

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.

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An Introduction

FLORIAN COULMAS



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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.

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