

# Genesis, visual attributes and contemporary communication features of the alphabet

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# GENESIS, VISUAL ATTRIBUTES AND CONTEMPORARY COMMUNICATION FEATURES OF THE ALPHABET

## ABSTRACT

Throughout 5,000 years of human literacy, the alphabet system has developed from pictograms and ideograms to the contemporary system of Latin letters. The simplification of primary pictograms and their transformation to ideograms followed the major goal of written communication – to transmit thoughts and ideas. Besides, written communication has enabled preservation of knowledge, and that has generated the expansion of information and its availability today. The high speed of gathering written information, as well as its superabundance, calls for rethinking of semiotic features of Latin letters as the basic units of written communication in the Western world, especially in terms of marketing communication and its effectiveness. The written expression is the major tool of branding and getting closer to target market segments. Social development influences the development of communication, which is visible through numerous brands and signs, i.e. symbols that make products and companies recognizable in the market. The distinct sign forms of the alphabet are used to suggest the story of a brand, product or service. A constituent element of its comprehension is conscious or unconscious knowledge drawn from different sources in the environment. The history of human literacy, the development of each particular letter, the communication rules of the contemporary marketplace, the impact of brands and information superabundance make up the basis for further research into communication features of the alphabet, semantics of written forms and their redefinition in the context of effective marketing communication.

**Key words:** alphabet, genesis of script, visual designation, marketing communication, brand

## 1. Introduction

A range of communication methods were invented in different eras and in different geographic entities (Frances, 1906). Representing objects by simplified images is the beginning of writing (Frances, 1906) and the moment in which knowledge is no longer transmitted only orally, thus enabling its accumulation and preservation (Shad et al. 2002). Scholars from different disciplines (Clodd, 1904; Frances, 1906) feel that the alphabet is the greatest invention of humankind. Thus, the theoretician Clodd (1904) states that the alphabet's influence on people is inimitable by any other invention. Jermain (1906) notes that the history of our alphabet is the golden thread connecting it to the long story of human civilisation. The alphabet is the greatest achievement of the human mind and the ultimate intellectual breakthrough. Boardley (2010) states that the alphabet was an innovation, rather than a spontaneous product of the wonder of language. Its genesis resulted from the articulation of a human need to standardize the communication symbols and to effectively spread and preserve this standard.

The main purpose of this paper is to explain the genesis of the modern script and to discuss different challenges and limitations related to the use of modern alphabet in marketing communication. The assumption here is that a script is a means of communication through space and time, without which many technological breakthroughs would not be possible (Clair, 1999), and the basis of a writing system is the *repetition of agreed forms in which every form has an unequivocal meaning*. As in today's society there is a need for communicating different meanings to a great number of people in a short amount of time, this paper establishes the importance of knowing these signs as a prerequisite for expanding the existing ways of communication.

Written expressions are today the most intensive and subtlest form of marketing communication aimed at creating the desired associations and experiences in target market groups. According to Tavassoli and Han (2001), the script is the fundamental and the commonest identity and identification component of marketing communication.

## 2. Communication of civilisations of the ancient world

The oldest man-made writings date back to the time when people were cave dwellers. Lascaux cave paintings in France, which are tens of thousands years old (30 000 and 12 000 years B.C.), visually communicate animal forms, but are not communication signs as they do not contribute to a codified system of standardized symbols. They are not used in a repeated standardized way that would denote the same concept, and are not considered to be a systematized way of writing, but simply images.

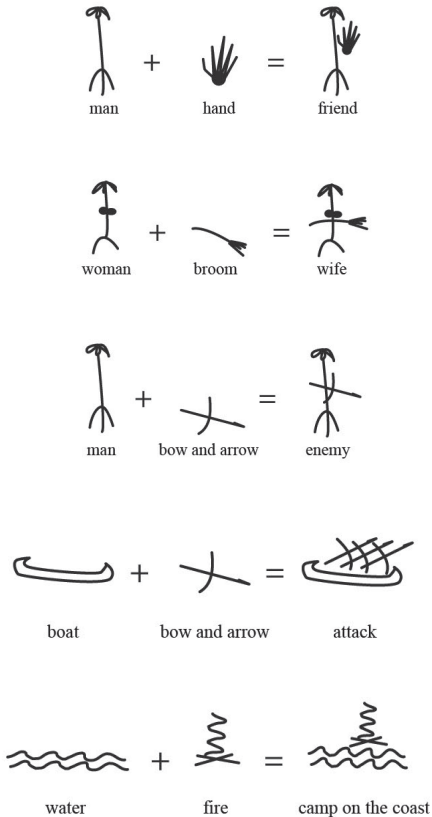
Early pictorial scripts used *pictograms* – simplified drawings of the objects represented. Pictograms are suitable as signs for people, animals, places and objects, but are not efficient for communicating complex and abstract ideas, emotions and actions (Clair, 1999).

