

# GFL

*German as a foreign language*

## **The Rechtschreibreform – A Lesson in Linguistic Purism**

Nils Langer, University of Bristol

## The Rechtschreibreform – A Lesson in Linguistic Purism<sup>1</sup>

Nils Langer

The German spelling reform of 1998 generated an amazing amount of (mostly negative) reaction from the German public. Starting with a general overview of the nature of linguistic purism and the history of German orthography, this article presents a wide range of opinions of the spelling reform. The data is mostly taken from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, either in the form of newspaper articles or letters to the editor, showing that the reform is rejected by untrained linguists (folk) for various political and pseudo-linguistic reasons, which, however, have in common a fundamental misconception of the nature and status of both orthography in general and the 1998 spelling reform in particular. This article argues, therefore, that the vast majority of objections to the spelling reform is not based on linguistic issues but rather based on a broadly politically defined conservative view of the world.

On 1 August 2000 one of the leading German broadsheets, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), returned to using the old ‘bewährten’ spelling rules after one year of working with the new rules, arguing that the new rules had not achieved what they set out to do. The FAZ is on its own in this assessment, no other German newspaper followed its lead, and only two intellectual societies, the *Hochschullehrerverband* and the *Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung*, returned to the old spelling after the FAZ’s decision. This event made headlines for some time, showing that after the whole debate about the spelling reform had quietened down since March 2000 (the constitutional court’s ruling), the issue is still very contentious. Why, one may ask, “should such a dry, academic topic become a subject of furious public debates stretching over decades [...]” (Stevenson 1997: 186)?

*Linguistic Purism* is one of the most interesting aspects of sociolinguistics as it clearly unearths the deep feelings that are held by untrained linguists about (their) language. In examining puristic viewpoints in the field of linguistics, the heterogeneity of the arguments put forward to justify language planning or purification is striking. It appears that a language may decline or come under threat from another for an infinitely diverse range of reasons. In this article, I will explore to what extent we can actually speak of *linguistic purism* as a matter pertaining to language and linguistic issues. Using the recent reactions to the spelling reform in Germany, I

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Lesley Sharpe and Frank Shaw for their very helpful comments. As always, all faults remain my own.

hope to show that puristic views about language have nothing to do with language in principle, that is there is no common ground on how people object, what people object to and why people object to a certain development (or lack thereof) in a language. Rather, I suggest that linguistic purism is concerned not with language but only with a particular, *political* view of how to interpret the world. What distinguishes linguistic purism from other conservative attitudes is the vehicle for these views: in the case of linguistic purism, language provides all the arguments, thus telling us about attitudes to society rather than about language as an isolated feature: “[W]hat can ‘the state of the language’ tell us about ‘the state of the nation’?” (Stevenson 1997: 186). The spelling reform in Germany shows clearly that even subjects that are on the absolute periphery of language (if that) such as spelling can be made into a case to demonstrate *Sprachverfall*, anything will do to get a point across, even if this means that factual evidence is turned upside down.

## **1. Introduction - the relevance of purism, orthography and spelling reform**

### **1.1 The relevance of purism**

In sociolinguistics we are concerned with the use and status of language in all aspects of society. Apart from studies of how certain groups of speakers ‘subconsciously’ use certain types of language or linguistic constructions, an interesting field of study is to examine what speakers ‘consciously’ think about language and to what extent these beliefs correspond to actual usage. I will follow Preston & Niedzielski’s (2000) concept of folk-linguistics as the sum of reflections on language by folk, whereby *folk* is defined as untrained linguists, or rather, all people acting as untrained linguists, that is to say that even a professor of linguistics will belong to *folk* when expressing a view on language that is not based on the rational reflection facilitated by years of study. Many linguists, for example, will probably have felt uneasy about the change in the spelling of *daß* to *dass*, and we will probably correct a student’s *to who* to make it *to whom*, despite our awareness that *daß* to *dass* is merely a superficial, orthographical change which does not actually affect the language, and that the retention of *whom* is restricted to educated written English, and even there a change in the language is slowly taking hold.

Studying folk-linguistic belief will help us understand linguistic purism better since it enables us to compare actual changes in a language with the extent to which speakers are aware of these. Of particular interest is the degree to which folk’s views are accurate or simply based on an

unverified mix of indoctrination and half-baked observation, cf. the initial reaction by one interviewee who claimed before counting that *with whom are you speaking* is to be preferred over *who are you speaking with* since the latter involved more words (and hence contained redundant words), despite the fact that both sentences contain exactly the same number of words (Preston & Niedzielski 2000: 276).

A comparatively simple way of collecting puristic attitudes towards language is to scan evidence in the media, in particular letters to the editor (cf. Crystal 1988: 27ff. for English), as these often show very clearly that folk tend to have very serious opinions on correct / incorrect use of language and anything related to language but with an (often contradictory) array of reasoning. For example in German, the prescriptivist idea ‘to speak as you write’, is obeyed in the pronunciation of word-final schwa in *habe*, *laufe* etc. but violated in the ending {-ig}, rendering *Honig* to [ho::nIC], rather than the expected [ho::nIk]<sup>2</sup>. Crucially, folk claim to object to a particular construction (say the multiple negation in: *I don't know nothing*) not because it is spoken by a group of speakers of lower social prestige (for example working class Cockney, Geordies) but because the construction is wrong, illogical, not rational, inelegant. In the case of the much cited multiple negation this line of argument seems particularly absurd because of its presence in Standard Italian and French as well as in the Middle High German and Middle English, all languages known for their ‘high literatures’.

