

What Follows from Writing?



Geoff Nunberg
School of Information, UC Berkeley

IS 218
History of Information
Feb. 1, 2011



Itinerary, 2/1

Writing & Technological Determinism

Writing and the Stages of Culture

Consequences of Writing

Alphabets vs logographic systems

Cognitive implications of literacy

Leapfrogging literacy?



Writing & Technological Determinism

Teachers say text messages r ruining kids' riting skills

Text and instant messaging are negatively affecting students' writing quality on a daily basis, as they bring their abbreviated language into the classroom. As a result of their electronic chatting, kids are making countless syntax, subjectverb agreement and spelling mistakes in writing assignments. *American Teacher*

Will text messaging produce generations of illiterates? Could this —OMG—be the death of the English language? *Newsweek*



Writing & Technological Determinism

The accelerated automation of word-processing makes possible a new immediacy in the creation of public, typified text.

Digital writing... 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 redefined. Michael Heim, *Electric Language: A philosophical study of word-processing*, 1987



Writing & Technological Determinism

The Swackhamer 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

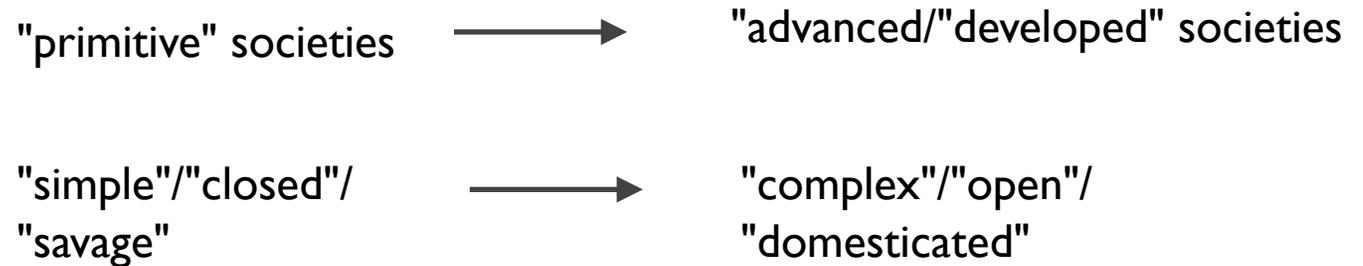


Writing and the Stages of Culture





