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978-0-521-33794-6 - The Interface between the Written and the Oral

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Studies in Literacy, Family, Culture and the State

The interface between the written and the oral

Whilst the fundamental significance of the spoken language for human interaction is widely acknowledged, that of writing is less well known, and in this wide-ranging series of essays Jack Goody examines in depth the complex and often confused relationship between oral and literate modes of communication. He considers the interface between the written and the oral in three major contexts; that internal to given societies, that between cultures or societies with and without writing, and that within the linguistic life of an individual. Specific analyses of the sequence of historical change within writing systems, the historic impact of writing upon Eurasian cultures, and the interaction between distinct oral and literate cultures in West Africa, precede an extensive concluding examination of contemporary issues in the investigation, whether sociological or psychological, of literacy. A substantial corpus of anthropological, historical and linguistic evidence is produced in support of Goody's findings, which form a natural complement to his own recently-published study of *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*.

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Studies in Literacy, Family, Culture and the State

Literacy

Literacy in Traditional Societies (edited, 1968)

The Domestication of the Savage Mind (1977)

The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society (1986)

The Interface between the Written and the Oral (1987)

Family

Production and Reproduction: A Comparative Study of the Domestic Domain (1977)

The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe (1983)

Culture

Cooking, Cuisine and Class: A Study in Comparative Sociology (1982)

The State

Technology, Tradition and the State in Africa (1971)

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Frontmatter

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Frontmatter

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Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
 The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
 10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1987

First published 1987

Reprinted 1988, 1989, 1991, 1993

British Library cataloguing in publication data

Goody, Jack

The interface between the written and the oral. –
 (Studies in literacy, family, culture and the state)

1. Written communication. 2. Oral communication.

I. Title. II. Series

001.54 P221

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Goody, Jack.

The interface between the written and the oral.
 (Studies in Literacy, Family, Culture, and the State)

Bibliography.

Includes index.

1. Written communication. 2. Writing. 3. Oral communication.

4. Sociolinguistics.

I. Title. II. Series.

P211.G66 1987 001.54 86-24428

ISBN 0 521 33268 0 hard covers

ISBN 0 521 33794 1 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 1999

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-33794-6 - The Interface between the Written and the Oral

Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

<i>List of figures and tables</i>	<i>page</i> viii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xxi
PART I WRITING AND THE ALPHABET	1
1 The historical development of writing	3
Writing and design	3
Proto-writing	8
Early writing systems	18
Logographic writing	29
The development of phonetic transcription	37
The alphabet	40
The unity and diversity of alphabets	49
The implications of graphic systems	53
PART II THE INFLUENCE OF EARLY FORMS OF WRITING	57
2 Literacy and achievement in the Ancient World	59
3 Africa, Greece and oral poetry	78
Memory and verbatim memory	86
Oral composition and oral transmission	91
Heroic societies and the epic	96
4 Oral composition and oral transmission: the case of the Vedas	110

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-33794-6 - The Interface between the Written and the Oral

Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

vi

Contents

PART III WRITTEN AND ORAL CULTURES IN WEST AFRICA	123
5 The impact of Islamic writing on oral cultures	125
Oral recitations	127
Writing and magico-religious activity	129
Time and space	132
6 Literacy and the non-literate: the impact of European schooling	139
Postscript	147
7 Alternative paths to knowledge in oral and literate cultures	148
Traditional knowledge among the LoDagaa	149
The growth of knowledge	155
Three modes of acquiring knowledge	156
Literacy	157
Two paths to knowledge as social control	161
Conclusions	164
8 Memory and learning in oral and literate cultures: the reproduction of the Bagre	167
Memory and the Bagre	167
Verbatim memory in oral cultures	174
Schools and memory	182
Conclusion	189
9 Writing and formal operations: a case study among the Vai (with Michale Cole and Sylvia Scribner)	191
The writings of Ansumana Sonie	196
PART IV WRITING AND ITS IMPACT ON INDIVIDUALS IN SOCIETY	209
10 The interface between the sociological and psychological analysis of literacy	211
Achievement in the Vai script	211
Vygotsky and the psychological analysis of Vai literacy	214

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-33794-6 - The Interface between the Written and the Oral

Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents	vii
Varieties of script and varieties of tradition	217
Logic and logical reasoning	219
Mediated and unmediated implications	221
Literacy effects in the Vai study	223
The shift from abilities to skills	226
Memory and writing	234
Schools	236
The experimental method	244
Culture and cognition	245
Abilities, capacities and skills	246
Cultural resources and individual attainment	251
Psychological texts and practical action	252
The internal–external problem	253
11 Language and writing	258
Linguists and the written language	261
Three dimensions of the written and the spoken	262
The written and spoken registers compared	263
Grammar and rules	265
Individual performance in the two registers	266
Divergences between the written and oral registers	270
Cross-word puzzles	272
Other grapho-linguistic techniques of cognitive operation	274
Lists and categories	275
The empty-box	275
Reordering information	276
Arithmetical operations	277
The syllogism	278
Writing and diglossia	279
Class and register	283
12 Recapitulations	290
<i>Notes</i>	301
<i>Bibliography</i>	306
<i>Index</i>	321

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-33794-6 - The Interface between the Written and the Oral

Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Figures

1 The myth of Ethiopia	<i>page</i> 9
2 The Narmer palette	11
3 Buffalo robe by Lone Dog	13
4 Ojibwa scrolls	15
5 The early tablets from Uruk	24
6 Tokens from Susa	25
7 Cuneiform signs	29
8 Canaanite cuneiform	45
9 Runic writing	53
10 Thanks for sympathy	145
11 A culture–cognition model	247
12 A modified culture–cognition model	248

Tables

Table 1 Variations in graphic representation	7
Table 2 The genealogy of the alphabet	48
Table 3 Schematic representation of effects associated with each ‘literacy’	223

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-33794-6 - The Interface between the Written and the Oral

Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

This book deals with three aspects of the interface between the oral and the written which are often confused. There is the meeting of cultures with and without writing, historically and geographically. There is the interface of written and oral traditions in societies that employ writing to varying degrees in various contexts. And there is the interface between the use of writing and speech in the linguistic life of any individual. Chapter 11 takes up these problems specifically for language but the interest runs throughout the book.

The impact of the written channel upon cultural systems was never of course everywhere the same. It depended upon social circumstances and varied with the type of system employed for the visual representation of language. Such systems developed out of other forms of visual representation or graphic device – to put the notion yet more generally. They can be ordered morphologically and to some extent historically in a developmental sequence with a reasonable measure of precision.

There are many ambiguities in the use of the word literacy. In talking about its consequences, Watt and I (1963) referred to the presence of a system of writing, that is, not just to the written word as such but to the teaching of a system of writing; others use the term to indicate a specific level of accomplishment. Clearly there are a number of possible variations in the impact on culture, depending upon:

- 1 the nature of the script and its method of reproduction,
- 2 the numbers able to read and write at a specific level (for example, a signature),
- 3 whether individuals are learning to read and write their natural

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-33794-6 - The Interface between the Written and the Oral

Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x

Preface

tongue, a related language, a different living language, a dead language or an invented language,

- 4 the width of use within the culture (e.g. whether or not that is restricted to religion),
- 5 the content of the written tradition.

Again, the question of literate (or non-literate) societies is different from that of literate (or illiterate) individuals; in the first case the term refers to the presence or absence of a written tradition, in the second to the ability to read or write to a particular level. It is in order to avoid some of these ambiguities that I have tended to talk about societies with and without writing when dealing with the first kind of interface, or with general comparisons.

The opening section of the book deals with the sequence of historical changes to and in writing systems, though it is one that future evidence and subsequent reflection will certainly require us to modify. The second part considers problems of the historical impact of writing upon Eurasian cultures, while the third probes the interaction between oral and written cultures (as distinct from the co-existence of oral and literate channels within the same culture) which is found in West African societies both in the recent past of the historian and the yet more recent present of the fieldworker, evidence for the latter coming largely from my own observations. This is the situation I have earlier tried to describe for West Africa (1968b). But in much of Asia and Indonesia such interaction is a yet more salient feature of cultural systems; for example, the commentary of the Balinese puppeteer is strongly influenced by the themes of Indian sacred writing contained in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, as is so much of the art and architecture. Here we are dealing with the interface between oral and written cultures and my general approach is to use the study of historical processes to interpret the here and now, and the analysis of present observations to understand what happened in the past. Comparative history and comparative sociology are part of a single process of understanding and explanation. Since I am also writing from an anthropological background, the process of understanding and explanation has an 'ethnographic' dimension; that is to say, a dimension relating to intensive studies (my own and those of others) and incorporating the notions of the people whose behaviour is being studied. In

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-33794-6 - The Interface between the Written and the Oral

Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

xi

other words, I do not distinguish a separate domain of cultural studies concerned with meaning, since this must be one element in most social analyses but especially in those dealing with communication.

