

Sophomore Tutorial 97r: Writing Systems and Language Conservation

This syllabus is up-to-date as of February 3, 2022

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Website (for Homework, Handouts, etc.):	https://jackisaacrabinovitch.github.io/teaching/ling97r
Location:	Barker Center 218 (Fong Room)
Class Hours:	TuTh 9:00–10:00 AM
Office Hours:	TBD

1 Description

Coulmas (2003) defines writing as, “a system of recording language by means of visible or tactile marks.” In this way, until the invention of the phonograph in 1877, writing was the only way for language to break free of the ephemeral nature of its spoken and signed forms. The aim of this course is to introduce students to the variety of writing systems in the world, and to foster the ability for critical analysis of writing both as a system for recording language and as a socio-political tool, specifically in how linguists and activists can use writing systems to help language conservation and revitalization movements. The class will culminate in a final project in which students are tasked with determining and presenting on linguistic and socio-political issues with respect to a (made up by me) culture/language and give suggestions regarding the creation of an orthography for the culture’s language.

2 Meeting Information

We will meet twice a week on Tuesday and Thursday from 9:00 – 10:00 AM in Barker Center 218 (Fong Room).

3 Expectations

3.1 Participation

I expect students to be present for the class and to participate in discussion. If you are unable to meet in person, let me know ahead of time and I will make sure to set up a hybrid system. Because participation will be a major part of the class, I will not record meetings (with exceptions in the case of emergencies). To let me know when attendance or participation are not possible, please email me at jrabinovitch@g.harvard.edu.

Students who miss class should arrange a time to go over the materials with me. I will make sure that class materials are available online so that all students may access them.

3.2 Norms (In progress)

Students may have their laptop or tablet out during class to take notes.

3.3 Assignments and Readings

The class will include weekly readings and problem sets. The problem set should take no longer than twenty minutes to complete, and you should not be spending more than an hour of time on work for this course each week. I will prioritize certain readings above others, but do not feel the need to complete any reading if it takes too much time; some weeks will have longer readings and I will make sure to let you know which readings are longer and adjust the problem sets accordingly.

Before each reading I will give a set of prompts to think about for the reading; we will have discussion at the beginning of class over some of these prompts and how they relate to the readings and the problem set. If you have any particular comments or questions on the readings or problem set that aren't discussed in the prompts, feel free to bring those into class as well!

For problem sets, feel free to collaborate, I only ask that you turn in your own individual problem set, and that you include the names of your collaborators on the top of the page. I anticipate discussing the problem sets on the day that they are turned in, and as a result I will not accept late homework. If there are extenuating circumstances, however, I will be willing to provide opportunities to earn points back (likely through additional problem sets).

Problem sets will be graded on a basis of both accuracy and good faith attempts: this is to say that an accurate and good faith answer will score more highly than an inaccurate good faith answer, but both will be scored higher than a non-attempt or what I would consider a bad faith answer (lack of justification, paraphrasing wikipedia without demonstrating an understanding of the reasoning, etc.).

3.4 Final Projects

The final project for this class will be a mock orthography workshop. In week 4, I will introduce a fictitious language known as Harvardese. Students will either individually or in small groups, analyze different aspects of Harvardese phonology and morphology, and prepare a 15-20 minute presentation on some proposals for the orthography of Harvardese regarding the specific aspect of phonology or morphology that they were assigned, taking into consideration technological constraints and socio-political issues regarding Harvardese culture. After all the presentations have finished, we will convene to determine a new standard for Harvardese orthography.

The final project will be graded on effort and attention to specific issues regarding the module you are assigned: e.g. do you make sure to avoid proposals with debilitating ambiguity or confusing sound-symbol correspondences, do you justify your proposals, do you consider all of the issues that may arise, etc.. I am not looking for a perfect orthography (and I think in our class we will find that there is no such thing), but rather a

demonstration that you can think critically about the multifaceted issues that surround writing as a tool for the conservation of a language and the culture that use that language.

3.5 Grading

Grading will be divided as below:

Participation: 20%
Problem Sets: 40%
Final Project: 40%

4 Schedule

Readings are accompanied by their length in pages, and are ordered in priority for reading.

Week 1: What is Writing?

Highlighted Systems: Latin, Cyrillic, Lusona, Nsibidi, Ogham

- (1)
 - a. Introductions, go over the syllabus
 - b. Discussion: What is writing?
 - c. Some basic terminology: writing systems, scripts, orthography, signaries

Problem Set 1 Assigned

Reading for next week: Coulmas (2003) Chapter 2 (20 pages).

Week 2: History and Categorization of Writing Systems

Highlighted Systems: Egyptian Hieroglyphs, Hieratic, and Demotic, Hanzi, Sumerian, Akkadian, Phoenician, Greek, Arabic, Amharic, Devanagari, Irish, Hangul

- (2)
 - a. The history and technology of writing
 - b. The categorization and typology of writing systems
 - c. Script transmission, change, and revolution.

Problem Set 1 Due

Problem Set 2 Assigned

Reading for next week: Bird (1999) (31 pages), Anderson et al. (2005) (equiv 5 pages), Swadesh (1948) (10 pages).

Week 3: Guiding Principles of Writing Systems

Highlighted Systems: Mayan Script, Cherokee, Gonga, Xhosa, chữ Quốc ngữ, Latin Bai

- (3) a. Script transmission, how do people fit languages into writing systems
- b. Defective scripts and what we don't include in a script
- c. What does it mean to be a 'good fit' for a writing system
- d. Social reasons to keep non-phonemic scripts and diasystems

Problem Set 2 Due

Problem Set 3 Assigned

Reading for next week: England (2003) (11 pages), abstracts for Caballero et al. (2021) (2 pages) and Geary (2021) (2 pages), Bow (2013) (34 pages).

Week 4: Conservation, Orthographic Design, and Standardization

Highlighted Systems: Czech, Hebrew, Scots, Patwa, Venetian, Old Lisu, Wôpanâk

- (4) a. Language planning and writing
- b. Technological constraints: Typewriters, Typesetting
- c. Auxiliary Diacritics: Hebrew Nikkud and Scots parochial apostrophe
- d. Introduction to Harvardese: choosing a script

Problem Set 3 Due

Problem Set 4 Assigned

Readings for next week: Two articles on Inuktitut and comments (Bell 2019 and Simon 2019, both equiv 1 page) and Piller (2010) (1 page), optionally Nishiyama (2020) (26 pages)

Week 5: Domain, Prestige, and Control in Writing

Highlighted Systems: Nüshu, Manchu, Mongolian, Qaniujaaqpait, English, German, Braille

- (5) a. Status in script: Reverential Capitalization, Manchu Dotted Final n
- b. Fitting in loans: Greenlandic Loans, Katakana
- c. Who can use a script? Nüshu, Hiragana, and Braille
- d. What does it mean to see your language written?

Problem Set 4 Due

Week 6: Final Presentations

Highlighted Systems: Harvardese

- (6) a. Final Presentations
- b. Deliberating on the 2022 orthography of Harvardese

References

- Anderson, Deborah, R. McGowan, and K. Whistler. 2005. Recommendations for creating new orthographies. *Unicode*. Available at: <http://www.unicode.org/notes/tn19>.
- Bell, Jim. 2019. National Inuit org approves new unified writing system. *Nunatsiaq News*.
- Bird, Steven. 1999. When Marking Tone Reduces Fluency: An Orthography Experiment in Cameroon. *Language and Speech* 42:83–115.
- Bow, Catherine. 2013. Community-based orthography development in four Western Zambian languages. *Writing Systems Research* 5:73–87.
- Caballero, Gabriela, Claudia Juárez Chávez, and Michelle Yuan. 2021. The representation of tone in San Juan Piñas Mixtec: Phonological and orthographic implications.
- Coulmas, Florian. 2003. *Writing systems: An introduction to their linguistic analysis*. Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics. Cambridge, U.K. ; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- England, Nora C. 2003. Mayan Language Revival and Revitalization Politics: Linguists and Linguistic Ideologies. *American Anthropologist* 105:733–743.
- Geary, Jonathan A. 2021. Assessing the evidence for lateral phonemes in River Yuman: Implications for Piipaash orthography.
- Nishiyama, Hidefumi. 2020. Racializing surveillance through language: The role of selective translation in the promotion of public vigilance against migrants. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 43:1757–1775.
- Piller, Ingrid. 2010. Multilingual prohibitions. <https://www.languageonthemove.com/multilingual-prohibitions/>.
- Simon, Mary. 2019. Inuktut Qaliujaaqpait — the product of history and determination. *Nunatsiaq News*.
- Swadesh, Morris. 1948. Sociologic Notes on Obsolescent Languages. *International Journal of American Linguistics* 14:226–235.