Molinari, Julia. "How Did We Get Here? A Selected History." *What Makes Writing Academic: Rethinking Theory for Practice*. London,: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. 45–73. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350243958.ch-2>>.

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How Did We Get Here? A Selected History

Introduction

The evidence has begun to accumulate that our beliefs about literacy are a blend of fact and supposition, in a word a mythology, a selective way of viewing the facts that not only justifies the advantages of the literate but also assigns the failings of the society, indeed of the world, to the illiterate.

(Olson, 1994, p. 2)

This chapter highlights the contingency of human choices and shows that what counts as writing and, by extension, academic writing is a matter of human decision-making and ideology. I argue that ‘Western’ literacy has idealized ‘higher order’ thinking by arrogating and then conflating ‘logical’, ‘linear’ thinking with alphabet-based literacies. Throughout history, knowledge has been communicated via a range of script, alphabetic and non, each representing the values and purposes of people. Shining a spotlight on this range allows us to reflect on what was and what is. It further creates a space within which to consider why things are as they are and how we’d like them to be.

After some introductory remarks on why I use history to explain current practices, I suggest that the orthodox conflation of writing with the alphabet and with cognition is misguided and, because of this, writing should be re-positioned as *one of several* modes for communicating academic knowledge and thinking about it critically. I evidence some of the different ways that academic knowledge has been communicated to suggest that academia might reclaim some of this diversity. The final section of this chapter focuses on how the scientific paradigm of the European enlightenment and European colonial practices have imposed their own forms of literacy to the exclusion of others: this serves to remind us that writing practices are ideological, including those favoured by ‘Western’ academies (Canagarajah, 2021; Henderson, 2018; Lillis & Tuck, 2016; Russell, 2002; Street, 1984; Turner, 2010, 2018).

Using History to Understand the Present

History shows it could all have been different. In his *Representations of the Intellectual*, which document his 1993 BBC Reith Lectures, Palestinian critical theorist, secular humanist and historian, Edward Said (1994) claims that history, not God or similarly unaccountable entities, allows us to see why things are and how they could have been. In Said's thinking, humanism is a response to social injustices and is a way of 'speaking truth to power'. In this sense, 'humans are the measures of all things' and can therefore (Said, 1994, p. 45):

Look at situations as contingent, not as inevitable, look at them as a result of a series of historical choices made by men and women, as facts of society made by human beings and not as natural or god-given, therefore unchangeable, permanent, irreversible.

Said identifies with the legacy of Giambattista Vico (1959 (1725, 1730, 1744, 1928)), the eighteenth-century Italian professor of Rhetoric whose seminal work *La Scienza Nuova* was a response to the rational hypothetico-deductive Cartesian philosophy of the time. Vico argued against Descartes's method on the grounds that 'it renders phenomena which cannot be expressed logically or mathematically as illusions' (Costelloe, 2018). Instead, Vico proposed that (Said, 1994, p. 45)

the proper way to understand reality is to understand it as a process generated from its point of origin, which one can always locate in extremely humble circumstances.

More recently, critical theorist and historian Michel Foucault (1972a, p. 7) claimed that 'history is one way in which a society recognises and develops a mass of documentation with which it is inextricably linked'.

Our social practices – of which writing is one – are also 'located in extremely humble origins' and are 'inextricably linked' to our past, making the history of writing an inseparable part of understanding writing itself. With knowledge of why writing practices have evolved as they have, present and future practices can emerge from informed choices and possibilities, not templates, straightjackets or pigeonholes (Paxton, 2013). This allows us to *hold rules to account*, breaking, following and adapting them from a position of knowledge and openness towards change.

A Misguided Conflation: The Alphabet and Cognition

Historians of writing show that definitions of writing are as useful as they are redundant. None are univocal. Arguing from a philological and semiological perspective, Pettersson (1994) has claimed that attempts to provide core definitions of writing are fallacies doomed to failure. This is because of three interconnected reasons. Firstly, in order to decide what counts and does not count as writing, we would need to have a pre-agreed notion of what writing is before being able to recognize instances of it. But since we don't, as I discuss below, definitions remain elusive. Secondly, even if an antecedent definition were possible, countless problems would arise in trying to classify new instances that do not sit comfortably with the definition. For example, do non-alphabetical scripts such as pictorial rebuses or Chinese logographs count as 'writing' (DeFrancis, 1989; Harris, 1986)? And thirdly, by extracting a definition from an *ad hoc* classification based on 'uniquely identifying' features (such as a mark on a surface or an alphabet), we are, on the one hand, conflating what are contested defining properties with what is a *post hoc* classification and, on the other, begging a whole series of other questions such as what counts as a 'mark', a 'surface', an 'alphabet'. For example, history shows that writing is not exclusively alphabetic and that what has been labelled as 'writing' has varied in form, content, purpose and interpretation (Olson, 2001; Schmandt-Besserat, 2001; Woodard, 2001). Some argue that 'real writing' is unequivocally alphabetical, i.e. based on phonological representation, which explains why, over time, it has become conflated with 'literacy' (DeFrancis, 1989; Gelb, 1952; Havelock, 1976). Others, however, refute this conflation on the grounds that what counts as 'writing' very much depends on who is doing the counting and why, which leaves open the possibility to re-think what writing means (Coulmas, 1989; Harris, 1986, 2000). The debate over what counts as 'writing' further assumes that there was a key moment in time that separated non-writing communities from writing ones. It also rests on a contention concerning the purpose of writing: does it function as a *representation* of the objects it refers to or as a *symbolic correspondence* that 'stands for' something else? If it *represents* the objects it refers to, then what is the nature of this representation: a copy or replacement of its object, as the alphabet is said to graphically 'replace' the phonology of spoken language? If writing is *symbolic* in its correspondence to nature, who decides which symbol stands for its referent and how do they decide this?

Despite its problems, the representational theory of language has endured and forms the basis of influential theories that underscore modern-day structural linguistics (Harris, 2000; Harris & Taylor, 1989; Orman, 2016). Its origins can be traced to how Cuneiform ‘writing’ is said to have evolved during the early Mesopotamian era of 8000–3000 BC from the use of geometrically shaped counters to record the inventory of goods (such as grain) to incisions, or marks, on clay tablets that *re-presented* these goods functionally: clay tokens ‘stood for’ an object not a sound, as the alphabet is said to do. While representational theories of language may account for the one-to-one correspondence between a geometric token and the number of grains needed for a commercial transaction, they struggle to explain pictographic languages, such as ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs or ancient Chinese characters, because the use of pictograms, namely pictures representing ideas, is not concerned with one-to-one correspondence with an object but with symbolism. This linear (and highly compressed) history of how writing has evolved leads us to logographic writing (2600–2500 BC), of which both ancient and modern Chinese are examples. Here, a sign or mark is said to *re-present* or ‘stand for’ a sound or word, not an object. In philology, it is generally agreed that the emergence of logograms marks the shift from a visual representation theory of language, where a mark stood for an ‘object’, to an aural representation theory of language, where a mark now stands for a ‘sound’ (Schmandt-Besserat, 2001). Syllabic scripts, where signs represent syllables rather than whole words, are concurrent with logographic ones (Fischer, 2005). Current Indian, Japanese, Arabic and Hebrew are all examples of syllabic languages and are said to have converged in 2000 BC with the invention of what is commonly, but, as we shall see, problematically, referred to as the ‘Greek’ alphabet: this moment marks a seismic shift in how phonetic languages came to be represented in writing and in how ‘Western’ notions of literacy subsequently developed.

