The UK Linguistics Olympiad   2015

Problem 5: How to read a rune

Old Norse was the language of the Vikings, used for six centuries from about 700 CE in Scandinavia and throughout the Northern Hemisphere. The Old Norse language had a major impact on English, for example through the Viking gods who gave names to most of the days of the week – "Sun day", "Moon day", "Tiw's day", "Wodan (or Odin)'s day", "Thor's day", "Frigg day" - as well as a great many other words from *ado* and *anger* to *wrong* and *yule*. For a long time, Old Norse was written using 'runes', an alphabet specially devised for carving into stone or wood.

The table below contains the names of eleven Old Norse gods, written in runes.

a. ᛒᚠᛚᛞᚱ			g. ᛋ�off		
b. ᚦᚢᚱ			h. ᛞᛖᛏᛚᛁᛞᛖᚱ		
c. ᛁᚦᚾᛏᛏ			i. ᚠᚱᛖᛁᚱ		
d. ᛞᚠᚷᚱ			j. ᚢᛞᛁᛏ		
e. ᛏᚢᛏᛏ			k. ᚱᚨ		
f. ᚠᛁᛖᛁᛋᚠ					

Nine of these gods are listed below in modern English, using our alphabet (usually called the 'Roman' alphabet) and in alphabetical order. The names given below are either based on the gods' original Old Norse names, or on their roles in nature; for instance, the god of the dawn might be listed either as 'Dawn' or as Delling (his original name). Remember that the modern version of the name may not be quite the same as the original Old Norse name – think what happened to their names in our days of the week!

<p align="center">Baldur, Dallinger, Day, Earth, Freya, Freyr, Ithun, Night, Sun</p>

Q.5.1. Write the modern name for each of these nine gods in the table next to the cell containing its rune spelling.

Q.5.2. Using the Roman alphabet, work out the two missing names and write them in the appropriate cell.

Q.5.3. Using runes, write the names of the gods Tyr, Ran and Sif in the table below.

l. Tyr	m. Ran	n. Sif

Problem 5: How to read a rune – solution (19 points)

Scoring:

- **Q.5.1.**   1 point for each answer except b and j (max 9)
- **Q.5.2.** 2 points for each of b and j; 1 for a partially right answer (max 4)
- **Q.5.3.** 2 points for each correct word; 1 for **<u>one wrong letter</u>** (max 6)

a.	Baldur	g.	Earth	
b.	**<u>Thor</u>**	h.	Dallinger	
c.	Ithun	i.	Freyr	
d.	Day	j.	**<u>Odin</u>**	
e.	Night	k.	Sun	
f.	Freya			
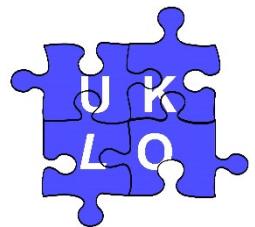
o. Tyr	p. Ran	q. Sif
		NB

Commentary

There are many ways into this problem. Here is one which is quite straightforward.
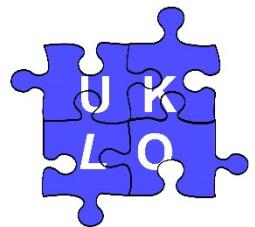
- Let's call the names a-k 'rune-names' and the ones written in our Roman alphabet 'Roman-names'. How to match rune-names with Roman-names? We can look for two kinds of clue:
  - We know that the runes are an 'alphabet', so let's assume that each rune corresponds to one sound; and we know that roughly how many sounds each Roman-names has, so we can match the rune-names and Roman-names simply by counting the runes in the rune-names and the sounds in the Roman-names. But that means that we need to think of the Roman-names in terms of their sounds rather than in terms of their letters; for instance, *Night* has five letters but only three sounds.

- o If we know something about the history of alphabets we know that most alphabets have evolved out of earlier ones, so we may guess that runes and the Roman alphabet actually developed out of the same common ancestor. That being so, we can look for clues in the shapes of the runes. Two stand out immediately: one looking like a capital R, and the other like a capital B. The link may turn out to be spurious, but it's worth pursuing.

- Following the length clue first, the longest rune-name is (h), with seven runes, and the longest Roman-name is *Dallinger*, with just six sounds for most speakers in the UK: /daliŋə/. But we also know that some people always pronounce an /r/ at the end (and that everyone inserts /r/ before a vowel, as in *Dallinger is dead*). So maybe we can recognise seven sounds in the Roman-word: /daliŋər/. Of course, some speakers may feel that the *ng* spells two separate sounds: /ng/; such speakers will have to think round this, and will certainly be helped by knowing that most speakers have just a single 'velar nasal' /ŋ/ for *ng*. Suppose, then, that *Dallinger* does indeed have seven sounds, it seems safe to assume that it matches rune-name (h): (h) = Dallinger - an important breakthrough because this gives us all the other letters in this name.

