

This paper is concerned with the names given to the characters of writing systems, and specifically letters in alphabetical systems. Where previous studies of letternames have essentially been diachronic (eg. on their emergence in Latin, Gordon 1973), or functional (eg. on their rôle in reading and writing pedagogy, Ellefson et al. 2009), no study of the epistemological nature of these objects has been undertaken. Considerable confusion surrounds their status, compounded by the fact that in many cases (eg. English, French), they have no stable phonetically-based graphical form, their phonetic form (eg /bi:/) having graphical forms (<b, B>) which create a sign which is graphological, but also iconic.

Fundamentally character names are restricted to phonetic writing systems. This restriction reflects the fact that the characters of syllabaries and graphologies are multiphonemic, articulatable phonetic forms. Hence the impossible articulation of /b/ explains the presence of a supporting vowel (/bi:, be/ etc), or else the adoption of a lexico-metonymical term (beta, bravo). It follows that the absence of specific naming in syllabaries and graphologies reflects the avoidance of tautology, since a *de facto* iconic name exists. For syllabaries, this is the phonetic identity of the given syllable; in some cases (e.g. Japanese kana) individual syllables have no semantic value other than the grapheme itself, precluding ambiguity. In graphologies the name will be coterminous with the lexeme represented singly by the character. This potential ambiguity explains the existence of marginal examples of character-names in Chinese: the radical numbering system, iconic names for glyphs (疒, known as 病字旁, ‘character-病 side’ as it occurs on the left side of this character), and the practices of hand-tracing (disambiguation through iconic tracing of a character in the palm).

Letternames are subject to variation. One may distinguish a *normative* set from a *pedagogical* set used in reading instruction (/a, bə, kə/), and *lexico-metonymical* sets used in specific domains, either *in absentia* (alfa, bravo) or *in praesentia* (A for apple). The emergence of competing sets results from systemic insufficiencies in the normative set. For instance, English /bi:/ and /pi:/ are only distinguished minimally by voicing. As a result the normative set is inadequate in situations of auditory interference (telecommunication), and a metonymical name featuring the letter as initial is adopted: *bravo* and *papa*. Similar processes lead to the adoption of disambiguating sets based on common or proper nouns (A for apple; P for Peter).

While the principal rôle of letternames is in spelling-out, they are also crucial parts of reading and writing acquisition, and of acronymy. The paper concludes by looking at how their formal properties impact on these roles. In acquisition their monosyllabic nature may lead to « syllabic spelling » in children (eg. *tpot* for *teapot*) (Treiman and Tincoff 1997), while their rôle in acronymy has given rise to metalinguistic language play (Pires 2007).

References

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