

## **SIL Electronic Book Reviews 2014-002**

### **The idea of writing: Writing across borders**

Edited by Alex de Voogt and Joachim Friedrich Quack

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### **Summary of contents**

Most of us tend to think of writing systems (both scripts and spelling conventions) as belonging to a specific language or group of languages. And such they generally are. But how did they get that way? For most languages, writing originally came not from within the language community, but was borrowed and adapted from some neighboring language. The subtitle “Writing Across Borders” is important here; all the papers in this volume deal with writing systems that influenced or were influenced by other writing systems or adapted by languages other than that which they were originally designed for. The practice of writing has “crossed borders” of languages, scripts, phonemic systems, and ideologies. This volume is a collection of ten papers on writing systems that came out of a conference on the topic, with most of the writing systems coming from ancient history and cultures.

The book begins with Alex de Voogt’s chapter introducing the book: “Invention and Borrowing in the Development and Dispersal of Writing Systems.” He asserts that a complete script is necessary for a writing system—one cannot successfully use an incomplete system. So when a language is written for the first time (unlike the few historical cases of independent inventions of a writing system—Chinese, cuneiform, Meso-American—a script is largely borrowed from some existing script. Of course, when symbols are borrowed, the users may not assign the same phonetic values to a symbol as the original orthography did. He presents a typology in which the sign shape, the sign value, or the type of system—three logically independent factors—are examined, and case studies of languages which borrowed these are noted. He ends with brief notes on the papers that comprise the remainder of the volume.

Reinhard Lehmann’s paper “27–30–22–26– How many Letters Needs an Alphabet? The Case of Semitic” starts with the fundamental question of “What is a letter?” This would seem to be obvious, but he points out some complexities of Arabic, such as whether the Lam-Alif ligature is a separate letter and whether the diacritic marks should count. Lehmann traces the history of Semitic writing in detail, starting from the Old South Arabic script of the second millennium BC with 29 graphemes and what is called the “Halaḥama” sequence of these. Ugaritic had 27 signs originally, but added three more, to yield 30 in the Ugaritic Long Alphabet, and also some

evidence of a 22-symbol alphabet. There is controversy over whether the inventory was augmented or reduced. Lehman favors the reduction hypothesis, while noting the cost that it would not have represented the phonemic system fully. He also explains how the Phoenicians spread this 22-symbol alphabet, including how it worked out in Hebrew. He opposes Daniels' claim that Semitic orthographic systems were an *abjad* (a symbol system containing only consonants) and defends the idea that these Semitic writing systems really are alphabets. He then turns to address the central question of a title—does a language need vowels in its alphabet? The answer is that it depends on the language: Semitic languages with their severely restricted vowel inventories can function without independent vowel graphemes, but Greek, which adopted this writing system, has a greater number of vowels that are much more unpredictable, and therefore requires vowels in its alphabet.

In “Nubian Graffiti Messages and the History of Writing in the Sudanese Nile Basin,” Alex de Voogt and Hans-Jörg Döhla review the history of several scripts and writings in the Nile Basin before moving to their main topic, the use of Arabic script for the Nubian language on Sai Island. This manifests itself in the highly public graffiti on walls and vehicles. This system has developed without official support, and has no single inventor or sponsor. It helps that Arabic has some letters representing sounds that don't occur in Nubian, and also that Nubian has some sounds that don't occur in Arabic, thus paving the way for Nubians to use some Arabic letters for non-Arabic sounds (e.g., the Nubian palatal nasal is consistently written with the Arabic letter for a palatal fricative). The whole system seems limited to graffiti, not any school or other personal use.

“About ‘Short’ Names of Letters,” by Konstantin Pozdniakov examines a question almost never consider: why do we label letters the way we do? Why do we say (in English) [bi] for <b>, but [ɛm] for <m>? Names for letters often originate as real and entire words starting with that letter, e.g., “delta” in Greek. When the name is shortened, some remnant of that is left, but also there is pressure from speakers who just believe a letter should be pronounced a certain way. Pozdniakov shows there are more factors than these obvious ones. He shows Tahitian is irregular in how it shortens names of letters and that Greek never had “short names.” In Latin, we find some systematicity, in that no consonants which have names with a [VC] name structure are stops ([ef, el, em, en, er, es]), [Ca] structure is used for velars, and the rest are [Ce] in structure. He shows how several Romance languages have adapted these to their particular phonology (and the reader of this volume will of course see the application to English letters’ “short names,” though the phonetics of these names have been modified through the centuries), and interestingly, how Russian “short names” for their *Cyrillic* letters are virtually identical with phonetically corresponding Latin ones. In contrast, the names for vowels in the Austronesian language Drehu all have a [CV] form, but with the choice of [V] being apparently random.

In “Early Adaptations of the Korean Script to Render Foreign Languages,” Sven Osterkamp shows how the Han'gŭl script was used even in the 1400s to write Chinese and Japanese, and other Asian languages (Manchu, Mongolian) soon after. Adaptations included the doubling of voiceless Han'gŭl stop symbols to represent the Chinese voiced stops. Other adaptations were needed to represent labiodentals and retroflex sounds. Circles and other diacritics have been used, not only for Chinese labiodentals, but for other languages as well, with some diacritics borrowed directly from Japanese. This chapter details the necessary adaptations.

