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**‘To observe things as they are without regard to their origin’:  
Henry Sweet’s general writings on language in the 1870s**

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***Abstract***

From 1870 to 1877, in a series of articles and review articles on general linguistics alongside his work in Old English and phonetics, Henry Sweet waged a campaign against prejudice in language study. The time was right for such an enterprise: the world of the Education Act (1870), the reform of Latin teaching, the debate on spelling reform, the popularization of science by Huxley and Tylor. Sweet sought to persuade the world of the errors of the ‘visual conception of language’ maintained by educated people in his own time, and he argued for the phonetic observation of the natural sentence as the foundation of language study. In these years Sweet developed new approaches to the phonology of medieval English (1872, 1874), the close description of the sounds of foreign languages such as Danish (1873), the most efficient methods for the ‘synthetic’ study of a foreign language (1877). Most radical, perhaps, is his attempt ‘to upset some of the conventional dogmas of philology, logic, grammar, partly by means of a consistent phonetic analysis, and to explain the real meaning of the parts of speech’ (Sweet, ‘Words, Logic and Grammar’, 1876). In short, scientific observation must triumph: we must learn ‘to observe things as they are without regard to their origin’.

**F**rom 1868 to 1877, in a series of articles and review articles on general philology that complemented his early work in Old English and phonetics, Henry Sweet (1845–1912) made exploratory ‘sallies’ into linguistic theory (to use a term by Roman Jakobson 1966: 250) and, at the same time, waged a campaign against prejudice and prescriptivism in language study. As his work progressed he became convinced that educational practices in his own day had distorted a true understanding of the form and structure of English and other modern languages. The following statement is characteristic of the views he expressed in these early publications:

An educated man in the nineteenth century is one who has been taught to associate groups of type marks with certain ideas: his conception of language is visual, not oral. The same system is applied to other languages as well as English, so that we have the curious phenomenon of people studying French and German for twenty years, and yet being unable to understand a single sentence of the spoken language, and also of Latin verses made and measured by eye, like a piece of carpentry, by men who would be unable to comprehend

the metre of a single line of their own compositions, if read out in the manner of the ancients (Sweet 1873–74b: 479).

Here Sweet posits a ‘visual conception of language’ as an explanation for the currently woeful lack of language awareness. And in his early writings, Sweet sought a threefold solution to the problem: (1) he and like-minded philologists promoted new methods of linguistic description based on observation and phonetics; (2) in the then heated debates on spelling reform, he defended the phonetic approach against ‘prejudice and irrational conservatism’ (Sweet 1877d: 169); (3) writing for both an academic readership and a wider general public, he criticized the typographic and ‘one-sidedly antiquarian’ approaches to the study of the English language.

### *1. A sketch of Sweet’s early career (1868–1878)*

A brief look at Sweet’s career is appropriate, for it suggests that the period from 1868 to 1878 marks an initial, separate stage in Sweet’s scholarly development. Here the published biographical sketches, albeit brief, are invaluable: particularly those by his contemporaries Wyld (1913), Brandl (1913), and Onions (1927), as well as later, more critical accounts by Wrenn (1946) and, most recently, in the work of the historian of phonetics M.K.C. MacMahon (2004).

In his period at King’s College School London from 1861 to 1863, Sweet showed little promise and progressed only as far as the Upper Fourth. Like the philologist William Walter Skeat (1835–1912), Sweet was taught by the Anglo-Saxon scholar Oswald Cockayne (1809–1873), and perhaps became familiar with Old English even then. But occasional later remarks reveal that his schooling generally had a negative effect on him: he was left with a distaste for Latin and Greek, and he came to despise the lifeless and meaningless methods by which these (and other) languages were taught at most Victorian public schools. Colleagues such as the phonetician Alexander J. Ellis (1814–1890) and Professor A.H. Sayce (1845–1933), the Oxford Semiticist and comparative philologist, had similar experiences at public school, and they later expressed equal distaste for the supposed ‘mind-training’ provided by a classical education (Ellis 1875–76, Sayce 1874: 11–12).

One intellectual fascination for Sweet during his early career was alphabets, and he subsequently became interested in the notation of speech sounds, taking lessons in the mid-1860s with Alexander Melville Bell (1819–1905), the inventor of the ‘organic’ phonetic script known as Visible Speech. His study of phonetics then developed through contact with the ideas of A.J. Ellis and the philologist Eduard Sievers (1850–1932). The later enthusiasm for the reading and spelling reform movements, and hence also for the reform of language teaching, stem from these interests.

