

# “Writing” and “Alphabet”

John Mountford

The two English words “writing” and “alphabet” are both linked to language. The notion of language is built into “writing,” and the notion of writing is built into “alphabet.” Different disciplines which use these words as technical terms, use them differently; and everyday usage is often imprecise. Linguistics, as the science of language, can contribute towards sorting these meanings out. A start is made in this direction, in the belief that related disciplines ought not to be “divided by a common terminology.”

## PART I: The Word “Writing”

**I.0** Considering its significance in human history, it is surprising that the transmission of language in the form of writing continues to receive comparatively little *concerted* attention. Perhaps the disunity of the many disciplines concerned with writing under its admittedly diverse aspects, both practical and academic, has contributed to the rise of what might be called “speculative mediastics” in recent years.<sup>1</sup>

Is typography one of the disciplines concerned with writing? In one sense of the word “writing,” yes; in another, no. The first sense is the important one: typography is crucially concerned with the transmission, in the modern world, of language in the form of writing—of “the written word,” as it is often called. By comparison, the second sense is trivial: typography is not concerned with *handwriting*; there are other disciplines, such as palaeography, to whose province handwriting belongs. Though this point is trivial, the confusion sometimes caused by the different

1. See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964) or, better, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962.)

uses of the word "writing" is not trivial. Sometimes, for instance, the handwriting sense obtrudes and makes us hesitate to affirm that typography is concerned with writing. Yet it is.

Both disciplines, typography and palaeography, are equally concerned with the transmission of *language in the form of writing*. From this point of view the way in which writing happens to be produced or reproduced physically is immaterial. Mechanical or manual, writing is all one and stands in a single relationship to language. It is from this point of view, a linguistic one, that we shall try to disentangle some of the senses in which the word "writing" is used in English.

1.1 Four quite usual senses of the word "writing" are exhibited in the following expressions:

- (1) in speech or writing
- (2) reading and writing
- (3) in writing or in print
- (4) in ordinary writing, not in shorthand.

In (1) writing is contrasted with speech as a *medium of language*. This arrangement of the three terms "language," "speech," and "writing," is the commonest in linguistic science. Language is the human attribute, the system of communication characteristic of human beings. Speech transmits language aurally; writing transmits language visually. "Language" is a higher-order term denoting something more abstract than either speech or writing.<sup>2</sup>

Language is the organisation (grammatical and semantic) which the two media have in common (they have very little else in common, when one thinks about it). The obvious differences in their physical substances (typified by "air" in the case of

2. Note that colloquially and in some specializations (notably certain branches of psychology, physiology, and anthropology unconcerned with writing) "speech" is the traditional term for the human attribute. Note also that not all linguists have accepted the "triangular" arrangement of the three terms: Leonard Bloomfield, in his classic book *Language* (New York: 1933; London: Allen & Unwin, 1935), equated the study of language with the study of speech, to the exclusion, theoretically, of writing.

speech, by "ink" in the case of writing<sup>3</sup>) are not the only differences between the two. They differ also, for example, in the manner of their acquisition: we are equipped at birth to acquire language spontaneously in the medium of speech, but not in the medium of writing. The two differ in several other ways, but they are matched together in expressions like "speech and writing" for a very plain reason: because they are, for us, the two *normal media* of language. Lip-reading and gesture and touch can provide other language media, but these are abnormal media; whereas speech and writing are both regarded as normal media in modern societies.

Let us call this sense "writing—1." The expression "in speech or writing," then, enshrines a reference to media of language, and writing—1 designates one such language-medium. This is the widest, and the most basic, of the four senses exhibited above.

