

# The Origin of Writing

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## Chapter Two

# The Tyranny of the Alphabet

We say 'As easy as A.B.C.' No one ever said 'As easy as Chinese ideograms, or Egyptian hieroglyphics.'

A.C. Moorhouse, 1946.

The problem of the terminology in which to discuss the question of the origin of writing is in large part a problem created by the tyranny of the alphabet over our modern ways of thinking about the relation between the spoken and the written word.

Although Tarzan mastered the art of writing unaided (and could even write a letter in impeccable English to his beloved Jane before being able to speak a word of her native language)<sup>1</sup> he could hardly have realised (unless the information was contained in Lord Greystoke's dictionary) that his own apprenticeship to writing corresponded exactly to the etymology of the word. For he would not have known that *writing* was originally merely a term designating the process of scoring or outlining a shape on a surface of some kind. (In this very broad sense, writing ought to include drawing, and even the art of the silhouette. Nowadays it does not, although that original use of the verb *write* survives in English as late as the sixteenth century.) Ancient Egyptian had one word meaning both 'writing' and 'drawing'. Similarly, the Greek verb γράφειν ('to write') originally meant in Homer 'engrave, scratch, scrape'. The later restriction of such words to designate alphabetic writing hardly warrants the narrow perspective

<sup>1</sup> Edgar Rice Burroughs, op.cit., pp. 148-9.

adopted by those historians of the subject who take for granted that graphic signs count as writing only when used for purposes which alphabetic writing was later to fulfil.

The various types of sign used in the writing systems of the world are commonly classified as follows: (i) *alphabetic*, (ii) *syllabic*, (iii) *logographic*, (iv) *pictographic*, and (v) *ideographic*. For people educated in the Western tradition, the most familiar of these is the first.

The form of alphabet most widely used at the present day is the English alphabet, comprising twenty-six letters, each of which has a name and an allotted place in a conventional sequence known as 'alphabetical order'. Each of these twenty-six letters has two forms, one called the 'capital' letter and the other the 'small' letter. Different styles of handwriting and different type faces present both series in somewhat different shapes: but this does not affect the identification of the 'same' set of letters. Alphabetic writing may nowadays for all practical purposes be defined as any system of recording which uses this particular inventory of letters, or some historically related variant of it, of which there are many. The edicts of Ashoka in India and the runic monuments of Scandinavia alike employ alphabetic writing, although presenting little obvious similarity in appearance either to each other or to modern English printed characters.

Historically, the alphabet now used for writing English is derived from the Greek alphabet, the word *alphabet* itself combining the names of the first two letters of the Greek alphabet, *alpha* and *beta*, although the term is of Latin, not Greek, origin. The Greek alphabet in turn is known to have been an adaptation of an earlier Phoenician system of writing. This complicated evolution has now been traced in some detail, thanks to the researches of several generations of scholars.<sup>2</sup> All authorities agree that our ancestors' first attempts at writing were not alphabetic.

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the best account in English is given by D. Diringer, *The Alphabet*, London, 3rd. ed. 1968.

Historians of writing distinguish a number of theories about the origin of the alphabet. These include the so-called 'Egyptian' theory, which derives the alphabet in one way or another from a simplification of various forms of writing known to have 'been used in Egypt; the 'Cretan' theory, propounded principally by Sir Arthur Evans, which held the alphabet to have originated in Crete and been taken thence to Palestine, and later borrowed by the Phoenicians; and the 'geometric' theory of Sir Flinders Petrie, which traced back the letters of the alphabet to a set of geometric signs which occur in prehistoric inscriptions throughout the Mediterranean area. The modern consensus view, however, favours the North Semitic alphabet as the earliest known form and dates its appearance to the first half of the second millennium B.C.<sup>3</sup> A more contentious assumption is that the alphabet represents the end-product of a process often called the 'acrophonic principle'. 'According to this principle,' writes Gelb, 'the sign values originated by using the first part of a word expressed in the word sign and by casting off the rest, as if we chose, for example, a picture of a house to stand for *h* because "house" starts with an *h*'.<sup>4</sup>

Alphabetic writing is usually contrasted with an earlier type of writing now generally called *syllabic*. As this term implies, in syllabic writing each sign normally stands for one or more syllables, the inventory of such signs being termed a *syllabary*. Whereas a typical alphabetic system will employ, for instance, three letters to render the English monosyllabic word *sat*, a typical syllabary would have a single sign for that purpose. Syllabaries such as the Japanese, in which each sign has the value of either a single vowel (e.g. *a*) or else a syllable consisting of a combination of consonant followed by a vowel

<sup>3</sup> Diringer, *op.cit.*, pp.195-222.

<sup>4</sup> I.J. Gelb, *A Study of Writing*, 2nd. ed., Chicago, 1963, p.143. Gelb himself (p.251.) rejects this explanation and asserts that in his view, with a few sporadic exceptions, 'acrophony as a principle seems to play no part in the history of writing'.

(e.g. *ka, sa, ta, na*) are sometimes called *open syllabaries*. Such syllabaries have no signs for syllables ending in a consonant.

