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Semantic Psychology

O. M. Norlie
Luther College

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O. M. NORLIE

Semantic psychology is the psychology of language. This paper will call attention to the need of a more psychological alphabet.

On the basis of statistics for 1928 the schools of America from the kindergarten to the university devote 67 per cent of their time to language study, and only 23 per cent to all the other subjects. Actually, they spend more time than that on language, because every subject has to use language, some of which is very technical and has to be mastered in connection with each special subject.

The inadequate alphabet is one of the chief, no doubt the chief, reason for this great expenditure of time, effort, and money. We have long since put aside pictographic writing as being too cumbersome. There are many systems of writing in use, a hundred or more, but the system that we use, and which most nations use; namely, the Latin, seems to be the most satisfactory. Still, it is at best a very cumbersome tool and should be relegated to the historic archives and museums.

Language grows. In 1628 Webster recorded 70,000 English words. The latest Webster has 600,000. Vizetelly estimates 1,000,000. With 26 letters in the alphabet it is possible to have nearly 700 septillion permutations and combinations, no two alike. Now, the 26 letters do not represent all the actual or possible sounds in the language. Three of the letters (c, q and x) have no sounds of their own. The 26 letters have a gross total of 123 sounds, 67 vowel and 56 consonant; and a net total of 8 simple vowels (each of them both long and short) and 6 diphthongs; 1 unvoiced consonant, 9 voiced, 8 cognates (voiced and unvoiced), and two double consonants (each of them voiced and unvoiced). There is no single way to represent a sound. A single letter may represent up to 15 sounds. A single sound may be represented in up to 15 ways — by various single letters, diacritical marks or orthographic combinations.

Language changes likewise in spelling and pronunciation. Spelling and pronunciation should agree, but seldom do. We no longer spell according to the fashion of Spencer and Shakespeare and Coverdale. Changes in pronunciation follow definite laws, largely physiological and psychological. The tendency is towards the sounds that require the least muscular tension.

Psychology tries to analyze sensations, in fact, everything mental in terms of the physiological and physical. Speech is a mental activity. In Judd's opinion it is the most elaborate form of behavior.

It has a physiological basis, and the vowel and consonant formations as they are made in the mouth can be easily studied.

Psychology should perform this service. We need a better alphabet. The world needs a universal alphabet. The 6,760 languages listed by Meillet and Cohen, get to be much of kin in the study of their sounds. The sounds should be studied according to their formation and their tendency to change. Each sound should have its own letter to represent it. Each letter should represent one sound, and one only. The letters should be simpler than the Latin alphabet, just as the Arabic figures are simpler than the Latin notation which they displaced. We have already given up spellings once held dear, pronunciations once in vogue, the German script still hanging on in various lands. Why should we not want to give up our present alphabet and script? It is better than some. Japan and China are discarding their hieroglyphics for the Latin form of print and it is said that they learn about five times as fast under the Latin as under their old systems i.e., they learn five times as much in the same time. Louis Napoleon, who knew some 80 odd languages, said that he could learn any language in the Latin alphabet and print, for alphabet and print were the greatest difficulties in learning a foreign language. Still, the Latin system of writing, like the Latin system of counting, is entirely too inadequate for modern use. We want an alphabet and a script as good as, or better than, the Arabic system of figures.

Note the improvements in speed all around us. The locomotive, the auto, the street car, the steam ship, the air ship, the telegraph, the telephone, the radio, and a thousand other useful inventions. Imagine how slow the ox cart and the row boat were. Think back to the time when mathematics did not have the Arabic notation and science did not use the metric system. Just look and see how we stagger along under the load of the Latin alphabet and how little we get out of it, even though we spend two thirds of our time from the kindergarten to the university and professional school in language study. A better alphabet, a universal alphabet, would reduce the time spent in school and would increase the amount learned. It would promote ready intercourse and understanding among nations. It would save billions of dollars yearly. Psychology can come to the help of Semantics as it has become the truest ally of Education.

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY,
LUTHER COLLEGE,
DECORAH, IOWA.

