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## **Review of Daniels, P.T. (2018) An exploration of writing**

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### **Citation**

Haring, B. J. J. (2019). Review of Daniels, P.T. (2018) An exploration of writing. *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, 76(3-4), 287-291. doi:10.2143/BIOR.76.3.3286984

Version: Publisher's Version

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

## TAALKUNDE

DANIELS, P. T. — *An Exploration of Writing*. With a Foreword by David L. Share. Equinox Publishing Limited, Sheffield and Bristol, CT, 2018. (24,5 cm, XV, 236, 7 figures, 8 maps, numerous tables). ISBN 978-1-78179-529-3. £ 27.95 / \$ 35.00 (paperback).

*An Exploration of Writing* is the latest book by one of the world's most important specialists on writing systems. Perhaps best known as the co-editor and co-author of the widely used reference work *The World's Writing Systems*,<sup>1)</sup> Peter Daniels has authored a great number of publications on writing. Writing papers mainly on ancient Near Eastern scripts in the 1980s and 1990s, he has grown concerned increasingly with comparative work on a broad range of writing systems, ancient and modern, across the globe. It is indeed a very wide range of scripts that is being 'explored' in the book under review here.

Given the width of this range, one may be surprised at the modest number of pages, with the main text remaining considerably less than two hundred. That text, however, is exceedingly well-focused. Although dealing with many

different types of script (ancient and modern), a clear central concern runs through the different chapters which keeps the reader focused until the very last page. That concern is with the ways in which human language – a continuous stream of sound – has been perceived, by people of widely different times and places, as consisting of discrete phonological units, and with the ways in which such units have been represented by equally discrete graphic signs. Although this central point is illustrated in the book by examining many different languages and scripts, the resulting text is inquisitive rather than descriptive, its main question being: what is the nature of the linguistic units that have been taken as points of departure in the development of scripts? Hence, most of the book is about the different possible strategies for segmenting human language as perceived, which are typologically classified in separate chapters (1 – 'Syllables and Syllabaries', 2 – 'Segments and Alphabets', 3 – 'Consonants and Abjads', 4 – 'Moras and *Kana*', 5 – 'Clusters and Abugidas', 6 – 'Morphemes and Morphograms', 7 – 'Words and Heterograms', 8 – 'Hybrids and Innovations'). The remaining chapters focus on scholarly approaches to scripts, historical and modern (9 – 'Recoveries and Decipherments', 10 – 'Pictograms and Mysteries', 11 – 'Origins and Characteristics', 12 – 'Graphonomy and Linguistics'). The last is by far the longest chapter, and in fact the conclusion to the book.

The range of different scripts discussed, and the languages expressed by them, is impressive. Whereas some scripts are discussed together in one chapter merely because they show typological similarities while being unrelated 'genetically', others are presented as historically related, the routes of their diffusion being visually supported by maps at the end of the book (p. 189-195). The role of Aramaic in the development and spread of writing systems across Asia, as set out in chapters 3-5, is particularly striking. Here it is clearly shown how one type of writing inspires the development of others. As a widely diffused *abjad* (i.e. consonantary) with vowel notation (*matres lectionis*), Aramaic served as the basis for developing Kharoṣṭhi, the earliest script used for an Indic language (p. 65 f.). At that point, the writing strategy was changed into an *abugida*, a system in which individual signs express consonants followed by the vowel most common in the language notated (in this case /a/), unless specific signs expressing different vowels follow. *Abugida* would be the main principle of several later Indic scripts, including Devanagari, in which vowel length was also indicated, and which developed separate characters for initial vowels (p. 69). Via a different route, the Aramaic *abjad* was the inspiration for Iranian scripts, via which its influence reached even further, to Uyghur, Mongol and Manchu in East Asia. Every step in the diffusion brought its own innovations, which were motivated by differences between the languages notated. Other scripts are discussed in relative isolation; this is especially true of 'original grammatogenies' like Chinese, which has been placed in chapter 6 because it is essentially morphemic, whereas the Japanese it inspired occurs in chapter 4 because of its phonetic *kana* notation. The plethora of different scripts discussed in depth, but often briefly, makes the book a challenging read at times. For some, more (background) explanation is required in order to make them really useful cases for discussion (e.g. hieroglyphic Egyptian in chapter 8, and Iberian, Carian, Meroitic and Udi, all of which are in chapter 9).

