

## Preface

How to teach the reading and writing of English is a notoriously controversial question. The quasi-phonetic methods now (2014) back in fashion do often work—as do all the other methods and no methods, for cases are on record of children who somehow just manage to pick up reading by having a page in front of them as grown-ups read. The reported success of all new methods may be due to their renewing the teachers' *listening*. But to have a class chanting *a sounds a* [as in *cat*] while a big letter *A* (capital or lower case) is held up or projected, *b sounds b/ə/*, *c sounds c* [as in *cat*] and so on through the alphabet, is to teach what is not the case. *A* may sound as in *cat*, but also, as in *Kate*, or *wash*, or *wall*, and if the word is *bath* I as a Northerner will be all right with *a* as in *cat* but I take it Her Majesty the Queen would read the word with a long *a* not as in *cat*—and neither of us, I trust, is misreading.

My impression is that the position attributed to George Bernard Shaw is more or less taken for granted: spelling indicates sound; our spelling is chaotic because it does not do so simply and consistently, so English spelling ought to be made simpler and more phonetic. But even if the intention of *phonetic* is *phonemic*, phonetic spelling would not be simpler, and full phonetic transcription of speech is very much more complicated than ordinary spelling.

In any case, reading is no more than music the conversion of signs to separate sounds. We no more make discrete sounds in reading than talking. If we did read a letter at a time, reading would be immensely

slower and there would have to be further processes to make any sense. I remember my slowness in learning to read Hebrew, which for months *did* go sound-by-sound: which made it difficult to recognise words and almost impossible to get the sense of whole sentences or the rhythm of verses. In ordinary reading, letters are noticed only if there is some doubt. You misread something, go back, and substitute a different letter.

That alphabetic spelling has some representative connexion with the sounds we make or imagine as we read is surely true; written texts have to be readable aloud. But it is not the connexion Shaw assumed. Often, spelling will allow the reader to identify phonemes, but spelling does other important things too.

It should not be surprising that written English is grammatically and syntactically graphic. The written language often gives grammatical information unheard in speech. Written words are separated by spaces; written sentences start with a capital (speech has no equivalent of capital and lower case) and end with a full stop. The written apostrophe (distinct from the quotation marks also not found in speech) records precisely what is *not* sounded. Questions and exclamations are marked. Signs like numerals, ampersands, *etc.*, not exclusively English, will be sounded differently in different languages. And so on. In print, we know that the *Queen Elizabeth* is a ship not a person. Printed verse will show lines and stanza form (often illiterately rendered in wedding and funeral orders of service by centring all the lines).

What is true of modern written English is not generalisable to all alphabetic writing. In the Greek of New Testament times words were not separated by spaces. The sentence itself, now so carefully marked

that not to write in sentences is our principal mark of semi-literacy, is in written English an innovation of the sixteenth century. In Middle English *sentence* meant something quite different;\* no medieval manuscripts are punctuated in sentences as we understand sentences. Our spelling is a part of a system that has developed over centuries, as Professor Horobin recounts.†

For it does not follow from alphabetic spelling's not being simply phonetic or phonemic that English spelling is unsystematic. The primary function of the alphabet in modern English is to spell words the sound of which we know. It is part of the system that homophones are often spelled differently, distinguishing words that sound the same. Shaw himself somewhere makes one of his semi-literate women characters say *knee* when she should have said *née*, a spelling distinction impossible to make in spoken performance on stage.

Mr Wallerstein's contribution is to show with copious examples that the systematic nature of English spelling can be clearly seen as long as one recognises that "the visual representation of English . . . is as much ideographic (*i.e.* conceptual) as it is phonological," and "Our written language, as well as having various relations to sound, formulates language in a way different from speech."

We have, of course, a number of anomalous spellings, of which Mr Wallerstein gives an intriguing list. Anomalies are possible only where there are regularities, including regularities in the representation

\* Cf. my book *Cranmer's Sentences*

† Simon Horobin, *Does Spelling Matter?*, Oxford U.P., 2013, is reviewed on this publisher's website [www.edgewaybooks.com](http://www.edgewaybooks.com), column 101.

of sound. *Kate* is as regular a representation of sound as *cat*.

The system of written English is a product of the republic of letters. Unlike some nations including the U.S.A. we have no authority that rules on the correctness of spelling, unless one counts the O.E.D., which is less authoritative than it used to be. This great system has been developed by the common judgement of the literate English. Its use is one of the things that maintains English as the language of a great culture, not only the international language of science.

This little book completes a trilogy in which Mr Wallerstein defends English against the loss of “linguistic resource” inseparable from the cultural collapse of the last thirty or so years. English prose has altered for the worse, as he demonstrates in *Dear Mr Howard*. Lexical and grammatical incorrectness is, in *The Liza Doolittle Syndrome*, shown to be indistinguishable from failure to make sense (as when *to beg the question* is used to mean *to raise a question*, precisely the opposite of its English sense). *Spell* demonstrates that the failure to perceive ordinary spelling as part of the wonderful system we have for endowing our purposes with words to make them known is itself a symptom of lost sense. By calling attention to these matters Mr Wallerstein is helping to keep the making of common sense possible to the English.

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