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THE DESERET ALPHABET AS CONTRASTED WITH OTHER SPELLING REFORMS IN AMERICA

Don L. F. Nilsen
Arizona State University

It would take little research to determine that the alphabet presently used for representing the English language very inaccurately represents the sound system of that language. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that a great many spelling reforms have been suggested to resolve this problem if indeed it is a problem.1 In a doctoral dissertation written in 1953 at Columbia University, Samuel C. Monson treats, in some detail, fifteen different spelling reforms that have been proposed for American English. Dr. Monson discusses four types of spelling reform: His first type is, "Alphabets with some symbols used for more than one sound"; his second is "Present alphabet with added symbols"; his third is "Non-roman alphabets" with "arbitrary symbols"; and his fourth is "Non-roman alphabets" with "symbols indicating the production of sounds."2

The Deseret alphabet is a Type 3 phonetic alphabet. The requirements that it be placed into the Type 3 category are: 1) that it be basically a phonemic system, 2) that it be based on Non-roman characters, and 3) that these be arbitrary symbols. Like most phonemic systems of today, the Deseret alphabet was not a purely phonemic system.3

1In a speech at the University of Indiana during the 1964 LSA Summer Institute, Noam Chomsky, generally ascribed as the leading theoretical linguist in America (and probably the world), said that English orthography is much better off as it is than it would be if it were phonemic. In support of this contention, he indicated that an orthography should give not only phonetic information, but morphological and syntactic information as well. As one example, if English were phonemic, i.e. if there were a perfect correspondence between English sounds and letters, the writing system would be unable to distinguish between homonyms.


3Consider for example the initial teaching alphabet (i/t/a), an alphabet designed to help in the beginning stages of reading. Although it is generally accepted as a phonemic alphabet, it sometimes uses two symbols to represent a single sound (e.g., z and x to represent the same sound /z/; x, c and k to represent the same sound /k/) and it sometimes uses one symbol to represent two sounds (e.g., y represents both the sound /y/ and /iy/; ue represents both the sound /uw/, and /yuv/). See "Is i/t/a Phonemic?" by Don Nilsen, Elementary English, April 1966. Consider also the Trager-Smith system, which is considered by some to be the prototype of phonemic systems; this system uses the symbol, h, to represent not only the first sound in "house", but also to represent vowel length. The treatment of vowels in general is frequently criticized in this system.

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Phonemic alphabets generally have difficulty representing the vowel before an r, especially when that vowel has been reduced in pronunciation to the schwa sound. The i/t/a system, mentioned in footnote 3, resolves this problem by using the regular vowel letter before the r even when this vowel is pronounced as schwa. Then, in order to indicate that the preceding vowel is reduced to schwa, it uses a special symbol, an \~ with a tail. Therefore, in i/t/a, the words bird, were, hurt, word, and heard are written \~i\~d, \~w\~e\~r, \~h\~u\~t, \~w\~o\~r\~d, and \~h\~e\~a\~r\~d, so that the same sound is actually written at least five different ways. Like other phonemic alphabets, the Deseret alphabet had difficulty with pre-r vowels. One example of this was in the transcription of the word "Deseret," which has an \~a, the vowel of eat before the r. While in the word learn, the vowel before r is transcribed as \~r, the vowel of up. Concerning this problem Samuel Monson states, "Pratt's transcriptions with the Deseret alphabet include at least one example of an r-colored vowel symbolized by r alone: favored. Usually, though, a vowel appeared before the r: [\~] if the usual spelling were er (mysteries, never, others, father); [\~] with other combinations (record, learning, first, pillar, favored, returned, mercy)."

Another incident of spelling interference occurs (perhaps) with the word "Deseret," which was just considered in reference to the vowel preceding r. In regular English orthography, the distinction between /s/ and /z/ is often lost in that both of these sounds are often represented by the same symbol; s. It is possible, therefore, that the word, "Deseret," which was written with an \~r rather than a \~l was pronounced with an /s/ sound rather than a /z/ sound. If that was the case, the sound must have changed from /s/ to /z/ by the very regular phonological process called assimilation: the voicing of the preceding and following vowel sounds forced the consonant /s/ to become voiced as well in order to be more similar to its immediate phonological surroundings, and therefore more easily pronounceable. Again referring to spelling interference, Samuel Monson says, "The Deseret transcriptions, influenced by the Pitmans, are characterized by the influence of present spelling in unaccented syllables: [i] in repent, Jerusalem, and nevertheless; [a] in Judah; [v] in commencement and sorrowful; [ae] in afflictions, according and away; [\~] in Jerusalem and somewhat; and [\~\~] in afflictions and consists."


