

Literacy in a Non-Literate Age

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Editor's note: *In this article, Robin Lakoff summarizes a longer essay written for *Spoken and Written Language*, edited by Deborah Tannen (in press).*

Writing skills, like most other academic skills, tend to be taught locally: they are taught in terms of sentence structure — or at a slightly more abstract level — in terms of cohesive devices and narrative strategies. While teaching these skills is necessary, it can be argued that by concentrating on teaching them, one loses a sense of the issues that underlie the real problem for teachers of writing: Why has writing (and reading, for that matter) become so hard to learn? Perhaps it is time to take a global, more abstract, look at the problem, to ask broader questions such as: What is it like to write — as opposed to talking? What is the purpose of communicating in writing? What function does literate communication play in our lives and in our cultural consciousness today? What are the benefits of literacy?

It is worthwhile to point out that, just as the human race has not been literate from its beginnings, neither has it been in agreement about the virtues of the written medium since the advent of literacy. Indeed, it is often noted that Plato, only a couple of centuries after literacy had been introduced into Greece, wrote into the voice of Socrates words about literacy that sound remarkably like the words of contemporary commentators about non-literate communication:

The fact is that this invention (writing) will produce forgetfulness in the souls of those who have learned it. They will not need to exercise their memories, being able to rely on what is written, calling things to mind no longer from within themselves by their own unaided powers but under the stimulus of external marks that are alien to themselves. . . . And as for wisdom, you're equipping your pupils with only a semblance of it, not with truth. (Phaedrus, 275).

Plato's dour view soon gave way to another, which prevails into the present day. More often implicitly than explicitly, we feel that literature and literacy are unequivocally good, that literacy is an essential skill, valuable for its own sake, a mark of a person's — or a culture's — entry into true civilization. This view was expressed long ago by Cicero:

But these pursuits (literature) nurture youth, give pleasure to old age. They are an embellishment in good fortune, and in adversity a refuge and comfort. They entertain us at home, are no inconvenience in public; they pass nights with us, they travel with us, they go to the country with us. (Pro Archia Poeta Oratio, 7)

In fact, today, we view the ideal human being as a literate person. Hence, the preferable channel of communication is the written one, and the ideal way to represent discourse — whether it originates in the written medium or not — is as it appears in writing. As we see, this attitude, dating back a couple of millennia, was strengthened by the invention of movable type 500 years ago. The press made literacy and its products generally accessible, so that reading and writing were no longer reserved for the few. At the same time the gulf between written and oral communication widened because they produced different emotive effects. Talk, produced by speakers for hearers in face-to-face contexts, is immediate and personal; written manuscripts, produced by scribes, in some sense still remain personal documents, one-to-one communication between writer/copier and reader; printed works, produced in huge impersonal numbers, fail to communicate the personal transmission of meaning from writer to reader. The printing press simultaneously increased our expectations for universal literacy and intensified our different attitudes toward the written and oral media and their effects upon us.

Consider an example of what I suggest: There is a preference, even in the recording of oral discourse, for doing so in the written medium. For example, Boswell represented Samuel Johnson's talk — those wonderfully orotund, perodic sentences — as if it were literate discourse. Granting that Johnson was probably unusually fluent, even for his time, a time when the most articulate conversationalist was one who adhered most closely to literate forms of expression, and granting further that the rhetorical style in Johnson's time encouraged the development of a more convoluted oral style than one usually encounters today, it is hard to believe that anyone could have spontaneously produced the utterances attributed to Johnson. It is equally hard to image someone intending to memorialize a great person today who would choose to do so by exemplifying the person's "wit and wisdom" in Johnsonian style. Something has changed.

Still, even in the works of most contemporary writers, the representation of oral conversation is "cleaned up" in ways seldom obvious to the reader. An un-retouched transcript of authentic ordinary conversation is almost impenetrable to us because we are so accustomed (1) to the conventions of "idealized" conversation as represented in writing and (2) to the oral, non-spontaneous dialogue of the movies or television. We do not find false starts, interruptions, overlaps, and hesitations used in these forms which we do find in truly spontaneous discourse. In real conversation, inadvertencies

are profuse, and tend to have a pragmatic rather than a semantic function: They give us organizational "space" in conversation, but they do not have real "meaning." We do not assume that a **vocalized pause means**: "I am nervous"; or a **hesitation means**: "I have something to hide." In the constructed dialogue of film or television such devices are utilized specifically for these semantic purposes; in such dialogue, we do not adhere to the conventions of ordinary spontaneous conversation, in spite of the fact that we are at pains to represent our constructed dialogue as spontaneous conversation.

Consider still another example of our preference for writing over speaking. Writing is cool, dignified, controlled; while ordinary talk is warm and responsive, but not quite trustworthy. In part this attitude is due to the fact that, until very recently, oral discourse could not be reproduced: Once uttered, it was gone, so that it really could not be taken very seriously.

Now, with the advent of audio- and video-tape, oral productions are as permanent as written ones, and this is making a difference in our attitudes toward the two media once again. In addition to new technology, re-evaluation of the preferred "character-style" of people has added to renewed appreciation for the spoken medium. In the past the good person was one who was reticent, private, and logical rather than emotional; controlled rather than spontaneous. Today's ideal person is quite the reverse. If we begin to look at the differences between talk and writing from this newer global perspective, talking begins to be seen as preferable to writing.

We have, a number of pieces of evidence that this is happening. For one thing, non-spontaneous speech style has changed, from a form intended to recall the written medium (think of the Churchill era) to one structured to evoke a sense of spontaneity, a conversational responsiveness to an audience (a style which Ronald Reagan uses superlatively). In formal and sophisticated writing, too, we find reflections of a change. Consider someone whom many have called one of the foremost stylists of our time — Tom Wolfe: His most salient characteristic as a stylist is his incorporation of the conventions or ordinary conversation — exclamations, italics, false starts, and so forth — into expository prose. .

The thing was, he said, the Mercury system was completely automated. Once they put in the capsule, that was the last you got to say about the subject.

whuh!

"Well," said Yaeger, "a monkey's gonna make the first flight."

A monkey?

The reporters were shocked . . . Was this national heresy? What the hell was it . . .

But f'r chrissake . . . (The Right Stuff, pp. 105-6).

We see further evidence of this trend in the proliferation of italics and quotation marks in written prose where formerly they would never have appeared. They are found in numerous forms of expository prose, as if to signal, "This is only meaningful if you can hear a human voice literally speaking behind this print." Although the italicized style abounds in such genres as *Cosmopolitan* magazine, examples are everywhere. Quotation marks, enclosing everything that is not an aspect of a formal, "voiceless" style of written discourse is often found in student papers, but can be seen elsewhere too; for example, a sign held up in Wiesbaden, Germany, to greet the returning American hostages from Iran, read, "WELCOME!"

In our society we indeed note evidence of a shift from the primacy of the literate medium to its secondary place as non-print media assume the primary place. It can no longer be asserted with confidence that literacy is an essential part of the equipment of a cultured and sophisticated person. Since this is true, we must — if we are to inculcate literacy at all — reassess the way in which it is presented. To tell students, overtly or covertly, that they *must* achieve literacy to survive, if they are to have respect, is rapidly becoming a dangerous strategy: It will backfire once it becomes clear that this is no longer really true. Rather, perhaps it is time for us to think of literacy as a skill akin to, say, quilting: Once a survival skill, part of one's ordinary set of skills, but now something learned as an adornment, a special aesthetic ability, yielding a special and unique kind of pleasure to its possessor. It isn't that literacy makes us better — just that it makes us happier.