THE SYLLABLE IN PERFORMANCE:
ORTHOGRAPHY
CHAPTER SIXTEEN

SYLLABLES AND SYLLABARIES: WHAT WRITING SYSTEMS TELL US ABOUT SYLLABLE STRUCTURE

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1 Introduction

Though they have been largely ignored in modern linguistics, writing systems provide rich evidence for phonological structures. They are systems which analyze, encode, and transmit language, usually on a phonological basis. Though a number of them, such as the Roman alphabet as applied to English, are notoriously inexact, the fact that they are learnable and usable as ways to transmit language suggests that there is a relationship between what writing systems encode and the structures of language itself. And unlike any recent phonological theory, many writing systems have stood the test of time. Looking at writing systems for evidence of syllabic structures yields strong evidence for the linguistic reality of syllables, for a number of their properties (such as onset-coda asymmetry and the special status of /s/), and for their internal structure (moras, and onsets and rhymes).

1.1 Theoretical Preliminaries

According to Ray Jackendoff, “one crucial test of a theory of linguistic structure is whether it can be integrated into a theory of processing” (Jackendoff 1983, 5). The central claim of this chapter is that a writing system is by its nature a theory of processing: in writing, language is analyzed into discrete structures, encoded into signs, and then decoded into language again by the reader. The encoded structures must be ones that the reader and writer can access and manipulate. Therefore, the presence of a structure in a writing system is good evidence for the linguistic reality of that structure. Written evidence of syllables therefore constitutes evidence for their linguistic reality.

The linguistically naïve native speaker of a language employs unconsciously the manifold structures of the language. By contrast, becoming literate requires raising to some level of awareness (whether fully