- Following the letter-shape clue, we notice that the last rune in (h) is the one that looks like R, so if (h) really does match *Dallinger*, this corresponds seems to be for real: the R rune = r. It's always comforting to find a first guess confirmed by independent evidence. This match also gives us some crucial general information: we read runes from left to right, just like our Roman alphabet. You can't take this for granted in writing systems.

- But there's a problem with *Dallinger*. In our pronunciation, the first and third vowels are different in both pronunciation and spelling, but in the norse-name they seem to have the same rune, which looks a bit like an upside-down W – or (if you squint a bit), a sideways E. So maybe the sounds for the runic equivalent of *Dallinger* are actually something like *Dellinger*, with an 'e' sound rather than an 'a' in the first syllable. Rather tentatively, then, let's guess that the M rune = e.

- Assuming that the R rune = r, where else do we find it? The rune is at the end of five other rune-names, but *r* is only at the end of two other Roman-names: *Baldur* and *Freyr*. The missing names are a puzzle at the moment, but let's try and find *Baldur* and *Freya*. The latter is easy to find in rune-name (i), which ticks all the boxes: it contains the R rune not only at the end but also in the second place, and it also contains the M rune for e, which confirms that guess; so (i) = Freyr. This name in turn produces two more runes with helpful shapes:
  - o the first one, looking like F and sounding /f/. So the F rune = f.
  - o the fourth one, looking like a capital I and corresponding here to the *y* of *Freyr*; but it also corresponds to *i* in *Dallinger,* so let's assume that the I rune = i.

- We now have enough clues to finish off most of the first question. But there are several twists where inspired guessing helps, given that the aim is simply to find the most plausible pairing of rune-names and Roman-names:
  - o The rune-name for *Baldur* has no vowel sign between *d* and *r*, so maybe the R rune on its own can indicate a short syllable of some kind.
  - o Conversely, the rune-name for *Ithun* has a double letter at the end, which is presumably *nn*. We notice that another rune-name (e) also ends in a double letter, so maybe this is a regular feature.

- o The rune-name for *Earth* seems to have two initial vowels, unlike our modern pronunciation of *Earth*; but we guess that our modern spelling may reflect an earlier pronunciation where the *e* and *a* were pronounced separately.
  - o The rune-name for *Freya* contains the same vowel rune as we found at the start of *Earth*, but not corresponding to anything in our pronunciation of *Freya*.
  - o The most difficult Roman-names to link are those which are common nouns: *Day, Night, Sun*. Presumably their rune-names are also common nouns, so we're looking for the Old Norse words for 'day', 'night' and 'sun'. Here you just have to guess, using whatever clues are available. You know that there are five unassigned rune-names, and that two of these have Roman-names that are not in the list given; so the task is to find among the five left-over rune-names the three that are most likely to match our three Roman-names. Just look at the first letters:
    - ▪ (b) begins with *th*
    - ▪ (d) begins with *d*
    - ▪ (e) begins with *n*
    - ▪ (j) begins with the second vowel in *Earth*, which isn't /a/ (for which we have another rune as in *Baldur*) but might be /o/. So let's assume it's /o/.
    - ▪ (k) begins with an unidentified rune whose shape might remind you of S.

    Of these five, (d) is a good candidate for *Day* and (e) for *Night*. For *Sun*, neither (b) nor (j) looks at all promising, but (k) could start with /s/. Pursuing these leads,

    - • (d) spells *Da?r* – even more plausible as the Old Norse for 'day'; so (d) = Day.
    - • (e) spells *No??*, where the unknown rune looks like an arrow-shaped T; so maybe it's actually *Nott* – a very plausible word for 'night'. So (e) = Night.
    - • (k) spells *Sol* – strongly reminiscent of our *solar* (not to mention French *soleil* and Spanish *sol*), so (k) = Sun.
- • The second question asks for the Roman-names for the two as-yet unidentified rune-names, which are (b) and (j).
  - o (b) is easy: you can just spell out *Thor* (bearing in mind, of course, that our *th* actually indicates just one sound, so it has just one rune). So (b) = Thor. But just in case you didn't know about Thor, the introduction actually mentions him as in "Thor's day" (i.e. Thursday). Always read the introduction carefully because it often contains important clues.
  - o (j) is equally easy to spell out: *Odin*. But who was Odin? You may have heard of him, but just in case you hadn't, the introduction tells you that he's the same as Wodan, as in "Wodan's day" (or *Wednesday*).
- • The third question is just fun, building on the runes that you already know about. But notice that it includes the Roman-name *Sif*, which contains an *S*. You can see this as confirmation that the rune for S is included in the given word, so it must be the S-like rune at the start of (k).