

# **International Journal of the Humanities**

Volume 2, Number 3

Article: HC04-0269-2004

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**Edited by Tom Nairn and Mary Kalantzis**



**International Journal of the Humanities**  
Volume 2, Number 3



This paper is published at [www.Humanities-Journal.com](http://www.Humanities-Journal.com)  
a series imprint of the [UniversityPress.com](http://UniversityPress.com)

First published in Australia in 2004-2006 by Common Ground Publishing Pty Ltd at  
[www.Humanities-Journal.com](http://www.Humanities-Journal.com)

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ISSN 1447-9508 (Print)  
ISSN 1447-9559 (Online)

The International Journal of the Humanities is a peer-refereed journal published annually. Full papers submitted for publication are refereed by the Associate Editors through an anonymous referee process.

Papers presented at the Second International Conference on New Directions in the Humanities,  
Monash University Centre in Prato, Italy, 20-23 July 2004.

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# A Short History of Meaning

Mary Kalantzis

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In its founding moments, the first exponents of western rationality went out of their way to express disdain for older, spoken, narrative traditions of representation. By the measure of Plato's dialectical mode of argumentation, the works of Homer and Hesiod appeared to be less than satisfactory. In the dialectical flow of *The Republic*, the interlocutor Socrates cautions that these stories 'should not, I think, be carelessly related to those who are young and lacking in judgment'; indeed, at points some of the so-called Greek myths were so unsatisfactory they 'should be heard by the fewest people possible'.<sup>1</sup>

Twentieth century researchers have argued that Homer and Hesiod may not even have been individual authors; and at the very least they retell narratives from a long tradition of oral verse, perhaps pre-dating the Greeks themselves.<sup>2</sup> As a pioneer of the episteme of writing, Plato finds a need to devalue the versifiers and their moral messages. He stands for a new kind of thinking (or episteme) and being-in-the-world (or lifeworld).

This paper focuses on our representational means or the means of production of meaning in three historical moments. We will start with what I have called 'first languages' as aspects of what are often, less than helpfully we will argue, called 'oral cultures'. We will then discuss some consequences of writing as scribal culture emerges since a point some three millennia BCE, a process intensified with the mass application of print after the fifteenth century CE. Finally, we will consider some aspects of the new cultures of representation that emerge during the twentieth century, dominated first by photographic and more recently and more radically over the past quarter century, by the electronic production and reproduction of meaning.

In telling this story, we want to discuss the kinds of thinking (episteme) and being-in-the-world (lifeworld) that particular representational means reflect and create. It has long since been established by philosophers and scientists of language that writing is no mere transcription of thought. It is, indeed, not even a direct record of speech. It is a

specific way of thinking and being. On one point, at least, we want to agree with Plato, his deep understanding that the episteme and lifeworld of the written word is quite radically at variance from the spoken world. So too, contemporary shifts in representational means may be reflect and create new epistemes and new lifeworlds—and this is our primary interest.

Our narrative and our case is grounded in the discipline of history in the sense that its method is to trace change over time. Time in this case is measured on a scale of the five thousand years since the first appearance of writing, and moments or episodes within this time. Our three moments, however, are never so chronologically distinct as the wars and reigns and iconic lives of conventional history. Rather, these moments occur now and then, here and there, as long and short transitions, sometimes separately and in other times dialectically overlaid. The empirical complexity is such that we have only the time in this short paper to resort to schematics of the grossest kind.

The transition from spoken cultures has been in process for all five millennia under consideration here, and if it were to maintain its current course (which we will argue later, it may not), may still take a half century to complete. Let us map the territory of human meaning first, then discuss the meaning of those meanings in terms of episteme and lifeworld.

There are about 6,000 languages left in the world today, but this number is rapidly diminishing. Of the 1000 languages in Brazil a century ago, only 200 are left today; of the 500 Australian languages at the moment of British colonisation, probably only a dozen will survive the first decade of the twenty-first century; of what were probably the thousands of years of languages of Europe, only sixty remain today after four millennia of literate civilisation.<sup>3</sup>

The languages of literate cultures have taken over the world. Ninety-six percent of the world's population speaks one of the top twenty languages, and these are all languages of writing.<sup>4</sup> Only 283 of today's languages have more than one million speakers; only 899 have more than 100,000

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Buxton, Richard. *Greek Mythology*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2004. p.31.

<sup>2</sup> Parry, Adam, ed. *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971. Havelock, Eric A. *Preface to Plato*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1963. Havelock, Eric A. *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986.