Both alphabetic and syllabic characters are commonly grouped together as *phonograms* (i.e. signs indicating pronunciation). Phonograms are in turn distinguished from three other types of sign: (i) from signs representing a word, but giving no indication of its pronunciation, (ii) from signs which take the form of a simplified picture of the thing they represent, and (iii) from signs representing an idea or a message as a whole, rather than any particular formulation of it. The terms (i) *logogram*, (ii) *pictogram* and (iii) *ideogram* are often used in the senses corresponding respectively to these three distinctions; but not, unfortunately, with ideal consistency. If they were, however, one might give the following illustrative examples: (i) '\$' as a *logogram* of the word 'dollar', (ii) a circle with 'rays' radiating from the circumference as a *pictogram* for the sun, and (iii) an arrow mark as an *ideogram* indicating the direction to be followed.<sup>5</sup>

There are two types of sign, both widely employed in writing systems, which do not quite fit into the classification so far described. One of these, which has a foot in both the phonographic and non-phonographic camps, and will be more extensively discussed below, is the *rebus*. The rebus is a transferred pictogram, re-employed as the sign for a word or syllable which by chance happens to be close or identical in pronunciation to the word which originally motivated its pictographic form. Thus, a pictogram originally designating the word *sun*, might subsequently come to be employed as a rebus for the word *son* (assuming, as in these English examples, that the words for 'sun' and 'son' are similarly pronounced in the language in question). The distinctive

<sup>5</sup> In China, the traditional classification of written characters recognised no less than six types, including phonograms (*xie sheng*), pictograms (*xiang xing*) and ideograms (*zhi shi*), together with others peculiar to Chinese. (A. Gaur, *A History of Writing*, London, 1984, p.81.)



Chinese imperial seal of the Emperor Qianlong (1736-95). Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

feature of the rebus, consequently, is that its apparent pictographic form does not necessarily correspond to its meaning.

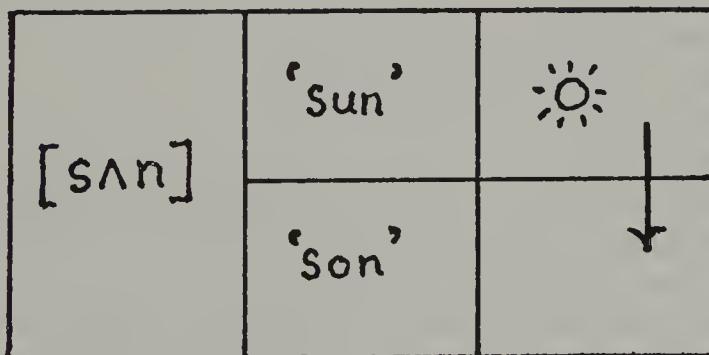


Fig. 1. A hypothetical English rebus. The problem of finding a symbol for the word 'son' is solved by borrowing the pictogram for the identically pronounced word 'sun'.

A rebus, then, is a secondary sign, in the sense that it presupposes the existence of a prior sign which supplies the link between its form and its meaning. This is also true, although in a rather different way, of the type of signs often called *determinatives*. These are supplementary signs used to clarify the intended interpretation of other signs. For example, if a script uses a circle with 'rays' as a pictogram to designate the word *sun*, and the pronunciation of this word is identical with that of *son* meaning 'male offspring', the two words might be distinguished in writing by representing the second as the circle pictogram followed by a pictogram of a human figure. This ancillary sign would be a determinative, indicating that the first pictogram should be interpreted not as *sun* but as *son*. Determinatives may also distinguish between alternative pronunciations of a sign. They are particularly common in alphabetic abbreviations. For instance, in 'Ch.' (standing for the name *Charles*), the second letter in effect functions as a determinative, distinguishing this use of the sign 'C' from its function as an initial of other names (*Christopher, Conrad*, etc.). Diacritics such as accent marks may also be regarded as a form of determinative: the presence or absence of an acute accent, for example, distinguishes the pronunciation of French *plié* ('plaice') from that of *plié* ('folded').

Actual usage of these terms is in various respects less straightforward than the above account might suggest. The term *pictogram* appears sometimes to be used to include almost any type of non-alphabetic symbol. Sometimes, on the other hand, pictograms are distinguished from ideograms by the criterion that the latter are 'abstract' signs (i.e. not recognisably pictorial). Most of the terminological confusion in this field may be attributed to three facts. The first is that many early texts remain undeciphered or only partially deciphered, with the consequence that the precise nature of the signs they employ is still a matter for speculation. The second is that there is no consensus among authorities as to how the various terms should be distinguished. The third is that a

script may in general be characterised as, say, 'pictographic' or 'syllabic' when it is actually a mixture of signs of various types.