5It would probably be impossible to determine the pronunciation of the word "Deseret" by tracing its etymology, because, according to Webster's Third New International Dictionary (page 610) the word was not borrowed into English from another language, nor did it descend directly from Proto-Germanic, but rather it was "coined in the Book of Mormon (Esther 2:3)."

Despite these few examples of non-phonemicness, the Deseret alphabet was actually a very good writing system from the standpoint of phonemics. It contained a separate single symbol for both the "hard" and "soft" th sound (L vs Y) and for both the sh and zh sounds (D vs S), as well as for the ch and j sounds (C vs G). It also contained a single symbol for the ng sound (G). There was one consonant phoneme which required two symbols, wh (W) and two of the four diphthong phonemes, oy and ew (as in few) required two symbols (O and O). The alphabet makes a two-way distinction of low back vowels, e.g., it would distinguish between cot and caught (W vs O), but not between the vowels of father and box, which are different only in British English and in the English of very few Americans (especially in New England).

The second point of Dr. Monson's cataloging system is that to be classed as Type 3, the symbols must not be based on Roman characters. It is easy to see by looking at Plates I and II, that the Deseret alphabet is not based on Roman characters. Just as Charles C. Fries changed the names of "Noun," "Verb," "Adjective," and "Adverb" to "Class 1," "Class 2," "Class 3," and "Class 4" in order to rid these categories from the meanings regularly associated with noun, verb, adjective and adverb. Brigham Young and others changed from Roman characters to non-Roman characters in order to start fresh; Brigham Young felt that the regular letters were used to represent so many different sounds that they were totally useless. The third point of Dr. Monson's cataloging system is that to be classed as Type 3, the symbols must be arbitrary. By this he means that for this type of alphabet, there is no relationship between the shape or position of the letter and the articulation of the sound.

Since the Deseret alphabet characters are not based on the Roman alphabet, and since they are arbitrary as far as articulation is concerned, one would naturally wonder what base, if any, they had. George D. Watt is generally recognized as the innovator of most of the symbols, although W.W. Phelps and others were probably responsible for some. Stanley Ivins paraphrases from A Journey to Great-Salt-Lake City (by Jules Remy and Julius Brenchley, London: 1861, p. 185) in the following way: "Most of them (the Deseret characters) appeared to be of original design, but about half a dozen could have been copied from Greek and Arabic."9

Since George Watt knew shorthand very well, and since shorthand systems are usually phonemic systems, it has been assumed by some people that

7It should be noted that parts of Plates I and II are not written in the Deseret alphabet; rather than their being written in Deseret characters that look like Roman characters. Also, the Deseret alphabet uses Arabic numerals.


