| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Tracing the Journey of Writing: From Ancient Pictograms to Modern Alphabets

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| ABSTRACT

This paper explores the evolution of writing systems from ancient pictograms to modern alphabets, highlighting the transformative journey of human communication. The study primarily employs a two-dimensional framework. In one framework, various definitions of writing systems are analyzed in a historical manner, and another dimension looks into the various types of the development of writing systems. In order to communicate information, early civilizations used pictographic representations, which are straightforward drawings that represent real objects. As time goes forward, these evolved into ideographic systems, where symbols represented abstract ideas, and subsequently into logographic systems, with characters denoting entire words. The development of syllabic scripts marked a shift towards phonetic representation, assigning symbols to syllables. The beginning of alphabetic systems, notably the Phoenician alphabet, introduced symbols representing individual phonemes, streamlining writing and enhancing accessibility. The Greek adaptation, incorporating vowels, laid the groundwork for many contemporary alphabets, including Latin and Cyrillic. This progression from concrete imagery to abstract phonetic representation underscores humanity's quest for efficient and precise written communication.

| KEYWORDS

Writing; history; development; brain; pen

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

1.0 Introduction:

Writing is the record or the recorded form of speech. It is a medium of communication that represents language through the inscription of signs and symbols. The development of writing, as we know it, is a relatively recent phenomenon. The development of writing was one of the great inventions. Writing allows us to transcend time and space. It is the wheel of our words, the time machine of our thoughts. Millions of people in the world speak languages with no written form. Among these people, oral literature abounds, and crucial knowledge is memorized and passed between generations. But human memory is short-lived, and the brain's storage capacity is finite. Writing overcame such problems and allowed communication across the miles through the years. A writing system brings the ability to message because it encodes spoken language into a physically preservable system.

1.1 Review of the Literature:

The evolution of writing systems is an evidence to humanity's long-term mission to record, communicate, and preserve knowledge. Scholars have broadly observed this progression, highlighting the multifaceted nature of writing's development across different civilizations. When we consider the development of writing, we should bear in mind that a huge number of languages of the world today exist only in the spoken form and do not have a written form. For these languages that do have writing systems, the development of writing is a recent phenomenon. The ages of the languages have been put back to at least 6500 BC and 2900 BC. We may trace human attempts to represent information visually back to cave drawings which were made at least 20,000 years ago or to clay tokens from about 10,000 years ago. Writing which is based on some type of alphabetic script can only be traced back

to inscriptions dated around 3,000 years ago introduced by Denise Schmandt-Besserat (2014). Similarly, the Chinese writing system, with roots tracing back over 6,000 years, showcases a unique evolution. Lu and Aiken (2004) discuss how early Chinese inscriptions, particularly during the Shang dynasty, were closely tied to counting and accounting practices, reflecting the practical motivations behind the inception of writing Much of the evidence used in the reconstruction of ancient writing systems comes from inscriptions on stone or tablets found in the rubble of ruined cities.

Writing is not language but merely a way of recording language by means of visible marks. In some countries, such as China, Egypt and Mesopotamia, writing was practiced thousands of years ago. In order to study writing, we must know something about languages, and we have to use great care in interpreting the written symbols in terms of actual speech. The advent of digital technologies continues to transform writing, introducing new forms and mediums. However, the foundational principles established by ancient scripts remain integral to understanding the trajectory of human communication.

1.2 Methodology:

The research methodology for this study on the evolution of writing systems from ancient pictograms to modern alphabets employs a two-dimensional analytical framework:

a) *Historical Analysis*: This dimension involves a chronological examination of the development of writing systems, tracing their progression from early pictographic representations to complex alphabetic scripts.

b) *Typological Classification*: This aspect categorizes writing systems based on their structural characteristics and functions. It explores various forms, including pictographic, ideographic, logographic, syllabic, and alphabetic systems, analyzing how each type represents language and conveys meaning.
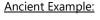
2.0 Systems of Writing:

An account of the early history gradually emerged, but it comprises many gaps and ambiguities. It is difficult to decide whether a piece of graphic expression should be taken as an artistic image or as a symbol of primitive writing. The effort to discover the writing system had led us to find the following types of writing systems.

2.1 Pictographic:

A system of pictorial representation in which pictures actually reproduce familiar objects can be considered the most primitive way of representing and conveying thought. When some of the "pictures" come to represent particular images in a consistent way, we can begin to describe the product as forms of picture-writing, or pictograms.

Pictograms may be language-independent, but they do not seem to be culture-independent.

Ancient Example:

Stands for "Sun"   *Stands for "Moon"*

Modern Example:

(Warning against swimming because of crocodiles)

Pictographic writing has been found among people throughout the world, ancient and modern, among African types, American types, American Indians, Alaskans, Eskimos, etc. The more "picture-like" forms are pictograms.

2.2 Ideographic:

A stage when the symbols do not actually represent objects is called the ideographic stage of writing. Ideograms are defined as the representation of an IDEA, and this definition is often interpreted as implying that they (symbols) have no direct connection with spoken expressions. The more abstract, derived forms are ideograms.

 For Example:

This symbol may mean or express the idea of "Sun is very Hot".

"No Dogs!" sign in Spain. The dog illustration is a pictogram. The red circle and bar is an ideogram representing the idea of "no" or "not allowed".

The Chinese is the typical example of a writing system which is supposed to be ideographic.

2.3 Logographic:

The term derived from the Greek word 'logos' means '*word*. Since the words of any language are structural elements that represent concepts, the written symbols of logographic systems are equivalent to words. Each character is used for a word as a whole and not for any of the sounds that make up the word. Logographic writing systems have been developed independently in separate parts of the world and are the oldest type of writing system.