A further difficulty arising from the application of the terminology may be illustrated by reference to Egyptian hieroglyphs. According to Lurker,<sup>6</sup> hieroglyphs fall into three classes. One class (ideograms) comprises symbols which render a word without reference to its sound. Thus a rectangle with an opening below, meant 'house'; two legs meant 'walk'; the lotus or reed, characteristic of Upper Egypt, meant 'south'; the conjoined signs for 'god' and 'servant' meant 'priest'; and the goose, the phonogram for 'son', together with the sun, stood for the king, as 'son of the sun'. A second class (phonograms) indicate either a consonant or a succession of two or three consonants. Vowels were not written. Thus the phonogram for 'goose' (*sz*) was also used to write the word for 'son', which had the same succession of consonants; and the phonogram for 'swallow' (*wr*) was used to write the word for 'great' (also *wr*). Hieroglyphs for words of one consonant could also be used as phonograms for that consonant. Thus the symbol for 'stool' (*p*) also stood for the consonant 'p', and the symbol for 'loaf' (*t*) also for the consonant 't'. The third class (determinatives) had no phonetic value but were placed at the end of a word to indicate its category. Thus the names of towns included the ideogram for 'town', and the word for 'locust' included the determinative symbol for 'goose', as representing flying creatures in general.

In Lurker's tri-partite classification – which in its own terms is clear enough – not only is the class of ideograms taken to subsume logograms and the class of phonograms to subsume rebuses, but the three classes are distinguished on functional criteria, with the result that the same sign can sometimes be classified in more than one way. Thus, for example, the goose sign is mentioned under all three heads: it is part of an ideogram for 'king', a phonogram for 'son', and a

<sup>6</sup> M. Lurker, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt*, London, 1980, pp.62-4.

determinative for 'locust'. The only way to avoid this cross-classification would be to distinguish rigorously between a terminology of forms and a terminology of functions: but authorities on the history of writing on the whole fail to do this.

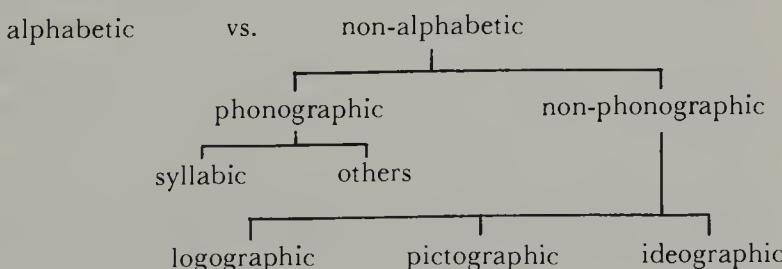
A further point to note is that the distinction between alphabetic and syllabic writing raises the question of how to classify systems of the kind found among Semitic scripts, which have signs for consonants only, and omit vowels altogether. It is sometimes argued that these are not alphabets and are better regarded as 'consonantal syllabaries', despite the fact that the term 'consonantal syllabary' seems in turn to be self-contradictory. More important than the resolution of this classificatory 'problem', however, is the significance of the way it is posed. The problem itself is generated by two assumptions. One is the assumption that a 'consonants only' system cannot be a 'true' alphabet, since the alphabets we are most familiar with are 'true' alphabets and they do indeed contain letters for vowels as well as letters for consonants. The other assumption is that a 'consonants only' system cannot be a 'true' syllabary either, since a 'true' syllabary is conceived of on the analogy of a 'true' alphabet and therefore must somehow accommodate vowels too. A 'consonants only' system is thus seen as neither one thing nor the other, a kind of graphological freak which does not conform to either of the two 'natural' alternatives for phonographic writing. This line of thinking fails altogether to take into account the fact that the practical utility of having separate signs for vowels will vary according to the phonological structure of the language concerned, just as will, for instance, the practical utility of having separate signs for voiced and voiceless consonants. What is viable as a writing system for one language is not necessarily viable for another, and the history of the alphabet amply illustrates this point. It is all the more ironical to find writing systems being classified and evaluated as if they should have been designed not to meet the practical needs of

particular linguistic communities, but rather to serve the universal descriptive purposes of an Abstract Phonology.

More important still for our present purposes is the fact that the distinction between alphabetic and syllabic writing is drawn in such a way as to define the latter in terms of the former, thus reversing the actual historical sequence of development. This reversal already prejudgets in various subtle ways a number of questions about the origin of writing. It is as if, retrospectively, evolution could be seen to have been gradually working towards the creation of an 'ideal' alphabet as its long-term goal.

Thus when one looks carefully at the traditional terminology used to discuss the history of writing, it becomes clear that the keystone of the whole conceptual structure is the alphabet. All the distinctions recognised are based directly or indirectly upon an initial opposition between alphabetic and non-alphabetic signs (Fig. 2).<sup>7</sup> What this conceptual structure reflects, historically, is the ethnocentric bias of a European approach to non-European languages. In this sense, modern scholarship has unquestionably and unquestioningly taken the alphabet as its central paradigm example of a writing system. The consequences of this for the problem of the origin of writing are both far-reaching and distorting. They involve in one way or another some of the most basic assumptions underlying modern linguistic theory.

Fig. 2.



<sup>7</sup> A clear example is Pedersen's classification of writing systems. (H. Pedersen, *The Discovery of Language. Linguistic Science in the Nineteenth Century*, tr. J.W. Spargo, Bloomington, 1959, p.142.)