### Long Sounds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sound</th>
<th>Letter</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sound</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>t</td>
<td>as in...</td>
<td>it.</td>
<td>ß</td>
<td>as in...</td>
<td>cat.</td>
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<tr>
<td>s</td>
<td>as in...</td>
<td>combination.</td>
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<td>as in...</td>
<td>cat.</td>
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<tr>
<td>h</td>
<td>as in...</td>
<td>length.</td>
<td>ß</td>
<td>as in...</td>
<td>cat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d</td>
<td>as in...</td>
<td>dente.</td>
<td>ß</td>
<td>as in...</td>
<td>cat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>as in...</td>
<td>nose.</td>
<td>ß</td>
<td>as in...</td>
<td>cat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>ate.</td>
<td>ß t</td>
<td>ß</td>
<td>as in...</td>
<td>cat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>as in...</td>
<td>at.</td>
<td>ß</td>
<td>as in...</td>
<td>cat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o</td>
<td>oat.</td>
<td>ß g</td>
<td>ß</td>
<td>as in...</td>
<td>cat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ooo</td>
<td>ooze.</td>
<td>ß k</td>
<td>ß</td>
<td>as in...</td>
<td>cat.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Short Sounds of the above.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Name</th>
<th>Sound</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ß</td>
<td>as in...</td>
<td>gate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ß</td>
<td>as in...</td>
<td>gate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ß</td>
<td>as in...</td>
<td>gate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ß</td>
<td>as in...</td>
<td>gate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ß</td>
<td>as in...</td>
<td>gate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ß</td>
<td>as in...</td>
<td>gate.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Double Sounds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sound</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ß i</td>
<td>as in...</td>
<td>ice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ß ow</td>
<td>owl.</td>
<td>ß ur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ß ye</td>
<td>ß l</td>
<td>ß n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ß woo</td>
<td>ß m</td>
<td>ß n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ß h</td>
<td>ß n</td>
<td>ß n</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Plate II: Two sample lessons in the Deseret Alphabet, page 14 of Deseret First Book. Lesson 21 would be written in regular orthography as follows: I see a girl and a cage. The door of the cage is open. The bird which was in the cage has flown off. What a pity! This makes the girl grieve to think her bird has gone, never more to come back. Lesson 22 would be written as follows: I am fond of nice cake. My sister Jane bakes good cakes, and she gives me some when I go home. I can eat a cake and drink some milk.
the symbols in the Deseret Alphabet were adapted from some shorthand-system—probably the Pitman system. Concerning this, Floris Springer Olsen writes:

After an analysis of all of the characters of the alphabets were studied in comparison with all of the shorthand systems known before 1882, this comparison revealed that seventeen have no resemblances whatever to the shorthand plates; sixteen have slight resemblances; and only five of the Deseret Alphabet characters can be said to be closely enough related to assume that they could have been drawn from these shorthand systems.10

Concerning the Pitman system, which George Watt knew best, Miss Olsen concludes...

The Pitman system of shorthand could have influenced two of the Deseret Alphabet symbols. This indicates that though George D. Watt was an expert writer of Pitman shorthand, the characters of this shorthand system had very little influence on the symbols which he, and possibly other members of the committee, invented for the symbols of the Deseret alphabet.11

Now that the Deseret alphabet has been typed in comparison to other American spelling reforms and its origin shown, there are three other places where attention should be focused—the purpose, the extent, and the decline of the Deseret alphabet as contrasted with other spelling reforms. Like other spelling reforms, this alphabet would allow people to learn English spelling in a fraction of the time that would be taken otherwise; since the alphabet would do away with silent and superfluous symbols, there would be a saving of time and a twenty percent saving in printing space in the transcribing of material; and since in Utah "No less than 12,754 of the population of 40,244 in 1860 were foreign-born. . . .",12 the Deseret alphabet provided an excellent tool for the teaching of English as a foreign language, and for analyzing non-English languages. However, there were additional reasons as well for devising the Deseret alphabet—reasons which are not shared by other spelling reforms.

11Olsen, Ibid., p. 64.
12Monson, "Representative American Phonetic Alphabets," op. cit., p. 127
Stanley S. Ivins indicates that he thinks that one reason for introducing the Deseret alphabet was "...to confine the reading of church members, especially new converts from foreign countries, to things which the church leaders wanted them to read," though Mr. Ivins indicates that this was never said to be the reason. In support of this assumption, Mr. Ivins mentions that this would not be an inconsistent stand for the church to take in view of the fact that Brigham Young ordered people to burn their copies of Lucy Smith's book on Joseph Smith, and he also ordered them to destroy their copies of Orson Pratt's pamphlet on the Holy Spirit. Related to this reason for adopting the new alphabet was the fact that non church members would not be able to read church doctrine, all of which was to be written in the Deseret alphabet. Both of these two purposes would combine to help keep the Mormons a unique and separate people.

