

Six New Letters for a Reformed Alphabet

Nicola Twilley

Type is always on a sliding scale of ephemerality, rendered impermanent by its substrate, medium, or message. Even if the words are considered worth saving – and in that distinction, we’ve already lost a large percentage of all typographic material – digital type is trapped in its storage medium, lead is melted down, paper thins and yellows, ink fades, and stone is eroded. The technologies of type evolve and decay.

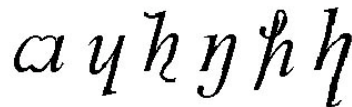
Type is the building material of written language, and language itself – if it has a self – is a system in constant motion: shedding skins of dead words; borrowing words from other languages; inventing words to reflect its users’ habits and needs.

Type is built on the foundation of a writing system, from the building blocks listed in an alphabet. Here, at the level of the alphabet itself, we have surely reached bedrock: it is the stable and unchanging essence of all letters, the referent for all pieces of type... In fact, alphabetical solidity is nothing more than a temporal effect: if we could use time-lapse photography to revisit the development of the 26-letter Latin alphabet used to transcribe English, we’d see that letters have been discarded, added, and reshaped almost beyond recognition. The alphabet itself is malleable, temporary, subject to reform and revision.

In this paper, I present the alphabet reforms suggested by Benjamin Franklin, using them to uncover the multiple motivations of alphabet visionaries past and present. A founding father, diplomat, printer, scientist, writer, and civic reformer, Franklin’s achievements include charting the Gulf Stream, writing the most widely published autobiography of all time, and introducing rhubarb and the soybean to the US. He invented the lightning rod, a new musical instrument, the flexible catheter, and, most importantly for my purposes, six new letters for a reformed alphabet.

Franklin wrote his alphabetic proposal in 1768, while living in London. “Franklin Fonetic” consisted of 26 letters, but the conventional letterforms c, j, q, w, x, and y were all thrown out, to be replaced with new letterforms. Briefly, these new letters represented the following sounds:

1. **law**, caught
2. **run**, enough
3. **this**, breathe
4. **singer**, ring
5. **she**, sure, emotion, leash
6. **thing**, breath



The remaining letters of the traditional Latin alphabet were retained, but their sound value was narrowed to just one sound, or phoneme, so that, for example “the g has no longer two different Sounds, which occasion’d Confusion, but is as every Letter ought to be, confin’d to one.” (Franklin, *A Scheme for a new Alphabet and a Reformed Mode of Spelling*)

a b c d e f g h i k l m n o p r s t u
 [æ] [b] [d] [e] [f] [g] [h] [i] [k] [l] [m] [n] [o] [p] [r] [s] [t] [u]
v z æ y h η h̄ h̄ th d̄h
 [v] [z] [ɔ] [ʌ] [ð] [ŋ] [ʃ] [θ] [ʧ] [ʤ]

Franklin's first use of this alphabet was in a letter to his London landlady's daughter, Polly Stevenson. She was living with her aunt in the country, and their correspondence is a mixture of flirtation and long-distance instruction: Franklin wrote to her at length and in complex detail about how electricity is conducted, how colors absorb heat, and how the moon affects tidal flows. Previous exposure to Franklin's eclectic and experimental intelligence must explain the fact that on receiving a letter entirely written in a new alphabet, Polly simply transcribed it, and then replied in the new alphabet, listing the obstacles in the way of its widespread adoption.

