Mystic Messages—The Magic of Writing

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Abstract. This article studies how writing has been employed to pass subliminal messages not present in the spoken language, and how readers have searched for such secret messages.

The text illustrates how the intrinsic properties of both open and closed writing systems were used to create a magic of writing. It analyses examples from 1st millennium BC cuneiform acrostics to arcane readings of kanji in contemporary Japanese popular culture to show how writing is used as a non-linguistic system to encode and decipher messages.

For the first edition of *Grapholinguistics in the 21st Century*, the author has looked at open and closed writing systems. For him, open writing systems such as the cuneiform and Chinese writing systems are systems that have a core character repertoire, but can easily be extended (Küster, 2019). The character repertoires of closed writing systems such as the Greek or Latin alphabets, but also Hebrew abjads or the Hangul syllabary are essentially fixed.

This article further explores this the way open and closed writing systems operate and how in both cases writing can be a very different sign system from spoken language. This article looks at the magic of writing as an extreme case in which writing is imbued with meaning that its linguistic equivalent does not have. Already Küster (2006) studies acrostics, in which the order of the alphabet becomes a metaphor for completeness and ultimately perfection, and this remains one case covered. From here to number magic and Kabbalah it is but a small step. This glance at closed writing systems is then complemented by samples of contemporary Japanese culture. Three cases illustrate approaches to a magic of writing that work quite differently from the ones showcased for closed writing systems in the West.

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1. Magic

Probably already the earliest human societies sought ways of controlling the environment on which their survival depended— ensuring timely rain falls, good hunts, fertility, health and the clan's general prosperity. Magic, they believed, could grant them this power.

Often the performance of magic became the domain of specialists, be they called magicians, shamans, wise women, because it was imagined that its efficiency depended on precise adherence to a given set of often complicated ceremonies, invocations, incantations, and spells. Some speculate that already prehistoric cave paintings had been painted by shamans.[1] The potency of magic would often be reflected in its complexity; sloppiness in performing magic might result in the magician's death or worse and bring calamity to their societies, but if correctly executed great benefits could accrue:

> The magician does not doubt that the same causes will always produce the same effects, that the performance of the proper ceremony, accompanied by the appropriate spell, will inevitably be attended by the desired result. […] If he claims a sovereignty over nature, it is a constitutional sovereignty rigorously limited in its scope and exercised in exact conformity with ancient usage.[2]

Magic existed for millennia, perhaps tens of millennia, before the invention of writing. It was therefore by necessity linked to spoken language and rituals. Its secrets were typically transmitted orally from teacher to student, with a lot of emphasis on precise repetition, though the cave paintings bear witness that even very early on practitioners seem to have wanted to persist aspects of their rituals and even thoughts and emotions.[3]

So it is maybe not surprising that over time writing was employed to record magic rituals, be they cuneiform tablets with incantations or (much later) grimoires and spell books.[4] However, these written representations of spoken magic that just reproduce oral spells are not the topic of this article, even though they might be an interesting study in an of itself, as many grimoires invented their own script-like devices to record magic.

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1. Whitley (2009), who emphasises the "undeniable association between decorated panels and the deep, dark inner sanctums of the caves" (p. 28) and its links to shamans and shamanism.

2. Frazer (1890), Chapter IV. Magic and Religion—in this magic is truly the "bastard sister of science," in many ways its predecessor.

3. Whitley (2009) speaks of these paintings of "visionary images that illustrate the spirits and events of the supernatural world". If true, these images also would be among the earliest recorded instances of story telling.

4. See Davies (2009) for a history of spellbooks.

Instead, we look here at the mechanisms that were employed to transform writing itself into a vehicle for the performance of magic. We see how writing was used to pass subliminal messages not present in the spoken language and how readers searched for such secret messages, and at ways the intrinsic properties of writing were used for this—a magic of writing.

