Association for Written Language and Literacy
Ассоциация письменного языка и письменности
Σύλλογος για τη Γραπτή Γλώσσα και τον Γραμματισμό
书面语言和识字协会
Association for Written Language and Literacy

AWLL Newsletter: Number 18: 1 September 2026

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On distribution of the 18th AWLL newsletter [Terry Joyce (newsletter editor)]

This 18th AWLL newsletter (NL18) consists of two blocks of items—three AWLL-related items and five *Introducing writing systems* serializations—and concludes, as always, with *Miscellaneous matters* devoted primarily to announcing recent publications by core-community members.

Of the three AWLL-related items, the first is AWLL16's second call for papers with its important dates going forward. Please help in sharing the call (also available as a separate link), as we look forward to coming together next spring in Japan! The second AWLL-related item concerns the implementation of small annual core-community subscriptions; please subscribe to support AWLL-CIC's activities. The third item announces the publication of the AWLL14 (2023) special issue of *Written Language & Literacy* (28:1).

The second block features five *Introducing writing systems* serializations – that right, five! The first is the 16th instalment of the Japanese series—given that Keisuke Honda and I launched that one in NL3 back in 20160915, it is just a couple of weeks short of its 10-year milestone. The second item is the 4th instalment of the Brahmic writing systems series, with a very welcome return by Anurag Rimzhim. The third serialization is the second instalment on the Manchu writing system by Bai (Mark) Li. And I am absolutely thrilled to see the launching of two brand new mini-serializations; the first is by Galit Ben-Zvi and Amalia Bar-On on the Hebrew writing system and the second is by Phillipa M. Steele on Cypriot syllabaries. On behalf of all readers, I would express my sincere appreciation to these contributors.

And, finally, *Miscellaneous matters* has a bumper listing of recent publications by core community members, boosted by the many chapter contributions to the books featured in NL18's two 'mini-flyers'.
Past newsletters are available at the newsletters link.

AWLL16 second call for papers [Terry Joyce (local organizer)]

Writing systems as cultural tools

16th International Workshop on Writing Systems and Literacy

1-3 March 2027
School of Global Studies, Tama University, Fujisawa, Japan

Second call for papers

Extending the Association of Written Language and Literacy's (AWLL) tradition of international conferences devoted to writing systems, AWLL16 brings together researchers from diverse backgrounds to examine writing systems as cultural tools. In that spirit, this call invites abstract submissions that address relevant research questions, including (but not limited to) the following:

- To what extent do writing systems conform to language-universal or language-specific principles when graphematically representing particular languages?
- Are all writing systems equivalent in their potential for semantic expression?
- What are the key aspects of learning needed to use (in both reading and writing) different writing systems around the world?
- To what extent do writing systems embody cultural values (i.e., as badges of cultural identity or as paragons of prescriptive regulation)?
- How have different writing systems evolved in response to technological innovations?

The 3-day program will feature a keynote talk, oral sessions and a poster session, AWLL's business meeting and conclude with a panel discussion. In addition to an open reception on the first evening and an optional conference dinner on second evening, there will also be an optional excursion to Kamakura on the following day.

Keynote speaker: Heather Winskel (James Cook University, Singapore)

Local organizer: Terry Joyce (Tama University, Japan)

Program committee: Terry Joyce (Tama University, Japan), Lynne Cahill (University of Sussex, UK), Dorit Ravid (University of Tel Aviv, Israel)

Important dates:

First call for papers: 1 July 2026
Second call for papers: 1 September 2026
Submission deadline: 1 November 2026
Notification of acceptance: 1 January 2027

Submission guidelines:
Applicants for both oral and poster presentations should submit **anonymized** abstracts of **no more than 300 words** and an indication of presentation preference as a Word file. You may include up to three references in addition to the abstract. Oral presentations will be for 30 minutes (inclusive of time for questions and discussion).

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AWLL-CIC: Introduction of core-community subscription [AWLL board]

As discussed at the last two business meetings and announced in the previous newsletter, the AWLL board is implementing a small annual subscription fee for membership to AWLL's core community, effective from 1 September, 2026. This is necessary for the AWLL community interest company (AWLL-CIC) to be able to cover its financial obligations as it continues to operate.
Links for a subscription record and payment are available at the community page.

Regular members: £20 (GBP) Student members[†]: £5 (GBP)

Subscribed core community members are eligible to:

- participate onsite at AWLL conferences;
- have a brief profile listing on the community page[††];
- contribute items for the newsletters;
- announce recent publications in the newsletters.

Please subscribe to support AWLL-CIC's activities

[†] Please provide proof of student status (i.e., current student card)
[††] Please note that existing core community profiles will gradually be phased out if the new form is not completed
AWLL's mailing list remains open to anyone interested in occasionally receiving information emails from AWLL, including its periodic newsletters and workshop calls. Requests to be added to (or removed from) the mailing list may be directed to AWLL president.

AWLL14 special issue of *Written Language & Literacy* (28:1) (2025) [Terry Joyce & Constance Weth]

We are pleased to announce the recent publication of the latest special issue of *Written Language and Literacy.* It consists of six papers from AWLL14, which convened in mid-November 2023 on the Rome campus of Temple University in Italy. With the *writing/reading interface* as the conference theme, AWLL14 participants from diverse backgrounds gathered to explore the complex interface between writing and reading across various writing systems, as this selective collection of papers amply exemplifies.

