

A hand holding a magnifying glass over a globe, symbolizing exploration and language. The background is a cloudy sky with green foliage. A horizontal line is drawn across the top of the image.

**GE2124**

# **The World through Languages**

**Dr. LI Bin**



# Review

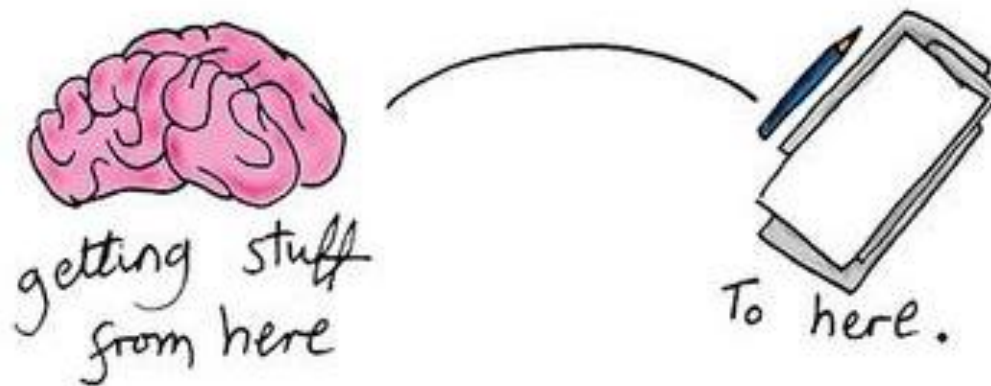
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- Definition of human language
- Languages are alive: changes and variations
- Many faces of language
- The linguistics system

**Exercise:** *Who calls you what and when?*



# Lecture 2: the Writing System



好記性不如爛筆頭 (Mandarin proverb)  
The palest ink is better than the  
sharpest memory. (Fromkin and Rodman,  
1978:356)



# Pictography

## □ Modern-day signs





# Pictography

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- ▣ Prehistoric cave painting



**Cave of Chauvet in  
France**



**Helan Mountain in China**



# Why did our ancestors start writing?

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## □ The divine origin

- The Bible: the Tower of Babel
- Mythological explanation (0-4:22)



## □ Anthropological perspectives

- An imaginary meeting of “Alice” and her ancient ancestor (0-5:36)



# Invention of writing:

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- For administration
- For religious reasons
- For practical reasons such as trade



# Ancient scripts

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- [W]riting was invented independently at least three times:
  - Sumerian cuneiform in Mesopotamia (ca. 3400 BCE),
  - Chinese characters in China (ca. 1600 BCE) and
  - Mayan glyphs in Mesoamerica (ca. 300 BCE).
  
- Egyptian hieroglyph in Egypt (ca. 3200 BCE)
  
- ❖ Only the Chinese script is an unbroken living tradition.  
*(By Ingrid Piller, Distinguished Professor of Applied Linguistics at Macquarie University, Sydney)*





# Origin of writing cont.

- Counters and clay tokens for book keeping



*"Before Writing. Volume I: From Counting to Cuneiform"*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992



# Cuneiforms: wedged scripts

Token	Pictograph	Neo-Sumerian/ Old Babylonian	Neo-Assyrian	Neo-Babylonian	English
					Sheep
					Cattle
					Dog
					Metal
					Oil
					Garment
					Bracelet
					Perfume

