

## The representation of distinctive features in writing systems: Omission and commission

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Many phonographic writing systems carry hints in their design of relationships between phonemes, e.g. Old English *eth* <ð>, created from <d> to represent /ð,θ/, a phoneme similar to /d/. Other writing systems use such relationships systematically, as when Carrier Syllabics represents aspiration with a straight line and glottalization with a bent line. In phonological theory, distinctive features are properties that serve both to differentiate phonemes (when their values differ) or to group them into natural classes (when their values match). Systematic relationships between signs representing related phonemes serve as written representations of features. Features are encoded in writing systems both explicitly (“by commission,” as when kana *dakuten* encodes voicing) or implicitly (“by omission,” as when the Younger Futhark writes voiced and voiceless stops with the same letter). I will survey implicit and explicit encodings of features in phonographic scripts and examine why certain features (particularly major place of articulation) are only encoded explicitly while others (voicing, aspiration, and glottalization) are encoded either explicitly or implicitly. I draw on Drescher’s contrastive feature hierarchies, whereby some features are more central to the contrasts of phonemic inventories than others. In Drescher (2016), the phonemic ambiguities of the Younger Futhark reflect a point in the contrastive hierarchy just above the terminal feature divisions. However, ambiguities in Linear B and Cherokee are less systematic. In both cases, more explicit representation of laryngeal features is made at the coronal place of articulation than at other places. This reflects both of a feature hierarchy and the comparatively preferred status of coronal place.

Written representations of distinctive features demonstrate their accessibility to script designers. Thus the discovery of distinctive features by twentieth-century linguists was foreshadowed by their use in various writing systems, and their behavior in writing systems may help fine-tune feature theory in the twenty-first century.

Drescher, B. Elan. 2016. Contrastive feature hierarchies and Germanic phonology: Jørgen Rischel’s Analysis of the Scandinavian runic reform. Presented at the 43rd annual LACUS Forum, Saint Mary’s University, Halifax, August 2016.