There are a number of general questions that need to be clarified at the start. First of all there is the question of the transmission of what I call 'standardized oral forms' rather than 'oral literature', in order to avoid the implication of 'letters' that is embedded in the concept 'literary'. In this we must include transmission from the oral register to the written form in which we know the oral product. The transmission of such forms (SOF) may occur:

- 1 in performance (before a local audience),
- 2 in rehearsal, where there is a different kind of interaction between speaker and listener which may involve a limited alternation of roles in the process of teaching and learning,
- 3 in performance out of context, e.g. in making a written record, which entails a shift of the poem or tale from one register to another.

It is the analysis of this last process that is critical in assessing the status of verbal forms such as the Bagre, the long 'myth' of the LoDagaa of northern Ghana, to which I refer throughout the book. 'Oral literature' is usually presented to non-participants in the form of the written word. In assessing the status of these versions, we have to remember that until recently their recording was necessarily undertaken *outside* the normal context of performance. Before the coming of the transistorized tape recorder (and to a limited extent the earlier gramophone), our knowledge of any except the shortest oral communication was confined to those produced under the third type of situation, when an outsider was usually involved as the audience and transcriber. The position was slightly different when an individual belonging to a society that had just acquired writing wrote down oral material in his own language, if that material formed part of his very own corpus of knowledge; in theory certain Near Eastern myths could have been written down in this way. But in virtually all these cases writing down, whether by dictation, or even from one's own memory in the case of long standardized oral forms, entails a 'constructed' performance, since the very deliberate process of spelling out (dic-

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Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

tation) and writing down (transcription) often produces significant differences.

From the problem of transmission, I turn to that of the registers or channels available within any particular culture, and how this second level of interface is affected by changes such as the introduction of particular forms of writing, printing or of other channels, all of which must be seen as additions to oral communication. For while writing may replace oral interaction in certain contexts, it does not diminish the basically oral–aural nature of linguistic acts. Strictly speaking, therefore, it is a mistake to divide ‘cultures’ into the oral and the written: it is rather the oral and the oral plus the written, printed, etc. This being the case, for the individual there is always the problem of the interaction between the registers and the uses, between the so-called oral and the written traditions, that is, at the third level of interface which I consider in the fourth and final section.

The complexities of the second level of interaction between registers in the same culture come out when we consider the process of writing a ‘paper’ or ‘speech’ for a conference. In composing such a talk, which is not a ‘talk’ at all but a ‘lecture’, a reading, I may first sketch out a rough outline, either in my head or on paper; more probably this phase will be implicit rather than explicit. I then construct and rehearse the sentences (or at least the constituent phrases of those sentences) before committing them to paper. I do so ‘sub-orally’, monitoring them through the ‘inner ear’. The words, phrases, sentences are then written down, altered or rearranged, and finally read through before they are delivered to the audience. I may store the words and the structure more or less verbatim so that I can speak without ‘script’, without ‘notes’, without immediate visual reference. What a good ‘speaker’, you may exclaim; or what a terrible ‘talk’. Although the work was first formulated ‘orally’, by mouth or silently in the mind, it was not communicated directly to the ears of the other, the hearer, that is, aurally. Between formulation and communication, the recording (recoding) and reading (decoding) of the message by the use of writing has intervened, involving the transfer from sound to sight, from ear to eye. This transfer to a graphic medium enables me to recast sentences, change the order, alter the structure. Nor do I

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978-0-521-33794-6 - The Interface between the Written and the Oral

Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

have to do this all at one time, the time of composition; the production of the text or score, as distinct from the utterance or performance, can be a continuing process, subject to review.

One can of course 'review' the words when composing a song in the head. One can and does. With longer constructions, especially those without the strong rhythmic character of song or verse (and virtually all verse in oral culture is song, that is, accompanied by music or given a musical form through the voice), the process is obviously more difficult. On the other hand, writing necessitates some measure of reconsideration since it involves the transfer of linguistic material from one channel to another. The writer pauses, thinks what he is saying, as if he was dictating slowly to himself. I use the verb 'dictate' deliberately since, as we have seen, it is a process that has dominated the recording of oral forms and has mediated the transformation of utterance into text that has provided us with the raw material for scholarly study.

