



# Language, writing, and disciplinarity in the Critique of the “Ideographic Myth”: Some proleptical remarks

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## Abstract

Prominent in recent discussions of East Asian writing systems has been a metadiscursive polemic that can be labeled the Critique of the Ideographic Myth. Associated primarily with John DeFrancis and J. Marshall Unger, this is an attack on the notion that the Chinese writing system represents ideas directly, and more broadly an argument for the primacy of phonography in inscription in general. This paper considers the disciplinary framework of the Critique, tracing its roots in a prewar Sinological debate (the Boodberg–Creel controversy) and in Leonard Bloomfield’s famous dismissal of writing, and locating it within the postwar field of Asian Studies.

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*Keywords:* History of writing systems; Sinology; Asian studies; Bloomfieldian linguistics; Ideography; Area studies

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The radical difference in scripts doubtless strengthened the disposition to see in China not a subject for history in all its many branches, like France, but an -ology. Egyptology, Sinology—they both suggest not simply chapters in the story of man, as parts of the proper study of mankind, but self-contained intellectual puzzles (Levenson, 1964, pp. 507–508).

The primacy of speech and the primacy of the graphic principle based on speech need to receive the categorical support of scholars concerned with the nature of writing and the progress of linguistic science (DeFrancis, 1989, p. 218).

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## 1. Introduction

The past two decades have seen a resurgence of interest in the comparative and historical investigation of writing.<sup>1</sup> As the sole region of the globe with widely employed writing systems that do not descend from the Semitic scripts of the ancient Middle East, and as one of the few places where writing is thought to have been invented outright, East Asia understandably occupies an important place in such scholarship. It is of considerable interest, then, that within recent anglophone Asian Studies, the most prominent discussions of writing as a general problem have been dedicated less to its historical development than to a metadiscursive critique of certain conceptions of the Chinese writing system.

This metadiscourse, which I refer to as the ‘Critique of the Ideographic Myth,’ came to prominence in the late 1980s, in books published by the University of Hawai’i Press and in such journals as *Monumenta Nipponica* and the *Journal of Asian Studies*; it reached a high water mark of sorts with a well-attended two-part panel at the 1995 annual meeting of the Association of Asian Studies in Washington DC, entitled “The Ideographic Myth and Its Impact on Asian Studies”.<sup>2</sup> The present paper focuses on arguments made by the originators of the Critique, John DeFrancis and J. Marshall Unger, both individually and in co-authored papers and reviews, although some reference is made to work by others under their influence.<sup>3</sup> Two central premises animate the Critique: the first is that the Chinese writing system does not represent ideas directly, but rather the syllables of Chinese words, and only secondarily morphological information about those syllables. The second, and more fundamental, premise is that all writing is necessarily phonographic, and that writing systems based on the direct representation, not only of ideas, but even of words, do not exist in practice and are in fact impossible.<sup>4</sup>

Elsewhere I have explained how my sympathy with many of DeFrancis and Unger’s arguments is tempered by reservations about their treatment of premodern writing, especially in connection with the translinguistic nature of ‘Chinese’ characters in early Korea

<sup>1</sup> As Peter Daniels observes, “the fortunes of writing in modern linguistics have fallen and risen” (1996, 10); for an oft-cited survey of the fall, see Basso (1974, pp. 425–426). The latter half of the 1980s saw a cluster of anglophone surveys of writing systems, with the publication of Sampson (1985), Coulmas (1989), and DeFrancis (1989). The field received a dramatic boost with Daniels and Bright (1996), which assembled dozens of specialist essays on an appropriately wide range of historical and theoretical topics; recent years have seen another crop of general and theoretical works, with the appearance of Harris (1995), Coulmas (1996), Sproat (2000), Harris (2001 [2000]), Fischer (2001), Coulmas (2003) and Rogers (2005), the last of which provides a useful bibliographic starting point for surveying general and specialized studies of writing.

<sup>2</sup> Revised versions of many of the panel’s papers are available in Erbaugh (2002).