2.   The Origins of Magical Writing

As far as we know, cuneiform writing was quite prosaically invented as a mechanism for book keeping—a product of economic necessity to administer the increasingly complex commercial interactions in Sumerian city states. It was from its very beginning linked to ordered lists of terms as a key tool for memorising cuneiform characters and their hierarchical relation among each other and the concepts they represented.[5] At the beginning neither writing nor lexical lists seem have been linked to rites or magic, though by the Early Dynastic period we have first proof for incantations preserved on cuneiform tablets.[6]

2.1.   Acrostics

Going beyond recording incantations and spells that were originally transmitted orally, practitioners began to explore the internal logic of the semiotic system of first cuneiform and then alphabetic writing to create a magic of writing.

One of the early known ways of using a characteristic of writing for magical purposes was acrostic poetry where each line or alternatively each line in a stanza would begin with the same cuneiform character. While this might look like alliteration, it was not, as "[m]ost of the acrostics make use of this polyphony of sign values"[7] that marks many open writing systems. In other words, while the lines share the same initial character, they do not necessarily share the same phoneme.

The acrostic itself can transmit a hidden message:

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5. Lexical lists are part of the earliest stage of script development in the Middle East, cf. Nissen (1981, p. 101) and Englund, Nissen, Damerow, and Baghdad (1993, p. 13).

6. http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/edition2/literature.php— "Also first attested in the late Early Dynastic period are two particular types of non-utilitarian text that had a long history in Mesopotamia: incantations and royal inscriptions. The former employ various religious and rhetorical strategies, as well as mimetic ritual, to achieve instrumental ends such as curing illness."

7. Soll (1988, p. 307), here with reference to Babylonian acrostics.

Akkadian acrostics are message acrostics in which the initial syllables or signs of the horizontal acrostic lines spell out a message when read vertically. Seven complete or partial acrostic texts are known from Akkadian literature.[8]

In the case of the Babylonian *Theodicy*, written around 1000 BC, the message read "I, Saggil-kīnam-ubbib, the incantation priest, am adorant of the god and the king".[9] Other Akkadian texts would go even further and work with double acrostics with incantations encoded via both the initial and final syllables.[10] This sophisticated mechanism of hiding a message could only work in writing. It is the sheer difficulty of writing such acrostic poetry that in the mind of practitioners imbued it with its potency.

The Babylonian *Theodicy* is an acrostic in its written form—"[e]ach of the 11 lines of the stanzas start with the same sign, like Psalm 119. To achieve this [...] throughout the author allows himself the liberty of using a little the polyphony of the signs".[11] In other words, in contrast to alliteration the artifice cannot be separated from writing.

The advent of the alphabet with its intrinsic order would add an additional layer—acrostics whose first letters spelled out the order of the alphabet rather than a specific message. The alphabet itself is a "ready metaphor for totality"[12], a metaphor of completeness.

Alphabetic acrostics would become a staple also in wisdom literature, most prominently in a number of Hebrew psalms.[13]

2.2. *The Number of My Name*

One of the earliest known examples of number magic linked to a text—a name in this case—are foundation cylinders of the Assyrian king Sargon II (king from 722 to 705 BC) who had the wall around Dur-Sharrukin— "Sargon's fortress", today's Khorsabad in Iraq, about 15 km northeast of Mosul—built in a length that corresponded to "the number of his name".[14] Sargon II. proclaimed that "Vier Sar, drei Ner, 1 Soss, 3 kâné, 2 Ellen [Summa: 16280 Ellen]—so viel mein Name bedeutet—machte ich das Mass ihrer Mauer, und auf hohem Berggestein gründete ich fest ihr Fundament".[15]

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8. See Brug (2010).

9. `http://www.etana.org/node/582`, cited after Lambert (1996, pp. 63–89).

10. Some such examples are the acrostics discussed in Sweet (1969).

11. See Lambert (1960, p. 66).

12. See Soll (1988, p. 317).

13. Cf. also W. G. E. Watson (1982) and W. G. Watson (1986).

14. At least four copies of this foundation cylinder are known, two each in the Louvre and in London, cf. Lyon (1883, p. XIV).

