Introduction: Writing and the Alphabet

ABC

Different writing systems – How did our alphabet arrive?

NB Words included in the glossary (page 177–186) are given in bold type on their first occurrence in the book.

Different Writing Systems

When we write or teach our children to write in English, we use the **alphabetic** system which developed from ancient times through the cultures of the Western world. The alphabetic system, though, is not the only writing system, and some pupils in our schools for whom English is an additional language may well come from cultures where the writing system is of a different nature.

Writing systems can be divided into two main types. First, there are those that represent things by **pictographic** symbols, a bit like the laundry symbols inside our clothes, or notices at airports and other public places. Then there are those that actually represent spoken words, either by symbols that stand for a whole word, or a **morpheme**, a meaningful part of a word; these are called **logographic** systems. Finally, there are those where symbols stand for sounds, called **phonographic** systems (Sampson, 1985). A morpheme may be a word, the root of a word, or a suffix or prefix, or even a syllable that has its own meaning, such as 'un', for instance. The separateness of such units is usually obvious to native speakers and children do not, as a rule, have to learn how to segment the stream of spoken meaning, or **semanticity**. However, there are times when young children have minor difficulties, as when a 5 year-old asked 'How do you spell *smorning?* I've done *the!*', although this is rare.

In a logographic system the stream of sound has been split up into morphemes, but in a phonographic system there is a second splitting of the morphemes into individual sounds; this is a double analysis, called double articulation. As speech is symbolism itself, then in systems which represent spoken words the writing is a further level of symbolism built upon the first, sometimes referred to as second order symbolism. Thus in a phonographic writing system, such as we have in English, not only do we have a second order symbolic system, we also have a double layer of sound analysis represented in the splitting down from morphemes. Acquisition of such skills does not come naturally, and both analysis and synthesis, the splitting and spelling out, or the decoding and encoding generally need to be learned (Downing and Leong, 1982; Bradley and Bryant, 1983).

In both types of system, of course, the repertoire of symbols and the meanings or the sounds they represent have to be learned. However, in a logographic system the repertoire of meaningful units is very large, imposing an enormous learning load. In a phonographic system, once blending and splitting skills have been learned, the load is reduced. If the phonographic system is syllabic, the learning load is still very large, of course, and in ancient times this led to writing being learned only by a scribal class.

Today, whereas some writing systems are **phonological**, others are in logographic form. Where the case is the latter, being literate is usually an attribute of the learned, rather than of the ordinary person. In China the writing system is basically logographic, although there are some phonographic elements. Origins were iconic, that is, pictorial, but these are lost in the mists of time. There are a vast number of symbols to be learned. However, one advantage is that since most symbols are not linked to sounds, all the different Chinese languages, which are distinct and not merely dialects, can use the system with equal ease. In modern global business, though, such a system is a handicap for the use of word processors and computers. In Japan there are two systems, one is a logographic system long ago derived from the Chinese, called *kanji*, while the other is phonetic in nature, a phonological system known as *kana* (Robinson, 1995). Today, an educated Japanese person is supposed to know about 2,000 *kanji*, while a literary individual may have a repertoire of about 5,000. Careers, income and status depend on the mastery of *kanji*, and this often produces extreme stress. Primary school children are expected to learn about 960 *kanji*. On top of this, they must also learn their sounds for *kana*, of which there are two different sets, one formal and one less so. Today there is a third set, with intrusions from the West, called *romaji*, Roman letters. A breakfast cereal packet in Japan may have text written in *kanji*, *kana* and *romaji*. There are difficulties for computer use, of course, which at present is only really possible in *kana*.

How did our alphabet arrive?

Although our language is Indo-European in origin, our alphabetic writing system grew from the Semitic languages of the past in which early writing was developed. At first writing was done on clay tablets, and it is not surprising that it arose in the area of the Middle East known as 'the fertile crescent' where clay was plentiful in the area between the two great rivers of the Tigris and the Euphrates. Early writing grew from pictographic to **syllabic** forms, but later forms were phonographic, and by the middle of the second millennium BC an alphabetic system was being used, with 30 signs. The first appearance of a truly alphabetic system, using letter shapes, began in the second millennium in Sinai, employing a characteristic of Egyptian hieroglyphic writing. Here the symbols of items for the first sound of a spoken word were often used, as if we were to use S to indicate a snake, although their writing was in hieroglyphs. This feature became combined with initials from a Semitic vocabulary, and this was the starting point of the alphabet we use today.