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Factors Influencing the Success and Failure of Writing Reforms

1. Introduction

The spelling reform that was introduced in Russian schools a hundred years ago, on 1 September 1917, was very successful – so successful that nowadays many young Russians, when confronted with a pre-1917 Russian text, do not know how to read ⟨ѣ⟩, ⟨ѳ⟩, or ⟨ѣя⟩ (like ⟨е⟩, ⟨ф⟩, and ⟨ѣѣ⟩, respectively), and even a young Russian philologist recently asked me if I could tell her what kind of letter ⟨ѣ⟩ was (I could: a ⟨ѣ⟩ in italics). However, numerous reforms of writing systems have not met with success. Many have remained proposals – e.g. the 1930 attempt to convert Russian to the Latin alphabet (cfr. Alpatov 2001, 2015) and the Russian spelling reform projects of 1964 and 2000 (cfr. Karpova 2010). Some were officially implemented but then revoked – e.g. the Second Chinese Character Simplification Scheme of 1977, which the People's Republic of China had to withdraw in 1986 due to continuing public resistance. Other reforms, though endorsed by the government, have been largely ignored by the public – e.g. the French “Rectifications” of 1990¹ or the Latinization of Uzbek, which was enacted in 1993 and entered into force in 1995 but which even twenty-two years later and after the end of the twice extended ‘transitional period’ of altogether fifteen years has still not been implemented by newspapers and magazines. In this paper I try to shed some light onto the question which factors determine whether a writing reform is successful or not.

Discussions about writing reforms usually focus on evaluating how good a reform proposal is, and if a reform was not successful this is often attributed to its not having been good enough. However, “practical criteria of efficiency have never been the sole determining factor of the success or failure of writing reforms” (Coulmas 2003: 237). Some of the best reforms failed, and some proposals took several centuries before they were finally accepted as the best solution. Therefore we will consider the actual contents of a reform proposal (which Sampson [1985: 207] calls the “objective matters”) as one of the factors

¹ For instance, Saussure's (1916: Introduction, ch. VI, § 5) famous example of spelling pronunciation, *gageure* ‘challenge, impossible task’, whose normative pronunciation is /gaʒyʁ/ but which is sometimes mispronounced as /gaʒœʁ/, should be disambiguated as ⟨gageüre⟩ according to the “Rectifications”; however, a Google search conducted in March 2017 shows that unreformed ⟨gageure⟩ is still 120 times more frequent on the net than ⟨gageüre⟩ (759,000 vs. 6,270 hits). Other elements of the reform fare slightly better (e.g. unreformed ⟨ambiguïté⟩ /ābigyite/ ‘ambiguity’ has only 10 times more hits than ⟨ambigüité⟩, and ⟨événement⟩ /evenmā/ ‘event’ only 3 times as many as ⟨évènement⟩).

influencing its success, but try to identify other factors that might play an even more important role (although Sampson calls them “subjective issues”).

I use *writing reform* as a cover term for reforms of writing systems on three levels: *script reforms*, which change the script used for a language (e.g. from the Latin to the Cyrillic alphabet, from the Arabic to the Latin script, or from the Chinese script to the Latin alphabet); *glyphic reforms* that change the script variant (e.g. from blackletter to roman type or from Old Cyrillic to *graždanskij šrift*); and *spelling reforms* that affect the orthography (e.g. the Russian reform of 1917, Vuk Karadžić’s Serbian reform, or the simplification of Chinese characters of 1956).

Spelling reforms are ubiquitous. Few languages with a noteworthy written history have never had any. Script changes are also very common – even languages with very long unbroken written histories often changed their scripts during the first centuries of their literacy. For example, Latin was initially written in the Etruscan alphabet, and the Germanic tribes employed runes before they adopted the Latin alphabet (Dale 1980: 8). Even Greek, which has been written in the same alphabet for almost 2,800 years now, used to be written in Linear B and the Cypriot syllabary before that (Haarmann 2006: 2406), and the latter was directly replaced by the Greek alphabet in the 4th century BC. In contrast to this, glyphic reforms like the introduction of *graždanskij šrift* by Peter I in 1708 or the abolition of blackletter for German in 1941 are rather rare, since glyphic variants of scripts usually evolve gradually. This can also happen with orthographies and even with scripts: for example, the Indic scripts (Nagari, Bengali, Gurmukhi, Tamil, Tibetan, etc.) all developed from a common ancestor, the Brahmi script, in the course of two millennia, mostly without any punctual reforms. I will not deal with such evolutionary changes here. Furthermore, this paper can only deal with a small selection of the writing reforms ever proposed for the languages of the world. In view of the occasion for this special issue and as a Slavist, I concentrate on reforms of Slavic languages and languages of the former Soviet Union, adding a few prominent cases from other languages.

The outline of this paper is the following: first we examine strictly linguistic factors of representation on various levels of language (2.), then we turn to factors of economy (3.), then to the semiotic values associated with writing systems (4.), and finally to various sociological factors, including the political system (5.1.), literacy rate (5.2.), the motivation for the reform (5.3.), and timing (5.4.).

2. Representation

2.1. Grapheme Inventory

Many writing reforms have been proposed in order to change a writing system that represents the spoken language in an ‘imperfect’ way. For example, one of the arguments brought forward for the Latinization of Turkish and many languages of the Soviet Union that were previously written in the Arabic script was that the Arabic script does not represent vowels (e.g. Clement 2008: 174). At the same time, many language communities (even

non-Semitic ones) continue to use consonantal alphabets and employ vocalization systems only in language pedagogy and for their holy scriptures. After the October Revolution, full-fledged Arabic alphabets were developed for several languages by adding letters for all vowels and writing them consistently (e.g. *Yaña imlâ* for Tatar; similar alphabets were developed for Bashkir, Crimean Tatar, Karakalpak, Kazakh, Kumyk, Nogai, and Turkmen), but nonetheless they were all replaced with the Latin alphabet towards the end of the 1920s. Another example of an unsuccessful though maximally representative alphabet was Franc Metelko's Slovenian alphabet of 1825, which was the only one that distinguished the phonemes /ɛ/, /e/, and /ə/ (by using the letters ⟨e⟩, ⟨ė⟩, and ⟨z⟩, respectively) as well as /o/ and /ɔ/ (by using ⟨o⟩ and ⟨ȯ⟩). Nonetheless, it never won general acceptance. Instead, since 1839 the Gajica alphabet, which does not distinguish these phonemes, has asserted itself as the official alphabet for Slovenian.

One might ask what it means for a writing system to provide complete representation. For example, most writing systems do not represent word stress, even if it is distinctive (as in Russian /mu'ka/ 'flour' vs. /'muka/ 'agony, torment', which are both spelled ⟨мука (muka)⟩, or German /y:bər'zɛtsən/ 'to translate' vs. /'y:bərzɛtsən/ 'to ferry across', which are both spelled ⟨übersetzen⟩); and none at all, to my knowledge, regularly represents sentence intonation.

The Russian spelling reform of 1917 worked in the opposite direction, being concerned with abolishing 'superfluous' letters: ⟨ə (f)⟩, ⟨i (i)⟩, ⟨ɛ (ě)⟩, and ⟨v (ÿ)⟩, as well as the hard sign ⟨ɤ (")⟩ in final position. Indeed none of these letters was necessary for the representation of the phonemes of Russian, though they could serve purposes on different linguistic levels (see 2.2 and 2.3). Similarly, the Greek spelling reform of 1982 abolished several diacritics that did not correspond to Modern Greek pronunciation: the three accents (acute ⟨'⟩, grave ⟨`⟩, and circumflex ⟨ˆ⟩), which had originally marked different pitch patterns, were conflated into a single accent mark (called *tonos*, but graphically identical to the acute) that is used only in polysyllabic words to indicate the stressed syllable²; the two breathings, which used to indicate the presence (rough breathing ⟨'⟩) or absence (soft breathing ⟨`⟩) of a word-initial /h/, as well as the iota subscript ⟨ι⟩, which used to indicate an Ancient Greek long diphthong, were eliminated entirely because both /h/ and the long diphthongs were lost in Greek.