Yi intended to hav sent in Ziz Papers sooner,
 bzt bing bizi fargat it.
 Mr Kolman has mended diti: bzt iur gud
 Myf̄er has bin indispoz̄d uiz̄ e slyt Tivyr, standd
 uiz̄ myt̄f̄ feibeln̄d and uisines. He wuld nat̄ al-
 lau me to send in nyrd̄ az̄ it at Zi tyim, and is
 nau bet̄er.
 Yi uiz̄ in to kansider Zi Alfabet and giu
 mi Instances of syt̄f̄ Iglyt̄ Uords and Saunds
 az̄ in mee Zink kann nat̄ perfektly bi abprest
 bzi it. Yi am perswaded it mee bi kaampl̄it̄d
 bzi iur help. Zi greter difikyly uil bi to
 bring it into ius. Howev̄er, if Amendments
 eer nev̄er att̄emted, and Ziys kasntinu to gro
 uis̄ and uis̄, Zee myt̄ hym to bi in a regh̄t
 Kasndiflȳn at last; syt̄f̄ indid̄ yi Zink auz̄
 Alfabet and Kyit̄ing uilredi in; bzt if ui go an
 az̄ ui hev̄ dyn e fiv̄ Senturiz langer, auz̄
 nyrd̄ uil graduall̄ uis̄ to ekpres̄ Saunds, Zee
 uil onli stand far Ziys, az̄ Zi rittin nyrd̄ du
 in Zi Quiniz̄ Languaḡf̄, huil̄f̄ yi Iyspekt̄
 myt̄

Mrs Stevenson

Franklin to Polly Stevenson, July 20, 1768

Franklin had his new letters cast into type in Philadelphia, and they were used to print his "Scheme for a new Alphabet and a Reformed Mode of Spelling" eleven years later, in his collected *Political, Miscellaneous, and Philosophical Pieces*. But, as you may have deduced, his new alphabet remained temporary, his twisty variations on the letter "h" exist now only as a historical curiosity. In between developing his alphabet in letters to Polly Stevenson, and the alphabet's publication eleven years later, Franklin's time was spent on the arguably more

urgent tasks of drafting the Declaration of Independence, securing French support for the American Revolutionary War, and then shaping the Constitution of his newly formed country, the United States.

[TABLE of the REFORMED ALPHABET.]			To face p. 472.
Character.	Sounded [respectively] as in [the Words in the Column below.]	Manner of forming the Sound as expressed in the reformed Sound.	[Manner of pronouncing the Sounds.]
o	Old.	o	The first Vowel, naturally, and deepest sound; requires only to open the mouth, and breathe through it.
*a	John, Folly; Awl, Ball.	a	The next requiring the mouth opened a little, or hollower.
a	Man, can.	a	The next, a little more.
e	Men, lend, Name, Lanc.	e	The next requires the Tongue to be a little more elevated.
i	Did, Sin, Deed, seen.	i	The next still more.
u	Tool, Fool, Rule.	u	The next requires the Lips to be gathered up, leaving a small opening.
*y	um, un; as in umbrage, unto, &c. and as in er.	y	The next a very short Vowel, the Sound of which we should express in our present Letters thus, <i>ub</i> ; a short, and not very strong Affirmation.
b	hunter, happy, high.	hub	A stronger or more forcible Affirmation.
g	give, gather.	gi	The first CONSONANT; being formed by the Root of the Tongue; this is the present hard g.
k	keep, kick.	ki	A kindred sound; a little more acute; to be used instead of the hard c.
*fi	(fh) Ship, with.	ifb	A new letter, wanted in our language; our <i>fb</i> , separately taken, not being proper elements of the sound.
*z	(ng) ing, repeating, among.	ing	A new letter, wanted for the same reason;—These are formed <i>back in the mouth</i> .
n	end.	en	Formed <i>more forward</i> in the mouth; the Tip of the Tongue to the Roof of the mouth.
r	Art.	r	The same; the tip of the tongue a little loose or separate from the roof of the mouth, and vibrating.
t	Teeth.	ti	The tip of the tongue more forward; touching, and then leaving, the roof.
d	Deed.	di	The same; touching a little fuller.
l	ell, tell.	el	The same; touching just about the <i>gums</i> of the upper teeth.
f	Effence.	es	This sound is formed, by the breath passing <i>between</i> the moist end of the tongue and the upper teeth.
s	(ez) Wages.	es	The same; a little denser and duller.
*h	(th) think.	eh	The tongue under, and a little <i>behind</i> , the upper teeth; touching them, but so as to let the breath pass between.
*h	(dh) thy.	eh	The same; a little fuller.
f	Effect.	ef	Formed by the lower lip against the upper teeth.
v	ever.	ev	The same; fuller and duller.
b	Bees.	b	The lips <i>fall together</i> , and opened as the air passes out.
p	peep.	pi	The same; but a thinner sound.
m	ember.	em	The <i>clasp</i> of the lips, while the <i>e</i> [here annexed] is sounding.