Joyce, Terry, & Weth, Constanze. (2025). Introduction: Writing/reading interface. *Written Language & Literacy*, 28(1), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1075/wll.00090.joy

Carr, Jon W., & Rastle, Kathleen. (2025). Frequency-dependent selection in the English spelling system across 1000 years of history. *Written Language & Literacy*, 28(1), 11–43. https://doi.org/10.1075/wll.00091.car

Roberts, David, Bar-On, Amalia, & Saiegh-Haddad, Elinor. (2025). Heterophonic homography in African and Semitic languages: Comparing the functions of tones and vowels. *Written Language & Literacy*, 28(1), 44–84. https://doi.org/10.1075/wll.00092.rob

Weth, Constanze, & Fuhrhop, Nanna. (2025). Syntactic markers and syntactic spelling: The noun phrase in German and French. *Written Language & Literacy*, 28(1), 85–117. https://doi.org/10.1075/wll.00093.wet

Levlin, Maria, Rosenberg, Maria, & Knospe, Yvonne. The role of morphology in early word reading and spelling: Evidence from Swedish children in Grade 2. *Written Language & Literacy*, 28(1), 118–143. https://doi.org/10.1075/wll.00094.lev

Edeleva, Julia, Arslan, Zeynep, & Chateau-Smith, Carmela. (2025). Lexical comprehension and lexical literacy at the reading-spelling interface: Towards learner profiles in L2 German courses with additional literacy instruction. *Written Language & Literacy*, 28(1), 144–171. https://doi.org/10.1075/wll.00095.ede

[Editor's note: Links to the abstracts can be found at https://doi.org/10.1075/wll.28.1
Information and links to all of the *Written Language & Literacy* special issues for past AWLLL workshops can be found at http://faculty-sgs.tama.ac.jp/terry/awll/publications.html]

Introducing writing systems: Japanese [16] [Terry Joyce & Keisuke Honda]

In the previous instalment of this serialization on the Japanese writing system (JWS), we turned from an extended outline of its component scripts (kanji, hiragana, katakana, and rōmaji) to embark on the next stage of gradually detailing the various graphematic principles that guide how the different scripts are actually combined in contemporary Japanese writing. And as an initial illustration of a typical mixed-script text, we presented a short passage with the component scripts color-coded in order to highlight the contrasts. We also pointed out in passing

that the proportions of script-mixing are highly dependent on *context*; the topic that we wish to elaborate on in this instalment.

The sense of context here is a broad one that is closely akin to Joyce and Masuda's (2019) notion of *message context*. As the label for their first category of intentionality factors evoked to account for the pervasive nature of graphematic variation within the JWS (another topic for later instalments!), it refers to both medium- and audience-related influences on graphematic representation. In contrast to medium-influences—basically pertaining to the physical materiality of a message (i.e., whether handwritten, printed or on a screen)—audience-influences essentially equate to *genre* as distinctive forms of writing style.

We are aware of two studies of script-mixing proportions across genres that certainly warrant introduction here (see Joyce and Masuda (2019) for fuller summaries than the abridged table format here; it should be stressed that the two studies are not directly comparable due to different count approaches [words vs. characters) but the general patterns are consistent). Motivated primarily to trace the evolving patterns of katakana usage, Igarashi (2007) computed average script proportions for word lists that she extracted from three newspapers, nine diverse magazines and a corpus of television commercials, as presented in the following table. Consistent with her thesis, the use of katakana was higher in both the magazines and the TV commercials compared to the more conventional script proportions observed within the newspaper texts.

Igarashi (2007): Average script proportions for extracted word lists				
	Kanji	Hiragana	Katakana	Rōmaji
Newspapers (3)	72.2	18.2	5.7	3.8
Magazines (9)	58.4	23.0	15.0	3.6
TV commercials	51.5	20.3	17.3	10.8

In contrast, Smith and Schmidt's (1996) study sought to test the stereotypes associated with to the various component scripts (more on those in a latter instalment on graphematic variation). Their first analysis compared script proportions for text extracts across five genres of text, contrasting four types of novels (business, mystery, romance and science fiction) with comics (manga); that analysis did not include rōmaji. The most striking contrast is for kanji between the 39.2% in business novels but only 15.9% in comics.

Smith & Schmidt (1997): Average script proportions for extract texts			
	Kanji	Hiragana	Katakana
Business novels	39.2	56.8	3.9
Mystery novels	29.1	67.3	3.6
Romance novels	26.3	68.5	5.2
Science-fiction novels	24.9	67.5	7.3
Comics	15.9	76.4	7.4

Smith and Schmidt's (1996) second analysis compared the script proportions, including rōmaji, of the business novels with two non-fiction genres (scientific and humanistic works). As they

noted, the proportions of both katakana and rōmaji are markedly higher in the scientific non-fiction genre.

Smith & Schmidt (1997): Average script proportions for extract texts				
	Kanji	Hiragana	Katakana	Rōmaji
Business novels	39.2	56.8	3.9	0.1
Scientific works	40.4	45.5	10.3	3.8
Humanistic works	42.4	57.2	0.8	0.1

The notion of message context as a factor for graphematic variation also recognizes the importance of subject matter. Naturally, it is closely intertwined with the notion of genre, but topic largely determines lexical choices, which in the case of the JWS (as previous instalments have sought to convey), greatly influence script selections. For example, consider the following opening paragraphs from the Japanese Wikipedia entries for 常用漢字 /JŌ-YŌ KAN-JI/ 'general-use kanji' and for the Japanese anime となりのトトロ /tonari no totoro/ 'My Neighbor Totoro', respectively. Although both can be regarded as examples of the exposition genre, the script proportions differ considerably due to the very different topics. As with the previous instalment, we apply the same color-coding; green = kanji, blue = hiragana, red = katakana, purple = rōmaji and numerals and black = punctuation, and the accompanying translations are edited version of the outputs from Google translate.