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<sup>3</sup> Crystal, David. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*. 2 ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. p.286. Crystal, David. *Language Death*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> McWhorter, John. *The Power of Babel: A Natural History of Language*. New York: Perennial, 2001. p.257.



and these are all languages of writing.<sup>4</sup> Only 283 of today's languages have more than one million speakers; only 899 have more than 100,000 speakers.<sup>5</sup> The ancestral homes of the speakers of small and rapidly disappearing languages are Australia, Melanesia, the Americas, Siberia and Arctic Europe. The languages of their displacement and suppression were brought first by agricultural societies which used writing as an instrument of elite control (religious, bureaucratic, restricted knowledge) or more recently industrial societies which use literacy as an instrument of mass citizenship. This means that the displacement of what we call 'first languages' began with Celtic, Greek, Latin and their derivatives in Europe (including the displacement of the now not-even-nameable ancestral languages of Aristotle and Alexander), by the languages of the African kingdoms as is the case of the Bantu languages, by the civilising languages of the Maya, the Aztecs, the Olmecs and the Incas in Mesoamerica, by the Chinese languages and their derivatives in East Asia.

We know that the populations of first languages were, by subsequent standards, small. A rough estimate of their average size based on contemporary and recorded experience of these languages might be one thousand speakers per language, and there is reason to believe that the logic of these languages was such as to ensure a greater consistency in the size of language populations that is subsequently the case. So, if the world's population was ten million by the time the whole habitable world (bar New Zealand and the Pacific) was populated at about 15,000 BCE, there may have been ten thousand languages in these, our global-human beginnings. If these estimates bear scrutiny, even more remarkable than the imperial thoroughness of agricultural and then industrial societies is the fact that perhaps half of the world's first languages still exist, despite the havoc done to the lifeways in which they are grounded, and despite the pervasive global threat of their imminent extinction.

What is it about first languages which make the sensibilities of their speakers, their modes of entanglement with the natural world, their epistemes, their lifeworlds, so different from those of literate humanity? We want to mention four features of first languages: their diversity, their tendency to divergence, their inherent synaesthesia and their dynamism.

First, their diversity: the range of language forms amongst first languages is nothing less than staggering, reflecting the enormous capacity of human beings to invent meanings. To take something so fundamental as the nature of human agency, the relation of subject, verb and object

varies dramatically. The North American languages Yuchi and Mohawk focus on the ability of the subject to initiate action, or the animacy of the noun. The South American language Hixkaryana orders agency by object in relation to consequent verb and subject.<sup>6</sup> The Northern Australian languages Warrgamany and Dyirbal use a case system called ergative-absolutive by linguists to intertwine subject and object in a common structure of action.<sup>7</sup>

Second, we want to note the tendency to divergence in first languages. From the point of view of modern, literate rationality, the rate and frequency of divergence between and within first languages makes little sense. Why would small, neighbouring groups speak different languages at all, let alone languages that were often so vastly different from each other? The classical modern answer is that these groups grew progressively more different from each other because they were isolated, and because there was not much need to communicate with neighbours. All the evidence, however, points the other way—speakers of different first languages communicated with each other regularly and frequently, and certainly to a greater degree than the neighbours in the apartment block of a modern city even when they have a common language. In fact, they managed language diversity with a degree of sophistication rarely found today. Individuals were almost invariably multilingual, speaking up to perhaps five or more languages. And they had various purpose-built lingua francas and interlanguages, such as baby language and gesture language.

So why, from the point of view of a mass society which makes virtue of standardisation, go to all this seemingly needless trouble? The answer, it seems, is in an inherent logic of divergence. In modern societies, we rely on stable, predictable and consistent signifier-signified relations. A 'chair' for me is more or less a 'chair' for you. In a world of abstract, role-defined, interchangeable roles and functions we have to depend upon that. Our logic is convergence and homogenisation of meanings—a life of writing demands or creates it.

In first languages, we can depend upon no such thing. A word may refer to a bird, a place, a religious totem and a person's name. And in the next language group, the same bird/place/totem/person is named differently, and that is essential, because it defines the precise relation of a particular person to a particular place. It is an integral part of the person's and the group's being, and the meanings they ascribe to the world. Meaning occurs in a complex semantic

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<sup>4</sup> McWhorter, John. *The Power of Babel: A Natural History of Language*. New York: Perennial, 2001. p.257.