It remains to be seen to what extent one should distinguish between folk of lesser education and folk of higher education, that is politicians, academics and writers, especially when dealing with language but not linguistics. This appears particularly sensible in the case of the German spelling reform, for while people of all social strata objected to its introduction, it was in particular the latter group of text producing professionals that were most vocal in their outrage.

## 1.2 The relevance of orthography

In order to show that linguistic purism has nothing to do with linguistics *per se*, it seems sensible to examine a case where an aspect is scrutinised that is considered to be part of language by folk but not, as such, by expert linguists. To oversimplify slightly: orthography is

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<sup>2</sup> There is of course an obvious reason for that. When Theodor Siebs's orthoepy (*Bühnenaussprache*, 1898) was agreed, most of the delegates were Northern German (von Polenz 1999: 257ff.). The

not part of language because it is an artificial system, consciously invented and developed by people. Language, on the other, is naturally acquired in processes that are even today unclear to us. Crucially, however, to say that orthography is part of language would be to say that a language without orthography is missing something. Clearly this is not the case, as evidenced by the hundreds of (complete) languages in the world that are not written.

Another aspect very important to the current discussion about the spelling reform is the fact that, contrary to belief at least in Germany, spelling is rarely codified by law. Codification of spelling usually comes after the codification of a standard language (cf. Trask 1996: 334 for Basque in the 1960s), and in most cases, the state does not intervene (but cf. the exception of France). Instead, a certain dictionary tends to gain authoritative status by being particularly old or large rather than by its formal elevation to guardian of spelling or language. The situation was rather different in Germany from 1955 to 1998 when the privately-owned *Duden* was granted the right by the regional governments (*Kultusministerkonferenz*) to give a ruling in cases of doubt. Note in this context that the only aspects of the German language that are formally codified are *orthoepy* and *orthography / lexis*; the grammar of standard German, although written down in the *Duden* and respected as set in stone, has no officially protected form.

### 1.3 The relevance of the spelling reform

Patrick Stevenson (1997: 186) expressed his bewilderment over “the strange case of the reform of German orthography.” Given the fact that orthography is not part of language proper, it is rather surprising that a minor reform of some of the spelling rules in standard German would cause the puristic reactions that it did: it is this observation, namely that a virtually non-linguistic issue such as spelling can cause puristic uproar, which supports most strongly the claim that linguistic purism is a purely political rather than a linguistic issue.

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Northern pronunciation for /ho:nig/ is [ho:nIC] whereas the ‘expected’ [ho:nIk] is realised in Southern German varieties (Russ 1994: 63).

## 2. German orthography: development and history

### 2.1 The beginnings until 1850

It is useful at this point to sketch very briefly how German spelling developed over the centuries. Principally, German spelling is a graphic, alphabetic representation of linguistic sounds as *perceived* by the hearer. The first texts written in German date back to the eighth century, but the problem of variation in spelling was found right from the beginning of written German owing to different perceptions of sounds and the adherence to different writing traditions (that is ‘write as you were taught to, not as you pronounce the language’). Examples of the former include cases (a) where a sound did not exist in Latin or (b) where different sounds (allophones) were perceived as one sound (phoneme):

- a) sounds that did not exist in Latin: [ð, θ] => <th> (e.g. <thaz>, /ða:s/, {DAS})
- b) sounds that were not perceived as different: [x, ç] => <ch> (e.g. <lacht> vs <licht>)

In Early New High German (1350-1730), tendencies towards supraregional language varieties and, from the seventeenth century, a national German standard language did not automatically entail the fixation of a unified orthography, showing again that language and spelling are not mutually dependent on each other. In fact, it was not until the late nineteenth century that official, binding norms were set by the authorities. This does not mean, however, that prior to this, ‘free’ spelling resulted in anarchical writing. On the contrary, anyone reading even seventeenth-century texts in the original today will be able to verify that although the language may be different, the spelling proves no obstacle to comprehension. This is not to say that the many spelling reformers since the sixteenth century have been unsuccessful, but no individual orthographarian has been followed and no legal authority has officially endorsed a particular way of spelling.

However, because of the adherence to spelling traditions, changes in the languages were not always reflected in a modified spelling, causing an even greater rift between spelling and pronunciation. Thus, while <ei> to the pronunciation of [aI], and the monophongisation of <ie> to [I@] are not reflected in the spelling (we still write <klein> despite [klaIn] and <liebe> for [li;b@]), the monophongisation of [uO] to [u:] has resulted in a modified spelling, thus Middle High German *guot* is spelled *gut* today.

## 2.2 From the nineteenth century

Until the mid-nineteenth century, spelling was neither anarchical nor formally codified but consisted of “nach allmählicher Entwicklung traditionell gewachsener Normen” (von Polenz 1999: 236). In 1862, the Prussian ministry of education decreed that at least all teachers of the same school should agree to use only one spelling (Wells 1990: 371ff.). In 1876, a first conference on spelling took place in Berlin, resulting in at least a partial codification of orthography. The degree to which irregularities were still very frequent is exemplified in the marking of long vowels: while the homophones /vi;d6/ (<wider>, “again, against”), /fi;b6/ (<Fiber> (“fever, fibre”) and /mi:n@/ (<Mine> “facial expression, mine”) were spelled identically, /li;t/ was not (<Lid> “eye-lid” vs <Lied> “song”). Furthermore, there was some considerable regional variation, such as the spelling of geminate consonants:

### Prussia vs. Bavaria

Bettuch – Bettuch

Kammacher – Kammacher

Litteratur – Literatur

It was not until 1901/02 that a second, national conference took place in Berlin, this time agreeing on further changes such as the deletion of <h> after <t> in words of German origin:

<th> => <t> in *Tal, Tat, Taler, tun, Tor, Ton, Rath*,

and the germanisation of the foreign graphemes <c> and <cc>:

<c>, <cc> => <k>, <z> in foreign words, e.g. *Kanzler, Akzent, Publikum*.

The 1901/02 conference covered substantial ground and also received backing from Austria and Switzerland: “Einheit und Einheitlichkeit, wenn auch nicht völlig konsequente Durchführung, waren erreicht” (Wells 1990: 376). However, the delegates of the conference always considered the results as work in progress and suggested that the rules should be reviewed again. Importantly, the dictionary published by Konrad Duden (1829-1911) since 1880 never had official status. Crucially, the 1901 conference published a set of rules, not a dictionary – and Duden ‘merely’ applied the rules to create a list of words and, for lack of competition and presumably because of the quality of his work, the *Duden* dictionary was considered to be an authority. However, its legal status as being the ultimate authority on questions of orthography (*if it’s in the Duden, it’s correct, if it’s not in the Duden, it’s wrong*)

dates back no further than 1955 when the education secretaries of the regions passed a decree to that effect. It has frequently been pointed out in the light of the current debate about the spelling reform that the 1955 decree was illegal (as it created a monopoly for a private company) and that, if one was to return to the old spelling, it could technically only be the 1901/02 one - which unsurprisingly is hopelessly out of date.

In 1996, representatives of Germany, Austria, and Switzerland but also Liechtenstein, Luxemburg, Hungary, Romania and Belgium signed an agreement which technically is not so much a *Neuregelung* (despite its name) but a *Festsetzung* of the spelling rules. In contrast to what was accepted spelling before, the *Neuregelung* included a number of changes, albeit comparatively minor ones. The reform was activated on 1 August 1998, and is supervised by an international commission (with representatives from Germany (6), Austria (3) and Switzerland (3) to ensure the correct implementation but also to review the reform in 2005 if it was felt that some changes should be reversed or extended.

To conclude, codification of German spelling has been a long process ever since the first time German was written down. However, codification by legal authority has taken place only for the last 140 years so. To list but a few, before 1998 the standard German orthography included at least these inconsistencies:

### **i. orthographic differences with a purpose**

#### a) semantic differentiation

Ehre – Ähre, Rad – Rat, Lerche – Lärche, sitzen**en**bleiben – sitzen **b**leiben, dass – das

#### b) etymological differentiation

/f/ => <ph>, <f>, <v> (Philosophie, viel, fühl)

/r/ => <rh>, <r> (Rhabarber, Rahm)

### **ii. orthographic differences without a purpose**

Auto **f**ahren – rad**f**ahren

Del**ph**in – Elefant

Ballet**t**ruppe – Ballet**t**änzer

mit **B**ezug auf – in **b**ezug auf

### **iii. semantic difference with no orthographic repercussion**

hängen**en**bleiben – hängen**en**bleiben

das – das (relative pronoun vs definite article)



#### iv. more than 50 rules on punctuation

It was felt that a reform of the spelling of German was needed because the 1901/02 norms

- were often decided on political, rather than orthographical grounds (e.g. ss/ß)
- were always seen to be provisional
- were simply too complicated and irregular, leaving speakers to struggle with the orthography of their native language, even after thirteen years of schooling

### 3. The spelling reform: a very brief overview of some of the changes

As mentioned above, a change of spelling is slower than change of language since the latter is not always noticed by the speakers. However, there is general agreement that spelling should correspond as much as possible to the actual pronunciation of a language. In pre-standardised days, spelling would automatically adapt to changes in languages as some experimentation of a given author would catch on more readily than the suggestion of another. However, since 1901/02 we live in standardized times and thus a ‘natürliche’ adjustment is not possible anymore. It therefore seems quite legitimate to reform the spelling from ‘above’, that is by state intervention to keep everyone happy – learner and user. Given the degree of literacy and the number of the users, it would be foolish to reform spelling *radically* every 20 years or so. Rather, a ‘behutsame’ adjustment needs to counterbalance tradition and innovation. Having said all this, the present reform is even less radical as it merely simplifies and reduces irregularities within the spelling system. It does not introduce innovations to reflect a change in the German language, it merely repairs and streamlines the existing spelling.

The basic principles underlying all changes to the old spelling are those of *Vereinheitlichung* (standardisation) and *Vereinfachung* (simplification):

#### i. Stem-principle: all homophonic members of a lexeme should be spelled the same

Kuß – Kusses – Küsse {KISS}      =>      Kuss – Kusses - Küsse

Nummer – numerieren {NUMBER} =>      Nummer – nummerieren

Platz – plazieren {PLACE}      =>      Platz – platzieren

also:

Stange – Stengel	=>	Stange – Stängel
aufwendig – aufwenden, Aufwand	=>	aufwendig / aufwändig
Quantum – Quentchen	=>	Quantum – Quäntchen

## ii. Compounds: no consonants are ever dropped

Schiffahrt	=>	Schiffahrt / Schiff-Fahrt
Ballettruppe / Ballettänzer	=>	Ballettruppe / Ballettänzer
Zoo-Orchester	=>	Zoorchester / Zoo-Orchester

