

Writing systems: an annotated bibliography

LIS 407

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Introduction

This annotated bibliography is written for the general undergraduate or graduate reader who wishes to learn about the nature and origins of written language and the wide variety of writing systems, both living and dead, that have been used to represent the world's languages.

In deciding what to include in this bibliography, I considered primarily four types of works: compendious general works with extensive bibliographies or collections of links; works that tell personal stories; works that convey practical information on learning and using scripts; and works that spark the imagination. Special emphasis is placed on obscure or 'exotic' scripts that may be of particular interest to the curious, and to unusual uses and interpretations of scripts. A few works that address the phenomenon of written language generally are included, but for the most part the focus is on the scripts themselves. Many things that deserved mention were omitted merely because of limits of time and space; I hope to build a larger bibliography – with shorter annotations! – in the future.

Works marked with a star (★) are represented in a unified index that follows the bibliography proper. This selective index to the scripts and other notable topics covered in the cited works is intended as a finding aid and to make up, in some measure, for the shortcomings of some of the individual works' indexes.

General works

- ★ DANIELS, P. T., & BRIGHT, W. (Eds.). (1996). *The world's writing systems*. New York: Oxford University Press.

This exceptional book, with 79 contributors and nearly 900 pages of text, is a comprehensive treatment of modern and ancient writing systems from around the world.

The book is organized into thirteen parts: Grammatology; Ancient Near Eastern Writing Systems; Decipherment; East Asian Writing Systems; European Writing Systems; South Asian Writing Systems; Southeast Asian Writing Systems; Middle Eastern Writing Systems; Scripts Invented in Modern Times; Use and Adaptation of Scripts; Sociolinguistics and Scripts; Secondary Notation Systems; and Imprinting and Printing. Each of these begins with a brief introduction and continues with one to twelve articles averaging about ten pages in length. The articles are organized into sections, each of which contains its own, often extensive, bibliography. For example, the second part (Ancient Near Eastern Writing Systems) is comprised of twelve articles organized into seven sections: The First Civilizations, Mesopotamian Cuneiform, Egyptian Writing, Epigraphic Semitic Scripts, Anatolian Hieroglyphics, Aegean Scripts, and Old Persian Cuneiform.

A nine-page section at the beginning of the book describes the affiliations and scholarly efforts of the book's contributors. Individual articles are consistently well written and make good use of tables showing the individual elements of scripts. A typical article is organized using headings such as Historical background, Development, The symbols, Diacritical marks and punctuation, Sound-symbol correspondences, and Distinctive characteristics. Many articles describe regional or stylistic variations, changes a script has undergone over time, and relations among scripts.

The book is flawed by an exhaustive but frustratingly unhelpful index that generally fails to distinguish substantive discussions of scripts and other topics from passing mentions of them; it appears to have been generated by a computer rather than a human being. The index is followed by two pages of corrigenda that were produced too late to be incorporated into the body of the text.

- ★ AGER, Simon. (2005). *Omniglot: a guide to written language*. Retrieved April 28, 2005, from <http://www.omniglot.com/>

This Web site, consisting of about 700 pages, is a treasure trove for curious readers looking for practical information on alphabets and other writing systems.

The site is divided into nine sections: What is writing?; Abjads; Alphabets; Syllabic alphabets; Syllabaries; Complex writing systems; Undeciphered writing systems; Alternative writing systems (logographic and other non-traditional scripts); and Your writing systems (scripts invented by the site's users).

The bulk of the site consists of descriptions of scripts and languages, with a few other communication systems tossed in for good measure (e.g., Morse Code and maritime signal flags). Each of these is given its own page – 487 of them as of this writing – that consists of a brief description of the language or script, a chart showing the letters in the script and their pronunciations (in the International Phonetic Alphabet), a brief sample text (most commonly the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights), and links to sources of further information on the Web – in many cases, including links to freely downloadable fonts that let readers try out the script on their own computers.

The number of individual pages in the site is somewhat misleading, since a large number of pages describe the particularities of languages whose writing systems are based strictly on the

Roman alphabet. For example, Danish and Norwegian are treated separately even though they use exactly the same alphabet. This greatly benefits users looking for language-specific information, but may lead some readers to confuse languages with the scripts in which they're written.

Ager provides an alphabetical list of links to all of these pages and a separate search page in which one can search the full text of the site via Google: for example, a search for 'vertical' turned up 27 matching pages.

