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PRACTICAL LIMITATIONS TO A PHONEMIC ALPHABET

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One of the greatest benefits that modern linguistic study has brought to the development of writing systems has been in the area of phonemics, that is the study of the sounds and sound differences in a language which are significant for the speakers of that language. From a situation of chaos before, where there was a great tendency to disregard sound distinctions which were important to the speakers of a language, new light has come with the principle of using one symbol in writing for each of the significant sounds in a language. However, with the great improvements that have come through the insights of phonemics, there has been a tendency to overlook some of the other factors which must be considered in constructing an adequate alphabet. Even at their worst, phonemic alphabets are usually very superior to most of the "home made" variety of alphabets which just "growed" like Topsy. However, even with strictly phonemic alphabets there are some areas for improvement.

Reactions to phonemic alphabets

Completely phonemic alphabets have been employed in a number of languages over the past thirty or forty years. They usually met with considerable success, but here and there problems arose. The supporters of strictly phonemic alphabets were at first quite puzzled, for obviously a phonemic alphabet has a fundamental advantage in indicating just those sounds which are significant to the speaker of the language. There is a saving of effort in the correspondence of one symbol to each significant sound, and yet some people who were learning to read their own language just did not react enthusiastically to them. What were the difficulties?

The responses of the people learning to read such phonemic alphabets included such comments as, "Those letters look funny." "Why isn't the word written like Spanish? (or French, or Portuguese, depending upon the dominant language of the area)." "Our language isn't like that." "This word should have an extra letter, even if we don't pronounce it." "Are you sure this will help us learn Spanish?" Such comments as these do not indicate just what the problems are in each instance, but once they are interpreted in the light of the particular situation, it soon becomes clear that there are some real problems, even in fully phonemic alphabets.

Two fundamental principles involved in systems of writing

There are two fundamental principles which it is very easy for expert linguists to overlook in the preparation of alphabets for the practical use of every-day people. Of course, in a strictly scientific treatment of the language written for the use of linguists, the expert may use any alphabet he cares to and

his choice of symbols is determined only by the problems of the consistency and patterns of use of the sounds in question. However, an alphabet which is to be used by ordinary people must take into consideration the following two principles: (1) alphabets (systems of writing) are largely cultural matters, and the value of existing systems of writing which may be known to the people in greater or lesser degree must be taken fully into consideration. (2) Reading consists of a complex series of reactions to symbols which are seen. Though such symbols should be related to speech sounds, there are certain exceptions to the rule of one-to-one correspondence and the requirement that writing must follow the precise manner in which people speak.

The significance of cultural pressure

It is difficult to measure the cultural pressure of a writing system which is employed by a dominant cultural group. In general, of course, the greater the feeling of cultural insecurity the more intense will be the response to the cultural pressure of the dominant language. For this reason people in many parts of Spanish-speaking Latin America often insist that the /k/ in their language should be written as *c* before *a, o,* and *u,* and *qu* before *i* and *e.* This is based on the system in Spanish; and though it seems quite illogical, nevertheless the people insist that the exclusive use of *k* (which does occur in a few Spanish words) is not correct. They prefer to go to the trouble of learning the use of *c* and *qu,* because this makes their language more like Spanish and gives them a sense of cultural prestige.

It is true that such ideas of cultural prestige may start with just a few people—a local teacher or a young man who has gone off and acquired a very limited knowledge of Spanish—but the reaction of "the local boy made good" is sufficiently strong to influence the entire community.

In some of the French-speaking areas of Africa there is considerable pressure for the use of *ou* for the sound of [u] or [w]. There is often a strong prejudice against the *u* for the high back vowel, as in English *boot,* because the *u* of French is quite a different vowel (a front rounded vowel, as in *rue,* "street"). Despite the fact that the combination *ou* seems quite awkward to English-speakers (and in fact, it does lead to certain difficulties for the reader), nevertheless, many people greatly prefer the *ou* since it seems more like French. When efficiency and cultural prestige are against one another, cultural prestige almost always wins in the end. It is not what is easiest to learn, but what people want to learn and use which ultimately determines what will be in the writing system.

It should also be noted that a program of literacy promoted by a church or other agency has relatively little chance of success if it is contradictory to a long range program of the government. In general, governments are insistent upon teaching the European language or dominant trade language of the area, and ultimately more people learn their abc's through the government school system than are likely to acquire them through a literacy program sponsored by some other body. In Spanish-speaking Latin America it can be estimated that fully 95% of the people who read their own language have learned the alphabet in some government school in which Spanish was taught. In many instances the pupil did not learn enough Spanish to be able to understand what

he was reading, but at least he acquired a knowledge of the alphabet; and accordingly, anything which is to be directed to him should conform as much as possible to this system of writing which he knows.

