

THE STUDY OF WRITING *)

An Account of "A Study of Writing" by I. J. Gelb.

The term 'grammatology' in the subtitle of this book is a coinage which the author suggests for 'the study of the science of writing' (249). Although he indicates that this book is only a preliminary outline of the subject matter and methods of such a science, Gelb has gathered a considerable amount of material and has developed a number of revolutionary theories concerning many of the writing systems of the ancient Near East. He brings to this subject his competence not only as a specialist in Sumero-Akkadian cuneiform and Semitics, but also as one of the leading contributors to the decipherment of Hieroglyphic Hittite, intimately involved in the problems of the Indo-European languages of Anatolia.

A number of recent studies of writing naturally come to mind in discussing Gelb's book; at first glance one might expect their contents to be similar. But the purpose and content of Gelb's book are completely different. D. Diringer's *The Alphabet* and C. Fossey's *Les caractères étrangers* consist chiefly of tables and charts presenting many of the world's writing systems. H. Jensen's *Die Schrift* gives more descriptive information concerning particular types of writing systems. Similarly, G. R. Driver's *Semitic Writing* (mistitled, since it deals with non-Semitic writing as well) contains exhaustive materials on the cuneiform and West Semitic writing systems, with considerable documentation in the ancient sources for the native terminologies and techniques of writing. Gelb's book, on the other hand, presents for the first time a typological structural analysis of writing and writing systems, without the analysis of external form so familiar from the usual studies. In this structural realm, Gelb has succeeded in laying to rest certain well established myths concerning the writing systems of the ancient Near East, and has thrown a completely new light on these and other writing systems.

Chapter 1, 'Writing as a system of signs', treats the following

*) *A Study of Writing: the foundations of grammatology.* By I. J. Gelb. Pp. xv, 295. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952.

subjects: ways of communicating ideas, definition of writing, sources of information, the study of writing. Gelb defines writing as 'a system of human intercommunication by means of conventional visible marks' (12); he defends the linguist's position that writing is basically a representation of speech. It is disappointing, however, that at this late date he finds it necessary to characterize his linguist as a behaviorist. This merely revives the earlier logomachy on the subject of the American linguist's behaviorism instead of acting on Bloomfield's dictum that the linguist needs no sanction from any school of psychology. Indeed, Gelb himself has extended the linguist's insistence on formal structural study to the field of writing without regard to the twilight zones in which writing may not be a point-for-point representation of speech. Without regard for the psychological explanations that have been offered for this or that development of a writing system, Gelb analyzes writing in terms of the formal and the knowable.

Chapter 2, 'Forerunners of writing', discusses primitive drawings, the descriptive-representational device, the identifying-mnemonic device, and various limited systems that fall short of full phonetic representation on the logographic, the syllabic, or the alphabetic level. As forerunners of writing Gelb identifies those communication systems in which the full realization of the principle of phonetic transfer from symbol to sound had not yet been achieved. Here belong the well known American Indian drawings which could be interpreted independently of any particular language. Among limited systems, Gelb includes particularly the Aztec and the Mayan. In general, he distinguishes between representational forms in which the artistic or pictorial elements are paramount and those in which the concept of phonetic transfer is the dominant principle.

Chapter 3, 'Word-syllabic systems', begins the discussion of 'full systems of writing'. Gelb introduces the subject by listing the seven types of writing according to which he classifies the systems of the world in their earliest or logosyllabic stage. His structural framework consists of three main categories: *logographic*, where each symbol stands for a word of the language; *syllabic*, where each symbol represents a whole syllable and sometimes even bisyllabic groups; and *alphabetic*, where each symbol represents a consonant or a vowel. Since no pure logographic system exists anywhere, Gelb sets up an

intermediate stage called *logo-syllabic*. This category accommodates four of the seven systems mentioned above, viz. Sumerian, Egyptian, Hittite (i.e. Hieroglyphic Hittite, since cuneiform Hittite falls within the Sumerian type), Chinese, Cretan, Proto-Elamite, and Proto-Indic. The other stages are in reality no more pure than the logographic. Alphabetic systems, for example, retain vestiges of either logographic or syllabic stages or both. Nevertheless, in the basic typological sequence *logographic* > *syllabic* > *alphabetic* (already indicated by Bloomfield), Gelb has a framework into which any system of writing can be structurally fitted.

So far, the reviewer has purposely ignored the external characteristics of writing systems. It is Gelb's thesis that considerations of external form are meaningful only to the epigrapher or paleographer, not to the 'grammatologist'. What is important for the latter is the inner form and principle underlying a particular writing system, not its outer gestalt. With this in mind, one can appreciate the dilemma into which one is customarily placed by labelling the Old Persian or Ugaritic system 'cuneiform' and letting it go at that, merely because the wedge is the component element of the symbol. The absurd results of this terminological confusion are found in all the handbooks which wrestle with comparisons between Ugaritic or Old Persian and Akkadian signs. Understanding of the structure immediately differentiates the Ugaritic from the Old Persian and both from the Sumero-Akkadian type.

