Sociolinguistic factors in borrowed writing systems
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Linguists have commonly taken the view that a borrowed phonographic writing system starts off with a fairly simple one-to-one relationship between sounds and graphemes; over time, the language changes, but the writing system does not, thus creating complexity in the relationship between language and writing. This paper investigates a number of cases of borrowed writing systems where such complexity is present from the beginning. It argues that sociolinguistic principles are responsible for these situations.

Writing systems are complex\(^1\). Linguistics has typically regarded much of this complexity as the result of historic changes in the language which have not been matched by corresponding changes in the writing system. This view says that when writing systems are first borrowed, a one-to-one relationship exists between graphemes and phonological units. Over time, however, language changes, but the writing system stays the same; as a result complexity is introduced. From time to time a language may reform its orthography to eliminate complexity by bringing the graphemic system more into line with the phonological system.

When an alphabetical writing system is first invented or introduced for a language, it is almost always reasonably accurate and free from ambiguities. But, as time passes, it does not remain so. The language changes, as languages always do; [...] the writing system gets out of step with the changing language, and in the end one has irregularities and complexities of the sort we find in current English. (Hockett 1958, 545)

Although linguistic theory has changed enormously since Hockett’s time, the general linguistic view of writing has not changed greatly. For example, Finegan and Besnier (1989) in their text expressed very similar views. “In an ideal orthography, each phoneme of the spoken language would be represented by a different graph, and each graph would represent only one phoneme... English pronunciation and English orthography have not kept pace with each other over time [...]“ (1989).

According to the mechanisms implicit in the traditional view, borrowing a writing system is a process whereby the phonemic inventories of the original language (i.e., the language that the writing system is borrowed from) is compared with that of the new language (i.e., the language borrowing the writing system). Where the same phoneme, or a phonetically similar one, occurs in both languages,

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the graphemic symbol for that phoneme is retained. Symbols for sounds not occurring in the new language are discarded, and new symbols are invented for sounds of the new language which do not occur in the original language. Thus, a newly borrowed writing system starts out with a good fit between the phonological and orthographic writing systems.

Although not stated specifically by Hockett, it completely consistent with his position to assume that orthographic reform acts to bring the writing system back into line with the phonological system, and thus to reduce complexity.

Hockett’s position is clearly true in broad strokes. The traditional view accounts for a large number of cases; however, there are many cases which simply do not fit his views. Many cases exist, however, where sociolinguistic factors, not language change, are responsible for complexity (i.e., a straying from a simple one-to-one relationship between the phonological and graphemic systems). As well, orthographic reform does not always simplify the graphemic phonological relationship.

This paper examines the traditional view of complexity in writing in the context of how a writing system is borrowed from one language and applied to another. It concludes that many complexities stem from the presence of sociolinguistic factors, whose presence is not surprising, given that social reasons are ultimately responsible for the borrowing of the writing system in the first place. Writing is borrowed because it embodies a positive social value for the borrower.

Hockett refers to both newly invented and borrowed writing systems. I have spoken about invented writing systems elsewhere (Rogers 1996), and in this paper I will only be addressing the issue of borrowed writing systems. Further, only phonographic systems, i.e. alphabetic and moraic (syllabic) systems, are considered here. Orthographic transcriptions are shown in angled brackets.

2. Older inventory retained

Not infrequently, the entire inventory of symbols in the original language is borrowed into the new language even though the new language has no use for all of them.

2.1 Etruscan

The Etruscans in Italy borrowed the western Greek alphabet in the 7th century B.C. (Bonfante & Bonfante 1983, Bonfante 1996, Threatte 1996). The Etruscan alphabet has been found on the edge of an ivory writing tablet (Figure 1) from Marsiliana d’Albegna (650 B.C.), presumably put there as an aid to the budding scribe. Etruscan was generally written right-to-left, and the letters point to the left.

