

# The Idea of Writing

Writing Across Borders

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BRILL

LEIDEN · BOSTON

2012

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## ABOUT "SHORT" NAMES OF LETTERS

Konstantin Pozdniakov

SOCRATES: *A very simple matter. I may illustrate my meaning by the names of letters, which, you know, are not the same as the letters themselves with the exception of the four, ε, υ, ο, ω; the names of the rest, whether vowels or consonants, are made up of other letters which we add to them; but so long as we introduce the meaning, and there can be no mistake, the name of the letter is quite correct. Take, for example, the letter "beta"—the addition of e, t, a, gives no offence, and does not prevent the whole name from having the value which the legislator intended—so well did he know how to give the letters names.*

HERMOGENES: *I believe you are right. (Plato)*

Where do short names of letters come from? Why do we call a letter [ve] in Russian, [vii] in English, [fau] in German, and [uvə] in Spanish? After all, we do know that all these letters are borrowed from the Latin and Greek traditions, which are, in turn, related by succession.

Why would a Russian sigh and say, "yo-ke-le-me-ne"<sup>1</sup> and not, for instance, "\*yo-ka-el-em-en", which would match the "correct" short names of letters? Why do we sometimes say Ka-eL-eM flights and never \*Ke-Le-Me or \*Ka-La-Ma?

What makes letter names "correct"? How did it happen that we name the letters [ka], but [de], [em], although schoolchildren, before they are taught the rules, persistently tend to universalize vocalization of such names, each time choosing one and the same vowel [pe], [re], [se], [te] and not, let us say, \*[po], \*[ro], \*[so], \*[to]?

Many generations of pupils, instinctively and individually, have been making the same "mistake" in naming letters, and many generations of teachers have been correcting these mistakes. Still, as it turned out, neither native speakers nor professional linguists have clear answers to the question—where did this norm come from?

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<sup>1</sup> An euphemism for a Russian curse designated by five letters; roughly comparable with "EKLMN".

Letters with “conventional” names are easier to explain. Their algorithm of development is well-known: a frequently used (or “important”) word starting with the sound designated by the letter is selected, like Russian  $\text{з}$  [z]—*z'eml'a* ‘ground, soil’. Quite often, these names appear to be iconic signs where the denotation of this word is depicted symbolically (Greek *delta* / Phoenician *daleth* ‘door’).

The situation is more complex when it comes to short—spelling—names. The iconic nature of a sign usually disappears, and two factors determining the name of a letter remain:

1. Certain “heredity” exists—when a short name of a letter is taking shape, the name that existed in the donor language is often preserved;
2. There is some agreement, a “convention” that might not be related to linguistics at all but meets the ideas of a certain group of people responsible for written language and believing that a letter should be named this way and not otherwise.

The history of short names is the history of multiple conventions (often forgotten) that were based partly upon pronunciation of letters in the source language and partly upon individual attempts to adjust the letters of the source language and their names to a specific language.

These two factors are well-known. Moreover, they are rather obvious. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that, along with these two factors, which are “external” against the language system, there are also intralingual factors influencing the selection of a letter name. These names tend towards partial unification in many languages, that is the tendency to use the same vowel. Such unification follows rather distinct and often predictable patterns.

The discussion of intralingual factors is hampered by the lack of reliable materials regarding, 1. tradition, and 2. origin of naming short letters. Even in my native Russian, neither I nor any of my learned colleagues are able to satisfactorily answer the questions as to where established Russian short letter names came from and when. Certain essential features allow us to conclude that we are correcting negligent pupils according to the norms of the Latin tradition. Are there other factors that will shed light on the questions and how can we proceed?

I became aware of this problem for the first time while studying the material of young Polynesian traditions. Let us consider the Tahitian alphabet as an example. “Creation of the Tahitian alphabet dates back to the early 1800s when English missionaries developed an alphabet on the

basis of Latin script containing of 13 letters and named *piapa* 'abecedary' (Arakin 1981) (see table below).

As is well known, Polynesian languages have remarkably few consonants. Only nine exist in the Tahitian language, including a glottal stop consonant not marked with any symbol. This makes certain oddities in naming of letters even more obvious. Why [pi], [ti], [vi], but [mo], [ro], and [nu] right there, as well as [he], and, finally, [fa]? What made such diversity of vowels appear in the names of letters (all the five vowels available are "involved" in designation of consonants as its segments)? What is the logic of vowel selection in each case, if any? We cannot explain this oddity by the Polynesian tradition as no tradition exists. Let us assume that in case of [pi], [ti], and [vi] we are facing a direct borrowing from English, but the English pattern is not applied for the designation of the five remaining consonants.

