

The Akṣara in Brāhmī Writing Systems

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The indigenous writing systems of the Indian subcontinent are without exception derived from Brāhmī, the earliest form of which is exemplified in the Anurādhāpura inscriptions in Elu Prakrit of Sri Lanka dating back to the 5th century BCE and the Ashokan edicts of Girnar dating back to the 3rd century BCE. The script has received considerable academic attention ever since its decipherment in 1837 by James Prinsep of the East India Company. The Brāhmī script diversified into numerous local variants collectively referred to as the Brāhmī scripts and dispersed all over South and South-East Asia.

Brāhmī and its derivative writing systems are organized around units called *akṣaras*. *Akṣaras* are to our writing systems what letters or characters are to alphabets like Cyrillic and Roman. In the ancient Indian metrical and grammatical tradition the term *akṣara* referred to the syllable, a cluster of sound segments organized around certain well-known phonological principles. Over time, with the advent of writing in the Indian subcontinent, the term *akṣara* came to denote a cluster of *graphemes* – basic units of orthography – organized around principles that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, have hitherto remained largely unexplored. An attempt will be made here to fill that lacuna.

Traditionally the Brāhmī scripts have been typologically classified as *alphasyllabaries* (Bright 1996) or *abugidas* (Daniels 1996). Bright's terminology is based upon formal properties of these scripts, e.g. the predominantly diacritic status of the vowel symbols that do not occur in a linear order corresponding to the temporal order of utterance. It focuses on the graphic arrangement of symbols in writing. Daniels, on the other hand, "prefers a typology based on the 'functional' criterion of correspondence between sound and symbol, in particular the importance of the 'inherent' vowel and its replacement by other vowel symbols" [Bright 2000].

A close examination of the Indic writing systems reveals that the notion of "inherent vowel" in the Brāhmī *akṣaras* or graphic syllables is problematic and so is the interpretation of the *virāma* as a "vowel killer" that kills the inherent vowel in an *akṣara*. However, a hybrid approach that focuses on the correspondence between sound and symbol without ignoring the formal reality of the *akṣara* as the primary graphic unit of representation results in a reduction of script types while accounting for experimental psycholinguistic data on reading Brāhmī scripts.

References

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