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**The future of Braille**

People often ask me: “Is Braille still useful today? People with visual disabilities can access the information they need through computers or smartphones that come with synthetic voices, not to mention CD players or audio files in a variety of formats. So why still bother with Braille?” This kind of thinking actually raises questions about the future of Braille, for if it were proven that this system could be replaced by audio, it would mean that Braille no longer has a future.

I am convinced that those who are thus predicting the demise of Braille do not realise that it is a writing system. And to let a writing system disappear is to force the people who use it to take a clear step backwards.

Indeed, the invention of writing marked a fundamental step forward in the history of civilisation, as it enabled the precise, widespread and long-term transmission and dissemination of the knowledge accumulated up to that point by humanity. As a result, human society has been able to progress much more rapidly than before, and societies with a knowledge of writing have gained the upper hand over others.

Writing, according to the dictionary, is a “system of representing speech and thought by way of standard signs marked down and intended to be permanent”. This general definition ought to be supplemented by specifying that this system should be capable both of being decoded directly (without intermediaries) by anyone who has learned it, and of adapting to the invention of new media such as parchment, paper, computer screen or tactile Braille sheet.

However, according to this definition, Braille turns out to be a system of reading and writing in relief that is very suitable for the blind; it has never been equalled, despite various attempts to replace it.

This is because Braille is an optimal system for reading texts with one's fingers. Louis Braille's genius is to have understood that a combination of raised dots can be recognised instantly, whereas a character formed by raised lines takes much longer to identify using the fingers. The fact that Braille's system made its mark on its own, that its use was furthered in its day by the blind people who were using it, is striking proof of this. It replaced the other relief writing systems that had existed before, such as the ordinary relief alphabet created by Valentin Haüy, or even the stylised alphabet developed by Moon in England in an attempt to overcome the defects of Haüy's system. The six dots used in the Braille system form a rectangle of standard dimensions that can be felt in an instant by the fingertip, making for fluent reading – I am aware of the eight dots used in computer braille, but dots 7 and 8 are only used sporadically so that there is little impact on reading speed.

Featuring six dots that offer 64 combinations (26), Braille is also highly suitable for writing the usual symbols of the alphabetical writing codes that have become widely used throughout the world. With its 64 possibilities, Braille has been adapted not only to languages using the Latin alphabet, but also to transcribe languages using different alphabets such as Arabic, Hebrew, Greek, Russian, etc. I personally collaborated in the creation of a Braille alphabet adapted to Mossi, Burkina Faso's main language, as part of a literacy project for blind people in that country.

Braille is therefore an optimal system for reading and writing with one's fingers. As a result, it can be said that the blind and the sighted are approximately equal when faced with a document made available in the form appropriate to them. I say "approximately" because a blind person will normally read more slowly than a sighted person and will have a more restricted ability to navigate a text, simply because the eye can take in an entire page at once, whereas a blind person will need several seconds to achieve the same feat.

Nevertheless, thanks to Braille, the blind can read and write. This is important, as it enables them to carry out three fundamental operations that would be impossible for them otherwise:

1. to create a spatial representation of the text being read: this helps them to identify its structure and thus better understand the development of the ideas being presented;
2. to make a physical record of their ideas by attaching them to a medium, thereby being able to pick them up again, evaluating them, putting them in a coherent order, modifying them, etc. This would be difficult to do even for a simple text and impossible if a higher level of complexity were required. And yet these operations are fundamental to any act of creative writing;
3. to acquire new concepts more effectively: how could one consider learning how to spell, or a foreign language with its own grammar, solving mathematical equations with multiple unknowns, etc., without first learning to master an adequate reading and writing system?

For all of these reasons, I am a strong advocate of teaching Braille: it is the only way for a blind person to be able to read and write. While I can understand, at the very least, that a person who has lost his or her sight late in life may choose not to learn the system of raised dots, I would find it totally irresponsible not to teach Braille to a visually impaired child, on the pretext that it would be useless given the aids to which he or she has access these days. This would condemn the child to illiteracy and further compromise his or her possibilities for social or professional integration. Computer technology today offers blind people who can read unimaginable opportunities to access sources of knowledge that were closed off to them not so long ago.

It has been almost two centuries since Braille was invented. Over the years, this system has proven its ability to evolve and adapt to new media, such as the digital ones. It has opened up paths of knowledge to the blind, and will continue to do so in the future – provided it is not sabotaged!