After leaving King’s College School, Sweet studied historical grammar from 1863 to 1864 at Heidelberg University, attending the lectures of Adolf Holtzmann and teaching himself the details through a close study of Grimm’s grammar.<sup>1</sup> Old English

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<sup>1</sup> Drüll (1986: 118–19). In the two semesters when Sweet was matriculated at the university, Holtzmann lectured on Sanskrit, Germanic antiquities, history of German literature, German

became an absorbing interest, initiated by his reading of Grimm (1819), and perfected apparently through the books of Vernon (1865), Thorpe (1846, 1865). In the period up to and including his study of Greats (classics) at Oxford (1869–1873), Sweet studied the Northern languages intensely, including Icelandic, Danish and Swedish, apparently in his spare time while working in the office of his uncle's law firm. Both the Bodleian and British libraries became favourite haunts, and he gradually developed his palaeographic skills as he read through scores of Old English manuscripts.

At Oxford, Sweet met Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900), then Professor of Modern Languages and head of the Taylorian Institute. At this time there was no possibility of reading for a degree in modern languages (Firth 1929), but Sweet contented himself with winning the Taylorian prize in German language and philology in 1870—in fact his only academic distinction at the university itself. In 1873 (the year he barely passed his classics degree), he published a study of the sounds of Danish, and in the following year the first version of *The History of English Sounds*. In 1876, Sweet became President of the Philological Society; his two presidential addresses (1877 and 1878) are notable for their wide reading in philology and phonetics, and for their comments on applied linguistic issues such as the 'practical study', i.e. the learning and teaching, of modern foreign languages. The culmination of this period is the essay 'Words, Logic, and Grammar' (1875–76) and—at the end of the following year—the pioneering *Handbook of Phonetics* (1877), as well as a draft of *The Practical Study of Languages*, not published in full until twenty years later (Sweet, 1882–84, 1885a, 1899).

Sweet quickly gained a reputation for his erudition, even while still officially a Balliol student, and from 1870 he became the regular contributor of reviews and short articles on Old English for the new fortnightly journal of literature, science and art, *The Academy* (founded 1869). Fellow contributors included philologists Skeat and Max Müller, the critic Matthew Arnold, and the scientist Alfred R. Wallace. From his active involvement with *The Academy*, we can assume that Sweet was acquainted with current literary, linguistic, anthropological and general scientific debate as well as with the latest news in his own field of philology. In addition—and this point is worth emphasis—it was through this popular medium that his ideas were able to reach a much wider audience than that of the *Transactions of the Philological Society*, where he published specialised linguistic studies.

From 1871 onwards, Sweet also began to produce his major work in Anglo-Saxon studies, initiated through his membership of the London Philological Society (from 1869), and through his friendship with Frederick J. Furnivall (1825–1910), the general editor of the Early English Text Society. Along with the *Handbook of Phonetics* (1877d), his best known scholarly works of this period are the *Anglo-Saxon Reader* (1876) and the important editions of Old English texts: the *Pastoral Care* (1871–72), *Orosius* (1883) and the *Oldest English Texts* (1885c). The latter book was, according to Onions (1927), the product of 'seven years of the closest work', which put the early history of English on a sound basis. It was the research for this edition that drew Sweet away from more general linguistic work, and the year 1878 can therefore be regarded as marking the end of the period of his early writings.

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mythology, Old and Middle High German texts. For this information I am grateful to the archivists of the Ruprecht-Karls Universität Heidelberg.

## 2. *Sweet's new approaches to linguistic description*

In the 1870s, then, Sweet applied his learning to various works of technical description, but it would be wrong to say that he worked alone in a vacuum. The model of the special investigation was promoted by his fellow-members of the Philological Society, and included the dialect studies of the later editor of the Oxford Dictionary, James A.H. Murray (1837–1915) and the writings of A.J. Ellis, both of whose work Sweet reviewed and promoted (Ellis 1869a,b, Murray 1873, Sweet 1871a and 1873).

Alongside the special investigations is the more radical study ‘Words, Logic, and Grammar’ which Sweet read not only to like-minded colleagues in the Philological Society (Sweet 1875–76) but also, in a modified form, to the anthropologist Edward B. Tylor (1832–1917) and his colleagues at the Anthropological Society (Sweet 1877a). In this paper Sweet attempted ‘to upset some of the conventional dogmas of philology, logic, and grammar, partly by means of a consistent phonetic analysis, and to explain the real meaning of the parts of speech’ (1877–79: 1). In short, as he stated in the original text of the paper, scientific observation must triumph: ‘we must learn to observe things as they are without regard to their origin’ (Sweet 1875–76: 471).

