

# What Follows from Writing?

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InfoSys 103  
Geoff Nunberg  
9/12/07



# Itinerary

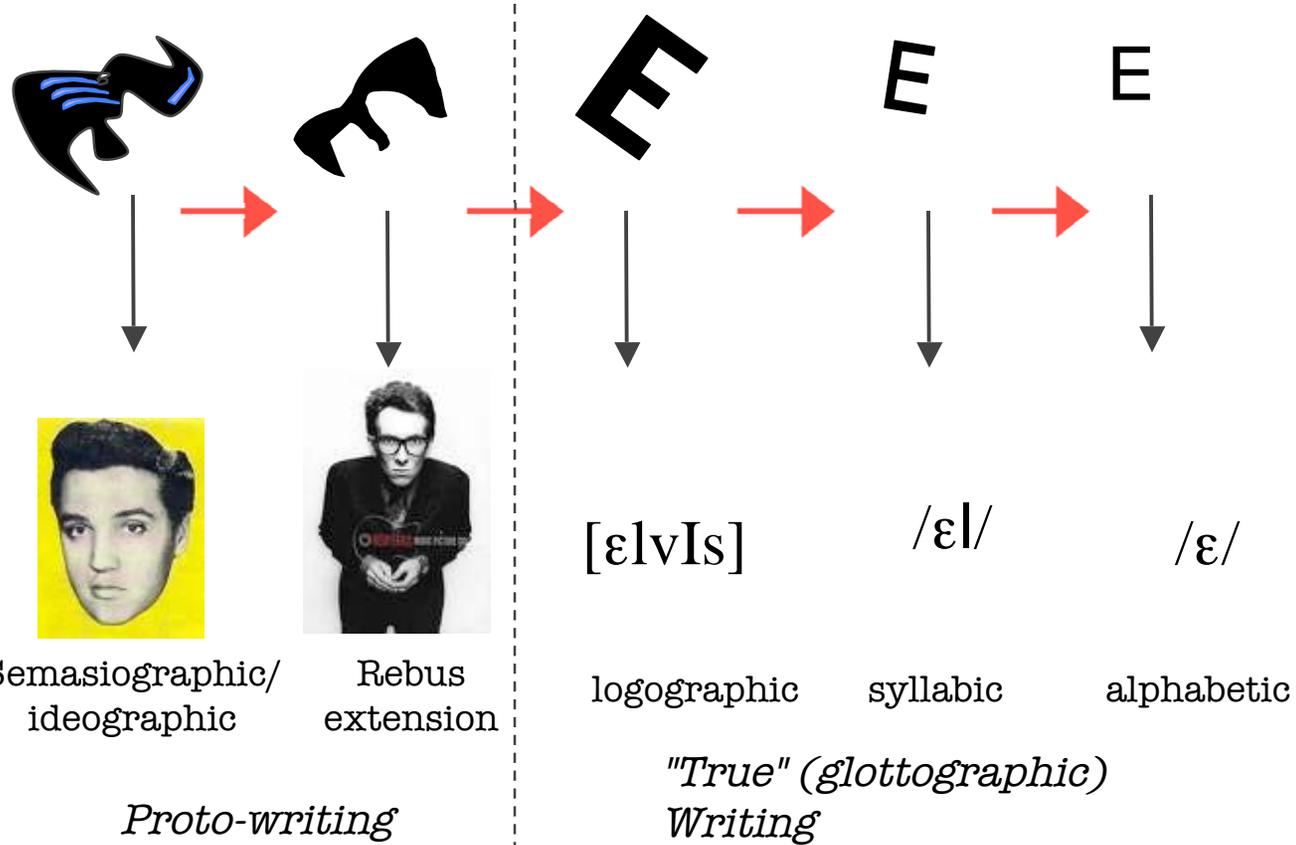
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Finish section on writing systems  
Discussion of assignment  
Social & cognitive effects of writing



# Development of Written Symbols

Simplification of sign →





# Development of Written Symbols

Shift from logographic to syllabic:

Cf English logographs @, &: imagine formation of words like "h@st&."

