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The **worst** writing system in history! :(

Public attitudes toward the *learnability* of writing systems

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WHY ATTITUDES?

– people are very interested in writing systems as a topic of discussion ☺

– they often rank writing systems by how "hard" or "logical" (or "beautiful", "ugly"...) they are

– such rankings reveal *literacy ideologies* – including what users think writing *should* do

– this study asks: *What do these evaluations tell us about how users imagine literacy?*

HYPOTHESES

Code	Hypothesis	Summary
H1	Cultural stereotypes	Difficulty reflects cultural imagery, not structure.
H2	Familiarity bias	Scripts similar to one's own are judged "easier".
H3	Normativity projection	Alphabetic norms (sound–symbol, linearity) are projected globally.
H4	Aesthetic overlay	Difficulty intertwines with beauty or prestige.

THIS STUDY

Platform	Entries
Quora	124
YouTube	17,489
Reddit	818
Total	**18,431 comments**

Data:

– platforms: **YouTube · Reddit · Quora**

– 18,431 comments/posts (overwhelmingly English-language)

– focus: attitudes, evaluations, metaphors, and ideologies (about *learnability*)

Methods:

– qualitative discourse analysis

– inductive category coding (7 categories)

– cross-platform comparison

SOURCES

REDDIT

Is there such thing as a "bad" writing system for a language and how do you recognise it?

What's your least favorite writing system for a language?

i made the worst writing system known to man kind.

What's the worst script/language pairing you can think of?

Writing system alignment chart, ngl it was difficult
What languages have the least adapted writing systems?

Has there ever been a study to determine which type of writing system is the easiest to learn?

What does r/linguisticshumor consider a bad orthography?

Most efficient writing system?

Written Chinese seems to be objectively worse than English…?
Any thoughts on this?

QUORA

What is the worst writing system?

What are the pros and cons of the various writing systems?

What languages have a worse spelling system than English?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of major writing systems in the world?

What is the worst alphabet/writing system of an ancient language?

Which are the worst written languages in the world?

What is the least effective writing system?

What is the ugliest writing system?

From a linguist's perspective, which is the most effective writing system?

What are some of the best and worst writing systems?

YOUTUBE

How to make a language: Writing systems

World's Hardest Spelling Bee… is a writing systems bee! But what even is writing?

The Hardest Language To Spell

Ranking the Best Writing Systems in the Universe

The Top 7 Craziest Writing Systems in the World

Top Ten Coolest Writing Systems

World's Most Complicated Writing System (corrections in the description)

The Hebrew Alphabet is bad

Why Does India Have So Many Writing Systems?

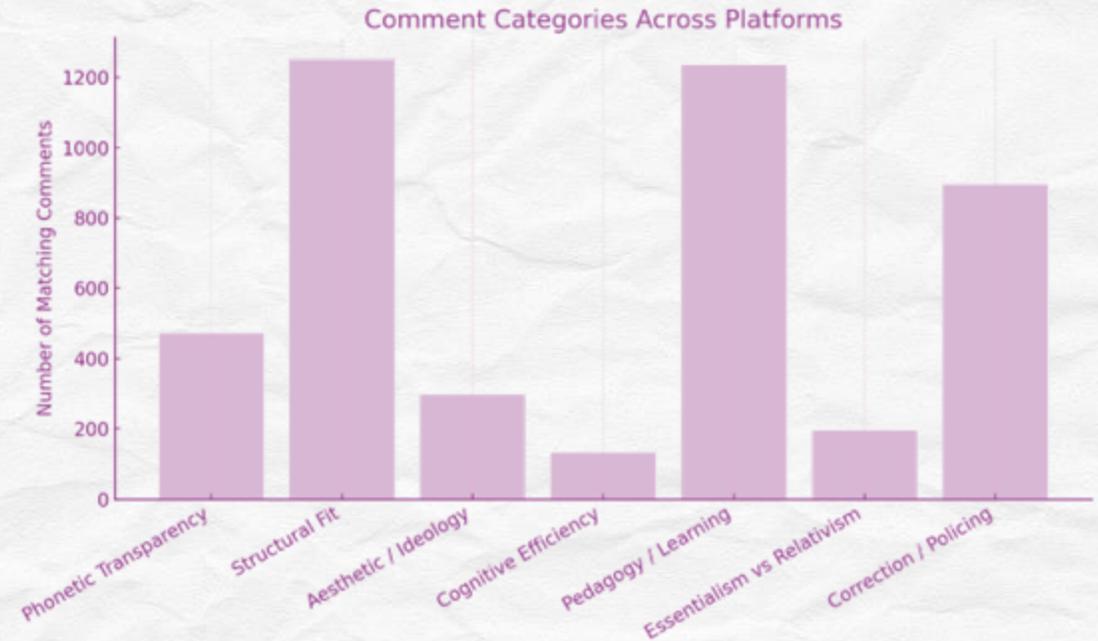The Japanese Writing System in a Nutshell