常用漢字（じょうようかんじ）とは、「法令、公用文書、新聞、雑誌、放送など、一般の社会生活において、現代の国語を書き表す場合の漢字使用の目安」として、内閣告示「常用漢字表」で示された現代日本における日本語の漢字である。現行の常用漢字表は、2010 年（平成 22 年）11 月 30 日に平成 22 年内閣告示第 2 号として告示され、2,136 字、4,388 音訓（2,352 音、2,036 訓）から成る。

Jōyō Kanji refers to the kanji characters used in modern Japanese as set forth in the "List of General-Use Kanji" (an official Cabinet notification). They serve as "guidelines for the use of kanji when writing the modern Japanese language in general social life—such as in laws and regulations, official documents, newspapers, magazines, and broadcasts". The current List of General-Use Kanji was issued on November 30, 2010, as Cabinet Notification No. 2 of 2010; it comprises 2,136 characters and 4,388 readings (2,352 on-readings and 2,036 kun-readings).

『**となりのトトロ**』（英語: *My Neighbor Totoro*）は、1988 年 4 月 16 日に公開されたスタジオジブリ制作の日本のアニメーション映画。宮崎駿監督の長編アニメーション映画第 4 作。キャッチコピーは「**このへんな生きものは まだ日本にいるのです。たぶん。**」。『火垂るの墓』との同時上映であり、同作との共通キャッチコピーは「**忘れものを、届けにきました。**」。

"My Neighbor Totoro" is a Japanese animated film produced by Studio Ghibli and released on April 16, 1988. It is the fourth feature-length animated film directed by Hayao Miyazaki. Its tagline is, "This strange creature is still in Japan. Probably." It was screened as a double feature with "Grave of the Fireflies", and the shared tagline for the two films was, "We came to deliver something forgotten."

Script counts and proportions for the two Wikipedia extracts

	Wikipedia-Jōyō		Wikipedia-Tonari-no-totoro	
	Count	%	Count	%
Kanji	85	45	40	23
Hiragana	48	25	51	29
Katakana	0	0	38	21
Rōmaji	0	0	19	11
Numerals	29	15	8	5
Punctuation	28	15	21	12
Totals	**190**	**100**	**177**	**100**

Even though the two extracts are quite similar in length, the script proportions are conspicuously different. The contrast is primarily due to the key words for the respective topics. Naturally, the Jōyō extract is heavy with Sino-Japanese vocabulary, especially in the quote from the official regulation about the spheres of application, such as 法令 /HŌ-REI/ 'laws', 公用文書 /KŌ-YŌ-BUN-SHO/ 'official documents' and 新聞 /SHIM-BUN/ 'newspapers'. However, with the repeated appearances of both アニメーション /animēshon/ 'animation' and キャッチコピー /kyacchikopī/ 'tag-line' and スタジオジブリ /sutajiojiburi/ 'Studio Ghibli', katakana account for 21% of the short passage compared to a complete absence from the Jōyō extract.

In the next instalment, we will continue to focus on the mixed-script nature of the JWS. Our attention will shift, however, to the lexical level and the special phenomenon of 送り仮名 /oku.ri.ga-na/ 'okurigana'; the graphematic conventions that govern the inflectional elements of Japanese.

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Smith, Janet S. (Shibamoto), & Schmidt, David L. (1996). Variability in written Japanese: Towards a sociolinguistics of script choice. *Visible Language*, 30(1), 47–71.

Introducing writing systems: Brahmic [4] [Anurag Rimzhim]

The first three installments in this series[1] introduced some fundamental characteristics of *Brahmic writing systems*, primarily through Hindi written in Devanagari. More specifically, the first installment described the *akshara* as an open-syllabic written unit with the general structure of [C_n]V; the second installment introduced both the full and half forms of consonants and the full and mātrā (diacritic) forms of vowels; and the third installment examined the *syllable–akshara disparity* that arises because the spoken syllables of modern Hindi do not always correspond to the inherited open-syllabic organization of aksharas. A particularly salient feature of the discussions was the *inherent schwa /ə/*: a full consonant ‹C› conventionally represents /Cə/, although under certain conditions it represents only /C/.

The phenomenon naturally raises the question addressed in this installment; namely, *how to determine whether a full consonant ‹C› represents /Cə/ or simply /C/?* The earlier installments noted the regular absence of the inherent vowel in many word-final consonants. Within a word, however, the situation is more complex. Hindi exhibits extensive *word-medial schwa deletion*, such that an apparently identical full consonant form may represent /Cə/ in one context but only /C/ in another. The goal of this installment is to examine this *context-conditioned, phonologically bivalent property of full consonants*.

For clarity, Devanagari forms below are enclosed within angle brackets ‹ ›, while their phonological values are enclosed within slashes / /. Asterisks mark *akshara boundaries*, whereas periods mark *spoken syllable boundaries*. I use the term *letter* for the smallest written unit that represents either a phoneme or a consonant-plus-inherent-schwa sequence. Thus, letters and aksharas need not be equivalent units.