<sup>1)</sup> P.T. Daniels and W. Bright (eds). 1996. *The World's Writing Systems*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Much of the discussion focuses on the relative importance of single sounds (segments) versus syllables, a primary role being assigned to the latter. Breaking up language into syllables, rather than sounds (or phonemes), is considered by the author to be the natural course of action. It is regarded by Daniels as the prime linguistic principle at work, not only in the development of scripts when and where no others yet existed, but also in the creation of new scripts by people who were aware that writing existed – or so we are informed repeatedly in the book (e.g. p. 84: ‘the result is always a syllabary’). Hence, Ancient Egyptian and Semitic consonantal writing does not represent an ‘original grammatogeny’, but was a result of stimulus diffusion from a syllabic writing system, i.e. Sumerian (p. 141-142).

To those who study writing systems in historical and comparative perspectives, this argument is not new. It may be traced back to Ignace Gelb’s fundamental book *A Study of Writing* (1952), in many ways the foundation of modern grammatology (a term Daniels now replaces with ‘graphonomy’). Although originally a student of Gelb, Daniels does not follow the model of unidirectional development (logographic – syllabic – alphabetic as historical stages) that is set out in *A Study of Writing*. Indeed, that model has suffered quite a bit of criticism in recent decades, not least by Daniels himself. Nor does the author agree with Gelb’s contention that Semitic consonantal writing (as found in Hebrew, Phoenician, Arabic) is in fact syllabic, i.e. consisting of CV-type syllables with ‘undetermined vowels’ (p. 133). Semitic consonantaries are better called *abjads*, as was pointed out already in *The World’s Writing Systems* (1996), and on many other occasions. However, all this does not eliminate the apparent fact that writing systems originating when and where none yet existed, nor were known to exist, served to express languages in which monosyllabic words were prominent (Sumerian, Chinese, Maya), so that logography was also ‘syllabography’. In this sense, the author has a strong point.

To be sure, Daniels’ argument does not build only on the languages and scripts mentioned in the above paragraphs, and not only on the myriad of historically attested writing systems. It also includes phonological research of the learning process of writing, and of the phonetics of spoken language (as noted in the twelfth and last chapter, ‘Graphonomy and Linguistics’). Here also, it is the syllable that emerges as the natural phonetic unit of division, and even as an indivisible unit, since consonants are nothing more than slight changes between vowels, which constrict or interrupt an otherwise continuous stream of sound; these constrictions and interruptions being ‘what the mind interprets as syllables’ (p. 162). For illiterates, Daniels claims that analyzing text by syllables would appear to be easier than by segments (or: phonemes), whereas those having some degree of reading ability are more susceptible to segmental reading (p. 159). This observation raises the suspicion that interpreting language phonetically in terms of vowels and consonants is a strategy inspired by alphabetic reading experience (p. 164, 186). Such a hypothesis requires testing in communities where writing is done entirely without awareness of alphabetic systems, but such communities are rare. In China, for instance, such a test would be difficult to conduct now that school training in reading and writing Chinese characters includes the rendering of their phonetics in alphabetic signs (*pinyin*, p. 159).