The Etruscan alphabet is shown below along with the symbols of the western Greek alphabet (in their modern shape) and a roman transliteration. A comparison of the Etruscan and Greek alphabets reveals how accurately the Etruscans preserved the Greek alphabet including some letters which have since disappeared in Greek (digamma <Ϝ>, sampi <ϡ>, and qoppa <Ϙ>); psi and omega are not included here as they were not used in the western Greek alphabet.
Figure 1.

Figure 2.

Etruscan writing tablet with alphabet.

Etruscan alphabet with Latin and Greek equivalents.

Etruscan did not have voiced stops nor a vowel /o/. Nevertheless, the Greek symbols for <b d g o> were dutifully included in the Etruscan inventory of letters. In my view, the useless symbols were borrowed because the alphabet was seen as a whole, a single cultural entity. Over time, the Etruscan alphabet was reformed and <b d o> were dropped (This is consistent with how Hockett would expect orthographic reform to work). The letter <g> (from Greek gamma) was used for /k/ as described below.

For the Etruscan voiceless stop /k/, the letters <c k q> were all used with the following allographic distribution:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>k</th>
<th>&lt;k&gt; before /a/</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>&lt;c&gt; before /e, i/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q</td>
<td>&lt;q&gt; before /o, u/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is not clear why this allographic variation developed. Keep this point in mind, however, as we will return to it later.
2.2 Roman

The roman alphabet is derived from the western Greek alphabet via Etruscan (Bonfante 1996). In the western Greek dialects, the symbol $\chi$ $<$X$>$ represented a cluster /ks/ (not the aspirated /k$\acute{}$/ as in the central and eastern Greek dialects). In Greek, /ks/ along with /ps/ formed a special phonotactic class of stop-fricative clusters occurring in both onset and coda positions. The western Greek alphabet, however, did not have a separate symbol for /ps/ as was the case in the alphabet of other areas of Greece, and thus no such symbol turns up in Latin. Latin did not need a special symbol for /ks/ since the cluster could easily have been written $<$CS$>$ or $<$KS$>$, nor did this cluster form a special phonotactic category in Latin. Nevertheless, the Romans retained $<$X$>$ in its western Greek value of /ks/, not, I believe, from any linguistic necessity or usefulness, but from a conservative sense of maintaining the Greek writing system as it was known to them.

2.3 Italian

A more modern example is the Italian alphabet, which is the same today as the one learned for English. Italian, however, has no native words with $<$ j k w $>$. Nevertheless, the alphabet is learned with these letters, and they are used where needed in foreign word. Since the Renaissance, the roman alphabet generally has had a basic fixed form. Extensions, mainly in the form of diacritics, have been made for individual languages, but nothing has been subtracted. The roman alphabet is a set cultural entity. If a language uses the roman alphabet, it uses it in this form regardless of whether all those letters are needed or not.

Similarly, in modern Catalan the letters $<$k w$>$ are not used although they are present in the alphabet as it is learned by Catalan-speaking children. As well, in a theatre, there would be rows numbered $k$ and $w$. In some sense, the modern roman alphabet has a shape which transcends the requirements of any particular language (p.c. Juli Cebrian 1998).

2.4 Cree — Inuktitut

The Cree writing system is moraic (see Poser 1997 for the use of moraic instead of the traditional syllabic) with a symbol for each consonant–vowel sequence. The Cree symbols are shown at the left of Figure 3. Each consonant has a distinct shape, and the four vowels are indicated by different orientations of the consonant symbol. The first row shows morae with null onsets. The last column shows the symbols for consonants in coda position.
The Cree writing system was borrowed for Inuktitut in the mid nineteenth century (Nichols 1996). The resulting system was underdifferentiated by not providing for the Inuktitut sounds /q q/, and it was overdifferentiated by retaining the Cree four-vowel system, whereas Inuktitut only needed three; however, it was underdifferentiated for vowels by not showing long and short vowels. Several symbols used for Cree consonants were not needed. However, the Cree system was used for over a century, and it was not until 1976 that the Inuktitut system was revised (right side of Figure 2) to overcome the conservatism in the original borrowing. Blank rows on the Cree side indicate consonants that were missing for Inuktitut; blank rows on the Inuktitut side show consonants that were unnecessary for Inuktitut. The column for the vowel /a/ on the Cree side was unnecessary for Inuktitut, and the long vowels were added for Inuktitut.