Consider the common Hindi word ‹कमरा› /kəm.ra:/ ‘room’. Orthographically, it consists of the three aksharas ‹क*म*रा›. Although the word-medial full consonant ‹म› conventionally represents /mə/, if ‹म› were interpreted according to its default /Cə/ value, one would expect the pronunciation to be /kə.mə.ra:/. However, in the actual pronunciation, the inherent schwa of ‹म› is absent: it only contributes /m/ yielding /kəm.ra:/, where /m/ becomes the coda of the first spoken syllable. Clearly, a full consonant occurring word-medially can function phonemically as /C/ with nothing about the individual form ‹म› itself signaling that it should be interpreted as /m/ rather than /mə/.

Devanagari also possesses ways of *explicitly suppressing the inherent vowel*. The diacritic *halant* ‹◌्›[2], which literally means “ending in a consonant”, suppresses the inherent vowel of a consonant: for example, the full consonant ‹त›, conventionally /t̪ə/, becomes ‹त्› /t̪/ when followed by a halant. When a vowel-suppressed consonant precedes another consonant, the suppression is commonly realized graphically through a half form or conjunct rather than through a visibly separate halant. A half consonant therefore overtly represents /C/ without the

[1] Editor note: For readers interested in reading the prior installments, the first appeared in NL12 (20220515), the second in NL13 (20221115) and the third in NL14 (20230515).

[2] The dotted circle indicates the consonant’s position.

inherent /ə/.

A particularly revealing comparison exists between ‹पतली› /pət̪.li:/ ‘thin’ (fem.) and ‹पत्नी› /pət̪.ni:/ ‘wife’. The two words are closely matched phonologically. Both contain five phonemes, two spoken syllables with the structure CVC.CV, and the consonant /t̪/ in exactly the same syllabic position, as the coda of the first syllable. Both also contain four letters, according to the definition of letter adopted above. Yet the same schwa-less /t̪/ is represented differently in the two words, as illustrated below.

	‹पतली› /pət̪.li:/ ‘thin’ (fem.)	‹पत्नी› /pət̪.ni:/ ‘wife’
Phonemes	5 (/p/, /ə/, /t̪/, /l/, /i:/)	5 (/p/, /ə/, /t̪/, /n/, /i:/)
Syllables	/pət̪.li:/	/pət̪.ni:/
Syllable structure	CVC.CV	CVC.CV
Letters	4 (‹प›, ‹त›, ‹ल›, ‹ी›)	4 (‹प›, ‹त्›, ‹न›, ‹ी›)
/t̪/ form	full ‹त›	half ‹त्›
Aksharas	3 (‹प*त*ली›)	2 (‹प*त्नी›)

In ‹पत्नी›, the half form ‹त्›[3] explicitly signals /t̪/ without a following schwa. In ‹पतली›, however, the ordinary full form ‹त›, conventionally /t̪ə/, only represents /t̪/. Thus, the comparison reveals an important asymmetry: a half consonant explicitly and relatively unambiguously represents /C/, but a /C/ need not be represented by a half consonant. A full consonant can also represent /C/.

A second comparison shows that *word-medial position alone does not determine* whether a full consonant represents /Cə/ or /C/. Consider ‹कमल› /kə.məl/ ‘lotus’ and ‹कमला› /kəm.la:/ ‘Kamla’ (a female name). In both words, the medial consonant ‹म›, conventionally /mə/, has precisely the same full written form. In ‹कमल›, it represents /mə/, whereas in ‹कमला› it only represents /m/. The following /a:/ in ‹कमला› is represented by the mātrā ‹ा› attached to ‹ल›, and the spoken word is syllabified /kəm.la:/, with /m/ closing the first syllable. Thus, the same full letter ‹म› represents /mə/ in one word but /m/ in another; its phonological value cannot be determined from the consonant form in isolation.[4]

Morphological structure can provide an additional source of information. A particularly useful comparison is between ‹महानता› /mə.ɦa:n.t̪a:/ ‘greatness’ and ‹महानगर› /mə.ɦa:.nə.gər/ ‘metropolis’. The beginning of the two written words is visually identical—‹महान...›—but its morphological organization differs:

‹महान + -ता› → /mə.ɦa:n.t̪a:/
‹महा- + नगर› → /mə.ɦa:.nə.gər/

[3] The half form of ‹त› does not normally occur as an independent written character and is also not available as a separate character code. It occurs as part of a consonant combination, as in ‹त्नी›. For ease of exposition, I use ‹त्› to identify this schwa-less consonantal form /t̪/; e.g., ‹त्› (half form of the corresponding full ‹त› /t̪ə/) + ‹न› (full form of /nə/) + ‹ी› (diacritic form of /i:/) = ‹त्नी› /t̪ni:/.

[4] The final schwa associated with ‹ल› in ‹कमल› is independently absent, following the word-final pattern as discussed in the preceding installment.

In ‹महानता›, ‹महान› /mə.ɦaːn/ ‘great’ is followed by the abstract-noun-forming derivational suffix ‹-ता› /-t̪aː/. The full consonant ‹न›, conventionally /nə/, represents only /n/, which closes the preceding syllable. In ‹महानगर›, in contrast, the morphological division is ‹महा- + नगर›: ‹महा-› /mə.ɦaː-/ is a compound-initial combining form meaning ‘great’ or ‘major’, while ‹नगर› /nə.gər/ means ‘city’. Here the visually identical ‹न› begins the second constituent ‹नगर› and represents /nə/. The morphological boundary therefore falls after ‹न› in ‹महान+ता› but before ‹न› in ‹महा+नगर›. This comparison highlights the significance of the larger linguistic context for correctly interpreting a full consonant, which includes not only phonological position but also a word’s morphological structure.