Where does this happen?



# Development of Written Symbols

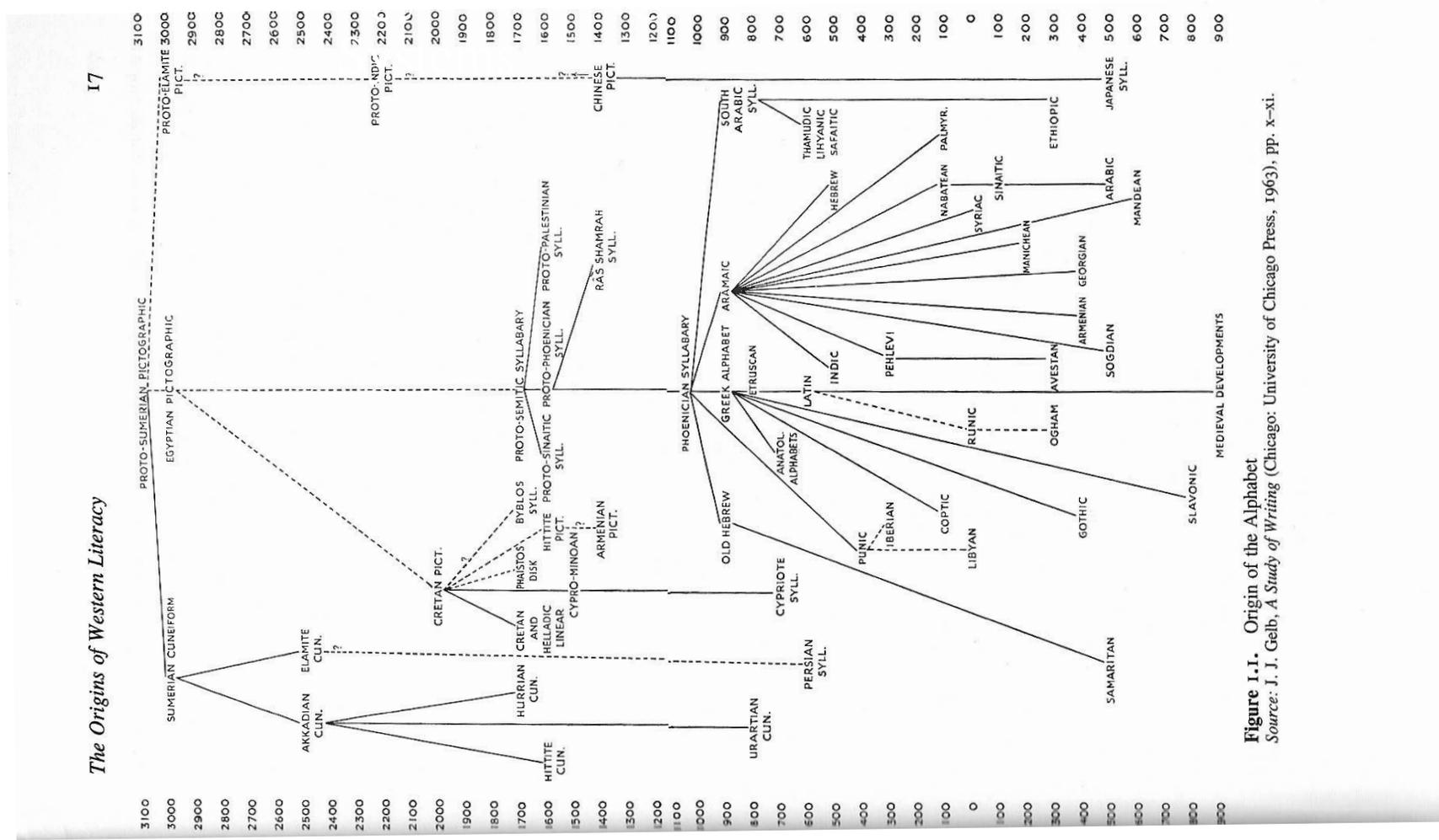
Shift from logographic to syllabic:

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# Origins of major writing systems



**Figure 1.1.** Origin of the Alphabet  
 Source: J. J. Gebb, *A Study of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. x-xi.