Unlike pictograms, *ideograms* express ideas. They are formed by combining two or more pictograms (Figure 1). Thus, for example, a pictogram of woman and a pictogram of child can be combined to represent the idea of *pregnancy* although they are not a literal interpretation of a pregnant woman (Clair, 1999). In other words, ideograms are pictograms that indicate a meaning different from the one originally intended by a particular pictogram (Figure 3).

Figure 1 shows some of the ways pictograms are changed into ideograms. Each pictogram that has acquired additional meanings is changed into an ideogram. For example, the pictogram of *hand* will turn into an ideogram if additional symbols are associated with the initial pictogram, symbols that transmit the ideas of *greeting*, *offering* or *taking*. Even though pictograms and ideograms are the origin of writing, wider use became possible only after their simplification. The first precondition of written communication would be simple images, recognizable and easily interpretable by the majority of population, i.e. users of the writing system (Figure 2 and Figure 3) (Clair, 1999).

Ideograms marked the beginnings of the written language. As there is an element of abstraction, ideograms often require interpretation and translation. Every culture has developed a specific set of ideograms that reflect its spiritual beliefs, political, economic and social structure (Clair, 1999).

**Figure 1. Ideograms – combinations of pictograms aimed at communicating complex ideas and messages**

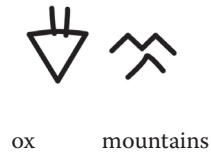


Source: Clair, K., *A Typographic Workbook: A Primer to History, Techniques, and Artistry* (1999)

### 2.1. Sophisticated writing systems

Sophisticated writing systems were found to have developed in ancient Sumer, Egypt, China and India. The Sumerian cuneiform script emerged around 3200 B.C., whereas Egyptian hieroglyphs began to be used around 3000 B.C. The first versions of the Chinese writing system can be traced back to 1800 B.C., with Sanskrit appearing around 1500 B.C. Thus enriched by their writing systems, these cultures experienced accelerated development of complex socio-political organisations, wrote down legal norms, history, literature, philosophical legacy, and the body of knowledge related to medicine, mathematics and theology.

**Figure 2. Simple pictograms, representative in their shape**



Source: Clair, K., *A Typographic Workbook: A Primer to History, Techniques, and Artistry* (1999)

**Figure 3. A combination of two pictograms; ox and mountains resulting in the final ideogram with the meaning wild ox**



Source: Clair, K., *A Typographic Workbook: A Primer to History, Techniques, and Artistry* (1999)

The Egyptian concept of writing spread through the Sinai and Canaan region between 1700 and 1500 B.C. (Obenga, 1999). With frequent trading, the Egyptian concept of writing became also the major influence in the emergence of the Phoenician alphabet (around 1500 B.C.). To facilitate their business transactions, the Phoenicians did away with a certain number of signs and invented the alphabet as a trading instrument. This system, initially intended for speedy writing and reading of trading records, soon became widely accepted due to its simplicity in comparison to pictograms, and through later modifications, it acquired constancy of use. (Clodd, 1904).

The Phoenician alphabet comprised 22 signs. It was used to spread literacy, as well as to note down content from other languages that were still only oral. Through the increase in translation, the Phoenician alphabet became crucial for intercultural communication, and as it grew in popularity, both the Phoenician alphabet and language expanded rapidly in the region (Clair, 1999).

Proto-cuneiform script, one of the earliest examples of writing, is a form of cuneiform script and an interim form of the earliest pictographic writing and its later, more abstract forms. Most clay tablets that were found actually contain secular content, with lists of taxes and commercial transactions among other things. In addition to business-related items, clay tablets contain other content, such as adventures of Gilgamesh and his companion Enkidu (Clodd, 1904). Since there was no standard as to the direction of writing, the signs of cuneiform script were frequently rotated to adjust to the direction of writing, which could be confusing. Cuneiform script ceases to be used at the beginning of the Iron Age in the 12th century B.C. (Naveh, 2004).

## 2.2. The art of writing: from ideograms to phonetics

The development of writing took place in two phases: the ideographic phase and the phonetic one (Frances, 1906). In the former phase of writing, signs, symbols and pictures suggested the idea of an object without stating its name. In that way, symbols written in a sign message could be recognized and interpreted regardless of the language or the country, or nation, of origin. As this kind of written communication did not allow for construction of sentences or stating of names, the development of alphabet brought about the next phase, i.e. phonetics, in which sound representation is enabled by using words (Frances, 1906). It became obvious that a language in which a picture or a grapheme represents a thing or an idea has a distinct advantage: even when spoken language had a range of varieties, the written form in its unified code remained the same, thus being understandable by all the participants in communication (Boardley, 2010).

In the ideographic era it was possible for pictures of objects (or for symbols of ideas) to keep an accepted and permanent sound sign in any language.

In contrast, phonetics was from the very beginning struggling with homophones – the phenomenon in which a relatively reduced number of sounds denote a larger number of notions. Confusing homophones – signs for sounds – were not letters or signs of an alphabet, but rather pictures of objects used to express a sound. The first stage in the development of phonetics is often called the *rebus* phase by philologists (Latin *rebus* means *by things* – pictures that represent words or parts of words) (Jermain, 1906). An example of this method of sound representation is the sentence in a rebus form *I can sail round the globe*<sup>1</sup> (Figure 4).

