

Why Some People Think Those Who Make Spelling Mistakes Should Be Crucified: Some thoughts on spelling in Dutch and English



Famine. Natural disasters. Global warming. Child soldiers. Rape culture. All horrible things. When confronted with an issue like this at, say, a party, people will generally say something along the lines of “Yes, that IS horrible”, and then move on with their lives. It is bad, but it is far away and abstract. There is, however, one subject that will turn any well-meaning middle-of-the-road housewife into a crazy militant killing machine. It has nothing to do with death, or murder, or mutilation. This subject is spelling. For some reason almost everybody makes a really ridiculously big deal about spelling and more specifically ‘errors’. You should see the way veins pop in their neck, the way rage builds up, only to be released in agonizing screams of “No! It should be *they’re!*” So if people are so tender about the subject, why do we keep making mistakes? And who says what a mistake is and what isn’t?

First let me explain some things about spelling. As you all may or may not know (depending on whether or not you survived Philology 3), in days of yore, everyone did more or less what s/he liked spellingwise. There was some consensus on spelling, but a lot of words were spelled very differently, even in the same text. Shakespeare is a great example of this, inserting a letter here and there to suit the meter. Then, in the course of the 17th century, standardization kicked in. There were several reasons for this: in short, more people were reading and writing, the need for a supraregional dialect arose, and people wanted to feel better than those who could not write properly. Well, maybe that last bit is not entirely true, but it is certainly true that with the coming of

standardization came the first spelling-snobs: people were quick to condemn those who could not spell properly. As people still do today.

Nowadays, most of us learn to spell in elementary school. The rules are relatively fixed, and everybody gets along nicely. It is not easy to learn, but most of us get there eventually. We still make the occasional mistake during high school, but nothing major. And then disaster strikes: people keep on making mistakes. But why? Surely we have spent enough time throughout our formative years to be able to do a simple task like spelling?

One of the most obvious reasons why we make mistakes has to do with the way language works. A lot of language rules are learned subconsciously, while we are still infants, or very small children. With these things no-one will ever make a mistake: I promise you that there is not one speaker of English (or Dutch, or German or French for that matter) who will put the article behind the noun. There are languages that do that (for example Swedish and Bengali), but we learn to say “the book” and not “book the”. This rule is internalised. Spelling, however, is not internalised. Many linguists say that it is not even really language: it is just a framework of agreements representing language. Be that as it may, it is clear that spelling rules are not internalised: we have to learn them. People learn these rules to different extents: some of us may not have to think twice about how to spell *facetiousness*, but I sure do.

Another reason why people, especially non-native speakers, make so many mistakes is because of the sometimes vast discrepancy between pronunciation and orthography. How on earth is a second language learner to know that *knight* is spelled the way it is? Or take *colonel*, pronounced as a homophone with *kernel*. Only by meticulous study can this be learned, and especially English has so many exceptions! Of course people used to pronounce *knight* more or less exactly the way it is spelled. Even for the English it would be pretty cruel to spell a word completely different from the way it is pronounced. But pronunciation changes over the years (because all languages change all the time, remember?), and it would help if spelling represented pronunciation to some extent.

So a lot of people still make mistakes. Is there something we can do to help? Well, a possible solution could be a spelling reform. If there is an institution controlling spelling, like the Real Academia Espanola de la Lengua in Spain, this is feasible. Problematically, many languages do not have such an institution. So how do different languages deal with spelling?

In the Netherlands, there is no language academy to say what's what, but the spelling system is laid down in a law, called appropriately the [Spelling Law](#)¹. All the educational and governmental institutions are obliged to follow this law. It is not entirely clear what happens when you break this law however: are you punished with time in jail for writing *pannekoek* instead of *pannenkoek*? The law is based on the spelling reform of

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http://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0018784/geldigheidsdatum_20-03-2013

1996, called the Little Green Book. Though there are these official guidelines, there is still a myriad of problems. First of all, the different dictionaries sometimes have different spellings. Secondly, and more importantly, people simply do not agree with the Green Spelling. The influential [Society Our Language](#)² proposed a different type of spelling called the "White Spelling". This spelling has some different rules, and is followed by amongst others various newspapers. So, there seems to be a bit of a dichotomy in the Dutch spelling landscape. We'll just have to see how this will pan out.