This scientific approach—the observation of the actual existing forms of a language—clearly had its origins in his earlier work. For instance, Sweet had suggested in a review of ‘German Grammars of English’ that if the language were transcribed without prejudice, writing one word where one is heard, then English might appear more like a ‘symmetrically developed agglutinative language’ rather than a language with ‘no grammar’ (1874a: 68). Sweet drew on various sources for this insight. He was evidently inspired by his reading of *Philology of the English Tongue* (1871) by the Oxford professor of Anglo-Saxon John Earle (1824–1903). In his review of Earle’s book for *The Academy*, Sweet had noted that the phrase *I love* could equally well be represented *I-love* or *Ilove* since the pronoun *I* is almost as much a dependent inflexion as the *-o* in the Latin *amo* (1871c: 506). Such ideas were in the air in the 1870s. The theory that present-day English might be undergoing a process of agglutination of its forms was also held by Richard Morris (1833–1894), author of a book on historical word-formation (1872). As President of the Philological Society in 1875, Morris took a notably ‘uniformitarian’ approach (Christy 1983), emphasising the scientific methods employed by the geologist Sir Charles Lyell (1797–1875) and, moreover, speculating on the structure of English in a similar manner to Sweet:

We believe that it is as true in linguistic as in geological formations, that whatever is, has been, and may be. We see this in numerous remarkable coincidences in the grammatical apparatus of languages having no historical connection whatever. Sometimes the old laws of speech formation may be studied in one and the same language; so that it would not be difficult even in English to illustrate the isolating, agglutinative, and inflexional processes which are peculiar to certain tongues... (Morris 1875–76: 8–9)

Elaborating on such an approach in his ‘Words, Logic, and Grammar’ in 1876, Sweet classifies the English personal pronoun ‘I’ as a *half-word*, which he distinguishes from



a *full-word* by the fact that it is weakly stressed (Sweet 1875–76: 473 and 475). As he writes earlier in the same paper:

We find, in short, that every sentence can be analyzed into smaller groups characterized by one predominant stress-syllable around which the others group themselves (Sweet 1875–76: 473).

On this analysis, the pronoun ‘I’ is a pronominal prefix, which cannot normally exist on its own without an accompanying verb, while the independent emphatic form is *me* (Sweet 1875–76: 495–6), a direct challenge to the condemnation of the form *it’s me* by contemporary prescriptivists such as George Washington Moon (1823–1909).<sup>2</sup>

A related example is Sweet’s treatment of the English future tense, which need not, in his opinion, be regarded as an analytical construction made up of three separate words, but as one agglutinative form with three variants (1875–76: 492):

the positive future: hiylgou  
 the negative future: hiywountgou  
 the emphatic future: hiywilgou.

The example shows also that even at this stage in his career Sweet was working on a notion of *grammaticalization*—though without coining a specific term for the phenomenon (cf. Lindström 2003). It is noteworthy also that Sweet’s transcription ignores the usual separation of words, thus imitating the scribal practices of word-division that he knew from his editorial work on Anglo-Saxon manuscripts (Atherton 1995, 1996).

In the course of ‘Words, Logic, and Grammar’, Sweet went on to propose a new way of representing the stream of speech in phonetic notation. The written sentence is to be divided into sound-groups, as with the above examples, but in the new notation a printed space between two written forms indicates that the following syllable is pronounced with stronger force or stress, on the analogy of bars in musical notation (1875–76: 483). This is the system that Sweet goes on to employ a year later in his *Handbook of Phonetics* (1877d: 112–14), for instance in what he termed his ‘Broad Romic’ transcription of English ‘Colloquial Phrases’. Here is a selection, with my re-transcriptions of Sweet’s notation; the sign (\) indicates a falling tone, (-) before a word indicates lack of stress, while (˘) and (˙˙) mark extra degrees of emphasis:

- |                                    |  |
|------------------------------------|--|
| 1. kəmə˘ pət ˘wəns\                | ‘Come up at once’.                           |
| 4. hiiəren dhaerən ˘evrewhaeə\     | ‘Here and there and everywhere’.             |
| 5. -dhei keim bækdhə seim dei\     | ‘They came back the same day’.               |
| 6. -dhə mənuh˘ æddhə ˘hætənez hed\ | ‘The man who had the hat on his head’.       |
| 7. koknez səmt˘ aimz ˘feiltədes    | ‘Cockneys sometimes sometimes fail to        |
| tiqgweshbə twiyndhə ˘˘haerəndhe\   | distinguish between the <i>hair</i> on their |
| hedzəndhe ˘˘aeəwiy briydh\         | heads and the <i>air</i> we breathe’.        |
| 8 -dhə boi aas(k)tez faadhərefiy   | ‘The boy asked his father if he wouldn’t     |

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Baron (1982:192) on Moon’s controversy on pronouns with Henry Alford, author of the usage manual *The Queen’s English* (1865, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition 1870).

wudntrˈaadhə gouə litl faadhə\          rather go a little farther’.