## iii. Optional Germanisation of Foreign Loanwords:

Delphin <i>but</i> Elefant, Tele(ph/f)on	=>	Del(ph/f)in, Elefant, Telefon (but: Elephantiasis)
Ketchup <i>but</i> Scheck	=>	Ket(s)chup, Scheck

## iv. Regularisation of Spelling Together / Apart:

radfahren <i>but</i> Auto fahren	=>	Rad fahren, Auto fahren
irgend jemand <i>but</i> irgendwer	=>	irgendjemand, irgendwer

## v. Use of Small / Capital Letters

in bezug auf <i>but</i> mit Bezug auf	=>	in Bezug auf, mit Bezug auf
schuld geben	=>	Schuld geben
der, die, das letzte	=>	der, die, das Letzte

## vi. Punctuation

Most commas are now optional and should be used by the writer to structure a sentence / text (cf. the use of commas in English!). The old rules are all still valid, as an option.

## vii. Hyphenation of Words at the End of a Line

We-ste <i>but</i> Wes-pe	=>	We-ste, Wes-pe
Zucker <i>but</i> Zuk-ker	=>	Zu-cker



nor does it promote the use or introduction of new (foreign or otherwise) words – it merely attempts to repair system-internal irregularities.

Linguistic purism, on the other hand, is actively concerned with the rejection or acceptance of certain *linguistic* constructions. “[A] purist is a person who attempts to purify a language of certain undesirable features – be they unwanted foreign elements, vulgar colloquialisms, or some new-fangled popular jargon.” (Thomas 1991:1). Neither Thomas (1991) nor Rash (1998) include the field of orthography as a potential part of linguistic purism:

[The aims of purism are:]

- a. the maintenance of what is generally accepted as correct grammar and good style, and
- b. the protection of a language from the encroachment of perceived impurities, such as foreign influences, provincialisms, coarse expressions and slang. (Rash 1998:89)

Some of the most prominent modern examples of purism include

- loanwords: against Anglicisms (*downloaden* (Duden 2000: 303) but in favour of Graecisms and Latinisms (*Zirkus*, *Mauer*, but esp. words such as *Philosophie*, *Logik*)<sup>5</sup>
- purity of origin and meaning: *Handy* is not a word because it is not a word in English
- *con'troversy* (as opposed to *'controversy*) is wrong because it is American
- *medieval* should be spelled *mediaeval* or at least *mediaeval*
- “Deutsch ist eine *würdelose* Sprache”, that is do not ever use the periphrastic subjunctive with *würde* in ‘good’ German

Even more pointedly, both Rash and Thomas agree that purism is pro-home and anti-foreign: but one the most problematic cases in the recent spelling reform was the Germanisation of foreign loanwords, that is the (optional) spelling of *Spagetti*, *Delfin* and *Fassette* (alongside *Spaghetti*, *Delphin*, *Facette*), that is an antipathy towards making words more German! The spelling reform, however, does not serve to show Thomas’ and Rash’s assessment to be wrong. Rather, while both are quite in their right to ignore orthography<sup>6</sup> since it is not part of language proper, the folk-linguistic reactions to the spelling reform nonetheless show to what

<sup>5</sup> In this context, cf. the difference between *Fremdwörter* and *fremde Wörter* (Eisenberg 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Thomas (1991: 66) mentions one case of puristic outcry over orthography when in 1818, the Latin letter <j> was introduced to written Czech. Trask (1996: 334) briefly refers to problems related to the spelling of Basque up to its standardisation in the 1960s.

extremes linguistic purism can go, namely to attack issues that are not linguistic in the first place, thus handing support to the claim suggested in this article that linguistic purism has nothing to do with language as such but is merely a representation of a particular set of political ideas.

## 5. Folk-linguistic reactions to the spelling reform

So far we have established that while Language changes and there is nothing to stop that, spelling in standardised written languages often does not reflect a particular (accepted) language change (such as the diphthongisation of /i:/ in English to /ai/ (/wain/ = <wine>). Therefore it would seem both legitimate and desirable to modernise the spelling at regular intervals.

The advantage of such a modernisation would be a closer match between spelling and pronunciation and hence greater ease for reader and writer to learn and remember the rules of orthography. However, as we saw above, the 1998 spelling reform (in contrast to 1989, NdR 1989) does not even go so far as to propose any changes in the matching of pronunciation and spelling, with some minor exceptions of optionally extending the Germanised (that is closer to German pronunciation) spelling of some foreign loan words<sup>7</sup>. As mentioned above, the only substantial thing the spelling reform is successfully changing is the removal of spelling-internal inconsistencies. To argue against the reform is to argue in favour of irregularities – irregularities that are hard to learn but serve the very useful purpose of distinguishing between speakers with an advanced education and those without, given the importance of knowing how to spell properly for example when writing a job application. To hear from leading intellectuals that one should maintain the status quo which makes life difficult for a vast majority of the German-speaking people can only be described as disappointing. But let us look at the reactions in more detail.

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<sup>7</sup> This lack of radicality obviously opens the question posed by “reformophiles”: to what extent the considerable intellectual and logistic effort of a formal implementation of a spelling reform can be justified if the changes are only minor. While I fully accept the argument – and there are reasons why a more radical reform has not been postulated (again) –, this article deals with puristic reactions from people to whom even a minor change is already far too much – hence I feel justified in not discussing the advantages of more extensive changes over the present *Neuregelung*.

