

'A' is for 'orange'

The trouble with Bangla spellings in Latin script



ANDREW EAGLE

A is for apple, b is for bear, c is for cat... English spelling is easy enough at the beginning. It clearly deteriorates thereafter. Yet one must have extra

sympathy for Bangladeshi students of English because for them, sometimes 'a' is for orange.

Consider: "The phone rang." Rang is a kind and friendly English word. It's spelt phonetically. The 'a' is the 'a' in apple. But in Bangladesh we have Rangpur, which isn't really rang-pur but rong-pur.

Today the Bangladesh government will consider changing the spelling of five district names. The proposed spellings are: Chattagram (Chittagong), Barishal (Barisal), Kumilla (Comilla), Jashore (Jessore) and Bagura (Bogra). To shift from colonial to home-grown spellings is commendable. The question is whether the result is tailored for linguists or everyday speakers.

Ideally, Bangla should be written with the beautiful Bangla alphabet, tailored with letters to represent every Bangla sound. When a language is written in an alphabet that isn't its own there must be compromise, such as the 'th' in Thakurgaon which signifies a Bangla sound unavailable in English with an English sound that doesn't exist in Bangla.

Despite the good dose of compromise required, there are



Language diversity by Tobias Mikkelsen.

standards that can make it easier. One is that 'a' just isn't 'o'. Thus we sometimes see 'Rongpur', 'Sirajgonj', etc. The 'modern' use of an 'o' is much closer to the pronunciation.

So why was it Rangpur in the first place? The short answer is that it makes sense to linguists. It's worth noting the difference between transliteration and transcription. The former system

attempts to maintain the exact spelling of the word from the source language while the latter pays heed to pronunciation. Which is more important?

Well, it depends... If the point is to communicate, to do business, to study, to watch movies and talk, pronunciation is a useful focus. For almost all of the advantages that

English as a global language may have for non-native speakers, pronunciation will rank highly.

Is it a big deal? Any language teacher can explain how if one repeats an error multiple times it becomes learnt knowledge. To correct the mistake, to un-learn it, is far more difficult than taking the time to learn it correctly in the first place. The use of the Rangpur spelling subtly reinforces the idea that sometimes 'a' is for orange. Given how many Bangla words written in English use 'a' for an 'o' sound, it's not unreasonable to question if it isn't an impediment to higher English standards.

Conversely, it makes Bangla less accessible to English-speakers. All their lives 'a' has been for 'apple'. As students of Bangla, assuming they are yet to master the script, they suddenly have to learn that sometimes 'a' is for orange, except when it isn't. In terms of promoting Bangla abroad, Rongpur has the advantage.

To pronounce 'Chattagram' sounds quite unlike what is truly said, which is Chottogram. The first 'a' in Barishal will be pronounced unwittingly as the 'a' in apple. It'd be a bit like spelling the name of the former Russian president as Baris Yeltsin and expecting people to say Boris.

As for Kumilla, well the hard 'c' and 'k' sounds are identical in English so substituting has no pronunciation value. The substitution of the 'o' for a 'u' might be worthwhile to mirror the Bangla spelling, but in this instance it won't make much difference to English pronunciation because both words,

Comilla and Kumilla, favour stressing the second syllable, the 'mill'. Thus the pronunciation change is from C'milla to K'milla with minor influences of 'o' and 'u': almost identical.

The traditional spelling of Jessore is a good candidate for change. 'E' is, after all, for 'egg'. But the proposed version, Jashore, isn't much closer. Imagine the poor tourist asking for a bus ticket to Jash-ore, pronouncing the 'a' as in apple. Nobody would understand them! Clearly, the most approximate pronunciation is Joshore.

Looking at Bogra, the current spelling isn't bad. Yes, it misses the 'u' in the Bangla spelling but the sound is close. It's actually closer in sound than 'Bagura' which for any English-speaker will rhyme with Magura.

Of course the main point is not how spelling affects English-speakers. Much more important is how uncoordinated pronunciation systems affect Bangladeshi students of English, who then have to master two distinct ways of pronouncing some Latin script letters. The matter might seem minor, but it might just prove the difference between landing a great international job later in life and missing out because someone from a country where the transcription system is a better parallel can speak English more clearly.

On a final note, it is important to bear in mind that English does not own the Latin alphabet. Nevertheless, in the case of shifting Bangla place names, the revision most probably has the English version foremost in mind.

Andrew Eagle is an author and regular contributor to The Daily Star.

