Conifers

(see pdf for graphics)
Writing systems:

Pictographs:

Figure 1:

“The conifer-shaped objects in Figure 1 are people. The second from the right is the writer (the row of dots represents plaited hair and thus shows that she is a woman); the next one leftwards, the recipient of the letter, was previously her lover, but has now gone off to live with a Russian woman (plaited hair, together with a skirt with panniers, distinguishing Russian from Yukaghir costume). The Russian woman, naturally, has broken up the relationship between writer and addressee (line from the head of the Russian woman cutting through the lines joining the two Yukaghir); nevertheless, the new ménage is stormy (criss-cross lines linking the two). The writer is unhappy (crossed lines) alone in her house (the rectangular enclosing structure), and she is still thinking of the addressee (curly tendril reaching towards him). On the other hand the addressee should bear in mind that there is another young man at home (far right) sending a tendril towards her. If the addressee wants to act on this message, he had better hurry before his new household has children (two small conifers on the left).”

Chinese

The first major point to be made about the Chinese writing system is that it is logographic — a Chinese character stands not for a consonant, a vowel, or a syllable but for a morpheme. That such a system developed in Chinese follows in part from certain characteristics of the language: 1). morphemes are overwhelmingly exactly one syllable in length and 2). syllables are easily distinguished from one another. Chinese is, in fact, an analytic (that is, isolating) language in which what morphology there is is expressed by stringing phonologically-distinct morphemes together.

The fact that modern Chinese is logographic is made abundantly clear by Figure 26. Notice that despite being written with different characters, a large number of morphemes are homophonous. Obviously, the character stands for a meaningful morpheme not just a syllable, a phonological unit.