

A typology of North African writing systems

According to Simpson, “written language is a form of language. As such, it deserves to be treated with the methods of modern, scientific linguistic study which have been increasing our understanding of the spoken form of language for many decades” (Simpson 2001:11). Afroasiatic languages are unique in the long history and variety of writing systems which have been used to depict them. This poster presents the writing traditions of North Africa as a significant part of the Afroasiatic linguistic tradition, and as a valuable component of Afroasiatic historical linguistics.

The focus will be on the following writing traditions: Arabic, Egyptian hieroglyphs (Loprieno 1995), hieratic, demotic, Lybico-Berber (Pichler 2007), Phoenician-Punic (Krahmalkov 2001), and Tifinagh. As linguistic typological inquiry observes and attempts to describe the structural patterns of spoken language, in this poster I attempt to describe the patterns of the ancient orthographies of North Africa (as well as modern Tifinagh). These writing systems are compared to each other with regard to time period used, geographic distribution, type of writing system, number of symbols, distributions of symbols, and mediums of writing. In addition, the relationships between orthographies and their spoken languages are investigated.

The intent of this poster is to invite further discussion of the linguistic typology of writing systems and linguistic descriptions of the interactions between language and orthography.

References

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