Figure 4. The rebus form for *I can sail round the globe*



Source: Frances, J. D., *In the path of the alphabet* (1906)

In contrast to the era of ideograms where pictures of objects represented those very objects, Figure 4 indicates that pictures of objects represent sounds. This way of writing made it possible to use signs and/or symbols to denote a whole word. This feature was sufficient for a monosyllabic<sup>2</sup> language, however, the needs of polysyllabic<sup>3</sup> languages required further evolution of phonetics, and signs began to be used to denote separate articulation of elements that make up words (Frances, 1906).

Letters in the modern-day alphabet also imply the reading of symbols. Namely, the letters in contemporary alphabets represent sounds, but their varied representation (Figure 5), so vivid in the different design of letters, is reminiscent of logotypes of famous brands. In other words, reading and interpretation of pictures/signs depends on the reader's knowledge, i.e. on his/her information base as well as the things he/she managed to understand based on his/her own perception. This is why it is possible to have multi-layered, different interpretations of the same sign string, and different readers of Figure 5 might see in it a story, a brand, a product or an item.

Figure 5. Corporate alphabet



Source: Andrews K., *Corporate alphabet*, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/91806538@N00/2314668364/>, (2008)

### 3. The development of script

As shown in the previous chapter, the ideographic phase was followed by the phonetic phase. It should be noted that the phonetic phase of writing was still ambiguous in representing vowels (Frances, 1906). The West Semitic script with symbols reduced to consonant groups made reading easier, and was thus the first major step in the spreading of literacy. Systematic insertion of vowels was the next step in the development of script and the modern-day alphabet (Naveh, 2004).

#### 3.1. The beginnings of the modern alphabet

A key factor leading to the invention of script was the need to find a method of communication that would allow transfer of information outside of hailing distance. Initially, all scripts had a large number of signs, making them difficult to learn; such knowledge was thus limited to a small number of priests and dignitaries (Naveh, 2004).

Over time, the number of signs was gradually reduced. The beginnings of the alphabet are traced back to the land of Canaan in the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C. (Naveh, 2004), and the Proto-Canaanite script is generally considered to be the origin of all alphabets. The earliest evidence of the Proto-Canaanite script, for example Wadi el-Hol inscriptions, confirms the Egyptian origin of the Canaanite alphabet (Naveh, 2004; Yardeni, 2003). The Proto-Canaanite script had begun with 27 to 30 signs, whereas in the 13<sup>th</sup> century B.C. the number of signs was reduced to 22 (Naveh, 2004). This writing system was taken over by West Semites, and then transferred to Ancient Greece, from where the alphabet spread to other parts of what is today called Western civilisation (Naveh, 2004).

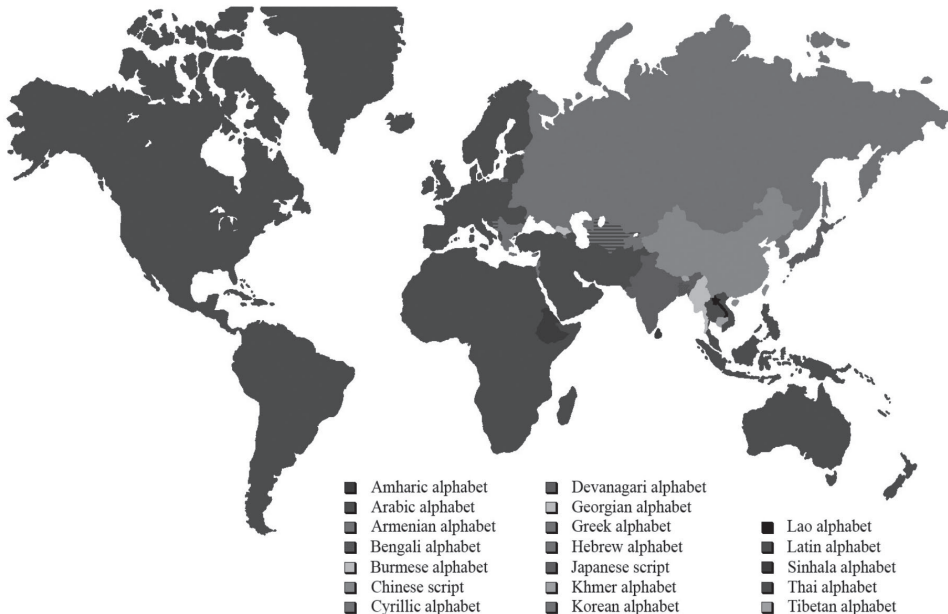
Proto-Canaanite texts are written either vertically or horizontally, or as boustrophedon<sup>4</sup>. The 11<sup>th</sup> century changes that brought about linear forms and stabilisation of the direction of writing from right to left were also the cause to change the name from Proto-Canaanite to Phoenician script (Naveh, 2004). The main branches of the Proto-Canaanite script are the Phoenician and Greek scripts. Two scripts developed from the Phoenician script – ancient Hebrew and Aramaic, whereas all the European scripts were derived from the Greek alphabet (Naveh, 2004).