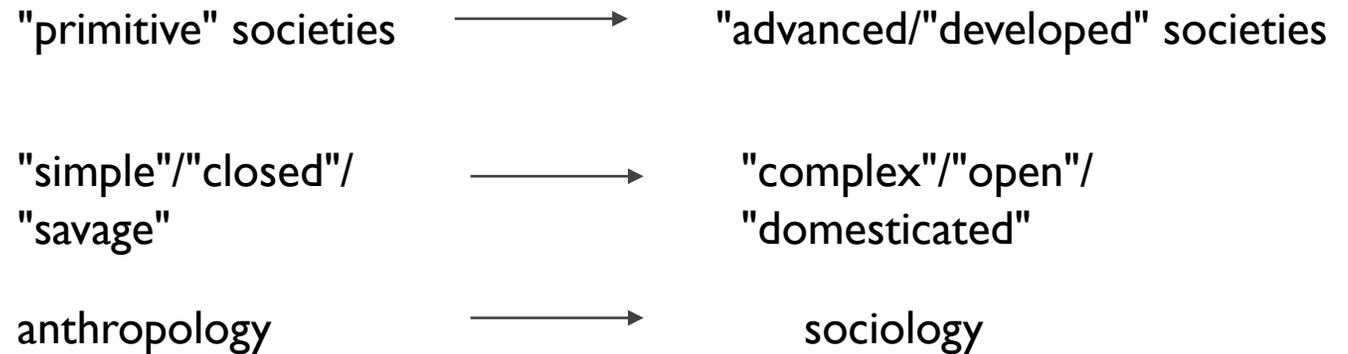
Writing and the Stages of Culture



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



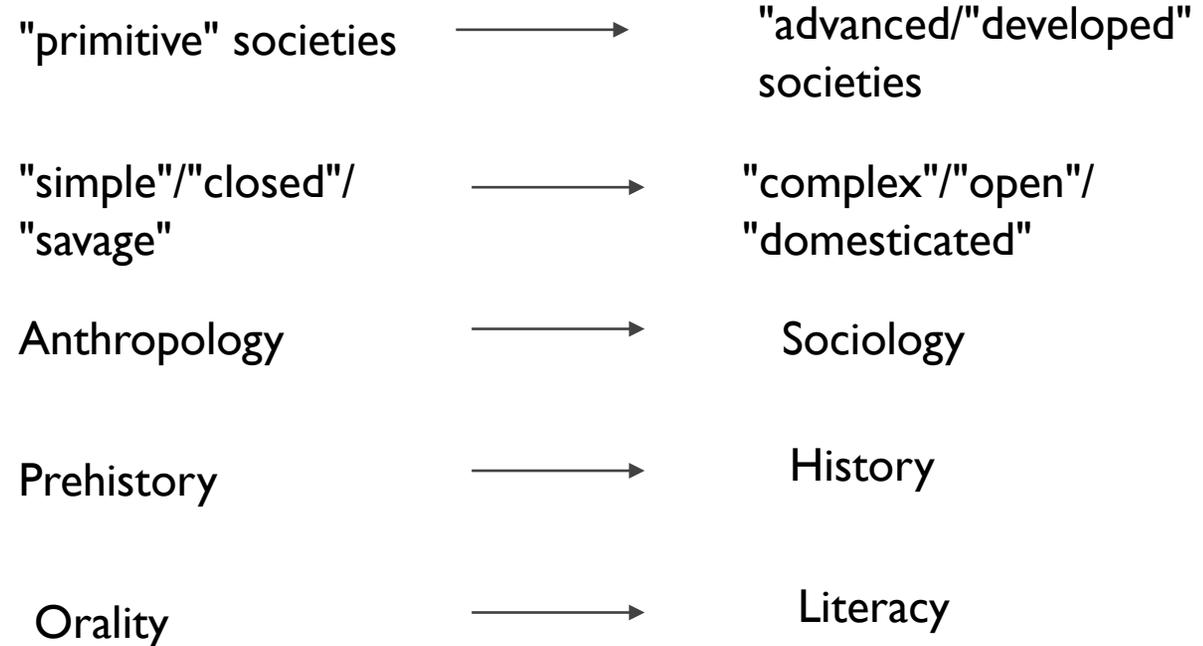
Writing and the Stages of Culture



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



Writing and the Stages of Culture



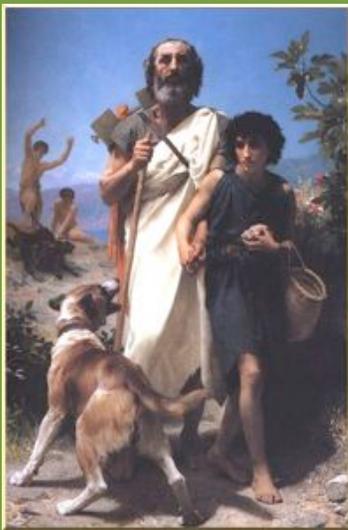
(after Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*)



Modes of Cultural Transmission in Oral Societies



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,... 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. CF Tiv (Nigeria), Gonja (Ghana).



Emergence of Literate Societies

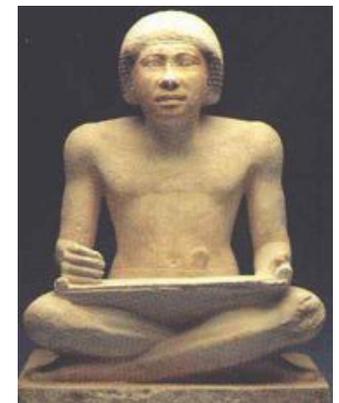


Egyptian scribe, ca.
1500 BCE

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.





Changes accompanying literacy in Greece

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.

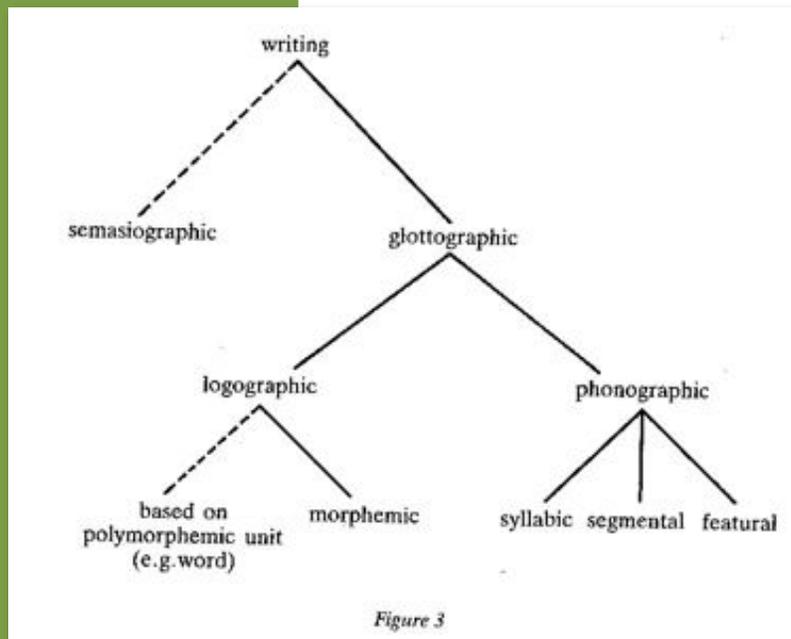


Consequences of the Alphabet



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,



Emergence of the Alphabet in Greece

First "true" alphabetic script emerges in ca. 750 BC in Greece: revises Phoenician 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





"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)



Assignment for 2/1

Havelock writes:

The invention of the Greek alphabet... 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.