Omniglot.com is noteworthy for its inclusion of recently invented scripts, including the Klingon alphabet and the Tengwar and Cirth scripts of J. R. R. Tolkien. Links to the pages for these scripts, which number about fifty, are listed alphabetically on a separate page; they are also included in the general list of internal links, which unfortunately makes no distinction between fictional and non-fictional writing systems.

The Web site is consistently organized; individual articles are generally well written and, though brief, convey enough information to give the reader a clear picture of the script. By all accounts the work of just one person, the site has been around since 1998 is currently updated on a regular basis, generally once every week – for example, during the first four months of 2005 a total of 27 language and script pages were added.

★ DIRINGER, D. (1948). *The alphabet: A key to the history of mankind*. New York: Philosophical Library.

Though somewhat dated, this book presents a host of information on well-known and obscure scripts from around the world and through the ages – from cuneiform, hieroglyphics, and the still-undeciphered Indus Valley script to the Chinese characters, medieval scriptal varieties ("hands") of the Roman alphabet, and specimens of modern typefaces.

The author devotes 26 pages to the runes of Northern Europe and the Celtic ogham – two families of writing systems whose predominantly straight lines were particularly well suited for inscriptions on wood and stone – and 73 pages to the scripts of South Asia that descend from the ancient Brahmi syllabary.

The book is noteworthy for its large collection of illustrations, including photographs of inscriptions and extensive examples of both familiar and little-known scripts.

Conceptions and interpretations of writing

- ★ DRUCKER, J. (1995). *The alphabetic labyrinth: The letters in history and imagination*. London: Thames & Hudson.

This illustration-rich book relates the stories of people's long fascination with writing, its origins and significance, and the fascinating, bizarre, absurd, and provocative ideas and imaginings that have resulted.

Drucker's focus is on mystical and philosophical conceptions of written language, from the ancient Greeks through medieval times to the present. The book begins with a summary of the theories of the origins of writing and goes on to describe, in fascinating detail, efforts to find mystical significance in the letters of various writing systems, most notably the Greek, Roman, and Hebrew alphabets.

To illustrate the philosophical conceptions of written language, Drucker recounts a dialog of Plato which puts forth the idea that letters have inherent meanings in and of themselves. For example, the Greek letter ρ (*rho*) is considered to be indicative of rapid motion because of its trilled pronunciation and its use in words with meanings such as 'tremble,' 'crush,' and 'strike.'

Later conceptions of the alphabet ascribe to it the power to injure or heal; this power was thought to have a divine or mystical basis. Drucker goes on to describe the efforts of alchemists to harness the power of the written word in their search for a way to transmute base metals into gold, and the use of increasingly bold uses of typography by modern advertisers to engage and persuade the viewer.

One particularly interesting part of the book describes the many attempts over the centuries to explain the ultimate origin of the Hebrew, Roman, and other alphabets – for example, the imaginative reconstruction of ‘celestial alphabets’ reflecting the shapes of the constellations, Renaissance rationalizations of the Roman alphabet that explain the shapes of its letters in terms of the dimensions of the human body, and ‘visible speech’ theories that propose that letter forms reflect the various configurations of the speech organs as they produce the sounds the letters represent.

A chapter on Kabbalah details the search for mystical knowledge hidden within the Hebrew scripture, including the use of *gematria* – calculations involving the numerical values assigned to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet that permitted the ‘discovery’ of hidden prophecy.

Ancient scripts and the history of writing

- ★ GELB, I. J. (1963). *A study of writing* (Rev. ed.). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

The emphasis in this book is on the development of written language and writing systems in the ancient world.

The first chapter introduces the reader to the wide variety of means of written communication and sets it in opposition to speech and other forms of aural communication. Speech, Gelb states, is by its nature limited in time and space, while written language is timeless

and transportable. He goes on to a discussion of rock drawings, which he sees as constituting forms of visual communication that served communicative and recording purposes without being writing itself. He further distinguishes writing *per se* from identifying marks – such as mason’s marks or cattle brands – and from tallying devices such as the Inca *quipus* and mnemonic ‘writing’ that enabled one to recall a message or story but did not contain a transcription of speech; all of these, he states, may be forerunners of writing, but nothing more. Regarding the glyphs of pre-Colombian Middle America, Gelb makes the assertion, disproved since the publication of this work, that ‘even a superficial knowledge of the inscriptions of the Aztecs and Mayas is enough to convince oneself that they could never have developed into real writing without foreign influence.’

Other anachronisms include the claim that there is a ‘universal order’ to the development of scripts; for example, that syllabaries never develop from alphabets. Still, the book is valuable for its many illustrations and provocative discussion of the ancient history and ultimate origins of writing.

ROBINSON, A. (1995). *The story of writing*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Notable for its large, crisp illustrations – many in color – this book is a lively and engaging exploration of the world’s scripts and their uses from ancient to modern times. The book’s 217 pages are divided into three thematically organized sections – How writing works, Extinct writing, and Living writing – each containing a handful of chapters of fifteen to twenty pages.

Robinson devotes 88 pages to extinct scripts, paying special attention to the Egyptian hieroglyphics, the cuneiform scripts of Sumeria, Babylonia, and Old Persia, the Linear B script, and (most recently) the Mayan glyphs. The book brings ancient scripts to life by telling the stories of the people of the 18th to 20th centuries who deciphered them, and by illustrating the

everyday use of writing. For example, Robinson shows a Sumerian clay tablet used for accounting purposes, analyzing and explaining the significance of many of the tablet's numeric and other symbols (which he labels 'proto-writing'). Where other authors might yield to the temptation to 'fill in the blanks' with speculation about the remaining symbols, Robinson makes no such attempt; this is typical of the book's approach, focusing on the questions raised by ancient writings and challenging readers to consider the possible answers.

A later chapter explores the development of the Chinese characters and the art of Chinese calligraphy, and presents a clear explanation of the complexities of the Japanese three-part writing system.

The final chapter of the book, 'From hieroglyphs to alphabets – and back?', discusses modern applications of pictographic or logographic symbols for communication – for example, the symbols devised for use in airports and other transportation centers and the familiar signs made to represent the many sporting events of the Olympics. As Robinson points out, these are intended to transcend barriers of language and culture and to be 'capable of expressing thoughts more subtly, humanly and mercurially than phonographic symbols [i.e., the individual elements of scripts], which are seen as artificial, even inherently authoritarian' (p. 212). Though he rejects this view, Robinson similarly rejects the older view that 'the alphabet' is the pinnacle of a steady evolution from primitive scripts, the best possible writing system, and the hallmark of advanced civilizations.

The book concludes with a topically organized bibliography, an exhaustive annotated list of illustrations, and a brief but useful index.

Writing systems of Asia and the Pacific

KANEDA, F. (1989). *Easy hiragana: first steps to reading and writing basic Japanese*. Lincolnwood, Ill.: Passport Books.

This is a slim manual on writing hiragana, the cursive syllabary used to complement the use of Chinese characters in writing Japanese. For each letter, Kaneda provides an illustration of how to write it, including the all-important stroke order. The reader practices by overwriting light gray hiragana characters and whole words set in boxes on the page. The emphasis is on writing the letters clearly and correctly.

FISCHER, S. R. (1997). *Rongorongo: The Easter Island script*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

This thick tome – 560 pages of text, 102 pages of notes, a 6-page glossary, 41 pages of references, and a 5-page index – describes the quest by Western missionaries and scholars to ‘decipher’ the inscriptions found on Rapanui (also known as Easter Island), a small island in the South Pacific. The rongorongo symbols – comprised of dozens of human- and animal-like forms mixed with cartoon-like abstract shapes – have stirred the imagination of Western missionaries, explorers, and scholars since the mid-19th century. The inscriptions have been a source of great controversy over the years, and there isn’t even agreement as to whether the rongorongo constituted a form of writing or instead had some other symbolic or magical significance.

In the first half of the book, Fischer relates the story of the many attempts to decipher the rongorongo and offers an account of their use by – and significance to – the modern inhabitants of Rapanui.

The second half of the book is devoted to detailed documentation of the rongorongo themselves. Fischer uses 100 pages to present the inscriptions, providing photographs, clear

transcriptions of the weathered glyphs into regularly formed outlines, and physical descriptions such as their dimensions and the types of wood in which they were inscribed.

Writing systems of Africa and the Middle East

OYLER, D. W. (2002). Re-inventing oral tradition: the modern epic of Souleymane Kanté. *Research in African literatures*, 33, 75–93.

Oyler recounts the story of Souleymane Kanté, who created a syllabary for the Mande languages of West Africa in 1949 as a response to European authors' dismissal of the importance of African languages and to the unsuitability of the Arabic and Roman scripts to his own Mande language, Maninka. Kanté created his script, which he named N'ko – meaning 'I say' in each of the Mande languages – to enable the recording of Mande history, knowledge, literature, and customs by the languages' speakers themselves. Kanté went on to transcribe religious texts written in Arabic into N'ko and to create a dictionary of Maninka. For these 'act[s] of defiance against the intellectual and cultural denigration of Africans' (p. 83), he became – and remains – a cultural hero.