1.2 In (2) writing is paired with reading. Having determined the medium by contrast to speech, we now have two terms which refer to the complementary skills of this medium: taking in language in this medium is the skill of reading, giving out language in this medium is the skill of writing, writing—2. The corresponding skills in the medium of speech are "hearing" and "speaking." These four (hearing and speaking, reading and writing) are the basic skills of normal linguistic communication. Each of these four terms designates a complex skill which embraces both the linguistic organisation and the concomitant physical activity involved in receiving or producing language in either of the two media. When paired with "speaking," "hearing" has a specifically linguistic sense which it lacks on its own. In isolation it reverts to its general, wider sense of receiving any sounds; coupled to "speaking," it is used of taking in language by ear, a skill which is acquired in advance of speaking in infancy. "Reading" and "writing" (like "speaking") retain their linguistic content in isolation—though, when parted from each other and used

3. See H. J. Uldall, "Speech and Writing," *Acta Linguistica*, IV (1944), 11–16.

respectively of reading out sounds and of penmanship, they may lose it in the opposite direction, that is, through being narrowed down. This narrowing down to constituent or apprenticeship activities is sometimes allowed to obscure the most general and important sense of these two terms in which they contrast with each other as designating the basic linguistic skills of the written medium.

Writing—1, then, is a language-medium; writing—2 a language-skill.

1.3 In (3) “writing” means “handwriting,” a trivial sense by comparison with writing—1, but by no means a trivial aspect of man’s linguistic activity. Handwriting and print are two manifestations of writing—1; typewriting is a third. There are others, but these are the three that matter most in the modern world for the transmission, in books, agreements, letters, timetables, etc., of language in long stretches. Once again, we are wholly within the language-medium of writing (writing—1); the language-skill involved in production is writing—2 (in reception it is reading); and the differences relate to three different *media of writing*, viz., handwriting, typewriting, and print. Writing—3, then, can be regarded as short for “handwriting,” both in ordinary usage and in those disciplines in which only handwriting is in question, such as palaeography or calligraphy.

To sort out these different senses of “writing,” along these or similar lines, is an elementary first step towards clear thinking and clear interdisciplinary discussion, especially when the meaning is flickering between senses (1) and (3). Typography is a discipline inescapably concerned with writing—1, incidentally or not at all with writing—3. When necessary, ambiguity can be avoided by firmly using “handwriting” and resisting the word “writing” when writing—3 is meant.

1.4 By similar care the vagueness of writing—4 (“in ordinary writing, not in shorthand”) can be avoided. This is not such a widespread use as the other three, since people have less occasion to talk about shorthand and “ordinary” writing than about speech and writing, reading and writing, or print and writing. All

the same, it is found in everyday usage, and it is frequent in certain kinds of discussion of spelling reform or of initial literacy teaching (the teaching of reading, as it is usually called). These topics share with the discussion or exposition of shorthand the need to compare and contrast one or more "ways of writing" English (or whatever the language happens to be). To use the term most generally accepted in linguistics, the contrast in question is between a number of *writing-systems* for a given language. The writing-systems under discussion may be the standard orthography and a number of shorthands, or the standard orthography and a number of proposed ("reformed") orthographies, and so on. Writing-systems specially designed for initial literacy teaching are another category: Pitman's i.t.a. (Initial Teaching Alphabet) and Malone's Unifon are recent examples of such pedagogical writing-systems. Other categories of writing-system exist besides these three, such as linguists' systems of transcription and transliteration. There is no limit to the number of writing-systems that a language may have.<sup>4</sup>

"Writing," then, is used in the sense of a "way of writing a language" in expressions like "our ordinary writing" or "our conventional writing" (cf. "in French writing," "in Chinese writing"). This is a colloquial use—though it will be found in non-colloquial contexts as well<sup>5</sup>—in comparison with the use of "writing-system" to designate the genus of which orthographies and shorthands are two species. The vagueness inherent in using "writing" in the sense of writing—4 can be eliminated by using the technical term "writing-system," which denotes a precise and important linguistic concept.

4. On this view, a description of a language (that is, a grammar) may be said to *select* the standard orthography for description, if it deals with the orthography at all.

5. "Our ordinary alphabet/spelling/script" or even "our ordinary print" are other colloquial expressions which are found used with the same meaning—and these also are not always confined to colloquial contexts.