The alphabet is Proto-Sinaitic-Phoenician-Palestinian-Greek-Lebanese and dates to between 2000 and 1000 BC (Fischer, 2005; Goody, 1977; Harris, 1986, pp. 30–1; Schmandt-Besserat, 2001, p. 16623). Its designation as ‘Greek’ and as having been ‘invented’ at one moment in time, i.e. 2000 BC, is, therefore, inaccurate because of the vast geographical area where the alphabet developed and because it established itself over one thousand years. While it may seem pedantic to point this out, it is a reminder that men and women select which histories and whose accounts and approximations to refer to when they trace the genealogies of the phenomena they care about. By signalling that nationalistic claims to ownership of something as momentous as the origin of the alphabet are questionable, I am preparing the reader for what is to come.

Indeed, some linguists and historians of language (e.g. Harris, 1986) remind us that writing systems did not suddenly appear but they developed incrementally, synchronously and serendipitously alongside other writing systems. This suggests that it is misleading to reduce definitions of writing to alphabetic writing. This is because rather than having evolved in a linear and chronological fashion, from pictograms to ideograms to logograms, to syllabic representations culminating in the phonetic representations of the alphabet, writing systems are likely to have co-existed. And during this co-existence, they are likely to have borrowed and (erroneously) copied from each other, adapting these borrowings to specific needs (Fischer, 2005, pp. 296–7). If writing is thought of in this serendipitous way, then ‘alphabetic’ writing is just one of many kinds of writing.

Despite the possibility that writing can be non-alphabetic, the alphabet has become co-extensive with ‘Western’ definitions of ‘writing’, most likely because it now forms the basis of some of the world’s writing systems, those that share an alphabetic genesis, such as Latin, Arabic, Hebrew and Cyrillic. Unlike pictographic and logographic forms of notation, the ‘Greek’ alphabet had twenty-two letters ‘each standing for a single sound of voice, which, combined in innumerable ways, brought an unprecedented flexibility to transcribe speech’ (Schmandt-Besserat, 2001, p. 16624): it is this flexibility that is said to explain why alphabetic script formed the basis of so many languages. Gradually, writing came to be defined by the alphabet because, unlike a picture, writing could ‘record a linguistic utterance directly’ (Woodard, 2001, p. 16633):

The term ‘writing system’ specifically denotes a set of symbols which is used for the graphic (written) recording of language Forms of graphic expression which may have some semantic content – such as cave drawings, petroglyphs, icons and even sophisticated picture messages – but which do not or could not record a linguistic utterance directly, are thus excluded from the realm of writing.

The co-existence of pictorial and alphabetical symbols allowed philologists to create different categories with which to include and exclude different forms of graphic representations. These categories included distinctions between non-writing systems, as noted by Woodward, above, partial writing systems¹ and full writing systems (DeFrancis, 1989, p. 5):

Partial writing is a system of graphic symbols that can be used to convey only some thought. Full writing is a system of graphic symbols that can be used to convey any and all thought.

¹ For DeFrancis, mathematics and rebuses are forms of ‘partial writing’ because they are not based on the sounds of speech.

To side-step the many difficulties generated by creating categories to include and exclude what does and does not count as writing (such as whether ‘all thought’ can be conveyed by any form of representation), others, such as Erard (2018), began framing writing in functional terms, not graphic ones. Erard sees writing as a ‘layered’ concept that has explosive effects. His conception challenges the idea that ‘writing’ can be defined by reducing it to any single form:

I like to think of writing as a layered invention. First there’s the graphic invention: the notion of making a durable mark on a surface. Then the symbolic invention: let’s make this mark different from all other marks and assign it a meaning that we can all agree on. Humans have been doing this for a long time, too. Then there’s the linguistic one: let’s realize that a sound, a syllable and a word are all things in the world that can be assigned a graphic symbol. This invention depends on the previous ones and itself is made of innovations, realizations, solutions and hacks. Then comes the functional invention: let’s use this set of symbols to write a list of captives’ names, or a contract about feeding workers, or a letter to a distant garrison commander. All these moves belong to an alchemy of life that makes things go boom.

Olson (2001, p. 16640) and Harris (1986) have argued that, rather than an evolution from mark to picture to sound, changes in scripts reflect borrowings, errors and adaptations from several co-occurring scripts. A modern-day example of such borrowings is English spelling, a system which bears an erratic resemblance to its phonology because of its Latin, French and Anglo-Saxon influences, because of historical errors in transcriptions and because it has never been possible to systematize it via, for example, an Academy of Language. This mottled history explains why the English language has remained a porous and open system that can swiftly accommodate neologisms and changes in meaning (Barber, 1993; Crystal, 1988). Harris, Olson and others have argued that similar dappled borrowings and unsystematic uses are likely to have occurred in ancient times, too, especially over the course of the thousand years that culminated in the establishment of a ‘Greek’ alphabet. What this less linear account suggests is that the orthodox conflation of ‘writing’ with the alphabet may be unwarranted (Harris, 1986):

Writing was originally merely a term designating the process of scoring or outlining a shape on a surface of some kind. (In this very broad sense, writing ought to include drawing and even the art of the silhouette. Nowadays, it does not, although that original use of the verb *write* survives in English as late as the sixteenth century). Ancient Egyptian had one word meaning both ‘writing’ and ‘drawing’. Similarly, the Greek verb γράφω (‘to write’) originally meant in

Homer ‘engrave’, ‘scratch’, ‘scrape’. The later restriction of such words to designate alphabetic writing hardly warrants the narrow perspective adopted by those historians of the subject who take for granted that graphic signs count as writing only when used for purposes which alphabetic writing was later to fulfil.

On Roy Harris’s account, if ‘writing’ can include drawing, then, in principle, it can include other forms of representation. Indeed, both Harris (1986) and Halverson (1992) have argued that many enduring assumptions about how writing originated need challenging. In particular, Harris refutes the classical Aristotelian and De Saussurean thesis that the alphabet, understood as a precursor to writing, evolved as a substitute for speech, with each letter (*grapheme*) representing a sound (*phoneme*). Rather, since an alphabet cannot capture all the nuances of speech, writing can never be a full surrogate of speech (Harris, 1986, 1989, 2000). That the alphabet does not account for all forms of writing is evidenced by the existence of Chinese characters and script, an example of a writing system that can be processed semantically without an intermediate phonetic stage. Unfortunately, the reason Chinese was *not* considered to be a writing system by ‘Western’ standards has more to do with political ideology than it does with the putatively unique adeptness of the alphabet in capturing the sounds of speech. I discuss this later in the chapter, but before then, more needs to be said about why the conflation of the alphabet with writing is misguided.

Even if we grant that alphabetic writing is a representation of speech, it has become clear that it is inherently inadequate in this representation. This inadequacy is evident when we consider the vast range of non-alphabetic ways that humans have developed to try and compensate for the fact that the alphabet cannot fully represent speech (Olson, 2001, p. 16641):

The history of writing is largely the history of inventing devices, such as punctuation and text structures, as well as rules for interpretation that have taken sometimes as long as millennia to develop.

If the alphabet, and by implication writing, cannot fully represent speech, then it becomes as (in)adequate as drawing in representing human thought. This is one reason why Harris (1986, 2000) and Coulmas (1989) see no difference between writing and drawing (Olson, 2001, p. 16641). In fact, for both Harris and Coulmas, semasiographic systems, such as road signs and mathematics, are systems of writing capable of representing meaning without relying on a prior link to spoken forms.

