



Back to the Future with Writing and Speech

Tim Ingold (✉)

University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen AB24 3QY, Scotland, UK

tim.ingold@abdn.ac.uk

Abstract

This essay for the inaugural issue of *Technology and Language* suggests a kind of time-travel. As the hand becomes dethroned in writing, the voice might be in speech, and it is with the technologies of the scribal and vocal arts that they can be reclaimed. In the fairly recent past, words, severed from hand and mouth, have been converted into the liquid currency of a global information and communications industry. Technologies followed in step and stripped words of both gesture and voice, reducing them to mere tokens in anonymised circuits of exchange. This condition is here critiqued not in terms of semantics or eloquence but in terms of the traces of writing and speech – what is said not by the what but by the how of the hand and the voice.

Keywords: Hand and voice; Scribal and vocal art; Writing and speech

Аннотация

В этом эссе для первого выпуска журнала “*Технологии в инфосфере*” (“*Technology and Language*”) содержится своего рода путешествие во времени. Когда рука исчезает из письма, и голос – возможно из речи, это восполняется с помощью технологий. В последнее время слова, выхваченные из-под пальцев и изо рта, превращаются в ликвидную валюту глобальной индустрии информации и коммуникаций. Технологии, продолжая этот путь, лишили слова жеста и голоса, сведя их к простым токенам в анонимных схемах обмена. В эссе это явление подвергается критике не с точки зрения семантики или красноречия, а с точки зрения отпечатка письменной и устной речи, как в них действует рука и голос.



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Back to the Future with Writing and Speech

Words are human things, never more than when spoken or written by hand. In speech they well up on the breath, their sounds sculpted by movements of the tongue and lips. In writing they spill out onto the page as the hand – now hesitating as it waits for coming thought, now racing to catch up with it – leaves a meandering trail in its wake. It is not just that I speak, or write. My speaking also speaks me: it speaks me into being, into life. And so too, my writing writes me, turning life into text. Whether in speaking or in writing I come into the audible or visible presence of others with ears to listen or eyes to read. You know me by my voice, it is the way I am. And when I send you a letter by post, you know me by my handwriting. Moreover from the weight and inflection of the line, be it of sound or ink, you can tell how I am, how I'm feeling. This is more than words can say, yet words are saying it, not by way of the meanings we attach to them, but thanks to the expressive power of the line itself.

We lose this power at our peril. Never in human history, indeed, has it been at greater risk. For we have stood by as words, severed from hand and mouth, have been converted into the liquid currency of a global information and communications industry. And our technologies have evolved in step. They have allowed language to be distilled from the conversations of life, only to be reinserted into algorithms of computation, as the executive arm of an artificial intelligence. The effect is to strip words of both gesture and voice, reducing them to mere tokens in anonymised circuits of exchange. Cut off in both body and mind from the words we once produced, and that once produced us, we ourselves are set to lose something of our own humanity.

First to go were the traces of writing, a victim of the keyboard. It is impossible to write – in the original sense of scribing a line – with a keyboard. The punctual movements of the fingers, as they tap the keys, leave no mark upon the page. True, with manual typewriters the force of a tap might register in the density of the mark, and perhaps even leave an impression in the surface. Like a pianist, the manual typist can play loud or soft. But as the electronic keyboard replaced its manual counterpart, and as the mechanics of the typewriter gave way to the computations of the word processor, even this residual medium of expression was lost. Today, writing is no longer a scribal art. It has become, rather, a practice of literate composition, or verbal assembly, in which fragments of words, or words themselves, are arranged in different permutations and combinations to create an effect. To read, then, is no longer to allow one's vision to linger on the surface of the page as it follows the traces of inscription. The handwritten line, that had once captivated the eyes of readers, as a vocal melody might captivate the ears of listeners, is now dismissed as a distraction. Reading processed words calls instead for a vision that cuts through paper, as through a screen, in order to recover meanings reflected from behind. The manuscript page has morphed into a glass window.

Imagine a future, not so very distant, in which what has happened to the written word in our own day is about to happen to the spoken word as well. By then, people will have long forgotten how to write by hand, as they have already forgotten how to write with a quill. No longer able to express their feelings directly in their lines, they have resorted to a surrogate vocabulary of standardised emoticons. But as corporate and state



interests continue to drive developments in information technology, attention turns to speech. If words of writing could be purged, in the name of communicative efficiency, of the surface distractions of the line, then why – ask the developers – should not the same be done with spoken words as well? If the aim of words is strictly to convey information, then they should leave no breathing space for prosody, for the musical qualities of vocal pronunciation that had once lured listeners to follow along or even to join in. The expressive powers of the voice, then, are to be banished from speech just as, in our own time, those of the hand were banished from writing. The lullaby, the lament, the carol and the hum will become things of the past: you will have to visit a museum to hear them, from old recordings. Eventually, people will forget how to sing, as before they had forgotten how to write by hand. Instead, digital synthesizers, operated by neurotransmitters from the brain, will pump out messages, assembled from a standardised repertoire of sounds.

This, to be sure, is a dystopic scenario. And in all likelihood, the so-called ‘digital revolution’ will self-destruct before the scenario is ever fully realised. In a real world already facing climate emergency, the infrastructure that keeps the virtual world afloat is manifestly unsustainable. Not only are the supercomputers on which it depends consuming colossal quantities of energy; the extraction of toxic heavy metals for use in digital devices is also fuelling genocidal conflict around the world, and looks set to render many environments permanently uninhabitable. What then will become of us? Stripped of hand and voice, are we destined to go the same way as our technology, into mutually assured destruction?

One little invention could save the day, and perhaps the planet too. It would consist of nothing more than a hand-held tube, mounted in a shaft, and filled with a black or coloured liquid extracted from plant materials. The tube is closed at one end, while to the other is affixed a tip of keratin – the stuff of feathers and fingernails – sliced down the middle. On contact of the tip with a surface, capillary action draws the liquid content down through the slit, so as to leave a trace. It is possible to write with this instrument on almost any smoothly textured surface, such as of linen, paper or papyrus. Its expressive potential and versatility are unmatched by any contemporary digital interface. It costs almost nothing to make, from natural ingredients that can be obtained virtually anywhere. It is easy to use, requires no external supply of energy and leaves no pollution in its wake. This simple invention could secure the future of writing for hundreds if not thousands of years, as indeed it did in the past, until the forces of digitisation drove it to the brink of extinction.

Perhaps, as we relearn how to write by means of this device, we will rediscover our voice as well. We’ll remember how to sing and speak. In history, humans were speaking and singing long before they began to write. But in the future, it might just be the other way around.

Tim Ingold