
Roy Harris. *Rethinking Writing*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000. 249p.

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In *Rethinking Writing*, Emeritus Professor Roy Harris of Oxford University examines the standard linguistic assumptions of the role of writing in relation to speech and finds them, at best, to provide an incomplete theory.

Under the traditional view, which started with Aristotle and found a willing apologist in Saussure, writing is viewed as notation of speech. Alphabetic letters are textual representations of sounds of speech: each letter is taken to represent a sound in the stream of verbalized utterances, to provide phonetic equivalence between a perceived piece of the utterance and its textual record. Additionally, this is a system of notation, because written words may be composed of combinations of letters representing sounds assumed, conventionally, to form pieces of spoken words (instead of creating a unique symbol for each word in the language), and the shapes of written letters may be arbitrary. The visual form of the letter “T” need not logically connect to the sound we choose, in society, to associate with this letter in speech.

The implication of the traditional view, and especially that of Saussurean semiology, is that of writing subordinated to speech. Speech is viewed as the primary vehicle of human communication, and therefore ought to be the primary subject of study by linguists. The study of writing becomes a secondary question—a lesser study of speech transferred from its natural form to an artificial record in a text of some kind.

Within that framework, Harris finds ample room to ask hard questions and to raise discordant observations, starting with the plain enough fact that many writings are created to transmit meaning between the creator and an intended audience, in a particular context not necessarily dependent on the substitution of writing for speech to create meaning in the act of communication. One needs only to imagine a street sign providing directions to drivers by means of the streets named on the sign and the placement in space of the slats in the sign (parallel to the road being followed by the driver, or crossed to it; arrow marks, color coding, etc.). What’s more, if writing is to be seen merely as a phonetic transcription of speech, then writing tends to avoid fulfilling that task with disturbing frequency. Is the “g” of “ought” pronounced as a hard “g” in ordinary speech? If not, as usually it is not, then is the “g” a mistake in transcription retained only by the historical development of the language; or does it serve different purposes, just one of which could

be—within the system of written English words, without comparison to writings in other languages—visually distinguishing categories of words within texts, regardless of the pronunciation of these words orally? Related, how is it that one letter may refer to multiple pronunciations (hard “g” versus soft “g,” etc.)?

Harris takes the interrogation deeper in some of the most fascinating sections of his book. If writing is subordinate to speech, a mere notation, how is it possible then for written texts to influence modes of speech, in terms of readers using texts to find status or other cultural markers to import into their speech? And what should be made of systems of ideographic “writing,” as Chinese and Japanese marks are claimed to be, or the function of personal signatures in texts, or the now widespread use of web sites in which a text is “constructed” by each user’s choice of hyperlinks to follow within a net of web pages?

Harris raises and proposes answers to each of these questions in depth, with additional critiques of the Aristotelian/Saussurean view of writing, too complex to detail here, throughout his book. But the sum of efforts is to call into question the validity of attempting to explain writing in terms of an assumed subordination to speech, and to advocate an integrational semiology of writing that places the text on equal footing with speech and attempts to explore the functional interdependence of speech and writing within their social uses.

In other words, this book is worth reading at least twice—first, to grasp the serious arguments presented without taking an opinion too quickly, and second, for the enjoyment of taking stands for or against Harris’ views, and relating them to one’s personal understanding of what writing really means in the world. ✱