French Spelling Isn't That Bad

Why I think the Chinese writing system is TERRIBLE

CATEGORIES

Seven main discourse types :

1. Phonetic transparency

2. Structural fit

3. Aesthetic and ideological evaluation

4. Cognitive efficiency

5. Pedagogy and learning trajectory

6. Script essentialism vs relativism

7. Correction and expertise displays

Comment Categories Across Platforms

1 · PHONETIC TRANSPARENCY

I'm a native speaker of french and I can't write without making a bunch of mistakes everywhere. A ton of people can't. If it was written phonetically at least native speakers wouldn't have so much trouble writing things that should be easy. And for non native learner of french it would still be probably easier to just learn masculine and feminine versions of words (alongside with liason letters) rather than to deal with that mess. At least reading would be easy. (**YouTube**, French spelling isn't that bad)

Polish. I don't know much about the language, but if only they had went with the Cyrillic alphabet instead I bet it would've made more sense phonetically. (**Reddit**, What languages have the least adapted writing systems?)

Some writing systems take less time and effort for people to learn, whether these are children in school learning how to write their native language, or adults learning a foreign language for professional purposes. If a writing system is mostly phonetic, it will be easier to learn. (**Quora**, What is the least effective writing system)

- transparency as moral virtue ("logical", "fair", "respectful to learners")
  - irregularity (and features such as silent letters) criticized
- alphabetic ideology as default
- users equate *sound–letter correspondence* with "good" writing system

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2 · STRUCTURAL FIT

I'm sorry - what utter utter rot. I remember when this clip first came out and it frustrated me just because of the sheer degree of misinformation and misunderstanding and subsequent explanations of the Thai writing system which is actually one of the most beautiful, rational, logical, symmetrical systems where consonants, vowels and tones all fit like a glove. (…) this clip has done more to turn people off learning Thai, or give them an excuse to give up more than possibly any other clip on the internet. (**YouTube**, World's Most Complicated Writing System (corrections in the description))

It's just a side-effect of colonization and modern linguistics springing out of regions where roman script is most commonly used. And Latin is the most common script, regardless, so of course it will have strange mutations depending on where it lands. And yes it doesn't work well outside IE languages but IE is also the most common family in the world, so (…) . (**Reddit**, Is there such a thing as a "bad" writing system for a language and how do you recognize it?)

Korean is a great one. It's an alphabet which pretty much sticks to one symbol for one sound. You can literally learn to read and write the language in an afternoon. (**Quora**, From a linguist's perspective, what is the most effective writing system?)

- ideology: "Good writing systems fit their language."

- goes beyond sound-symbol fit to system-wide coherence
  - critiques of mismatches in morphology, syllables, redundancy

→ folk typology mirroring expert discourse

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3 · AESTHETIC AND IDEOLOGY

It's funny because I have stumbled upon this after a discussion about the practicality of Mongolian Bichig as it's becoming an official writing system. I think Bichig looks great & I find it interesting as a script and plan to learn it and whilst it is alphabetical and is practical as a writing system for the most part like other alphabetic languages and has history and looks beautiful in calligraphy like Chinese, but it has very limited practicality in modern technology, because it's a vertical writing system and it would play hell trying to provide a bichig option on websites (…). (**YouTube**, Why I think the Chinese writing system is TERRIBLE)

They're all pretty bad, although some are definitely worse. A better question would be whether there are any good writing systems out there. (…) Hangul is beautiful and clever, but no longer in sync with the language, and perhaps too phonemic - that is, not phonetic enough. (**Reddit**, Is there such thing as a "bad" writing system for a language and how do you recognise it?)

This is really, REALLY subjective. This is my opinion (and please whoever is reading this - don't take offence because that is not my goal here). I don't find appealing the Ethiopic script (abugida) and the Inuktitut syllabary. Ge'ez abugida Inuktitut They look interesting but neither of the two are appealing to me. They look messy and compared to other scripts, aesthetics are not their strongest asset. (**Quora**, What is the ugliest writing system?)

