PHONETIC TRANSCRIPTION AND THE VOLNEY PRIZE

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ABSTRACT
The institution of the Volney Prize in the early nineteenth century was intended to concentrate attention on the need for a standard system to transcribe and transliterate languages. This paper briefly discusses two of the essays submitted, and assesses how far the Volney Prize succeeded in its objectives.

1 THE BACKGROUND
This paper is concerned with the institution of the Volney Prize - an episode in the history of the development of transcription. The term 'transcription' is taken to include both (a) the recording of the phonological and/or morphological elements of a language using a specific writing system (referred to in this article as 'transcription' in a narrower sense); and (b) the recording of the graphic symbols of a second writing system (referred to henceforth as 'transliteration').

Prior to the 19th century there was no standard scheme for transcription or transliterating languages, although a number of systems had been put forward, often with newly devised notations, using Transliteration. (e.g. Wilkins [6], De Brosses [1]). The most practical scheme then existing was that of Sir William Jones [13] - intended particularly for converting Oriental scripts to the Roman alphabet.

Constantin François Volney (1757-1820) was a prominent member of the group of savants in France known as the Idéologues. It became one of his great aims in life to make oriental literature and culture more accessible to the West, and to open up the East to the influence of the superior (as he saw it) western civilisation. With this in view he published two works in the course of his life which were intended to provide a system for transcribing (in the wider sense) the oriental languages, notably Arabic (Volney [4,5]), but he was conscious that they only went part of the way towards achieving this objective. He was aware of Sir William Jones' scheme, and believed it to be an important contribution to the advancement of transcription systems. When Volney died, in 1820, he left approximately 24,000 francs in his will "for the best work related to the philosophical study of languages" with the wish that it should "encourage all work promising to continue and bring to completion a method of transcribing Asiatic languages into European letters".

2 THE VOLNEY PRIZE
A Commission was set up to administer the Prize, consisting of members of the French Academy, and it began by asking for essays which would prepare the ground for a satisfactory phonetic transcription scheme. This meant (a) setting out by what means Volney's wishes could be fulfilled; (b) determining the scope of the new system; (c) mapping out a plan of action to be followed; (d) specifying what a successful outcome might lead to. Of the four essays submitted for this first competition of 1822 two were by librarians - no Philologues at all, who relied on their profession to achieving a solution to the transcription problem. Scherer was from Munich, and Schleiermacher was later to be librarian of the Ducal Library in Darmstadt. They were awarded the prize of one of the crucial issues - whether to aim at a transcription of pronunciation or simply a transliteration. Scherer, later favoured translator, Schleiermacher the latter. Over the heads of the members of the Volney Commission and the contestants had sharp disagreements about what Volney's real intentions had been. There is no doubt that his ultimate aim was for a universal phonetic alphabet. But the question was whether to aim for a more limited objective, attainable in the immediate future.

Some of the problems involved in a transcription of pronunciation are:
1. to limit the sound to be transcribed - there was as yet no clearly formulated notion of the phoneme, though it is clearly implicit in the mention in some schemes of 'fundamental' or 'important' sounds.
2. to be able to convey the pronunciation accurately so that non-specialists could understand and reproduce it. This required a satisfactory phonetic terminology - only in part available at that time.
3. to choose from among competing accents of a language.
4. to allow (at least if universal use is anticipated) for the incorporation in any scheme of 'new' sounds - i.e. to have an open-ended system.
5. to provide sufficient symbols for the sound distinctions required, and symbols that were aesthetically pleasing, easy to reproduce, and yet clearly distinct from each other.

SCHERER
Scherer's essay is admirably clear. While recognising the above problems, he believed that he benefited from the experience of a satisfactory phonetic transcription scheme which would help with the difficulties. He had no intention of replacing existing orthographies. The alphabet would stand alongside them, helping to make oriental languages more accessible to the learner. He foresees the possibility in due course of what he calls 'philosophical' symbols, by which he means newly created symbols, not taken from existing alphabets. However, the need to enlist wide public support, as well as considerations of the economy of means of the alphabet, to begin with, would have to use the easily available familiar symbols, the same as the Roman alphabet, as well as the numerals and some Greek letters or by other devices.

He sets out what he considers to be the Principles of a good notation system:
1. No one sound should be represented by more than one symbol, and no symbol by more than one sound.
2. Symbols should be chosen on principles of simplicity, consistency and accessibility in printing types.
3. They should be usable in handwriting as well as in printing.
4. They must include the marking of the 'syllabic accent' - already found in most systems of transcription.

Where possible he aimed to combine a transcription of pronunciation with an indication of the original orthography. As regards scope, while accepting that in the first place limited groups of languages would be dealt with, he sees nothing in principle against the idea of a universal alphabet. Scherer envisages (or at least too optimistically as it turned out) that a solution to the problem could emerge in the following year's competition, and that the necessary tools would rapidly be made available - namely (a) the full notation system, with a suitable introduction and illustrations of its use; (b) a simple grammar, a chronology and a vocabulary of two of the most important languages - Arabic and Sanskrit; (c) possibly a complete transcription of a selected oriental classic work. He sees the new alphabet as having five main benefits:
1. economy in the reader's time; 2. economy in printing costs; 3. attracting new students to oriental studies; 4. aiding language acquisition in general; 5. improving communication for all those coming into contact with oriental languages - administrators, travellers, traders etc.

