Alphabetism in reading science

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Reviewed by:
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Keywords: learning to read, reading, anglocentrism, alphabetism, language, writing systems, orthography

There has been mounting concern among social scientists that conclusions from studies conducted on highly educated populations from affluent European cultures may have limited applicability to human behavior in general (Henrich et al., 2010). Similar reservations have also been voiced in the fields of language (Evans and Levinson, 2009) and literacy (Share, 2008a; Frost, 2012). Reading research, in particular, has been overwhelmingly dominated by work on English, which appears to be an outlier among European alphabets (Seymour et al., 2003; Share, 2008a).

I have argued that because spelling–sound relations are so complex in English orthography, much of reading research has been confined to a narrow Anglocentric research agenda addressing theoretical and applied issues with only limited relevance for a universal science of reading and literacy.

My intention here is not to reiterate my 2008 arguments or even expand them, but to move on to another major obstacle to progress. Before moving on, however, I would like to add a note of optimism to the Anglocentrism debate. In recent years, interest in other languages has indeed begun to emerge from the shadows probably because the scientific community of Anglo-American reading researchers has felt itself “come of age” as a substantial body of well-replicated and converging findings has coalesced in recent years, at least on several key topics such as word identification and dyslexia (Vellutino et al., 2004; Snowling and Hulme, 2005; DeHaene, 2009; Rayner et al., 2012). The field is now witnessing important first steps toward universal models of reading (Perfetti, 2003; Perfetti et al., 2005; Ziegler and Goswami, 2005; Frost, 2012) as well as a growing number of linguistically and grammatologically informed studies emerging outside the confines of English and other European alphabets (Nag and Perfetti, 2014; Saiegh-Haddad and Joshi, 2014; Verhoeven and Perfetti, 2014). It is still the case, nonetheless, that the theoretical and applied frameworks developed for English are all too frequently being applied to other languages and writing systems without due consideration for linguistic and writing system diversity. Almost all publications by English-language researchers continue to omit any “…in English” qualification in the titles of their papers—“A New Whiz-Bang+++ Model of Learning to Read”—as if the results of studies conducted in English alone enjoy the privileged status of universal applicability, unlike researchers investigating other languages who are obliged to qualify their findings by adding the “…in Chinese/Arabic/Korean etc.” disclaimer which automatically demarcates the findings as language-specific and hence not necessarily universally applicable.

Here, I focus on yet another “-ism,” which I call “alphabetism”; the belief that alphabetic writing systems are inherently superior to non-alphabetic systems, and which, like Anglocentrism, has also stymied psychologists’ and educators’ thinking about learning to read across diverse writing systems. Here too, I join other scholars who have also expressed concerns about “alphabetolatry,” or alphabetic “supremacism” (e.g., Rogers, 1995). Looking around the globe, it is apparent that most individuals do not acquire literacy in a European alphabet, yet in many parts of the (non-European) world, the belief that alphabetic orthographies are the ideal has led to calls to alphabetize or discard non-alphabetic scripts. Needless to say, these proposals have profound ramifications for instruction and curriculum.

