

SHIFTING SCRIPTS

Throughout history, people have created different writing systems that correspond to the peculiarities of each language. And these scripts have evolved in the process. How exactly can no longer be determined these days, as this evolution generally ended millennia

ago. One exception, however, is the West African Vai script, which did not come into being until the 1830s. Its well-documented development provides researchers with insights into the evolution of scripts.

WRITING SYSTEMS

Different scripts around the world can roughly be divided into three systems – although there are also mixed systems.

Letter-based scripts are divided into alphabetic scripts, such as Greek, Latin, or Cyrillic, and consonant scripts, such as Arabic, in which vowels are not represented.

With syllabic scripts, the individual characters (graphemes) usually stand for several letters, for example, a combination of consonant and vowel.

In logographic scripts, each character has a meaning, but does not usually represent a whole concept. To represent concepts, characters are combined. In Chinese, there are often combinations of one or more symbols of meaning (pictograms) and a character that also includes pronunciation (phonogram).

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Letter-based script

Arabic
كَلِمَة

[kalima]
word, speech

Greek
λόγος

[ˈlɔɡos]
word, reason

Syllabic script

Japanese (Hiragana)
こんにちは

[ko-n-ni-chi-ha]
hello

Vai
𞎎𞎏𞎐

[ɓɛ-ɛ-na]
good

Logographic script

Chinese
日

[rì]
sun

青

[qīng]
blue-green

晴

[qíng]
in combination:
clear, bright

Mixture of pictogram (left) and phonogram (right)

DEVELOPMENT OF THE ALPHABET

Protosinaitic, the oldest known alphabetic script, can be traced back to hieroglyphics. The Phoenician script represents a further stage of development, from which, among other things, the Greek script developed. However, it is no longer possible to trace exactly which changes the individual letters underwent. Presumably, characters were simplified over time to make writing easier, but only to the extent that they can still be easily distinguished for reading.

Protosinaitic

from 1700 B.C.

alp (ox)

maym (water)

kap (palm of the hand)

Phoenician

from 1100 B.C.

?alf

mēm

kaf

Greek

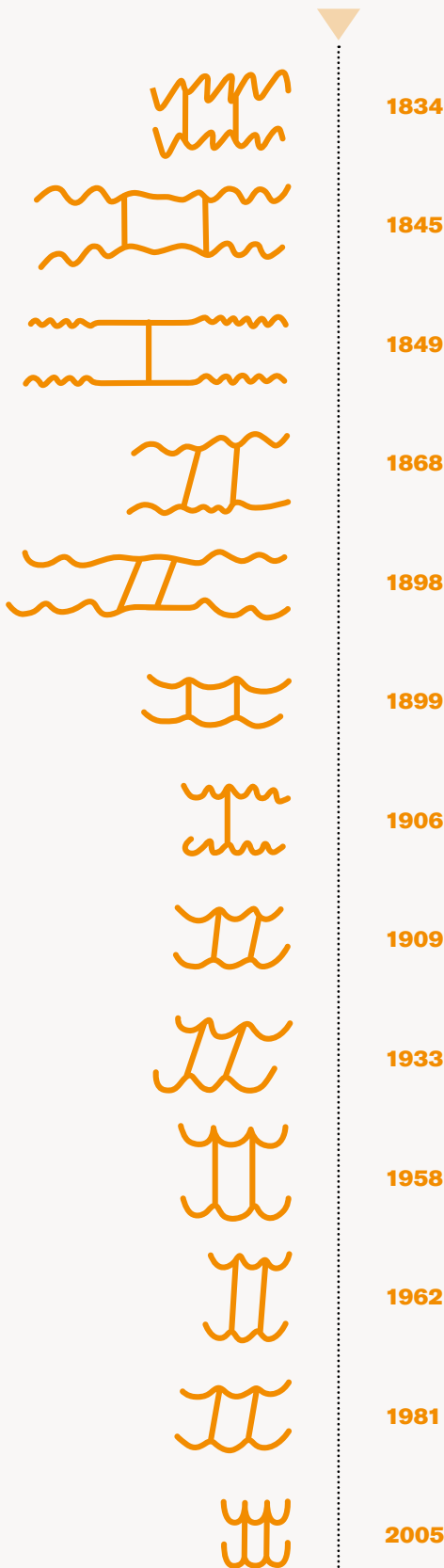
from 800 B.C.

alpha

my

kappa

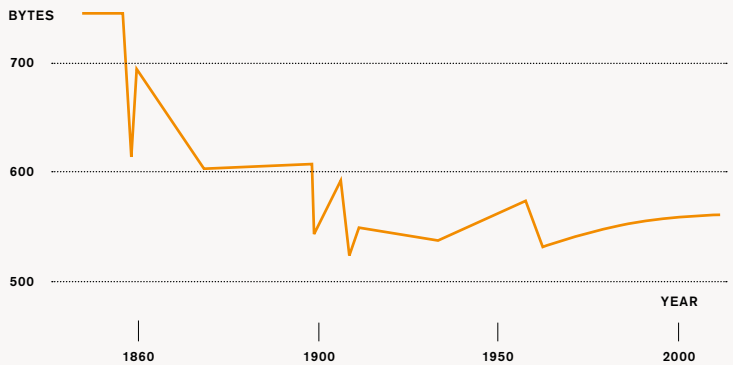
**THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHARACTER <GA>
IN THE VAI SCRIPT**



THE VAI SCRIPT

This syllabic script with around 200 graphemes (script elements) was developed by illiterate people in Liberia from the 1830s onwards. Thanks to a large number of documents, the script's evolution from its beginnings to its standardization as Unicode in 2005 is well documented. An international research team, including Olivier Morin, Research Group Leader at the Max Planck Institute for Geoanthropology, has analyzed the changes in the characters with mathematical models. From this, it can be concluded that the individual character elements do indeed become simpler over time, as has long been suspected.

THE CHANGING COMPLEXITY OF THE CHARACTER <GA> 



Descriptive complexity, as measured by the size of the image file in zip format, has decreased significantly over time.