

# The Idea of Writing

## *Play and Complexity*



Edited by Alex de Voogt and Irving Finkel

BRILL

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The idea originated at a conference on board games, where the two editors discovered a second common interest in need of attention. At the resulting gatherings, dedicated to the study of writing systems, the audience and participants changed but the playful element remained.

The first meeting lasted only half a day but the enthusiasm from the participants and the Research School CNWS made a sequel unavoidable. The generous support of the International Institute for Asian Studies for the first gathering and the continuous logistic and financial support from the Research School CNWS have created a solid platform on which many departments exchanged ideas while their favorite colleagues from abroad were added to the list of speakers.

The fourth and fifth symposia expanded to three-day events, and were funded by the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences along with the continuous support of Leiden University and the Research School CNWS. At this time, the symposium has found its own momentum so that it is possible to announce here that the next symposia will be organized by the participants from abroad in alternating European cities. After five symposia entitled *The Idea of Writing*, this volume exhibits a collection of the results. It contains contributions of the first four symposia and the themes of each meeting are reflected in the headings of the individual sections.

The publication of this volume occurs following the discontinuation of the Research School CNWS that for more than twenty years protected the interests of the small departments that specialized in 'non-Western' languages and writing systems. To this institution and its people this volume is dedicated.

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## INTRODUCING WRITING ON WRITING

Alex de Voogt

*The Idea of Writing: Play and Complexity* is an exploration of the versatility of writing systems. From ancient Egyptian, Cuneiform and Meroitic writing to Chinese, Maya and Maldivian script, the authors examine the problems and possibilities of polysemy, representing loan-words or adapting a writing system to another language. The playful and artistic use of writing, including a contribution on writing dance, further illustrates the possible intricacies of the scripts. This collection of articles aims to highlight the complexity of writing systems rather than to provide a first introduction. Yet as complex as the description of these writing systems may appear, the readers and writers of the most complex scripts did not suffer in a way that has made these systems impractical or impossible to them.

The different academic traditions in which these writing systems have been studied use linguistic, socio-historical and philological approaches that all provide insight into largely the same phenomena. The contributions were first presented in a series of symposia in which the interaction between experts of different fields and writing systems was central. As a result, the complex content of each contribution is made accessible to other specialists in the study of writing.

A first point of reference in the *Idea of Writing* is the seminal work by Daniels & Bright (1996) who provided a systematic overview of the world's writing systems. They concentrated on how the systems work by analyzing and classifying them. They follow earlier publications by, for instance, Diringer (1968), DeFrancis (1989) and, in particular, Gelb (1952) whose academic approach also launched the term *grammatology* to describe the field.

Daniels & Bright specifically advance the work of Gelb. Their publications resulted in a growing interest in writing systems. However, later works are not much concerned with the working of writing systems or are limited to only a small region (e.g., Goody 2000, Borchers, Kammerzell & Weninger 2001, Houston 2004, Sanders 2006). The idea of writing has associations that go beyond and away from the system itself and arrive at cultures, languages, communication and interpretation.



A broad perspective on the study of writing systems increases its possible relevance to other disciplines, a development that is only in its beginning stages.

As this volume illustrates, culture, language and different disciplines are also part of the study of writing systems in the narrow sense. The analysis and intricacies of the system need an understanding of scripts that is not integral to any single discipline, but requires linguistics, philology and history as a starting point. The interpretation of writing always necessitates an understanding of language and its context. An analysis of how the elements of the script are employed presumes that the effort to read and interpret the text has already been made. Writing is still of interest even when the reading is completed.

The systematic study by Daniels & Bright introduces nearly all writing systems and occasionally speaks to the details to which this volume is dedicated. These elements become apparent when the script shows its versatility. How does the system work when words from other languages need to be represented? Does a scribe have options when writing the same (string of) words and how are these choices governed? What possibilities are created when a scribe is playing with the versatility of the writing system? The exploration of play in writing, polysemy, loanwords and the application of scripts to other languages combine to demonstrate the versatility of writing systems.

### *Versatilities*

Play in writing, also known as *jeu d'écriture*, is the individual's exploration of a script's versatility. It is the realm of poets and designers, but includes the ancient scribes who showed off their abilities in texts they produced in the service of others.

A play on writing adds to a play on words. In the Cuneiform examples more than one language can be played at once. In Japanese two scripts take part in play, while in Maya seemingly endless possibilities of substituting one sign for another display the scribe's knowledge of language and writing system.

