Exercises on writing systems
May 5, 2017

These exercises will be due at the beginning of class on Wednesday, May 10.

1. For the sake of this exercise, imagine a language (let’s call it “Anachronese”) with the same phonological system as contemporary American English and an appropriate subset of its lexicon, but spoken in 800 B.C. and lacking any writing system. Could you adapt the Phoenician alphabet shown in the left-hand columns of Figure 14.14 (sixth edition: Figure 16.12) to serve as a writing system for Anachronese? What changes or extensions would you need to make?

   Note that the Phoenician alphabet contains only consonants and includes symbols for several sounds that are not phonemes in Anachronese, specifically, the pharyngeal fricatives [h] and [ɣ], the unvoiced uvular stop [q], and the velarized or pharyngealized consonants [s̚] and [t̚].

   The Phoenicians used no punctuation marks, separated words with centered dots rather than spaces, and wrote from right to left. You might also consider whether and how to adapt these conventions to Anachronese.

2. One perceived weakness of the writing system that we normally use for English is that, although we can use the punctuation mark at the end of a sentence to indicate what kind of a speech act the speaker is performing, there are only three possibilities: making a statement, asking a question, or exclaiming (full stop, question mark, or exclamation point). What other kinds of speech acts might it be useful to indicate with explicit punctuation marks? What would be the advantages and disadvantages of inventing new, special characters to indicate speech acts of these kinds?

3. One writing-related act that we and our assistive technologies carry out much more frequently in the twenty-first century than in any preceding one is the operation of sorting: arranging written records in an order that makes it easier to find a single record among a large number of similar records. What is the effect of the frequent need to sort written records quickly, efficiently, and accurately on the selection and use of a particular writing system for creating and maintaining records?