

## Basic Factors Triggering the Spelling Reform in the Bulgarian Language

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### **Abstract**

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*The purpose of this article is to focus on the spelling reforms in the Bulgarian language from a historical perspective and the factors which led to them. It also focuses on the analysis of the results after these reforms. For this purpose the three basic spelling reforms in the history of the Bulgarian language are chosen – the reform from 1899, the so called Drinov – Ivanchev spelling model; the reform from 1921 – Omarchevski spelling model; and the reform from February, 1945. The main reason for these reforms is the search for a unification of a standard form because of the diversity of dialects; the search for a cultural model, parts of which are intralingual changes and also some extralinguistic factors (social, political, etc.)*

### **Key words**

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*spelling system, factors, reforms, spelling models*

The purpose of this article is to focus on a succession of spelling reforms taking place after the Liberation of Bulgaria from Ottoman rule aiming at the consolidation of the Modern Bulgarian literary language. The issue is approached from a historical perspective and attention is paid to the cultural factors which led to them.

Before focusing on the basic factors and the processes that took place between late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the middle of 20<sup>th</sup> century, a brief explanation of what spelling (or orthography) is will be presented.

Spelling (or orthography [from Greek ορθογραφία] – both terms are used interchangeably) is the set of rules which determines a unified way for writing words in a language. Thus, providing ease in written communication among the members of a society who use this language. Every spelling relies on a particular alphabet. Spelling systems are changeable. They change periodically by omitting some old concepts and elements in order to keep pace with the spoken language. Usually radical or insignificant reforms in the spelling system are instituted in close relation with important social and political changes. Views and beliefs of the dominant social groups and classes of the time reflect the spelling systems too.<sup>28</sup> (Stoyanov 1999:152)

In the history of the Bulgarian language a lot of factors have played the role provoking the unification and codification of Modern Bulgarian. The focus in the

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<sup>28</sup> All the translations in the present article are the author's

present paper is set on the spelling reforms after the Liberation of Bulgaria from the Ottoman rule in 1878, since this was the period with the most important changes which led to the reform of the language, especially in the part concerning its orthography. Three basic spelling reforms took place during that period popularly known as the Drinov-Ivanchev spelling model from 1899, Omarchevski spelling model from 1921, and the so-called Fatherland's front spelling model from 1945.

These three reforms are not the only ones that took place throughout the history of the Bulgarian language, but they are the most remarkable ones that set their marks in the spelling system of the language. According to most of the Bulgarian historical linguists there are six periods in the history of the New Bulgarian Literary language where different and important processes happened. The periodization is taken from the History of New Bulgarian Literary language issued by the Bulgarian Academy of Science and is as follows:

1. First signs of Modern Bulgarian Language ( from the second half of 18<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the first quarter of 19<sup>th</sup> century)  
This was the period when the idea of one common language norm with a vernacular basis was consolidated. It started with *Istoriya Slavyanobolgarskaya* (1762) or *Slavonic-Bulgarian History* written by Paisius of Hilendar and *Primer with Various Instructions* by Dr. Petar Beron (1824). This period of mixed use of a vernacular and a literary language, was characterized by the tendency towards giving priority to the vernacular written form rather than to the literary one.
2. The first steps of laying the foundations of codification of the Modern Bulgarian language were taken in the period from 1824 till the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century. This was the period when the vernacular nature of the language was set.  
During this period the first periodical press appeared, as well as textbooks, the first poetry works, written in Modern Bulgarian were published, etc.
3. The period from 1853 till the Liberation of Bulgaria from the Ottoman rule, 1878 was characterized by more intensive building of the language and its codification  
This was also the period when literature had its peak, especially prose and journalism.
4. From 1878 to the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century was the period of completion of building the language when Modern Bulgarian was undergoing consolidation and codification of unified basic norms.
5. The period from the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century to 1944 was one of development and enrichment of Modern Bulgarian language when the whole normative system was consolidated and codified.
6. The period of recent development was placed after the 9 September, 1944, which is characterized by stabilization and improvement of the normative system, and also by enrichment of the lexis and enlarging the social basis of the language.

As R. Rusinov notes in his work (Rusinov, R. 1981) after the Liberation of Bulgaria from the Ottoman rule in 1878 the situation with the Bulgarian language system was very complicated. There was a great diversity of spelling models and the society at that time used many of them at the same time. The well-educated part of it continued using the spelling model they had used and learned during the Bulgarian National Revival. Publications written in accordance with the spelling models of at least three literary schools appeared. Different spelling models were applied and used in one and the same school, too. It was difficult even for the teachers who were already used to one spelling model and it happened that “one teacher who taught several classes had to educate the students in each class differently, and sometimes they even tried to suggest their personal views on spelling” (Rusinov 1981:53) This caused chaos among teachers, students, educationalists and bookmen. In order to avoid it five projects for unification of the literary language were suggested, but none of them lasted for long.

Then in 1899 the so called Drinov-Ivanchev spelling model was accepted by the Minister of Education – Todor Ivanchev, who confirmed “ *A Guide to the Common Spelling*”, November 5, 1899, as a compulsory model for the schools, but it turned out that all the other institutions started using it. At that time the Bulgarian alphabet contained 32 letters. Some of the changes this model suggested were:

1. The letters –ъ and – ъ were still written at the end of the words thus retaining the specific for the Slavic languages soft and hard endings known as soft-correlation.
2. The letter – ѣ remained in the alphabet
3. The letter – ш remained in the alphabet, which represents the consonant sound combination between ш + т as in /штъркел/ spelled шѣркел.
4. The letter ж (*Big Yus*, which is a nasal *o*, existing in Old Bulgarian) had to be written inside the word according to its etymology, but had to be pronounced as – ъ (e.g. всѣде, вѣдица)
5. All the nouns, expressing masculine gender, added the definite article - ѣтъ, - ѣтъ, - ятъ; when they were the subject in the sentence; and the indefinite article – а, -я; when they were the object. (e.g. волѣтъ, вола, конѣтъ, коня, etc.)