<sup>3</sup> DeFrancis, a specialist in Chinese linguistics and language pedagogy who taught for years at the University of Hawai’i (and is currently emeritus professor of Chinese there), is well-known as an author of Chinese language textbooks and readers, histories of language and script reform in China and Vietnam (DeFrancis, 1950; DeFrancis, 1977) and, more recently, a very useful alphabetic Chinese–English dictionary (DeFrancis, 2000). Unger, currently professor of Japanese at Ohio State University, combines training in historical linguistics with interests in language pedagogy, electronic media (Unger, 1987), script reform (Unger, 1996), and the history of linguistic thought.

<sup>4</sup> This rough summary hardly does justice to the Critique, which is a varied collection of texts that respond in detail to a wide range of secondary sources on writing in particular and culture in general. The core works are DeFrancis (1984), DeFrancis (1989), Unger (1990), and Unger and DeFrancis (1995) (see also DeFrancis and Unger, 1994). The present paper is devoted to the Critique as it was presented between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s; partly in response to the theories of the Bakhtin circle and of Roy Harris, Unger has continued to develop his ideas about writing (see Unger, 1998a,b,c, 2004).

and Japan (Lurie, 2001, pp. 320–333). My aim here, however, is not to consider the empirical content or specific claims of the Critique.<sup>5</sup> Rather, in keeping with the theme of this collection, the present paper examines an important feature of this polemic against the notion of ‘ideography’: the role played therein by disciplinary discourses of Sinology and linguistics, before and after the emergence of the field of Asian studies.<sup>6</sup> My goal here is neither to endorse nor to refute the arguments of DeFrancis and Unger (or their interlocutors), but rather to consider how those arguments about writing have been shaped by the status of language as an object of competing academic disciplines.

## 2. Writing, language, and sinology

The belief that the Chinese writing system inscribes ideas, and is thus at least potentially independent of (spoken) language, is a venerable one, with significant implications for early modern and modern European intellectual history.<sup>7</sup> Criticism of this conception of Chinese characters also has a long history, going back at least as far as the Franco-American scholar Peter S. Du Ponceau (1760–1844), who devoted a monograph to the argument that they “represent ideas no otherwise than as connected with the words in which language has clothed them, and therefore that they are connected with sounds, not indeed as the letters of our alphabet separately taken, but as the groups formed by them when joined together in the form of words” (Du Ponceau, 1838, xii).<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the most famous subsequent controversy about the nature of the Chinese script was a vociferous debate between two of the founders of modern academic Sinology in the United States: Herrlee Creel (1905–1994) of the University of Chicago, a cultural historian and well-known popularizer, and Peter Boodberg (1903–1972) of the University of Berkeley, a legendarily erudite philologist. This exchange, which was carried out in four articles published between 1936 and 1940 in *T'oung Pao* and the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, is of great interest here, because Boodberg’s arguments represent the chief forerunner to the Critique (and are cited as such by DeFrancis).<sup>9</sup> The controversy began with a long article by Creel (1936) entitled “On the Nature of Chinese Ideography”, which argued against notions that Chinese was a primitive language or had a primitive writing system, in effect insisting that Chinese characters were a “method of writing which consists merely of a graphic representation of thought, but which is not primarily a system for the graphic notation of sounds” (p. 85).

<sup>5</sup> Nor will I address the philosophical and semiological issues raised by the debate over the term “ideograph”. The former are taken up, in a way that—as discussed below—has proved controversial, in Hansen (1993), while a discussion of the latter is available in Harris (2001 [2000], pp. 138–160).

<sup>6</sup> The European roots of Sinology are an important part of the story, but this paper focuses primarily on the interactions among that discipline, linguistics, and area studies in the United States.

<sup>7</sup> On the development of early modern European ideas about Chinese writing and their wider cultural and intellectual significance, see Mungello (1985) and Porter (2001).

<sup>8</sup> For more on Du Ponceau’s discussion of the Chinese script, see Chao (1940), Unger (1990, pp. 394–395) and Boltz (1994, pp. 3–7).