In the past, many influential Western scholars explicitly argued that alphabets are inherently superior to non-alphabetic writing systems (Taylor, 1883; Gelb, 1963; Havelock, 1982). The shelves of most college libraries abound with volumes whose very titles idealize the alphabet (e.g., Diringer’s The Alphabet: A Key to the History of Mankind; Moorhouse’s Triumph of the Alphabet). When reading researchers today seek enlightenment on the subject of writing systems they refer to Gelb—the founding father of the field of “grammatology” (Gelb, 1963). Like Taylor (1883) before him, Gelb (1963) propounded an evolutionary view of writing system history from “primitivist” pre-alphabetic systems to alphabetic. Consistent with the “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny” idea, Gelb’s inexorable “three great steps [logographic-to-syllabicto-alphabetic] by which writing evolved from the primitive stages to a full alphabet” (p. 203) was embraced by almost all reading researchers, despite its repudiation by subsequent scholarship in the field of writing systems research (Mattingly, 1985; Olson, 1989; Daniels, 1992, in press; Rogers, 2005; Coulmas, 2009). Foremost among these, perhaps, was Ferreiro in her Piagetian classic Literacy before Schooling (Ferreiro and Teberosky, 1979) and, subsequently, a series of stage-oriented theories of reading and writing development (Piagetian and non-Piagetian alike) all referring to pre-alphabetic and alphabetic stages (Gough and Hillinger, 1980; Marsh et al., 1981; Frith, 1985; Ehri, 2005). It needs to be pointed out, however, that the
“The Phonecian system, however, was not perfect. It failed to represent all vowels... It was the Greeks who finally created the alphabet as we know it... For the first time in the history of mankind, the alphabet allowed the Greeks to have a complete graphic inventory of their language sounds.” (Dehaene, 2009, p. 193).

“The basic difference between Western alphabetic and East Asian syllabic writing acts on several levels to promote or inhibit creativity, particularly that associated with breakthroughs in science... syllabic literacy entails a diminished propensity for abstract and analytical thought... Certain Asian characteristics credited with blocking creativity, such as conservative political and social institutions and group-oriented behavior, derive in part from effects that the orthography has had on the minds of individuals,” (Hannas, 2003, p. 203).

Although some initial thoughts have been offered as to when an alphabet may or may not be the appropriate orthography (e.g., Perfetti and Harris, 2013), this topic is new to the agenda of reading science. Some historical background on the alphabet provides a valuable perspective on this issue.

SOME HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Contrary to popular belief, the alphabet did not originate among Semitic speakers, or their Egyptian neighbors, but was a uniquely Greek creation invented only once, and probably on the basis of a fortuitous misunderstanding of Phoenician writing (Daniels, 1992). An alphabetic writing system, with full and equal representation of consonants and vowels, was ideally suited to the unique features of Indo-European languages (Diringer, 1948; Taylor, 1883). It added vowel notation to the Phoenician abjad, which was also a segmental/phonemic system but represented (and only needed to represent) consonants alone. Would an alphabet ever have been needed had there been no Indo-European languages in the world? Indo-European languages have a large inventory of complex syllable structures, far too many for a syllabary such as Japanese. And because vowels are essential constituents of root morphemes (bat/bet/bit/but/beet/etc.) the Semitic abjad would have been inadequate.

This uniquely European mutation was first disseminated throughout Europe with the spread of Christianity, then across the globe by European colonizers, traders, and, above all, missionaries who never thought to question whether their own writing systems would be optimal for non-European languages. They took it for granted that the ideal orthography was alphabetic, operating on the principle of one letter for one sound (phoneme) for both consonants and vowels under the motto “consonants as in English, vowels as in Italian.” (Gleason, 1996).

But are alphabets optimal? Well, we really don’t know. There is, however, evidence suggesting that it cannot be assumed that alphabets are inherently superior and therefore the default choice of script. There are at least four lines of counterevidence converging on the conclusion that syllable-based writing systems are, in many cases, superior to alphabets.

1. Psychoacoustically, syllables are more “real” than phonemes (Liberman et al., 1967). Data from illiterates (Morais et al., 1987), pre-literates (Liberman et al., 1974), or persons literate in purely morpho-syllabic or syllabic systems (Read et al., 1986) confirm that syllables are easier to deal with than phonemes.

2. Historically, syllabaries appeared earlier and more often in ancient times (Rogers, 2005; Gnanadesikan, 2009),
Anthropologists have reported widespread literacy among indigenous peoples using syllabic systems in North America (among the Cree, McCarthy, 1995; Cherokee, Walker, 1969; Africa, Scribner and Cole, 1981); and the Philippines (the Hanunó'o, Kuipers and McDermott, 1996).

