IN A MANNER OF SPEAKING

a monthly podcast on the spoken word

EPISODE #8, September 2018: *Do Phonetics! Change the World!*

Hello, Paul Meier here with the latest podcast from Paul Meier Dialect Services, at paulmeier.com. That's where you'll find all my books, ebooks, and services for spoken-word training and coaching, from stage dialects, to Shakespeare, to corporate communication, and accent training for non-actors.

First, while you're listening, I strongly recommend that you read along in the PDF I created for this podcast. Seeing AND hearing will be important, as I'm using phonetic symbols. Go to paulmeier.com, find *In a Manner of Speaking* under Other Services on the menu bar, and download the document from the podcast page.

English is your first language – or you're pretty fluent in it – or you probably wouldn't be listening to this podcast. Like me, you probably take its maddening peculiarities for granted, hardly noticing them anymore.

But think about the millions of people who struggle to learn this infuriating lingua franca. One thing they discover is that, apart from the other crazy complexities English throws at them, they simply can't guess from the way they're spelled, how many words are pronounced. A hopeless proposition!

The most famous example: Words containing o-u-g-h, like *through, thought, cough, though, bough* (as in the bough of a tree), *enough*. You heard me pronounce the o-u-g-h completely differently in each word. Six different vowels [u, ɒ, ɑ, oʊ, aʊ, and ʌ]! Six different pronunciations of the same letters! And then there's *thorough* [θʌɹoʊ] or [θʌɹə] as Brits pronounce it, the older spelling of *hiccup*, *h-i-c-c-o-u-g-h* [hɪkʌp] – was it once [hɪkkɑf]? – maybe nine different pronunciations of o-u-g-h!

Imagine you're trying to learn English and you come across the word *c-h-o-u-g-h* for the first time. You've never heard *c-h-o-u-g-h* spoken by a native English speaker. Perhaps only a few native speakers have heard of this species of bird. So how will you pronounce c-h-o-u-g-h? Like *through* i.e.[ʧu]? Like *thought* [ʧɒt]? Like *cough* [ʧɑf]? Like *though* [ʧoʊ]? Like *bough* [ʧaʊ]? Like *hiccough* [ʧʌp]?

Like *enough* [ʧʌf]? Ah, seventh time lucky! Yes, this small black bird with a red beak is a chough [ʧʌf]. But there was no way to know that from the spelling.

Think of the poor letters in our alphabet who don't know who they are because no one knows how they're supposed to sound.

Take the miserable letter /c/. What an identity crisis he must be having. Am I [k] as in *cat*, [s] as in *ice*, [ʧ] as in *church*, [ʃ] as in *machine*? Who am I? What am I good for?

Or the letter /y/, who doesn't even know if he's a consonant as in *yet* and *youth*, or a vowel as in *myth* and *silly*, and who makes a completely uncredited appearance as a consonant in *music* [mjuzɪk] and *beautiful* [bjuɾɪfɫ].

And the letter /x/; now there's an inferiority complex! He's redundant, and he knows it. [k] and [s] could easily do his job, e.g., *fix* [fɪks] f-i-k-s; and [g] and [z] have it covered if you pronounce *exist* as [ɪgzɪst], as opposed to [ɪksɪst]. And the letter *zee* (or *zed* if you are anywhere in the English-speaking world other than the U.S.A.) can easily deal with the /x/ in *xylophone, xenophobia*, etc.

And how about the letter /r/? The Romans called it the "dog's letter," *lettera canina* (canine letter), since it growls like a dog, supposedly. Well, the languages of the world that use the Roman letter /r/ can't even begin to agree about what that dog sounds like! When a French dog growls [il gʁɒnjə]; but an Italian dog [riŋːkjə], and an American dog [gɹæʊɫz]. The three languages agree that the letter /r/ is helpful, but use three completely different sounds for it – [ʁ, r, and ɹ] – so we need three completely different symbols. Of course, *some poor British dogs aren't quite sure whether growling is acceptable in polite company so their growling is very restrained*. [demonstrating in conservative RP with labialized /r/.]

