

Rita Marquilhas

**The History of Writing Practices and Scribal Culture (Discussion of the
Specialized Theme organized by Martyn Lyons) ***

**22nd International Congress of Historical Sciences. Jinan (China) 22-29 August
2015**

The focus of the history of writing, as the discipline is practiced today, has lost the deterministic bias it once had. We no longer think of such history as the tale of an ever-growing triumph of civilization, a chronicle of high cultures, closed elites, and powerful individuals. We have learnt from authors like Armando Petrucci, Roger Chartier and Donald F. McKenzie, just to cite the first whose works became more influential, to turn into a modality of *storia della cultura scritta*, a history of scribal culture (or written culture), focused on **the meanings** that different social groups seem to have, along history, confined to written artefacts.

To explain quite simply, this *storia della cultura scritta* (history of scribal culture) is a disciplinary middle land, where sociology and anthropology meet history. Here, writing is seen as social interaction through enduring signs, a process that must be carefully taken in its condition of a practice that runs and changes with time, is power (or contra-power) invested and gets continually re-shaped, depending on the perspective of social actors.

The challenge we all accept as scribal culture historians is to see those artefacts not as traditional historical sources, in the sense of transparent evidences, but rather as opaque, complex discourses, that demand a thick description of the social knowledge and shared beliefs they materialize. The term **thick description** comes from Clifford Geertz's suggestion of the appropriate ethnographical method to use in the interpretation of cultures. It is an interpretation based on extrovert expressions formulated by the informants themselves, it is microscopic in its analysis of local behaviours and assumed truths, and it targets social discoursei.

In all this book's chapters, we have **thick descriptions** of written artefacts in history, assuming that written artefacts (original, authentic ones) are what corresponds to **the informants' extrovert expressions** in Geertz's anthropology. The written artefacts we can read about here are precisely the cuneiform clay tablets of the first Millennium BC in Mesopotamia, the sign of the cross and related symbols in Mediaeval Europe, the 19th century ego-documents of non elite people in Finland, and one late 19th century Cheyenne letter.

It is our impression that the most salient result of the thick descriptions that we get in these and other studies in the domain of the history of scribal culture is that a new light is shed into a well-known phenomenon: that of the **stability of writing, the endurance of its supports, of its codes, and its visual traces**. Such stability and endurance are normally remarked in order to explain why spelling reforms are always so difficult to implement, for instance, or to explain why certain texts (religious, administrative, funeral or laudatory) get more promptly written than others.

We saw here, as we see in many studies in the domain of the history of scribal culture, that there is a more hidden result of such phenomenon. Because of its endurance and stability, writing gets transformed at a pace that is always **much slower** than that of the uses attached to it: the use of language, the use of power and knowledge, the use of contra-power, and the communication of common wisdom are some examples. Such mismatch between the slowness of changes in writing systems and the quickness of changes occurring in social contexts produces a paradox that demands a remedy and such remedy is often the REANALYSIS of the very functions served by writing.

Reanalysis is a technical term used in historical linguistics to refer the creative interpretation of ambiguous language data on behalf of speakers, especially the ones acquiring language. It is an interpretation that may trigger language change at several levels: phonology, morphology and, above all, syntax. In syntactic reanalysis, speakers attribute a new structure to sentences with ambiguous linearization and thus start mechanisms that change the language grammar (cf. Campbell 2004ii).

In what concerns the uses of writing for the uses of language, Francis Johannès shows how the same cuneiform technology, which only the clay matter could embody, was progressively reanalyzed along its adaptation from the Sumerian language to the Accadian, the Hurrite, the Hittite, the Cannanite and the Ugaritic. Writing cuneiform characters in clay was a practice that was stretched all over Mesopotamia to the point where no more stretching seems to have been possible in the face of a competing technology, that of the Phoenician script, in its Aramaic derivate, embodied in the parchment matter. The response in the Mesopotamian context, as Francis Johannès explains us, was to reanalyze cuneiform script as the proper form for scholar uses, thus guaranteeing its survival for many more centuries in a new function, and its appropriation by one specific group, more scholarly than the preceding ones.

In Antonella Ghignoli's study, whose departure point is that of a continuum between late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages in Europe in terms of an inherited written culture, we see the same impetus of reanalysis, here attached to the non-alphabetic signs of the cross and related symbols. Only here such reanalysis leads to the appropriation of writing by the non-literate, or at least to their entrance on the theatre of writing celebrations with a role of their own. The drawing of a cross, that began as an invocation of Christ, a pious opening in a document or a letter, became a tool of inclusion of the illiterate in the writing sphere, so that, and I cite, *a person who was not*

able to write a signing line to a legal document could however participate with its own hand in the documentary process, as author of the written contract or as witness.

In Germaine Warketin's paper the theory of reanalysis is overtly assumed, although the author prefers to speak of ***adaptive uses of media*** when she mentions the use of paper in cases, like the Cheyenne letter she describes, which are instances of contact between the inscriptions tradition in North America and the Western uses of writing brought by the European.

Anna Kuismin seizes the case of ordinary people gaining access to written communication at a time when reading and writing became a generalized practice in the West, even among the under-privileged. The Finns producing ego-documents in the 18th and 19th centuries that the author studies are modern social actors reanalyzing writing for purposes that are non-bureaucratic and non scholarly, although they didn't develop new textual genres for such purpose. They clung to the traditional genre of the epistle, the diary, or the account book, but reinvested them with new meanings: the genres served now as tools they could plastically bend in order to adapt to the complexity of the self-image they were trying to project.

Notes

i Geertz, Clifford. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture." In *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.

ii Campbell, Lyle. *Historical Linguistics: an Introduction*. 2.a ed. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2004

* Funded by the European Research Council, ERC Advanced Grant 2011, GA 295562.