ABOUT “SHORT” NAMES OF LETTERS

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Socrates: A very simple matter. I may illustrate my meaning by the names of letters, which, you know, are not the same as the letters themselves with the exception of the four, ε, υ, ο, ω; the names of the rest, whether vowels or consonants, are made up of other letters which we add to them; but so long as we introduce the meaning, and there can be no mistake, the name of the letter is quite correct. Take, for example, the letter “beta”—the addition of e, t, a, gives no offence, and does not prevent the whole name from having the value which the legislator intended—so well did he know how to give the letters names.

Hermogenes: I believe you are right. (Plato)

Where do short names of letters come from? Why do we call a letter [ve] in Russian, [vii] in English, [fau] in German, and [uva] in Spanish? After all, we do know that all these letters are borrowed from the Latin and Greek traditions, which are, in turn, related by succession.

Why would a Russian sigh and say, “yo-ke-le-me-ne”, and not, for instance, “*yo-ka-el-em-en”, which would match the “correct” short names of letters? Why do we sometimes say Ka-eL-eM flights and never *Ke-Le-Me or *Ka-La-Ma?

What makes letter names “correct”? How did it happen that we name the letters [ka], but [de], [em], although schoolchildren, before they are taught the rules, persistently tend to universalize vocalization of such names, each time choosing one and the same vowel [pe], [re], [se], [te] and not, let us say, *[po], *[ro], *[so], *[to]?

Many generations of pupils, instinctively and individually, have been making the same “mistake” in naming letters, and many generations of teachers have been correcting these mistakes. Still, as it turned out, neither native speakers nor professional linguists have clear answers to the question—where did this norm come from?

1 An euphemism for a Russian curse designated by five letters; roughly comparable with “EKLMN”.

Letters with “conventional” names are easier to explain. Their algorithm of development is well-known: a frequently used (or “important”) word starting with the sound designated by the letter is selected, like Russian земля ‘ground, soil’. Quite often, these names appear to be iconic signs where the denotation of this word is depicted symbolically (Greek δέλτα / Phoenician דלת ‘door’).

The situation is more complex when it comes to short—spelling—names. The iconic nature of a sign usually disappears, and two factors determining the name of a letter remain:

1. Certain “heredity” exists—when a short name of a letter is taking shape, the name that existed in the donor language is often preserved;
2. There is some agreement, a “convention” that might not be related to linguistics at all but meets the ideas of a certain group of people responsible for written language and believing that a letter should be named this way and not otherwise.

The history of short names is the history of multiple conventions (often forgotten) that were based partly upon pronunciation of letters in the source language and partly upon individual attempts to adjust the letters of the source language and their names to a specific language.

These two factors are well-known. Moreover, they are rather obvious. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that, along with these two factors, which are “external” against the language system, there are also intralingual factors influencing the selection of a letter name. These names tend towards partial unification in many languages, that is the tendency to use the same vowel. Such unification follows rather distinct and often predictable patterns.

The discussion of intralingual factors is hampered by the lack of reliable materials regarding, 1. tradition, and 2. origin of naming short letters. Even in my native Russian, neither I nor any of my learned colleagues are able to satisfactorily answer the questions as to where established Russian short letter names came from and when. Certain essential features allow us to conclude that we are correcting negligent pupils according to the norms of the Latin tradition. Are there other factors that will shed light on the questions and how can we proceed?

I became aware of this problem for the first time while studying the material of young Polynesian traditions. Let us consider the Tahitian alphabet as an example. “Creation of the Tahitian alphabet dates back to the early 1800s when English missionaries developed an alphabet on the