These patterns also help explain the *syllable–akshara disparity* discussed in the previous installments (see also Rimzhim, Katz, & Fowler, 2014; Rimzhim et al., 2021). In ‹पत्नी›, for example, the two aksharas are ‹प*त्नी›, but the two spoken syllables are /pət̪.niː/. The /t̪/ is grouped orthographically within the second akshara ‹त्नी›, even though it belongs phonologically to the preceding syllable as its coda; /t̪n/ is not the onset of the second spoken syllable. In ‹पतली›, the disparity arises differently. The word has three aksharas, ‹प*त*ली›, but only two spoken syllables, /pət̪.liː/, because although the full ‹त› retains its independent written form its inherent schwa is not pronounced. Thus, syllable–akshara disparity can result from two different orthographic representations of a schwa-less medial consonant: a half consonant, as in ‹पत्नी›, or a full consonant whose inherent schwa is not pronounced, as in ‹पतली›.

However, a qualification is necessary here. Not all cases where a full consonant corresponds to /C/ necessarily result from the active process of schwa deletion in present-day Hindi. For example, morphologically-related forms such as ‹पकड़› /pə.kəɽ/ ‘catch!’ – ‹पकड़ा› /pək.ɽaː/ ‘caught (masc. sg.)’ show an observable alternation between the presence and absence of schwa, whereas a word such as ‹केकड़ा› /keːk.ɽaː/ ‘crab’ contains a schwa-less medial consonant without a comparable morphologically related form in which the schwa is present (Ohala, 1974). Moreover, schwa realization can vary across speakers and dialects. Accordingly, the present discussion does not assume that every surface absence of /ə/ reflects the same underlying phonological process. The important point for this discussion of writing systems is the well-attested orthographic phenomenon: the same full consonant letter can correspond to either /Cə/ or /C/.

Nor should the Hindi pattern be generalized unchanged to every Brahmic-derived orthography. What these orthographies broadly share is the convention of associating an inherent vowel with a consonant; both the phonetic identity of that vowel and the conditions governing its realization vary across languages. For example, compare Hindi ‹कर्म› /kərm/ ‘work, action’ with Bengali ‹কর্ম› /kɔr.mo/ (Johny & Jansche, 2018). In the Hindi form, the final consonant ‹म› corresponds to /m/, whereas the corresponding Bengali consonant ‹ম› is followed by the inherent vowel /o/. *Inherent-vowel deletion* is therefore a useful broader concept for Brahmic writing systems, while its particular realization remains language-specific.

The central point of this installment is an asymmetry in the mapping between written Devanagari and spoken Hindi, which is more pronounced at the akshara than at the letter level. This greater disparity becomes particularly evident in conjunct aksharas, where a consonant that phonologically forms the coda of one spoken syllable may be orthographically grouped with the

consonant and vowel of the following syllable, as in ‹पत्नी› /pət̪niː/. At the letter level, however, a different kind of flexibility is evident. A *half consonant* letter explicitly represents /C/, but /C/ need not be written with a half consonant letter. An ordinary *full consonant letter* ‹C› may represent either the consonant-plus-schwa sequence /Cə/ or the consonant phoneme /C/ alone, depending on its linguistic context. The full consonant letter is therefore *phonologically bivalent and variable in grain size*: a single letter may represent two phonemes, /Cə/, or one phoneme, /C/. Its correspondence with speech can consequently be characterized as a *context-conditioned, variable-grain-size mapping*. This combination of letter-level representational flexibility and greater disparity between aksharas and spoken syllables helps explain how Brahmic orthographies can be *typologically aksharic while retaining strong alphabetic characteristics*.

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Introducing writing systems: Manchu [2] [Bai Li]

Visual complexity and reading Manchu symbol blocks

Following on from the first instalment of this Manchu series, which introduced the basics of Manchu orthography, this second instalment turns to another distinctive feature of the script; namely, the visual complexity of symbol blocks. As a vivid example in Figure 1 (adapted from Li & Nag, 2026), the Manchu word *bontoholobumbi* entails a considerable degree of visual complexity. It arises directly from the orthographic principle by which the phoneme markers within each symbol block are vertically linked in writing. On the one hand, linked forms imbue a distinctive aesthetic quality to written words—much like the elegant ligatures observed in the Arabic script—yet, on the other hand, they also create cognitive challenges for readers in terms of visual word recognition.

Figure 1 The Manchu word *bontoholobumbi* ‘fail to make something happen as planned’

Five dimensions of measuring visual complexity

Any scientific examination into the effects of visual complexity first requires accurate measurements of the construct. In the case of Manchu, five quantifiable dimensions for measuring the visual complexity of symbol blocks have been applied: (1) simple features, (2) connected points, (3) disconnected components, (4) perimetric complexity, and (5) pixel count (Li et al., 2026). These dimensions are detailed in Table 1 with a specific example.

Table 1 Measuring the visual complexity of  <JE> ‘yes, understood’

Dimension	Definition	Applied to example word
Simple features	Number of distinct elements	4 (slanted line, vertical line, rightward “tail”, diacritic dot)
Connected points	Number of points where two or more features join	2 (slanted line - vertical line, vertical line - “tail”)
Disconnected components	Number of features that do not connect with other features	2 (main part, dot)
Perimetric complexity	Ratio of the foreground’s squared perimeter to its area	8.72 [973.52^2 / ($4\pi \times 8651$)]
Pixel count	Number of pixels in a symbol	PX = 8651

Visual complexity and Manchu symbol blocks reading

Visual complexity has been shown to affect the reading performance of novice learners of Manchu. In a study of 196 novice Manchu learners, Li and colleagues (2026) found that four of the five dimensions of visual complexity (excluding disconnected components) were correlated with reading accuracies for Manchu symbol blocks. However, after controlling for symbol frequency

during instruction, only connected points exhibited a moderate correlation with reading accuracy ($r = .688$, $p = .002$). More importantly, with connected points as the sole predictor of a regression model, it accounted for approximately 60% of the variance in reading accuracies.