Quasi-experimental studies suggest that young children are able to learn to read syllabically (abugidically) more easily than phonemically/alphabetically (e.g., Gleitman and Rosin, 1973; Asfaha et al., 2009). Asfaha et al., for example, investigated reading acquisition in four Eritrean languages that use either syllabic (abugidic) (CV) Ge’ez (Tigrinya and Tigre) or alphabetic Latin-based scripts (Kunama and Saho). Instruction in alphabetic Saho focuses on CV units, whereas alphabetic Kunama is taught alphabetically, i.e., phonemically. Asfaha et al. found that first graders learned to read the non-alphabetic Ge’ez far more easily than the alphabetic scripts in spite of the larger number of signs. Moreover, the abugidic CV-level teaching of alphabetic Saho produced superior results compared to alphabetic teaching of (alphabetic) Kunama. There are also studies showing that children and adults who have struggled to learn to read alphabetically find it easier to learn to read a syllable-based orthography than an alphabetic orthography (Gleitman and Rosin, 1973; Moore et al., 2014).

My aim here is not to show that syllabic writing systems are superior to alphabetic systems, but simply that alphabets cannot be assumed a priori to be inherently superior to other writing systems. The crucial question (as discussed by Perfetti and Harris, 2013) is the match between language structure and writing system, in particular the size and complexity of the syllable inventory.

This issue leads to the more general question, What makes an orthography more or less optimal?

WRITING SYSTEM EFFICIENCY AND A UNIVERSAL MODEL OF LEARNING TO READ

An efficient writing system must do two things simultaneously: represent sound and meaning (Rogers, 1995; Share, 2008b; Frost, 2012). This is no simple task, because these two aspects of writing must often be traded off against each other. I have termed these two dimensions of orthography deciperability and automizability/unitizability (Share, 2008b). Orthographies can be regarded as dual-purpose devices serving the distinct needs of novices and experts (see Share, 2008a). Because all words are initially unfamiliar, the reader needs a means of deciphering new letter strings unassisted (see Share, 1995, 2008b, for more detailed discussion, and Ziegler et al., 2014 for an explicit computational instantiation of this notion). Here, the representation of recombined sub-lexical phonological elements (either syllabic, sub-syllabic, or phonemic) is fundamental if a script is destined to be decipherable and learnable (Mattingly, 1985; Unger and DeFrancis, 1995). But the essence of skilled reading (as is the case with all human skills) is speed and effortlessness. To achieve fluent, automatized reading, the expert-to-be requires unique word-specific or morpheme-specific letter configurations that can be “unitized” and automatized for instant access to units of meaning. Here morpheme-level (and probably also word-level) representation is essential. Both morpheme distinctiveness (<rite/right>) as well as morpheme constancy (<soft/soften>) are crucial for rapid silent reading (Rogers, 1995).

The corollary to this orthographic duality is what goes on inside the reader’s head. Initially unfamiliar words and morphemes become familiar units, as the novice reader’s orthographic lexicon begins to grow. This “unfamiliar-to-familiar” or “novice-to-expert” dualism highlights the developmental transition (common to all human skill learning) from slow, deliberate, step-by-step, unskilled performance to rapid, automatic, one-step (i.e., unitized) skilled processing. And because this broader dualism applies to all words in all orthographies, it seems a useful platform for developing a universal theory of learning to read.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This manuscript was written while the author was a Visiting Scholar at the Department of Educational Psychology, City University of New York, Graduate Center, in New York City. The author is indebted to Dr. Linnea Ehri for graciously hosting this visit.

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Conflict of Interest Statement: The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Received: 25 March 2014; accepted: 27 June 2014; published online: 18 July 2014.

Citation: Share DL (2014) Alphabetism in reading science. *Front. Psychol.* 5:752. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00752

This article was submitted to Cognitive Science, a section of the journal Frontiers in Psychology.

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