At the same time, however, due to a sound change called *iotacism* Modern Greek sports seven ways of spelling /i/: ⟨ι (i)⟩, ⟨η (ī)⟩, ⟨υ (y)⟩, ⟨ει (ei)⟩, ⟨οι (oi)⟩, ⟨ηι (īi)⟩, ⟨υι (yi)⟩, which have not been touched by the reform. The abundance of phonologically superfluous spellings for the sounds of English (e.g. ⟨ee, ea, ei, ie, e⟩ for /i:/) has given rise to dozens of reform proposals (both spelling reforms and script reforms, advocated by such influential people

² Note that by restricting the use of the accent mark to polysyllables the distinction between stressed monosyllables and clitics is lost, so that e.g. [ˈse] 'you (acc. sg.)' (from Ancient Greek σέ (sé)) and [se] 'in' (from εις (eís)) are both spelled ⟨σε (se)⟩. Therefore in a few cases the *tonos* is now used with a distinctive function, e.g. ⟨ή (ī)⟩ 'or' (from ή (ē)) vs. ⟨η (ī)⟩ (article, nom. sg. fem; from ή (hē)).

as Benjamin Franklin, George Bernard Shaw, James Pitman, H. G. Wells, Daniel Jones, or Mark Twain), none of which has met with success.

2.2. *Phonology vs. Morphology*

A good reason for making concessions with regard to the representation of phonology is the representation of morphology. In many cases, however, this is not the content of reforms but an argument against reform, because traditional spellings often still reflect morphological ties and distinctions that have been lost in speech due to sound changes. For example, the silent letter in ⟨sign⟩ reflects its relationship with ⟨signature⟩, where the ⟨g⟩ corresponds to /g/ – a visual key to word families that would be lost if the word were respelled as ⟨sine⟩, Shavian ⟨𐀭𐀮⟩ (vs. ⟨𐀭𐀮𐀵𐀮𐀵𐀮⟩ for *signature*) or any other more ‘phonetic’ way. Similarly, the fact that Russian orthography does not reflect vowel reduction e.g. in ⟨озеро (ozero)⟩ /‘oz̩ira/ ‘lake’ and its plural form ⟨озёра (ozëra)⟩ /a‘z̩ora/ keeps its stem ⟨озер (ozër)⟩ uniform, in contrast to deliberately ‘phonetic’ and un-Russian Belarusian orthography, where the cognate is spelled ⟨возера (vozera)⟩ in the singular and ⟨азэры (azëry)⟩ in the plural, more accurately reflecting the pronunciation but obscuring the morphological relationship.

A counterpart of the morphemic principle is the lexical principle, i.e. the graphical distinction of homophonous words. This is very frequent in English, e.g. ⟨right⟩ vs. ⟨write⟩ vs. ⟨rite⟩ vs. ⟨wright⟩, but it also occurs in many other languages whose orthographies are not too shallow, e.g. German /‘zaitə/ = ⟨Seite⟩ ‘side; page’ or ⟨Saite⟩ ‘string (of an instrument)’, Russian /kam‘panʲiʲi/ = ⟨компания (kompanija)⟩ ‘company’ or ⟨кампания (kampanija)⟩ ‘campaign’, Polish /‘buk/ = ⟨buk⟩ ‘beech’ or ⟨Bóg⟩ ‘God’. In pre-1917 Russian orthography, the ‘superfluous’ letters ⟨ө (f)⟩, ⟨и (i)⟩, ⟨ѣ (ě)⟩, ⟨ѵ (ÿ)⟩ could differentiate homonyms: ⟨лѣчу (lěču)⟩ ‘I heal’ vs. ⟨лечу (leču)⟩ ‘I fly’, ⟨ѣсть (ěstʹ)⟩ ‘to eat’ vs. ⟨есть (estʹ)⟩ ‘is’, ⟨Пафосъ (Pafos)⟩ ‘Paphos’ vs. ⟨паѣось (pafos)⟩ ‘pathos, enthusiasm’, ⟨мѵра (mÿra)⟩ ‘of the chris̄m’ vs. ⟨мира (mīra)⟩ ‘of the world’ vs. ⟨мира (mira)⟩ ‘of the peace’. However, the number of such minimal pairs was small: with ⟨ө (f)⟩, ⟨и (i)⟩, ⟨ѵ (ÿ)⟩ there seem to have been only one each (the ones mentioned above), and with ⟨ѣ (ě)⟩ probably less than a dozen. Consequently, this lexical principle did not counterbalance the amount of time needed to learn the extensive ‘*jat*’ drills’ that were necessary to know where to write ⟨ѣ (ě)⟩ and where ⟨е (e)⟩.

An example of a spelling reform that deliberately ‘deepened’ an orthography by introducing morphemic spellings was the so-called *kori(j)enski pravopis* ‘root spelling’ of Croatian. For example, the plural ⟨dohoci⟩ ‘earnings’ (pronounced /‘dõxõtsi/) was changed to ⟨dohodci⟩ because of the singular /‘dõxõdak/ ⟨dohodak⟩ (cfr. the ministerial order issued on 23 June 1941 by the Minister for Worship and Education, Mile Budak, item 2). This spelling reform was carried out by the fascist government of the Independent State of Croatia and reversed when Tito’s communists came into power.

Some reforms aim to strengthen both the phonemic and the morphemic principle. An example is the spelling of ⟨ß⟩ in German. While in intervocalic position there has long

been a well-established visual distinction between ⟨ss⟩ after short vowels and ⟨ß⟩ after long vowels, in final position ⟨ss⟩ used to be judged typographically impossible because its counterpart in blackletter, ⟨ff⟩ contains a long s, which cannot occur word-finally. Therefore in this position ⟨ß⟩ used to be written even after short vowels³, so that the difference between the long vowel in ⟨Fuß⟩ and the short vowel in ⟨Fluß⟩ was just as invisible as the constancy of the stem between ⟨Fluß⟩ und ⟨Flusses⟩. This double imperfection was amended by the 1996 spelling reform:

(1)	a.	⟨Fuß⟩	=	⟨Fuß⟩	/ˈfu:s/	‘foot’	(nom. sg.)
	b.	⟨Fußes⟩	=	⟨Fußes⟩	/ˈfu:səs/	‘foot’	(gen. sg.)
	c.	⟨Fluß⟩	→	⟨Fluss⟩	/ˈflus/	‘river’	(nom. sg.)
	d.	⟨Flusses⟩	=	⟨Flusses⟩	/ˈflusəs/	‘river’	(gen. sg.)

As one can see, ⟨ß⟩ now consistently indicates a preceding long vowel, just as ⟨ss⟩ indicates a short vowel. At the same time, the spelling now usually remains constant within the same morpheme (except in those rare cases where vowel length changes due to ablaut, e.g. /ˈmɛsən/ ⟨messen⟩ ‘to measure’ vs. /ˈma:sən/ ⟨maßen⟩ ‘[we/they] measured’). However, although the new spelling has finally prevailed and after ten years of debate between 1996 and 2006 there now seems to be ‘spelling peace’ (‘Rechtschreibfrieden’), the reform can hardly be called successful, seeing that this ⟨ß⟩ spelling was first proposed in 1827 (see § 5.1.).

Another example is the problem of representing /o/ after palatalized consonants in Russian. Historically, /o/ did not appear in this position, until in the 12th century in certain cases /e/ changed to /o/. Consequently, the Cyrillic letter ⟨e⟩ came to represent both /e/ and /o/ after palatalized consonants. There were several attempts to find an adequate representation for /jo/ in the 18th century, most notably the ligature ⟨iô⟩ (sometimes substituted by ⟨iö⟩ or ⟨iö̃⟩), which was introduced by Adodurov in 1731, but also digraphs like ⟨ьо⟩ (‘o’) and ⟨йо⟩ (jo) (Pčelov, Čumakov 2000: 22-27). However, people still had to choose between indicating the pronunciation /o/ and indicating the underlying morphology by writing ⟨e⟩. In 1783 princess Ekaterina Romanovna Daškova (to this day the only ever female president of the Russian Academy of Sciences among 26 men) invented the letter ⟨ë⟩ as a solution to this problem (cfr. Pčelov, Čumakov 2000: 13-16):

(2)	a.	⟨жена⟩	=	⟨жена⟩	=	⟨жена⟩	/ʒiˈna/	‘wife’ (nom. sg.)
	b.	⟨жены⟩	→	⟨жоны⟩	→	⟨жѣны⟩	/ˈʒoni/	‘wives’ (nom. pl.)
	c.	⟨ель⟩	=	⟨ель⟩	=	⟨ель⟩	/ˈjeli/	‘fir-tree’
	d.	⟨елка⟩	→	⟨йолка⟩/⟨iôлка⟩	→	⟨ѣлка⟩	/ˈjolka/	‘Christmas tree’

³ Even within this train of thought it is inconsistent that ⟨ß⟩ was written even in positions where ⟨f⟩ was possible, cfr. ⟨du haßt⟩ ‘you have’ vs. ⟨du haßt⟩ ‘you hate’, not *⟨du haßt⟩, because ⟨ff⟩ (and consequently ⟨ss⟩) was admitted “only between two vowels” (“nur zwischen zwei Selbstlauten”, Duden 1926: XI).

