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THE LETTER KILLETH: WRITING AND SCRIPTISM

(“The Letter Killeth”: Penulisan dan Skriptisme)

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ABSTRACT

Linguistics has always stood against the belief, widespread across many cultures, that the true, primary, correct form of a language is located in its written version. Roy Harris called this belief ‘scriptism’, and made it one of the component fallacies of his ‘integrationist’ critique of mainstream linguistics, which he regarded as ‘segregationist’ in its aim of separating a language system from actual verbal communicative acts. Yet Harris’s treatment of spoken and written language is not entirely consistent with his own critique. In particular, it takes for granted that writing changes not only the way people think about language, but their cognitive capacity generally. The present article explores other arguments that have been made for and against such a view, and proposes that integrationists should be sceptical of Harris’s position concerning scriptism, and should think about ways of undertaking empirical research into the question of whether literacy entails or is required for a particular way of conceiving language, or whether on the contrary literacy already requires such a conception.

Keywords: History of linguistics, literacy, integrational linguistics, Roy Harris, writing and cognition, Jacques Derrida, Eric Havelock, Jack Goody.

ABSTRAK

Linguistik sejak sekian lama menentang kepercayaan yang tersebar luas dalam pelbagai budaya bahawa bentuk bahasa yang sebenar, utama dan paling betul terletak pada versi bertulisnya. Roy Harris menamakan kepercayaan ini sebagai “scriptism” (skriptisme) dan menjadikannya salah satu kekeliruan asas dalam kritikan linguistik integrasional (integrationist linguistics) terhadap linguistik arus perdana, yang menurut beliau bersifat “segregationist” (pemisahan) kerana bertujuan

memisahkan sistem bahasa daripada tindakan komunikasi verbal yang sebenar. Walau bagaimanapun, kupasan Harris tentang bahasa lisan dan bahasa tulisan tidak sepenuhnya selaras dengan kritiknya sendiri. Secara khusus, beliau mengandaikan bahawa penulisan bukan sahaja mengubah cara manusia berfikir tentang bahasa, malah turut mengubah keupayaan kognitif mereka secara umum. Makalah ini meneliti pelbagai hujah yang telah dikemukakan sama ada menyokong atau menolak pandangan tersebut. Seterusnya, makalah ini mencadangkan bahawa para sarjana linguistik integrasional seharusnya bersikap lebih skeptis terhadap pendirian Harris mengenai skriptisme, serta mempertimbangkan cara untuk menjalankan penyelidikan empirikal bagi meneliti sama ada literasi sememangnya membawa kepada, atau menjadi prasyarat kepada, suatu cara tertentu dalam memahami bahasa, ataupun sebaliknya, literasi itu sendiri telah pun memerlukan cara pemahaman sedemikian.

Kata kunci: Sejarah linguistik, literasi, linguistik integrasional, Roy Harris, penulisan dan kognisi, Jacques Derrida, Eric Havelock, Jack Goody.

τὸ γὰρ γράμμα ἀποκτείνει τὸ δὲ πνεῦμα
ζωοποιεῖ (2 Corinthians 3:6)

HARRIS ON SCRIPTISM

Anything that is valued spawns counter-values: rejection or ambivalence that, running against the general current of value, can define new creeds and identities, religious or professional. The general cultural value accorded to writing as a technology and an institution has been so great as to give rise to the belief that the written is the true, primary, correct form of language, with the spoken as its secondary, inferior realisation, more prone to variation and error.

The counter-value – the creed that defines linguistics, and gives linguists their professional identity – has been to insist that, on the contrary, the spoken is the true, primary, original form of language, with the written as its secondary representation, into which are introduced naïve analyses and false beliefs, including the errors that linguists call spelling pronunciations. This is the doctrine that students of linguistics have to reproduce in order to pass their examinations and get the degrees that certify their identity as members of the professional guild. It is in this sense the ‘orthodox’ belief, and, predictably, it has itself spawned counter-values that are grounded in certain logical leaps and lapses inherent in the orthodox view.

Scriptism was the term used by Roy Harris (1931-2015) for the fallacy through which written language gets prioritised as a model for spoken language – a fallacy that, as Harris was not the first to maintain, carries on in modern linguistics in spite of its dogmatic commitment to the opposite position, the primacy of spoken language.ⁱ The first six pages of Harris’s chapter “Language and writing” in his 1998 *Introduction to Integrational Linguistics* lays out why ‘orthodox linguistics’ – his term for any approach that segregates a language system from real acts of communication – is wrong “on all possible counts” where writing is concerned (Harris, 1998, p. 109), before the next nine pages explain his integrationist view. Adding yet another spiral to the vortex of values and counter-values, however, Harris’s description of the integrationist position, as I read it, reproduces some of the very features for which he has just rejected the approach he calls orthodox.ⁱⁱ

After quoting Leonard Bloomfield, Ferdinand de Saussure, Eugene Nida and André Martinet to illustrate the orthodox view of writing as secondary to spoken language, Harris says that

For the integrationist,

- (i) speech and writing cannot be separated in this way,
- (ii) the equation of language with speech is untenable,
- (iii) writing is not merely a way of recording the spoken word [...] (Harris, 1998)

The “in this way” of (i) is ambiguous. It could mean that speech and writing can indeed be separated but not put in a primary/secondary hierarchy; or it could mean that they should not be separated at all, but fully integrated, as (ii) appears to confirm, and as one would expect an ‘integrationist’ programme to advocate.

With (iii) we encounter another ambiguity, this time with ‘not merely’. Is writing ‘not merely’ a way of recording the spoken word because there is no difference between them? Or is the point that writing is a means of recording but more than *just* that, which would seem to imply that writing is a manifestation of language in its own right? This would tend toward the separatist reading of (i): speech and writing are distinct manifestations of language, but inseparable, and with neither subordinate to the other.

