

The Origins of Alphabetical Order.

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Published in *Modern English Teacher*, May 2000

The mind of the child has the curious ability to focus on a subject that would rarely, if ever, occur to an adult. This was recently brought home to me in conversation with a six-year-old who asked me, in effect, "who decided on the order of the letters in the alphabet?"

Who indeed? We take it for granted that the letters in the alphabet are in some way naturally arranged in a particular sequence but a few moments' thought must convince us that this can only be arbitrary. Yet again, it would seem that this arbitrary decision must have been taken a very long time ago. This article will attempt to provide some kind of an answer to the question.

In alphabetic writing there is a direct correspondence between the grapheme and the phoneme which makes it the most economical and adaptable of writing systems. Unlike ideograms, pictograms or other logographic characters the alphabetic system requires a relatively small inventory of elements which can be adapted to a wide variety of languages. The smallest known alphabet in use today is that of Rotokas in the Solomon Islands, whose writing uses no more than eleven letters, and the largest, to the best of my knowledge, is Khmer, with seventy-four.

In contrast, the great Chinese dictionary of K'ang Hsi contains nearly fifty thousand characters and in Japan today even elementary school children are required to learn eight hundred and eighty one of the one thousand eight hundred and fifty characters prescribed by the Japanese Ministry of Education. The case of Japanese is even more complex as four writing systems are in regular use; *kanji* (derived from Chinese), *hiragana* (a kind of 'grammatical particle'), *katakana* (used for words borrowed from other languages and the Roman Alphabet which is becoming increasingly common in advertising, mainly in English).

Alphabetic writing first appeared in the first half of the second millennium B.C.; so-called Proto-Sinaitic script has been discovered in 1915 at the Serabit el Khadem temple in the Sinai. It seems that this was based on Egyptian writing, and the suggestion is that Seirite slaves, unable to master the complexities of the Egyptian writing system of their masters, borrowed merely the uniconsonantal signs; systems where one sign represented the first consonant of the object depicted. Earlier, less complete inventories have been found, but the first signs of abstraction occur with this Proto-Sinaitic script.

The Proto-Sinaitic alphabet consisted solely of consonants, the first two letters being a stylized ox head, rather like an upside down capital A, and a box-like shape; these were to become *aleph* and *bet* in the Semitic alphabet and *alpha* and *beta* in the Greek. So we can see that the origins of the word 'alphabet' go back a long way !

The first alphabets had no provision for vowels, and indeed Phoenician did not even separate words. Later, in Hebrew and Aramaic, words were separated and ambiguities were clarified by context or by the inclusion of aspirant consonants, but it was not until the Greeks combined the five unstressed aspirant consonants, (*aleph*, *hey*, *yod*, *ayin* and *vav*) which they converted into *alpha*, *eta*, *iota*, *omega* and *omicron* (A, E, I, O and U in the modern Roman alphabet), with the twenty-two Phoenician consonants, and added three more consonants for sounds present in Greek but absent in Semitic tongues, that we had a real, complete alphabet.

The Greek alphabet was the first phonetically explicit alphabet, that is to say the first alphabet in which each letter represented either a consonant or a vowel and which gave a one-to-one correspondence between the written and the spoken language. In some senses it has never been improved upon. (By comparison, English is far less efficient; it represents forty sounds - twenty consonants and twenty vowels - by only twenty six signs, causing a host of ambiguities).

Because the Greeks took over an inventory of signs the order of these didn't change. And, just as the Greeks had borrowed their alphabet directly from the Phoenicians, the Etruscans

and later speakers of Latin took theirs from the Greeks, again with some modifications. The names were changed, and shortened; The letter Z was replaced by G and later re-introduced along with Y, the two letters being placed at the end of the alphabet. Before that, X was the last letter of the Roman alphabet.

The alphabet we have in English today is more or less based on the Roman alphabet. However, the letters J, U and W were added in the Middle Ages, and other letters, which will be familiar to those who have studied Anglo-Saxon have disappeared; W replaced the runic symbol 'wynn' (ƿ/ƿ), and the sounds once represented by 'thorn' (þ/þ) and 'eth' (ð/ð) have been replaced by the digraph 'th'. The character 'ash' (Æ/æ) still remains in English in a few isolated cases. The letter J was a variant of I and for that reason was placed next to it, and U and W were placed either side of V because they were variants of it.

Other European languages which have adopted the Roman alphabet use modified versions of what is basically the same alphabet, adding symbols and accents according to the phonemic structure of each language. So Spanish has adopted the letters CH, LL and Ñ, and uses certain diacritics on vowels (á, é, í, ü, etc.) while other European languages employ a variety of letters and diacritics (œ, ø, å, ç, â, ã, etc) to cater for their needs. Generally speaking, a 'new letter' has been inserted in the alphabet of each language in the position where it seems most 'logical', that is beside a letter to which it bears some resemblance.

The first extant record we have of 'alphabetical order' refers to the great library at Alexandria. This however only extended to grouping writings together by their first letter, and the concept of full alphabetization is unrecorded until about 200 A. D. and little practiced until the advent of printing. One reason might be that at that time the number of written manuscripts was small enough not to need a mass retrieval system; most writing would have been on scrolls and a pigeonhole system adequate for the purpose.

However, it is interesting to bear in mind that when the Greeks borrowed the Phoenician alphabet they copied the names, sound values and order. Obviously this order was essentially arbitrary and the fact that the order was preserved might indicate that the order was of some importance, perhaps for ritual or administrative purposes. In Hebrew Scripture, for example, the psalms and proverbs are grouped under letters of the alphabet. Perhaps alphabetic order was in use earlier but we have no examples of it.

We find examples of alphabetization in the work of certain Roman scholars, but admittedly not many of them. Pliny, Plautus and Virgil show a familiarity with it, as do certain public administrators. Isolated examples shine out through the dark ages - a lexicon by Plotius in the ninth century, a biblical concordance here, a Greek-Latin lexicon there, and in the year 1053 we find in the introduction to a dictionary the words (here modernised) :

Anyone who wishes to find anything quickly must also notice that this whole book is composed according to the alphabet, not only in the first letters of the parts but also in the second, third and sometimes even in the further determinative arrangements of the letters

But it was not until the introduction of the printing press that the idea of alphabetization really took off. Before this the cost of paper (or parchment) was too high to permit a system of ordering based on copying each item onto separate cards and then ordering the cards, the most practiced way of ordering until computers recently took over. But when multiple copies of a publication could be printed at a resale profit the expense of producing items in alphabetical order could be absorbed. Also, as time went by, the amount of information in the public domain increased so rapidly that systematic ordering became a necessity.

As late as 1604, when Shakespeare's plays were being performed, we can read in the preface to Robert Cawdray's *Table Alphabetical*:

If thou be desirous . . . rightly and readily to understand and to profit by this Table, and such like, then thou must learne the alphabet, to wit the order of the letters as they stand, perfectly without booke, and where every letter standeth".

the implication clearly being that children were not drilled in alphabetical order in primary school as we are today.

Of course in today's literate society the first steps towards literacy, taken in primary schools, are taken precisely in the learning of the alphabet, and it is a strange irony that this should be an oral litany. The alphabet has, for small children, the rhythms and cadence of the nursery rhyme, and indeed often figures in anthologies of these tales. Yet alphabetical order is taken wholly for granted and, apart from curious six-year-olds, there are surely few people who stop to think of its Proto-Sinaitic origins.