Mann жена Männer жёны

Fig. 1. Uniform stem with umlaut

As demonstrated in FIG. 1, the two dots indicate a different pronunciation while at the same time keeping the spelling of the stem constant in the base letter, just like the German umlaut letters, which probably inspired Daškova. However, ⟨ë⟩ is not used consistently even today, 234 years after its ingenious invention. Outside children's books, textbooks, and dictionaries, it is mostly still replaced with ⟨e⟩.

A remaining problem of Russian orthography is the spelling of the hard sign ⟨ъ (")⟩, which always indicates a /j/ after a consonant; the problem is that /j/ in the same position can also be indicated by the soft sign ⟨ь (')⟩. The alleged phonetic difference that consonants before the soft sign are palatalized and consonants before the hard sign are not does not seem to correspond to phonetic reality; consonants pronounced without a break immediately before /j/ are always palatalized. Consequently, especially in foreign words spellings like ⟨пъеса (p'esa)⟩ /'pjesa/ 'theatre play' (from French *pièce*) and ⟨адъютант (ad'jutant)⟩ /ad'ju'tant/ 'adjutant' have to be learned by heart. In Russian words, the hard sign is used at the end of prefixes (e.g. ⟨объём (ob"ëm)⟩ /a'bijom/ 'volume') but not at the boundary between stem and ending (e.g. ⟨пъём (p'ëm)⟩ /'p'jom/ 'we drink', ⟨с помощью (s pomoš'ju)⟩ /'spomaʃ'ju/ 'with the help of'). In 1964, a spelling commission headed by Viktor Vinogradov proposed, among other changes, to use only the soft sign, so that the hard sign would finally have been abolished completely (cfr. Karpova 2010). This proposal was not accepted. In 2000, another spelling commission proposed to take the morphological boundary function of the hard sign more seriously and use it also in acronyms like ⟨минюст (minjust)⟩ /m'in'just/ 'ministry of justice' or ⟨госязык (gosjazyk)⟩ /gosji'zik/ 'official language of a country' (*ibidem*), where the current spelling seems to imply pronunciations like /mi'n'just/ or /gos'i'zik/ and which could be disambiguated by spelling them ⟨минъюст (min"just)⟩ and ⟨госъязык (gos"jazyk)⟩. These words would then better correspond to both the phonemic and the morphemic principle. Due to strong resistance the proposals are no longer under discussion.

All in all, the direction of the reform – towards phonology, towards morphology, or both – does not seem to be decisive for its success.

2.3. Etymology

Even more than the morphemic principle the etymological principle tends to assert itself by evolution, not by writing reforms. Consequently, there are few reforms that strengthen the etymological principle. A few English words are famous for having been Latinized or Grecized in the 16th or 17th century, e.g. ⟨debt⟩ (originally ⟨dett⟩, from Old French *dete*,

adjusted to Latin *debitum* ‘debt’) or ⟨doubt⟩ (originally ⟨douten⟩, from Old French *douter*, adjusted to Latin *dubitare* ‘to doubt’). In a few cases these changes of spelling were based on false etymologies: ⟨island⟩ (formerly ⟨iland⟩), unlike *isle*, is not derived from Latin *insula* ‘island’ but from Old English *ieġ-land* (cfr. German *Eiland* ‘island’), the first part of which is related to Swedish *ö* ‘island’, German *Aue* ‘meadow by a river’, and Latin *aqua* ‘water’; the ⟨c⟩ in *scissors* and *scythe* was added on the wrong assumption that these words were related to Latin *scindere* ‘to split’; the verb ⟨ache⟩ was originally spelled ⟨ake⟩ but was adapted to Greek *ἄχος* ‘pain’ by Samuel Johnson though it is actually related to *ἄχος* ‘curse’; probably the strangest spelling is the bird’s name ⟨ptarmigan⟩, which is derived from its Scottish Gaelic equivalent *tàrmachan* but received its ⟨p⟩ by wrong connection with Greek *πτερόν* ‘wing’.

In Russia, Church Slavonic orthography was etymologized systematically. This even happened twice: during the time of the ‘Second South Slavic Influence’, which began at the end of the 14th century, and during the ‘correction of the church books’ (Russian *knižnaja sprava*) in the middle of the 17th century. Although these reforms were mainly directed towards restoring the sense of the church books, they had severe effects on orthography:

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|-----|----|-------------------------|---|--------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| (3) | a. | ⟨АНГЕЛЪ (angel)⟩ | → | ⟨АНГѢЛЪ (aggel)⟩ | /ˈanɣel/ | ‘angel’ |
| | b. | ⟨ЕВАНГЕЛИЕ (evangelie)⟩ | → | ⟨ЕВАНГГЕЛИЕ (eĭaggelie)⟩ | /(j)eˈvanɣeliije/ | ‘gospel’ |
| | c. | ⟨СПАСЕНИА (spasenija)⟩ | → | ⟨СПАСЕНІА (spasenīa)⟩ | /spaˈsienīja/ | ‘salvation’ (gen. sg.) |
| | d. | ⟨ЗѢЛО (zělo)⟩ | → | ⟨ЗѢЛѠ (zělō)⟩ | /zĭeˈlo/ | ‘very’ |
-
- | | | | | | | | |
|-----|----|--------------------|------------|---|--------------------|------------|-----------|
| (4) | a. | ⟨Исꙋсꙋ (Īsus)⟩ | /iˈsus/ | → | ⟨Иисꙋсꙋ (Īisus)⟩ | /i.iˈsus/ | ‘Jesus’ |
| | b. | ⟨Михаилъ (Mixaíl)⟩ | /mĭˈxa.il/ | → | ⟨Михаїлъ (Mixaíl)⟩ | /mĭ.xaˈil/ | ‘Michael’ |

The changes in (3) were introduced during the ‘Second South Slavic Influence’ (cfr. Uspenskij 2002: 304–317 = §§ 11.1–11.4) and restored by the ‘correction of the church books’ wherever they had in the meantime given way to ‘shallower’ representations. The changes in (4) were only introduced in the 17th century and belong to the long lists of names whose pronunciation and spelling were adapted to Greek and/or Ruthenian norms (*ibid.*: 439 = § 17.2.1, 465 = § 17.3.8). The new spellings are still normative in Church Slavonic today.

More often, however, etymology is used as an argument against reform. For example, Fëdor Polikarpov in 1724 argued for the retention of the distinction between the letters ⟨ф (f)⟩ (*fert*) and ⟨ѳ (f̑)⟩ (*fita*) in Russian, although in every-day speech they were pronounced exactly the same way, and both letters only occur in loanwords:

Вмѣстѣ д не глаголи ф, ниже т, акѡ деодѡрѣ, а не феодѡрѣ, ни теодѡрѣ, ни хдеодѡрѣ. Противно бо разуму по произведенію реченія, зане ѳрѣ д: деодѡрѣ, бѣодѡрѣ, ѳрѣ ф, феодѡрѣ, смѣодѡрѣ (quoted in Živov 1986: 59).

In the place of *f̑* do not say *f* nor *t*, e.g. *Fëodor* and not *Feodor* nor *Teodor* nor *Xfëodor*, for this is contrary to the derivation of the word, since with *f̑*, *Fëodor* means ‘God’s gift’, and with *f*, *Feodor* means ‘snake gift’.

Similar etymological arguments can be found whenever etymological distinctions are given up in favour of a shallower orthography. Another example is the German spelling reform of 1996, which abolished, for example, the distinction between ⟨gräulich⟩ ‘greyish’ and ⟨greulich⟩ ‘gruesome’ (both words are now spelled with ⟨ä⟩ because the latter is related to *Grauen* ‘horror’). This has been ridiculed by opponents of the reform like Theodor Ickler (1997: 19). However, all these arguments for the retention of orthographic distinctions usually underestimate the function of context. For example, adjectives are always accompanied by a noun, which is usually enough to disambiguate homophones without the assistance of spelling. Therefore ⟨eine gräuliche Geschichte⟩ is just as unlikely to mean ‘a greyish story’ as ⟨eine gräuliche Tönung⟩ is unlikely to be intended in the sense of ‘a horrible tint’. Similarly, there simply is no name **Pheodore* (meaning *‘snake gift’⁴), so that *Fëdor* is always a cognate of *Theodore*.

