

George Bernard Shaw's New Alphabet & Orthography

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Preface

George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950) was born in Ireland. While he grew up in Dublin from 1856 to 1876 in his youth, his local people spoke both Irish–English, or Gaelic, as many modern Irish do. So, he couldn't naturally speak Kings–English very well, when he moved to England in 1876. Although Shaw established his career as Man of Letters, for more than 70 years in England, and scarcely came back to Ireland, he eventually couldn't escape Irish accent. We can find Shaw's culture shock about English dialects, when reading an act one of *John Bull's Other Island*, and that, since then, Shaw chose to open the way to study how to speak English scientifically. When reading a preface of *Pygmalion*, we can understand that he learned many kinds of phonetics.

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Shaw was interested in expressing many kinds of dialects, and often wrote them in his novels and plays. In addition, he often published many essays in his Irish humor. Also Shaw was an orator who spoke English in Irish sound for all his life. Shaw found that, a written English is not the one enough to spell dialects of English, as a written English don't expressed sound. Therefore Shaw proposed a phonetic English as a reform of English. Shaw was a modernist, just like Ionesco did. According to Dr. Lee's research, it is said that it took Ionesco many years to master foreign language, but Ionesco found that he mastered a foreign language quickly, if he studied it scientifically. Also Shaw might believe that a phonetic science could change English dialects into the standard English, if every one studied it scientifically.

Shaw's way to express dialects, however, was different from Synge's one. Maybe, Shaw was interested in dialects as means to express the ones, making use of a phonetic science, but Synge, in them as well as a study of an etymology. Synge went to Alan Island to research the dialects, and perfectly studied Anglo–Irish. Then, he wrote his plays, exhaustively using them. Shaw, however, didn't thoroughly research dialects just like Synge. Therefore, we can find that Shaw couldn't be perfectly engaged in studying a dialect, comparing Shaw's plays with Synge's.

It was his friend, James Lecky that recommended Shaw to study a phonetic for the first time. Lecky was one of Shaw's closest friends for his first years in London. When Shaw was interested in a phonetic science, Alexander Bell published the theory of visible speech in 1867, and Henry Sweet published *Primer of Phonetics* in 1890. Their uniqueness is that they tried to study it by using

science. We can find the effect Shaw got from phonetic, in his works.

Shaw's interest was how to spell a spoken English, in phonetic sign, as quickly as possible, because he would like to write many things. For example he tried to read 300 books for a year, and at the same time, he made an effort to write 1500 words a day. Therefore, Shaw often misunderstood many authors and he misspelled in his writings. Shaw, however, said that he was often prevented from strict English spelling's rules.

In 1847, Isaac Pitman, famous for stenography, published *Phonotypy*, composed entirely 40 letters. It was very popular in a short term, but quickly forgotten. By the way, according to Shaw's essay, he began to learn Isaac Pitman's shorthand in his teens, before he left Dublin. And in 1882 or so, Shaw used Pitman's for his personal notes, the drafts of letters & verses, and etc., but he wrote his works in a longhand for publication. Because Lecky told Shaw that Pitman's shorthand is drawing, not writing, and probably the worst system of shorthand ever invented, and that Sweet's Current shorthand was far superior to Pitman's. Shaw, however, wrote *Widowers' Houses* in Pitman's in 1892. We, however, should pay attention to the fact that Shaw wrote his first play in Pitman's. Because any authors' first works include the seeds of all works they would produce.

In 1902, Shaw tried to master Sweet's shorthand: *A Manual of Current Shorthand* (1892). Nevertheless, Shaw couldn't master Sweet's. According to Barbara Smoker's essay, Shaw was theoretically fond of Sweet's shorthand, but it was difficult for Shaw to master it, when he was 46 years old. It could be why Shaw was too late to master Sweet's. So Shaw gave up Sweet's, and used Pitman's again.

According to Smoker, Sweet's is supposed to be easier to read, because it used alphabet, but Shaw preferred Pitman's, as he accustomed to it. In fact, Shaw said that he could write at the rate of 20 words per minute Pitman's, but not Sweet's. The weak point of Pitman's, however, is not easy to read it after writing it, because Pitman's didn't use alphabet. So some one had to transcribe it to longhand. At first, Shaw did it himself, but later, he asked his secretary to do it. In short, Shaw would rather chose the way to write it quickly than the one to bother himself about transcribing it. Shaw's opinion might not be logic. We, however, should consider Shaw's. Shaw compared Roman figures; MCMXLIII with Arabic ones; 1963. Certainly, we can reads the later easier than the former. Therefore Shaw also must have thought we could find the way to write it quickly in the age of science.

