

# On languages and spelling

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May 12, 2006



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When I brought up the topic of spelling bees earlier this year, it triggered several comments on how various languages deal with the issue of spelling. Here are some thoughts on the topics that were brought up: German spelling is only partly phonetic. Given the spelling of a word, one can, after applying a rather large set of rules, determine its pronunciation with very high accuracy. On the other hand, given the pronunciation of a word, the spelling is not obvious. For example, do you write “*Feber*” or “*Vehber*” or possibly “*Phäber*”? “*Ist*” or “*isst*”? “*Quelle*” or “*Kwälle*”? The fact that Germany is undergoing controversial spelling reform proves that German spelling is not entirely predictable. After all, if spelling were completely phonetic, there would be no need for reform! And all those pronunciation rules. Sometimes a “d” is pronounced like “t”; sometimes a “t” is pronounced like “z”; sometimes a “g” is pronounced like “ch”; sometimes “st” is pronounced like “scht”. One would think that a truly “phonetically-spelled” language would have a one-to-one correspondence between sounds and letters. (I’m led to believe that many Eastern European languages are phonetic in this way.) Furthermore, given a word’s spelling, it’s not always obvious where the stress lies. For example, you just have to know that the accent in *Krawatte* goes on the second syllable. The spelling gives you no help. Swedish is like German in this respect: Given the spelling of a word, you can (again, after the application of a rather large set of rules) determine its pronunciation with a high degree of confidence. But going in the other direction can be a nightmare. The tricky “sj” sound goes by many spellings: “sj”, “stj”, “stj”, “sk”, “ch”, and sometimes even “g” (in French-derived words). Depending on the regional accent, the pronunciation of a leading “s” can vary depending on the ending of the previous word. (Though I suspect most Swedes don’t even hear the difference themselves.) At least in English, we’re honest about the fact that our spelling is complicated. English spelling only starts to become intuitive once you’ve learned French, German, Middle English, Greek, Latin, and a handful of other languages, learned British history (so you know who conquered whom when and ransacked their language for new words), and learned how the precursor-languages to modern English were pronounced at the time the words were imported. That last point is a problem common to many languages. The spelling of a word tends to change much more slowly than its pronunciation. English retains the original spelling long after the pronunciation has moved on. Many Chinese characters are puzzling until you realize that the word was pronounced differently a few thousand years ago. (Yes, there is a phonetic

component to Chinese characters, believe it or not.) Resistance to spelling reform in Germany is just another manifestation of spelling inertia. One thing I thought was interesting was the types of competitions different languages use to promote correct spelling and/or grammar. In the United States, spelling competitions (known as “spelling bees”) are the most common way of accomplishing this. Students are each given a word to spell, which must be done from memory. Spell it correctly and you survive to the next round; spell it incorrectly and you are eliminated. It is my understanding that in Taiwan, the analogous competition is the “dictionary look-up”. I’m hazy on the details, but I think the way it works is that a character is shown to the class, and the students race to look it up in the dictionary. Since dictionaries are typically arranged phonetically, a student who already knows how the character is pronounced has an advantage over a student who has to count strokes and perform radical decomposition in order to look it up.

I was not previously aware of dictation competitions, but they appear to be particularly popular in Poland. This allows greater emphasis to be placed on the complexity of Polish grammar. A former colleague of mine who grew up in Poland told me that when she goes back to visit relatives, it takes her a while to “regain her tongue” and stop making grammatical errors. You know you’ve got a complicated language when even a native speaker has to get back up to speed.

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