No Child Left Bewildered: Using Phonetic English as a Lingua Franca

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Abstract

This article first explores the evolution of the English language particularly the influence of Celtic, Latin, German, and French. Second, it considers the resultant irregularities with respect to orthography: graphotactic and morphological but most importantly phonological. Third, the use of English as a lingua franca is discussed alongside English as a foreign language, cognate languages, artificial languages, other vehicular languages besides English, pidgin English, and English creole. Fourth, the issue of man-machine communication is examined in terms of speech recognition, phonetic transcription, conversion from documents to speech, dictionaries with audio pronunciation, and programs for oral translation. Last, support is provided for the adoption of phonetic English as the official language of the United States.

Keywords: Phonetic English, phonetic spelling, lingua franca, global language

1. Introduction

There are times to follow and there are times to lead. It is time for the United States to lead the rest of the world by using phonetic English. This would facilitate communication not only between people but also between people and machines. Why not simply spell words like they sound, eliminating confusion as well as embarrassment. English is after all the lingua franca of both business and science. At present, the US has no official language. But Congress could and should adopt phonetic English now.

A brief history of the English language is revealing. "English is not normal. It is a mixed language not only in its words, but in its grammar … an offshoot of Proto-Germanic that traded grammar with offshoots of Proto-Celtic. The result … (is) a structurally hybrid tongue" (McWhorter, 2008, p. 60-61). But the complex morphology of English is also the result of infusions of both Latin and French. And even this mixture does not reflect the many additions and revisions over the past 500 years.

Geography played an important role in the development of the English language. "The Celtic Britons had the misfortune to inhabit an island that was highly desirable both for its agriculture and its minerals. The early history of Britain is the story of successive invasions. One of the most famous was the landing of Julius Caesar and his legions in 55 BC … Roman words crept, corrupted, into British usage" (McCrum, MacNeil, and Cran, 2002, p. 52). Then "Christianity brought its huge Latin vocabulary to England in the year AD 597 … (with) the mission of St. Augustine" (ibid, p. 61).

These military and religious invasions from the Latin or Mediterranean region were followed by less organized but nevertheless effective invasions from the German or Baltic and North Sea regions. And, since the Celtic languages of "Welsh and Cornish were spoken in England long before the Angles and Co. came … the flavor of Welsh and Cornish bled into their way of speaking … 'Englisc' (or 'Anglisc') as a second language" (McWhorter, 2008, p. 118, 120). An abbreviated version of the story is related as follows:

> Germanic tribes called Angles, Saxons, and Jutes (from Jutland or Denmark) invade Britain in the fifth century. They bring along their Anglo-Saxon language, which we call Old English … Danish and Norwegian Vikings start invading in 787. They speak Old Norse, a close relative of Old English, and sprinkle around their … words … More words (come) from the Norman French after William the Conqueror takes over 'England' in 1066 (defeating King Harold II at the Battle of Hastings) … When England falls into the Hundred Years' War (from 1337 to 1453) with France, English becomes the ruling language once more … grabbing up Latin terms from classical authors (ibid, vii-viii).

English is thus a hodgepodge of languages. "Celts, Roman colonizers, Viking marauders, Norman conquerors—all came and went, leaving their mark on Britain's landscape, language, and character" but the English language was most profoundly influenced by the Germanic language of the Anglo-Saxons (Alexander, 2011). English waned after the Norman Conquest but waxed again before the 14th century. "The ordinariness of English speech must have given it a spontaneity which the learned languages of Latin and French lacked" (Clanchy, 1997, p. 184).

During the middle ages, the written word began to catch up with the spoken word. But writing remained haphazard. "Before the age of fully-fledged dictionaries there were fewer spelling regulations. People tended to write as they spoke … (and) the English language, perhaps like the mass of English society itself, was unruly and unrefined" (McCrum, MacNeil, and Cran, 2002, p. 106, 132). That roughness was passed along from one generation to another.

Today, "school children are still grappling with a spelling system that dates back to William Caxton … (who) introduced the press into England around the year 1476 … (and) settled for the idiosyncrasies of the English he heard in the streets of London … He (and other printers like him) helped to fix the language on the page before its writers and teachers had reached a consensus. It is to this that English owes some of its chaotic and exasperating spelling conventions" (ibid, p. 43, 85, 87).

