

Secondary Uses of Letters in Language

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The primary use of the letters of the alphabet requires no comment. The history of script in general, and of the alphabet in particular, has of late produced a spate of valuable books, varying in scope, emphasis, and level of presentation; ¹ in these monographs and in earlier treatises alphabetic writing has been quite properly contrasted with alternative preferences for hieroglyphics (and other pictographs), cuneiform characters, syllabaries, ideo- or logographs, and other media of written communication. The common denominator of all these vehicles for recording ordinary speech and other forms of discourse is the strict limitation of writing to the task of perpetuating pre-existent modes of actual language. As a result, it has been axiomatic with many linguists that script and print serve to reflect and to preserve the given stage of a language, without ever seriously interfering with its growth.

¹ D. Diringer, *L'alfabeto nella storia della civiltà* (Florence, 1937); id., *The Alphabet, a key to the History of Mankind* (New York, 1948; rev. ed., 1951), and *Collier's Encyclopedia*, ed. 1964, I, s.v. *Alphabet*; J. Février, *Histoire de l'écriture* (Paris, 1948; rev. ed., 1957); I. J. Gelb, *A Study of Writing; the Foundation of Grammatology* (Chicago, 1952; rev. ed., 1963); G. R. Driver, *Semitic Writing from Pictograph to Alphabet* (London, 1948; rev. ed., 1954); J. Friedrich, *Entzifferung verschollener Schriften und Sprachen* (Berlin-Göttingen-Heidelberg, 1954)—with special reference to the ancient East (for criticism see É. Benveniste, *BSLP*, LIII:2 [1957–58], 52f.); M. Cohen, *La grande invention de l'écriture et son évolution* (2 vols.; Paris, 1958) beside *L'écriture* (Paris [1953]); H. Jensen, *Die Schrift in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart* (Berlin, 1958; orig. *Geschichte der Schrift* [Glückstadt, 1925]). For a popular presentation of certain angles see also P. E. Cleator, *Lost Languages* (London, 1959; paperback, New York, 1962); cf. the review here by W. Winter (XVIII, 124f.).

There exist, however, several additional, increasingly important functions of the letters which fail to meet these qualifications. Though some of these functions are limited to specific languages, most cut across speech communities, literary traditions, graphemic systems, and—broadly speaking—cultures. Of these concomitant uses the present paper, panchronic in its general orientation, aims to provide a bird's-eye view, stressing those functions which—counter to assertions so frequently repeated—do tend to influence languages, increasing or otherwise modifying their actual store of resources. It would be an exaggeration to affirm that writing systems are glottogonic, that they are apt to give rise to wholly new varieties of speech. But it is defensible to contend that under favorable circumstances ingredients of a graphemic apparatus may percolate into the spoken language, which that apparatus was initially called upon merely to represent.

Not all the derivative functions of letters will be included in our survey, because some transcend the matrix of language proper. The names of the letters—not infrequently in keen rivalry with numerals—have been put to excellent use in certain highly technical notations and elaborate systems of labels. In particular, musical nomenclature as favored throughout the English- and German-speaking countries (with noteworthy antecedents in classical Greek: Α, Β, Γ, Δ, ... 2d c. B.C.; Byz. πΑ, Βοι, ...) and international scientific terminology (especially its logico-mathematical and chemical branches) both make ample, neatly defined use of conventional letters. In fact, there have emerged traditions for distinguishing between Latin and Greek fonts (the latter ordinarily reserved for angles, in geometry, and for rays, in exact sciences) and, within each font, for contrasting capitals with lower-case characters (e.g., points vs. lines). In symbolic logic imaginative scholars have lately drawn on a wide selection of traditional as well as newly devised characters. Only at rare intervals do we expect to cross the path of mathematicians in the course of this paper, however.²

² One special aspect—inviting separate study—of the relation of letter to cipher is the widespread use of the former for numerals. In most instances one observes the substitution of one set or progression (alphabetic order) for another (succession of numbers), e.g. in Hebrew, in Arabic—to the extent that a modified version of Indic numerals has not been adopted instead, along the eastern fringe of the domain—and in Church Slavic, including its adaptation to the needs of Old Rumanian. The Romans, on the other hand, tolerated a mixed system, using certain capital letters as downright abbreviations, e.g. C = *centum*, M = *mille*, while allowing I = 1, V = 5, L = 50 and D = 500 to stand apart.

Even closer to home the humanist must narrow his choice. As is well known, letters and numbers played a signal role in magic formulas and in medieval mysticism, both Christian and Jewish. One cannot appreciate the recondite meaning of some Dante passages without reference to this material, and one will be hard put to savor fully the short story *El Aleph* by the contemporary Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges without a measure of familiarity with the cabbalistic tradition.³ Again,

Similarly, where the current system of foliation or pagination forces us to intermingle letters and numerals, the former category may involve abbreviations (fol. 12r^o = 12 *recto*) or may, on a more abstract plateau, symbolize mere succession (p. 128c = p. 128, 3d column from left).

