

The Standardization of Alphabetic Graphemes

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During the historic development of our national alphabets the direct relationship between the sound of the language and its visual symbols has become obscured. The need for a stronger, direct relationship between sound and symbol is discussed; a suggested rearrangement of graphemes within our alphabets is illustrated.

It is difficult for me to shed the impression that our various alphabets have, during their historical development, forfeited their original advantages and have complicated their wide-spread utilization instead of retaining and further developing those advantages. As a result, we are faced today with the question—or challenge—of unification and simplification of the graphemes (*Grafeme*)¹ of

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As a Russian graphic designer speaking to a linguistic/typographic theme, Mr. Telingator prefaced his lecture with these remarks: "I am neither a scientist nor a semasiologist nor a philologist—my field is book design; I am also engaged as a type designer. Questions arise in my work which are not directly related to my profession. It may, therefore, be self-evident that my attempts to express an opinion about some of these problems may lead to certain mistakes since I am not sufficiently proficient in all of the complexities these problems involve. In spite of this, I should like to deal with one of these problems in a very general way—simply as an idea—in the hope that it will be taken up, corrected, and refined by the appropriate specialists."

1. *Grafeme*: a term introduced by the Soviet type designer, Tagirow, denoting the abstract sound symbols of an alphabet (see S. B. Telingater, "Über das Grafem des Alphabets" in *Typografie*, 1965/1, pp. 21-23).

national alphabets which are based on the Roman and the Greek alphabets. The classic foundation of these national alphabets was constructed in such a way that each grapheme was the equivalent of a definite phoneme; or, expressed differently, that each letter denoted a sound.

It is not necessary here to analyze deeply the reasons for this historical development nor the fact that in our contemporary alphabets different relationships between graphemic and phonetic systems have crystallized themselves; but it should be emphasized that the complicated graphemic visualization of some sounds (eaux, a, ch, oi, etc.), the existence of silent letters, or the deviations in the pronunciation of letters in relation to their alphabetic sound value constitutes a certain regress when compared to the simple and clear readability of the Roman and Greek alphabets. There seems to be a certain defect in the historical development of divers sound values of the same letterform (e.g., P-R in the Russian, and P-P in the Latin language). We are faced here with a basically different pronunciation, not merely with a dialectal distinction. One could elaborate on this complex of questions: different phonetic values of the same letter, double recording of the same sound, wrong rhythmic direction in the recording of the graphemes, etc.

In this connection a utilitarian and perhaps not too naive a question should be raised: could man not find ways to correct these historical deficiencies? A radical solution could be the unification of the graphemic systems of those alphabets which are derived from the Roman and the Greek alphabets. Furthermore, the unified, standardized graphemes should be made mandatory for all of the alphabets within the Roman-Greek and Greek-Cyrillic group. The system of diacritical marks should be equally standardized in principle.

The table of graphemes presented here (Fig. 1) is merely an initial step requiring further discussion and development. At the same time I am also recommending a new arrangement of the graphemes within the alphabet, which is dictated by the character of their graphic forms. In this way, one must assume, a certain practical sense of logic would express itself in the arrangement of the alphabet (the precision of the system of graphic construction replaces the historical sequence which lacks any systematization).



Figure 1. Graphemes as proposed by the author and arranged on the basis of the character of their graphic forms.

There is no doubt that the implementation of this idea would, in all practicality, stretch over several generations. Even in the normal process of development, past historical deficiencies would have to be eliminated. Many difficulties would undoubtedly arise; within every language special problems would have to be coped with.

It is certain, however, that the progressive development of history and of mankind is closely related to the peaceful co-existence and the economic and cultural relationships among nations. International tele-communication and travel which

promote such relationships are developing at an accelerated pace. Nobody can deny that the standardization of the alphabet could be of eminent importance in this respect. The rising development of science and technology (faster than we realize) is elevating humanity to a level at which the multitude of different alphabets should be considered a serious impediment for the future progress of civilization on our planet.

The practical implementation of this promising task would undoubtedly have to be performed in tactical stages. These stages might include: elimination of the archaisms in our alphabets and of the silent, unpronounced letters; improvement of the diacritical marking system; standardization of individual letters with national alphabets, etc. A general solution based on territorial or language areas would have to be arrived at after international discussions have taken place.

It is interesting to note that the standardization of alphabetic graphemes on an equal phonetic basis could result in a reduction of text lengths from 20% to 25% in some languages, especially French and English. In this connection, it should be pointed out that this proposal has nothing to do with the ideas of the Esperantists; it confines itself to a reform of alphabetic graphemes and in no way attempts to alter the various national languages.

Phonetists always emphasize the fact that the original forms of the alphabets utilized by us were not derived from a phonetic basis but from a graphic, pictorial one. The signs of the phonetic script had their origins in the hieroglyphs. If one could incorporate the subtleties of human speech and the phonetic richness of our language into the creation of a corresponding alphabet, a multitude of new and useful graphemes and combinations would be the result. But even then, many of the delicacies of phonetic combinations and of other language finesses would be impossible to record. We must bear in mind that any standardization of alphabets should lead to a minimum of graphemes, and all of the general phonetic variations must be expressed through the diacritical system.

Figures 2 through 7 show examples for the standardization of alphabetic graphemes in several languages.

