

The history of the alphabet essay sample



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Introduction

It is really very easy to express our feelings and thoughts on the paper with the help of twenty six simple signs which we call ‘ alphabets’. The evolution of the alphabet to its present stage is result of the contribution of different nations. Even before the discovery of ‘ alphabet’ men used different signs to express and record the thoughts to communicate with others. The discovery of ‘ alphabet’ was the most difficult and yet one of the very fruitful achievements of human intellect. After the discovery of twenty six characters known as ‘ alphabets’ it has become the fundamental in preserving the human knowledge. The phrase “ as easy as A. B. C” has become a proverbial expression. The system of writing without the ‘ alphabet’ would lack the power of expression.

The Origin

The origin of alphabet was deemed by the highest authorities to be an unsolved, if not an insoluble problem. (Taylor 88). However, the earliest known origin of the alphabet is 1700 B. C. to 1500 B. C. in the Mediterranean. In 1000 B. C. the evolution of some other alphabets occurred from Canaanites, Aramaic, South Semitic and Greeks Aramaic became the basis of Middle Eastern nations like Arabic, Hebrew and Indian. Later the Greek alphabet formed Modern Greek, Cyrillic and Etruscan. Cyrillic became the script for eastern European Nations including Russia, Bulgaria and Serbia. Etruscan evolved into Latin, which was used in the Roman Empire. The Latin spread in whole Europe because of Roman conquest. The word ‘ alphabet’ itself has the origin from the Late Latin ‘ Alphabetum’ which in turn

originates from the Ancient Greek ‘Alphabetos’, alpha and beta, the first two letters of the Greek alphabet. Though the history of the alphabet starts in ancient Egypt, there are traces that many other countries like Arabia, Mangolia significantly contributed to the growth of alphabet.

Ideograms and Phonograms

Ancient Egyptians used logograms also known as ideograms, which represented a sound or expression. This graphical system of representation later formed the source of all existing ‘alphabets’. From time to time men from various races invented methods of writing which may be defined as “the art of recording events and sending messages.” This art began with the rude pictures of objects; these pictures were gradually assumed as representatives of words. The writing began with ideograms which later developed into phonograms. The difference between ideograms and phonograms is that the former represents the ideas and the later represents the sounds.

Five primitive systems of writing

There are five great systems of picture writing invented independently;

1. The Egyptian
2. The Cuneiform
3. The Chinese
4. The Mexican
5. The Hittite

In addition to these systems we have independently invented picture writing of various semi-savage tribes, such as North American Indians, the Picts, the Laplanders and the Eskimos. (Taylor 15)

Advancement

The innovative idea of using sound symbols to denote numbers was later carried across the Mediterranean, during the period that followed the massive conquests of Alexander, known as Hellenistic Age (338 to 30 B. C. E.). In Egypt it seems to have adopted officially at Alexandria during the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus (246 to 221 B. C. E.). (Barry 22)

In addition to the old pictorial symbolism inherited from the Egyptians, Mycenaeans, and Phoenicians, the letters of the alphabet were soon given new meanings and attributions by the Greeks. Almost from the moment they inherited the alphabet in the 18th century B. C. E., the Greeks used letters as symbols for various animate and inanimate objects, of which numbers were the most important. During the classical, Hellenistic and Roman Ages, the letters of the Greek alphabet were associated with planets, stars, signs of zodiac, musical tones, deities, angels, elements of human body, and numerous other objects and ideas. (Barry 65)

Until recently, it was believed that the people who lived in the Sinai desert began using their alphabet in 1700 B. C. In 1998, archeologist John Darnell discovered rock carvings in “ Valley of Horrors: in southern Egypt that push back the origin of the alphabet to the 1900 B. C. or even earlier.

Conclusion

The purpose of this was to gather the misplaced mystery of the development of the alphabet. The real mystery remains but the pattern of development from Egyptian to Semitic seems to be understandable. The Semitic alphabet developers borrowed at least 90% of their sound categories and 90% of their shapes from the Egyptians.

References

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