**writing/书写(Shū Xiě)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| European Perspective | Roland Marti | 12 Apr 2022 |

1. An elementary definition of writing could be: “Writing is the rendering of language by secondary means.” Usually it is the rendering of spoken language, i.e. a sequence of auditory signs, by written signs.

2. Writing as it developed in Europe came from the East, true to the old saying “Ex oriente lux” [The light comes from the East]. The development of writing before it was adapted in Europe points to the Middle East as the region of origin. The reason for the development of writing was, to quote another saying “verba volant, scripta manent” [The spoken word is volatile, the written word permanent.] With the increased complexity of the social structure of humanity it became increasingly important to make language more permanent. The main areas where this need for permanence was felt earlier than elsewhere were administration, commerce, and religion.

3. If writing is the permanent form of language, it must render linguistic units as the spoken language does. Since language is multi-layered writing systems must choose one of the levels to be rendered by visual signs. They can be (from large to small) the word (logography), the syllable (syllabography), or the sound (phonography). Phonography is monogenetic (all phonographic writing systems essentially have one common origin) in contradistinction to logography, which evolved in various areas of the world independently[[1]](#footnote-1). Phonography developed out of logography through the application of the acrophonic principle: a sign that originally stood for a word was reduced to represent the first sound of the word[[2]](#footnote-2). Semitic phonography originally only had signs for consonants. Transmitted by Phoenician this writing system reached Greece, where vowels were also rendered by signs, thus creating a full-fledged phonographic writing system: the Greek alphabet. And this form of phonographic writing, rendering vowels and consonants, would become the only one used in Europe[[3]](#footnote-3). In the past there were several phonographic writing systems in Europe[[4]](#footnote-4), but by now they are reduced to three: Latin, Greek, and Cyrillic[[5]](#footnote-5).

4. Phonographic writing, as the European writing system par excellence, has several undeniable advantages: it has a very restricted number of signs (usually not more than forty for a given language), the signs are usually clearly distinguishable and comparatively easy to write (or draw), and there should be a clear correspondence between sounds (phonemes) and signs (letters). Unfortunately the latter, even though it is always quoted as the main advantage of phonographic writing, is usually not adhered to systematically. The main reason for this is the fact that the spoken language is subject to permanent change, whereas the written language, since its main task is to conserve, tends to be conservative. The change of a writing system (usually referred to as orthographic reform), is an arduous task and, more often than not, doomed to fail[[6]](#footnote-6). The result of this is that spoken language develops further, whereas written language conserves a previous stage, developing what is known as “historical orthography”. And thus one of the main advantages of phonographic writing was eventually lost: when seeing a sequence of signs the reader often did not know how to pronounce it (unless he had learned the particular pronunciation of the word), and when hearing a word the listener did not know how to write it (unless he had learned it)[[7]](#footnote-7). Another problem of phonographic writing is the very fact that it is monogenetic. Since the unit to be rendered by phonographic writing is the sound it would be desirable to have one and only one written sign (letter or grapheme) for one and only one sound (phoneme). But the Greek sound system was rather different from that of Semitic, so some Semitic letters were superfluous (e.g. several signs for velar stops) and for some Greek sounds there were no letters (e.g. the vowels). All the alphabets in use now in Europe for various languages had to be adapted, either by changing the meaning of letters[[8]](#footnote-8), by eliminating[[9]](#footnote-9) or modifying them[[10]](#footnote-10) or by inventing new letters[[11]](#footnote-11). Another solution was to use letter combinations to represent single sounds (phonemes)[[12]](#footnote-12). In the last case, however, the original idea of “one sound = one letter” was diluted. There were attempts to remedy this situation, particularly in languages using the Latin alphabet. New letters were rarely added (e.g. Icelandic <þ>). Instead diacritic signs were preferred (earliest example: <G>), typically put over, under or in letters: <á> <ç> <Ł>.

Thus Europe, using only phonographic writing systems, theoretically had the advantage of using a relatively simple system that was easy to learn, with few signs to render spoken language, but this advantage was partly lost due to internal factors (the dynamism of spoken language vs. the static nature of written language) and due to the monogenetic nature of phonographic writing.

