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Pictographs versus letters



Indus Valley script

The major difference between pictographic and phonetic scripts is that while in the former the individual symbols represent ideas and objects, in the latter the symbols stand for sounds.

Thus in Japanese the character for 'horse' ultimately derives from a picture of a horse; the same character, when read by a Chinese or Korean, still means the same thing but already pronounced differently. It is sort of like the use of numerals in the West: 1, 2, 3, 4 mean the exact same thing all over Europe but pronounced "one, two, three, four" in English, "odin, dva, tri, chetyri" in Russian, and "un, deux, trois, quatre" in French. They represent the concept of the number, regardless of its sound value.

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Egyptian script

People have been using various symbols as records for some 30,000 years, but the first civilization that used true writing was that of the Sumerians, shortly followed by the Egyptian culture. Beside this, the Chinese, the Mesoamerican Indians, and the Indus Valley civilization also invented unique pictographic systems. The Mesoamerican and the Indus Valley scripts turned out to be a dead end with no heirs. The other three scripts are the ancestors of all other writing systems in the world, both phonetic and pictographic. As far as we know, all phonetic systems at one point evolved out of pictographic ones. This circumstance had led certain scholars to the belief in "developed" and "primitive" writing systems; the idea was that those scripts which were still using pictographic characters were merely at a lower stage of evolution than those with alphabetic or monosyllabic symbols.

Seemingly, the two dozen letters of the Roman alphabet seems much easier to both learn and to use than the 5-6,000 characters of written Chinese language where every symbol is a unique word and has to be memorized separately. Yet the practice shows that children in countries using the alphabet do not learn to read and write faster than those in Japan or China: the road from learning the individual letters of the alphabet to actually reading and comprehending written text is a long and laborious process.

Sometimes there are other opinions voiced saying that in the age of technology and computerization, pictographic languages are becoming obsolete: the high number of symbols makes the input of these languages tedious and unnecessarily time-consuming. But in reality, nothing is further from truth than this. Because each character stands for an entire word and idea, inputting a single character means the input of an entire word. In English on the average it takes about four keystrokes followed by a space to input a word; using the *pinyin* input system in Chinese it takes about five, and the space is not required; but while typing

歐
共
體

'European Community' in Chinese characters typed on the computer.

phrases and entire sentences makes no difference in keystroke number, in Chinese it significantly reduces the number. In English, the phrase 'European Community' consists of 18 keystrokes, in Chinese it can be entered with 3.

Today's major pictographic systems are the Chinese characters used in China, Japan, Korea, while all other writings are phonetic, including the mono-syllabic systems of Katakana and Hiragana in Japan, the Devanagari in South-East Asia etc, and the different alphabetic scripts all over the world. Almost all European alphabets are based on the Greek and Roman alphabet, with certain modification and adaptation.

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