Greek adaptation of the Canaanite alphabet had begun already around 1100 B.C., but this writing system truly flourished only after the Romans had adopted it indirectly through Etruscans. With Roman innovations and adaptations the Latin alphabet came into being, which is today the prevalent writing system among the European nations (Yardeni, 2003). At the time when Latin characters started to take shape, its creators had already been centuries away from the Canaanite alphabet and its first images. This is one of the reasons preventing us from fully recognizing the origin of scripts and initial meanings of signs in use today. Still, there are things that are known, such as the basic meanings of certain basic signs in the Canaanite script. In that script, the word for head was *ra sh*, and the word for water was *may* or *maym*. An ox was called *alluf* or *alf*, a house was *bayt*, and a kind of boomerang was *gaml*. These Canaanite words with slight variations have survived in the names and the phonetics of today's alphabet letters; however, their original meanings have been completely lost (Yardeni, 2003).

The word *alphabet* in English is derived from the Latin *alphabetum*, which originates from the Ancient Greek word *Ἀλφάβητος* (*alphabetos*) – alpha and beta<sup>5</sup> – the first two letters of the Greek alphabet (Diringer and Olson, 2012). The term *alphabet* was used to mean a limited number of letters put in a certain sequence where individual value plays no part in defining the order of letters (Naveh, 2004). Although the Latin script is the most pervasive writing system today, there are dozens of other scripts currently in use, consisting mostly of lines.

Examples of such scripts are the Amharic alphabet, Arabic alphabet, Armenian alphabet, Bengali alphabet, Burmese alphabet, Cyrillic alphabet, Devanagari alphabet, Greek alphabet, Georgian alphabet, Hebrew alphabet, Japanese script, Khmer alphabet, Chinese script, Korean alphabet, Lao alphabet, Latin alphabet, Sinhala alphabet, Thai alphabet, Tibetan alphabet, to mention just a few (Ager, 2012).

Figure 6. The distribution of the Latin script across the world



Source: McGregor, C. H., *The world's scripts and alphabets, World standards*, <http://users.telenet.be/worldstandards/the%20world's%20scripts%20and%20alphabets.htm>, (2012)




Figure 6 shows the distribution of the Latin alphabet and several other most widely used alphabets in the world.

The alphabet has spread on all continents except the Antarctic, with Latin characters being the most widely used writing system today (Haarmann, 2004).

#### 4. How modern letters acquired their shapes

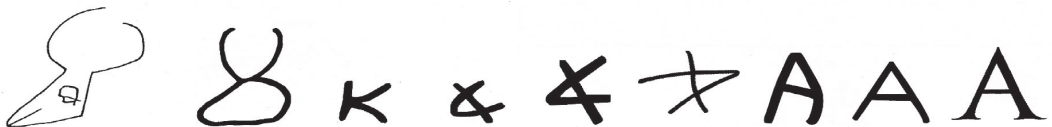
Each phase in the development of a script of different nations and cultures included some preliminary stages (Frances, 1906) involving long-lasting selection of ideograms, phonograms<sup>6</sup> and signs to represent particular sounds. The transition from pictorial scripts to phonetic alphabets led to the reduction of signs, and thus faster and more efficient use of writing space. For example, instead of drawing the entire ox head (the meaning of the letter A, i.e. *alefa*), in time, people began to draw only its outline (Figure 7) (Danesi, 2004).

Eventually, writing became faster, making it possible to record more and more content. Consequently, the shapes evolved and were further simplified. Over time, the strokes were separating and shifting; they were becoming shorter, longer or disappeared; they curved and connected with the next stroke. This caused the change, i.e. resulted in different shapes of a sign representing the same image (Yardeni, 2003).

Some letters of the Phoenician alphabet can be traced back to pictographic symbols<sup>7</sup>. Alphabetical sounds were initially represented by pictures of natural objects whose names began with these sounds. Phoneme A, for instance, was represented with an outline of the head of a bull, having in mind that *aleph*, a Semitic term for ox, began with that very phoneme (Sophocles, 1854). A pictogram for the phoneme A is the head of an ox , which symbolizes the strength and power of this animal, but also a leader. *Aleph* corresponds to the Greek *alpha* and Arabic *aleph*. The root *aleph* is an adapted version of the original root *el*, which means strength, power and leader. Each of these meanings is connected with the meaning of the pictogram . Furthermore, the phoneme I denotes a shepherd's staff and represents authority. These two pictograms placed next to one another denote *strong authority*. The concept of an ox and shepherd's staff in the word  had been transferred to the modern era as the sceptre and the crown of the monarch, a nation's leader. Put together (shepherd's staff and the horns of an ox) denote both authority and power (Northington, 2009).

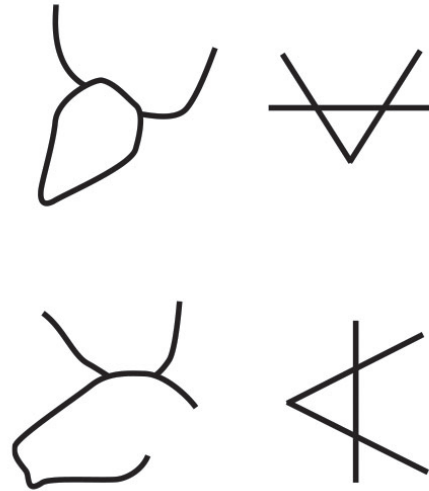
*Aleph* originally denoted the word ox and then later it was reduced to denote the first sound, i.e. the vowel A in the word *aleph*. The Phoenicians took the meaning of the name *aleph* and used its simplified form in their alphabet (Figure 8).

Figure 7. The development of the letter A



Source: Sack, D., *Letter Perfect, The Marvelous History of our Alphabet from A to Z* (2003)

Figure 8. Stylized ox head



Source: Danesi, M., *X Marks the Spot: The Power of Sign-Making and Sign-Use in Today's World* (2004)

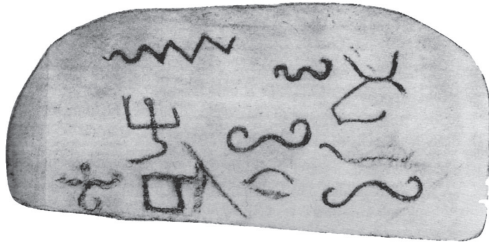
Bearing in mind that the Phoenicians wrote from right to left, it was easier for them to draw an ox shape sideways. The Greeks, unlike the Phoenicians, from whom they took over the script, used to write from left to right. This is why they rotated the sign A by 180 degrees, removed all unnecessary details and thereby created the present-day letter A. This transformation of phoneme A by putting it into an upright position (i.e. *seating* an ox on its horns) occurred approximately 500 years B.C. At the time, the writing was becoming increasingly standardized and letters ceased to change directions.

Obviously, the current Latin letter forms were developed gradually through time by simplifying signs. This was exemplified by the letter A, but the same can be done using the letter E. If one takes a look at the Proto-Sinaitic alphabet (Figure 9), one

can see a simplified rod-like figure of a person praying.



Figure 9. Proto-Sinaitic alphabet, 1500 B.C.



Source: Boardley, J., *The origins of abc, Where does our alphabet come from?* <http://ilovetypography.com/2010/08/07/where-does-the-alphabet-come-from> (2010)

If one cuts off the torso and the head and then rotates the rest of the sign, the origin of the Latin letter E will become quite obvious (Figure 10).

Figure 10. The development of the letter E



Source: Boardley, J., *The origins of abc, Where does our alphabet come from?* <http://ilovetypography.com/2010/08/07/where-does-the-alphabet-come-from> (2010)

Such development of the letter E can be correlated with the initial meaning of the Phoenician hē, earlier hallu, which stood for a celebration and praise, i.e., a prayer, in the broader symbolic sense. This can be linked to the shape of the sign and explain it at the same time (Boardley, 2010). Moreover, the same author finds that the abstract letters led to the idea of an abstract god, who forbade displaying idealized images but allowed representing them by abstract symbols. In any case, today's Latin letter forms are the result of numerous modifications throughout history which transformed images representing real objects in the environment into abstract forms that only remind of the basic forms from which the letters were created.

The designer of these early letters is unknown, but not the tasks that he was facing. Once the need for alphabet and for its concept was firmly established, the designer had to design the letters in order to fully implement the new communication medium. This meant that he had to research the potential target groups, i.e. users of the alphabet. The phonetics of their language had to be catalogued, simplified and reduced. It was necessary to analyze the effectiveness of other attempts to create a written language, such as Minoan cuneiform script or Egyptian hieroglyphs. Based on these analyses, the designer had to develop original letter forms. From a technical point of view, the letters had to be composed of recognizable, simple and easily memorisable forms. This was not an easy task, and thus the creation of new, unique letter forms and their clear differentiation from pictographic signs was a major challenge to the designer. It was necessary to predict what the associations that would spring to readers' minds and make sure that letters were not too abstract because otherwise they could not be reproduced. Each letter form had to be different from the others, but all together, as a whole, they had to work well and represent a harmonious and homogeneous corpus. Modern marketing communication has taken over all these rules and incorporated them in the design of brand symbols.

Phonetic alphabet made it possible to simplify letters and limit the number of elements needed to communicate the spoken word (Shad et al. 2002). This, in turn, has made language learning easier and allowed the use of written form of communication to expand. In time, the design of the letters – and thus legibility – has improved, which led to even wider use of phonetic alphabet in different languages across the world. A significant intellectual breakthrough was made when pictograms with their limitation to expressing only nouns and simple actions, were left behind. With the emergence of phonetic writing, historical events were recorded more accurately and as a result could be studied later. Moreover, phonetic alphabet made it possible to think about future actions, have discussions about the past and the future and report on current events (Shad et al. 2002).

