

4-17-1998

# The Alphabet and the Ideograph: The ABCs of Political Conflict?

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## Recommended Citation

(1998) "The Alphabet and the Ideograph: The ABCs of Political Conflict?," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 15 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol4/iss15/2>

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International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: The Alphabet and the Ideograph: The ABCs of Political Conflict?

Author: Editor

Volume: 4

Issue: 15

Date: 1998-04-17

Keywords: Ideograph, Conflict

**Abstract.** This article describes a possible source of political differences among people based on language differences.

The hypothesized sources of political conflict most often reflect the usual suspects. They include instinctual aggression, needs for resources that overwhelm resource availability leading to instrumental competition, dynamics based on social cognition that lead to the construction of ingroups and outgroups, psychodynamic splitting, and overcompensation mechanisms for feelings of inferiority.

A less researched suspect encompasses notions that people with generic differences in language may actually see the world differently and, thus, more often be confronted with conflict. What would support these notions? Although the transformational grammar of Chomskian psycholinguistics suggests that all humans may share some basic similarities both in the foundations of thought and of language, psychological research based on Whorf's hypothesis suggests that language and thought are, at the least, thoroughly interrelated in constructing a picture of the world and a worldview--implying that language and thought differences among people may beget political differences.

One psychological research tradition germane to this discussion posits cognitive differences between people who learn only an alphabetic language, e.g., English or French, versus those who learn only an ideographic one, e.g., Chinese or Japanese. (People who learn both at the same or different times will be briefly discussed below, while people who learn sign language alone or in combination with alphabetic and/or ideographic languages will be left for a future IBPP article.) Consider the following.

In a clinical case study, a 56-yr-old Japanese male with a lesion in the left posterior inferior temporal lobe of the brain manifested both alexia (loss of the ability to read) and agraphia (loss of the ability to write) of the ideographic kanji system of Japanese writing. The same brain lesion in a Western patient would probably be associated with alexia without agraphia of the relevant Western language (Hamasaki et al, 1995).

Japanese students accomplished a sequence of tasks--either responding with the name of the color in which an ideograph or syllabic orthograph (equivalent to an alphabetic character) is written or the name of the color that the ideograph or syllabic orthograph expresses. (This latter color might be consistent or inconsistent with the color in which the ideograph or syllabic orthographs is written.) The students found less difficulty with the inconsistent stimuli than do Western research subjects. Results also supported the hypothesis that ideographic characters and colors are processed in the nondominant right cerebral hemisphere, while syllabic characters are processed in the dominant left cerebral hemisphere (Morikawa, 1981.)

Additional research suggests that ideographic versus alphabetic stimuli engage different psychological processing mechanisms (Besner & Coltheart, 1979). Koreans educated in both the alphabetic and ideographic Korean writing systems show better recognition and free recall memory for words presented ideographically than alphabetically (Park & Arbuckle, 1977), and Japanese employing

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ideographs show a similar but simpler approach to Westerners employing alphabets in deriving socioemotional impressions of psychological identities and actions (Smith et al, 1994).

The above results are merely suggestive of what can be termed contributions to national character differences based on cognitive differences that could even lead to adaptive variations encompassing emotions and motivations. These consequences could affect the initiation, prevention, and management of political conflict with implications for crisis management, negotiation, diplomacy, and information warfare including propaganda. At present, however, it may be a very big leap to derive practical applications--the challenge being greater for individuals than for peoples in general. (See Besner, D., & Coltheart, M. (1979). Ideographic and alphabetic processing in skilled reading of English. *Neuropsychologia*, 17, 467-472; Hamasaki, T., Yasojima, K., Kakita, K., et al. (1995). Alexie-agraphie pour l'écriture kanji apres lesion temporale postero-inferieure gauche. (Posterior inferior temporal lobe lesion of the dominant hemisphere causing alexia with agraphia of kanji.) *Revue Neurologique*, 151, 16-23; Morikawa, Y. (1981). Stroop phenomena in the Japanese language: The case of ideographic characters (kanji) and syllabic characters (kana). *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 53, 67-77; Park, S., & Arbuckle, T.Y. (1977). Ideograms versus alphabets: Effects of script on memory in "biscriptural" Korean subjects. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Learning and Memory*, 3, 631-642; Smith, H.W., Matsuno, T., & Umino, M. (1994). How similar are impression formation processes among Japanese and Americans? *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 57, 124-139; Whorf, B.L. (1956). *Language, thought, and reality*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.) (Keywords: Ideograph, Conflict.)