Writing systems of the Americas

COE, M. D. (1999). *Breaking the Maya code* (Rev. Ed.). New York: Thames & Hudson.

COE, M. D., & Van Stone, M. (2001). *Reading the Maya glyphs*. London: Thames & Hudson.

The first of these two books tells the story of the efforts of scholars to decipher the Mayan script of Mexico and Central America; the second describes the script for readers with no previous specialized knowledge – 'students, tourists, and armchair travelers.'

In *Breaking the Maya code*, Coe presents the multi-faceted stories of the many scholars and determined amateurs – among them Coe himself, an expert on Mesoamerican cultures – that

struggled to make sense of the Mayan glyphs from the mid-1900s to the present. Biographical sketches are mixed with accounts of ancient and modern Mayan culture; tantalizing clues about the nature of the glyphs lead to wild speculation and unexpected breakthroughs; sound theories end in mistaken interpretations; an expedition to a site in Guatemala leads to mishap and death.

Excursions of the imagination

TOLKIEN, J. R. R. (1965). *The return of the king*. In Tolkien, J. R. R. *The lord of the rings* (Collector's Ed.). Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.

At the end of this famous work of fantasy, Tolkien presents a number of appendices containing additional information about the people, places, and events of the book. Appendix E describes and illustrates the two alphabets used in *The lord of the rings*: the *Tengwar*, a cursive script, and the *Cirth*, a runic alphabet. In devising the Cirth, Tolkien adapted some of the forms – but not the pronunciations – of the Germanic runes; he alludes to this in the text of the appendix: '[The Cirth] were long used only for inscribing names and brief memorials upon wood or stone. To that origin they owe their angular shapes, very similar to the runes of our times [i.e., the Germanic runes], though they differed from these in details and were wholly different in arrangement' (p. 395). Tolkien credits an individual (Rúmil, who exists only within the history of Tolkien's imagined world) with the invention of the Tengwar.

Both alphabets are formulated in such a way that phonetic affinities are indicated formally in the letter forms. For example, the dental consonants **t**, **d**, and **n** are denoted by the visually related letters **ṭ**, **ḏ**, and **ṇ** in exactly the same way that the labial consonants **p**, **b**, and **m** are by **Ṗ**, **Ḃ**, and **Ṃ**.

SERAFINI, L. (1983). *Codex Seraphinianus*. New York: Abbeville Press.

A mysterious, uncanny, and often humorous book written by an Italian architect in an unknown script, *Codex Seraphinianus* appears to be an encyclopedia of a world both like and unlike our own. Its handwritten text of inscrutable cursive letters is lavishly illustrated with fanciful color drawings of improbable sights: fantastic creatures of all shapes and sizes, multicolored organic machines with no clear purpose, landscapes human-like forms with absurd appendages – wheels, pens, a miniature forest of hair.

A section of the book that appears to be concerned with language depicts the many forms the book's script takes – letter forms emblazoned in rainbows or formed of cracks in stone, literal speech bubbles floating up from a speaker's mouth, miniature worlds revealed in the loops of letters. A drawing of a Rosetta stone-like artifact – complete with a disheveled graduate student who points out its features with a huge misshapen knitting needle – teases the reader with the possibility of deciphering the book's script, but presents as translation aid only an inscription in yet another mysterious script.

This is a book that cannot be read as a book, a magnificent non-text that allows the reader to imagine meaning where there is none. Or is there?

Fonts

DEVROYE, L. (n.d.). *On snot and fonts*. Retrieved May 3, 2005, from <http://jeff.cs.mcgill.ca/~luc/fonts.html>

This Web site contains links to information on hundreds of fonts – a large number of them of them downloadable free of charge – for dozens of languages and scripts around the world. Devroye warns that many links are likely to be dead, but the sheer number of them means that

there are plenty of live links to follow. This is an excellent starting point for anyone interested in actually *using* the scripts described in the other cited works.

Index

This index includes selected scripts, languages, and other topics found in the works marked with a star (★) above – some of whose indexes are quite poor. The index is not meant to be exhaustive, but points only to substantive occurrences of significant terms and to tables and illustrations of scripts. Each set of page references to a single work is preceded the author or editor’s name appear in small caps – for example, DRUCKER 256 refers to page 256 of J. Drucker’s *The alphabetic labyrinth*. Web sites are referenced without page numbers or partial URLs, and some terms with variant spellings have been regularized.

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