While the above examples are curiosities created by individuals, the representation of loanwords in writing systems requires a more universally found versatility. Most, if not all, writing systems have been used to write words from languages for which the writing system was not developed. More precisely, scribes of any era are forced to develop

ways to write sounds or sound sequences not immediately found in the writing system. This development is both part of and outside of the writing system. It might make the system less efficient by adding signs, or less systematic by allowing exceptions to a rule. The contributions in this volume reveal the different perspectives that can be used to explore this topic. From borrowing signs, to loanwords for writing-related instruments, the topic of loanwords and writing systems has much future scholarship to anticipate.

Polysemy in writing systems complicates the reading and writing of a script even if loanwords are absent. The word polysemy itself is as ambiguous as the writing that results from it and the contributions on this aspect of writing systems investigate the different meanings of the word and possible alternative or additional terms such as polyvalency. One sign may have different readings and one reading may be found in different signs. The non-alphabetic scripts that are featured here are in a continuous competition for the most complex possibilities that polysemous elements of writing systems can bring. Although no winner is proclaimed, it is a game to play with writing. It is possible to conclude that no convincing direction in the development of writing systems is found that disambiguates that which is written.

The application of a script to another language is the study of the writing of loanwords in extremis. It is shown that complex scripts, in terms of polysemy, have been applied to other languages as well as the modern Roman script. In some examples, more than one script have been applied to one language so that a competition of systems can develop.

As in the work of Daniels & Bright the book concludes in a domain in which many writing systems have been developed, but in which movement rather than words play the leading role. The writing of dance refers back to *jeu d'écriture* in which individual and playful writing takes the stage, whereas scripts for dance attempt to write that which is playful.

### *Scripts*

Only a selection of the participants and writing systems presented at the Idea of Writing symposium series is represented here. Some contributions are still in progress and may be published elsewhere, but the present collection has not been made haphazardly. They include

four main writing systems for which a tradition of research on writing exists: Cuneiform, Egyptian hieroglyphic writing and its related scripts, Chinese and Japanese scripts as well as Maya hieroglyphs. Contributions on scripts for which much fewer studies are available add examples and exceptions.

The Americas (Maya), Asia (Chinese, Japanese, Sanskrit) and Africa (Meroitic, Fidäl) are well-represented next to the ancient Cuneiform and Egyptian systems on the border of Africa and Asia. Examples also come from Indian Ocean (Maldiv Islands) and Pacific Ocean (Caroline Islands) countries. European scripts are mentioned as an influence rather than a topic of their own with the exception of the European and American writing of dance. The examples date from a wide range of time periods illustrating the broad relevance of an otherwise narrow perspective on writing systems that has been applied.

This spread of geography and time is also represented in the background of the individual authors: French, British, German and Dutch. More significantly, each author is part of a separate university tradition. This fueled the contrasts in approach and perspective. In order to do justice to the topic presented here, this diversity has been encouraged and has led to an exchange of views in a still unfolding field.

For each contribution the author was required to go beyond what was already described in the volume by Daniels & Bright. Explanations of the writing systems are only presented as far as it is necessary to comprehend the general argument or the examples in the text. Instead, the contributions correct, expand or bypass what is found in general introductions to writing systems.

### *Styles*

The study of writing systems, also known as grammatology, is not a field in which any of the contributors hold a degree, although some may have met and most are acquainted with the pioneering work of Gelb. There is no unifying perspective or language that brings studies on writing together as part of one discussion. Sinologists exchange views with Sinologists and Egyptologists participate in Egyptology conferences. At the most, regional connections are made, such as East Asia or Middle East studies, where writing meets other writing. In the study of writing systems this segregation needs to be overcome in order to gain from a diversity of styles.

Writing systems do not belong exclusively to grammatologists. Linguists have a view and method of analysis that is frequently applied to scripts. Philologists developed their own view, less abstract and more connected with the interpretation of texts, that lies at their basis. A range of other disciplines reads scripts for their own disciplinary purposes and historians may have a view on the development of the script itself. These views come with their own jargon, traditions and viewpoints; in short, they all have their own style of presenting their material, introducing their topic and addressing the reader.

