A Case For Ontolophemes: A Dramatic New Abstract Analysis Of The History Of Language and Writing: English's Alphabet As A Sacred Geometrical Ontology Of Graphemes by Daniel Dinkelman & Diohka Aesden, Cineris Multifacet, 2025

There is a tendency in linguistics towards heavy abstract theorising, extending as far as what might be called 'over-theorising'. Often large, elaborate (over-elaborate?) schemata are developed, providing an abstract framework for the analysis of language and languages. They are not always at all easy to assess or indeed to use, nor do they always appear to add to linguistic knowledge to a sufficient degree to outweigh the associated disadvantages.

Some of these schemata are in fact **potentially** useful in some respects, for instance the professional linguist Sydney Lamb's 'Stratificational Linguistics' (later known as 'Relational Network Theory'), which maps each language as a vast diagram (always along the same general lines) with lines linking representations of concrete linguistic items and of more or less abstract categories. Like all non-Chomskyan brands of linguistics, this theory has faced an uphill battle in Lamb's native USA, but it has led to otherwise unnoticed insights, for example recognition of the fact that just one of a very orderly set of possible abstract relationships between linguistic items/structures appears never to occur. On the other hand, many linguists find the huge arrays of linked items much less than perspicuous and therefore struggle to use the theory.

Another school of abstract linguistics, mainly practised on the continent of Europe rather than in the Anglo-American intellectual world, may be exemplified by the work of the mid-C20 Danish scholar Louis Hjelmslev, whose 'Glossematics' has a highly formalistic, logic-based and quasi-scientific approach and deals only with the formal and semantic/semiotic characteristics of language. However, many empirically-oriented linguists find that the links between the complex arrays of abstract categories presented by Glossematics, on the one hand, and concrete linguistic facts, on the other, are less than plain. ('Formal linguistics' as practised in the Anglo-American world and explicated in e.g. Charles Bazell's key book *Linguistic Form*, displays much more transparent links between abstract patterns or structures and actual usage.)

There are also theories of this kind developed by often well-informed but linguistically-untrained writers. One such is 'Ontolexics', which I discussed in *Skeptical Intelligencer* Vol 25, 2022, Number 3 (Autumn). Another example of a **very** abstract theory of language structure, which indeed is arguably dubious in other respects too, is the proposal of Daniel Dinkelman and Diohka Aesden regarding 'ontolophemes', presented in their 2025 book *A Case for Ontolophemes: Icosikaihexagon and Icosihenagon: English's Alphabet As A Sacred Geometrical Ontology Of Graphemes*. The book presents 'a transformative perspective on language that transcends its utilitarian functions to reveal its sacred dimensions'. Its focus is more specific than those of the theories outlined above: in addition to its (surprising) emphasis upon English specifically (see below), it also deals not so much with language structure as a whole but specifically with historical phonology (the development of sound-systems) and in particular the history of orthographic scripts, interpreted in terms of underlying **geometrical** analyses. And, most dramatically, the intellectual background framework is that of mystical traditions (seen as sources of veridical knowledge), in which language is interpreted as 'a divine incantation—a living, sacred geometry in which every phoneme, grapheme, and ontolopheme is harmoniously integrated'

Although its topic might appear dauntingly erudite, the book has received positive online reviews from non-linguists, which justifies a serious though relatively non-technical review by me as a skeptical linguist.

In general terms this proposal is not unlike some other esoteric proposals regarding the origins of scripts (e.g. Judith Dillon's *Alphabets And The Mystery Traditions*, reviewed by me on this web-page). Dinkelman and Aesden hold that 'every letter or glyph [MN: at the very origin of writing *per se*, or later?] was imbued with a precise, inherent meaning, serving as an ontolopheme that summoned

natural, spiritual, and cosmic forces'. For example, the written character which eventually became Hebrew aleph, Greek alpha and Roman A and was at one stage shaped like an ox's head inherently encoded an elemental object/sacred energy, the significance of which covertly persists and can be explicated by authors such as these. Indeed, the authors claim that 'modern literacy, conlang design, and scriptural pedagogy are re-enchanted by reclaiming these lost, invocatory correspondences'.

A linguist will at once draw attention to the fact that all known scripts are much more recent in origin than the phonologies which some of them express. Key facts regarding the phonology of a language may have little to do with key facts regarding any script used to write it, or may have very complex relationships with same. And some scripts are **non**-phonological (in origin or in some cases at **any** stage), and here there is typically no ground for associating any symbol in such a script with the **pronunciation** of any word in a relevant language. Furthermore, the earliest known writing is from as recently as 3000 BCE; all statements about either phonology or writing before that date are at best well-informed speculation. In addition, alphabetic or other phonologically-interpreted symbols (e.g. those representing syllables) are used with different values cross-linguistically and over time. Indeed, these values may vary greatly between languages sharing a script. Hebrew aleph represents a consonant, not a vowel like alpha or A. Japanese *kanji*, Chinese in origin, have completely non-Chinese phonological values. (But see below on putative origins versus subsequent developments.)

The details of such developments are often obscure, the more so with the passage of time – even during the earlier phases of **known** history. So are connections between linguistic symbols of all kinds (alphabetic, syllabic, non-phonological, etc.) and any esoteric or even exoteric spiritual beliefs current in the relevant societies.

At a more detailed level, in places (even in their title) Dinkelman and Aesden appear to assume, for instance, that the Roman alphabet contains 26 letters, as in English. They evidently know too much about the history of orthography (and about the relevant aspects of linguistics generally, as revealed in this book and in other work by Dinkelman) not to understand that this is in no way a privileged or especially important version of the alphabet. Some languages, such as Swedish, employ more letters; some, such as Italian, employ fewer. Like numerologists, authors of this kind cannot plausibly ascribe underlying non-linguistic features to any specific version of the alphabet (if that is indeed what they intend).

Flying in the face of all this complexity and uncertainly, Dinkelman and Aesden, proclaiming a primordial, in origin universal '1-1-1 correspondence', assert that 'each sound (phoneme) must match a unique symbol (grapheme) and express a specific sacred concept (ontolopheme)'. They develop historical accounts of specific languages in these terms, regarding the various languages as diverging over time and thus as obscuring this supposed ancestral pattern. (Of course, it is not at all clear that all human languages have a **single** common ancestor in any case. There are at present over 50 'language families', each of which is by definition not known to have a common ancestor with any other.)

It is the **geometrical** analysis which is most striking here. Dinkelman and Aesden's analysis involves models of polygons, toroidal recursions, and non-Euclidean fields, in particular the Icosikaihexagon (26 angles) and Icosihenagon (21 angles) of their title. But it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that these purported links between geometry and linguistic form involve little more than special pleading – especially in light of the objections raised above in respect of linguistic history and the facts of linguistic diversity.

Maybe Dinkelman in particular has shifted out of the modernist mainstream into more 'esoteric' modes of thought; this is not an unfamiliar scenario. But most linguists, like most scientists and just about all skeptics, are, on the preponderance of evidence and reasoning, disinclined (to say the least) to accept the existence of spiritual and 'cosmic' forces such as are invoked here. Much stronger and less equivocal evidence, and strong counter-arguments to the objections of

linguists as outlined above, would be required if we were to embrace ideas such as those of Dinkelman and Aesden (with or without the geometrical element) as true or even as arguable.

Some other proposals also involve abstract schemata relating to historical and mythological narratives. I instantiate with the accompanying review.