Did you ever hear what one wit suggested as an alternate spelling for the word *fish*? Highlighting the absurdity of our spelling conventions, he or she – we aren't quite sure who that person was (not George Bernard Shaw, a champion of spelling reform himself, to whom it's often erroneously attributed) – suggested g-h-o-t-i. G-h-o-t-i? For *fish*? But wait! It makes perfect sense or, more accurately, it's as perfectly senseless as many other English spellings. You take the [f] sound of *gh* as in *enough*, the [ɪ] sound of the letter /o/ as in *women*, and the [ʃ] sound of /ti/ as in *action*. String them together and what do you get? [f ɪ ʃ] Fish!

You have to admit: Spelling *fish* g-h-o-t-i is just as logical as pronouncing *Colonel* [kʰɝ·nɫ] (as in *Lieutenant Colonel*, and don't get me started on [lutɛnənt/lɛftɛnənt]). Or *mortgage* [mɔɹ·ɡɪʤ]. Or *queue* [kju], as in *there was a long q-u-e-u-e for tickets*. Or *Wednesday* [wɛnzdeɪ], honoring the god, Woden – [woʊdnzdeɪʔ]. Or *February* [fɛbjəɹĭ], ([fɛbɹuɛɹĭ] if you are desperate to honor the spelling). We can put *February* down to the 16th-century craze for re-Latinizing words. By 1225, English had taken up the French word for the second month, *feverer,* or however the Normans pronounced it back then – the first use recorded by the *Oxford English Dictionary*. But, 150 years later, some clever-clever English authority thought *Februarius,* as the Romans spelled it (though Jove only knows how they pronounced it), should be echoed in the name. So they changed the /v/ to a /b/. Or how about *receipt*, with its now silent /p/, once a synonym with *recipe*. "Do you have the receipt [ɹəsit] for that new pudding, Apple Charlotte?" as we heard in *Downton Abbey*?

I picked up some of these peculiarities from an online article by linguist Arika Okrent. But, as I have only seen her name in print, I have no idea how she likes it pronounced. And you certainly don't know how to spell it from just hearing me speak it! You see the problem?

Clearly: Whoever is in charge of all this is a complete idiot. Someone decided, long ago, that it would be a good idea to freeze our spelling, put it in a straitjacket, try to stop it changing. Perhaps Samuel Johnson's 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language*, widely credited with (or blamed for) standardizing our spelling, is the one to point the finger at, though his motives were of the purest, and humans had actually been making dictionaries since ancient times. And no account of spelling reform is complete without mentioning Noah Webster, whose enormously influential 1828 *An American Dictionary of the English Language* changed the spelling of many words in American English, like *honor, color, mould*, and *center*, though his proposals to re-spell *machine* as m-a-s-h-e-e-n and *women* as w-i-m-m-e-n gained no traction at all. But lexicographers, as the writers of dictionaries like to be called, have my complete sympathy. After all, how on earth would you make an alphabetical dictionary without standard spelling? Orthography it's called. Orthography. (An orthopedist keeps your bones straight; an orthographer keeps your spelling straight.) The impact of the *King James Bible* of 1611 on the standardization of English spelling cannot be forgotten either; after all, it's the word of God, and surely God doesn't make spelling errors! But pronunciation, which can't be tamed any more than the wind or the weather, kept going its own merry way, evolving continuously, until the gap between spelling and pronunciation widened into the yawning chasm it is today. Now, you simply have

to know the endless exceptions to the spelling rules (i before e except after c…) and the exceptions to the exceptions. Or you just master the pronunciation of every one of the 20,000 to 35,000 words in the average person's vocabulary. Alphabets like our Latin-based one (itself derived from the Greek) were supposed to capture the way we actually pronounce our words; yet our alphabet has become a temperamental and wholly disobedient employee, a tail wagging the dog, who should be fired!