In summary, when a writing system is borrowed, there is a tendency for the inventory of symbols to be considered a single object, and for the entire inventory to be borrowed regardless of how well it fits the new language.
3. Retention of older writing conventions

We have just seen evidence that users of an alphabet have tended to borrow it completely. However, not only the inventory of symbols may be borrowed, but also the conventions of using the symbols.

3.1. Etruscan

As we have seen, Etruscan had three symbols for the sound /k/; these symbols were used in complementary distribution:

\[
\begin{align*}
& \kappa \text{ before } /a/ \\
& \chi \text{ before } /e, i/ \\
& \varphi \text{ before } /o, u/
\end{align*}
\]

Latin borrowed this convention almost exactly. The early Latin distribution was:

\[
\begin{align*}
& <k> \text{ before } /a/ \\
& <c> \text{ before } /e, i, o/ \\
& <q> \text{ before } /u/
\end{align*}
\]

By classical times, \(<c>\) was the normal spelling of /k/, except that \(<q>\) was used with /kwV/, and \(<k>\) was found in only a few words.

\[
\begin{align*}
& <\text{kalendae}> /\text{kalendai}/ \text{ ‘first day of month’} \\
& <\text{kathargo}> /\text{karta…go}/ \text{ ‘Carthage’}
\end{align*}
\]

The significance of this example is that a writing convention was borrowed, which in this case served no obvious, linguistically useful purpose either in the original language or in the new one. I suggest that the reasons for borrowing this convention were social in nature. Latin scribes simply accepted that this was the way that writing was done because that is the way Etruscans wrote.

3.2 Russian

Russian has oppositions of plain and palatalised consonants /ta - t\j/ (Cubberley 1996). This opposition however is written in cyrillic, not by using different consonants, but by using different vowel symbols, e.g. \(<\text{ta \j}>\). The vowels such as \(<\j>\), which are used to indicate that the preceding consonant is palatalised, are known as yotated vowels.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>pronunciation</th>
<th>writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>plain</td>
<td>&lt;\text{ta}&gt; /\text{ta}/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>palatalised</td>
<td>&lt;\text{t\j}&gt; /\text{t\j}/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The cyrillic alphabet has been used to write a large number of non-Slavic languages of the former Soviet Union and adjacent areas, such as Moldovan, Tajik,
Komi, Turkmen, Tatar, Kazakh, Uzbek, Kirghiz, Kabardian, Avar, Chukchee, and Mongolian (Comrie 1996). Most of these languages do not have an opposition of plain–palatalised consonants, and thus do not need the yotated vowels. However, the yotated vowels are retained in the alphabet of these languages, and where sequences of /jV/ do occur, the yotated vowel symbols are used.

The reasons for retaining yotated vowels from Russian writing are twofold: one, this way of writing seems natural to those familiar with cyrillic. Second, it allows Russian words to be written in cyrillic in their usual spelling. Here again social considerations outweigh a one-to-one simplicity.

3.3 Arabic

Arabic is written with two layers of symbols (Bauer 1996, Kaye 1996). The consonantal layer is primary, and is obligatory. The consonantal symbols <w y> are used to write the long vowels /ā ū/ respectively; consonant symbols used in this way to write vowels are referred to in Semitic as matres lectionis ‘mothers of reading’. Symbols for short vowels, the absence of a vowel, case endings, and geminated consonants constitute a secondary layer and are optional and generally not written except in the Qur’ān and in material for children and students of Arabic.

