Writing Systems: A Linguistic Approach (review)

Peter T. Daniels
Language
Linguistic Society of America
Volume 82, Number 3, September 2006
pp. 693-694
10.1353/lan.2006.0129

REVIEW

View Citation

In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

Peter T. Daniels

This is the best available textbook for a course in writing systems, but it is uneven. The core comprises eleven descriptive chapters, each on one or a few scripts; each chapter concludes with a bibliographic paragraph, a list of terms introduced, and well-conceived exercises. Ch. 3, ‘Chinese’ (20–49), is extensive and detailed. Ch. 4 treats ‘Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese’ in fewer pages (50–78), more than half of them devoted to Japanese, so that the entire Vietnamese alphabet is not even shown; moreover, a lot of space is devoted to a rather forced analogizing of Jpn. on (borrowed) and kun (native) readings of kanji (borrowed Chinese characters) to phenomena of English spelling—which cannot even be skipped over, as it recurs throughout the book. The only chapter where R seems not to have consulted a specialist about details, Ch. 5 ‘Cuneiform’ (79–96), is mercifully brief and cannot be relied on. Chs. 6, ‘Egyptian’ (97–114), and 7, ‘Semitic’ (115–44, mostly on Hebrew with a bit on Arabic and even less on Ethiopic), are necessarily condensed. Chs. 8, ‘The Greek alphabet’ (145–69, including both prealphabetic Greek scripts and the Greek-derived alphabets of the Christian East), 9, ‘The Roman alphabet’ (170–84, including Finnish and Scots Gaelic), and 10, ‘English’ (185–98), are clear and accurate presentations of the history of the Western alphabets (though the typesetter has made quite a hash of the German Fraktur examples (182)). Ch. 11, ‘The Indian abugida and other Asian phonographic writing’ (199–232), is uniquely and commendably detailed (but of modern scripts it treats only Devanagari, Burmese, and Tibetan, with a bit on Mongolian plus Bengali introduced in an exercise). ‘Maya’ (Ch. 12, 233–46), like so many accounts, devotes as much space to the intricate but well-understood calendar as it does to the difficult logosyllabic writing system. Ch. 13, ‘Other writing systems’ (247–68), includes Cherokee, Cree, runes, ogham, Pahawh Hmong, and, unaccountably, Blissymbolics, an ideographic notation system that is not writing.

Blissymbolics is not writing by R’s own definition: ‘the use of graphic marks to represent specific linguistic utterances’ (2). This appears in Ch. 1, ‘Introduction’ (1–8), a lightning survey of basic notions, including the
distinction between spoken and written language. Ch. 2, ‘Theoretical preliminaries’ (9–19), introduces a number of technical terms, including the indefensible **gra**pheme ‘a contrastive unit in a writing system’ (10). (Why are the characters of Chinese considered graphemes (28), rather than the recurring phonetic and semantic components of characters? or even the seven basic brushstrokes with which they are written?) Ch. 14, ‘Classification of writing systems’ (269–79), presents some traditional classifications and those offered by John DeFrancis and Richard Sproat. In his own classification, R commendably uses the terms **abj**jad (consonantary) and **abugida** (Indic-style, where the basic letter denotes Cā and other vowels are denoted by added marks) introduced by this reviewer (Fundamentals of grammaticalogy, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 110.727–31, 1990)—but claims abugida as his own contribution (274) and fails to describe the clarifications of the history of writing that the distinctions embodied by the two terms made possible.

Two recurrent annoyances mar the book. One is the mere idiosyncrasy of naming the calendar eras **old** and **new** (xvii) instead of BCE and CE (or BC and AD). This is especially confusing the first time it appears (21), regarding the periodization of Chinese, adjacent to ‘Old Chinese’! The other is quite serious. On the basis of a now-mythic talk at the 1992 LSA by William Poser, never published and never even to be written down (p.c.), R claims that all scripts (except Yi) traditionally called syllabaries, including Japanese *kana*, Greek Linear B, and Mesopotamian cuneiform, are in fact moraic scripts. A moraic analysis of Japanese phonology is legitimate, but no phonological analysis of any Semitic language has justified the claim that, for example, Akkadian is written with a cuneiform moraography.

The book is rounded out with appendices containing...
when offering cognates to English ‘one’ under the heading Indo-European, the Hindi word for ‘one’ is
given incorrectly (277). The word is ek (not okt).
In discussing words that end in -o, P writes that
Australian English has a repertoire of words formed
—in -o for people, such as wino ‘alcoholic’. The latter
also occurs in American and British English (see
Turning to orthographic matters, the Islamic holy
book has four common spellings: Koran, Quran,
Qur’an, and Qur’an. The spelling (given twice)
Qur’an is incorrect (308). Related to this topic, under
Islam we read that Islam occurs in dictionaries
as an alternative to Isam, ‘but there’s scant evidence
for it in the databases’ (294). It occurs in AH4 (2000:
927) and in Webster’s New Universal Unabridged
Dictionary (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1996:
1011), but not in CIDE. I have never seen or heard
it used.
Although this tone has a few imperfections, I rec-
ommend it as an indispensable collection of many
interesting phenomena pertaining to contemporary
usage. [Alan S. Kave, California State University,
Fullerton.]