... but not much evidence for a single source (monogenesis)...



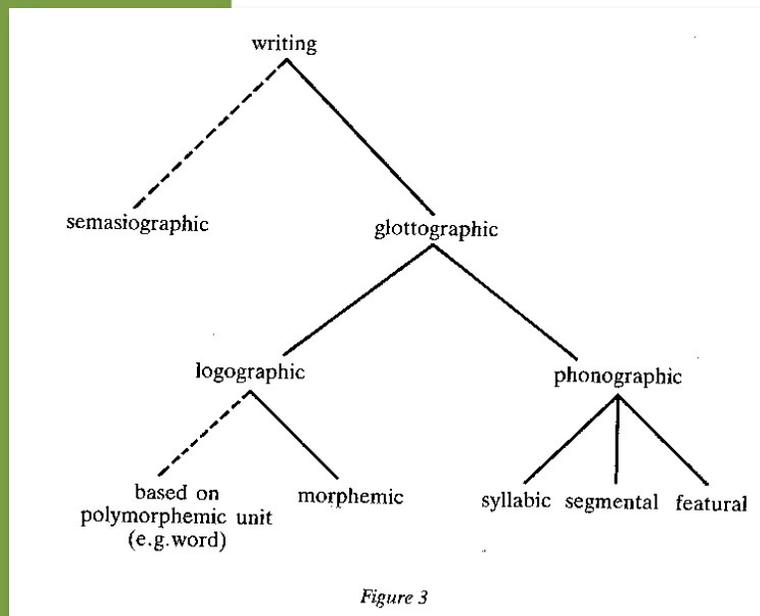
# Origins of Alphabetic Writing

Alphabetic system derived from application of syllabic system to different phonological structures.

Logographic: mod. Chinese, Japanese (mixed)

Syllabic: Linear B, Cherokee, Korean Hangeul (featural)

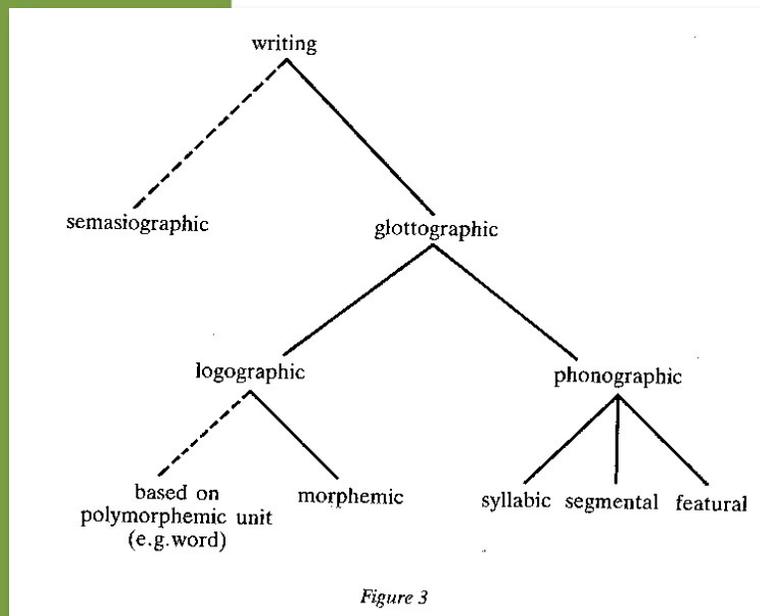
Alphabetic: Roman, Cyrillic, Gk, Hebrew, etc,





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Logographic: mod. Chinese, Japanese (mixed)

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Alphabetic: Roman, Cyrillic, Gk, Hebrew, etc,

Problem with completely phonetic alphabetic systems: ambiguity.