15. Lyon (1882, 11, line 65), also Lyon (1883, p. 39). The exact number is being discussed, with current literature going for 16,283 rather than 16,280 cubits, "De 16 283

The great city was entirely built in the decade preceding 706 BC. After the unexpected death of Sargon in battle in 705 BC, where even his body felt into the hands of his enemies (an extremely bad omen in Assyria), Dur-Sharrukin was abandoned and the capital was shifted 20 km south to Nineveh.

While there is no consensus yet on how this calculation was made and which exact numerical values should be applied for the cuneiform characters in the case of Sargon II's name, we can safely assume that the Assyrian king expected this message on Dur-Sharrukin foundation cylinders to magically strengthen the wall of his newly founded capital. Presumably the mystic equivalence of the royal name and his capital's wall was conceived to link and reinforce both. It may well be that, when Sargon II ignominiously died in battle shortly afterwards, it was this same equivalence that helped to doom his short-lived capital.

Sargon II could build on a tradition of cuneifom signs that were mapped to numbers. As Pearce (1996) elaborates in his article on *number-syllabary texts* in that late cuneiform period, the numeric value was one linked to the cuneiform signs themselves, not to their typically polyvalent readings.[16] What is more, these mappings were not secret knowledge, not *Geheimwissen* (cf. p. 461), but rather accepted knowledge that became soon loaded with theological overtones—"by the first millennium, numerals frequently represented divine names."[17]

To map numbers and characters is not obvious in an open writing systems, whereas it is a perfectly natural feature of a closed writing system with a clear order between its letters. On a purely speculative note, given the very late attestation of number-syllabary tests in the history of the cuneiform script at a time where the Phoenician and Aramaic scripts were long in current use, it could very well be inspired by the numerology of the early Semitic scripts. It would then naturally have fit in a existing tradition of acrostics and other forms of sign magic.

3. Kabbalah

Just like alphabetic acrostics, the Kabbalah and in particular its use of gematria to search for hidden messages in the Torah derives from the double use of Greek and Hebrew letters as number signs, which in turn reflects the order of those letters in their writing systems.

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grandes coudées, le nombre de mon nom, je fis le circuit de sa muraille", cf. Contenau, 1940, p. 162. / "I made the circumference (lit., measure) of its (the city's) wall 16,283 cubits, (corresponding to) my name (*nibīt šumīya*), and established the foundation platform upon the bedrock of the high mountain" Frahm (2005, p. 48).

16. The texts "demonstrate that the scribes intended the numerals to represent only the sign form and not the possible syllabic readings of the sign" (Pearce, 1996, p. 460).

17. See Pearce (ibid., p. 461).

As we have seen above, the idea of finding hidden numbers and meanings in sequences of letters seems to have a long tradition in the Middle East, with Sargon II's magic just being a case in point. Number magic cut two ways—practitioners used it to imbue texts with magic by consciously encoding into them further layers of meaning, but also tried to decypher such layers from texts that certainly were never meant to have them.

These strategies were known in Israel in the Hellenistic period, but are likely much older—as mentioned above, it might have been itself the inspiration for applying number magic in the late cuneiform period.[18] At a time where the Aramaic writing system was fully established, some Aramaic texts were even "retrofitted" into cuneiform to strengthen this link.[19] Similarly, Lieberman (1987, p. 167) traces Rabbinic gematria squarely back to Mesopotamian practices.

3.1.   The *Zohar*

While some apologists today claim that the Kabbalah go back to Talmudic, if not Mosaic or even Adamic times,[20] it probably came about only in the 12th century, though building on a much older tradition of Jewish mysticism. Its foundational work, the *Zohar*, was written—or, as some practitioners would have it, rediscovered—in 13th century Spain.

Among many other things the *Zohar* developed an outright philosophy of the role that the Hebrew letters had in the creation of the world, starting out in the prologue where "When He desired to create the world, all the letters came before Him in sequence from last to first"[21] with Bet ב being the letter chosen to create the world "because the letter Bet is the first letter of the word blessing (HEB. BRACHAH)"[22]. Here, the Torah starts with Bet. Aleph א is compensated by the honour to "be the first […] of all the letters […] all calculations and actions of the people shall commence with you. Therefore, all unity shall be expressed by the letter Aleph!"[23]

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18. For an interesting, but explicitly speculative study on occurrences of 52—the numerical value associated with the name of god—already in the Masoretic version of the Torah cf. Knohl (2012).

