

Writing

In an anthropological sense, writing includes all social practices that use systems of graphic (sometimes also material) signs, which are recurrent, combinable and conventionally linked to a linguistic content. From this perspective, one could say that writing has been with *homo sapiens* from the beginning. On the other hand, linguistic and philological approaches have expressed more limiting views of writing. In particular, three perspectives have emerged: the evolutionary one (e.g., Ignace Gelb's famous statement about the pictographic origins: "at the basis of all writing stands picture"); the linguistic one (i.e., the idea that writing must, or should, merely represent speech); and the vague (seemingly opposite) relativistic stance according to which "if all writing is information storage, then all writing is of equal value" (Albertine Gaur). These approaches share a view of the written sign as a static entity, informed by the logic of the alphabet (or rather by a partial, Western theory about it, as pointed out by Roy Harris).

More recently, anthropologists have rethought the relationship between orality and literacy, rethinking, with Jack Goody's three-vertexes model, the "unilinear" Saussurean model of the language-writing ratio. One of the goals of the anthropological research on literacy has been to investigate psychocultural changes caused by the acquisition of (mostly alphabetical) writing skills in societies previously without writing. Such an approach shows several limitations, among which are a schematic binarism regarding the passage from orality to literacy; the assumption that equates literacy with alphabetical literacy, thus uncritically accepting traditional linguistic typologies; and an emphasis on psychological effects (mainly in scholars such as Walter J. Ong). In these studies writing is frequently considered as a non-social activity (even if socially transmitted) that aims at improving individual skills and mental processes. The social side is highlighted mainly in the context of linguistic/orthographic policies implementing a standard written language in a given country.

The myth of a "primary orality" is also highly questionable given that a circulation of graphic messages (i.e., texts produced according to a notation, related primarily to linguistic-conceptual contents and only conditional to reflexive aesthetics) does in fact exist in all cultures. Even what is considered by many the "land of orality," Africa, is a forest of symbols that materialize cultural and linguistic contents that cannot be understood outside of their social context. This is the case for the Akan graphic symbols, the Nigerian *nsibidi*, and the Dogon cosmogonic signs. Rather than "pseudo-non-writing/partial/limited" or forerunners of "true/complete/unlimited writing" (according to John DeFrancis' terminology), they are evidence of the intrinsically social attitude toward all media of communication in many non-Western cultures. In Africa, as well as in Native American cultures, "to write" never meant to produce a static, fixed and a-pragmatic text reflecting an "ideal" and totally explicit utterance, in a one-to-one ratio with the (phonic) elements resulting from an abstract analysis of a sentence.

The new anthropological approach mentioned at the beginning moves from a flexible taxonomy, grounded on semiotic principles. If languages are equipollent in *abstracto* because they all share the features of omniformativity and omnitranslatability, then *de facto* those features can be implemented only by the concrete speech acts in which many other non-segmental factors (gestures, settings, audience, proxemic, etc.) play a significant role, since meaning is always constructed pragmatically and inferentially. Writing systems are neither omniformative nor equipollent, even though they give rise to new codes emphasizing other dimensions of a communicative act. Thus their degree of pragmatic and contextual sensitiveness will be inversely related to their expressive power. Writings that tend to be exhaustively superimposed on explicit and de-contextualized acts of speech (e.g., the alphabetical, standard written languages) will tend to express more linguistic contents, resorting less to co-textual and performance contexts, or to a shared graphic competence as completely independent from oral communication. On the contrary, writings that tend to re-structure language (Chinese is a good example) will need a degree of pragmatic, graphic, and inferential competence that goes as far as allowing each written element to reshape the linguistic system, rather than simply corresponding to a single spoken element. All writing systems, thus, could be arranged along a continuum whose two (purely theoretical) extremes, according to Louis Hjelmslev's terminology, will be named signal-writing and metasemiotic-writing. As a consequence of this definition, scriptorial sign is considered a dynamic unit, a sign function implementing texts whose meanings are interactively constructed. There follows a basic need for the researcher: one has to investigate (through fieldwork or historical reconstruction) practices, contexts, and uses of writing systems to fully understand their products (i.e., texts).

Specific sociolinguistic situations vary considerably, challenging the binary opposition between orality and literacy. In Aztec Mexico of the colonial period, it is essential to postulate a triadic model of cultural circulation interweaving Latin alphabet, local pictographic writing, and orality, as argued by Serge Gruzinski.

Finally, on the basis of Dell Hymes' SPEAKING model, we can adopt a model for the description of scriptorial events whose components correspond by acronym to the mnemonic word WRITING, the seven different factors being W = Writers (e.g., Who are the writers? Do they have specific status? Are writing skills subjected to institutionally recognized patterns?); R = Readers (e.g., Who are the readers? Is the role of the reader independent from that of the writer? Are there different reading skills, according to sociocultural or status levels?); I = Instrumentalities (e.g., What kind of instruments are used to write a message, and how are they related to keys through which scriptorial events must—or should—be interpreted?); T = Textualization (e.g., Which are the rules governing the passage from cultural—and linguistic—content into written texts? Is there any distinctive pattern of "translation" between linguistic and scriptorial domains?); I = Interpretive context (e.g., What is the role played by the environmental context in which the written text is placed, in the interpretation of that same text?); N = Norms (e.g., Are there graphic and social norms related to the writing and reading of different kinds of texts?); G = Genres (e.g., Is there a "canon," either implicit or explicit, through which texts are classified and hence interpreted?) (See also *evolution, genre, inference, literacy, media, orality*)

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