

1

What is writing?

The men who invented and perfected writing were great linguists and it was they who created linguistics. Antoine Meillet

Writing has been with us for several thousand years, and nowadays is more important than ever. Having spread steadily over the centuries from clay tablets to computer chips, it is poised for further dramatic advances. Although hundreds of millions of people are still unable to read and write, humanity relies on writing to an unprecedented extent. It is quite possible that, today, more communication takes place in the written than in the oral mode. There is no objective measure, but if there were any doubts, the Internet explosion has laid to rest the idea that for the human race at large writing is only a ‘minor’ form of communication. It is not risky to call writing the single most consequential technology ever invented. The immensity of written record and the knowledge conserved in libraries, data banks, and multilayered information networks make it difficult to imagine an aspect of modern life unaffected by writing. ‘Access’, the catchword of the knowledge society, means access to written intelligence. Writing not only offers ways of reclaiming the past, but is a critical skill for shaping the future. In Stanley Kubrick’s 1968 motion picture ‘2001: A Space Odyssey’ a computer equipped with a perfect speech recognition programme, which is even able to lipread, threatens to overpower the human crew. This is still science fiction. In contrast, the ability of computers to operate in the written mode, to retrieve, process and organize written language in many ways surpasses unaided human faculties. Mastering the written word in its electronic guise has become essential.

The commanding relevance of writing for our life notwithstanding, it is anything but easy to provide a clear definition of what writing is. Partly this is because of the multiple meanings of English words and partly because of the long history of writing and its great importance. At least six meanings of ‘writing’ can be distinguished: (1) a system of recording language by means of visible or tactile marks; (2) the activity of putting such a system to use; (3) the result of such activity, a text; (4) the particular form of such a result, a script style such as block letter writing; (5) artistic composition; (6) a professional occupation. While in this book

2 *What is writing?*

my principal concern is with (1), the relationships with the other meanings are not accidental or unimportant. The various uses of 'writing' reveal the many aspects of society and culture touched upon by what cultural anthropologist Jack Goody has aptly called the technology of the mind. It can be studied from a great variety of angles in several different scientific fields. Philologists, historians, educationalists, perceptual and cognitive psychologists, cultural anthropologists, typographers, computer programmers, and linguists all have their own interest in writing based in their disciplines' specific understanding of how writing works, what functions it serves, and which methods can be applied to its investigation. What is more, of a technology that has evolved over thousands of years it cannot be taken for granted that it has not changed substantially. There is little reason to believe that writing means the same in different linguistic and cultural contexts. Rather, the meaning and validity both of past and contemporary theories of writing are contingent upon the historical and, perhaps, cultural circumstances within which they were conceived. Indeed, properties of writing systems may have an effect on how writing is conceived, and, conversely, conceptions of writing may influence the way certain signs are dealt with. Maya writing is a case in point. Anthropologist Michael Coe (1992) has shown how the refusal to recognize the Maya glyphs as writing long stood in the way of their linguistic decipherment, which, once accomplished, added a new facet to our understanding of the multiformity of writing. Every attempt at a single universal definition of writing runs the risk of being either ad hoc or anachronistic, or informed by cultural bias. To appreciate the difficulty it is useful to review some of the definitions that have been provided by writers who concerned themselves with the issue.

Aristotle

What is probably the most widely quoted definition of writing was given by Aristotle. The second part of his propositional logic, *Peri Hermeneias*, begins with some basic explanations about things, concepts and signs. Before discussing nouns and verbs as parts of sentences that can be true or false, Aristotle discusses how these linguistic entities relate to ideas and to things of the material world. He explains:

Words spoken are symbols of affections or impressions of the soul; written words are symbols of words spoken. And just as letters are not the same for all men, sounds are not the same either, although the affections directly expressed by these indications are the same for everyone, as are the things of which these impressions are images. (1938: 115)

Aristotle's main concern here was not with writing. Rather, his purpose was to alert his readers to the need to clarify the complicated relationships that obtain between things, ideas and words, as a prerequisite of developing logical thinking. He only dealt with writing because words manifested themselves in two different forms: as sounds produced by the human voice and as letters. Explaining the relationship between the two was a matter of systematic rigour and terminological orderliness, but of little importance for the rest of his treatise on proposition. Yet, this brief statement became hugely influential in Western thinking about writing.

