DISCUSSION ON WRITING SYSTEMS IN DIFFERENT LANGUAGES

Arranged by Grigory Kazakov

Following the tradition of the previous special issues of *Linguistics & Polyglot Studies,* in the present one, articles are supplemented by a round table discussion (by way of a written exchange of ideas, as in 2022). This time it addresses the topic of writing systems. Our esteemed experts are:

– Minoru Ohtsuki, PhD, Professor at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Daito Bunka University (Tokyo, Japan);

– Olga V. Popova, PhD, Senior Researcher at the Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences (Moscow, Russia);

– Osvaldo Alexis Zúñiga Elizalde, Lecturer in Nahuatl at the Meritorious Autonomous University of Puebla (Cholula, Mexico).

Publishing the results of this discussion, the editors hope that it will attract more public and research attention to the productive topic of writing and reading practices in different languages and cultures.

1. **What are the tendencies in the writing system of your language (country, region)?**

– *Minoru Ohtsuki:* Among the five (or six) writing systems of Japanese, there is a tendency for hiragana and katakana (syllabaries) to be used more often than kanji (Chinese characters). There also seems to be a trend in which katakana, whose major role is to denote foreign words, onomatopoeia, animal and plant names, is also used for non-foreign words. Masuji (2018) investigated into the background and various factors involved in such use.

– *Olga Popova:* Sumero-Akkadian cuneiform arose as a logographic script and, at the level of Sumerian (an isolated language), turned into a mixed logographic and syllabic system in the 3rd millennium BC. It was the logosyllabic script that was adapted to write Akkadian (a Semitic language) in the 3rd to 2nd millennium BC, and later Hittite (Indo-European), Hurrian and Urartian (Hurrito-Urartian languages), and others. The following trends can be identified:

• The writing system, in which logograms (signs for words) and syllabograms (signs for syllables) alternate, tends to get simplified and to increase the role and frequency of phonetic signs. Special cases are scholarly texts, where logograms serve to demonstrate masterful knowledge of the script.

• A phonetic writing system begins with a syllabary, and only then becomes alphabetic. Cuneiform demonstrates this trend. It is first logographic, then mixed logosyllabic, and later turns out to be predominantly syllabic in the later periods of the Akkadian language and in Urartian cuneiform, where there are almost no ideograms. Only then does the syllabic writing system begin to transform into an alphabetic one, but in the case of Akkadian it makes only the first attempts. Alphabetic cuneiform systems arise in a situation where the syllabary is known. So when we are deciphering an ancient writing system, our first hypothesis should be that we see a syllabic script, and not an alphabetic one.

• Alphabetic writing replaces logosyllabic cuneiform in the territory of Mesopotamia at the end of the 1st millennium BC. The general trend is to simplify writing by reducing the number of characters in the script.

– *Osvaldo Zúñiga:* Mexico is the most populated Spanish-speaking nation in the world, where Spanish coexists with 68 indigenous languages embracing more than 360 varieties across the country. Nahuatl alone has some 60 varieties, which can be as similar between each other as the Spanish of Argentina and that of Mexico, but also as different as French and Romanian.

After the fall of the capital city of the Aztecs, Tenochtitlan (1521), and the Spanish occupation, the decline of their and other native languages started. Most of the traditional books, or *amoxme*, were burnt or prohibited, forcing the indigenous population to quit their original writing system based on codices. This meant that the language had to survive in its spoken form, adapting written forms from the Spanish alphabet. Nowadays, Nahuatl writing directly reflects the oral speech, but there is no consensus about which spelling might be the most suitable.

There are two commonly used Nahuatl orthographies: the so-called classic Spanish-based writing, which uses the Spanish letters like "c, h, z, i"; and the Anglo-German system, with the letters and accents mainly used in German or English, such as "w, j, k, ö, y". The first tradition is largely historically based, as it was the main western alphabet in Nahuatl used throughout and after the colonial period for family names (such as "Xochitl"), place names (e.g. "Iztaccihuatl"), and the very name of Mexico. The second system took root in academic publications, as excellent researchers of Mexican native cultures came from abroad, mainly from the US, Germany, England and France. This second type of spelling in highly recognized publications gave Nahuatl an opportunity to differentiate itself from Spanish and gains terrain every year. The difference between the two approaches can be seen, for example, in the change from "Tlazohcamati" to "Tasojkamatyj".