It could be worse though. In Germany a spelling reform, supposedly simplifying the orthography, was instigated in 1996 as a test. However, there was so much resistance against this reform that a court ruling was needed. The highest constitutional court ruled in 1998 that language users could basically do what they wanted with language and spelling outside of schools. In 2006 the institution responsible for the reform, the Council of German Orthography, agreed to remove some of the more controversial rules, which was greeted with relief by many opponents. But still, apparently only 21% of the Germans like the modern spelling. So, not such a success again...

So what about English spelling? There is no Academy of Language there, so no authority for a spelling reform. Nevertheless, it is clear to many people that English spelling is really unbelievable opaque. Some of the reforms have worked, to an extent. When Noah Webster published his famous dictionary in 1828, he introduced some changes, most of which are still followed today, such as the well-known ending *-or* as opposed to English *-our* in *color/colour*. Another,

² <http://www.onzetaal.nl/>

much less well-known spelling reform is called SR1. This reform was proposed by the linguist Harry Lindgren. He wanted to get rid of spellings such as *ph*, replacing it with *f*, as in *photo* → *foto*, and he also had a lot of ideas about simplifying vowels. His ideas are best exemplified in this short poem:

Draw a breth for progress,
Tred abrest ahead.
Fight agenst old spelling,
Better "red" than "read".
Spred the words at brekfast,
Mesure them in bed,
Dream of welth and tresure,
Better "ded" than "dead".

Some of these spellings are problematic, because *red* is already in use as a spelling of course for the colour, but to be honest, for a second-language speaker it would simplify matters a great deal. The problem is of course that this is based on the pronunciation of a certain group of English speakers, which is not necessarily the biggest group. So should the biggest group of speakers decide? That also does not make a lot of sense: very soon the greatest group of speakers will supposedly be the Chinese.

And the thing is this actually caught on for a while in Australia, where it was adopted by the Australian Teachers' Federation in 1975. It was even adopted by the Labor government in 1972-1975 to such an extent that "Australian Ministry of Helth [sic]" was the official spelling for the Ministry. However, as is common in politics, as soon as that government was out of office, the next government went back to orthographic conservatism. It is interesting to see though, that at least one spelling (as far as I am aware) is in common use on the Internet: *thru* instead of *through*. So maybe this reform will have another chance, one that I think it

definitely deserves, because it doesn't create any difficulties with understanding as far as I can see.

The 21st century presents us with a new spelling challenge: the Internet. Although I do not have proof for this assumption, I believe that the balance between speaking and writing is changing rapidly (I will surely try and do research about this in the future, so hold on). This greatly influences the way we write on the Internet: the language used is much closer to that of spoken rather than written English, and that of course presents all kinds of "problems". A lot of people feel that because of Internet, people are using language in all the wrong ways more and more often. Although I don't think that is necessarily true (and neither does David Crystal by the way; see his excellent book *Internet Linguistics*), it is certainly true that for the first time in history we come into contact with people who use an inordinate amount of different languages, but a lot of whom try to spell English as well. What sort of effect this will have on English spelling remains to be seen, but it is not unthinkable that some words will be simplified somewhat.

It is excruciatingly hard to try and convince people not to judge people based on spelling errors. But, as this article hopes to show, there are reasons that people make mistakes. They are not dumb, not lazy, not disinterested: it is just hard to spell right. And there are people, myself included, who consider it to be of greater importance for someone to be able to articulate his/her thoughts properly than to be able to spell. Moreover, does it really matter if I spell *Armageddon* as *Armagedon*? I will probably get my point across. So no, it does not matter. Face it. You're just a snob.

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