

Le «biais du langage écrit» et le rôle des sciences phonétiques

The “written language bias” and the role of phonetic sciences

What is the Written Language Bias?

“...a tendency to analyze languages using writing-induced concepts as phoneme, word, literal meaning, and sentence, while at the same time subscribing to the principle of the primacy of speech for linguistic inquiry.”

-- Coulmas (1996)

The WLB is pervasive in linguistics where, by tradition, speech is analyzed via assumed letter-, word-, sentence-like units despite the lack of working definitions of such units with respect to speech. The WLB extends to assumptions of grammatical categories that are conceptually linked to European-style orthographic systems (e.g. “subject”, “adjective”, “preposition”, etc.). Using such assumptions to represent and analyze oral communication leads overlook the prosodic structure of speech and its function as a communicative act. Instead, speech is conceptualized as reflecting combinations letter- and word-size constructs obeying to a given grammatical ability. Criticisms of the WLB have been persistent throughout the history of linguistics. Here are a few...

“The series of characters which we read and write as representing an articulate language have given us a mistaken notion of the units which we utter and which we hear.”

-- Stetson (1928/1951)

“Almost all linguists have followed Saussure (1916) in claiming to be studying spoken language not written language. But the fact is that almost all modern linguists, like Saussure, never really escaped from letter-based characterizations of language. Audio (and video) recordings are rarely found in the linguistics classroom or in most linguistics research. When we think of “words,” “speech sounds,” and “sentences” in our descriptions of language, we are importing the conventions of our writing system and trying to use them uncritically as hypotheses about psychological representations.”

-- Port (2010)

“For sure, we can force all languages into one abstract mold, which mostly means forcing the grammatical entities of non-European languages into European categories. Just as there was a time when Europeans viewed all languages through the Procrustean lens of Latin grammar, we may now view the native languages of Southeast Asia, the Americas, and Australia through the Procrustean lens of Standard Average European grammar. But why? On one reasonable view, this is just Eurocentrism, plain and simple, and it is not very good science.”

--Tomasello (2008)

Part of the work done in the lab and courses such as LNG 3450 deal with the processes underlying basic prosodic structures (cycles, chunks, breath groups) because of the fundamental need to address the WLB in language sciences. Research on these structures and the WLB is understandably scarce within linguistic circles and leads to recognize certain ethnocentrism in the way professional linguists analyze speech. There are numerous implications extending to areas of research in psychology and neurosciences dealing with verbal processes.