Unfortunately, the notion of an ideal alphabet holding up a mirror to phonetic reality is based on the assumption that in phonetic reality we find an antecedently given set of individual sounds. This assumption is called in question as soon as it is pointed out that it is equally possible to define individual sounds as, precisely, those complexes of acoustic features which are conventionally held to be represented by single letters of the alphabet. We might with no less justification choose to treat the syllable as the 'individual sound', and regard its consonantal and vocalic properties simply as constituent features of that individual sound. That syllables are 'larger' units than consonants or vowels proves nothing either way. For that matter, all consonant and vowel sounds may in turn be analysed systematically into 'smaller' phonetic components: it is perhaps merely a historical accident that no system of writing has ever adopted this alternative type of analysis as a basis for devising sets of signs. What at least is clear is that to assume straightforwardly that an English spoken word such as *bat* consists of just three 'individual sounds' because its written form comprises just three letters is simply to put the alphabetic cart before the phonetic horse. What needs first of all to be elucidated, here as in other cases, is what represents what.

Representation is a problem which recurs in various guises in twentieth-century theoretical linguistics. It has two complementary parts. On the one hand, there is the question of the relationship between a language and its 'representation' as portrayed in the descriptive linguist's account of its phonology, morphology, syntax, etc. On the other hand, there is the question of the relationship between this 'scientific' account and the 'representation' of the language in the minds of native speakers. So there is in fact a double problem of representation: but in both instances there can be no doubt that it was the alphabet which offered linguistic theorists their most readily available model of how the problem of representation might in principle be tackled. That is to say, ideally there would be a

one-one correspondence between the representing symbols and the linguistic units or structures which they represented. An 'ideal' alphabet would exemplify this correspondence, at least as regards the pronunciation of the language. Analogous 'alphabets' at other linguistic levels can readily be constructed on this model. Correctness of representation is implicitly judged in terms of a correspondence of this 'alphabetic' type.

The ideal alphabet, envisaged is thus one in which each letter would stand for just one individual sound, whether consonant or vowel, and there would be no redundant letters, no reduplication, and no need to represent any individual sound by a combination of letters. In short, the alphabet and the sound system would be mirror images of each other. In practice, alphabets generally employed for the recording of historical, legal and literary texts, in all cultures which have adopted alphabetic writing, fall short of this correspondence. The ideal, none the less, has exercised a profound influence upon the way in which laymen and scholars alike evaluate the use of alphabetic writing and treat some uses as 'better' or 'worse' or 'more rational' or 'less anomalous' than others.

By comparison with this alphabetic ideal, syllabic writing is automatically seen as something more primitive and clumsy. For syllabaries use symbols which fail to separate out the ultimate linear units of the sequence of sounds. They 'lump together' the consonant-vowel combinations which an ideal alphabet would represent individually. Less obvious, perhaps, is that even to say that a syllabary is a system of characters each of which stands either for a vowel or for some fixed combination of consonants and vowels is already to describe what a syllabary is in alphabetic terms. That is, the notion of consonants and vowels combining to form syllables of various kinds is itself an alphabetic notion. Once this perspective is adopted, it becomes extremely difficult to resist the implication that consonants and vowels are, in the nature of things, more basic elements than syllables, and hence syllabic writing somehow fails to come to terms with the real basis of speech,

whereas alphabetic writing succeeds.

It is the same alphabetic bias which explains certain curious features of the way in which non-phonographic writing is analysed. For instance, it follows from the definitions given above that there is no reason why a pictogram should not also be an ideogram, and in fact such combinations are common in the modern international sign language of motorways and airports (the figure of a man indicating a toilet for men, the outline of a cup indicating the availability of beverages, etc.). It follows also that there are likely to be cases in which it is not clear whether to treat a sign as an ideogram or a logogram. (The dollar sign, it might be argued, functions as a substitute for the English word 'dollar' only in certain linguistic contexts, whereas in others it functions as a symbol standing for a certain national currency, independently of the name by which that currency happens to be designated in English.) In fact, the underlying rationale of the triple distinction between logogram, pictogram and ideogram is somewhat puzzling until we realise that what motivates these concepts, once again, is the implied contrast with alphabetic writing. Alphabetic writing typically does *not* (i) use word signs which give no indication of pronunciation, or (ii) use simplified pictures as characters, or (iii) represent ideas independently of any specific form of words. Thus logograms, pictograms and ideograms together represent, as it were, the negative side of a conceptualisation of writing which is dominated by the positive status assigned to the alphabet.

The alphabetic bias is, unfortunately, virtually endemic in Western education, where children are taught 'correct pronunciation' by being presented with alphabetic writing and required to 'read it aloud'. Their ability to do this is taken as an important indication of their progress towards 'literacy'. Saussure commented on the educational consequences of this practice in his *Cours de linguistique générale* as follows:

Grammarians are desperately eager to draw our attention to the written form. Psychologically, this is quite understandable, but the consequences are unfortunate. The use acquired by the words 'pronounce' and 'pronunciation' confirms this abuse and reverses the true relationship between writing and the language. Thus when people say that a certain letter should be pronounced in this way or that, it is the visual image which is mistaken for the model. If *oi* can be pronounced *wa*,<sup>8</sup> then it seems that *oi* must exist in its own right. Whereas the fact of the matter is that it is *wa* which is written *oi*. To explain this strange case, our attention is drawn to the fact that this is an exception to the usual pronunciation of *o* and *i*. But this explanation merely compounds the mistake, implying as it does that the language is subordinate to its spelling. The case is presented as contravening the spelling system, as if the orthographic sign were basic.<sup>9</sup>

The situation, however, is even worse than Saussure describes it. It is not simply a question of psychological perversion of the natural order of priorities between sounds and letters, but of something more fundamental. Saussure, whose phonetic theorising antedates the invention of the sound spectrograph, and also the modern systematisation of phonemic analysis, failed to realise to what extent his own basic assumption that speech comprises a linear sequence of discrete sounds was itself an extrapolation from the familiar structure of the written word. The notion that in speaking we select the individual consonants and vowels which somehow emerge from our mouths threaded in the right order like beads on a string is simply the image of alphabetic orthography projected back on to speech production.

