

## (Re)inventing writing: stories and histories

LIS 470

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In this paper I explore language users' conceptions of the significance of their own scripts – and of the scripts of other languages – outside of their mundane function as a means of communication parallel or subordinate to speech.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, I draw upon accounts of three essentially creative acts: the creation of a new script for an existing language; the reinterpretation or reinvention of a script that results from looking through – or beyond – its surface to see some hidden meaning; and the creation of a script simultaneous with the creation of the imaginary language for which it is used.<sup>2</sup> I do so, I hope to draw out the questions people ask about what scripts do, their ideas of how scripts come to exist, and their theories of what scripts *mean*.

I begin by examining some theories of the origins of writing – in particular, the alphabets commonly described as descendants of the Phoenician alphabet. Next, I present accounts of the creation of scripts for languages that had no indigenous written form, ranging from myths and legends to the telling or retelling of stories by the modern-day people who use (or used) a script or by the script inventor themselves. In the third part of the paper, I explore attempts to discover hidden meaning in existing scripts, elevating them from mere transcriptional devices to meaningful systems of divine or arcane knowledge in their own right. Finally, I present three cases of scripts created in conjunction with fictional languages, in hopes that these imaginative acts might shed some light on the meaning of writing. I conclude with a few observations on the three kinds of creative acts and what they might tell us about the significance of scripts.

### The origins of writing

Authors in the Western tradition have proposed a great many theories to account for the origins of the scripts of the ancient and medieval world. Though some of these concern the development of scripts in China, South Asia, and the Americas, most of the debate has been focused on the origin of 'the alphabet.' Depending on the author and context, this term may be used to denote the Roman, Greek, Hebrew, or other alphabets.<sup>3</sup> More commonly, however, it refers to all alphabets collectively, with the presupposition that there is only *one* alphabet or that each alphabet is a manifestation of the same underlying system – or, at the very least, that all alphabets are members of the same family.

Ideas about what events and conditions might have led to these acts of creation – whether the unsuitability of existing scripts, the need to correct a perceived cultural imbalance, or visions or messages from the gods – all have some bearing on the significance of writing. Much more attention, however, has been paid to the details of what scripts 'evolved' into what other scripts and how they are all related.

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<sup>1</sup> By 'script' I mean a system of visual representation of language. Although the term is often applied specifically to a system of letters or characters used in writing by hand – as opposed to those appearing in printed form – I prefer it to the more general term 'writing system' because of the latter's various, overlapping senses. A 'writing system' may be a system for the visual (or tactile) representation of language – more or less faithfully rendering speech – or, more generally speaking, it may be any system of written human communication, whether linked specifically to spoken language or not (Harris, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Though the creation of secret codes and private scripts is an interesting subject in its own right, I will not discuss them here.

<sup>3</sup> Properly speaking, the Hebrew script is, of course, an abjad rather than an alphabet. But it has generally been regarded as an alphabet nonetheless.

This concern with the lineage of ‘the alphabet’ rests largely upon the supposition that writing is the hallmark or even the foundation of civilization – or at least of ‘our’ civilization:

We live in an age of rapid technological change in which we feel the underpinnings of our society and culture are constantly being uprooted. This might explain the present concern for ‘roots’ that grips contemporary thought. This book is about ‘roots’ too, those of Western civilization, which we shall trace back to our unique writing system, the phonetic alphabet. (Logan, 1986, p. 17).

To understand where we come from, the story goes, we must understand the history of our writing.

For example, Gelb (1963) presents the now-deprecated view that alphabetic writing is the culmination of centuries of evolution. His family tree–like table of the ‘stages of the development of writing’ (p. 191) shows a progression, from top to bottom, from no writing at all to alphabetic writing. In this view, the development of scripts is the story of a family viewed over a great span of time, in which each generation yields to the next. Only a few aged relatives – the scripts of China and Indian, say – cling stubbornly to life; the future belongs to the alphabet.

