BOOK REVIEW

GEOFFREY SAMPSON, *Writing systems*. Sheffield, UK and Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2015. x + 280 pp.

Reviewed by Edward J. Vajda

This is a revised edition of a book originally published in 1985. In hindsight, the first edition made an important contribution toward establishing the study of writing as a valid subdiscipline of modern linguistics during a time when the world’s writing systems were not generally regarded as a prime focus of linguistic theory. The past three decades have witnessed a renewed interest in the development and typology of writing, stimulated in part by Sampson’s thought-provoking monograph. This has resulted in the appearance of a major worldwide survey of scripts (Daniels & Bright 1996), novel typological approaches to writing (DeFrancis 1989), and advances in understanding the psychology of reading graphic symbols (Rayner et al. 2012).

This second edition encompasses the contents of the first while adding important new information on the history, typology, and psychology of writing systems. Its introduction (1–17) justifies why writing should occupy a serious place in contemporary linguistic science alongside the study of spoken language. It also explains notational idiosyncrasies used in the book that might confuse any reader unaware of them in advance, such as using a minus sign before a date to indicate “BC” or “BCE” and transcribing the voiceless palatal fricative as [ʃ] rather than the traditional IPA [ɕ], something to note before reading the chapters on Chinese in particular.

The book’s 14 chapters are not intended as an inclusive survey of the world’s writing systems so much as a sampling of scripts carefully chosen for their utility in explicating key facets of the evolution of writing. Each chapter can be evaluated according to how it contributes to an understanding of writing history, typology, or psychology.

Chapter 2, “Theoretical preliminaries” (18–39), offers a definition of writing broader than the glottographic definition (based on spoken language) that normally forms the starting point in typologies of writing systems. Sampson’s conception also subsumes semasiographic systems, such as the internationally recognized symbols used on road signs and in the garment care industry, as well as the system of “Blissymbolics” devised by Karl Blitz in the mid-twentieth century to represent concepts in graphic forms without using the medium of any particular spoken language (21–23). While linguistic definitions of writing typically correspond to Sampson’s “glottographic writing”, the discussion of semasiography provides a valuable context for understanding the phenomenon of writing under any definition. The remainder of the book is concerned with glottographic systems, which might be defined as “writing proper”. Sampson uses the term “logographic”, which literally means...
“word-writing” to cover systems where meaning rather than phonetic form determines graph usage. However, he also shows that there are no writing systems where polymorphemic words are written using separate symbols, so that all “logographic” systems are in fact based largely on morphemes rather than words. The alternative basis for writing is “phonographic”, where graphs are paired with either the syllable, the sound segment, or the phonetic feature in a predictable way without consideration of what meaning any given combination of graphs conveys. However, in most scripts used by actual speech communities, including English spelling, functional considerations play at least some role in addition to phonetic form. A different approach would have been to characterize all scripts based on the degree of interplay between sound vs. meaning as motivating factors, with graphic conventions motivated by meaning rather than sound alone serving as departures from the phonological basis of the system.

Chapter 3, “The earliest writing” (40–59), primarily discusses the evolution of Sumerian cuneiform. Sampson cites the decipherment of Maya glyphs as evidence disproving the monogenesis hypothesis of writing origin. He is non-committal on whether Chinese characters arose independently of writing in Southwest Asia, and simply treats cuneiform as chronologically the oldest attested true glottographic system. The origin of Egyptian hieroglyphs are not mentioned in this connection, however, though they are as old or nearly as old as cuneiform writing, and it is unclear whether the author views them as having arisen through stimulus diffusion from the Tigris–Euphrates area or if hieroglyphs represent another independent creation of writing. As to the rise of Sumerian cuneiform itself, Sampson critiques and rejects the idea that it developed out of earlier semasiographic uses of clay tokens, leaving the mechanics of its origin still unresolved.

 Readers looking for a book that chronicles the step-by-step evolution of writing will find many unwanted gaps, since the author’s stated goal is to cherry-pick writing systems in order to illuminate certain general issues about the nature of writing. The next system to be discussed is the irregular Greek syllabary known as Linear B (60–72). Key topics covered include details of the “incompleteness” of the script (which sounds are omitted or ambiguously represented) and how this suggests the system’s likely origin from an earlier syllabary used to write a language phonologically quite different from Greek. Recent scholarship cited here points to a connection with Luwian, an Indo-European language of the Anatolian branch; however, this theory is not widely accepted and both the origin of Linear A script and the provenance of the language it represents remains unresolved (Marangozis 2006). The famous decipherment of Linear B by Michael Ventris is mentioned, though as in other chapters, the historiography of script decipherment stays mostly outside the book’s focus.