Letters and numerals compete strongly in modern city planning and environmental design, with Washington, D.C. emerging as a classic grid of radial streets alphabetical AND numerical. Further incidental points of contact between letters and numerals: composite identifications in automobile plates, in a cumbersome system of telephone numbers now rapidly becoming obsolete (e.g.: LA[ndscape] 5-0839), etc.; oblique, euphemistic references to obscene, i.e. socially controversial or restricted, words through exclusive mention of the number of letters contained (Am.-E. "four-letter words"); allusive, circumlocutional substitution of 'number of letters contained in the alphabet' for the specific figure, as in the following passage from the Florentine historiographer Giovanni Villani's *Nuova Cronica* (1st half of 14th c.): "Fe'edificare badie quante lettere ha nell'a,b,c," (see R. Accademia d'Italia, *Vocabolario* . . . , A-C [Milan, 1941], p. 10a).

Grading of accomplishment may be by letter (American system: A through F) or by number; in the latter eventuality, the top quality may be marked by the lowest number (German system: 1) or by the highest number (Russian system: 5 = *pjatërka*) within the range set aside for this purpose. There exist combinations of the two competing systems, e.g. A1 'supreme quality'; conceivably this particular prefixation of A has spilled over into the parlance of astronauts: *A-o.k.* In American collegiate slang grades are given names: *A* → *Ace*, *B* → *Bomb*, *C* → *Cook* (var. *Hook*, in deference to that letter's stark curve); these nouns, in turn, give rise to verbs: *I bombed that exam, he cooked that course*. The usage is very fluid.

³ On Dante one of the latest treatments is by R. Dragonetti, *Aux frontières du langage poétique; études sur Dante, Mallarmé, Valéry* (Rom. Gand., IX; Ghent, 1961), pp. 81-92; cf. K. D. Uitti's perceptive analysis here (XVIII, 117-124, esp. 119 and fn. 5). The mystical and symbolic meanings ascribed to letters by cabbalists are examined by J. Abelson, *Jewish Mysticism* (London, 1913), pp. 98-106. On one twentieth-century echo see L. A. Murillo, "The Labyrinths of Jorge Luis Borges, an Introduction to the Stories of the Aleph," *MLQ*, XX (1959), 259-266.

Major bibliographical items in the broad field of magic: F. Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie* (Leipzig and Berlin, 1922); K. Preisendanz, *Papyri graecae magicae* (Leipzig and Berlin, 1928-31); P. Kraus, *Jābir ibn Hayyān: Contribution à l'histoire des idées scientifiques dans l'Islam*, 2 vols.,

in the realm of literary whims and experiments one discovers several that have indirect bearing on our problem, as when a few figures of the Renaissance, equating (as was then the custom) letters and sounds, arbitrarily declared one or two such symbols unbearably ugly and proceeded to expel them from their writings;⁴ a policy adopted (this time, to be sure, in a facetious key) by the American humorist James Thurber in *The Wonderful "O"* (1957).⁵ The reason for these voluntary retrenchments is that letters as carriers of sound form part of literary topic and stylistic ornamentation, but hardly of language proper. One additional deduction: it is of course true that designations of the letters of the alphabet—though no longer so heavily fraught with meaning in the modern languages as they were in, say, Hebrew and Phoenician, where *bet* meant 'house,' *gimmel* 'camel,' and *dalet* 'gate'⁶—in other respects constitute members of the total lexicon and, grammatically, of a certain form-class and are thus subject to given rules of comportment. Speakers

Mémoires de l'Institut d'Égypte (Caire), XLIV (1943) and XLV (1942); F. Cabrol, *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, s.vv. *abécédaire*, *alphabet*, etc.

⁴ This attitude was abetted by the desire of many literati to identify their vernacular as closely as possible with Latin, viewed as the supreme model of elegance. See E. Buceta, "La tendencia a identificar el español con el latín," *HMP*, I (1925), 85–108, and "Composiciones hispano-latinas en el siglo XVII," *RFE*, XIX (1932), 388–414; cf. R. Lapesa, *Historia de la lengua española* (Madrid, 1959), pp. 202–205. A useful florilegium of such encomia was prepared by a student of A. Castro and P. Sáinz Rodríguez: J. F. Pastor, *Las apoloías de la lengua castellana en el Siglo de Oro* (Madrid, 1929).

⁵ As a pure "jeu d'esprit" or literary exercise, without any recourse to heavy-handed justifications either esthetic or "genealogical" (purity of descent, etc.), such experiments of commission or omission have been carried on in Romance countries at distinctly later dates. Thus Rubén Darío, while still a resident of Nicaragua, wrote a short story ("Amar hasta fracasar") in which he shunned all vowels except *a*; as late as May 1950, H. F. Miri published in the Argentine journal *El Hogar* the story "Querer es perecer," from which he mock-pedantically banned all vowels save *e*.

⁶ The Western world has of late unexpectedly witnessed a partial return to the paleo-Semitic system since, for reasons of enhanced clarity or as a mnemonic device, letters have again—optionally or mandatorily—become associated with certain key words. This elaboration occurs in the spelling-out of unfamiliar names (particularly over the telephone in long-distance calls), in all kinds of signalling messages, in labelling outposts (as when, the U.S. Army favors the tags *Able*, *Baker*, *Charlie*, *Dog* . . . , while the Alabama National Guard prefers *Alpha*, *Bravo*, *Charlie*, *Delta* . . .), etc. See *The New Yorker* of April 10, 1965, p. 128b.

have to decide on their gender (this has long been a controversial issue in France no less than in modern Greece, and standard Italian preferences, based on an artificial norm, fail to match those of Tuscan proper) and on the formation of their plural in speech and script (“two *l*’s,” alternatively spelled: “two *T*’s”). In terms of affixation, the names of letters may act as the heads of small word-families referring to idiosyncratic defects and provincialisms of speech, e.g., Cl.-Gr. *rōtakizō* ‘to make excessive or improper use of /r/’ and Byz. *rōtakismós* ‘pronunciation of [r] as [γ]’, Sp. *cecear* ‘to lisp’ (hence *ceceo* ‘lispings’ [n.], *ceceante* ‘id.’ [adj.]), Russ. *a-kat’* vs. *o-kat’* ‘to pronounce as *a* or *o* an unstressed sound marked by *o* in standard spelling’ (flanked by the abstracts *akanje* and *okanje*), etc.⁷ One may entertain legitimate doubts as to the propriety of calling this use “secondary.”