In general, it seems best to set up the typological sequence as follows: *logographic* > *logo-syllabic* > *syllabic* > *syllabic-alphabetic* > *alphabetic*. This scheme accounts for those systems, such as Old Persian and West Semitic *scriptio plena*, which Gelb calls 'Oriental forerunners to full alphabetization', and thus gives adequate emphasis to the intermediate mixed stages.

Perhaps the single most important revolutionary concept in this book is Gelb's assignment of the West Semitic systems to the syllabic stage. Others have preceded Gelb in alluding to the syllabic character of the West Semitic systems; Gelb names F. Praetorius, S. Yeivin, E. Schwyzer, A. Poebel, and H. Pedersen, with E. H. Sturtevant and Bloomfield to be included also. But it is to Gelb alone that we now owe the full proof of the syllabic character of West Semitic writing. Very briefly his argument may be summed up as follows. (1) Since the

alphabet as such was developed by the Greeks out of material borrowed from West Semitic sources, what existed prior to this alphabetic invention must have been a stage of writing other than alphabetic. (2) The syllabic character of the West Semitic systems is to be understood as the type where each symbol stands for a consonant plus any vowel or zero. The proof for the inherent vowel within each West Semitic sign is to be found in the systems of vocalic indication developed in later times, when a distinct symbol was invented to indicate the absence of vowel: if the basic sign had been merely consonantal, no such separate sign would have been needed. Furthermore, this is true not only of Hebrew with its *shwa* and Arabic with its *sukūn*, but (what is more important) of the systems derived from the West Semitic, such as the Ethiopic and the Indic. In both of these, the basic sign subsumes a vowel (short *a*), and special signs were invented both to express other vowel qualities and quantities and to express absence of a vowel. Note also that the names of the Arabic letters, so far as they do not go back to earlier names (such as *alif*, *mim*, *nun*), are of the *Ca* type (*ba*, *ta*, *tha*, etc.). This thesis, the high point of Gelb's volume, illustrates the value of the structural approach in the study of writing. Perhaps the nonsense about West Semitic syllabaries being consonantal because 'in the Semitic languages only the consonants are important' will now finally be abandoned.

In the chapter on logosyllabic systems, Gelb discusses each of the seven basic systems and the underlying principles of each. For the three still undeciphered (Proto-Elamite, Proto-Indic, and Cretan), he presents a convenient summary of what has been done and what still remains to be done. There is also an important contribution in the material (fig. 57) illustrating the essentially unequivocal syllabaries of the various Assyro-Babylonian dialects. The bugaboo of polyphony and homophony for Sumero-Akkadian cuneiform is accurately exploded in favor of the view that every period and text-genre had its own syllabary in which polyphony and homophony were minimal. In the present state of things, as Gelb so pointedly advocates (110), a basic need in this field is the compilation of individual period and area (= dialect) syllabaries.

Chapter 4, 'Syllabic writings', deals briefly with the cuneiform syllabaries such as Elamite, cuneiform Hittite, Urartean, Luwian, and Palaic. Then in the discussion of the West Semitic syllabaries, there

follow: the unfolding of the argument for the syllabic nature of these writings discussed above.

Chapter 5, 'The alphabet', begins with the 'Oriental forerunners' to the alphabet and continues on to the first example of a true alphabet, the Greek. Gelb here suggests that the typological sequence given earlier represents a unidirectional trend of development. It is worth quoting the paragraph in which he points this out. "What this principle (i.e. unidirectional development) means in the history of writing is that in reaching its ultimate development, writing, whatever its forerunners may be, must pass through the stages of logography, syllabography, and alphabetography in this, and no other, order. Therefore, no writing can start with a syllabic or alphabetic stage unless it is borrowed, directly or indirectly, from a system which has gone through all the previous stages. A system of writing can naturally stop at one stage without developing farther. Thus, a number of writings stopped at the logographic or syllabic stage. The saying 'natura non facit saltus' can be applied to the history of writings in the sense that no stage of development can be skipped. Therefore, if it is accepted that logography develops first into syllabography, then the so-called Egyptian 'alphabet', which is developed from logography, cannot be an alphabet but must be a syllabary. There is no reverse development: an alphabet cannot develop into a syllabary, just as a syllabary cannot lead to the creation of logography. For this reason it is absurd to speak of the development of the Ethiopic (or Sanskrit) syllabaries from a Semitic alphabet. As shown in another place, both the Ethiopic and Sanskrit writings are further developments from a Semitic syllabary, which in turn, is a creation following the model of the Egyptian syllabary" (201). The proof of this unidirectional trend of development lies in the observation that there are no observed examples of reversed or skipped stages of development.

