

## COMMUNICATION

## Signs of Meaning

Andrew Robinson

“A OCCDRNIG TO RSCHEEARC AT C M A B R I G D E UINERV TISY, IT DEOSN’T MTTAER IN WAHT OREDR THE LTTEERS IN A WROD ARE, THE OLN YIPRMOETNT TIHNG IS TAHT THE FRIST AND LSAT LTTEER BE AT THE RGHIT PCLAE.” Thus Barry B. Powell, near the end of *Writing*, playfully reminds the reader of the complex interplay between the shape of a word and its phonetic representation.

On the book’s first page, Powell takes aim at what he regards as three long-established misunderstandings that bedevil the study of writing: that the purpose, origin, and function of writing are to represent speech; that writing originated in pictures; and that writing systems necessarily evolve over centuries of use toward more efficient phonetic representation, as in alphabets.

Egyptian hieroglyphs, for example, clearly do not fit the first claim because they do not indicate vowels. Egyptologists have to supply those when transliterating hieroglyphs to make pronounceable words in the presumed ancient Egyptian language: the pharaonic name Ramses is actually written with just three consonantal hieroglyphs that represent *r*, *ms*, and *s*. As to the second claim, although some of the earliest written signs (protocuneiform from the late fourth millennium BCE in Mesopotamia) do look like pictures—a human head, a fish, barley, and so on—most are indeed abstract. As for evolution, one has only to contemplate Chinese writing, which became progressively less phonetic from its relatively simple origins in the Shang civilization of the second millennium BCE and by the 18th century consisted of almost 50,000 characters.

Although far from a textbook, *Writing*

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**Writing**  
Theory and History  
of the Technology  
of Civilization

by Barry B. Powell

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presents the basics of Mesopotamian cuneiform, Egyptian hieroglyphs, Chinese characters, Aegean writing systems such as Cretan Linear B, and the fiendishly complicated Mayan glyphs (which have been deciphered only in the past few decades). The most important chapters concern West Semitic writing

from the Near East (such as the Phoenician script) and the Greek alphabet, Powell’s special field as a classicist. He is best known for his provocative thesis that the Greek alphabet was invented circa 800 BCE by one man, probably Homer, in order to write down oral epic poetry (*J*).



**Archaic bookkeeping.** Protocuneiform clay tablets from Uruk in Mesopotamia, circa 3200 BCE, preserve the earliest known writing.

Here Powell strongly argues against another popular view: that to create their alphabet the ancient Greeks borrowed the Phoenician script, which has only consonantal letters, and added to it letters for the Greek vowels. He notes, “It is inaccurate to say that the inventor of the Greek alphabet ‘added vowels’ to a previously vowelless script, when the concept ‘vowel’ depends on how the Greek

alphabet functions and not on objective features of human speech.” Spectrograms of ordinary speech do not distinguish vowels from consonants: there is a continuous wave. The letters of the alphabet are what gives us the compelling idea that speech can be atomized into particles of sound. Nor are words the discrete acoustic entities we like to think. Powell reminds us that when the classicist Milman Parry (in his famous 1930s studies) asked illiterate Balkan singers to sing just one “word” of their songs, they would deliver an entire line, several lines, or even a complete song.

On the origins of writing in Mesopotamia, Powell takes pains to distinguish what he calls semasiography from lexicography. In semasiography (such as petroglyphs, protocuneiform, airport signage, and mathematical notation), the signs are not attached to necessary forms of speech, whereas in lexicography (such as cuneiform or the alphabet), they are. No one really knows how semasiography gave rise to lexicography. Powell favors Denise Schmandt-Besserat’s theory that the semasiographic clay “tokens” found in large numbers in Mesopotamian sites from about 8000 BCE until the emergence of protocuneiform circa 3300 BCE were instrumental precursors of lexicography (2). He incorrectly suggests, however, that the tokens “gradually disappear” around 3400 BCE, whereas, as Schmandt-Besserat admits, they continue until 1500 BCE, long after the emergence of lexicography. Rather than precursors, the intriguing tokens are more likely to have been a parallel system of accounting that tells us nothing definite about the emergence of writing.

The book is in places partial and contentious, with a number of unsubstantiated assertions—such as its misrepresentation, following Maurice Pope (3), of the scientist Thomas Young’s crucial contributions to Jean-François Champollion’s decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphs. Surprisingly, Powell does not mention John DeFrancis’s comparable book (4), which has the advantage of being written by a Chinese specialist.

No doubt Powell is right to generalize that “The Chinese will learn to use the alphabet, but alphabet users will not learn to use Chinese” because of its bewildering signary. But he goes too far in his undervaluing of the important role, emphasized by DeFrancis, of phoneticism in reading and writing Chinese characters. Despite these shortcomings, *Writing* is stimulating and impressive (if too

densely written for the nonspecialist), a worthy successor to the pioneering book by Semitic specialist I. J. Gelb (5).

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## LANGUAGE

# Social Motives for Syntax

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As surprising as it may sound, most cognitive-science research on language has been avowedly disinterested in communication. One dominant philosophy, grounded in the work of linguist Noam Chomsky, sees language as primarily an instrument of thought, not action. On this view, the key event in the evolution of language was a mutation resulting in an organlike faculty in the human mind, with selective advantage in the realm of reasoning. This faculty happened also to be useful for generating complex communicative behavior, though perhaps in the same way that a foot happens to be good for playing soccer: it did not evolve under the selective pressure of that function.

Michael Tomasello (a developmental psychologist at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology) offers a distinctly contrasting perspective in *Origins of Human Communication*. Following ordinary-language philosophers from Ludwig Wittgenstein through J. L. Austin, Paul Grice, and John Searle, Tomasello sees language as a means for doing things, not a device for processing or merely externalizing thoughts. Here, to communicate is to act on others in the social realm (1, 2). For language to have this function presumes not only a conspecific with a comprehending mind but also a willingness to cooperate. Take the simple example of a

request: I say, "Please pass the salt." If all goes well, this utterance has an effect on your mind that in turn causes a compliant pattern of behavior: you pass me the salt.

Requests form one of three classes of social action on which Tomasello builds his account of human communication. The others are informing-helping (e.g., when one person points to keys that another just dropped) and sharing (e.g., when two people's attitudes toward a third person align in the course of a gossip session). He summarizes research showing that all three social motives are fully evident in the communicative behavior of prelinguistic infants and all but absent among our closest relatives, the great apes. Humans have a special combination of cooperative instincts, prosocial motives, high-level intention attribution, and moral propensities (3). Tomasello contends that without this unique psychological wherewithal in the domain of social cognition, language as we know it could never have evolved.

Tomasello's work represents a long-standing and now rapidly growing view that language is not restricted to abstract structures of gram-

matical patterning but includes gestures and other bodily movements of the kinds that typically accompany speech (4, 5). In this book, Tomasello does more than merely include gestures: he gives them pride of place. Gestures, he argues, are necessary for the development of language in both phylogeny and ontogeny. What is new here is not the idea itself but the fascinating battery of experiments by Tomasello and colleagues garnered in support of it. The research settles some long-standing controversies in developmental psychology by showing that 9-month-olds use gestures for multiple, often sophisticated social functions, including the three basic social motives. These favorable conclusions on the social cognitive sophistication of human infants contrast with the findings on primates Tomasello summarizes. The research he discusses defines limits of chimpanzees' capacities in experimental settings (to the certain chagrin of many field-working primatologists). Lacking humanlike prosocial motives, chimps show only rudimentary strategies for making requests and little or no evidence of the helping and sharing behavior that comes so naturally to human infants.

Many traditional linguists find a focus on gesture in accounting for the origin of language unsatisfying. The problem is that while gesture provides a key link in the chain of events, other critical links remain missing. Gestures lack the highly structured complexity

of grammar: How to get from one to the other? [Such statements of incredulity are of course the enemy of gradualist evolutionary accounts (6).] Linguists in the 1990s expressed a similar worry in response to Robin Dunbar's socially grounded theory of language evolution (7). When Dunbar proposed that language evolved in response to the pressure of maintaining social relations in ever-larger groups—functionally analogous to (but much more efficacious than) what primates do with grooming—linguists complained that they could not see how to get from "mere grooming" to the dazzling complexities of syntax. As a linguist, Tomasello is qualified to address this concern and advance Dunbar's cause significantly (although surprisingly he makes no reference to Dunbar's work).

Tomasello's solution is an ingenious linking of requesting, informing, and sharing with three distinct levels of complexity in the grammatical possibilities that any language will furnish. He dubs these "simple syntax" (strongly dependent on immediate context), "serious syntax" (for making unambiguous reference across contexts), and "fancy syntax" (for organizing long and complex narratives). But this is essentially as far as his links to grammar go, promissory notes notwithstanding. Precisely because the author is a linguist, this omission is a missed opportunity to complete the argument, to connect the dots that lead from basic social actions ultimately to the radically varying, historically developed complex linguistic systems that are found around the world. I fear that without the story being told through to the end, many linguists will remain incredulous.

With this book, Tomasello makes a powerful and highly readable case for the social foundations of human communication (in line with a fundamental shift in current thinking on the nature of language) and of the underlying cognition that makes language possible. In this naturalistic account, language is an adaptation that gradually emerged, in step with the evolution of a special kind of social mind.

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### Origins of Human Communication

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