

# Writing Systems in East and Southeast Asia

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based on Goddard Chapter 6

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# Introduction to Writing Systems

- Language: Primarily spoken, but writing is a stable, visible form.
- Writing is integral to language culture.
- Study of writing systems reveals cultural history and linguistic insights.
- Two basic principles: logographic and phonographic.
- Logographic: Symbols represent words/morphemes.
- Phonographic: Symbols represent sounds (phonemes/syllables).

# Types of Writing Systems

- Logographic Systems:
  - Symbols represent morphemes (e.g., Chinese, Hieroglyphics).
- Phonographic Systems:
  - Alphabetic (segmental): Symbols represent phonemes (e.g., Latin script).
  - Syllabic: Symbols represent syllables (e.g., Japanese kana).
  - Featural: Symbols represent phonetic features (e.g., Korean Hangul).
- Mixed Systems:
  - Combination of logographic and phonographic elements (e.g., Japanese).

# Alphabetic Systems: Malay/Indonesian === Jawi

- Traditional Jawi script:
  - Arabic origin.
  - Right to left writing.
- Example:

(1) السلام عليكم *as-salām 'alaykum* “Peace be upon you.”

- Jawi (جاوي) is a shortening of الجزائر الجاوي, *Al-Jaza'ir Al-Jawi* “Java Archipelago”
- *Jawi* is often used to mean ‘Malay’, for example in *Bahasa Jawi* “Malay Language”
- Jawi has 31 original Arabic letters;
  - 6 new letters constructed to fit phonemes native to Malay: ca (چ /tʃ/), nga (غ /ŋ/), pa (ڤ /p/), ga (گ /g/), va (ڤ /v/),
  - 1 additional phoneme used in foreign loanwords: nya (ن /n/).

# Jawi Script Details

- Jawi script is highly stylized for brush writing.
- Letters change form based on their position in the word.
- Example of a Jawi phrase:

(2) بالي جكرتا (Bali Jakarta) - Bali to Jakarta

- Usage has declined but still part of Malaysian education.
- Used in religious documents and decoration

وورما نيت بهاس

Wordnet Bahasa

# Alphabetic Systems: Malay/Indonesian — Rumi

- Introduced by colonial powers.
  - Malay spelling followed English
  - Indonesian spelling followed Dutch
- Standardized in 1972 for both Malaysia and Indonesia.
  - *di-buat* → *dibuat*, *di-rumah* → *di rumah*
  - *ch* and *tj* /tʃ/ → *c*: *ketjap/kechap* → *kecap*
  - *njonja/nyonya* → *nyonya*
  - *ke-barat<sup>2</sup>-an* → *kebarat-baratan* “westernized”

# Alphabetic Systems: Thai

- Derived from Old Khmer script.  
Derived from Mon, originally Indic
- No spaces between words; consonants represented by main letters, vowels by diacritics.
- Example:  
(3) สวัสดี (sawasdee) - Hello
- Complex relationship between letters and tones.

# Thai Tones and Consonant Classes

- Consonant letters divided into three classes: high, middle, and low.
- Tone determined by initial consonant, tone marks, and vowel length.
- Thai words with initial /kh/ (Smalley 1994: 184)

Thai Word		Meaning	Thai Word		Meaning
ขา	khǎa	leg	คา	khaa	embedded
ข่า	khàa	galangal	ค่า	khâa	cost
ข้า	khâa	slave	ค้า	kháa	trade
ขาด	khàat	lack	คาด	khâat	to strap
ขัด	khàt	obstruct	คัด	khát	be clogged

- Complicated function of the initial consonant, diacritic and final consonant
- But generally deterministic
- Like most writing systems, sound changes quicker than writing



# Thai vowels

อะ

a

[a]

อ

a

[a]

อา

a

[a:]

อิ

i

[i]

อี

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[i:]

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เอี

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[ɤ:]

