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WRITING SYSTEMS

The Status of the English Language

Paper presented by the United Kingdom ^{1/}

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In the eighth century BC, when the Greeks adapted Phoenician script to produce the Greek alphabet, seven of the resulting letters represented vowel sounds. This was the first graphic representation of the individual vowels of a language and it could well have been the factor, above all others, which led to the adaptation by the Romans of the Greek alphabet for the writing of Latin.

In the ninth century Cyril and Methodius supplemented the Greek alphabet to provide Old Bulgarian with an alphabet of its own, an alphabet from which all the present-day Cyrillic alphabets were developed.




There were minor defects in the Greek alphabet as far as Latin was concerned. The letter "c" was used to represent the sounds "g" and "k". To remedy this, the Romans invented the letter "g". A second shortcoming was that long and short vowels were not differentiated. Neither was tonic stress indicated. These factors have been present in the Roman alphabet ever since.

Writing is not language, but is rather its graphic representation. As languages change through time, writing therefore at best serves as a guide to pronunciation, only at a particular date to a particular group of speakers of a single language. Dialect prevents a unique reading of writing. With time, moreover, changes of syntax and of speech habits create an ever-widening rift between the written and spoken forms of all languages. This rift is no less marked in alphabetic writing systems than in, say, the Han characters of Chinese. In both cases pronunciation is now markedly different from the past, and varies from region to region at any given period.

In the case of the Roman alphabet, this movement away from the original phonetic quality of the individual letters or groups of letters is dramatically displayed in the Romance languages, the direct descendants of Latin.

In French, Italian and Spanish (the last two less far removed from Latin), the letter "h" has lost its phonetic quality and is now no more than an orthographical convention. The letter "i" has been substituted for Latin "l" in many Italian words. In Spanish, "h" has frequently been substituted for "f". The "k" sound is rendered "ch" in Italian but "qu" in Spanish, where Latin had "c". Alternatively, this same Latin letter is pronounced as English "ch" in Italian (before "e" and "i"), as "s" in French, and as English "th" in Castilian Spanish. The letters "g", "j" and "z" are pronounced totally differently in the three languages. Portuguese "x" equals French "ch" and Italian "sci", and does not occur in Spanish.

There cannot be said, therefore, to be a single Roman alphabet even for the three major Romance languages. If we add, for example, Catalan and Romanian, we add two further distinct alphabets. Therein lies the difficulty of trying to achieve international standardization in the romanization of geographical names. Furthermore, the Roman alphabet is used far more widely than in the Romance languages.

Some time before 300 AD the Germanic peoples adopted a Graeco-Roman alphabet whose letters, the "runes", sometimes known as "futhark", were:
f u  a r k g w h n i j p  z s t b e m l  o d.
This very useful alphabet was gradually replaced by the Latin alphabet, and by the eighth century, when Latin was being translated into English, the Latin alphabet was adopted with the addition of the letters "θ" and "w". Under Norman influence the letter "θ" disappeared, leaving the English alphabet in the form we use today. There were deficiencies for English in the Latin alphabet, and the digraphs "ch", "sh" and "th" were devised. There were no symbols specifically for the whole range of vowel phonemes. On the other hand, there were three surplus letters: "c", "q" and "x" (pronounced "s" or "k", "k", and "ks" or "gs" respectively).

Other European languages developed special forms of the Roman alphabet. Dutch, German, Finnish, Hungarian, Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, and so on: no single alphabet is common to any pair of languages. There is likewise a lack of uniformity in the Cyrillic alphabets, and even greater differences in those Slavonic languages which adopted the Roman alphabet, as a comparison of (for example) Czech and Polish will demonstrate.

How does one proceed in trying to find an acceptable method of romanization which will serve the purposes of international standardization? It would be neither helpful nor realistic to ask people to learn even a small number of the many existing Roman alphabets, with the additional task of remembering how to pronounce the individual simple or accented or modified letters, or consonant clusters.

It would be unwise to look beyond the three Roman-alphabet working languages of the United Nations for this purpose. All three languages are widely understood. English in particular has acquired international standing and is the most widely understood language in the world today. It is reported that, in the People's Republic of China alone, the number of people learning English exceeds the entire English-speaking population of the United States. English has become the first language in communications, diplomacy, sport, commerce and education. In the last few decades it has also become the language of computer science, space, physics, mathematics, and the special disciplines of meteorology, oceanography, cartography, photogrammetry, geodesy and surveying. These disciplines are closely related to geographical names.

Yet in the attempts to achieve standardization in the romanization of geographical names there has been a move away from English, French and Spanish in the past few years. This is a quite remarkable trend, and the Conference and the Group of Experts should pause and study the possible consequences of this drift. We should not attempt to impose on the non-specialist user geographical names which he will have the ability neither to pronounce nor to memorise. To expect a large number of people to learn even a few unfamiliar letters is too much to ask: geographical names are difficult enough even when written in the alphabet of a single Roman-alphabet language.

Part of the drift away from these three languages is shown by the tendency to replace digraphs familiar to millions of people around the world by unfamiliar letters with accents and diacritical signs. For most of the world the use of diacritical signs is beyond the competence of all except a few specialists. The rest lack the facility for typing or printing them without special equipment. Even writing them demands special instructions and practice.

We recommend a restriction in the use of accents, signs and modified letters to circumstances where they cannot be avoided in romanization.