To the extent that folklore and literature utilize and even maximize certain latent or weakly developed possibilities of linguistic exploitation of the letters, their eloquent testimony will be welcomed. Yet where verbal artists determinedly cut off their links with common experience and its correlates in spoken and written language, indulging flights of unfettered imagination, the privacy of their individual worlds will be here respected through discreet silence. The celebrated sonnet “Vowels” by that daring visionary Arthur Rimbaud is a case in point: ⁸ undeniably it involves the use of certain letters (or sounds?—The margin of doubt is significant . . .) in polished, highly personal art, but the thread connecting the poet’s synesthetic hallucinations with patterns of

⁷ On *ceceo*, *ciceo*, *siseo*, and many related terms, either traceable to Renaissance grammarians and orthoepists or coined by modern analysts of their writings, see A. Alonso, *De la pronunciación medieval a la moderna en español*, ed. R. Lapesa, I (Madrid, 1955), 91–450, passim; cf. my review in *RPh*, IX, 237–252.

⁸ For this piece no accurate date is available; it is usually included with the precocious poet’s “Poésies” (1869–71) and thus antedates by a margin of forty years the pictorial use of letters and near-words in still lifes by the generation of Picasso.

As was to be expected, Rimbaud has found a host of followers; for one incisive comment on Valle-Inclán’s fanciful embroidery on the “luminous” and “morally wholesome” quality of *A*, etc., see P. G. Earle’s critique of a collection of essays by R. J. Sender in *NRFH*, X (1958), 447–449, esp. fn. 1. Undeservedly forgotten, on the other hand, is Goethe’s facetious short piece “Séance” (ca. 1797), in which a riotous assembly of three orders of letter-sounds which have achieved varying degrees of autonomy (vowels, consonants, certain consonantal digraphs) is depicted in an effort to ridicule the unproductive session of an Academy.

accepted usage, or even with any conceivable sublimation of these patterns, is so tenuous that his peers will not henceforth be called to the witness stand:

A noir, E blanc, I rouge, U vert, O bleu; voyelles / je dirai quelque jour vos naissances latentes ./ A, noir corset velu des mouches éclatantes / Qui bombinent autour des puanteurs cruelles, // Golfes d'ombre; E, candeurs des vapeurs et des tentes, / lances des glaciers fiers, rois blancs, frissons d'ombelles; / I, pourpres, sang craché, rire des lèvres belles / dans la colère ou les ivresses pénitentes. // . . .

What then remains under consideration after such drastic curtailment?⁹

Identification of Relevant Secondary Uses

One derivative use, sharply contrasted with all the others, relates to the *conventional arrangement* of letters in standard alphabetic order. Two kinds of sequences come to mind. On the one hand, the brusque juxtaposition of the initial and final links in an extended chain serves to evoke 'totality' in phraseological or paroemiological context (It. *dall' «a» alla zeta*). On the other, a deftly chosen segment of the chain, pronounced as a single lexical unit, may convey a special message, as when *alphabet, ABC*, and their counterparts have come to designate the very institution of the alphabet (or the primer from which it is taught or else, figuratively, the content of that primer: the rudiments of any discipline, the basic facts; cf. the Madrid daily *ABC* and, ironically, Denmark's recent musical review *A.B.C.*). Not all such latent possibilities have reached fruition: while *x, y*, and *z* are individually used

⁹ I also deliberately leave out of the reckoning the many-pronged issue of spelling pronunciations. The initial step is ordinarily the enforcement of an etymological spelling, which may involve an etymology judged by hindsight as correct (OFr. *doit* 'finger' > mod. *doigt*, in forgivable deference to *DICTUS*) or false (OFr. *pois* 'weight' > mod. *poids*, in unwarranted deference to *PONDUS*, the actual base being *PĒNSUM*, cf. Sp. *peso*); see G. Gougenheim, "La fausse étymologie savante," *RPh*, I, 277–286. The actual pronunciation need not be affected by a pretentious or would-be-erudite spelling; Brit. /nevju/ perpetuates OFr. *nev-out, -eut* < *NEPŌTE*, but Am.-E. /nefju/ goes further in adjusting itself to the arbitrary spelling with *ph*. The whole problem has been carefully surveyed for Modern French (V. Buben, *Influence de l'orthographe sur la prononciation du français moderne* [Bratislava, 1935]). In postclassical Spanish such Latinizing graphics as *digno, columna* (for older *dino, coluna*) are likely to have functioned as wedges for the actual reintroduction into spoken Spanish of the clusters *-gn-* and *-mn-*.

in mathematical equations for carefully hierarchized unknowns,¹⁰ laymen have apparently felt no need for amalgamating them into a single word (*XYZ) conveying some such message as ‘triad of unknowns.’

