Abjad

An **abjad** (/ˈæbdʒæd/)[1] is a type of writing system in which (in contrast to true alphabets) each symbol or glyph stands for a consonant, in effect leaving it to readers to infer or otherwise supply an appropriate vowel. The term is a neologism introduced in 1990 by Peter T. Daniels.[2] Other terms for the same concept include: **partial phonemic script**, **segmentally linear defective phonographic script**, **consonantary**, **consonant writing** and **consonantal alphabet**.[3]

So-called **impure abjads** represent vowels with either optional diacritics, a limited number of distinct vowel glyphs, or both. The name *abjad* is based on the Arabic alphabet's first (in its original order) four letters — corresponding to a, b, j, d — to replace the more common terms "consonantary" and "consonantal alphabet", in describing the family of scripts classified as "West Semitic".

Contents

Etymology

The name "abjad" (*abjad* أبجد) is derived from pronouncing the first letters of the Arabic alphabet order, in its original order. This ordering matches that of the older Phoenician, Hebrew and Semitic proto-alphabets: specifically, aleph, bet, gimel, dalet.

Terminology

According to the formulations of Peter T. Daniels,[4] abjads differ from alphabets in that only consonants, not vowels, are represented among the basic graphemes. Abjads differ from abugidas, another category defined by Daniels, in that in abjads, the vowel sound is *implied* by phonology, and where vowel marks exist for the system, such as nikkud for Hebrew and ḥarakāt for Arabic, their use is optional and not the dominant (or literate) form. Abugidas mark all vowels (other than the "inherent" vowel) with a diacritic, a minor attachment to the letter, or a standalone glyph. Some abugidas use a special symbol to *suppress* the inherent vowel so that the consonant alone can be properly represented. In a syllabary, a grapheme denotes a complete syllable, that is, either a lone vowel sound or a combination of a vowel sound with one or more consonant sounds.

The antagonism of abjad versus alphabet, as it was formulated by Daniels, has been rejected by some other scholars because abjad is also used as a term not only for the Arabic numeral system but, which is most important in terms of historical grammatology, also as term for the alphabetic device (i.e. letter order) of ancient Northwest Semitic scripts in opposition to the 'south Arabian' order. This caused fatal effects on terminology in general and especially in (ancient) Semitic philology. Also, it suggests that consonantal alphabets, in opposition to, for instance, the Greek alphabet, were not yet true alphabets and not yet entirely complete, lacking something important to be a fully working script system. It has also been objected that, as a set of letters, an alphabet is not the mirror of what should be there in a language from a phonological point of view; rather, it is the data stock of what provides maximum efficiency with least effort from a semantic point of view.[5]

Origins

The first abjad to gain widespread usage was the Phoenician abjad. Unlike other contemporary scripts, such as cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphs, the Phoenician script consisted of only a few dozen symbols. This made the script easy to learn, and seafaring Phoenician merchants took the script throughout the then-known world.

The Phoenician abjad was a radical simplification of phonetic writing, since hieroglyphics required the writer to pick a hieroglyph starting with the same sound that the writer wanted to write in order to write phonetically, much as *man'yōgana* (Chinese characters used solely for phonetic use) was used to represent Japanese phonetically before the invention of kana.

Phoenician gave rise to a number of new writing systems, including the widely used Aramaic abjad and the Greek alphabet. The Greek alphabet evolved into the modern western alphabets, such as Latin and Cyrillic, while Aramaic became the ancestor of many modern abjads and abugidas of Asia.

A specimen of Proto-Sinaitic script containing a phrase which may mean 'to Baalat'. The line running from the upper left to lower right reads *mt l bᶜlt*.

Impure abjads

Impure abjads have characters for some vowels, optional vowel diacritics, or both. The term pure abjad refers to scripts entirely lacking in vowel indicators.[6] However, most modern abjads, such as Arabic, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Pahlavi, are "impure" abjads – that is, they also contain symbols for some of the vowel phonemes, although the said non-diacritic vowel letters are also used to write certain consonants, particularly approximants that sound similar to long vowels. A

"pure" abjad is exemplified (perhaps) by very early forms of ancient Phoenician, though at some point (at least by the 9th century BC) it and most of the contemporary Semitic abjads had begun to overload a few of the consonant symbols with a secondary function as vowel markers, called *matres lectionis*.[7] This practice was at first rare and limited in scope but became increasingly common and more developed in later times.

Al-ʻArabiyya, meaning "Arabic": an example of the Arabic script, which is an impure abjad.

Addition of vowels

In the 9th century BC the Greeks adapted the Phoenician script for use in their own language. The phonetic structure of the Greek language created too many ambiguities when vowels went unrepresented, so the script was modified. They did not need letters for the guttural sounds represented by *aleph*, *he*, *heth* or *ayin*, so these symbols were assigned vocalic values. The letters *waw* and *yod* were also adapted into vowel signs; along with *he*, these were already used as *matres lectionis* in Phoenician. The major innovation of Greek was to dedicate these symbols exclusively and unambiguously to vowel sounds that could be combined arbitrarily with consonants (as opposed to syllabaries such as Linear B which usually have vowel symbols but cannot combine them with consonants to form arbitrary syllables).