## 5.1 Purism and Politics

### 5.1.1 The spelling reform is unconstitutional

In 1996, a professor of Law at the university of Jena took his case to the federal constitutional court (BVG), arguing for the withdrawal of the spelling reform as it violated his rights of personal dignity, personal freedom, freedom of action, right as a parent, freedom of speech and freedom of teaching (Johnson 2000: 116f.). Several further court cases were heard (roughly 50% decided in favour of the reform), mostly from parents claiming that the state cannot force their children to be taught a new spelling, until in July 1998 the BVG rejected the complaints, arguing that it was quite in a state's right to change the spelling norm for its employees (civil servants, including teachers) (25.3.1999, FAZ). Despite the BVG's ruling, a feeling remained that a democratic government should not be allowed to impose a certain way of spelling ("Verrat demokratischer Grundsätze (Artikel 20GG)", Dr Karl-Theodor Lieser, Berlin, 5./6.8.2000, BZ, S.9), in spite of the fact that this is what the state had been doing since Wilhelmine days (1903).

### 5.1.2 The spelling reform is undemocratic

The claim that the implementation of the spelling reform followed undemocratic procedures is equally absurd, given the length of the consultation process, the involvement of independent expertise and the signing of the agreement by several foreign countries as well as all regional secretaries for education (*Kultusminister*), following the normal procedures for changes in the curriculum. However, the reactions were quite different, arguing that the procedures had 'raped' the parliaments, and are reminiscent of the 'dictatorial GDR-practices'. The East German writer Günther Kunert warned that one should act now, otherwise we will find ourselves in a 'Halb-DDR':

Sie ist undemokratisch durchgesetzt worden. (WIR gegen die Rechtschreibreform (Schleswig-Holstein, 1997/8)

Hier sind die Parlamente von den Kultusministern vergewaltigt worden. (Horst Milde, President of Lower Saxony-Parliament, 1.11.1996)

Nicht nur, was die neuen Regeln vorschrieben, sondern auch und vor allem, wie sie "von oben herab durchgedrückt" worden seien, empöre alle freiheitlich denkenden Bürger, sagte der Schriftsteller Günther Kunert auf derselben Veranstaltung. Jemand, der einen großen Teil seines Lebens in der DDR verbracht habe, fühle sich an diktatorische Praktiken erinnert: Die Einführung der neuen Regeln wirke auf ihn wie ein Staatsstreich. Wer damit einmal Erfolg habe, sei in Versuchung, dergleichen zu wiederholen. Der Coup der Kultusminister könnte auch andere dazu verleiten, ähnlich zu verfahren. Daher gehe es nicht nur um die Regeln der Rechtschreibung,

sondern auch und vor allem um die Regeln der Demokratie. Er rufe allen Bürgern zu “wehret den Anfängen”, sonst fänden sie sich unversehens in einer Halb-DDR wieder. (FAZ, 31.7.2000)

Finally, it was argued that freedom of expression presupposes the conscious decision to spell a word in a certain way, something which, as is claimed below, is not possible anymore with the new spelling.

Der frühere Feuilletonchef der ‘Bayerischen Staatszeitung’, Krieger, appellierte an seine [journalistischen] Kollegen, sich die Freiheit des Schreibens zu nehmen. Freiheit setze voraus, daß man sich für eine bestimmte Schreibweise *bewußt* entscheide und daß der Leser beabsichtigte Abweichungen, Nuancen, erkenne. (FAZ 1. Aug. 2000)

Astonishingly, it seems to escape Krieger that he himself never consciously chose to spell a word in a certain way but that he simply followed the rules as he learned them at school!

### 5.1.3 The spelling reform was created by some anonymous laymen

Another argument to show the reform to be a piece of undemocratic action relates to its designers, leading experts in orthography from Germany, Switzerland and Austria who had been working on reforming German spelling over decades but who nonetheless are described as ‘anonymous’, ‘dilettantes’ whose expertise on matters of spelling is claimed to be inferior to those of writers and journalists (who, surely, are experts in producing texts, not in preferring a certain spelling over another):

von einer kleinen, weitgehend anonymen Expertengruppe (DENK-Aufruf, Oct.1996)

Die zahlreichen Schriftsteller und Professoren, deren Kompetenz die der Schreibreformer bei weitem übersteigen dürfte, [...].(Friedrich Denk, FAZ, 21.10.1996)

Es ist höchste Zeit, diesen Dilettantenverein aufzulösen und den missglückten Großversuch an den Schulen zu stoppen.(Prof. Dr. H. Jochems, Kreuztal, Spiegel 16/2000)

bornierte [...] Vorgaben inkompetenter “Fachleute” mit ihrem präventösen Dilettantismus [...] (Dr Karl-Theodor Lieser, Berlin, 5./6.8.2000, BZ, p.9)

### 5.1.4 The spelling reform and German obedience

It has also been claimed that the spelling reform was successful only because of the German inclination towards obedience, which is described as part of the German personality, something that has been around for some time and one cannot get rid of since in Germany one always preferred to talk about rules rather than content. As J. von Westphalen put it: The Germans want to obey. They always want to get everything just right:

Ich finde es als ein gutes Zeichen der Demokratie, wenn Leute waehlen koennen wie sie sich entsprechend ausdruecken wollen. Ich moechte hierzu noch bemerken, dass man es hier in England als ein amuesantes Deutsches Charaktermerkmal [sic!, NL] findet, dass immer alles bis ins letzte Detail als klar definiert und gesetzlich geregelt erscheinen muss. In dieser Beziehung sind finde ich die Englaender als eher laid back. (Brian Muller, Shoreham 7. Aug. 2000, FAZ)