A final difficulty with reducing the function of writing to a representation of speech is that it assumes ‘speech’ is synonymous with ‘language’. But this conflation,

too, is problematic not least because of its exclusionary implications (see Evans (2014)). If 'speech' were equal to 'language', this would entail that deaf/mute people don't communicate linguistically. The fact that a deaf/mute person can read, write and understand alphabetic script suggests that it is meanings, rather than sounds, that are conveyed by the graphic sign, whether alphabetic or not: this is because there is nothing phonologically inherent in 'cat' that it needs to be heard or pronounced as /kæt/ to be understood as meaning 'cat'.² By undermining the conflation of the alphabet with writing, on the grounds that writing does not need to be heard to be understood (or seen, for that matter), we are more likely to accept that pictographic and logographic scripts convey meanings in ways that do not rely on alphabetic script or sound. Similar arguments are developed in Evans (2009) and Malpas (2002). They are important because, as we will see, the prominence given to the alphabet by 'literate' cultures has been used to discriminate against non-alphabetic cultures and against multimodal ways of communicating knowledge.

Notwithstanding the above critiques, influential historians of writing, like Gelb (1963), have defended the thesis that for a script to count as 'writing' it needs to be alphabetic. Gelb claimed that pictures cannot be considered part of writing because the urge to draw is aesthetic, not communicative (Pettersson, 1994, p. 131). This stance led him into several difficulties when attempting to 'lay a foundation for a full science of writing' (Gelb, 1963, p. 23 cited in Pettersson, 1994, p. 138). Not only did Gelb equate writing with the alphabet and therefore speech, but he also insisted that for writing to be considered 'writing' it had to consist of a 'mark on an object' rather than 'be' that object (as a token or a drawing might be). Significantly, Gelb's definition of writing would rule out Chinese script as a written form of its language,³ because it is not alphabetic. Gelb

² An extreme example of how *unphonetic* the English language is illustrates this point further by showing that there is nothing phonologically inherent in the letters of the alphabet that they sound one way or the other: 'ghoti seagh' is a non-sensical phrase in English; yet, based on how the English language has evolved to represent the sounds of the alphabet, it can be pronounced as 'fish chef' (Fish: Gh pronounced as 'f' as in 'enough'; O pronounced as 'i' as in 'women'; Ti pronounced as 'sh' as in 'tion'. Chef: S pronounced as 'sh' as in sugar; Ea pronounced as in 'bread'; Gh pronounce 'f' as in 'enough').

³ In an attempt to assuage the divisive polemic that has surrounded dismissive 'Western' attitudes to Chinese (cf. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Joseph Priestley in Harris, 2000, p. 2), DeFrancis, J. (1989). *Visible speech: The diverse oneness of writing systems*. University of Hawaii Press has argued that although Chinese is not alphabetic, it is nonetheless 'phonetic' in the sense that the early pictograms and the later stylized signs of Chinese characters represent phonic elements (such as morphemes and syllables) or whole words. This, according to King, B. (1991). Reviewed work(s): Visible speech: The diverse oneness of writing systems by John DeFrancis. *Linguistic Society of America*, 67(2), 377-9. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/415119>, is, however, a trivial observation that can be applied to all written forms because they can all be pronounced whether they are alphabetical or not. In this sense, then, DeFrancis does little to extinguish the polemic. Rather, Chinese characters, whilst having originated as pictograms, have since become so stylized and far removed from their original pictorial depiction that Chinese cannot meaningfully be said to be a pictorial language any more. This is because the original representation can no longer be discerned.

therefore revised the definitions he gave in *A History of Writing* by omitting any reference to the alphabet (Gelb, 1980, pp. 21–2 cited in Pettersson (1994, p. 144)):

The proposed new definition of writing is as follows: writing in its broadest sense is a recording system or device by means of conventional markings or shapes or colour of objects, achieved by the motor action of the hand of an individual and received visually by another.

This new, non-alphabetical definition of writing would now include picto/logographic languages but it remains problematic for at least the following reasons:

- ‘conventional markings’ would now cover the entire field of semiotics, including semasiography (whereby communication is achieved entirely without words, such as in road signs);
- the requirement for writing to be ‘achieved by the motor action of the hand’ would rule out Stephen Hawkin’s ‘writing’ because he used eye movement and dictation software; and
- the condition that the marks be ‘received visually by another’ excludes braille from the definition.

What this cursory⁴ overview has served to highlight is that there are reasons to challenge the conflation of writing with the alphabet as well as to question the motivations for this conflation. Since definitions of writing, literacy and cognition have been used to exclude and vilify forms of literacy that do not conform to the alphabetic canon, writing is as much ideological as it is a mechanical skill. Indeed, as noted by Olson in opening this chapter, being or not being ‘literate’ has implications for social inclusion and exclusion.

Many studies on ‘Western’ literacy assume a linear transition from an oral to a written culture. They include influential work by historian Havelock (1976, 1982), who has also dated the origins of ‘Western’ literacy to the Greek alphabet. I have

⁴ Key linguistic theories of the twentieth century have been necessarily omitted because the scope of this chapter is to provide a very brief historical foundation for justifying the possibility, in principle, of diverse forms of (academic) writing. I am, however, aware of the complex and nuanced tradition of ‘Western’ linguistics, in particular De Saussure’s structuralism, which distinguishes between writing and speech by drawing attention to the diachronic contingencies of the latter (*parole*) and the synchronic stability of the former (*langue*) Harris, R., & Taylor, T. J. (1989). *Landmarks in linguistic thought: The Western tradition from Socrates to Saussure*. Routledge, Saussure, F. d., Baskin, W., Meisel, P., & Saussy, H. (2011). *Course in general linguistics*. Columbia University Press and with Derrida’s deconstruction of Western logocentrism, which de-centres language and meaning and repositions them as differential relationships involving absences, differences and deferrals. Derrida, J., & Spivak, G. C. (1976). *Of grammatology*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

already questioned the sweeping linguistic and geographical generalizations that underscore this view, namely that what is meant by ‘Greek’ is actually a vast geographical area that includes the modern-day Middle East. Indeed, the ‘West’ is far too readily accepted as a synecdoche that covers immense geographical and cultural areas which are not ‘Western’, as patiently shown, for example, by Appiah (2016a) in his Reith Lectures and by de Sousa Santos (2009) in *A Non-Occidental West*: both have challenged the mis-appropriation of ‘Western’ by the ‘West’. When Havelock claims that the ‘psychological and epistemological revolution’ brought about by written, i.e. alphabetized, prose, ‘inheres only in an alphabet’ (Halverson, 1992, p. 151), he is clearly advancing, or at least assuming, a normative thesis about the superiority of the alphabet compared to other systems of thought and knowledge representation. This has cemented and perpetuated the collective dismissal of oral and visual cultures on the grounds that they restrict thought and lead to indoctrination, whereas written culture (‘Western’ written culture, specifically) frees thought from rote repetition. An obvious objection to this is that civilizations that are non-alphabetic, but nonetheless ‘written’, have also generated their own ‘psychological and epistemological revolutions’ – China’s millennial history of medicine, philosophy and literature being a case in point (Van Norden, 2017) and the debunking of the myth that ‘literate’ minds are more conceptually ‘agile and deductive’ than non-literate ones, being another (Scribner & Cole, 1981).

Despite such objections, the shift from oral to written societies, where ‘written’ is equated with ‘alphabetic’, has been credited with developing a ‘logical’ mind because it has allowed us to ‘see’ language, enabling us to do what Havelock calls ‘backward scanning’, whereby we can reflect on how a text is organized, categorize the topics that it deals with and create logical ordering. This has allowed us to turn language into an object of study which has generated grammatical concepts such as ‘clause’ and ‘sentence’ (Olson, 1994). In addition to providing opportunities for reifying language as an object of study, the shift from oral to written has also freed us from the need to preserve cultural wisdom through repetition, proverbs and prescriptive metrics – associated with oral prose – so that we can create novel statements through writing. Havelock illustrates this shift through a detailed analysis of the socially unifying and culturally preserving function of Homeric prose, which used repetition, proverbs and prescriptive metrics as a way to preserve cultural wisdom. By having a writing culture, he argues, we are no longer bound by the need to memorize familiar ideas and to be ‘indoctrinated’. In short, according to Havelock, ‘the Greeks did not just invent an alphabet; they invented literacy

and the literate basis of modern thought' (cited in Halverson, 1992, p. 152). This view has not only had negative repercussions on how the 'West' has treated non-Western civilizations, but it has led to the illogical and normative conclusion that alphabetically literate cultures are superior to non-alphabetic ones, rather than being simply different (Appiah, 2016b; Said, 1978, 1993).

