

Rationality and the Literate Mind
Harris, Roy (2009)

New York: Routledge. pp.190
ISBN10: 0-415-99901-4.

Reviewed by Vladimir Žegarac

This volume investigates the impact of writing as a technology on the way humans think. The starting point for the discussion is that the “plasticity” of our brains makes our thinking in general, and our thinking about the workings of our minds in particular, susceptible to various technologies. Harris argues that the impact of writing on the relation between language, communication, and rationality has been underestimated, poorly understood, and misconstrued. The author introduces his integrationist perspective, which views communication as “a continuous attempt to integrate the present with the past and the future” (p. ix) and emphasizes the creative nature of human communicative behavior. Harris aims to show that integrationism provides the basis for an adequate account of the nature of language, communication and rationality, while dispensing with the assumption that communication is based “on the ‘codes,’ ‘systems,’ ‘habits,’ and ‘rules’ postulated by orthodox theorists” (p. ix) whose mindset, shaped by life in a literate culture, has led to the development of a fundamentally flawed view of the rationality of social action, including communication. The wide-ranging discussion, which draws on Aristotle, Cartesian philosophy, early 20th century anthropology, neurolinguistics, the philosophy of language, and generative grammar, purports to expose these flaws and to present evidence in support of the

Affiliation

University of Bedfordshire, UK.
email: vladimir.zegarac@beds.ac.uk

integrationist approach by exploring three questions whose significance is highlighted in the introduction (Chapter 1):

Does writing restructure consciousness?

Did the invention of writing have a profound effect on mental processes?

Is the literate mind significantly different from the preliterate mind (and, if so, is literacy the cause of the illusion that it is)?

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the distinction between the “primitive” and the “civilized” mind in anthropology and expounds the view that this distinction is rooted in “scriptism”: a mindset characterized by the belief that written languages are superior to spoken ones, and that good writing is the model for good speaking. According to Harris, the early anthropologists’ preoccupation with defining technical terms, such as *rational* and *logical*, and their neglect of the ways people in particular societies think and act, owe much to their scriptist mindset. Their misconception of the primitive mind as irrational stems from the scriptist Aristotelian view that words represent extra-linguistic aspects of reality directly: “Men supply the words: reality supplies the meanings” (p. 29). This view of linguistic meaning supports the further misconception of “rationality” as a real-world feature which can be directly observed in the way people use language.

The influence of scriptism is further explored in Chapter 3, through a discussion of the view that primitive societies are characterized by the “prelogical mind.” The author considers the example of a “primitive” society whose members readily assert and assent to manifestly false beliefs such as: “The sun is a white cockatoo.” Harris argues that such peoples were assumed to have a “prelogical mind” because of anthropologists’ scriptism: the assumption that words represent extra-linguistic reality directly, so that the content and the rationality of a belief can be assessed on the basis of the literal meaning of the utterance which represents the belief.

Chapter 4 on “Reason and Primitive Languages” aims to show that a plausible alternative to the views criticized in the preceding chapters cannot be provided within the scriptist perspective, because the erroneous assumption that human cognition is oriented towards logical classification is fundamental to scriptism. In this chapter, Harris considers the view that “languages provide a public mirror not of the world as it actually exists but of the ways different communities habitually view the world, and the beliefs they habitually entertain about it” (p. 46). The discussion aims to expose the flaws of this view (which he traces back to Aristotle) and presents evidence which suggests that the words and concepts of “primitive languages” have “the semiological function not of classifying a given set of items, but of

integrating a whole range of activities (marriage, hunting, feasting, etc.) which, if left unintegrated, would – it is feared, whether rightly or not – result in social chaos” (p. 53). The chapter concludes that the view of languages as codes which provide “fixed pairings of forms and meanings” – typical of Western literate societies – does not provide a good basis for settling the issue of rationality and logic in relation to “primitive languages” and the “primitive mind,” precisely because any such discussion is inevitably confined to comparisons between different languages construed as rigid classificatory systems.

The author points out that the validity of this conclusion depends on the relation between literacy and rationality, which is taken up in Chapter 5. He observes that writing, but not speech, “provides room for structures that rely on two-dimensional relations” (p. 73) and that this is the most important difference between speech and writing. He raises the question of whether there is a connection between the ability to reason and the ability to write, and concludes that it cannot be settled through theoretical debate or by looking at evidence from neuroscience. Rather, a better insight into this issue can be gained through a closer examination of the way our conceptions of rationality depend on our assumptions about language. This chapter provides the context for the consideration (in Chapter 6) of what Harris labels “Aristotle’s language myth,” arguing that Aristotle’s views on language and meaning, which are built into the foundations of Western philosophy and science, have important implications for his views on logical reasoning. Aristotle takes the truth-conditional view of linguistic meaning in which language is a fixed public code and views linguistic communication as a process of thought-transference, a process which involves encoding thoughts to be communicated into utterances and decoding utterances into received thoughts. This enabled Aristotle to develop a logic which describes human reasoning in terms of truth-preserving operations on sentences. According to Harris, participation in a literate culture was to a large extent responsible for these misconceptions, which provided the foundations for a logic likely to be found intuitively plausible only in these cultures, creating the illusion that members of preliterate societies are somehow less rational. These ideas are expounded in Chapters 7 to 9, where Harris initially explores the importance of the alphabet as a prerequisite for developing the concept of “variable”: the use of a letter to stand for a whole class of items. The discussion of “variable” in Chapter 7 highlights the importance of definitions for describing explicitly the class of items which fall under a particular variable. The author argues that this approach is woefully inadequate because Aristotle thought of a definition as a statement about the “essence” of a thing, and the term *essence* itself defies definition.

