



# The Technology of Writing

- Aniket Alam
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# Writing Restructures Consciousness

- Writing establishes 'context-free' language
- Autonomous discourse
  - Discourse detached from author
- Plato's arguments against writing are the same as the arguments today against computers
  - Destroys human memory
  - (Plato had to put his objections to writing in writing, and objections to computers are most-often written and spread via computers :-D )
- This critique of the technology of writing was possible only because of the adoption of this technology



# Tools of Writing

- Stylus, Brush, Pen, Pencil, Chisel...
- Bark, Leaf, Wood, Metal, Clay, Rock, Skin, Paper...
- “Reduction of dynamic sound to quiescent space”
- Script is artificial, invented
  - Given by God

# Code

- Writing is not any semiotic marking
- Set of deliberately decided signs which follow similarly formed rules
- Allow very large number of combinations
  - Words
  - Phrases
  - Sentences
- Most developed are alphabets

# Alphabet

- Like the wheel, once invented can only be copied
  - Improvements, but only incremental
  - Hebrew, Arabic still do not have letters for vowels
- Vowels came with the Greeks
  - Argument that this was partly, if not wholly, the cause for excellence in Greek philosophy and arts
- With vowels one can write, read languages one doesn't know
- Alphabets are an analytical action on sound
  - And then allow for analytical faculties to develop
- Alphabet has lost all connection with thing as thing
  - "Bird" has no connection to the visual representation of any bird

# Glamour

- Writing was often considered magical
  - Script was divine
- Writing is a “trade” practiced by highly trained, elite craftsmen
- Secret(ive) trade
- At craft literacy stage, it is not necessary, nor practical, for people other than craftsmen to know reading/writing

# Democratic Revolution

- Alphabet script could be learnt by anybody
- Kept confined to few using punishment, social taboos, fear
- In ancient Greece first glimpse of “mass” literacy
  - All free citizens, many slaves, women...
  - Interiorisation of the alphabet
- Everyone could read and write
  - Alphabetical script is a mass technology
  - “Planet Scale”



# Interiorised Knowledge

- For centuries, millennia even, writing was typically read aloud
- Yet, it allows one to write and read quietly
  - Inside your own mind, cut-off from other people and contexts
  - “...writing makes possible increasingly articulate introspectivity, opening the psyche as never before ... to the interior self”
  - “Writing makes possible the great introspective religious traditions such as Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. All these have sacred **texts**”
- Writing creates the idea of the “original”
  - The Word as the Foundation of Knowledge



# Proper, Pure Language

- Scripts adhere to particular spoken languages
- These become the “original” language: The touchstone
  - London upper-class dialect became standard English
  - Hochdeutsch (spoken in the highlands of south Germany) became German
  - Tuscan became Italian
  - Khari Boli became Hindi
- Grapholect
  - A dialect which becomes a primarily textual language
  - With its oral manifestations secondary
- Learned Languages
  - Latin, Sanskrit

# Fixed, Yet Editable

- Script fixes sounds to visual symbols on long lasting material
  - Fixity over time and space
- No editing possible in oral communication
  - Erase a spoken word by denial or patchwork
  - Makes speaker unconvincing
- Written words can be edited without anyone knowing
  - How many times have I edited this slide?
- Changes the way we think
  - Visual sounds
  - Fixed, yet editable

# Emergence of Historical Consciousness

- Accumulation of texts – corpora – gives writing language depth in time
- Literate intelligentsia can feel the distance in time within their culture
- The past become fixed with its texts
  - Yet Editable!!
- Textual traditions are necessary but not sufficient conditions for the emergence of historical consciousness
- Print technology makes historical consciousness ‘overdetermined’