2.4. *Spelling of Names*

The vainness of etymological arguments of the type brought up by Polikarpov was already understood by Trediakovskij, who argued in 1748 that *Fëdor* did not mean anything in Russian but was just a proper name (Müller 1994: 74). He even remarked humorously that the arguments in favour of the retention of the distinction of ⟨ϕ⟩ vs. ⟨θ⟩ always used the name *Fëdor* as an example because it was Polikarpov’s own first name (*ibid.*: fn. 138). In fact, as banal as it sounds, the spelling of the names of the protagonists in a reform debate might play a fairly important role. For example, it was Đuro Daničić who invented the letter ⟨đ⟩ for Serbo-Croatian (cfr. Simić 2010: 181–183), which made an unambiguous representation of the phoneme beginning his first name possible. The decree of 1942 that made the Russian letter ⟨ѐ⟩ a compulsory element of the Soviet school programme (НКР) was signed by the People’s Commissar for Education, Vladimir Petrovič Potëmkin. In 1849 one of the main opponents of the replacement of ⟨w⟩ with ⟨v⟩ in Czech was Wáclaw Wladiwoj Tomek (Sedláček 1993: 63; nowadays spelled (Václav Vladivoj Tomek)).

Trix (1997: 13 f.) has examined how the Albanian orthographies that were under consideration at the Congress of Manastir in 1908 would have represented the pronunciation of the congress participants’ names:

I found no evidence that this was brought out in discussions, but how one’s name is pronounced is certainly not an extraneous matter to most politicians. And I did find

⁴ The Ancient Greek word for ‘snake’ is ὄφις, so that compounds with this stem start with ὀφιο- (as in ὀφιοβόρος ‘snake-eating’, Bailly 1935: 1430, or *ophiology*) or sometimes ὀφεο- (as in ὀφεόδηκτος alongside ὀφιδόδηκτος ‘killed by a snake’, *ibidem*) but never with *φεο-. In Modern Greek the stem has lost the initial ο- but has also been augmented to φίδι, which does not yield compounds with *φεο- either. Probably what Polikarpov meant is that together with the article (which is also used with proper names), ὁ Φεόδωρος instead of ὁ Θεόδωρος could be heard as ὀφεόδωρος ‘gift of a snake’ in Modern Greek pronunciation.

evidence that Midhat Frashëri cared how his name was pronounced. [...] I found several books that had belonged to him [...]. On these books he had written “Mitat Frashëri”, a spelling that reflects the general devoicing at the end of syllables (/d/ → /t/), and a loss of /h/ in syllable-initial positions, an alternative form in Tosk. The spelling also removes all possibility of the digraph miscue **“miḍat”*.”

Apart from the protagonists’ own names, holy names also play a role in discussions about script reforms. Trix (1997: 12–13) has demonstrated this for such Albanian words as ‘Allah’, ‘mosque’ or ‘church’. The spelling of the name of Jesus in Russian Church Slavonic had been one of the central issues leading to the schism of 1666, since the Old Believers insisted on keeping the traditional spelling ⟨Іѣсѣъ (Ĭsus)⟩ (pronounced /i’sus/) instead of the new spelling ⟨Иисѣъ (Ĭsus)⟩ (pronounced /i.i’sus/), which was ‘restored’ by Patriarch Nikon in accordance with the Greek spelling ⟨Ιησοῦς⟩. Simeon Polockij argues that the trisyllabic spelling includes “two mysteries” (“ДѢТѢ ТѢИТѢ”):

҃резъ двѣ слѡга перѡва, еже естъ, ҃резъ ꙗко ѿ Душѣ и тѣло знаменѣтся Бжїа Сна
воплощенна. ҃резъ третїи пакѣ слѡгъ трепїсменный сѣс ѿбѣлѣется Сѣа Трѣца (Simeon
Polockij, *Žezl pravlenija*, 1667; quoted in Trunte 2014: 380 = § 29.7d).

(By the first two syllables, i.e. *i* and *i*, the soul and body of the incarnate Son of God are signified; the third syllable, on the other hand, i.e. the three letters *sus*, signifies the Holy Trinity).

In 1708 Peter I tried to reduce the number of /i/ letters in the Russian alphabet to one, which would have yielded the spelling ⟨Іисусъ (Ĭsus)⟩. Maybe Musin-Puškin (cfr. Živov 1986: 58) convinced the tsar that the introduction of a third spelling for *Jesus* was not advisable (even though the reform only applied to secular books, while the church books remained untouched). Lomonosov (1755: 42, § 85) later gives several reasons for keeping both ⟨і⟩ and ⟨и⟩, using ⟨по вознесении Иисусовѣ (po voznesenii Ĭsusově)⟩ for ⟨по вознесении Иисусовѣ (po voznesenii Ĭsusově)⟩ ‘after the ascension of Jesus’ as one of his examples of the repulsive and undistinctive appearance the retention of just one /i/ letter created. In 1917 the spelling was changed to ⟨Иисус (Iisus)⟩ anyway.

In 1956 the new rule was formulated that in Russian the stressed instrumental singular masculine ending *-óm* after ⟨ш (š), ж (ž), ч (č), ц (c), щ (šč)⟩ should be spelled ⟨-ом⟩ rather than ⟨-ем⟩. However, the members of the orthographic commission noticed that in Lenin’s patronym it had previously been spelled ⟨-ем⟩: ⟨Владимиром Ильичѣм Лениным (Vladimirom Il’ičem Leninyam)⟩, which contradicted this rule. Nonetheless the spelling of this ‘holy name’ was retained as a tacit exception to the general rule “[i]n order to preserve V.I. Lenin’s orthographic inviolability” (“[ч]тобы сохранить орфографическую неприкосновенность В.И. Ленина”). Other instances of the same patronym, however, conform with the rule, e.g. the instrumental case of Tchaikovsky’s name is ⟨Петром Ильичом Чайковским (Petrom Il’ičom Čajkovskim)⟩ (Bukčina 1990: 76).

Steuereinschätzungskommission Steuereinschätzungskommission

Fig. 2. Economic blackletter

3. *Economy*

Another very popular argument in discussions about writing reforms is economy. Even in a very recent text Luidl (1998) argues that blackletter saves space because of its narrower letters (see FIG. 2 from Luidl 1998: 17)⁵. In 1929, the commission for the conversion of the Russian language to the Latin alphabet calculated to the kopeck the financial savings that would be associated with Latinization. For example, 15,985,440 roubles per year would be gained by saving 69,240,000 kg of paper; 633,000 kg of lead for type could be saved, which was equivalent to 329,160 roubles; the fact that publishers would annually have to proofread and print 559,920,000 sheets less would economize 2,159,760 roubles (cfr. Frings 2007: 310–317).

All these calculations were based on the assumption that a Latin text runs approximately 11–13% shorter than the same text in the Cyrillic alphabet (cfr. Frings 2007: 314; Lunačarskij 1930: 25 talks about almost 20%). This is mostly due to the existence of the narrow letters ⟨f, i, j, l, r, t⟩ in the Latin alphabet, all of which correspond to letters of *n*-width in the Cyrillic: ⟨ф, и, ѣ, л, р, т⟩. Apart from that, some *m*-wide Cyrillic letters can have *n*-wide Latin counterparts: ⟨ж (ž)⟩ corresponded to ⟨z⟩ in the reform proposal, ⟨ш (š)⟩ was to be replaced with ⟨s⟩, and ⟨ю (ju)⟩ with ⟨ú⟩, ⟨ü⟩ or ⟨y⟩ in the three versions of the proposal (cfr. Alpatov 2001: 19). The Cyrillic alphabet of today does not have any narrow letters due to the abolition of ⟨i (i)⟩ in favour of ⟨и (i)⟩ in the spelling reform of 1917, and only one letter, ⟨м (m)⟩, is slightly narrower than its Latin counterpart. However, the proposal also replaced some Cyrillic letters with sequences of two Latin letters (⟨ш (šč)⟩ with ⟨sc⟩ and syllable-initial ⟨я (ja), е (e), и (i), ё (ě), ю (ju)⟩ with ⟨ja, je, ji, jo, ju⟩; cfr. Frings 2007: 314). Therefore some words could in fact turn out longer in the Latin alphabet than in the Cyrillic, the most extreme example probably being ⟨jejo⟩ ‘her’, which is about 60% wider than Cyrillic ⟨еě⟩. Nonetheless, the estimated ratio seems to be realistic, as a short sample text shows (FIG. 3; the introduction of the Communist Manifesto – from “A spectre is haunting Europe” to “published in the English, French, German, Italian, Flemish and Danish languages” – to take a text that would have had some significance for the Soviet decision-makers): The reduction from 23 Cyrillic lines to 20½ Latin lines is indeed approximately 12%.

