

# Babel

A Linguistics  
Newsletter for  
the Community



## Teach a Man to... *Photi*?

What do you think of when you hear the word *language*? For some of us, our minds might conjure up images of literary giants like Shakespeare and Faulkner, or we might be reminded of our favorite poetry, or perhaps even our high school English classes. But what is *language*?

To a linguist, language refers to two big ideas: the system in our brains that “computes” language, and the interplay between speaking and listening. While writing (referred to as *orthography*) is certainly a way of representing language, even those individuals who can’t read or write possess the power of language. In linguistics, this is an important distinction to be made: the written word and the spoken word are not the same thing.

Many of us have heard that English is the “hardest language to learn.” In reality, English isn’t nearly as “complicated” as other languages, and some linguists may even describe English as being rather boring! What is hard about our language is the writing system: why is *through* spelled with so many extra letters? Or *yacht*? Why do we pronounce it *hampster* but it’s spelled *hamster*? The orthography of English is confusing and, for the most part, completely arbitrary. We could easily spell those words *thru* or *throo*, *yawt*, and *hampster*, but we don’t. This is the disconnect between language and writing: the rules of writing were invented and have to be learned, but the rules of language are natural.

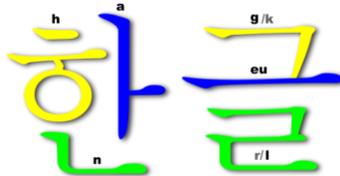
For a fun look at the strangeness of English orthography, check out this video with Ed Rondthaler *On English Spelling*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XTjeoQ8gRmQ>.

### Research Corner

Writing is still important to language and linguistics, as it can sometimes affect the learning of a new language. For example, in a study conducted by Martha Young-Scholten and Monika Langer (2015), the pronunciation of three American students during their first year of living in Germany was found to be partially influenced by German orthography! In particular, German words that are written with an initial “s” are pronounced as though they start with a “z” sound. The English learners, however, consistently pronounced it as “s”, using the written word as a “false” cue. However, this isn’t always the case: a study by Paola Escudero (2015) showed that both English and Spanish speakers learning Dutch weren’t really affected by the Dutch spelling of words: they were able to learn the words despite how “difficult” or “easy” the spelling of the words were.

### Around the World in 80 Orthographies!

Not every language is the same in how they are written. In modern Korean, the Hangeul writing system uses characters comprised of radicals, with each radical representing a particular sound. Here’s the word *hangeul* written in Hangeul.



In Modern Arabic script, words are written without their vowels, a system called an *abjad segmental script*. The reader determines the vowels by looking at *diacritics*: additional symbols placed over each character, which represents the vowels.



### Local Events

Join us on October 17<sup>th</sup> at Barnes and Nobel (365 Benner Pike) for the Bilingualism Reading Corner! Enjoy stories in Spanish and Italian with Carla Fernández and Federica Bulgarelli.

Join us on October 16<sup>th</sup> for the PSU Undergraduate Exhibition in Hispanic and General Linguistics. For more information, go to: <https://sites.google.com/site/psuxling2/home>

### Featured Books

*The Story of Writing* by Andrew Robinson, in which he explores and explains the connection between sound, symbol, and script.

*Letter Perfect* by David Sack, where he tells the story of the English alphabet, how it emerged, and where it came from, tying together culture and language.