Does English Need a New Alphabet?

By Alex Bellos

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 Q, so we can deduce that Q must be “the” and QIS must be “this.” So S is the “ss” sound. By looking at the other appearances of S 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: S is the sound “ss,” while Q is the sound “zz.” Likewise, J is the sound “f” and J 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 J, we can deduce that the character for “b” must be the same symbol, rotated 180 degrees: L.

Source: Babette Newsome, United Kingdom Linguistics Olympiad 2013