

On the typology of writing systems

Script types and script classes

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Different languages use different principles for relating written units to spoken ones. Their proper classification is a debated matter in the literature on the typology of writing systems. In this talk, I shall propose a classification system based on the following general assumptions:

1. A natural language which is both spoken and written has a linguistic system with two subsystems: a *spoken system* and a *writing system*.
2. The spoken system identifies the spoken units of the language. The writing system, in turn, identifies the language's written units; those units are ultimately formed from the writing symbols provided by one or several *scripts* in the writing system.
3. Scripts are the very entities to be classified in a typology of writing systems.
4. Types of scripts are defined with respect to *correspondence relations* at the interface between the writing system and the spoken system of a language.
5. All scripts in the writing systems of natural languages can be assigned to one of two major types: *phonographic* scripts or *logographic* scripts.
6. Subtypes of phonographic scripts include *phonemic* and *syllabic* ones.
7. Differences between *strictly phonemic* ('alphabetic') scripts like Latin script and *weakly phonemic* ('abjad') scripts such as Arabic or Hebrew script can be reduced to logical properties of the involved correspondence relations.
8. A similar case can be made for the relation between 'syllabaries' like Japanese Kana, which are *strictly syllabic*, and *weakly syllabic* 'abugidas' of the Devanagari type.