* [N.B. The six new letters are marked with an asterisk to distinguish them, and shew how few new sounds are proposed. E.]

Franklin's "Scheme for a Reformed Alphabet"

In a new country, filled with revolutionary spirit, Franklin's alphabet did find some support, particularly in the person of Noah Webster, who pioneered American spellings, such as "color," "center," and "organize," and went on to publish the first *American Dictionary of the English Language* in 1828. In 1785 and 1786, Webster was on the road, lecturing on language and spelling in Boston, Charleston, and just about everywhere in between. In Philadelphia, Benjamin Franklin was in the audience, and eagerly shared his own scheme with Webster, giving Webster free access to his library as well as bequeathing him special type for the reformed alphabet. Webster was persuaded: "Your Excellency's sentiments upon the subject ... have taught me to believe the reformation of our alphabet still practicable."¹ Webster saw in Franklin's alphabet a way to achieve his own aims: a cohesive, uniquely American, national identity: "'Language, as well as government, should be national,' Webster insisted in 1789. 'America should have her *own* distinct from all the world.'"²

¹ Noah Webster to Benjamin Franklin, May 24, 1786, quoted in Jill Lepore, *A is for American: Letters and Other Characters in the Newly United States*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 31.

² Noah Webster, cited in Jill Lepore, *A is for American*, 4

For Webster, and a handful of others, true independence from Britain had to encompass language as well as politics, whether through alphabet reform or spelling reform, or both. A unique national alphabet would promote national unity, its code acting as a marker of difference, excluding “non-Americans.” In a country re-inventing itself, the alphabet is never a neutral technology. Its influence extends far beyond the simple transcription of speech to encode political, religious, and cultural values. In the first quarter-century following the drafting of a constitution for the newly united states, Webster was joined in his alphabetic efforts by at least seven other patriotic innovators, including Abner Kneeland, who felt sure that “Americans would abandon their twenty-six letter alphabet in favor of his set of thirty-five characters because “The United States have changed from a *Monarchical government* to a *republican*; from *dependence* to *independence*. And why not change in other respects?””³

Webster did succeed in creating an American spelling (and, in the process, permanently confusing those of us who must move between two – or more – versions of English) but he ultimately abandoned alphabet reform as too radical. However, countries with identity crises are still prone to enlisting the symbolic power of alphabets in the service of encoding difference. Indeed, alphabet shifts have become so common in former Soviet republics that *Atlantic Monthly* magazine dubbed the phenomenon “New-Alphabet Disease” in a 1997 article by Toby Lester.⁴

Azerbaijan, a leader in the field, has changed alphabets three times in the last hundred years: from Arabic to Latin (in the 1920s, inspired by the lack of correspondence between Arabic’s three vowels and Azerbaijani’s need for eight), from Latin to Cyrillic (in the 1930s, under Stalin’s decree) and now from Cyrillic to Latin again, to free themselves from communist rule with “a drastic, immediately visible, and richly symbolic change.”⁵ When change was initially suggested, under Gorbachev’s *glasnost*, a variety of factions began to lobby aggressively for different alphabets. Iranians and Islamic leaders promoted a return to Azerbaijan’s religious roots with Arabic. They were joined by Azerbaijani writers, making the case that a return to Arabic would unlock hundreds of years’ worth of pre-1920s Azerbaijani literature and culture. Meanwhile, Turkish diplomats, Azerbaijani entrepreneurs, and computer scientists outlined the economic and social benefits of the Latin alphabet. Lester relates that, “Zealous reformers in Turkmenistan, possibly getting carried away by the Latin alphabet’s financial promise, proposed that the \$ and c (cents) symbol be the upper- and lower- case letters for the ‘sh’ sound.”

³ Abner Kneeland, quoted in Jill Lepore, *A is for American*, 204

⁴ Lester, Toby. 1997. New-Alphabet Disease. *Atlantic*, July, 20

⁵ Lester, *ibid*.