Gutenberg's development of movable-type printing techniques between 1438 and 1456 made a global contribution to written communication and allowed its mass use, thus changing the course of human history (Shad et al. 2002).

The information era has opened new questions, among others, the question about the connection between written communication using the Latin alphabet and modern marketing.

### 5. The alphabet and modern marketing communication

Marketing communication is a process involving two or more sides, in which messages and ideas are exchanged by targeted exchange of symbols. Key elements of this definition are:

- communication is an intentional process (real effort is made by the initiator of the communication process in order to obtain a response from target interlocutors),
- communication is a transaction process (all participants are involved in the process),
- communication is symbolic (words, images, sounds and other stimuli are used for conveying ideas, i.e. messages).

To be successful, modern marketing communication needs original concepts, which will be transformed into symbols that can successfully convey a message or an idea.

The signs, from which today's Latin alphabet letters developed, have gradually lost their original meaning as they spread from one civilization to another. Today, the use value of the Latin alphabet letters has been reduced to the phonetic representation of what the signs initially stood for. In other words, in its beginnings, the alphabet had two levels of meaning: a) the signs had meanings closely related to cultural identity, and b) the signs allowed the possibility of multi-level coding. The global age and global communication have been seeking to create new signs using alphabet letters. The reason for this is that the letters of the alphabet today are not signs but only letters to which new symbolic value is added through design. As a result, there is a need to reconsider sign communication in the context of cultural, political, economic and social identity.

Considering this issue at the company level, one of the reasons for the existence of logos and brands, which visually differentiate one company from another, may be the fact that the letters of the alphabet no longer have the symbolic meanings they used to have in the past.

Symbols are major marketing and communication tools. A number of studies show the significance that consumers attach to symbols, and how the latter affect the perception of the product and the purchase decision (Dado, Goliasova, 2008). A brand is a symbol in itself, and the clarity and relevance of communication are critical to the success of a product on the market. Brand strategists base their activities on convergence, i.e. on creating a signal that can build an associative network in the mind of the recipient. The communication signal must therefore contain a clearly articulated idea – a communication message, whose elements ultimately create a brand. Symbols are instruments used to create this sign. Although words are the primary vehicles for conveying the meaning, many are convinced that symbols do that in a much more powerful way (Harsh, 2011).

Contemporary research in this area (MacInnis, 1999) has shown that pictorial symbols, regardless of whether they relate to the product name, category or manufacturer, are key elements in creating brand recognition, previous communication relating to a specific cultural identity and overall market positioning of a product as a part of an integrated marketing communication. Pictorial symbols are much closer to what is connected with the term *letter/sign*, than with the term *word*. This fact contributes to the renewed importance and role of the design of Latin alphabet letters in the development of marketing communication.

The development of civilization has changed the way in which letters of the Latin alphabet are interpreted in relation to their original meaning. Various meanings of the letter X confirm this hypothesis. Throughout the history of its existence, the letter X has changed its meaning depending on the context, starting from the cave walls to the cyberculture logos (Danesi, 2004).

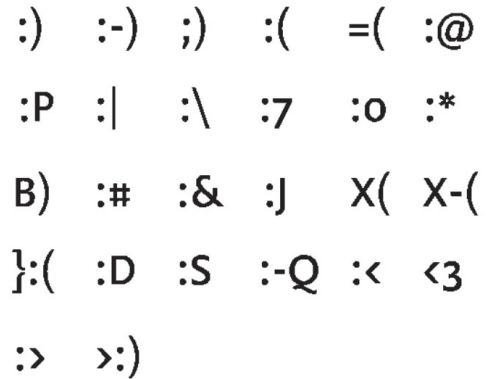
Danesi (2004) found over 250 meanings of the letter X, some of them being:

- any unknown or unnamed factor, thing or person,
- signature of any illiterate person,
- sign for an error,
- cancellation,
- unknown, unknowns in mathematics,
- multiplication sign,
- Roman numeral ten,
- mechanical damage,
- mark for a location on the map,
- mark for the choice on the ballot,
- movie rating,
- symbol of Christ,
- symbol for kiss,
- symbol of Kronos/Cronus, the god of time and the planet Saturn in Greek and Roman mythology,
- symbol of youth culture (Generation X),
- X-Men comic books.

Obviously, the letter X is no longer merely a letter and, in each case in which it has an added meaning, it has become a sign. Thus, the today's X is at the same time an emblem and an allegorical image needed for understanding pop culture. The use of the sign X reveals a dimension of evolution, explains Zipf's Law, named after Harvard linguistics professor, George Kingsley Zipf who devised it in the 1940s. According to Zipf's Law, social evolution results in the reduction of effort (in terms of communication) and condensed form (in communication). This trend is evident in the use of abbreviations and acronyms: HNK = Hrvatsko narodno kazalište (Croatian National Theatre); HAZU = Hrvatska akademija znanosti i umjetnosti (Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts), laser = light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation, etc.