The notation serves as a phonological and grammatical analysis of Sweet’s own speech; no. 4 *here there and everywhere* contains the voiceless (wh),<sup>3</sup> which he regarded as a Scottish pronunciation acquired from his mother. Sentence no. 8 shows the weaker forms of the 3<sup>rd</sup> ps. personal pronoun (hiy) and of the possessive (hiz), which becomes (ez) in unstressed syllables. As a possible pronunciation of the past tense of the verb *to ask* Sweet also notes in brackets the dropping of the *k* sound in the consonant cluster of *asked*. The descriptive approach is characteristic: Sweet’s sentences no. 4 and no. 7 showing his own linking *-r-*, which by 1877 was well established in educated London English (Ellis 1877e; Bailey 1996: 103–4). Nos. 6 and 7 also demonstrate aitch-dropping in unstressed syllables, which is then neatly contrasted in no. 8 with the presence of *h* in the stressed syllables of the Cockney shibboleth *air* and *hair*.

In short we have here an attempt at a phonetically-based descriptive approach. There are a few minor errors and weaknesses in the method of transcription and the selection of material. *Come up at once* is perfect as a natural ‘colloquial sentence’, as Sweet intended. But sentence 8 with its rhymes is clearly an example artificially invented to illustrate the point about the lack of medial *-r-* in the adverbial <farther>. Such artificial effects were removed and the system improved in the *Elementarbuch*, or primer for teaching English as a foreign language, which Sweet eventually published in 1885 (Sweet 1885b)

Inevitably the pronunciations in the transcription were hard for many native speakers to accept. Above all for many Victorians, h-dropping is the worst of all faults—seen in the now infamous remarks by Dean Henry Alford (1810–1871) in his *A Plea for the Queen’s English* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition 1870):

First and foremost let me notice that worst of all faults, the leaving out of the aspirate where it ought to be, and putting it in where it ought not to be. This is a vulgarism not confined to this or that province of England, nor especially prevalent in one county or another, but common throughout England to persons of low breeding and inferior education, particularly to those among the inhabitants of towns.<sup>4</sup>

Alford is at his most severe and socially prescriptive in this passage, and it contrasts with the less emotive and more descriptive attitude of Sweet in the Appendix to the *Handbook of Phonetics*, where he is discussing the need for spelling reform:

The history of *h* and *r* is an instructive instance of how pronunciation may be controlled by a changed spelling. It is certain that if English had been left to itself the sound *h* would have been as completely lost in the standard language as it has been in most of the dialects. But the distinction between *house* and ‘*ouse*, although in itself a comparatively slight one, being easily marked in writing, such spellings as ‘*ouse* came to be used in novels &c. as an easy way of

<sup>3</sup> Round brackets round a form indicate Sweet’s Broad Romic notation.

<sup>4</sup> Alford’s views on *h* are discussed by Crowley (2003: 129) and Mugglestone (2003: 52, 92).

suggesting a vulgar speaker. The result was to produce a purely artificial reaction against the natural tendency to drop the *h*, its retention being now considered an almost infallible test of education and refinement. The weakening of *r* into a vowel and its absorption into the vowel that precedes it, although really quite as injurious to the force and intelligibility of the language as the dropping of *h*, not being easily marked in writing, passes unheeded, and indeed, few people realise the fact that they make no difference whatever between such words as *father* and *farther* (Sweet 1877d: 194–95).

What Sweet and Ellis both demonstrate is that ordinary untutored intuitions about grammar and pronunciation may be misleading. Some English speakers are probably unaware of the differences between careful and rapid speech, while others deny that they drop *h* or *r*—presumably because the visual form of, for example, <he> is so fixed in their minds that they imagine they must say /h/ whenever the word *he* is spoken. In fact, as we know from later reports (Sweet 1899; Jespersen 1995, MacMahon 2001: 1589), such weak forms and assimilations in Sweet's English textbook of 1885 were castigated as vulgar and slovenly by some of his contemporaries. Sweet and his colleagues found they had to engage in vigorous debate as they sought to persuade their opponents of the visual and orthographic prejudices that shaped their attitudes.

### ***3. The Debate on Spelling Reform***

On May 18<sup>th</sup> 1877, addressing the Philological Society in his role as president, Sweet surveyed recent scholarly work in the field. He emphasised and summarised his own work in phonetics and general linguistics, and strongly urged the Society to find practical applications for its scientific work:

The most important of the numerous practical applications of phonetics is that of *spelling reform*. This difficult problem postulates the most thorough-going and minute phonetic analysis, and can be approached by a trained phonetician only (Sweet 1877–79: 9).

