

## Writing systems: the utmost monstrosity of alphabets and ‘orthographies’

That human things are quite imperfect is something sadly known to any thinking being. Among the various questionable manifestations of human ‘intelligence’, here we want to deal with the writing system of ‘cultural languages’, namely the ones which, somehow, have been equipped with a kind of spelling.

First of all, we must debunk the belief that writing is the very essence of a language. There are even people who believe that spelling has a ‘divine origin’ – we obviously refer to those who are willing to believe in the existence of one or more gods, whose wickedness would appear even in the visible aspect of a language, in addition to the serious guilt of having ‘created’ the world and everything that belongs to it.

Such a concept is absurd by nature: as a matter of fact, most languages have no (official or unofficial) writing system. Admittedly, the languages equipped with a writing system are spoken by about 95% of all speakers in the world (with different degrees of proficiency), reaching the number of only a few hundred languages. Around 500 languages (certainly not over 2,000 – for which some Bible-mad people have prepared their translations, that have no practical value at all). The other 5,500 languages remaining today (or even 10,000, depending on the criteria used for their classification) are spoken by just a ‘poor’ 5% of speakers. On the average, each one of these languages would have about 60,000 speakers; but, very many of them are restricted to few tribes or villages, therefore used only by a few *thousands* of speakers, sometimes not more than a *hundred*, at most.

It is estimated that in Africa there are 900 million inhabitants, who speak over 1,500 languages (even though a dozen of these are spoken by 75% of people; whereas the over 100 million Nigerians speak around 250 different languages, obviously with widespread bilingualism or plurilingualism (R. Breton [2003] even says 470 ‘languages!’).

Moreover, in Amazonia, one could find 400 ‘languages’, spoken by about 3 million inhabitants, scattered in that vast territory (average: 7,500 speakers per language). And in Papua New Guinea, around 800 ‘languages’ are spoken by 7 million people (average: 8,750).

Even in Italy, if dialects are taken into account, the inventory can safely exceed 500 in number, obviously, not fully intelligible to each other, but grouped in koines, within which somehow mutual intelligibility occurs in contiguous areas, and can even occur in faraway areas of the same koine or between contiguous areas of different koines!

Of course, we must always keep in mind the various possibilities of bilingualism (and plurilingualism) between national languages and dialects (or other languages). Therefore, any counting of speakers is –necessarily– done by tens, hundreds, thousands (ie 10, 100, 1000), as well as by tens and hundreds of thousands (ie 10,000, 100,000), up to millions (ie 1,000,000) or tens and hundreds of millions (ie 10,000,000, 100,000,000).

Structurally, and scientifically, there is no difference between a language spoken by hundred millions of people and one spoken by merely a few dozen people. Of course, very different are the considerations concerning the usefulness and practicality of these latter languages in relation to the first ones.

But, back to the heart of the matter, writing is nothing but a secondary expedient, not necessary at all. It is just a superstructure, undoubtedly useful for non-oral communication, as printing and word processing demonstrate. However, calling somebody on the phone or listening to (magnetic or electronic) recordings clearly shows that true (oral) languages do not depend at all on their possible written form.

Talking about official spellings, it's inevitable to say that the *ideographic* and *pictographic* ones are outdated, and basically, absurd (because neither scientific, nor useful; but rather childish). However, it's better not to say that to Chinese or Japanese people!

*Para-alphabetic* writings (based on consonants, or syllables and with 'inherent' vowels, or morae) are almost just as absurd. They are incomplete, and with many –even serious– imperfections.

The least absurd writing systems are the *alphabetic* (or *segmental*) ones, with vowels and consonants, that combine, regardless of semantics, but simply in order to fix a visual aspect, starting from pronunciation, which is the true manifestation of each language. Writing is only a secondary –not necessary– expedient, so much so that the vast majority of languages have no orthography (despite working regularly as means of oral communication), as we said.

We discard, for scientific reasons, all the non-alphabetic writing systems (in spite of the visceral attachment by various people to their very deficient systems as if they even were divine emanation, as we said); we can't avoid to criticize all the alphabetic systems, as well.

Even the most widely used alphabet, the *Latin* one, has very clear flaws and a small number of characters. In fact, it needs integration, consisting of additional letters (like  $\emptyset$ ,  $\text{æ}$ ,  $\text{x}$ ,  $\text{ç}$  – and  $\beta$  not really necessary), or diacritics (like  $\grave{\text{e}}$ ,  $\hat{\text{o}}$ ,  $\ddot{\text{u}}$ ,  $\text{å}$ ,  $\tilde{\text{n}}$ ). What is more, for plain phonemes, it's often necessary to use digraphs (like *ch*, *sh*, *th*, *ng*), or trigraphs (like *sch*), or even tetragraphs (like *tsch*).

In addition, there is the complication of 'etymological' writings, that unduly favor diachronic considerations (*real* ones, as in French *doigt* /'dwa/, from Latin *digitum*; or *alleged* ones, as in English *debt* /'dɛt/, twistedly influenced by its Latin form *debitum*). If such ways of writing words can connect certain words to previous forms, however, they move away a language from its effective oral form.