Notwithstanding its widespread acceptance and influence, Havelock's account may also be misguided. Firstly, whilst it is true that writing has afforded the development of a systematized grammar, it does not follow that thinking in ordered ways would not have happened if alphabetical writing had not developed. This leaves open the possibility that other forms of representation, including images, also produce ordered ways of thinking. Secondly, according to Halverson, Havelock based his arguments that the Greek alphabet has shaped 'Western' thought on some unfounded assumptions about Homeric prose and about the primacy of orality over the written word. Indeed, there seems to be insufficient evidence to conclude that Homer's ballads were indeed spoken first and then transcribed: they could have been written and co-existed with an oral tradition. If Halverson is right, this would undermine the orthodox view that society transitioned from orality to writing and that the latter is a thought-structuring substitute for the former. If true, this would have significant implications: if writing did not substitute speech but co-existed with it instead, then the arguments that suggest writing is superior to speech are weakened indicating that writing and speaking simply allow us to think *differently*, not better or worse. And finally, even if it were true that writing was a precursor of logical alphabetical thought, this does not entail that writing *caused* logical thought⁵ since, for example, logical thought was presumably already happening with Socrates before Plato transcribed him for posterity. In fact, because there is no conclusive evidence for the need to memorize spoken language in the first place, it is hard to see what role writing played at all. It is possible that alphabetic writing simply functioned as cuneiform writing in corresponding to and recording astronomical-mathematical observations or accounting. That new thoughts became possible because of the structures and societies that developed as a result of writing is not the same as saying that writing caused us to think 'better'.

Walter Ong (1982, 1986), another influential historian of literacy who continues the legacy of Havelock, is notoriously credited with the cognitive

⁵ This is referred to as a *post hoc propter hoc* fallacy, namely the illogical conclusion that derives from stating that if an event precedes another it must have caused the event that follows it. Another way of thinking of this is in relation to the difference between correlation and causation.

theory that writing is, in fact, superior to speech because it raises consciousness by developing reasoning in ways that orality does not. Ong's most cited work, *Orality and Literacy* (1982), argued that the transition from speech to writing in literate societies had a profound impact on the ways in which people thought and argued. Ong makes the seemingly reasonable claim that the technological advent of writing simply makes us think *in a certain way*, suggesting that writing is comparatively, rather than qualitatively, different to other ways of communicating (1986, p. 24):

Without writing, the literate mind would not and could not think as it does, not only when engaged in writing but even when it is composing its thoughts in oral form.

But Ong soon betrays value judgements that relate to the putative *superiority* of literate thinking (writing-influenced) over non-literate thinking (oral) (1986, pp. 29 and 32):

We know that totally oral peoples, intelligent and wise though they often are, are incapable of the protracted, intensive linear analysis that we have from Plato's Socrates. ... Like other artificial creations and indeed more than any other, writing is utterly invaluable and indeed essential for the realization of fuller, interior, human potentials ... By distancing thought, alienating it from its original habitat in sounded words, writing raises consciousness. Alienation from a natural milieu can be good for us and indeed is in many ways essential for fuller human life. To live and to understand fully, we need not only proximity but also distance. This writing provides for, thereby accelerating the evolution of consciousness as nothing else before it does.

The above quote is revealing in several other ways. For example, the reference to 'alienation' and 'distance' signals that Ong considers detachment from context ('original habitat' and 'natural milieu') to be a virtue. This might explain why the characterization of academic writing as objective and impersonal has come to be accepted as an inherent epistemic virtue rather than a culturally determined attribute. Elsewhere, Ong also draws attention to the 'cool, analytic processes generated by writing', invoking Plato's shunning of the oral poets in *Phaedrus* (Ong, 1986, p. 29). He goes on to observe that writing has an impersonal quality because it 'separates the world from the living present' in a way that speech does not. Ong's references to writing being 'impersonal', 'cool', 'detached', 'distant' and as providing a 'full consciousness' very much echo in modern-day understandings of academic writing as autonomous, objective and impersonal.

The conflation of writing with the alphabet and with higher-order thinking (e.g. Emig, 1977) clearly has enduring historical and ideological roots and it explains why Turner has referred to it in terms of an ‘ontological complicity’ (2018, p. 181): it is a complicity because it assumes ‘good’ thinking cannot take place without ‘good’ writing and it is ontological because ‘good’ writing is equated with ‘good’ thinking. Notwithstanding its misguided legacy, this complicity remains largely unquestioned. Yet, as I have shown, there are reasons to question the assumed qualitative superiority of ‘Western’ written literacies over other forms of literary practices and to consider the affordances of non-standard, including non-written, communication for expressing higher-order thinking. I turn my attention to this in Chapter 3, after showing that academia itself, the institution of higher-order thinking *par excellence*, has a long tradition of communicating knowledge in a variety of formats, including poetry, a tradition which seems to have become lost in modern-day academic practices.

Varied ‘Academic’ Writings

One way of approaching a history of English academic writing is to locate it within the history of how universities have historically communicated knowledge. Unfortunately this lies far beyond the scope of this book, but, luckily, I can defer instead to historians of scientific and other academic writings, such as Bazerman (1988), Doody et al. (2012) and Taub (2017), who have painstakingly documented and analysed an impressive catalogue of written academic genres. These include the ancient world’s tradition of communicating science via poems, letters, encyclopaedias, commentaries and biographies, to name a few and via modern-day understandings of ‘essay’. My aim in this section is to draw on the wealth and breadth of this research to trace an account of how the modern-day imaginary of what makes writing ‘academic’ celebrates objectivity, linearity, some linguistic standards rather than others, prose and impersonality at the expense of other epistemic virtues, such as creativity, public and popular engagement (to democratize knowledge), recursiveness and composition, multilingualism and multimodality. A note of caution is that what I refer to as ‘academic’ genres are not necessarily texts that have been written at an academic institution, such as a university, as we now know it: universities as we now think of them have a varied history, and scientific and other knowledge, which we now associate with being generated at institutions of higher learning, has been equally developed within learned societies, such as research centres and royal and religious institutions.

Indeed, academic communication existed long before universities were founded. The first ‘Western’ European universities are only a thousand years old and even they were late-comers to the world’s academic scene, appearing as they did after those in Africa: Al-Qarawwiyyin, in Fez, Morocco, 859 AD, which is still a university; the University of Timbuktu (West Africa) founded in 982 AD ‘and attended, throughout the 12th century, by about 25,000 students’ (de Sousa Santos, 2017, p. ix) and Al-Azhar University, Cairo, 970 AD. Earlier still, there were universities in China, where the *Dà xué*, the *Great Academy*, was founded in 200 BC by Emperor Wu Di of the Han Dynasty; in India, where ancient centres of learning existed in 300 AD; in Korea, where the Gukhak was founded in 682 AD, and in Japan, where the Daigaku-no kami of the Japanese Imperial Court existed before 794 AD (Peters, 2017). Today, it is the European academies that dominate the global stage, alongside their American and Australian progenies, which are younger still. In Europe, Bologna and Paris are said to be the oldest, founded in 1088 and 1150, respectively, although these dates are contested (Rüegg & Ridder-Symoens, 1992–2011), followed by Oxford 1150 (where teaching occurred earlier, in 1096) and Cambridge in 1209 (Collini, 2012).

