

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01642-2 - Writing and Society: An Introduction

Florian Coulmas

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

### Writing and Society: An Introduction

How does writing relate to speech? What impact does it have on social organization and development? How do unwritten languages differ from those that have a written form and tradition? This book is a general account of the place of writing in society. Drawing on contemporary and historical examples, from clay tablets to touch-screen displays, the book explores the functions of writing and written language, analysing their consequences for language, society, economy and politics. It examines the social causes of illiteracy, demonstrating that institutions of central importance to modern society are built upon writing and written texts, and are characterized by specific forms of communication. It explores the social dimensions of spelling and writing reform, as well as of digital literacy, a new mode of expression and communication posing novel challenges to the student of language in society.

FLORIAN COULMAS is Director of the German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ) in Tokyo.

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-01642-2 - Writing and Society: An Introduction  
Florian Coulmas  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

## KEY TOPICS IN SOCIOLINGUISTICS

*Series editor: Rajend Mesthrie*

This new series focusses on the main topics of study in sociolinguistics today. It consists of accessible yet challenging accounts of the most important issues to consider when examining the relationship between language and society. Some topics have been the subject of sociolinguistic study for many years, and are here re-examined in the light of new developments in the field; others are issues of growing importance that have not so far been given a sustained treatment. Written by leading experts, the books in the series are designed to be used on courses and in seminars, and include useful suggestions for further reading and a helpful glossary.

Already published in the series:

*Politeness* by Richard J. Watts

*Language Policy* by Bernard Spolsky

*Discourse* by Jan Blommaert

*Analyzing Sociolinguistic Variation* by Sali A. Tagliamonte

*Language and Ethnicity* by Carmen Fought

*Style* by Nikolas Coupland

*World Englishes* by Rajend Mesthrie and Rakesh Bhatt

*Language and Identity* by John Edwards

*Attitudes to Language* by Peter Garrett

*Language Attrition* by Monika S. Schmid

Forthcoming titles:

*Sociolinguistic Fieldwork* by Natalie Schilling

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-01642-2 - Writing and Society: An Introduction  
Florian Coulmas  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

# Writing and Society

## An Introduction

FLORIAN COULMAS



Cambridge University Press  
 978-1-107-01642-2 - Writing and Society: An Introduction  
 Florian Coulmas  
 Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,  
 Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press  
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781107602434](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107602434)

© Florian Coulmas 2013

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception  
 and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,  
 no reproduction of any part may take place without the written  
 permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2013

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by the MPG Books Group

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Coulmas, Florian, author.

Writing and Society : An Introduction / Florian Coulmas.

pages cm. – (Key topics in sociolinguistics)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-01642-2 (hardback)

1. Writing Social aspects. 2. Written communication Social aspects.

3. Literacy Social aspects. I. Title.

P211.7.C69 2012

302.2'244 – dc23 2012022015

ISBN 978-1-107-01642-2 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-60243-4 Paperback

---

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or  
 accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to  
 in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such  
 websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

---

Contents

*List of illustrations*   page vi  
*List of tables*   vii  
*Preface*   ix  
*Acknowledgements*   xi

1 The tyranny of writing and the dominance of vernacular speech   1  
2 The past in the present and the seeds of the public sphere   19  
3 Written and unwritten language   39  
4 Literacy and inequality   60  
5 The society of letters   81  
6 Writing reform   104  
7 Writing and literacy in the digitalized world   126