The second use, most trivial of all, involves *abbreviations*. Under favorable circumstances, these may lead to the crystallization of linguistically autonomous units where two or more letters, carved out from one word or, more frequently, from several successive words, come alive as a new, easily pronounceable unit, such as G. *BZ* /Bezetz/ ← *B* (*erliner*) *Z* (*eilung*) *am Mittag* (a famous inter bella venture), Fr. *URSS* /ürs/ vs. Russ. *SSSR* èsèsèsèr/, Am.-E (1964) *SNCC* /snk/ and older *K.O.* /keo/ ‘(to) knock out’. This acronymic variety is ancient, boasting precedents in the medieval Hebrew tradition (*l^enak* ‘Bible,’ *RAMBAM* ‘Maimonides’), but has of late gained tremendously in momentum.¹¹

¹⁰ Historically, the tentative choice of *x* as a symbol for the prime unknown is due not to the position of the given letter within the alphabet, but to the fact that in Hispano-Arabic rendition *x*- /š/ happened to be the initial letter of the Oriental key-word for ‘(some) thing’ (*šaj?*). But the lasting success of the abbreviation may independently be attributed to the smooth expansibility of the pattern within the terminal segment of the standard European alphabet. Conversely, the abbreviation *N* for ‘any, unidentified’ ← *nescio*, eminently successful in mathematics, turned out to be conspicuously less so in language, though Russian classics would use *N* as an equivalent of Western *X*, e.g. (*gospodin*) *N*. ‘Mr. X,’ *v gorode N*. ‘in a town to be left unnamed.’ The serializing power of *X* is not without parallel: Sp. *fulano* ‘so-and-so, Mr. X,’ of transparently Arabic parentage (cf. Hebr. *p^hlōnī*), generated a close-knit sequence *çutano* ‘Mr. Y’ and either *mengano* or *perengano* ‘Mr. Z’; all adventitious members of this series are etymologically opaque.

¹¹ Such abbreviations as involve the first and the last letter of a word (*Dr.* = *Doctor*, *Mr.* = *Mister*, *Mt.* = *Mount*, *Sr.* = *Señor*, *vs.* = *versus*), or the first letter and the concluding segment (*Mlle* = *Mademoiselle*, *Mme* = *Madame*), or else the first and the last letter plus some central pillar for additional support (*Bldg.* = *Building*, *Mgr.* = *Manager*, *Mmgr.* = *Monsignor*, *Mrs.* = *Mistress*) tend to remain strictly graphic and seldom come alive as elements of speech in their own right. British spelling favors setting them apart through the omission of a period, thus: *Dr* = *Doctor*, as against *Dr.* = *Drive*. There also exists a Western tradition for abbreviating in written form the Latin word, but actually reciting its local vernacular equivalents; for writing, that is (in a German-speaking country, say), *p.* and reading it *Seite*, or for interpreting (in the British sphere of influence) *viz.* as *namely*. All these uses are at the opposite pole of those here examined. The highly abstract character of abbreviations is eloquently demonstrated by the frequent marking of the plural through reduplication—purely graphic, never phonic (E. *pp.* ← *pages*; Sp. *EE. UU.* ← *Estados Unidos*).

In the third use, which is spreading even more rapidly at this moment under the combined pressure of science, industry, commerce, and modernity cultivated as a style, the SHAPE of a letter (typically, the printed capital) furnishes a handy frame of reference: *A-beam*, *S-curve*, *T-shirt*. The *size* rather than the configuration is at issue in the phrase *not an iota* (or, on a more vernacular level, *not a jot* beside *not a jot or tittle*, the latter a cognate of Sp. *tilde*; the ultimate source is Matth. 5: 18). What sets off this function from the two preceding ones is the characteristic limitation to a single letter—a feature likewise peculiar to the remainder of the functions here surveyed.

The fourth use—latent rather than real or, at best, vestigially documented—refers, strictly speaking, to sounds rather than to their graphic representations. But given the widespread equation of sound and letter, even among highly literate and tone-setting members of western societies, and given the further fact that the near-phonemic script favored in certain influential communities makes this deeply rooted confusion venial, it seems marginally permissible to invoke, by way of short-cut, the acoustic value attached to a letter, or simply the *acoustic image* of that letter. Since metaphoric qualifiers have, from Antiquity, surrounded the discussion of sounds (*gracilis* lit. ‘thin,’ *pinguis* lit. ‘fat,’ etc.), one might expect to discover, in phraseological inventories, at least a few traces of “letter-sounds” used as congealed frames of reference;¹² free-wheeling poets striving to escape from the boredom of stereotypes may have advanced much farther.

The fifth use involves neither the delineation of the written character, nor the impact on the ear-drum and nerve system of the actual speech sound which that character symbolizes, but the highly conventional *label* given to both in spelling-out aloud, reciting the alphabet, and other verbal identifications of “letter-sounds.” These labels show varying cross-linguistic diversity (the discrepant designations of *h*, *j*, *q*, *x*, *y*, and *z* are notoriously difficult to keep apart for the polyglot). Under

¹² The power of the metaphor in phonetic nomenclature has recently been explored by Iván Fónagy, *A metafora a fonetikai műnyelvben* (Budapest, 1963). The book is also available in German translation: *Die Metaphern in der Phonetik* (The Hague, 1963); appended to it is an important bibliography transcending phonetics. In the mid-’fifties the late Harvard scholar R. Poggioli, interestingly, toyed with the parallel idea of devoting a book-length monograph to the impact of the metaphor on the habitual phrasing of literary analysis (“flowering,” “current,” “influence,” “vogue,” etc.).

favorable conditions they acquire a certain vitality of their own, which may be vindicated in facetious or intimate context: puns, rebus-like puzzles, veiled statements (*IOU = I owe you*), and so forth.