Much has been written about it. His pronouncement that spoken words are symbols of affections or impressions of the soul – what we would call concepts or ideas – while written words are symbols of spoken words allows for interpretation. What is a symbol? Aristotle's term is *symbolon* which is usually translated as 'symbol' in English. Other translations of the Greek original have preferred the term 'sign', which is more general in meaning and thus makes it easier to accept that a relationship between nonperceptible entities (impressions of the soul) and perceptible entities (spoken words) should be of the same order as a relationship between perceptible entities of two different sorts (spoken words and written words). A variety of verbs such as *depict*, *designate*, *signify* or *stand for* have been used to give expression to the nature of the relationship between a *symbolon* and that which it symbolizes. The common element of all of them is the implicit assumption that this relationship is characterized by linearity and directionality, rather than being symmetric:

things affection of the soul spoken word written word

This formula can be given a temporal and an ontological interpretation. Things exist. You think about them, then you speak, then you write. The phenomenal world precedes cognition which precedes language which in turn precedes literacy.

The central element of Aristotle's definition is that it determines the function of writing as forming signs for other signs as their referents. Writing is not only preceded by, but also subordinate to, vocal speech. This assumption reflects the literacy practice of Greek antiquity. The notion that letters stand for sounds was firmly established, and that both individuals and societies used speech before writing was evident. Literacy had a place in society, but did not embrace large sections of society yet. It was not a form of life as it is now. Letters had not yet broken free of sounds. It followed that writing, at least Greek writing, was a secondary sign system serving the sole purpose of substituting for or representing the primary sign system, vocal speech. When writing was invented, such a linear representational relationship between speech and writing did not exist, but that was none of Aristotle's concern. Nor did he address the question of whether the relationship

4 *What is writing?*

he had identified might change in the course of time as the consequences of literacy made themselves felt in society. His remark that ‘letters are not the same for all men’, although affections of the soul are, and the fact that it was part of a treatise on proposition suggest that he had a general statement in mind, and this is how it was understood by subsequent generations of scholars right to the present time. Writing is secondary to and dependent on speech and, therefore, deserves to be investigated only as a means of analysing speech. This is the gist of Aristotle’s definition of writing, which became axiomatic in the Western tradition.

Liu Hsieh

It has been argued that Aristotle’s definition is a direct result of the nature of the Greek alphabet, which is said to be the first full-blown phonetic writing system humanity developed. Thus, writing systems, rather than being conceptually neutral instruments, are thought to act on the way we think. In this connection an explanation of what writing is and whence it came that emerged within the context of Chinese literary culture is of some interest. It bears resemblance to Aristotle’s, but upon closer inspection also differs in important respects. In his celebrated essay ‘Carving of the Literary Dragon’ writer and philosopher Liu Hsieh (465–522) states:

When the mind is at work, speech is uttered. When speech is uttered, writing is produced.

The Tao inspires writing and writing illuminates the Tao. What in mind is idea when expressed in speech is poetry. Isn’t this what we are doing when dashing off writing to record reality?

Writing originated when drawing of bird trace replaced string knitting.

(1983: 13–17)

This definition shares a number of elements with Aristotle’s. A mind at work is what Aristotle calls ‘affections of the soul’. It produces speech that in turn generates writing. The Tao corresponds to nature, that is, things about which ideas are formed in the mind. However, Liu Hsieh’s statement also contains an element that lacks a counterpart in Aristotle’s definition. Writing is credited with a creative analytic potential: it illuminates the Tao. Moreover, the Tao inspires writing, apparently unmediated by speech. An idea in the mind is expressed in speech, but also in writing that is employed ‘to record reality’. While Aristotle unambiguously places speech between ideas and written words, Liu Hsieh seems to concede the possibility that ideas are expressed poetically in speech or in writing, where the relationship between the two is not necessarily unidirectional. This does

not imply that, unlike the Greek philosopher, the Chinese denied that writing was bound up with language, but from his account of the relationship between ideas, speech and writing it cannot be concluded that he conceived of writing as a mere substitute for speech.