Scherer's approach is practical, and the system he put forward the year's competition adhered closely to the principles he had set out in 1822. It drew on all the related tools and techniques used in the heading of 'phonography', and transliteration separately as 'semiology'. He attempted to combine the two by using lower case letters for phonography and upper case for semiology. He gives as an example the name Muhammad translated from Arabic. The semigraphic version, translating the Arabic name into Western script, but the combined version would be MuθHHμμμμ (the circumflex and other signs!) Scherer intended that this would be a type of Arabic diacritics for vowels and for doubling the consonant. The 40 letters of which all but 12 are taken from the roman alphabet, and most of the remainder have only slight modifications of roman letters.

Scherer's phonetics is inevitably
incorrect in places, but he makes some interesting observations. He presents the
vowels in a vowel diagram, which he
specifies do not relate to the sounds of a particular language. In his
later works, he had introduced a third
dimension. Whereas the basic vowel sounds
are represented as the complex of a solid
elliptical body, the vowel 'mute' is i.e. approximated
he describes them as a "vowel yet
undeveloped" is said to be in the centre (see
diagram). In his 1822 essay he talks of
this vowel as either "concealing itself
within the vocal sphere" or "approaching the
vocal periphery". He equates it
with the colour grey which he regards as a
mixture of all colours. (This comparison
with colours is found in a number of early
descriptions.) As with most early vowel
diagrams the central line does not
represent vowels with a central tongue
position, but front rounded vowels.

4 BRIERE

It is impossible here to give more than a
taste of the essays on transcription which
were submitted for the Volney Prize in the
first 20 years (after that the Commission
decided to drop the topic of transcription,
disappointed with the results of previous competitions). They remain
limited in number and scope in the strictest
sense, limited to the most ambitious,
attesting to provide for all sounds in all
languages. This end of the spectrum
obviously includes those which are of more
interest to the phonetician. I shall
confine myself to one of these more
ambitious schemes - the most ambitious in
fact - which was put forward by M. de Briere -
the pseudonym - his real identity is still
obscure. He first put it forward in 1827,
and resubmitted it in 1831. It did not
win a prize on either occasion, though
Briere did eventually win in 1837 with
a much more limited scheme.

The 1827/1831 proposal was entitled
Phonographie crtiographique
(phonographie - the art of representing
the movements of speech by precise letters -
that is, it was a universal alphabet.
After a description of the speech
organs accompanied by somewhat crude
diagrams, he gives a productive
mechanism that is involved. He
selected from a description of articulatory
movements relating to the
larynx, velum, hard palate, teeth, lips, tongue, jaw and cheeks. To give
an idea of the detail of his description,
21 possible lip positions are allowed for,
and 17 different positions of the tongue tip (see Appendix for examples). Larynx
raising and falling is taken into
account. Briere derives 80 subsections of these is then subject
xious to the degree of variation
within each category.

Interesting, and unexpected in a
description of this period, is his
recognition of variations which are
frequently totally ignored in description
of speech. He lists those as: speaker's
sex, age, temper, physical
dimensions, state of health, body posture,
situation, proximity to others, taste of
voice, tone of voice, character, emotional
state, air and manners, social
position, national or provincial accent.
each in which he is living, the
temperature, the time of day, seasonal
weather and the season of the year. 

Although variations of this kind may be
ignored for many purposes (and
perhaps it is for this that the Commission
was looking for), they are evidence of an open mind and an
observant eye. There is nothing
wrong with this. He also provided for features of
the concept of what constitutes a vowel.
He calculated that the number of sounds would allow for
the description of 43,923,680 sounds!
The vowel "o" springs to mind. But
he made it clear that the number of sounds
which would have to be symbolised in
reality would probably not exceed 220.
The degree of precision which his system
would call for if applied in full is
obviously beyond what average
of a universal alphabet would possess, but
is it stimulating to find such a
search for precision at a time when so many
after precision at a time when so many
searches were little more than rehashes of
previous work, involving little or no new
observations.

One other particular point of interest is that
Briere calls the "organic name" to
each sound, based on its formation. It is the
same kind of reasoning as Janssen's
aphanaphetic notation ([2]). To take one
example, in the Indian lung sound orng
been given the name "tPA-lou", where [t] =
tongue tip raised, [P] = aspiration
and [ou] = mouth opening.

APPENDIX

EXAMPLES OF BRIERE'S CLASSES OF SOUNDS

1. pulmoniti = lung movement
gutturalité = larynx action
2. glosso-stapitlityque = tone movement
3. nasality = soft palate movement
4. lingualité = tongue tip movement
5. palatalité = contact with palate
6. velarité = contact with
velum
7. labialité = lip position
8. oroalité = mouth opening
9. labialité - lip position
10. labialité - mouth opening
11. nasalité - inflation of cheeks

Examples of subclasses:
1. gravi-poluturalité = larynx lowered
2. acuti-poluturalité = larynx raised
3. cavi-lingualité = tongue tip lifted
and curved
4. extensi-velarité = jaw pushed forward
5. lati-velarité = jaw moved sideways
6. distensi-labialité = lips flattened
7. retracti-labialité - lips drawn back

5 CONCLUSION

In all 35 essays on transcription were
submitted, of which six were awarded the
Volney Prize. The selection of these was
made by the Commission to have
presented a system which they could do
more than commend as worthy of further
examination or wider circulation before
approval could be considered. Volney's
choice for the adoption of a new system
with the backing of the French Academy
was never realised, though the
institutions of the prize awarded so many
valuable works in the wider linguistic
field. Many of these works are seen here
as part of a major project concerned with
the Volney Prize essays in the course of
the next few years.

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2. JANSSEN, Otto (1889). Der
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3. VOUGY, William (1788). "Dissertation on the orthography of
nostratic words in Roman letters."
4. Scherer's 1822 vowel diagram

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209