2. Orthography

"The relationship between the written and spoken forms of the language … is enough to drive people to distraction" (Lynch, 2009, p. 163). Far too many words are spelled one way but sound another. So it is not surprising that "over the last three centuries, thousands of writers throughout the Anglophone world have proposed schemes for spelling reform" (ibid, p. 132). In 1712, Jonathan Swift "stirred up public controversy with 'A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue' … proposing an academy that would … lock the whole thing down to stop its frustrating change" (ibid, p. 63). In 1755, Samuel Johnson "laid down the law (in his Dictionary of the English language), but it was the common law … not from fiat but from precedent … not dictating to the great writers … but listening to them" (ibid, p. 92, 88, 87). And although Dr. Johnson published his dictionary "to settle arguments about language … he scorned the idea of permanence in language" (McCrum, MacNeil, and Cran, 2002, p. 137, 139).

Even after the publication of "Thomas Sheridan's pronouncing dictionary (The General Dictionary of the English Language in 1780) … agreement about correct pronunciation was a will o' the wisp" (ibid, p. 186). In 1768, "Benjamin Franklin offered a new alphabet that would do away with most of the obvious inconsistencies in English spelling" (Lynch, 2009, p. 176). In it, for example, "the g no longer has two different sounds … but is, as every letter ought to be, confined to one. The same is to be observed in all the letters, vowels, and consonants, that wherever they are met … their sound is always the same" (Sparks, 1856, p. 299). "Franklin never pursued this scheme seriously, but one of his disciples, Noah Webster did … (by adding) marks to the current 26 letters … in his American Dictionary in 1828 … (but the idea) never caught on" (Lynch, 2009, p. 176, 181).

There were other schemes for spelling reform many of which advocated phonetic shorthand. In 1884, Sir Isaac Pittman observed in his "History of Shorthand" that "from the commencement of the art to the introduction and general dissemination of the System of Phonetic Shorthand, with which writing and printing reform is associated, 200 different systems" were published (Pitman, 1891, p. 14). And he cited organizations such the "Phonetic Shorthand Writers Association," the "Phonetic Institute," and the "Phonetic Society" as well as publications such as the "Phonotypic Journal" and the "Phonetic Journal" (ibid, p. 154, 193, 204, 25, 200).

"The early twentieth century's most ardent champion for a new alphabet was George Bernard Shaw … In an essay called 'Spelling Reform v. Phonetic Spelling: A Plea for Speech Nationalization' … in 1901, he argued … the English alphabet, after all, 'is a phonetic one as far as it goes; and our established spelling, partly out of date, and partly corrupted by an ignorant academic attempt to make it more etymological'" (Lynch, 2009, p. 178). But, in spite of all efforts to reform the English language, its spelling remains more outdated and confused than ever. "Writing and talking are very different things … (the) spoken language" always changes but the written word never does (McWhorter, 2008, p. 33). So learning to write the spoken word or to speak the written word has, over the years, become a daunting task.

"English, like most alphabetic orthographies … (relies) in part on regular connections between letters and sounds … and yet this phonological basis does not explain the variability with which sounds are represented across different words … A second source of information useful to spelling comes from graphotactic regularities about the legal combination of letters … (and) a third level of consistency in spelling comes from the smallest units of meaning in language, or morphemes" (Deacon, Pacton, and Conrad, 2008, p. 118).

"One group of models, termed loosely 'late,' advocate that children take some time to learn about the role of graphotactic and morphological regularities in spelling … (and) that children do so by learning rules or principles that can be applied across a very large sample of items … In sharp contrast, the 'early' model proposes that even very young writers appreciate the place of phonological, graphotactic, and morphological information in spelling … (and that) statistical or associative learning … encourages exploration of regularities" (ibid, p. 119). But students (especially older students) "are commonly reluctant to practice their pronunciation in front of others" (Por and Fong, 2011, p. 245). Nothing could be simpler and less embarrassing than simply spelling words like they sound. Phonetic English would make life easier not only for those learning English as a native language but also for those learning it as a foreign language or as a lingua franca.

3. *Lingua Franca*

It is of course important to distinguish between English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a lingua franca (ELF). Although "English is shaping itself differently in European contexts from the official languages of the two English-speaking member states (the UK and Ireland) … nowhere is there any acknowledgement of ELF as a different medium of communication, shaped and changed by its European non-native speakers (Cogo and Jenkins, 2010, p. 273-4). "ELF … regards non-native varieties of English as different rather than deficient … in terms of phonology/phonetics … lexicogrammar … (and) pragmatics," e.g. placing stress on different syllables, zero-marking the third person singular in the present tense (saying he run instead of he runs), and code-switching (relying on non-English terms) (ibid, p. 275-81).