Plato

Liu Hsieh and Aristotle speak of the same four elements: in modern parlance, objects, concepts, vocal signs and graphical signs, but the mapping relations between them suggested by their definitions are not identical. In the West, Aristotle's surrogationalist definition has been the basis of the bulk of scholarly dealings with writing ever since, although it was also recognized early on that writing does more and less than represent speech and can never replace it. More clearly than Aristotle, Plato sensed the unbridgeable chasm between discourse and text, between speech and speaker that writing brings about. He was concerned with the communicative function of writing and saw that it was the tool of artificial intelligence as opposed to empathetic dialogue-generated insight, but he was deeply sceptical of the new technology and the form of knowledge it made possible. In the *Phaedrus* dialogue he lets Socrates say, 'Written words are unnecessary, except to remind him who knows the matter about which they are written' (*Phaedrus* 275d). Writing, he reasoned, was just a memory aid, but could not substitute for speech, which was always bound to a speaker who could be asked for clarification. In contrast, written words were silent, they lacked the immediacy of speech, they were dead. In Plato's day, knowledge and knower were not separated, as is typically the case in fully literate societies.

Zen

Plato's critique of writing has been an undercurrent of Western thinking which, however, has strongly favoured the Aristotelian notion that writing is a representation of oral language. As a tool of enlightenment it has met with similar distrust in the Eastern tradition. For example, consider the common Zen slogan 'written words are useless' (Japanese: *furyū monji*), which protests the distance between message and author/reader and the reliance on objectified knowledge. Enlightenment is practice, consciousness in action, the Way; it cannot be captured in fixed signs. Notice, however, that there is no consistent Zen view on writing, just as there is no such thing in Plato. In both cases, scepticism is coupled with veneration. Plato put his misgivings about writing into writing. It was he who

6 What is writing?



Figure 1.1 Chinese character wú, 'nothing'

preserved in his writing Socrates' philosophy for posterity. Excluding from his Republic poets who at the time were seen as reciters rather than creators of songs, he did more than anyone to usher in a literate culture grounded in analytic thinking. And much as Zen adherents denied the cognitive value of writing, they practised the art of writing. Calligraphy is one of the most highly valued and sublime arts inspired by Buddhism, *shodō* the Way of writing. Consider, for example, the Chinese character for 'nothing' (Chinese *wú*, Japanese *mu*) in figure 1.1 at which many a Zen master has tried his hand. The overwhelming presence of what means the absence of everything is striking and at least as amazing as René Magritte's painting 'The betrayal of images' (figure 1.2). It is hard to imagine that, in the absence of writing, the thingness of nothing would have become a philosophical problem. *Wú* is not nothing, it just means 'nothing', a relationship much like that between a pipe and a picture of a pipe. The visual nature of the sign does the trick.

It is perhaps not surprising that something that touches the human mind so deeply as does writing should evoke diverse and countervailing responses. There is something inherently contradictory about writing, the paradox of arresting the transitory. In this book I am not concerned with the philosophical aspects of this paradox or the artistic expressions it inspired, but we cannot ignore its consequences for linguistics. It is common practice in linguistics to ignore the paradoxical character of writing down language, of treating as achronic something whose very essence is its existence in real time. At best it is treated lightly as a necessary and legitimate abstraction. However, this proves nothing but the fact that linguistics, notwithstanding its claims to universality, is a Western science thoroughly rooted in the Aristotelian tradition. For the scientific study of language is confronted with this paradox from the very beginning. Before anyone thought of writing them down, words were evanescent, *verba volant*. Recording the ephemeral, providing the fleeting word with a permanent form ready to be inspected and reinspected is the first step of linguistic analysis, a step that, strictly speaking, is as impossible to take as it is impossible to give a straight answer to a *kōan*, an illogical riddle developed



