

INITIATIVES

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TO ZED AND OMEGA

MAKING THE CASE FOR A SINGLE WORLD ALPHABET

BY JOHN CULKIN

The whole world seems eager to learn English. It has become the unproclaimed international language of the global village, an essential instrument of communication in science, commerce, technology, air transport, and diplomacy. It is mandatory in the curricula of the elementary schools of more than a hundred countries, and an estimated 600 million people speak it as their primary or secondary language. It is a nifty language.

The only real problem is the damn spelling.

For more than 10 centuries the English language has accumulated words and sounds from the Continent and beyond. No one since King Alfred has done much to either extend the alphabet or to assert rigorous spelling rules. The “Anglic tung” of Alfred has become a glorious assembly of more than a million words spelled in helter-skelter fashion. George Bernard Shaw was one of the most voluble advocates of alphabet reform, and it was he who facetiously suggested that the word “fish” should be spelled as “ghoti”—by taking the *gh* from “tough,” the *o* from “women,” and the *ti* from nation.”

The alphabetic principle, as established by the Phoenicians and Greeks, calls for one letter for each sound and one sound for each letter. Most of the world’s alphabets (with the exception of French) are 90 percent efficient; that is, they have about the same number of sounds and letters. English is only 20 percent efficient: Spoken English has 40 sounds, and written English spells them 200 ways. Today, the language is represented by a set of alphabetic hieroglyphs that require three to five years to learn. With a 40-letter alphabet, only a few months of instruction and practice would be necessary. Thus a 100 percent English alphabet would have 40 letters for the 40 sounds of English.

The English alphabet that provides 40 letters for 40 sounds is called UNIFON. It was invented by a Chicago economist named John Malone in 1959, and it does for language what Arabic numerals do for mathematics. It provides a compatible, consistent, generalizable, and unambiguous system. Imagine the chaos of our arithmetical computations if the Arabic numbers could randomly take on several other values. “7 (now and then) times 6 (occasionally) equals 42 (give or take a few).” The brilliance of the system

is that 10 numbers give us all the numbers. Similarly, the 40 letters of UNIFON give us perfect spellings for the one million words of English.

UNIFON itself is easily learned. It is logical and consistent. But is it feasible and possible? Or is it another great idea whose time may never come, like the metric system in the United States?

Response: If someone doesn't know the metric system, it usually doesn't make much difference, but if they don't know how to read, they are dead. UNIFON stands a good chance in succeeding because it deals directly and scientifically with a critical problem that is running away from us. We cannot afford to have 25 million adult illiterates in our country or to have large populations who fail to learn English. UNIFON makes sense on economic, social, and political, as well as on linguistic, grounds.

Nevertheless, no one is naïve enough to think that the whole population is going to take a weekend off and adopt a new alphabet on the following Monday. Adults resist change. So, here is the plan.

The Future: 2020. This will be the year for perfect vision and, therefore, an appropriate time for the president and Congress to decide that the country is moving to full adoption of a 100 percent efficient alphabet of 40 letters to match the 40 sounds of English. The people will have been prepared gradually for the change because in the preceding 34 years they will have studied UNIFON in school, seen it used with adult illiterates, applied it in the learning of foreign languages, consulted it as the pronunciation guide in their dictionaries, worked with it on computers and voice-actuated technologies, heard about its success with the handicapped, read about how it helped resolve the issues of bilingual education, enjoyed the comic strips written in UNIFON, and had fun

learning it on the network television series "Caraway Street."

The Present: 1986. Here is how we will spend the intervening years. The first step in the conspiracy is to make UNIFON available as a pronouncing alphabet, to serve as a diacritical marking system in dictionaries, to replace the chop suey now appearing between the brackets in the dictionary. Most people never learn the current systems anyway, so there will not be a lot of popular resistance to the change. But look what happens. Since there is a perfect coincidence between the letters of UNIFON and the sounds of English, we will be able to alphabetize all words both according to their traditional spellings and their UNIFON spellings. Thus, the ancient conundrum arising from student-teacher dialogue will be solved this way:

Johnny: Teacher, how do you spell "physics"?

Teacher: Look it up in the dictionary.

Johnny: I can't look it up because I can't spell it.

In our two-way, transphonal dictionary, the word "physics" will be listed and cross-referenced as:

physics—FIZIKS
and

FIZIKS—physics.

Johnny will be able to look it up either according to its spelling or its pronunciation. This convertibility between pronunciation and spelling will open up a variety of new approaches on the learning and transmission of English and other languages. (Research is just beginning on the development of a Spanish-English UNIFON dictionary.) An English UNIFON dictionary with 100,000 entries will be ready for publication in book and computer form in 1987.

We are putting forth UNIFON as a way of facilitating access to and mastery of the traditional alphabet. We want to

make the alphabet “user friendly.” We want to use UNIFON as a tool to bridge the gap between speech and spelling. It will serve as a converter, a transformer, a modulator, an adaptor for our 40 sounds and our 200 spellings. UNIFON will perform as a “phonetic modem.” In computer terms, a modem is “a device that converts data from one form into another, as from one usable in data transmission to one usable in telephone transmission.” UNIFON perfectly maps the sounds of English and logically organizes its spellings. It provides the irreducibly smallest number of categories under which all the variants of English orthography can be catalogued.

Currently, there are about 4,000 languages in the world and hundreds of alphabets and writing systems. Modern communications and transportation are pushing us closer and closer to each other, and we need direct and clear methods of transmission. History has shown that it will not be a manufactured language like Esperanto or Interlingua. If one language will be used, it will almost certainly be English.

The inventor of UNIFON, John Malone, refers to his alphabet as “humane letters” and to its use in international communications as “non-Imperial English.” The challenge then is to facilitate the use of English as a second language, if it is not the first. Every country will keep its traditional language as its primary one. It is happening anyway, and UNIFON can insure the success of the process. Of course, the trade-off for English-speakers is that they must learn UNIFON as a pronouncing code in order to increase their efforts to master other languages—and why not?

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