⁵ The word *Steuereinschätzungskommission* is not used in German any more. According to Muret, Sanders (1920: 1914) it can be translated as ‘commissioners for the assessment of taxes’.

Призрак бродит по Европе — призрак коммунизма. Все силы старой Европы объединились для священной травли этого призрака: папа и царь, Меттерних и Гизо, французские радикалы и немецкие полицейские. Где та оппозиционная партия, которую её противники, стоящие у власти, не ославили бы коммунистической? Где та оппозиционная партия, которая в свою очередь не бросала бы клеймящего обвинения в коммунизме как более передовым представителям оппозиции, так и своим реакционным противникам? Два вывода вытекают из этого факта. Коммунизм признаётся уже силой всеми европейскими силами. Пора уже коммунистам перед всем миром открыто изложить свои взгляды, свои цели, свои стремления и сказкам о призраке коммунизма противопоставить манифест самой партии. С этой целью в Лондоне собрались коммунисты самых различных национальностей и составили следующий «Манифест», который публикуется на английском, французском, немецком, итальянском, фламандском и датском языках.

1 Prizrak brodit po Jevrope — prizrak komunizma. Vse sily staroj Jevropy objedinilis dlá svás-cennoj travli etogo prizraka: papa i čarí, Metternix i Gizo, frančuzskije radikaly i nemečkije poličej-skije. Gde ta opozicionnaja partija, kotoruju jejo protivniki, stojasčije u vlasti, ne oslavili by komunisticskoj? Gde ta opozicionnaja partija, ko-toraja v svoju oceredí ne brosala by klejmáscego obvinenija v kommunizme kak boleje peredovym 10 predstavitelám opoziciji, tak i svojim reakcion-nym protivnikam? Dva vyvoda vytekajut iz etogo fakta. Kommunizm priznajotsá uže siloj vsemi je-vropejskimi silami. Pora uže kommunistam pered vsem mirom otkryto izložití svoji vzglády, svoji 15 čeli, svoji stremlenija i skazkam o prizrake komunizma protivopostavití manifest samoj partiji. S etoj čelju v Londone sobralisí kommunisty samyx razlicnyx načionalínostej i sostavili sledujus-cij «Manifest», kotoryj publikujetsá na anglijs-kom, frančuzskom, nemečkom, italjanskom, fla-mandskom i datskom jazykax. 20

Fig. 3. Economic Latin Alphabet

For someone who prefers Cyrillic over Latin, however, the digraphs used in the Latin alphabet make it easy to demonstrate the opposite. In Jezbera's (1860: 9) argumentation, the Russian orthography is much more space-saving than any (existing) orthography based on the Latin alphabet:

Ruské „защищающий“ (ochraňující) piše
Čech : **zaščiščajuščij** ;
Lech : **zaszczyszczajuszczyj** ;
než nastojte!
Němec : **zafschtschifschajuschtschiji !!!**

Protivníci písma kyrilského! jestliže zde ještě nevidíte, teda vás už z lidí nikdo více nepřesvědčí; avšak contra stultitiam etiam dii impotentes, t. j. proti hlouposti bojují sami bohové nadarmo!

(Russian “защищающий” (defending) is spelled **zaščiščajuščij** by a Czech, **zaszczyszczajuszczyj** by a Pole (oh help!), **zaschtschischtschajuschtschiji** by a German!!!

Opponents of the Cyrillic script! If you still do not see it here, then no other human being will convince you either; after all, *contra stultitiam etiam dii impotentes*, i.e. against stupidity even the gods are helpless!)⁶

However, in any case it seems that information that has to be taken in visually cannot be compressed without decreasing the ease and speed of reading. For example, in Chinese the introduction to the Communist Manifesto takes up only 14½ lines (FIG. 4), which in comparison to the Russian Cyrillic text is a reduction by 37%. This is of course due to the fact that the Chinese writing system uses only one character of about the width and height of the letter ⟨М⟩ for each morpheme-syllable. Yet, in order to be able to read the minute strokes of the Chinese characters with the same ease as the Cyrillic letters, one would have to print them larger, which would approximately use up the space saved before. If the Chinese lines are printed as narrowly as the Cyrillic lines (as they are in FIG. 4), it can be rather hard to make out differences between similar characters like ⟨末 (mò)⟩ ‘last’ and ⟨未 (wèi)⟩ ‘not yet’, between ⟨采 (cǎi)⟩ ‘collect’ and ⟨采 (biàn)⟩ ‘distinguish’ or between ⟨間 (jiān)⟩ ‘space’, ⟨閒 (xián)⟩ ‘peaceful’ and ⟨開 (kāi)⟩ ‘open’ (cfr. Liu, Lin 2008: 94)⁷. Similarly, while the line spacing of the Cyrillic text in FIG. 3 looks acceptable, the line spacing of the Latin text is definitely too narrow due to the large number of ascenders and descenders in the Latin script (which seem to be the counterbalance of the on average narrower characters). But an increase of the line height by just 12% would nullify the 12% gained on average letter width.

This is not to say that orthographies cannot be tweaked to save some space if they are imperfect. For example, the abolition of redundant word-final ⟨ъ⟩ in the Russian spelling reform of 1917 did save space while at the same time rendering spellings clearer rather than obscuring them: Due to the similarity of ⟨ъ⟩ and ⟨ь⟩, the new form ⟨угол (ugol)⟩ ‘corner’ looks more different from ⟨уголь (ugol’)⟩ ‘coal’ than the old form ⟨уголъ⟩ did.

On the whole, however, differences between writing systems will rarely have a financial effect. ‘Scientific’ figures provided by proponents or opponents of a reform are futile or at the very least extremely exaggerated. What they never take into account is that, in the terms of communication theory, any elimination of redundancy in language implies a loss of signal strength. Therefore more energy is needed to overcome the inevitable noise in the

⁶ Note that the Latin examples in the first part of the quotation, which is here given in facsimile, are printed in bold type and slightly larger than the Cyrillic one. Furthermore, the German transcription has a redundant ⟨i⟩ at the end and would normally begin with ⟨f⟩ rather than ⟨j⟩.

⁷ Tranter (2008: 139) reports that in Japanese *manga* comics the characters often use unfamiliar foreign words written in one of the syllabaries, which have to be glossed for the readers with Japanese synonyms in Chinese characters. However, since the latter are more complex than the former and therefore need more space to be read easily, the gloss is written in regular size on the line with the word actually uttered in smaller type above the line, rather than the other way round as is usually the case when Chinese characters are provided with a *furigana* gloss.

- 1 一個幽靈，共產主義的幽靈，在歐洲遊盪。為了對這個幽靈進行神聖的圍剿，舊歐洲的一切勢力，教皇和沙皇、梅特涅和基佐、法國的激進派和德國的警察，都聯合起來了。有哪一個
- 5 反對黨不被它的當政的敵人罵為共產黨呢？又有哪一個反對黨不拿共產主義這個罪名去回敬更進步的反對黨人和自己的反動敵人呢？從這一事實中可以得出兩個結論：共產主義已經被歐洲的一切勢力公認為一種勢力；現在是共產
- 10 黨人向全世界公開說明自己的觀點、自己的目的、自己的意圖並且拿黨自己的宣言來反駁關於共產主義幽靈的神話的時候了。為了這個目的，各國共產黨人集會于倫敦，擬定了如下的宣言，用英文、法文、德文、意大利文、弗拉
- 15 芒文和丹麥文公布于世。

Fig. 4. Economic Chinese

channel, which in written communication means the use of more space on the paper to achieve the ideal information density for a given purpose. This nearly always reduces the desired effect to zero.

