

1 The tyranny of writing and the dominance of vernacular speech

We live in a literate world. This is true, notwithstanding the fact, that according to UNESCO statistics, there were, in 2010, some 790 million illiterate adults in the world, more than the population of the European Union. However, even in the African and Asian countries where illiterate adults are concentrated, oral culture is no longer considered a viable alternative to literate culture – a different way of life, a matter of preference that could be sustained. Life without letters is a paradise lost, if a paradise it was. In our day and age, reading and writing are indispensable for participation in society, and there is no evading the fact that literacy skills are a major determinant of one's life chances. This holds for the world at large and is even less debatable for industrialized countries. Illiteracy in these countries is a deplorable state of affairs, a social injustice that excludes a small minority from mainstream society. Language in the written mode is part of everyone's everyday communication behaviour, actively and passively and, in the case of the illiterate, confronts them with an insurmountable barrier. It is, therefore, argued nowadays that literacy is a universal human right.¹

Writing has been around for at least five millennia, and although universal literacy is a recent achievement in only some parts of the world, writing has exercised an influence on language for a long time. In fact, a clear distinction between writing and language has not always been made, neither in everyday discourse nor in scholarship. It is perhaps understandable, therefore, that, in order to eliminate confusion and to establish the object proper of linguistic inquiry, modern linguists have emphasized speech, relegating writing to the sidelines. Linguistics, it has been argued repeatedly, should study *natural* language – that is, the inborn capacity for language – and while human beings are born to speak, they are not born to write. This is the basis of the argument for the neglect of writing in linguistics. A brief review of the origin of this argument is useful in order to appreciate its merits and the influence it had on theory formation in linguistics as well as in sociolinguistics.

The argument can be traced back to two influential founders of structural linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure and Leonard Bloomfield. These two scholars, each for his own reasons concerned with laying the foundations of a synchronic linguistics as opposed to historical philology, made a strong case for abstracting, in the scientific study of language, away from writing.

SAUSSURE'S ARGUMENT AGAINST WRITING

One of Saussure's lasting achievements was to establish the science of speech sounds as the cornerstone of structural linguistics. Chapter 7 of his *Course in General Linguistics*, on phonology, begins with a most vivid metaphor: 'Whoever consciously deprives himself of the perceptible image of the written word runs the risk of perceiving only a shapeless and unmanageable mass. Taking away the written form is like depriving a beginning swimmer of his life belt' (Saussure 1978: 32). However, it was exactly this that he felt was necessary to achieve his objective of coming to grips with the structure he knew was inherent in the 'shapeless and unmanageable mass' in a way that was not compromised and distorted by the imperfect graphic rendition of speech sounds. He had to make the case that linguists should indeed jump into the deep, without the lifebelt of writing. Citing the example of the name of the French town *Auch* which is pronounced [ɔːʃ], he denounced 'the tyranny of writing' and said that 'orthography is unimportant' (1978: 31). It was in this context that Saussure lamented the fact that spelling influences and modifies language. His concern was to make sure that linguists would study what they meant to study, rather than a distorted image thereof.

Saussure had a point, for lettered people like him, unless they are trained linguists, tend both to attribute more importance to the permanent and stable written word than to what Anthony Burgess (1992) called 'a mouthful of air', and to conceptualize language in terms of the visual images of its units. It is by means of books, dictionaries and grammars that proper language is taught and raised onto the level of conscious reflection. The fact Saussure saw very clearly is that the perception of language is heavily influenced by writing. A naïve understanding of the Latin alphabet as a writing system that is (ideally) grounded in a one-to-one correspondence between letters and sounds reinforces the tendency to conflate the distinction between the two. Saussure was concerned, and rightly so, that writing obscures our view of language, an entirely abstract system of values, and that we must exclude it from the analysis of language because it 'is unrelated to its inner system' (1978:

23). He thus concluded that ‘the linguistic object is not both the written and the spoken forms of words: the spoken forms alone constitute the object’ (1978: 23f.).