Shaw wrote *John Bull's Other Island* (1904) in Pitman's. At first, Shaw wrote his works with Pitman's, and then transcribed them in Johnsonese alphabet. Every time Shaw transcribed his manuscript, Shaw must have thought that he would like to get a new alphabet which was able to write as easily and quickly as Pitman's. So Shaw often proposed that some one should make a new alphabet, which is more easy to write than Johnsonese's. In 1908, Shaw had his Pitman's

shorthand's manuscript; *Getting Married* transcribed by his secretary.

In 1879, in his first novel: *Immaturity*, Shaw expressed a dialect through his character, who spoke Irish, somewhat resembling the author. Next, Shaw used a dialect in his novel: *Love Among the Artists* in 1881. There, Owen Jack corrected Magdalene Brailsford's expression of poor people. Thirdly, Shaw wrote Lickcheese's dialect in his first play: *Widowers' Houses* in 1892. Fourthly, Shaw wrote Burgess' one in *Candida* in 1894. Then, in 1899, Shaw wrote Felix Drinkwater's one in *Captain Brassbound's Conversion*, but he couldn't express them very well, so in 1901, he proposed a spelling reform that English should be a phonetic sign in his essay: *GBS ON LANGUAGE*. His idea is that English should be spelt with expressing one letter for each sound. Shaw said that Phoenician alphabet had only 26 letters, while sounds of English speech had at least 42, as listed by the phonetic expert Henry Sweet. So the shortages of about 16 letters must have been compensated, making use of combination of two letters of alphabet, viz:

th dh ch sh zh ng ae ee ie oe aa au oo uu ou oi

These combined letters, however, produce comparatively long spelling. For example, the word: "though", also two-sound word should be spelled with six. Therefore, Shaw suggested that a new complete type of alphabet must be devised.

Since then, Shaw suggested a spelling reform through his essays. Also he wrote characters who use dialects in his plays. For example, Henry Straker in *Man and Superman* in 1903, Hodson and Matthew in *John Bull's Other Island* in 1904, Snobby Price, Peter Shirly, Rummy Mitchens, and Bill Waker in *Major Barbara* in 1905, an innkeeper in *Passion, Poison, and Putrefaction, or Fatal Gazogene* in 1905, Collins in *Getting Married* in 1908, and Mrs Farrell in *Press Cuttings* in 1909, and Eliza and Doolittle in *Pygmalion* in 1912.

Since then, Shaw seemingly gave up writing dialects in his plays after *Pygmalion*. Shaw might lose his interest to express dialects in his plays since 1912. Because Shaw admitted, in the stage direction of *Pygmalion*, that he was unable to express dialects, as he didn't have the means to write dialects. Shaw might escape from a nightmare of Irish accent, writing cockney in *Pygmalion*. Because this one almost showed a middle class except one little scene in act one. Also, it would be known as a musical: *My Fair Lady* rather than as the working classes' drama. At least, Shaw showed not only a naturalist playwright also vaudeville's in *Pygmalion*. Shaw abandoned expressing of dialects and paid attention to music in it.

Shaw emphasized that a new alphabet should be improved from a sound point of view in his essay. According to Shaw, Sweet could distinguish 11,000 sounds in spoken English. So Shaw might be interested in sound. By the way, Shaw wrote a Henry Higgins in his drama: *Pygmalion*, and Higgins told Pickering that he could pronounce 130 distinct vowel sounds. Shaw might make a character of Henry Higgins as a model from Henry Sweet.

Shaw's new alphabet, however, has two ways of spelling. First way is to add

new letters to old alphabet, for example: long “s” and upside down letter of “e”, etc. Also second is that they have to invent new alphabet which is different from old one.

At first, Shaw insisted that a new alphabet should be improved on the basis of sound: phonetic sign. He, however, couldn't find it. Shaw said “My own experience as a playwright in efforts to write modern cockney dialect phonetically with 26 letters has convinced me its impossibility.” (1) So Shaw hoped that someone should create a phonetic sign to spell dialects. It seems that Shaw regarded a phonetic sign as a score. Shaw said that he was not only a dramatic poet but also a word musician. Shaw thought that plays had an element of music. Therefore *Pygmalion* developed into musical *My Fair Lady*.

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Shaw had two thoughts of new alphabets. One is that someone improves Johnsonese alphabet. Another is that someone invents a new alphabet which is quite different from Johnsonese's. In fact, Sweet made his shorthand, improving a Phoenician alphabet, while Isaac Pitman made it, using simplified sign. Anyway, Shaw was accustomed to Pitman's, so Shaw had become to propose a new alphabet more than improved alphabet. Shaw wasn't an inventor, so he hoped someone offered a new way to write it quickly. If Shaw got a new alphabet, he might have written *Pygmalion* in dialects, just like Synge. As Shaw preferred a science, he believed a written English should be reformed scientifically. Shaw's propose, however, might be unrealizable, from the phonetic point of view. Because we have to think children education, when they begin to study how to write letters. So we have to think simplified alphabet for beginners (children and foreigners and etc.). Shaw, however, thinks a new alphabet must spread, if someone invents new alphabet. Shaw admitted that children education was important, as many scholars pointed out it to him. Nevertheless, he proposed a new alphabet to use it at once.

