ORTHOGRAPHY

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We are assembled today in the name of the University not built with hands. The same disorder of Nature which last April made men distrust the solid earth on which they dwelt, revealed to them the sure resource of human helpfulness; and the same distress which showed how small their actual need in things of sense, pointed straight toward the things that are real and the things that abide. The same disaster which doubly decimated the monied support of Berkeley and disheveled the glories of Stanford's poecile walls unveiled to clearer view the greater University of Man we always knew was always there, the university of common purpose in common love of truth and cleanness,—not anchored to the soil of any place, not named with names, not built with hands.

I am sure there never was a time when, by the touch of worldwide sympathy, Stanford felt more certainly conscious of its part in this greater university; I am sure there never was a day when the hand-clasp of Stanford and Berkeley carried the heartbeat, as this day which by its very circumstances reminds of common loss and common task, and blends oneness of fate with oneness of spirit. A memorial will we rear today "out of our stony griefs," and it shall be a witness between us, and Mizpah, the watch-tower, shall be its name: The Lord watch between me and thee when we are absent one from another.

The chief instrument of that inner communication amongst men upon which is conditioned human sympathy and mutual understanding as the basis of the larger life in human society is language. The significance of this occasion prompts me therefore to some remarks on unity of standard in intercourse by language, and I am further encouraged thereto by the consideration that philology having of late "got into politics" a little, is suffering the usual maltreatment in current discussions. It is not with a view to taking sides in a practical controversy, but in order to present some fundamental principles of the science of language pertinent thereto and commonly ignored, that I make this my venture, trusting to your kind allowance, that philology, now, that various other walks of life have had hearing in the matter, may not seem to trespass in claiming for its adumbrations the right to throw some further shadows upon the question.

The definition of language as voice expressive of thought is doubly inadequate. In the first place, it is far less a means of
expression than a vehicle of communication. Historically it takes its form almost entirely, not from the prompting to express what is within one, but from the suggestions of hearing as to what will be intelligible to others. It is a means of communication; it always takes into account the other man; it is pre-eminently a social instrument. In the second place, it is, in modern civilized society, addressed more to the eye than to the ear. Most of us read every day more language than we hear, even if we limit our reading to newspapers and text-books, but if we turn to the higher intellectual life, there can be no doubt that our acquaintance with the larger range of powers and possibilities in language is determined immeasurably more by reading than by hearing. Broadened intercourse in the world of men is calling more and more for an intercommunication of thought not restricted to the range of a speaker's voice. We resent the power of distance to keep men and ideas and sympathies asunder, and we refuse to condition inter-communication upon a certain physical propinquity of larynxes and ears. The phonograph and the telephone are ultra-modern devices for annulling distance and bringing larynx and ear nearer together without the crude necessity of bodily transporting one or the other. As such these instruments aid in returning language to its original character as sound addressed to the ear. Still if we were from this time on to abandon altogether the pen and the printing-press and make our libraries into storehouses of phonograph-cylinders, we should at least cut ourselves off from the past, for written language is an instrument not only of triumph over space, but even more significantly, as a means of record, an instrument of triumph over time. One may fairly presume, I think, that the device of written language, by which man has been slowly lifting himself during the last four millenia out of the shackles of space and time, i.e. out of savagery, is not likely to be abandoned forthwith. The problem however of how to hold the written language in intelligible relation to the viscous body of the spoken language without sacrificing the essential value of the former as an agency of civilization will command increasing attention, and will demand the co-operation of special knowledge, broad human wisdom, and withal much caution, for the problem is beset with grave difficulties, and most especially as concerns the English language of all languages that are or ever have been.

