What Follows from Writing?

Geoff Nunberg

School of Information, UC Berkeley

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Itinerary, 2/3

Writing & Technological Determinism

Writing and the Stages of Culture

Consquences of the Invention of the Alphabet

Alphabets vs logographic systems

Cognitive implications of literacy

Leapfrogging literacy

Writing & Technological Determinism

The Swackhamerist Doctrine

Telegraph requires brevity & directness. Forces users to discard the verbosity and complexity of the prevalent English style. "The "telegraphic style terse, condensed, expressive, sparing of expletives, and utterly ignorant of synonyms will propel the English language toward a new standard of perfection."

"Influence of the Telegraph upon Literature," by Conrad Swackhamer, *United States Democratic Review*, 1848

The Swackhamerist Doctrine

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….

Digital writing is nearly frictionless. It invites the formulation of thought directly in the electric element…There is not only a new technology available in word processing but a gradually emerging sense of a new kind of community. And in such a community, psychic life will be redifined. Michael Heim, *Electric Lanuage: A philosophical study of word-processing,* 1987

The Swackhamerist Doctrine

"Digital natives, those who were born after 1980, process information very differently than those who were not. And so, I think that we are seeing a very long-term trend here in terms of how young people relate to one another, to institutions and to information that is fundamentally different than what came before."

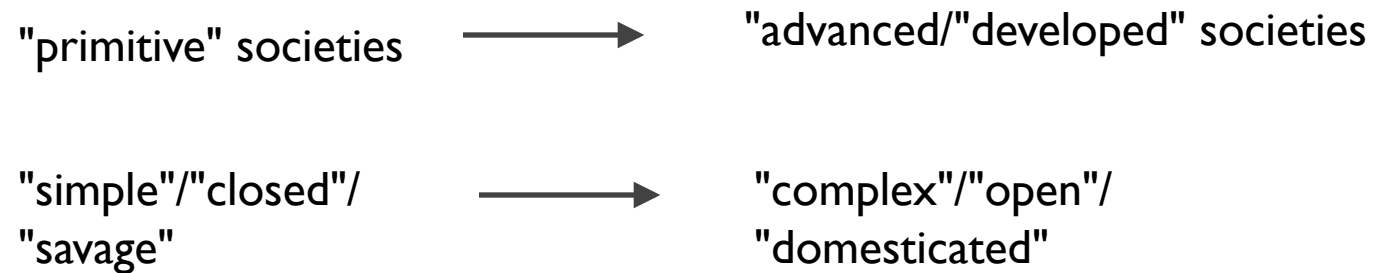John Palfrey, author *of Born Digital*, "On the Media," Jan. 30, 2009
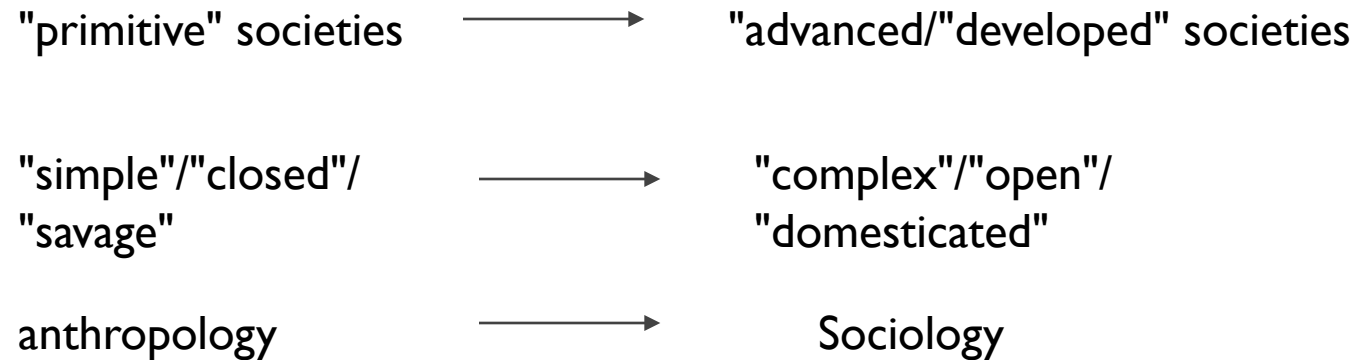
Writing and the Stages of Culture

Writing and the Stages of Culture

"primitive" societies   →   "advanced/"developed" societies

"simple"/"closed"/
"savage"   →   "complex"/"open"/
"domesticated"

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

Writing and the Stages of Culture

"primitive" societies → "advanced/"developed" societies

"simple"/"closed"/ → "complex"/"open"/
"savage" "domesticated"

anthropology → Sociology

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. Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*)