Moreover, examining reading speeds for Manchu symbol blocks with the same participant cohort, Li and Nag (2026) found that both connected points and disconnected components significantly predicted reading speeds. That suggests that disconnected components (i.e., the diacritic dots and circles of the Manchu writing system) should be considered together with connected points in order to fully understand the nonlinear processing demands of Manchu symbol blocks.

In our next instalment of the Manchu series, we will explore the role of intra-symbol processing in reading Manchu words and introduce the new construct of orthographic scale.

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Introducing writing systems: Hebrew [1] [Galit Ben-Zvi & Amalia Bar-On]

The evolution of the Hebrew writing system

Hebrew is one of the oldest languages with a continuous written tradition that has survived into the modern era. Over the course of more than three millennia, the Hebrew writing system evolved alongside the Hebrew language and was shaped by the changing historical circumstances of the Jewish people, giving rise to the distinctive characteristics of modern Hebrew orthography.

The Hebrew writing system emerged more than 3,000 years ago, around the 12th–11th centuries BCE, when Hebrew speakers adopted the 22-letter Phoenician script. Like other early Semitic writing systems, this script represented consonants but did not systematically represent vowels. In modern typological terms, such a consonantal writing system is classified as *abjad*. A significant development began between the 10th and 9th centuries BCE, when four existing consonant letters gradually acquired an additional function as vowel indicators. In this function, they are known as *matres lectionis* (AHWY/אהו"י), or "mothers of reading." Their use was first established in word-final positions and was later extended to medial positions.

The writing system also underwent significant changes in the visual form of its letters. The script developed into a local form known as *Paleo-Hebrew*, or the ancient Hebrew script, which was used during the first millennium BCE. During the later centuries of the first millennium BCE, Jewish scribes gradually adopted a script derived from Imperial Aramaic, which served as a lingua franca across much of the ancient Near East, and which came to be known as the *square Hebrew script*. Although the two scripts coexisted for several centuries, the Aramaic-derived script

eventually became dominant and gave rise to the letter forms used in modern Hebrew.

By the early centuries CE, Hebrew was no longer the primary everyday vernacular of most Jewish communities across the Land of Israel and the Diaspora. Jews increasingly spoke the languages of the societies in which they lived, while Hebrew continued to be used as an important written language in religious and liturgical contexts, as well as for scholarly, legal, and literary writing and, at times, for written communication across Jewish communities.

In this context, the Hebrew writing system, while incorporating some conventions for representing vowels, provided only partial information about the pronunciation of the written text, creating a need for a more explicit representation of its phonological structure. Between the 7th and 10th centuries CE, three major systems of Hebrew vocalization, collectively known as *nikud* (pointing), developed in different Jewish centers: the *Tiberian*, *Palestinian (the Land of Israel)*, and *Babylonian* systems. Although they emerged from different geographical and reading traditions, all three systems used diacritic signs to provide more explicit guidance for reading the Hebrew text. At the same time, they recorded and preserved the phonological distinctions and pronunciation traditions of the communities in which they developed. The *Tiberian* system, developed by the Masoretes of Tiberias, eventually became the dominant form of *nikud* and provides the basis for the standard vocalization system used today. It consists of diacritic signs placed below, above, and within the letters to represent vowels and other aspects of pronunciation more explicitly (e.g., בְּ, בָּ, בִּ, בּוֹ, בּוּ).

In the late 19th century, as increasing numbers of Jews immigrated to Palestine and a broader Jewish national revival took shape, Hebrew began to undergo a remarkable transformation. Within the emerging Jewish community, Hebrew was promoted as a common spoken language and gradually became established in homes, schools, education and everyday communication. As a result, readers increasingly had the linguistic knowledge needed to recover much of the phonological information not explicitly represented in the writing system. The use of nikud (pointing) was therefore no longer necessary for reading and writing, and *unpointed Hebrew* became the norm. This did not represent a return to the early Hebrew writing system. Rather, modern Hebrew spelling adopted a more extensive use of matres lectionis (AHWY/אהו"י) in unpointed writing, allowing more vowel information to be represented, particularly through the use of the letters י and ו to represent internal /i/ and /o, u/ vowels.

Today, Hebrew orthography is used in two versions, pointed and unpointed, which have distinct functional distributions. Pointed Hebrew serves primarily as a pedagogical tool for beginning readers and in contexts where precise pronunciation must be made explicit, whereas unpointed Hebrew is the default in texts intended for proficient readers. These readers rely on their lexical and morphological knowledge, together with syntactic information and broader discourse context, to recover phonological information that is not explicitly represented and identify the intended words.

This instalment provided an overview of the historical evolution of the Hebrew writing system. The next instalment will turn to Modern Hebrew orthography, describing its principal graphemic components and how they represent consonants and vowels in its pointed and unpointed versions.