As every language serves the purpose of communication among the members of its speech-community it follows that every language is a standardized product. This is true of spoken language as well as of written language, though in a more refined degree and less obtrusively. In the last analysis and from the purely descriptive point of, e.g. phonetics, every speaker possesses a language of his own; there are as many languages as there are individual speakers. Each one has his own selection

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of words, uses some of them in special meanings or with individual limitations of meaning, has his own intonations, or peculiarities of pronunciation or special colorings of particular sounds, but all these individualisms are held in continual restraint and subjected to a perpetual leveling influence by what the individual is daily hearing from those about him, as well as by the necessity of making himself understood by those about him. The result by countless imitations and compromises is the unconscious standardizing which creates and maintains the idiom of a speech-community however small it may be. The constant struggle between the centrifugal forces of individual usage and the centripetal forces of intercommunication within the community yields on the one hand standard, on the other, life, as the source of progress and historic change. But the mass swings as a whole, and reduces the individual languages approximately to its own orbit. The same conditions which held the individual language in subservience to the community speech operate in holding or reducing the speech of the lesser community to accord with that of the larger community according to the dictation of intercourse. Isolation allows dialects to emerge and shape themselves in separate standards; resumption of intercourse levels them out and constrains them into subservience to the greater mass and recognition of the wider standard. So the great national languages are created in part by leveling, in part by absorption, but always in response to the facts of national life and intercourse. The man who desires to have part in the larger community and gain a hearing will accommodate himself to the standard, be it unconsciously through natural imitation of that which he admires, or consciously and with toil, as in the case of actors and public speakers who cannot afford to bear the provincial mark. There arises too, in cases of the rapid extension of a standard such as has characterized the history of English in the last century, the intervention of the school-teacher, the dictionary, and even the elocutionist as valiant exterminators of dialectal vermin. Theirs is rather rough work to be sure, but after all they are the frontiersmen of an advancing unitary civilization founded upon free intercourse that insists upon a uniform, standard means of intercommunication. A man who moves about much among various classes and in various places and wishes to be generally acceptable to all audiences on short acquaintance had better standardize his theayter and obleege and massacree and aint and hist (hoist) and Roosian and Euro'-pean; but at home it will make no difference. It ought not to make a difference anywhere, but it does; it seems to start a suspicion that he may not be the bearer of a message from the great world.

The matters I have just been discussing fall mostly under the guardianship of orthoepy and orthophony. I have indeed fetched a compass in my approach, but the goal toward which
I am tending is orthography, which is to the written language what orthophony is to the spoken. Writing arose from the demand for record for those separated in time or for communication with those separated in space. Writing began as pictures of objects then gradually attached itself to their names, then to syllables, then to single sounds. Writing began in Europe when the Greeks, receiving the Phoenician symbols and with them their names, applied them with the value generally of the initial sound of these names in writing down sound by sound, as best they could, their own words. It was a painful exercise in phonetic spelling, and their early inscriptions are abiding monuments of the agony. The speech of different localities differed in dialect, and each district wrote as its own dialect sounded with the result that the writer of one district could scarcely decipher the writing of his neighbors. Added to this was the embarrassment that different districts had accepted the symbols with somewhat different values; thus the Ionians who dropped their h's accepted the letter heta (our H) with the value e, to them the initial sound, while the Athenians who kept their h's gave it the value of h. After awhile, about 400 B.C., the Athenians, by way of conformity to the more brilliantly worldly Ionians, compromised to the extent of adopting their letters and their values but continued to spell at first more or less phonetically. The shape however which the phonetically written word assumed during the following generation proved to be the form the word was to keep for all the generations thereafter. The literary prestige of the fourth century established the word in place of the letter as the unit, and ever after, even down into the present Modern Greek the assemblage of symbols marking the word remains unchanged. The sounds have changed but have dragged the letters with them. And what is more, with the decay of provincialism and the rise of a national Hellenic consciousness based upon intellectual achievement and embodied in Alexander's Empire the Athenian form of the words as the vehicle of a nation-making literature became the accepted form for all the dialectal districts. So there became one normal form for all Greece in all the generations; and Syracuse could read a newspaper of Byzantium, if there were one, and Polybius could read Thucydides, six centuries before him, and never suspect that he could not in a seance understand Thucydides' ghost, if there were one. This written language of Greece was an orthography, nothing more nor less, and this is what an orthography meant for Greece: It shaped and maintained a nation, though tribes and states decayed, manners and faiths shifted, and no governmental system stood to represent the national existence; and when in the nineteenth century the little state reemerged from out the black lava crust of Turkish rule, that had submerged and almost choked it, it was an orthography, more than any one thing else that gave it
the breath of a national life. With the outbreak of the Greek Revolution in 1821 the only strand,—to be sure it was a golden thread—that joined the new back to the old was the language preserved in the service of the faithful ancient church of the east, and preserved essentially unchanged in outward form from the tongue in which were first written the Epistles and the Gospels.