4. *Semiotic Values and Associations*

While linguistic and economic criteria are often put forward in support or rejection of writing reform, the real incentives for reforms often have to do with politics (cfr. Simonato-Kokochkina 2003: 200) or foreign influences. Thus, Turkey switched from the Arabic script, which was associated with Islam, to the Latin alphabet, which was associated with France – the model of a secular nation-state – and the French Revolution. The Mongolian parliament decided in 1991 to switch from Cyrillic, which was associated with communism and Russian paternalism, to the Mongolian script, which was associated with national values, autonomy and Genghis Khan (though this switch was never implemented completely; cfr. Grivelet 2001)⁸. In 1945 the pro-Soviet Bulgarian government abolished ⟨Ѣ (ě)⟩, ⟨Ѡ (ǎ)⟩, and word-final ⟨Ѣ (")⟩ (NZP), practically copying the Russian reform of 1917 and creating a Bulgarian alphabet that does not contain a single letter that is not also in the Russian alpha-

⁸ According to a widespread but apocryphal story, it was Genghis Khan himself who in 1204 noticed that Tata Tonga, a captured Uighur, could write, and ordered him to create the Mongolian orthography. Although the concrete circumstances of the adaptation of the Uighur script for Mongolian are unknown, it is indeed rather probable that it would have been elevated to a state script in Genghis Khan's empire, even if it had been introduced earlier; the earliest extant manuscript is from 1224-1225 (cfr. Chuluunbaatar 2008: 23-25).

bet. The introduction of orthographies with the Czech háček (ˇ) in Slovak, Upper Sorbian, Lower Sorbian, Slovenian, and Serbo-Croatian in the 18th-19th century made these languages look uniformly 'Slavic', completely in the spirit of Slavic National Revival. Collin (2011: 59) sums up the current situation in the Central Asian post-Soviet republics as follows:

Any further moves toward Arabic script will be considered victories for radical Islam or Islamism, while the triumph of Turco-Roman will suggest endorsement of secular Islamic and Western values. The continued use of Cyrillic implies a persistence of Russian cultural and political influence in the area.

In general, such semiotic values are indexical, i.e. they are based on co-occurrence in the real world. For example, the Arabic alphabet happens to be used primarily by Muslims and to be the script of the Qur'an, so it is naturally associated with Islam. On the other hand, the associations are open for reinterpretation. For example, at the turn of the 20th century the blackletter variant of the Latin alphabet was seen as 'the German script', which is justified in so far as it was by that time mainly used for German, whereas roman type was used for most other languages written in the Latin script. However, Friedrich Soennecken, who promoted the roman variant, rejected the designation *deutsche Schrift* 'German script' on the grounds that the Gothic variant had originally formed in northern France in the 12th century and that "these bizarrely tangled letter forms arisen from haphazard writers' whims" ("diese verworrenen, durch Schreibwillkür entstandenen absonderlichen Buchstabenformen") could not be regarded as the "attire of the German language and the expression of the German character" ("Kleid der deutschen Sprache und [...] Ausdruck deutschen Wesens", Soennecken 1916: 3). At that time, Soennecken was not very successful; both blackletter and roman type continued to be used for German. Later, in 1941, when blackletter was abolished by Hitler's administration, identifying it as "Schwabacher Judenlettern" ("Schwabach Jew-letters", cfr. Rück 1993: 256; Spitzmüller, Bunčić 2016: 297-298; Bunčić *et al.* 2016: 327-328), this was supported neither by historical facts nor, as it seems, by the associations even of most of his Nazi followers. However, now, after several decades of almost exclusive use of roman type, the two glyphic variants have definitely lost their associations as 'German' vs. 'un-German'. Blackletter is nowadays associated with tradition (when used on pub signs, beer labels, in hotel names, newspaper mastheads, diplomas, etc.), Nazis (ironically, since they abolished it), and heavy metal music.

5. *Sociological Factors*

5.1. *Political System, Organs of Language Policy*

As Coulmas (2003: 237) remarks, "[u]nless the political constellations are right, the best reform programme is bound to miscarry". In this context it might at first glance seem that it is easier for an absolute monarch or a dictator to decree a writing reform than to get a reform proposal through a democratic parliament. Tsar Peter's alphabet reform of 1708, the Belarusian spelling reform of 1933, Hitler's abolition of blackletter in 1941, the simpli-

fication of Chinese characters in the People's Republic in 1956-1964, and – of course – the Russian spelling reform of 1917 seem to point in this direction.

However, there are numerous counter-examples. On the one hand, democratic societies have writing reforms as well, e.g. the Swedish spelling reform of 1906, the Latinization of Azerbaijani in 1991 or the Dutch spelling reform of the Nederlandse Taalunie of 1994. Even Atatürk's Turkish alphabet reform passed a democratically elected parliament on 1 November 1928 (cfr. Wood 1929: 199). On the other hand, even reforms promoted by totalitarian regimes can fail. For example, the "Second Chinese Character Simplification Scheme" published in 1977-1978 had to be recalled by the communist government (Rohsenow 1986). The Russian spelling reform had a long history in tsarist Russia but it was found too daring to be implemented.

Both the introduction of the *kori(j)enski pravopis* 'root spelling' for Croatian by the Ustaša government in 1941 and the reintroduction of the Latin alphabet for Belarusian by the Nazi administration in 1942 (cfr. Antipova, Bunčić 2016: 165-167) were reversed when the respective regimes were overcome. The 'Claudian letters', which were introduced by Roman Emperor Claudius, did not survive the end of his reign in AD 54 (Ryan 1993: 611). This shows that writing reforms decreed without democratic legitimation can be short-lived because they depend much more on the rulers staying in power than democratically legitimized reforms.

Furthermore, longer processes of deliberation can ensure the linguistic quality of a reform project (even if they are applied by an otherwise non-democratic government). For example, the Latinization of many languages on the basis of the New Turkic Alphabet (*Jaŋalif*) during the early, relatively liberal phase of the Soviet Union (cfr. Crisp 1990) was much more consistent than the Cyrillic orthographies developed later at the height of Stalinism. The Latin alphabet for Turkmen created by authoritarian president Saparmyrat Nyýazow rather quickly in 1991 and obviously without competent linguistic advice, is a case in point: with a view to circumventing technical problems with non-standard characters, he designed an alphabet consisting exclusively of characters available in codepage 437, which at the time was the standard on American configurations of IBM compatible computers. For this reason, apart from a few special letters like ⟨ç⟩ for /tʃ/, ⟨ä⟩ for /æ/, or ⟨ñ⟩ for /ɲ/, which happened to be present in the codepage, the new Turkmen alphabet contained several non-alphabetic characters reinterpreted as letters: The phoneme /ʃ/ was represented by ⟨ç⟩ as a small and ⟨\$⟩ as a capital letter; /ʒ/ by small ⟨f⟩ and capital ⟨£⟩; and /j/ by small ⟨ÿ⟩ and capital ⟨Ÿ⟩⁹. When it turned out that this alphabet would not be accepted by the population, a public debate ensued, which resulted in its revision in 1995, replacing ⟨\$ç⟩ with ⟨\$š⟩, ⟨£f⟩ with ⟨Žž⟩, and ⟨Ÿÿ⟩ with ⟨Ýý⟩ (and ⟨ñ⟩ was also changed to ⟨ň⟩; cfr. Clement 2008: 178-181). This second attempt at Latinization was rather successful (*ibid.*: 182).

⁹ Note that ⟨ÿ⟩ is included as a letter in codepage 437, but capital ⟨Ÿ⟩ is missing (just as in ISO 8859-1), probably because in French this letter never occurs word-initially. The character ⟨f⟩ might have been chosen because of its similarity to *long s* ⟨ſ⟩; however, it is the top half of the integral symbol (position F4 in codepage 437, U+2320 in Unicode; both are followed by the bottom half ⟨J⟩).

If dictatorial powers are not conducive to the success of writing reforms in the long run, does at least the existence of a government with authority over the whole language area facilitate writing reforms, compared with languages spread over several countries? Indeed Sampson (1985: 207) sees the lack of “a single cultural centre” for the English language community as one of the reasons why it is so hard to reform English spelling. However, the German spelling reform of 1996 was agreed upon by eight countries¹⁰, as was the Portuguese spelling reform of 1990 (which took effect in 2009 although it had not been ratified by all signatories). In the case of English it would probably be sufficient if the United Kingdom and the United States agreed upon a reform to make the other 52 officially English-speaking countries follow suit.

5.2. *Literacy Rate*

Doubtless the main obstacle for writing reforms are the people who can write. Therefore it might be easier to reform a writing system that is used by fewer people, especially if the reform promises to make it easier for the illiterate to learn it. For example, when the Russian spelling reform was implemented in 1917-1918, the literacy rate was still rather low, whereas by 1930, when the proposal to switch to the Latin alphabet was made, the *Likbez* literacy campaign had already been running for eleven years, and the spelling reform projects of 1964 and 2000 were confronted with an almost completely literate population. A similar case is the successful simplification of Chinese characters in 1956-1964 and the unsuccessful ‘Second Scheme’ of 1977.