<sup>5</sup> Crystal. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*. p.286.

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<sup>6</sup> Albey, Mark. *Spoken Here: Travels Among Threatened Languages*. London: William Heinemann, 2003. pp.72-3; 236-8.

<sup>7</sup> Dixon, R.M.W. *Ergativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. Dixon, R.M.W. *The Dyirbal Language of North Queensland*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972.



overlay of materially, spatially and bodily grounded associations.<sup>8</sup>

Perplexing though it may be to us moderns, within first languages there is a tendency to add still more complexity in the form of internal divergence: clan or family groups speak different dialects; women develop their own languages; adults learn ever more arcane secret and sacred languages as they get older and progress towards becoming elders. Indeed, the markers of language, dialect, ideolect are harder to distinguish than in the world of written languages. Language divergence appears more in the nature of a continuum than geographically bounded spaces. Personality is expressed through multilayered and overlapping identities rather than through a single or even primary language for each bodily distinct person.

Third, first languages are inherently synaesthetic. Over the course of the twentieth century, linguists and historians attempted to describe the features of human communication before writing, and in this endeavour they graduated from using terms of negative comparison such as 'illiterate' or 'preliterate', and began instead to use more positive terms such as 'orality'. For all their attempts to avoid negativity, however, orality is still less than the orality-plus-literacy of modern existence. This is what happens when your interest in the nature of meaning is narrowed to language alone.

We want to use the term 'synaesthetic civilisation' in an attempt to account more accurately for the fullness and complexity of first languages, involving the subtle and profound overlay of word, image, gesture, sound and space. In fact, if we were to define writing as the association of speakable word and iconic image, first languages had systems of writing as sophisticated as any, albeit fundamentally different from those that emerge in scribal and then print culture.

Finally, we want to note the dynamism of first languages. The languages of synaesthetic civilisations are in a state of constant flux. This is not the semi-conscious and slow drift of modern written languages. Change is rapid and negotiated. It may be that, on a person's death, their name cannot be spoken, in which case the whole metaphorically overlaid world to which their name refers has to be renamed. Or meanings are renegotiated in ceremonial moments when different groups tell their histories, religion and law to each other. Indeed, the first languages of today are not in an empirical sense ancestral; they are more different to their forms, say five generations before than languages which have been artificially stabilised by writing. What is 'first'

is not their forms, but their representational means, their means of production of meaning.<sup>9</sup>

So in the historical experience of first languages we find modes of human existence—epistemes and lifeworlds—which represent dramatically diverse experiments in being human, which thrive on divergence, which are deeply synaesthetic, and which embody a dynamism that gives enormous scope to human agency in the constant negotiation and renegotiation of meanings.

And then there was writing. People started writing in four different places—in Mesopotamia about five thousand years ago, and then in India, China and Mesoamerica. There may have been no direct connection between these four events, although they happen in same historical moment, the moment of agriculture. We of the western historical tradition have developed the habit of calling this moment, often in a self-congratulatory way, 'the beginning of history' or 'the dawn of civilisation'. Before that there was 'prehistory', inhabited by 'uncivilised' peoples. However, all-too-often we forget **IS** that this moment was also the beginning of the end of another kind of history, the end of a myriad of other civilisations. Now we're using the words in ways which are more faithful to their Latin roots—*historia* as narrative and *civilis* as political community. Since the beginning of the species, humans have lived by narrative and cohabited in political community. The kind of civilisation that came with writing was new because it left fragments of voice and records of event, as well as the traces of monumental architecture that have since become the furnishings for our conventional notions of history and archaeology.<sup>10</sup>

Not to take the traces at their face value, however, we want to argue that writing is more profoundly identifiable as representational function than as a communicative form. For most of its millennia it has been the preserve of an elite, a mechanism for maintaining inventories of ownership and wealth, an instrument of state bureaucracy for siphoning off surpluses, a font of religious power that maintains the social order—all instruments for the institutionalisation and maintenance of inequality that marks the end of the relatively egalitarian lifeways of first peoples. In this functional sense, the quipu or knotted strings used as representational means by the imperial Incas were a form of writing, telling of rulers, and taxation, and religious

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<sup>8</sup> Cope, Bill. "The Language of Forgetting: A Short History of the Word." In *Seams of Light: Best Antipodean Essays*, edited by Morag Fraser, 192-223. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1998.