CHANGES IN AZERBAIJANI ALPHABET WITHIN 20TH CENTURY

Modified Arabic after Islam*	Old Latin 1929-1939*	Cyrillic 1939-1991* (earlier types)	New Latin 1991-date (earlier types)	Examples in new Latin (translations)
ا	A - a	А - а	A - a	Ana (mother)
ب	B - b	Б - б	B - b	Baş (head)
ج	C - c	Ч - ч	C - c	Can (soul)
چ	Ç - ç	Ч - ч	Ç - ç	Çay (tea)
د	D - d	Д - д	D - d	Daş (stone)
هـ	E - e	Е - е	E - e	Ev (house)
ا	Ə - ə	Ә - ә	Ə - ə (Ä-ä)	Əl (hand)
ف	F - f	Ф - ф	F - f	Fil (elephant)
گ	G - g	Г - г	G - g	Göz (eye)
غ	Q - q	Г - г	Ğ - ğ	bağ (garden)
هـ	H - h	Һ - һ	H - h	Hara (where)
خ	X - x	Х - х	X - x	Xaç (cross)
اي	I - i	И - и	İ - i	İlan (snake)
ئ	İ - i	И - и	İ - i	İldırım (thunder)
ز	Z - z	Ж - ж	J - j	Jalə (dew)
ک	K - k	К - к	K - k	Kim (who)
ل	L - l	Л - л	L - l	Lalə (tulip)
م	M - m	М - м	M - m	Maral (deer)
ن	N - n	Н - н	N - n	Nar (pomegranate)
ا	O - o	О - о	O - o	Ora (there)
ا	Ö - ö	Ө - ө	Ö - ö	Özge (other)
پ	P - p	П - п	P - p	Pay (share)
ق	Q - q	Г - г	Q - q	Qar (snow)
ر	R - r	Р - р	R - r	Rəqs (dance)
س - ث - ص	S - s	С - с	S - s	Sən (you)
ش	Ş - ş	Ш - ш	Ş - ş	Şən (cheerful)
ت - ط	T - t	Т - т	T - t	Tənri (god)
ار	U - u	У - у	U - u	Uca (tall)
ا	Y - y	У - у	Ü - ü	Ürak (heart)
و	V - v	В - в	V - v	Vəliq (existence)
ی	J - j	Ј - ј (Я - я)	Y - y	Yay (summer)
ز - ذ - ظ - ض	Z - z	З - з	Z - z	Zirvə (peak)
ع			' (apostrof)	Mə'lum (known)

* Modified Arabic script is still in popular use in Southern (Iranian) Azerbaijan.
 * Conversion to Latin was proposed in 1922, but it was not officially established till 1929.
 * Latin Alphabet continued to be in use till mid-40s and after adaptation of Cyrillic.

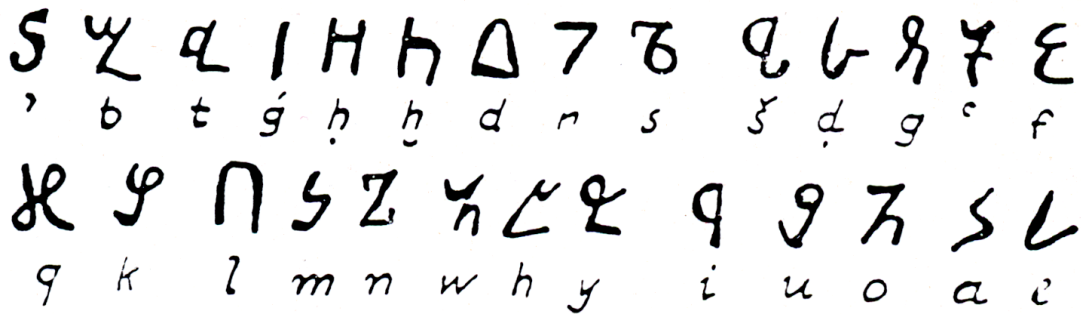
The transition to a uniquely Azerbaijani thirty-two letter Latin alphabet has not been smooth. For example, in January 1992, the Azerbaijani National Assembly spent days arguing over what letterform to choose to represent the most common sound in the language (the “a” in “hat”), ultimately choosing the letterform that represented that sound in the Azerbaijani variant of Cyrillic (rather than the Turkish letterform.) “I was struggling for our little letter,” Shaig Safarov (an Azerbaijani political activist) said, “It differentiates us from all other languages.”⁶ This Azerbaijani variant of Cyrillic, incidentally, was created in a deliberate Stalinist attempt to isolate the Turkic nations. The result was that although the various Turkic peoples could understand each other’s speech, their Cyrillic alphabet varieties were sufficiently complex that they could not communicate in writing with each other.