19. Cf. Gordon (1937) for an example of a late cuneiform incantation tablet written in Aramaic. While the tablet itself was written only in Hellenistic times, the incantation itself may be older, since "[i]t is well known that the efficacy of an incantation is often believed to be in direct proportion to its antiquity," p. 105.

20. Cf., e.g., Kurzweil (2007, 35ff).

21. Zohar, Prologue, verse 23, cited after https://www.zohar.com/zohar/Prologue/chapters/6.

22. Loc. cit., verse 37, capitalisation in the original.

23. Loc. cit., verse 38.

It could be the topic of another article to look more in detail at the grafematics of the *Zohar* and of the Kabbalah as a whole. Here, let it be sufficient to state that this philosophy does not stop at the letters itself. The forms of the letters—in this case the stroke of Aleph א—is also loaded with meaning:

> Come and see: The first subject of the Torah we give to children is the Alphabet. […] Even supernal angels and the most sublime cannot comprehend it, as these matters are the mysteries of the Holy Name. There are 14,050,000 worlds dependent upon the stroke of the Aleph א, MEANING THE STROKE OF THE UPPER YUD OF THE ALEPH, and 72 holy names are engraved in the impressed letters in them. The high and low beings; heaven, earth and the seat of glory of the King—are hanging from one side to the other side, MEANING FROM THE UPPER STROKE TO THE LOWER STROKE of the expansion of the Aleph […][24]

Given the central role of Hebrew letters and writing in general, it is not surprising that the Kabbalah sought to extract layers of meaning from the Torah that are linked to the written word itself—"Kabbalists believe that God created the world through a combination of Hebrew letters"[25], as a contemporary popular introduction to the Kabbalah puts it. The classical layer of interpretation went from the "literal meaning, the homiletic meaning, the hints that the text implies, and the secret, mystical meaning"[26]. For this latter gematria is a common, though by no means not the only approach to extract these type of mystical meanings through the contemplation of the—in a literal sense—written word.

This love for letters also inspired a number of non-Jewish practitioners of the Kabbalah—while the Kabbalah originates in Judaism, it had adepts also in other religions. The Christian scholar Ramon Lull was one of the most prominent of them, searching in the spirit of the ecstatic Kabbalah, "combinations of letters which constitute the Divine name"[27], but by far not the only one. Even today gematria is still being used in some esoteric circles in the hope of extracting deep hidden messages from written texts.

3.2.   Kabbalah and True Names

The Middle Eastern tradition met with the Socratic search for *true names* and their numeric identities. In Greece Plato's ideas would give additional impetus, as in *Cratylos* where Plato makes Socrates say:

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24. Zohar, Acharei Mot, verse 303, cited after `https://www.zohar.com/zohar/Acharei\%20Mot/chapters/50`. Capitalisation in the original.

25. See Kurzweil (ibid., p. 130).

26. See Kurzweil (ibid., p. 218).

27. See Idel (1988, p. 171).

On this basis, then, you will judge the law-giver, whether he be here or in a foreign land, so long as he gives to each thing the proper form of the name, in whatsoever syllables, to be no worse lawgiver, whether here or anywhere else, will you not? (Plat. Crat. 390a)

This hunt for the *proper form*, the *true name*[28] of a thing became common in the Hellenistic and post-Hellenistic world and well beyond. It influences strands of the Kabbalah, which elevated the concept of finding hidden meanings into a philosophy. In particular gematria became a major tool. The ultimate meaning of a text would not be the one indicated by the language that the writing ostensibly represents, but rather a mystical message transmitted via numbers encoded exclusively in the written word.