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<sup>9</sup> Christie, Michael J. "Grounded and Ex-centric Knowledges: Exploring Aboriginal Alternatives to Western Thinking." Paper presented at the Conference on Thinking, Townsville, 7 July 1992.

<sup>10</sup> For an examination of these historical concepts on a global and long view, see Christian, David. *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History*. Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2004.

conformism.<sup>11</sup> Then in a new phase in the history of writing, from Gutenberg's invention in 1450 to about 1900, literacy emerges as the fundamental logic of mass-educated, industrialised societies.<sup>12</sup>

So what is the episteme, the sensibility, the lifeworld of literate cultures?<sup>13</sup>

First, literate cultures create languages which hugely simplify the many things that are subtle and complex in first languages, such as the hundreds of pronouns in some Aboriginal languages compared to the handful in modern English, the displacement of fine distinctions of quality by mechanical distinctions of quantity, subtitles of tense and voice that become lost to the structure of action in literate languages, and above all immense grammatical complexity—so great in fact that many first languages prove virtually unlearnable by outsiders not born to them and schooled into them over a lifetime. Literate languages are big on some new things, to be sure, such as vocabularies, so gargantuan in the case of English that we can only rely on the social mnemonic of the dictionary to be literate users of the language. And there is less structural and functional diversity amongst literate languages than there is between first languages.

Second, literate languages tend to standardise and homogenise meanings. In first languages, the signifier-signified relation could be fluid, divergent and constantly negotiated and renegotiated. In literate societies, and particularly amongst imperial elites of agricultural societies and the mass societies the emerge of modernity, signifier-signified relations need to be standardised, at least in the public domain. By the time of modern, mass-literate states, an agenda of explicit linguistic assimilation is set in place, where the extent of the speaking and writing public of the modern state is ideally coterminous with the borders of its political sovereignty. This reaches its most painful apogee in the project of modern nationalism.

Third, literate cultures tend to separate the modalities of meaning.<sup>14</sup> Modern literacy separates written word from image, gesture, sound in its

spatial reference point. This results in part from the very materiality of communicative modes—the separation of image and font in the forms of typesetting and letterpress printing, and later technologies which separate the oral from other modes, such as telephone and radio.

Finally, literate languages stabilise; they tend to fix signifier to signified in such a way that language drift comes as a surprise, serving only to confound the best laid plans of lexicons and grammars, official language forms and pedagogies. And in a deeper representational sense, literate cultures are less capable of dealing with change than those of first languages, and less able to recognise the role of agency to human meaning and action. They make us capable of certain kinds of reasoning, to be sure, and a kind of reasoning which allows us to take unprecedented charge of the natural world as well as charge over other people if we find ourselves conveniently located in positions of power within social hierarchies. But for the all successes of the engineers and the managers, some of our capacities to negotiate change have been lessened. Our anxieties about change are more notable than our capacities to deal with change in our lived realities.

So, here is the episteme and lifeworld of scribal, and with even greater intensity, print cultures, which tend to standardise and homogenise forms of meaning, abstract and separate modes of meaning and provide less scope for the negotiation of meanings, thus diminishing our capacity for human agency and ability to deal with change.

And then, in the twentieth century, there comes a series of transformations in the means of production and reproduction of meaning, initially around photography and its derivatives, but with a substantial quickening of the pace of change since the beginning of the widespread application of digital technologies to representation a quarter of a century ago.<sup>15</sup> Here are four features of these changing representational means:

First, after half a dozen millennia when the written words was a source of power, then half a millennium in which this power became nothing less than obsessive, photographic means of representation (lithographic printing, cinema, analogue television) began to restore power to image and comfortably overlay image with written text. We want to call this the 'new synaesthesia'. The digital accelerates this process as the elementary modular unit of manufacture of textual meaning is reduced from the character to the pixel. Images and fonts are now made of the same raw materials, and more easily overlaid—hence the television screens that stream more and more writing over image, and the magazines and newspapers which layer image and

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<sup>11</sup> Vansina, Jan. *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973 (1961). pp.36-37. Henson, Sandra Lee. "Dead Bones Dancing: The Taki Onqoy, Archaism and the Crisis in Sixteenth Century Peru." M.A., East Tennessee State University, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Eisenstein, Elizabeth L. *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformation in Early-Modern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

<sup>13</sup> This section draws heavily on: Goody, Jack. *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977. Goody, Jack. *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. Ong, W. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Methuen, 1982.