Tatarstan then tried to follow Azerbaijan’s lead, only to provoke the Russian Duma into passing a law in November 2002 requiring all state languages within Russia to use the Cyrillic alphabet. The Russian government was quite emphatically not blind to the power of letters: “Russian TV said deputies made the move because they believe that using the same alphabet

⁶ Lester, *ibid*.

will unite the country.”⁷ One deputy even called the proposed alphabet change a threat to “Russia’s national security and integrity,” whereas those in favor of the Latin alphabet accused Russia of “intruding on the genetics of human consciousness.”⁸ “Script innovators and reformers are often labeled as traitors” notes linguist Mark Sebba, citing examples from Haiti (where proponents of certain letters are accused of being agents of American imperialism) and Poland (whose 1930s alphabet reform represented for some a Soviet power grab, for others, a Jewish plot.)

There are numerous other examples of alphabetic reform inspired by nationalist, political, or religious sentiment, intended to unite a certain group and exclude others, and they have been implemented with varying degrees of success. In 1960, newly independent Somalia adopted a newly invented alphabet, “Osmanian”, which blended influences from Italian, Arabic, and Ethiopic scripts (the direction of writing was Italian, the order of the letters, Arabic, and the actual letterforms were derived from the Ethiopic alphabet.)⁹ This particular alphabet inspired a 1969 coup, and was officially abandoned in favor of a Latin alphabet in 1973.



The Osmanian alphabet, invented by Osman Yusuf for writing the Somali language

Cult-leaders and dictators often turn to alphabetic reform for similar reasons of identity and exclusion. The Mormon Church invented their own temporary alphabet, Deseret, which was used for four religious books and one tombstone in Cedar City, Utah, before being abandoned.¹⁰ A free Deseret font is available at <http://home.earthlink.net/~slbartok/projects/fonts/htm>, for anyone interested in expanding their alphabetic horizons. And finally, not to be outdone, North Korea’s official news agency reported on 22 August, this year, that Kim Jong Il’s latest achievements are alphabetic, as he executes “Immortal Feats for Unified Development of National Language.”¹¹ No images of his new letterforms seem to be available yet.

⁷ BBC Monitoring report, cited in Sebba, Mark. 2003. Ideological and Alphabets in the former USSR. Working paper, Centre for Language in Social Life, Lancaster University, U.K., 1

⁸ Sebba, *ibid.* 9, 11

⁹ Andrew Robinson, *The Story of Writing* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1995), 45

¹⁰ See www.omniglot.com

¹¹ From <http://www.kcna.co.jp/index-e.htm>

᠊	᠊	᠊	᠊	᠊	᠊	᠊	᠊	᠊	᠊	᠊	᠊	᠊	᠊	᠊	᠊
[i:]	[eɪ]	[ɑ]	[ɔ:]	[oʊ]	[u:]	[ɪ]	[ə]	[æ]	[ɑ]	[ʌ]	[ʊ]	[ɑɪ]	[aʊ]		
᠋ᠠ	᠋ᠡ	᠋ᠢ	᠋ᠣ	᠋ᠤ	᠋ᠥ	᠋ᠦ	᠋ᠦ	᠋ᠦ	᠋ᠦ	᠋ᠦ	᠋ᠦ	᠋ᠦ	᠋ᠦ	᠋ᠦ	᠋ᠦ
wu	yee	h	pee	bee	tee	dee	chee	jee	kay	gay	ef	vee	eth		
[w]	[j]	[h]	[p]	[b]	[t]	[d]	[tʃ]	[dʒ]	[k]	[g]	[f]	[v]	[θ]		
᠋ᠢ	᠋ᠢ	᠋ᠢ	᠋ᠢ	᠋ᠢ	᠋ᠢ	᠋ᠢ	᠋ᠢ	᠋ᠢ	᠋ᠢ	᠋ᠢ	᠋ᠢ	᠋ᠢ	᠋ᠢ	᠋ᠢ	᠋ᠢ
thee	es	zee	esh	zhee	er	el	em	en	eng						
[ð]	[s]	[z]	[ʃ]	[ʒ]	[r]	[l]	[m]	[n]	[ŋ]						