Saussure’s emphasis on speech as the primary manifestation of language and his insistence that linguistic analysis must be concerned with abstract units and relationships rather than physical manifestations were well reasoned and proved to be very influential for linguistic theory formation and beyond, laying the groundwork of Structuralism. Yet his argument about writing was flawed. The first flaw concerns his assertion, quoted above, that writing is unrelated to the inner system of language. Without going into the details of what the inner system of language is, it can be said that, unless writing were a graphic code entirely of its own, it must be related to the inner system of language in one way or another; otherwise, it could not be interpreted in linguistic terms, which, however, seems to be the very point. Writing must be readable, and that means interpretable on the basis of more or less systematic mapping relations between sound, meaning and graphic sign within the framework of a given language. However deficient and convoluted, writing thus does relate to the inner system of language.

The second flaw of Saussure’s argument for excluding writing from linguistics is of a somewhat different quality. He acknowledged the influence of writing on our perception of language and hence, ultimately, on language itself. He also allowed for the possibility that ‘writing may retard the process of [language] change under certain conditions’ (1978: 24), but saw this as an aberration that should be disregarded, an artefact that disrupts the natural course of events. In his understanding, language was a natural faculty, and it was the linguist’s task to discover the ‘precise laws [that] govern its evolution’ (1978: 31). The scientification of the study of language was his project. Natural laws rather than the vagaries of human life were to him what could best, and therefore should, explain the reality of language. His observation that ‘when there is disagreement between language and orthography . . . the written form almost inevitably wins out’ (1978: 25), rather than furnishing the motivation for studying the interaction between speech, writing and language, led him to the conclusion that ‘writing assumes undeserved importance’ (1978: 25) and should thus be disregarded. In retrospect this is not a little surprising, for, much as he was concerned with laying the foundations of linguistics as an exact science, Saussure also emphasized that language is ‘a social fact’ (1978: 6), ‘a social institution’ (1978: 15). What this meant must be discussed in detail.

Saussure was quite aware of the tension inherent in characterizing language as both a *natural* faculty – subject to natural laws – and a *social*

institution – subject to man-made rules and conventions. He compared language to other institutions such as political and legal institutions which, by virtue of being sign systems, share important properties with language. However, language, he argued, is a social institution unlike any other, because: (1) it involves all members of the relevant community all the time, and (2) it cannot be changed at will. Thus, while language is a collective product, artificial interventions cannot alter the course of its evolution. The discovery in the nineteenth century that sound change is systematic and follows inalterable rules lent credence to Saussure's argument and the exclusion of writing from the study of language it implied.

BLOOMFIELD'S ARGUMENT AGAINST WRITING

Like Saussure, Bloomfield conceived of language as an institution and considered the study of linguistic change essential 'because it offers the only possibility of explaining the phenomenon of language' (Bloomfield 1933: 281). Language change is continuous, a fact that is often overlooked because (1) the speed of change is slow, and (2) writing suggests stability. Moreover, those dealing with language professionally are biased towards writing, for 'we today are so used to reading and writing that we often confuse these activities with language itself' (1933: 283). This is an impediment to analytic insight because 'the conventions of writing remain unaltered even though the speech-forms have undergone linguistic change' (1933: 292). Since linguistic change proceeds regardless of whether and how writing conventions change, written records cannot, without much careful interpretation, serve as data. They are as Bloomfield (1933: 21) put it, 'a handicap' to the study of language.

Another point that Bloomfield adduced is that writing is a recent invention that has 'been in use for any considerable length of time in only a few speech-communities . . . confined to a very few persons' (1933: 282). His observation that 'all languages were spoken through nearly all of their history by people who did not read or write' (1933: 21) is incontrovertible. It provided for him a reason to assert the primacy of ordinary spoken language over written texts as a subject for linguistic analysis. Yet the influence of writing on speech is something he could not ignore. Again like Saussure, he took issue with discrepancies between spoken and written forms and assumed that, in this event, 'people are likely to infer that there exists a preferable variant that matches the written form', adding, 'especially, it would seem, in the last centuries with the

spread of literacy' (1933: 487). He commented on the pervasiveness in some languages of 'bookish borrowings' which often do not conform with the sound change patterns of other parts of the lexicon. He furthermore remarked that 'a *literary dialect* may become established and obligatory for written records, regardless of the writer's actual dialect' (1933: 292).