The European Union is currently in a state of denial over the disjuncture between principle and practice. "The claim that interpretation and translation have made multilingualism workable is not true, except in the most formal settings … English has become the de facto but unacknowledged lingua franca … Only in some border regions where the language of the neighbor is of more immediate relevance, or in multilingual countries where the constitution stipulates that constituent groups should learn each other's language, is the tide of English stemmed" (Wright, 2009, p. 94-5). The official system of the EU is neither fair nor practical.

> The 23-language regime excludes minorities and is … so cumbersome that it encourages lingua franca use … Although on the celebratory level there is a discourse in support of multilingualism … on the policy level, full diversity is abandoned for a strategy of support for a restricted number of lingua francas … (but) it takes little account of the fact that more than one lingua franca produces burdens for those for whom none of the chosen languages is a mother tongue (ibid, p. 110).

English means of course different things to different people both outside and inside the EU. "Asian ELF is different from European ELF… (and) within Europe, Scandinavian users of English differ from those with a Slavic or Romance language as their mother tongue" (Fiedler, 2010, p. 9). Within the EU, some attempts are being made to avoid ELF altogether. "EuroCom … is a method of acquiring reading competence in several cognate languages. Its basis is people's knowledge of one language of a family … There are three sub-projects: EuroComSlav … EuroComRom … and EuroComGerm ... The question is whether this aim is ambitious enough" (ibid, p. 5-6).

The most ambitious European project is also the oldest, proposed over a century ago (Esperanto, 2011). "Artificial languages also called universal languages or world auxiliary languages … (or) planned languages … are language systems which have been consciously created … for the purpose of making international communication easier … and … Esperanto … is the only system among about 1,000 that has managed the successful transition from a mere project to a genuine language" (Fiedler, 2010, p. 12). "National languages … are easy to learn naturally but hard to learn as a student. That is why many people have tried to invent a simple (artificial) language … 'Esperanto' … was developed between 1880 and 1890 by … Ludovic Lazarus Zamenhof … a Russian eye doctor in Poland … (and) for a while … was an official project in the USSR and in the People's Republic of China" (Nerriere and Hon, 2009, p. 13-14). But, as it now stands, few people anywhere can either write it or speak it.

There are more than 7,000 natural languages in the world today. "Of these … about 80 are 'vehicular' languages, such as Chinese, Hindi, Spanish, and Arabic – languages learned by non-native speakers in order to communicate with native speakers of a third tongue. English, of course, dominates all of these" linguistic vehicles (Economist, September 10, 2011, p. 96). In terms of population, "Mandarin Chinese is the language with the most speakers. After that is Hindi, and then Spanish. But … English will … continue to be the most important international language … (even though) it is far too difficult and … does not have good links between the written and the spoken" word (Nerriere and Hon, 2009, p. 21, 20, 22).

"Some … take pride in speaking … 'plain English' … using common English words … a level of usage and correctness … which is 'enough' for understanding … Globish is … (one such) subset of English … It … uses simple sentence structures and a small number of words … 1500 … that are already international" (ibid, p. 33-35). In other words, Globish is essentially a pidgin English, "an auxiliary language, one that has no native speakers" (McCrum, MacNeil, and Cran, 2002, p. 212). It is not a creole like Ebonics (from the words ebony and phonics), a "term coined by the psychologist Robert Williams … and featured in the title of his 1975 book, Ebonics: The True Language of Black Folks" (Lynch, 2009, p. 265). But Globish is like Ebonics in terms of two major deficiencies. It is neither quantitatively sufficient nor qualitatively satisfactory and therefore is mischaracterized as "plain English."

In 1780, John Adams prophetically wrote that "English is destined to be in the next and succeeding centuries more generally the language of the world than Latin was in the last or French is in the present age" (Mencken, 1982, p. 282). Today "the majority of English interactions take place between non-native speakers to whom the language functions as a 'lingua franca' … (and) this current global role of English is unique in the history of languages" (Pitzl, 2005, p. 50-51).