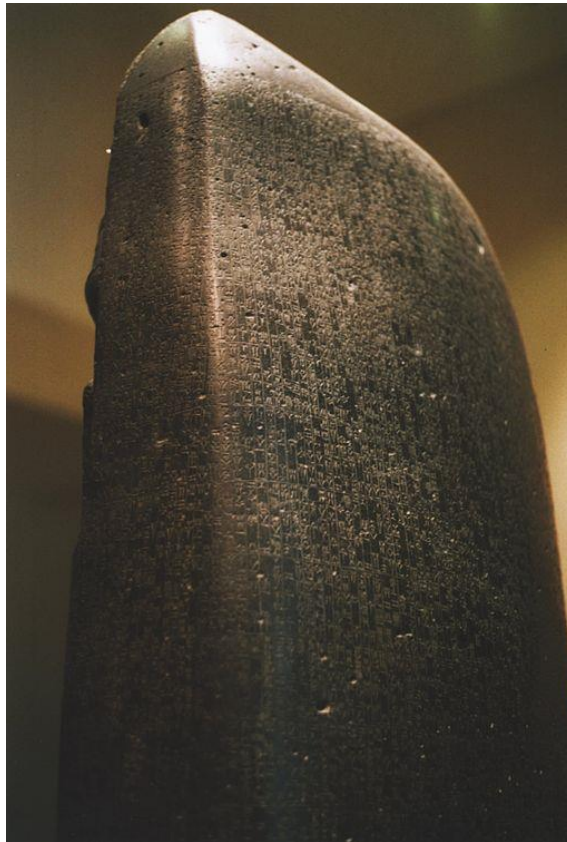




# Code of Hammurabi

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- ❑ Collection of the Babylonian Laws during the reign of Hammurabi (1792-1750BC)



<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ACode-de-Hammurabi-1.jpg>

By UnknownRama (Own work) [CC BY-SA 2.0 fr (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/fr/deed.en>)], via Wikimedia Commons from Wikimedia Commons





# Mayan language

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Deciphering the Maya codes

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xIWxJc-4Hqs>



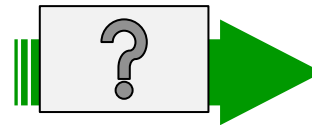
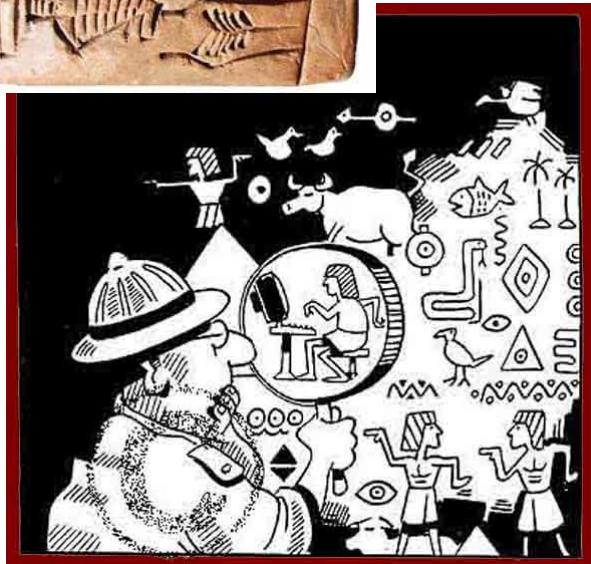
# Mayan language

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<https://www.worldhistory.org/article/789/how-to-read-a-maya-glyph/>

# From pictorial to sound representation



Α α	Β β	Γ γ	Δ δ
Ε ε	Ζ ζ	Η η	Θ θ
Ι ι	Κ κ	Λ λ	Μ μ
Ν ν	Ξ ξ	Ο ο	Π π
Ρ ρ	Σ σ ς	Τ τ	Υ υ
Φ φ	Χ χ	Ψ ψ	Ω ω





# The Rebus Principle

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- Name in a Cuneiform tablet



# From pictorial to sound representation



<https://www.britannica.com/place/Phoenicia>



# Transmission and development

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- The Latin alphabet was inspired by the Greek alphabet that was inspired by the Phoenician abjad inspired by Egyptian hieroglyphs.
- The Phoenician abjad (“ancestor” of modern Western alphabet) inspired the Old Hebrew script (ca. 1000 BCE), which inspired the Aramaic script, which inspired the Syriac script (ca. 500 CE), which inspired the Sogdian script, which inspired the Uighur script (ca. 800 CE), which inspired the Mongolian script (1200 CE).



# Chinese characters



## Oracle bones:

- Animal bones and tortoise shells with inscription for divination from Shang Dynasty (1600-1046 BCE)
- Symbols on the bones are “precursors” of Chinese writing

Cartoon of 36 Chinese characters:

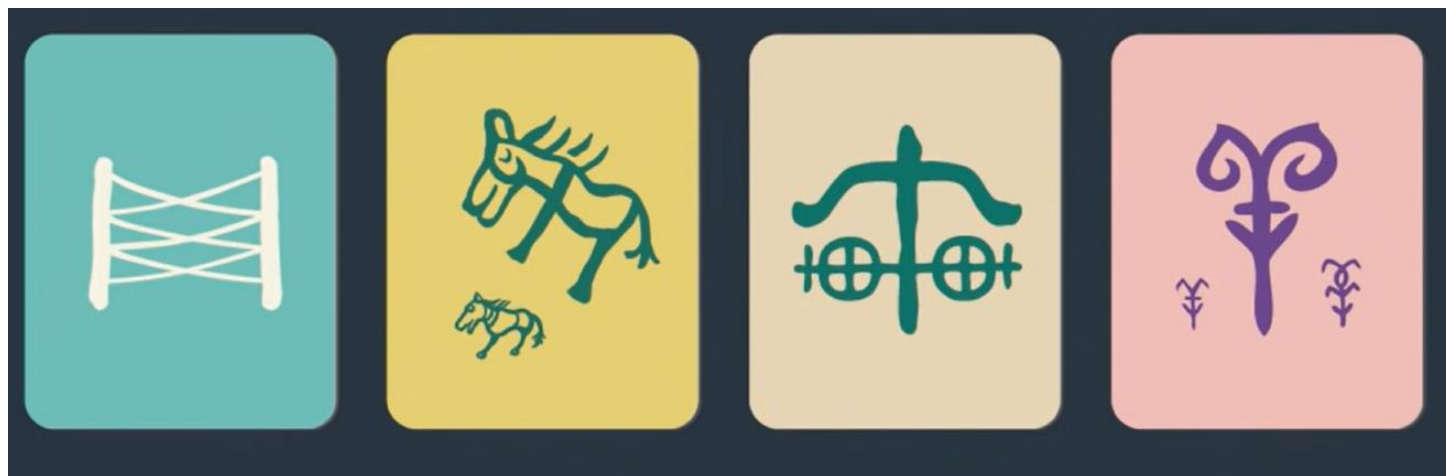
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RxWCAnaKjds&list=PLdxxnC71ik-H7i8xXy0EmwkBGqoDWID8A>

History of Chinese writing:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VI3Q5z8Nywc&list=PL50388CC256F9B1F2>



# Chinese characters



[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_M1z8La1D2w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_M1z8La1D2w)



# Six methods of character formation 六書



- 《說文解字·序》：指事者，視而可識，察而見意，上、下是也。象形者，畫成其物，隨體詰詘，日、月是也。形聲者，以事為名，取譬相成，江、河是也。會意者，比類合誼，以見指撝，武、信是也。轉注者，建類一首，同意相受，考、老是也。假借者，本無其字，依聲託事，令、長是也。
- Four methods to create new characters:
  - **Pictograms** 象形; **Ideograms** 指事; **Compound ideograms** 會意; **Phono-semantic compounds** 形聲
- Two methods to re-use existing characters:
  - **Phonetic loans** 假借; **Derivative cognates** 轉注