The Deseret Alphabet

So, as these examples attest, Webster's impulse to adopt Franklin's alphabet in order to create group identity was far from unique. Franklin's own impulse in creating the alphabet was quite different. He was a man who looked closely and with curiosity at the world around him, seeking ways to improve it wherever he saw the opportunity. His alphabet was conceived in the same spirit as his less smoky, more fuel-efficient house-heating stove, or his more easily cleaned and repaired street lamp. The alphabet, for Franklin, was not unlike a household tool, something to repair, rewire, and update. Improving the writing system would have the twin benefits of increasing the spread of literacy among native-speakers, as well as enhancing international understanding, making it easier for foreign speakers to learn English. Franklin, youngest son of a Boston soap-maker, and with less than two years of formal education, credited much of his "rags to riches" success story to his habit of reading and was always anxious to share that opportunity with others.

As Franklin correctly noted, alphabets were developed in order to transcribe speech, but "the Changes in Pronunciation brought on by the Course of Ages" combined with the tendency of alphabets to remain static – "set in stone" perhaps, or "cast in lead" – means that the two no longer corresponded accurately to each other, leading to the "wretched Condition ... I think our Alphabet and Writing [are] already in"¹² By Franklin's time, rising literacy rates following the invention of the printing press had cast a spotlight on the difficulty of representing the 40-something sounds of spoken English in a borrowed alphabet of 26 letters. In fact, printers had been somewhat to blame for narrowing the English alphabet: William Caxton used type made in continental Europe, which lacked the Anglo-Saxon letters *thorn*, *yogh*, and *eth* (sounds that went on to be expressed as "th" in the, and "gh" in "night", and "th" in thread, although Caxton himself transcribed *thorn* as "y", hence "Ye Olde Tea Shoppe.")

Again, Franklin was not alone in attempting to re-unite the alphabet with the sound of spoken language. William Bullokar, a sixteenth-century printer, designed a 40 letter phonetic alphabet for the English language with "rather Gothic" letterforms.¹³ In the twentieth century, graphic designers Herbert Bayer and Jan Tschichold both developed phonetic (sans-

¹² Benjamin Franklin to Mary Stevenson, Richmond, July 20, 1768, *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, (Yale University Press) vol. 15, 173b

¹³ Colin Clair, *History of Printing in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 25

serif) alphabets with new characters: Bayer for English, including new letters to represent the endings “-ed”, “-ory”, “-ing”, and “-ion”; Tschichold for German, with new letters for the sounds “ch” and “sch”.

George Bernard Shaw, who famously observed that the word fish may as well be written “ghoti” (“gh” from laugh, “o” from women, and “ti” from nation) was so frustrated by the “hopelessly inadequate alphabet” at his disposal, that he left money in his will to develop a new one.¹⁴ The resulting competition attracted 467 entries, with the winner being Kingsley Read’s phonetically accurate alphabet of 48 letters (24 vowels and 24 consonants.) According to another clause of Shaw’s will, this new alphabet was used alongside the traditional alphabet in a new publication of his play, *Androcles and the Lion*. 53,000 copies were printed, with one copy given to each public library in Britain, the Commonwealth, and North and South America, and to all the national libraries of the world. (Shaw’s will also left money for an estimate to be made of the world’s man hours wasted in writing and printing English with an alphabet of 26 instead of 40 or more letters, and a valuation in money of those wasted hours, but this calculation appears not to have been carried out yet.) Read, who owned a lettering company supplying everything from neon shop signs to calligraphy, published a magazine called *Shawscript* for a number of years, and the alphabet attracted a lot of initial interest. Again, free Shaw fonts are available, for those of you now bursting to break free of the shackles of the Latin alphabet, at <http://www.demeyere.com/Shavian/info.html>. You can also download *Ghoti Fingers*, the virtual Shavian typewriter, here: <http://www.saytheword.org.uk/shavian/ghotifingers.html>.