The logographic writing system was first used by the Sumerians in the southern part of modern Iraq between 5000 and 6000 years ago in the form of cuneiform writing, which means 'wedge-shaped, and the inscriptions used by the Sumerians were produced by pressing a wedge-shaped implement into soft clay tablets, resulting in forms like the relationship between the written form and the object it represents has become arbitrary. In a logogram each sign corresponds to a word.
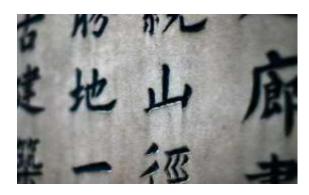
For example:
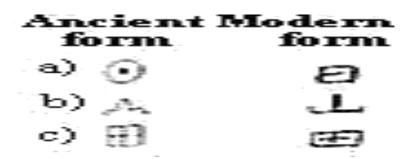

(The 'Hieroglyphic' writing of ancient Egypt)

(The 'Cuneiform' writing of ancient Mesopotamia and)

(The Chinese writing system were all logographic in their earliest form).

All three writing systems were invented at least 5 thousand years ago and survived for thousands of years. The modern Chinese writing system is also logographic. We can compare the ideograms for (a) "sun", "day"; (b) "mou ntain", "*shan";* and (c) "field", *"tian".*

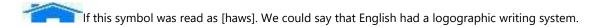### 2.3. (i) Disadvantage:

a. An enormous number of symbols must be memorized.

b. A person must learn approximately 5000 characters in order to learn newspapers printed in Chinese.

2.3. (ii) Advantage:

a. No need to know how to pronounce the language represented by the writing system in order to learn to read the messages written in it.

b. Imagine that the English word house was represented by a stylized drawing of a house.

 If this symbol was read as [haws]. We could say that English had a logographic writing system.

2.4 Syllabic Writing System

When a writing system employs a set of symbols which represents the pronunciation of the symbol, it is described as syllabic writing. Thus, a character is attached to a purely phonetic value. The syllabic writing generally represents a consonant and a vowel. The total set of characters that are used for a given language is referred to as a syllabary.

For example: In the 19th century an American invented a syllabic writing system, which was used by the Cherokee Indians to produce written messages from spoken language.

2.4 (i) Advantage:

It is more economical in the sense that it requires far less memorization and learning time.

2.5 Alphabetic Writing Systems:

An alphabetic writing system employs a character or combination of characters to represent the speech sounds used by that language. Each of the syllables that make up the words of a language since there are just a limited number of speech sounds used by any given language. We must say "typically" because greater or lesser departures are almost universal. Ideally, an alphabetic system should have a one-to-one correspondence between phonemes and graphemes. That is, each grapheme represents one phoneme, and each phoneme would represent one grapheme.

In the Cyrillic alphabet, the 'hard sign' and 'soft sign' usually have no pronunciation of their own. They indicate something about the preceding consonant.

Many of the languages of such a system Sanskrit, Marathi, Nepali, and others use a writing system called 'Devanagari'.

2.6 Phonetic Writing System:

These are the modern writing systems based on I.P.A. (International Phonetic Alphabet) symbols. In which there are proper one-to-one correspondences between sounds and letters. Spoken form does not require the teaching of sounds. Spoken is not permanent. It is ephemeral as compared to a writing system, which is permanent. These IPAs give us a uniform international medium for studying and transcribing the sounds of all the languages of the world. Many languages of the world have no written form at all. It has been made possible to study such languages with this alphabet.

In other words, the IPA is a precise and universal means of writing down the spoken form of utterances as they are spoken without reference to their written representation, grammatical status or meaning.

In reading English, the IPA helps us in establishing and maintaining international intelligibility and uniformity in the pronunciation of English. With the help of IPA we can easily teach the pronunciation of English or of any other language. The teachers and readers of English (or of any other language) can improve their pronunciation and can overcome the confusion created by the spelling with the help of the International Phonetic Alphabet writing system.

2.7 Conclusion:

In conclusion, the development of writing systems is a reflection of how people have moved from concrete representations to abstract symbols as a result of the necessity to communicate, record, and preserve information. Beginning with pictographic representations of concrete objects, writing systems advanced through ideographic and logographic stages, capturing more complex ideas and spoken words. The creation of alphabetic and syllabic systems represented important turning points that made written communication more effective and adaptable. This was further improved by modern and up to date phonetic systems, including the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), which offer accurate representations of speech sounds. This evolution emphasizes how linguistic requirements, technological advancement, and cognitive development interact to shape the variety of writing systems we use today.

2.8 Limitations and directions toward further research:

This study was limited in nature, but many possibilities are open for further research. While this study offers a comprehensive overview of the evolution of writing systems, several limitations highlight areas for future research: Incomplete Archaeological Records, Interdependence of Writing Systems: Treating distinct scripts as independent data points can be misleading. Cultural and Societal Influences, Technological Impact. There is a need for further studies to be conducted, and the results should be confirmed by other studies.

Acknowledgment

Author's Bio note

Dr Md Sohel Rana is an assistant professor in the Department of Foreign Languages at Jazan University, Saudi Arabia, where he has been teaching for 14 years. He holds BA and MA degrees in linguistics and a PhD in applied linguistics from Aligarh Muslim University (2010). Dr Rana has authored four books and over 18 research papers published across India and internationally. He has presented papers at conferences in Dubai (2012), Bangkok (2015), and Kuala Lumpur (2018) and was invited to the Third Asian Conference on Education in Osaka, Japan (2011), and IAFOR conferences in Kuala Lumpur (2012). His work has been featured at the 10th International Conference on South Asian Languages (ICOSAL) at Moscow State University.

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