[Die Reform] konnte nicht ueberzeugen, trotz allen von oben ausgeuebten Drucks, trotz aller Bereitschaft zu vorausseilendem Gehorsam, die in Deutschland offenbar so leicht nicht auszurotten ist. (Christian Meier, 31.7.2000, FAZ)

Man ist versucht zu resignieren: In Deutschland hat man sich halt schon immer mehr ueber Regeln als ueber Inhalte aufgeregt. (Dr. Axel Stommel, Teltow, BZ, 5./6.2000, p.9)

Die Deutschen. Sie wollen gehorchen. Dem Diktat der Orthographie. Sie wollen alles richtig machen. (Joseph von Westphalen, 19.2.1997, p. XIII, Sueddeutsche Zeitung)

## 5.2 Purism and Language

Whereas the above comments principally linked the spelling reform with political issues such as democracy and civil obedience, the following will shed some light on the connection between the reform and language.

### 5.2.1 The spelling reform makes reading more difficult

It is argued that the old spelling was highly phonetic<sup>8</sup>, and thus there was no need for a reform. This was seen as confusing even for an experienced reader and unsuccessful on the evidence of the first *Klassenarbeiten* at school especially at a time (Oct. 1996) when the new spelling was restricted to the classroom. But no reformer had ever claimed that the benefits of the reform (easier learning of spelling) would be quantifiable within a few years. Instead, it was always anticipated that one will have to wait until the new spelling has become visible in everyday life, thus probably not before the end of the transition period in 2005:

Unter den Sprachen Europas nimmt die deutsche Schriftsprache [die alte Rechtschreibung] insofern eine Sonderstellung ein, als sie keineswegs besonders kompliziert, sondern im Gegenteil besonders einfach ist. Die [...] phonetisch hoechst getreue [sic!] Schreibweise [...]. (Dankwart Guratzsch, 17.10.1996, Die Welt)

Als Lehrerin habe ich ziemlich schnell gemerkt, daB die Rechtschreibreform von weltfremden Theoretikern ausgeheckt worden ist. Die Fehlerzahl sinkt naemlich nur minimal. Nach Auswertung der ersten Deutscharbeiten meiner Schueler habe ich festgestellt, daB sich der Fehlerquotient um maximal 0,5 Prozent verbessert. (Marion von der Kammer, Berlin, Spiegel 44/1996)

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<sup>8</sup> Although this is true when compared to French and English, but certainly not for Italian or Dutch. Also, the claim is clearly not accurate when seen on its own: if the relation between spelling and pronunciation of German was indeed phonetic (or rather: phonemic) in a highly regular fashion, nobody would have suggested reforming it.



Als begeisterte Vielleserin habe ich mir bislang drei Romane in der neuen Rechtschreibung gekauft. Immer wieder bin ich dort an Sätzen hängengeblieben, die durch die neuen Regeln so unübersichtlich waren, daß ich sie mehrmals lesen mußte, um überhaupt ihren Sinn zu erfassen. [...] Alle drei Bücher habe ich nach halber Lektüre entnervt beiseite gelegt. (Heike Blumenberg, Berlin, 5./6.8.2000, BZ, S.9)

On the other hand, a simplified spelling is misunderstood as a simplification of the content of German lessons, a procedure that one would surely not wish to extend to subjects like maths and physics, lowering their content value also:

Die Rechtschreibreform sei gut für die Grundschüler, weil sie nun weniger Fehler machen, sagt Bundesministerin Bulmahn. Und was ist mit der Mathematik, der Physik und den vielen anderen Fächern? Sollten die nicht vielleicht auch auf Grundschul-Niveau herunterreformiert werden? (Gerd Segatz, Norderstedt 10. Aug. 2000, FAZ)

## 5.2.2 Spelling is part of language

### 5.2.2.1 The spelling reform simplifies the German language

One of the most astonishing comments relates to the equation not only of spelling and language but also the direct relation between spelling (= language) and cultural values. It is argued that the spelling reform damages the linguistic culture, is a cultural disaster, messes up literary quotations, and its retraction would be a benefit to culture in general:

Gleichzeitig fordert der [Hochschul]erband die Kultusministerkonferenz auf, "mit den erforderlichen Korrekturen an der Rechtschreibreform die deutsche Sprachkultur vor Schaden zu bewahren". (FAZ, 2.08.2000, p. 1)

kulturpolitisches Desaster (dtv-Chef Wolfgang Balk)(Spiegel, 42/1996)

Gezeigt wird, dass [die neuen] Wörterbücher literarische Zitate verhunzen, dass Schüler nicht weniger, sondern mehr Fehler machen als früher. (Prof. Peter Eisenberg, FAZ, 31.7.2000)

[Wie ich sagte:] Da Sprache wichtigster Teil der Kultur sei, dürfe die Rücknahme eines Eingriffs in sie der Kultur zugutekommen. (Hermann Kant, Prälank, 5./6.8.2000/ BZ, p. 9)

Furthermore, the spelling reform is claimed to result in the trivialisation of the language, confusion, linguistic impoverishment, and that it reduces the number of expressions of the language or even eliminates words<sup>9</sup>, and leads to an intellectual split in German society because *Panther* and *Thunfisch* now have optional spelling variants without a <h>:

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<sup>9</sup> The argument refers to the claim that because former *sitzenbleiben* and *sitzen bleiben* are now spelled in the same way, one of the words is lost. That this cannot be upheld is clear to anyone who realises that a word consists of meaning, syntax (morphology) and phonology. Notice that even the

führt zur Verflachung der deutschen Sprache (Siegfried Lenz) (*Spiegel*, 42/1996)

[D]ie sichtbarsten Folgen [der Reform sind] Verwirrung, sprachliche Verarmung und die Beschneidung der sprachlichen Ausdrucksmöglichkeiten. (Helmut Krüger, Potsdam, BZ, 5./6.8.2000)

[Sie] eliminiert Wörter aus dem deutschen Wortschatz und vermindert so die Ausdrucksmöglichkeiten unserer Sprache. (WIR gegen die Rechtschreibreform (Schleswig-Holstein), 1997/8)

Wenn *Panter* und *Tunfisch* möglich werden, aber *Panther* und *Thunfisch* Hauptformen bleiben, entsteht eine mentale Zwei-Klassen-Gesellschaft. (*Spiegel* 42/1996, p. 264)

The famous liberal writer Siegfried Lenz claims that he signed the Frankfurt declaration (urging ministers to stop the reform) against the *spelling* reform to halt the decline of the *language!* It is somewhat disheartening when even leading intellectuals do not realise the difference between spelling and language, especially if this lack of subject knowledge does not prevent them from publicly declaring their strong resistance. That this is not restricted to Siegfried Lenz is clearly shown by the astonishing number of famous intellectuals that signed the Frankfurt declaration and who joined with Günter Grass in congratulating the FAZ on their return to the old spelling:

[Ich unterschrieb die Frankfurter Erklärung] als Bürger und Schriftsteller, den der wahrnehmbare **Sprachverfall** nicht unbesorgt sein läßt. (Siegfried Lenz, *Spiegel* 42/1996, 268)

### 5.2.2.2 The spelling reform is *schwachsinnig* and illogical

Having considered criticisms that relate to politically or culturally based lines of argumentation, there are also a number of statements that simply reject the spelling reform for reasons that are much more openly emotional. The *Spiegel* title page from 14 October 1996 opened with the claim that the German language was *endangered* because of the nonsensical (new) spelling, while the authors of the Schleswig-Holstein petition stated that the reform was an *attack* on both language and literature!

Schwachsinn Rechtschreibung - Rettet die deutsche Sprache! (*Spiegel* title page, 42/1996)

Die Rechtschreibreform ist ein Angriff auf die deutsche Sprache und Literatur. (WIR gegen die Rechtschreibreform, Schleswig-Holstein, 1997/8)

The novelist Walter Kempowski feels that the new (optional) way of separating the ‘good old German’ word *Abend* as *A-bend* at the end of a line is simply barbaric. Even more absurdly, it

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old spelling made no orthographic difference between the two meanings of *hängenbleiben* (“to get stuck” vs. “to repeat a year in school”).

is argued by Lieber and Meyer in the *Berliner Zeitung* that the new rule of never dropping a consonant in the writing of compounds is ‘simply ludicrous’ or ‘mad’; both writers clearly show their complete ignorance of the old spelling in this context, since triple letters were the norm even before 1998 (no letter was dropped when three vowels co-occurred or three consonants co-occurred with another consonant following). Again, their criticism is contributes to the overall impression that the negative reactions to the spelling reform were based on general puristic feelings rather than a critical analysis of the proposed changes:

Jetzt gipfelt diese Änderungsschneiderei sogar darin, daß man ein schönes, altes, deutsches Wort barbarisch trennt. A-bend. (Walter Kempowski, in *Die Woche*, 18.10.1996)

Die Verwendung von drei aufeinander folgenden Buchstaben [...] ist schlicht affig, und die Ersetzung von ‘ß’ durch ‘ss’ ist eher peinlich. (Dr. Karl-Theodor Lieser, Berlin, BZ, 5./6.8.2000)

‘Missstand’, ‘Schlussstrich’, ‘Litfasssäule’ – keine Sprache der Erde erlaubt drei gleiche Buchstaben in Folge. Wer sich so etwas ausdenkt, gehört in die Klapsmühle! (Ingo Meyer, Berlin, BZ, 5./6.8.2000)<sup>10</sup>

### 5.3 Purism and Freedom of Thought

Let us finish this section on the reaction to the spelling reform with an extreme though not unrepresentative line of argumentation. In response to the FAZ’s return to the old rule, the following letter sees the change in the spelling rules as an attack on the intellectual and cultural heritage of the German people as well as on everyone’s right to think freely. How it can be seriously claimed that having to spell *dass* rather than *daß* restricts one’s freedom of thought, as the following letter claims, really is difficult to comprehend.

Es ist nicht nur, daß völlig widersinnige Orthographie verordnet wurde, die Rechtschreibreform war/ist ein vorsätzlicher Angriff auf die deutsche Sprache. [...] Der Eingriff des Staates auf die Sprache [d.h. die Rechtschreibreform] muß als Angriff auf das geistig kulturelle Erbe eines Volkes und auf das individuelle Recht auf freies Denken, das nur aus der Sprache wachsen kann, gedeutet werden. (Roman Wengerter, Frankfurt am Main, 3.8.2000, FAZ).<sup>11</sup>

## 6. A Lesson in Linguistic Purism

The spelling reform probably caused as much emotional debate in Germany as the discussion over changing the postcodes in the early 1990s and the introduction of the Euro. The reactions exemplified in the quotations in section 5 show very clearly that the spelling reform was rejected by a diverse range of people and for a vast array of reasons. However, careful

<sup>10</sup> As Frank Shaw points out, at least Romanian allows for the triple letters (*copiii lui Kennedy*; “Kennedy’s Children”).

