






























Some Comments on Orthography[†]

Lawrence M. Schoen

(a version of this article appeared in the first issue of *HolQeD*,
the journal of the Klingon Language Institute, and is used here with their permission)

Those first three years of *TOS* were rather stingy. While we were allowed the occasional inference of Klingon culture, our exposure to Klingon language was limited to the rare and frustrating glimpse of signage aboard a Bird of Prey. Frustrating because there is something about unfamiliar writing systems that tantalizes and entices, that beckons to us promising exotica, that hints of secrets and understanding if only we could read those strange glyphs. If only...

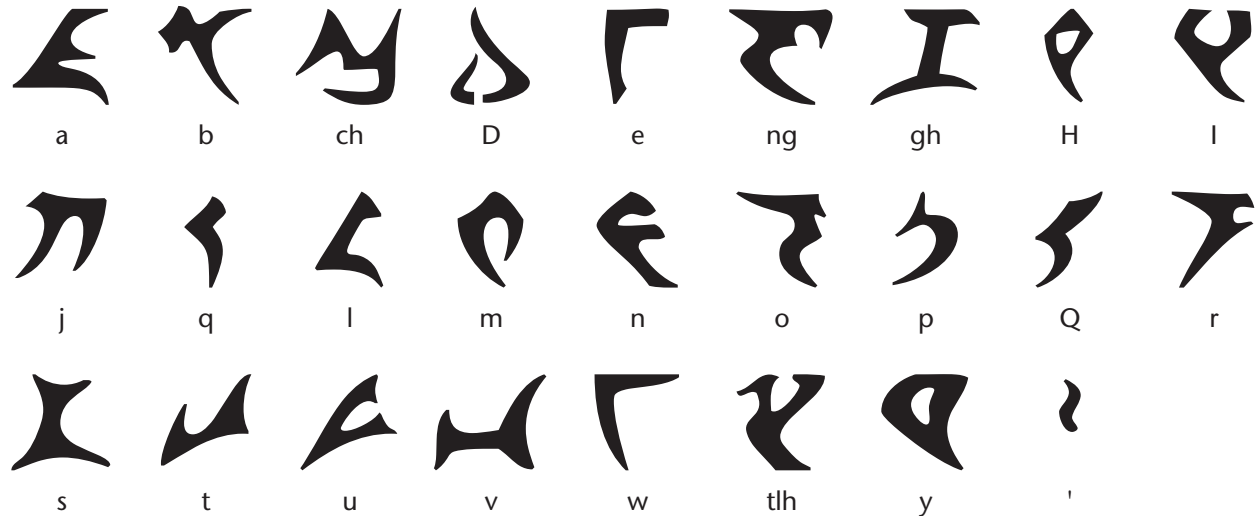
In 1980 the *U.S.S Enterprise Officer's Manual* was published. Though now out of print, in its time this volume was perceived as a great treasure trove of information. Among its inclusions was the following table of characters, which has since come to be known as the Mandel system:

								
K	L	I	NG	O	N	F	B	D
								
G	A	M	X	TH	H	V	J	E
								
S	Y	W	P	OO	T	R	U	Z

And so at last, after so many years of wondering, there was a key to the Klingon writing system! Except, it wasn't. This incredible alien alphabet was presented to us as little more than another way of encoding English; a second-order symbol system in which the letters of the roman alphabet could be mapped onto a different collection of symbols, not so different from similar systems such as Morse code or semaphore. Admittedly there were a few differences. A character for a velar nasal stop was included ("NG"), and one for dental fricatives was added as well ("TH"). Unfortunately in the case of the latter, no indication of voicing was provided. And although the "C" and "Q" characters were left out (though they subsequently surfaced in several fan variations of the alphabet) presumably because of redundancy, the "X" character was retained, though with no indication of being a voiceless velar fricative (a common substitution). There is also the addition of a sixth vowel character. But that's all. Nothing alien, nothing particularly exotic. Sure the letters looked interesting and may have caused some speculation as to what instrument (stylus? brush?) might be used to shape them, but that was the extent of it. And yet, none of it seemed to matter. It was Klingon, and fans eagerly clasped it to their collective breast. No matter that there was nothing to write in it, it served quite well for English, and that was enough until real Klingon came along.

More recently we've been treated to a different alphabet, (often incorrectly attributed to Michael Okuda, scenic designer for *Star Trek: The Next Generation*TM), one which corresponds to the phonemes of Klingon as described by Okrand in *The Klingon Dictionary*. While the characters themselves are easily

identifiable from background displays on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*TM (assuming one has access to video equipment and a reasonably large television screen), there has never been an “official” release describing the particular relationship between individual glyphs and specific sounds. As Okuda has indicated (*HolQeD 1:1, 11*) all Klingon background displays are composed for appearance, not communication. And yet, an unofficial letter to a Klingon fan group from an unnamed source at Paramount resulted in the following alphabet:



Unlike its predecessor, these glyphs provide an excellent fit to the phonology of Klingon, or more specifically that of tlhIngan Hol. However, other questions still remain.

The keen observer of *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* will note several Klingon glyphs which are not included in the alphabet above. While some appear to be simple rotations of characters (and one is reminded of Sequoyah’s creation of the Cherokee syllabary), others appear to be completely novel. That they are not included in the alphabet need not necessarily be cause for distress, nor tempt us to suspect the assignment of sound to sign. Our own writing system is replete with logographs, single characters representing whole ideas or words (e.g., !, @, #, \$, %), clearly a part of the system but not a part of the alphabet.

Then too, it may be helpful to keep in mind Allan Wechsler’s remarks (*HolQeD 1:1, 3-10*) on the sparse distribution of consonants in tlhIngan Hol. While perhaps a bit far fetched, the unexplained characters might be instances of alphabetic characters from an earlier, and phonemically larger, form of the language, maintained either for historical purposes in affairs of state (I refer here to the trial scene in *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*), or more simply as decoration.

In any case, there is clearly much much more to be learned about Klingon orthography, more tantalizing promises and secrets to discovered. Of course it’s unknown whether any further explanations are apt to be forthcoming, but at least the exotica is there. Or, to make the case more clear by example, what precisely is “the Klingon mummification glyph” mentioned in *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home*, and what is its role in a larger writing system?

†Both alphabets are available as a single laser font, named “KLIpIqaDmey,” which may be purchased from the merchant page of the Klingon Language Institute’s website (<http://www.kli.org/kli/Merchant.phtml>).