So when I compose orally (in my head) the sentences that I now write, I compose sentences for writing, ones that are adapted to the written channel. Some work has been done on the difference in the nature of linguistic communication in English depending on the channel employed and this is reviewed in chapter 11. Such research employs various psycholinguistic tests such as *cloze* procedures to distinguish kinds of verbal ability, written as distinct from spoken *usage*, within the context of written and spoken communicative *acts*. Other methods have been used to differentiate between the frequency of nominalization and verbalization, of nouns and verbs – one is reminded of Bateson's cry 'down with nouns' – taken as indicators of literature influences in sentence structure, in speech or writing. Then there is work on repetition, formulaic expressions and parataxis (the way of joining clauses). These differences of expression vary between individuals within a particular literate culture, but they also mark the products of the written and the oral traditions respectively.

In the present discussion the term 'tradition' usually refers to specific aspects of the content composed in or transmitted through the oral (spoken) and written registers in a particular culture. But as we have seen, we make a mistake if we think of these 'traditions' as totally distinct one from another. There is bound to be constant

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978-0-521-33794-6 - The Interface between the Written and the Oral

Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

interaction for reasons that are too obvious to mention. Even where a large proportion of the population neither reads nor writes, they often partake indirectly of both 'traditions'. Hindu India is a case in point. In the distant past reading and writing has at times been deliberately restricted to the Brahmin or other higher castes; until recently this was the case with the reading of religious texts. Nevertheless in all regions of that vast country a literate religion pervaded the world view of every caste from top to bottom, whether or not the believers could read or write. Some wanted to modify it, some broke away altogether, but the products of the written religion dominated much of their social and cultural life. Not only the content but in many cases the very presence of writing itself structures religious practice, providing a source of truth (the Bible grasped in the right hand, the Jewish phylactery on the wrist, the Muslim verses sewn on the fighting smock). But the written word often has to become the spoken word in order to communicate fully with spiritual beings as with human ones; and so it was frequently considered essential for the literates not only to read aloud but even to internalize the text and then to recite it from memory. Only in this way was full understanding possible, for understanding involved overt, public, communication, often without direct recourse to the Book.

Moreover, even where some pluralistic societies do have something one can describe as distinct 'traditions', one oral, one written, the 'oral' differs in certain basic respects from the structure of tradition in a *purely oral* society. Firstly there is a constant dialectic between written and oral activities. Each literary work that is accorded high status, whether it is the Bible, the Qu'ran or the works of Marx, gives rise to commentaries that take shape in both the spoken and the written registers. From the historical point of view, we know of these commentaries only when they are written down and become the *Torah*, the *Hadith* or the *Smirti*, that is, when they themselves are subsequently incorporated into the written corpus. The Religions of the Book provide particularly vivid examples of such incorporation, the learned written tradition constantly drawing upon such commentaries. Secondly, major topics of human concern are largely defined and appropriated by the written tradition and its commentaries; that is where we find

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978-0-521-33794-6 - The Interface between the Written and the Oral

Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

xv

discussion of Heaven and Hell, of morality and taboo, of God and his prophets. Hence the oral is left to fill in the interstices, to pick up the residue, to deal with less central issues. The 'myth' is developed in writing while folktales continue to have an oral half-life around the winter hearth; religion is the Church, magic the marginal; Easter services are conducted by the priest, the spring rituals are a matter of parade and display, of jest and irony. One of the problems inherent in the work of the folkloric, anthropological nationalists of Europe in the nineteenth century was their failure to appreciate the partial nature of the 'oral tradition' to be found in a society with writing, anyhow one with long and extensive literacy.

In most of this book I will concentrate upon 'literary' material in the usual sense of this word as referring to 'art forms'. But other important cultural items are intimately affected by the use of writing. I was recently enquiring into certain rural protests in northern Ghana which were closely linked to the use of literate mechanisms (that is, registration, mortgages, courts) for acquiring land (1980). Some of the difficulties arose from the deliberate manipulation of the power of the word by the literate, the educated, the schooled. Others resulted from a general over-valuation of the 'truth' of the written word, while yet another element was the inevitable consequence of literacy, its role as a reductive instrument, in this case reducing the multiplicity of human rights in a plot of land to a simple, one-line statement, 'X owns Y'. All over the world, the techniques of writing have been used to acquire, that is, to alienate, the land of 'oral' peoples. It is a most powerful instrument, the use of which is rarely devoid of social, economic and political significance, especially since its introduction usually involves the domination of the non-literate segment of the population by the literate one, or even the less literate by the more. Where writing is, 'class' cannot be far away.

