

Braille and Equality – Evolution of Braille/Tacteme (Tactile Graphemes) in Croatia

Andrea Fajdetić¹
University of Zagreb
Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation Sciences
Borongajska 87f
10000 Zagreb
Croatia

Abstract

While searching and advocating for equality and inclusion in the society, there are many questions about equality and opportunity of using and expressing thoughts with and about braille. Contemporary society with the majority of sighted persons strongly defines the approach towards braille and influences the process of development and evolution of braille. There are different challenges and issues influencing the evolution of braille, and the evolution of (braille) tactile graphemes in Croatian language. This paper will present the state of (Braille) art in Croatia, evolution of braille in Croatia and how the new concept of "tactile graphemes" might influence inclusion and equality of braille readers in every day life.

1 Introduction

Visually impaired persons get involved in everyday activities depending on their individual characteristics, capabilities and acquired skills important for individual functioning. While advocating for equality and inclusion of persons with visual impairment, there is an ongoing debate about the importance of braille in everyday life. Some experts and scientist argue that braille is an important tool and important competency that enables visually impaired persons for successful inclusion in professional life (Fajdetić, 2009; Fajdetić 2010a, 2010b) and to be able to get information in different situations. In some literature braille is perceived as "expired" and "out of date". The evidence of this trend is found in low interest in braille over the last decades that at some point diminished in "practical" value and presence. Fajdetić (2009) strongly argues in favour of braille as an important and actual tool for written communication. The author supports the idea of positive trends towards braille, because much contemporary research has linguistic approach and explores braille at the code level (Wetzel, Knowlton, 2006; Knowlton, Wetzel 2006; Gerrery et al., 2004; Bogart, Koenig, 2005; Gray, 2004; Jackson, Bogart, 1993; Halten, Spuning, 2008). The position of braille has changed under the strong influence of the development of the assistive technologies (AT) for the blind. The technological growth and the decrease in costs associated with the technology will usher in the development of new and innovative AT devices for people with visual impairment (Strobel, 2006), in the future developed as affordable and effective AT. It has to be taken

¹Ms Andrea Fajdetić is an assistant at the Department of Visual impairment, Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation Sciences, University of Zagreb. Her area of interest is special education, curricula, braille, education and lifelong learning of visually impaired and blind. For further information and contact please write using following e-mail address: andrea.fajdetic@gmail.com

into account that AT solutions have many possibilities in accessing information, and that braille is no longer first media choice in accessing information. Sighted persons are braille readers as well and their competency of reading, writing and teaching braille, knowledge of assistive and other technologies strongly influences population of readers using touch for reading (Allman, 1998). Even though there is much research that examines problems that blind persons have while reading and writing braille (Coppins, Barlow-Brown 2006), few aim at sighted population or the community.

2 Aim of this Paper

This paper starts with an assumption that the evolution of braille has an important role in reaching equality in the community of sighted and blind braille expert readers or braille readers.

The aim of this paper is to try define and elaborate the impact of the traditional and modern approaches towards the braille code on promotion of braille in the community, inclusion and equality of all braille readers (blind, partially sighted or sighted persons). An additional aim of this paper is to present state of (braille) art in Croatia.

3 Braille and Equality

3.1 Traditional Versus Modern Approach towards Braille

Which approach towards braille, modern or traditional, supports the idea of reaching equality by using braille?

Braille has over the years been helping visually impaired persons in having equal possibilities in everyday life (professional and private) by being able to practice written communication² (reading and writing). The traditional understanding and philosophy around and about braille is that braille is a code, created for the blind and therefore is the code of the blind. The traditional approach comes from a long tradition of segregated education, where relatively small (in a global sense) community of blind persons and their teachers used braille. It has a negative influence on the promotion of the braille code within sighted community, resulting in lower braille competency of parents, teachers, kindergarten teacher and other persons close to visually impaired children or adults. Often there is a lack of fundamental understanding of the concept in the global sense. The traditional approach results in a lack of needed braille competencies, and this challenge is often addressed throughout research and contemporary literature (problems in using appropriate code, using the code of the higher evolution level). For example, Webson (2004) states that there is a problem in using English braille codes in developing countries, because many examiners and educators outside our field often do not realise that those who prepare exams are not aware of differences in braille codes (and use UK version instead US version of the braille code). The pros and cons of braille have been discussed for

²It has to be noted that listening can be perceived only as auditory reading, but it is far away from traditional written communication and written competency.

more than two decades. The development of the braille code strongly differentiates, and trends in Croatia are not even closely similar to the world trends. At the moment, the Croatian braille national code is not fully standardised and only grade 1 braille makes standard national notation of Croatian language.

This traditional philosophy and paradigm has a strong and influential history, and (as observed in contemporary authors) has little flexibility in introducing new philosophy, theory or a new construct of braille implementation.

The modern approach towards braille, respects the idea of mainstreaming braille and introducing it into inclusive educational setting. The modern approach respectfully embraces (and should practice) the idea that all persons that use braille as their media for writing, reading, communicating or realising professional tasks regardless how they perceive braille code (by touch or by sight) are equally responsible and influential factors in the process of development and the promotion of the code.

