

Footnotes to Goody: On Goody and his critics¹

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Note de l'éditeur scientifique: ce texte reprend la conférence prononcée par l'auteur lors du colloque «Écritures: sur les traces de Jack Goody» (ENSSIB, 24-26 janvier 2008) et une version française en sera publiée dans les actes. Sa licence est de type Creative Commons (cf. <http://barthes.enssib.fr/licences> et <http://barthes.ens.fr/licences>). EG

For more than a half-century Jack Goody has been a leading advocate of the view that social structure and social change may be traced, in large part, to changes in means of communication, especially the invention of writing systems. This view took its best-known form in the groundbreaking and influential paper written with literary theorist Ian Watt first published in 1963 entitled “The consequences of literacy” (Goody, 1968). In that paper the authors argued that an alphabetic writing system had played a dramatic role in the specialization of intellectual functions such as those involved in distinguishing between origin myths and history and the rise of specialized modes of thought based on linguistic awareness and formal logic. In a word, they saw literacy as a primary factor in the rise of what we now call a literate society, and more grandly, civilization-- civil society, the society of rules and laws.

Goody and Watt's formulations were similar to those that were advanced in the same period by Eric Havelock (1982), Marshall McLuhan (1962) and Walter Ong (1982). Although somewhat tainted by a cultural chauvinism and an overemphasis on the

¹ "Écritures: sur le traces de Jack Goody". ENSSIB, Lyon, France, January 24-26, 2008

uniqueness of the alphabet, the central claim of the "literacy hypothesis" was eloquently expressed by Eric Havelock in a lecture delivered at the University of Toronto in 1976 and later republished in his *The literate revolution in Greece and its cultural consequences*:

The civilization created by the Greeks and Romans was the first on the earth's surface which was founded upon the activity of the common reader; the first to be equipped with the means of adequate expression in the inscribed word; the first to be able to place the inscribed word in general circulation; the first, in short to become literate in the full meaning of that term and to transmit its literacy to us (1982, p. 40).

Jack Goody continues to be perhaps the best known and certainly the only living member of the original proposers of the literacy hypothesis. His numerous books, including *The interface between the oral and the written* (1987) and *The logic of writing and the organization of society* (1986) are representative (for an current appraisal of the work and influence of Jack Goody see Olson & Cole, 2006). Goody has also accrued the greatest number of critics. Halverson (1992), an anthropologist writing in *Man*, described what he called the "implosion of the literacy thesis" claiming that Goody's hypotheses consisted of "a thin tissue of vague suggestions, gratuitous assumptions and unsupported generalizations" (p. 305). The basis for his criticism was that the effects that Goody described did not obtain universally; there were readers who could not write, there were societies with writing who still lacked legal codes, written literature, and a scholarly tradition and so on. Yet, in my judgment, the criticisms are misdirected.

Halverson claimed, for example, that an interest in what words mean (as opposed to what person's mean by them) is universal, that rules for analogy and formal reasoning are universal, and that it is academic discourse, not literacy, is relevant to reasoning-- as if it

were merely a contingent fact that academic discourse is based on a documentary tradition carried out in large part through writing and reading. He drew the rather pedestrian conclusion that “the consequences of literacy depend entirely on the uses to which literacy is put” (p. 314). Baines (1983, p. 593) another anthropologist writing in the same journal, *Man*, drew a similar conclusion, that writing “may be a necessary precondition for some social or cognitive change, but it does not cause such change”. This conclusion is upheld by the oft-cited findings of Scribner and Cole (1981) on the cognitive effects of a limited and indigenous literacy among the Vai peoples of Liberia. Researchers found few differences between those able and those not able to write the Vai script on a variety of cognitive measures. Learning to read and write and study English in the school over a period of years, on the other hand, produced dramatic effects on a variety of cognitive measures especially, they noted, in the ability to give reasons and to justify and make explicit their reasoning on cognitive tasks. These skills, they point out, are very skills that were in fact taught in the schools. Scribner and Cole attributed such knowledge to schooling, again, in my view, ignoring the fact that schooling is essentially a literate enterprise—an induction to the literate practices of the dominant society. The debate revolves around the conception of literacy at play. To the critics it means simply the ability to read and write; to the literacy theorists it meant the elaboration and participation in a literate tradition, a culture of writing, in which schooling plays an essential part.