<sup>9</sup> The articles are: Creel (1936), Boodberg (1937), Creel (1938a) and Boodberg (1940) (photographic reprints of the Boodberg articles, on which I relied in preparing the present paper, are available in Cohen (1979)). For a brief account of this “celebrated exchange”, see DeFrancis (1984, pp. 85–87). Founded in 1890, *T'oung Pao*, a joint Dutch–French publication, is among the most venerable institutions in European Sinology; the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* (in publication since 1936) has similar status in the United States.

Creel opposed not only a model of “unilinear evolution” of scripts that led to the conclusion that “if Chinese does not fit into the predetermined top of the scale, then it follows that Chinese is primitive” (1936, p. 86), but also analyses of Chinese writing that saw it as “chiefly an attempt, dismally unsuccessful, to represent sounds” (p. 126). In this latter critique, his principal target was Bernhard Karlgren (1889–1978), the Swedish Sinologist who first applied the techniques of modern historical phonology to the reconstruction of earlier forms of Chinese.<sup>10</sup> Creel’s comments show a relatively undeveloped sense of the disciplinary nature of both his own work and that he opposes. Early in the article he explains that

Practically all writing in Western lands, and that of most of Asia, is done by the representation of sound. As a result, linguistics and phonetics have at times almost coalesced. During the past eighty years Occidental scholarship has developed the study of the sounds of language beyond the dreams of its founders into one of the chief techniques of contemporary scholarship. [...] What more natural than for phoneticians to approach Chinese literature confident that there, too, their craft will unlock every door? (1936, p. 87)

These lines demonstrate a clear sense of “phonetics” as a field of study, but “linguistics” seems to denote more a general area of inquiry than a bounded discipline. A few lines later he continues:

From the phonetic *point of view*, Chinese has long been studied by eminent scholars [...] But comparatively little work has been done by Western scholars toward the serious, systematic study of Chinese ideography from the *point of view* of the methods by which [...] it conveys the thought of the writer to the mind of the reader. This is a field for research which is of profound importance for philology, psychology, and the general project of human history (p. 87; emphasis added).

As is also apparent from his description of Karlgren as a “phonetician” (p. 160), Creel sees this mode of scholarship as a foil for his own approach, but more than anything such terms seem to indicate different perspectives (“point[s] of view”), with a flexible relationship to academic disciplines as such.<sup>11</sup> This presents a striking contrast to the disciplinary orientation apparent in Boodberg’s uncompromising critique of Creel’s discussion of ‘ideography.’

Boodberg’s initial reply to Creel is embedded in a long article entitled “Some Proleptical Remarks on the Evolution of Archaic Chinese” (1937). His attack on the notion that early Chinese writing is ideographic takes place on a number of fronts: a brief excursus into the theory of writing; linguistic considerations that allow him to argue that apparently

<sup>10</sup> In this critique, Creel focuses on Karlgren (1974 [1923]) and Karlgren (1926).

<sup>11</sup> The editor of *T’oung Pao*, Paul Pelliot (1878–1945) (a pioneering scholar who became, for better or worse, representative of prewar Sinology), appended a short and gently worded critique to the end of Creel’s article. It demonstrates a somewhat more developed sense of academic discipline as an affiliation marking the qualification—or lack thereof—to pursue certain forms of inquiry: “All his work shows him to be a well-informed connoisseur of writing, like the Chinese scholars themselves, who is, however, neither a linguist nor a phonetician” [Tout son travail montre un connaisseur averti de l’écriture, comme le sont les savants chinois eux-mêmes, mais qui n’est linguiste, ni phonéticien] (Pelliot, 1936, p. 164). An important aspect of the Creel/Boodberg debate is also implicit in Pelliot’s comment: the contrast between modern western (or “Occidental”, as Creel puts it) and traditional Chinese scholarly methodologies. This is central to the much-discussed problem of Orientalism, in both its original ‘scholarly’ sense and the broader meaning it has taken on since Said (1978).

ideographic character elements are actually phonetic; and analysis of a class of “alliterative binoms” (p. 354) as stemming from multi-character indications of single syllables with initial consonant clusters. Significantly, a much clearer disciplinary frame is apparent in this article, whose introduction includes the following paragrah:

It is, perhaps, inevitable that in the investigation of ancient ‘ideographic’ scripts the ‘phonetician’ and the ‘epigraphist’ should often work at cross purposes. Even in Egyptology and Assyriology we frequently meet with such a situation, but in those sciences the outstanding philological achievements of both camps have considerably mitigated this wasteful division of labor. In the field of Chinese, however, where we are just beginning to formulate methods of philological approach, the division is greatly retarding the development of science (Boodberg, 1937, p. 329).

