

# WHAT IS A "LETTER?"

## *Summary*

The application of the word "letter" exclusively to written characters is a recent limitation of its sense. As a technical term of traditional grammar, it originally stood for an entity possessing three attributes or aspects: *nomen*, *figura*, and *potestas*. Early writers may be misinterpreted if the implications of this concept are not realised.

A better title for this article <sup>1)</sup> might, perhaps, be "what was a letter?", for one contention of it is that the word has fairly recently undergone a change, more precisely a *limitation*, in meaning. *Letter* is the key term in any discussion of the relations between speech and writing; but past statements and discussions on this subject are liable now to be misinterpreted, unless this change in meaning is taken into account. Thus J. S. Kenyon has said that John Walker, in his *Dictionaries* (1791 and later), treats letters "as the elements of language, with 'powers' of sound, as if they were a kind of seed from which the spoken language sprouted and grew."<sup>2)</sup> Walker, certainly, says "the First principles or Elements of Pronunciation are Letters"; but this is not the naive remark it seems at first to be, and his use of *letter* by no means implies, as Professor Kenyon suggests, that "the written form of the language was the language itself."

It is true that the *Pocket Oxford Dictionary* (1924) defines *letter* as "any of the symbols of which written words are composed", and this may be taken as a typical definition of modern British and American dictionaries. But the first sense given by Dr. Johnson is "one of the elements of syllables; a character in the alphabet", and it is to be noted about this earlier definition that although the second part of it refers to writing, the first seems to refer to speech. Johnson's illustrative quotations do not clarify further, but it is not necessary to read much in the early English grammarians to realize that this

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<sup>1)</sup> I am indebted to Professor J. R. Firth for the original suggestion that I should write this article, and for criticism and advice.

<sup>2)</sup> *American Pronunciation* (9th edition, 4th printing, 1946), p. 113.

is a real ambiguity. In fact (although there is no hint of this in the *O. E. D.*) the strict limitation of the sense of the word to writing is a recent development, and *letter* has, in the past, frequently been used in a sense similar to the modern term *speech-sound*. There can be no doubt that when William Holder (1669) said "The *Elements of Language are Letters, viz. Simple discriminations of Breath or Voice*",<sup>3)</sup> he was not speaking of marks on paper. Equally explicit is John Bulwer's (1648) striking remark that „Letters the true Elements of Speech [are] made of Motions, nay [are] nothing else but locall motions of the parts of the Mouth."<sup>4)</sup> And there can be no possibility of taking *letter* in its modern sense in Charles Butler's (1633) observation that "sundry letters, of frequent use in our tongue, have not peculiar and distinct characters", and his use of the remarkable phrase "uncharactered letters" to refer to these is surely decisive. Many other instances of this sense of *letter* could be found,<sup>5)</sup> and Walker was merely following a common usage.

Latin *litera* was equally ambiguous, and writers in both English and Latin have expressly referred to the double meaning. John Wallis writes in *De Loquela*, 1653 (p. 2):

*Litera dicenda est Sonus in voce simplex seu incompositus, in simpliciores indivisibilis. Et peculiari plerumque caractere designatur. Sin malit aliquis non Sonum ipsum simplicem, sed Characterem soni simplicis indicem, Literam appellare, fruatur, per me licet, arbitrio suo.*<sup>6)</sup>

<sup>3)</sup> A list of the writers from whom illustrations are taken is given at the end of the article.

<sup>4)</sup> Compare R. H. Stetson, *Motor Phonetics* (1928): "Speech is rather a set of movements made audible than a set of sounds produced by movements."

<sup>5)</sup> See, for example, Simon Daines (1640), A. Lane (1700), William Thornton (1793), Edwin Guest (1838). Several writers even use the word *alphabet* in the sense of the *sound-system* of a language.

<sup>6)</sup> A translation of *De Loquela* by James Greenwood forms Chapter VIII of his *Essay towards a Practical English Grammar* (1711). The above passage is there rendered:

*A Letter may be said to be a Simple or uncompounded Sound, in a Word, which cannot be divided into any more simple Sounds. And it is generally marked by a particular Character. But if any would rather have it, that a Letter is not a simple Sound it self, but a Character which marks a simple sound; he is at liberty to enjoy his opinion.*

And Simon Daines in *Orthoepia Anglicana* (1640), p. 2:  
 According to the Etymologie, or strict sense of the term, Letters are but certain Characters, or notes, whereby any word is expressed in writing: and for this cause were they by the antient Latinists distinguished into Letters, as they be Charactericall notes, and Elements, as the first grounds or Principles of speech. But this nicety is confounded in the generall acception, which promiscuously terms them Letters; and this we shall follow.