Further on we shall encounter a passage that may help explicate this. For now, the main lesson to take away is that the difference between integrationism and segregationism on this score appears to equate, in Harris’s view, with the difference between *distinguishing* speech from writing on the one hand and *separating* them on the other. That is a fine line, comparable perhaps to Saussure’s comparison of the two components of the linguistic sign, the signifier and the signified, to the front and back of a sheet of paper. Only the whole – the sheet, the sign, the language – is a concrete reality. The separate parts – the recto and verso, the signifier and signified, the spoken and written – are abstractions.

Harris then explains why “It is important to understand in the first place why orthodox linguistics is so anxious to keep speech and writing in segregated compartments”:

There are two reasons and they are interrelated. One is that if the written word were admitted as an alternative to the spoken word as a means of linguistic expression, then literate communities would have to be treated differently for purposes of linguistic analysis from pre-literate communities. Many linguistic communities would need to be divided into two or perhaps more subcommunities, depending on the degree of literacy of the members. The linguistic knowledge of a literate person would have to be treated as being cognitively of a different order from the linguistic knowledge of a pre-literate person. (Harris, 1998, p. 110).

Admitting “the written word as an alternative to the spoken word” seems to be an unfolding of (iii) above, hence what ‘the integrationist’ sees as the right understanding: linguistic expression is unitary, with speech and writing as its distinct manifestations – separate but equal, to borrow a slogan from a different form of segregationism. The motive Harris attributes to orthodox linguists is a curious one. It would be easier to believe that they were anxious to avoid treating “literate communities differently for purposes of linguistic analysis from pre-literate communities” if they had not done precisely that: treated them differently. Saussure stands apart from the others insofar as all his published work was historical, relying on written texts, although he also had a deep interest in the local dialects of the Suisse Romande and encouraged his students in Paris to investigate living spoken dialects in their home regions (see Joseph, 2012). But the others whom Harris names all treated literate and non-literate people’s language

differently – indeed, Bloomfield’s “Literate and Illiterate Speech” (1927), left unmentioned here, is the classic modern work on just that topic.

Nor does Harris explain why “if the written word were admitted as an alternative to the spoken word as a means of linguistic expression, then literate communities would have to be treated differently for purposes of linguistic analysis from pre-literate communities”. The *then* clause does not follow from the *if*-clause. Historically, linguistics has shown an ability and readiness to abstract away all the many cultural differences in language production and interpretation that linguistic anthropologists make the focus of their study. Similarly, with the “linguistic knowledge of a literate person would have to be treated as being cognitively of a different order from the linguistic knowledge of a pre-literate person”. *Have to be? Why?*

The orthodox linguists’ motive for relegating writing to a secondary position, Harris says, is that to admit that the linguistic knowledge of a literate person is “cognitively of a different order” would then “threaten the unity of linguistics as a discipline” (Harris, 1998, p. 110). A deliberate, self-interested ignorance on their part, then, based on what “are not considerations that carry any weight at all from an integrationist point of view” (Harris, 1998 p. 111).

For the integrationist, [...] there is no basis for treating either speech or writing as if these had arisen as independent, autonomous processes by which one individual made contact with another, just as travel by sea and travel by air offer alternative but quite unrelated ways of crossing the Atlantic to visit a friend. (Harris, 1998.)

This helps with the ambiguity of “speech and writing cannot be separated in this way”, discussed above, and here reworded as “there is no basis for treating either speech or writing as if these had arisen as independent, autonomous processes”. Now, though, some cognitive dissonance arises: if there is no basis for treating either speech or writing as if these had arisen as independent processes, then why should it matter if the focus of analysis is on just one or the other?

What exactly Harris thought about the linguistic knowledge of a literate person being cognitively of a different order from that of “a pre-literate person” is not spelled out here. He says that such difference is what orthodox linguists want to avoid, and the previous page stated that “the integrationist position is opposed to the orthodox position on all possible counts with regard to the status and study of writing”. Harris does not reject the notion of “linguistic knowledge” altogether, to judge from passages elsewhere in this book where he uses it in a non-dismissive way. Nor is he using “cognitively” to refer to something like general intelligence, since this is specifically about “linguistic knowledge”.

Does Harris himself then think that the linguistic knowledge of a literate and a pre-literate person are cognitively of a different order? Turning to the second part of the chapter, the answer appears to be that, yes, he does.

What is characteristic of writing is that the forms have a temporal duration which allows for reprocessing [...]. The possibility of reprocessing is extremely important for social and cognitive reasons. It allows written information to be checked. That is precisely why documents have played such an important part in the development of civilization. (Harris, 1998, p. 122)

Cognitive reasons. For Harris, not just the linguistic knowledge but the sort of cognition tied to the development of civilisation is directly bound up with writing. But how to square this with what he said about there being no basis for treating either speech or writing as if these had arisen as independent, autonomous processes?

It is at this point that Harris introduces the notion of ‘scriptism’.

Writing is a tool which enables speech to be codified. [...] This has important consequences not only in that access to these codifications requires literacy, and therefore puts educational programmes on a different basis than any available in preliterate societies, but also for the development of linguistic reflexivity. In a literate society, one learns to think of speech in terms of how it might be written down, and hence to regard the written language as a kind of model for ‘good’ speech. The integrationist term for this kind of priority that characterizes attitudes to language in literate societies is **scriptism**. (Harris, 1998, p. 123)

Calling writing “a tool” sounds more like the orthodox view that Harris rejects than what one might expect an integrationist to say. More seriously, both the first and the second sentence quoted above are factually false. Pāṇini’s *Aṣṭādhyāyī*, which has a strong claim to be the founding text of language analysis, *was an oral text*, its composition based on principles of memorisation. It was written down belatedly, after centuries at the centre of an educational programme aimed specifically at the codification of Sanskrit. Codification demonstrably does *not* require literacy, unless it includes ‘oral literacy’ – but Harris never uses the term in that way. Literacy for him is writing. He does say that “the integrationist does not define writing in terms of marks on a surface. Even though many forms of writing do in practice, involve marking a surface, that is not a necessary condition” (ibid., p. 122), but the examples he goes on to give are of skywriting and neon signs: writing in the everyday sense, just in non-traditional media.