WORLD AUTISM AWARENESS DAY

Autism and Siblings: The Unsung Heroes

NUSRAT MIRZA

WHEN my twins were in their early months, during our visits to the paediatrician, I remember his concern about my daughter who appeared to be frail and weak. On the other hand, he would give my son a cursory glance and a brief check-up before reconfirming how healthy he was. Interestingly, my son started showing signs of autism from an early age, which gradually became worse while my daughter was growing up to be a neurotypical child.

Siblings of autistic children are an interesting lot. Some of the characteristics of this group have much in common. This realisation came from sharing experiences over the years with other families who have children with autism. This write-up is really about my daughter and siblings who may have similar experiences.

I remember the time when my daughter would have play dates over to our house from her Reception class (KG-1 equivalent). When I would pick her and her friends up from school, she would surprise me with how assertively she would tell her friends "You better be good to my brother." Her hapless friends would be at a loss as they did not understand why they needed such a warning. I guess even my daughter didn't fathom what that meant. It was probably more of a gut feeling that her brother was different and that she needed to protect him from her friends who would not understand him as well as she did.

Over time, my daughter became an integral part of my son's ABA (Applied Behavioural Analysis) behavioural therapy which took place at our home for three years while she was in her Nursery Reception Year 1 (age 3-6) years. ABA is a therapy used to help

children with autism and learning difficulty to help with learning and to encourage positive behaviour. The therapists would involve the whole family during these sessions whenever possible. My daughter was the most useful member of the family, taking part in structured and unstructured behavioural techniques, like turn-

contribute to. The pupils were expected to convince the school why a particular charity should be chosen. Upon entering her teenage years, my daughter worked hard, pitching and giving speeches to convince the school why the National Autistic Society should be chosen, and she was successful. She helped raise funds through school

When it was time for her to choose a subject for her university, psychology seemed to be the natural choice. To quote from her personal statement sent to universities: "I remember watching as my twin brother rocked back and forth in agony, hitting his head with his hands. By the time we both turned three, these episodes became a regular occurrence, as the signs of autism became more pronounced. I was too young to realise what autism meant, but I was frustrated, wondering why I could not understand someone I loved so much. It is difficult to understand the disorder as there is a barrier between people with and without autism—the ability to communicate. My experience with my brother also sparked my curiosity about the spectrum of human behaviour. I wondered what could cause people to act in certain ways, and in the case of my brother, how development, as well as the neurological make-up, can affect behaviour. For this reason, developmental and abnormal psychology became my favourite fields."

As she happens to be a fine artist, she tried to depict her perception of the world that her brother may be experiencing day in and day out in a piece of artwork. The colour red represents how noisy, hectic and unbearable the world is around him. The chains confining and trapping him in his non-verbal world, while he is trying to break free. The music notes flowing

beautifully to keep him calm, reflecting his love of music.

Siblings play an important role in the world of autism; they are the unsung heroes. They would normally take the back seat just like my daughter, not expecting much, and helping where they can, so that the family can get on with coping with the struggles of autism. She certainly is my hero.

My Brother Ayman

I have a brother,
His name is Ayman,
There are many things he can't do,
Yet there are many that he can.

He can't talk, but he can smile,
He will listen, even if it takes a while,
With a face like an angel,
Innocence is his style.

The world he finds hard to understand,
Words mean nothing to him,
Music is his life,
In his own way he can sing.

Although he may have drawbacks many,
He still stands brave and tall,
He continues to learn slow and steady,
And is the best brother of them all.

Poem written by Antara Mirza at the age of 11.

Nusrat Mirza is involved with special educational needs, especially for autism, both in the UK and in Bangladesh.



In this piece of artwork, Antara Mirza tried to depict her perception of the world that her brother may be experiencing. The colour red represents how hectic and unbearable the world is around him. The chains confining and trapping him in his non-verbal world.

taking and sibling peer play. She learnt early how to help, manage and live with her brother's unique challenges. There were many nights she lay awake along with the family when he was having a bad night, and still managed to go to school the next day. She learnt to hide objects from her brother either to keep him safe or to protect her things or homework from being destroyed.

Her secondary school chose charities every year identified by students to

activities over the years, which were then channelled to the National Autistic Society.

It was around this time she wrote the accompanying poem about her brother, reflecting how difficult life must be for him and, at the same time, highlighting his strengths. This was entered into a poem competition for which she won the first prize. The prize consisted of a bunch of books to her delight as she is a voracious reader.

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