# Classification of writing systems

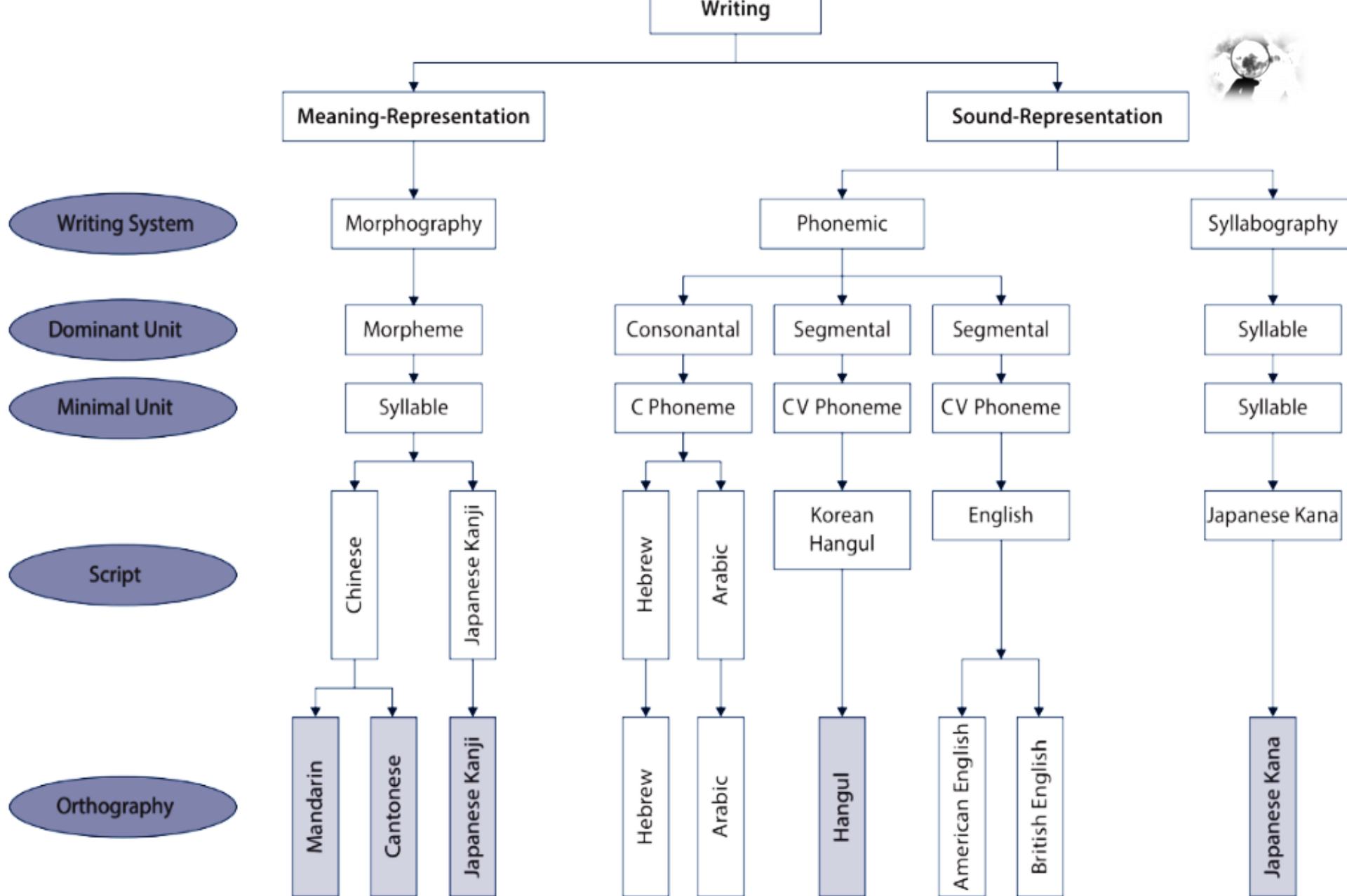
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- Phonographic: sound representation
  - Alphabetic: consonantal, segmental
  - Syllabic
- Morphographic: meaning representation
  - Logographic

<https://arabic.fi/words/777>

ك-ت-ب 'write': [k], [t], [b]



Tibetan: The consonant cluster *rd* is written as a conjunct རྩི་

The combination with *o* is written as རྩོ་

The cluster *rj* is written as a conjunct རྩེ་

The combination with *e* is written as རྩེ་

The entire word is written as རྩོ་རྩེ་



*rdo-rje* “diamond”

Table 3. Typical syllabaries

Japanese	カ	キ	ク	ケ	コ
Cherokee	Ꭰ	Ꭱ	Ꭲ	Ꭳ	Ꭴ
	ka	ki	ku	ke	ko

- Bright, W. (2000). A matter of typology: alphasyllabaries and abugidas. *Studies in the Linguistics Sciences*. 30(1): 63-70.



# References

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- ❑ Daniels, P. T. and William Bright, eds. *The World's Writing Systems*. 1996, OUP.
- ❑ Rickerson, E. M. and Barry Hilton, eds. *The 5-Minute Linguist*. 2012, Equinox.
- ❑ Misra, K. K. *Textbook of Anthropological Linguistics*. 2000, Concept Publishing Company.



# Exercises-Q1

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□ *Itsy bitsy teeny weeny yellow polka dot bikini*

(A pop song by Brian Hyland: No. 1 hit on the Billboard Hot 100 in US and top 10 in UK in 1960s.)

- The above line in English are re-written in three different made-up left-to-right scripts.



- Identify what kind of writing system each script is
  - pictographic, ideographic, syllabic, alphabetic, etc.
- Explain your answer. (Language Files, 2011:613)

**a.** τσ βτσ τυ ων φλ πλκ δτ βκν

**b.** ʘx ʘx ◆◻ ◆◻ ʘʘ ◼○ ʘ ʘx◆◻

**c.** ʘ ○ ʘ ʘ ◻ ʘ ◼ ʘ