*Notes*   152  
*Bibliography*   155  
*Index*   171

Illustrations

2.1	Bottom-up item of linguistic landscape: ostrakon bearing the name of Perikles Xanthippos. <a href="http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Perikles_Ostracization.jpg">http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Perikles_Ostracization.jpg</a>	page 20
2.2	Top-down item of linguistic landscape: Codex Hammurabi (c. 1780 BCE)	24
2.3	Egyptian obelisk dating from 595–589 BCE, brought to Rome in 10 BCE by Emperor Augustus; today in front of the Italian parliament building on Piazza di Montecitorio (photograph: author)	33
2.4	In the public sphere: reading the newspaper. Honoré Daumier, <i>Le Charivari</i> , 1847 (used with permission, European Newspaper Museum, Krefeld, Germany)	36
4.1	Political party symbols allowing illiterate Indians to cast their vote	67
5.1	The letter of the law vs the spirit of the law (© CartoonStock, used with permission)	84
6.1	A simple model of decision making for writing reform	107 and 123
6.2	A realistic model of decision making for writing reform	124
7.1	The writing on the wall	129
7.2	Sample of American Sign Language Writing (used with permission <a href="http://www.si5s.com/">www:si5s.com/</a> )	136
7.3	Then: Speaker’s Corner in London, 1933, addressing those within earshot (licensed by Getty Images)	142
7.4	Now: WikiLeaks, 2010, addressing the world (this file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported licence)	143
7.5	Then: Denis Diderot’s <i>Encyclopédie</i> , 1750	148
7.6	Now: An encyclopedia that anyone can edit	149

Tables

3.1	A matrix for languages as resources	<i>page</i> 40
3.2	Sumerian as a resource	40
3.3	French as a resource	40
3.4	Occitan as a resource	41
3.5	Spoken and written language	57
4.1	Functional illiteracy and low income in selected OECD countries	64
4.2	Consumption of two newspapers by socioeconomic status	65
4.3	Minority-languages literacy	78
6.1	Cyrillic letters and their Roman equivalents	115
6.2	German spelling, old and new, some examples	118
7.1	Texting jargon	131

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01642-2 - Writing and Society: An Introduction

Florian Coulmas

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---



## Preface

Writing systems and written language are objects of great complexity and wonder testifying to human ingenuity and the determination to create our own universe. If language is the most distinctive inborn trait of our species, writing is our most consequential invention. It is so ubiquitous in everyday life that one has to wonder what purposes it serves. How does writing relate to speech? What impact does it have on social organization and development? How do unwritten languages differ from those that have a written form and tradition? In twentieth-century linguistics it has been axiomatic that writing is unimportant, but this is hardly so, certainly not if we direct our attention to the social aspects of language behaviour, a society's repertoire of codes, and the division of labour between different modes of linguistic communication. From a sociological point of view the very concept of a language, in the sense of one language being distinct from another, is indissolubly bound up with writing. If we want to understand the social functions of language, both speech and writing must be taken into consideration, as well as the multifaceted interplay of the two.

In this little book I have recorded my observations and thoughts about the role written language and writing play in society. For historical reasons explained in the first chapter sociolinguistics has not been very interested in or accommodating to writing. However, nowadays, not just Trappist monks but many other younger tribes write more than they speak and writing has evolved from a specialized skill into a mass mode of communication. The communicatively relevant parts of social environments can no longer be adequately described and analysed unless writing is recognized as a crucial component of linguistic ecology. The reasons for this are less theoretical than empirical. Humanity has moved steadily towards relying on written communication in ever more domains of life. This involves changes in communicative behaviour, in language socialization, in the ways we learn and acquire knowledge, and in the formation and maintaining of social networks. The media revolution is not just a catchword; it is

a reality to which we are forced to adapt and in which writing is of central importance. Many of the on-going changes we are only beginning to understand. This book, therefore, rather than summing-up the results of a consolidated field of research should be seen as offering a perspective on the emergent subject area of writing in society.

## Acknowledgements

Chapter 2, ‘The past in the present and the seeds of the public sphere’, overlaps with a chapter I contributed to *Linguistic Landscape: Expanding the Scenery*, edited by Elana Shohamy and Durk Gorter (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 13–24. In Chapters 4 and 6, ‘Literacy and inequality’ and ‘Writing reform,’ respectively, I have used several sections of a paper I wrote jointly with Federica Guerini, entitled ‘Literacy and writing reform’ which appeared in *The Cambridge Handbook of Language Policy*, edited by Bernard Spolsky (Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 437–60. And Chapter 5, ‘The society of letters,’ draws on material contained in my article ‘Social practices of speech and writing,’ published in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the Language Sciences*, edited by Patrick C. Hogan (Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 35–45. I am grateful to acknowledge the publishers’ permission to use these materials.

I want to thank Tessa Carroll who read the entire manuscript, which benefited very much from her comments and useful suggestions. Special thanks are due to Claus Harmer who helped me with some of the illustrations.