The basic layer, consisting only of consonants, is shown in the first line of the example,

\[<\text{yt}k\text{l}m\text{n}> \quad /\text{yatakallamn}a/ \quad \text{‘they (f) speak’}\]

and the form with the vowels and other symbols is shown in the second line. The short diagonal stroke above a consonant shows the vowel /a/ following that consonant; the w-shaped symbol above the <l> shows gemination; and the small circle above the <m> shows that no vowel follows.

Glottal stop is an ordinary consonant in Arabic, and in the original Semitic alphabet, was written with an ‘alif <\text{"}>; ‘alif is also used as a mater lectionis to write long /ā/. The Qur’ān, the earliest major text in Arabic, was written in the dialect of Medina of western Arabia. In initial position, glottal stop was written with an ‘alif <\text{"}>, as expected; otherwise, however, it was not written since the Medina dialect had lost glottal stops in medial and final positions. Early scholars from other dialect areas wanted to indicate the glottal stops which the Medina scribes had omitted; however, they did not want to change the sacred text.

The scholars solved their dilemma by creating a new mark <\text{\text{"}}>, called hamza, to represent glottal stop. The hamza was added as part of the secondary layer and thus not considered as altering the crucial part of the text of the Qur’ān. In initial position, it was written over the ‘alif; in medial and final position it was written over a vowel, where possible, and sometimes as an independent symbol. The rules governing its placement are quite complex.
Initial position

\( \text{ذن} /\text{?adina}/ \) ‘to permit’

Medial position

\( \text{سأ} /\text{sa?ala}/ \) ‘to ask’

\( \text{سوءك} /\text{su?aka}/ \) ‘your evil’

Final position

\( \text{برئ} /\text{bari?}/ \) ‘innocent’

\( \text{باء} /\text{ba?}/ \) ‘name of the letter ب’

Modern Arabic writers now consider the hamza as indicating a glottal stop and the 'alif as merely a seat for hamza (or as marking long /ā/ in other contexts). (Bellamy 1989, Bauer 1996).

This Arabic case shows a situation where a simple relationship (glottal stop is written with an 'alif) is drastically altered (glottal stop is written with a hamza whose placement is quite complex) because of dialect variation and a desire to preserve a cultural value, namely a sacred text.

3.4 Judæo-Arabic

Judæo-Arabic (Birnbaum 1971; Blau 1981; Fishman 1985; Hary 1995 1996) describes the form of Arabic spoken by Jews and written with the Hebrew alphabet. Even in pre-Islamic times, some Jews were speaking Arabic, and their numbers increased with the spread of Islam and Arabic culture. Judæo Arabic has been spoken both in the Middle East and in North Africa.

In Judæo-Arabic, borrowed Hebrew words are written in their normal Hebrew spelling. Arabic words at first were written phonetically. As the importance of Arabic culture grew, however, Judæo-Arabic was increasingly written with features peculiar to the Arabic writing system. Three specific borrowed conventions are discussed here.

I. In Arabic, there is a feminine ending which exhibits an alternation between /h/ and /h/. In Arabic, this ending is written in a special way as ١ known as ta marbūṭa, having the basic shape of ١ <h> with the two dots of ٤. In Judæo-Arabic, this ending is written as ٤; i.e., with the basic Hebrew shape of ٠ <h>, but with the two dots borrowed from the Arabic script.

II. In Arabic, the basic form of the article is /?al-/ and the /l/ assimilates to a following coronal sound. The article, however, is always written as <?l-> … not showing the assimilation. Similarly, in Judæo-Arabic, the article is written as <?l-> …, also not showing the assimilation, following the
Arabic tradition. As an example, consider the word /nahaːr/ ‘daytime’. Since it begins with an /n/, the /l/ of the article becomes /n/ in pronunciation; in writing, however, the article is still written <ناهار>. In Judæo-Arabic, the writing adopts the Arabic rule, rather than writing the article phonetically with an /n/.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arabic</th>
<th>‘daytime’</th>
<th>/ʔan-nahaːr/</th>
<th>‘the daytime’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>نهار</td>
<td>نهار</td>
<td>&lt;ناهار&gt;</td>
<td>&lt;ناهار&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Judæo-Arabic</th>
<th>‘daytime’</th>
<th>/ʔan-nahaːr/</th>
<th>‘the daytime’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>נאם</td>
<td>נאם</td>
<td>&lt;נאם&gt;</td>
<td>&lt;נאם&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

