Theories of Writings and Writing

Open thematic workshop organised by Rossana De Angelis (Université Paris-Est Créteil / CEDITEC) & Pierre-Yves Testenoire (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle / HTL)

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The term *writing* is polysemic, as it simultaneously denotes a *technique*, a *practice*, a *product*, a *system* and an *institution*. This polysemy thus allows us to approach writing from a variety of different perspectives. Each meaning of the word *writing* could be the subject of a specific *semiology*, focusing on culturally determined forms of writing according to their characteristic components and dynamics. Drawing on these specific semiologies whilst seeking to go beyond them, this workshop examines the history of theories of the written word and of writing. Its aim is to reflect on the ways in which the written word and writing have been described, studied and conceptualised. From which perspectives? Using which notions? Which concepts? Which tools? By virtue of which imaginaries or ideologies?

Submissions may cover any period and any linguistic or cultural area and must fall within one of the following three themes:

1. History of theories of writings and writing

The major role of writing in the development of metalinguistic thought was highlighted by Auroux, who regards its emergence as the 'first technolinguistic revolution in the history of humanity' and as a prerequisite for the development of grammatical traditions (Auroux *et alii* 2000, p. 48 ff.). A common approach to tracing the history of thought on writing is to examine its relationship to language. Harris (2001, p. 235 ff.) thus divides theories of writing into two schools of thought: the *scriptists*, who view writing as the transposition of a spoken language; the *anti-scriptists*, who view writing as a semiological system independent of spoken language. Among the *scriptists* are most linguistic theories (Saussure, Bloomfield, Martinet, etc.), which regard writing as a system of signs whose primary function is to transpose another system—language—from an oral and auditory medium to a graphic and visual one. Among the *anti-scriptists* are studies that have radically changed our approach to writing, such as those by Marshall McLuhan (1962), Eric Havelock (1963), André Leroi-Gourhan (1964), Jack Goody (1977, 1994), Walter Ong (1982), David Olson (1994) and Roy Harris (1993, 2001). These approaches do not view writing as a mere transposition of language from an oral-auditory medium to a graphic-visual medium, but as a semiological system in its own right that offers a distinct intellectual methodology. This methodology is based on the abandonment of the oral dimension (linear and temporal) in favour of the written dimension (non-linear and spatial).

>> Who are the leading theorists of writing? Which of their contributions remain to be discovered? What are their contributions? What are their epistemological strengths and limitations?

>> Can we now outline an overview of theories of writing? What are the main schools of thought? What is the periodisation?

>> What role does the study of writing play in the work of grammarians and linguists? What is its relationship with their description of languages, and their theory of language or speech?

>> Do other divides emerge apart from the *scriptist/antiscriptist* (Harris) or *logocentric/autonomist* (Anis 1988, Klinkenberg 2018) opposition? Which ones?

2. Conceptualisation of writing

Taking into account the relationship between writing and language allows us to challenge another division: that between writing regarded as a tool for representation (of both language and ideas) and writing regarded as a tool for communication (independently of languages). Indeed, the material components of writing systems standardise operations of *organisation* of the space of meaning, of *representation* and of *communication* of segmented meanings, irrespective of the languages with which they share the same sociocultural context (for example, mathematical notation, musical notation).

>> What distinctive features does the writing system of language present in comparison with the writing systems of other languages?

>> What conceptions of writing do we share today?

>> Which of these are specific to certain cultures? And which are suggested by contemporary technologies?

3. The Imaginary of Histories of Writing

The third theme concerns historical representations of the history of writing. 'Histories of writing' constitute, in fact, a scholarly genre as ancient as it is popular, as evidenced by the numerous academic and popular works devoted to them; yet these histories have never been scrutinised or historicised in their own right. The workshop invites contributions with a view to constructing a history of the histories of writing.

>> To what extent does the 'history of writing' constitute an academic genre, and from when? What is the history of this genre? Why did historical approaches experience a surge at a particular point in time (for example, the 1950s, with the overviews by Gelb 1952, Moorhouse 1953, Cohen 1958, Février 1959, etc.)?

>> Should we speak of the history *of writing* or the history *of writing systems*? What prominence is given to the various systems in these works? To the comparative approach?

>> What is meant by 'writing' in these various works? What phenomena does the concept of writing encompass? What prominence is given to the linguistic, numerical (see Herrenschmidt 2007) and metalinguistic values of written signs (such as punctuation)?

>> What are the imaginative frameworks of these histories? Can we identify any underlying theoretical models? Any ideological positions? What scenarios of genesis or origin stories (e.g. myths) do they propose? What vision of the history of writing systems do they present?

Workshop languages: French and English.

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