One of the most striking examples of this in recent intellectual history is Wittgenstein's discussion of how it might be possible to train people as ideal 'reading machines' (*als Lesemaschinen*).<sup>10</sup> Central to this discussion is the notion

<sup>8</sup> As in the French word *roi* ('king'), pronounced [rwa].

<sup>9</sup> F. de Saussure, *op. cit.*, p.30.

<sup>10</sup> *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, Oxford, 1953, § 157.

that what happens when we read aloud is that the eye scans a sequence of written characters and as a result the reader is 'guided' (by some process never clearly explained) to pronounce certain sounds. At one point in the discussion, Wittgenstein goes so far as to introduce a comparison with the operations of a pianola, where a mechanism is devised to ensure that certain notes are struck which correspond to holes in the surface of a revolving cylinder. Now no one would suppose Wittgenstein, of all philosophers, to be naive enough to equate the alphabet with a phonetic notation, or the human speaker with a machine which 'reads off' sounds from scripts in the manner of a pianola. Nevertheless, these are the ideas on which Wittgenstein's discussion is based. Where do they come from? Wittgenstein himself did not invent them: rather, he draws upon them as if such comparisons will be intuitively obvious to any intelligent person. And so perhaps they are. But only because they are founded upon a whole cultural tradition which has over the centuries built up an idealisation of what the alphabet would be if only it could.

Wittgenstein's description of the reading process, for all its philosophical subtlety, sounds like nothing so much as the description of a person suffering from a particular form of dyslexia. He appears to assume that reading is quite different from understanding the words one reads. It is simply a question of translating marks on a page into vocal equivalents, either aloud or 'in one's head', and nothing more. Now doubtless there are – perhaps rather rare – types of reading performance which would fit this description: a trained phonetician, for example, reading a phonetic transcript of a text in a language with which he is totally unfamiliar. But whether anything like that is a basic component of normal fluent reading is quite a different matter. The point here is that it is just such an image of what the reading process must essentially be that alphabetic writing itself projects; or, rather, of what it would be if the alphabet were an ideal phonetic notation.

Alphabetic tyranny of a no less insidious kind is indicated by the evidence which emerges from such a book as Iona and Peter Opie's *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*.<sup>11</sup> The alphabet provides an endless source of what the Opies call 'self-incrimination traps'. These are trick questions designed to induce the victim to say something stupid, vulgar, or otherwise reprehensible.<sup>12</sup> Typical are catches like 'Spell *olic* and say "stars"'; or 'Spell *I cup*'. The verbal mechanism of these spelling catches shows a number of interesting features. They are, as it were, childish versions of Bellerophon's deception. The catch is that the victim does not grasp – until it is too late – what the message he has been told to deliver actually means. But there is more to it than that. Often what the juvenile victim is asked to spell is not something which in the normal course of events would arise as orthographically problematic. The two examples just cited both illustrate this point. *Olic* is not an English word: at best it is a 'part' of words like *frolic*, *alcoholic* and *vitriolic*, all of which belong to a highly literate stratum of English vocabulary: so the chance of being asked to 'spell *olic*' in real life – even in real classroom life – are, to say the least, remote. Similarly, although there is an English verb *cup*, the number of occasions on which a schoolchild is likely to have encountered the paradigm *I cup, you cup, he cups, she cups*, etc. will not be high. Certainly by no means as high as the incidence of 'genuine' orthographic traps like 'How do you spell *friend*?'. In short, the very existence of these joke questions which hinge on spelling tests of the most remote degree of plausibility points to the fact that modern education rapidly inculcates into children's minds the following principle: *anything I can say can be spelled*. For this is the basic premiss needed even to make sense of instructions like 'Spell *olic*' or 'Spell *I cup*'. These instructions, as employed in 'self-incrimination traps', do not need paper and pencil or

<sup>11</sup> Oxford, 1959.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p.84ff.

blackboard and chalk. They are traps sprung orally in the playground, or on the way to school.