The two founding fathers of structural linguistics felt they had to resist the 'tyranny of writing' to make the case for a linguistics that investigates language regardless of whether it has a written form, and to make sure that writing did not interfere with the study of language in an uncontrolled and hence unwelcome way, for their predecessors often 'failed to distinguish between letters and sounds' (Saussure 1978: 24). What is more, both scholars realized that unwritten languages were deserving of the linguist's attention no less than those with a long literary tradition, a point of particular importance to Bloomfield, who took an interest in native American languages that had never been recorded or used in writing. Their advice was sound, important for the development of linguistic theory, and hugely influential; however, it led to the baby of writing being thrown out with the bath water of its messy effects on linguistic analysis. Given the attention Saussure and Bloomfield paid to writing in their seminal books, it would seem doubtful that this is what they intended. Neither of them denied the influence in literate societies of writing on language, but it was not what they meant to study. Following their lead, theoretical linguistics saw the emergence of research paradigms that have no place for writing.

Bloomfield's (1933: 21) statement that 'writing is not language, but merely a way of recording language by means of visible marks' belongs to the stock-quotations cited in linguistics textbooks. Excluding writing from the objects of investigation became all but a defining feature of linguistics. Today, the priority of spoken over written language is generally accepted in linguistics, and understandably so.

Lyons (1968), writing a generation after Bloomfield, still had some thoughtful observations about the relative independence of written and spoken language in some languages such as French and Chinese, differences of grammatical structure and vocabulary that distinguish the spontaneously acquired from the learned language. Lyons (1968: 41) also mentioned 'the peculiar status of Latin in medieval and Renaissance Europe' which, he said, tended to confirm the principle of the priority of the written language. These facts, however, did not persuade him or generations of students who came to linguistics by studying his deservedly influential textbook to abandon or even modify the principle of the priority of the spoken language. Lyons still felt that he had to argue

Saussure's case that linguistics from a synchronic point of view ought to deal with speech rather than writing. Since then, this has become taken for granted. Introductions to linguistics usually have little to say about writing and written language. Some of the more widely used textbooks, such as Radford *et al.* (1999), Fromkin (2000) and Matthews (2003) have no chapter on writing; others, such as Poole (1999) and O'Grady, Dobrovosky and Karanba (1997), include a final chapter about writing systems that is likely to be skipped at the end of the course. In this sense, the tyranny of writing has been successfully defeated, vernacular speech being universally recognized as the legitimate object of linguistic study.

ARE SAUSSURE'S AND BLOOMFIELD'S ARGUMENTS STILL VALID?

Saussure and Bloomfield argued against (1) the confusion of writing with language, and (2) the elements of writing entering into the process of linguistic description. Both points are valid, but they have been taken to heart only partially.² The most widely used linguistic transcription system, the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), is an offshoot of the Latin alphabet. It was first designed in the 1880s in France by 'Dhi Fonètik Tìcerz' Asóciécon' (The Phonetic Teachers' Association) as a tool for transcribing the sounds of foreign languages, and has been revised and undoubtedly improved many times since, by adding letters for sounds not present in European languages and providing for other phonetic differentiations. But the basic principle of *writing* is still the same. For the purposes of analysis the stream of speech sounds, which is a continuum, is divided into discrete units that only in a very abstract sense correspond to something in the empirical reality of speech. The visualization of speech by means of an IPA transcription produces an inappropriate picture suggesting that speech is something discontinuous, consisting of distinct and discrete elements. By using the IPA, linguists thus create the object of their investigation. This is by no means a minor technicality. Assuming some kind of equivalence between an extent in time – speech – and an extent in space – writing – is no less problematic in linguistics than in physics, where it is at the heart of the question of permanence and change and our understanding of the universe. However, short of solving the mystery of the continuity of space-time, linguistics cannot but approach the nature of language by constructing models of it. Writing systems, including the IPA, can be understood in this sense as models of language.

