

THE HISTORY OF WRITING

Anne Pallant

13 June 2007

Part 1

I am going to talk to you about the history of writing as John said, as the title says. I'm no great expert, but I am interested, OK. So what I am going to give you this morning is a quick, not too detailed, but a look at the history of writing from its beginnings as we know it, until modern times. But we've only got 50 minutes, and for each stage in its history you could spend days on it, OK. So remember it's a brief look at the history and if you are interested, afterwards, I will send you via blackboard some references. But I am sure some of you know perhaps more about the history of your own writing than I do, and you can contribute that in your discussions afterwards.

My first question is – is this writing? What is it – *a picture, a sign* - a picture. Do you understand what it is telling you? Yes. OK Mohammad where is it? Is it, OK, have you switched off your mobile phone? So there are two reasons why this is there, to remind you to switch off your mobile phone, and for you to question whether this is writing or whether it is a picture, think about it. I am going to start with some definitions and, as many of you know, there's never one definition of anything in the whole academic world. Ok. So one definition, this is in a book called '*The World's Writing System*' – it's defined as a system of more or less, ok - more or less, it's not definite, ok- permanent marks used to represent an utterance. When we speak we make an utterance. So it's transferring that utterance to a permanent mark, in such a way, that it can be recovered, more or less, this person likes 'more or less', very cautious, exactly, without the intervention of the utterer.

When I speak, if you don't understand you can ask me. When I write, and you read a book that I've written you can't always ask me, if you have my email address you can write and ask me. David Crystal last week said he receives a lot of emails with questions. Today it is possible, but traditionally this person is saying that the utterer, the writer, cannot intervene in your understanding, ok. In parenthesis, in brackets, as a writing teacher I ask you to think about that when you write. Think about the reader. The reader can't ask you questions, explain everything to the reader when you write.

Another definition; 'a set of visible or tactile signs'. What does tactile mean? Tactile? You can touch it, yes. Can you see any signs in this room that you can touch that send you a message? Yes Khalifa, 'Exit' – think about it. Used to represent units of language in a systematic way with the purpose of recording messages which can be retrieved, which can be taken again by everyone. Not everyone in the world, but everyone who knows the language and knows and understands the rules of the language, OK, so think about that. And another definition, or part of an extended definition; 'complete writing must have as its purpose communication'. Why bother to write, why write if you are not

communicating something important? Complete writing must consist of artificial, artificial graphic marks on a durable – durable, something that lasts, something that continues over the years or, in today's world, electronic surface. This is on an electronic surface and I can send it to you – you are all writing down – I can send it to you, do take notes, but I can send it to you because it will not disappear. Unless I delete it.

Part 2

On the handout that I gave you I left you with some 3 fundamental questions at the end, what were they? Did you read it? Did they read it? *They did not get that far.* Well have you got your handout, what are the questions? OK don't worry I'll give you them. How did writing come into existence? Once it came into existence how did writing develop? Once it developed, how did writing spread? We are going to look at the answers to some of those questions this morning in the next 30 or 40 minutes. But the origins – how did we get from no writing at all to writing? Did it just happen? Think about it.

Now you said that the picture of the mobile phone was not writing. Well the first written symbols were actually what we call pictograms or pictographs. So on the Fire Exit you've got somebody running, running away from a fire. I am sure in your language you, or in your country, you have puzzles, and games and some of them are picture games. Some of you were playing games on the coach so you will have games – what does this refer to ...*(visual)*. OK so we've got 'b' and we've got ... put them together – belief yes, good. Do you have that in your country?

We have a name, can you see that, puzzles with pictures for words we call them *rebus* from the Latin and they are very popular in Europe. It is actually a good game to play if you draw pictures and get people to guess what you are drawing. This is to give you an idea of the first writing pictograms, but writing actually began – do you know why it began? Anyone? To *communicate*. Good, to communicate what? *Your view of information*. What kind of information? History maybe? Are there any business people here, business students? In the future, accounting students?

The beginnings were in accountancy. I will explain more about that. In the late 4th c B.C. – 3,000 and something, and this was as a direct consequence of the compelling – do you know 'compelling'? Yes, lots of essential, necessary, driving forward, demands of an expanding economy. Today the Chinese economy is expanding, the Indian economy is expanding. Expanding economies are not new. In the late 4th c entury one particular economic region was expanding, do you know where it was?