<sup>14</sup> Kress, Gunther. "Design and Transformation: New Theories of Meaning." In *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*, edited by Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis, 153-161. London: Routledge, 2000. Kress, Gunther, and Theo van Leeuwen. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge, 1996.

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<sup>15</sup> Cope, Bill, and Mary Kalantzis. "Text-Made Text." Melbourne: Common Ground, 2003.

text in a way that was never easily achievable in the era of letterpress printing. Then there is the return to the aural, first with telephone and radio, then more closely overlaid in the digital era as sound is also made from the same bits and bytes as image and character. New overlays of oral and written modes emerge as telegraph, telegram and then email stay more faithful to the fluid epistemes of speaking than the earlier literate forms of letters and memoranda, and then voice synthesis of digital text turns the readable into the hearable.

Second—and we will just consider English for the moment—after an era of standardisation, homogenisation and assimilation, even the global-imperial language of pax Americana is diverging internally at a pace which seems to be picking up in reverse correlation to its imperial adventurism and successful plantation of fast food franchises in every corner of the earth. The social languages of subcultures, peer cultures, communities of fashion and fad and fetish, diasporic communities of second language speakers and local and regional dialects—all of these forms of English are becoming less mutually intelligible rather than more. They are spoken through the seemingly endless television channels, streamed radio, web communities and person-to-person meeting points of the new cosmopolis. Underneath this is a new logic of identity, not to mention senses of belonging and sovereignty that increasingly defy the neatly homogenising efforts of the nation-state. We are returning to a deep logic of divergence and diversity, and with this a fluidity of signifier-signified relations not witnessed since we spoke first languages.<sup>16</sup>

Third, as expansive as the imperial pretensions of global English may be, the new representational means also paradoxically create the conditions for a return to radical multilingualism—the call centres that run in tens—and why not hundreds or thousands?—of languages, the possibilities of machine translation which remove the language-bounded-ness of a particular meaning, the universal scripting system Unicode which is entirely agnostic about alphabetical and ideographic meanings and small or large character sets because are all manufactured of the same stuff and rendered to the same media. Ironically, these techniques, developed in the world city of global English, make the maintenance and revival of peripheral first languages an easier and more achievable task.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, the new media are more accessible than the printing presses of the era of print literacy—cheaper to access and more manipulable by amateurs. And insofar as many are victims of the new, digital divide, the same metropolitan powers that attempt to make intellectual property an new form of private property, have in the heart of their system people of genius who are committed to access through the activist politics of ‘open source’ technologies and to the preservation of a ‘creative commons’ for intellectual property.<sup>18</sup> Defying the logic of industrial modernity, the means of production and distribution of meaning are either trending towards free in the case of electronic meanings, or flat economies of scale in the case of physical media such as digital print. In a manufacturing sense, this latter reality makes small cultures and narrow meanings just as viable—albeit not so profitable—as mass cultures and homogenising meanings.

So here we are, five thousand years later. The historical narrative we have told is a story of partial return to synaesthesia, divergence, multilingualism and deep diversity. But in important ways, it is not really a return at all. The future will be incomparably different to any of our pasts. A new synaesthesia, a new diversity, a renewal of subjectivity and agency, a new capacity to take become subjects rather than anxious objects of change—these are some of the aspects of epistemes and lifeworlds that are emerging today. Notwithstanding the false starts, the momentary misjudgments, the instances of backlash and the regression, there may be space here to shape a new humanity. We can be sure of one thing only, that it will be like none of our pasts.

We do want to suggest, however, that in imaging our human future we may at times have more to learn from the representational forms embodied in first languages than from those of literate culture. And herein lies a pivotal role for the humanities, as modern-day Platos imagine and advocate new representational means and new agendas for being human.

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<sup>16</sup> Cope, Bill, and Mary Kalantzis, eds. *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*. London: Routledge, 2000. Cope, Bill, and Mary Kalantzis. *Productive Diversity: A New Approach to Work and Management*. Sydney: Pluto Press, 1997.

<sup>17</sup> Cope, Bill, and Gus Gollings, eds. *Multilingual Book Production*. Vol. 2.2, *Technology Drivers Across the Book Production Supply Chain, From the Creator to the Consumer*. Melbourne: Common Ground, 2001.

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<sup>18</sup> Lessig, Lawrence. *The Future of Ideas: The Fate of the Commons in a Connected World*. New York: Random House, 2001. Williams, Sam. *Free as in Freedom: Richard Stallman's Crusade for Free Software*. Sebastapol CA: O'Reilly, 2002.

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