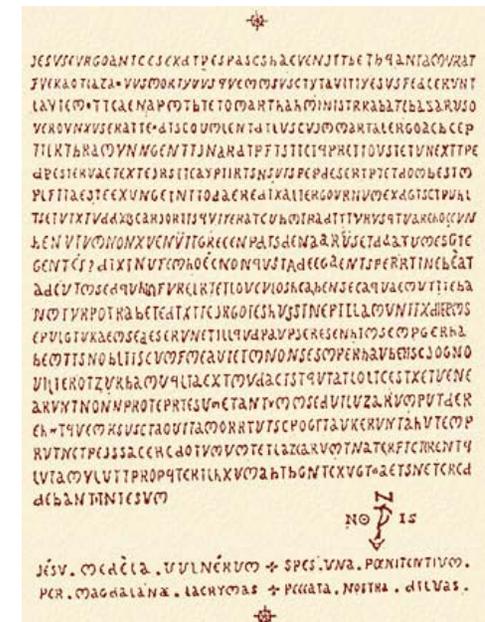
Cf French *au, aux, ô, os, haut, hauts, eau, eaux, os*, etc.



# Later Developments

Subsequent development of further orthographic elements: word-spacing, punctuation, paragraphing, etc.

Not fixed till early age of print. Reduce ambiguity, make writing increasingly accessible to wider community or in absence of immediate context,





## Later Developments

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Subsequent development of further orthographic elements: word-spacing, punctuation, paragraphing, etc.

itisofaromehenceforthfreethatiamtowritethehistoryhercivila  
dministrationandtheconductofherwarsherannuallyelectedm  
agistratestheauthorityofherlawssupremeoverallhercitizenst  
hetyrannyofthelastkingmadethislibertyallthemorewelcomef  
orsuchhadbeentheruleoftheformerkingsthattheymightnotun  
deservedly becountedasfoundersofpartsatalleventsofthecity



## Later Developments

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Subsequent development of further orthographic elements: word-spacing, punctuation, paragraphing, etc.

It is of a Rome henceforth free that I am to write the history-- her civil administration and the conduct of her wars, her annually elected magistrates, the authority of her laws supreme over all her citizens. The tyranny of the last king made this liberty all the more welcome, for such had been the rule of the former kings that they might not undeservedly be counted as founders of parts, at all events, of the city...



## The Role of Punctuation

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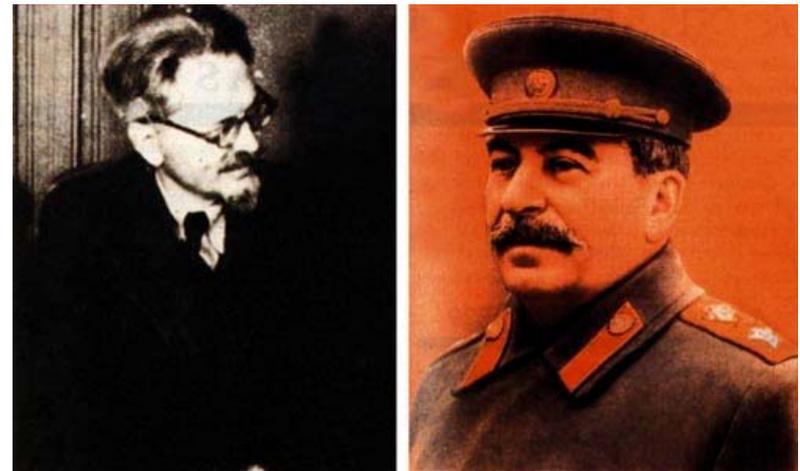
I spoke to the boys Sam and Tom.  
The press secretary gave them the  
rules they were not allowed to speak to  
the committee directly.  
To my parents Ayn Rand and God.