Linguistics as Saussure conceived it is not an empirical science, such as, for example, mineralogy, which studies the physical properties of

minerals found in the environment, produces taxonomies, and on that basis develops theories about their origin and formation. By contrast, phonemes and other units of language, such as syllables, morphemes, words, sentences and meanings, cannot be observed in the environment, being theoretical constructs. Knowledge generation in linguistics thus proceeds in the opposite direction from those natural sciences that start out from evidence gathered via sense experience. In the field of language, there are no given observable objects to start out with, because speech communities are not uniform, and no two people speak exactly alike. In fact, no one speaker speaks exactly the same on different occasions. Linguists, therefore, have to deal with an ‘unmanageable mass’, as Saussure called it; and to get a grip on it, they make assumptions about it and impose upon it structures, whose plausibility can be assessed, both internally as being more or less consistent (free of contradictions, redundancies and ad hoc rationalizations), and externally on the basis of speakers’ judgements about similarities and differences. As we have seen above, Saussure and Bloomfield realized the influence of writing on people’s speech behaviour and perception of language. Since linguistics, to establish its object of investigation, depends on speakers’ judgements, it cannot very well ignore this kind of influence, simply on the grounds that language would evolve no matter whether it is or is not used in writing. If for that reason alone, writing must therefore be taken into account in the study of language in literate speech communities. Bloomfield’s pronouncement that ‘in order to study writing, we must know something about language, but the reverse is not true’ (1933: 21) was useful at a time when the study of unwritten languages needed justification. Nowadays it can no longer guide us, for there are many things about language we cannot understand without studying its written form: the writing system, the effect of written norms, writing-mediated language contact, and language attitudes, for example. The invention of writing, although it occurred relatively recently in the history of the human species, has revolutionized the way language can be used. Writing may well be adaptive, for example, by being conducive to co-operative behaviour in a range beyond earshot. This aspect of the nature-culture interplay that characterizes human language must be recognized.

As Saussure said, language has both a natural and a social/cultural side, and while it is perhaps impossible to change sound laws deliberately, other aspects of language are open to intentional modification and innovation. Clearly, the written form of language is entirely on the sociocultural side, but if there are distinct written varieties, and if it is the case, as Saussure and Bloomfield assert, that these varieties have a

bearing on linguistic change, writing must not be ignored. For, unless we reflect on the nature of the relationship between linguistic units and their graphic representation and unless we remember that the IPA is derived from the Latin alphabet and not vice versa, we are ill equipped to avoid the trap into which Saussure and Bloomfield accused their predecessors of having fallen. Conventional writing is not language, true; but graphical renditions of speech by means of the IPA or any other notation system are not language either.

THE SOCIAL INDEXICALITY OF LINGUISTIC RESOURCES

How did the tyranny of writing come about, and why is it so entrenched? One of two answers to this question has to do with the medium and our senses, and the other has to do with power. ‘Seeing is believing’ says the proverb. Demonstrative evidence is convincing to us, and of all our senses, even though it is the most easily deceived, it is our sight that we trust most. This might be seen as testimony to the immense importance of vision in human life, survival and adaptation to the environment, which, perhaps, also makes us attribute more importance to the written than to the spoken word.

In addition to evolutionary reasons underlying our inclination to rely on vision, the ‘undeserved importance’ of writing stems from the fact that knowledge of the written language has never been, and is not still, distributed evenly in society. Rather, literacy skills are indicative of social status and prestige and they correlate with other social variables. The acquisition of writing by a speech community produces an unprecedented and irreversible alteration in its communicative resources and their functional allocation. In all societies writing is associated with authority, that is, with an *auctor* – whence ‘author’ – one who sets forth written statements and is empowered to enforce obedience. In this sense, the ‘tyranny’ of writing is a social reality that ought to be studied as such. In literate societies, most speakers and listeners are also readers and writers whose linguistic repertoire is shaped not just by the input received through the auditory channel, but also from the linguistic landscape in which they grow up and the written texts they are exposed to from an early age, as well as by the school that functions as an agent for the legitimization and reproduction of an official or national language. While it is true that ‘all languages were spoken through most of their history by people who did not read and write’, today most people do read and write and the most widely spoken languages have a long literary tradition. The remaining unwritten languages are many,

but their speakers are few, and many of them are literate in another language.