So, to sum up Harris’s position: although writing and speech cannot be hierarchised or treated as historically independent, the advent of writing represents a cognitive milestone, directly bound up with the development of civilisation, and of codification of the language, which produces the error of scriptism that the education system serves and spreads. Orthodox linguists err in pretending that writing is secondary to spoken language, whereas integrationists recognise that spoken language is different outside a literate society, where “one learns to think about speech in terms of how it might be written down, and hence to regard the written language as a kind of model for ‘good’ speech” (Harris, 1998, p. 122). That is a fallacy, says Harris, because written language should not be a model for spoken language.

This also happens to be exactly what orthodox linguists have always said. Central to the ‘descriptivist’ doctrine that has differentiated linguistics from ‘prescriptive’ grammar since the seventeenth century is the insistence that it is a historical illusion to take written language as primary and spoken language as its secondary, degraded realisation. But when orthodox linguists say this, Harris accuses them of erroneously separating writing from speech, and regarding writing merely as a way of recording speech. When he himself says it, though, he is revealing the fallacy of scriptism.

There is a tension in Harris (1998) between his maintaining that “there is no basis for treating either speech or writing as if these had arisen as independent, autonomous processes” (p. 111) and his belief that “The advent of writing thus constitutes a milestone in the cultural history of any community. Once its members become literate, their notion of ‘speech’ will never be the same again” (Harris, 1998, p.

124). The second statement implies that speech arose prior to writing, as an independent, autonomous process, directly contradicting the first statement. The first is what his integrationist creed ought logically to maintain; so whence comes the second? The last quoted passage continues:

Writing, as Love puts it,

achieves the object of fixing the identification of utterances (in the limited sense of providing them with something laying down what it is your utterance was an utterance of. If you write it *CAT*, then *that* is what you said. (Love, 1998)

Not only does a preliterate society have no means of ‘recording’ speech, but -- more importantly -- it has no means of conceptualizing speech as a counterpart of *anything else*. The identification of language with speech is total and inevitable. (Harris, 1998, p. 124)

Harris’s framing of the quote neglects to acknowledge the nature of oral cultures, including the Indian one within which Pāṇini’s grammar was composed, or the Greek one in which were created, recorded and transmitted not only the Homeric epics but *the technology of writing itself*. Countless oral cultures have flourished through the history of the human race, into the present day; Harris airbrushes them out of existence. Adding insult to injury, Harris calls any society that does not use writing (in the narrow sense) “preliterate”, a term that has been widely rejected for decades on account of its implication that any society without writing is behind the curve in terms of the development that must lead inevitably to literacy.ⁱⁱⁱ Even Goody and Watt (1963), on whom more below, used the less Whiggish “non-literate”.

Further down the page of Harris’s *Introduction*, we find this item among the “Questions for discussion”:

5. ‘Writing restructures consciousness’ (Ong, 1982). What aspects of this ‘restructuring’ would an integrationist emphasize?

– which sounds like an endorsement of Ong’s message, despite the hedge of putting scare quotes around ‘restructuring’. Ong (1982), about whom more below, is one of three ‘further readings’ for this chapter, a rare instance of one did not author by Harris or one of his former students. It is surprising to see Harris align himself with Ong and the ‘Toronto School’, whose most famous member was Marshall McLuhan. Their profound commitment to the separation of spoken and written language is easier to reconcile with the position of orthodox linguists than with Harris’s programme of integrating the two. I expect that McLuhan and Ong would have asked Harris whether scriptism might not be an inalienable aspect of how writing contributed to the development of civilisation – whether the spread of ‘scriptist’ thinking, even to illiterate people, might not have made the spread of literacy immeasurably more efficient. In which case, can it really be dismissed as an illusion or myth, rather than an alternative conception of language that, by Harris’s lights (since he is not anti-civilisation), has been extraordinarily valuable?

THE INDIVIDUAL AND HISTORICAL DIMENSIONS

In Harris’s comments on the effects of writing on cognition and consciousness, the invention of writing and an individual’s learning to write get fused together. Investigating the invention of writing is no easy task, given that there can, by definition, be no written records of the process, and such oral records as come down to us have been heavily mythologised. The closest thing to observational insights lie in what can be inferred from the comparison of different writing systems, and of literate and illiterate

societies – or transferred from the experience of learning to write after the invention of writing. The last of these is alluring, since it is an experience, every literate person shares. Indeed, it takes considerable effort to resist transferring memories of our own pre-literacy onto the pre-literacy of the human race. Those memories are not necessarily distant: if when travelling I find myself in a place where all the signs are in a script of which I am ignorant, I am functionally illiterate. Yet this is not the same experience as living before the invention of writing, when no one was illiterate. That may sound counter-intuitive: wasn't everyone illiterate until writing was invented? To answer 'yes' to that question would be anachronistic, because the literate/illiterate dichotomy could not exist before writing. Everyone then was neither literate nor illiterate.

The categories only apply once writing exists. Moving from the logical to the practical level, (il)literacy as a concept presumes a recognition of the value of writing, to the point that learning it becomes a norm. How quickly that followed upon the invention of writing cannot be measured without knowing when writing was invented, and that can only be guessed at based on accidents of textual survival. But by the time of Socrates, we know that worries about the dangers of, not illiteracy, but literacy, were strong. Their *locus classicus* is Plato's *Phaedrus* and other dialogues. A few centuries later St Paul is worrying about the effects of literacy on the interpretation of the covenant, warning that "The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life" (2 Corinthians 3:6). The notion of the dangers of writing carries on into the modern period with Rousseau and Saussure (see Derrida, 1967) and Harris's scriptism. It can be detected too in those modern-day forms of exoticism which excoriate missionaries for destroying traditional cultures by foisting writing on them, enslaving them to Western capitalist hegemony.