There are some languages in which spelling is far more trustworthy, usually because it's been more recently standardized, so spelling and pronunciation haven't had time to diverge like English has. Serbo-Croatian is one, I'm told. Esperanto, whose creator L.L. Zamenhof, employed the "one letter, one sound" ideal, is another. And I believe Marc Okrand's Klingon and Tolkien's Tengwar (Elvish) make the same claims. But even these make no provision for the eventual and inevitable divergence of a fixed pronunciation from its accepted spelling.

There is one blindingly obvious and simple way to make writing the servant of our speech once again and not its master or competitor. And we've had the solution for over 100 years.

Get rid of all the world's alphabets except one: IPA. No, not India Pale Ale! The International Phonetic Alphabet, developed in the late 1800s. The mission: To assign one symbol for every significant sound in every language. In other words, an *International* Phonetic Alphabet. Marvelous idea! Just like a gram, or an inch, or a minute, each symbol of the IPA would represent one speech sound, permanently defined. We don't have English, Chinese, and Zimbabwean meters, do we? A meter is a meter whatever it measures or whoever does the measuring, everywhere in the world. And the length of a meter hasn't changed since established in 1793. So why should the letter "a" stand for a different sound in different dialects and languages and at different historical times? Or be pronounced differently in different words? It's crazy!

It's important to remember that, prior to the 18th century, when English spelling was standardized, people spelled much more as they spoke or as the occasion moved them. The variability of spelling was enormous. Shakespeare himself, in all six surviving instances of his signature, spelled his last name differently. This variability in spelling is, paradoxically, one of the main clues available to historical linguists like David Crystal in reconstructing the prevailing pronunciation of bygone times (see my very first *In a Manner of Speaking* podcast from February 2018). Clearly, "Spell it as you say it, rather than spell it right," has been the

dictum during most of the history of written English. And people did their best to use the Latin alphabet phonetically, but it just wasn't up to the job. If only IPA had been invented a thousand years ago!

It's far-fetched, sure. And I know it's never going to happen. And I'm a little tongue-in-cheek here, if you can't tell. But think of the benefits of adopting IPA as our mainstream writing system. Here are just a few:

1. All a 5-year-old kid would have to do is learn one symbol for one sound (one *grapheme* for each *phoneme* if you want to use the jargon and impress your friends). The symbol for the sound [k], for example, conveniently designated by our familiar Roman letter /k/, is the only one she needs whether she's spelling *cat, chasm, lack,* or *question*, now confusingly represented by c, ch, ck, or q. Master the IPA symbols, Sally – it really only takes a week or two – and you'll be a champion speller immediately! I promise! And a champion reader too, if your storybook is in IPA.

2. No more spelling errors, Sally. No more spelling tests, no more spell checks. Spelling bees? A quaint relic of the past. Of course, we would still test our students' skill in transcribing IPA from what they hear. That's a sort of spelling test, but not a test of a standard spelling, of course.

3. No more embarrassing doubt about how to pronounce people's names. Once you've seen their name spelled, you know how to say it! Because the pronunciation is the spelling! The spelling IS the pronunciation. People struggle with my name. Meier. Is that M-y-e-r, M-e-y-o-r? Over and over, I have to spell it out: M-E-I-E-R. But once you've seen it in IPA [maɪə̆], no more problems! In England, I am [pɔɫ maɪə]; in America I'm [pɒɫ maɪə˞]. At the Kentucky high school where I first taught, I was [pɑʊ ma˞]. I'm happy to hear my name pronounced in any of these ways and would be delighted to see it spelled variably in IPA by whoever is writing it.

4. Think of this one: As your tribe's accent evolves over time, its spelling evolves right along with it. Spelling and pronunciation would be a perfectly blissful marriage of equals. When I was growing up in England, RP speakers would have said *Sue knew who fooled with her blue shoes*, the way I just pronounced it, using the close, back, lip-round vowel [u] as defined in IPA. But in my own lifetime, the mainstream pronunciation has shifted drastically to [ɨ]. Many would now say [sɨ̈ njɨ̈ hɨ̈ fɨ̈ɫd wɪð ɜ blɨ̈ ʃɨ̈z]. That's a completely different vowel. It's shifted from [u] to [ɨ], completely losing its lip-rounding and now made more centrally in the

vowel space and with a more open tongue position. And we used to say *don't go home* [dəʊnt gəʊ həʊm], but now many Brits say [daɪnt gaɪ haɪm]. Talk about a Great Vowel Shift! Adopt the IPA, and this natural evolution in pronunciation presents no problems at all.

