

WRITING AS LANGUAGE

Roy HARRIS

University of Oxford

Abstract : The refusal to accept writing as a form of language is among the most conspicuous features of the foundations of linguistic theory in the twentieth century. It is, like much else in modern linguistics, a legacy from the nineteenth century. To this consensus view there are relatively few exceptions; but, few as they are, they include some theorists of note: Firth, Gardiner, and Hjelmslev. More recently, the question 'What is writing?' has been addressed from a theoretical perspective which is quite different from that of the Copenhagen school: that of integrationism. Writing is, quite simply, the more powerful form of communication; which is why modern linguistics, for all its phonocentrism, is essentially dependent on having linguists who are literate.

Keywords : history of linguistics; writing; Saussure; Bloomfield; Martinet; Hjemslev; integrationism; glossematics

The refusal to accept writing as a form of language is among the most conspicuous features of the foundations of linguistic theory in the twentieth century. Saussure (1922, p.45) insisted that the spoken word alone, and not a combination of the spoken word with the written, constituted 'l'objet linguistique'. Bloomfield (1935, p.21), more bluntly, asserted that 'writing is not language', but merely a way of recording it. For Martinet (1966, p.11) the linguist ignores written forms on principle. The list could be extended.

ISBN: 0 08 043 438X

It is, like much else in modern linguistics, a legacy from the nineteenth century. Hermann Paul, the leader of the Neogrammarian school, is quite emphatic that not only is writing not language itself, but it is in no way an equivalent for language (1886, Ch. 21).

To this consensus view there are relatively few exceptions; but, few as they are, they include some theorists of note: Firth, Gardiner, and Hjelmslev. Firth (1937, Ch.4) quotes with approval what he calls 'a neglected saying of Archbishop Trench: "A word exists as truly for the eye as for the ear"', and adds 'In a sense written words are more real than speech itself' – a proposition which, if taken with any degree of epistemological seriousness, both Saussure and Bloomfield would have condemned as linguistic heresy. Gardiner (1951, p.109) goes further than Firth by treating writing as one of the 'secondary forms' of speech and arguing that 'linguistic theory, if sound, will apply alike to the spoken and the written form'. What exactly that parity of application would entail Gardiner does not explain. But Hjelmslev goes furthest of all. In a glossematic perspective, there is no question of speech taking priority over writing, since the languages that linguistics deals with are systems which can be manifested in any appropriate material form. This is made quite explicit by Uldall (1944, p.16) who asserts: 'The system of speech and the system of writing [...] are only two realizations of an infinite number of possible systems, of which no one can be said to be more fundamental than any other.' If that is so, then clearly it is wrong to treat a written language as other than equipollent with the corresponding spoken language. It is in no way 'derivative' or 'secondary'.

More recently, the question 'What is writing?' has been addressed from a theoretical perspective which is quite different from that of the Copenhagen school: that of integrationism (Harris 1993, 1996; Wolf 1997). Like glossematics, integrationism also rejects the orthodox doctrine of the primacy of speech, but for different reasons. The following is a brief attempt to elucidate these differences.

First of all, it is important to be clear about the hidden agenda which underlay the theoretical demotion of writing in the programme of modern linguistics. In the orthodox accounts of the history of linguistics, a great song and dance is made about 'correcting' a traditional view which accorded superiority to written texts, particularly those of major literary works. This is all part and parcel of a mythopoeic narrative which tells of the relatively recent emancipation of 'linguistics' from the long-suffered thraldom of 'philology'. (The opening chapter of Saussure's *Cours* gives a classic version.) Even if this narrative were historically credible, the question remains why the respective roles of speech and writing should then be *reversed* (rather than each being accorded its due).

The answer to this question becomes obvious when we examine the rationale implicit in the reconstructions of nineteenth-century linguistics. Hermann Paul was not the only scholar who realized that the whole Indo-European enterprise – the jewel in the crown of the new 'science'

ISBN: 0 08 043 438X

– became trivial if speech and writing were mere equivalents, i.e. actually related by simple one-to-one correlations. For then there would be no basis for using one as evidence for 'uncovering' a hidden history of the other. And since all or most of the available historical evidence was written, it followed that speech was inevitably cast in the role of what the 'evidence', when rightly interpreted, revealed. As soon as science is conceived as detecting truths hidden from view, a 'science' of language has little option but to treat its most visible materials as 'evidence' and to draw inferences therefrom about what is less visible or not visible at all. So there is a sense in which it was historically inevitable that when language was eventually drawn into the orbit of nineteenth-century science, speech and writing had to be fitted into a relationship of priority. Equipollence was out of the question.