2. What are the latest findings concerning the script(s) in the focus of your research?

– *Minoru Ohtsuki:* Ninomiya and Ninomiya (2017) examined visual symbols such as ideograms, phonograms, Arabic numerals, chemical symbols, map symbols and logic symbols in the framework of humanization and visual formation, which were presented as the principles of grammatology in their previous studies.

Ohtsuki (2017) stated that, in the history of writing systems, a process of formalization, systematization, and simplification can be observed (e.g. pictograms > ideograms & phonograms). This process can be said to be "unidirectional" in the sense that there is no regressive change in the writing system(s) of a language if observed as a whole. What is important here is the fact that, in the transition of stages, the former stages do not disappear by natural selection but remain and become accumulated, so that even after the stage of phonograms is reached, former types of writings can continue to be used, or even other types of "subsystems" achieve their own development.

Kuroda (2021) proposed a cognitive grammatology, adding a third pole of writing to the phonological and semantic poles of cognitive linguistics. He dealt with many problems in grammatology. It is of interest that he paid attention, for example, to the metalinguistic function and elaboration of Japanese ruby characters, usually placed above or to the right of kanji or other types of characters, to show not only the characters' reading but also the meaning that the writer wants to convey to the reader.

– *Olga Popova:* Sumero-Akkadian cuneiform has been studied quite well. The main areas of research are now focused on the publication of new texts, grammar and history of the region. Among the latest achievements in relation to the writing systems of the region, it is worth noting the significant progress in the decipherment of the ancient Elamite script by the French archaeologist François Desset. I am talking about Linear Elamite which was used in Iran from the end of the 3rd to the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC. This is the second stage of the development of writing in the Elamite state. The oldest stage is called Proto-Elamite pictographic writing, an original undeciphered script which was used in the 4th millennium BC. Later, it supposedly develops into Linear Elamite. Simultaneously with this, the Elamites switch to the well-deciphered Assyrian-Babylonian cuneiform, thanks to the texts in which we have a fairly complete picture of the Elamite language.

–   *Osvaldo Zúñiga:* In terms of codex writings, research has focused on the Mayan culture, mainly due to the current infrastructure projects in their territory. Because of the construction of the Mayan Train that goes through the rainforests of the Mayan peninsula, many discoveries have taken place. Inscriptions craved on the walls on ancient buildings, buried sculptures and many artifacts shed light on the writing systems of ancient cultures. For instance, a sculpture found in the archeological zone of Chichén Itzá helped establish the relation of the Mayan codex writing to the Mexica (Aztec) codex system. This was an astounding finding since both civilizations belonged to widely different historical periods. The sculpture shares Mayan as well as Toltec traits, having Huasteco art aesthetics. Both the Mayan and the Toltec civilizations are considered two of the most influential cultures in the Mesoamerican cultural zone. The contact between the late Mayan and Toltec civilizations shows the relation and even merger of cultural traditions such as codex writing, which was never separated from painting. All this helps to build and study cultural connections in ancient writing systems across large time distances.

3.   How has the advent of the digital era affected writing?

–   *Minoru Ohtsuki:* As Ohtsuki (2017) indicated, use of emoticons, (like ":-)", ": 0") and "emoji" (ideograms and smileys used in electronic messages and Webpages (like ☺) and "kaomoji", or Japanese emoticons ((*^^*)♡ ; w(° o °)w), has played a significant role in digital communication, along with the use of abbreviations, codes and other means. Semiotically speaking, all these pictorial representations of facial expressions are icons, because of the similarity between the form and the content. The frequent use of these non-linguistic signs is arguably associated with people's desire to compensate for what is lost in electronic messages, especially expression of feelings.

