

Instructor:  
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Barker Center 218 (Fong Room)  
TuTh 9:00–10:00 AM  
Fr 1:00–2:00

## Writing Systems and Language Conservation

Week 2: The History of Writing – Due Tuesday February 22, 9:00 AM

### For Consideration in the Readings

**This question is for consideration; there is no need to write it down, these are simply prompts to help with close reading and for discussion on Tuesday.**

**For England 2003:** One of the criteria which the Maya linguists used to determine whether or not a specific spelling would be implemented was historicity: if a form was more historically ‘authentic’ or conservative, it would be used in the standard orthography. What special status do more conservative forms have? Why would they be selected? What is the benefit of creating a united orthography across multiple varieties of Mayan? Can you think of any positive or negative socio-political consequences that come out of such a decision?

**For Caballero et al. 2021 and Geary 2021:** These two abstracts are both for presentations at the West Coast Conference on Formal Linguistics that happened in 2021 (I also presented, though not on orthography). Can you follow their argumentation, and how the phonological phenomenon each describe should influence an ‘ideal’ orthography for the language? Do you agree with their conclusions? What do these researchers assume determines an ideal orthography?

**For Bow 2013:** What differences do you see between intra-community (among members of a linguistic community) and inter-community (between different linguistic communities) political pressures on the creations of orthographies? What pressures tend to win out? To what benefit and to what expense?

## (Avoiding) Ambiguity in Orthography

Imagine a language, we'll call it Exemplish, in which all non-velar consonants have phonemic plain and velarized versions:

Plain		Velarized	
IPA	Orthography	IPA	Orthography
[m]	m	[m <sup>v</sup> ]	mg
[p]	p	[p <sup>v</sup> ]	pg
[b]	b	[b <sup>v</sup> ]	bg
[f]	f	[f <sup>v</sup> ]	fg
[n]	n	[n <sup>v</sup> ]	ng
[t]	t	[t <sup>v</sup> ]	tg
[d]	d	[d <sup>v</sup> ]	dg
[s]	s	[s <sup>v</sup> ]	sg
[l]	l	[l <sup>v</sup> ]	lg
[k]	k		
[g]	g		
[x]	h		

Figure 1: Some consonants of Exemplish and their orthographic representations.

As you may be able to tell from the chart above, the general rule is: <g> following a consonant marks that the consonant is velarized. However, the current orthography for Exemplish has an ambiguity, as shown by the minimal pair below.

alge	[al <sup>v</sup> i]	'alcohol'
alge	[algi]	'water'

Please answer the following:

- (1)
  - a. Why does this ambiguity arise? What might be a context in which this specific ambiguity is detrimental if the current orthography were to be implemented across a society?
  - b. Describe a possible change to the orthography such that 'alcohol' and 'water' are spelled differently and <alge> still refers to 'alcohol'. How would 'water' be spelled?
  - c. Describe a possible change to the orthography such that 'alcohol' and 'water' are spelled differently and <alge> still refers to 'water'. How would 'alcohol' be spelled?
  - d. Do you have a preference for one of the two changes you described? Why?

## Morphophonological Representation in Orthography

In Exemplish, plurals are formed in the following way:

- (2)
  - a. If the word ends in a vowel, a [g] is added to the end of the word.
  - b. If the word ends in a non-velar consonant (anything but [k], [g], or [x]), the final consonant is velarized.
  - c. If the word ends in a velar consonant, a vowel [ɪ] is added to the end of the word.

[ɪ] is typically written as <e> in Exemplish. There has been debate among scholars about how to represent the plural form and final velarization orthographically. The two proposals would result in the following spellings.

IPA	Proposal 1	Proposal 2	Meaning
[tojf]	toif	toif	bird
[tojfʷ]	toifg	toifg	birds
[dɔk]	dok	dok	boat
[dɔkɪ]	doke	dokg	boats
[dɔkɪ]	doke	doke	fish
[dɔkɪg]	dokeg	dokeg	fishes

Please describe the two proposals and how they differ. If you were an Exemplish speaker and were to vote on which proposal would be accepted as the official orthography, which would you choose? Why?

Give an example of some ambiguity that arises in English spelling (or the spelling of some other language). How would you change the orthography of that language to avoid such an ambiguity? Do you know what the historical reason that such an ambiguity exists?