The use of abbreviations and acronyms reduces the time and effort needed for communication in the virtual space. For example, b4 = *before*; F2F = *face-to-face*; gr8 = *great*; h2sus = *hope to see you soon*; g2g = *gotta go* are also accounted for by this law. Another example is the use of emoticons, i.e., signs that communicate certain conditions and condensed comment on messages, for example ;) = *wink*; :-o = *shocked*; } = :-| = *anger* and so on (Figure 11). These abbreviations and acronyms have spread beyond the framework of the virtual space because of the frequency of their use (Danesi, 2004).

Figure 11. Emoticons



Source: Danesi, M., *X Marks the Spot: The Power of Sign-Making and Sign-Use in Today's World* (2004)

The change in communication using Latin alphabet letters can be seen in the names of companies. Today, when the letter A is no longer the head of an ox (see Figure 12), it can be interpreted as, for example, the name of the company *Adobe*, or the name of another company that has a logo with an initial letter A. When one *reads* the meaning of the logo, one cannot see the old Semitic symbol of the ox that had symbolic power, but rather a company that, by changing the design of a letter, has created its own sign. In doing so, the company has assigned a specific and symbolic meaning to letters or an entire message, which differentiate it from symbols and messages used by its competitors.

Due to the characteristics of today's alphabet, companies cannot communicate their messages directly through letters. For that, they need to change the design and typography. Such interventions have long-lasting financial consequences for individual companies that are related to:

- a) creating a message that will be carried by signs,
- b) copyright protection of newly created communication symbols,
- c) communicating the symbol,
- d) creating a recognizable symbol and positive associations in target audiences,
- e) maintaining the symbolic value and meaning of the defined communication message,

- f) eliminating communication barriers in the global market (different cultures interpret the same message differently).

In view of the above, the possibilities have opened up to add new standardized meaning to any letter of the Latin alphabet. Examples of letter A symbols that have the same meaning anywhere in the world include AAA batteries, class A, blood group A, etc. Obviously, the potential permutations of the meaning of each letter allow for the possibility of having an infinite number of different symbolic variations. This fact allows differentiation in communication when using Latin letters, despite their finite and clearly defined number (Figure 12).

Figure 12. Signs using letter A (Anonymous, 2010)



Source: Seven Five Seven, Adobe, <http://757.mcelixir.com/adobe/> (2013),  
 Wikipedia, [http://hr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datoteka:Audi-Logo\\_2009.png](http://hr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datoteka:Audi-Logo_2009.png) (2009), Graphics Archives, Asel Art Center, <http://www.graphis.com/logos/ca2ce860-4b40-11e2-ae70-f23c91dffdec/> (2014)  
 Studio Mazzini, Alpina, <http://www.graphis.com/logos/ca2ce860-4b40-11e2-ae70-f23c91dffdec/> (2003),  
 Hudson M., AIGA Member News, <http://blogs.acu.edu/artanddesign/category/aiga/> (2013)

## 5.1. Implications

The global age and global communication have been seeking to create new signs using alphabet letters. The reason for this is that the letters of the alphabet today are not signs but only letters to which new symbolic value is added through design. The letters in contemporary alphabets represent sounds, but their varied representation (Figure 5) is reminiscent of logotypes of famous brands. In other words, reading and interpretation of pictures depends on the reader's knowledge, as well as the things he/she managed to understand based on their own perception. This is why it is possible to have multi-layered, different interpretations of the same sign, and different readers see in it different stories, brands, products or items. As a result, there is a need to reconsider sign communication in the context of cultural, political, economic and social identity.

Social development influences the development of communication, which is visible through numerous brands and signs, symbols that make products and companies recognizable in the market.

Today, when the letter A is no longer the head of an ox, letter E a person in a prayer, B a house, to name a few examples, letter A can be interpreted as the name of the company *Adobe*, or the name of another company that has a logo with an initial letter A. When one *reads* the meaning of the logo, one sees a company that, by changing the design of a letter, has created its own sign.

In doing so, the company has assigned a specific and symbolic meaning to letters or an entire message, which differentiates it from symbols and messages used by its competitors. Considering this issue at the company level, one of the reasons for the existence of logos and brands, which visually differentiate one company from another, may be the fact that the letters of the alphabet no longer have the symbolic meanings they used to have in the past. Companies create new signs in response to the challenges brought by new technologies and thus new forms of communication.

## 6. Conclusion

Human communication is based on the transmission of messages and the pursuit of their simplification. The existing Latin alphabet letters were created by reduction and linearization of pictograms. As a result, complex images have become conventional signs formed by simple writing movements. In about 5,000 years of its development from pictograms and ideograms to abstract representation of today's letters that represented signs first, the script has remained one of the greatest human accomplishments.