In "populous countries such as India, Pakistan, and … Nigeria … English is an official language, invariably used for international dealings and also, in most cases, for internal business" (Language, 1965, p. 9). Approximately "90 countries use English as an official language" regardless of "the percentage of the population who can actually speak" it with fluency (Watts, 2011, p. 281). "According to recent issues of the Union of International Associations' Yearbook, there are about 12,500 international organizations in the world. A sample showed that 85 percent made official use of English - far more than any other language" (Crystal, 2004, p. 11).

Officially, "the clearest example of the dominance of English is in aerospace. English is the language of international airports … (as both) ground staff and pilots are trained … in English" (Language, 1965, p. 9-10). Unofficially, the clearest example is the World Wide Web. "The media that make up the Internet are overwhelmingly American in origin, so it is no wonder that the mother tongue of the Web is English" (English Language Guide, 2011). More people use English online than any other language (Internet World Stats, 2011).

"Given a world of satellites, televisions, and telephones, English will probably flourish at two quite distinct levels: International Standard … and Local Alternative … The former will evolve more or less uniformly throughout the Standard English-using world. At this educated level, the differences between British English, American English, and a Third World variety like Indian English are probably not so severe as to require … a simplified 'Nuclear English'. The latter, the local alternative, will become more and more distinctive and will indeed throw up local literatures" (McCrum, MacNeil, and Cran, 2002, p. 373).

"Since there is always a common variant of a feature at the top of an asymptotic distribution for every feature at any locality, then speakers may come to perceive such common variants as 'standard' or 'normal,' and come to think that there is a linguistic system composed of these most common variants … Speakers … may also find uses for less common variants. They may come to think of them not just as non-standard or otherwise odd variants, or as historical residue or evidence of incipient change, but to employ them … to enact social or regional identities" (Kretzschmar and Tamasi, 2003, p. 398).

For those who champion standard English, there are "at least five grounds on which to object to a word, a phrase, or a usage: (1) taste (or personal preference) … (2) authority (or) proper usage … established by the great writers (3) etymology, the true meaning … (or) the meaning of its root, usually the Germanic, Latin, or Greek … (4) analogy with classical grammar, (e.g.) Latin and Greek (and) … (5) logic" to prohibit abuse such as the double-negative (Lynch, 2009, p. 188). But there are other objections that relate more specifically to spelling.

"A common assumption in studies of English world-wide is that speakers of an L2 (or second language) frequently rely on the orthographic form of words in settling upon their pronunciation … the 'spelling form hypothesis' … (but) phonetic and orthographic forms often do not coincide" (Mesthrie, 2005, p. 127). There are numerous "conceptual problems with the 'spelling form hypothesis' … Assumption 1: Literacy is widespread … Assumption 2: L2 speakers learn the spelling of words before they formulate (mental) phonological classes of words … Assumption 3: Spelling is easy, pronunciation is difficult … Assumption 4: English letters have sounds about which there is consensus amongst all L2 speakers … Assumption 5: Literary people access orthographic forms as they speak … (and) Assumption 6: L2 diachrony (processes and strategies speakers use in order to communicate) is involved in L2 synchronic processing" (ibid, p. 134-139).

There is however agreement in one respect: "It has been observed by all writers, on the English language, that the orthography or spelling of words is very irregular; the same letters often representing different sounds, and the same sounds often expressed by different letters … Two principal causes may be assigned: 1. The changes to which the pronunciation of a language is liable, from the progress of science and civilization; (and) 2. The mixture of different languages, occasioned by revolutions in England, or by a predilection of the learned, for words of foreign growth and ancient origin" (Webster, 1789, p. 391).

4. Man-Machine

This disconnect between spelling and pronunciation causes confusion not only between people but between people and machines. "Man-machine oral communication is complicated by the inconsistencies and ambiguities of English spelling, variation in pitch and stress used to convey emotion or meaning, and the fact that spoken sentences do not normally have pauses between words" (Sanford and Gibson, 1981, p. 241).

> Some 45 letters/characters are required to represent the sounds of English. Because the Roman alphabet contains only 26 symbols, the needed extra symbols have either been borrowed from other languages or invented as entirely new symbols, as in various dictionary-oriented phonetic alphabets such as the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) and the American College Dictionary Alphabet (ACD), or made up of combinations of two or more Roman letters, as in World English Spelling (WES), and two-character ARPABET. One other approach has been to assign different sounds to upper- and lower-case Roman letters, as in single-character ARPABET. Clearly, the use of nonstandard characters is incompatible with any scheme for communication with computers or machines through standard terminals or typewriters, and also presents a problem of recognition for the average reader" (ibid, 1981, p. 241-2).