The various categories here isolated are not rigidly delimited in real life; there exist all kinds of transitions and overlaps, some of them on an international scale. Thus, in a phrase like *Mind your p's and q's!* 'be meticulously careful!' the prime reference is to the (perilously similar) shapes of the two letters at issue—a resemblance entailing the need for extra tidiness (cf. *dot every i*)—, i.e., to the “third use,” but the effectiveness of the saying is enhanced by the fact that *p* and *q* occur consecutively in alphabetical order (“first use”). In contrast, note the relative colorlessness of the Ptg. idiom *fazer q.c. com todos os “ff” e “rr”* ‘fazê-la com a maior perfeição.’ Again, abbreviations can be very artfully devised, as when the University of California’s Committee for Arts and Lectures at Berkeley calls itself *CAL* (a name generations of students have used as the affectionate designation of the campus itself), echoing in this respect the nationally known *AID* (= *Agency for International Development*), *CARE*, and *SPUR*. A pioneering example of this use (1919) is the title of the ephemeral French avant-garde journal *SIC—Sons-idées-couleurs*.¹³ The sophisticated arrangement which selects the letters in the order of their appearance in the alphabet simplifies memorization; when this aim is achieved, the first and the second use are simultaneously pressed into service.

Segments of the Alphabetic Array

The succession of the letters in those conventional alphabets (Greek, Latin and Standard European, Church Slavic, etc.) which ultimately hark back to the Hebrew-Phoenician tradition has left characteristic reflexes: lexical, phraseological, and paroemiological.

Lexically most noteworthy are the designations of the alphabet itself, based either on the first two letters of such scripts as Hebrew-Yiddish (*alefbes*), Greek (*alphabet*), and Cyrillic (Church-Sl. and Russ. *ázbuka*), or as many as three: G. *ABC* /abece/, E. *ABC* /ebisi/, OFr. *abeçoi* ‘primer,’ Fr. *abécé* (since 13th cent.), Sp. *abecé* (one of the earliest attestations: *Cancionero de Baena*). There is a strong presump-

¹³ It was edited by P. A. Birot; see *TLS*, Febr. 18, 1965, p. 121. The year 1921 witnessed the foundation of the *P.E.N. Club*, with dual allusion (a) to *p(oets)*, *e(ssayists)*, *n(ovelists)* and (b) to the *pen* as a writing tool.

tion that OSp. *abze* (vars. *abçe*, *auze*, *auce*, *alze*) ‘fate, luck’, invariably feminine, and OGal.-Ptg. *avezi*, *avizi*, which in conjunction with *boõ* and *mau* meant ‘(un)lucky’, reflect Lat. *ABC*, stressed *ábecè* and interpreted in the semantic context of ancient magic (cf. E. *to spell* alongside *to cast an evil spell*).¹⁴ The use of the four initial letters has

¹⁴ *Auze* occurs in *Mio Cid*, vv. 1523, 2366, 2369—also in *Santo Domingo*, 420c (*por su auze mala*); *abçe* in *Signos*, 26b (*por su abçe mala*); *auçe* in *Milagros*, 778a; the *Alexandre* wavers between *alze* (*mala*) (O,545a) and *abze* (P, 557). The only derivative on record is traceable to Berceo: “Por end(e) te digen todas las gentes bien *auzada*” (*Loores*, 137d). The Old Galician *Cantigas* contain such sequences as “um home (o demo) *aveziman*,” “um mouro *avizimau*.” The Old Portuguese version of the Arthurian *Demanda* enriches the inventory by *aveziboo* ‘venturoso, feliz, próspero’; the lifespan of *avezimao* extended to the period of Gil Vicente. In ancient Spain, then, *auze*, restricted to a few formulaic combinations, was still dimly recognizable as a noun; along the Atlantic Coast it merged with its stereotyped qualifiers ‘good’ and ‘bad’ to form a sharply polarized pair of compound adjectives.