However, too small a number of proficient writers can be detrimental to writing reform as well. For example, when the Soviet authorities tried to Latinize small languages of Northern Russia with only about 1,000 speakers each, these alphabet reforms were stopped because it made no sense to re-educate the few writers of these languages, print new school-books, etc. (cfr. Frings 2007: 387-396). The dismissal of these small reforms seems to have initiated the general backlash to Cyrillic in the 1930s and 1940s (*ibidem*). Moreover, the 1936 spelling reform of Polish, the 1994 reform of Dutch, the 1996 reform of German, etc. are ample proof that a high literacy rate does not preclude writing reform.

5.3. *Motivation for the Reform*

Reforms of writing systems are a very suitable means to make political or social changes visible and are therefore often put into effect immediately after revolutions and similar events. A good example are the reforms of the Chinese script:

¹⁰ One might argue that Germany, comprising almost 80% of the German-speaking population, is the ‘cultural centre’ of the German language. However, Switzerland and Austria pursue a rather autonomous language policy, which can be seen e.g. from the fact that Switzerland does not use the letter ⟨ß⟩ and that Austria when joining the European Union in its “protocol №10” secured the right to continue using specific Austrian words in trade regulations etc.



Fig. 5. Atatürk in Kayseri (Sep. 1928)

Language reform became a rising tide chiefly after society underwent a big change. For instance, Zhuyin Zimu was adopted after the 1911 revolution; the vernacular style was favored in the May 4 movement of 1919; and the Pinyin System was adopted after the 1949 revolution (Zhou 1986: 22).

Even in English, as Coulmas (2003: 238) notes, “it is no coincidence that the only spelling reform ever to be effected coincided with the independence of the United States”. He of course refers to American spellings like <color>, <center>, <dialog> and <program>, which were introduced “by American nationalist Noah Webster, who in 1789 declared: ‘As an independent nation, our honor requires us to have a system of our own, in language as well as government [...]’ (Webster 1992: 34)”. Another example is Atatürk’s script reform of 1928, which replaced the Ottoman version of the Arabic script with the Latin alphabet for writing Turkish. The well-known photo shown in FIG. 5 is an excellent illustration of the typical circumstances under which a script reform takes place. It is ordered in the aftermath of a fundamental political change and is endowed with a high symbolic value. This is why we see Mustafa Kemal Atatürk as the nation’s supreme teacher in front of the blackboard:

As soon as the language commission were ready to recommend the new alphabet, President Kemal began enthusiastically to study and to teach it. Dolma Baghtche Palace, where he was spending his summer vacation, became a primary school where ministers of state and other high officials in Turkey learned their A B C’s with the president of the republic as their teacher. Many interesting stories are told of President Kemal as a teacher of the new alphabet. Whomever he came in contact with, whether great or small, was sure to be asked if he had learned the new alphabet and to be given a lesson forthwith

if he had not. He paused in the midst of a busy day to enter the schoolroom of his little adopted daughters to give a lesson on the new characters to their English instructor (Wood 1929: 199).

One of the things Atatürk wanted to show by teaching the new alphabet himself was that everyone could learn it. This is typical of script reforms endorsed by leftist governments: they tend to introduce scripts that are (perceived to be) easier to learn than the old ones, while conservative governments usually put forward other reasons for the reform. A good example of the latter is the reintroduction of the Mongolian alphabet in Mongolia at the beginning of the 1990s (Grivelet 2001), which nobody claimed to be easier than Cyrillic¹¹; instead it was promoted as a matter of national identity as the traditional Mongolian alphabet before the Sovietization of the country.

In contrast to such writing reforms with a political motivation, those reform proposals that are not linked up to any sociopolitical event often take very long to win general acceptance, if they are ever generally adopted at all. An example of this is the introduction of ⟨ë⟩ in Russian. As mentioned above, it was invented in 1783 by Ekaterina Daškova. The first book with this letter, Ivan Ivanovič Dmitriev's *I moi bezdělki*, was printed in Moscow in 1795 (Pčelov, Čumakov 2000: 45–52), and it might have been Gavriil Romanovič Deržavin, who was present at the academy meeting in 1783, who promoted the idea by using it in his letters (*ibid.*: 52–54). In 1797 it was used in Nikolaj Karamzin's almanac *Aonidy*, which was printed in the same printing house. This time the use of the new letter was explained in a footnote: “Буква е съ двумя точками на верьху замѣняетъ ѳѳ.” (“The letter e with two dots above replaces ѳѳ”, II, p. 166; consequently, Karamzin has until recently been credited with inventing this letter, e.g. by Grigor'eva 2004: 31). However, it took 159 years, until 1942, for the letter to become an obligatory part of the school programme, and up to now the letter is generally used only in children's books, schoolbooks, dictionaries, etc. In common usage it is only written in those rare cases where a syntactic ambiguity would arise from its replacement with ⟨e⟩. Ten years ago and 224 years after its invention, the use of ⟨ë⟩ was finally made obligatory by the Russian Ministry of Education and Science – but only for proper names in official documents (МОН).

An example from the German language is the indication of long and short vowels before /s/. As early as the 1827 first Radlof (1827: 357) and then Heyse (1827: 215–223) in his influential grammar recommended spelling ⟨ss⟩ (and ⟨ff⟩ in blackletter¹²) after short vowels

¹¹ Moreover, the traditional Mongolian alphabet fails to distinguish between /k/ and /g/, /o/ and /u/, and some other phonemic contrasts of Mongolian, which are faithfully represented in Mongolian Cyrillic.

¹² In blackletter, which makes a difference between long ⟨ſ⟩ and round ⟨ſ̄⟩, Heyse recommended the form ⟨ff⟩: ⟨daſſ⟩, ⟨blaſſ⟩, ⟨verhaſſt⟩, ⟨küſſt⟩; at the end of a word he later also accepted ⟨ſ̄ſ̄⟩ (especially in print, whereas in handwriting he considered ⟨ff⟩ to be more convenient than ⟨ſ̄ſ̄⟩) but suggested the use of a ligature ⟨ſſ̄⟩ (different from ⟨ſſ⟩) as the ideal: ⟨daſſ̄⟩, ⟨blaſſ̄⟩, ⟨verhaſſt̄⟩, ⟨küſſt̄⟩ (Heyse 1838: 257).

in all positions: “*der Fluss, des Flusses, muss, müsst, wisst, dass so gut, wie müssen, wissen etc. (nicht mufß, müßß, oder gar mufz etc.)*” (*ibid.*: 221). This spelling was in some German states even introduced in the schools (though hardly used outside of them, cfr. Markner 2006) but from the unification of German orthography in 1901 until 1998 the only normative German spellings continued to be ⟨Fluß⟩, ⟨muß⟩, ⟨müßt⟩, ⟨wißt⟩, ⟨daß⟩ (but ⟨des Flusses⟩, ⟨müssen⟩, ⟨wissen⟩). So from 1827 it took more than 170 years until the spelling reform of 1996, which was implemented with a transitional period from 1998 to 2006, revitalized Heyse’s linguistically fully justified rule and elevated the spellings ⟨Fluss⟩, ⟨dass⟩, etc. to the standard.

An extreme example is the distinction of consonantal /v/ from vocalic /u/ in Latin, which for historical reasons had only a single letter ⟨v⟩ for both. As early as the middle of the first century AD, Emperor Claudius proposed using ⟨ɹ⟩ for consonantal /v/ (Ryan 1993: 611). However, it took more than one and a half millennia until the problem was solved for New Latin by reinterpreting the allographs ⟨v⟩ and ⟨u⟩ as separate letters with different functions.

5.4. *Timing*

So we have seen that writing reforms have a higher chance of success if they are linked to a political turning point, so that the new writing system is associated with the new order. However, for this mechanism to be effective, such reforms have to be implemented before a large body of texts reflecting the new political system have been written in the old writing system and before a significant part of the population has learned to write in the new circumstances. In other words, the unreformed way of writing still has to be associated mainly with the old political context. Therefore there seems to be a certain *kairos*, a short time span immediately after a political change, during which a writing reform can be accomplished more easily than later. The more time elapses between the political event and the writing reform, the smaller the chances become for the reform to find the necessary acceptance.

This can be seen in the different fates of the post-Soviet writing reforms. For Azerbaijani, the switch from Cyrillic to Latin was decreed on 25 December 1991 (Hatcher 2008: 111), just four days after Azerbaijan had joined the Community of Independent States and on the very day that Michail Gorbačëv declared his resignation, which led to the peaceful dissolution of the USSR and the full independence of Azerbaijan six days later. Of course Cyrillic texts did not stop being written immediately (*ibid.*: 113–114). As Glück (1994: 748) has pointed out, any reform of the writing system brings about “a transitional phase spanning at least two generations” (“eine wenigstens zwei Generationen umfassende Übergangszeit”). However, the reform was definitely successful; Azerbaijani is now overwhelmingly written in the Latin script.

