

Instructor:
Email:
Website (for Homework, Handouts, etc.):
Location:
Class Hours:
Office Hours:

Jack Isaac Rabinovitch
jrabinovitch@g.harvard.edu
jackisaacrabinovitch.github.io
Barker Center 215 (Fong Room)
TuTh 9:00–10:00 AM
TBD

Writing Systems and Language Conservation

Week 1: What is Writing?

1 Goals for this Week

Here are our goals for the week:

- (1)
 - a. Go over the syllabus and discuss class norms
 - b. Discussion: What is Writing?
 - c. Learn about the terminology and structural components of writing
 - d. Some of the history, diversity, and technology of writing systems

2 Syllabus, Class Norms, and Introductions

Please refer to the syllabus!

3 What is Writing?

Like any good researcher, the first place to go with a hard question is Wikipedia.

Writing is a medium of human communication that involves the representation of a language through a system of **physically inscribed, mechanically transferred, or digitally represented** symbols. Writing systems are **not themselves human languages** (with the debatable exception of computer languages); they are means of rendering a language into a form that can be reconstructed by other humans **separated by time and/or space**. While not all languages use a writing system, those with systems of inscriptions can complement and **extend capacities of spoken language** by enabling the creation of durable forms of speech that can be transmitted across space (e.g., correspondence) and stored over time (e.g., libraries or other public records). It has also been observed that the activity of writing itself can have knowledge-transforming effects, since it allows humans to externalize their thinking in **forms that are easier to reflect on, elaborate, reconsider, and revise**. Writing **relies on many of the same semantic structures as the speech it represents, such as lexicon and syntax**, with the added dependency of a system of symbols to represent that language's phonology and morphology. The result of the activity of writing is called a text, and the interpreter or activator of this text is called a reader.

~ Wikipedia, emphasis mine

Do you agree with this definition? What are some claims that this passage makes about writing? How does this definition consider things like Braille, road symbols, emojis, utility markings, indents on vinyl records, or the International Phonetic Alphabet?

The term 'writing', like all academic terms, has a variety of definitions depending on author, context, and agenda. We will discuss models of writing with respect to these three things:

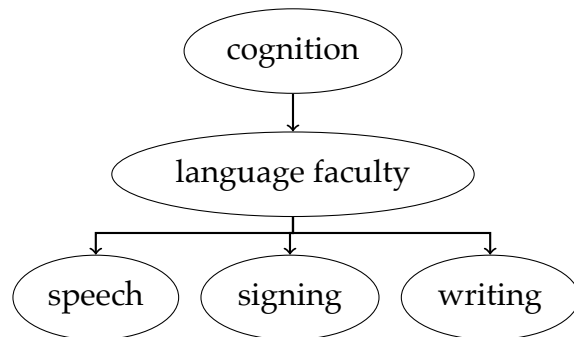
- (2)
 - a. **Cognition:** Thoughts and cognitive processes which we may articulate through language, but are themselves not governed by language or linguistic faculty.
 - b. **Language Faculty:** 'Big L' Language, our thoughts organized and patterned through our system of language (organization with combinatorial semantics, syntactic structure, etc.)
 - c. **(Instances of) Language:** 'Little l' language, such as signing and speech. These are languages as a collection of specific grammatical patterns and lexica, rather than the faculty itself.

In fairness, where the dividing line between these is is up for debate. See *linguistic relativity* (Whorf 2012), and *universal grammar* and *third factors* (Chomsky 2005).

3.1 Writing as an Independent Modality of Language

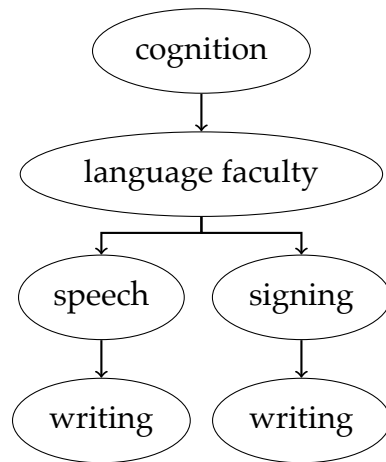
Often, writing is thought of as a ‘modality’ of language, on par with speech and signing: under this model, writing is an instance of language which comes directly from our language faculty.

Under this model, written form is a language unto itself: written English and spoken English are two (possibly related) ‘languages’ which we must learn with our language faculty.



3.2 Writing as a Derivative of Language

Many linguists today consider writing a 'secondary' modality, meaning that it is a form of language which is used as an auxiliary to/a record of primary modalities such as signing and speech



Under this model, written form is simply a derivative of true languages: written English is a tool or record which represents (to varying degrees of success) spoken English.

A common reason for such a distinction is historical: under many definitions of language, there is no written language independent of a signed or spoken form; all systems typically thought of as written language historically have been representative of spoken language.