Priscian was one of those who distinguished *literae* and *elementa*, though he draws attention to confusion in their use (and he was by no means consistent himself):

Litera igitur est nota elementi et velut imago quaedam vocis literatae, quae cognoscitur ex qualitate et quantitate figurae linearum. hoc ergo interest inter elementa et literas, quod elementa proprie dicuntur ipsae pronuntiationes, notae autem earum literae. abusive tamen et elementa pro literis et literae pro elementis vocantur. 7)

Brightland's *Grammar* (1711) criticizes Wallis's definition quoted above, and insists that "Letters are the Signs of Sounds, not the Sounds themselves"; the autor, however, himself lapses into common usage a few pages later when he says "The several Sorts of Sounds us'd in Speaking, which we call *Letters* . . ."

There were always, of course, ways of avoiding the ambiguity. Several synonyms existed for both senses of the word, and *letter* could be pinned down to one of the two by using for the other either *character*, *symbol*, *note*; or *element*, *sound*, *voice*. Both Holder (1669) and William Thornton (1793) are strict in their use of *letter* in the spoken sense and *character* in the written, while Hart (1569) uses *Letter* in the written sense and *voice* in the spoken (an entry in the index of his *Orthographie* is "element: of speech, the voice; of writing the letter.") Wallis, writing in *English* (1670) said "*Letters* are the immediate *Characters* of *Sounds*." Alternatively, *letter* could be eschewed altogether; Alexander Hume (c. 1617) used *sound* and *symbol*, and Robert Robinson (1617) used *sound* and *character*.

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7) *Institutionum Grammaticarum Libri I-XII ex recensione Martini Hertzii* (Vol. II of Keil's *Grammatici Latini*). Leipzig, 1855.

Edward Search wrote at the beginning of his *Vocal Sounds* (1773):  
 I should have entitled my performance letters, but that I should then have been understood of letters written, or characters used upon paper; whereas my intention is to point out the letters spoken, or single sounds composing our syllables and words when we discourse with one another. But these two kinds of letters, the written and the spoken, do not always answer each other.

The word *letter* was, in fact, probably more commonly taken to refer to writing in the late 18th. century; no established usage arose, however, until in the 19th century *speechsound*, or simply *sound*, was adopted by phoneticians as their principal technical term.<sup>8)</sup> And *letter* is not really, even now, limited to the sense of "written character," in spite of what the dictionaries say:

Certainly the letter "h" has not yet yielded up all its mystery. How came it, for example, that the ancient Roman Cockney gratuitously inserted the letter which his modern London fellow improperly omits?

The Times leader<sup>9)</sup> from which this is taken was not discussing writing.

Webster's *New International Dictionary* states (s.v. *letter*) "this confusion of letter with sound is common among early orthoepists. Recent phoneticians avoid this use of letter."<sup>10)</sup> But the fact is that "this use of letter" is still common enough in circles unfrequented by phoneticians. The latter tend to regard it as merely muddled; it seems possible that it is rather the persistence of what was once a perfectly well-recognized, if perhaps inconvenient, usage, and that in modern dictionaries the community as a whole has had imposed on it a technical limitation of the word *letter* belonging to a small class of

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<sup>8)</sup> That it is still very much a technical term is shown by the fact that questions such as "how many sounds are there in such-and-such a word?" are meaningless to the man in the street.

<sup>9)</sup> May 16th, 1946.

<sup>10)</sup> Curiously enough it omits to explain what "this confusion" is, and there is nothing to illustrate "this use of letter". It is clear, however, that the ambiguity under discussion here is intended.

people; much as *insect* might be defined to exclude spiders in order to please the zoologists.

That there is no record in the O.E.D. of what has been a popular usage for centuries is remarkable.

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The double sense of *letter* is not only shared with, but, of course, inherited from, *litera*; it is but one sign of the fact that nearly all linguistic thinking in Europe was once in terms of a traditional Latin doctrine which derived, ultimately, from the Greeks. *Litera* was a technical term of this doctrine, of which many other survivals may be found even in contemporary grammatical terminology and classification. A few words about this doctrine will make clear that the word *letter* was used by early English orthoepists, phoneticians, and grammarians, in a way which was possibly inconvenient, probably misinterpreted, but certainly not muddled.