It is clear from the preceding paragraphs that the author deals with ‘writing’ as a purely linguistic phenomenon, and this reviewer wholly agrees with Daniels’ reservation of the word for linguistic notation: ‘... as a term is needed for those visual communication systems that *do* represent language, the existing term “writing” should be retained for the latter.’ (p. 126, note \*). This statement is actually made in the one, extremely brief chapter on non-linguistic notations (‘Pictograms and Mysteries’, p. 126-131). One might argue that this chapter should have been longer, if only because studying notations different from writing, but sharing some of its characteristics, is eminently helpful in defining what writing in a strict sense is, and what it is not. Recent years have seen a growing interest in semasiography, as the study of such notations is called by some, and references to some of the ensuing publications would have been helpful.<sup>2)</sup> One important point the author rightly makes is that semasiographic systems, such as the Mesopotamian prehistoric tokens and the Inca *quipu*, were not necessarily forerunners of writing. Indeed, the idea (held by some) that they were, is another example of limited, unidirectional thinking. But to many a reader (including the reviewer), the tokens and *quipu* (as well as clay tablets, papyrus, parchment, palm leaves and paper, for that matter) also raise questions of materiality, another important factor in establishing why scripts look the way they do. This topic has also enjoyed considerable attention in recent years,<sup>3)</sup> but just like semasiography, it is not the one of author’s concerns. When discussing Chinese writing in chapter 6, he notes the ‘continual battle among (i) the energy it takes to inscribe a character involving multiple movements of the writing instrument, (ii) the need to preserve recognizability, (iii) conformity to a prevailing aesthetic, and (iv) visual distinctiveness’ (p. 87). These truisms include material and cultural aspects, but together with social aspects of writing, they are largely absent from the discussion. The subject of literacy, although prominent in the Foreword by David Share, is barely touched upon in the book.

Whereas one could argue, with good reason, that a book about writing should not be about non-writing, and not necessarily about the people who did the writing, or about the objects they wrote on, Daniels’ excellent linguistic discussion has one drawback: it neglects other important factors involved in the development and use of writing systems, such as cultural and material ones, which may be influential, even decisive, when it comes to developing, borrowing and adapting writing systems. If for instance, and as is maintained in the book under review, Egyptian and West-Semitic consonantal writing systems were secondary with respect to Sumerian, and changed the writing strategy from the rendering of unchanging syllables to the writing of consonantal roots (which in spoken language were variably ‘filled’ with vowels, p. 141-142), why was that change not made for Akkadian, the first Semitic language to be written? The question is not raised in Daniel’s discussion of cuneiform

<sup>2)</sup> E.g. P. Andrassy, J. Budka and F. Kammerzell (eds), *Non-Textual Marking Systems, Writing and Pseudo Script from Prehistory to Modern Times* (Lingua Aegyptia – Studia monographica 8), Göttingen 2009 (see especially Frank Kammerzell’s essay on graphic information processing, p. 277-308); J. Evans Pim, S.A. Yatsenko and O.T. Perrin (eds), *Traditional Marking Systems. A Preliminary Survey*, Dover 2010.

<sup>3)</sup> E.g. K.E. Piquette and R.D. Whitehouse (eds), *Writing as Material Practice: Substance, surface and medium*, London 2013 (Open Access; URL: <http://www.oapen.org/search?identifier=533915>).

writing (p. 101-103). I suspect part of the answer to be that Akkadian and Sumerian were used within the same societies, and shared a Mesopotamian writing *culture* in which cuneiform graphs denoting syllables were the rule. Writing is cultural practice as much as it is linguistic, and linguistic requirements alone are unlikely to explain why different writing systems have been developed, borrowed and changed. This point, then, is left for future explorations of writing.

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April 2019

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MEJDELL, G. and L. EDZARD (eds.) — High vs. Low and Mixed Varieties. Status, Norms and Functions across Time and Languages. (Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes, Band 77). Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden, 2012. (22 cm, 210). ISBN 978-3-447-06696-9. ISSN 0567-4980. € 48,-.

The Arabic speaking world is a prime example of the phenomenon that since Ferguson's coinage of the term in English academia is referred to as *diglossia* in sociolinguistics. This is a situation of bilingualism where a 'H(igh)' standardized, superimposed literary language (e.g. Classical or Modern Standard Arabic) is used alongside 'L(ow)' regional dialects (e.g. native Arabic vernaculars) in different social contexts. The volume under review contends the oversimplified understanding of diglossia as a sharp dichotomy between H and L and argues for a more gradient, dynamic and multifactorial model compared for different speech communities across space and time. Hence, the twelve papers in total (one in French) cover a wide range of languages including (in alphabetical order) Arabic, Berber, Czech, English, Hebrew, Hindi, Irish, Norwegian, Persian, Romance/Latin and Urdu. They were presented at an equivalent workshop organized at the University of Oslo (June 14–15, 2010) with which most contributors are also affiliated. Gunvor Mejdell's introduction includes an important synthesis of the contributions that mainly review individual case studies in their own disciplines. Whether it is a vernacular becoming the basis of new literary forms, the L register complementing or acquiring certain spheres of the H register and *vice versa*, emerging diglossia through stylistic variation or an international *lingua franca* (such as English) influencing a H register, they all presuppose a dynamic perspective of di- or even polyglossia, allowing for code/style mixing and various 'fuzzy' transitional stages in between. Hence, mixed languages that emerge at the interaction of distinct registers and major sociolinguistic changes due to national independence subsequent to periods of stable diglossia are recurrent themes in this volume.