The more writing is held up as a watershed in how people conceive of language, the wider the gap becomes between our modern pre-literate experience in a literate society and that of a non-literate past or present. Before we fold our personal experience into our reconstruction of history, we should consider what can be learned by separating the two.

Personally, I remember being socialised into writing in various stages. The first was learning the letters of the Roman alphabet, largely through the Alphabet Song, with help from children's television programmes. The second was learning to write the letters. The third was learning to read words – in English, with my mother's help, and in Latin, in church, following the Mass in my missal. The fourth was learning to write words, almost always in conjunction with drawing a picture of what the word meant. The fifth and sixth stages, which happened almost simultaneously, were taught to read and write the Arabic alphabet by my grandfather, for whom the important thing was to teach me the letters, which held a sort of magic for him (for some reason he was particularly enthralled by ح). Putting them together into the words of his mother tongue was just an exercise for showing how the letters worked their magic. The seventh, and the greatest challenge of all because of the nervous-muscular coordination involved, was learning to produce cursive script, which however took little if any special effort to read.

If I think about how my own socialisation into reading and writing may have affected how I conceive of language, several ways come to mind. It was surprising to be corrected for writing *thee apple* – my socialisation into the awareness that, in writing English, sound can be trumped by word-identity. *The* look the same whether the vowel is /i/ (before a vowel) or schwa (before a consonant). I ought to have picked that up from reading but was confused by *thee* in the English prayers in the missal. This awareness of word-identity may have affected how I think of words and letters and sounds, and language more generally. It certainly contributed to my understanding that learning these arbitrary rules was a passport to being received as an educated person, with all the advantages and opportunities that entailed.

Did it also transmit to me a conception I previously lacked about what a language is and how it works? Probably. Maybe. I would not know how to measure this. In approaching the question from a scientific perspective, I am obliged to say: I don't know. In particular, I don't know how much came through learning to read and write *per se*, and how much through the things I heard my teachers and others say. To determine the answer with any degree of non-impressionistic bias, I would need to generate two twin versions of my young self, take the three of us back in a time machine to Nineteen Never-Mind, and observe one young me learning to read and write while ensuring that the second remains illiterate – indeed, that the second mini-me is kept insulated from all manifestations of literary culture, including broadcasting. By this point, the circumstances in which the two young mes are being raised differ so completely that it would be illusory to imagine I was isolating literacy as a variable for investigation. In sum: I expect that learning to read and write has an impact on how I conceive of (a) language, and I wish it were possible to determine whether or not that is so but am forced to admit that it is impossible.

Moreover, even if I persuaded myself by the weight of the evidence that learning to read and write affected my conception of language, it would be a further stretch to maintain that this must be the case for everyone. To assume this would be not just unscientific but, I should imagine, contrary to the spirit of integrationism, with its deep scepticism toward any attempt to project one's own interior experience onto others. Even if one considers such projection justifiable, the facts I have related about my learning to read and write are so particular that I cannot imagine many people having the same experience as mine, to the point that becoming literate does not designate a particular path, but countless paths that lead to the same end. But perhaps the end is not the same; and yet Harris's treatment of the subject never wavers from the implication that the end and the path are each the same for every literate person.

Part of the problem with my intuition that my own experience of literacy is generalisable is the peculiar nature of that experience, and the awareness that everyone's experience has its own particularities. Another part is that not even the seven stages of my socialisation into literacy that I laid out cover the whole story. I learned to speak my mother tongue almost entirely from literate people, and if their utterances were shaped by their experience of writing, those utterances were not specially marked in the 'input' they provided to my 'acquisition'. Even if I had myself never learned to read or write, I would still speak the language of literacy, just by virtue of growing up in a literate culture. It is inescapable. To reach back into my memory of pre-literacy is to reach back to memory before language, where I find only a few images, ones recalled so often throughout my literate life that I cannot know whether they are original memories, or later, post-literate internal reshapings. I suspect the latter just because, if I try, I can shift the perspective from seeing through my infant eyes to seeing myself as an infant having the recalled experience, something I could never actually have witnessed.

Any hope of finding living experience that would shed light on what language was like before writing would need to come from a culture unexposed to literacy. Harris's published work on these matters shows little curiosity about such cultures, beyond noting their existence and the fact that they have not bought into the 'Western language myth' of which scriptism is a part. Yet they invariably have their own language myths, with important features in common with what Harris decries as 'fixed-code theory', 'surrogationalism' and so on, concerning which he is tacit. In saying this I am aware that I have never done anthropological fieldwork among people who do not read and write; my knowledge of cultures in which literacy does not figure comes, ironically enough, mainly from books and articles, and also spoken lectures – but then lectures, a word which in French means 'readings', is a genre in which the line between the spoken and written are blurred (a point to which I shall return).

TECHNOLOGICAL DETERMINISM

My research into language standardisation (starting with Joseph, 1981, 1987), has never turned up a study of a culture in which the investigators found no evidence of conceptions of right and wrong, good and bad, better and worse ways of speaking the language. This is true of languages that have never been written as of those with a long-written tradition, even if the latter have more fully developed manifestations of standardness such as grammar, textbooks and style guides.