The move to reform spelling had been extensively debated on at least two previous occasions and the issue was revived again in the 1880s (MacMahon 1985: 90, 106–7). In general, of course, reform was very firmly on the agenda in 1870s England, and arguably many of the Victorian educational reforms had been successful. The Public Schools, guided by Max Müller and other university professors, had endeavoured to reform the teaching and pronunciation of Latin in order to eradicate the faulty anglicized pronunciations (Max Müller 1871, Palmer 1871). More importantly, following Forster's Education Act of 1870 the school boards now provided for universal primary education throughout the country. But teachers were apparently facing the problem of how best to teach literacy to 'children of the labouring population', and figures printed by Sweet (1877d: 210) suggest that the standard attained at public elementary schools was not high. Following the motion passed by the London School Board under the chair of the Liberal educationist Sir Charles Reed

(1819–1881) in November 1876, it was felt that ‘a great difficulty is placed in the way of education by our present method of spelling’, and it was resolved that English orthography should be reformed and simplified (Ellis 1877a: 185). Practical schemes were proposed on several occasions in the following year. Philological advice was sought: a Spelling Reform Conference was held on May 29, 1877 (Ellis 1878: 6), chaired by Sayce and Morris, with addresses by Sweet, Murray and Ellis—a similar meeting of philologists taking place in America chaired by Francis A. March (1825–1911). A remark by Ellis sums up the spelling reform agenda:

I wish to speak like an educated inhabitant of the metropolis of England who has learned to speak by association with educated men, not as one who has had to pick up his knowledge from the letters because he was unfamiliar with the sounds. (Ellis 1877f: 13)

This last quotation illustrates the extent to which the debate was also a pressing political and social issue for many of those involved—as it was to remain until at least the time of George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950), who treated some of the social questions arising from this issue in his plays *Major Barbara* (1907) and *Pygmalion* (1916). Ellis and Sweet, it should be noted, are still a hundred years away from regional accents on the BBC, since they both supported standardisation, despite their scholarly interest in dialects. Sweet wanted ‘uniformity, clearness, and elegance of pronunciation’ (Sweet 1877c), but like Ellis ‘in the interests of mental and social advance’ (Ellis 1877a: 186) Sweet was in favour of teaching general ‘received pronunciations’ throughout the country. The plural here is significant, since both scholars were aware of ‘variable realities of spoken usage’ (Mugglestone 2003: 259). What disturbed the two scholars was the inability of their contemporaries to recognise the forms of their own language when it was recorded phonetically. James Murray faced similar problems when he undertook to provide a notation to record prevailing pronunciations of words entered in the New English Dictionary (MacMahon 1985: 77).

The following is an example of Glossic, the kind of orthography that Ellis was promoting, in which the values of the letters, or combinations of letters, are derived from traditional forms of English spelling:

Feineli az rigaardz eisolaited (aur eizolaited) werdz, dhai aar all ritn az strong aur emfatik eksept dhi aartiklz “a, dhi,” faur which “u, dhu” might [sic] hav been euzd, but “a” indikaits an admisibl proanunsiashen between a and aa (ritn a’ in ekstended Glosik), and dhi saim apleiz too udher eusez of week “a”. Again, “dhi” iz dhi sound aulwaiz euzd faur *the* befoar vouelz and admisibl at aul teimz.

Dhe [sic] eksplunaishenz abuv givn sufeis too shoa dhi prinsiplz ov dhis keind ov reiting. Dhi proanunsiashen heer euzd mai aur mai not bee aproovd ov ; dhat iz nothing too dhi perpus, bikauz eni udher riseevd proanunsiashen kuod hav been eekweli eezli ritn, az shoan bei dhi alternutiv proanunsiashenz okaizheneli anekst. (Ellis 1877c: 230)

Unwittingly the two misprints in the above passage show the practical difficulties that such a spelling presented. Its advantage was flexibility; it could record alternative pronunciations, and it would facilitate a gradual reform in which pupils could learn to read in the old orthography whilst learning to write in the new. Sweet, by contrast favoured an immediate change, and his Broad Romic, as we have seen, was based on the Roman values of the vowels, which would have brought English back into harmony with European languages such as Italian and German, thus ‘facilitating the acquirement of foreign languages by ourselves, and of English by foreigners’ (Sweet 1877b: 163).

For Sweet and his colleagues the negative side-effect of education was to instil ‘wrong connexions’ between letters and sounds, or between letter-combinations and ideas, and to nurture prejudices about the true nature of language. Thus on March 10<sup>th</sup> 1877, with debate turning to the form that the new English spelling should take, Professor Sayce wrote to *The Academy*:

What is wanted is that, as Mr. Sweet says, ‘every sound [should] have a distinct symbol, and every symbol one invariable sound’. As pronunciation varied, therefore, the spelling of words would vary also, and the philologist would be able to make the same use of printed texts that he now makes of MSS. (Sayce 1877: 209)

‘Variations in educated speech,’ Sayce asserts, would not be a problem, as they would be merely ‘like different printing-presses’. Essentially very close to Sweet (1877b) in his argument, Sayce continues as follows:

An arbitrary spelling like that of English dissociates the language of the eye from the language of the ear, and makes it exceptionally hard for an Englishman to learn to speak a foreign tongue. And more than this: it tends to disguise the real nature of speech and to create an attitude of mind which has been the cause of numberless false theories in the science of language. (Sayce 1877: 209)

It is this ‘attitude of mind’ that Sayce and Sweet felt they had to fight, as we shall see below.