Tore Janson opens with a study of Vulgar Latin and its comparison with Middle Arabic. In the course of time, scholars came to discern a sharp dichotomy between Vulgar and Classical Latin was too simple and a more complex model was required. No clear-cut boundary can be found between one spoken variety and another according to Janson, so that there must have been manifold spoken varieties of Latin. Vulgar Latin was viewed differently in two main research traditions with different objectives. Romance linguists were

in search of the Proto-Romance language and mistook Vulgar Latin for the spoken language ancestral to Italian, Spanish and so forth. Latin philologists in turn subsumed all non-Classical properties of texts from different contexts, periods and locations under Vulgar Latin.

Related to this, Hagemann's article on Romance glosses in Latin texts further on in the volume (pp. 158-168) discusses how scholars questioned the long accepted view of Latin (H) and Romance (L) diglossia. Roger Wright argued that the society was essentially monolingual but the orthography lacked behind on innovations in the spoken language (much like modern French). Hagemann follows up on this scenario for pre-Carolingian Spain just before the Early Romance period by examining Romance glosses in a collection of sermons from the 10th century. Supplementary glosses consisted of Latin emendations and additions to the original text. Synonymous glosses, by contrast, are all identifiable as Romance. They show an informal register of spoken Romance in untraditional spelling distinct from but sometimes also overlapping with the outdated written Latin, indicating an increasing gap between the changeable vernacular and antiquated spelling. The glosses, then, are pertinent to the diachronic development of Ibero-Romance in displaying minor innovations of the spoken register of Latin still represented in historical spelling.

Latin, being the official *lingua franca* of the Roman Catholic Church, was the dominant written language in Western Europe during the Middle Ages and left a major impact on subsequent written traditions in local languages. By examining macaronic religious texts, Jan Erik Rekdal (pp. 169-179) demonstrates this change was gradual in Ireland. Among Irish ecclesiastical learners a gradual change occurred in the written language from Latin to Irish between the seventh and tenth century. Rekdal identifies three types of language mixing:

- (i) quotations of the authoritative original versions of the text that eventually begin to alternate between Latin and Irish;
- (ii) Latin-Irish mixing for stylistic purposes;
- (iii) switching by Irish (place)names.

The mixing of Latin and Irish occurs within and between clauses, the latter involving mostly noun phrases and prepositional phrases. Written Irish was increasingly used within a milieu of mainly Latin Christian literacy distinct from the Irish pagan oral traditions.

Returning to Vulgar Latin but shifting towards Middle Arabic, Janson (pp. 28-31) notes that the divergent research traditions of Vulgar Latin are comparable to those of Middle Arabic. Middle Arabic was said to represent or approximate an existing spoken language chronologically in the middle between Old Arabic and the modern Arabic vernaculars (e.g. Blau). Or Middle Arabic simply subsumed anything deviant from the Classical Arabic norm (e.g. Versteegh). In the latter approach, Middle Arabic could not be considered representative of a real language with a traceable, unique history. Nevertheless, Middle Arabic, like Vulgar Latin, is now viewed as an interesting field of research in itself, rather than a conglomeration of regrettable errors made by uneducated authors.

Indeed, Jérôme Lentin defines Middle Arabic as an intermediate variety with unique characteristics emerging along the H and L spectrum of diglossia distinct from both the Classical (H) and the colloquial (L) opposite ends. He illustrates how Middle Arabic features can be classified on