When language is studied from the point of view of its social nature, including the uses that society makes of its linguistic resources, there is every reason to consider both its spoken and its written forms, which vary along stylistic scales of formality and context dependence as well as in terms of attitudes and potential for social regulation. For sociologists interested in language – there aren't all that many – it would make little sense to exclude writing from their field of inquiry. To them the 'tyranny of writing' that Saussure noted is a prime reason for studying it, for it is testimony to the great importance of writing in society. While mainstream sociology has paid scant attention to writing, it must be noted that some of the most influential contemporary thinkers, notably Habermas and Derrida, put writing at the centre of their philosophy. Habermas built in his early work a media and communication theory of the public sphere to which we will return in Chapter 2. To him the distinction between speech and writing corresponds to that between the naïve participant in communicative interaction and the reflecting observer of discourse (Habermas 2008). Derrida (1967) has presented powerful arguments against the reductionist view of writing as a mere expression of speech, maintaining instead that in order to understand the development of language the interplay between speech and writing must be studied. Only by abandoning de Saussure's tenet of the secondary nature of writing as a supplement to speech can the true symbolic power of writing be appreciated. It lies in the fact that writing expands the range of intellectual pursuits beyond what is possible without it. Examples cited by Derrida (1972) include sign systems such as theoretical mathematics and information retrieval systems that have never been absolutely linked with phonetic language production. Their existence and the effects they can have on speech and language suggest that speech and writing, although related in rule-governed ways, are autonomous systems that, once writing has been created, develop and mutually influence each other. For the purposes of this book, the autonomy of writing is a more promising starting point than the notion that writing is derived from and secondary to speech.

Another important thinker who paid much attention to the symbolic power of language was the French sociologist Bourdieu. In order to understand the social functioning of language, the differences between situated speech and language as a regulated, normative system imposed on a community must be analysed. Linguists, Bourdieu notes, tacitly accept 'the *official* definition of the *official* language' when they speak, as

they tend to do, of 'the language' without further qualification (Bourdieu 1991: 45). The crucial importance of writing in this connection is obvious, for the language in question, which Bourdieu calls the legitimate or 'authorized language', is 'produced by authors who have the authority to write' and it is 'fixed and codified by grammarians... [as] a system of norms regulating linguistic practices' (1991: 45). Bourdieu's 'linguistic practices' can be linked easily with Basil Bernstein's notion of class-specific codes, which will be discussed below. Both concepts can be understood as habitual systems of meaning that represent symbolic resources and serve, among other things, social reproduction, including the reproduction of inequality. As a social practice, writing occupies a different position in the symbolic resources of different societies and is charged with different functions relating to power in different ways. From a sociological point of view, it is plainly evident that, rather than serving as a substitute for speech, writing constitutes a part of a society's communication apparatus that is not derived from speech and cannot be replaced by speech. It is a social practice and a mode of communication in its own right.

However, the appreciation of writing in social philosophy had little impact on mainstream sociolinguistics. Influenced by structural linguistics of the Saussurean or Bloomfieldian strands, mainstream sociolinguistics has by and large ignored writing, focussing on vernacular speech instead. The rationale for restricting the object of investigation in this way is that vernacular speech is most spontaneous and least monitored consciously by its speakers. For this reason it is said to be the variety sociolinguists should study, because it provides them with 'the most systematic data for the analysis of linguistic structure' (Labov 1972: 208). Labov's insistence on spontaneity as a criterion for selecting a speech style suitable for data collection echoes Saussure's condemnation of the tyranny of writing, which has thus been replaced by the dominance of the vernacular. However, if, as I have argued elsewhere (Coulmas 2005) and as most sociolinguists agree, language behaviour is under all circumstances a matter of choice, it is not really plausible that, for the purpose of data collection, varieties characterized by a higher degree of conscious monitoring than vernacular speech should be sidestepped, for the extent to which the choice of vocabulary, style and pronunciation is conscious and guided by orientation to a norm, real or imagined, is socially indicative. What is more, language is the tool that humans employ if not for cognition, then certainly for communicating its results to others. Why the conscious monitoring of using and thereby shaping this tool should get in the way of understanding how it works remains an enigma.