These early mediaeval European universities did not require students to write. Teaching and learning were informal arrangements and their official establishment as universities grew out of a need to ensure the financial security of their students and teachers, to promote rationality in the belief of God and to cultivate *la vita contemplativa*, which involved reading, rehearsing and interpreting scriptures. These universities provided practical social solutions to trade and commerce, especially at Bologna University, which built its reputation around the study of Law. The lecture, where a professor read from books for several hours and the oral *disputatio*, not writing, where students discussed and displayed their knowledge mnemonically rather than interpretatively, were the main forms of academic communication (Clark, 2006; Friesen, 2017; Leedham-Green, 1996).

The emergence of writing as a way to communicate academic knowledge can be traced to the Early Modern/Renaissance university (1500–1800) and specifically, to the advent of the printing press (1450–1700), which allowed the knowledge, languages and vernaculars of pre-print society to become visible and widespread. It became easier to classify information and collect data; to create index pages and multiple maps; and to circulate portraits of leading cultural figures, such as Erasmus and Luther (Eisenstein, 1983, p. 130). The Gutenberg Bible – which lent its name to the ‘Gutenberg Revolution’, aka ‘The Printing

Revolution’ – was the first Bible to be printed between 1450 and 1460 using a system of *incunabula* (movable print), allowing for several reprints which facilitated the dissemination of religion and individual, unmediated reading practices. A new, smaller pocket-sized format for books, called the *octavo*, also emerged during this time, making books more portable. This format became known as the ‘Aldine’ edition named after its Venetian printer-inventor, Aldus Manutius. It was smaller than the previous Gothic formats because it used the *italic* typeface which reduced the space taken on the page allowing more books to be printed more cheaply, thus contributing to the dissemination of knowledge.

Eisenstein (1983) has cautioned, however, that, contrary to default and prevailing historical classifications, what is commonly referred to as the ‘Renaissance’ took place before the advent of printing,⁶ indicating that print simply allowed existing knowledge to circulate rather than to be created *ex novo*. Eisenstein’s warning is important because, once again, it guards against unquestioning dispositions towards historical events: the printing press did not take Europe out of the ‘dark ages’ and into a ‘re-birth’ (Renaissance), as many history books have had us believe. Rather, according to Eisenstein, print simply made visible what was already there. The surreptitious conflation between print and the emergence of knowledge, between the ‘dark ages’ and the absence of reason, has echoes of the conflation between writing and reason, discussed earlier.

At this time, writing and reading became firmly established in European cultures because of print and this triggered significant social and cultural consequences. For example, between 1500 and 1600, the Reformation movement of Martin Luther, a German Friar and Professor of Theology at Wittenberg University in Saxony, toppled the dominance of the Catholic Church. This was made possible because Luther’s Protestant message spread via ‘academic’ writings called ‘theses’ famously pinned to his door. Despite the fact that they were not intended to be read by ‘the people’, Luther’s writings became a powerful revolutionary tool that allowed his Reformation to gather momentum (Postman, 1993, p. 65):

What Luther overlooked was the sheer portability of printed books. Although his theses were written in academic Latin, they were easily transported throughout Germany and other countries by printers who just as easily had them translated into vernaculars.

⁶ In fact, Francesco Petrarca (1304–74), commonly referred to as a Renaissance poet, died before printing was invented.

This period in history witnessed further transformations such as the rise of individualism and standardization: for those who could read, reading alone and in silence became possible because reading no longer needed to be performed exclusively in a public forum (such as the Church or Lecture); and the sheer volume of publications that print generated meant that writing began to standardize in new ways. Tensions arose between individuality and standardization, for example, in how subjects and landscapes were reproduced in print. Ironically, impersonal standardization also spawned a 'heightened appreciation of individuality' (Eisenstein, 1983, p. 133; Good, 1988), which explains the success of humanist philosopher and essayist Michel de Montaigne (1533–93). His *Essais* proposed a new informal essay style that reclaimed a sense of the personal, private self as a way of counteracting the increasingly standardized, public self that print enabled. Montaigne's personal, introspective and contemplative style became popular because it spoke to the needs of an ever wider, geographically scattered and impersonal readership (Eisenstein, 1983, p. 58):

Traditional rhetorical conventions had allowed for the difference in tone between addressing a large assemblage in a public arena, where strong lungs and broad strokes were required and pleading a case in a courtroom, which called for careful attention to detail and a more soft-spoken, clearly argued, intimate approach. But no precedent existed for addressing a large crowd of people who were not gathered together in one place but were scattered in separate dwellings and who, as solitary individuals with divergent interests, were more receptive to intimate interchanges than to broad-gauged rhetorical effects. The informal essay which was devised by Montaigne was a most ingenious method for coping with this new situation. He thus established a new basis for achieving intimate contact with unknown readers ... provided a welcome assurance that the isolated sense of singularity which was felt by the solitary reader had been experienced by another human being and was ... capable of being shared.

Montaigne's essay format was to greatly influence the genre of the scientific experimental article (discussed below) because of the way it represented human experience as being both narcissistically personal and distantly objective (Eisenstein, 1983, p. 58):

Its [the *essai*'s] abbreviated structure reflects both a prescriptive world view, empirical in spirit and observational in method and a sceptical despair of achieving any unified cosmological view. The kind of discursive informalism

and ordinary subject matter epitomized by the French familiar essay had immense philosophical appeal for growing scientific interests in seventeenth-century England, which, Bacon had cautioned, would not succeed without a profound literary reform.

(Paradis, 1987, p. 60)

At the same time as Montaigne was challenging standardization and reclaiming individual expression, standards were being imposed by religious and political authorities in attempts to reclaim, stabilize and sanitize language: Latin, the language of authority and Catholicism, had been increasingly co-existing with local 'vulgar' vernaculars, as evidenced by Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* written in Florentine vernacular in 1320 as an attack on and parody of the corruption and double-standards of the Church. The quest for linguistic standards culminated in the establishment, in 1584, of the Italian *Accademia della Crusca*. Some forty years later, in 1635, the French *Académie Française* boasted a similar language-preserving and tradition-entrenching mission (Rüegg & Ridder-Symoens, 1992–2011, p. 11, Vol. 2):

For the French humanist the correct cultivation of language was the heart of the new educational movement ..., in the mediaeval universities, language was raw and barbarous; scholastic textbooks darkened the intellect. It was through reading the ancient and biblical writings in the original languages that light was brought into university education.

The English language has never been able to police its language in this way, despite several attempts (see, for example, Crystal (2003)). As a consequence of this lack of language policing, it has evolved into a porous and flexible system able to accommodate new lexis (Yun & Standish, 2018). Oddly, despite its porousness, or possibly because of it, the English language to this day lends itself to heated controversies about standards and correct usage.

Unlike the Ancient university, the Renaissance university was projected towards action and novelty. It nurtured *la vita activa*, pushing the boundaries of knowledge through human discovery and technology rather than divine intervention. Famously, Columbus's explorations of the Americas in 1492 sparked a wave of 'humanism', understood as the waning of mediaeval and divine reverence and as the waxing of human reason and capacity to understand, explore, conquer and colonize the world (Rüegg & Ridder-Symoens, 1992–2011, Vol. 2).

The emergence of new genres to communicate this knowledge marks the humanist era.