Responding to the critics

In his critique of Goody and Watt (1968), Halverson (1992) claimed that “the ‘cognitive’ claims of the literacy thesis have no substance” (p. 301) while acknowledging that “a ‘cumulative intellectual tradition’ is unquestionably aided immensely by writing” (p. 303). But his reading of Goody and Watt lacked, to say the least, nuance. Goody and Watt’s cognitive claims are more suitably read as metalinguistic ones, namely, that words

as distinctive conceptual entities that could be inventoried and analyzed, owe their existence to writing. “Are we to suppose that no one before Socrates ever asked the meaning of a word?” Halverson asked (p. 304). But that misinterprets Goody’s claim. The appropriate anthropological question, not asked let alone answered, is whether or not there is a universal distinction between "he means" and "it means". It is only the latter that is, by hypothesis, linked to literacy. The distinction to be drawn is between meaning as reference and meaning as sense. To ask what one is referring to when one speaks is a far simpler matter than asking about the definition of a word; only the latter becomes the object of literate analysis and sets the stage for the formation of dictionaries and philosophical analysis of words and meanings. To think of a word independently of its reference is a complex cognitive task achieved in large part in learning to read and later elaborated through discussion, commentary and criticism of written documents. Recall Dicken's *Gradgrind* explaining to rural children that a horse was not simply a horse but a "domesticated quadraped".

Different scripts represent language in different ways. Scribner and Cole’s (1981) study of readers of the Vai syllabaries found that even proficient readers had limited notion of words as entities because the script did not represent isolated words but rather syllables. Bruce Homer and I (Homer & Olson, 1999) did extensive studies on this topic and concluded that the units of print, whether word or Chinese character, determined the units that subjects articulated out of the stream of speech. But in a segmented script even function words such as articles and prepositions are separated off as words. Thus the young children that Bruce Homer and I studied had no difficulty judging that content words, nouns, are words but did have difficulty with other parts of speech, “two little pigs” is thought to contain two words, “a little pig” is thought to be one word and so on. Contrary to Halverson’s claim that “the consequences of literacy depend entirely on the uses to which literacy is put” (p. 314), the very fact of writing a certain type of script calls

into consciousness certain properties of language that are otherwise largely overlooked. These include not only an awareness of the phonology of the language, so-called phonological awareness, but also word awareness. In fact, even the great Samuel Johnson, the maker of the first English dictionary, lacked an adequate notion of the meaning of a word, appealing to what he referred to as a means of defining them. It was only with Frege (1976) that sense or meaning came to be clearly distinguished from reference. Thus Halverson's conclusion that consciousness of language is simply a given, available to all, literate and non-literate alike is false.

Halverson follows Scribner and Cole in further claiming that formal reasoning is not strictly speaking a consequence of literacy but rather a consequence of academic discourse as experienced in Western-styled schooling. Few would disagree that formal reasoning is a key concern of the school; where one may disagree is in the assumption that schooling is something other than an induction into literate practices. The better question is why is literacy so central to those practices of formal schooling? Why not throw books away and content oneself with talk? And the answer, I suggest, is that formal reasoning and schooling alike derive from the particular access to language as served up by texts fixed by writing and taken as significant by the society.

Learning to read and write involves a degree or type of awareness of language quite distinctive from that required for speaking. Let me remind you of the most obvious cases. It is well known that what is called "metalinguistic awareness", namely, reader's awareness of the phonological properties of their own speech is largely unknown to nonreaders. This may seem anomalous in that children must know the phonology because they are competent speakers of English, say, rather than Swahili. But such linguistic knowledge is largely implicit and to learn to read and write at least some of that knowledge must be reorganized in terms of a set of explicit categories represented by the

written signs. Children have to learn that “b” sound in baby, ball, rabbit, and rub can all be represented by the letter b. This consciousness can of course be taught through oral methods—word and sound games of various sorts—but it is the specialized knowledge about language that is required for dealing with an alphabetic script. Such metalinguistic knowledge is ordinarily a consequence of acquaintance with letters.