5. No more shame because your accent isn't "standard." In my brave new world, everyone would spell the way they speak. No more guilt over dropping your aitches, or your haitches as the Irish and the Aussies say. No more slavish obedience to the written word as the authority. We would celebrate all the Englishes of the world. The idea of correct spelling, *orthography*, and even correct pronunciation, *orthophony*, are obsolete. We restore something of what we lost when the written starting trumping the spoken.

6. Think of the boon to creative writers and their readers. When authors represent the speech of their characters using IPA, they capture their accent, and even something of their mood and purpose, their formality or informality. In the spelling! Spelling would become a rich narrative tool in its own right – just as when an oral storyteller is at work. If IPA had been invented 400 years ago, we wouldn't need historical linguists to exhume Shakespeare's original pronunciation (the topic of my first podcast: https://www.paulmeier.com/in-a-manner-of-speaking/). Because Shakespeare himself would have expressed the speech style he heard in his head for Cleopatra, Othello, King Lear, Juliet, or Hamlet.

7. Think about this! An email's notorious ambiguity would be vastly diminished: Instead of using grinning emoticons or emoji to make sure the reader knows what you're feeling or what they're supposed to be feeling, you express yourself more fully through IPA. The reader could almost "hear" your voice in your text or email. Now that's fulfilling the inherent promise of a writing system – capturing human speech and preserving it forever, graphically.

8. People who already use IPA to read and write their native French, Arabic, Hindi, or Mandarin, etc., could effortlessly read and pronounce English texts. And English speakers could instantly read and pronounce French, Arabic, Hindi, or Mandarin texts. Brilliant!

Am I crazy? Remember: IPA can be used as broadly or as narrowly as you like, to suit the needs of the situation.

If I want – and in the International Dialects of English Archive, which I run, and as a dialect coach and author of stage dialect manuals for actors this is EXACTLY what I want – I can capture the exact nature of the phoneme /t/, for example. It's

aspirated (whispered) in British English *city* [sɪtʰɪ]; it's *unaspirated* and *retroflex* in Indian *city* [sɪʈi] (the tongue being curled back a little); it's *voiced* and even *tapped* as in American *city* [sɪɾi]; and it's *affricated*, to use the jargon, in Liverpool *city* [sɪtsi]. Four different versions of the same sound. I can capture both the voiceless /th/ of *bath* [bæθ] and the voiced /th/ of *bathe* [beɪð]; many people don't even know we even have these two /th/ sounds in English! But each has a symbol of its own. And when an old-fashioned Cockney says *Ethel thought she'd take a soothing bath at three-thirty* as [ɛfʊ fɔʔ ʃəɪd tʰaɪkʰ ə səʊ̯vɪm bɑːf əʔ fɹəi fɜːʔəɪ]; or a Russian says [ɛtɫ tɔt ʃɪd t̪ɛk ə suːdiŋ bɑːs əʔ t̪ri t̪ɛr̪t̪i] or a Pakistani says [eʈel ʈɒʈ ʃɪd ʈek ə suːɖiŋ bɑːʈ əʔ ʈri ʈɛrʈi], they can express themselves accurately to their readers with the specific IPA symbols.