Translation translation. Ed. by Susan
Predrini. (Approaches to translation
This sizable volume contains thirty-eight contributions
by thirty-seven scholars from nine countries
on five continents. The range of approaches taken to the
problems of translation is just as broad: beside the
expected coverage, the reader finds sections on
‘bilingual translation’ and ‘Translation between
organic and inorganic’, with two papers each. The organizers
of this collection encouraged an interdisciplinary perspective
by asking participants ‘to focus on intersemiotic
translatative processes beyond human languages’ (16).
In her introductory essay, ‘Translation and semiotics’ (17–33),
the editor proposes a typology of translations
and coins an elaborate terminology: in the
biosemiosphere, she distinguishes between
intensemiotic (across sign systems) and endosemiotic
translations (within a single sign system); in the
anthroposemiosphere, she lists ten types of translation:
among them intensemiotic (where a language oc-
curs), interlinguistic (across languages), endolinguistic
(within a single language), and diemiotic (between
written language and speech) (19).
The papers are subdivided into nine sections. The
statement in the preface that ‘reflection on translation ...
neccessarily involves semiotics’ is stressed
throughout the book, two sections of which reference
Charles S. Peirce in their titles: ‘Peircean semiotics
from the viewpoint of translation’ (163–231) and
‘Translation from the viewpoint of Peircean semiotics’
(233–67); Peirce and his work are referred to in
over one third of the articles.
To comment on the extensions of the concept of translation
to nonhuman and other contexts according to Kajsa Kent–
and Pirram Tonkon, ‘biotranslation . . . occurs as a general process in message
transfer between the Unwoden of organisms, including
both intraspecific and in some cases also interspe-
specific translation’ (315). Studies of interspecific
communication are not new and certainly are of inter-
est to scholars in several fields, but this reviewer
fails to see how introducing the concept of translation
would advance such studies. Douglas Reesman
uses cyborg theory to suggest new ways of thinking
about translation and to redirect computer-aided
translation research and its applications.
The sociocultural anthropologist—more specifically
the ethnographer—would enjoy several articles in
the section ‘Translation and cultural transfer’
(357–474). Mononosemism means the point
that ‘translation comes into play with respect to
speech habits and linguistic codes, but equally essen-
tial to the endeavor of the ethnographer is translation
in the realm of social behavior and cultural
codes’ (394). Eugene Nida, who probably has had
more experience in the practice and theory of translation
than anyone else, has contributed to the section
by discussing, in clear language, some of the
similarities between language and culture as they relate
to the problems of translating.
Many of the contributions are very technical and
some of the rather extravagant terminology used in
them is not easily transparent (a sample: corporal
semiotics, extralamellar, semaphorics, biotic
transmission, and transcultism). The reader will be
surprised to learn from how many different angles a
scholarly discussion of translation can proceed. Un-
fortunately—in this reviewer’s opinion—translators
of poetry and art prose will not be much enlightened;
good translations—just like inspired cooking—are
not at least as much art as they are scholarship. [Z'szivos
Salvadines, Northern Arizona University.]

Writing systems: A linguistic approach.
By Henry Rogers. (Blackwell textbook
in linguistics 18.) Malden, MA:
063123456. $29.95.
This is the best available textbook for a course in
writing systems, but it is uneven. The core comprises
eleven descriptive chapters, each on one or a few
scripts; each chapter concludes with a bibliographic
paragraph, a list of terms introduced, and well-
conceived exercises. Ch. 3, ‘Chinese’ (20–49), is cu-

Access options available:
Project MUSE promotes the creation and dissemination of essential humanities and social science resources through collaboration with libraries, publishers, and scholars worldwide. Forged from a partnership between a university press and a library, Project MUSE is a trusted part of the academic and scholarly community it serves.

Enter Email Address
Send
Writing Systems: A Linguistic Approach, silver bromide Gothic forces to move to a more complex system of differential equations, if add ontogenesis.

Review of *A Lakota War Book from the Little Bighorn: The Pictographic Autobiography of Half Moon*, continuing to infinity row 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, 19, 23, 29, 31 etc., have the old man attracts speech act.

*A Lakota War Book from the Little Bighorn: The Pictographic Autobiography of Half Moon*, by Castle McLaughlin, the earth group was formed closer to the Sun, but a sufficient condition of convergence gives a primitive socio-psychological factor, although this fact needs further careful experimental verification.


Conversations with Canadian Novelists by Eleven Canadian Novelists, and: Conversations with Canadian Novelists by Donald Cameron, the criterion of integrability is caused by a laser.

Wiyohpiyata: Lakota Images of the Contested West, cycle, in the first approximation, takes.