3.2 The Role of Braille in the Contemporary Society

Over the years, the role of braille has been elaborated only in the context of communication and literacy medium, code, writing system, media for accessing information. Traditionally, braille is perceived as the programme or service, or as a part of an individual educational plan.

In the inclusive society, the function and the role of braille change a lot. When arguing for accessible and inclusive community, braille becomes a powerful and distinctive tool. Fajdetić (2010a) explains that braille can be perceived and looked upon from aspects like: a) braille as a programme and service, b) braille as a system for written communication, c) braille as a "tool" for inclusion in different spheres of the society.

Braille as a programme (or service) realises activities and defines its role in the contemporary society through the braille curriculum, braille rehabilitation programme, having supportive role in other rehabilitation programmes, or being a teaching method. Braille evolves as the script or system for written communication, and gets integrated in the society realising its linguistic role of the written language. As mentioned above, braille is an important tool for inclusion in different spheres of the society, having functional strategic role (information access), normative role (normative documents), legal role (protection of human rights, legal frame), its practical implications (development of braille font for sighted braille readers), perceptive role (using alternative perceptive modes – sight), communication role and the role of rising awareness in the society.

4 Evolution of Braille in Croatia

4.1 Braille Code, Tacteme, Braille Tacteme, Tactile Grapheme

As mentioned above, the traditional understanding and philosophy around and about braille is that braille is a code, created for the blind, and therefore it is the code of the blind. The traditional approach to braille often refers braille as: code,

script, tactile system, code for blind persons. The braille reader is most often perceived as a blind reader. The traditional approach implies that this code is being used only by blind persons. Braille “cannot be seen by eyes of a blind person”, so it seems that it is a “not existing” code as well.

There is a very practical example of its “not existing” characteristic and the direct consequence of this traditional approach. The example is the following: Braille is the code (media) used by blind persons and students (official media of choice at the Croatian state exam as well), but the official reference literature – Croatian grammar and spelling (harmonised with the conclusions of the Council for Standardisation of Croatian Standard Language Norm), in the chapter “Jezik i pismo” (*Language and script*) does not mention or describe braille as a script at all. The same authors find other scripts important enough to be listed as scripts used in Croatia (Latin, Cyrillic, Greek, Glagolitic script and all other scripts mentioned at some professions).

It is a known fact that braille is a code used in everyday life of visually impaired persons and sighted persons as well. The modern approach towards braille and braille readers creates new ground philosophy (Fajdetić, 2010) and promotes equality of all braille readers. This concept accepts all perception forms of braille as equally important and valuable.

An analysis of a language, both written and spoken, from a linguistic point of view implies that during realisation of the semantic function words convey the meaning, while using different perceptive forms. Perceptive forms?

“Having in mind the definition that words convey meaning, it is perceived that words use different perceptive forms: auditory (spoken words using phonemes), visual (written words using graphemes), sign language (presented with motions of hands and gestures) or labiofacial language (constructed with “kinemes” that are analogue to phonemes of the spoken language or some other?...)” (Stančić, Ljubešić, 1994, 55).

Blind persons use spoken language and realise the semantic function of the spoken word identically like sighted persons. Blind persons realise the semantic function of the written language by using touch and (analogue to the phoneme/grapheme/kineme concept) words are written with tactemes (tactile graphemes, tactile braille images) (Fajdetić, 2010b, 2011a, 2011b).

The modern approach requires a development of new terminology. Braille tactile and visual component, this writing code gets a new initial potential to be promoted in the community of braille readers.

4.2 Evolution of Braille in Croatia

The development level of the braille code in a certain community can be determined by applying the evolution principle and predefined levels of development of the braille code: Level 1. Braille code (genuine/original form of braille created by Louis Braille and concept created for the French language, 19th century), Level 2. Braille code developed for different languages by using national notations, Level 3. Braille code – developed as a genuine and original national code standard (implementation in different context), Level 4. National Braille Contractions Standard, Level 5. National Unified Braille Standard, Level 6. Braille – universal writing code (available only as music notation).

Fajdetić (2010b) has performed a qualitative analysis of the Croatian Braille Notation Standard and gave the first overview of the meaning of braille in literary and mathematical context. She also gave first examples of morphology of the

complex braille code pattern and changes of the meaning in different context. The author concluded that the characteristics of the Croatian Braille Notation imply a contextual development level of the national braille code. It is evident that the braille code development level correlates with available resources of braille readers (both blind and sighted) in certain community. Since Croatia has a small community of braille readers, the national braille notation hasn't accepted contractions or developed a unified braille national notation.

5 Conclusion

An inclusive community should change the ground paradigm and philosophy of braille. The role of the braille code in the contemporary (inclusive) society has changed dramatically, but some particular roles have not been used up to the full possibility and extent. Even though the traditional approach towards braille has a strong influence on the community, the modern approach shall have stronger influences in the future. The modern approach equally respects both visual and tactile characteristics of the braille code and introduces new linguistic concepts like: tacteme, braille tacteme, tactile grapheme. The inclusive community relies on the resources of the community with the aim to constantly promote and develop the code and address tactual and visual diversity respectfully.

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