Chapter 6, 'Evolution of writing', presents a summation of the systems of writing discussed earlier in the book in an attempt to classify the various writing systems of the world and forerunners of writing within the structural framework already mentioned. However, it would seem preferable to reverse the order of the two basic premises suggested for the analysis of writing systems and by such a reversal to indicate that the hypothesis of unidirectional development and the structural framework of writing systems result from the observation of

various systems and their underlying principles. Thus, by observing that "From the historical point of view the development is from the Egyptian through the West Semitic writing to the Greek writing" (given as premise II, p. 205) and by study of the inner principles of other writing systems and their developments, it may be stated that "From the point of view of the theory of writing the evolution is from a word-syllabic through a syllabic writing to an alphabetic writing" (given as premise I, p. 205).

Chapter 7, 'Modern writings among primitives', briefly presents some information on such writing systems as Cherokee, Cree, Micmac, Alaska Eskimo, and Vai and Bamum in Africa. One of the concluding observations that "Judging by the great majority of writings discussed in this chapter, the syllabic stage is best suited for use among primitive societies" (211) is hardly justified considering the paucity of information given about them and in view of the the success achieved in many parts of the world in making 'primitives' literate in phonemic orthographies. It is in this area that the weakest arguments in this book are to be found. The continual comparisons between 'primitive' societies and psychology with the psychology of children is not a sound procedure from the anthropological (or psychological) point of view. There is really no reason to suspect that the child in 20th century European-American society recapitulates in his own development the experiences of 'primitive' societies. Nor is there any reason to assume a simplicity of structure and organization in the psychology of either the child or the 'primitive'. Anthropological and psycho-analytical literature have long demonstrated that adult observers have assumed simplicity and naiveté as convenient explanations for much more complex systems than could have been suspected. The interesting experiments of H. Bauer and J. de Groot which Gelb describes (144) where children of school-age were instructed to invent alphabets prove chiefly that external similarity or even identity of symbols does not prove relationship of writing systems. In both these cases, the resultant inventions contained many signs which showed strikingly fortuitous similarity to West Semitic, Cretan, and Cypriote forms. However, the use of children in these experiments is a wholly secondary and incidental matter. Would an adult under the same circumstances have come to much different results? This reviewer tried just such an experiment with an adult and the result was much the

same as reported by Bauer and de Groot. Gelb's essential point is therefore to be reiterated. "The whole question of the formal aspect of the Proto-Semitic and Semitic writings is of secondary importance in comparison with that of the origin of the inner structure of these writings. Different as these various writings appear in outer form, they are all identical in their most important inner structural characteristic: they all consist of a limited number of signs (22—30) each of which expresses the exact consonant, but does not indicate a vowel" (146—7).

Another criticism that seems justified is the use of the term 'primitive languages' where the author clearly intends 'languages of primitives' or rather 'languages of pre-literate societies'. In consideration of the vast amount of linguistic misinformation abroad in the world, it behooves one to take special care with such terms, either eliminating them altogether or else avoiding equivocation in their use.

Chapter 8 poses the interesting and still baffling question of 'monogenesis or polygenesis of writing'. Although Gelb leaves the question — as he must — unanswered, one has the impression that he inclines toward the possibility of monogenesis at least for the Old World. Indeed, only recently a short note in a bibliography devoted to cuneiform studies¹⁾ quotes an article by R. von Heine-Geldern, *China, die ostkaspische Kultur und die Herkunft der Schrift*, Paideuma 4 (Bamberg 1950) 82 as follows: "... es ergibt sich mit hoher Wahrscheinlichkeit, dass alle altweltlichen Schriften letzten Endes von einer kleinasiatischen Schrift des 4. Jahrtausends abstammen dürften."

Chapter 9, 'Writing and civilization' (with its sub-headings: importance of writing, writing and speech, writing and art, writing and religion) covers in a very interesting manner a good deal of important material. The concluding chapter entitled 'Future of writing' is a summation of the author's views and gives him an opportunity to mention and briefly discuss such topics as 'visible speech', alphabetic notation, and the IPA system of writing. The book closes with a short section in which the terminology used throughout is collected and defined. This is followed by a rather complete bibliography ranging from works dealing with general problems and surveys to instructive

¹⁾ A. Pohl, Keilschriftbibliographie 14, *Orientalia* 21.337 (1952).

bibliographical reference for specific writing systems from all parts of the world. There are also ninety-five well chosen and well reproduced illustrations which enhance the prose accounts of particular problems.

This review has attempted in general to give an overall picture of the contents of *A study of writing* pausing to comment, amplify, and criticize only at random. Any criticism offered here is written in a spirit of amplification with no intent to detract from the essential value and originality of this treatment of writing. There are still many chapters to be written, none the least of which is an adequate treatment of writing systems from the point of view of their expression of the phonemic systems of the languages for which they are used. Perhaps the long period of gestation in the writing of this book (to which Gelb alludes in the introduction) is to be blamed for the lack of consideration of phonemics in some areas where such a treatment would have been highly pertinent. It would be wholly superfluous to point out some minor typographical errors which will cause no trouble to any reader of this book. In this reviewer's opinion, Gelb's book represents a revolution in yet another philological domain pointing the way toward systematization, description, and analysis of writing systems. Gelb has succeeded admirably in laying the foundations to 'grammatology'. Let us now go on from here.

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