In earlier decades these observations sometimes came within studies with a broader focus on the link between writing and ‘civilisation’. The idea of such a link had become firmly embedded in thinking both inside and outside academia since at least the late eighteenth century. In the 1950s and 1960s it took on renewed vigour with the writings of McLuhan, which originated within academia but spread into popular culture. In the same period the related idea was becoming widely accepted that the invention and spread of writing brought with it cognitive evolution: that people do not think, do not perceive the world, in the same way after writing as before. Here work by anthropologists, notably Goody & Watt, along with McLuhan’s Toronto School colleague Father Walter Ong (e.g. Ong, 1967, 1982), were taken as authoritative proof of a theory that, like Darwinian evolution, seemed so intuitively plausible that, while called a theory, it was treated as though it were a fact. It helped too that Goody & Watt were waving the flag of racial equality:

Michael Cole, who worked closely with Goody, describes Goody & Watt (1963)

as starting from the following premise: We can no longer accept the ethnocentric notion that rational thought characterizes people who live in complex societies, whereas prelogical thought is typical of simpler societies, nor can we afford to ignore the differences between societies that represent polar opposites with respect to the complexity of their technological infrastructure. As a result, Goody and Watt set out to understand the differences between civilized and primitive societies by focusing on the different ways that cultural transmission takes place in them. (Cole & Cole, 2006, p. 307)

In fact, Goody and Watt (1963) did not frame their paper quite as the Coles report. The “ethnocentric notion” is taken as already rejected, so much so that a corrective is needed to restore attention to “the differences between societies”; and the matter is not addressed head on but in terms of academic disciplines:

We can no longer accept the view that anthropologists have as their objective the study of primitive man, who is characterised by a “primitive mind”, while sociologists, on the other hand, concern themselves with civilised man, whose activities are guided by “rational thought” and tested by “logico-empirical procedures”. The reaction against such ethnocentric views, however, has now gone to the point of denying that the distinction between non-literate and literate society has any significant validity. This position seems contrary to our personal observaton [*sic*] [...]. (Goody & Watt 1963, p. 305)

Note my *sic* at the end: how ironic that a typo (“observaton”) should have slipped in here, precisely in the context of literacy and precisely in the word *observation* – as if the text is whispering to us to be wary of Goody’s & Watt’s observational prowess where literacy is concerned.

Anthropologists began calling Goody's & Watt's theory into question early on, and by the 1980s the charge of technological determinism had been widely levelled at Goody (Cole & Cole, 2006, give an overview and defence). In 1982 appeared both Ong's *Orality and Literacy* and the linguist Deborah Tannen's 'The myth of orality and literacy'. *The Alphabet Effect* (1986) by McLuhan's associate Robert K. Logan would be answered by Paul Grosswiler's 'Dispelling the alphabet effect' (2004). There is typically a lag time between developments in a specialised field and their filtering out to the broader academic community, the more so when the developments are questioning a theory with the seeming explanatory power of Goody's & Watt's, but if the historian Elizabeth L. Eisenstein was aware of the charges of technological determinism that anthropologists had raised, she was unfazed by them when publishing her 1979 book. It pushed the theory further by maintaining that the invention of the printing press had brought about another stage in cultural and cognitive evolution – again taking an idea with roots going back at least to the late eighteenth century and giving it a new lease of life by translating it into modern academic terms.

As an example of the overweening power of this kind of technologically deterministic explanation, consider this passage from Mulholland (2013), discussing how oral 'voice' was brought into written poetry in the eighteenth century:

While Renaissance scholars believed that handwriting conveyed someone's personality, making the pen an extension of the human body, print was thought to be the opposite: impersonal and anonymous. The printing press separated the text from the body, creating an alternate persona that, while metaphorically related to the body of its creator, was also understood as being detached from it. This feeling about print had intensified by the eighteenth century, leading many poets to experiment with ways of recreating an intimate connection between author, text, and reader, while still maintaining the benefits of print's alternate personae. (Mulholland, 2013, p. 18)

A compelling story. But the printing press is an invention of the fifteenth century. We are now talking about three hundred years later. What evidence is there that "This feeling about print had intensified by the eighteenth century", apart from the very developments that the technology is being invoked to explain? The problem with circular reasoning is that, like a vortex, it sucks readers in and makes us dizzy.

Goody & Watt and others pay lip service to oral cultures, but whatever capability or power they accord to them is followed by how literate cultures are infinitely more powerful and capable. In retrospect it is surprising that in the early 1960s transferring the value-laden primitive-rational divide onto the technology of literacy could still be perceived as a non-ethnocentric, indeed anti-ethnocentric move. But this is the same period in which Basil Bernstein could purport to be liberating underprivileged children by calling their working-class languages 'restricted codes' and arguing that only middle-class 'elaborated codes' make any sense of individual identity possible (Bernstein, 1964, pp. 58, 63; see also Joseph, 2004, 68-70). While some technology was perceived as oppressive, writing and printing were still, like education, generally seen in their traditional roles as forces of social change and liberation from oppression, hence not likely to be associated with ethnocentrism, even though they clearly 'belonged' to powerful societies and were proportionally weaker in 'underdeveloped' ones.

Sometime between then and now it became more commonplace to perceive 'development' as the loss of something essential, the Faustian selling out of who-we-as-a-culture-really-are for the allures and conveniences of modernity and technology. That perspective was always there; it was the driving force

behind the pastoral poetry of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and bound up with the bringing in of the oral voice that Mulholland has studied.

Saussy (2016) has told the story of ‘orality and its technologies’ in twentieth-century culture, including linguistics. One of its main threads was the desire for an authentic understanding of both Homeric and Biblical texts, as the products of oral cultures that were only set down in writing belatedly, rather than composed in ‘written language’. What sent Milman Parry to Paris to study with Antoine Meillet, and then to the Balkan mountains to record living epic oral poetic performances, was his conviction that Homer was misunderstood by us moderns, who need to learn to hear his voice (or voices, since the consensus was that the Homeric poems were the product of what we’d now call ‘distributed cognition’) undistorted by the prism of our literacy.