I have used as a testing ground for my discussion of oral cultures and oral traditions my own fieldwork among the LoDagaa and Gonja of northern Ghana. I spent two years with both of these groups (in the latter case working with Esther Goody) and have exchanged visits with both peoples up to the moment of writing. When I first stayed with the LoDagaa of Birifu in 1950, a European school had just been established in the settlement. Some young

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Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

men had already been sent to school elsewhere and had returned as teachers. The Gonja had for long been influenced directly by Islam and writing had played a peripheral role in the society even before the advent of the new education, resisted by the Muslims but accepted more readily by other groups. Writing had begun to make its mark in a 'restricted' way, although modern schooling has altered the situation dramatically over the past thirty years. Nevertheless, the oral tradition continued within a changing context and I recorded versions of the Bagre 'myth' of the LoDagaa over a thirty year period (Goody 1972; Goody and Gandah 1981).

In discussing some aspects of the interface and the nature of 'logical' reasoning, I have continually referred to the 'syllogism'. This is partly because a seminal study of Vygotsky and Luria focussed on this activity, which therefore became central to subsequent psychological experiments, partly because it is a paradigm of Aristotelian logic, and partly because I do not find it profitable to discuss logic, reasoning or rationality except in terms of specifics of this kind. For me, too, the syllogism serves as a paradigm.

I should add that what I am trying to explain is not logical operation on a day to day level, since it never occurred to me that this was absent in oral cultures, but why they do not have the 'logic' of the philosophers. Not why they cannot add (they can) but why they do not have mathematicians and mathematics, not whether or not they analyze language (they do) but whether they have grammars and grammarians (*in sensu strictu*), not whether they have poetry, but whether they have literature (that is, written literature).

Since writing is so closely associated with schools, it is inevitable that I return to this subject on several occasions. In Chapter 6 I touch upon some effects on African society of European schools; in Chapter 7 I discuss forms of knowledge and refer to the kinds taught in schools in Ancient Egypt; in the following chapter I consider the question of memory in oral reproduction and compare the procedures with that of early Sumerian schools; in Chapter 10 schooling forms an important variable in the psychological experiments bearing on cognitive abilities and skills, and I return to consider the connection of writing with schooling (as distinct from education) from the earliest times.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-33794-6 - The Interface between the Written and the Oral

Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

xvii

It has been suggested to me that I should use the introduction to this volume to offer 'a reply to critics' of what some see as the oralist (Maxwell 1983), some as the literacy, thesis (Street 1985). If I do not do so, it is partly because I often find such exercises picayune when carried out by others, more suited to an article than a book. Partly too, because I prefer to try and advance the analysis in other ways. In any case I do not have an overall theory that determines each particular hypothesis but simply a topic for enquiry, which seems to produce answers, perhaps partial, to intellectual questions. Watt and I considered calling our original article 'A Theory of Literacy', but rejected it in favour of 'consequences'. By 1968 I had preferred 'implications' for the first term and more recently 'writing' for the second, in order to try and avoid some of the ambiguities. In more substantive ways earlier contentions have been changed in favour of new ones. The 'alphabetic' writing of the Greeks is no longer seen as so unique an achievement, while its dates seem to require revising in an earlier direction. Logographic scripts like the Chinese contain many phonetic components and the division between these, syllabaries and alphabets is less pronounced in certain ways. The result of these reassessments is not to abandon the idea that the invention and development of writing were important events for humanity but to elaborate the argument in the light of new information or informed criticism.

A reevaluation of the original statement of the hypothesis was necessary not only because of the longer history of what was, in most respects, an alphabetic script; but also because it was clear that certain of the features attributed to alphabetic writing were to be found in other systems. Backward in time this meant the Ancient Near East, for which some aspects of the relation between writing and cognition were discussed in *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (1977) while others are considered in the second chapter of the present study.

But it also meant reconsidering the effects of writing in India and China, a topic to which some attention was given in a volume of essays, *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (1968), more specifically by Gough. Our initial emphasis had been too much on the tradition of western humanism and the problems to which it gave rise. We

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-33794-6 - The Interface between the Written and the Oral

Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xviii

Preface

certainly gave greater weight than we should to the 'uniqueness of the West' in terms of modes of communication, a failing in which we were not alone; it has been at least an implicit assumption, not only of many classical historians and those who have studied the rise of industrial capitalism, but also of some of the valuable studies of literacy in Western Europe that have appeared since we first wrote. One of the best antidotes to such ethnocentrism is Rawski's book, *Education and Popular Literacy in Ch'ing China* (1979). While recognizing the difficulties that logograms present for learning to read and especially for learning to write, she points to the widespread existence of schools and of the elements of literacy in Ch'ing China. The notion of literacy as a level of attainment carries other implications than with an alphabetic or syllabic script because individuals can recognize anything from 1 to 30,000 characters. The script gives access to the reading and composition of written works in a very different way. Despite these qualifications, the general trend of this research is to strengthen rather than lessen the case for emphasizing the social and cognitive effects of writing.