### 1.5 To sum up:

writing—1: language-medium

writing—2: language-skill

writing—3: writing-medium

writing—4: writing-system.

There are, of course, other senses of the word “writing” (as there are, for example, of “reading”) which have not been mentioned; and there is much to elaborate about those senses that have been mentioned, and about the terminology adopted in this brief discussion. Even the above summary is misleading unless the colons are carefully interpreted!

1.6 In semantics—the branch of linguistics which studies meaning—multiple meanings of words cause no surprise; indeed, a large part of semantics is devoted to the study of this phenomenon. It is found in all languages, and the name given to it is “polysemy.” The range of meanings of the word “writing” is just one example of the polysemy exhibited by most words in English which relate to important concepts, especially when these words are the common property both of everyday discourse and of a variety of specialised discourses.

What must be remembered with regard to writing is that the notion of language is built into it. This must not be lost sight of anywhere along the line, the line which goes from the literate mind, through the production of writing, the reproduction of writing, and the reception of writing, to the literate mind again. It must not be lost sight of whether writing is being considered *per se*, or in comparison with other means of communication, linguistic or non-linguistic.

## PART II: The Word "Alphabet"

2.1 Literacy—the ability to use language in the form of writing—is a universal human potential. Upon this assumption all modern educational systems are built. This potential is being realised in the world today in several hundred different languages.

Languages differ from each other in many ways. The science of linguistics is concerned equally with the unity of human linguistic ability—the mainspring of contemporary "psycholinguistics"—and with the variety of its manifestations. One aspect of this variety is external, or social; one aspect is internal, or structural. There is no absolute dividing-line between these two aspects of language.

Among the points of social (or external) difference we will put the following: the size of the community served by the language, varying from a handful of people to communities of hundreds of millions; the status of the language, whether international, national, local, or liturgical, etc.; the standardisation of the language, its tradition of literacy (if any), and the extent and variety of the literacy practised in it. This combination of "size, status, and standardisation" is intended only as an indication of some of the questions which fall within the recently named field of "sociolinguistics" and which are relevant to the present discussion.

The points of structural (or internal) difference are traditionally central to the science of linguistics. Languages differ from each other in their grammar, vocabulary, and phonology (or sound-structure), and also in their "graphology," that is to say, in the way they are written, or, more technically, in the structure of their writing-systems. It is this last area of difference which is relevant to the word "alphabet."

Typographers, rightly, have their own use for the word "alphabet" as a technical term in typography. This use does not necessarily coincide in meaning with the use made of the same word by linguists concerned with the general study of writing and of literacy, and with the application of these general studies to the practical problems of language standardisation, of orthography design, and of literacy promotion and maintenance.

2.2 The key-term for the linguist engaged in this field is “writing-system: (sense—4 of “writing” in Part I of this paper). Since his science is a general one, the linguist begins by surveying the writing-systems of the world as a whole, in order to classify them. His first classification is usually into “phonological” and “non-phonological.” A writing-system which represents, in some way, the sound-structure of its language is a phonological writing-system; one which does not do this is non-phonological (often called, in the past, “ideographic,” but this is a misleading name).

The paramount example of a non-phonological writing-system is the traditional writing-system of Chinese. The traditional writing-system of Japanese, also, is largely non-phonological. Even if the two language-communities in question happened to be small and insignificant, the linguist, as a scientist, could not overlook them. As it is, even the smaller of the two communities, Japan, numbers nearly 100 million people, and its level of literacy is one of the highest in the world with a colossal production and consumption of books and newsprint, and a proportionate volume of archives, documentation, exchange of public and private correspondence, and turnover of educational materials. All this has been achieved with the use of a supposedly archaic writing-system. For the modern expansion of literacy in Japan was accomplished in the traditional orthography of Japanese, though the cause of “romanisation” has been pleaded ever since the impact of Western technology in the 1860s and '70s. Non-phonological writing-systems survive only in the Chinese/Japanese corner of the world—but it is a very large corner.

