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Language: 'Y' Is for Branch

Newsweek

May 8, 2006 issue - Mark Changizi, a theoretical neurobiologist at Caltech, recently started pondering the "deep structure" of the alphabet—or, more precisely, all the characters in all the major written languages. He suspected that all alphabets had something in common. "People who build machines that recognize objects in the natural world use this letter lingo, like a 'Y junction,' where three lines meet at a point," he says. "And I thought, Hmm, isn't that strange and coincidental?"

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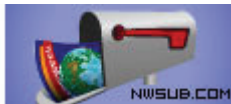
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Strange, yes. Coincidental, no. After exhaustive study, Changizi and colleagues think our ancestors largely modeled their alphabets after natural features in their environment. The letters Y and K, for instance, resemble forking tree branches, and similar shapes are found throughout other alphabets. Other symbols and characters, such as the asterisk, have no natural basis. Changizi also found that the vast majority of common letters take no more than three strokes to write—perhaps because short-term memory can hold only three basic visual pieces of info at a time. The best way to create an alphabet, it seems, is to keep it as simple as ABC.

—*Mary Carmichael*

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