But when such narrow distinctions aren't necessary or useful, you would transcribe more broadly. Even borrow from the idea of "Cut Spelling," a reform once considered by the Simplified Spelling Society in which redundant letters are simply cut out. So just as when texting – *fashion* is perfectly comprehensible as f-s-h-n – why not dispense with vowels when you don't need them? After all, many alphabets do. The first Semitic Alphabet was entirely consonantal; you just inferred the vowels from the context. Same with Egyptian hieroglyphs. And Arabic does fine with an alphabet that omits short vowels. Not a big difficulty, as I can prove now *as I replace every vowel with the same identical vowel without making life at all difficult for the listener* [Paul demonstrates]. You just heard me replace every vowel with the same vowel, a schwa, or neutral vowel [ə], the most common vowel in English. Ironically, this most common vowel has no direct equivalent in our everyday alphabet. The point here is that vowels are almost redundant (I can order coffee in Starbucks anywhere in the world, and whether I ask for [kʰɔəfĩ] in New York, [kʰɒfɪ] in London, or [kʰæfĩ] in Chicago, my barista understands what I want from the consonants); yet our vowels are the sounds that change most from accent to accent and give the most difficulty to poor spellers.

I hope you've gathered from my tone that I suggest replacing our long-established alphabet with the IPA more as a provocative thought experiment than a serious proposal. Spelling reform attempts in the past have mostly failed; even very tame ones.

You see, there are great arguments against reform, many of which I support myself. David Crystal believes the cons will always outweigh the pros. I think he's right. Here are some of the powerful arguments against:

1. We would lose the etymology, what we may call the fossil record of the earlier stages of our language, embedded in our archaic spelling. Maddening as it may be in other ways, it allows us, thrillingly, to peer into the distant past. It would be a shame to banish that fossil record to the museum where only scholars trained in the abandoned orthography could tease out its secrets. And I've mentioned how that spelling is also an important clue in reconstructing historical pronunciation.
2. The spelling of English isn't just a utilitarian device, but a cultural artifact with deep and abiding associations. Being able to still order a pint of best bitter in the pub was important enough to Brits to keep the pint after liters and kilograms had replaced the older measurements. I would feel something had drastically changed to see *photograph* spelled with two f's. In a sense, a tree, the sky, an eye, a knee, love, please, laugh: These things aren't merely signified by their spelling. They ARE their spelling.
3. The period of transition from the current to the new orthography would be impossibly chaotic. Those who don't also know the older spelling system would be unable to read older texts that hadn't been reprinted in the new spelling.
4. Republishing everything in the new spelling would be enormously expensive, and would we transcribe American books in an American accent? British books in a British accent? Irish books in an Irish accent? And so on. If so, which accents would we choose, and who does the choosing?
5. Conservatism and inertia will always have a huge effect. People who had an expensive education and mastered English spelling have almost no incentive to change, and they're the decision makers.
6. It's hard to imagine finding room on keyboards for the extra symbols we would need to express just a standard pronunciation of our own tongue, let alone the symbols we would need to write in all the accents of English and the sounds of other languages and in their own regional accents. IPA has over 100 symbols, not including the 50 or 60 diacritics and prosodic marks. Of course, I'm able to type all these symbols, but only by using a very special keyboard manager program. It often requires two or more keystrokes to generate a single symbol.

So orthography, correct spelling, is here to stay. It's very unlikely to be reformed at all, let alone replaced by the International Phonetic Alphabet. So spelling and pronunciation will continue to diverge. And IPA will remain the hugely useful tool it is but never become the mainstream writing system of everyday texts. We will continue to privilege the pronunciation of those in power. They get to define the correct pronunciation (might is right, right?). Competing alphabets will continue to

divide the peoples of the world, the pronunciation of the various languages impenetrable to foreigners, even those who share the same alphabet. Regional and class accents and dialects will continue to be just that: regional and class accents and dialects, to be preserved and celebrated, as we do on the International Dialects of English Archive (IDEA) and studied and recreated by actors with the help of dialect manuals like mine.

Thanks for joining me.

Again, for a downloadable PDF of this podcast, using IPA to express much of what you're hearing, go to paulmeier.com and find *In a Manner of Speaking* under the menu's Other Services. You will also find the Interactive IPA charts Eric Armstrong and I created. Join me next time, when my guest will be Jim Johnson, founder of AccentHelp, an associate editor of IDEA, and a professor at the University of Houston School of Theatre and Dance. Like me, he's also a prolific gatherer of real-life dialect samples throughout the world. We will talk about that activity as well as many other topics, I am sure. Next time on *In a Manner of Speaking*.

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