Reading as a system of symbols which we see

Though we sometimes tend to overlook the fact, reading is a system of representing sounds by symbols which we can see. In a language such as Chinese there is practically no relationship between the symbols which are seen and the corresponding speech symbols. Of course, this is a very inefficient way of representing language. Alphabets and systems which use symbols for syllables are much more effective, but even some of these, like the alphabets employed in English and French, depart a long way from actual pronunciation. The theoretically perfect goal of a system of writing would consist in representing each phoneme (or significant sound) with only one symbol, writing just as people speak. But practically speaking there are some necessary limitations. These involve (1) divisions of words, (2) writing of unpronounced sounds, (3) constant spelling for words whose pronunciation varies, and (4) standardization of dialect differences.

Word divisions

The linguist finds that in many languages there are no phonetic borders between "words". In Spanish the whole phrase, consisting of one to several words, is pronounced as though it were a single unit. Technically, the expert would find it necessary to write such a phrase without spaces to mark off words. However, this type of writing would be very difficult to read. We need spaces between words in order to identify units which have meaning in themselves. Of course, we have to make room for compounds and some phrase-words, but in general we find that reading is easier if spaces occur between words.

Writing unpronounced sounds

In general it is not a good practice to use letters for which there are no sounds ("silent letters"). This just clutters up the writing system and leaves the reader very confused. However, there are restricted instances in which such extra letters should be written. In the Tarascan language of Mexico, practically no final vowels are used in speech. Nevertheless, speakers of the language insist that final vowels are "parts of the words". These vowels can be pronounced and are regarded as an integral part of the word, even though in actual practice they are regularly left off. A similar situation occurs in some of the languages of West Africa, where almost all final vowels are lost when they come before vowels in following words. Here again, it has been found wise to preserve these vowels in the written form of the language.

The fact that in some cases it is advisable to write "lost" vowels is no warrant for adding vowels indiscriminately throughout the language. There are two essential requirements for the writing of such vowels: (1) their automatic loss in easily definable positions (this does not justify the arbitrary writing of a vowel for some grammatical reason) and (2) the insistence on the part of the speakers of the language that such vowels should be added. Frankly, we do not know enough about all the factors involved in this type of reaction on the part of a native speaker, but those who have dealt with such problems in the field

are fully aware of such decided preferences. Some day we may get around to a more satisfactory study of these speaker reactions.

Constant spelling for words whose pronunciation varies

In many languages sounds in words which come together affect each other. For example, a word such as /in/ may become /im/ before words beginning with /bpm/, /il/ before words beginning with /l/, /ir/ before words beginning with /r/, and so on. This means that the same unit /in/ (as before dental sounds and vowels) also occurs in the forms /im il ir/ and so on. (Note, for instance, in English the words indirect, impossible, illegal, and irregular.) In each case the form is determined automatically by the following sound. Such assimilations, as they are called, may be practically obligatory, and yet in some instances speakers of such languages have insisted that such a word be written *in* in each occurrence, rather than as it is actually pronounced. What is behind such a reaction? Evidently, the speaker of the language recognizes a kind of unity about such a word which he finds best reflected in a constant spelling, the *in* in each instance. These types of modifications occur in all kinds of languages. In Spanish people write *un poco,* but it is very rare that they pronounce the nasal sound as /n/ before /p/. The pronunciation is almost always /m/ before the following /p/. However, the unity of the word is best preserved by writing *un* with an *n* in each occurrence.

This principle of constant spelling for words whose pronunciation varies is not a warrant for regularizing the grammar of a language, thus smoothing out all kinds of spelling variations. This principle only means that when the sounds of words which come together affect each other in purely automatic ways, there may be some distinct advantage in preserving the basic form of the word rather than writing it in a number of different ways.

Problems involving dialect differences

When different dialects present a variety of different forms it is necessary to make some choices if there is to be a regular system and if the same printed materials are to be widely used. On the whole it is not advisable to "make up" an artificial dialect. Such attempts are rarely if ever successful. It is best to choose that dialect which (1) is the culturally dominant one, (2) is the most regular in grammatical formations, and (3) is most easily understood by the other dialects. At times it is impossible to find all these requirements met in a single dialect, and so some compromises must be made. The techniques for arriving at satisfactory solutions of such difficulties are often very complicated.

By settling upon one form of the language, we tend to establish a means of communication which will have wider use than any of the previous local dialects, and the very consistency of writing tends to make reading easier. Though writing as each person speaks does have some advantages for the particular dialect in question, nevertheless after some introduction to the "literary dialect" readers are often able to use it extremely well. The big difficulty of course comes in attempting to teach people to read a dialect which is not their own. Accordingly, it is wise to provide primers and some introductory materials in the particular dialect in question. Once the person has learned what reading is, he can then make the adjustment to another dialect much more easily.