III. Normally, long /ā/ in Arabic is written with ‘alif <ا>; however, at the end of some words, it is written with ی <y>, known as ‘alif maqṣūra. Again, Judæo-Arabic, follows the Arabic tradition by writing such words with the Hebrew letter י <y>.

The Judæo-Arabic community split with the world of Muslim culture in North Africa in the fifteenth century, and somewhat later in Yemen. After this time, the orthography of Judæo-Arabic came more under the influence of Hebrew writing conventions. After the fifteenth century, the ‘alif maqṣūra with י <y> was altered to ה <h>, resembling the Hebrew practice.

The writing of Judæo-Arabic was strongly subject to sociolinguistic influence. Orthographic reform was a response to cultural changes. At first, words were written phonetically. As the Arabic culture became stronger, spelling tended to imitate Arabic practice; when the Arabic influence waned, spelling tended to imitate the Hebrew tradition.

In summary, we have seen several cases in this section where complexity has been introduced for cultural reasons and not the result of historic change in the language.

4. Retention of older, culturally important spelling

Because of the cultural importance of the original language of the writing system, words of that language are frequently borrowed into the new language and continue to be written as they were in the original language.

Because of the religious influence, languages which have been written with the Hebrew or Arabic writing systems have typically borrowed extensively from Hebrew or Arabic and such words are written in their normal Hebrew or Arabic form.
4.1 Hebrew
For Hebrew, examples would be Yiddish, Judezmo, and Judæo-Arabic. We have just seen this phenomenon in Judæo-Arabic. In Yiddish the same is normally true; Hebrew words have their normal Hebrew spelling. In the Soviet Union, however, there has been a movement to write Hebrew words phonetically. Presumably, this is due to an effort to put some distance between Yiddish and Judaism.

4.2. Arabic
Similarly, in the Muslim world, in languages such as Persian and Urdu, written with the Arabic script, Arabic words are frequently borrowed and written in their normal fashion. In fact, since writing came to the Urdu speakers of Pakistan via Persian, Persian words borrowed into Urdu also retain their Persian spelling in Urdu. In India, Hindi is essentially the same language as Urdu with many of the same Arabic or Persian borrowings, but they are written phonetically in Devanagari, the normal script of Hindi.

4.3 Cyrillic
We have already seen that in non-Slavic languages written with the cyrillic alphabet, words from a Slavic language, such as Russian, are written in their normal fashion. In Outer Mongolia, Mongolian is written in cyrillic. Mongolian has vowel harmony, and words borrowed from Russian are adjusted phonologically to fit this pattern. Nevertheless they are written in their normal Russian spelling, completely disregarding their Mongolian pronunciation.

4.4 Southeast Asia
Buddhism travelled from India to Southeast Asia via Sanskrit or Pali (Court 1996). The original writing system of India was known as Brahmi. Buddhism thus brought both the Sanskrit language and the Brahmi script to Southeast Asia. The script developed into the Burmese, Thai, Laotian, and Cambodian writing systems. Large numbers of Sanskrit and Pali words, both religious and secular, were borrowed into these languages.

