

Phonetic transcription has generally been governed by the principle, “One Sound, One Symbol”. Discuss, in relation to English spelling.

In this essay, I will describe the differences between phonetic transcription and a writing system, then illustrate some of the ways that the English spelling system is not phonetic, and briefly explore the potential benefits and disadvantages of reforming the English spelling system to make it reflect more closely the spoken form of the language.

We can define 'phonetic transcription' as the process of making a written record of a spoken utterance, using a set of symbols that has been designed to represent all the distinct sounds which can occur in human speech. It might on the face of it appear that this is equivalent to 'writing down what someone says', but there is a difference: in the case of phonetic transcription, it is a series of SOUNDS which is being recorded, while typically 'what someone says' is taken to refer to the speaker's MEANING.

The distinction is important when we consider the purpose of a writing system. Specifically, the objective of written language is to convey meaning, rather than sound. This is why, although it may be tempting to do so, it is not entirely fair that we should consider an alphabetic writing system such as English to be no more than a 'slimmed down' version of the International

Phonetic Alphabet: the aims of the two systems are not the same (although they may have certain features in common).

Above all, it is important to remember that written language should primarily be useful to the reader, not the writer. A given piece of text will only be written once, and then by someone who (presumably) knows what he is trying to communicate. On the other hand, it may be read many times, and each reader may have to understand a meaning which may not be familiar. Any problems experienced by the writer in locating the correct spelling for his words are therefore outweighed by considerations for the readers who are trying to comprehend their meaning.

The alphabet used in written English has a fairly complex lineage: it is descended, with modifications by Saxons and Normans, from the Greek system, which itself borrowed from the Phoenicians (Bryson 1990:114; Fromkin, Fromkin and Hyams, 2003:551). Ostensibly, it is arranged on a PHONEMIC principle, where individual characters represent linguistically significant sounds, but since more than forty different phonemic symbols are required to describe 'Received Pronunciation' (RP) English, it is clear that having only twenty-six letters available in the English alphabet is going to result in some compromises – not least of which is that there is no letter corresponding to “the most common vowel sound in English” (Bryson 1990:77) - the schwa,

represented phonemically as /ə/.

In fact, 'compromises' hardly does justice to the apparent illogicality and inconsistency of the English spelling system. As Trask (2001:265) says, “English spelling is notoriously complex, irregular and eccentric, more so than in almost any other written language on earth”. Few if any letters are pronounced consistently (for example the 'c' in 'cat', 'nice', 'suspicion' and 'chain' are pronounced /k/, /s/, /ʃ/ and /tʃ/ respectively), and different letters or letter combinations can be used to represent a single phoneme (for example, the final sound in each of the words 'thief', 'rough', 'Molotov' and 'epitaph' is /f/). Some words are HOMOPHONES – that is, they share the same pronunciation but are spelled differently; when my daughter makes a shopping list including “vegetable chilly”, both words are misspelled, but only the first is highlighted by the spell-checker. And it is not just children who have problems: asked to spell the word which is pronounced /kɒnʃɪəns/, many adult native speakers will be inclined to consult a dictionary.

So why do we put up with this apparently inefficient and inconvenient spelling system? Perhaps we should attempt to design a new system from the ground up, and make it more accurately correspond to the sound of the spoken language? In fact, even if the effort involved in everyone learning the new

system, and converting all existing written documents to a new form were not prohibitive, there are several reasons why this may not be a practical or even a desirable objective.

One of the main obstacles to making spelling more regular is that it may not be easy to agree on what the 'rules' should be. Very few people are speakers of RP English; the language is spoken with a multitude of accents, and so while it may make sense to me that the word 'bath' should be spelled 'bahth', others would be perfectly happy to have it left as it is, and still others may want a different spelling altogether.

Another problem with trying to capture the phonemic form of English in a spelling system is that the spoken language is not static: conventions for pronouncing words change. For example, as Bryson (1990:84) points out, the word 'helped' used to be pronounced /helpud/: the spelling still reflects the older form. It would appear that unless we make a commitment to a system of constant revision, any spellings we choose will eventually be left behind. Trask (2001:268) suggests that the logical conclusion of this process is that we end up with a system like Chinese, where the written form of a word has nothing to do with the way it is pronounced. In fact, such a system would not be without its advantages: as Fromkin *et al.* (2003:554) point out, despite using an array of mutually unintelligible spoken languages, people from all over

China are able to use the same writing system. In any case, the process by which pronunciation evolves is not something that can be proscribed, and so any system we invent which is 'correct' today will inevitably become outdated sooner or later.

More seriously, what we risk losing by attempting to make written English correspond directly to the spoken form is the meaning that can be conveyed in the spelling of a word. As has already been mentioned, written language exists to convey meaning, and so what we should be concerned with is not how accurately it captures the sound of speech, but how well it conveys the meaning intended by the writer.

Most obviously, homophones would be affected by changing the spelling system. Admittedly, it might make it easier for my daughter to write her shopping list if words were spelled according to how they are pronounced, but we would lose the ability to distinguish between the concepts of 'a chilli pepper' and - admittedly less likely but still useful - 'a chilly pepper'. And it is not just words which are homophonic; MORPHEMES (the components that make up words) can be spelled differently while being pronounced identically. As Pinker (1994:191) notes, this:

can tip off a reader that one word contains another ... for example, spelling tells us that overcome contains come, so we know that its past tense must be overcame, whereas succumb ... [becomes] not succame but succumbed.

In fact, the spelling rules are not always so straightforward as Pinker implies (for example the verb 'welcome' does not conjugate this way), but the point here is that the different spellings can provide a clue to the fact that while there may be identical sounds, the embedded meanings are distinct. We should risk losing these clues if we changed the spellings.

Then there are many words which share a common etymology but whose pronunciation differs apparently arbitrarily; if we were to change their spelling to reflect current pronunciation then we may remove the hints to their meaning which their current form provides. For example, 'cleanliness' contains the word 'clean'; 'magician' contains 'magic'. [Admittedly not all word forms work this way – for example, 'clarity' and 'clear' - but it would arguably be more useful to adopt the spelling 'clarity' than to change 'magician' to 'madjishun'.]

So the spellings of English words, while not necessarily being phonemic, can often be justified on the basis of their contained meaning. And in fact, while it is admittedly not always easy to tell what the spelling of a word is without recourse to a dictionary, someone familiar with written English will in most cases be able to work out how to pronounce a previously unknown word based on its spelling: there are rules, although they may sometimes be somewhat arcane.

In summary, the purpose of written text is to convey meaning, and so it is of

prime importance that the readers' interests are served (even if this makes life more difficult for the writer). Advocates of a reformed system of spelling that is in line with phonemic principles are overlooking this fact, and place too much emphasis on the needs of the writer. The English spelling system as it stands is admittedly idiosyncratic and difficult to learn how to write properly, but (when it is written properly) it works very well at conveying meaning. If any reform is needed, it should be guided by the principle of making it easier to communicate meaning, not speech sounds.

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