## The Role of Punctuation

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Comrade Stalin. You are right and I was wrong. You are the true heir to Lenin. I should apologize. Trotsky

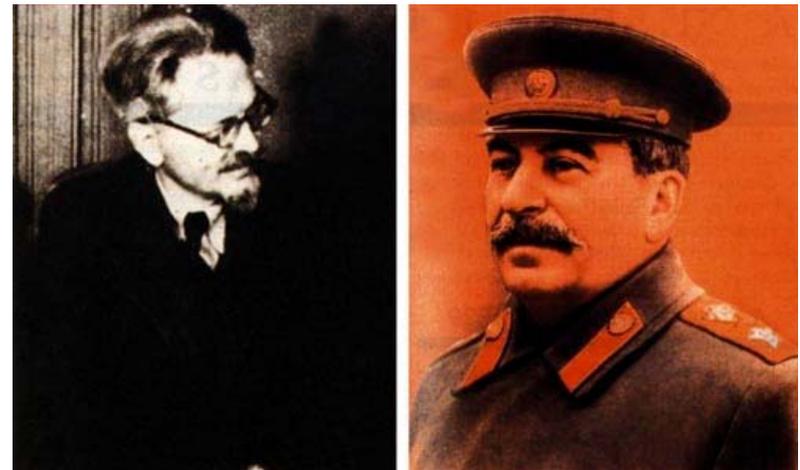




## The Role of Punctuation

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Comrade Stalin. You are right and I was wrong? *You* are the true heir to Lenin? *I* should apologize?? Trotsky





# Assignment

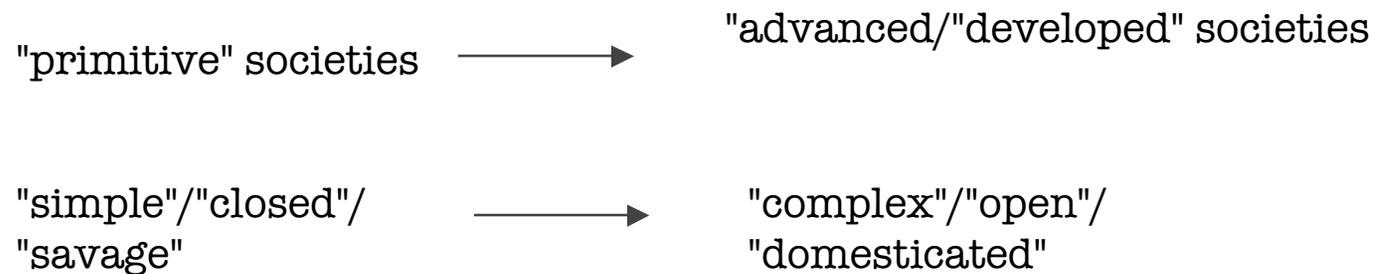
In his 1987 study of the cognitive effects of word-processing systems, *Electric Language*, Michael Heim wrote:

The accelerated automation of word-processing makes possible a new immediacy in the creation of public, typified text. Immediacy in the sense of there being no medium quod, no instrumental impediment to thinking in external symbols, but only a medium quo, or purely transparent element. As I write, I can put things directly into writing, My stream of consciousness can be paralled by the running flow of the electric element. Words dance on the screen. Sentences flow smoothly into place, make way for one another, while paragraphs ripple down the screen. Words become highlighted, vanish at the push of a button, then reappear instantly at will. Verbal life is fast-paced, easier, with something of the exhilaration of video games.... Because this playful way of putting things is immediate, enjoyable, and less constrained by materials, it encourages on-screen thinking, that is, thinking in a typified, public element.... Digital writing is nearly frictionless. It invites the formulation of thought directly in the electric element....