Since Ellis, we have had Pitman and Sweet, Volapuk and Esperanto, and no end of phonetic alphabets and shorthand systems; but we are still entangled in Johnson's absurd etymological bad spelling, wasting years of our lives in writing the single sounds of our language with two, three, four, five letters or more... (2)

Shaw, however, believed that science must produce something new, even if it decayed, because he grew up with it.

Eventually, Shaw changed his opinion, and he insisted that a new alphabet should be improved on the base of an economic reason: saving time. Shaw might insist that a new alphabet should be one to be spelt speedily and easily. For example, Shaw used a shorthand when he wrote his play. Thanks to it, he could write his plays much more than Shakespeare.

I reflected on the number of plays Shakespear(sic) would have had time to write if he had written them in the phonetic alphabets of Pitman, Sweet, or Gregg, and

on the staggering fact that Dickens, though a professional verbatim reporter, had to go through the drudgery of writing all his novels in Johnsonese longhand for the printer. (3)

Shaw had to change his manuscript from shorthand to longhand, every time he wrote it. Because no one could not read shorthand. Therefore Shaw must think that we should have had shorthand everyone can read.

Eventually, Shaw insisted a new alphabet. Because an old one has already a character of an old history. For example Shaw had always faced an etymology. Shaw insisted that b's at the end of the word "bomb" was unnecessary. But Hollis criticized Shaw that the second "b" of "bombardment" and "bombardier" are voiced sound and these two words are related to "bomb".

Shaw proffered Esperanto and Pidgin, because they have simple spelling and simple grammar. Shaw showed himself his simplified spelling example, omitting apostrophe except a few cases.

The apostrophes(sic) in ain't, don't, haven't etc., look so ugly that the most careful printing cannot make a page of colloquial dialogue as handsome as a page of classical dialogue. Besides, shan't should be sha'n't, if the wretched pedantry of indicating the elision is to be carried out. I have written aint, dont, havnt, shant, shouldnt and wont for twenty years with perfect impunity, using the apostrophe only where its omission would suggest another word: for example, hell for he'll. There is not the faintest reason for persisting in the ugly and silly trick of peppering pages with these uncouth bacilli. I also write thats, whats, lets, for the colloquial forms of that is, what is, let us; I have not yet been prosecuted.

Shaw might think the over-use of apostrophe ugly from the point of an aesthetic view. Shaw might think that spelling must be simple and aesthetic.

Eventually, Shaw couldn't show his idea of a new alphabet. So he hoped some idea man created a new alphabet. First of all, a new alphabet must be spelt more easily and speedily than an old one. After his death, a new alphabet was made. And *Androcles and the Lion* was put into a new alphabet. Then, *Androcles and the Lion* was published with a new alphabet from Penguin paper books in 1962. Johnsonese's was pressed in the left page, and a new alphabet, in the right page.

Nevertheless, Shaw's new alphabet has not been accepted. Maybe people might be accustomed to an old one. So no one caught up with a new one. But Shaw's successors, (Barbara Smoker and etc.), make an effort to improve English alphabet a little by a little.

Conclusion

Shaw couldn't completely build up his study of a phonetic science, compared with Synge's etymological study. Shaw hoped that someone offered a new way to write dialects, though he believed that a written English should be reformed scientifically. Synge, himself, studied Irish dialect, while Shaw hoped that someone offered a way to master it easily. Shaw only showed a small part of dialects in his works, compared with Synge. From the phonetic point of view,

Shaw's propose has not accomplished yet.

Anyway, Shaw, certainly, offered his idea of a phonetic alphabet through his essay. Japanese people cannot speak English, without the phonetic sign. Shaw was Irish. Shaw wrote Nerue that English is difficult for him as well as for Nerue. Because Irish speak Gaelic everyday. Therefore, for Shaw as for Nerue, English is a foreign language. Shaw wrote *John Bull's Other Island*. In the play, Doyle, Irish, confessed that he tried to speak English correctly, coming to England from Ireland for the first time. Maybe Shaw found that it was difficult to pronounce English, without improving English alphabet.

Notes

- (1) *George Bernard Shaw on Language*, ed Abraham Tauber (Peter Owen, 1963), p. 81.
- (2) *Ibid.*, p.151.
- (3) *Ibid.*, p. 103.

References

1. Barbara Smoker, *Man of Letters, The Genius of Shaw* ed. by Michael Holroyed, (Hodder & Stoughton, 1979)
2. Henry Sweet, *Primer Phonetics*, (Oxford, 1929)
3. Henry Sweet, *Spoken English*, (Oxford, 1929)