It can be noted that the pattern is not applied in cases where the prototype names of English letters deviate from the Ci structure, most common in the English language, and have a different structure—[ef], [em], [en], [ar], [eich], that is, the (V)VC structure (a nominal phonetic transcription is quite sufficient for the purposes of this article). A certain unification of consonant designation took place in the Tahitian language, so that each designation, as opposed to English, has a CV structure. But what kind of unification are we talking about if three letters with names containing a similar vowel—[ef], [em], and [en]—turn into [fa], [mo], and [nu]?

The Tahitian alphabet

Letters	Names of Letters	Pronunciation
A a	A	[a]
E e	E	[e]
F f	Fa	[f]
H h	He	[h]
I i	I	[i]
M m	Mo	[m]
N n	Nu	[n]
O o	O	[o]
P p	Pi	[p]
R r	Ro	[r]
T t	Ti	[t]
U u	U	[u]
V v	Vi	[v]

Let us consider the aforementioned issues in “prototype” systems, namely the Greek and the Latin systems. To the best of my knowledge, no short names of letters in the Greek tradition are known to have ever existed. Let us have a look at long names of Greek consonants and group them by vowels they contain:

- zeta, theta, beta, delta;
- gamma, kappa, tau, lambda;
- mu, nu;
- pi, xi, sigma, psi, phi, khi;
- rho.

At first glance, the very formulation of the question of vowel quality in these names (for instance, the [a] vowel is present in the names of both letters designating velar stop consonants—gamma and kappa) is unjustified: most names of letters designating consonants are borrowed from Phoenician; consequently, it makes no sense to look for logic of naming in the Greek language. However, let us pay attention to the following two points: 1) all the letters added by the Greek (phi, khi, psi) have a unified vowel, besides, it is an [i]-vowel; 2) where borrowed from Phoenician, many names of letters got different vowels, and such change seems unmotivated for some of them at first thought.

Why \*[pe] > [pi], but \*[mem] > [mu]? Without knowing the basics of Greek philology, hypothesizing about a linguistic tradition that has been developing for over 2000 years would be absurd. Still, proceeding from a certain experience of research in the field of diachronic analogical changes in various languages of the world, I may be so bold as to postulate that the \*[mem] > [mu] change *could* well have taken place by analogy with \*[nun] > [nu]. In such a case, names of letters designating nasal sonants would bear a common vowel marker that no other Greek letter name has. If so, vocalic unification of certain names of letters, at least letters designating nasal sonants, is present not only in alphabets deriving from Greek but in the Greek alphabet itself as well.

Let us note one more detail, which, as we shall demonstrate later in this article, is typical for quite a number of derivative alphabets. The [a] vowel in *gamma* is not justified by a Phoenician origin. Doesn't the [a] vowel represent a marker of names of letters designating velar consonants already in Greek? For this is the very peculiarity we observe in quite a number of derivative alphabets.

With little known about Etruscan letter naming, let us proceed directly to the Roman alphabet.

It was precisely the short names of Latin and not Greek letters that served as a source of letter naming in most European alphabets including Cyrillic ones. I was unable to determine whether short Latin names derived from a Greek (Etruscan) source, or developed independently. It is important to know for our further narration that three general types of letter names have developed in the Latin tradition:

1. names with a CV structure, with [e]-vowel, including [be], [ce], [de], [ge], [pe], [te], [ve];
2. names with a CV structure, with [a]-vowel, including [ha], [ka];
3. names with a VC structure, including [ef], [el], [em], [en], [er], [es] (Gordon 1973: 30).

The life journey of the names of these very letters will be of interest for us.

First of all, it is worth noting that any phonetician can easily identify the features determining the phonetic nature of the names belonging to groups 2 and 3:

- group 2 includes velar consonants, and, if we set ourselves a task to define peculiar features of each group, we should say that group 2 includes unvoiced consonants (group 1 contains the voiced velar [ge]);
- there are no stops in group 3; it contains only fricatives and sonants. Let us keep in mind that **all** the fricatives and sonants are included in group 3, except [h] in group 2.

Regardless of the somewhat obscure history of origination of short letter names, rather distinct trends are evidenced in Latin, such as: names of all stops except velars (unvoiced?) ones have a Ce structure; names of velar (unvoiced?) consonants have a Ca structure (that is, compact consonants tend to combine with the most compact vowel!); names of non-obstruent consonants, namely fricatives and sonants, have an eC structure. That was the starting point of all European alphabets, and, as we shall see below, irrespective of the "authorship" and the specificity of a language, these purely phonetic features of Latin letter names have been treasured in most new traditions and preserved to the present day.