In the past, scripts had three levels of meaning: alphabetic, numeric and symbolic level. With the loss of specific meanings, the letters have become universal because they did not have the meaning that would suit some other cultures using the script. Therefore, by changing the design and assigning new meanings to the script, it was possible to transmit new messages, whereby the most widely-used script today (the Latin alphabet) has become abstract in the broadest sense of communication. Due to different locations and time of development and overall complex history of the alphabet, the original

meanings of individual letters have been lost. When a script was introduced to a new culture, the meanings of letters changed and adjusted. This means that the letters became abstract signs that, apart from the associated phoneme, no longer had their own definition or meaning. It is the abstract nature of signs that companies use to their advantage by attaching their own meanings to the existing signs in line with their business philosophy, in order to differentiate and attract customers and ultimately sell their products and services. Hence, in addition to their description, these newly created signs carry within themselves also "the logic of the product and the political economy" (Baudrillard, 2001:7).

Undoubtedly, Latin letters are codes that have been successfully used to express ideas and thoughts for millennia. The meanings of the letters have changed together with the new social and cultural trends and the Latin alphabet is still developing. In a world of global capital, new signs, derived from the Latin alphabet, are being created. Efforts to convey as much information as possible in a shortest possible period are a result of new communication features and technologies. These efforts are reflected in the understanding and use of Latin alphabet letters. Companies create new signs in response to the challenges brought by new technologies and thus new forms of communication. Considering Zipf's Law (Danesi, 2004) and a growing number of meanings that have been attached to letters, there is a possibility that the current alphabet system will develop into a more complex communication code in which letters will not be just an abstract representation of the sound. In addition to that, they will acquire symbolic meanings adapted to the current time, which will be used and modified by the consumer depending on the needs he/she wants to meet. This is a topic for further research.

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**(ENDNOTES)**

- 1 The pronoun I is expressed by the picture of an eye; the verb can by the picture of a (tin) can, the verb sail by the picture of a mast; round by the picture of a circle, and the noun globe by the picture of a globe
- 2 Greek (mono...+ cf. silaba) of one syllable, languages that only contain words of one syllable, e.g. Chinese (Klaić, 1979)
- 3 Greek (poly... + cf. silaba) of many/more syllables (Klaić, 1979)
- 4 Boustrophedon is a technical term denoting a script written from right to left and from left to right in every other line (Naveh, 2004: 18).
- 5 The signs alpha and beta stand at the beginning of the Greek alphabet. They are identical to the Semitic names, i.e. Semitic signs aleph and beth. The names for these signs have no meaning in Greek, unlike in Semitic. Aleph denotes an ox, and beth denotes a house (Clodd, 1904).
- 6 phonography, Greek (fōnē – voice, sound + gráfō – write, record) sound recording (by mechanical or electro-optical means); phonogram – 1. content recorded by phonograph; 2. phonetic alphabet (Klaić, 1979)
- 7 *Alpha* (*alef* = ox) comes from the hieroglyph of an ox head; *zeta* (*zayin* = weapon) comes from a double-sided ax; *sigma* (*samech* = place) comes from the sign for tree; *omikron* (*ain* = eye) comes from a circle that represented an eye; eta and *epsilon* (*cheth* = fence and he = window) come from the signs for a wall, door or window (Clodd, 1904)



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## **GENEZA, VIZUALNO ODREĐENJE I DANAŠNJE KOMUNIKACIJSKE ODLIKE ABECEDA**

### **SAŽETAK**

Kroz približno 5000 godina ljudske pismenosti abecedni sustav razvijao se od piktograma i ideograma sve do današnje apstraktizacije u latinična slova. Pojednostavljanje prvotnih piktograma i njihovom transformacijom u ideograme slijedio se osnovni cilj pisane komunikacije – prenošenje misli i ideja. Uz prenošenje misli i ideja pismovna komunikacija omogućila je konzerviranje znanja, a njegovo arhiviranje generiralo je informacijsku ekspanziju kao temeljnu odliku novoga doba. Upravo brzina dolaženja do pisanih podataka i njihovo preobilje uzrokuje potrebu promišljanja semiotičkih odlika latiničnih slova – temeljnih jedinica pisanih poruka u zapadnome svijetu, posebice sa stajališta marketinške komunikacije. U tom svjetlu, upravo je pismeni izričaj glavni alat brendiranja i uspješnog približavanja ciljnim tržišnim skupinama. Konstantan razvoj društva potiče i razvoj komunikacije čemu svjedoči i prisutnost brojnih brendova i znakova kao simbola prepoznatljivosti proizvoda i proizvođača na tržištu. Danas se u znakovnim formama abecede može iščitati priča o brendu, proizvodu ili usluzi. Sastavni elementi ove spoznaje čine znanja, prikupljena svjesno ili nesvjesno, iz različitih izvora prisutnih u okruženju. Poznavanje povijesti ljudske pismenosti, razvoja svakoga slova pojedinačno, komunikacijskih pravila današnjega komercijalnog svijeta, utjecaja brendova i preobilja informacija otvara prostor za daljnja istraživanja komunikacijskih odlika abecede, semantike pismenih oblika i njihove redefinicije u smislu učinkovite marketinške komunikacije.

**Ključne riječi:** abeceda, geneza pisma, vizualno određenje, marketinška komunikacija, brend