<sup>11</sup> I am indebted to Michael Gratzke (Cambridge) for providing this example.

consideration of what spelling, and for that matter the spelling reform, actually is, has shown that the general criticism by the public is ill-founded and based on ignorance and gut reaction<sup>12</sup>. The reform was designed to erase some of the worst irregularities of the spelling rules, with an aim to facilitate the learning and application of these rules, esp. for school children. It was never its target to advance the progress of Germany, as indirectly presupposed by Theo Waigel:

Das Gras [des Protestes] wächst mittlerweile so laut, dass ein Politiker wie Theo Waigel es hört und in der Passauer Nibelungenhalle verkünden kann, es bringe Deutschland nicht vorwärts, wenn man statt *Schiffahrt* nun plötzlich *Schiffahrt* schreibe. Wo er *recht* (alt) hat, hat er *Recht* (neu). Indessen verfolgte das Reformwerk nie den Zweck, Deutschland voranzubringen. (Hartmut Unterstöger, 19.2.1997, p. XI, Süddeutsche Zeitung)

That the poets and writers as representative of German intelligentsia and professional ‘text producers’ reject the reform out of hand is equally surprising since it is poets who often ‘disobey’ certain rules of spelling or punctuation in order to achieve a particular effect. Their complaints over the reform hint at a certain degree of intellectual arrogance, according to the principle: I learnt the old rules, why should others have an easier time?:

Nicht für die Dichter wurde die Reform gemacht, sondern für das Millionenheer der Lernenden. (Dr Hans-Peter Nolting, Göttingen, Spiegel 44/1996)

Dichter, bleib bei deinen Leisten! Sicherlich hätte die Kommission auch die Schriftsteller hören sollen. Aber diese sind nicht die Obergutachter über die Sprache. (Michael Kussmann, Neuss, Spiegel 44/1996)

And finally, it is striking that spelling is more or less consistently equated with language, and language with cultural heritage and thought. But as shown above, changing the spelling of a certain word neither changes its syntax, phonology, nor semantics:

Wenn im Deutschen (wie in vielen anderen Sprachen) “Filosofie” geschrieben werden sollte, würde es mich emeritierten Philosophieprofessor auch nicht stören, solange das denkerische Werk unverfälscht bleibt. Die Denker verwechseln hier denken mit buchstabieren. (Prof. W. Hirsch, Altenholz, Spiegel 44/1996)

So, “what can ‘the state of the language’ tell us about ‘the state of the nation’?” (Stevenson 1997: 186). Leaving aside the fact that the spelling reform does not concern language *per se*,

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<sup>12</sup> There are other critics, who, equipped with an understanding of the subject matter, reject the spelling reform because of internal inconsistencies. These critics were not discussed in this article because they are not puristic as such and because they are part of a tiny minority.

the reactions nonetheless show us very clearly how language is viewed in Germany today. It appears as something holy, untouchable, something that is both part of the people, but also represents intellectual thought and cultural heritage. It is like a home to everyone, and nobody must change it, or else we lose our sense of belonging:

Die Muttersprache ist wie die Landschaft, in die man hineingeboren wird, etwas Angestammtes, eine Heimat, aus der niemand vertrieben werden darf. Wir haben sie ererbt, wir müssen sie heil weitergeben. (Günter Gillesen, FAZ, 12.8.1988, cited in Stevenson 1997: 186)

On a more political level, it appears that the reasons for the ferocity of the reactions have to do with at least two points that are not restricted to linguistic issues:

- *Media-hype à la Gore/Bush*: news is made by the media; if enough journalists decide that something is newsworthy, they generally succeed in arousing the interest of the public. It is no surprise that the spelling reform became an issue only once the media took an interest, despite the fact that press releases and general information had been issued well in advance of the final decision over the spelling reform in 1996.
- *Reformstau*: German politics has been plagued over the last few years with the inability of government and opposition to agree on major political reforms such as modernising the health system, taxes and the state pension scheme. Judging from the reaction to the spelling reform, one easily gains the impression that the public was defying the attempt by the ‘politicians up there’ to impose another unworkable reform on ‘us down here’.

The outcry over the spelling reform is very similar to objections to an increasing use of English loan words, but in the case of the spelling reform the language is not actually affected. The reactions to the reform often refer to linguistic issues but in all cases are misguided and often based on a misinterpretation or ignorance of the facts. But the facts, it seems, are unimportant. What appears to be important is that the language is in danger and thus we need to protect it. This is, of course, the foundation of linguistic purism: an endangered language and therefore an urge or even necessity to protect it. In this way, the spelling reform is an excellent example on which to base an investigation of linguistic purism, as it shows us that puristic feelings can be activated even when no reason actually exists. The reaction to the spelling reform is not about language – it is an attitude towards change and about a political conviction that change is bad in principle and must be defied. By showing us how little puristic attitudes are connected to

actual threats to a language, the spelling reform provides us with a lesson in linguistic purism par excellence!

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## Biodata

The Schleswig-Holsteiner Nils Langer studied at Newcastle upon Tyne, Leiden, Heidelberg and Wolfenbüttel and completed his PhD thesis on the effectiveness of seventeenth century grammarians for the standardisation of German in 2000. Having worked briefly at University College Dublin, he is now a Lecturer in German at the University of Bristol.