The Letter J in The English Alphabet

By
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Historical Background

THE LETTER J WAS THE NEWEST ADDITION TO THE ENGLISH ALPHABET. The letter "J" is the tenth letter of the alphabet used for the modern English Language. It is also used in a number of other languages, including French, German, and Spanish. The letter "J" evolved from the letter "I," so the early development of the two letters is the same.

Our J was developed from tenth letter of the Phoenician alphabet, "YOD." The Phoenicians used the letter to represent the beginning "Y" sound of YOD, which was their word for hand. When the Greeks adapted the Phoenician alphabet around 800 B.C., they used the letter, which they named "iota," for the sound of the vowel that is much like the consonant "Y." The Etruscans adopted the Greek alphabet about 700 B.C. and the Romans adopted the Etruscans alphabet in 650 B.C. Both peoples continued to use "I" in this way.

In Europe, in the Middle Ages (A.D. 400's through the 1400's) scribes began writing a lengthened form of "I" at the end of a word. They used this form especially for a Roman Numeral, such as VIII (the numeral for eight). After the invention of printing in the late 1400's, the long- tailed "I," which began to look like "J" was used at the beginning of a word, while an ordinary "I" was used in the middle. "J" began to be used for the consonant sound in France around about 1620, and the English printers soon followed this practice. The first **English language** book to make a clear distinction between "I" and "j" was published in 1633. "I" and "J" were not considered to be separate letters until 1801, with the publication of William Perry's Royal Standard English Dictionary. Perry's dictionary was the first to alphabetise words separately under "I" and "J."

When Was J Added to the Alphabet?

J is a bit of a late bloomer; after all, it was the last letter added to the alphabet. It is no coincidence that I and J stand side by side—they actually started out as the same character. The letter J began as a **swash**, a typographical embellishment for the already existing I. With the introduction of lowercase letters to the Roman numeric system, J was commonly used to denote the conclusion of a series of one's—as in "xiij" for the number 13.

Are J and I Related?

J's phonetic quest for independence probably began with the sound of the letter I. Originally a **Phoenician** pictogram representing a leg with a hand, and denoting a sound similar to the Y in "yes," I was later adopted by **Semitic** groups to describe the word "arm" which, in Semitic languages, began with a J (also possessing the same Y sound as in "yes").

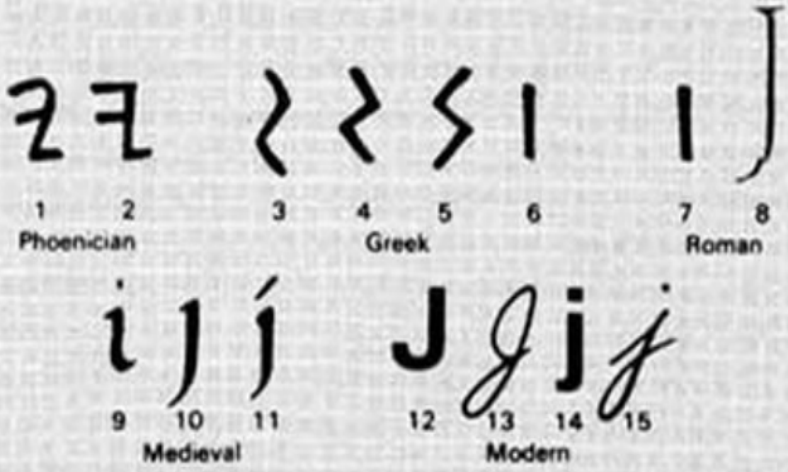
How did J get its sound?

Both I and J were used interchangeably by scribes to express the sound of both the vowel and the consonant. It wasn't until 1524 when Gian Giorgio Trissino, an Italian Renaissance grammarian known as the father of the letter J, made a clear distinction between the two sounds.

Trissino's contribution is important because once he distinguished the soft *J* sound, as in "jam" (probably a loan sound), he was able to identify the Greek "Iēsous" a transliteration of the Hebrew "Yashua," as the Modern English "Joshua." Thus the current phoneme for *J* was born. So the name Jesus is also a modern transliteration of the Greek "Iēsous". In Cymraeg (Welsh) we know The Christ as Iesu Grist.

The English language is infamous for matching similar phonemes with different letters and *J* is certainly no exception. In addition to the aforementioned soft *J* sound, as in "jam," which is phonetically identical to the soft *G* as in "general," the *J* in Taj Mahal takes on a slight variation

The J Develops



Around 1000 B.C. the Phoenicians and other Semites of Syria and Palestine began to use a graphic sign in the forms (1,2). They gave it the name yōdh, *meaning "hand," and used it for a semiconsonant* y, *as in English* boy, boys. *After 900 B.C. the Greeks borrowed the sign from the Phoenicians, using at first various angular versions (3,4,5), and then a simplified form (6). They also changed its name to* iōta *and made it stand for their vowel* i. *The Greek form (6) passed unchanged via Etruscan to the Roman alphabet (7,8). The Romans used the sign both for the vowel* i *and for the semiconsonant* y, *as in* IECIT. *When subsequently the need arose to differentiate the two sounds, an unsystematic habit grew up of adding a tail to the* i *for the semiconsonant, as in the late Roman and medieval Uncial (9,10) and Cursive (11). The distinction was not fully established until the 17th century, when the capital (12,13) and small letter (14,15) took their modern forms The dot on the small letter was carried over from the letter* i.

of that same sound and is probably the closest to Trissino's original phonetic interpretation. And, coming full circle, the *J* sound you hear in the word "hallelujah" is pronounced "halleluyah."

The original consonantal sound represented by the letter was the semivowel or spirant *i* (the sound of *y* in the word *yacht*). This passed into *dy* and later into the sound *dž* that the letter represents today. This sound was already established in the **language** in words of **Romance** origin in which it was represented by *g* (e.g., in words such as *gesture* or *ginger*), and these words retain their spelling.

In English the letter *J* represents the same sound (*dž*) in all positions, and deviations from it are extremely rare even in words of foreign origin. In the bird name ***jaeger***, however, the sound *dž* and the sound *y* are both admitted, and in certain personal and local names of **Spanish** origin (e.g., *Javier*, *La Jolla*), the sound of *h* is current in English usage. The minuscule form *j* is the lengthened form, retaining the dot, of minuscule *i*.

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