

Ambiguity and the creation and evolution of writing systems

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First stages of proto-writing systems are always iconographic. For instance, the first stage of Sumerian cuneiform represents quantities and drawings of common life referents, such as animals, plants, or body parts. This system was useful for administrative purposes, but it was not complete: abstract concepts as well as grammatical categories (such as tense or case markers) could not be written. Strictly speaking, iconographic systems are not writing systems, because they do not represent speech but rather part of the physical environment.

The objective of this talk is to show that the awareness of ambiguity is a principal factor in the creation and evolution of writing systems. More precisely, it will be argued that the awareness of ambiguity was opportunistically used to increase the expressiveness of scripts, i.e., to transform proto-writing into full writing.

I will focus on rebus writing and the appearance of determinatives. On one hand, rebus writing strategically exploits homophony, and thus lexical ambiguity, in order to attain full writing. On the other hand, the use of determinatives in different scripts appears as a mechanism to reduce the amount of ambiguity created by the strategic application of rebus writing. I will provide a comprehensive comparative investigation of how rebus writing permitted, step by step, the development of full writing in the cases of Sumerian cuneiform, Egyptian hieroglyphics, and Chinese logosyllabary, as well as a systematic investigation of how determinatives are used in these scripts to reduce ambiguity.

Segmenting the relevant linguistic chunks and detecting its potential ambiguity permitted the illiterate mind to analyze speech and develop gradually more complete writing systems. Therefore, the study of writing offers a window into the awareness of linguistic knowledge. The expected results of this research line should be very relevant to the history of writing, but also to general linguistics and psycholinguistics.

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