The 18th through mid-20th centuries saw a number of attempts to bring scripts together into a ‘family tree.’ The authority of these theories depended in large measure on their author’s ability to make the reader accept the plausibility of a visual progression of changes, so their works were often filled with charts and tables of letter forms in many scripts arranged so that more closely related scripts were positioned next to each other. Over time, as more inscriptions were examined and interested in the history of writing waxed, these diagrams became more plentiful and more complex.

For example, Diringer’s (1948) Figure 98 (p. 196) presents, in the familiar form of parallel columns of letters, two theories of the origin of the alphabet. Each subfigure shows selected Egyptian hieroglyphics and ‘Semitic’ or ‘North Semitic’ letters; one adds a column hieratic forms as well. Though presumably there was more to the theories’ authors than the mere presentation of visual forms, these illustrations were still central to the propositions that their authors expounded.

### **Inventing scripts**

I turn now to stories of the creation of new scripts by the speakers of languages that formerly had none – or whose scripts, imported from without, were ill-suited to the purpose.<sup>4</sup> These stories challenge the traditional picture of the development of scripts as a sort of pseudo-Darwinian race in which the winners – of a contest played out over centuries – are prestigious scripts such as the Roman alphabet, with little room left for losers.

In the process I hope to raise the questions of what people are doing when they invent a script – what motivates them? where do they get the idea? what is their purpose?

As we’ll see, a story is needed not just to relate the details of a script’s origin, but to account – in essence – for its pedigree. Many stories attribute the creation of a new script to a divine intervention, a mystical vision, or a dream with special significance; the resulting act of creation is often carried out in a remote location or an extreme state of mind. In some stories, a king or other figure of societal authority is directly or indirectly responsible for the script’s creation. In others, the inventor is concerned with the preservation of his language and culture. Often, these factors are combined in a single story.

Whatever the case, the person who creates the script, or through whom the script is created, by the rightness of his act, earns it a stamp of approval that imbues the script with legitimacy and a power beyond its ability merely to encode speech.

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<sup>4</sup> Because it’s not feasible to catalog every known instance of the creation of a new script, I limit the examples, for the most part, to little-known scripts created in the last 100 years or so.

*The Bamum script of King Njoya*

Jeffreys (1952) relates the story of Njoya, a king of the Bamum in the French Cameroons during the last decade of the 19th century:

Njoya was a remarkable man. He had seen at various times, as a result of his people returning from trading expeditions, Arabic script, German script and the Latin or English script. Here were three different languages, each with its own script. Bamum, his language, was a fourth language different from the other three but at present without a script or alphabet. He appears to have reflected upon this matter for some time. Then inspiration came to him in a dream. His *History of the Laws and Customs of his People*, written in his script, describes the birth of this invention ... (Jeffreys, 1952, p. 429)

According to King Njoya's history, a man in his dream directed him to draw the image of a hand on a board, wash it, and drink the water. Upon waking, Njoya did as he was directed, and it was then that the idea of creating a script came to him.

The King now summoned many of his courtiers and told them to mark out many things and to give names to all these things so that the result would be a book. In this way man's speech could be inaudibly recorded. (Jeffreys, 1952, p. 429)

The courtiers replied that no one would understand the signs they came up with. The king agreed and decided that while the courtiers would make signs, he himself would assign meanings to them. Njoya's history continues:

The King now collected all these signs, and called in Moma and Isiah (two Mohammedan Mallams) to help him plan. Five times he consulted with these two and by then understood enough. When Njoya consulted with them again the problem was solved. Then he called together many of his courtiers and taught them the signs. Many people learnt and King Njoya was very pleased. (Jeffreys, 1952, p. 429)

*Pahawh Hmong*

Smalley, Bang, and Yang (1990) tell the story of Shong Lue, a poor uneducated farmer in Northern Laos who taught the Hmong people a new script. As a child, Shong Lue had a dream in which two men instructed him to teach the Hmong people an alphabet that they claimed to have already given him. Shong Lue woke up puzzled, knowing of no such alphabet; it was only years later, in 1959, that anything more came of this:

Shong Lue had prepared a new mountain rice field by clearing the jungle in the usual Hmong practice, and during the fourth month, after the jungle had been cut and burned, he and Pang Xiong [his wife] went to clean off the unburned residue ... On the morning of the third day of going out to the field in this fashion, Shong Lue told his wife that he was going to leave early to hunt squirrels around the field. She was to prepare breakfast and bring it along when it was ready. (Smalley, Bang, & Yang, 1990, p. 19)

On her way to the field, Pang Xiong was knocked unconscious by a whirlwind. Waking up some hours later, she returned to her husband and told him what had happened; Shong Lue decided they should see a shaman about the matter, but before he could decide which one to go to, a voice spoke to him:

You do not need a shaman. I am sending your two brothers to come to help you, that's all. You must not be afraid. (Smalley, Bang, & Yang, 1990, p. 20)

The voice went on to assign a task to Shong Lue: he must build a temple and make an offering, not working in the fields and not sleeping with his wife or smoking opium till the task was done. The voice went on:

Make ink from the indigo plant, and paper from bamboo, and have them ready. When that is done, people will come and bring you the Pahawh. (Smalley, Bang, & Yang, 1990, p. 20)

Shong Lue began to worry that he was losing his sanity, but the voice continued:

I am God your father, who sent you to be born on earth as a human being. You are not crazy, but you must do what I tell you to do. (Smalley, Bang, & Yang, 1990, p. 20)

Shong Lue hesitated, worrying about the time that would be lost and how his family would eat in the meantime, but the voice reassured him:

Don't worry about such matters. I will send three kings to come and help you build the field shelter, plant the seed rice and weed the fields. Three days from now you just carry enough seed rice to the field and come back home. (Smalley, Bang, & Yang, 1990, p. 20)

Shong Lue followed the instructions he was given, and when his preparations were finally done he began to smoke the opium that had been forbidden him. Presently,

... two young men appeared in the bedroom doorway.

Shong Lue called out a greeting: 'Are you here, the two of you?'

'Yes, we are here teach you the Pahawh Hmong and the Pahawh Kmu,' they replied. (Smalley, Bang, & Yang, 1990, p. 21)

The two men showed Shong Lue how to make a bamboo pen and began to teach him the new alphabet. Every night for nine months, after his wife was asleep they came back to teach him more. Emissaries from heaven provided him with money to pay for food for his family. At the end of his education, his wife gave birth to twin boys.

Later, a written message from the two young men who had taught him the script caused him to remember that he was one of three sons of God sent to earth to teach the Hmong people the Pahawh. In fulfilling his mission, Shong Lue becoming revered as a prophet and messiah. In 1971, the government of Laos assassinated him because of his growing influence.

#### *The Toma script*

Joffre (1943) relates the story of the creation of the Toma script of French Guinea, said to have happened in the early 1930s:

I discovered recently among [the Toma] a syllabic script ... distinct from both the Vai and the Mende systems ... The informants I was able to question explained to me the principal discoverer of the script was a certain Wido Zogbo, of the village of Bwékéta, Liberia, and a labourer in the Firestone Company, an American firm. Being in his village, say the natives, Wido decided to go to Dukôlô to buy some thread. After shopping he returned home and gave the thread to his friend Mariba to have it woven. Then in his home, such ideas visited him: 'God takes no pity on the Tomas? Other races know writing. Only the Tomas remain in their ignorance.' God answered him: 'I fear that when you are able to express yourselves you shall no more respect for the beliefs and customs of your race.' 'Not at all,' answered Wido, 'we shall still keep living as in past days. I promise it.' 'If such is the case,' said God, 'I am willing to grant you the knowledge, but take care never to show anything of it to a woman. Then Wido with the aid of Mariba, invented the script. (Joffre, 1943, p. 110–111)

Other versions of the story included the participation of a third person – a woman, no less – in the script's creation.

#### *The 'Phags pa script*

Van der Kuijp (1996) attributes the creation of the 'Phags pa script – or, more accurately, its adaptation from the *dbu can* form of the Tibetan script – to the monk 'Phags pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan, a Buddhist patriarch of the 13th century. Ordered by the Emperor Kublai Khan to create a script that could be used to write all the languages of the empire, 'Phags pa spent the next five years devising the script. It was never widely used, however (Van der Kuijp, p. 438).