Human speech (*vox articulata et literata*), the subject matter of grammar, may, according to this doctrine, be split up into progressively smaller units: sentences, words, syllables and letters. To the study of problems connected with each of these units, one branch of grammar is devoted: syntax, etymology<sup>11)</sup>, prosody, and orthography. (This four-fold division can be found in England in nearly all grammars from Aelfric to the end of the eighteenth century, though it is now generally forgotten.) It is the last of these four branches with which we are here concerned. Its name, it should be remarked, was appropriate enough in the days when grammar was a description of Greek in Greek, and little more was involved in it than correct spelling. The name persisted, however, for many centuries after other problems had intruded, in spite of attempts from time to time to supplement or replace it by the term *orthoepy*.<sup>12)</sup>

What exactly was this smallest element of language, which formed the object of study of orthography? This can best be answered by considering the most important fact about *litera*: that it was a thing

<sup>11)</sup> I.e., morphology — a sense different from both the original Stoic, and the present-day, meaning of *etymology*.

<sup>12)</sup> The heading to one of the sections of John Danes' *Paralipomena Orthographiae* (1638) is "Orthographia, melius Orthoepia." Michael Maittaire (1712) gives one of the four parts of grammar as "Orthoepy, or the Doctrine of Letters."

with three attributes, *nomen*, *figura*, and *potestas*. *Figura* was the letter as written, *potestas* as pronounced, and by its *nomen* it could be identified for discussion or teaching.

In the time of the Greeks a name was not a necessary attribute of a letter; when a letter did have a name it was, incidentally, the more peculiarly felt as belonging to the letter since it was a foreign borrowing such as *alpha*, *kappa*, with no associations with anything else. By the time the doctrine was fully adapted to Latin, the *nomen* had become an essential feature of all letters, though no longer as distinctive a word as in Greek.

It is not easy to discover the relationship between *figura* and *potestas*. Some grammarians appear to define *litera* as an element of spoken language<sup>13</sup>), the written form thus appearing as a secondary thing (compare the Stoic terms *στοιχεῖον* and *χαρακτήρ τοῦ στοιχείου*.<sup>14</sup>) It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that for others it was a very sophisticated concept — a structural element of language, with two aspects or realizations, one visible and one audible. Some such concept may be intended by many later writers who seem, on the surface, to be using *letter* in a carelessly ambiguous manner. *Letter* is undoubtedly a structural term for Edwin Guest (1838) when he says "every vocal [*sc.* voiced] sound has its corresponding whisper sound, that might, if custom had so willed it, have constituted a distinct letter." He speaks of dividing a word "into its *literal* elements," and James Elphinston (1790) heads a table of English sounds: "The Litterary System."

Normative description, then, of the European vernaculars fell naturally into the terms of this doctrine. Just as Latin had been described within the framework originally designed for Greek, so the phenomena of English were fitted into the framework of Latin rather than investigated impartially. Arguments, for instance, about whether *j* and *v* were letters, continuing long after the time when the

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<sup>13</sup>) E.g., "vox simplex una figura notabilis" (Victorinus), "minima pars vocis articulatae" (Donatus). For the principal definitions see L. Jeep, *Zur Geschichte der Lehre von den Redetheilen bei den Lateinischen Grammatikern* (1893), p. 110.

<sup>14</sup>) The possible meanings of *στοιχεῖον*, its relation to *γράμμα*, and its influence on the meaning of *litera*, are of great interest, but cannot be gone into here. Cp. Ingram Bywater, *Aristotle's Poetics* (1909), p. 262.

two figures and the two powers of *i* and *u* had been brought into useful harmony, are only thus explicable; and apparently pointless discussions concerning the status of *h* are only intelligible in the light of the original doctrine. <sup>15)</sup>

Neither does speculative thinking on problems of English sounds and spelling, even when it is most adventurous, escape from the terms of the doctrine; it is doubtful, indeed, whether any advantage would result from doing so. An interesting example of this is provided by the numerous attempts there have been to establish some sort of relation between *nomen*, *figura* and *potestas* other than a purely arbitrary one.

Commonest of these is the claim that *nomen* should be related to *potestas* by deriving the former from the latter. Alexander Top (1603) speaks of "the most improper names of H. and Y.", and Charles Butler (1633) criticizes the name "dubble u" because it is "a name of the forme, and not of the force." There are only ten letters, says William Bullokar (1580), "whose names and whose sounds rightly agree," and *Right Spelling Very Much Improved* (1704) says, "Our Letters should have Names, according to their Sound and Force." The modern "Phonic" method of teaching reading is based on the same reconciliation of *nomen* and *potestas*, and is remarkably anticipated by Honorat Rambaud (1578) when he says "lire n'est autre chose que bien nommer les lettres."