This diversity reveals more than it obscures. From the contributions found here, not only aspects of other writing systems can be gathered, but also the different possible perspectives from which data may be analyzed can be observed. With the study of writing systems as its own discipline, this amalgam of backgrounds and approaches is most likely blurred, while in its present shape it leaves all freedom to explore.

To appreciate the versatility of writing systems, this book should be read from beginning to end, a rare necessity with edited volumes. Meanwhile the reader is entertained with playful examples for which serious study is the basis.

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## **PLAY IN WRITING**



## STRANGE BYWAYS IN CUNEIFORM WRITING

Irving Finkel

One might be forgiven for thinking that cuneiform writing was already sufficiently difficult in itself that puns, secret writing or even downright cryptography were altogether unnecessary. Cuneiform is certainly complex, and we can be sure that over the three thousand years of its usage no-one possessed of administrative status ever significantly tried to simplify it, let alone make it accessible to all. 'Literacy' as a social desideratum was on nobody's agenda in antiquity. In a world where hardly anyone could read, including the kings, reading ability conferred an undoubted power, and those who held it, with their access to age-old wisdom and other literary traditions, would have seen no merit whatsoever in the idea of 'reading for the masses'.

The cuneiform script is syllabic, and chronologically and technically wholly pre-alphabetic. The closest that the Mesopotamian mind got to the concept of alphabetic writing is in the vowel signs. No consonant could ever be written free of a vowel, be it before (CV, such as BA) or after (VC, such as UB), but they did devise free and clear-standing signs for four individual vowels, A, E, I, and U; for O they had no use.

The script can only be classed as inconvenient, at least from the perspective of the modern student, and surely likewise for those in antiquity who were constrained to master it with a career in mind. Once learned, however, the script is surprisingly workable, free of ambiguity and adaptable to other tongues. It ran and ran for more than three thousand years, also serving other languages and cultures beyond Sumerian and Akkadian.

As is well known, cuneiform writing proper derived at some point about 3200 BC, if not before, from an initial stage of purely pictographic signs. The shortcomings of pictographic writing fast became apparent in day-to-day contexts where the recording of words and ideas was crucial. The repertoire of original signs, more or less realistic and depending on curves, was reduced to straight-edge stylised forms that could be produced by the linear strokes of a stylus in clay. Before long the graphic symbols had left their antecedents far behind, and developed to a point where they were practically unrecognisable.



Meanwhile, parallel developments in usage meant the creation of numerous CV or VC syllables to provide the background of the mature script. In addition to such primary signs, the script for various historical reasons grew littered with more complex phonetic elements, as exemplified by CVC (such as NAM) signs, on the one hand, or CVCVC (such as BULUG) on the other. Other crucial features of the developed script were *logograms*, in which one sign served for a whole word, *ideograms* where a sign served to convey a range of meanings, some abstract, *determinatives* (such as “stone”, “wood”, or “city”) and *phonetic complements*, to gloss ambiguities.

Mastery of the cuneiform script by apprentices was impeded by two essential characteristics:

1. Any given phonetic sign, such as BA or LU, also had a range of other *unrelated* phonetic values, in some cases many, and
2. Any given value, such as *ba*, could be expressed by more than one sign, some times many, which today are given a numerical identity, i.e.,  $ba_1$ ,  $ba_2$ ,  $ba_3$  or  $ba_4$  etc.

A further point was that throughout its long history Mesopotamian cuneiform was locally used to write both Sumerian and Akkadian, languages which were linguistically wholly unrelated to one another. Connections and interdependence between the two languages within the culture meant that it was always possible for a Babylonian or Assyrian scribe to write a word or words in Sumerian, leaving it to the reader to supply the translation where needed. The phenomenon occurs spasmodically in our own writing, with such usages as “\$” for “dollar”, but in cuneiform it is a regular feature that can produce problems of its own.

The working cuneiform syllabary that a middle-grade professional would need to command varied in number, but was usually probably less than 100. The full range was well in excess of 600 signs (plus their values); the recent sign list of Borger (2003) in fact itemizes 907 discrete signs. The sum was probably not familiar to many scribes, although there were always explanatory reference lists to hand, and there are contexts in which learned teachers or writers took the opportunity to use clever writings and show off, as discussed below.

From the very onset of their training scribes were immersed in the two unrelated languages, both of which could be recorded traditionally, and sometimes in varying and far from obvious ways. Their education centered on the polyvalence of the signs, and the ‘correct’ ways in which