*Sorang Sompeng*

Zide (1996) tells of Mangei Gomango, an educated member of the Sora language community in eastern India who created a script for his language in 1936, when the Sora people faced growing pressure by promoters of the Oriya and Telugu languages, each group vying to impose linguistic and cultural dominance over the Sora. Inspired by his father-in-law, an influential Sora leader, Mangei ‘retreated to the hills, where ... he received in a vision the 24 letters of Sorang Sompeng’ and subsequently founded a religious order devoted to Akshara Brahma, the spirit-lord of letters. The letters of Sorang Sompeng are named for the 24 gods of the Sora pantheon. (Zide, 1996, p. 613.)

*Varang Kshiti*

The *Varang Kshiti* script of the Ho language, a Munda language related to Sora, was invented or discovered in the mid-20th century by Lako Bodra, who ‘claimed to have found the Ho script painted on rocks on the top of a sacred hill’ (Carrin, 2000); or alternatively, ‘according to Pinnow,<sup>5</sup> Lako Bodra’s claim was that the script was “invented in the 13th century by a certain Chawan Turi and rediscovered in a shamanistic vision and modernized by Bodra himself.”’ (Zide, 1996, p. 616).

*The N’ko script of Souleymane Kanté*

Oyler (2002) tells the story of the invention in 1949 of the N’ko script, whose creator, the Guinean Souleymane Kanté, became a cultural hero to speakers of the Maninka language and other Mande languages that use his script. According to Kanté’s own account, he was motivated by outrage when Kamal Marwa, a Lebanese journalist, dismissed African languages as unsuitable for writing and linked the supposed inferiority of Africans to their lack of an indigenous script (Oyler, p. 76). The tale of Kanté’s reaction to these statements and his efforts to create a script to disprove Marwa’s assertion is widely known among those literate in N’ko:

In 1944, Kanté came across Kamal Marwa’s ‘infamous’ publication in the market (personal interviews 17, 59). Shocked by what he read and believing the article gravely insulted Africans, Kanté sought to discuss his grievances with the author (personal interviews 22, 32, 35, 59). Marwa, however, had already returned to Lebanon (personal interviews 9, 59). The tale the relates that Souleymane Kanté began a silent reflection upon his own language, Maninka. Without a word to anyone, it seems, Kanté embarked on the long and arduous process of creating and controlling his own language in a new form of writing. (Oyler, 2002, p. 78)

Kanté had formerly learned Arabic and French. He spent the next two years writing the Maninka language in the Arabic script, which proved insufficient to represent the tones of Maninka. But he had seen other Africans read and write their languages in the Roman alphabet.

Kanté then attempted to use the Latin Alphabet for writing Maninka. He discovered, however, that while the Latin alphabet accommodated the use of accents adequately, it could not capture the tonality of Maninka. ...

After considerable trial and error, Souleymane Kanté finally concluded that it was impossible to write African languages accurately utilizing borrowed alphabets. ... Thus Kanté embarked upon an entirely original project, the creation of a writing system that reflected the specific characteristics of the spoken Mande languages ... (Oyler, 2002, p. 80)

Kanté devised an alphabet with 27 letters and called it N’ko, which in each of the Mande languages has the meaning ‘I say’; he chose this name to represent the unity that he hoped the script would

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<sup>5</sup> As Zide indicates, he is quoting – presumably in his own translation – Pinnow, H.-J. (1972). Schrift und Sprache in den Werken Lako Bodras im Gebiet der Ho von Singbhum (Bihar). *Anthropos*, 67, 822–855. I wasn’t able to locate Pinnow’s article.

bring to speakers of the Mande languages. He later explained his purposes in creating the new script and the uses to which he had hoped it would be put:

The ‘Souleymane Kanté story’ goes on to explain the rationale for using the new writing system when two others, the Latin alphabet and Arabic script, were already in use. One group of explanations was expressed in the early 1950s by Kanté himself to his cadre of supporters as being the need for Africans to become literate in their own languages (personal interview 45). He saw the need for Africans to learn Western knowledge in their maternal languages, thus accelerating its control (personal interviews 17, 26), the need to conserve knowledge for future generations by recording local history from elders and knowledge controlled by specialists such as healers (personal interview 5), and perhaps the need to disprove the pervasive, prevailing opinion that Africans had no culture. ...