Figure 1.2 René Magritte 1929, 'The betrayal of images'

by Zen masters as a technique to discredit the verbal side of the mind. 'How do you see things so clearly', a Zen master was asked. 'I close my eyes', he answered. This little episode warns of the danger of believing in one's own systems and categories, the categories, that is, that guide the seeing eye. Another *kōan* describes three monks watching a streamer flutter in the breeze. One of them comments, 'The streamer is moving', while the second objects, 'The wind is moving'. The third monk says, 'You are both wrong. It is your mind that is moving.'

To distinguish the categories that are inherent in the object of observation from those that are in the mind is a fundamental problem of linguistics, as of all empirical sciences. Writing suggests fixed categories and stability: words, syllables, letters. This would not be a problem if writing systems were the object of inquiry and analysed in their own right in order to discover the structural relationships between their constitutive elements. However, they are often studied for what they would reveal about the nature of language as well as the mental processes underlying it. The very existence of writing is taken as proof that language can be studied as if it were a stable object consisting of fixed parts. Even though it is recognized as 'only' a representation of speech, its categories are allowed to intrude into linguistic inquiry. In order to avoid confusion, it is of great importance, therefore, clearly to distinguish that which writing represents of language from what it imposes onto it. This is no easy task, as the following definition, which we find in an ancient Egyptian text, indicates.

8 *What is writing?***Egypt**

Egyptian hieroglyphs were understood as models of the totality of all things. An ancient Egyptian onomasticon, that is, a list of words ordered for subjects, is described in the introduction as ‘the beginning of the teaching for clearing the mind, for instruction of the ignorant and for learning all things that exist: what Ptah created, what Thoth copied down’ (Gardiner 1947: 1). It was things that were recorded, not words. In his introduction to the lists he edited, Gardiner (1947: III), therefore, remarks:

Their title to be called Vocabularies could be upheld only if the lists could be shown to refer primarily to words, rather than to things, and that was clearly against the intention of the compilers.

That a direct relationship between things and written signs was assumed by the Egyptians is also suggested by a text about creation in which the hieroglyphs play a crucial role.

And the whole multitude of hieroglyphs were created by what was thought in the heart and dictated by the tongue. And thus Ptah was content when he had created all things and all hieroglyphs.

‘All things and all hieroglyphs’, Egyptologist Jan Assmann explains, means the forms of nature and their rendition in writing. The heart envisages the forms, the tongue voices them as words, which, by demiurgical powers, attain a physical existence as things. Things are modelled as inner writing in the heart subsequently to be vocalized by the tongue and transformed into perceptible entities of the phenomenal world. ‘There is a virtual congruency between the corpus of signs and the corpus of things’ (Assmann 1991: 91). According to this view the signs precede the things, they are models rather than images. Creation is an act of articulation in the heart, which finds expression in written signs first and then in speech. Externalized writing is thus more properly viewed as a discovery than an invention.

This account puts Aristotle’s linear order of the elements involved in writing on its head and, therefore, from an Aristotelian point of view, strikes us as bizarre. How is it to be understood? The pictorial clarity of Egyptian hieroglyphs is well known and offers an explanation. Does not the Egyptian understanding of writing differ from the Greek because of the iconic relationship between signs and objects so strikingly evident in Egyptian writing but lacking in Greek? This explanation, once again, implicitly assumes that properties of writing systems have repercussions on conceptions of what writing is. On this ground, the Egyptian idea of writing could be easily cast aside as irrelevant for a theory of writing proper, which consists in the representation of words, rather than things. Disturbingly, however, the Egyptians

are not alone. Similar definitions of writing have been proposed within the Western tradition and about Western, that is, alphabetic writing.

