

Re: Kanji, Katakana, and Hiragana are different LANGUAGES.

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Source: <http://sci.tech-archive.net/Archive/sci.lang.japan/2007-08/msg00280.html>

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 - *Date:* Tue, 14 Aug 2007 12:20:27 -0400
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On Mon, 13 Aug 2007 14:15:26 -0700, Don Kirkman wrote:

Couldn't agree more. The various romaji systems are also writing systems that can be used to represent the Japanese language.

No ones commenting that these "writing systems" are "pictographic" writing systems. Maybe that was more of an argument in sci.lang.... (?)

All writing systems by definition are graphic in nature. I agree with you that no one has commented "these 'writing systems' are 'pictographic' writing systems. There are no known pictographic writing systems ancient or modern. The term pictograph is used to refer to some prehistoric cave drawings or representing statistical information pictorially. It may also be used to refer to a pictorial sign such as the international road signs that I referred to in another post.

Generally, when people imprecisely use the term 'pictograph' in this newsgroup, they are quickly set straight. I can't really address the discussions in sci.lang – there aren't many relating to language.

All writing systems (ancient and modern) are abstractions. In other words, any pictorial basis in the symbols is used in an abstract manner rather than as a literal illustration. This is true even in a writing system such as ancient Egyptian where what appear to be drawings of animals, things, or people are actually phonetic glyphs or symbols used to express an idea

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rather than a thing. Writing systems such as the three known Ancient Egyptian Scripts (Hieroglyphics, Hieratic and Demotic), Chinese, Japanese kanji, etc. that contain more than just phonetic symbols are referred to as logographic systems.

Logograms are more prevalent than people think. Those that assume that the writing system used to depict English is alphabetic do not realize that numerals such as '2' and special characters such as '\$' or '%' are logograms. I suppose now that this has been brought to your attention, you will hypothesize that the English alphabet and Arabic numerals are different LANGUAGES.

The roman alphabet may memorialize ancient representations of concrete objects:

a < alpha/aleph, etc = "ox", "ox horn"
b < beta/bet[h] = "house", "floor plan of tent"
g < gamma/gimel = "boomerang" [some think "camel"]
d < delta/dalet = "door", "tent opening"

The Modern Hebrew (Israeli) and Greek alphabets come even closer to memorializing the Phoenician ancient representations of concrete objects. In fact, the meaning of some of the names of the Hebrew letters is the same in both modern Hebrew and ancient Phoenician – example 'ayin' (eye). Although the Phoenician letters of the first alphabet (as far as we know) were abstract symbols that referred back to concrete objects, the characters were not logographic in nature but acrophonic. An acrophonic alphabet is where the first letter of the name of the letter is the same as the letter itself and the name of the letter is a word in the vocabulary of the language written in that alphabet.

AFAIK, the only true acrophonic alphabet in use today is Glagolitic, an old Slavic alphabet that has survived in the liturgies used in some Eastern churches. The Glagolitic alphabet can be seen here:

<http://www.omniglot.com/writing/glagolitic.htm>

The first two letters Az and Buki provide the etymology for the Russian word for alphabet (azbuka) and mean 'I' and 'letter' respectively in old Church Slavonic. The Cyrillic alphabet was originally acrophonic but modern Cyrillic is not – the first three letters in modern Cyrillic, for example, just represent the sounds of the letters (A, Be, Ve) and are not meaningful words in themselves.

The Phoenician alphabet may or may not have been a true acrophonic alphabet. The names of 16 of the 22 letters are common Phoenician words for objects or animals. As far as scholars know, the names of the

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remaining six letters are not Phoenician words. One school of thought is that they have acrophonic value but the names are in Ancient Egyptian or one of the other languages that influenced the creation of the Phoenician alphabet.

For example, you site:

g < gamma/gimel = "boomerang" [some think "camel"]

The Phoenician letter gimel is believed to have been derived from the Egyptian hieroglyphic for gaml (throwing stick). (The Phoenicians may have been influenced by a proto-Canaanite cuneiform script such as the Ugaritic script instead of borrowing it directly from Ancient Egyptian.) The Phoenicians, instead of using the Egyptian word 'gaml' (throwing stick) to name the letter substituted a Phoenician word that sounded quite similar, 'gimel' camel.

Phoenician is a Semitic language where most words are based on a three consonant root. Today, the three Phoenician consonants of gimel, mem, and lamed are preserved in the Hebrew and Arabic words for camel, גמל and جمل . Hebrew and Arabic are also Semitic languages where most words are based on a three consonant root. The languages read left to right. These words contain no vowels so, from right to left, the letters are gimel, mem, and lamed (Hebrew – note the names are the same as the Phoenician names) and gim, mim, lam (Arabic – the vowels are long vowels in katakana they would be written ガミル). The English word for camel traces its etymology back through the Greek to these three Semitic consonants.

Arabic, unlike Hebrew, has not preserved most of the Phoenician names. One exception is the letter ع ('ayn) which, like the Hebrew ע (ayin), relates back to the Phoenician letter ayin meaning eye. Even today, the Arabic and Hebrew words for eye are close in pronunciation to the Phoenician word for eye.

Phil Yff

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