Another purpose of the Deseret alphabet that sets it apart from other spelling reforms is that it was to be a substitute for "the pure Adamic language" until the real thing came along. This fact is expressed by Samuel Monson in the following way:

Many early Church writings and sermons allude to a belief that there was to be a return to the language spoken before the confusion of tongues at the Tower of Babel—to what Mormon leaders called "The pure Adamic language...In fact, Brigham Young's suggestion to the Board of Regents for a new alphabet was of a temporary expedient until this pure language should be restored."

As to the extent of the Deseret alphabet during its best years, Samuel Monson indicates that it enjoyed "...a measure of popular acceptance probably unequaled in the history of phonetic alphabets." Floris Springer Olsen states that "The total outlay for the Deseret Alphabet was estimated at $20,000, which was in that day an educational fortune."

There were three books published in the Deseret Alphabet: Deseret First Book (See Plate II), Deseret Second Book, and the Book of Mormon (both in a partial and in a complete edition, the partial edition being designed as a third reader). A number of other materials were also prepared for publication, but were never actually published. For a period of about two years, the Deseret News ran frequent articles in and about

13 Personal correspondence, dated November 14, 1966.
14 Monson, "The Deseret Alphabet," op. cit., p. 128
15 Ibid.
16 Olsen, op. cit., p. 53.
the Deseret alphabet. The alphabet was used in the Church Historian's Office; it was used for shop signs, and for private correspondence; it was used for Brigham Young's ledger accounts for a year, and for his personal history; it was used on coins, and on election advertisements and ballots; "The more faithful saints" used it for keeping journals; and in Cedar City, it was even used on a tombstone. But even though all of the above mentioned items were written in the Deseret alphabet, and even though there were many schools established for teaching the orthography (including some night schools), the alphabet never really received enough grass-roots support. Stanley Ivins indicates that Brigham Young was the chief advocate of the alphabet, and that it was the government and church leaders who accepted it rather than the bulk of Mormons. In his words, "I think that very few Mormons accepted the alphabet, except the Territory and Church officers, who did what Brigham told them to do." Samuel Monson also expresses the fact that there was little grass-roots support when he says,"...interest in the alphabet was very low by the time the books were finally presented to the public."

So the Deseret alphabet was doomed to a short life. Stanley Ivins mentions that the use of the alphabet made etymological studies more difficult because the spellings with the Deseret alphabet were closer to the present language—and therefore farther from older stages of the language—than the regular spellings. Samuel Monson points out that the train and the telegraph made isolation no longer possible, however desirable. He further says that the financial burden was overpowering. The Mormons had to transcribe a remarkably large number of books into the Deseret alphabet, which was an impossible task financially; or they had to leave these great books unaccessible to the Mormon populace, which was obviously very undesirable; or else they had to abandon the alphabet, and make the books accessible to Mormons in their regular printings. It was the last alternative which they chose.

Franklin D. Richards felt that the alphabet was abandoned mainly because the evenness of the lines made it difficult for the eye to follow and distinguish the words. Furthermore, he pointed out that since the orthography represented the actual sound system, there was no uniform orthography, as each person wrote as he spoke, thus revealing his particular dialect. Richards also indicated that "busier times came on," so that people had less time to think about the alphabet. In addition to all of these factors, Brigham Young, the chief proponent of the alphabet, died, though Stanley Ivins feels that the Deseret Alphabet died long before 1877. Ivins goes on to say that a letter from F. D. Richards in the Bancroft Library manuscript about Utah states that

17 Ivins, personal correspondence, Loc. cit.
19 Ivins, "The Deseret Alphabet," op. cit., p. 239.
20 Ibid., pp. 150-151.
"The Deseret Alphabet went out of use by a kind of tacit neglect, or by general distaste for it." 21

Samuel Monson states that "The Deseret alphabet failed; but it had a greater chance of success than any movement toward thorough spelling reform in English since printing became firmly established." 22

Let me conclude this article with Stanley S. Ivins' description of the end of the alphabet:

Thus, twenty years after its inauguration, the Mormon plan to reform the English language came to an un­lamented end. It had received the enthusiastic support of Brigham Young and other high Church officials. But the Saints, in refutation of the popular notion that they blindly followed their leaders in all things, had rejected the new alphabet, and chose to retain the old system with all its "imperfections and ridiculous vagaries." 23

21 Ivins, personal correspondence Loc. cit.