

## A BASIC PRINCIPLE: ONE SYMBOL FOR EACH DISTINCTIVE SOUND

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When a person is planning to prepare a practical writing system or orthography for a language, the first step, of course, is to make a thorough investigation of the varied sounds which occur in the language. This is what linguists call a **phonetic** study. But to give every sound in the language a different letter or mark would result in a writing system which would be both unwieldy and impractical. For example, in the English language, the *t* which occurs before the vowel sound *ai* in the word *tight* has a puff of air after it (this is called aspiration). Phonetically the sound could be written as [t<sup>h</sup>]. On the other hand, the *t* which appears before the *r* (written in English as *er*) in the word *better* has no aspiration, but is produced by flapping the tongue against the roof of the mouth (this is termed a flap). Again, there is another *t* which is neither aspirated nor flapped: it occurs in the English word *still*. This is called the unaspirated *t*. In English, the difference between these *t*'s does not make any difference to meaning, so they are all written as /t/. The English reader automatically makes the sound adjustments because he unconsciously knows the rules which underlie the use of the /t/ in its various contexts.

Any language, then, has a large number of actual sounds, but a relatively small number of **distinctive sounds**—the ones which make a difference in meaning. These distinctive sounds we call **phonemes**. A good writing system will be a **phonemic** one—that is, it will represent each of the distinctive sounds by a different symbol. The sound differences which are not distinctive will be disregarded. So, a good phonemic writing system for English would have one phoneme /t/ to represent the three sounds mentioned above. In the Thai language, however, the aspirated [t<sup>h</sup>] and the unaspirated [t] must each be given a different symbol. The word *thii*, for example, which means “time” or “instance” has to be kept separate from the word *tii* which means “hit” or “strike”. In Thai there are two phonemes, namely /t<sup>h</sup>/ and /t/. These two sounds are distinctive in Thai, but they are not distinctive in English.

In many languages a phonemic writing system needs to show the difference between short and long vowels. This difference does not affect meaning in English, but in the Chin languages of Burma, India and Bangladesh, and of course many other languages in the world, it is important, and the orthography must mark this distinction in some way. The Thai language also makes a distinction between long and short vowels. For example, the word *bàad* means “to cut”, but the word *bàd* means “ticket”. Linguists working in Thai indicate vowel length by writing two vowels in a row, as in *bàad* above. However, the word for “to cut” could just as well have been written as *bà.d* or even *bād*, depending on the choice of the orthography marker. The important element here should be consistency.

Other languages make distinctions in meaning between words by the use of different tones. For example, the Thai sentence

máa	maa	léew
horse	come	completive

means “the horse has come”. The difference between “horse” and “dog” is indicated by pitch or tone. The word for “horse” is pronounced with a high tone and the word for “dog” by a rising tone. These tones could just as well be indicated by numbers. For example,

1	3	1
maa	maa	leew
or,		
4	3	1
maa	maa	leew
dog	come	completive

In the Hmong Daw language of North Thailand all syllables end in a vowel, so the people who designed the orthography for this language thought of an ingenious way to show the tone on each syllable. They placed consonant letters at the ends of the syllables to indicate tone. For example, the word *paab* which means “to help” has a final *b* that indicates the first tone, while the word *paav* “to tie” has a *v* to indicate the third tone, and the word *paam* “feast” has an *m* which indicates the seventh tone. This syllable *pa* can appear with all seven tones of the Hmong language, and every time the tone changes the meaning changes. So, it is absolutely necessary in the writing systems for complicated tone languages such as Hmong Daw or Thai to use special marks (diacritics) such as the grave accent (˘) or acute accent (ˊ), or numbers or letters to indicate the meaning changes caused by tone.

Following Dr. William Smalley in the book *Phonemes and Orthography: Language Planning in Ten Minority Languages of Thailand*, page 30, we can define a phonemic writing system as

one that represents with a single symbol or an unambiguous combination of symbols each of the structurally different distinctive sounds in a given language. It does not differentiate the nondistinctive differences of sounds with individual symbols, but accounts for them by rules.

These distinctive sounds or phonemes are often psychologically significant to the native speaker. A native speaker who has learned to read a writing system which is phonemic does not have to get anything from the context. He reads what he sees. He also reads the symbol in different ways in different places. For example, a native speaker of English reads /p/ in *pill* or *spill* differently on the basis of his speech habits which produce different pronunciations in different kinds of situations. He does not do this on the basis of writing. However, the foreigner using the same language is aware of all sorts of other nondistinctive differences in sounds because he tends to view the language from the point of view of his own language. The principle which must always be followed is that the alphabet should be what is easiest for the **native speaker** of the language to read. It should never be tailored to the needs of the foreigner.