The modern state is national by virtue, not of unity of blood or faith, but preeminently by virtue of unity in the medium of intercourse, primarily by writing, secondarily by speech. Germany has one recognized standard language overlying various shrinking dialects of speech; likewise France, Italy, Holland, Spain. Norway is held aloof from Sweden by a distinct standard of Scandinavian speech, and is turned toward Denmark. Austria-Hungary fails of nationality from lack of a common idiom.

I come now to speak of the English language. This has made more than a nation, and more than an empire. The one instance in history of a single language serving two great empires, it has dedicated a broad region belting the globe to free intercourse and equality before the law.

Historically it is a dialect of the English midlands elevated by natural processes to supremacy above its colleagues and gradually extended with the spread of the English empire throughout the world, being enriched and cosmopolitanized, lifted out of its provincialism and fitted for its broader tasks by materials absorbed from multifold sources, and being simplified in its structure and mechanism by submitting to use in the mouths of men of various minds and various tongues. Prior to the sixteenth century its spelling, though not self-consistent, owing in general to the diversity of the sources of the language and the confusing influence of the French spelling, was still quasi-phonetic, i. e., though it did not always represent the same sound by the same symbol, it undertook to represent the spoken word. The appearance however in this century of an abundant literature, coincident with the development of printing, tended to fix the spelling and remove it from subservience to sound. Its call to a higher and wider use cut the language loose perforce from the spoken idiom of any single district or class. Our present orthography may therefore be roughly said to represent nineteenth century words by means of symbols, which though by no means used with the simplicity and self-consistency of phonetic spelling, really stand for sixteenth century sounds. At that time the vowel-symbols were used essentially in the “continental” values. We now, e. g. write the phonetic word *nayn* with *a* because it was pronounced *naam* in the sixteenth century, and write *mile* with *i* because it was then pronounced *meel*. We write the word *see,* on the one hand as *sea,* commemorating its
former pronunciation with the open ay-sound, and on the other as see, as a record of the older close ay-sound. The two words were distinct in Shakespeare's time. The influence of printing, the appearance of dictionaries in the eighteenth century, and the patient insistence of teachers and spelling-books through generations gradually reduced the orthographic diversity to the present uniformity. It was a long, hard struggle, but it was a struggle which would not have been made, had not society had in view an end which it was of serious importance for it to attain. The intensity of the struggle has left its trace in an extraordinary orthographic orthodoxy, or even prudery, which often treats false spelling as a mark of vulgarity, if not of mental inferiority. But this is the way in human affairs with things which seem necessary, but cannot give a full rational account of themselves. The fact is that English orthography was compelled under existing circumstances to find its source of authority in the hasty crystallizations of usage rather than in the intelligent rulings of a rational tribunal,—hence the blind orthodoxy and hence in some claim to forbearance.