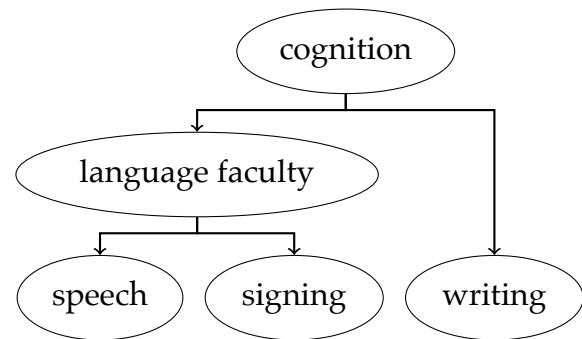
What does this distinction imply about how we process spoken and signed vs. written language?

What does this distinction imply about how linguists should value data from spoken and signed vs. written sources?

3.3 Writing as Distinct from Language

In Battestini (1997), Battestini argues that the two aforementioned models result in definitions of writing which are too narrow in scope.

Rather than being reliant on language, Battestini suggests that writing can be seen as visual and tactile markings which 'conservation of the collective memory', regardless of whether or not they represent linguistic systems. In this way, writing is (or can be) representative of our cognition through cultural knowledge rather than linguistic knowledge.



Such a definition comes out in part from a goal to decolonize linguistics; in many ways the standard view of writing in the European tradition is at odds with the vast wealth of visual and tactile memory systems used by cultures in Native America, Africa, and Australia. Under this model, written form is a cultural phenomenon separate from language: written English may be representative of spoken English in many ways, but other meaningful non-linguistic markings, such as emojis, utility signage, and mnemonic pictographs such as Sona, are writing as well.

How does such a definition of writing shift the aims or methodology of analyzing writing systems?

What makes something like utility signage not an instance of language in the same way that speech is? What does 'language faculty' entail, and how is its definition reliant on speech and signing?

4 Some Writing Terminology and Notation

For consistency we will use terminology found in Coulmas (2003).

Writing Systems: A 'writing system' can refer to two things: the specific system used by a language, or the kind of system (alphabet, abugida, etc. which we will discuss next week).

Script: A set of symbols/graphic forms used for a given writing system; English and Spanish use the same script, English and Greek do not.

Orthography: the standardized variety of a given, language-specific writing system; British English and American English orthography differ in some minor ways.

Sign(ary): A sign is a unit in writing; letters typically make an alphabet, and 'characters' is often used to discuss Chinese signs, but signs are a more generic term. A signary is the set of signs. English and Spanish both use Latin script, but with slight modification, meaning their alphabets (generic signaries) are different.

Orthographic Depth: How close an orthography relates to the phonology or phonetics of the language it represents.

	Mental/Symbol Representation	Realized Form
Sign/Speech	Phoneme	Phone
Writing	Grapheme	Graph

Grapheme: An abstract sign (or subpart of a sign) which makes an abstract unit of writing: <a> is a grapheme in English orthography.

Graph: An instantiation or realization of a grapheme.

English: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

French: Tous les êtres humains naissent libres et égaux en dignité et en droits. Ils sont doués de raison et de conscience et doivent agir les uns envers les autres dans un esprit de fraternité

Russian: Все люди рождаются свободными и равными в своем достоинстве и правах. Они наделены разумом и совестью и должны поступать в отношении друг друга в духе братства.

Romanized Russian: Vse lyudi rozhdayutsya svobodnymi i ravnymi v svoem dostoinstve i pravakh. Oni nadeleny razumom i sovest'yu i dolzhny postupat' v otnoshenii drug druga v dukhe bratstva.

Cyrillicized English: Ол Хјуман Биингс ар борн фри энд икуал ин дигнити энд рајц. Ђеј ар ендоуд уиђ рисон энд коншенс энд шуд акт тоардс уан анађер ин а спирит оф брађерхуд.

Dzongkha (Bhutanes): འགྲོ་བ་མི་རིགས་ག་ར་དབང་ཆ་འདྲ་མཉམ་འབད་སྤྱེལ་ལས་ག་ར་གིས་གཅིག་གིས་གཅིག་ལུ་
སྤྲོན་ཆའི་དམ་ཚིག་བསྟན་དགོ།

Vietnamese: Tất cả mọi người sinh ra đều được tự do và bình đẳng về nhân phẩm và quyền lợi. Mọi con người đều được tạo hóa ban cho lý trí và lương tâm và cần phải đối xử v^o i nhau trong tình anh em.

[illegible]

References

- Battestini, Simon. 1997. *écriture et texte: Contribution africaine*. Presses Université Laval.
- Chomsky, Noam. 2005. Three Factors in Language Design. *Linguistic Inquiry* 36:1–22.
- Coulmas, Florian. 2003. *Writing systems: An introduction to their linguistic analysis*. Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics. Cambridge, U.K. ; New York , NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Whorf, Benjamin Lee. 2012. *Language, thought, and reality: Selected writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*. MIT press.