Let us have a look at the Spanish system (Ortografía 1999). The letters we are interested in have the following names assigned (since 1803):<sup>2</sup>

be	ce	de	ge	pe	te	che				
efe	ele	eme	ene	erre, ere	ese	elle	eñe	uve, ve	uve doble	equis
hache	ka									
cu										
ceta, ceda, zeta, zeda	jota	I griega								

Initially, two innovations should be understood.

First, the names of the letters were subject to further unification. Instead of the Latin opposition of the Ce and the eC structures, less polar Ce and eCe structures are opposed in Spanish.

Second, the phonetic “algorithm” as observed in Latin has not changed. It is especially evident in the development of names of new letters. The *ll* digraph firstly representing the [lj]—“fonema lateral palatal de *llave*, se aricula con la misma pronunciación que la letra *y*, es decir, como el fonema palatal sonoro de *yunque*” (Ortografía 1999: 13) is not designated as \*[lje] or \*[je] or \*[aj] in the Spanish tradition but as [elje], that is, similarly to the way fricatives and sonants were designated in the Latin tradition. The same rule applies to designation of the nasal palatal sonant [eñe]. It becomes clear in the light of this rule, why the voiced labial consonant is named [uve / ube] and no more [ve / be] in Spanish—spirantization of the voiced stop took place in Spanish (\*b > v), and, consequently, the relevant letter was supposed to acquire the VC(V) structure and not the CV one. Another question arises here: why is the Spanish letter called [uve] and not \*[eve]? Perhaps it is the phonetic principle of the generation of letter names that reveals itself even more evidently here: a labial consonant is preceded by a labialized vowel in a letter name.

It should be noted that, despite a more consistent phonetic-based unification of letter names, the Spanish [ka] is the only letter having a Ca-structure. The case is that the Spanish language had to make a serious

<sup>2</sup> This variant has been used by the Academy since 1803.



decision: whether to appropriate the name for [h] inherited from Latin to group 2 (velar) and to preserve its [a]-vowel, or to group 3 (non-obstruent) implying the VC(V) structure. The Spanish judgment worthy of Solomon is an [ache] name instead of \*[che] or \*[eche].

The [a]-vowel along with the VC structure emerges in Portuguese as well, where the Latin h is matched by [aɣa]. However, the Brazilian system preserves the [ka]-name for the velar voiceless stop, while in Portugal the corresponding name is unified according to the "standard" principle, having transformed into [ke], as in Russian *ke-le-me-ne*.

A similar principle is observed in the Italian alphabet where voiceless velars are designated as [akka] (the Latin [h]) which is related to the Greek [kappa] name of the voiceless velar stop.

The same solution has entrenched in the French alphabet. The name of a letter designating the [h] sound must have a VC structure. As this is not a stop (see French names of other non-obstruent consonants—[ef], [em], [en], [el], [er], [es]), and at the same time, being a name of a velar consonant, it must follow [a]-vowel. Both conditions are fairly met by the name [aʃ] which is preserved in the French tradition.

While considering the French system, further evidence of significance of the phonetic factor for the general letter naming logic, a rather powerful one, in my opinion, would be appropriate to mention here. There are masculine and feminine letters in French. A Frenchman, at least one who lived in the 1800s, would have said: *un B, un D, un C*, but *une M, une F, une S*. It seems, according to a mini-poll among native speakers of French, that [l] allows both variants: *un L* and *une L*. In Grévisse (1993: 730) we read: "... lorsque le nom des consonnes commence par une voyelle, *f, h, l, m, n, r, s*, il est féminin selon Littré, selon le *Dict. gén.* et selon l'Acad. (qui donne pourtant les deux genres à *f: Un grand F. Une petite f*). Cette usage existe encore, mais le masculin prévaut très nettement, notamment parmi les grammairiens et les linguistes d'aujourd'hui". Why is it so? Perhaps the selection of a relevant article is not focused upon the nature of the sound designated by a letter but upon the very name of the letter: a letter name starting with a consonant (for instance, [de]) is preceded by a vowel (which is nasal in our case) (un), while a name starting with a vowel (for instance, [ef]) is preceded by the article ending with a consonant (une). But what is to be done with *le D* and *la F* then? Is it an analogical unification on the basis of the indefinite article? But why do Frenchmen say *un A* instead of *une A*? Consistently, a native speaker of French opposes names of letters designating stops, on the one hand, and names of letters designating non-obstruent sounds, on the other hand, by

gender. Thus, structural opposition of letter names [pe] / [ef] and [ka] / [aš] is anchored in the French language.