Persuading scholars to put the prism aside and open their ears was a good, methodologically healthy and mentally hygienic thing for Parry to attempt. The question is whether we can assume that what we then hear is the ‘real’ Homer, the promised land, the Utopia of undistorted original essence, the desire for which motivates the attempt.

Insofar as what Harris claims about writing and cognition is on the level not of individuals but of whole cultures, and how writing historically sparked the reification of language within them – perhaps just with one individual, after which the ideas could spread to others either through spoken or written language – we are left with the problem of the ‘originary moment’ when writing may have crucially aided ‘us’ (i.e., an unknown individual within our culture) to bring about the reification of the language-as-code idea. Where do we look for the evidence that will help us determine his claim’s validity? And what would it take to falsify the proposition? If it cannot be falsified, it is not a hypothesis, but a conjecture – a narrative that may offer a plausible explanation, but that could be a Just-So Story and hence must be treated with sceptical caution.

WRITING AND ORALITY

It seems odd that an ‘integrationist’ programme would want to rely on such a strong segregation of the spoken and written. In terms of its effects on conceptions of language, writing is treated by integrationists, usually implicitly though quite explicitly in Davis’s case, as an interloper into a way of thinking that should properly be formed by spoken language. It is not unlike the ‘dangerous supplement’ of Rousseau, or the source of monstrosities described by Saussure. But they were not asserting the need to integrate communication in all its forms into the analysis of language. Whatever Saussure’s other inconsistencies as exposed by Derrida (1967), this was not among them.

Naomi Baron, a linguist sympathetic to integrationism, has kept track of how more recent technological developments may have affected how we conceive of language, and specifically of how the spoken-written dichotomy has been blurred.

Even before the personal computer revolution, linguists attempting to characterize the difference between speech and writing found themselves qualifying each category with terms like “paradigmatic” or “typical”. Empirically, we all knew that formal speech had at least as much in common with “paradigmatic” writing as it did with “paradigmatic” speech, and that a note passed under the table in class (these days likely to be a text message received on a mobile phone) was as much like speech as it was like writing.

Historically, the paradigmatic relationship between the two modalities has shifted several times. Today, we increasingly find that technologies for representing speech and writing are becoming interchangeable. For example, speech-recognition software enables us to dictate to computers, which then dutifully produce written text; speech-synthesis software reads email or text messages aloud. Perhaps it is time to stop struggling to establish a line between speech and writing and, instead, to replace the exception-ridden dichotomous model with a new approach. (Baron, 2005)

I mentioned earlier the ‘lectures’ I have heard about non-literate people, and how the lecture is one of these hybrid genres. Even when not written out and read out, they contain chunks that the lecturer composed in writing and has largely or wholly committed to memory, making them doubly ‘written’. But those scare quotes I have just used are my way of writing *hybrid*: written but not written. Written₁, but not written₂. This is a way of performing Baron’s desideratum of replacing the dichotomous model.

In Joseph (2006, p. 34) I discuss how I have gradually become aware of a fundamental problem with the long tradition within philology and linguistics of studying – or refusing to study – standard or literary languages and the process of their creation. The large quantity of work in this area from the preceding hundred years (surveyed in Joseph, 1987) was mostly forgotten because linguists did not want to confront this issue, or to question the basic natural-artificial divide that was fundamental to their conception of language (see Joseph, 2000), according to which speech was natural and writing artificial. The literature on language standardisation was equally committed to that divide, but linguists preferred on the whole to consider the matter settled. The few who took a lively interest –Einar Haugen, Heinz Kloss, Charles Ferguson, Joshua Fishman – never challenged the concept of standard languages or the existence of a fairly uniform process that brought them about; on the contrary, they shored up those ideas, and in Fishman’s case tried to make them even more uniform and readily applicable in ‘nation building’ in the ‘developing’ world.

What none of them did, however, was to publish work that asked questions about how the standardisation process related to the unity of those ‘natural’ dialects. Parallels were drawn and continuities recognised with the koineisation of urban dialects, but this was put in oppositional terms to the ‘authentic’ dialects destroyed in the process. Such was the outlook in Weinreich’s *Languages in Contact* (1953). One had to go back to Gauchat (1905) and the section of Saussure (1916) on linguistic geography to find sustained discussion of why and how dialects became unified as dialects and why patterns of change might cross dialect boundaries; but even there, the issue of how this related to the formation of standard languages was not raised. In Saussure (1916) what relates to standard languages is treated under the heading of literary languages, where it is marginalised in line with Saussure’s treatment of written language as a mere secondary representation of real, spoken language. Hence it does not align for Saussure with his deep questioning of linguistic ‘identity’, how it is that repeated utterances, while never identical, are nevertheless received as representing the same sign.

Once we manage to get past the natural-artificial dichotomy that underlies the divisions of labour in linguistics, it becomes clearer that the process whereby a standard language is formed and spread is not different in kind from the process whereby a dialect is formed and learned by its speakers. Such differences as exist between the two are contingent ones, having to do with social and institutional factors, which are themselves thought of in the same dichotomous way, where home, childhood and villages set in green fields represent Nature, while school, adulthood and cities of grey concrete represent the opposite – artifice, the inauthenticity that comes with loss of innocence. The natural is the Garden of Eden; its opposite is Babel. In Eden there is no writing, or building, or any strangers, until

one appears and brings about Fall. In Babel all is directed toward building a tower, an artificial mountain. In both cases the problem is humans striving toward complete knowledge, either through eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge or building a tower to heaven, where all knowledge ultimately lies. Just as Eden and Babel, seemingly polar opposites, end up leading to the same desire and bringing on disaster, the authentic dialect and the standard language differ superficially but not fundamentally.