Sanskrit had a series of retroflex stops. The symbols for these consonants were retained in the new writing systems although the sounds were not typically present in those languages. In Burmese (Roop 1972; Wheatley 1987, 1996), for example, the retroflex series of stops transcribed \(<t \theta d \eta>\) is kept distinct in writing from the series \(<t d \theta d \eta>\) even though both series are pronounced as dentals. The so-called retroflex stops in Burmese are used mostly for words of Sanskrit origin.
Similarly the letters for the voiced aspirated stops of Sanskrit are preserved, even though in Burmese they are phonetically identical to the voiced (nonaspirated) stops.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brahmi voiced</th>
<th>voiced aspirated</th>
<th>Burmese voiced</th>
<th>voiced aspirated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/b/ &lt;b bh&gt;</td>
<td>ɓ</td>
<td>ɓ</td>
<td>ɓ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/d/ &lt;d dh&gt;</td>
<td>ɗ</td>
<td>ɗ</td>
<td>ɗ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/d/ &lt;d dh&gt;</td>
<td>ɗ</td>
<td>ɗ</td>
<td>ɗ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/j/ &lt;j jh&gt;</td>
<td>ɛ</td>
<td>ɛ</td>
<td>ɛ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/g/ &lt;g gh&gt;</td>
<td>ɠ</td>
<td>ɠ</td>
<td>ɠ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus we see that the cultural importance of the original language tends to favour retention of the original writing for borrowed words in the new language even though that writing may not represent accurately the pronunciation of those words in the new language.

### 4.5 Aramaic Persian

When the Achaemenid Persians, speaking an Indo-European language, conquered the Babylonian empire in 549 B.C., they invented a cuneiform alphabet as a distinctive way of writing their language (SkjærvØ 1996). However, this alphabet was used only for a relatively few royal texts. A west Semitic language, Aramaic became the chancery language and lingua franca of the Persian Empire, used throughout the area between Greece and India. The Aramaic script remained largely unchanged for seven centuries. The language of the people, however, was Persian.

At first, texts were simply written in Aramaic. By the 2d century B.C., however, Persian words began gradually to appear written in the Aramaic script; i.e., the Aramaic script was borrowed for writing Persian. Eventually, the entire written language was Persian. Many words, however, were still written in Aramaic, but were pronounced in Persian. Such words, thus, came to be logograms for the Persian
scribe. For example, the Persian word for ‘brother’ is /brād/; rather than spelling /brād/ out in Persian, however, which would have been easy to do, the practice was to write the Aramaic word for brother <AYH> and to pronounce it /brād/. This is somewhat similar to the situation in English, where someone might write the Latin abbreviation lb. but pronounce it as pound. Persian suffixes could be added to Aramaic logograms: e.g., the nominative plural of brother /brādar/ was formed by writing the Aramaic logogram <AHY> and then attaching the Persian suffix <tl> which represents the sounds /dr/. The genitive plural was formed by adding the further suffix <yn> giving <AHY-tl-yn> pronounced /brādarîyn/. The Persian writing is a remarkable example of conservatism, rather grandly flouting any notion of simplicity.

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
\text{nom.} & <\text{AHY}> & /\text{brād}/ & \text{‘brother’} \\
\text{pl. nom.} & <\text{AHYtl}> & /\text{brādar}/ & \text{‘brother’ (nom. pl.)} \\
\text{pl. gen.} & <\text{AHYtl-yn}> & /\text{brādarîyn}/ & \text{‘brother’ (gen. pl.)}
\end{array}
\]

5. Orthographic reform

If the writing systems and language get out of line with each other, then it would appear to be the job of spelling reform to bring them back into a simple relationship. In general, this seems to be the case, but I will present three cases of spelling reform, which seem, at least in some aspects, to have made the relationship between writing and language more complex.

5.1 Runic

In early mediæval times, a roman-based alphabet known as runic writing emerged in the Germanic area and was widely used, particularly in Scandinavia (Elliott 1996). The alphabet is known by the acronym of its first six letters: futhark. The older version had 24 symbols, known as runes, and a fairly simple, straightforward relationship with the phonological system.