Reading this passage, would you say that Heim's view of the effects of writing technology comes closer to that of Goody and Watt or of Scribner and Cole? Why?



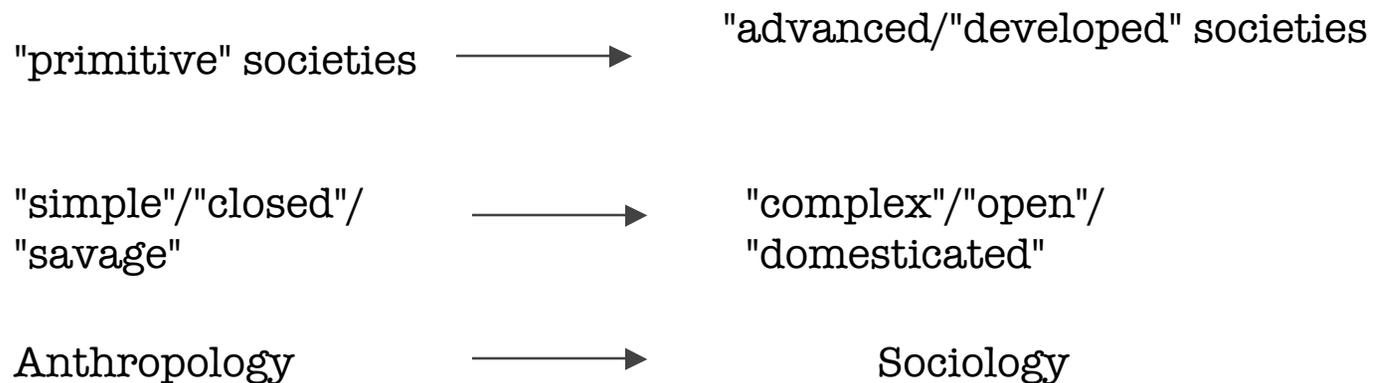
# Writing and the Stages of Culture



(after Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*)