One finds a plethora of etymological conjectures, starting with T. A. Sánchez AUCILLA ‘little bird,’ extracted from Apuleius. In his comparative dictionary, F. Diez avoided the downright rejection of that hypothesis, but voiced a preference for AU SPICIUM ‘divination by means of birds,’ deflected from its original gender—so he argued—through the pressure of its synonym *suerte* ‘fate.’ In his earliest gropings, G. Baist favored APICE ‘top, summit’ (*ZRPh*, VI [1882], 167, cf. VIII, 224), while J. Corun—abandoning, on G. Paris’ advice, his first trial balloon, *ALICE (from AL-ES, * -EX ‘winged [adj.], bird [n.]’)—concentrated on *AUICE ‘little bird’ (“Études sur le *Poème du Cid*,” *Rom.*, X [1881], 76f.) and G. Körting, *LRW*, was content to elaborate on Diez (AUSPICIUM). The general fatigue after so many conflicting fireworks showed for the first time in a lame statement by E. Gorra (*Lingua e letteratura spagnuola delle origini* [Milan, 1898], pp. 58, 79n), whose own leanings were split between AUITIA (pl. of AUITIUM ‘winged race, swarm of birds’) and AUSPICE (‘one who observes the habits of birds’) though he also made it a point to adduce AUCILLA and [*]AUICE; AUITIUM later haunted the imagination of J. da Silva Correia (*RL*, XXX [1932], 103f.). Meanwhile, C. Michaëlis de Vasconcelos, in a free variation on Cornu’s hunch, endorsed *AUICE, starting from an unsupported reconstruction *AU-IX, -ICIS ‘bird’ (for class. AUIS, in *Appendix Probi* style, as it were); see her critical ed. of the *Cancioneiro da Ajuda* (Halle, 1904), II, 84 (“que um pássaro de mau agouro significou acontecimentos desastrosos”). At this juncture Baist returned to the fray, proposing in a brilliant reversal of his earlier guess ABC as a base defensible on cultural grounds (“Etymologien,” *ZRPh*, XXXII [1908], 423f.), but failed to convince Menéndez Pidal who, in the Glossary accompanying his monumental edition of *Mio Cid*, II (Madrid, 1911), 489ff., classed *AUICE in lieu of AUCILLA ‘little bird’ as an instance of false regression, likening it to *peonza* ‘toy’ (toy) from *peoncilla* and to children’s *gabanzo* ‘overcoat’ from *gabancito*. This view drew the applause of J. Cejador y Frauca, *Vocabulario medieval castellano* (Madrid, 1929), s.v., and, more surprisingly, of J. Corominas,

also left vestiges: Fr. *abécédé*, Sp. *abecedario* (1578), Fr. *abécédaire* (16th cent.: G. Tory, adj. and n.) from L. Latin *abecedarius* (St. Augustine);¹⁵ even if at the incipient stage the *-d-*, as is not implausible, had a different origin,¹⁶ it was surely reinterpreted ex post facto as the fourth link in a tightly organized chain. (The manifold poetic, liturgic, and didactic uses of abecedaria, old and modern, do not concern us here.) On the dialect level, there has been observed, at widely scattered

DCE, I (Bern, 1954), 63*b* (s.v. *aguzanieve*) and 337*a* (s.v. *ave*); but Meyer-Lübke, in 1911 and then again in 1930, authoritatively supported Baist's etymon *A.B.C.* (*REW*₁ and *REW*₃ §16: "ausgehend von der vielfach bezeugten zauberisch-mystischen Verwendung des A.B.C.") and, on the second occasion, pointed out, in explicit refutation of Menéndez Pidal's alternative, than any regression would have led to a formation in *-a* rather than in *-e*. Of all verdicts returned A. Magne's (ed. of *A Demanda do Santo Graal*, III [Rio, 1944], 96f.) is probably the least tenable: the Brazilian scholar was willing to separate genetically the Old Spanish from the patently related Old Galician-Portuguese word, tracing the former to *A.B.C.* and the latter to **AUICE*. One possible minor objection to Baist's conjecture might be the consistently feminine gender of OSp. *auze*, observable through the prism of its qualifiers; but note that OIt. *abbicci* was epicene and that the general preference for the feminine in descendants of Latin words ending in *-e* or consonant is demonstrably a salient feature of Spanish (cf. *liebre* 'hare,' *miel* 'honey,' *sal* 'salt,' etc.). For a more searching dissection see my article "Form Versus Meaning in Etymological Analysis: Old Spanish *auze* 'luck,'" to appear in a testimonial in honor of J. Homer Herriott.

¹⁵ The alphabet viewed as a social institution and the web of magic and mystic beliefs attached to it, with their time-honored esthetic offshoots (*acrostic*, orig. 'poem in which the first and the last letter of each line, if they be taken in order, will spell a word—sometimes the author's name—or a sentence—e.g., the kernel of a message or a hidden meaning') and present-day trivial gastronomic ramifications (European *alphabet crackers*, American *alphabet soup*), exceed the limits of this paper. For one set of archeological data see A. Diederich, "ABC-Denkmäler," *Rhein. Mus. f. Philol.*, LVI (1901), 77–105; cf. further E. Schröder, "Über das *spell*," *ZDA*, XXXVII (1893), 241–268, esp. 263. The discussion of these problems has spilled over into Germanic and Romance etymology; see fn. 14, above, and cf. the following memorandum from Renée T. Kahane: "As we will show in a forthcoming study, *abece* is used in Wolfram's *Parzifal* (453,15) with reference to geomancy. In the Alfonsine *Lapidario* (Montaña, p. 63*a*), «*abecé de Saturno*» refers to constellations."