Massias

After alphabetic literacy had shaped Western ideas of writing for more than two and a half millennia, in the nineteenth century, Nicolas de Massias published a book in Paris entitled *The Influence of Writing on Thought and on Language*. At the time, writing attracted much attention among European intellectuals because François Champollion's decipherment of the Rosetta Stone in 1822 had demonstrated to the world that Egyptian hieroglyphs could actually be read and thus constituted writing, though of an utterly different kind than alphabetic writing. Like many of his contemporaries, Massias thought that writing, especially phonetic writing, was closely linked with language. He thought of it not just as a means of representing language or of cultivating it, but as something much more essential, which permits language to fully develop:

Here then is man, able by means of language, thought, spoken and written, to communicate with himself and with his present and absent similars. But these languages resolve themselves into a single one, which is limited, written speech. It is this necessity of writing which gives its name to grammar, osteology and framework of discourse. (Massias 1828: 5)

The first writing, without which man could not speak to himself and which distinguishes him from animals is that which the mind has traced in itself by its own action. (p. 7)

Phonographic writing is favorable to speech; it is speech; it makes up and breaks up the smallest elements of sound; and it sustains all movements and operations of the human spirit. (p. 96, quoted from Aronoff 1992: 72f.)

That writing is equated with speech sounds nebulous, but from the earlier quotes it is obvious that Massias does not speak metaphorically. Writing, for him, is at the heart of every language. Thought and spoken and written language are collapsed into one, written speech. As an ideal code it actively articulates rather than reproduces articulation performed in vocal speech.

In the Egyptian account of writing hieroglyphs are models of things created 'by what is thought in the heart'; in Massias' account language itself, its categories (grammar), structure (osteology) and framework of discourse are traced as writing in the mind. As we will see, the idea that writing is a blueprint for, rather than a representation of, speech is not as bizarre as it seems, although most linguists today would reject it out of hand.

10 *What is writing?***Contemporary views**

Although there is plenty of evidence that, in literate cultures, writing intrudes into the linguistic behaviour of people and that without writing many languages would not be what they are, the notion that writing is an active agent of language is unpalatable to many linguists for a number of reasons. One is that in modern linguistics languages are stripped of their historical dimension. Although the obvious fact that languages change in the course of time is acknowledged, the possibility that their nature may be affected by external factors such as writing is strictly denied, allegedly on the grounds that writing could not possibly have exercised any influence on the faculty of language because it is too recent an invention. The oldest records reach back a bit more than ten thousand years at best, while language must have evolved hundreds of thousands of years ago. Diachronic linguistics is essentially unhistorical, because, as a defining capacity of the human race, language is not supposed to change by virtue of a humanly contrived technology. There are no highly or less highly developed languages. This is a primitive of linguistics. Artifacts and technologies, such as writing, for example, are granted the potential to change the environment, but not humanity itself. Since language is conceived as an essential part of human nature, while writing is a mere technology, the effects of writing on language and by implication the complexities of their interrelationship remain largely unexplored.

Scholars in the language sciences who do believe that the invention or discovery of writing does make a difference, both with respect to what language is and how we think about it, are in a minority. Linguistic orthodoxy happily concurs with Ferdinand de Saussure's apodictic statement that made Aristotelian surrogationism a cornerstone of modern linguistics:

Language and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first. The linguistic object is not both the written and the spoken forms of words; the spoken forms alone constitute the object. (Saussure 1959: 23)

Following this prescriptive instruction, most introductory textbooks of linguistics simply exclude the problematic of writing or make do with a cursory review of a number of writing systems in the final chapter. Notice in passing that this is quite different in the Eastern tradition of the scientific study of language. The Encyclopedic Dictionary of Chinese Linguistics (*Zhōngguó yǔyánxué dàcídiǎn* 1991–2), for example, treats writing systems as its first topic at great length. A noble and widely accepted reason for ignoring writing or treating it lightly in the West is that all human languages are thought to be equal in the sense that they are expressions of the same inborn faculty of language. The concepts and theories