However, that is not the whole story. That is to say, it does not explain why Saussure and most of his successors so meekly accepted – as it would seem – the priority which happened to suit their predecessors. Here the relevant factor again has to do which prevailing concepts of 'science'. Sciences – at least in Saussure's day – were supposed to have a unified field of inquiry. How to set up linguistics as just such a science is a preoccupation all too evident in the published text of the *Cours*. Now if the equipollence of speech and writing had been accepted as a theoretical postulate, that would have made it extremely difficult to devise a uniform method of analysis applicable to both. For example, Saussure's principle of the linearity of the linguistic sign cannot simply be transferred from speech to writing, since graphic signs have more than a single dimension of articulation. Nor would it have been possible to treat all linguistic communities as being on a par in the linguist's eyes, since in literate communities there would be 'advanced' forms of linguistic knowledge entirely lacking in pre-literate communities. The relegation of writing to a 'non-linguistic' status offered an easy solution to all such problems, while retaining the advantage of being able to use texts as evidential material whenever necessary. Linguistics thus became a completely phonocentric discipline.

Hjelmslev's revolt against this phonocentrism is based on exploiting (against Saussure) the Saussurean doctrine of form and substance. The integrationist treatment of writing has no such basis. From an integrational perspective, speech and writing differ inasmuch as they involve the integration of biomechanically different activities. At the same time they may be interconnnected, inasmuch as certain forms of speech can be integrated with certain forms of writing. Unlike the glossematician, the integrationist insists here on a distinction between glottic and non-glottic writing, a distinction which is either ignored or marginalized by most authorities on the history of writing, as it is by the great majority of linguists.

The integrationist is not open to the crucial objection that can be levelled against the glossematic position; namely, that in fact what are treated as spoken and written versions of 'the same language' in many cases manifestly do not correspond. For instance, words that are spelled alike may be pronounced differently and, conversely, words identically pronounced

ISBN: 0 08 043 438X

may have different spellings. Hjelmslev's admission that not all orthographies are "phonetic" (1943, pp.92-3) is an attempt to evade the more serious problem of demonstrating that asymmetries between spoken and written forms of 'the same language' are in principle avoidable.

This is no problem for the integrationist, since the integrationist does not postulate a single system underlying both. For the integrationist, glossematics is a prime example of the theoretical incoherence which results when the orthodox doctrine of the fixed code is carried to the point where the code is assumed to exist independently of any specific materialization whatsoever.

In what sense, then, for the integrationist is (glottic) writing a manifestation of language? In the sense that it integrates speech systematically into a higher-level complex of verbal communication. Which is quite different from claiming that it 'represents' speech. In other words, the argument is that if a person's ability to speak e.g. English is rightly regarded as a linguistic ability, then *a fortiori* that person's abilities to read and write English are rightly so regarded too. Writing is, quite simply, the more powerful form of communication; which is why modern linguistics, for all its phonocentrism, is essentially dependent on having linguists who are literate. The irony permeating the whole history of the subject since the nineteenth century has been that of the failure by linguists to realize the theoretical implications of their own literacy. Which is in turn a reflection of their more basic failure to realize the theoretical implications of the reflexivity of language.

REFERENCES

Bloomfield, L. (1935) *Language*. Allen & Unwin, London.
Firth, J.R. (1937) *The Tongues of Men*. Watts, London.
Gardiner, A. (1951) *The Theory of Speech and Language*, 2nd ed.Clarendon, Oxford.
Harris, R. (1993) *La Sémiologie de l'écriture*. CNRS, Paris.
Harris, R. (1996) *Signs of Writing*. Routledge, London.
Hjelmslev, L. (1943) *Omkring sprogteoriens grundlæggelse*. Munksgaard, Copenhagen.
Martinet, A. (1966) *Eléments de linguistique générale*, 6th ed. Armand Colin, Paris.
Paul, H. (1886) *Principien der Sprachgeschichte*, 2nd ed. Niemeyer, Halle.
Uldall, H.J. (1944) Speech and writing. *Acta Linguistica* **4**, pp.11-17.
Saussure, F. de (1922) *Cours de linguistique générale*, 2nd ed. Payot, Paris.
Wolf, S.G. (1997) 'Writing for the twenty-first century', *Language Sciences* **19**, pp.93-100.

ISBN: 0 08 043 438X