

Writing Systems Research: A new journal for a developing field
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The birth of a new journal

In recent years writing systems has been emerging as a distinct area of research, driven by cross-linguistic studies of the acquisition or use of literacy and its cognitive repercussions, by the novel forms of language use developing in computer-mediated communication, and by sociolinguistic explorations of written language as a marker of identity, among other reasons. But these developments have spanned several different academic disciplines – education, psychology, linguistics, sociolinguistics, typography and many more. They are hard to follow without browsing a range of publications, and probably missing something, say an important paper on American and British spelling styles in a source such as *Business Communication Quarterly* (2004). This new journal *Writing Systems Research (WSR)* provides a forum for bringing together the diverse strands involved in the study of writing systems to allow work carried out in a particular discipline to be informed by the discoveries in related disciplines. It aims to provide a global forum for multi-faceted discussion of writing systems from a cross-disciplinary perspective. As editors we ourselves reflect the diversity of interests and approaches to the study of writing systems: one of us (Vivian Cook) is an applied linguist with a fascination with the English writing system, another (Jyotsna Vaid) a psycholinguist with a research interest in Indic writing systems, and the third (Benedetta Bassetti) an applied linguist with an interest in second language reading and Chinese, working in a department of psychology.

The lack of a visible forum for writing system research was demonstrated when one of us (BB) organised a one-day workshop on writing systems with a dozen invited speakers from within a radius of a few miles around her university. We were completely unprepared for the level of interest shown by colleagues and students from many countries, some of whom indeed travelled half-way round the world to attend. This enthusiastic response confirmed what we had suspected: researchers working on writing systems feel isolated within their own separate disciplines and are eager to learn about what is happening in closely related fields where there are similarly isolated bands of enthusiasts. When Oxford University Press approved our proposal to set up this new journal, they too agreed that the time was ripe. Over the ensuing months, numerous colleagues have welcomed the arrival of the journal and have made it a truly interdisciplinary and international project. The Editorial Board now includes 15 people from nine countries covering writing systems such as Hangul and kanji and topics as diverse as computational approaches to script, orthography and social identity, and neurocognitive underpinnings of written language. The board members reflect the different disciplinary perspectives that characterize research in writing systems and we have benefitted very much from their help and advice. There remain aspects of writing system research that are under-represented and we invite others interested in serving on the Board to write to us.

What is a writing system?

So what is a writing system? Language may be spoken, signed or written. Each of these modes of production may be described in terms of systems at the level of syntax, semantics, pragmatics, discourse, the lexicon, phonology, etc. ‘Writing systems’ does

not then refer to writing in the broad sense of anything that has to do with the written language; rather, writing systems are how people implement their knowledge of language through written symbols, in a way parallel to the disciplines of phonology and phonetics that deal with spoken implementation of language.

In the course of putting together a book on second language writing systems, two of us (VC and BB) tried to work out working definitions of the term ‘writing system’ and the related terms, mostly drawing on the work of Florian Coulmas. We found that the term ‘writing system’ has two distinct uses:

(i) *writing system* is used as an overall term for the ways in which written symbols connect to language, in Coulmas’s words ‘a set of visible or tactile signs used to represent units of language in a systematic way’ (Coulmas, 1999: 560). In this general sense writing systems fall into a few possible types, say sound-based writing systems versus meaning-based systems, or arbitrary systems versus analogue systems like Hangul for Korean or SignWriting for American Sign Language. Exploring the consequences of these main divisions for the individual’s processing of written language through phonological and lexical routes has occupied much research, together with how people switch from one overall system to another.

(ii) *writing system* is also used for the specific rules for writing used in a particular language (‘the English writing system, the Chinese writing system ...’); ‘In this sense a writing system is language specific’ (Coulmas, 1999: 560). This then encompasses all the resources that a particular language uses for writing, whether scripts, letters, correspondence rules, punctuation or whatever, so that we can refer to ‘the English writing system’ or ‘the Japanese writing system’. Each writing system for a language belongs to the overall classes of writing system above but shows how they are instantiated in a specific instance.

Alongside ‘writing system’ come the terms ‘script’ and ‘orthography’. A *script* is the physical implementation of the writing system (e.g. the Roman and Cyrillic alphabets for alphabetic writing systems); the writing system used in a single language may then utilise several scripts, say the three in Japanese or might change from one script to another, say the historic change in Turkish from Arabic to Roman script. *Orthography* consists of the general rules for using a script in a particular language, for example the distinct orthographic rules for the Roman alphabet in English and Italian or the different rules for using characters in Japanese and Chinese.

No two writing system researchers seem to use the terms ‘writing system’, ‘script’ and ‘orthography’ with exactly the same meanings. Doubtless contributors will astonish us with their differing interpretations. But the overall ideas are vital whatever the terminology: writing system research is concerned with the implementation of language in written symbols, no more, no less.

Our experience has also shown us that it is also necessary to stress that a language is not a writing system; a language typically *has* a writing system.. English can be conveyed in writing through roman characters, text-messaging, shorthand, written Morse code or in other ways. It is easy to slip into treating the writing system as synonymous with the language – Chinese ‘is’ the Chinese writing system. This becomes particularly dangerous when one is talking about acquisition: the first writing system to be learnt may not be the writing system for the first language the child acquires, for example for Chinese children in England whose Chinese writing system may be their second writing

system to be learnt after the English writing system. Given the multilingualism of the world today, one should be careful in labelling a writing system used by an individual as their first writing system simply because it is used by their first language.

This discussion of terms is intended as a starting point rather than as an unalterable set of definitions that brooks no alternative. Indeed we look forward to contributions that will make the theoretical terms used in this field more transparent and more standardised. Our summary here is simply part of the rationale for mapping out areas and topics that will appear in the journal.

What does *Writing Systems Research* cover?

Writing Systems Research (WSR) aims to publish original, evidence-based, descriptive or theoretical research articles concerned with any issue to do with the analysis, use and acquisition of writing systems in contemporary, historical or fictional use in single or multiple language users. In addition, it will feature brief research reports, commentaries, book reviews, and occasional conference or other announcements. The initial years will also include state-of-the-art summaries commissioned from experts in the various sub-disciplines involved.

WSR covers a broad range of uses of writing systems (from word recognition to handwriting to the cognitive consequences of using different writing systems, etc), and a broad range of actual writing systems (from morphemic writing systems such as Chinese to the various types of sound-based writing systems such as consonantal Arabic, phonemic Roman alphabet, moraic Japanese kana, etc.). For a list of the range of topics on which submissions are encouraged see the journal's website:

http://www.oxfordjournals.org/our_journals/writsy/for_authors/.

Starting a new journal for this new field has given us a sense of privilege in being able to assist at the birth of a research area that is central to modern use of language, has immense implications for contemporary psychology and linguistics and has important practical applications to life in the twenty-first century ranging from literacy to computer communication. We hope that *WSR* will indeed prove a useful rallying-point for this new developing field.

VC, BB, JV (co-editors)

Reference

Coulmas, F. (1999) *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Writing Systems*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers