

“The worst writing system in history”: Public attitudes toward the learnability of writing systems

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This paper investigates how ‘lay’ language users conceptualize the learnability – and particularly the perceived difficulty – of different writing systems. Drawing on informal online discourse from the platforms Reddit, Quora, and YouTube, it examines how linguistic knowledge, intuitive beliefs, and normative assumptions interact in shaping attitudes and ideologies toward scripts and writing systems from diverse traditions, including Hangul, Ge’ez, Thai, Mongolian, and Tangut.

The analysis is guided by four working hypotheses. First, perceptions of difficulty often reflect *cultural stereotypes* rather than graphematic structure: while Chinese is dismissed as “impossible”, Greek may be jokingly reduced to “just math”. Second, a *familiarity bias* suggests that systems more similar to one’s own – or commonly encountered in educational contexts – are judged as ‘easier’. Third, users appear to *project normative expectations* from their first acquired scripts onto unfamiliar systems, assessing them by standards such as phoneme-grapheme correspondence or (alphabetic) linearity. Finally, difficulty is frequently entangled with diverse aesthetic evaluations: Arabic may be admired as “beautiful but too hard”, while Hangul is described as “clever”.

The study focuses on how users articulate such judgments, often invoking concepts like logic, chaos, tradition, or authenticity. Although demographic data are rarely available, self-reported details (e.g., “coming from English”) allow for tentative insights into how prior literacy experience shapes perception. One interpretive framework is the *native script effect* (Gnanadesikan 2021), accounting for persistent first-script influence.

While typographic evaluations have been explored (e.g., Spitzmüller 2013), this study extends the inquiry, emphasizing how lay users assess scripts not only visually but also in terms of (linguistic) structure and logic. The paper thus contributes to our understanding of how writing systems are imagined and evaluated in the public sphere, offering a language ideological (Kroskrity 2010) perspective that complements typological and cognitive accounts with a view to an experiential dimension of graphematic and orthographic judgment.

References

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