In another study on Korean writing, “Han’gŭl Reform Movement in the Twentieth Century: Roman Pressure on Korean Writing,” Thorsten Traulsen notes that Han’gŭl letters are often combined to form square frames with compound characters. To simplify these compound characters, which multiplied enormously and put a strain on printing processes, a movement developed in the early twentieth century by Chu Si-Gyŏng and his followers to write *all* characters individually, left-to-right, on a single line (“online” writing). Further proposals in the following decades included cursive writing, with rounded characters and capital letters. These all had some influence from Roman or other Western sources. In more recent years, the square cell has been modified by use of various font designs that can be used on a typewriter, less radically departing from the square cell than online writing did.

“The Character of the Indian Karoṣṭhī Script and the ‘Sanskrit Revolution’: A Writing System Between Identity and Assimilation,” by Ingo Strauch, deals with the history of the early Karoṣṭhī script used in northwest India for the Gāndhārī language, and how a rival script, the Brāhmī, eventually overtook and obliterated it, becoming the mother of all South Asian scripts. Strauch details the characteristics of Karoṣṭhī and how it was modified in the time of Aśoka (approximately 250 BC) and afterwards. A weakness was that it tended toward phonetic rather than phonemic representation, thus inhibiting standardization. Around the turn of the millennium, Sanskrit was used in the spread of Hinduism, and Strauch details how both Karoṣṭhī and Brāhmī made modifications to accommodate this language. Gāndhārī’s use as a lingua franca declined in the third century AD, and Brāhmī, more suited to Sanskrit, took over.

In the brief “Symmetry and Asymmetry, Chinese Writing in Japan: The Case of Kojiki (712),” Aldo Tollini traces the introduction of writing in Japan in the fifth or sixth century AD using Chinese characters, and sketches the problems these Chinese characters created when applied to a different language. Japanese morphology created problems for the Chinese ideographs designed for the isolating Chinese language. Another problem was that Japanese and Chinese lexicons did not match: Japanese had words with no Chinese equivalent, and the reverse, or there were more than one equivalent. The Kojiki document, the first attempt of extended writing in Japan, is used to illustrate this.

“Writing Semitic with Cuneiform Script. The Interaction of Sumerian and Akkadian Orthography in the Second Half of the Third Millennium BC” is Theo Krispijn’s contribution. Akkadian, as a Semitic language, has a number of related languages which provide evidence as to what sounds existed in Akkadian, while Sumerian, being a language isolate, is correspondingly more difficult to analyze. Both languages use phonograms (symbols representing sounds) and logograms (symbols representing concepts). The phonograms of Sargonic Akkadian, pre-Sargonic Sumerian, Ebla Akkadian, and Sumerian in Ebla are presented in extensive detail, which is the bulk of the chapter. (The actual cuneiform symbols are not pictured, but the sound values of the symbols are.) Krispijn summarizes how the systems varied, e.g., that closed syllables were not consistently written in pre-Sargonic Sumerian, but were in the other systems, and that they treated long vowels differently. He concludes not only with a listing of the differences in these representations, but also with the conclusion that Sumerian as a language substrate strongly influenced the pronunciation of Babylonian Akkadian.

“Old Wine in New Wineskins? How to Write Classical Egyptian Rituals in More Modern Writing Systems” by Joachim Quack is the last chapter. By “more modern,” Quack is referring to the demotic script of Egyptian and the Greek script of about two millennia ago or more. When compared to the even older hieroglyphics of two millennia before *that*, the term becomes accurate. Some rituals (hymns, petitions to gods, purification rituals, etc.) persisted largely unchanged for millennia. When demotic arose, rituals were transliterated from the hieroglyphic system into that. Sort of. The rituals’ transfer into demotic resembles neither normal demotic writing nor, when transliterated back into hieroglyphics, does it resemble the normal hieroglyphics. Some adjustments were made. The demotic orthography for such rituals has been termed “unetymological” by scholars, since the demotic sign/s for one word is often used to write an unrelated word, and Quack gives many examples in his paper. Reasons for this are still unclear, though Quack presents several possibilities, and oral performance of rituals was certainly a factor. The use of Greek in the first and second century, an even clearer way to record phonetic pronunciation, AD, is consistent with this train of logic.

## Evaluation

This is a book which is rich in data. Many of the chapters give a very detailed, seemingly exhaustive, listing of the writing symbols and phenomena they are discussing, and this makes this book a good reference for those interested in those topics. A lack of supporting data is not an issue in this volume! For some papers, this seems to be the main goal, rather than discussing implications. Since differences in languages almost always involve differences in culture and society as well, there are necessarily sociolinguistic and cultural factors involved in each “crossing” presented. Due to the great time depth involved in most of the chapters, these can only be discussed in a summary fashion, with Traulsen’s “Han’gŭl Reform Movement in the Twentieth Century: Roman Pressure on Korean Writing” being the notable exception, since the movement is well documented from twentieth century sources.

The audience for this volume would be not only those interested in how writing systems cross borders (linguistic and political) in general, but also those interested in the particular languages and areas of the world covered, especially those in ancient times.

A Subject Index, Language/Script Index, and Author Index are included. Interestingly, the Author Index is the longest, perhaps reflecting the many citations in each chapter. It is a well-edited volume (I noticed only one typo) and well-bound.