The situation is even worse for people whose native tongue is not English. But some automated help is now available:

First, there is general "speech recognition" software for transcription of spoken English to written English (as opposed to "voice recognition" software for authentication in lieu of passwords). In particular, "professional transcriptionists need cost-effective tools for processing digital dictation from their healthcare, legal and professional authors" (American Dictation, 2011).

Second, there are programs that transcribe Standard English into phonetic English. "Truespel is a simple phonetic notation for American English. Words are written as they sound and are consistent with the pronunciation guide in an American dictionary. It uses a minimal set of 40 phonograms or sound signs and a stress marking convention (and) … is the first USA English phonetic spelling system that is pronunciation guide quality" (Zurinskas, 2011). You simply cut and paste text in ordinary English for immediate translation into phonetic English. A similar program, upodn.com, transcribes text using either American Phonetic English or the International Phonetic Alphabet. Other such programs include fyxm.net and project-modelino.com.

Third, there are machines that convert documents to speech. "The Intel Reader transforms printed text to the spoken word. It combines a high-resolution camera with the power of an Intel Atom processor" (Care Innovations, 2011).

Fourth, there are programs such as dictionary.com that enable users to look up words by typing them or by speaking them.

It provides "online access to millions of English definitions, synonyms, spelling, audio pronunciations, example sentences, and translations" through its Web properties (Dictionary.com, Thesaurus.com, and Reference.com), through its mobile applications (including iPhone, BlackBerry, Android, and iPad), and through its API (application program interface) data services (Dictionary.com, 2011). Using the cell phone "app" Dictionary.com, users may type or speak a word to see it defined and to hear it pronounced (using a Wi-Fi internet connection).

And, fifth, there are programs that translate from one language to another including worldlingo.com, translation.langenberg.com, freetranslation.com, speechtrans.com, translate.google.com, etc. Google Translate is a cell phone "app" featuring optional voice input and output (using a Wi-Fi internet connection). David Crystal "reckons that it is only a matter of time before automatic machine translation (MT) becomes so sophisticated that the language of Bagehot loses its role as lingua franca" (Economist, 6 August 2011, p. 50).

5. Conclusion

In the meantime, English continues to spread from the UK, the US, Australia, Canada, Ireland, and New Zealand around the world. Normally, the widespread dissemination of a language results in many different dialects and, in some instances, entirely new languages. Latin, for instance, morphed into the Romance or Romanic languages, e.g. French, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian, Spanish, etc. Geographical distances and social differences are obviously key factors.

The proliferation of English is not however leading to its disintegration. Instead, it is leading to its standardization especially in terms of phonetic spelling. Technological innovation is proving to be "the keyboard factor" as emails and text messages make instantaneous global communication not only possible and practical but also phonetic. Provincials by definition oppose linguistic uniformity but even they are being swayed by the personal computers and smart phones of the communications revolution. Young people are especially apt to spell words like they sound. Inadvertently, they are following the advice given by Noah Webster over two hundred years ago:

> The principal alterations, necessary to render our orthography sufficiently regular and easy, are these:
> 1. The omission of all superfluous or silent letters (bilt instead of built and frend instead of friend) …
> 2: A substitution of a character that has a certain sound, for one that is more vague and indeterminate (meen instead of mean and macheen instead of machine) … in this manner ch in Greek derivatives should be changed into k (karacter instead of character) … (and) 3. ch in French derivatives should be changed into sh (from machine to macheen to masheen) (Webster, 1789, p. 393-398).

"The great merit of spelling reform is that it would no longer require generations of students to spend years learning how to spell. The main obstacle, though, is that one generation would have to learn an entirely new system, which would require tremendous effort … (and if) a new system of English spelling is adopted – within a generation or so, centuries' worth of English literature would be unreadable" (Lynch, 2009, p. 183). But the advantages of phonetic English over standard English are roughly analogous to the advantages of the metric system over customary weights and measures in our modern technological society.

It is important for the US as a superpower to lead and to lead by example adopting phonetic English as its official language. As citizens, we should urge our representatives in Congress to enact legislation that mandates a system of easily pronounceable and spell-able English. And, as teachers, we should accept phonetic spelling with good grace on handwritten exams. But, until phonetic English is made official, we should continue to teach proper, standard, and conventional English to all our students: native born Americans, immigrants, and foreigners alike (Mujica, 2003). Failure to do so may limit their participation in global society.

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