Other explanations by Kanté’s supporters about the rationale for learning to use the N’ko alphabet are religious in nature reflecting their Islamic orientation. Many members of his family, his friends, and his supporters believe Kanté to have been divinely inspired. (Oyler, 2002, p. 80–81)

### Reinventing the alphabet

I turn now to some of the many efforts made over time to ascribe new meaning to existing scripts. While the creators of scripts in the stories above sought by their acts to validate or preserve cultural knowledge, the people in the following ‘stories’ looked deep into the elements of scripts in search of hidden knowledge and the power it would bring.

#### *The Greeks*

In Plato’s dialog *Cratylus*, Socrates and Cratylus view the elements of the alphabet as the fundamental units of language and ascribe meaning to letters according to the meanings of the words in which they occur and the physical nature of their pronunciation. Thus, the letter ρ (rho) is deemed a sign of motion because of the rapid motion of the tongue in pronouncing it and because of its use in words with meanings such as ‘tremble,’ ‘strike,’ and ‘crush’ (Drucker, 1995, page 61).

Greek authors of the Classical era were also fascinated by the use of the letters as numerical symbols. Numbers were seen as the ‘atoms’ of the universe, the most fundamental form of energy or matter; letters gained power by their association with numbers, becoming abstract signs capable of serving any purpose.

#### *Medieval conceptions of the power of scripts*

One purpose to which the letters were later put by medieval scholars was to function as signs whose careful examination might reveal cosmic truths. The system of number symbolism known as *gematria* was based on the use of letters’ numerical values as codes that unlocked the hidden messages in sacred texts.

Another way in which ‘the alphabet’ was linked to hidden knowledge lay in the search for meaning in the *visual* forms of alphabetic letters, focusing on ‘the interpretation of the alphabet as a symbolic matrix whose letters are assumed to encode in their visual shape the history of their origins, of some fundamental cosmological or philosophical truth, or some mystical or ritual power’ (Drucker, 1995, p. 12).

#### *Origins and rationalizations*

Learned Europeans constructing family trees of scripts attempted to trace the alphabet’s lineage – and thus, in some measure, their own – to the time of Adam. Since of all alphabets the Hebrew script lay closest to God, there by needs must lie hidden within it – but still recoverable, if only one looked closely enough – secrets and mysteries and perhaps even the sum of all knowledge, a gift from God.

Later, the Humanists rationalized the Roman alphabet, (re)constructing letters using simple geometric figures. Geoffrey Tory drew a connection with the human form (Drucker, p. 164), as did

Leonardo da Vinci (most famously) and others. In a similar vein, the Gnostic Marcos had earlier associated two letters with each part of the human body, starting with alpha and omega at the head. In *Adversus haereses*, Irenaeus speaks out against this heresy: ‘Such is the body of Truth, according to this magician [i.e., Marcos], such the figure of the element, such the character of the letter. And he calls this element Anthropos (Man), and says that is the fountain of all speech, and the beginning of all sound, and the expression of all that is unspeakable, and the mouth of the silent Silence.’

#### *The modern reinvention of an African script*

A modern African thinker who rejects the dominance of European views on the origins of ‘the alphabet’ but whose theories on writing echo those of earlier European thinkers, Ayele Bekerie calls the Ethiopic syllabary

a philosophical system in the strict sense of philosophy ... logical, critical, and imaginative ... a successful and elegant composition of music and knowledge. ... Attributing the foundations of the system to philosophy means that the system reveals the patterns and organizations of life. In other words, it shows the way to search for and know the meaning of life. (Bekerie, 1997, p. 142)

Bekerie (1997) sees the same kinds of associations between the Ethiopic script and the cosmos that the Greeks saw in their alphabet:

Ethiopic writing system [sic] ... has the following major distinguishing properties: Pictographic **ቤ** (*Bä* – *Bär* {door} or *Bāyt* {house}), Ideographic **ገ** (*Gä* – *Gämäl* {Camel}), Astronomic (seven sound categories for each day of the week multiplied by 26 main syllographs with a total of 182 days, which correspond to the total number of days in one of the two equinoxes), Numeric (specific numerical graphs adapted from the syllographs and then number knowledge (mystery) system and other configurations) and syllabic ... (Bekerie, 1997, p. 7)

Furthermore, like the alphabet in the minds of European scholars, the Ethiopic script is the privileged endpoint of a process of evolution:

The Ethiopic writing system has evolved from monovocal and monumental graphs to multivocal and philosophical graphs. In fact, its advanced and holistic nature made it to be one of the most literary and aesthetic tools ever designed by humans. (Bekerie, 1997, p. 9)

#### *Sound symbolism*

The idea that the letter forms of the Roman alphabet reflect the visual appearance of the articulatory organs in producing the sounds they represent goes back to the 18th century, if not further. Surprisingly, the idea has not died off; Allott (2000) presents a modern-day version. Rejecting hypotheses about the development of letters from pictograms or Egyptian hieroglyphics, he suggests another possibility:

What other approaches might be considered? One which has been suggested quite often in the past ... is that, originally, the letters of the alphabet might have represented a picturing of the positions or movements of the mouth and other articulatory organs in producing the distinct sounds represented by the alphabet. (Allott, 2000, p. 180).

Bemoaning the lack of an ‘iconic alphabet’ based upon these principles, Allott considers the failed efforts of Alexander Bell in creating his Visible Speech alphabet and the adjustments made by Henry Sweet the eminent English phonetician, who dubbed his version the Organic Alphabet:

Sweet’s discussion of Visible Speech and of the problems in creating an articulatory iconic alphabet is illuminating and can be applied retrospectively to understand *the problems faced by the original inventor of the alphabet* [italics added] ... (Allott, 2000, p. 182)

Allott speculates on what may have motivated this ‘original inventor’ and considers some of the problems that the inventor is likely to have faced before taking us through a simulation of the act of

inventing such an alphabet in order to see if the results bring any light to bear on the origins of the Roman alphabet

We have to attempt to put ourselves mentally in the situation of the original inventor, the circumstances which made the construction of an alphabet desirable and the decisions to be made in representing the articulation of speech sounds by visual patterns. ...

The idea which might have sparked off the construction of the alphabet would simply be: Why should I not represent speech by a picture of someone's face as he produces a particular sound? A next stage might have been: Why should I not limit the picture to the parts of the face which are used in speaking? (Allott, 2000, p. 185–186)

The exercise that follows leads, unsurprisingly, to letter forms oddly similar to those of the Phoenician alphabet.

#### *Celestial alphabets*

Drucker (1995) describes another – this time Medieval – theory of the origin of the alphabet:

The concept of the celestial alphabet is simple: the forms of the letters are supposedly derived from observation of configurations of stars in the heavens which can be 'read' as a form of sacred writing. (Drucker, 1995, p. 125)

The 'discoverers' of celestial alphabets may have taken their cue from the associations the Greeks made between the seven 'planets' and the letters of their alphabet: alpha as a symbol of Apollo (the Sun), beta for Mercury, gamma for Venus, and so on.

#### **Fictional scripts**

In this section, I examine the creation of scripts as part of the creation of a work of fiction. The purpose of these acts seems to be to better immerse the reader in the imagined world. They may also provide a glimpse into the conceptions that their creators have of their own actual scripts.

#### *Tolkien's scripts*

In his teens, the British philologist and fantasist J. R. R. Tolkien began to make up languages to amuse himself and his cousins (Carpenter, 2000). This led to the creation of a world and an age in which to place them; this would go on to become Middle Earth, the setting of *The hobbit* and *The lord of the rings*.