Writing and the Stages of Culture

"primitive" societies ⟶ "advanced/"developed" societies

"simple"/"closed"/ "savage" ⟶ "complex"/"open"/ "domesticated"

Anthropology ⟶ Sociology

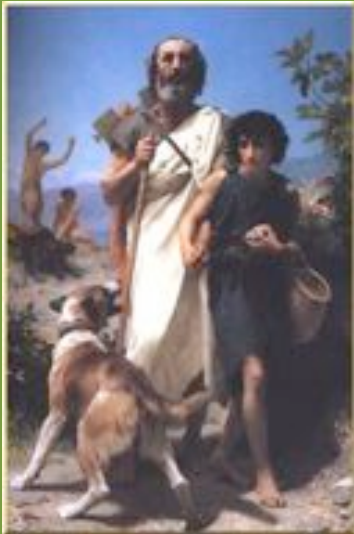Prehistory ⟶ History

Orality ⟶ Literacy

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

Modes of Cultural Transmission in Oral Societies

Milman Parry

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

> In [oral] culture, storage and transmission between the generations can be carried on only in individual memories. Linguistic information can be incorporated in a transmissible memory, as against some one person's memory, only as it obeys two laws of composition: it must be rhythmic and it must be mythical. Eric Havelock, *The Coming of Literate Communication to Western Culture*

Cf the complex metrical formulas of oral poetry…

> Jack Goody: In oral cultures, no fixity, "dictionary meanings." The "past" is simply a way of interpreting/explaining the present (e.g. of geneologies)

Consequences of literacy: "What's in a List"

Writing makes possible lists/arrays of inventories, geneologies, words, plants and animals, administrative categories, registers, etc. Make complex administration possible.

List = "locational sorting device."

Creates awareness of distinct possibilities of order. Cf varieties of lexical lists, catalogues, etc.

But cf also existence of complex lists in oral societies (Panini's grammar of Sanskrit -- 6th c. BC)

Consequences of Literacy in Greece (Goody)

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"

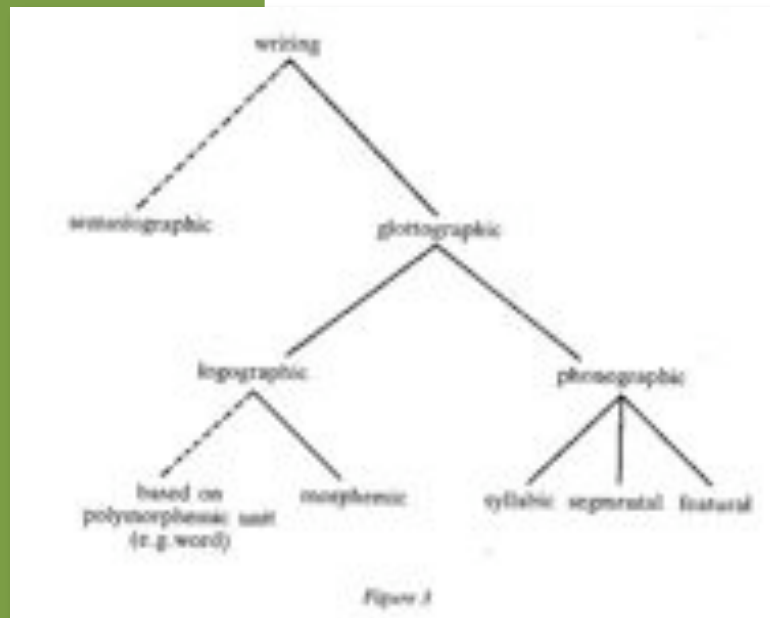Systematization/compartmentalization of fields of knowledge.

Consequences of the Alphabet

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 Hangul (featural)

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

Figure 1

Emergence of the Alphabet in Greece

First "true" alphabetic script emerges in ca. 750 BC in Greece: revises Phonecian script by providing symbols for both individual consonants and vowels.

"Cup of Nestor" ca. 750 BC, with earliest known Greek inscription; found near Ischia in Italy

Mycenean Greece and The Orient about 1450 B.C.

Emergence of Literate Societies

Egyptian scribe, ca. 1500 BCE

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.

Emergence of Alphabetic Societies

Alphabetic scripts are easier to learn, facilitate development of widespread literacy.

"This invention… could be learned by a majority of the population, thus creating the possibility of a popular literacy." Havelock

Aided by introduction of papyrus from Egypt.

Expansion of functions of literacy to other genres -- poetry, history, letters, etc.