¹⁶ Epistolary comment by Dr. Renée T. Kahane: "Would it not be simpler to consider the *-d-* as the reflection of the dental in the Greek model *alphabetáron*? This suggestion is supported by such Latin vars. of *abecedarius* as *abecetaria*, *abicitale*, *abicitarium* (*ThLL*), where the *t* as a rendering of *d* would be meaningless. Gr. *alphabédron*, on the other hand, is a regular formation on *alpha* and *beta*, recorded since the 10th century but doubtless earlier."

points of *Romania*, a conceivably very old reduction—in the mouth of children?—of *ABC* to “*be-a-ba*.”¹⁷

Interestingly, in several languages the Greek and the Latin designations are allowed to coexist with a subtle semantic differentiation: the former provides the learned label, the latter evokes the unsophisticated

¹⁷ A still very young Leo Spitzer, in his brilliant comment on an earlier note (1911) by O. J. Tallgren [-Tuulio], established the initial bridge between Ptg. *b-á-bá* (Queirós), Cat. *be-a-ba*, and S.-It. *bi-a-ba* (“Etymologisches aus dem Catalanischen,” *NM*, XV [1913], 158). In the 1st fasc. (1922) of his *FEW*, W. von Wartburg then added Loth. *bé-a-ba* from Uriménil (Vosges), as recorded in N. Haillant’s *Essai* (Épinal, 1882), and Langued. *beaba*, uniquely attested in Abbé P. A. Boissier de Sauvages’ *Dictionnaire languedocienfrançais* (Nîmes, 1756). Eight years later Meyer-Lübke rounded out the slowly emerging picture by adducing Sw. *beaba* (*REW*₃ §16); is his dubious Ptg. *baba* a hasty misrepresentation of Spitzer’s datum?

Wartburg, s.v., visibly puzzled by the distortion itself and by its geographic diffusion, called this form bizarre (“seltsam”) and termed its dispersal “merkwürdig;” and Meyer-Lübke, influenced by this phrasing, spoke of “eigenartige Umstellung und Doppelung.” The echoing of the bilabial *b* loses some of its oddity once *be-a-ba* is analyzed as a nursery word; as a bilabial, /b/ is, of course, a favorite with children, and the learning of the alphabet has figured prominently in didactically slanted children’s songs (examples from Catalonia: Vich, Llufríu de l’Empordá, Pollensa, in Alcover, *DCVB*, I, 30*b*; in modern Greek songs from Cephalonia, the chain of the names of the letters may be interrupted for the sake of rhyme). There exist, particularly on Italian soil, reductions of tripartite *ABC* to a bipartite skeleton; cf., on the one hand, OIt. *abbi* (its direct offspring can be heard in rural Toscana to this day) and, on the other, apheresized Sic. *bizzé* and Apul. (Maglia) *mizzé* beside fuller Cal. *ammeccé ambeccé* (*REW*₃ §16, and G. Rohlfs, *Dizionario dialettale delle tre Calabrie*, 3 vols. [Milan, 1932–39], I, 89*a*, with careful localization of two field-notes). Italian, incidentally, still wavers between the standard labels *abbicci*, endorsed by Dante, and *abeccé*, favored by Leopardi, who found support for his preference in Marchegiano usage; the word is masculine at present, but its use as a feminine was once condoned (cf. OSp. *auze*, fn. 14, above).

Understandably, the progeny of vernacular *ABC* shows much livelier growth, as regards derivation and “accidenti generali,” than do the descendants of austerely erudite ALPHABĒTUM. Apheresis, antihatic interfixation (-r-), and addition of diminutive suffixes have all three affected Cat. Val. (*a*) *beceroles* ‘primer’ (Alcover, *DCVB*, I, 31*a*; II, 367*b*); cf. doc. A.D. 1439: “Unes *beceroles* capletrades d’aur”; *Spill*, v. 13,594: “*Baceroletes* fluxes liçons,” while apheresis in conjunction with suffix change have moulded Cat. *becedària* ‘small piece of canvas displaying embroidered letters’ (*DCVB*, II, 367*ab*). Nevertheless, a few minor accidents did befall the Graeco-Latin counterpart; thus, *FEW*, I, 76*a* cites metathesized Havr. *aflabet* and, through the influence of *croisette*, Ard. *alfabet*, as recorded in C. Bruneau’s *Etude* (1913).

environment of the elementary school where the first knowledge of the letters is inculcated: contrast G. *Alphabet*, adj. *alphabetisch* ‘alphabetic,’ *Analphabet* ‘illiterate person’¹⁸ and *ABC-buch* ‘primer,’ *ABC-schütz(e)* ‘beginner, tyro.’ The same opposition obtains in Albanian (*alfabet* vs. *abece*), while in Russian—mutatis mutandis—*alfávit* and *ázbuka* are comparably paired off. Like the words for ‘grammar’ and ‘dictionary,’ those for ‘alphabet’ lend themselves to all kinds of familiar, jocular, and artistic extensions (Lope, *Preibáñez y el Comendador de Ocaña* [1614], Act. I, Sc. 9: “El *abecé* de los recién casados,” involving two alphabetically arranged sets of character traits desirable in a spouse; but the *X*, erratically, symbolizes in one instance “buena cristiana,” in the other two arms crossed, i.e. clasped around the bride’s neck).

More interesting are the alignments of the first and the last letter to suggest the totality of a scale, spectrum, or series, the pan-European model being *from alpha to omega* (cf. Russ. *ot alfy do omegi*); cf. the symbol $\Lambda\Omega$ used as a graphic reminder of the beginning and the end of earthly life on ancient Christian tombs. Adaptations include E. *from A to Z*, G. *von A bis Z*, Fr. *depuis A jusqu’à Z*, Pol. *od A do Z*. A spelling reform entailing the elimination of some letter at the head or at the tail of the series may require a corresponding change in phraseology. Precisely the latter modification has taken place in contemporary Russian through the loss of Θ and Ψ ; hence the refreshing title of a well-known children’s book of verse by S. Ja. Marsak: *Vesëloje putešestvije ot A do Ja* ‘A merry trip from “A” to “Я”.’