# Thai diphthongs

เียะ	เีย	เือะ	เือ	ัวะ	ัว	ว
ia	ia	uea	uea	ua	ua	ua
[iaʔ]	[ia]	[ueaʔ]	[uea]	[uaʔ]	[ua]	[ua]
อิว	เัว	เอ	เาว	เอา	อาว	เียว
io	eo	eo	aeo	ao	ao	iao
[iu/iw]	[eu/ew]	[e:u/e:w]	[ɛ:u/ɛ:w]	[au/aw]	[a:u]	[iau/iaw]
อัย	ไ	ไ	ไย	อาย	อัย	ออย
ai	ai	ai	ai	ai	oi	oi
[ai/aj]	[ai/aj]	[ai/aj]	[ai/aj]	[a:i/a:j]	[ɔi/ɔj]	[ɔ:i/ɔ:j]
ไย	อุย	เอย	อวย	เือย	อำ	ฤ
oi	ui	oei	uai	ueai	am	rue
[o:i/o:j]	[ui/uj]	[ɤ:i/ɤ:j]	[uai/uaj]	[uai/ueaj]	[am]	[ruw/ri]
ฤา	ฤ	ภา	อ	อ		
rue	lue	lue	ṃ	silences		
[ruw:]	[luw]	[luw:]	[~]	consonant		

한글

han

geul

ㄱ	ㄴ	ㄷ	ㄹ	ㅁ	ㅂ	ㅅ	ㅇ	ㅈ	ㅊ
g	n	d	r	m	b	s	-ng	j	ch
ㅋ	ㅌ	ㅍ	ㅎ	ㅏ	ㅑ	ㅓ	ㅕ	ㅗ	ㅣ
k	t	p	h	a	eo	o	u	eu	i

Image from Wikipedia (2024)

# Featural Systems: Korean Hangul

- Invented by King Sejong (15th century)
  - the process of invention is well documented in the Hunmin jeongeum, or "The correct sounds for the instruction of the people"
- Represents phonemes, arranged in syllable blocks.
- Example:

(4) 안녕하세요 *annyeonghaseyo* "hello"
- It was originally looked down on by scholars (who use hanzi) as used by women, children and the uneducated
- It was not widely adopted until the 19th century

# Korean Hangul: Design Principles

- Vowels represented by distinct vertical/horizontal strokes.
- Consonant shapes reflect place of articulation.
- One syllable is one block

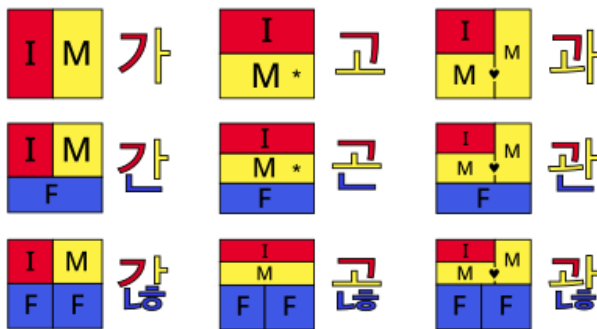


Image from Wikipedia (2024), cropped.

# Korean Consonants: shape $\approx$ articulation



ㄱ /k/



ㄴ /n/



ㅅ /s/



ㅇ /ng/



ㅁ /m/

Images from Wikipedia (2024)

# Korean Consonants: shape $\approx$ articulation


	Basic	Simple	Aspirated	Tense
Velar		ㄱ (k)	ㅋ (k <sup>h</sup> )	꺠 (k̚)
Fricatives		ㅅ (s)		ㅆ (s̚)
Palatal		ㅈ (tɕ)	ㅊ (tɕ <sup>h</sup> )	ㅉ (tɕ̚)
Coronal	ㄴ (n)	ㄷ (t)	ㅌ (t <sup>h</sup> )	ㄸ (t̚)
Bilabial	ㅁ (m)	ㅂ (p)	ㅍ (p <sup>h</sup> )	ㅃ (p̚)
Dorsal	(ʔ)	(ŋ)	(h)	

# Summary

- Hangeul is a well-motivated alphabetic system, not a direct mapping of phonetic features
- Many sounds change in combination, so technically it is morphophonemic
- It is said that “A wise man can acquaint himself with them before the morning is over; even a stupid man can learn them in the space of ten days.”

*Hunmin Jeongeum Haerye*, postface of Jeong Inji, p. 27a, translation from Gari K. Ledyard, *The Korean Language Reform of 1446*, p. 258



- Cia-Cia (Bahasa Ciacia / 바하사 짜아짜아) is a member of the Celebic branch of the Malayo-Polynesian language family (Austronesian)
- Spoken by about 80,000 people on Buton Island, a part of Indonesia to the south east of Sulawesi
- It used to be written in a Jawi-like script called Gundhul and is now mainly written in Rumi
- In 2007 Professor Chun Tai-hyun, a professor of Malay and Indonesian linguistics at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in Seoul developed a Hangeul orthography
  - For fricative /v/ it uses the obsolete jamo 
- It was privately taught since 2009 using a textbook written by Lee Ho-young, a linguistics professor at Seoul National University.
- It was abandoned around 2012, and revived around 2022
- A Cia-Cia dictionary in Hangul was published in December 2021.
- Hangul remains in use in schools and on local signs

# Chinese Writing System

- Ancient origins, evolved from pictograms.
- Continually in use for over 3,000 years
- A powerful force for cultural and political unification
- Also adopted by surrounding languages (Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese)
- Characters mainly represent morphemes, often compound structures.
- Example:
  - (5) 你好 *nǐ hǎo* “hello ‘you good’ ”
  - (6) 山 *shān* “mountain”
- Reformed to simplified characters in the 1950s

# Development of Chinese character horse 马

Type of Characters	Descriptions
金文 𠩺	Bronze script Jin wen 15th - 11th centuries B.C.E.
甲骨文 𠩺	Oracle-bone script Jia gu wen 12th - 11th centuries B.C.E.
大篆 𠩺	Large-seal script da chuan c. 8th century B.C.E.
小篆 𠩺	Small-seal script xiao chuan 2nd century B.C.E.
隸書 馬	Clerical script li shu 2nd century C.E.
楷書 馬	Standard script k'ai shu since c. 4th century C.E.
行書 馬	Running script Xing shu since c. 4th century C.E.
草書 𠩺	Cursive script Chao shu since c. 4th century C.E.

# Logograph writing system example: Chinese

## Pictographs

女	子	口	日	月	山	川	豕	目	心	雨	田	木	龜
woman	child	mouth	sun	moon	mountain	river	pig	eye	heart	rain	field	tree	turtle

## Ideographs

一	二	三	上	下	中	力	凸	凹
one	two	three	above	below	middle	stength (plough)	convex	concave

## Compound Pictographs / Compound Ideographs

好	安	明	家	思	牢	雷	男
good (woman + child)	peaceful (woman under a roof)	bright (sun + moon)	home/family (pig under a roof)	thought (heart + field)	prison (cow under a roof)	thunder (rain cloud over a field)	man/male (field + strength)

# Semantic-phonetic compounds

## Semantic-phonetic compounds

phonetic component

古 gǔ

扁 biǎn

敖 áo

旁 páng

堯 yáo

人  
(person)

估 gū  
(to guess)

偏 piān  
(biased)

傲 ào  
(proud)

傍 bāng  
(beside)

僥 jiào  
(lucky)

言  
(words)

詁 gǔ  
(commentaries)

諍 piān  
(to quibble)

謗 áo  
(to slander)

謗 bàng  
(to libel)

諍 náo  
(to argue)

虫  
(insect)

蛄 gū  
(mole cricket)

蝙 biān  
(bat)

螯 áo  
([crab's] nippers)

螃 páng  
(crab)

蟯 ráo  
(worm)

金  
(metal)

鈷 gū  
(cobalt)

鑊 áo  
(griddle)

鎊 bàng  
(pound sterling)

鎊 náo  
(cymbals)

97% of Chinese characters are phonetic compounds (Sproat 2010)! Other estimates are lower (Wang, pc 2013)

# Structure of Chinese Characters

- Phonetic component gives clues to pronunciation.
- Semantic radical provides meaning hints.
- Characters require memorization due to irregular phonetic-semantic correspondences.