Ohtsuki (2021) indicated that texting, a characteristic way of spelling words and phrases in the digital age, has created various new ways of spelling. All types of texting can be integrated under two principles: (1) "contraction" (e.g. message → msg) and (2) "mixing (of writing systems)" (e.g. great → gr8, to be → 2b). Also, it can be understood in a unified manner from a semiotic perspective. With regard to (a) the symbols themselves, phonograms are related to arbitrariness, while pictographs and emoticons (iconography) are related to naturalness. Regarding (b) the use of symbols, there is group closure and exclusivity toward outsiders, which can lead to backlash. And regarding (c) the users of the symbols, playfulness and amusement (and even infantilism) can be observed.

–   *Olga Popova:* It did not affect writing in any way, as I am talking about dead languages. A large number of electronic corpora are now being created, which greatly facilitates the work of Assyriologists. Creating 3D photographs of cuneiform texts also simplifies the work, although it does not yet eliminate the need to work with the originals.

–   *Osvaldo Zúñiga:* As for writing and learning Nahuatl, the digital era has had a double effect on its dynamics. Thinking of the printed sources, scarcity has been the constant limitation, since, compared with the publications in other languages, there is rarely serious economic support for producing materials in Nahuatl that could become available for wide use. With the digitalization of sources, the spreading of Nahuatl written materials has become easier than ever, and online language classes have made it possible to reach a much larger audience than in the classrooms.

4.   How have reading practices changed in recent years (decades)?

–   *Minoru Ohtsuki:* According to a survey conducted by the Japan Newspaper Publishers Association, circulation of newspapers as well as books and magazines peaked in the 1990s and has been on a sharp decline since 2008, but signs of a bottoming out were observed in 2004. However, the percentage of people who read on the Internet and on their smartphones may not be covered by such survey statistics. It seems that the decline is especially true of younger generations who are reading fewer and fewer newspapers (not even online news). On the other hand, according to a recent survey conducted by Ambitious (2023), about 90% of the respondents enjoy reading as a hobby. On an average, more than 40% of them read paper books, and about 80% of them read both paper books and e-books. On the whole, there does not seem to be much damaging impact on people's reading practice.

– *Osvaldo Zúñiga:* While technology changes very fast, ideas take more time to do so. If there are not many accessible printed publications in Nahuatl, there are even fewer e-books. Some improvements have happened such as an increase in the materials in indigenous languages aimed at different age groups, but there is still a lot of privilege not only for Spanish but also for foreign languages across Mexican online and printed publications, which received technological and economical support. And here is where ideas have to change, since prejudices over Nahuatl and other native cultures create a reluctant atmosphere where investors and editors do not feel interested. The biggest reading change for Mexican cultures was to pass from reading codex-painting systems to reading western alphabets. Learning to read digitalized texts with all that it implies seems to be the next great transformation.

5. **What developments do you expect in the future?**

– *Minoru Ohtsuki:* As for Japanese, the basic use of multiple writing systems will not disappear as long as the language survives, for it is intertwined with its scripts more deeply than any other language in the world. Simplification of writing may take place to a certain degree. The influence of digital use of writing systems will be inevitable. It is hoped that more research will be conducted in grammatology, a fruitful and promising area of linguistics.

– *Olga Popova:* In the future, I expect the publication of more texts, digitalization of publications, and creation of online corpora of various cuneiform texts from Sumerian and Akkadian in the south to Hittite in the north, as well as 3D scanning of cuneiform texts.

– *Osvaldo Zúñiga:* More than technological developments, it would be desirable to see an evolution of ideas, taking into account the cognitive processes that are unfolding when one writes by hand, or better care of visual health, by means of reading on paper rather than on screens. Obviously, it is much easier to send a PDF by e-mail than to send a printed book by traditional mail. But the question arises, why should efficiency and speed be prioritized over other variables being affected? I believe it is not about antagonistic positions, and finding a balance between the use of digitalized and printed reading materials may be possible.