The influence of the “language myth” on the philosophy of language and linguistics is also explored in Chapters 8 and 9, which provide the background for the author’s view (developed in Chapter 10) that our “habitual practices of writing and reading have effected profound changes in the way people think by ‘setting up new operational discriminations in human behaviour’” (p. 134). Harris challenges the “scriptist” assumptions that sounds and letters are different productions of the same underlying units and that writing can be used to represent spoken utterances adequately. On his view, “...writing is a form of communication *sui generis* and has no intrinsic connection with speech at all” (p. 139). He identifies two closely related consequences of writing as particularly important. Writing makes it possible to represent types of linguistic units using a representation system different from that in which tokens of those units are produced in communication. This invites a reinterpretation of words as units with decontextualized meanings, and of texts as repositories of meanings which are outside the writer’s control. Harris argues that these features of writing underlie the modern view of grammar as a system of unconsciously known rules which specify the “logical form” and the “deep structure” of a sentence. He maintains that this view of grammar is seen as necessary in the Western literate tradition for the following reason: finding common ground with other people is a prerequisite for finding agreement with them, and the ability to find agreement with other people is at the heart of human rationality. In the Western literate tradition, language – a system in which meanings are believed to be independent of language users and communication situations – is seen as providing this common ground.

The foundations for Harris’ alternative, integrationist, approach are laid out in Chapter 11, where it is pointed out that propositions (mental representations capable of being true or false) expressed by natural language utterances are not fully specified by the linguistic meanings of those utterances, but are largely determined by the context. This leads Harris to conclude that Aristotle’s law of non-contradiction (according to which it is not possible simultaneously to assert a given proposition and its opposite) needs to be construed in a way which makes it sensitive to the particular circumstances of each communication situation. In Chapter 12, the author shows how integrationism rises to this challenge. The following is a summary of the main points. Central to human interaction, with other humans in particular and with the environment in general, is a process of sign-making. This process involves the attribution of a sign value to behaviors (whether our own or those of others) and to the phenomena in our environment which pre-empt our attention. As an example of sign-making, the author considers the situation in which a person rings the doorbell and another

person responds to this sound by opening the door. In this situation, the person who opens the door is responsible for interpreting the sound as a sign. In other words, the person who opens the door makes the sign, which is independent of the action of pressing the doorbell (the sign produced by the visitor). What happens here is the integration of the sign-making behavior of the visitor and the sign-making behavior of the host. In other words, the sound of the doorbell is a sign because, and in so far as, it is assigned an integrational function in the situation of communication. It has the meaning that it has only in the here-and-now of that situation. For this reason, the meaning of a sign is never "fixed." From this perspective, the rationality of thoughts and actions is also embedded in actual situations of communication. Thus, the decision to open the door upon hearing the bell ring is rational if the person who hears the sound assumes that the caller is generally benevolent, but the same action is irrational if he assumes that the caller is malevolent.

This is a thought-provoking book and that quality alone is sufficient to recommend it to readers interested in any aspect of language and communication. Those with an interest in the pedagogy of writing will probably be prompted to reflect on two of Harris' ideas. On the one hand, the view that scriptism has influenced Western thinking about grammatical rules and structures as discoverable through artificial extrapolation from written forms of language invites an analogy with genre analysis. Genre analysts identify patterns of textual structure which are often presented as psychologically real, suggesting that they play a causal role in the production and the reception of texts. It might be worth investigating to what extent and with what consequences this aspect of genre analysis has influenced the pedagogy of writing. On the other hand, Harris' integrationist stance, especially the emphasis on the here-and-now of sign meaning, invites a discussion of the promotion of formal writing styles at the expense of more subjective modes of written expression appropriate for describing personal experiences and responses to situations.

Roy Harris is no stranger to controversy and he courts it. A critically inclined reader might argue that Harris' presentation of the integrationist alternative to the orthodox Western view of language and rationality is very sketchy and will convince only the already converted or the irrationally gullible reader; that much seminal work in ancient Greek philosophy, anthropology, philosophy of language, and linguistics is given short shrift; that highly relevant work in anthropology and pragmatics developed since the 1960s is generally ignored, and that Harris does not care about accuracy in attributing the ideas that he criticizes to their alleged proponents, occasionally seeming even keen to supply his adversaries with ammunition: "Perhaps those who have studied the works of Aristotle in greater depth

will say that I *have* invented him. No matter. The invented 'Aristotle' will do as far as I am concerned" (p. 176). And why not? After all, some people do not care about accuracy as long as the argument is provocative, which this book surely is.

About the Author

After obtaining a Ph.D. in linguistics from University College London, Vladimir Žegarac worked there as a researcher in the Survey of English Usage and at Middlesex University. Since 1995 he has been employed at the University of Bedfordshire, where he is currently a Reader in Language and Communication. In recent years, the specific topics he has looked at include the implications of Relevance Theory for the analysis of lexical meaning, second language learning, and ideology in newspaper language.