# Using Chinese Characters for Non-Mandarin Chinese

- Chinese characters were designed for Mandarin, which poses challenges for other Sinitic languages.
- Problem: Phonetic clues in Mandarin characters often don't apply to languages like Cantonese and Taiwanese.
- For literacy in Cantonese or Taiwanese, familiarity with Mandarin's written form is often assumed.
- Despite differences, some words in Cantonese and Taiwanese can be represented with Mandarin characters.
- Issue: Many words and grammatical elements in other Sinitic languages lack standard Mandarin equivalents.

# Writing Strategies for Cantonese

- Cantonese writers use various strategies to adapt characters:
  - ① **Unique Cantonese Characters:** Characters created for words without Mandarin equivalents.
  - ② **Phonetic Resemblance:** Using Mandarin characters that sound similar to Cantonese words.
  - ③ **English Letters:** Borrowing letters to represent Cantonese sounds.
- Example of phonetic adaptation: The Cantonese plural suffix **-deih** is represented by combining 'mouth' and 'earth' characters, resembling the pronunciation **deih**: 㗎



# Workarounds

(7) 你 喺 嗰度好 喇, 千 祈 咪 搞  
你 o係 果度好 la, 千 祈 咪 搞  
you being there good SFP, thousand pray don't mess with  
佢 啲嘢 ◦  
佢 D 野 ◦  
he/she of things/stuff .

You'd better stay there, and under no circumstances mess with his/her stuff.

- use 'o' instead of 口
- use alphabet: 'D'
- use homophones: 果度 for 嗰度
- because Cantonese is mainly spoken, there is considerable variation in the orthography

# Loan words

Because of the influence of English, Cantonese tends to use more loan words (as does Singapore Mandarin).

Cantonese	Jyupting	English	Mandarin	Pinyin
BB	bi4 bi1	baby	嬰兒	ying1 er2
巴士	baa1 si2	bus	公交车	gong1 jiao1 che1
拜拜	baai1 baai3	bye bye	再见	zai4 jian4
沙展	saa1 zin2	sergeant	排长	pai2 zhang3

# Japanese Writing System

- Combines kanji (logographic) and kana (syllabic).
- Example:

(8) こんにちは konnichiwa (hello)  
山 yama (mountain)

# Syllabaries: Hiragana and Katakana

- Hiragana: Used for particles, auxiliary verbs, and suffixes.
- Katakana: Used for loanwords, mimetics, and emphasis.
- Example syllabary table for Hiragana and Katakana.

# Kanji and Mixed System Writing

- Lexical roots written in kanji.
- Grammatical elements in hiragana.
- Foreign words in katakana.
- Mixed system allows nuanced text creation.

# Calligraphy in East Asia

- Highly valued art form, more esteemed than painting.
- Reflects cultural aesthetics and individuality.
- Styles include Seal Script, Clerical Script, Standard Script, Running Script, and Grass Script.
- Chinese calligraphy emphasizes brush techniques and stroke order.

# Japanese Calligraphy

- Emphasis on the beauty of handwriting.
- Grass style and Zen calligraphy notable for their fluidity and abstraction.
- Calligraphy remains a vital part of cultural heritage.
- Example figures showing brushwork and styles.

# Acknowledgements

- Images taken from Omniglot (<https://omniglot.com/>) unless otherwise stated