5. Writing in Europe, just as in the Middle East, was originally a profession, carried out by specially trained masons (in the case of inscriptions) or by scribes. It was often entrusted to slaves. Representatives of the élite could perhaps read, but they would generally not write (they preferred to dictate). This changed to some extent when writing essentially became the task of the (Christian) church or of church-trained personnel, particularly in the Middle Ages. In this period writing could acquire a numinous aura. But Reformation and to a lesser extent Counter-Reformation changed this in Western and Central Europe since both emphasised the ability of each individual to read the Holy Scripture and eventually all kinds of texts, with writing being a natural sequel to reading. Thus a new secularisation of writing set in, enhanced by book printing and mandatory public education with the emphasis on reading and writing[[13]](#footnote-13). Thus writing became even more of a technical skill with no particular aura around it.

6. There was (and to some extent still is) one exception: Cyrillic. The Cyrillic alphabet[[14]](#footnote-14) (in contradistinction to Greek and Latin) was introduced in the Christian era (9th century) by (as tradition erroneously held) a Christian saint, St. Cyril, and the creation was considered to have been inspired by God. Thus the orthodox Slavs held Cyrillic writing in high esteem. Even today May 24th (= May 11th according to the Julian calendar, the memorial day of the brothers Constantine-Cyril and Methodius) is an official holiday in Bulgaria as the “day of Bulgarian learning and culture and of Slavonic writing”. And the importance of Cyrillic was even carried over into the European Union: when Bulgaria entered the European Union in 2005 she added a unilateral “Declaration by the Republic of Bulgaria on the Use of the Cyrillic Alphabet in the European Union”, thus underlining the importance it attributed to Cyrillic[[15]](#footnote-15).

7. A consequence of the utilitary nature of writing in Europe is the fact that writing was much less considered an art than elsewhere. Calligraphy existed in Europe as well, but it played a minor role in comparison to writing in China or in regions using Arabic script.

1. E.g. Chinese writing, Egyptian hieroglyphs, Mayan glyphs. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Thus the Semitic sign for ‘house’, \**bayt-* (perhaps taken from hieroglyphic) came to represent the initial sound *b* only etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The only exceptions are writing systems for migrant or religious groups, such as Hebrew (for Yiddish or Ladino) and Arabic/Ottoman Persian (for Bosnian or Belarusian). Another exception is the secondary writing system known as stenography, which essentially relies on the syllabographic principle. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. E.g. Runic, Gothic, and Glagolitic. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. All phonographic systems allow for elements of other systems. Thus, logography is used in all three of them for numbers (1-9). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cf. the unsuccessful attempts to reform English orthography, the failed recent attempt of a minimal reform of French orthography and, most recently, the completely botched reform of German orthography. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Take, e.g., English gaol or read and [θru:]. The situation is similar in French. The difference lies in the fact that in French this affects only one direction: if you know the basic rules of French orthography and orthoepy you will almost always know how to pronounce a written word properly. But when you hear a word you will often not be able to write it properly unless you know Old French or Latin: when you hear [o:] this may be written as eau, eaux, au, aux, oh, depending on the context. English is even worse: when you see a word you do not necessarily know how to pronounce it, but neither do you know how to write a word you hear unless you have learnt the orthography of this particular word (remember G.B.Shaw’s alternative spelling for fish: ghoti). In a sense, thus, English is to a certain extent almost logographic. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Thus Greek α for /a/ originally represented a glottal stop /’/ in Semitic. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Semitic qoppa was only used as the number 90 in Greek since it was superfluous (there was already κ to represent the only voiceless velar stop). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Latin G was created on the basis of C by adding a (diacritic) hook in order to distinguish voiced and unvoiced velar stops. (The old tradition of using only C was conserved in the abbreviation C. for Gaius.) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cyrillic could originally be described as a Greek alphabet (24 letters) with added letters (14) for specific Slavic sounds, but it soon developed into a separate writing system. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Cf. <μπ> for /b/ in Modern Greek, <sz> or <sch> for /∫/ in Polish or German, <ci> for /t∫/ in Italian (ciaramella /t∫a-/ vs. caramella /ka-/), <пя> for /pja/ in Russian. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. And, of course, arithmetics (the three Rs). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Actually a misnomer since (Constantine-)Cyril created the Glagolitic alphabet that went out of use rather quickly in the Orthodox world (it survived in Croatia). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. It said, *inter alia*, “... the Cyrillic alphabet will become one of the three alphabets officially used in the European Union. This substantial part of the cultural heritage of Europe represents a particular Bulgarian contribution to the linguistic and cultural diversity of the Union.” To my knowledge Greece made no such declaration regarding the Greek alphabet when entering the European Communities in 1981. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)