Title: Why Braille

Author: Karen Keninger, director, National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, Library of congress, United States of America

Presented at: Tailoring the Reading Experience to Meet Individual Needs

Libraries Serving Persons with Print Disabilities 2016 Satellite Conference

International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions

August 11-12, 2016

Louisville, KY

One Christmas when I was a little girl, I made it my goal to learn the third verse of Silent Night. The only place I ever heard it was in church, so when the choir sang it, I paid particular attention and memorized the words.

“Silent Night, Holy Night, sun of God loves pure light.

My interpretation—God made the sun in the sky, and the sun in the sky loves to make pure light.

And then I got a little older, and another Christmas came around, and I thought, “you know, that probably isn’t S-u-n because this song is about Jesus. So it is probably s-o-n meaning boy-child, not s-u-n meaning the star in the daytime sky.

“Son of God Loves pure light.” My new interpretation was that Jesus loves good, strong light. That made sense to me—I liked good strong light, too.

Last year, for the first time, I got my hands on a braille hymnal with Christmas songs in it. When I actually read that verse, I realized, with something of a shock, that my hard-won interpretation of that verse was completely wrong. The real meaning, obvious when I read it, was quite difference. And all because of a comma, a capitalization, and an apostrophe.

Son of God, Love’s pure light

Jesus is the pure light of love.

Does it really matter that I had the meaning wrong? I have sung it with impunity for over sixty years. I think it does matter. It matters that I have complete and uninhibited access to the text of a song, or a history book, or a chemistry lesson, or my bank statement.

Language is rich with nuance, interpretation, context and delivery styles. And people started writing it down first to preserve things that were hard to remember, like how many stone axe heads did we order for the king? Or to codify the law on stone tablets. Today, nearly everything is written down, even our most fleeting thoughts sent in text messages.

Our oral traditions still exist, of course. We tell each other stories, we listen to radio, we listen to talking books or audio books. But when we want to learn something thoroughly, when we want to interpret a poem or understand a chemical formula, most of us want it written down. Here are examples of four chemical formulas. Can you tell what the difference is by listening to me read them the way my screen reader would read them?

naproxen sodium C14H13NaO3

Ibuprofen C13H18O2

Tylinol C8H9NO2

Aspirin C9H8O4

OK, you probably weren’t reading chemical formulas this morning. But how about your check register or expense report? Here’s mine:

Galt House Conservatory: $14.32

Taxi: $27.15

Drug store: $42.87

Gift shop: $148.22

Candy store: $37.98

Gift shop: $13.08

Breakfast: $35.43

How much have I spent so far?

What else have you read this morning? The buttons on the phone in your hotel room? The bill for your hotel stay? The channel selections on the television? The menu at breakfast? The labels on the shampoo and conditioner bottles? The news on your mobile device? An email from a friend? My name tag?

You don’t need your literacy, your ability to read, just to interpret poetry. You need it everywhere, all the time, wherever you go. It is a critical element of your everyday life, at work, at home, in community and family.

But you know the value of literacy, of seeing the print on the page or the screen. You are librarians and other professionals serving people with reading disabilities, including people who are blind or severely visually impaired. So what’s news here?

When people lose their ability to read because of visual impairments, they don’t lose their need to read. They compensate the best they can, but the need does not go away. They don’t lose their need to write things down and read them back, either. Have you taken notes at this conference? Have you balanced your checkbook or tracked spending on your credit cards recently? Have you asked for contact information and written it down so you could stay in touch with a new friend? If you could not write these things down, would the need go away?

All too often people who lose their vision as children are steered away from literacy into a completely aural, that is listening, approach—an approach which was abandoned by most world cultures long ago. And people who lose their vision as adults give up their literacy, thinking that they have no alternative but to move into a completely aural information environment.

Braille is that alternative. Braille is a complete and accessible system for reading, comparable in nearly every way, to print. Braille provides the commas, the apostrophes, the nuances of spelling. Braille differentiates sun and son. Braille can be written by an individual and read back independently. Braille is available in nearly 150 different languages.

In too many places around the world, including the United States, adults who lose their vision are steered away from braille. “It’s too hard to learn. It’s too hard to get. It’s too bulky. It’s too cumbersome. It’s too weird.”

