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## Differences on The Alphabet, the Ideograph, and Political Difference: Commentary and Reply

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Abstract. This article presents the commentary of a reader and an IBPP editorial board reply concerning the consequences of language differences for political differences among populations.

"The Alphabet and the Ideograph: The ABCs of Political Conflict?" was published in the April 17, 1998 (4(15)) Issue of IBPP. That article posits that language training based on an alphabet and that based on ideographs each may lead to differences in viewing the world. Further--given the intrinsic political nature of the world--differences in viewing the world ineluctably lead to political differences and conflict. The article contains (1) citations of research with data that seem to support the first hypothesis and (2) a strong caveat about the wide gap that must be bridged in generalizing from this research to support for the second hypothesis.

Commentary from Dr. William Hannas, an IBPP reader from Washington, D.C. Although I think IBPP's instincts are on the right track, there are some things that the journal needs to pay careful attention to. For starters, Whorf/Sapir had little to say about writing; the hypothesis concerns language--and speech in particular. These terms are not, formally or operationally, synonymous and one can get into a world of trouble by not distinguishing them.

By the same token, the notion of an "ideographic" language is misguided and that of an "ideographic" writing system only slightly less so. I can't fault IBPP for this because it was misled by the plethora of bad literature that has appeared on the subject. I can recommend some reading to help set this straight. The bottom line is, if one goes into print with that concept--i.e., an "alphabetic language" or "ideographic (even logographic) language"--scholars of orthography are not going to pay it any attention. I don't mean to imply that the concept of the character-based writing system having a unique effect on a society and culture is wrong--quite the contrary. But one has to approach this Issue with a solid foundation.

Ditto the notion of differential left (cerebral) hemisphere and right (cerebral) hemisphere processing of alphabetic and character scripts. Much (or most) of the studies that support this idea--including the Stroop tests, tachistoscopic studies, and clinical data--have been proven, for one reason or another, to be flawed in execution and/or interpretation, a fact recognized even by some of the earlier proponents of the thesis.

In conclusion, the thesis, I think, is doable but IBPP is going to get into difficulty (and shortchange the thesis in the process) unless it addresses other kinds of literature. I'll be happy to help where I can.

IBPP Editor's Reply. (1) IBPP concurs that speech, writing, and language are not synonymous. In fact, there are many indices of language including but not limited to speech, nonverbal vocalizing, writing, facial expressions, and body postures--each dependent on structural, process, and functional characteristics interacting within multiple contexts. Writing was chosen as but one manifestation of language. (2) Given (1), the reference to Whorf's hypothesis should have been more generally described as the Whorfian hypothesis of linguistic relativity--that language shapes thought. This ascription covers

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not just the work of Whorf but of others working with different indices of language and seeking to explore the notion of language shaping thought. (3) IBPP concurs that the notion of an alphabetic or ideographic language--or any language equated with how its is written--is conceptually and theoretically suspect and empirically problematic. IBPP also concurs that the notion of an alphabetic or ideographic writing system is problematic if the intent is to constitute the system solely by a set of characters. IBPP also suggests that a majority of researchers who use terms such as "ideographic language" or "ideographic writing system" are using a shorthand or ellipsis for convenience and are aware of the concerns of Dr. Hannas. (4) There certainly are many ways to improve the methodological rigor of clinically related research. In fact, the quest for adequate methodology in the psychological sciences has continued to be a core concern, at least since the era of Wundt's experimental activities in Leipzig. Of even greater concern is the interpretive enterprise addressed to experimental data. IBPP would posit that the methodological/interpretive concerns of Dr. Hannas are germane and apply to the exploration of psychological differences across the board.

The purpose of the IBPP article on "The Alphabet and the Ideograph" was to increase interest in the conceptual, theoretical, empirical, and experimental approaches to positing psychological differences among segments of human populations--especially political psychological differences. Dr. Hannas has identified significant concerns that must be addressed if notions as diverse as national character and psychocultural differences are to be founded on more than anecdote, stereotype, and suspect research. IBPP also hopes that Dr. Hannas will provide a list of pertinent references and related research pursuits that will be shared with the readership. (See Fang, S-P. (1997). Morphological properties and the Chinese character-word difference in laterality patterns. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance*, 23, 1439-1453; Koyama, S., Kakigi, R., et al. (1998). Reading of Kanji (morphograms) and Kana (syllabograms): A magnetoencephalographic study. *Neuropsychologia*, 36, 83-98; Leck, K.J., Weekes, B.S., & Chen, M.J. (1995). Visual and phonological pathways to the lexicon: Evidence from Chinese readers. *Memory and Cognition*, 23, 468-476; Peabody, D., & Shmelyov, A.G. (1996). Psychological characteristics of Russians. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 26, 507-512; The Alphabet and the Ideograph: The ABCs of Political Conflict? (April 17, 1998). *IBPP*, 4(15); Walters, K. (1996). Gender, identity, and the political economy of language: Anglophone wives in Tunisia. *Language in Society*, 25, 515-555.) (Keywords: Language, National Character, Political Cognition, Typology.)