This is not just a feature of childhood. In fact adults who have had little or no exposure to an alphabetic writing system behave much as do the pre-literate children. Morais, Alegria and Content (1987) set a number of phonological tasks known to distinguish reading from pre-reading children, to a group of essentially illiterate Portuguese fishermen, half of whom had had some exposure to the alphabet when they were young children. Tasks required them to break words into the phonological constituents represented by letters of the alphabet. A simple example would be to ask them to say /fish/ without saying the /f/. Like pre-reading children those never exposed to an alphabet were unable to carry out this task by reporting /ish/. The ability to analyze one’s own speech into such phonological categories depended upon their prior exposure to an alphabet. It is the writing system that provides some of the categories for thinking about, indeed hearing and analyzing, one’s own speech.

But there are several levels of structure in language beyond the phoneme. These too have to be discovered and brought into consciousness, in large part, though not exclusively, through the acquaintance with a writing system. These include knowledge of words, propositions, paragraphs and the specialized genres of written language. Pre-reading children readily attend to the content of what is said including tone of voice, that is to the meaning intended by a speaker, but they take considerable time to learn to play off what was said, the very words, from the meanings conveyed. Even some adults, of course, continue to insist that they said what they meant and they meant what they said! But

writing is a favored vehicle for preserving “what was said” in such a way that it is easily made into the subject of discourse. Conversely, a consciousness of what was said (as opposed to what was intended by it) is basic to understanding writing. A nice example of this growing consciousness comes from an interview I did with my pre-reading grandchild. I showed her a card on which I had written “Three little pigs”. I read it to her and had her say back to me what it said. I then covered up the last word and asked her to tell me what it now said, to which she replied “Two little pigs”. She assumed that the written marks represented objects, pigs, not words, a kind of picture writing. In fact such picture writing occurs in modern traffic signs as well as in some North American aboriginal scripts. The Blackfoot tribe of Alberta, Canada used picture writing in an ingenious way to create chronicles, one picture to represent an event typical of that year. Thus “The year the horses got drowned” was depicted by a circle representing the pond and some stick figure horses in the circle. In such a script there were no signs for the words of the utterance and consequently, no sign for the negative “No” as would be required to write “No horses got drowned”. In fact the major achievement in the history of writing was the invention of a means of representing utterances themselves rather than ideas or things the utterances were about. Indeed, it may be argued that the invention of writing was the discovery of these properties of language. All full writing systems are in fact representations of language rather than representation of ideas. Even so called “ideographic” writing systems are in fact “logographic”, that is, writing systems that represent words, logos, not ideas, ideos.

If another example of pre-reading children’s assumptions about writing may be inferred from their early attempts at writing. If asked to write “A cat”, a child may make a scribble; if asked to write “Two cats”, they may make two squiggles, and so on. But if asked to write “No cats”, they may say “I didn’t write anything because there are no cats”. Writing requires sustained attention to the linguistic form as opposed to what the

language is about. To oversimplify somewhat, writing distinguishes what is said from what is meant, capturing only the former. The American linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956) suggested that we dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language to show how our thought tends to run in conventional linguistic ruts. I revised this claim to the context of literacy to say “We introspect our language along lines laid down by our scripts” (Olson, 1994, p. 90).

In my recent writing I have elaborated on this theme by noting that writing takes on some of the properties of quotation. Just as quoted speech loses its direct "illocutionary" force; a quoted expression of an assertion is no longer an assertion but rather a quotation of an assertion. So too in writing one is in a sense "overhearing" an assertion rather than receiving that assertion. In the process of writing language becomes divorced from the speaker to become what Roy Harris () has called "autonomous language", language that allows the reader to interpret and use the language more or less for his or her own purposes.

The implication is that the chances for thinking about the language as opposed to thinking about what it expressed through the language is greatly enhanced. Whereas in speaking quotation is a secondary resource, in writing it becomes the primary means of communication. This is why writing is essential to the formation of lexicons and dictionaries as well as to logics and grammars. These activities are exclusively metalinguistic activities, the very metalinguistic activities we find in the activities of children as they learn to read and write.

The literacy hypothesis, then, is the hypothesis that a writing system and a tradition of writing is not a neutral practice; it allows us, indeed invites us to think about language and mind in some new ways. It did so by influencing discourse more generally, by

introducing new genres of both speech and writing. These range from the lists and tables examined by Goody to genealogies and chronicles, to history and laws, to science and literature, the genres that make up the modern intellectual world.

Goody opened up this discourse and subsequent explorations have been little more than footnotes to Goody.

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