I have made one exception to this resolution not to offer an 'answer to critics' in the present context, that is, in the discussion of the major work of Scribner and Cole (1981) on the Vai in chapter 10. I needed to resolve for myself what appeared to be a divergence between the import of the work we had carried out jointly, which is reported in chapter 9, and the results of their extensive, carefully-planned and scrupulously administered tests undertaken over a period of years. The outcome includes a consideration of the costs and benefits of using psychological tests to explain cultural-historical data. Or to rephrase the problem, since I have a general commitment to the unity of the social sciences (at least in terms of their results making sense to one another), to the limits of a too narrowly defined concept of cognition. Both discussions go back to Vygotsky but my own solution lies in being less mentalistic and more 'historical' than his experiments allowed for.

Finally this book represents another kind of interface. When I originally studied social anthropology, it was not only because I was interested in other cultures of a traditional kind, but because I wanted to see what light their situation threw on the modern world,

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Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

not only 'ours'. For those we were studying all of course existed in the contemporary scene. The rapid change they were undergoing and the nature of the adjustment was of the greatest importance not only practically but also in a theoretical perspective. In the social sciences change often has to take the place of experiment in order to investigate causal implications.

Since I was interested in this interface, I have not hesitated to draw together aspects of my experience of two particular 'simple' societies in the broader context of Africa and of Europe, historically as well as regionally. Such an approach may cause discomfort to those scholars who, either for reasons of temperament or theory, prefer to concentrate on one group or on one situation at a time. But it seems to me that, as among the LoDagaa, there is room for more than one approach to knowledge.

Most of the chapters presented here have been published before as work in progress but in somewhat different forms; I thank the publishers concerned for permission to include them in the present volume. A version of chapter 1 appeared as "Alphabets and Writing" in *Contact: human communication and its history*, ed. R. Williams, published by Thames & Hudson, London, 1981. A form of Chapter 2 was given at a conference in Bielefeld and published in F. Coulmas and K. Ehlich (eds.), *Writing in Focus*, Berlin, 1983. Chapter 4 was presented as a paper for an Urbino Symposium, published under the title, *Oralità: Cultura, Letteratura, Discorso* (B. Gentili and G. Paioni, eds.), Edizioni dell'Ateneo. Chapter 5 appeared as "The impact of Islamic writing on the oral cultures of West Africa" in *Cahiers d'études africaines* (1971): 455–66. Chapter 6 was printed in the *Times Literary Supplement*, May 12 (1972), pp. 539–40 as "Literacy and the non-literate". Parts of Chapter 7 appeared in French as "Les chemins du savoir oral" in *Critiques*, Dec.-Jan. 1979–80, and a fuller version in D. Tanner (ed.) *Spoken and Written Language: exploring orality and literacy*, published by Abex, Norwood, N.J., 1982. Chapter 8 was published in French in *L'Homme* 17 (1977): 29–52, as 'Mémoire et apprentissage dans les sociétés avec et sans écriture; la transmission du Bagré'. Chapter 9 was written with Michael Cole and Sylvia Scribner and published in *Africa* 47 (1977): 289–304. A very different version of chapter 11 appeared in *Soviet & Western*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-33794-6 - The Interface between the Written and the Oral

Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xx

Preface

Anthropology edited by Ernest Gellner, Duckworth, London (1980), pp. 119–33.

Finally I would like to acknowledge the help received from the many scholars who have at one time or another read and commented upon parts of this manuscript, including J. Alexander, R. Allchin, V. Allerton, M. Bernal, J. Bottéro, D. and T. Carraher, M. Cole, R. Finnegan, E. Goody, R. Horton, P. Johnson-Laird, S. Levinson, G. E. R. Lloyd, J. Oates, D. Olson, J. Ray, T. Turner, and a host of others over the years (especially S.-Hugh-Jones and G. A. Lewis). For help with word-processing and research on the final version I am indebted to Antonia Lovelace, Janet Reynolds and Carolyn Wyndham.

*St Johns College
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Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-33794-6 - The Interface between the Written and the Oral

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Acknowledgements

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