English and French orthographies, unfortunately, are based more on etymology than on linguistics. French also uses a series of diacritics (as Portuguese does, which, at least, has now abandoned the absurd etymological criteria, with *ph*, *rh*, *th*, *pp*, *tt*, *ff*, *ll*, *mm*...). English does not use diacritics, but suffers from all the drawbacks of etymology and of original spellings for the many loanwords it accepted and continues to accept.

The use of the Latin alphabet for the Romance languages has historical motivations. But now, after the inevitable evolution of each of them, the Latin alphabet clearly shows all its limits. In fact, there is no scientific connection between these languages and their written aspect, not even for Italian.

For example, an inherited absurdity from Latin is the grapheme *c* having two different phonemic correspondences in *cicala* /tʃi'kala/. Of course, to schooled Italians it may seem 'very natural' (almost 'divine!') that *c* is /tʃ/ before *i*, *e*, but /k/ before *a*, *o*, *u*. In reality, it's an absurdity that borders on uncivilized barbarousness (although, part of 'Italian civilization').

Naturally, it's not any better for most other languages, which use the Latin alphabet, having to resort to many diacritics and 'weird' combinations (but absurdly considered almost 'natural' by all speakers of those languages).

However, it would be more serious to use different letters, such as *č* /tʃ/ and *k* /k/ in all their possible contexts: before any vowel, or consonant, and word-finally. After all, thinking with a clear mind, *čikala* and *čigante* /tʃi'gante/ are not actually strange, as *cicala* and *gigante* are, instead.

Further languages in the world also use the Latin alphabet, but not without problems: in other parts of Europe, in America, Oceania, Africa and Asia. Vietnamese, for instance, has too many complicated diacritics (also due to its tones).

Even Esperanto has six absurd letters with a diacritic; being a constructed language, it would have been more serious to use just the 26 basic letters of the Latin alphabet, with only 26 phonemes instead of 28, by simply abolishing *ĵ* and *ĥ* /ʒ, x/ (and changing the shape of words containing them).

Also the *Cyrillic* alphabet (used by most Slavonic languages and, with absurd impositions, by those in the vast territories of the former Soviet Union) is not better than the Latin one.

Even the *Greek* alphabet has some serious flaws, especially for modern Greek with a myriad of ways for writing its only five phonic vowels /a/ α; /e/ ε & ε; /i/ ι, η, ι, οι, υ & υι (!); [σ] ο & ω; /u/ ου; to say nothing about sequences of vowel and consonant /av, af#, afC/ & /ev, ef#, efC/, still written as αυ and ευ, respectively. Luckily, at least, Greek got rid of two of its three traditional kind of written accents (and of its two 'breathings', rightly abolished). However, the *Georgian* and *Armenian* alphabets are not less criticizable.

Still worse are the Hebrew and Arabic 'alphabets' (with the complication of many variants depending on their position in words; used, with modifications, also in Persian, Pashto, Kurdish, Urdu, Sindhi), with vowels to be 'guessed' since they are not written.

In addition, there is the imaginative proliferation of alphabets, mostly syllabic, from the Indian subcontinent; and those used for Mongolian, Korean, Burmese, Thai, Lao, Khmer, Javanese (and Amharic, in Ethiopia), all different, only to name the ones for the most important languages.

Finally, alas, there are the various Chinese languages (and Japanese, which has decided to 'treat' itself with the Chinese way of writing, in addition to its own

two, rather limited, syllabic inventories). Mandarin Chinese also has an unsatisfactory, syllabic, official Romanization, with different diacritics especially for its tonemes: *pīnyīn* (in a pathetic and anachronistic attempt to combine *initials* and *finals*).

Those ideograms (absurdly called 'characters', since they are not *a, b, c...*) must be connected to some meanings (more or less 'hidden' in what remains of the original rather childlike 'drawings'), not to phonic segments that form individual words: not to real *characters*, which may be printable, like vowels and consonants. A true 'stroke of genius', for its native speakers, who, with great difficulty, managed to learn some thousands of these non-words. Only the most learned among those speakers can be said to know more than 10,000 of them.

In fact, rather than words, those 'image-syllables' are just like child stickers in an album, which must be deciphered depending on the number and type of strokes used to form each ideogram, according to certain criteria.

However, those criteria have nothing to do with true alphabetic criteria, by which single words are formed (and identified while deciphering them in reading). After all, as we all should clearly know, in this third millennium, any word is made up of phones (and phonemes and tonemes) in given sequences.

Each *phoneme* –in every language– should have its own unambiguous spelling! Finally, let us end with a sad thought about the absurd order of the letters of any existing alphabet, although each of us may be lead to consider it satisfactory, having learnt it so since our schooldays.

In addition, no single alphabet coincides with all others, to say nothing about the additional letters with diacritics, which should immediately follow their basic letters, in a simple and logical way.

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