Chapter 5 (73–103) turns to consonantal writing. Here Sampson emphasizes that the monogenesis theory of alphabetic writing is clearly correct (73), whereas glottographic writing in general arose on more than one occasion. The author argues persuasively that the West Semitic consonantal alphabet (or vowel-neutral syllabary) was derived via the acrophonic principle, whereby letter shape came to represent only the consonant anlaut of a word originally depicted pictographically. Much of this chapter describes how the morphological and phonological structure of Semitic languages is particularly amenable to a writing system based on consonants. The recent coinage ‘abjad’ to denote alphabetic writing lacking in vowel letters is not
used here, though it probably should have been included. The original source and inspiration for the first consonantal alphabet’s creation, like the reason behind its characteristic ordering of letters, inherited and largely retained by subsequent European alphabets, remains undetermined, as Sampson is careful to point out.

The next two chapters cover European alphabetic writing (104–19) and influences on graphic letter shape (120–42), the latter chapter being entirely new to this second edition. Once again, the focus falls on how well the script fits a given language’s phonology, as well as on its development over time. The origin and gradual stylistic evolution of letters in the Greek, Latin, Cyrillic, Hebrew, and Arabic alphabets are considered. Sampson makes a convincing case that all of these alphabets, historically speaking, are variations on a common theme. The explanation for additions and deletions of letters in the daughter alphabets, as well as for maintenance vs. change in the ordering of letters inherited from the Phoenician, is particularly informative.

The next four chapters treat the major writing systems of modern East Asia: China, Korea, and Japan, and present an updated version of the excellent treatment found in the book’s first edition. Chapter 8, “A featural system: The Korean Hangul” (143–66), discusses the Korean alphabet, focusing on how the shapes of the letters were originally motivated by phonetic features of the sound segment each letter represents. Sampson is less concerned with the degree to which today’s users of Hangul are aware of the system’s featural underpinnings than with how the development of the script illuminates the evolution writing in general. As in other chapters, this discussion succeeds in placing the rise of Korean Hangul in its proper cultural context, showing that the structure of the Korean language exerted a major influence on the alphabet’s development in light of the alternative of using Chinese characters to write the language.

The next two chapters focus on Chinese characters, or hanzi, which not only represent the world’s oldest continuously used writing, but embody several key areas of disagreement surrounding how writing systems should be typologized. In agreement with all other contemporary scholars, Sampson argues persuasively that Chinese characters are not semasiographic; in other words, they are not a system that conveys ideas apart from their linguistic expression in a particular spoken language, contrary to once prevalent European misconceptions about Chinese writing. As a convincing demonstration, he cites four synonymous words meaning the color ‘red’ (171), each of which is written with a distinct character. In a true semasiographic system, synonyms would receive only a single representation. He then goes on to demonstrate how the earliest Chinese characters developed based on pictures that conveyed specific words in Ancient Chinese and how this system was later extended by using the same graphs non-pictographically to represent aspects of their pronunciation in writing the much larger body of words not given to pictographic representation. Because of its origin based on physical resemblance between word meaning and graph, Sampson refers to modern Chinese characters as a logographic system. While this is clearly a correct interpretation of how Chinese writing first arose, the efficacy of calling the modern script “logographic” is debatable. Sampson implicitly disagrees with DeFrancis (1989), who interprets the system of Chinese characters used today as a highly irregular, or “morphosemantic” syllabary in which the phonetic aspects nevertheless numerically outweigh the pictographic core. DeFrancis offers an overall more convincing typological interpretation of contemporary Chinese writing, in which virtually every character expresses a particular syllable of sound,
albeit with a degree of irregularity in syllable to graph unmatched by any other syllabic writing system in modern use. Contrary to Sampson’s claim (168) that in Chinese “syllables are coextensive with morphemes”, DeFrancis (1989: 115–16) shows that 11% of Chinese characters in modern usage actually express only one syllable of a disyllabic or trisyllabic morpheme – in other words, they function as only part of a morpheme. Therefore, Sampson’s use of the term “logographic” to describe Chinese writing, even if read, as the author intends, to mean “expressing morphemes” rather than in the literal sense of “word-writing”, the characterizations falls short of accurately capturing the essence of modern Chinese writing. Also, the use of “logographic” to describe a heavily semantic (i.e. “irregular”) syllabic writing system like Chinese might unintentionally reinforce the mistaken notion that Chinese characters are “word-writing”. Only monosyllabic Chinese words can be written with a single character, and not because they are words but because they are single syllables. But this is perhaps just a terminological quibble over an issue that simply lacks a perfect solution: neither “logographic” nor even “morphosyllabic” makes an ideal name for Chinese characters. In any event, the partial uniqueness of hanzi, like each of the other writing systems discussed in this book, is one of the main points emphasized in Sampson’s book.