The significance of such games is not to be underestimated. We are already dealing, it would seem, with a culture in which even the youngest educational apprentices are deemed to be perfectly familiar with something which the Greek Stoic philosophers came to understand only after grappling with the problem for some time: that the elements of alphabetic writing can be identified in three ways, namely by sound, by shape and by name; the name being neither the name of the sound nor the name of the shape, but the name of a unit in a spelling system. Thus, as the popular children's counting-out formula puts it, 'O-U-T spells OUT': and it does so irrespective of whether the word thus spelled is written in capitals, in small letters, in italics or in gothic, and irrespective of how it happens to be pronounced. That is why the only correct oral answer to the instruction 'Spell *olic*' is to say the names of the letters: the trap might misfire if the victim could 'spell' simply by articulating the separate consonants and vowels, or by giving some other sequence of letters corresponding to that pronunciation e.g. *ollick*. Thus there is a folklore 'theory' of the alphabet already built into this classroom-cum-playground verb *to spell*. To ask how someone's name is spelled is not, in the light of this theory, either to ask how to pronounce it or to ask how to write it, even though the usual assumption is that one wants to know the spelling in order to be able to write it. Nevertheless, a child not yet able to read or write its own name may well know how to spell it, in this sense of the verb. Although correct spelling is normally manifest in correct writing, the dependence is the other way round, at least according to the folklore theory: that is, the written forms are correctly written only if they are correctly spelled. Thus for *homo alphabeticus* spelling comes to take priority both over speech and over writing: it establishes a level of linguistic articulation more basic than either. To be able to pronounce a word but not know how to spell it is treated as just as much a sign of

ignorance as to write it wrongly spelled.

Perhaps the most striking testimony of all to the tyranny of the alphabet is the fact that the first European to study the language of the Maya Indians, the Franciscan Diego de Landa in the sixteenth century, seems to have been convinced that Maya hieroglyphs were a form of alphabetic writing. He produced, with the help of informants, a Maya alphabet of 27 characters, which scholars later tried to use without success in deciphering Maya inscriptions. It appears that what he must have done was to ask his informants how they wrote the names of the Spanish letters, and his informants wrote down the hieroglyphic symbol for what they took to be his mispronunciation of native Maya words. So Landa's Maya alphabet stands as a kind of permanent folly in the history of linguistics. What it reveals is the depths of incomprehension which centuries of alphabetic culture can inculcate about the nature of writing.



Fig. 3. Landa's Maya 'alphabet'. (*Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán*, ed. H.P. Martinez, Mexico, 1938, p.208.)

The tyranny of the alphabet is part of that scriptist bias which is deeply rooted in European education.<sup>13</sup> It fosters respect for the written word over the spoken, and respect for the book above all as a repository of both the language and the wisdom of former ages. At first sight, the insistence that writing is only a representation of speech may appear to run quite counter to the prevailing scriptism of European culture. But that appearance is deceptive. The doctrine that writing represents speech becomes a cornerstone of scriptism once the written representation is held to be not a slavish or imperfect copy but, on the contrary, an idealisation which captures those essential features often blurred or distorted in the rough and tumble of everyday utterance. Thus it is possible for the written representation to be held up as a model of what the spoken reality ought to be.

The fact is that writing and speech in Western civilisation have for centuries been locked in a relationship which is essentially symbiotic. So close has this relationship been that it is difficult to prise the two apart. The Greeks did not distinguish consistently between speech-sounds and letters; and two thousand years later Saussure could still accuse one of the most distinguished philologists of the nineteenth century of confusing languages with alphabets.<sup>14</sup>

Ironically, it is the price we pay for making the effort to disentangle speech from writing that each is then defined by reference to the other. Speech is thought of in terms of the pronunciation of written forms. Writing is thought of as a way of setting down speech. These complementary oversimplifications have been long established in many areas of education. They have been profoundly influential in shaping the form taken by linguistic theory itself.

This is in part attributable to the fact that although it is easy enough to see where the oversimplification lies, it is far from

<sup>13</sup> R. Harris, *The Language-Makers*, London, 1980, p.6ff.

<sup>14</sup> F. de Saussure, op.cit., p.46.

easy to avoid it. For most purposes it is plausible to suppose it does not matter anyway: it suffices simply to 'bear in mind' that we are dealing with an oversimplification. Not for all purposes, however. If we are concerned with securing a firm conceptual grasp of the basic mechanisms of language, then it will not do to bow to the expediencies of oversimplification and leave it at that. What writing is must count as a question which lies at the heart of linguistics (although it is a question more often dismissed than addressed by contemporary linguistic theorists). To acknowledge the oversimplification leads immediately to the horrendous problem of proposing an alternative account of the relationship.

The depths of difficulty involved may be illustrated even from as simple a matter as explaining the difference between the two following examples:

- (i) I love to see, when leaves depart, the clear anatomy arrive,  
winter, the paragon of art, that kills all forms of life and  
feeling save what is pure and will survive.
- (ii) I love to see, when leaves depart,  
The clear anatomy arrive,  
Winter, the paragon of art,  
That kills all forms of life and feeling  
Save what is pure and will survive.<sup>15</sup>

An initial move might be to say that the first example is written as prose and the second as verse. But is the distinction between prose and verse itself a distinction of speech or of writing? The moment we say it belongs to both, we are back with that original symbiosis which left us uncertain how to distinguish the two. Perhaps it will be claimed that the convention of arranging lines neatly on a page one below another, as distinct from the rambling continuity of prose, together with accompanying difference in the use of capital

<sup>15</sup> Roy Campbell, *Collected Poems*, London, 1949, p.52.

letters, are clearly conventions of writing. But is it so clear? Is it not, rather, the rhythm and the rhyme of the spoken verse to which we must appeal in order to make any sense of such conventions? And if that is so, can we say that these are conventions of writing as such? The attempt to prise speech and writing apart opens up one gap here only to close another there.