DI FÖLKER VERDEN DAS ERZENTE

DIE VÖLKER WERDEN DAS ERSEHNT

HOE CIL, DEN FRIDEN, ERRINGEN, VENN

HOHE ZIEL, DEN FRIEDEN, ERRINGEN, WENN

ZI IRE BEMÜUNGEN FERAINEN UND

SIE IHRE BEMÜHUNGEN VEREINEN UND

BEHARLIH UND AKTIV FÜR FRIDEN

BEHARRLICH UND AKTIV FÜR FRIEDEN

UND FÖLKERFROÏNTSAFT KEMPfen

UND VÖLKERFREUNDSCHAFT KÄMPFEN

Figure 2. Alphabetic graphemes in German.

ZE PIPLZ UILL ECÏV ZE LOFTI END

THE PEOPLES WILL ACHIEVE THE LOFTY AND

ÇERİŞT GOUL OF SEİFFARDING PİS IF

CHERISHED GOAL OF SAFEGUARDING PEACE IF

ZEÏ PÜL ZEÏR EFFORTS END FAÏT

THEY POOL THEIR EFFORTS AND FIGHT

REZOLUTLI END EKTIVLI FOR PİS

RESOLUTELY AND ACTIVELY FOR PEASE

END FRENDSİP EMANİF NEİŞNZ.

AND FRIENDSHIP AMONG NATIONS

Figure 3. Alphabetic graphemes in English.

NARODI DOBŪTSA BLAGOPODNOĪ I
 НАРОДЫ ДОБЬЮТСЯ БЛАГОРОДНОЙ И
 ZELANNOĪ CELI - OTSTOĀT MIR,
 ЖЕЛАННОЙ ЦЕЛИ - ОТСТОЯТЬ МИР,
 ES LI ONI OBĒDINĀT SVOI USILĪA
 ЕСЛИ ОНИ ОБЪЕДИНЯТ СВОИ УСИЛИЯ
 I BUDUT NASTOĪČIVO I AKTIVNO
 И БУДУТ НАСТОЙЧИВО И АКТИВНО
 BOROTĒSA ZA MIR I DRUZBU
 БОРОТЬСЯ ЗА МИР И ДРУЖБУ
 MEZDU NAPODAMI.
 МЕЖДУ НАРОДАМИ.

Figure 4. Alphabetic graphemes in Russian.

LE PÖPL ABUTIRŌ A SŌ NOBL OBZĒKTIF
 LES PEUPLES ABOUTIRONT À CE NOBLE OBJECTIF
 TĀ SUETE K'Ē LA SOVGARD DŌ LA PE,
 TANT SOUHAITÉ QUEST LA SAUVEGARDE DE LA PAIX
 S'ĪL UNIS LŌR ZEFFOR E LUT AVEK
 S'ILS UNISSENT LEURS EFFORTS ET LŪTTENT AVEK
 ENERZI E PERSEVERĀS PUR LA PE E
 ÉNERGIE ET PERSÉVÉRANS POUR LA PAIX ET
 L'AMITĪE ĀTR LE PÖPL.
 L'AMITIÉ ENTRE LES PEUPLES

Figure 5. Alphabetic graphemes in French.

NARODI OSIŃŃNŃ ŚLAHETNI I
NARODY OSIĄGNA ŚZLACHĘTNY I

UPRAGNŃNI CEL - OBROŃŃ POKUJ,
UPRAGNIONY CEL - OBRONIA POKÓJ,

EZELI Z'EDNOĆŃ SVE VISILKI I BĚDŃ
JEŻELI ZJEDNOCZA SWIE WYSILKI I BĘDA,

VITRVALE I AKTIVNE WALCICŃ O POKUJ I
WYTRVALE I AKTYWŃIE WALCZYĆ O POKÓJ I

PSIAZŃ MĚDZI NARODAMI.
PRZYJĄŻŃ MIĘDZY NARODAMI.

Figure 6. Alphabetic graphemes in Polish.

A NĚPEK ELĚRIK A BĚKE MEĚVEDESENEK
A NĚPEK ELĚRIK A BĚKE MEĚVĚDĚSĚNEK

NEMES ĘS HŃN OOHAIŃTOTT
NEMES ĘS HŃN ŃHAJTOTT

CĚLIĀT, HA EĚSĚTETT ERŃVEL,
CĚLJĀT, HA EĚSĚTETT ERŃVEL,

ĀLLHĀTATŃSAN ĘS AKTĪVAN
ĀLLHĀTĀTŃSAN ĘS AKTĪVAN

HARCŃNAK A BĚKĚĚRT ĘS A NĚPEK
HARCŃNAK A BĚKĚĚRT ĘS A NĚPEK

BARĀŃSĀĜĀĚRT.
BARĀŃSĀĜĀĚRT.

Figure 7. Alphabetic graphemes in Hungarian.

In the Soviet Union the standardization of the alphabet or the introduction of a unified alphabet could be relatively easy, since one is familiar here with different alphabets. In our country, almost the entire young generation knows the Roman alphabet. One can imagine, however, that the practical implementation of an alphabetic standardization could cause many difficulties in individual languages. In French, for instance, we use the letter *s* for the plural form. If we let ourselves be guided by the principle that a sound equals a letter, all silent letters should not be written. What about the formation of the French plural in that case? Spoken French may help us here. It must be assumed that a Frenchman—on the basis of the context of the sentence—can understand very well whether a word is used in its singular or plural form, in spite of the fact that the *s* is unpronounced. Similar examples can also be found in other languages; if we are to hope for solutions to these problems, we must look to the philologists for guidance.

The examples shown here (Figs. 2-7) are, by no means, designed as final solutions to the questions I have raised. They are merely to illustrate the basic idea of my general proposal.

In conclusion, let me suggest that we admit, first of all, that the present form of many national alphabets can on all probability be improved. Once we agree on that, all research people whose work impinges on alphabetic studies would be called upon to participate actively in its continued development and modification on an international cooperative basis.

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