Chapter 11 (208–32) is entitled “Japanese: A mixed writing system”. This chapter was placed after the discussion of writing in Korea and Japan because understanding how the various components of the Japanese script are used depends crucially on understanding how they were transformed from their original source. Sampson nicely demonstrates that Japanese Kanji represents a true morpheme writing system that arose when Chinese characters were borrowed for their meaning and applied toward writing Japanese root words (the kun readings of Kanji), or for writing single syllables of Chinese loanwords (the on readings, of which there are various levels reflecting the chronology of borrowing). By contrast, the two kanas are syllabaries based on Chinese characters or pieces of characters adopted not for their meaning but rather to convey a specific phonetic value in writing native Japanese affixes and function words (hiragana) or loanwords from languages other than Chinese (katakana). Sampson also identifies featural components used in conjunction with the kanas, such as the diacritic notation of voicing in obstruents. Therefore, although the non-chronological ordering of chapters might seem odd at first glance, with Chinese writing treated late in the book and coming after the chapters on European alphabets, or the more recent invention of the Korean alphabet discussed before the much older Chinese and Japanese writing tradition, this ordering nicely facilitates a graduated discussion of the topics investigated throughout the book.

The final three chapters discuss writing systems in light of modern information technology (233–48) and the vagaries of English spelling (249–64), which become easier to assess given the issues already covered in earlier chapters. A conclusion (265–66) reiterates the book’s main findings: writing systems are diverse and do not lend themselves to a uniform descriptive theory but rather must be discussed in their cultural and linguistic context.

One of the most important achievements of the present book is its success in placing the development of individual writing systems in their relevant historical contexts and in linking aspects of their evolution to structural features of the languages they represent, without being excessively deterministic in claiming that writing typology inevitably follows language structure. The book succeeds in debunking simplistic
statements about whether one type of writing is superior to another in a general sense. Sampson’s selective survey of alphabetic vs. syllabic scripts, and phonetically regular scripts vs. those with significant irregularities linked to semantic features goes far in illustrating how multi-faceted any consideration of functional utility must be when evaluating a writing system. This, in turn, sheds wisdom on what underpins debates about writing reform in countries with graphic traditions as diverse as English and Chinese. The takeaway conclusion of this monograph is stated succinctly on its very last page (266): “… contrary to what is often supposed, the history of writing systems does not support the assumption that the ideal writing system is one that records speech sounds with perfect fidelity”.

There are now many books that explore the origins, history, and variety of the world’s writing systems. One of my personal favorites remains the wonderfully titled “Visible speech: The diverse oneness of writing systems” (DeFrancis 1989). This “oneness”, far from not existing (contrary to what is argued in the book under review), might instead be characterized as the universal interplay of linguistic sound and meaning as competing motivating factors in writing conventions, with certain systems favoring one pole over the other by differing degrees and in various ways. Regardless of alternative considerations about which scripts should have been included and which left out, or about what a particular writing system should be called, Sampson’s book in its newly revised form stands out for its engaging consideration of virtually every key question in the development and description of writing. With its clear style, succinct definition of specialized terminology, and balanced explanations providing background on opposing viewpoints, only a specialist might be familiar with beforehand, this erudite book makes an excellent introduction to the subject of writing for the general reader. It also furnishes ample food for thought to scholars already well acquainted with the history of writing.

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