Those addicted to the fashionable reduction of linguistic questions to the formulation of 'rules' will doubtless not be slow to point out that, at least as far as English is concerned, although it is relatively easy to devise a set of 'rules' for rewriting examples of type (ii) as examples of type (i), it is remarkably difficult (if not impossible) to do the reverse. That is to say, given a sample of English verse, it can be 'rewritten' as prose with few or no exceptions to a list of general instructions, which have to do with matters like capitalisation after a comma, beginning new lines, and so on. Whereas, given a sample of English prose, we have no guarantee at all that any set of rules is available which will rewrite it into a canonical English verse form traditionally acknowledged. It is impossible to make octosyllabic couplets out of the Gettysburg address, at least as it stands, or stood. But had the Gettysburg address been couched in octosyllabic couplets in the first place, there would have been no difficulty about re-writing them as English prose, either then or now. One point of this example is to focus upon the sense which the term *writing* acquires when we relate it to its modern technical or quasi-technical derivative *rewriting*. A more general and more important question, however, concerns what this asymmetry of conversion between prose and verse forms tells us about the distinction between writing and speech. For it is far from clear that in speech *as such* the asymmetry has any counterpart at all. Can anyone now 'respeak' the Gettysburg address (as distinct from reading Lincoln's words aloud, or rephrasing his message)? Thinking about that difficulty may lead us to see in what respects questions of linguistic theory are still – as ever –

at the mercy of the usage and etymology of the terms in which they are couched.

Perhaps some will feel tempted to argue that the distinction between prose and verse is in the final analysis a distinction of speech, because the sentence of the first example would be read differently from the sentence of the second, although the words in both cases are the same. Certainly it would seem possible – at least, in many instances – to distinguish audibly between words read ‘as prose’ and the same words read ‘as verse’. But the problem thus settled immediately bobs up again, behind our backs this time. For how can we establish that the very distinction between a prose-reading voice and a verse-reading voice is not itself a reflection of a prior distinction in writing? What tells the reader to read in one voice rather than another is, arguably, the disposition of written forms seen on the page.

Then again, is it true to say that in the two cases the words *are* the same? Or if we insist that they are, are we not then insisting precisely on that equation between spoken and written units which is part of the question at issue? One of the ever-present pitfalls in arguments about the distinction between writing and speech is that the modern relationship between the two is such as to facilitate and even encourage circularity of this kind. Whether we refer here to the ‘same words’, ‘same phrases’, or ‘same sentences’, the postulated sameness cannot ultimately free itself from that symbiotic interlocking between speech and writing which gave us the basis for comparison in the first place.

Least of all does it help if we invoke the fact that poetic traditions flourish even in pre-literate societies. That does not prove that the distinction between prose and verse must ultimately be independent of writing altogether. For it begs the question of what happens to poetry once it becomes written. We cannot take it for granted that awareness of spelling, or knowledge of manuscript and typographic conventions, play no part in the literate poet’s processes of creative composition. On

the contrary, it begins to make less and less sense to ask whether the literate poet composed the poem 'aloud' and then wrote it down; or composed the poem 'on paper' and then recited it to find out what it sounded like. This would be to confuse the hammers and nails of composition with the workmanship itself. One might as well ask whether Beethoven strummed a few notes absent-mindedly on the piano before it occurred to him that this sounded like a good tune; or whether he wrote down a random configuration of blobs on stave lines and wondered what the result would be if he played them.

What seems at least uncontentious is that the opening stanza of Roy Campbell's poem is both 'readable' and 'readable aloud'. But that is not an intrinsic characteristic of written poetry, nor of writing. For there are conventions of writing available to the literate poet which do not need the backing of any spoken correlate. There are, in other words, 'unspeakable' poems. One example, also on the subject of life, death and survival, is Robert Richardson's *Nuclear Breathing Exercises* (see opposite).

The claim that some of these lines can be read, but not read aloud, may need preliminary clarification. Certainly they can all be rendered in some audible form or other, if anyone insists. But this will in the end come down to expedients like saying the names of individual letters: and that is not, in the relevant sense, reading aloud. No one when asked to 'read aloud' a sonnet by Shakespeare starts spelling out the first word. True, Robert Richardson is not William Shakespeare: but it makes no difference in this instance. For it would defeat the purpose of Richardson's poem to insist on a full oral version of it, just as it would defeat the purpose of Shakespeare's to start spelling it out. The poetic point of this breakdown in the mechanism of reading aloud is closely connected with the physiological act of breathing. The poem breathes its last on what traditional grammar calls a final consonant. But a consonant, according to the etymological definition, requires other phonetic elements to accompany it in order to be

BREATHE	IN
BREATHE	OUT
BREATHE	IN
BREATHE	OUT
BREATHE	IN
BREATHE	OUT
BREATHE	IN
REATHE	OUT
BREAT	IN
EATHE	OUT
BREA	IN
ATHE	OUT
BRE	IN
THE	OUT
BR	IN
HE	OUT
B	IN
E	OUT
	IN
	OUT
I	
	UT

T

pronounced: and here none are left. That isolated final consonant is the final self-contradiction of nuclear phonetics.