Good yes our friends hereit was in Sumeria, in part of Mesopotamia. What – up here, down here? Well the area I want to focus on is around here, a place called Uruk, can you see it ? It's just here, this is a different scale map and Uruk – Babylonia is here, Sumeria is here. I am just going to go back so that you can see Uruk again. Many students come from around this area. There's Libya right over there, we've got the Arabian Desert. So the agricultural economy of this area was expanding. It was a very, very fertile area. So if the economy was expanding, and trade got more complex – what happens, think! Need accounting – yes you need

to write down the trading, the transactions OK because for somebody to remember it was too much. How much did Mohammad give me? Can't remember. How much did Wissam give me? Can't remember, I will have to write it down. You do it today and we will continue to do it in the future. But it needed a dependable form of records.

Part 3

Now there are theories – sorry. The purpose in this economy was for example to record the amounts of grain, the numbers of sheep and cattle going in, coming out. The list of raw materials, and products. Raw materials before they were made into food. Labourers, people who worked, what they did. Therefore we need to know how much to pay them, how much did they work. The fields – who owned them, where were they, and also very important was religion. So the income of temples and the outgoings, so the money that came into the temples, or the food, or the products and what went out. And production levels were looked at, delivery dates, locations and debts purely because it got very complex, it was very fertile and the production grew. Now what are the theories about how, that's why, but how?

There are different theories. There was one Sumerian in Uruk and he developed this system, he decided that things needed to be recorded. Another theory was that it was the work of a group, administrators and merchants that were clever. Another is that it was accidental – oh if I do this we know what is going on. Or over a long period it developed bit by bit. And there was a counting system of clay tokens. Clay was used because it was soft, when it was damp. You know clay, from the earth, you can make an impression in it and when it dries you have a permanent impression. So writing started on clay tokens in that area. First of all they were pictographs as we have talked about. They were pictures I will show you some in a minute. Then it developed into cuneiform signs, have you heard of cuneiform? I will show you in a minute. So they went from pictures to signs and all around the area of Sumeria, Babylon, and Assyria. Eventually it was standardised as a language, and people who needed the language were able to understand it. Some examples of how it developed, ok?

So, very much pictures, first writing, bird, it then developed and this is the beginning of the cuneiform . The long stem and triangle at the end, that is cuneiform writing. That's the origin of writing according to research up until this day. Fish, this we can see is a fish, can you see that that's a fish? Now, yes, good. I can't. You will make a good accountant, then. Ox became Ox. Some of the symbols at first were just rotated 90 degrees. So, it developed like this, OK? So, it's started with the one and that meant - what is it? (head?) Head, yeah, good, that works. Then they rotated it and that was the next stage. Then in about 2600 BC, it became what we call a glyph, you have heard of hieroglyphics? In Egypt? Glyph, glyph is the image, the symbol. Four is when it began to be written on clay, that's cuneiform, OK? Stage five, the next stage, and then you can see how it develops through the ages, but over a period of two or three thousand words, OK? And the final one is supposed to be a simplified version. But I think you need to study it to understand that it is simple.

Here is an example of an inscription on a monument, from the second century BC. Just to show you how it developed, and that it is actually real and I am not making it up. I wanted to spend a bit more time on the origin, because I think it's interesting and there is a reason for it, to communication about the economy to keep records. Then, somebody mentioned - *what has happened here?*

Part 4

Somebody mentioned Egypt there, and that is where it developed afterwards. Egypt is not very far away. However there are two theories about writing in Egypt and I will talk about those in a minute. These are just some of the ways it developed, and I will talk a bit more about them later. But obviously in different parts of the world things were happening at similar times. The important ones are the Egyptian, the Crete - do you know where Crete is? Greece, yes, I am telling you it's in Greece and that was the next stage. China, a lot was developing with their writing and Central America, very important in the development of writing. But I will talk more about that in a minute. I will just talk briefly about Egypt - two theories, one, that influence from Sumeria reached Egypt and they developed their own hieroglyphs and pictures.

Or, another theory is that it developed independently for their own economy, for their own religion. They had two different scripts and the hieroglyphs, the pictures - you are all familiar with the pictures? - the birds - yes, no, in Egypt. Some of you 'yes'. But that developed into a cursive script. Do you know what a cursive script is? Yes I need Fiona at the front to demonstrate. It's when you - it becomes more joined up and flows more. It's not just picture, picture, but it's linked up. You had the hieretic which originally was for business and administration and later it was used for religious purposes. The demotic developed later. And this was all on papyrus, it was not on clay.