The reform proposals met with considerable opposition. Some writers simply dismissed the whole issue; even the son of the chairman of the School Board later wrote of ‘the uncertain and marshy field of “spelling reform”’ (Reed 1883: 179). But the proposals also engendered a good deal of debate about language in the pamphlets and popular journals. These make for fascinating reading from the standpoint of the present day; the critics are at once reasonable when they argue about the cost and practicability of the reform and at the same time, in many of their statements, they confirm what Sweet, Ellis and Sayce are saying about the ‘attitude of mind’ and visual conception of language so prevalent at the time. An instance is found in a pamphlet on spelling reform by Dr. George Farley. F.R.S., professor at King’s College, London, written partly in reaction to the schemes of March and Ellis (Farley 1878). Farley’s own scheme is workable, basically ‘the omission of duplicated consonants’, though it has some oddities like *suxeed* and the unphonetic *unecesarily*. However, his comments

on Ellis's 'Glosik Speling' seem to be (perhaps) wilfully provocative, or (more likely) naively letter-based, revealing a basic ignorance of the difference between voiced and voiceless *th*; he remarks first that German speakers of English sometimes say 'di, dis, dat' for 'the, this, that', then adds: 'but we have no recollection [sic] of ever having heard anyone, native or foreigner, pronounce them as dhi, dhis, dhat' (Farley 1878: 24).

Another insight into language attitudes is seen in the open letters to Ellis from James Spedding (1808–1881), the literary scholar and specialist in the writings of Francis Bacon, who supported the reform as an aid to the spread of literacy and the standardisation of the language. Spedding wrote in *The Academy* of the need 'to arrest the process through which so many of our words are rapidly losing their original and characteristic features'. His convoluted justification for this hinges on the avoidance of the 'obscure' vowel now known as schwa, which he is certainly aware of, but wishes to proscribe out of the language:<sup>5</sup>

Many a delicate *a* and *o* will be degraded into a slovenly *e* or *u*, but they will not be sanctioned by authority [i.e. if a reform takes place]; whereas, if they are exhibited to the learner as the true vowel sounds which the *a* and *o* represent, he will try to pronounce them, and the distinction between the final syllables in 'Ithuriel' and 'etherial,' 'sequel,' and 'equal,' and 'antiquarian,' 'symptom' and 'system,' & c. will be lost to the language. (Spedding 1877: 489)

Various letters went to and fro in the pages of *The Academy* as Spedding and Ellis crossed swords on these questions. In his response to Ellis's letter written in proposed 'Glossic' spelling (Ellis 1877c) Spedding praises Ellis's phonetic abilities but rejects the analysis itself on prescriptive grounds, as a record of faulty pronunciation:

I seem to hear, as I read, all the faults in pronunciation which I am in the habit of hearing around me, and which I have all my life been most anxious to avoid... [these faults] are only too familiar in ordinary speech, and are here so well represented that they make this letter positively disagreeable to read; it is like listening to a man reading with a slovenly articulation. But this, though a triumph in its way, is not what we want. (Spedding 1877)

Ellis responded in terms of 'observation' and objectivity:

I have always disclaimed being an orthoëpist, in the sense of one who decides what ought to be the pronunciation of English. I have endeavoured, during more than the complete generation which has elapsed since I first took up the study as a practical subject, to become an observer, and to try and ascertain what is said by well-educated Englishmen, rather than what should be said, and to discover if possible

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<sup>5</sup> James Murray also had to defend his descriptivist views on schwa against those who wished to halt 'the conquests of the neutral vowel' (see MacMahon 1985: 77 and 104, note 15).

some natural ground for the actual diversities of usage. (Ellis 1877e: 558)

As early as 1874, Sweet had proposed a reason for such cases in the idea that most people have a ‘double pronunciation’, one learned by imitation, the other an unconscious modification:

If asked to pronounce the sound distinctly they will give the former sound, and will probably disown the latter as a vulgarism, although they employ it themselves in rapid conversation. (Sweet 1873–74b)

Ellis offered the following case study as an explanation:

As Klopstock laid it down: if you want to know how a man pronounces a word, don’t ask him, but lead him to introduce the word unconsciously in conversation, and then observe. Directly a man attempts to pronounce words isolatedly, he becomes confused, and forms theories, and belies himself. A lady having told me she always said *lek'tyer*, and never *lek'cher*, said *lek'cher* over and over again to me in the course of the following conversation, without being conscious of it. (Ellis 1877f: 15)