One of Derrida's central points concerning spoken and written language is, as mentioned earlier, that before writing there was no 'spoken language', which could only be conceived after writing was invented; and that the pre-dichotomy language had the essential features that modern linguists ascribe to the written side of the speech-writing divide, including distribution across space and endurance through time. Were this not the case, the Homeric epics, and the Bible, which begins with two different accounts of creation apparently derived from two distinct oral traditions, would not have been possible. All the research into modern oral traditions carried out in the twentieth century has testified that oral transmission is capable of at least as much reproductive fidelity as is writing (which is itself far from perfect in this respect). Of course, the development and spread of sound recording has relegated most ideas about the spoken-written distinction to the pre-recording past.

Does Harris's definition of writing include sound recording? It is unclear. Maybe he would categorise it under 'repetition' and keep writing restricted purely to the visual; but that would raise questions about people who are blind or otherwise visually impaired, who do or do not know Braille, and whether their conceptions of language differ from those of sighted literate people. Are Audio Books not written? Is being read the same as or different from reading in regard to how a person conceives of language? This brings us back to Baron's point about the dichotomy having been surpassed: perhaps this means that the effects of writing have now been so wholly integrated into spoken language that Harris's views concerning their effect on concepts of language should be treated as purely historical ones, with no counterpart in the experience of people today, outside rare contexts of isolation from anyone touched in some way by literacy.

I agree with Baron that the definitions and characterisations we have set up for spoken and written language – which, though always leaky, seemed to hold water for much of the modern period – have given way with the flood of new technologies. At the same time, the more one learns about oral cultures, past and present, the more one questions whether writing was really the sea change that people in a literate culture perceive it as being, to the point of making it into an evolutionary leap in human consciousness and cognition. Nor is it clear to what extent any of the cognitive effects attributed to literacy are due to the *process* of writing, as opposed to the availability of written texts. In using writing as the general term Harris prioritises history over individual experience: each of us learns to read before we write; some people only read and cannot write, including but not limited to those who have lost the use of their hands; and it may be the experience of seeing language written, rather than inscribing it, that affects how we think of it. I can imagine that the development of motion pictures and radio contributed to new ways of conceiving language and communication in the first quarter of the twentieth century, yet very few people were involved in making movies or in broadcasting. It was the experience of *seeing* movies and *hearing* radio that counted, and so too with reading, even if most readers also write. And with oral epic poetry: hearing it, not composing or reciting it, was the core experience of oral literacy that everyone in the culture experienced.

Havelock (1963) agreed with his Toronto School contemporaries that the development of writing brought a sea change by making 'abstract' thinking possible, but he was equally concerned with *why* this happened, as well as with how it was possible for epic poetry to develop before writing.^{iv} Havelock

contends that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were far more than entertaining stories or even historical records. They were the encyclopaedia of everything the Greeks deemed worthy of knowing and passing on to the populace at large, now and in the future. How, he asks, was this possible before the invention of writing?

The epic poems themselves seemed to exclude the rather obvious answer that metre and other aspects of poetic form made memorisation possible. They do not use rhyme, their metric patterns are not regular but complex and varying, and no tradition had come down of their musical settings, apart from pictorial and dramatic representations of bards reciting while plucking the lyre. Their sheer length had inclined some scholars to speculate that the Greeks had developed writing centuries before any of the surviving attestations. Others, however – Havelock among them – had been more persuaded by a different line of research. The recordings that Parry and Albert Lord (1960) made of a living tradition of oral poetry in the Balkans opened a direct link to Homeric prehistory, or at least as direct a line as anyone might imagine possible.

Through Parry's work, Havelock came to believe that the Homeric tradition had not depended on writing at all, indeed that its spirit was wholly antithetical to everything that the written word represented.^v The Balkan bards showed how poetic texts of vast length, far beyond what the average school-educated European could possibly commit to memory, were retainable, in unvarying form (though cf. Saussy, 2016, pp. 63-73), using all the resources of both mind and body, including music, dance, and the sort of embodied performance that inspired psychological identification of both bard and audience with the characters whose voices were being channelled.

Havelock maintained that the form was an integral part of how the encyclopaedia contained in the Homeric epics became embodied in both reciters and audience. Based again on modern oral traditions as observed by Parry, Havelock contends that "the main onus of sheer repetition, which the memory needs as its prop, is transferred to the meaningless metrical pattern which is retained tenaciously in the memory", and the verbal content is "then so expressed as to fit acoustically into the pattern". This process restricts the possible combinations of sound and rhythmic elements, which would otherwise be practically unlimited, and so "The requirements of memory are met in a fundamental fashion through practising a strict economy of possible combination of reflexes", where by reflexes Havelock means all the movements of the organs such as tongue, lips, lungs and larynx by which speech is produced (Havelock, 1963, pp. 148-149).

But still other bodily reflexes are brought into play to assist the educational work. The performer accompanies his recital with music played on the lyre. The music will

continually confirm his memory of the pattern which he is keeping. But the more obvious effect is directed not to himself but to his audience. Their ear drums are bombarded simultaneously by two disparate sets of sounds organised in concordant rhythm: the metrical speech and the instrumental melody. The latter must be repetitive; it [...] exists only to make the words more recollectable [...]. (Havelock, 1963, p. 150)

In contemporary oral recitation as observed by Parry, the bodies of the audience are pulled into the rhythm of the epic, as their legs and feet are brought into "motions as organised in dancing". Once again "we confront here a pattern of organised actions, the function of which is mnemonic. It moves in a rhythm which parallels that of the spoken words, and spaces and punctuates them, so that the choric recitation becomes also a bodily performance". Even if we cannot know whether this audience

participation also took place in ancient performances, we can be confident that the audience at least watched the performers' movements, "in which case", Havelock says, "the mnemonic assistance is mediated to them through their eyes". Havelock believed that the physiological patterns involved "become automatic reflexes" in the vocal organs, which are "then strengthened by parallel behaviour in other parts of the body (ears and limbs)" (Havelock, 1963, p. 151).