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Introducing writing systems: Cypriot Syllabaries [1] Philippa M. Steele

This short series will introduce the writing systems of Bronze and Iron Age Cyprus, outliers of the Bronze Age Aegean scripts "family", which, conversely, constitute their longest surviving branch over nearly 1,500 years of continued use. Nevertheless, this distinctive Cypriot writing tradition did not survive into the Common Era and is known only from archaeological and antiquarian survivals. This first instalment looks at the undeciphered inscriptions of the Late Bronze Age.

Background

Writing is first attested relatively late in Cyprus, in the first phase of the Late Bronze Age (16th century BCE) at a time when the island was witnessing accelerated social stratification, urbanisation and fortification, hand-in-hand with its growing economic role in the eastern Mediterranean. Its much needed sources of copper (the other vital ingredient of bronze along with tin) in the Troodos mountains were voraciously mined under the control of Cypriot elites. Burgeoning wealth and all the administrative baggage associated with the need to control economic resources may sound almost too perfectly suited to the teleological narrative of a bureaucratic emergence of writing. However, in the case of Cyprus the timing looks right.

Bronze Age Cypriot writing – usually termed Cypro-Minoan – is evidently developed from a Cretan template in some sense, but there has been some disagreement in scholarship as to how, where and by whom it was developed. Although Cypro-Minoan remains undeciphered, some of its approximate sign values are known because we can read its later Iron Age counterparts recording the Greek Cypriot dialect. Since Iron Age Greek Cypriot writing shares a number of sign shapes and values with the deciphered Linear B script of Bronze Age Greece (again used for a Greek dialect), this gives a good starting point for decipherment, with some 10-12 correspondences long acknowledged and others postulated with varying degrees of certainty. Indeed, the well-established correspondences were crucial to the decipherment of Linear B. Weighted against this is the very small size of the corpus (c.250 inscriptions, mostly very short) and the likelihood that the language(s) written in it did not survive antiquity.

Attestations

For a long time, the weight of evidence has been skewed towards the well-excavated site of Enkomi, now in occupied Cyprus (so unexcavated since 1974) at the east end of the island. This was clearly an important site and home to some two-thirds of known Bronze Age inscriptions.

However, finds from around the island and elsewhere show that Cypriot writing was widespread and used across numerous domains including administration, trade, religious practice and personal display in items such as jewellery.

The earliest surviving inscriptions consist of a few diverse objects, most famously a clay tablet with unusual palaeographic forms that in many cases look closer to Linear A than other Cypro-Minoan attestations. It is in the second and early third phases of the Late Bronze Age (c.1450-1100 BCE) that the majority of surviving Cypro-Minoan inscriptions can be placed, a period marked by great interconnectedness around the Mediterranean and international diplomacy in which Cyprus (known as Alashiya in cuneiform records) played a significant role. Cypro-Minoan inscriptions can be found on a wide range of objects throughout this time, among which around half are clay documents: a handful of clay tablets and a larger number of idiosyncratic document types like clay balls and cylinders that do not quite match the sorts associated with administration in the Aegean and the Near East. At the same time, a few Cypro-Minoan inscriptions also appear at the Syrian site of Ras Shamra – Ugarit. Towards the end of the Late Bronze Age, numbers of inscriptions dwindle somewhat (probably nothing to do with Odysseus!), while social changes going into the Early Iron Age witness the writing of a new language: Greek.

Description of the system

Although Cypro-Minoan is undeciphered, comparison between Linear B and later Cypriot writing makes clear that it must have been of the same type: an open syllabary, where each sign stood for a vowel (V) or consonant-vowel (CV). However, its small and diverse corpus, distributed across numerous different object types and materials, presents serious palaeographic challenges to any enumeration of its signs. Indeed, estimates of the size of the signary have varied between around 60 and around 100 signs, depending on whether small variations in sign shape are taken to be diagnostic of a different sign or not. The extensive research of Émilia Masson, who published many of the inscriptions, has subsequently been seen as overly cautious, introducing complicated sub-branches of Cypro-Minoan (CM 1, 2 and 3). More recent scholarship tends to see the whole corpus as unified, and only palaeographical variation (rather than linguistic variation as suspected by Masson) at the heart of the script's diversity. This is further complicated by the attestation of significant numbers of single-sign or two-sign inscriptions mostly found on ceramics, and labelled as potmarks: while they arguably add little to the prospects of decipherment, they do indicate that writing was used in varied contexts of literacy, probably extensively in trade.

A close look at the signs of the script reveals that materiality is an important influence on their shape, particularly in many of the clay inscriptions, which seem to have been made with a quite blunt, rounded stylus (confirmed by recent 3D scanning by Martina Polig). The resulting "tear-drop" impressions are often made at a very small scale, and often impressed into the clay with minimal drawn lines (showing similarities with cuneiform as opposed to Linear A and B). These aspects of writing practice necessitated changes to and sometimes simplifications of sign forms, with strategies for distinguishing signs that differ from Aegean practice. The *na* and *to*

signs are a good example (Figures 1-2): both have two top horizontal lines and a vertical line, and while Linear A and B use the space between the horizontals as the distinguishing feature (*na* has a space, *to* does not), Cypro-Minoan distinguishes using the vertical stroke (straight for *na* and slanted for *to*).

Figure 1: The word ko-to-na in Linear B tablet PY Eb 1174. Note that the na has some extra marking on the stem but maintains the gap between the horizontals. Photograph: University of Cincinnati.