Tolkien's love of the written word made scripts an essential part of his creation; of these, the two that he developed furthest were his *tengwar* and *cirth*. The *tengwar* were – depending on the 'mode' they were written in – a cursive abjad or alphabet of visual forms organized on phonological principles. A single basic shape was used for each place of articulation – labial, dental, and so on – and variations were used to construct the letter forms themselves; for example, the dental consonants /t/, /d/, and /n/ were represented using the letters **ṛ**, **ḏ**, **ṅ**. The letters of the *cirth*, though inspired in visual appearance by the North Germanic *futhark*, were, like the *tengwar*, constructed on phonological principles (Tolkien, 2000, Appendix E).

In his role as 'translator' of the recorded 'history' of Middle Earth that takes form in *The lord of the Rings*, Tolkien ascribes the creation of the *tengwar* to Rúmil, a metalsmith of ancient Middle Earth:

The scripts and letters used in the Third Age were all ultimately of Eldarin [i.e., Elvish] origin, and already at that time of great antiquity. *They had reached the stage of full alphabetic development* [italics added], but older modes in which only the consonants were denoted by full letters were still in use. ... (Tolkien, 2000, Appendix E)

Tolkien's statement that the scripts 'had reached the stage of full alphabetic development' reveals his own acceptance of the notion of an 'evolution' of scripts in our world from pictograms through syllabaries to alphabets.



### *The Kesh alphabet*

Le Guin's (1985) novel *Always coming home* takes the form of an ethnographic study – by an anonymous ‘editor’ – of the Kesh, a Northern Californian people of the distant future whose language and experiences evoke those of Native Americans of the past.

Reading and writing were taken to be elements of human social existence as fundamental as speech itself ... The Kesh were less inclined than we to consider speaking and writing as one activity taking different forms. ... To the Kesh, they were two kinds of language, either of which might be translated into the other, if it were useful or appropriate to do so.

The alphabet in use while we were in the Valley had been developed several centuries earlier by a group of people in the Madrone Lodge of Wakwaha who were dissatisfied with the alphabet then in use. Either because it had been borrowed from another language or because Kesh had changed a good deal in sound, this ornate ‘fesu’ alphabet was cumbrous and arbitrary ... The ‘aiha’ (new) alphabet ... was pretty nearly phonetic. ... The design of the letters was severely chastened, and perhaps overrationalised. (Le Guin, 1985, p. 494–495)

### *Codex seraphimianus*

Written in an unknown – and perhaps unknowable – script, the *Codex* of Italian graphic designer Luigi Serafini seems a sort of ‘hallucinatory encyclopedia’ (Schwenger, n.d.) of a bizarre world filled with beautiful absurdities and incomprehensible text. The work is divided into thematic sections – the natural world, (un)human industry, the arts, language, and so on – reminiscent of Enlightenment categorizations of human knowledge. Writing pervades many of the book’s images:

Perhaps the strangest section is the one on language, where the materiality of the letter is taken to the extreme. Here letters and words proliferate into different species beyond our own world’s superficial differences of language. Forming themselves out of various elements, they flame, drip, and sprout. No longer confined to the plane of the page, they rise above it with the help of gas-filled balloons or are dropped onto it by tiny parachutes. They are literally fished from the mouth or dribbled from it onto a white bib. And under a microscope the curves of the letters become those of a highway or a stream, populated accordingly, or reveal teeming Dantesque figures. (Schwenger, n.d.)

A Rosetta Stone–like image tantalizes us with the possibility of deciphering the text of the *Codex*, but the only guide to its meaning is inscribed in a different, equally unknown Serafinian script.

### **Epilogue**

In the stories told above, the invention of a new script is an act of creation. Inspiration or instruction comes from figures in dreams, from the gods, or from kings or emperors; these figures sometimes play a direct role in the making of the script. All of these serve to validate a script, to give it the *imprimatur* of authority and power. On the other hand, the reinvention of a script might purport to be an act of discovery, not invention, but the flights of fancy that result raise important questions about our inner conceptions of the significance of writing. Finally, fictional scripts spark the imagination and may be used to explore the boundaries of our relations to scripts.

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