

Tifinagh and consonantal writing systems

Eugene Buckley

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Linguistic setting



Afro-Asiatic

- A large family of languages across North Africa and the Middle East.
- Consonantal-root morphology, famous especially from Semitic.

Berber

- One branch of Afro-Asiatic.
- Multiple languages across the Maghreb (western North Africa).
- Tuareg in a large region of the Sahara and Sahel.



Tuareg

- A semi-nomadic people of the western Sahara and neighboring Sahel.
- Local names reflect historical sound changes.
 - **Tamahag**, Tahaqart
 - **Algeria, Libya, Niger** — 62,000 speakers
 - **Tamajaq**, Tawallammat
 - **Niger, Mali** — 640,000 speakers
 - **Tamajeq**, Tayart
 - **Niger** — 250,000 speakers
 - **Tamashaq**
 - **Mali, Burkina Faso** — 281,200 speakers
- The language is sometimes collectively called Tamashek / Tamasheq.
- The point of interest here is the use of the traditional Tifinagh script by the Tuareg to write their language.



References

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Scripts

Libyco-Berber (Numidian)

- An ancient script of disputed origin.
 - Most likely from Phoenician, perhaps via Iberia.
 - Mainly attested in Algeria and Tunisia.
- Rock inscriptions often difficult to date.
 - May have originated by the 6th century BCE, or even earlier.
- Only consonants are represented, to the extent the texts are understood.
 - E.g., Punic names ʔnkn, ʔsyn, ʔrʔ = V-initial Libyco-Berber nkn, syn, rʔ.



gwytt·mdn·bwmʔmt·z,ym
hyhz,rt·z,bmn

(written from the bottom up)

Oukaimeden, Morocco
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Traditional Tifinagh

- Descended from Libyco-Berber, through long period of minimal attestation.
 - Some letters differ graphically or in their phonetic value.
 - In Niger, also called *Shifinagh*.
- Used today by the Tuaregs mainly for symbolic or playful purposes.
- Only consonants are written, except for many word-final vowels.

In this photo, the city name *Kidal* (in Mali) is written kdl from left to right.



Neo-Tifinagh

- A recently proposed, standardized version of the script with vowel letters.
 - Structurally a simple alphabet, not an abjad.
- Limited use in Morocco and Algeria for Northern Berber.

At right, Tifinagh written in this alphabet, with vowel letters i and a.

ⵜⴰⵎⴰⵙⴰⵛⴰⵏⵜ

Typology!

The Semitic abjad

- An *abjad* is a writing system that represents just (or mainly) consonants!
 - The West Semitic script family, ultimately inspired by Egyptian!
- Phoenician is a pure form, representing only consonants!
 - *katt!* 'I was' written = kt.!
- Hebrew, like most abjads, writes some vowels!
 - The otherwise consonantal letters v h as *matres lectionis!*
 - *l!/#\$* 'tablets' historically *!#\$ %& \$ iwkt. !&# \$!mat. !&#&\$wkt!*

A syllabary?

- Gelb (1963): writing systems evolve unidirectionally over time!
 - Logographic > syllabic > alphabetic!
 - Cannot skip a step, or go in reverse!
- West Semitic is derived from Egyptian consonantal signs!
 - Egyptian phonograms < logograms, therefore must be syllabic!
 - Semitic yielded the Greek alphabet (syllabic > alphabetic)!
- Under this view, the West Semitic script is a syllabary!
 - CV signs in which the vowel is indeterminate, and can be zero!
- Hebrew *\$' = %&#&\$three!*
 - As a consonantal alphabet (abjad): " !
 - As a syllabary with unmarked vowels: " *x " (" *j*o!)
- *Matreshave* to be treated as phonetic complement to syllabic sign!

Syllable structure!

- Partly this works because (ancient) Semitic syllables all begin with C.V!
 - Every syllable therefore has at least one consonant, and letter!
- Many have rejected the syllabic analysis (Daniels 2000)!
 - Complications such as this needed to resolve contradictions!
- But a compromise position (Swiggers 1984)!
 - A letter denotes a consonant, but STANDS for a syllable!
- True even in borrowings of a script to languages with V-initial syllables!
 - Adaptations of Arabic: initial *alif* occurs in vowel-initial words!
 - Persian *ædab* 'custom' written *!# = \$db!*
 - Malay *mas* 'gold' written *\$%#& sms!*
 - A letter therefore still STANDS for that syllable!
- But in Tifinagh no such marker exists!
 - An important proof of the abjad as a true segmental system!

Tifinagh writing!

! "#\$%&'&!

w nk fdd w tnt!
awa nk fidudu tinnat "
this (is) me Fedudu saying!

'() *\$+!, '%()*-!.

hl!# "f sw y hd l!#b al!
hullfin Sif Sivi nid !el!\$aba

I.great.there.the.chief send.me here.the.clothing!

Letter from Cohen (1968) analysis of first line

- Initial, internal, and some final vowels are omitted!
 - This results in unrepresented initial syllables: note w for *awa* 'this'!
 - Same is true in Lybico-Berber!
 - In more limited way, also found in Orkhon (Old Turkish) runes!
- Many final vowels are written by special sign, or y w for *i u!*
 - Notably, these do not function to represent a syllable, just the V of CV.

Complex linguistic structure!

- Tifinagh mainly represents consonants, but also some vowels word-finally!
 - Already the constituents C, V, and Word are implicated!
- Syllables are not directly represented. More examples of unwritten initial V!
 - Singular *ʕakit* 'tent' as *#&ekt*; plural *!haktan* as *#& hktn!*
 - Infinitive *st* 'to hear' as + (s! : impf. hab. *sall!* 'I hear' as +0) *s!f!*
- But syllabification does matter in when a segment is C or V!
 - Vowel in *in/a* 'he killed': *!nfa* (Hartouze 1896)!
 - Glide in *als wa yn/a* 'the man he killed': *!s (+!, !)*. Is w ynfa!
- Word-internal vowels are not directly written, but they play another role!
 - Ligatures are used for certain adjacent consonants. (Priest, et al. 2008)!
 - *!nbal* 'the buried' as *n!b: tas!q* 'song' as *ts!#!t*
 - Loanword *fanta* 'Fanta' as *\$!*, *n!#e* (Aghali-Zakara 1994)!
- Unwritten V prevents the use of a ligature in CVC!
 - *anabal* 'burial' as *nbl : base!q* 'infection' as *tstq*
 - Loanword *limo nat* 'lemonade' as *(!&!m!nt*!
 - Some writers may not strictly observe this practice. (Prasse 1972)
- The rich constituent structure of spoken language provides many categories that can play a role in writing systems!
 - The syllable is decidedly less important in Tifinagh!
 - Swiggers' compromise reflects a fact of Semitic syllables!
 - Not an inherent property of an abjad!