ᵀ	ᵇ	ᵀ	ᵈ	ᵀ	ᵍ	ᵀ	ᵀ	ᵀ	ᵀ	ᵀ	ᵀ
peep	bib	tot	dead	kick	gag	thigh	they	fee	vow	so	zoo
[p]	[b]	[t]	[d]	[k]	[g]	[θ]	[ð]	[f]	[v]	[s]	[z]
ᶤ	ᶤ	ᶤ	ᶤ	ᶤ	ᶤ	ᶤ	ᶤ	ᶤ	ᶤ	ᶤ	ᶤ
sure	measure	church	judge	yea	woe	hung	ha-ha	loll	roar	mime	nun
[ʃ]	[ʒ]	[tʃ]	[dʒ]	[j]	[w]	[ŋ]	[h]	[l]	[r]	[m]	[n]
ᶤ	ᶤ	ᶤ	ᶤ	ᶤ	ᶤ	ᶤ	ᶤ	ᶤ	ᶤ	ᶤ	ᶤ
if	eat	egg	age	ash	ice	ado	up	on	oak	wool	ooze
[ɪ]	[i:]	[e]	[eɪ]	[æ]	[aɪ]	[ə]	[ʌ]	[ɒ]	[əʊ]	[ʊ]	[u:]
ᶤ	ᶤ	ᶤ	ᶤ	ᶤ	ᶤ	ᶤ	ᶤ	ᶤ	ᶤ	ᶤ	ᶤ
out	oil	ah	awe	are	or	air	err	array	ear	ian	yew
[aʊ]	[ɔɪ]	[ɑ:]	[ɔ:]	[ɔ:r]	[ɔ:r]	[ear]	[ɜ:r]	[ər]	[ɪər]	[ɪə]	[ju:]

Kingsley Read's Shavian alphabet

During his lifetime, Shaw wrote his plays in Isaac Pitman’s shorthand. Pitman’s grandson, James, was another alphabet reformer, and the designer of the Initial Teaching Alphabet. This rather beautiful set of 44 lower-case letters was used to teach children how to write

¹⁴ Shaw, George Bernard, in his *Preface* to R.A. Wilson, *The Miraculous Birth of Language* (<http://homepage.ntlworld.com/Vivian.c/shawpreface.htm>)

English in 140 of the UK's 158 Local Education Authorities in 1966.¹⁵ Since the idea was that children would ultimately transition to the traditional 26 letter alphabet, many of the new letters, such as 'ing' ('ng') and 'chay' ('ch') were designed to look like ligatures of the traditional letterforms, and children were taught to write them using the pen motion needed to form a traditional 'n' and 'g', or 'c' and 'h'. Initial results were encouraging, with children learning to write using the Initial Teaching Alphabet performing at significantly higher levels than children learning their traditional A, B, Cs, and then transitioning to the Latin alphabet with no problems. Nonetheless, the scheme ran into the predictable difficulties of an entirely new alphabet (the limited range of materials printed in I.T.A, and the barrier the new alphabet erected between parents and children) and was gradually phased out in mainstream education. Although over the past hundred years there have been major or minor reforms to the writing systems of nearly every major language in the world, English has remained resistant, a language failed by "the dead wreckage that accumulates and encumbers" it.¹⁶ It is a language enslaved by its alphabet.