Turning to phonological writing-systems: these are further divided into syllabic and alphabetic, according to the usual classification. The dividing-line between the two is by no means clear, but there are two characteristics which render a writing-system unequivocally alphabetic: they are a strictly limited number of basic symbols, and a full and explicit representation of all vowels. Those phonological writing-systems which do not qualify as alphabetic may be classed as syllabic, though this traditional term is not ideal.

Broadly speaking, syllabic writing-systems serve a considerable number of language communities, both large and small, in Asia

and North Africa, and are associated with the Arabic and Devanagari scripts for the most part, but also with such distinct scripts as the Hebrew and the Ethiopic.

Alphabetic writing-systems are the most prolific and are found throughout the rest of the world, mostly based on roman (Latin) or cyrillic (Russian) alphabets. The reasons for their proliferation and continued productiveness are manifold, and are related to matters of linguistic structure and graphological economy, to psycholinguistic factors concerning the acquisition and exercise of literacy, and to sociolinguistic factors concerning the status of the major European languages and the supply and transmission of written material. On the historical factors concerned with the technology of printing and with the expansion of European culture in association with printing, we need not dwell.

**2.3** It is clear that the word "alphabet" needs to be used with great care when the world's writing-systems are considered as a whole. When we analyse the relations holding between individual languages and their established writing-systems, we see that not all these writing-systems are alphabetic, and some are not even phonological, in structure. And though all writing-systems yield, on analysis, an inventory of basic symbols out of which their words are constructed these symbol-inventories cannot all be appropriately called "alphabets." In particular, the word has no application as regards the traditional writing-systems of such important languages as Chinese and Japanese, with their thousands of distinct "characters."

A precise sense can be given to the linguistic term "alphabet" in respect of alphabetic writing-systems: it can mean, quite simply, the *set of letters*; in the English writing-system, for example, the set of 26 letters. In this way the term gains in precision what it loses in generality, for much talk about "alphabets" outside linguistics is not about alphabets but about writing-systems. These are very much more complex entities than alphabets, and the loose use of the word "alphabet" in the sense of "writing-system" conceals this complexity rather than clarifies it.

#### 2.4 Three further considerations may reinforce this argument.

In the first place, we have been speaking of languages and their writing-systems as though each language had only one writing-system, the one often known as the “orthography” or the “standard orthography” of the language in question. In classifying writing-systems, just now, according to their linguistic structure, we were considering only the standard orthographies of languages. But, as we mentioned in Part I, writing-systems can be classified on a quite separate dimension, that of the purpose they serve. This is most clearly illustrated by the existence of shorthand writing-systems, or stenographies, which do not serve the ordinary purposes of literacy, as orthographies do, but are designed for the specialised purpose of fast writing.<sup>6</sup>

In the second place, when we analyse an orthography (or any other kind of writing-system), we never find that it consists solely of its letter-symbols or syllable-symbols or word-symbols (as regards the last, the linguist would speak, more precisely, of morpheme-symbols). Let us take as an example the family of European writing-systems based on the roman alphabet: each of these contains other symbols in addition to the alphabetic ones (the letters), viz., numbers or figures, marks of punctuation, and symbols such as the asterisk, the degree-sign, or (increasingly) the dollar-sign. Their symbol inventories are not confined to the symbols from which their words are constructed (the letters). The symbol inventory is *not* the alphabet.

Much more important—and this is the third point—the symbol inventory is *not* the writing-system. A set of symbols on its own is inert. If the symbols are to represent language, there must be rules for their use. These rules, along with the symbols they govern, constitute the writing-system—rules of spelling, rules of punctuation, the rules which govern the direction of writing, the paragraphing, the word-spacing, the use of figures, of capitals, italics, abbreviations, and so on. “Rules” may seem an over-

6. See David Abercrombie, *Studies in Phonetics and Linguistics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), chapter 8, “Writing Systems.” Chapters 9, “Isaac Pitman,” and 14, “On Writing and the Phoneme: Two Reviews,” are also of considerable interest for the present topic.

formal word for the conventions governing some of these features, but there must be regularities governing the use of any graphological device in any writing-system, and in using the writing-system we respond to (in reading) and exploit (in writing) these regularities.

