



All languages are different, even if they share some vowels, consonants



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WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

A READER asks “are there any vowels which occur in all languages?”. Like many questions about language, this seems beguilingly straightforward.

But it is difficult to answer without enrolling the questioner in a course on phonetics and phonology.

Broadly speaking, the answer is yes. But the fact that all languages have a sound that is approximately similar to the vowel in English “ta” is only the beginning of the story. The simplest version of a better answer is that languages have different numbers of vowels and this affects their precise pronunciation. Classical Arabic and Inuktitut have just three vowels, for example, while Taa, a language of Botswana, has 30. So the “a” in Arabic has a different value and a much wider space to roam in than the vowels in Taa. People accept a wide variety of “a”-like vowels in Arabic while in English the same degree of variation might change a “gnat” into a “nut”.

Another similar question asks “do any consonants occur in all languages?”. Here the answer is more complicated. There are certainly plosive sounds (such as “p”, “t” and “k”) in all languages, but some languages have no “p” (eg Ganiien’keha, an Iroquian language), and some have no “t” (eg colloquial Samoan), and some have no “k” (eg Nihau Hawaiian). And once again it is crucial to recognise that a consonant in one language system is very different from what superficially appears

like the “same” consonant in another language. Take the sound that we write as “p” both in English and in Maori. If we compare the Maori and the English pronunciations of “paua”, we will find that English speakers have a puff of air after the “p”, like a short h-sound, while Maori speakers do not – their pronunciation is more like the English “p” in “spin”. Also the value of a Maori “p” is different from that of an English “p” because in English we must keep “p” apart from the “b” at the beginning of “bower”, whereas there is no such distinction in Maori. So can we say that “p” occurs in English and in Maori? You can now see that the answer is not straightforward.

Other readers are interested in why different languages use different writing systems. Why are the scripts used to write Arabic, Persian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and English so different? The answers to these questions involve history and culture. One response is that some systems try to record separate sounds, some record separate syllables, and others focus on separate concepts. If a writing system records different sounds, then the goal is one symbol to one sound.

Maori and Italian are examples of scripts which use the Roman alphabet to record distinct sounds. This means you can have a reasonable go at reading them aloud, even if you don’t know the meaning of what you are reading.

By contrast there is no way you can read aloud a Chinese script without learning to speak some particular variety of Chinese.

Chinese symbols record concepts or meanings and these meanings are pronounced differently in different Chinese dialects.

This is one reason why China can claim that all Chinese people use the same language, although in their spoken forms they are mutually unintelligible.

A Cantonese speaker cannot understand a Hokkien speaker. But if they write to each other all will be clear. On the other hand there is a huge burden in learning to read Chinese, since you have to learn a different symbol for every meaning or concept.

In 1444 King Sejong decided to reform the Korean alphabet, changing from the use of Chinese script to a system based on the sounds of Korean rather than on concepts. Immediately this made it possible for Koreans to learn to read more easily, and the result was greatly increased literacy. Putonghua which is a sound-based writing system for Chinese has made a start in this direction for China. But it is impossible to abandon centuries of culture and literature encoded in the ideographic system which is what we know as “Chinese”. The dilemma is obvious. We do not want to ditch culture but the cost is high for language learners. English uses an alphabetic system but sometimes meanings rather than sounds are represented in the spelling of a word (eg. “malign-malignant”), clearly a topic for another column.

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Symbolic meaning: All Chinese is written the same way, but pronounced differently in different dialects.