The Initial Teaching Alphabet

Another Franklin follower, William Thornton, took alphabet reform beyond the English alphabet, imagining a perfect, universal alphabet (although he only succeeded in "perfecting" English). This idea, as old as Babel, that a perfectly rational alphabet could be a means to enable universal understanding and sympathy, has found support from utopianists – not to mention cultural imperialists – throughout history. Perhaps the most successful new alphabet of this genre is the International Phonetic Alphabet, a collaborative effort begun in Paris in 1886. Its aim was to create a universal alphabet in which one symbol would be used for the same sounds, in all languages, and so each language's alphabet would consist of a different selection from the basic set of hundreds of symbols. Most of its new letters were created by modifying letters of the Latin alphabet in some way, either by using small capital letters, turning the original letterform upside down or back to front, or adding a flourish

¹⁵ The story of the Initial Teaching Alphabet was found in Hall, Jeremy. "The Initial Teaching Alphabet." *Eye Magazine* 55

¹⁶ From <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~ozideas/writsoc.htm>

A few language experts speculate that the hour for widespread reform of the English Latin alphabet is now upon us, 300 years after Franklin's birth. Typographer Hrant Papazian suggests that alphabetic type will cast off its adherence to the shape of writing, and thereby reform itself, becoming better suited to the physiology of human vision, as well as the adult reading process. Printer, typographer, and academic Joanna Drucker finds in emoticons and the Palm Pilot's Graffiti alphabet compelling evidence that the shift in technology (from movable type to digital fonts) will force the alphabet reform to which English has been so resistant. And for those of you who cannot wait for the revolution to come, you can personally visit and use the Alphabet Synthesis Machine online (at <http://alphabet.tmema.org>) to create and evolve your own writing system. You can download it as a PC format True Type font, and your creation will be entered into the machine's archive – but, chances are, your alphabet will still be as temporary as Franklin's.

CONSONANTS (PULMONIC)

Where symbols appear in pairs, the one to the right represents a voiced consonant. Shaded areas denote articulations judged impossible.

Clicks	Voiced implosives	Ejectives
⦿ Bilabial	ɓ Bilabial	ʼ as in:
Dental	ɗ Dental/alveolar	pʼ Bilabial
! (Post)alveolar	ɟ Palatal	tʼ Dental/alveolar
≡ Palatoalveolar	ʝ Velar	kʼ Velar
Alveolar lateral	ɠ Uvular	sʼ Alveolar fricative

Where symbols appear in pairs, the one to the right represents a rounded vowel.

Λ	Voiceless labial-velar fricative	ʑ	Alveolo-palatal fricatives
W	Voiced labial-velar approximant	l	Alveolar lateral flap
ɥ	Voiced labial-palatal approximant	ɥ	Simultaneous ʃ and x
ħ	Voiceless epiglottal fricative		Affricates and double articulations
ʕ	Voiced epiglottal fricative		may be represented by two
ʔ	Epiglottal plosive		symbols joined by a tie bar if
			necessary.
			ɸ ʈ

[illegible]

◦ Voiceless	p t k	.. Breathily voiced	b d g	◦ Dental	f θ ð
◡ Voiced	b d g	~ Creakily voiced	ɸ ɓ ɗ	◡ Apical	t̪ d̪ ɳ
h Aspirated	^h p ^h t ^h k	◦ Linguallabial	ʈ ɖ	◦ Laminal	ʍ ɹ
◡ More rounded	ɔ̞ ɔ̠	w Labialized	t ^w d ^w	◡ Nasalized	ẽ
◡ Less rounded	e̞ e̠	j Palatalized	tʲ dʲ	n Nasal release	d̥ˀ
◡ Advanced	ɥ	v Velarized	tˠ dˠ	l Lateral release	d̥ˁ
◡ Retracted	ɰ	ɤ Pharyngealized	tˤ dˤ	◡ No audible release	d̚
◡ Centralized	ɘ	~ Velarized or pharyngealized	ɟ		
× Mid-centralized	ɜ	◡ Rained	ɛ̝ (j = voiced alveolar fricative)		
◡ Syllabic	l̩	◡ Lowered	ɛ̞ (β = voiced bilabial approximant)		
◡ Non-syllabic	ɱ	◡ Advanced Tongue Root	ɕ		
◡ Rhoticity	ɻ	◡ Retracted Tongue Root	Ʉ		