# Writing and the Stages of Culture

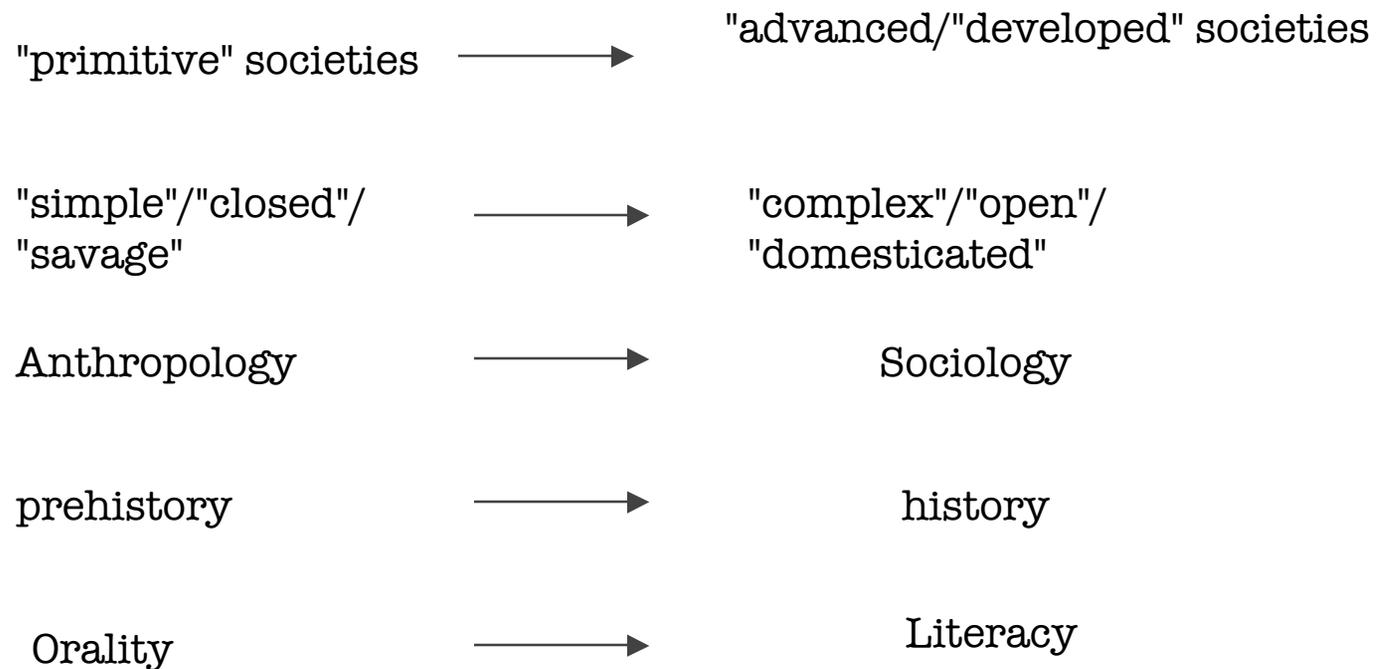


Man as animal is studied primarily by the zoologist, man as talking animal primarily by the anthropologist, and man as talking and writing animal primarily by the sociologist.

(after Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*)



# Writing and the Stages of Culture



(after Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*)



# Modes of Cultural Transmission in Oral Societies (Goody)

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Oral societies: pass on culture in "long chain of interlocking conversations..." (including rituals, etc.); culture stored in memory.

Cf the complex metrical formulas of oral poetry...



Milman Parry



# Modes of Cultural Transmission in Oral Societies (Goody)

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Oral societies: pass on culture in "long chain of interlocking conversations..." (including rituals, etc.); culture stored in memory. Complex formulas of oral poetry...

No fixity, "dictionary meanings."

"past" is simply a way of interpreting/explaining the present (e.g. of geneologies --e.g., Jacob's 12 sons; shifting geneologies )



# Emergence of Literate Societies (Goody)



In early literate societies, literacy restricted to small priesthood or guild.

(association of literacy w/ magic)

Functions of literacy restricted to record-keeping, administration, rituals, laws, monumental inscriptions, etc.

"pictographic and logographic systems [tend to] reify the objects of the natural and social order."  
Impose conservative bias.





## Consequences of Literacy in Greece (Goody)

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Writing as the "technology of the intellect"  
Transition from "mythical" to "logico-empirical"  
thought  
Emergence of logic & philosophy, history, etc.  
Past is no longer mutable -- multiple versions  
exist. Possible to question inconsistencies, etc.  
Writing detaches words from context, makes  
critical consideration of meanings possible.  
Emergence of "systems of rules for thinking"  
Systematization/compartmentalization of  
fields of knowledge.



# Emergence of Alphabetic Societies (Goody & Watt)



Transition to literacy involves a progress toward alphabetic scripts.

Alphabetic scripts are easier to learn, facilitate development of widespread literacy. (5th-6th c. BC in Greece -- first "literate societies")

Aided by introduction of papyrus from Egypt. Expansion of functions of literacy to other genres -- poetry, history, letters, etc.



# Alphabetolatry, 1

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What made Greece different?

"The notion of representing a sound by a graphic symbol is itself so stupefying a leap of the imagination that what is remarkable is not that it happened relatively late in human history, but rather that it ever happened at all."  
Goody and Watt



## Alphabetolatry, 2

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"The invention of the Greek alphabet, as opposed to all previous systems, including the Phoenician, constituted an event in the history of human culture, the importance of which has not as yet been fully grasped. Its appearance divides all pre-Greek civilizations from those that are post-Greek. ... In the Greek system it became possible for the first time to document all forms of a linguistic statement with fluency and to achieve fluent recognition, that is, fluent reading, of what had been written, on the part of the majority of any population. On this facility were built the foundations of those twin forms of knowledge: literature in the post-Greek sense, and science, also in the post-Greek sense." Eric Havelock, "The Preliteracy of the Greeks"



# The Persistence of Alphabetolatry

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“To become significantly learned in the Chinese writing system normally takes some twenty years. Such a script is basically time-consuming and élitist. There can be no doubt that the characters will be replaced by the Roman alphabet as soon as all the people in the People’s Republic of China master the same Chinese language (‘dialect’), the Mandarin now being taught everywhere. The loss to literature will be enormous, but not so enormous as a Chinese typewriter using over 40,000 characters.”