– scripts described as *beautiful, ugly, chaotic*, or *graceful*

– visual taste often tied to cultural judgment or stereotype

– aesthetic praise may mask ideological bias

– reflects affective and identity-laden views of scripts

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4 · COGNITIVE EFFICIENCY

The difficulty to learn one language is also heavily dependent on its global usage and popularity. Chinese is reasonably difficult to non-native users for requiring to memorize at least 500 common modern hanzi/characters, but with the interest of the language increases continuously and at least 1.2 billion native users, these facts contribute to its accessibility almost like English.
(**YouTube**, The hardest language to spell)

The underlying principles of the system are easy, the fact that tons of shit is spelled with historical spelling that you just have to memorize is difficult. It certainly isn't as bad as English by any means, especially since the rules are generally consistent and few in number, but it's still a little weird to get used to. (**Reddit**, Writing system alignment chart, ngl it was difficult)

As someone who knows Mandarin Chinese, I feel quite qualified to answer. (…) Pros: It makes sense ; the characters are (usually) visual representations of its definitions. It makes good use of space ; because every word takes up approximately the same amount of real estate, you can convey a longer message on a smaller sheet of paper than if you wrote it with an alphabetic language. But the pros pretty much end there. Cons: It is extremely difficult to learn, especially for foreigners. (**Quora**, What are the pros and cons of the various writing systems?)

- scripts praised or criticized based on mental effort required

- users reference "brainpower," memory load, or pattern recognition

- simple, regular, or modular writing systems seen as easier to process

- appeals to pseudo-science to rationalize intuition

Aliens would destroy our planet because they will rage from not being able to learn Asian languages 💀 (**YouTube**, The Japanese writing system in a nutshell)

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5 · PEDAGOGY AND EXPERIENCE

I am a Tibetan and studied for 12 years still can't read and write properly .. learned other languages in less years and atleast could read local news papers . I still can't read Tibetan news paper even though I speak the language fluently . It's difficult to form works in Tibetan as well (**YouTube**, The hardest language to spell)

(…) for someone who has never encountered hànzì, memorising the thousands of symbols seems like, and is, a Herculean task. Many of my classmates and I flunked Chinese test after Chinese test just because we forget what word to write. In fact, when writing an essay in Chinese, we are allowed (and even encouraged) to bring an e-dictionary to find out what words to use (…) One example of two Chinese words that seem like they should sound similar due to appearance are "免" (to waive) and "兔" (rabbit) . Though the difference is just a dot (点) that "兔" has but "免" doesn't, the pronunciations are worlds apart. (**Reddit**, Writing system alignment chart, ngl it was difficult)

(…) from the European languages the worst is unquestionably the Greek. I'm a native Greek speaker and after 12 years in school learning Greek day and night i cannot write a single Greek word correctly. I refused to learn it because from 6 years old i couldn't comprehend why i should learn something that is so stupid. My educated compatriots usually commend the complexity of the Greek language and they see it as a virtue, but let's face it. They are just idiots. (**Quora**, Which are the worst written languages in the world?)

– personal narratives of learning difficulties or breakthroughs

– scripts judged by how long they take to "click"

– frequent mentions of memorization, fear, joy, or frustration

– learning experience seen as measure of script effectiveness

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6 · ESSENTIALISM VS RELATIVISM

(…) And yeah our script may not be quite as complex but we make up for it by making everything else super complicated. Most if not all Thai kids take formal Thai language classes for at least 14 years from kindergarten to 12th grade and even then there is still much more to learn. The bottom line is I don't think it's possible to say which language is the hardest to speak or write. It depends on your upbringing and how your brain works. (**YouTube**, The hardest language to spell)

"Most effective" for a writing system depends on the criterion used. No single script is optimal on all dimensions; different scripts trade off phonological transparency, morpho-lexical compactness, learnability, typographic economy, and fit to technological contexts. The following organizes those trade-offs, gives comparative evaluations, and offers practical implications. (…) Phonological transparency (phoneme–grapheme consistency): how predictably letters map to sounds. High transparency speeds literacy acquisition and decoding (e.g., shallow orthographies). (…) (**Quora**, From a linguist's perspective, which is the most effective writing system?)

As to which is best, it depends on the language Alphabets are best with languages that have a medium number of sounds, especially those including consonant clusters, and short word length. Syllabaries are best with languages that have long words and few sounds, generally languages that don't have consonant clusters, and have a small number of vowels, of which one is typically far more common than the others. Ideograms are best for languages with lots of sounds or tones. Word length is not a big issue. (**Quora**, What are some of the best and worst writing systems?)