A bit more information, these are examples of the hieroglyphics. I can't read it, if we all studied it we would all be able to read it. We have also got a lot of other things to do but it is an interesting subject. There are more than 2,000 characters in the hieroglyphs and each hieroglyph represents a common object, so very familiar to the Egyptian people. And also hieroglyphs could represent the sound of an object or the idea of an object. So there were two purposes. One the people could relate to the sound, and therefore say it, on the other hand they could understand the idea that it was representing.

How do we know the sounds? Well, scholars have worked out the sounds from evidence from other later scripts which kept the sounds from the Egyptians. Again very interesting, not enough time to go into detail, but an interesting thing about the hieroglyphs - you could either read them from the right to the left or the left to the right. So there was a mirror image, it was symmetrical. So people if they were better readers from right to left ,did that, if not they read from left to right. What was their use? They were used in government, they were used for laws, funeral inscriptions and praising royalty. Writing was very much used in ancient times to praise the king, to praise the rulers. So that everybody knew how powerful the rulers were, so that the rulers had control over the people. So all very - and of course economics again, all very common uses of writing, ancient writing.

The next stage is something called *linear A*. Now scholars do not understand it they haven't been able to what we call, decipher. When we decipher a code we work out what the symbols mean, we haven't been able to do that. But they do know, that it was from Crete, the Minoan civilization, and they were on seal stones. Seal stones for sealing important documents, and to give important governmental information and clay tablets in 1900 BC. So there was a lot of overlap, at the time. While this was going on in Crete hieroglyphics were developing in Egypt, and cuneiform was developing further in Sumeria and Babylon. Again it was used for records and it looked like this, so I am not surprised that they haven't been able to work it out, to understand it yet, but maybe you can, maybe you have a theory which you would like to discuss over coffee.

Now *linear A* then developed into *linear B* which they have deciphered, so that was later and really it is the earliest relation to European script. So any script that resembles English, French, Italian, Spanish – that type of script and that was used for transactions, again the economy, trading, it looked like that. Now how they deciphered it is a very interesting story. Scholars sat down and that is all they did for years, and you can read about it. That developed into this, which is much easier. So in some ways it's going backwards to the pictures, in some ways it's going forwards because it is much clearer. So you've got a bath tub here, they did have baths in those days, a cow here, a horse here. A female horse, a male horse, a female sheep a male sheep etc etc. So animals were very important products, oil, wine were very important, spices, olive oil – how many of you cook with olive oil, it is not new. Gold, bronze, wealth, it's all to do with the economy. Yes, yes, economic transactions – so no academic writing so I expect you wish you had lived in the 2nd c BC.

That, then moved onto classical Greek which really is the beginnings of the western writing and that developed from *linear B*, but it also included Phoenicians, from the east of Egypt, and with different symbols and consonants being – they reused them. The Greeks sort of used the old symbols in a different way, they reinvented it. And it was the beginning of the alphabetic languages. Alphabet meaning a word, A B C and it represents a sound as well. So you get something like this, can anybody read it?

Part 5

Greek - its 'oh Andres Athenaioi' it means 'oh men of Athens'. So 'andros' is 'men' and 'athenaioi' is 'from Athens', so it really is the beginning of the western European language system. After that the alphabet reached us, and when I mean us, I mean western Europe. The real origin, they are still not sure, they are still putting pieces together but its probably a mixture of the cuneiform and the Phoenician. Now that has led us from Babylonia to western Europe. I just want to show you a map that will give you an idea of what is going on in other parts of the world. *If you can see it... No, you can't really see it can you?* It's not very clear but can you see that it's the world? Excellent.

So cuneiform started here, Egypt, Phoenician here and Greek here. Then it spread here. But while that was going on, you've got parts of India, and Pakistan,

I think, where script was developing in the 3rd c BC at the same time. Chinese 2nd c BC, Japanese much later. I will talk about that – very, very late and Kaori can tell you all about it over coffee. In South America it was only really in the 1st c BC so that is later. So this, very, very old. I am just going to show you something else where hopefully most of your, some of your languages are represented. The origin of all of them comes here. It moves down through Egypt. This is mainly what I have talked about – Greek, Etruscan, Latin, modern European. But here you have got modern Arabic that comes straight down via Egypt, via Canaan, Phoenicia, early Aramaic, I don't know this one, and down to modern Arabic and modern Persian. Off these you have got Jewish and modern Hebrew, old Hebrew and south Arabian and Ethiopian languages. So these are the oldest and have led to all of these. But what was going on in other parts of the world?