Is it hard to learn? It takes time and effort to learn. This is not unlike everything else in life. It took time and effort to learn to read print. It takes time and effort to learn to dance, or sing, or swim, or speak another language. But it is not any more difficult than learning French, or Arabic, or Korean or English, as an adult.

But why bother? Technology has improved. You can listen to books, you can use synthetic speech on a computer or tablet. Who needs braille?

And I ask you the same question—who needs print? why do you read the print on your iPhone instead of turning on VoiceOver? Why don’t you invoke the narrator in Windows to read your computer screen to you? They’re both built-in and available to anyone who wants to use them.

Braille provides the reader with the same intimacy, privacy, and in-depth mapping that print provides the print reader.

What do I mean by mapping? Audio text is serial. Each word comes and goes like a speeding car on the interstate. It can, of course, be rewound, or slowed down, so that you can try to catch the words as they zoom past. But there’s no paragraphing, no bold or italics or other emphasis, headings may or may not be obvious. You take it in like a string. Some of it rolls neatly into a ball. Some of it tangles up and gets mixed up. Some of it disappears completely when you are distracted for even a moment.

Braille gives the reader everything that print does. But, you say, it’s still bulky, expensive, and hard to come by. Traditionally this has been the case. But that is changing. With low-cost braille devices coming onto the market, and software already here to render any text in refreshable braille, a braille reader can access any digital text, in documents, books, magazines, web pages, and anywhere else.

Traditionally and practically, more emphasis on literacy has been given to children than to adults. And still only 12% of blind high school students in the United States are braille readers. But what about the adults we serve? Have they lost their need to read along with their eyesight?

No. They do not lose their need to read—only their ability to read. They become a-literate. They know how to read—they just can’t see the text. But they have little or no support in most places to learn and practice reading in this new way, with fingers that take time to become sensitized, with codes that take time to learn and decipher. Rather than discouraging braille, rather than steering adults to audio-only, libraries can take an active role in promoting, teaching and supporting braille. Models exist at libraries offering language lessons to immigrants, for instance that could be modified for braille. Programming to support and encourage braille for adults, including social support from peers as well as competent instruction and practice can restore literacy in middle and even later life. Speed and fluency come with practice, just as learning a new dance, or a new language requires practice and support.

I’m sure you can all think of ways this can be done. We heard from Nedeljka yesterday about efforts in Serbia. Here are a few possibilities to consider.

Provide training in a group setting. Invite your adult readers to join in local or regional braille classes where they can get support from an instructor and each other.

Start braille reading book clubs, and provide suitable material for early readers that simplifies the code

Have braille game nights with playing cards, word games, and other games with the cards brailled.

Loan simple refreshable braille devices and provide whatever support is needed

Develop support group activities for people using these refreshable braille devices

Technology has moved people away from braille, but now, thanks to the concerted efforts of people who understand the value of braille, technology may well be the solution. New, inexpensive refreshable braille devices will soon be on the market. With refreshable braille device and digital text, the arguments against braille begin to fall off. It is no longer bulky. I can put 200 books on a tiny SD card. And it’s no longer so difficult to acquire. Everything is digital these days, and can be converted to braille with the click of a button.

My dream for the National Library Service is that NLS will be able to incorporate refreshable braille devices and digital braille files fully into our program so that all of our patrons will have equal access to braille, and thus equal access to full and competitive literacy.

My dream took a giant step forward in July when the United States Congress passed a bill authorizing NLS funds to be spent on refreshable braille devices as part of its nationwide program. The next step is to pilot these devices and discover how they will function in our program. We have about 30,000 braille readers. They won’t all want these devices at first, but over time I hope to convert our braille program to all-digital with hard-copy produced only on demand. It will take several years to make this transition, but the result will be vastly more material available for the same dollars we are spending now on our hard-copy only program.

I have another dream. I want digital braile to be as user-friendly as digital audio has become with the daisy format. So at NLS we are beginning the process of developing a digital braille format based on ePub3, complete with linking, navigation, searching, and formatted layout. It’s an exciting time at NLS. And with Marrakesh, and the advent of a low-cost braille reader, it’s an exciting time for all blind people.