Is there a phonetic principle in names of letters? One of the most reliable 'tests' is checking the names of letters that designate new sounds, that is, sounds that did not exist in the donor language. We have already seen that, for example, the Spanish tradition assigns such names to designate phonemes not present in Latin and that are "aligned" with the phonetic nature of these sounds. Thus, for instance, the letter designating the nasal palatal sonant in Spanish is named [eñə] but not \*[ñə]. In Polish, such names emerge as [en'], [es'], along with the inherited [en] and [es]. In Hungarian, we see *esz* for [s] along with *es* for [š], *eny* along with *en*, and *el ipsilon* or *ely* for [j], along with *el*.

An interesting modification of Latin letter names is observed in the Russian language. This very point will cause raised eyebrows among most Russianists, for they know, without doubt, that the Cyrillic alphabet came to us from the Greek tradition. And one does not have to know the history of development of the Cyrillic alphabet; a mere comparison of the graphic forms of letters and the sounds designated by the letters will be a sufficient proof of this. But where have the Russian **short** letter names come from? If I take the liberty to repeat, it seems like we do not know whether short names of letters ever existed in Greek. However, we can see almost a *complete* match of short letter names in Latin and in Russian where such letters designate relevant sounds. Let us satisfy ourselves by comparing Latin and Russian names according to the three abovementioned groups:

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Latin	be	ce	de	ge	pe	te	ve			
Russian	be	ce	de	ge	pe	te	ve	že	ze	če

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Latin	ef	el	em	en	er	es
Russian	ef	el	em	en	er	es

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Latin	ha	ka		
Russian	ha	ka	ša	šča

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Such coincidences cannot be random. Direct borrowing of names from Latin or from some language oriented at the Latin tradition is obvious. But it is not possible to be sure when and how this borrowing occurred.

Names of French letters have developed such subtleties that are not to be found in the Russian language: the Russian tradition stands closer to the Latin and not the French one (compare Russian [ge], [e], [že], [ha] with French [že], [œ], [ži], [aš], respectively). As for the Greek tradition, there appear to be no grounds to consider it at all.

So, the peculiar features of the Russian names are related first of all to five letters (sounds): three of them ([ze], [če], and [že]) are universalized according to the "standard" algorithm, while two others ([ša], [šča]), according to the algorithm applied to velar consonants. Again we see the proof that the peculiarities are related to the sounds that did not exist in the source language or had no separate letters to designate them. There is no verifiable explanation for the origin of short letter names, names we are using quite often in Russian, and no information is available in encyclopedias, reference books, or consolidated works on the Russian language.

The fact is our teachers give the highest grades to those children who make an [e]-vowel after names of most stops and an [a]-vowel after names of velar and sibilant consonants (another display of the "compactness" principle?), and who use the [e]-vowel before names of all sonants and before most of fricative consonants without pronouncing it after the consonant has been defined. Thus, the contemporary Russian tradition supports the phonetic principles of letter naming that were developed in the Latin language.

Some systems eventually tracing back to the Latin system look unusual compared to the rest, however the principle of structural opposition of letter names remains the same. Let us have a look at the Finnish system (Ahonen 2005: 16–17) as an example:

A a	[aa]	F f	[äf]	K k	[koo]	P p	[pee]	U u	[uu]
B b	[bee]	G g	[gee]	L l	[äl]	Q q	[kuu]	V v	[vee]
C c	[see]	H h	[hoo]	M m	[äm]	R r	[är]	X x	[äks]
D d	[dee]	I i	[ii]	N n	[än]	S s	[äs]	Y y	[yy]
E e	[ee]	J j	[jii]	O o	[oo]	T t	[tee]		

Similar to the systems discussed above, one group in Finnish, according to letter names, includes unvoiced velar consonants [hoo] and [koo], and the second group includes sonants and fricatives [äf], [äl], [äm], [än], [är], [s], with [ks] aligned to them. Names of stops (except [koo] and [kuu]) have a Ce structure which developed from earlier CV or Ce. By the way, it is entirely possible that we are dealing with a more orderly unification of

names for velar voiceless consonants, with all the three names containing a deep labialized vowel: [hoo], [koo], and [kuu].