This spelling model put the end of a long period of chaos in the literary environment. “It was applied not only everywhere in Bulgaria, but also in the Bulgarian schools in Macedonia which were still under the Ottoman rule.” (Rusinov 1981:82)

Two decades later some bookmen circles started expressing their discontent with this spelling model and created their own models (e.g. Petko Slaveykov – a Bulgarian publicist and a public figure - created his own spelling model and it was partly accepted by other writers; the circle of the bulletin “Misal” did not agree with the current spelling model). The teachers also complained that the Drinov-Ivanchev orthography model was difficult, set on etymological patterns and retaining letters that existed in Old Bulgarian, which was archaic for the modern language situation and which as a result caused a lot of problems in the process of both teaching and learning. In order to answer the need of updating the spelling in accordance with the development of the modern language in 1921 the government

made drastic reforms concerning not only the spelling problem. A committee of six members was appointed by the Minister of National Education – Stoyan Omarchevski. The committee had to revise the reform from 1899 and to decide whether it should be simplified or not. On 21<sup>st</sup> July, 1921 the spelling reform was a fact. Its basic changes were:

1. The letter –Ѣ was removed from the Bulgarian alphabet (now there were 29 letters left)
2. The letter –Ѧ was also removed from the alphabet
3. The vowel –Ѣ had to be written with the letter Ѣ (e.g. сѢд, тѢмен, etc.)
4. The letter –Ѥ ( called *ям* in Bulgarian, or double *е*) was removed from the alphabet and it was replaced by –я and - е

This reform was followed by a spelling project suggested by the Faculty of History and Philology at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. The only changes they planned were:

1. the letters - Ѣ and –Ѧ when written at the end of the words were kept,
2. the letter –Ѥ when in the middle of the word was replaced by –Ѣ,
3. the letter –Ѥ was replaced with –я and –е,
4. when softening of a consonant had to be made with the position before –о, the letter - Ѣ had to be put, and when at the end of the words the letter –Ѣ ( e.g. актѢор, ГѢоте)

In 1923 Drinov-Ivanchev spelling model was brought back. It was followed by a turbulent period, many debates, spelling projects, which resulted again in chaos. It was only after 1944 when there was a good opportunity for different changes to be made, changes in the cultural, economic and political life in Bulgaria. “The democratization of the education and culture put the question of the immediate solution of the spelling problem at that time.” (Rusinov 1981:107) One of the main concerns of the new government was to simplify and make more democratic the spelling of the Bulgarian language. The main goal was the old spelling model to be replaced by a new one which would be accessible for all the various strata of society. Thus, the illiteracy among the people would be eradicated easily. The reform was put into effect in February, 1945. The new model was now easier to understand, to learn and was thus more convenient for the aims of the government.

The main changes that were made by this reform were:

1. The letters –Ѣ and –Ѧ were no more written at the end of the words (e.g. деньѢ, пролѢтъѢ, etc.)
2. The letter –Ѣ was kept and written only to soften the sound when put in front of –о (e.g. КольѢо, гѢон, etc.)
3. The letters - Ѥ and - Ѥ were removed from the alphabet and were replaced by the letters -Ѣ and – е

**Some examples :**

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<i>Before the reform:</i>	<i>After the reform:</i>
бѣли цѣль	Бели цял
Ванѣо тѣргѣ царѣ човѣкъ	Ванѣо тѣрг цар човек
Ще бѣдѣ тѣ сѣ	Щебѣда те са

4. Some words were simplified the way they were pronounced in everyday speech (e.g. *сърце* instead of *сърдце*, *нужно* instead of *нуждно*, *празник* instead of *праздникъ*, etc.)
5. For the first time in the history of the language common punctuation norms were set.

Some results after these spelling reforms can be pointed. The spelling of the Bulgarian language has gone through a great number of changes and development. A lot of factors led to these and a unified spelling model has been achieved. Despite the difficult situation after the Liberation of Bulgaria from Ottoman rule, despite the struggles for one or another spelling model to be established, the language succeeded in stability for some time. It was only then when it could be said that the language achieved stability. Some of the factors responsible for the spelling reforms are:

1. The need for unification of the language because of the different dialects all over Bulgaria ( before the Drinov-Ivanchev spelling model)
2. Ideological and political struggles – from 1899 to 1945
3. Changes in the Bulgarian government – new minister of education – new spelling reform (“*A Guide to Common Spelling*”, November 5, 1899; 1921; 1923; 1945)
4. Because of the lack of specialists, bookmen were the people who were the social factor which influenced to a high extent the use of particular spelling models
5. The nature of the spelling reforms
6. The nature and level of the different philological beliefs and knowledge
7. The needs of the public education, etc.
8. The significance of the press in the development of the spelling in the language

All these factors played their role in the process of unification of the language. It was a hard period for the language itself, since there was no particular institution which would take the responsibility to introduce one model which would be easy to use, easy to understand and applied. All that diversity of spelling projects, models and reforms brought the language to its present condition. Each of the people

(publicists, poets, politicians, etc.) who put effort to unify and simplify the spelling contributed to some extent to the development of the language.

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