As to the resultant orthography it cannot be denied that many inconsistencies are frozen into its mass. One and the same sound is denoted by various different devices, as when, to cite an extreme case, the voiceless lingual sibilant is indicated by sh in shine, si in pension, s in sugar, ss in issue, sci in conscious, ti in nation, ci in social, ce in ocean, and ch in charade. On the other hand one and the same device may denote different sounds, as ough, which denotes of in cough, o in dough, uf in enough, and au in plough. Words of like sound are differently spelled, as cite, site, sight, but this last must be esteemed rather an advantage, as an appeal to the eye. It must also be admitted that the language in its preoccupation with adjusting itself to its importunate tasks laid itself open to the tricks of false pedantry and rococo decoration, such as the b in debt and doubt, the gh in delight, the ue in tongue, the hy in rhyme. Such are the familiar materials of the oft-repeated indictment against our orthography. It is undoubtly a barrier to the acquisition of the language now extending itself as a common vehicle of intercourse beyond its natural habitat. In the inevitable discussion of its reform, however, a sober consideration of all that is involved must warn against the rash imperiling through shallow judgment of the greater good for the lesser benefit. Here follow certain points of view:

First. Uniformity in the written language throughout its entire territory in any given period, as the present, is a prime demand of civilized intercourse.

Second. The establishment for the United States of a standard of written English different from that recognized elsewhere in the English-speaking territory is an isolating and divis-
ive movement promising loss and waste to intercourse and culture; and introducing consciousness of contrariety where the opposite is desired. The needless irritation caused by the minor differences already existing points ominously to what would result from greater.

Third. The English language is not the property of the people of the United States, still less of its government; it is a precious possession of the English-speaking world, and the moral authority to interfere in its regulation must arise out of the entire body, and not from a segment thereof.

Fourth. Every person who is born to the use of the language inherits thereby a definite advantage in the world for intellectual gain, for influence and effectiveness, yes, even for commercial success, by very reason of its extension of use in uniformity of standard. This inherited advantage constitutes a vested interest, and must not be trifled with.

Fifth. Any radical change such as for instance would be involved in phonetic writing would have the effect of cutting us off from the language of Shakespeare and the English Bible making of this a semi-foreign idiom, to be acquired by special study. Indeed, our entire present library collections of English books would be placed beyond the reach of the ordinary reader, and be as Dutch to his eyes. The bond uniting all the products of the language from the Elizabethan period to the present day creates a very precious heritage for every speaker of the English tongue.

Sixth. The adoption of a phonetic writing, it should furthermore be remembered, would involve imitation of the various dialectal forms of the spoken language,—all of which is highly interesting to phonologists, but to the plain reader anathema.

Seventh. Print is addressed to the eye, and the reader’s eye taking in whole words or even the composite form of whole phrases in rapid glance is disturbed and hindered by abnormal forms of spelling.

Eighth. The proposal gradually to introduce through the co-operation of volunteers a certain number of new spellings, and then, when these are well under way presumably certain others, seems to promise an era of ghastly confusion in printing offices and in private orthography and heterography, as well as of much irritation to readers’ eyes and spirits.

Ninth. The list of three hundred words proposed by the Simplified Spelling Board is a somewhat haphazard collection following no very clear principle of selection. One hundred and fifty-seven of them, such as color for colour, are already in their docked form familiar to American usage. The remainder seem to owe their inclusion in the list to their having been misspelled a number of times in English literature; thus the y is tabooed in pigmy (for pygmy) not in synonym; the older
spelling is resumed in rime (for rhyme), but not in gest for guest, or tung for tongue. There is no excuse, however, for thru (for through) from any point of view. The symbol u carries generally in English the value yu or u (in but); only very rarely, as in rural, rumor, has it the value oo. Thru has not even the authority of error.

The interests here involved are too serious to be treated craftily, or on the principle of the entering wedge. If these are all the changes to be made, they lack system and are unworthy. If more are to be exacted, let us know what we are doing.

The English tongue is our priceless heritage whereby we as a people and as individuals are made members of the widest community of intelligence and freedom in the records of mankind and sharers of the amplest traditions of vigor, integrity and self-government; and it behooves us to deal considerately with it, and keep it in honor. This possession furthermore we hold in joint title with many peoples in many lands, and we may not ask for the portion of goods that is ours without injuring the rights of others and likewise impairing our own estate and the inheritance of our children. In the jealous keepership of our children and our children's children, the tongue in which our fathers spake the freedom of the individual man shall become the chief instrument of unity and peace among all men.