Let us go back to Oceanian alphabets mentioned in the beginning of the article. The Tahitian language contains so few consonants and names of these consonants are so unusual that the easiest explanation naturally suggests itself, namely that the English missionaries based their development of letter names upon their own criteria, unknown to us, which offer no typological interest, and proceed from the factor designated as “convention” earlier in the article.

Eyore spoke uncompromisingly about this factor:

Eyore had three sticks on the ground, and was looking at them. Two of the sticks were touching at one end, but not at the other, and the third stick was laid across them. Piglet thought that perhaps it was a Trap of some kind <...>

“Do you know what this is?”

“No,” said Piglet.

“It’s an A,” said Eyore severely. <...> “Christopher Robin said it was an A, and an A it is—until somebody treads on it,” Eyore added sternly. (Milne 1926)

The missionaries said that it was a [mo] (all letter names are given with long vowels in the Tahitian academic dictionary, particularly [moo]), so a [mo] it was. But the truth is that similar letter name peculiarities are evidenced in languages of the Austronesian family not belonging to the Polynesian group and developing their own alphabets based upon the Latin tradition independently (as it may be suggested) from the convention that was generated on the Tahiti island.

Let us consider letter names that have settled in Austronesian languages of another group, namely Drehu and Nengone, which are spoken on the islands of the Commonwealth. Actually, it was exactly the strange letter names in the Drehu language recorded in 1996 that, according to Wamo Haocas, a native speaker of this language, gave an impulse to raising the issue of the phonetic nature of letter names in alphabets.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding the Drehu language, my records, for the most part, match comments given by specialists, however, minor variances exist that may be caused by inconsistencies in the records or simply an unestablished

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<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of this article, these recordings were checked by one of the most competent authorities in the field of Austronesian languages, Claire Moyse-Faurie, who redirected my questions to specialists in the Drehu and Nengone languages (Jacque Verdonon, Emma Troopy, Tila Vaitiko, Julie Xmae). My acknowledgements to them all.

## Names of Letters in Drehu

			Labials	Dentals	Palatals	Velars	Labialized Velars
I	Stops	Voiceless	pi	ti			
I		Voiced	bi		di (dri [ji] )		
I	Fricatives		vi		ci ([ʃi])		
I	Sonants				(nyi [ñi])		
E	Stops					ke	
E	Fricatives				ze	he	
A	Fricatives	Voiceless	fa		sa	xa	wa (qa [xwa])
A		Voiced		ða		ga ([ɣa]?)	
A	Sonants		wa	la	ja ([y] in ny)		
O	Fricatives			ro			
O	Sonants		mo				
U	Sonants			nu			

*Comments to the table:*

- Consonants are grouped by orders in columns and by series in rows. This two-dimensional table does not allow for the inclusion of a third feature—a vowel quality. For this reason, the vowel feature and the series feature are combined in relevant rows where possible.
- The table does not include the glottal stop consonant. Names of the glottal stop in Oceanic traditions give an example of a purely conventional factor affecting letter-naming. Thus, in Wallis the glottal stop is called *fakamoga* (*faka* 'to do; causative prefix'; *moga* 'Adam's apple', while its name in the Futu language is *apitolofi* (derived from the French *apostrophe*) or *gā fakatu'u*, for the reason that pronouncing of a vowel is preceded by a breath catch on the glottis level (Claire Moysse-Faurie, personal communication).

norm. They may also be the result of dialect differences related to implementation of certain Drehu phonemes. Below, in brackets I provide the data obtained for the cases in which differences or adjustments in my records appear important.

It is easy to see that the "exotic" system of the Tahitian alphabet is fully represented in the alphabet of Drehu, one of the languages spoken on New Caledonia! At the same time, not including the glottal stop, Drehu contains 22 consonants, unlike Tahitian with 8 only. It can be concluded that it would be easier to define system attributes using the material of Drehu. The question at issue is whether these attributes can be defined at all. There are a few rules and some conclusions as to possible trends worth mentioning:

1. All names of consonants have a CV and not a VC structure. That is, in the languages considered, structural unification of letter names according to the "main" variant took place.
2. All the letters having a "standard" Ci-structure in English, preserve their names.

