

Does English Need a New Alphabet?

By Alex Bellos

1. b
2. d
3. e
4. a
5. c

This puzzle involves some simple deciphering skills. The alphabet is phonetic, and two sentences begin with the “th” sound. Two Shavian sentences begin with a **ϑ**, so we can deduce that **ϑ** must be “the” and **ϑις** must be “this.” So **ς** is the “ss” sound. By looking at the other appearances of **ς** in “cats” and “slept,” we get the remaining phrases.

It takes looking a little deeper to determine which letter creates the sound “b.” Look at the pairs: **ς** is the sound “ss,” while **ϛ** is the sound “zz.” Likewise, **ι** is the sound “f” and **ϣ** is the sound “v.” In other words, each pair of characters (which is the same symbol rotated by 180 degrees) shows a soft and hard version of the same consonant sound, something linguists call “unvoiced” and “voiced.” These terms refer to how the mouth pronounces the sound: The unvoiced version does not vibrate the vocal chords, whereas the voiced one does. The sound “b” is a voiced consonant, and its voiceless counterpart is “p.”

Since the Shavian character for “p” is **ι**, we can deduce that the character for “b” must be the same symbol, rotated 180 degrees: **ϣ**.