Tifinagh and consonantal writing systems
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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.
- Tamajaq: 45,000 speakers
- Tamaqeq: 62,000 speakers
- Tawargha: 19,000 speakers
- Tamasheq: 10,000 speakers
- High: 485,000 speakers
- Low: 211,000 speakers
- The language is sometimes collectively called Tamazight / Tamasheq.
- The point of interest here is the use of the traditional Tifinagh script by the Tuareg to write their language.

Libya–Berber (Numidian)
- Descended from Libyan–Berber, through long period of minimal attestation.
- Some letters reflect graphically or in their phonetic value.
- In Niger, also called Shftiqh, used today by the Tuaregs mainly for symbolic or playful purposes.
- Only consonants are written, except for many word-final vowels.

Traditional Tifinagh
- In this photo, the city name Khartoum is written left to right.

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

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.
- Hebrew, like most abjads, writes some vowels.
- The other consonant scripts are w as an index locant.
- Tifinagh (Latin) historically 1953 as Semitic, 1979 (Cohen), 1997 Rome

A syllabary?
- Gehr (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 indeterminable, and can be zero.
- Hebrew alphabet = Semitic.
- As a consonantal alphabet (abjad): called.
- As a syllabary with unmarked vowels: DIFN (➔ SYLL)
- Mutes have to be treated as phonetic complements to syllabic sign.

Syllable structure
- Party this works because (ancient) Semitic syllables all begin with C.
- Some writers offer syllabic representation of syllables in consonantal systems.
- Many have rejected the syllabic analysis (Daniels 2000).
- Complications such as needed to resolve complications.
- But a compromise position (Swiggers 1984).
- The letter denotes a consonant, but从来不 marks a syllable.
- True even in borrowings of a script to languages with syllable-initial syllables.
- Adaptations of Arabic: initial avh in vowel-initial words.
- Persico araba: “barn” written wff = 3mm.
- Malay aman “gold” written msw = 3s2.
- A letter therefore still crosses over to syllable.
- But in Tifinagh no such markers exist.
- An important proof of the abjad as a true segmental system.

Scripts

Libyan–Berber
- An ancient script of disputed origin.
- Most likely from Phoenician, perhaps via Berber.
- 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 Rham, Rhaem, Rhaem = variant Libyan–Berber Rham, Rham, Rhaem.
- W may be the same, but it appears here.

References


Tifinagh writing

Modern Tifinagh
- “Afrikansk” writing system.
- Uses alphabet letters.
- Some letters may not strictly observe this practice.
- The syllable is clearly less important in Tifinagh.
- Some writers may not strict observe this practice.
- The rich consonantal structure of spoken language provides many categories that can play a role in writing systems.
- The syllable is clearly less important in Tifinagh.
- Some writers may not strictly observe this practice.

Complex linguistic structure
- Tifinagh mainly represents consonants, but also some vowel sound-finally.
- Already the consonants C, V, and W are implicated.
- Syllables are not directly represented. More examples of unwritten initial V:
- Singular should “henv” as 4 + 6: plural should “hovn” as 6 + 6n.
- Infinitive should “infn” as D as: imph hab “infn” as D 6
- But syllabification does matter in whether a segment is C or V.
- Vowel in “africa” is not written E, etc.
- Gide in “africa” is “africa” as D 6 6E.
- Word–internal vowels are not directly written, but they play another role.
- Ligatures are used for certain segmental systems.
- “Henv” should be “henv” as D 6 6n.
- Loewenthal “Yenta” as D 6 6E.
- Some writers may not strictly observe this practice.
- The rich consonantal structure of spoken language provides many categories that can play a role in writing systems.
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