4.   Magic in Open Writing Systems

Gematria and alphabetic acrostics work best for closed writing systems. They depend on a mapping between letters and numbers, typically via the supposedly eternal alphabetic order of letters in the writing system.[29]

Though open writing systems also partially adopted these techniques, they had to find also other techniques to elicit hidden meanings from a written text. Contrary to Sumerian writing, the oldest examples of notably Chinese characters are actually directly linked to magic, more specifically pyromancy, divination by fire. Questions would be carved on bones in what is the oldest surviving form of Chinese writing from around 1200 BC. The diviner—often the king in person—would then heat the bone and interpret the resulting cracks to elicit an answer to the question. Sometimes this interpretation would be noted on the bone to compare it with the actual event later.

In Chinese culture this link between writing and ritual would never be fully broken, a trait that also of the Japanese writing system inherited. In Japan ema—wooden plaques—became a standard way to transmit wishes to the gods. The wish is inscribed on the plaque and hung at the shrine in question before being burned. Its written message is thereby posted to the god to whom the shrine is dedicated. This practice is still very much alive—some shrines figure prominently also in popular culture and some ema even figure characters from Japanese popular culture.[30]

In this article I will look at three contemporary examples from popular culture that exploit properties of Japanese writing:

28. The latter a concept explored, e.g., in Le Guin's Earthsea cycle, Le Guin (2012).
29. See Küster (2006, 181ff).
30. As described in Reader (1991), one such example is the real-life Shirakawa Hachiman Shrine that became a target of pilgrimage for fans of the *Higurashi—When They Cry* visual novel and anime franchise. The fans celebrate this shrine as the ficti-

4.1.   Magic in Polyphony

Magic in Hayao Miyazaki's animated masterpiece *Spirited away* features the ability of the witch Yubaba to enslave the humans that request to work for the spirit world bathhouse which she manages. She takes away their liberty and their identity of her applicants by re-baptizing them. However, this power seems constrained; she can only operate on a written contract and shorten her victim's written name, allowing her workers a tenuous link to their previous existence.

This specific constraint is lost in the English translation, where the name of the protagonist, Ogino Chihiro, inexplicably morphs into Sen. The logic behind this it is much more visible in the original Japanese title, 千と千尋の神隠し, *Sen and Chihiro's Spiriting Away*, and it is immortalized in the scene where Chihiro is forced to sign away her name and with it her identity. Yubaba makes all parts of Chihiro's signature disappear except for the single character 千, the first kanji in Chihiro's first name 千尋:

FIGURE 1. Miyazaki (2001), position 38:41

Like most Japanese kanji, 千 is the polyphonic grapheme which has two main syllabic readings, *chi* (the Japanese *kun* reading), but also *sen* (the "Chinese" *on* reading of the character).

Yubaba's magic thus relies on her ability to operate through writing and on *written* words. It exploits the polyphony of Japanese characters

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tious Furude Shrine in the equally fictitious village of Hinamizawa, addressing ema to some of the *Higurashi* characters. Andrews (2014) studies other examples.

to manipulate associations between identity, the written and the spoken word in ways that transcend spoken language.

Furthermore, by choosing the On-reading for Chihiros new name, Yubaba seems to remove Chihiro from her true Japanese roots. In addition, 千 also stands for 1,000, an implicit statement of capitalistic values usurping Chihiro's true personality. She has to start on a long inquiry[31] to reestablish her true identity and values.

4.2. Radical Magic

The *Monogatari* series of Japanese popular novels, authored by Nishio Isin, often situates itself with reference to a Shintoist pantheon and Shintoist magic. This magic very often turns around more esoteric interpretations of writing in general and kanji in particular. Even the animated rendering of the novels regularly showcases tablets of written texts to underline links that the spoken language cannot show.

