

Diversity in writing systems: embracing multiple perspectives

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This special issue of *Written Language and Literacy* presents a selection of papers from the Association for Written Language and Literacy's twelfth meeting (AWLL12), which took place in the Faculty of Classics, Cambridge, U.K., on March 26th-28th 2019.¹ The theme of 'Diversity in writing systems: embracing multiple perspectives' was chosen to reflect both the typological, chronological, sociocultural, and individual variety present within and between historical and contemporary writing systems, and the wide diversity of disciplinary backgrounds and approaches to the study of writing systems amongst the membership of AWLL. In keeping with this theme, the chronological and geographical range of the presentations was equally wide. The location of AWLL12 in the Faculty of Classics led to a particular focus on the ancient world, with presentations on writing systems from around the ancient Mediterranean, as well as ancient Chinese and Mayan. The first keynote, 'Developing integrated perspectives on writing systems' by Kathryn Piquette, illustrated the application of digital imaging techniques to inscribed texts, in particular to early Egyptian hieroglyphic inscriptions.

More recent writing systems were also well represented, with presentations on early modern and contemporary writing systems from Africa, South, East, and South-East Asia, Europe, the Near East, and North America. The second keynote, 'Emergent and early literacy: how children learn to use a writing system' by Sonali Nag, was based on her research into education in South Asian aksharic writing systems. The two keynotes exemplify the wide range of techniques and perspectives employed by presenters in studying writing systems, which also included theoretical approaches to the typology of writing systems; a close focus on written texts' palaeography or materiality; and sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic studies of writing systems' wider impact on both individuals and societies.

Full details of the 38 papers and posters presented at AWLL12, including titles, abstracts, and PDFs of presentations, are available on the AWLL website.²

We are pleased to present in this volume six papers based on those presented at the conference which, singly and together, demonstrate the theme of the conference from a variety of historical, typological, and theoretical perspectives. The first, 'The ubiquity of polygraphy and its significance for the typology of writing systems', by Sven Osterkamp and Gordian Schreiber, argues that a one-to-one mapping of linguistic units to graphical units is not as strong a norm as is often assumed. Rather, polygraphy, in which two or more graphical units function together to represent one or more linguistic units, is pervasive across a typologically diverse set of writing systems. This fact challenges existing typological definitions, and Osterkamp and Schreiber propose revisions to those definitions

¹ The local organisers were Robert Crellin and Anna P. Judson; Lynne Cahill, Terry Joyce, and Dorit Ravid also formed part of the programme committee. Financial support and facilities were generously provided by the Faculties of Classics and Asian & Middle Eastern Studies.

² <http://faculty-sgs.tama.ac.jp/terry/awll/workshops.html>.

accordingly. Their paper illustrates diversity within writing systems, in the variation of the mappings between linguistic units and graphical units within a single system.

The next paper, 'The missing piece in the jigsaw puzzle: a psycholinguistic account of the beginnings of the Coptic alphabet', by Victoria Fendel, considers the reasons for the replacement of the native Egyptian writing system by the Coptic alphabet around the second century AD. Fendel argues that not only were certain sociopolitical, sociocultural and sociolinguistic factors relevant, but phonological changes in the language made a change from a supraphonemic writing system to a phonemic writing system more appealing to Egyptian writers. Fendel's paper illustrates the diversity of writing systems that may be used for a single language, exploring the reasons to shift from one system to another.

In 'Reading' through the body in early Egypt: meaning as mediated and modified', Kathryn Piquette takes us back to the formative period of Egyptian writing. She focuses on the role of the embodied practitioner of writing or reading and the significance that written objects would have held for their readers. She argues that the meaning of a written message may well have been understood differently on each iteration of reading. Thus she draws attention to the diversity of experience and interpretation available within a given written text.

We move to East Asia in 'Areal script form patterns with Chinese characteristics', in which James Myers considers how patterns present in the formation of signs in the Chinese writing system have influenced other East Asian writing systems. He argues that the Sinoform scripts' similarities of form come about through the borrowing of regularities of form, that is, of elements of script grammar. This paper contributes to our theme by considering the process of diversification of a model script into multiple scripts inspired by that model.

The final two papers focus on South Asian writing systems. In 'How children learn to use a writing system: mapping evidence from an Indic orthography to written language in children's books', Sonali Nag introduces literacy acquisition studies to the volume. She considers the task facing children learning to read Kannada, as demonstrated by a corpus of child-directed texts. This task goes beyond the need to understand basic sound-symbol mapping to that of the recognition of multimorphemic words. This paper addresses our theme by emphasizing the need for more study of the acquisition of reading and writing in scripts outside the Roman alphabetic tradition and in non-WEIRD contexts.

In 'Brahmi's children: variation and stability in a script family', Amalia Gnanadesikan considers various properties of the modern descendants of Brahmi, identifying points of stability and variation and contrasting this script family with other South Asian scripts and with Arabic. She argues that the stability of satellite vowels and inherent vowels in this family derives from the 'akshara advantage', by which simple aksharas are decodable as syllables even though the scripts are essentially segmental. This paper contributes to our theme by considering how scripts within a script family differ—or not—from each other.

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