Omission of certain phonemic distinctions

One of the most commonly omitted features of a language is tone. The vast majority of the languages in Africa south of the Sahara are tonal languages (that is, there are distinctions in meanings of words based entirely on differences of tone), but relatively few of these languages mark tone in practical writing systems. It might be argued that if such tones were marked the people would read such languages more easily. This might be true, but the point is that people do read them quite well; and in the case of the vast majority of such languages there seems to be no recognition of any need of writing tone. If there are only a relatively few tonal minimal pairs in the language (that is pairs of words which differ in meaning only because of difference of tone), and if in most instances the meanings are quite clear from the context, there seems to be little or no reason for marking the tones on each syllable. In a language such as Ngbaka, spoken in the northwestern region of Zaire, there are supplementary particles which give a clue to the tones on the verbs. Where such particles exist, it is possible to consider omitting the tones. However, when as in some languages the different tenses of the verb and the different pronouns are marked only by differences of tones, then it is quite important for such contrasts to be marked.

Not only the tones of a language, but also the stress and the length of vowels may be left unmarked, unless there are many genuinely ambiguous forms. As in so many Bantu languages the next to the last syllable is almost always long. However, such a length of vowel need not be written, for it is automatically indicated by the very length of the word.

To suggest not using diacritic marks for tone, stress and length may seem like linguistic heresy to some people. Actually it is not. We simply need to recognize that for the speaker of a language it is not necessary to mark everything which is meaningful. In fact, the marking of such contrasts often seems unnecessarily awkward. In English we have a very elaborate system of intonation (tonal contrasts which occur on entire phrases), but we generally use only periods (full stops), question marks, and exclamation marks to indicate the major contrasts, while from a phonemic standpoint there are at least eight commonly used distinctions in intonation at the end of the sentence. If all our writing of English were as complicated as some phonetic books which describe English intonation, we would be disgusted with such "extravagances" and declare that this was certainly not English, at least not the kind of English which we wanted to read or to write.

There is a distinct tendency for dialects to differ rather widely with regard to features of tone, length, and stress (the so-called suprasegmental components of sounds). Where there is wide discrepancy, it is quite valuable to omit any writing of such features, for what may be correct for one dialect may be entirely wrong and confusing for another.

In spite of what I have said above about the good reasons for not writing tone, stress, and length in some languages, I should add here that in a good many languages such distinctions are not written when they should be. And as a result the readers of such languages have to stumble and guess unnecessarily to make sense of what they are reading.

Conclusion

A proper phonemic understanding of a language must always be the basis for an adequate system for writing it. However, as we have tried to show in this article, there are certain important practical factors which must be taken into account as well. These include a consideration of the feelings of speakers of the language about what they want and what is right in their situation, and what must be done to modify the strictly phonemic approach for the sake of making reading as simple and easy as it can be.

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SOME PROBLEMS IN WRITING KWARA'AE

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Kwara'ae is a language spoken in the northern part of the island of Malaita in the Solomon Islands, an independent nation in the south-western Pacific. It has about 15,000 speakers, and is thus by far the largest vernacular language, not only on Malaita, but in the whole of the Solomons.

This article describes some problems in developing a writing system for Kwara'ae. We shall first discuss particular problems, and then refer to some of the general principles involved in forming writing systems which are both efficient and acceptable to the people who speak the language concerned.

The situation of Kwara'ae

Kwara'ae is closely related to the other languages of northern Malaita, namely Kwaio, Langalanga, Gula'ala, Fataleka, Mbaenggu, Mbaelelea, To'abaita, and Lau. In fact, speakers of these languages can generally understand or speak one or more of the neighbouring languages. And often people from one group can hold conversations with those from another group, each person speaking his own language. However, because Kwara'ae is the largest language, there are probably more people who want to understand it than any of the smaller languages; and it has been used fairly widely in written form by both Protestants and Roman Catholics. The New Testament was published in 1961, but has not been very extensively used. This may be in part related to some unusual writing problems in Kwara'ae.

In general, the languages of northern Malaita do not have very complicated sound systems, and most of the sounds can easily be represented by letters taken from the alphabet of English. English is the national language of the Solomons, and has for a long time been the language of greatest influence in the work of government, missions and schools.

Even before linguists arrived at the principle of the phonemic writing system (that is, writing each distinct sound of a language with a separate letter), most of the writing systems used in Malaita were in fact phonemic, or at least nearly phonemic. The difficulties in writing were not so much in recognizing which sounds needed to be written as in choosing symbols for those sounds which did not match up easily with the sounds of English. The main problems in Kwara'ae are dealt with in the following sections.