A strange aberration was the reformed spelling of one G. W. (1703) in which the *potestas* was derived from the *nomen*. He gave the letter *h*, for example, the sound [tʃ], and *g* the sound [dʒ]; he then had to invent new symbols for the sounds [h] and [g]. <sup>16)</sup>

Establishment of a causal relation between *potestas* and *figura* is automatically obtained by the "visible speech translators" of the Bell Telephone Laboratories, which produce, direct from the spoken word, sound "spectrograms" which are legible. <sup>17)</sup> But before this brilliant

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<sup>15)</sup> That they were not intelligible to A. J. Ellis may be seen from his *Early English Pronunciation*, Part III, p. 805, footnote 3.

<sup>16)</sup> It is perhaps interesting to compare with this the fact that in London costermongers' "back slang" the *nomen* of *h*, and not its *potestas*, is used to produce the word for "half": *flatch* (though speakers of this mid-nineteenth century slang were supposed to have been illiterate).

<sup>17)</sup> See Ralph K. Potter, "Visible Patterns of Sound," *Science*, Nov. 9, 1945; R. K. Potter, G. A. Kopp, and H. C. Green, *Visible Speech*, New York, 1947.

discovery many attempts had been made to derive the *figura* from the *potestas*.

John Wilkins (1668) said "there should be some kind of sutable-ness, or correspondency of the figures to the nature and kind of the Letters which they express"; and it is for his "Visible Speech" (1864) that A. M. Bell is chiefly remembered. But before Bell, Wilkins had exhibited his own suggestions for what he calls "a *Naturall Character* of the Leters," departing altogether from the Roman alphabet, on p. 379 of his *Essay*; and Messrs. Holdsworth and Aldridge of the Bank of England had published in 1766 a shorthand the characters of which were derived from the same principle. Sir William Jones (1786) held a theory concerning the letters of all alphabets, "which at first, probably, were only rude outlines of the different organs of speech", which was anticipated by van Helmont's theories concerning the Hebrew alphabet in 1657.

Less extreme are those alphabets which do not aim at being entirely "representational", but assign symbols of similar shape to related sounds. This is done by Francis Lodwick (1686), "the more regularly to sort them into Classes, and to express the derivation of Letters of the same Organe, the one from the other." The *Alphabet Universel* of Emile Fournier (1861) is based on a similar principle, and so were the early phonotypic alphabets of Isaac Pitman (1842) and the Organic Alphabet of Paul Passy and Daniel Jones. It is noteworthy that one of the principles of the International Phonetic Association enunciated in 1888 is that "the new letters should be suggestive of the sounds they represent, by their resemblance to the old ones."

The traditional approach to speech sounds and spelling had all the defects of a dogma, and did not conduce, on the whole, to very much original thinking. Its effects are only too obvious, as William Holder said, "in the writings of some Learned men, who coming to treat of the nature of Letters, speak of them by Tradition, as of some remote exotick thing, whereof we had no knowledge, but by uncertain and fabulous relations"; and it led to absurd statements such as that of the usually acute thinker James Howell (1662) that Spanish *oveja* is a remarkable word because it contains all five vowels! "The powers of the letters", says H. C. Wyld, perhaps a little harshly, "is a phrase



we get positively sick of in the seventeenth century." 18)

Students of linguistics are probably better off without the ambiguous word *letter*. 19) Typographical discussions concerning *figura*, and phonological arguments concerning *potestas*, are still the main preoccupation of theorists of phonetic transcription today, but such problems are perhaps more easily handled in terms of *speech-sound*, *symbol*, and *phoneme*. 20) It may, however, be questioned whether, if *letter* had been retained in something like its traditional functional sense, the need for a phoneme theory would ever have arisen — though we should, certainly, have subtle theories of the *letter* in its place.

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The following is an alphabetical list of works from which illustrations were taken. Unless stated otherwise, the place of publication is London.

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 Holder, William. Elements of speech. 1669.  
 Holdsworth, William and Aldridge, William. Natural Shorthand. 1766.  
 Howell, James. A new English Grammar. 1662.

18) *History of Modern Colloquial English*, 3rd edn., p. 117.

19) Though Louis Hjelmsler considers "es war ganz sicher nicht als ein Fortschritt anzusehen, wenn man nach dem Einzug der Phonetik in die Sprachwissenschaft den Terminus „Laut“ statt „Buchstabe“ einfuhrte." ("Über die Beziehung der Phonetik zur Sprachwissenschaft", *Archiv für vergleichende Phonetik*, Band II, Heft 3, July 1938).

20) See J. R. Firth, "The Technique of Semantics", *Trans. Phil. Soc.*, 1935, pp. 55 and 56, especially footnote.

- Hume, Alexander. Of the Orthography and Congruitie of the Britan Tongue, Ed. Henry B. Wheatley. 1865. (Probably written about 1617).
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- Wallis, John. De Loquela. Oxford, 1653.
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- Wilkins, John. An Essay towards a Real Character. 1668.