Consider just one aspect or element of this broad claim. On the basis of the specific evidence presented by Havelock and Gough, would you say it is largely true, largely false, or true in some respects?

Ultimate triumph of the alphabet?



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.

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



Is Romanization Inevitable?

Barriers to shift to Pinyin:

Attachment to tradition and to characters

Loss of symbols of Chinese identity

Foregrounding of dialect differences/reshaping of national identity?

Apprehension about radical change

Favoring shift:

Ease of learning

Technological advantages (data input, texting, etc.)

Emerging digraphia/multilingualism

Spread of Mandarin



Contrasting alphabetic and logographic systems

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 *should*: U

journey: er *you*: oo

loud: ow

through –oo *bough* -- ow

though – oh *cough* -- awf

thought – aw *tough* – uhf

and...



Contrasting alphabetic and logographic systems

Alphabet: Ease of learning... Typographic simplicity.

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 *should*: U

journey: er *you*: oo

loud: ow

through –oo *bough* -- ow

though – oh *cough* -- awf

thought – aw *tough* – uhf

and... *hiccough* -- 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



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 soldiers can march in step.





Questions about Literacy & Societal Development



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

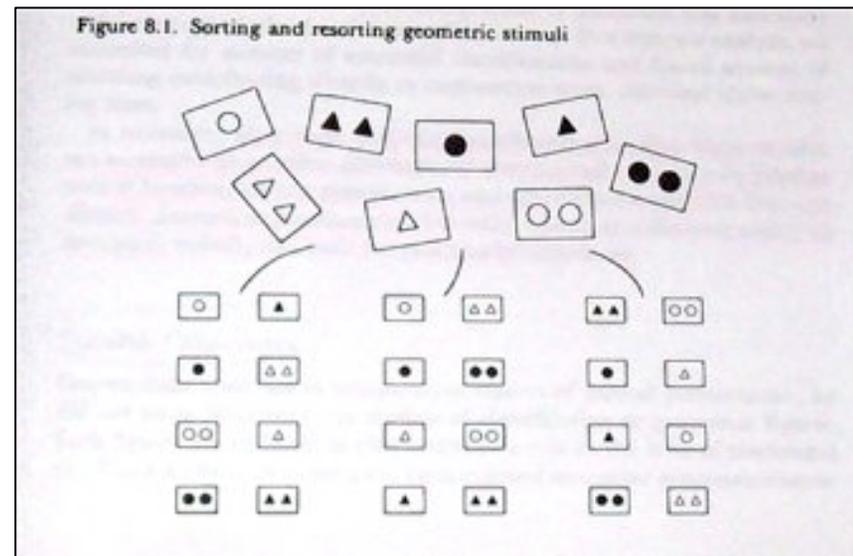
E.g., Geoffrey Lloyd on development of Greek and Chinese science: role of debate in political life, testing of ideas, patronage

"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 developed societies. Literate speakers seem to do better on logic problems, tests of abstract thinking (ability to recategorize objects).



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

Cognitive Consequences of Literacy



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 COMPLETE VAI SYLLABARY

| | | | |
|-----|---|---|---|
| p | — | — | — |
| b | — | — | — |
| mb | — | — | — |
| kp | — | — | — |
| mgb | — | — | — |
| gb | — | — | — |
| f | — | — | — |
| v | — | — | — |
| t | — | — | — |
| d | — | — | — |
| l | — | — | — |
| a | — | — | — |
| na | — | — | — |
| o | — | — | — |
| no | — | — | — |
| i | — | — | — |
| ni | — | — | — |
| y | — | — | — |
| ny | — | — | — |
| k | — | — | — |
| ky | — | — | — |
| g | — | — | — |
| gy | — | — | — |
| w | — | — | — |
| ny | — | — | — |
| m | — | — | — |
| n | — | — | — |
| ny | — | — | — |
| t | — | — | — |

THE COMPLETE

| | | | |
|-----|---|---|---|
| p | — | — | — |
| b | — | — | — |
| mb | — | — | — |
| kp | — | — | — |
| mgb | — | — | — |
| gb | — | — | — |
| f | — | — | — |
| v | — | — | — |
| t | — | — | — |



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)

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

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





Co-existence of writing with other forms of transmission



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

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

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





Readings for 2/3

Trithemius, Johannes. 1974 [1492]. In Praise of Scribes. R. Behrendt, ed. Lawrence, KA: Coronado Press. chapters I-III, V-VII, XIV.

Plato. 1973 [c. 360 bce]. Phaedrus & the Seventh & Eighth Letters. W. Hamilton, trans. Harmondsworth: Penguin. pp 21-26, “Prelude” pp. 95-103, “The inferiority of the written to the spoken word”, & “Recapitulation and conclusion”