Abugidas developed along a slightly different route. The basic consonantal symbol was considered to have an inherent "a" vowel sound. Hooks or short lines attached to various parts of the basic letter modify the vowel. In this way, the South Arabian alphabet evolved into the Ge'ez alphabet between the 5th century BC and the 5th century AD. Similarly, the Brāhmī script developed around the 3rd century BC (from the Aramaic abjad, it has been hypothesized).

The other major family of abugidas, Canadian Aboriginal syllabics, was initially developed in the 1840s by missionary and linguist James Evans for the Cree and Ojibwe languages. Evans used features of Devanagari script and Pitman shorthand to create his initial abugida. Later in the 19th century, other missionaries adapted Evans' system to other Canadian aboriginal languages. Canadian syllabics differ from other abugidas in that the vowel is indicated by rotation of the consonantal symbol, with each vowel having a consistent orientation.

Abjads and the structure of Semitic languages

The abjad form of writing is well-adapted to the morphological structure of the Semitic languages it was developed to write. This is because words in Semitic languages are formed from a root consisting of (usually) three consonants, the vowels being used to indicate inflectional or derived forms. For instance, according to Classical Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic, from the Arabic root ذ ب ح *Dh-B-Ḥ* (to slaughter) can be derived the forms ذَبَحَ *dhabaḥa* (he slaughtered), ذَبَحْتَ *dhabaḥta* (you (masculine singular) slaughtered), يُذَبِّحُ *yudhabbiḥu* (he slaughters), and مَذْبَح *madhbaḥ* (slaughterhouse). In most cases, the absence of full glyphs for vowels makes the common root clearer, allowing readers to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words from familiar roots (especially in conjunction with context clues) and improving word recognition while reading for practiced readers.

By contrast, the Arabic and Hebrew scripts sometimes perform the role of true alphabets rather than abjads when used to write certain Indo-European languages, including Kurdish, Bosnian, and Yiddish.

Comparative chart of Abjads, extinct and extant

Name	In use	Cursive	Direction	# of letters	Matres lectionis	Area of origin	Used by	Languages	Time period (age)	Influenced by	Writing systems influenced
Syriac	yes	yes	right-left	22 consonants	3	Middle East	Church of the East, Syrian Church	Aramaic, Syriac, Assyrian Neo-Aramaic	~ 100 BCE[8]	Aramaic	Nabatean, Palmyran, Mandaic, Parthian, Pahlavi, Sogdian, Avestan and Manichean[8]
Hebrew	yes	as a secondary script	right-left	22 consonants + 5 final letters	4	Middle East	Israelis, Jewish diaspora communities, Second Temple Judea	Hebrew, Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Aramaic, Judeo-Persian, Judeo-Italian, Yiddish, Ladino, many others	2nd century BCE	Paleo-Hebrew, Early Aramaic	
Arabic	yes	yes	right-left	28	3	Middle East and North Africa	Over 400 million people	Arabic, Bosnian, Kashmiri, Malay, Persian, Pashto, Uyghur, Kurdish, Urdu, many others[8]	512 CE[9][8]	Nabataean Aramaic	
Aramaic (Imperial)	no	no	right-left	22	3	Middle East	Achaemenid, Persian, Babylonian, and Assyrian empires	Imperial Aramaic, Hebrew	~ 500 BCE[8]	Phoenician	Late Hebrew, Nabataean, Syriac
Aramaic (Early)	no	no	right-left	22	none	Middle East	Various Semitic Peoples		~ 1000-900 BCE	Phoenician	Hebrew, Imperial Aramaic.[8]
Nabataean	no	no	right-left	22	none	Middle East	Nabataean Kingdom[10]	Nabataean	200 BCE[10]	Aramaic	Arabic
Middle Persian, (Pahlavi)	no	no	right-left	22	3	Middle East	Sassanian Empire	Pahlavi, Middle Persian		Aramaic	Psalter, Avestan[8]
Psalter Pahlavi	no	yes	right-left	21	yes	Northwestern China [8]	Persian Script for Paper Writing[8]		~ 400 CE[11]	Syriac	
Phoenician	no	no	right-left, boustrophedon	22	none	Byblos[8]	Canaanites	Phoenician, Punic, Hebrew	~ 1000-1500 BCE[8]	Proto-Canaanite Alphabet[8]	Punic (variant), Greek, Etruscan, Latin, Arabic and Hebrew
Parthian	no	no	right-left	22	yes	Parthia (modern-day equivalent of Northeastern Iran, Southern Turkmenistan and Northwest Afghanistan)[8]	Parthian & Sassanian periods of Persian Empire[8]	Parthian	~ 200 BCE[8]	Aramaic	
Sabaean	no	no	right-left, boustrophedon	29	none	Southern Arabia (Sheba)	Southern Arabians	Sabaean	~ 500 BCE[8]	Byblos[8]	Ethiopic (Eritrea & Ethiopia)[8]
Punic	no	no	right-left	22	none	Carthage (Tunisia), North Africa, Mediterranean[8]	Punic Culture	Punic, Neo-Punic		Phoenician	
Proto-Sinaitic, Proto-Canaanite	no	no	left-right	24	none	Egypt, Sinai, Canaan	Canaanites	Canaanite	~ 1900-1700 BCE	In conjunction with Egyptian Hieroglyphs	Phoenician, Hebrew
Ugaritic	no	yes	left-right	30	none, 3 characters for gs+vowel	Ugarit (modern-day Northern Syria)	Ugarites	Ugaritic, Hurrian	~ 1400 BCE[8]	Proto-Sinaitic	
South Arabian	no	yes (Zabūr - cursive form of the South	Boustrophedon	29	yes	South-Arabia (Yemen)	D'mt Kingdom	Amharic, Tigrinya, Tigre, Semitic, Cushitic,	900 BCE	Proto-Sinaitic	Ge'ez (Ethiopia and Eritrea)

