

## Commentary : Linguistics, “Writing,” and Typography

Ernest Hoch

Linguistics can certainly contribute towards cleaning up the imprecise and confusing uses of the word “writing”; the recent paper by John Mountford in *The Journal of Typographic Research* (“‘Writing’ and ‘Alphabet’,” II [July 1968], 221–232) is a welcome contribution towards that end. It does, however, call for comment mainly under two aspects.

First, I believe John Mountford interprets “typography” too narrowly. The impression arises (to quote but a few examples) from “Typography is crucially concerned with the transmission, in the modern world, of language in the form of writing” (page 221) and “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” (page 224); “Typographers, rightly, have their own use for the word ‘alphabet’ as a technical term in typography” (page 227) and “. . . 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 . . .” (page 230).

There can be few typographers today who think of the Roman alphabet in terms restricted to “the set of 26 letters”—even leaving aside the awareness that we use at least two if not three distinct Roman alphabets together, each originating in different periods of the past.

The background of rapid development in the field of communication is reflected in rapid change of the concept “typography” itself, and in the intermingled use of the word with different, conflicting meanings.

But in this instance of “polysemy,” most meanings correspond to different phases of development. At one end of the history-related spectrum, “typography” is still used as a synonym for letterpress. At the other, it stands for the purposeful manipulation of alphanumeric and other conventionalized symbols in order to communicate a message visually to given recipients. What is transmitted need not necessarily be language in the sense of the prose characteristic for the language concerned. The very success of the act of transmission may demand a modified prose, an algorithmic or some other non-prose form of representation. That, in our day, is the concern of typography. *Mutatis mutandis*, it is concerned with writing-3. The essence of typography, a brilliant teacher remarked, “can be taught with your toe in the sand.”<sup>1</sup>

The second main comment refers to the complete lack of taking technical distinctions into account. Linguistics, divorced from technical reality, loses some of the ability to “sort out meanings.” This results in statements such as “Handwriting and print are two manifestations of writing-1; typewriting is a third. There are others . . .” which leaves the problem quite unnecessarily in mid-air.

The criterion for “print” is the existence of—for want of a better term—an “image carrier” that allows large numbers of near-identical images to be produced from it. Whether that carrier is a photographic film or TTS tape, a letterpress form or offset plate, a gravure cylinder, a stencil or signals on magnetic tape, is important for further classification; but *all* forms of print are qualitatively different from writing in that one basic respect. Examination of the carrier allows us to forecast the content of the image to be printed.

“Writing,” whether handwriting or typewriting, is qualitatively different in that no amount of examining the typewriter, brush, pen, pencil, or finger will reveal anything whatsoever about the content of what is to be written.

Handwriting and print, it turns out, are qualitatively different manifestations of writing-1; typewriting is *not* an equal third

1. P. Burnhill, Head of Design Department, Stafford College of Art and Design, at the First National Conference of the Working Party for Typographical Teaching, England.

manifestation: handwriting and typewriting are sub-categories.<sup>2</sup> This qualitative difference throws light on yet another distinction which appears to be beyond the grasp of too many teaching establishments (that between “printing” and “printmaking”) and the educational damage resulting.

Handwriting or typewriting can, of course, be used to produce, directly or by intermediate steps, an image carrier for printing. So can a single print from an existing image carrier. So can, for that matter, drawing, engraving, etc.

There is no more need for the linguistic approach to be a-historical than to be a-technical. Study of the range of meanings of the word “drawing” can help to clarify the concepts associated with the word “writing.” It appears undesirable to exclude such study when analyzing writing-1, writing-3, and writing-4. Not only can the linguistic approach, by the inclusion of “drawing,” fully encompass writing-systems which are pictographic (and which were treated somewhat cavalierly in the *Journal*), but also within the European framework itself, analysis of the development drawing → writing → printing leads to further clarification of “writing.”

A rigid artificial dividing line between highly conventionalized drawing as a “basic skill of normal linguistic communication” and writing-3 is less useful to understanding than the recognition of such drawing as the language-skill involved in production and its pairing with reading in reception. The drawings of small children; the drawings of artists depicting scenes from everyday life or phantasy; the drawings representing, say, an identical event from the New Testament at different times or in different parts of the world; the drawings that form the elements of a pictographic writing-system: among the numerous criteria according to which they can be classified, a crucial one is that of the *degree of conventionalization*. At some point the increase in conventionalization, the decrease of latitude allowed within the

2. An analogy exists between the guitar and the harpsichord on the one hand, and a gramophone record or tape recording of a guitar or harpsichord concerto on the other. The fact that on keyboard instruments depression of each key will always give (nearly) the same note does not tell us anything about the piece to be played; a record or tape, once identified, does.

framework of convention, results in the new quality of “normal linguistic communication.”

Under that aspect, too, typewriting falls into its proper place—linguistically, historically, and educationally: the acquisition of writing—2 as a language-skill is the learning of highly conventionalized symbols. The latitude allowed within the framework of convention is of necessity greater for handwriting than for typewriting, as the latter uses prefabricated image carriers for individual symbols (though not an image carrier for the entire message to be transmitted).

Ernest Hoch is a consultant designer and typographer in London (45 Cholmeley Park, London N 6, England). Interested in education as a specific area of design, he is Director of Postgraduate Studies in Graphic Design at the Central School of Art and Design in London and consultant to the School of Advanced Studies, Manchester School of Art and Design. He is a founder member of the SIAD/STD Typographers' Computer Working Group and of the Working Party for Typographic Teaching; and currently chairman of the Technical Committee of the Society of Industrial Artists and Designers, and chairman of the Icograda Standardisation Commission.