

## A NEW ORTHOGRAPHIC SCRIPT FOR ENGLISH

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This is a brief report on a project having the aim of providing a new script for the English language. The new system of writing (which incidentally could well prove adaptable to other languages besides English) has now reached the point of being about to appear in print, and I am very sorry to have to say that I am not in a position – I am not permitted – to put it before you to-day. The reason for this regrettable secrecy will become clearer when I have filled in the background for you and sketched the events leading up to this forthcoming publication, but I should like to make it clear from the outset that I had very much hoped to be able to present the new alphabet at this Congress, and I trust that what I have to say will yet have some interest for you – in the absence of the script itself, about which I can however perhaps say just a little.

George Bernard Shaw, Irish playwright, critic and social reformer, died in 1950 at the age of 94. His interest in the alphabet during his lifetime was well-known, and when he died he left the bulk of the income from his considerable estate – nearly three quarters of a million pounds gross – in trust for 21 years after his death for a project for the creation and propagation of an entirely new alphabet.

Though the wording of the Will, and Shaw's pronouncements on the subject during his life, were characteristically vague on certain matters – notably just what the new alphabet was to look like, he was quite specific on a number of points: it was to have at least 40 letters (so as to cater for English on the basis of one letter for each sound), and it was to be used in a published transliteration of his play *Androcles and the Lion*, with our present roman orthography (what Shaw referred to as "Johnsese") on each facing page. Copies of this book were to be presented (and here I quote from the Will) "to public libraries in the British Isles, the British Commonwealth, the American States North and South and to national libraries everywhere in that order." Then, statistical estimates, based on comparison between the two scripts, were to be made of the economy achieved by the new over the old, this to be expressed as the annual saving, in monetary terms, taking into account the amount of writing and printing in English going on throughout the world.

Shaw had always been emphatic that the only effective appeal would be to people's pockets, and he was confident that the potential savings would prove to be astronomical, after which users of English would realise that they could hardly afford *not*

to go in for a new writing system. All this remains to be seen, since the text on which the statistical work is to be based has yet to appear. When the results are finally made known Shaw's wishes will have been carried out in full. He saw that there could be no question of imposing a new script on an apathetic or unwilling public, but that such a script would have to make its way on merit, if at all. The analogy that it is useful for one to keep in mind is that of the so-called arabic numerals, which have now taken the place of the much more laborious roman numerals for almost all purposes.

Well now, to go back a bit and deal chronologically with events since the publication of Bernard Shaw's Will. To cut a very long and involved story short: as a result of legal difficulties relating to the validity of the Will, it was not until the end of 1957 that the Public Trustee, whom Shaw had made responsible for carrying out his wishes, was able to reach a settlement and announce a public Competition for designing a new alphabet, the prize for the successful design being £500. Shaw himself had said nothing about the Competition, but the Public Trustee considered it would be preferable to choose an alphabet by public competition rather than just appoint someone to design one. So an advertisement, with an explanatory memorandum to help designers, was put out and by the closing date, one year later, some 450 designs had been sent in, from all parts of the world, and the panel of three judges set to work. Another year went by, and on New Year's Eve 1959 the Public Trustee announced the result: no one entry was considered perfect enough to be adopted as it stood and used for Shaw's scheme. However, four entries were declared to be of outstanding merit and the prize-money was divided equally between them, thus closing the Competition. But *Androcles* could not be printed until a single alphabet had emerged, so then the interim prize-winners were invited to revise their work in the light of suggestions and criticism. One of the designs, after considerable re-casting, proved superior and it is this that has been used in the transliteration which is now completed and in the hands of the printer. Within a very few months the book will be out, and besides the presentation copies to libraries it will be on sale to the public. It will contain, in addition to the dual text of the play, introductory and explanatory articles by various people who have been associated with the project.

Now I come to the reason why I am not allowed to place the actual design before you to-day: it is simply that the Public Trustee wants the book to make a profit, so as to increase the meagre resources now at his disposal for carrying out the rest of the project, and he is convinced that a leakage in advance of publication would cause public interest (such as it is) to slacken at the material time, namely when the book is first put on sale, since most of those who buy a copy will do so largely out of curiosity.

Now let me see what I can tell you about the Shaw Alphabet itself in the remaining time at my disposal. The first point is that it is completely new and original, not based on the roman letters, or on any others as a matter of policy – though resemblances to some existing forms can of course be seen. If simple forms are used – and simplicity is an obvious desideratum for any script – they are bound to be constructed

of elementary shapes such as the straight line and curves or parts of a circle, and so resemble existing simple forms such as one finds in the roman letters.

Complementary to the striving for simplicity, and to a certain extent conflicting with it, has been the search for maximum distinctiveness, the idea being that no letter should be liable to be mistaken for any other, even out of context, or even when carelessly formed by hand, or in very small print sizes.

Since the new letters are unlike any previously known to people, it follows that one cannot recognise even familiar words when written with those letters and so cannot read from the script until one has learnt to do so. This disconcerting fact has of course nothing to do with the intrinsic legibility of the letters or of groups of letters. The legibility of the script should prove to be good and the letters as such are certainly not difficult to learn.

The relationship between sound and symbol is of course a phonetic one but only to the extent appropriate to an orthography and, moreover, one which should be, by and large, equally acceptable to speakers of any type of English. For world purposes one would have the choice either of standardising spellings (which would require some arbitrary memorisation by all speakers) or of tolerating alternative spellings to a greater or lesser extent.

*Economy in use* has been a primary aim: this is achieved by omitting all unwanted, "silent" or doubled letters, by a judicious use of abbreviation for certain very common words, by avoiding letter shapes with lateral spread, and by allocating the simplest and narrowest letters to the most frequently occurring sounds.

The script is read from left to right, from top to bottom of the page – just like our present writing: it would clearly be undesirable to depart from established English practice in such fundamental matters.

There *is* departure from tradition – and a theoretical improvement – in the fact that each letter has one invariable basic shape: there are no capitals (though there is a device for indicating proper names where necessary), and cursive writing is not intended to look very different from print. Cursive should therefore be disjoined or, if joined, then the basic shapes should not be permitted to distort in the process of linking. It is thought that even if the new script proved on balance slower to write by hand than roman (and this is by no means a foregone conclusion), time would be saved at the other end in compensation, readers not having to decipher so much illegible handwriting.

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#### DISCUSSION

La question d'un alphabet de tracé neuf rationnel ne se pose pas que pour l'anglais.

Voir Marcel Cohen, *La grande invention de l'écriture et son évolution* 1958 volume de documentation p. 148. Ajouter, depuis, une publication de l'ingénieur Cordonnier.

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