The Non Western History of Writing and the Alphabet

Week 07
Lecture 01

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The Origins of Writing and the Alphabet

The learning objectives for week 07 lecture 01 are:

- to appreciate the nonwestern origin of writing and the alphabet;
- to understand the superiority of the alphabet as a means of writing;
- to understand the continuing use of some pre-alphabetic writing systems such as hieroglyphs.
The Origins of Writing and the Alphabet

Week 07 lecture 01 terms you should know:

- Hieroglyph
- Cartouche
- Rosetta Stone
The Origins of Writing and the Alphabet

Week 07  Lecture 01 Sources:


Writing and the Alphabet

1. Writing one of the most significant inventions of all time

- Allows storage of knowledge
- Allows accumulation of knowledge
- Allows much greater and faster communication and sharing of ideas
Writing and the Alphabet
2. Many pictorial writing systems in use worldwide
   - eg Native American drawing to be shown on slide 15
Writing and the Alphabet

3. True writing developed at least three times

– Ancient Middle East – Sumer and Egypt – around 4,000 BC
– Ancient China – about the same time
– Maya of Central America – around 2,000 BC
Writing and the Alphabet

4. True writing is writing that can convey everything humans are capable of thinking
   - Picture writing is limited in its ability to achieve this
   - True writing developed into the alphabet
Writing and the Alphabet

5. Alphabet the most efficient system of writing

– Letters represent only the sounds
– Meaning comes only from the sounds
– A few letters can be endlessly recycled (called “duality of patterning” in linguistics)
– Much easier to learn
Writing and the Alphabet

6. True alphabet maybe invented only once
   - Derived from Egyptian hieroglyphs
   - Developed over the millennium 3000 BC to 2000 BC in Egypt
   - “North Semitic” people took to ancient Canaan
   - Phoenicians took to Greeks
Writing and the Alphabet

– Greeks added vowel sounds
– Our word “alphabet” is the first two letters of the Greek alphabet
– Alpha and beta come from Semitic “aleph” and “beth,” still seen in Hebrew alphabet
– Aleph originally picture of ox head
– Can trace back to 4000 BC to Sumerian “gub”
Writing and the Alphabet

Can you go from the Semitic on to the Greek and then Roman letters?
Writing and the Alphabet

. Steps in writing and the alphabet
  – First came picture writing
  – See the Native American picture writing example on the next page

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A translation of this document would read: "1) We are in a camp of thirteen lodges, 2) encamped on a creek above the forks, 3) started hunting with eight horsemen, 4) on the way slept out two nights, 5) traveled in the direction →, 6) found buffalo, 7) behind the second creek from the camp killed some and made travois or sledges, and 8) slept but one night on our return home."
8. Next came “logogramic” writing
   – Mixture of pictures and sound elements
   – Chinese character writing is an example
Writing and the Alphabet

The evolution of linguistic written symbols from pictures to more "abstract" forms can be seen in a comparison between ancient and modern Chinese characters:

14th Century B.C.

Present

Sun  High  Fire  Water  Elephant

The modern-day Chinese alphabet consists of 214 characters plus numerous combinations, all of which must be learned in order to read the language well. On the other hand, Chinese character writing has distinct advantages in a nation of many dialects. Often people who cannot understand each other's spoken words can draw the characters in the air with their fingers.
Writing and the Alphabet

8. The modern Western – or Roman – alphabet derives ultimately from a process similar to that of Chinese, except that the Egyptians gradually transformed their hieroglyphics ("sacred pictures") into more abstract – sound related or "phonetic" – symbols →
Our own alphabet derives ultimately from the Egyptian hieroglyphs, as transmitted by the Hebrews, Phoenicians, and Greeks. Can you recognize any of our modern letters in these two examples of early and late Egyptian writing:

Translation: "What is the number being referred to?"
Writing and the Alphabet

9. The gift of alphabetic writing comes to us from three main sources:

- Ancient Sumer (Babylonia) around 4,000 BC
- Ancient Egypt 3000 BC to 2000 BC
- The ancient semitic peoples (later some came to call themselves Jews, possibly from “people of Judah”)

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Writing and the Alphabet

10. Of these, the most important were the Egyptians

- Developed the earliest writing of the Sumerians
- Transformed hieroglyphs into near alphabetic or true alphabetic writing
- Passed on their system to the nearby North Semitic cultures
Writing and the Alphabet

11. The earliest hierglyphs (3000 BC) were pictures
12. Hieroglyphs are still in use
2013 Update
Writing and the Alphabet

12a. Hieroglyphs are still in use – do they make use of the phone faster?
Writing and the Alphabet

13. Egyptian writing disappeared around 500 AD.

14. By 1700 no one had any idea what the strange picture-like drawings meant.

15. Then, in 1799 a French military officer in Egypt made an astonishing discovery.
Writing and the Alphabet

16. He picked up a stone in the village of el Rashid – now known in English as “Rosetta.”

17. He saw strange writing on the stone and passed it on to his superiors who immediately realized it was a document of great historical importance.
Writing and the Alphabet

18. The Rosetta Stone provided the key to unlocking the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs
19. The Rosetta Stone had been carved in 196 BC

20. It contained an inscription by priests honoring the then Egyptian pharaoh
Writing and the Alphabet

21. The inscription was written in three languages

– Ancient hieroglyphs

– Demotic, a writing system for Egyptian commoners

– Greek, which was the language of the Egyptian rulers in 196 BC
The Rosetta Stone
Writing and the Alphabet