When a child (or an adult) becomes literate, he does not learn just a set of symbols, he learns-also a system of rules by which the symbols are related to his language, or to the language in which he becomes literate. He learns, in short, a writing-system—the standard orthography of his language of literacy—and he exercises his knowledge of that writing-system both in reading and in writing (cf. language-skills in Part I). This is not to suggest that knowledge of a writing-system is a sufficient condition of literacy; it isn't, but it is a necessary condition.

2.5 To sum up: the word "alphabet" has, for the linguist, connotations which are too narrow for him to be able to apply it to the concept for which his science has evolved the term "writing-system." On the other hand, in its narrow (and, of course, traditional) sense of a set of letters serving as the basis of phonological writing-systems of a certain type, it can be given a precise role in graphological description for which no other word is so well suited.<sup>7</sup>

7. The problems of the classification of phonological writing-systems are scarcely covered by these brief remarks, the object of which is to indicate that "alphabet" and "writing-system" are not interchangeable terms. The traditional sense of "alphabet" is even narrower than we have suggested, since it means not merely a "set of letters" but a "set of letters in an institutionally accepted order." In this sense the Hebrew and Arabic writing-systems most certainly have alphabets, and this is an important feature of them. If "having an alphabet" is taken as the criterion for the designation "alphabetic," then this classification will be distinct from the one used in this paper, for which the contrast "syllabic/phonemic" might be substituted.

At no point in this paper are we concerned with alphabets as abstract historical entities, a sense found in such sentences as "Languages of Western Europe use the Roman alphabet" or "The Alphabet has spread throughout the world"; though the genetic study of graphological alphabets is as interesting as the genetic study of typographical alphabets. See David Diringer, *The Alphabet* (London: Hutchinson, 1949, 2nd edition) or, smaller, *Writing* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1962).

2.6 Before ending, it must be said that the use of the word “graphology” in this paper is far from traditional. The word has been adopted from the name given to the psychological study of handwriting interpreted as evidence of personality. In this paper it has been used, as a technical term in linguistics, in a much wider sense, in connexion with the language-medium of writing, to parallel the long-established use of “phonology” in connexion with the language-medium of speech.<sup>8</sup>

2.7 The linguist studies writing as a medium of language. Of all the ways of studying writing and its manifestations, his is the most general. All writing-systems fall within his field, and all kinds of writing,<sup>9</sup> handwriting no less than machine-writing (cf., writing-media, in Part I).

It is the same with the linguistic skills associated with this medium of language. The linguist is not the only student of literacy—far from it; but he is the most general, regarding the acquisition and exercise (and indeed the loss) of literacy as manifestations of man’s linguistic ability—his faculty of language—to be studied, like all linguistic phenomena, both in the individual and in society.

The many disciplines, theoretical and practical, which deal with specialised aspects of writing and literacy (and of an even wider field of visual communication) will all, one hopes, be represented in *The Journal of Typographic Research*. If the discipline of linguistics may make a contribution at this stage, let it be to encourage that aspiration towards generality without which so many and such diverse disciplines cannot collaborate.

8. The linguistic use of “graphology” will be found in Angus McIntosh, “‘Graphology’ and Meaning,” *Archivum Linguisticum*, XIII (1961), 107–120; M.A.K. Halliday, Angus McIntosh, & Peter Strevens, *The Linguistic Sciences and Language Teaching* (London: Longmans, 1964); W. Nelson Francis, *The English Language; an Introduction* (New York: Norton, 1963; Toronto: McLeod, 1963); and elsewhere.

9. This expression, “kinds of writing,” provides another example of the multiple meaning of “writing,” since it might refer to varieties of written texts, or to literary *genres* or styles. This is one of the meanings which we ignored in Part I. The linguistic study of this aspect of writing is sometimes known as “stylistics.”