

Book Review

Rethinking Writing

By Roy Harris

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Reviewed by Stephen Pierson

Purdue University

Small wonder this book does not have a place in the *Advances in Semiotics* series that Thomas Sebeok edited out of Bloomington since the mid-1970s. Though published by the same press and treating a semiotic topic (alphabetic writing), Harris's book is decidedly against Peircean semiotics. Harris contends that semiotics contains too little on writing *qua* sign system for the kind of reconsideration of alphabetic writing that Harris has in mind. Harris also finds Peirce's theory of the sign too "metaphysical" and "vague" for his purpose (pp. 64-65).

These are dubious reasons for not using Peirce. Peirce's semiotics encompasses all signs and thus could be applied to alphabetic writing. Moreover, Harris himself has no qualm about devoting an entire chapter to Aristotle's "semiology of writing," even though that semiology amounts to but two sentences in Aristotle's oeuvre. In addition, given the voluminous commentary on Peirce, Harris could readily find assistance with some of Peirce's more difficult passages.

Notwithstanding this facile rejection of Peirce, Harris's book is worthwhile reading for semioticians and semiologists alike. Devoid of jargon, it presents provocative arguments concerning some of the most hallowed assumptions about writing, such as (1) that there even is such a thing as an alphabet (in the Western sense of the term); (2) that alphabetic writing is superior to other kinds of writing and, concomitantly, that literate people are socially and cognitively superior to illiterates; and (3) that writing is best understood as a useful way of extending the temporal and spatial limits of speech.

Harris challenges these assumptions from his own semiological perspective, the premise of which is that a sign becomes meaningful only when it is integrated into an activity whose constituent features are context and intentionality as well as the sign(s). Harris thus calls for a semiology of writing (and of other signs) that starts with the notion of the "working sign," that is, the sign that is not identical to its form and referent (*à la* Saussure) but to its practical realization by the human agents in specific contexts. After all, Harris notes, there is no *a priori* correspondence between the intentions of the sign maker and the manner in which the sign is received.

Harris devotes most of the book to applying this integrational theory of semiology to the relationship between speech and writing. The groundwork

for this application is first set out in a historical overview of what little “analytic reflection” has been devoted to the semiological relationship of speech and writing (chapters 1 and 2). Harris singles out Plato as the only ancient who rejected the proposition that writing can provide “a viable surrogate for speech” (p. 18). But Aristotle and Quintilian saw things differently, and so Harris regards them as the founders of nomenclaturalism—the theory that words mainly function to name things just as surely as letters function to represent vocal sounds (pp. 30-31).

Saussure’s rejection of this nomenclaturalism is treated in detail in chapters 2 and 3, with much insight. Harris shows that this rejection was crucial to the character of Saussure’s entire semiology of language. If we agree with Harris (as most semioticians do) that Saussure’s theory of the linguistic sign is abstract and decontextualized, then we probably will agree with Harris’s explanation of it, namely, that it is the result of a theory of human cognition in which there is no understanding of the world or concepts of it until a speech community has *la langue*. Saussure’s philosophy of cognition, Harris points out, compelled Saussure to divide speech and writing into two separate sign systems, with writing as the resourceful substitute for speech. Harris notes that had Saussure not done so, he would have had to develop separate theories of linguistics for literate and preliterate societies. Yet given Saussure’s position on *la langue* as the logical determinant of human thought, “Saussure could not afford to admit that writing played a role . . . in the articulation of thought . . . in establishing a conceptual system which finds its mode of expression in language” (p. 33).

Harris will not say whether he agrees with Saussure that human beings do not have (or never had) understanding outside of language. But he absolutely seconds Saussure’s separation of speech from writing as distinct systems. Unlike Saussure, however, Harris contends that writing is not only different from but also independent of the semiological system that Saussure sets up for speech. And because it is, Harris argues, whenever Saussure compares speech and writing, the comparison lacks theoretical validity. Harris’s analyses of Saussure’s own comparative examples supports Harris’s point.

Rethinking Writing thus offers a pragmatic semiology of writing (“there are no contextless signs”) in which the significance of the sign is largely determined in use.

This integrational semiology has much in common with a twenty-first-century psychology of human communication. Yet the book does exhibit a few warts—the summary dismissal of Peirce being a prominent one. In addition, some of Harris’s major arguments are not waterproof. I myself did not put down Harris’s book convinced that there is no theoretical correspondence between letter and sound. In many practical affairs, writing does indeed represent speech reasonably well—doubtless owing to a relatively fixed inventory of phonemes. Nor did I walk away from this book convinced that writing should not be regarded as “cognitive advancement” for human beings. It may be true, as Harris asserts, that any “nincompoop” can learn to write, but single letters are rarely found by themselves, and not everybody can put as many together into the intelligent discourse that Harris has done here.