical terms used throughout and a list of bibliographical references, 18 pages long.

Why the rather unusual turn of phrase "grammar of words," as it figures prominently in the very title of the book? The concluding words in the summary to the final chapter provide a pithy answer: "[. . .] the grammar of words and the grammar of sentences are intertwined in many ways!" (p. 295). Earlier on, in this same chapter, the author, who is Professor Emeritus at the University of Leiden, draws attention to the fact that the notion "word" plays a central role

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