From a present-day perspective, at least two explanations may be offered for this lady’s behaviour. The first is that she insisted, come what may, that she always uttered the standard pronunciation /ləktjə/ rather than the form /ləktə/ with the /tʃ/ affricate, given as (ch) in Ellis’s notation above. In other words, she refused to accept that her speech changed in rapid conversation. Alternatively, she saw the letter <t> in her mind’s eye when asked to focus on the pronunciation of the word in isolation and consequently thought that this must be reflected in the way she said it. In 1890, while discussing the role of analysis and synthesis in the processes of association, the American psychologist William James noted a similar mental state evoked by considering a word in isolation:

This is probably the reason why, if we look at an isolated printed word and repeat it long enough, it ends by assuming an entirely unnatural aspect. Let the reader try this with any word on this page. He will soon begin to wonder if it can possibly be the word he has been using all his life with that meaning. It stares at him from the paper like a glass eye, with no speculation in it. Its body is indeed there but its soul has fled. It is reduced, by this new way of attending to it, to its sensational nudity. We never before attended to it in this way but habitually got it clad with its meaning the moment we caught sight of it, and rapidly passed from it to the other words of the phrase. We apprehended it, in short, with a cloud of associates, and, thus perceiving it, we felt it quite otherwise than as we feel it now, divested and alone. (James 1981)

Admittedly, James was writing here about the visual perception of a word on a page; but there is in common with Ellis’s explanation the unnatural feeling that is evoked by

focussing on a word in isolation, away from other forms with which it usually combines.

#### 4. *Unphonetic Grammarians*

It was not only in anecdotes about the confusions of non-linguists that the ‘visual conception of language’ revealed itself; even scholars themselves, particularly the ‘older school’ of philologists, were prone to it. A much quoted example is that of Jacob Grimm, who when expounding in his *Deutsche Grammatik* the phonological changes later known as Grimm’s Law, entitled that section ‘Von den Buchstaben’ (‘On Letters’), and even stated that the word *schwarz* is made up of seven sounds s-c-h-w-a-r-z.<sup>6</sup> In an article in *The Athenæum* in 1870—anonymous, but in fact by Sweet—reviewing Ellis’s *On Early English Pronunciation*, the author finds that Grimm’s *Lautlehre* is closer to ‘Buchstabenlehre’ (Sweet 1870: 737). In general, Sweet felt that such attitudes were still rife, and in his review of *On Early English Pronunciation* in he called for a phonetic training for dialectologists so that the dialects were recorded in an accurate and consistent way (1871a: 296). His review of Earle’s *Philology*, although favourable, nevertheless criticised the confusion between sound changes and ‘mere letter-changes’ (1871c: 506), and in the same year Sweet commented on a newly published etymological grammar of English: ‘Mr. Loth assumes, or at any rate, leads his readers to assume that the present confusion in our orthography existed from the beginning of the language’ (1871b: 343). Similarly, Sweet’s review article of 1870 attacks the kind of grammarian who ‘tells us that the Anglo-Saxon *i* of *min* remains unchanged in English while the *u* of *hus* becomes *ou*’. Typical of Sweet’s polemical style, this review also set up a straw man in the figure of the unphonetic grammarian:

If asked whether the spoken English word *mine* would suggest to an Anglo-Saxon the idea of ‘*meus*’, or indeed any idea at all, the comparative grammarian would probably have to confess, firstly, that he had never considered the question at all, and secondly, that he did not deem it of the slightest importance, being merely a question of ‘pronunciation’. (Sweet 1870: 737)

This may be compared with Sweet’s later article on German grammars of English:

The antiquarian philologist, having the written symbols constantly before his eyes, gradually comes to abstract them entirely from the sounds they stand for, and at last regards them as the language: any

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<sup>6</sup> The phrase ‘von den Buchstaben’ occurs in the first and second editions of the *Deutsche Grammatik* (1819), where Grimm in fact discusses letters. Some confusion occurs when Grimm treats the ‘division of letters into vowels and consonants’ (‘*eintheilung der buchstaben in vocale und consonanten*’). In the unfinished third edition, which only contains the first volume, Grimm changed the offending phrases to ‘*Lautlehre*’ and ‘*Alle laute der sprache zerfallen in vocale und consonanten*’ (‘all sounds of language can be analysed into vowels and consonants’) (Grimm 1840: 30). It is in fact Scherer’s recension of the second edition which most obviously confuses letters and sounds (Scherer, 1870: 1 and 4).



attempt to discover the real language represented by these symbols is looked on by him with supreme contempt, as a mere question of ‘pronunciation’. (Sweet 1874a: 68)

Compare also the passage from Sweet’s review of Ellis in *The Academy*:

When writing is an art practised by the few, and literature is handed down orally, the scribes are hardly influenced at all by orthographic traditions. In highly-civilised communities again, where writing is universal, and literature is represented almost entirely by printed books, the visible symbol of the word gradually acquires an independent value, and it suggests an idea without any reference to the sound it originally represented. (1871a: 295)