One such story centres around helping a desperate girl, Hachikuji Mayoi, trying to find her mother. She claims to be a lost snail:
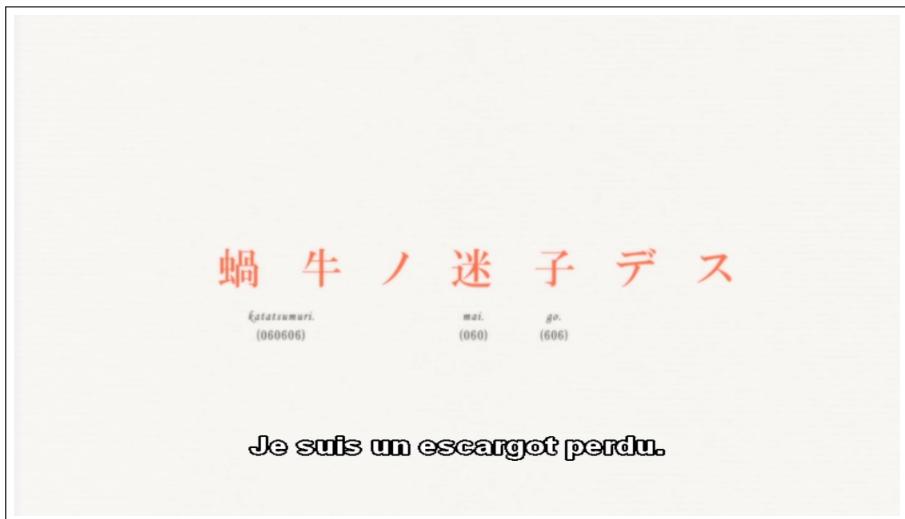

FIGURE 2. Itamura (2009), position 22:44. In the series written passages like this one regularly complement the story.

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31. The second kanji 尋 of Chihiro's first name is also the stem of the verb 尋ねる, to inquire, though now with the alternative reading *tazu* rather than *hiro*—another association that only works in the written language.

蝸牛 is the spelling that the story adopts for *snail*; it is a less common out of a number of possible forms of writing the underlying phonemes.[32] However, it is only on the choice of this particular spelling on which the magic works:

- The first of the two kanji, 蝸, contains the radical 咼 for *evil* and *dishonest*, associating the girl with negative forces
- The second of the kanji, 牛, symbolises *cow*, situating the story in a family of myths of entities who lure innocent wanderers astray

These same plays on specifically the written language are equally prevalent in the source material (Nishio, 2006).

The magic is in the letters themselves—by interpreting the underlying kanji characters in a arcane way, the author manages to associate the innocent and at first glance innocuous concept of a lost snail with other, more established ideas in myth.

4.3. The Servant's Three New Names

In Adachi, 2014, the Shinto god Noragami binds a new servant ("shinki") to his services. He literally inscribes a "property mark" in the form of a kanji on his servant and joins this with three different readings—his everyday name Yuki, his functional name, Setsu, and a third, true name that is not voiced. It is ultimately this third, secret reading of the servant that only he as a god can sense and that ultimately gives him power over his servant.

While coming from a very different cultural background, the idea of this third, hidden name bears strong similarity to the Platonic concept of a person's or object's true name. Finding this true name is envisioned to confer power over the named person or object—a vision obviously shared between Shintoism, much of the neo-platonic school, and the Kabbalah.

5. Summary

Using a number of examples this article demonstrate how the intrinsic properties of writing systems can carry mystical messages in the mind of practitioners. These messages depend only an esoteric interpretation of the written language that hides or reveals these messages.

The concrete methods of doing so depend on the logic of the writing system in question. In our selected examples we have encountered:

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32. Cf.   https://www.linguee.com/english-japanese/translation/snail.html, last consulted on 2020-01-19.

FIGURE 3. Adachi (2014, p. 177)

- acrostic poetry that imbues its text with messages hidden in its first and sometimes also last characters;
- number magic through numeric values associated with characters that are supposed to encode a text's deeper, secret truths, which the practitioner hopes to exploit or to which he hopes to gain access;
- links created between concepts by exploiting the internal structure of characters;
- polyphony that allows multiple readings of characters, creating again associations and messages that are pure artefacts of writing.

These techniques may not be the most prevalent use of writing. However, they demonstrate how writing systems can (partially) emancipate themselves from their underlying spoken languages and find new, non-linguistic ways to transmit meaning. For closed writing systems these mechanisms mainly exploit the writing system's internal structures, whereas open writing systems rely more on arcane features of the characters themselves. However, in both cases they succeed in creating a new system—a magic of writing.

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