– is a script inherently hard or just hard for you?

– tension between universal claims and learner-specific views

– reflects deeper beliefs about linguistic relativity and cognition

– essentialist views often clash with relativist rebuttals

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7 · CORRECTION AND EXPERTISE

It is not technically correct to say Thai script derived from Sanskrit. It is derived from Khmer script and Khmer script derived from Brahmi script. You just go to Wikipedia dude. Should I continue to watch your video given that you already gave the wrong simple fact? (**YouTube**, The hardest language to spell)

Calling kilogramo a loanword is a stretch. As for c/q, predictable doesn't mean not redundant. For x/j Méjico and México are both accepted in different places precisely because México is not how anyone would spell it if they heard it in the present. Spelling cazar as casar (i.e. the way it's pronounced in most places outside of Northern Spain) is considered straight-up wrong. You /could/ have a "write what you actually pronounce" option for that too like with (p)sicólogo and Mé(x/j)ico but expecting the entire Spanish speaking world to keep track of pronunciations that are only used by a minority of speakers isn't that different from French speakers having to spell things the way they were prounced 400 years ago. (**Reddit**, What does r/linguisticshumor consider a bad orthography?)

Actually it's not the language that has a writing system, it's the speakers that have one or both. Some people speak the same language, but use several different alphabets for it, and some alphabets (Latin in particular) are used for a wide range of languages. The best writing system for each writer is the one he or she knows best and is most comfortable with. (**Quora**, From a linguist's perspective, which is the most effective writing system?)

– users correct terminology and factual misunderstandings

– common refrains: "That's not an abjad", "Chinese isn't pictographic"

– reflects boundary work between lay knowledge and linguistic authority

– policing often re-centers the conversation on "correct" metalanguage

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HYPOTHESES REVISITED

H1 **Cultural stereotypes:** confirmed (orientalist tropes)

H2 **Familiarity bias:** alphabetic privilege dominates

H3 **Projection:** phonocentric norms universalized

H4 **Aesthetic overlay:** difficulty = prestige

IDEOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF DIFFICULTY

– the alphabetic condition: public discourse assumes phoneme–grapheme mapping is "logical" and universal → scripts judged by alphabetic norms

– difficulty as ideological mirror: "hard" ≠ complex — it indexes cultural distance and moral value ("Chinese = chaotic", "Hangul = logical")

– affective dimension: awe, frustration, beauty → emotional acts that sustain literacy ideologies

– native script effect: familiarity mistaken for universality; one's first script becomes the hidden standard (Gnanadesikan 2021)

– implication: difficulty as a *social index* of identity, hierarchy, and belonging

CROSS-PLATFORM COMPARISON

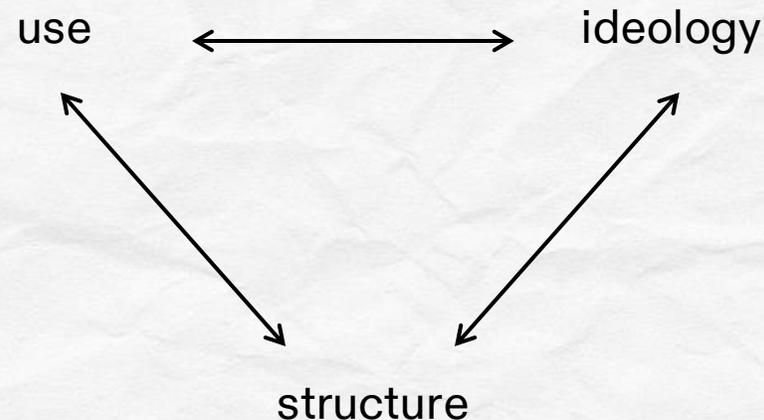| Platform	Genre	Tone	Dominant ideology
YouTube	Performance	Affective	Aesthetic awe and frustration
Reddit	Conversation	Ironic	Critical (meta)prescriptivism
Quora	Mini-essays	Rationalizing	Expertise and argument

→ emotion → irony → rationalization

HOW PLATFORMS SHAPE IDEOLOGIES

– vernacular expertise: lay users perform knowledge; folk grapholinguistics mirrors academic debate

– metaprescriptivism: users mock yet reinforce norms → critical awareness doesn't erase hierarchy

– ideological condensation: each script becomes a cultural symbol (Hangul = modernity, Arabic = spirituality, English = irrationality)