Several important academic literary and scientific genres re-emerged during this period, including the Chronicle, the Dialogue and the Letters (Bazerman, 1988; Eisenstein, 1983; Taub, 2017). Chronicles were used to record the travels of explorers because this format lent itself to being written on the move and to recording un-analysed geographic, anthropologic and botanical observations. The dialogue afforded opportunities to engage in conversation and discussion *with* the classics rather than showing uncritical deference to them by reporting or transcribing them *verbatim*. This genre was revived by Galileo's well-known literary outputs. Crucially, Galileo broke away from the established scientific writing conventions of his time, including his own, to re-propose the discredited Copernican heliocentric theory both in dialogue form and in Tuscan, the local vernacular of Pisa (where he taught). In doing so, like Dante (and in an act of what might be considered by modern standards as 'public engagement' or 'open access'), he broke away from the use of Latin and was able to reach non-academic and non-scientific audiences who proved to be more open to persuasion than his recalcitrant and sceptical scientific colleagues (Eisenstein, 1983, pp. 251–3):

Galileo's Dialogue on Two World Systems was such a provocative and polemical treatise, however, it almost seemed to court censorship in a way that is quite typical of most serious scientific work. The same thing cannot be said of his later treatise which helped to found classical physics: the Discourses on Two New Sciences. ... No great cosmic or philosophical questions intrude into this unimpassioned treatise ... it is about as controversial and stirring as some freshman lecture on mechanics, of which indeed, it is the ultimate source. ... The crowing irony of Galileo's career is that the failure of the great Dialogues should be so much more interesting than the success of the unobjectionable Discourses.

Other sixteenth-century scientists, such as philosopher Francis Bacon and mathematician Johannes Kepler, also broke with the tradition of using Latin, preferring instead to use vernaculars which lent themselves to greater dissemination via the printed word 'in an effort to convey the new spirit and methods of scientific philosophy' (Postman, 1993, p. 64).

And finally, the epistolary genre also thrived during these centuries as academics and natural philosophers (later to be called scientists⁷) began to publish work in and correspond via the two most influential academic journals

⁷ The term 'scientist' wasn't coined until 1833 by William Whewell Ross, S. (1962). Scientist: The story of a word. *Annals of Science*, 18(2), 65–85. <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00033796200202722>

of the time, the *Journal des Savan(t)s* and the *Philosophical Transactions*, both established in 1665. In particular, Henry Oldenburg, the first editor of the *Philosophical Transactions*, was keen to encourage correspondence and debate. He became known for being a 'present' editor who enthusiastically mediated between the readers and the article writers, publishing letters that became scientific documents in their own right and gradually allowing contributors to have more voice (Bazerman, 1988). Significantly, he published the work of international scientists, such as biologist Marcello Malpighi (Eisenstein, 1983), who were being ignored or censored in their native countries and published the correspondence with Isaac Newton in both English and Latin (Bazerman, 1988, p. 84), reflecting the widespread multilingualism of the scientific community.

Having briefly tended to the re-emergence of the chronicle, the dialogue and the letters as examples of ancient genres that were re-purposed to better communicate the knowledge of their time, I now turn to the specific relevance of the *Philosophical Transactions* to current academic writing practices. It is in fact the scientific genre of the experimental article that has survived and become the model for the ubiquitous academic essay. The genealogy of the experimental article has been meticulously traced by Charles Bazerman (1988) in *Shaping Written Knowledge*. Bazerman tracks its evolution from its early reports and descriptions of unusual events using the language of 'curiosity and wonder', whereby science was reported as uncontested and devoid of theory or methodology, to the increasingly careful illustration and precise reporting of methods and experiments. Attention to how methods were reported signalled the need to dispel controversies that were beginning to emerge as scientists were no longer individuals working alone to report what they saw in nature. Instead, they were increasingly being held to account publicly via the journals they corresponded in and in their presentations to learned societies. The function of drawings and illustrations also changed. Hitherto, they had been deployed to *represent* nature. By the 1700s, they became the methods and instruments for *understanding* it, as explained below with reference to Robert Boyle and his physico-mechanical experiments with pneumatics in the 1600s (Shapin, 1984, p. 492):

The sort of naturalistic images that Boyle favoured provided a greater density of circumstantial detail than would have been proffered by more schematic representations. The images served to announce that 'this was really done' and that it was done in the way stipulated; they allayed distrust and facilitated virtual witnessing. Therefore, understanding the role of pictorial

representations offers a way of appreciating what Boyle was trying to achieve with his literary technology.

Along with images, language also developed to reflect greater attention to how methods were reported. In 1672, Newton writes with the intention of eliminating uncertainty towards his optical findings. He develops a new rhetorical style to deal with criticisms, a form of compelling argument which becomes a closed system in which opposing arguments are reduced to errors. He writes with the intention of making his writing appear as fact, not controversy and finds ways of shaping it to avoid ambiguity by artfully guiding the reader step-by-step through an experiment expressed in self-referential language – recalling the meandering, explorative and tentative style of Montaigne – all the while intending to report what he believes to be an objectively observable phenomenon: the style evoked is that of a neutral observer ‘stumbling across a fact’. Bazerman analyses a section of the carefully crafted rhetorical style of Newton’s ‘A New Theory of Light and Colours’, an article published in the *Transactions* in 1672, highlighting the prominence of first person pronouns to reflect that it is the author-narrator-scientist who is making the discoveries (Bazerman, 1988, p. 91):

This earlier part of the article relies heavily on the language of personal thought and agency as it unfolds the attempts of a baffled investigator to come to terms with a robustly visible phenomenon. The first person followed by an active verb forms the armature of most sentences: ‘I suspected’, ‘I thought’, ‘I took another Prisme’, ‘I then proceeded to examine more critically’, ‘Having made these observations, I first computed from them’. At key moments he offers quantitative descriptions of his experiments, switching to third person existential statements: ‘Its distance from the hole or Prisme was 22 feet; its utmost length $13\frac{1}{4}$ inches.’ But even experimental quantities are framed by his limited agency: “The refractions were as near as I could make them, equal and consequently about 54 deg. 4” (93). The orderliness with which he pursues and isolates the phenomenon gives rhetorical warrant to the degree of facticity of language Newton allows himself in this section. That is, the credibility of the investigation helps establish the credibility of the fact and the credibility of the investigator.

Rather than a representation of speech (and its alphabet), the scientific language of seventeenth-century Europe is now a conduit for channelling mental thoughts from the mind of the truth-knowing writer/observer to the mind of the sceptical reader (Russell, 2002; Turner, 2010). Language becomes invested with the responsibility to not simply *report* what the scientist sees as an objective natural reality, but to also *persuade* a sceptical reader. Contrast this style of writing with the mnemonic verses of Homer, Pindar and Aeschylus

which required no reporting verbs, suggesting that for the pre-Socratics, reality did not need to be interpreted, it simply needed to be told (Olson, 1994, p. 193). The term 'verbatim' had been coined by the 1400s, suggesting that already by then, a new linguistic awareness was dawning relating to how a text could fix and stabilize meaning. English began to borrow reporting verbs from Latin, such as *imply*, to signal mental state verbs which indicated that an interpretation was taking place as opposed to an unhedged factual description of nature (Daston & Galison, 2010; Olson, 1994). With the 1700s came the development of theories of interpretation to understand what was 'in' the text, not what could be 'read' into it (hermeneutics). Because knowledge was becoming increasingly contested, the following authority-conveying features began to emerge in scientific writing: the use of nominalizations as grammatical metaphors to reify and de-personalize activities, presenting them as facts rather than processes; acknowledgements (in the form of references) to build allegiances but also to comply with the new 1710 intellectual property copyright encoded into British law (Pennycook, 1996); hedging language such as *probably* and *might be* to indicate speculation before a bold conclusion; and introductions to conflicts between theories began appearing in Volume 40 of the *Transactions* (1737) to signal that a hypothesis preceded the account of the experiment, even when there was no contention. The need to report accurately and clearly meant that language became 'invested with the role of "mapping" knowledge, without drawing attention to itself as part of the map. In other words, it has to be transparent' (Turner, 2010, p. 63).