Walter Ong, “Writing Restructures  
Consciousness,” 1982



## The abstractness of alphabetic systems

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Cf distinct sounds signaled by {t} in:

*time*

*cut*

*try*

*butter*

*button*

etc.



# Contrasting alphabetic and logographic systems

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Ease of learning... Typographic simplicity.

Ease of processing

Symbolic importance for linguistic community -- cf irregularity of English spelling



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## The Ideology of Literacy

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Universal literacy seen as tool for cognitive and social development.

"The illiterate man's thought... remains concrete. He thinks in images and not in concepts... His thought rarely proceeds by induction or deduction. The result is that knowledge acquired in a given situation is hardly ever translated to a different situation to which it might be applied." — 1972 Unesco report

"Writing maketh an exact man" -- Francis Bacon

Napoleon -- literate people can march in step.



# Cognitive Consequences of Literacy

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Research shows cognitive differences between literate and illiterate people in developed societies. Tests of abstract thinking (ability to recategorize objects).

But are differences due to literacy, schooling, or independent social differences?



## Questions about Literacy & Societal Development

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At social level: Does writing facilitate or determine cultural & cognitive changes?

E.g., Geoffrey Lloyd on development of Greek science: role of debate in political life, testing of ideas.

(Cf role of patronage in Han China)

# Cognitive Consequences of Literacy

Cf Work by Cole & Scribner among the Vai (western Liberia)

Syllabic writing system, independently invented in 19th c. Used for letters, commercial records. Taught at home

Many Vai are also literate in Arabic (Koranic schools), English (state schools)

Vai-literate adults do no better than illiterates on most cognitive tests (resorting) unless tests were directly related to writing (rebus puzzles)

But different for English-literate Vai.

E.g. be careful in ascribing cognitive benefits to "literacy" itself. (Cf Heath's work in Southern town )

THE COMPLETE VAI SYLLABARY

	i	a	u	e	ɛ	ɔ	o
p	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿
b	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿
ɓ	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿
mɓ	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿
kp	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿
mgb	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿
gb	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿
f	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿
v	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿
t	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿
d	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿
l	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿
q	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿
nd	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿
s	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿
z	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿
o	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿
j	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿
nj	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿
y	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿
k	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿
jg	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿
g	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿
h	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿
w	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿
ɸ	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿
m	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿
n	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿
ny	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿
ŋ	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿



# The Complexity of Literacy Practice



After Head Start "failures": Research on "early literacy" (Shirley Brice Heath, Yetta Goodman. Etc/)

Learning the functions of literacy

Bedtime stories and other rituals of literacy: building expectations, postponing questions, "reading" in pre-literate children: "talking like a book"

Discourse structure -- topic shifts. Oral precursors in religious services

How literate parents talk to infants...

Moral: "Literacy" is a broad range of social practices



# The Complexity of Literacy Practice

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Knowing when to write & read...



## Co-existence of writing with other forms of transmission

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Cf Somali oral forms (gabay--  
alliterative 21 syllable form)

(U) UU UU U UU UU U UU | UU U UU UU U

Roman alphabet introduced in 1972, but has not replaced gabay as means of political discourse.



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[http://youtube.com/watch?v=rFFgHwwnD\\_k&mode=related&search=](http://youtube.com/watch?v=rFFgHwwnD_k&mode=related&search=)