In general, Ellis’s work on the history of English pronunciation was well received by the popular academic world. Even the *Saturday Review*, or ‘Saturday Reviler’, as it came to be called for its caustic wit (Gross 1969), was convinced by Ellis, although the reviewer could not resist repeating a joke by Henry Alford, who renamed Ellis’s journal *Fonetic Nuz* as ‘Frantic Nuts’. This reviewer, probably Edward Augustus Freeman (1823–1892), the outspoken author of the celebrated *History of the Norman Conquest* (1867–79), referred to the ‘one darling dream of many of us [which] Mr. Ellis has worked hard to overthrow’ (Freeman 1871: 19), namely the misconception that English pronunciation had hardly changed over the centuries and that the Old English nouns *wif* (nowadays assigned the pronunciation /wi:f/) and *win* (i.e. /wi:n/) were still pronounced as their modern equivalents *wife* and *wine*.

A battle still had to be fought, however, with one unphonetic grammarian. This was Richard Francis Weymouth (1822–1902), schoolmaster, language teacher and fellow of University College London. Member of the Philological Society though he was, he could not be persuaded to relinquish the ‘darling dream’, and in 1874 he published his own *On Early English Pronunciation*, to rival that of Ellis, in which he argued that English pronunciation had not changed since the time of Chaucer and that the *i* of Old English *win* was in fact pronounced as in *wine* (Weymouth 1874). He also attacked Ellis’s axiom that ‘the orthography shows the sound’ pointing (confusedly, it would seem) to present-day words such as *knight* and *wright*. In a review of the book, Sweet seems baffled that Weymouth insists on a modern pronunciation for *win*, and on Weymouth’s latter point, defends Ellis, saying that it is not meant to be a universal principle:

Mr. Ellis only claims to have established that before the rise of printing the scribes wrote not by eye but by ear, and that, although the values of the letters were necessarily traditional, their use in expressing the actual sounds used by the writer was not so, but was guided by ear. (Sweet 1874b: 461)

Lack of space precludes discussion here of Sweet’s observation of phonetic practices in the work of Old English scribes (Atherton 1997). But in short Sweet’s main argument here is that medieval scribes and writers, though not spelling reformers,

nevertheless had a phonological mindset: they conceived of their language very differently to educated people in the nineteenth century.

### ***5. Some Applications of Sweet's Ideas***

The hypothesis that writing 'restructures consciousness' is a basic tenet of twentieth-century theories of orality and literacy developed, not without some controversy, in the 1970s and 1980s. Sweet's comments on the 'visual conception of language' have clear parallels to these much more developed theories and show again, as Jakobson observed, that Sweet's writings on the 'practical' study of language gave opportunities for sallies into new and little explored areas.

The following similarities between the ideas of Sweet and theories of orality may be noted. First, there is the notion that the printing press turns the spoken word into a visible and tangible, enduring object, to be seen as self-contained text rather than heard as utterances within a dialogue. This then produces the 'typographic mentality' which tends to conceive of the world in terms of visual textuality, making mental constructs and tackling cognitive problems by means of visual comparisons: isolating and grouping visual words as concepts, 'looking things up', making lists, diagrams, charts etc. (Goody 1989). Linked to such notions of a visual mentality is research on the influence of orthography on children's and adult's awareness of language (e.g. Ehri 1993). Thirdly, there is the mentality of scholars themselves, studying the products of 'oral' art forms as though they were fixed texts, who 'often went on to assume, often without reflection, that oral verbalisation was essentially the same as the written verbalization they normally dealt with [...] except for the fact that they were not written down' (Ong 1982: 10). Finally, we have the recognition that within manuscript culture, the 'typographic mentality' is less developed: people still conceive of writing as conveying the spoken word to the ear, more stress is laid on aural memory, and residual customs of the oral mentality still prevail (Clanchy 1993).

One objection is that Sweet does not attach enough importance to writing as an autonomous system, independent of the system of the spoken language (Sampson 1985). Like Saussure, Bloomfield and many early-twentieth-century linguists, Sweet assumed that the legitimate function of orthography is to give a 'faithful representation of the sounds of the spoken language', an attitude that leads to the logocentric view that writing is merely the representation of speech and that reading is vocalisation, rather than a cognitive, reconstructive activity. Here, there is clearly an overreaction against the graphic prejudices of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, there is certainly an overlap between Sweet's insights and Ong's reconstruction of the 'typographic mentality'.

In addition, some recent research indicates that the identification of syllables and morphological structure does depend on orthography, and this can be used to vindicate the grammatical approaches taken by Sweet in his early career. It is possible, as some now argue, that writing systems provide the models and concepts by which we understand the structure of speech (Olson 1993). Therefore by changing the model—by introducing a new method of transcription—the forms of the spoken language are revealed more clearly and radically to the linguistic observer. Such a

method is explored, as we have seen, in the writings of the 1870s that culminate in Sweet's innovatory treatise 'Words, Logic, and Grammar'.

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