Fast forwarding to more recent times, a period of great university expansion occurred during the 1900s following their decline during the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars. Of immense significance was the influence of Wilhelm von Humboldt, a German scholar and statesman credited with founding, in 1810, the modern 'Western' concept of the research university, which has particularly left its imprint on US universities and on Oxbridge in Britain (Rüegg & Ridder-Symoens, 1992–2011, Vols. 3 and 4; Russell, 2002). The Humboldtian university fully embraced the growing faith in science, reason, discovery and empiricism of the previous centuries making 'research' its core, essential nuclear foundation. According to Friedrich Schleiermacher, the liberal theologian and philosopher who inspired Humboldt (Vol. 3, p. 5):

the function of the university was not to pass on recognised and directly usable knowledge such as the schools and colleges did, but rather to demonstrate how this knowledge is discovered, to stimulate the idea of science in the minds of the students, to encourage them to take into account the fundamental laws of science in all their thinking.

At the same time, the increased professionalization of research and of salaried university staff, coupled with an increase in standardization processes and widening participation – compared with the 1700s, when no academic qualifications were needed to study at university and no written exams existed before 1820 (Leedham-Green, 1996, p. 125)⁸ – led to a steep rise in assessment procedures with written assignments becoming the main means through which to assess students, replacing the oral seminars or the more traditional *disputatio*. This, according to Kruse (2006, p. 348), ‘turned writing into a constraint that threatened to exclude [students] if they did not master the writing assignments.’

In terms of content and the structure of language, the written research paper began to stabilize and increasingly emphasize methods, a phenomenon that had begun in the early 1700s. Findings and conclusions, especially in Medicine, discussed consequences of hypotheses and experiments at the end of a paper in terms of logical deductions of the facts. These were presented using impersonal language such as nominalizations and making explicit reference to methods; citations began to develop into codified networks of acknowledgements and sentence structure became increasingly complex: noun and subordinate clauses increased (signalling intellectual complexity), even though sentence length and syntactical complexity remained stable at around 70 per cent simple and 30 per cent complex (Bazerman, 1988). All this suggests that scientific discourse was fairly homogenous during this time. That it continues to remain relatively stable to this day can be explained by the fact that these fixed, somewhat formulaic, forms have become ‘encapsulated’ by a dependency on the way knowledge is produced whereby findings and bold claims are foregrounded to serve the interests of (Bazerman, 2015, p. 267)

university departments and professional societies (with their structures of rewards and advancements), government and business interests and funding (based on perceived needs for scientific and technological knowledge), knowledge-based professions that pervade contemporary society (with their reliance on systems of authority and credentials), expanding educated populations who look toward science for knowledge and evolving technologies and systems for the production and distribution of texts (including cheap printing, commercial publishing companies, university and professional libraries, national mail systems and international agreements), despite advances in digital technology.⁹

⁸ The grading of papers had been introduced for the first time in 1792 at Cambridge University. Postman, N. (1993). *Technopoly: The surrender of culture to technology*. Vintage Books.

⁹ Despite the stability of genres described by Bazerman, Hyland, K., & Feng (Kevin), J. (2017). Is academic writing becoming more informal? *English for Specific Purposes*, 45, 40–51. <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2016.09.001> have begun to detect some linguistic informality in academic writing in what they call ‘illicit initials’, i.e. starting a sentence with ‘and’, ‘but’ or ‘so’.

But just as the humanist University was characterized by the contradictory dualisms of expressive individualism (epitomized by Montaigne) and technological standardization (triggered by print), so too was the university of the twentieth century caught between competing ways of thinking: on the one hand, a staunch faith in the precision and exactitude of science meant that hitherto ‘unscientific’ disciplines such as philology and (applied) linguistics became scientized (Orman, 2016), systematized (Harris & Taylor, 1989) and unified into an object of study that assumes language lies outside of us and can be a conduit for thought that is independent of its users (Yun & Standish, 2018). On the other, the emphasis on clarity, transparency of language and logic triggered a literary ‘relativist turn’ (Turner, 2010). This encouraged the reader to bring their own understanding to the text and to question the authority of both the author and the written word (Olson, 1994). Writers, historians, social critics and philosophers such as Richard Rorty, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend, even the Ludwig Wittgenstein of *The Philosophical Investigations* (Sigmund, 2017), became controversially known as the post-modernists who ‘relativized’ knowledge, reified ‘discourse’ and generally questioned the power of language to ‘refer’ to reality. In so doing, they developed an influential rhetorical style of their own which, unlike the grammar of the research article, privileged sentence length and syntactical subordination¹⁰ as a way of displaying *through form* the complex interconnectedness of reality, particularly social, psychological and philosophical reality.

Writing and Its Ideologies

As Bazerman has shown, writing has the power to shape knowledge. Because of this power, several scholars have been concerned with how writing also enacts political and social ‘ideologies’. For the sake of brevity, I simply take ideology to mean ‘worldviews’, although I acknowledge the nuance and contention that such a loaded word warrants because of its connotations (see, for example, Hannah Arendt (1953), who defines ideology literally as ‘the logic of an idea’ and follows this through with an account of how following the logic of an idea can result in ‘terror’).

¹⁰ Wittgenstein’s aphoristic style is clearly an exception to this.

This section, therefore, limits itself to signposting rather than developing the link between academic writing practices and ideology because similar ideas have either already been hinted at or will re-merge in subsequent chapters. For now, it is sufficient to note that literacy practices, which include academic writing, are ideological in the sense that they enact worldviews. This has already transpired from the above discussion where I argued that ‘Western’ views of literacy have invested alphabetical writing with the power to ‘raise consciousness’ and improve thinking in ways that other writing systems do not. This worldview contrasts with other worldviews whereby literacies do not need to be alphabetic to develop and display ‘good thinking’ (Arnheim, 1969; Kara, 2015; Kuttner et al., 2017).

In his history of the American university curriculum, Russell (2002) documents how academic writings enact what he calls ‘ideal’ social practices. When these are dictated by the needs of industry, writing becomes specialized and technical. When they are motivated by a research ideal, such as the Humboldtian faith in the fundamental laws of science, not only do they prevent any other genre from taking root, but they impose a straightjacket on the genres of all disciplines (Russell, 2002, pp. 71, 79, 85):

To understand why certain forms of student writing endured and others faded, or why certain pedagogies included writing and others did not, one must look to the character of the research ideal and the ways it interacted with writing in the new mass education system German scholarship rapidly set a new standard for academic writing, not only in the sciences but also in the emerging humanities and social sciences because disciplines viewed student writing through the narrow lens of their own research writing, they rarely explored other possibilities.

Russell further posits that these ‘ideals’ can morph into ‘ideologies’ (2002, p. 269). He exemplifies this with reference to two progressive US writing programmes in the 1950s and 1960s which were abolished because they prioritized the developmental and learning potential of writing over its specialized, skills-based technical nature. These programmes drew significantly on the progressive ideas of Arthur N. Applebee, an educationalist who regarded writing as integral to the learning process and was associated with progressive left-wing political ideals of equality and inclusion. Given the right-wing conservative political tendencies of the United States at the time, according to Russell, the association with a left-wing progressive thinker might explain why such programmes were not maintained. Several other writing scholars have similarly claimed that

writing ‘reproduces the ideologies and inequities of the institution and society’ (Archer & Breuer, 2016, p. 42); that academic writing as it is practised and taught in today’s academy is ‘ideological, transparent, objective and autonomous’ (Bennett, 2015; Lea & Street, 1998; Street, 1984); that it embodies ‘exclusionary ideologies’ (Lillis, 2001; Scott, 2013; Thesen & Cooper, 2013; Turner, 2018) and that by focusing on accuracy and standards, it privileges conservative, elitist and undemocratic ‘ideologies’ (Rose, 1985).