That is 'writing' at its most immediate and powerful – inscribing a text into the nervous system, not merely onto paper.^{vi} In that sense our "linguistic knowledge" is also written in us, whether or not we are literate in the narrow sense. I do not mean innately written in a genetic-code sense; that may be present but is of little consequence in comparison to the deep kind of 'writing' that occurs with interactive experience.

CONCLUSION

"The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life" embodies an idea deeply rooted in European culture, that the letter, *gramma*, is death, in contrast to the life of the spirit, *pneuma*, literally 'breath', the medium of speech. But in ancient Greek, *gramma* is not just writing in the narrow sense. In some passages of Aristotle, it clearly means 'articulation' of vocal speech. This is emblematic of the ways in which Derrida (1967) shows how linguistics has been grounded in a discourse based on an 'inside' and 'outside' of language – and how, on closer inspection, the outside turns out to be inside. That is the case with writing: excluded from language by linguists, even as they could only imagine and describe the inside of language in terms of writing. One of Derrida's central aims is to reveal how dichotomies such as these are used, deliberately or unwittingly, to construct the foundation of a 'science' of language, a science which purports *not* to be constructed, but to be the true revelation of Nature itself.

Harris's remarks on scriptism and literacy take the form, not of questions, but of the true revelation of Nature itself. It is put as a one-size-fits-all principle, when the question needs to allow for as many potential sizes as there are wearers. The central thrust of the integrationist critique was always that orthodox linguistics has set up an illusory abstract system of language as the primary reality it aims to comprehend, when instead it should be looking at instances of communication, with all their particularities, which are the true, concrete reality. How does a construct such as 'linguistic reflexivity' fail to be the sort of abstraction against which Harris routinely does battle?

What Cole and Cole (2006) identify as 'the Goody myth' is the view, widespread in the anthropological literature, that Goody & Watt had set up literacy as a universal explanatory principle, when they ought to have looked at the particular situations in which reading and writing have been taken up in different cultures. The Coles call this a myth because Goody and Watt actually do give most of their attention to the particularities of individual cases, so much so that for Halverson (1992) their article 'implodes' because of the contradictions and incoherence between the two. Harris, proclaiming a school of thought that rejects abstract nomothetic systematising in favour of ideographic particularities of instances of communication, nevertheless shows no interest in the particularities of how learning to write may have shaped conceptions of language either historically or contemporaneously, with individuals or societies. It may be his scepticism about knowing the experience of anyone other than oneself that leads him to treat 'writing' as a universal, homogeneous process, making it like the concepts of 'language' or 'Universal Grammar' toward which his scepticism is absolute, rather than like the biomechanical, macrosocial and circumstantial/contextual particularities he places at the heart of the integrationist creed.

It is to be hoped that future work along these lines will apply Harris's sceptical spirit to his own conception of writing and its effects on how people think about language. We should all, starting with me, listen more to what the rest of us (I do not mean other linguists) have to say about our experience and understanding of language, communication and literacy. The integrationist programme for understanding the circumstantial, the contextual has been interpreted by some (e.g. Pablé & Hutton 2015) as restricting observation to the anecdotal, by others as a justification for empirical research. If observations at the "pico" level by Cowley, Steffensen and their fellow Odense 'distributors' seem excessively fine-grained, they seem to be yielding novel insights, and are preferable to a methodology that would restrict us to filtering the circumstances and contexts solely through our own experience and conceptions, while treating as unknowable the experience and conceptions of those with whom we interact. Linguistic anthropology is one of several related fields that have shown us how to learn in a principled way from the beliefs of others, including those whom integrationists still tend to dismiss as labouring under a writing-induced false consciousness.

Only when integrationists apply the scepticism that is in their DNA to their conception of writing and its effects on how people think about language can they hope to pass beyond Harris's monolithic abstract conception and start to consider the ideographic particularities. They will then at least be consistent with their own principles and moreover may be in a position to document instances in which a particular form of engagement with writing is causally linked to a particular way of conceiving language. To say this is an act of faith: until it has been done, we do not know whether it can be done. In order to do it convincingly, we have to remain open to the possibility that it cannot be done – that is, to the possibility that we cannot prove on the balance of evidence, let alone beyond a reasonable doubt, that literacy entails or is required for, rather than requiring, a particular way of conceiving language, let alone other cognitive developments on either the cultural or the individual level.

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ⁱ Independently of Harris, Linell (1982) wrote about a 'written language bias' in linguistics. Linell's views would be echoed a few years later by Hayley Davis (1999), writing within the integrationist framework.

ⁱⁱ Lest I appear craven in criticising someone who can no longer defend himself, I raised similar questions during Harris's lifetime: see Joseph (1997, 2003), but also my deeply appreciative necrology of a man from whose work I have always drawn much inspiration (Joseph, 2015).

ⁱⁱⁱ Eagle-eyed readers may have noticed Harris's switch from "pre-literate" in the quote from p. 110 to "preliterate" in those from pp. 123 and 124 – unintended, no doubt, and a bit ironic considering his claims about the 'fixed-code' conception of language being dependent on literacy.

^{iv} In Joseph (2016) I discuss how Havelock's failure to define what he meant by 'abstract' put him in a long line of writers who use the terms abstract and concrete in contradictory and shifting ways.

^v The writings of Parry, who died at 33, were not widely available before a posthumous collection (Parry, 1971) edited by his son Adam, who was the Harvard colleague of Havelock and Lord and gave them access to his father's manuscripts and recordings.

^{vi} I do not mean to suggest that Havelock's reconstruction of pre-history is the truth; it is weak where the concrete and abstract are concerned, for instance. But it is more solidly founded than the Toronto School's.