By 5th century BC, Greece is an "alphabetic society" (Havelock)

Alphabetolatry, 1

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." Jack Goody and Ian Watt, "The Consequnces of Literacy"

The premise that the technology of communication controls the content of what is communicated has been popularized in connection with modern radio, cinema, and television. I am applying it in a more radical fashion to a shift in the character of the human consciousness which occurred in ancient Greece, and which we inherit. Briefly I am arguing that the history of the human mind, as of the human language, falls into roughly two epochs, the pre-alphabetic and the post-alphabetic. Eric Havelock
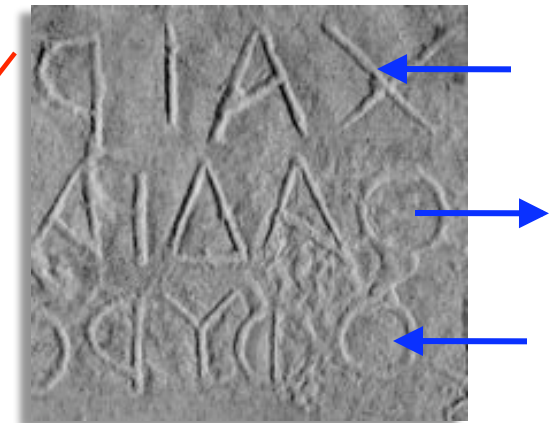
Alphabetolatry, 2

"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. … 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"

Boustrophedon

The Persistence of Alphabetolatry

Chinese Typewriter 1947

"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 Persistence of Alphabetolatry

Chinese Typewriter has 72 keys and 576 characters. You press two keys at the same time, one for the top part of a character and one for the bottom. This puts eight words into printing position. You select and print the word you want by pressing one of the eight white keys.
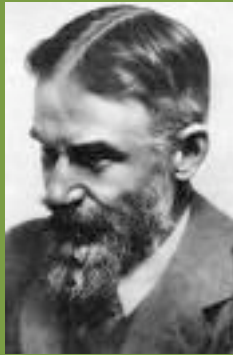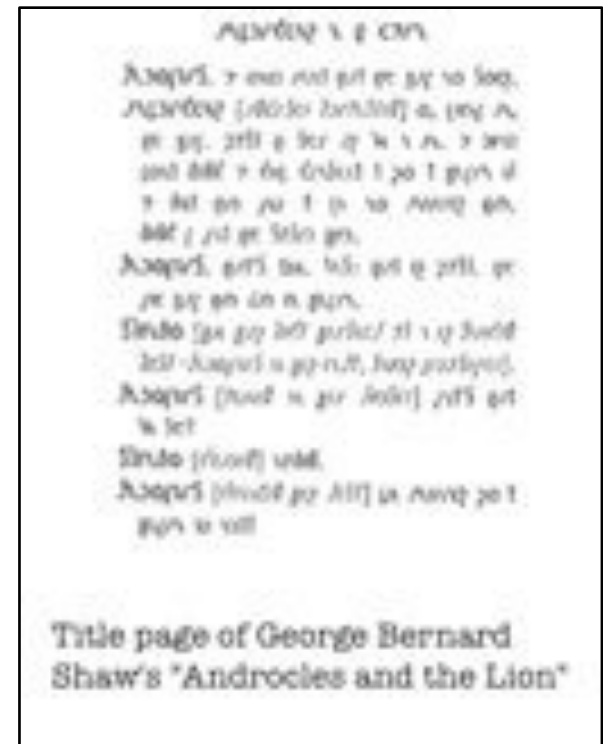
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Contrasting alphabetic and logographic systems

Virtues of "pure" or "phonetic" alphabetic writing:

Ease of learning. Typographic simplicity. Ease of processing.

Title page of George Bernard Shaw's "Androcles and the Lion"

Virtues of logographic systems

Doesn't privilege one dialect. Symbolic importance for linguistic community **--** cf irregularity of English spelling.

"Purely" phonetic systems can lead to ambiguities; Cf French *os, ô, eau, eaux, haut, hauts, au, aux,* etc.

How "phonemic" is English?

famous: uh	sh*ou*ld: U
j*ou*rney: er	y*ou*: oo
l*ou*d: ow	

through –oo	*bough* -- ow
though – oh	*cough* -- awf
thought – aw	*tough* – uhf
and…	

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Alphabet: Ease of learning... Typographic simplicity.

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*fam**ou**s*: uh	sh**ou**ld: U
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*thr**ough** –oo*	*b**ough** -- ow*
*th**ough** – oh*	*c**ough** -- awf*
*th**ough**t – aw*	*tou**gh** – uhf*
and… hicc**ough** -- up	

Social and Cognitive Effects of Literacy

The Ideology of Literacy

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.