		Arabian script)						Nilo-Saharan			
Sogdian	no	no (yes in later versions)	right-left, left-right (vertical)	20	3	parts of China (Xinjiang), Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan	Buddhists, Manichaens	Sogdian	~ 400 CE	Syriac	Old Uyghur alphabet[8]
Samaritan	yes (700 people)	no	right-left	22	none	Levant	Samaritans (Nablus and Holon)	Samaritan Aramaic, Samaritan Hebrew	~ 100-0 BCE	Paleo-Hebrew Alphabet	
Tifinagh	yes	no	bottom-top, right-left, left-right,	23	yes	North Africa	Berbers	Berber languages	2nd millennium BC[12]	Phoenician, Arabic	

See also

- Abjad numerals (Arabic alphanumeric code)
- Abugida
- Gematria (Hebrew & English system of alphanumeric code)
- Numerology
- Shorthand (constructed writing systems that are structurally abjads)

References

1. "abjad" (https://oed.com/search?searchType=dictionary&q=abjad). *Oxford English Dictionary* (Online ed.). Oxford University Press. (Subscription or participating institution membership (https://www.oed.com/public/login/loggingin#withyourlibrary) required.)
2. Daniels, P. (1990). Fundamentals of Grammatology (https://www.jstor.org/stable/602899). Journal of the American Oriental Society, 110(4), 727-731. doi:10.2307/602899: "We must recognize that the West Semitic scripts constitute a third fundamental type of script, the kind that denotes individual consonants only. It cannot be subsumed under either of the other terms. A suitable name for this type would be "alephbeth," in honor of its Levantine origin, but this term seems too similar to "alphabet" to be practical; so I propose to call this type an "abjad," *[Footnote: I.e., the alif-ba-jim order familiar from earlier Semitic alphabets, from which the modern order alif-ba-ta-tha is derived by placing together the letters with similar shapes and differing numbers of dots. The abjad is the order in which numerical values are assigned to the letters (as in Hebrew).]* from the Arabic word for the traditional order6 of its script, which (unvocalized) of course falls in this category... There is yet a fourth fundamental type of script, a type recognized over forty years ago by James- Germain Fevrier, called by him the "neosyllabary" (1948, 330), and again by Fred Householder thirty years ago, who called it "pseudo-alphabet" (1959, 382). These are the scripts of Ethiopia and "greater India" that use a basic form for the specific syllable consonant + a particular vowel (in practice always the unmarked a) and modify it to denote the syllables with other vowels or with no vowel. Were it not for this existing term, I would propose maintaining the pattern by calling this type an "abugida," from the Ethiopian word for the auxiliary order of consonants in the signary."
3. Amalia E. Gnanadesikan (2017) Towards a typology of phonemic scripts, Writing Systems Research, 9:1, 14-35, DOI: 10.1080/17586801.2017.1308239 "Daniels (1990, 1996a) proposes the name abjad for these scripts, and this term has gained considerable popularity. Other terms include partial phonemic script (Hill, 1967), segmentally linear defective phonographic script (Faber, 1992), consonantary (Trigger, 2004), consonant writing (Coulmas, 1989) and consonantal alphabet (Gnanadesikan, 2009; Healey, 1990). "
4. Daniels & Bright 1996.
5. Lehmann 2011.
6. Daniels 2013.
7. Lipiński 1994.
8. Ager 2015.
9. Ekhtiar 2011, p. 21.
10. Lo 2012.
11. "PAHLAVI PSALTER – Encyclopaedia Iranica" (http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/pahlavi-psalter). *www.iranicaonline.org*.
12. Franklin, Natalie R.; Strecker, Matthias (5 August 2008). *Rock Art Studies - News of the World Volume 3* (https://books.google.com/books?id=-zBwBwAAQBAJ&pg=PT127). Oxbow Books. p. 127. ISBN 9781782975885.

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External links

The Science of Arabic Letters, Abjad and Geometry, by Jorge Lupin (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4wKD0uN0NQ)