I will just go through this quickly – South America, have you heard of the Mayan Civilization in Mexico mainly? The earliest writing that we have is 250 BC. But scholars are pretty sure that it goes back further but we haven't got it. They had two systems; one for whole words called logograms and they have 550, and syllabograms for syllables. So a mixed system. And they were interested in place names and names of gods. They had glyphs, the pictures for these, and they were carved either in stone, bark from trees, wood from trees, jade- a precious stone, ceramics- pottery, but there are a few manuscripts as well. Manuscripts, meaning, it could be papyrus, or it could be, I'm not sure if they had paper, but I need to check that. But Mexico, Guatemala , and Northern Belize. So South America, and it was slightly more complex, because more than one glyph or picture could represent many syllables. And they were in columns and you read them from left to right, and top to bottom in a zigzag, a bit like Chinese- top to bottom, Chinese? I don't know enough about this to tell you in detail but I can show you what they look like. And I actually quite like this system of writing.

Part 6

So they used, and I can't tell you what these are either. It's just to show you what they were like . (Student) Thank you, yes. All of that was 'A' All of that was *bah*, I think that is the head of a sheep. So they did relate the sounds to the pictures as well. And this is high, but I don't think it's 'hi'i. But as I said if you are really interested, then you can find out.

I am going to move on to Chinese writing because that is pretty old, it's not as old as the cuneiform, but the first writing was found on oracle bones, so bones of animals. An it was kings, giving predictions or divinations. A divination is saying something about the future, but they claimed it was from the gods. Much of the first writing was about predicting the future. They were very concerned about the future, as probably you are as well, as we are today. They lived in their present but what was going to happen in their future..... I'll now show you an example in a minute. Then it developed into many different characters. And this was because different people in different parts of China were developing the characters but they weren't talking to each other. So they were developing them at different places and for different purposes. But after that, in 221 BC, there was a decision to reform and bring all the script together and try and have a unified one script. Is that right? Correct me if I'm wrong. And after that there was a gradual increase in the number of characters.

Now it could be that the people from around Babylonia did travel to China. Globalisation is not new. Globalisation started a long time ago, it's just now it is speeded up. However the characters are quite different. So it's unlikely that if they did travel there was an influence. That's a reconstructed bone oracle. Is it, Lee? (asks a student) What is it? The whole thing, can you read it? What does it say? What does it say? 'morning?' Some people with some people do something, yeah? Do something. That's good. It's very, very old. Don't worry about it. We can talk about it later.

Now I did mention Japan and that came much later. And there are a few people here who know a lot more than me, but just briefly the kanji in Japanese language was based on Chinese. But I think they did change some of the symbols and it was quite complex, so they wanted to simplify it into two types. The hiragana which was originally for informal writing but is mostly used, but today it's the most used script. They are the most used symbols. And katakana, which was originally for formal writing, and now it's still used for more formal but very specific expressions. (Kaori, is it right? Do you want to correct me?) Tell us then. Challenge the teacher. (*Unintelligible student response*). You mean specific words and expressions that come from the outside. Perhaps like film stars' names and tomatoes and OK. Thank you.

Coming to the end now, just a summary of the uses and the functions of writing. Power. Very, very important. Political power and economic power. Sometimes they cannot be separated. Palaces and temples were covered with these symbols. To remind people who was the boss. In fact in England we still have that.. If you go around you will still see symbols of the Queen or the Royal family. We still have that today, and it started thousands and thousands and thousands of years ago, and you probably have in your country. Funeral inscriptions. Etruscans, they were the very old people in Italy. They developed the Greek, the pre-Greek writing, and that became Latin and that became Italian. But it was very very common for funeral inscriptions, funeral writings. And as I said before predicting the future.

I am not going to talk about how we use writing today because you know, you live today. But something to think about is to compare how we use writing today and the origins- the main uses and functions of writing over the historical period. Why? Why? Think about this subject. Well, perhaps, I hope it's made you think about the difference between speech and writing. The difference between writing today and writing then, the origins of writing, why? The processes of reading, writing, speaking, thinking, and understanding what we read, what we write, and understanding each other and understanding a language. But how much do we, not necessarily we here, but we as a generation, as scholars, really understand about these processes. And also knowledge of other cultures. Knowledge of other cultures is very important, especially today, but it was also then, to help us get along in the world to help us live together in a more globalised world. So although this is history and some of the symbols and images look very strange, there is a purpose for thinking about it and looking at it. And I'll end with another question, 'Is this writing or not?' and 'Are you ready for it?'