Questions about Literacy & Societal Development

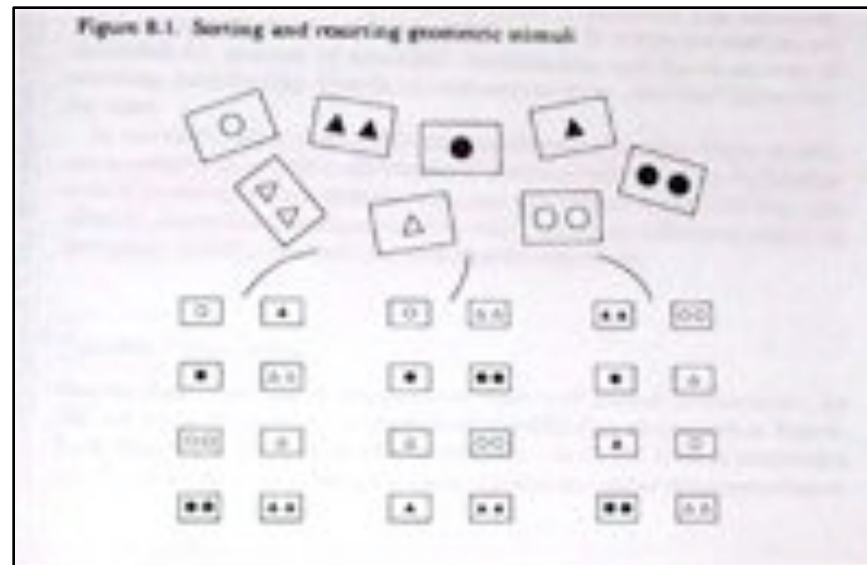At social level: Does writing facilitate or determine cultural & cognitive changes?

E.g., Geoffreys Lloyd on development of Greek and Chinese science: role of debate in political life, testing of ideas, patronage

"The Chinese norms, were identification with a group and aspiration toward an imagined orthodoxy.... They were the mirror image of the Hellenic emphasis on a thinker's own ideas even when he belonged nominally to a group" Chinese scholars "discouraged open disputes with contemporary rivals over concepts....Compared with their Chinese counterparts, Greek intellectuals were far more often isolated from the seats of political power"

Cognitive Consequences of Literacy

Research shows cognitive differences between literate and illiterate people in devleoped societies. Literate speakers seem to do better on logic problems, tests of abstract thinking (ability to recategorize objects).

Figure 8.1. Sorting and resorting geometric stimuli

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

Cognitive Consequences of Literacy

THE COMPLETE VAI SYLLABARY

THE COMPLETE

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

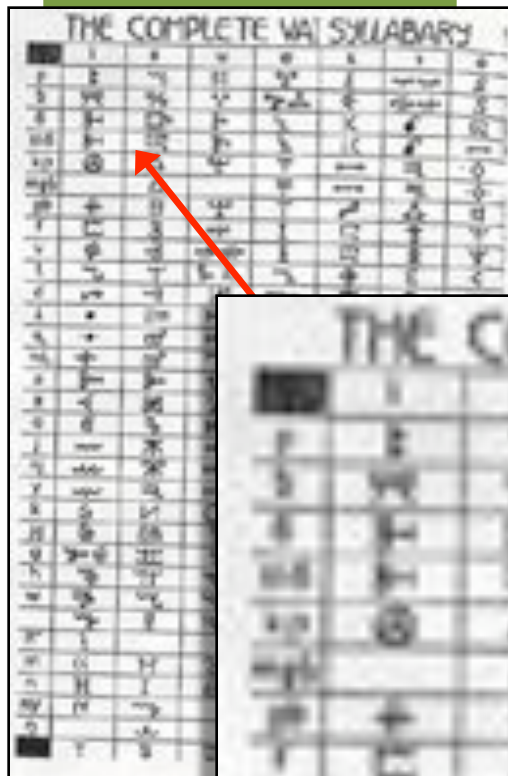Syllabic writing system, independently invented in 19th c. by Dualu Bukele
Used for letters, commercial records. Taught at home

Many Vai are also literate in Arabic (Koranic schools) and 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.

The Complexity of Literacy Practice

After Operation 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" involves a broad range of social practices…

Leapfrogging literacy

Co-existence of writing with other forms of transmission

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

(ᴗ) ᴗᴗ ᴗᴗ ᴗ ᴗᴗ ᴗᴗ ᴗ ᴗᴗ | ᴗᴗ ᴗ ᴗᴗ ᴗᴗ ᴗ

Romanized alphabet introduced in 1972; developed by Shire Jama Ahmed in collaboration with Italian linguists.

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Romanized alphabet introduced in 1972; developed by Shire Jama Ahmed in collaboration with Italian linguists.

But written Somali has not replaced the gabay as means of political discourse.

Leapfrogging Literacy

New forms of transmission can obviate the transition to writing