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## Pedagogical ideas in Spanish Golden Age Orthography

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### Abstract

The debate amongst Spanish orthographers took an unexpected turn at the beginning of the 17th century, when references to teachers, children, and the teaching of reading and writing became frequent. Phonetic spelling was defended because it helped children learn to read and write. Orthographers's pedagogical arguments are frequently related to the alphabet, the creation of letters, the order of the alphabet, the order of the primers' reading lessons, and the very concept of orthology that underlies phonetic orthography.

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### 1. Introduction

Throughout the Spanish Golden Age there was a continual debate about orthography. The push to establish a spelling system that reflected the shifting state of the Spanish language during this period—when Cervantes penned *Don Quixote* and Mateo Alemán published *Guzmán de Alfarache*—inevitably led orthographers to offer their reflections and judgements on how reading and writing should be taught (Chartier, 2001 y 2004; Esteve, 2007; Martínez, 2010). A somewhat arbitrary distinction can be made between those who advocated a phonetic reform, by which spelling would imitate speech, and those who defended the traditional Latin-based orthography. Supporters of the reform included Elio Antonio de Nebrija, Fernando de Herrera, and Mateo Alemán, among others; Gonzalo Correas's ideas about orthography represented a more absurd interpretation of this group's philosophy. Spearheading the rebuttal against a totally phonetic Spanish orthography were Juan López de Velasco and Juan de

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Robles, who aligned themselves with the proponents of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Latinate writing system (Gómez Camacho, 2014b). This trend, which combined the phonetic criterion with the established usage of printers, scribes, and master calligraphers, gained the endorsement of the Royal Spanish Academy (*RAE* in its Spanish acronym) in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Martínez, 1992; Frago, 2012).

The debate amongst orthographers took an unexpected turn at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when references to teachers, children, and the teaching of reading and writing became frequent. With Mateo Alemán's *Ortografía castellana* (1609), we can see for the first time what we could consider to be a pedagogical argument (Gómez Camacho, 2014a): phonetic spelling was defended because, according to phonetic orthographers, it helped children learn to read and write. Champions of the traditional orthography, meanwhile, put forward an identical argument.

We can identify two groups of authors involved in this dispute: the orthographers who used primary education to defend their position, and those who wrote spelling manuals in order to circumvent the exclusive privilege of printing primers that king Felipe II had bestowed upon Valladolid Cathedral (Resines, 2007). Both sides' pedagogical arguments are broadly related to the alphabet, the creation of letters, the order of the alphabet, the order of the primers' reading lessons, and the very concept of orthology that underlies phonetic orthography.

## 2. Methodology

This study combines research methods that are characteristic of both philology and educational sciences. From an educational standpoint, this is an empirical study founded on content analysis, which uses a practical model in order to be better understand the literacy process of the Spanish Golden Age. This methodology is qualitative, comprehensive (García Llamas, 2003; McMillan & Schumacher, 2005), and adapted to the interpretation of classic

16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century texts. Data was collected by means of the critical analysis of reference works, using an indirect and non-interactive observational technique (Colás & Buendía, 1992).

The reflections of the spelling teachers are first-person testimonies culled from several centuries of classroom experiences, and thus the research method used was that of narrative ethnography (Aguirre, 1995; Bolívar, Domingo

& Fernández, 2001; Bisquerra, 2005), which is based on direct observation and description (in this case from a diachronic perspective on the history of education.)

## 3. Simultaneous Teaching of Reading and Writing in 17th Century Orthography

Mateo Alemán is undoubtedly an essential author in classic Spanish literature; nevertheless, his fictional and philological texts on teachers, teaching, and children remain virtually unanalysed. In *Ortografía castellana*, Alemán sets forth specific ideas on education (Johnston, 1988), founded on both a profound interest in pedagogy and the analysis of the predominant approaches to teaching reading and writing at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Paz, 2002), and which stood in contrast to the picaresque method of learning through literary fiction (Parrack, 2005). The very structure of the text is a testament to Mateo Alemán's pedagogical disposition; after the obligatory prologue and a curious chapter in which spelling is linked to music, he launches into his orthographical ideas about "teachers' ignorance in the past and how important it is that they improve in the present in order to facilitate writing orthographically" (Alemán, 1609: 21); he uses the term "primary school teachers" (*maestros de primeras letras* in Spanish), while Ruiz Berro (2004) refers to "public school teachers" (*maestros de escuela pública* in Spanish) and Sebastián de Covarrubias (1611) uses *maestrescuela* in his dictionary.

Mateo Alemán generally considered the teachers "of the past" and his "predecessors" to have been lazy, bad, false, and ignorant (Johnston, 1983: 93); the future, however, would offer goodness, truth, law, and reason. Mateo Alemán deemed his spelling system, which was based on the joint learning of reading and writing in primary schools and was devised expressly with the aim "that children may learn," to be "the good writing method." It would be two centuries before this considerable reform to the Spanish educational system became widespread in Spain: "What issue would there be for children to learn to read and write simultaneously?" (Alemán, 1609: 25). In order to teach children reading and writing concurrently, it was necessary to move away from the writing models of the scribes and master calligraphers. At the same time, Alemán drafted a similarly revolutionary proposal to simplify letters and strip them of their adornments, though this did not occur in Spain for almost another 200 years (Viñao,

2002 a and b; García, 2004; Armenta, 2011).

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