No simple-minded account of writing as a mere transcription of speech affords the least insight into the techniques of poetic composition here. It is in the end irrelevant how a final *t* might or might not be pronounced in English. What is relevant is that it is read orthographically as the final letter of *out*: the last exit.

Thinking through such problems should bring us quite quickly to realise that there is no facile distinction to be made between writing-as-visible-marks, on the one hand, as opposed to speech-as-audible-sounds on the other. For it is of the essence of full literacy of the modern sophisticated kind that it entails the integration in consciousness of speech with writing. Marks on a page are no more the poem than sound waves are:

which is to say that speech is also more than the latter, just as writing is more than the former.

What such examples as these point to may seem to make the question of the origin of writing initially even more puzzling. In one sense that is all to the good, because that question itself has had its true intellectual content emasculated by those aforementioned oversimplifications about the relationship between writing and speech. Once we grant, however hesitantly, that it is just as naive to assume that writing is merely speech fixed on a surface as it is to assume that speech is writing ephemerally liberated into thin air, at least the way is open to a less prejudiced inquiry into the place writing occupies in the complex of human abilities and activities we now call 'language'.

Every question takes on a different significance as we put it in a different context. The question of the origin of writing is no exception. In one context, the strategy for answering it may seem so obvious to any person capable of reading that it is hardly worth serious discussion. Since we already know what writing is, we merely trace back that practice called 'writing' until we discover when and where it starts. The very simplicity of the problem disguises its complexity, as with almost all inquiries into cultural practices worth undertaking. As regards 'What is writing?', the sole difficulty might seem to be framing an answer of sufficient generality to encompass the enormous diversity of the world's known writing systems. It would need to be an answer which applied equally to specimens of writing as diverse as, for example, Egyptian hieroglyphs, Japanese hiragana and modern English. But framing an answer to cope with such problems surely cannot be beyond the wit of man. Robust confidence of this order already puts the question in an academic context which invites confusion between the origin of writing and the genesis of scripts.

The question of the origin of writing might seem almost sacrilegious if we lived in a society where *writing*, or a translational equivalent of that term, were the name of some

graphic mystery known only to high priests and performed in the inmost of tabernacles on holy occasions. It might seem, on the other hand, utterly trivial if we lived in a society which restricted the term *writing* to the exercise of one specific technique, and did not apply it also to the products of that technique. As it is, ours is a society familiar with uses of the term *writing* which license its application to a whole range of arts, crafts, skills and products, ranging from calligraphy to the composition of musical scores and television scripts. The very multiplicity of these applications itself marks out a certain form of civilisation.

In posing the question of the origin of writing, then, we cannot expect to be able to shrug off effortlessly the many implications of the fact that the Western tradition itself is a tradition founded on literacy. We cannot ignore, for example, the fact that language studies within that tradition have always been based on the implicit and unquestioned assumption that there is a 'special relationship' between writing and speech which allows what is spoken to be reduced to writing and thus handed on from one generation to the next. But exactly what form that 'special relationship' takes and how far back it goes in human history are issues which immediately become open to question once we ask for an account of the origin of writing. For we have no warrant to project back indefinitely into prehistory a conceptualisation of writing which is itself the product of the uses of literacy in a highly sophisticated civilisation.

If the problem of the origin of writing is to be put in its proper historical perspective, we need to begin by setting aside, if we can, the whole of this deeply rooted tangle of scriptist preconceptions about the relationship between writing and speech. To see why this is essential, it will be useful to examine next how such preconceptions render 'evolutionary' accounts of the origin of writing explanatorily sterile.

Even for this limited purpose, however, it will be necessary to fix on certain interpretations of terms which relate to the



Juxtaposed pictorial and scriptorial signs. The death of King Harold as recorded on the Bayeux tapestry.



Syntactically integrated pictorial and scriptorial signs.

distinctions one needs to draw. An obvious distinction (however it is ultimately to be defined) will be between the kinds of things Tarzan called 'bugs' in his primer and the kinds of things he counted as illustrations. In the following discussion, it will be convenient to designate the latter *pictorial* signs and the former *scriptorial* signs. Where the boundary between pictorial and scriptorial signs falls will patently be one of the contentious issues to be resolved. Consequently, it will also be necessary to have a term which is neutral with respect to that particular distinction; and for this purpose it is proposed to adopt the term *graphic* sign as referring to pictorial signs, scriptorial signs, or both. Which graphic signs are pictorial and which are scriptorial is in many cases not a problem. For example, we have no doubt that the Bayeux tapestry gives us

both a pictorial record of certain historical events and also, accompanying that pictorial record – or, more exactly, visually superimposed upon it – a sequence of scriptorial signs in the form of explanatory sentences written in Latin. Likewise, we have no doubt that a road sign combines, say, the pictorial sign of a motor car together with the scriptorial message 'Except for access'. It may be altogether less obvious, however, in many cases. Finally, since we do not wish to pre-judge the questions of whether or to what extent a pictorial sign always bears a recognisable visual resemblance to what it stands for, it will be useful to reserve the terms *iconic* and *iconicity* for that visual relationship. This will leave us free to allow that a pictorial sign is not necessarily iconic, or that the degree of its iconicity may be open to doubt.