Then again the names of consecutive letters, preferably of the first two, can be put to effective use in suggesting the string of events, the succession of steps in planning an enterprise, the need for consistency, the mutual complementarity itself. Thus G. *Wer “A” sagt muß auch “B” sagen* is echoed by Pol. *Jezeli sie powie “A,” trzeba powiedziec “B.”*¹⁹ Conversely, the inability to attach *B* to *A* or to discriminate be-

¹⁸ Italian temporarily even used the verb (18th c.) *alfabetare* (cf. E. *alphabetize*), before that the noun (16th c.) *alfabetato* ‘repertorio tenuto in ordine alfabetico’; to this day it tolerates the facetious regression *alfabeta* (m.) ‘literate person.’

¹⁹ From Grisons, the citadel of Western Raeto-Romance, W. Gottschalk, *Die bildhaften Sprichwörter der Romanen*, 3 vols. (Heidelberg, 1935–38), III, 207, reports: “Tgi ca ha getg *A*, quel gi era buger *B*” = “On n’a pas plutôt dit *A* qu’il faut dire *B*” (obviously an adaptation).

tween them will serve as a token of ignorance and boorishness, cf. *He does not know A from B*, Fr. *ne savoir ni A ni B*.²⁰

There are on record all sorts of sobriquets and facetious variations through capricious segmentation of words critically important or acting as irritants in a unique historical context. Thus, among Jews subjected to severe tribulations under Hitler, there circulated the harmless joke on the prevailing racism: *Sind Sie a-risch?*²—*Nein, ich bin be-risch* (Berlin, mid-'thirties). It is perhaps not inaccurate to surmise that certain alert, literate, and (hyper) sensitive individuals, in handling geographic and personal names beginning with one of the two "extreme" letters of the total alphabetic spread, remain critically aware of the special position allotted to these prime classifiers in membership lists, directories, gazetteers, etc. Living in *Aachen* or *Aarhus* (before it became *Arhus*) or else in *Zurich*, and bearing some such conspicuous name as *Abel* or *Zygmunt*, might make even the average person more "alphabet-conscious" than would spending one's sheltered life in *London* or *Madrid*, close to the midriff of the alphabet, and feeling protected from alphabetic exposure by comparatively neutral names like *López* or *Miller*.

Other phraseological groupings of labels for letters are less diaphanous and, like any other etymological puzzle, invite minute historical investigation. Here are, at random, some examples from colloquial Spanish, both standard and regional: *entrar con haches y erres* 'tener malas cartas el que va jugar la puesta'; *no decir uno ni haches ni erres* 'no hablar cuando parece que conviene' (Acad.). The starting point for this particular use seems to be a card game. On the other hand, *C* and *B*, in this erratic order, are paired off in Sp. *por ce o por be* or, more laconically, *ce por be* 'detenidamente, punto por punto'. Colloquial

²⁰ In the metaphoric expansion of the ambit of the single word *alphabet* it is the reference to the rudimental and elementary which prevails (much as the letter *A* stands for 'first step'; cf. the Spanish proverb: "Aunque el burro estudió, de la *A* no pasó"); thus, Sir Flinders Petrie, the British dean of Biblical archeologists, is reported to have appealed to pottery as "the essential alphabet (= 'basic tool') of archeology." But in conventional graphic representations the letters of the alphabet, artfully arranged in four or five rows—first widening, then tapering off—provide a compelling emblem evocative of all-embracing totality. The Italian publisher Riccardo Ricciardi deftly uses this emblem for his *Documenti di Filologia*, circling it by the tasteful motto: "Quantumvis circumi numquam me complecteris." Cf. the following paragraph on a counterpart of this imagery in language.

usage, observable particularly in Platense, seems to favor a lame compromise between these two no longer transparent binary groups: *por hache o por be* 'por una y otra razón, por causa desconocida'.

A point of special interest is the occasional use of peculiar names (preservation of archaisms or *ad hoc* coinage?) for letters included in such idiomatic formulas. Thus, the Russian tag for 'M' is normally *èm*, but in the binomial, not infrequently lengthened into a fanciful trinomial, *ni bè ni mè* or *ni be ni me (ni kukaréku)* 'neither fish nor fowl' (= *ni to ni sě*), *mè* or *me* is substituted for the standard label to match more closely, for the sake of smooth integration ("Einreihung") or forceful polarization, its counterpart *bè (be)*.²¹

²¹ The Russian Academy dictionary, Vol. I (1948), s.v., equates the more easily recognizable *bè (be)* ingredient of the congealed sequence with the name of the letter. As sounds, /b/ and /m/ share, of course, the distinctive feature of articulatory locus (bilabiality). The striking use of *mè* for *èm* calls to mind the cross-linguistic occurrence in proverbs and other playful arrangements of archaic or provincial verb forms tolerated for the sake of perfect rhymes which might otherwise be endangered, e.g. G. *Wie die Alten sunen* [= standard *sangen*], */so zwitschern die Jungen*; for further exemplification see my "Studies in Irreversible Binomials," *Lingua*, VIII:2 (1959), 113-160, esp. 137f.

NOTE: "Secondary Uses of Letters in Language" is being published in two parts; part two will appear in the next number of this Journal, April 1967. As Dr. Malkiel has promised in his introduction, part two will discuss abbreviations, the shape of the letters, the acoustic image of the underlying sound, and puns on the label of a letter.