Early Futhark (24 runes)

\[
\begin{array}{cccccccccccccccc}
/ & \text{f} & \text{u} & \text{t} & \text{h} & \text{n} & \text{i} & \text{j} & \text{a} & \text{r} & \text{k} & \text{g} & \text{w} & \text{b} & \text{m} & \text{l} & \text{y} & \text{n} & \text{d} & \text{o} \\
\end{array}
\]

In the 8th century, a major orthographic reform took place in Denmark reducing the number of runes from 24 to 16. The reasons for this change are not
known, but it produced a system with massive underdifferentiation. Of the 16 symbols, over half represented more than one sound.

Later Futhark (16 runes)

| ψ | ↓ | ถน | z | k, g, ʔ |
| v, w | u, y, o, Ø | θ, ø, d | a | r |

Some of these changes correspond to changes in the language, but the mergers of /b p/ /t d/ and /k g/ are examples of a spelling reform that has increased complexity.

5.2 Scots Gaelic

Scots Gaelic has recently undergone a fairly mild spelling reform affecting, among other things, the writing of long vowels. Traditionally, long vowels were shown with a grave accent. For the mid back vowels, long /oː/ was written as an <o> with an acute accent, and long /øː/ as an <ø> with a grave accent.

Traditional writing

- <ø> /oː/ mòr / mo:ɾ/ ‘big’
- <o> /øː/ mòd / mo:ɾd/ ‘court’

Recent reform

- <ø> /oː, øː/ mòr / mo:ɾ/
- mòd / mo:ɾd/

The recent reform discarded the orthographic difference between /oː/ and /øː/, writing them both with a grave accent. The functional load of the different accents in distinguishing the /oː/ — /øː/ contrast is quite low, so little information is lost.

The report of the committee on Gælic Orthographic Conventions simply noted that ‘Of the two marks at present used in Gaelic, the acute accent should be dispensed with, in view of the small number of words on which it occurs, and the grave accent alone would be used to indicate length’ (Scottish Examination Board 1981). Although a relatively minor point, the Scots Gælic revision is in this respect clearly a case where spelling reform has not acted to simplify the relationship between language and writing.
5.3 Yiddish

In Yiddish, Hebrew words are usually written in their traditional form and Yiddish words are written phonetically using the Hebrew script. In the late 19th century, however, a limited practice arose, particularly in the Baltic area (Birnbaum 1979), of borrowing German spellings, called pseudo-etymological spelling by Aronson (1996). For example, ‘door’ is ordinarily pronounce /tir/ and written <tir> in Yiddish; the German pronunciation is /tyr/ written Tür (spelled Thür with an <h> in the nineteenth century). The Germanised spelling of Yiddish was <thur> similar to the German. According to Aronson (1996), this type of spelling has disappeared, except perhaps amongst certain ultra-orthodox Jews.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard Yiddish</th>
<th>Germanised Yiddish</th>
<th>Standard German</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘door’</td>
<td>נַד</td>
<td>&lt;tir&gt; /tir/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Jew’</td>
<td>גיִיב</td>
<td>&lt;yid&gt; /yid/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(verbal prefix)</td>
<td>נָד</td>
<td>&lt;far&gt; /far-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘have’</td>
<td>הָבָה</td>
<td>&lt;hobn&gt; /hobn/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These unusual spellings in Yiddish are obviously culturally based. Popular descriptions of Yiddish used such terms as ‘jargon’, ‘gibberish’, or ‘broken German’. Spellings such as this were attempts to provide dignity to Yiddish by making it look more like a ‘standard’ language. The lack of success here can likely be attributed to the fact that writing standard German would give the writer greater prestige than writing in any form of Yiddish.

6. Conclusion

The traditional view of writing, most clearly stated by Hockett, is that borrowed writing systems start off simple and become complex. This paper has shown several cases where, because of social factors, complexity was a part of the borrowing process or where complexity has been introduced for social reasons.

Hockett’s view is not entirely wrong, but it is lopsided. It is based on purely linguistic assumptions. Writing, however, has very close ties to culture. Writing is not innate; it is always consciously learned. A language is written because writing is seen as having a positive social value, and the writing system frequently incorporates these social values, even when they result in greater complexity in the relationship between writing system and language.

References