As also shown by Fairclough (2001) and Bourdieu and Thompson (1991), language wields great power in enacting political ideologies. The 1900s witnessed the emergence of English as the *lingua franca* of academic research, replacing French and German (and Latin). This signalled a shift in economic and political power from mainland Europe (once the heart of academia) to the UK and the United States (now setting higher education agendas). The key events that cemented the shift to English include: the establishment of the American university based on the German research model (Russell, 2002); the two world wars, which intensified and prioritized scientific research to serve the war industry (Russell, 2002); the consequences of nineteenth-century colonialism (Mbembe, 2008; Morris, 2010; Said, 1978), then of decolonialism (such as India gaining its independence in 1947) and then again of post-colonialism, which meant that European countries, including the UK, had obligations to educate those it had colonized but also to maintain a form of ‘soft power’ to ensure allegiances (Peters, 2017). Indeed, the English language can be described as what Blommaert (2010) calls a ‘language regime’, namely a complex sociolinguistic ‘multiplex item’ that is mobilized to create dynamics of exclusion and marginalization. In this sense, language becomes ideological because it compounds what counts as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ English, even in multilingual contexts, where different kinds of English have evolved for a range of purposes that no longer warrant reference to a ‘correct’ standard.

Since English is the language of academia, it retains the soft power to enact the ideology of the dominant ‘West’. However, and somewhat more insidiously, the dominance of English (and of a certain variety of English, the one that conflates objectivity with an epistemic virtue) as the language of academia enacts linguistic injustices that exclude many from global academic conversations. This has been documented in Turner (2010), Politzer-Ahles et al. (2020), Politzer-Ahles et al. (2016), Lillis and Curry (2010b, 2015) and Hanauer et al. (2019). This is why Turner, in discussing EAP, claims (2010, p. 78) that

Academic writing should not be seen as autonomous or given. It is not an autonomous set of skills or a discrete set of rhetorical values that have been arrived independently, or been designated as such by some kind of decree. It is rather a cultural practice that has been invested in rhetorical values that are themselves the effects of wider cultural processes.

Moreover, ideologies are gendered because worldviews reflect the values of all individuals. Feminist writings enact ideologies that are 'situated' (Haraway, 1988), meaning that they acknowledge, through language, the bodies that produce them, the emotions that accompany them and the processes, constraints and locations that engendered them. They are typically contrasted with the confident certitude of male-authored objective, rational, impersonal texts. For feminist scholar Haraway, like Laurel Richardson referred to in Chapter 1, discourses of 'objectivity' are 'enshrined in elementary textbooks and technoscience booster literature' (Haraway, 1988, p. 576); yet, even scientists know that this is not how science is 'actually made', because the history of science also tells us that science is achieved through trial, error and incertitude (Kuhn, 1962). Instead, Haraway argues her stance in a style that academic writing textbooks do not showcase, presumably because her writing does not display the features of academicness that the standardized academic writing industry privileges. This omission is ideological, too, because it denies students the opportunity to be exposed to forms of academic writing that embody different worldviews by subscribing to other epistemic virtues, such as situated knowledge and feminist epistemologies, and that communicate knowledge through the use other kinds of prose, such as creative non-fiction (Gutkind, 1997), to narrate factually accurate stories that draw on a range of literary styles, such as personal memoirs and lyric essays (which combine prose and poetry).

Ideologies are also technological. Postman describes these in terms of a 'competition' whereby one technology vies to dominate another in order to gain advantage (1993, p. 16):

New technologies compete with old ones—for time, for attention, for money, for prestige, but mostly for dominance of their world-view. This competition is implicit once we acknowledge that a medium contains an ideological bias. And it is a fierce competition, as only ideological competitions can be. It is not merely a matter of tool against tool—the alphabet attacking ideographic writing, the printing press attacking the illuminated manuscript, the photograph attacking the art of painting, television attacking the printed word. When media make war against each other, it is a case of world-views in collision.

The idea that technologies embody a worldview is also captured in McLuhan (1964), who argued that technologies are ‘extensions of man [*sic*]’ because they embody the values of who creates them and deploys them. In his oft-quoted *dictum*, the ‘medium is the message’ (1964, p. 13), he was referring to the fact that language divorced from the context through which it communicates, its medium, becomes meaningless. For McLuhan, the ‘context’ of language includes the media (e.g. the words, visuals, sounds) through which language is carried. To understand a message one therefore needs to account for the medium through which that message is conveyed. Since that medium includes language, the affordances of language – its opportunities and potentials as well as its constraints – need to be acknowledged because as Bezemer and Kress (2008, p. 190) remind us in their multimodal and socio-semiotic analysis of scientific textbooks, there is always ‘something lost and something gained’ when we move between media (a process known as ‘transduction’, i.e. translating meanings from one medium to another such as from word to image) and that even in our choice of fonts and how we organize space on the page, we are communicating our ideologies to our readers:

[The] use of layout realizes an ideology of simplicity of display that is comparable to what is often said about sans serif fonts: That is, providing less ‘information’ is seen as apt for those regarded to have a lesser capacity to process information.

A further way in which ideology can be enacted through writing relates to epistemic injustice. By measuring academic competence almost exclusively through writing assessments that require standards of literacy that are exclusionary, we restrict which knowledge and whose knowledge is allowed to emerge. This point has been made by Flores and Rosa (2015), who have called out the raciolinguistic ideologies that underpin the monolingual literacy standards to which bilingual Spanish speakers are expected to conform, standards which discourage multilingualism from the American classroom. In this sense, excluding knowledge and ways of thinking not traditionally communicated in writing amounts to a form of ‘epistemic injustice’ (Carel & Kidd, 2014), namely an unfairness towards the way somebody communicates their knowledge because their background, upbringing, education, interests and abilities differ from the standard and because *we* (the readers/receivers) don’t understand why somebody is communicating the way they are. The phrase ‘epistemic injustice’ was coined by moral philosopher Miranda Fricker (2007) to refer to the ways in which the words of a speaker (in our case, a writer) are ignored, derided or simply misunderstood because the hearer (or the reader) is

negatively or ignorantly pre-disposed towards the speaker (writer). This negative predisposition could involve racist, sexist or educational biases, such as those implied by Rose (1989) when discussing Lucia's exclusion from the psychology class (see Chapter 1): Lucia was excluded on the grounds that she didn't have the language of academic psychology; yet, she was knowledgeable because of her situated experience of mental illness. Instances of epistemic injustice also resonate throughout Sperlinger et al. (2018), who argue that higher education should be made accessible to a far greater range of people and throughout life, not only at the age of eighteen. And finally, since translanguaging and codeswitching form part of a complex ecology of literacies whereby multilingualism is the norm for many students and academics, not the exception, preventing writers from making meaning and communicating their knowledge by drawing on a range of resources (i.e. polysemiosis) amounts to an ideology of discrimination (Canagarajah, 2011, 2013b, 2013c, 2018).

Conclusions

History as a method for understanding the phenomena we care about has two main functions: it allows us to trace the genealogies of phenomena so that we can identify key junctures at which things might have turned out differently; it lends itself to being selected to advance a particular worldview. In this chapter, I have challenged the histories that conflate writing with the alphabet and with higher-order thinking, arguing instead that writing did not have to be conflated with the alphabet and that although it has been, this does not mean that alphabetic cultures are better at thinking than oral or visual cultures. I have also highlighted that within academic writing cultures there is a thriving diversity of genres; yet, modern-day standards of academic writing seem to have evolved from and reified only one, the experimental article. Selecting the histories that have colluded with the idea that writing raises consciousness and that academic writing is 'objective' amounts to an ideological stance that leads to unjust practices, such as the exclusion of knowledge that is not presented 'objectively' in written form.