22. The Rosetta Stone was deciphered in 1822 by the French scholar Jean-François Champollion.

23. Champollion knew Greek and also Coptic – the language of Ethiopian Christianity that is derived from ancient Egyptian
Writing and the Alphabet

24. Through his knowledge of those two ancient languages and with much hard work he was able to decipher the first seven signs from demotic to Coptic

25...and from there he gradually worked out the meaning of the other symbols

3/12/2016
1. HIEROGLYPHS WERE WRITTEN to be read in different directions IN ORDER TO MAXIMIZE THE BEAUTY OF THE WRITING. The Egyptians tried to group signs in balanced rectangles. For example, the word for "health" would not be written as

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{right} + \text{left} \\
\text{(a left-to-right presentation)}, \text{ but as}
\end{align*} \]

This hieroglyph spells "s-n-b." Egyptian readers knew which vowels to add, just as modern readers of Arabic and Hebrew can insert the proper open sounds in their consonants-only writing.

But we don't know what ancient Egyptian sounded like, so modern scholars can only speculate on the actual pronunciation. The present convention is to put "e" in such places, so the word read off is **SENEB** = HEALTH.
Egyptian Writing

27. Egyptian writing principle no. 2

– Only consonents have written symbols
– Vowels are figured out –
– 3rd flr apt in hse, 4 lg rms, exclnt loc nr cntr, nr rr, prkg, w-b-frpl, hdwd flrs, skylts, ldry, $600 lincl ht.
Egyptian Writing

28. Consonants-only writing is still common in modern Arabic and Hebrew
Egyptian Writing

29. Principle #3 is the “determinative,” marking a sound to make it into a picture meaning:

The “mouth” symbol denotes the sound “r”
The determinative stroke causes it to mean “mouth” or “speech”
Egyptian Writing

30. Advanced writing techniques

nb = all, any, every

nfr = beautiful
Egyptian Writing

31. More advanced techniques

sba = star

pr = go forth

running legs indicate verb of motion
32. The Egyptian scribes’ attachment to aesthetics led them from the balanced rectangle to the rounded off rectangle we know as a “cartouche”
33. Cartouches were especially popular as emblems for the pharaohs –

This one is perhaps the most famous of them all...
Egyptian Writing

34. The boy-king –

Tutankhamun, Ruler of Thebes
(Ruled 1333 to 1324 BC)
Egyptian Writing

35. Red arrows show order of spelling of Tutankhamun – do you recognize the “ankh” part of his name?

Blue lines show “ruler of Thebes of Upper Egypt”
Egyptian Writing

36. Here is the cartouche of another famous pharaoh – Ramses II who reigned for 66 years (1279 to 1213 BC)
Egyptian Writing

37. Some people believe Ramses is the pharaoh described in the Bible in Exodus – but there is no verification from the Egyptian materials
38. We can only say for sure that by the time of Ramses II Egyptian writing had long been alphabetic and had influenced the spread of the alphabet to ancient Canaan and was probably on its way to the Greek islands.
Writing and the Alphabet: 2012 Update

39. Along with priestly hieroglyphics, Egyptian commoners had also developed a writing system, called “demotic,” which is one of the three languages on the Rosetta Stone.
Writing and the Alphabet: 2012 Update

40. In 2012 scholars at the University of Chicago have published an online dictionary of 2,000 words in Egyptian Demotic – words of family, love, words used in private letters.

Writing and the Alphabet: 2012 Update

41. You can read the September 18, 2012 *New York Times* Science Section article about this dictionary [here](#).

You can directly access the dictionary at the University of Chicago Oriental Institute [here](#).
Writing and the Alphabet: 2016 Update

42. Egyptian writing is known to be connected with religion, mysticism, poetry and multiple layers of imagery...
Writing and the Alphabet:
2016 Update

43. Archaeologist and Egyptologist Susan Brind Morrow has recently RE-translated some of the oldest and most mysterious of all the hieroglyphs...
44. Known as the “pyramid texts,” these writings are found all over the inside walls of 5th Dynasty pharaohs’ tombs at a site called Saqqara near modern Cairo.
Writing and the Alphabet: 2016 Update

45. By contrast, the more famous and older 4th Dynasty pyramids of 2,613 BCE (Before the Common Era = BC in the older notation) to 2,495 BCE – see the next lecture – while mathematically amazing – contain no writing at all.
Writing and the Alphabet:
2016 Update

46. The 5th Dynasty runs from about 2,494 BCE to 2,345 – the approximate date of the burial of the Pharaoh Unis (or Unas).
Writing and the Alphabet:
2016 Update

47. On the inside West wall of Unis’s pyramid, one sees...

[written in about 2,345 BCE = about one thousand years before Moses wrote down the book of Genesis]
“... “the earliest surviving body of written poetry and religious philosophy in the world.”

Writing and the Alphabet:
2016 Update

49. Partial translation of this text from about 2,345 BCE:

Over the fire
Beneath the holy ones as they grow dark
As the falcon flies, as the falcon flies
May Unis rise into this fire
Beneath the holy ones as they grow dark
They make a path for Unis
Unis takes the path
Writing and the Alphabet: 2016 Update

50. Growing dark may refer to the dawn when the stars (which the Egyptians thought were gods in the sky) grow dark and the falcon grabs the deceased’s soul to carry him towards the sky....
Writing and the Alphabet:
2016 Update

50. ...and much more is hidden in several multiple meanings that only emerge when one has studied the hieroglyphs themselves...
51. If you are interested in the multiple images and complex meanings of this and other pyramid texts, see her fascinating book.
Writing and the Alphabet

End of

Week 07 Lecture 01

Writing and the Alphabet