In the Republic of Moldova, an official law to convert the ‘Moldovan language’ to the Latin alphabet was passed even earlier, on 31 August 1989 (cfr. King 1994: 349). The advantage here was that no new alphabet had to be developed because the Moldovans simply adopted the Romanian alphabet and orthography (and it is a matter of heated debate whether Moldovan is a separate language or a variety of Romanian, cfr. King 1994). This script re-

form was a quick success in those parts of Moldova that are controlled by the government. In Transnistria, however, the ‘Moldovan language’ is still written in the Cyrillic alphabet.

As mentioned above, the first attempts at Latinizing the Turkmen language were made in 1991, although officially president and parliament only decided for the switch on 12 April 1993, now with an alphabet without currency symbols (Clement 2008: 180). By 1996 the Latinization of Turkmen can be said to have been successful (*ibid.*: 182).

A law on the Latinization of Uzbek, another post-Soviet Turkic language, was passed on 2 September 1993, with instruction in the new alphabet for first-graders starting in 1994 and an official transitional period until 2002, which was then extended to 2005 and afterwards to 2010. At present, Uzbek is apparently bigraphic, most newspapers and magazines still being printed in Cyrillic. For Kazakh and Kyrgyz, a common Latin alphabet was proposed in 1995. Since then, the transfer to this Latin alphabet has been discussed several times, several publications in Latin letters have appeared, but there is still no definitive decision in either country, and at the moment it seems that the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz are not inclined to give up Cyrillic. In Tajikistan, the introduction of the Arabic script for the official language, now identified as “Tajik Persian”, was discussed as early as 1989 but never enacted. Instead, in 1998 the Cyrillic spelling was reformed¹³.

Of course the differences in timing among the post-Soviet republics are no coincidence. Their different language policies in general can be associated with demographic differences (cfr. Fierman 2009), and events like the Black January massacre of 1990 in Baku certainly affected public opinion on national symbolism and script. However, I would argue that the moment chosen for a reform of the writing system is not only a symptom but also a factor influencing the fate of the reform. This can be demonstrated by looking at several reforms for the same language.

The Russian spelling reform, again, is a case in point. After long years of preparations but without decisions in tsarist Russia, the Provisional Government finally introduced the new spelling in the schools on 1 September 1917, six months after the February Revolution. On 23 December, just 59 days after the October Revolution, the reformed orthography was decreed to be the only official spelling starting a week later, on 1 January 1918 (Grigor’eva 2004: 293-294). Less than a year after the October Revolution, the implementation was reinforced by a fine of 10,000 roubles for printing texts in the old spelling (*ibid.*: 295-296). Apart from this, even the introduction of the Latin alphabet was discussed in 1917, but Lenin was afraid to act precipitately: “I have no doubt that the time for the Latinization of the Russian script will come, but it would be imprudent to act hastily now” (“Я не сомневаюсь,

¹³ The reform abolished the four letters ⟨ц (c), щ (šč), ы (y), ь (’)⟩. The first three had been used only in Russian loanwords, and ⟨ь (’)⟩ had been used according to the Russian model in words like ⟨чорьяк (čor’jak)⟩ /tʃɔːrˈjak/ ‘quarter’ to indicate that the iotated vowel letters ⟨я (ja), ю (ju), ё (ë)⟩ really represent /ja, ju, jo/ and not just /a, u, o/ after a palatalized consonants. However, since Tajik in contrast to Russian does not have any palatalized consonants, this is completely superfluous and the new spelling ⟨чоряк (čorjak)⟩ therefore sufficient.

что придет время для латинизации русского шрифта, но сейчас наспех действовать будет неосмотрительно”; from a personal conversation quoted by Lunačarskij 1930: 22). However, when in 1930, thirteen years after the Revolution, a special commission headed by Nikolaj Jakovlev presented its plan for an introduction of the Latin alphabet, the *kairos* was obviously over. The Cyrillic alphabet was not perceived as “the alphabet of the autocratic yoke, missionary propaganda and Great Russian national chauvinism” (“алфавитом самодержавного гнета, миссионерской пропаганды, великорусского национал-шовинизма”, Jakovlev 1930) any more. Especially with the new orthography, it was associated with Russian as the primary language of the Soviet Union, and the Latin script started to be associated with the capitalist West rather than Marx and Engels, whose works were now sitting on so many bookshelves in Russian translations (cfr. Bunčić *et al.* 2016: 326-327). Therefore the reform proposal was not even discussed in public (Alpatov 2001).

Obviously the time frame within which a politically motivated reform can successfully be implemented is relative and influenced by other factors. In the case of Chinese, seven years elapsed between the revolution of 1949 and the publication of the first list of simplified characters in 1956 (Rohsenow 1986: 73). Maybe the low literacy rate made this delay possible. However, the simplified characters of the “Second Scheme”, which were published in 1977, came much too late. They were not accepted by the public and therefore had to be recalled officially in 1986; *ibidem*).

6. Conclusion

Reforms of writing systems can be judged on the basis of graphematic criteria. Reforms promoted by leftist forces often strengthen the phonemic principle, aiming at making learning the writing system easier, whereas reforms supported by rightist groups of society tend to be promoted primarily for different reasons, especially national associations – although such associations are subject to interpretation. (Of course, both arguments can be combined, as in the case of Atatürk’s alphabet reform.) ‘Scientific’ arguments about the economy of writing systems, which are frequently put forward, are usually void because orthography does not change the information density needed in a given situation. A doubtless improvement of a writing system is a reform that strengthens both the phonemic and the morphemic principle.

However, even such linguistically justified reform proposals very often fail or take extremely long to be accepted unless they are linked to a political turning point, so that the new way of writing is associated with the new way of living. In this case, however, timing is crucial. The time span between the political change and the implementation of the writing reform has to be short because the more texts are written in the meantime the less the old writing system will be associated with the old political system.

Abbreviations

- MON: Ministerstvo obrazovanja i nauki Rossijskoj Federaciji, *O rešenijax Mežvedomstvennoj komissii po russkomu jazyku*, N° AF-159/03, "Rossijskaja gazeta", 2007, 3 May, <<http://img.rg.ru/pril/article/26/13/58/pismo.doc>> (30.03.2017).
- NZP: *Naredba-zakon za pravopisa* (27.02.1945 g.), "Ezik i literatura", 2015, 3-4, p. 15 (originally published in: "Däržaven vestnik", LXVII, 1945, 47, p. 1).
- NKP: Narodnyj komissariat prosveščeniya RSFSR, *Prikaz ot 24 dekabnja 1942 g. N 1825 o primenenii bukvy «Ë» v russkom pravopisanii*, <<http://www.kaznachey.com/doc/aNN9NLR0BYR/text/>> (27.03.2017).

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Abstract

Daniel Bunčić

Factors Influencing the Success and Failure of Writing Reforms

The Russian spelling reform of 1917-1918 was very successful – so successful that many young Russians, when confronted with a pre-1917 Russian text, do not know how to read ⟨ѣ⟩, ⟨ѳ⟩ or ⟨єя⟩. However, many reforms of writing systems have not met with success. Among them are the 1930 attempt to convert Russian to the Latin alphabet; the Second Chinese Character Simplification Scheme of 1977, which the PRC government had to withdraw in 1986; the French spelling reform of 1990, which is still ignored by most of the public; and the Latinization of Uzbek of 1993-1995, which, even twenty years later and after the end of the twice extended 'transitional period' of altogether fifteen years, has not been implemented by newspapers and magazines.

This paper examines a range of writing reforms (script reforms, spelling reforms, and glyphic reforms) – mainly from the Slavic and post-Soviet area – to determine which factors influence the success or failure of a reform and to what extent. Among the factors considered are the orthographic principles touched by the reform; the motivation for it; the scientific arguments put forward in the discussion; the semiotic values associated with the reformed writing system; the timing; the political system of the country; and the literacy rate of the speech community.

The results of this analysis might be a bit disillusioning for us as linguists because linguistic factors turn out to play a very minor role compared to extralinguistic factors. In fact, the most decisive factor seems to be timing.

Keywords

Alphabet Reform; Writing Reform Proposals; Slavic Languages; Languages of the Soviet Union.