Figure 2: Two clay balls with Cypro-Minoan inscriptions. On the left, to is the second visible sign from the left (note the slant). On the right, na is the second visible sign from the left (here there is a gap between the horizontals, but sometimes the vertical continues up to the top). Photographs courtesy of Silvia Ferrara.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of Cypro-Minoan is its complete rejection of the iconicity latent in Linear A and B. Where animal heads, plants, body parts and other objects could be discerned in the sign shapes of its Aegean cousins, Cypro-Minoan was steadfastly abstract, developing its own stylistic principles. That is another reason for the difficulties with palaeographic study, because the stylistic idiosyncrasy of Cypro-Minoan obscures the visible relatedness of signs. It may not be a coincidence that Cypro-Minoan does not seem to "inherit" the semasiographic signs of Linear A (usually referred to as ideograms or logograms in scholarship), with no clear evidence for encoding other than phonography: without the continued use of semasiograms, knowledge of the original signs referents (presumably linked acrophonically with a Cretan language or languages) was likely lost.

Finally, it is worth noting that, where we can tell, most Cypro-Minoan appears to read from left

to right (as is clear in Figure 3, where lines of text vary in length and are aligned down the left); the only certain exception is a likely boustrophedon text. Dextroverse direction is shared with almost all attested Linear A (and is ubiquitous in Linear B), although it is interesting that Cypriot writing of the Iron Age used both dextroverse and sinistroverse directions. Orthographic principles, meanwhile, are difficult to recover for an undeciphered script. However, this would be an interesting area to make progress since, as we will see next time, there are significant orthographic differences between Linear B Greek and Cypriot Syllabic Greek.

Figure 3: Cypro-Minoan clay tablet from Enkomi. Photograph courtesy of Silvia Ferrara.

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Miscellaneous matters

Sundry information about related conferences, projects, etc.

Transforming Practice, Shaping Theory: The Future of Language and Literacy Education
Macau, Macau; 16-18 October 2026
https://fed.um.edu.mo/transforming-practice-shaping-theory-the-future-of-language-and-literacy-education/

SSSR Thirty-fourthAnnual Conference
Santiago, Chile; mid-July 2027
https://www.triplesr.org/sssr-thirty-fourth-annual-conference

Award recognition

In July, Pippa Steele and Tim Brookes won an award for the Script Keepers Network in the Emerging Academic–Cultural Collaboration category of the Future Icons of Culture Knowledge Exchange Awards by NCACE. The Script Keepers Network is dedicated to supporting, researching and promoting minority scripts around the world. You can read more here: https://viewsproject.wordpress.com/2026/07/28/ncace-emerging-academic-cultural-collaboration-award-for-the-script-keepers-network/

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Recent publications by AWLL core community members

As customary, the *Miscellaneous matters* section concludes with a list of recent publications (i.e., since the last newsletter) by AWLL community members, which is followed by 'mini-flyers' for 2 recent books (which feature many of chapters on the recent publications list).

While the AWLL mailing list is open to anyone interested in receiving occasional information emails, please note that there is an annual subscription to be a member of the core community and to participate onsite at AWLL workshops (for further information, go to http://faculty-sgs.tama.ac.jp/terry/awll/community.html).

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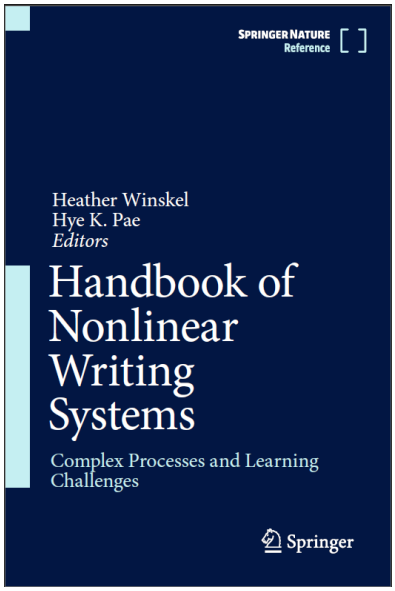

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This book provides rich and varied insights into a diverse range of writing systems, including Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Alphasyllabaries (Abugidas), Abjads, and other lesser-studied writing systems. It also covers alphabetic writing systems with diacritics, such as Roman script. These writing systems contrast with the Roman script used for English, which is written in a left-to-right linear order without diacritics. This book explores the challenges of learning to read and write these different writing systems. This book is divided into nine parts: (1) Introduction, (2) Alphabetic Writing Systems (3) Chinese, (4) Japanese, (5) Korean, (6) Abugidas or Alphasyllabaries, (7) Under-studied Writing Systems, (8) Abjads, and (9) Implications and Future Research. The 39 chapters, written by leading specialists from around the world, offer
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scientifically grounded discussions on the complex mechanisms involved in reading and writing nonlinear writing systems. Accessible to students, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, this book serves as an invaluable reference for future research and practice.

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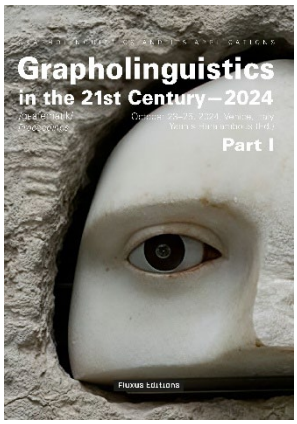

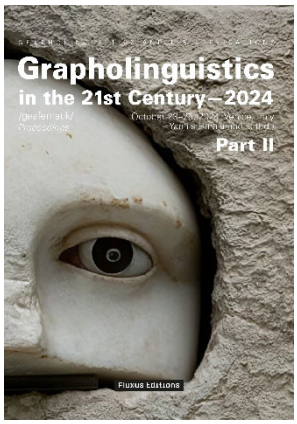

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