– toward lay grapholinguistics: public theorizing about writing reveals a living ideological ecology of literacy
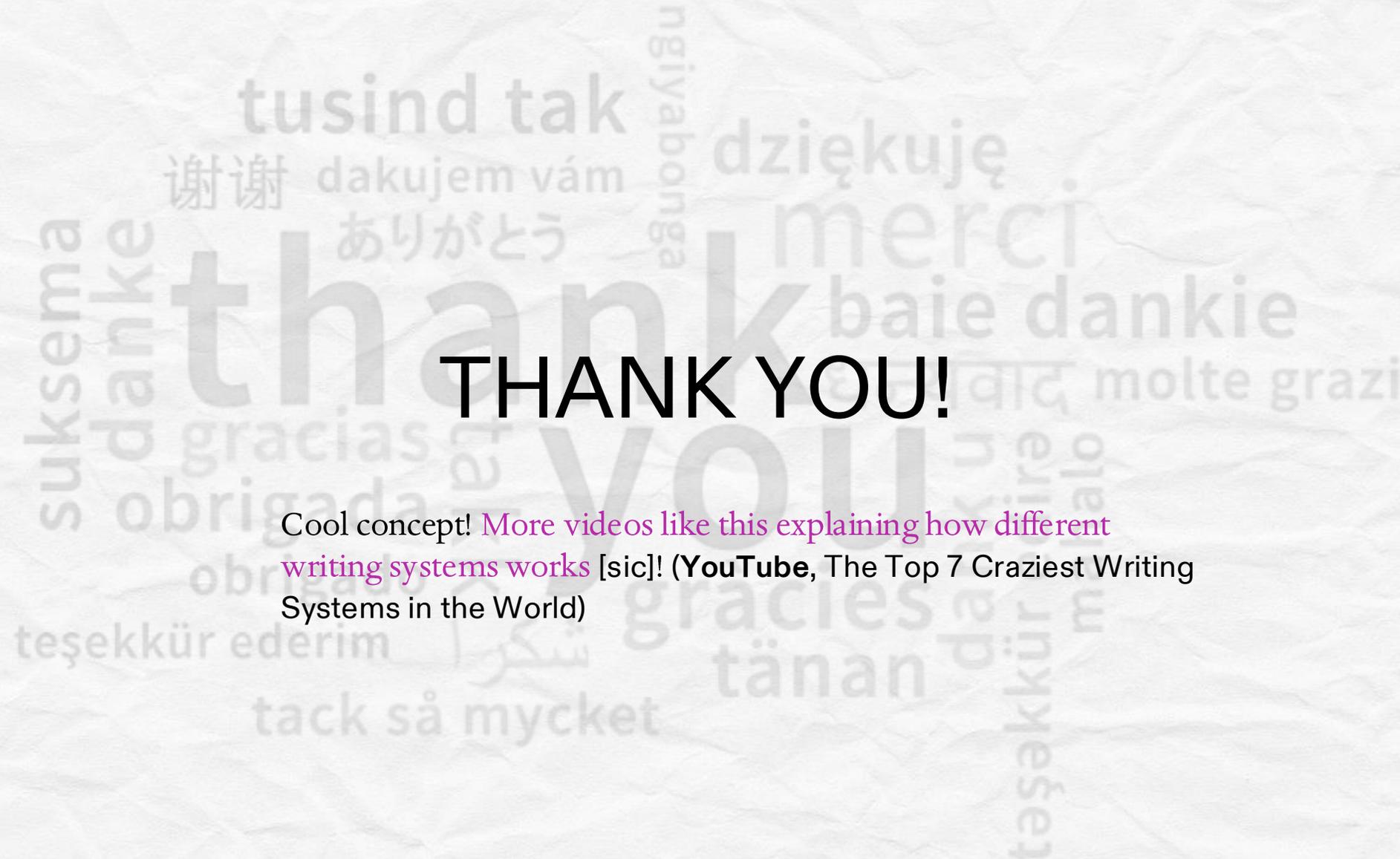
CONTRIBUTION

– extends grapholinguistics beyond structure → ideology

– bridges public discourse and grapholinguistics

– demonstrates that *normativity* is not only institutional but also vernacular

use ⟷ ideology

structure

OUTLOOK

– future: multilingual data (from non-English forums)

– survey component to test attitudes empirically

– integration into larger "Literacy and Normativity" project

THANK YOU!

Cool concept! More videos like this explaining how different writing systems works [sic]! (**YouTube**, The Top 7 Craziest Writing Systems in the World)