3. All the names with [a] identify non-obstruent consonants, designating fricatives and sonants.
4. The same applies to names with [o]- and [u]. To put it another way, non-front vowels are an attribute of names of non-obstruent consonants.
5. All stops except the velar [k] bear names with [i].
6. Except stops, [i] inherited from the standard English denomination of letters is present only in the names of palatal consonants, particularly [ši] and [ñi]. As likely as not, it is the palatal consonant that determines the [i] for non-obstruent sounds.
7. With the exception of [ze], which might have derived directly from the English [zed], [e]—is the particular marker of both names for velars, [ke] and [he].
8. Perhaps the names [ro] and [nu] are direct quotations of the Greek tradition, for the Latin tradition did not fit in here due to structural unification of all letter names (CV structure).
9. The name [mo] instead of [em] (Latin) or [mu] (Greek) might have been determined by the labial nature of the consonant, exactly as the palatality of [ši] and [ñi] defines inclusion of the vowel [i] into the name of the letter.

To conclude, the description of the Drehu alphabet requires the application of many rules, despite the condition that the CV structure demonstrates an obvious trend to further unification of Drehu letter names as compared to the English alphabet. As for the alphabet of Nengone, yet another language of New Caledonia to which the principles of letter-naming defined for Drehu and Tahitian are also generally applied, (including the CV structure, such names as [mo], [nu], [ro], [ja], [wa], and a number of other significant attributes), so many more special rules are necessary that this most strange system defies satisfactory description.

Below are letter names of this language grouped by vowels:

- Vowel I: [pi], [ti], [bi], [di], [vi].
- Vowel E: [ke], [he], [ge], [ce], [se].
- Vowel A: [fa], [xa], [wa], [la], [ja], [za].
- Vowel O: [ro], [mo], [yo].
- Vowel U: [nu].

Rules 5 to 7 established for Drehu do not match the description of the Nengone alphabet. Instead, other rules are required, such as:

- [e] is typical for all velar and all voiceless palatal consonants, that is, for most of the compact consonants (see the Russian grouping of voiceless velar and palatal consonants—with a different vowel quality—in [ka], [ha], [ša], and [šča]).
- It is not known why the palatal sonant has [o] in its name ([jo]).

When the number of rules approaches the number of consonant names these rules describe, one should rather speak about a random character of letter names. But somehow, it was these and not some other letter names that became accepted in Nengone! It is established that these alphabets were developed by English missionaries in the nineteenth century (Lenormand 1953). How were the changes effected and how did it come to be that Nengone letters names developed in this manner and not some other system? Transformation of English names in Tahitian, Drehu and Nengone seem radical and inconsistent in appearance.

Even these "exotic" systems demonstrate two factors definitely deserving attention. Why does unification follow the *yo-ke-le-me-ne* pattern and not, let us say, *yo-ka-la-ma-na*? Before formulating my assumption, let us return to the French language. French schoolchildren are taught the following: there are "names of letters", and there is "pronunciation (!) of letters". For example, the name of the letter is "em", while the pronunciation of the same letter is [m?]. (By the way, this concept is quite intriguing: should we implement it, we would be able to "legalize" the difference between [em] and [me] by defining the former as the name and the latter as the pronunciation of the letter. But what would represent the name of the sound [m] better, in such a case?!)

Moreover, there is a third variant in the French language, which has no "label". The French word *femme* 'woman' consists of one syllable and ends with the consonant [m]. But the poetic tradition requires that this word contains two syllables. Which vowel is then pronounced when this word is included in a poetic text? Neither [e] nor [ɛ], but [œ] is pronounced. And if a Frenchman has to articulate this word clearly (for instance, when someone cannot understand this word on the phone), the Frenchman will say, [fa-mœ]. What are we dealing with here, when it is neither the name nor even the pronunciation of the letter?

The French slang used by young people allows for such a feature as metathesis, just like many other types of slang. Here, *femme* turns into *mœf*, and *fête* 'holiday'—into *tœf*. That is, the "mute" final vowel is implemented as [œ]. Besides, the metathesis of the word *flic* 'policeman' where no "graphic" vowel is present either, comes out as *kœf*, not *kif* or *kef*!

All this is absolutely impossible in the Russian language. Why? A conservative assumption would be that in most languages—or, to put it more precisely, in many languages (considering Drehu and Nengone, one should not declare universals)—there is a tendency to use either shwa or, if there is no shwa in the system, a vowel standing closest to shwa as part of the “pronunciation” of letters. In the Russian language, the closest vowel to [ə] is [e]. This is where *yo-ke-le-me-ne* comes from. The French language, distinct from Russian, has an order of front labialized vowels and the closest vowel to [ə] is [œ]. This is where *kœf* came from.

I believe that even the fragmentary material provided here indicates that the field of letter names can be studied as a *system of changes by diachronic analogy* and would benefit from the continued attention of linguists.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.