With the exception of remarks made in a footnote to his discussion of the theory of writing, Boodberg displays little sense of ‘linguistics’ as a discrete discipline.<sup>12</sup> The dominant framework for his critique is that of “Sinology”, which, as the preceding passage makes clear, he sees as analogous to “Egyptology” and “Assyriology”. These introductory remarks conclude with a more explicit indication of his intended audience: “it is in the hope of dispelling this fog of misunderstanding that the writer presents in the following pages *for the consideration of Sinologists* a few hypotheses on the evolution of ‘sound and symbol’ in archaic Chinese” (1936, p. 330; emphasis added).<sup>13</sup> Within this larger framework, ‘philology’ seems to refer to a particular methodology or perspective rather than a strictly bounded academic discipline.

The central role of the discipline of Sinology in Boodberg’s critique is even clearer in his second article (1940), the fourth and final of the debate, which was written in reply to a response by Creel (1938a) to Boodberg’s first article. Driven to even greater acerbity by Creel’s reiteration of ideographic arguments, and perhaps also by his enlistment of Sumerological reinforcement—about which more below—Boodberg titled his article “Ideography or Iconolatory?” and forcefully expressed himself in such passages as the following introductory lines, from which I have omitted a list of three graphic ‘etymologies’ taken from Creel (1938b).

[...] as a philologist and teacher of Chinese, I am naturally perturbed by—and cannot remain indifferent to—the rise of a methodology which produces, not in comparatively innocuous special articles, but in textbooks through which a new generation of sinologists is expected to be trained, puerilities such as the following [...] To invite anyone to accept similar interpretations as the correct ‘ideographic’ analysis of

<sup>12</sup> “If we associate with a graph several related words, unable to determine which of them it is supposed to represent exactly, this does not mean that the graph *represents* the ‘idea’ or ‘concept’ behind those words. Whatever may be the significance of these vague terms in psychology, in linguistics they mean absolutely nothing. Linguistic science deals first and last with the word, its only reality. The ‘disembodied word’ which is what is generally meant by ‘idea’ or ‘concept’ does not exist for the linguist” (Boodberg, 1937, p. 332 [n. 5]; see also p. 333 [n. 7]). In his response to Boodberg’s criticisms, Creel retorted to this remark with a discussion of linguistics and psychology (1938a, pp. 272–275) that is of considerable interest, especially given the problematic relationship between the two that marked the emergence of linguistics as a discipline. The relatively flexible framework within which he discusses his own ideas, however, remains largely unchanged.

<sup>13</sup> The reference to “sound and symbol” is apparently an allusion to the title of Karlgren (1923), a popular introduction to the Chinese language.

Chinese writing is, to put it mildly, to incite him to disregard the laborious gains of scholarship of the past two thousand years and to make sinology a subject fit only for Kindergarten instruction (Boodberg, 1940, pp. 267–268).

These lines catalogue the components of a discipline with striking clarity: research and pedagogic activity (“philologist and teacher of Chinese”), multilevel publications (“special articles” and “textbooks”), and the all-important self-replicatory process by which “a new generation” of specialists is “trained”.

Further traces of disciplinary structure are apparent in a *T'oung Pao* editor's note (presumably written by Paul Pelliot). Remarks in Boodberg's earlier 1937 piece about Sumerian cuneiform parallels to Chinese developments had prompted Creel (1938a) to recruit a University of Chicago colleague, the prominent Sumerologist Arno Poebel (1881–1958), to supply a rebuttal. (Of course, in itself this consultation demonstrates a suggestively strong sense of Sumerology as a discipline with borders to be maintained.<sup>14</sup>) With typical polymathic bravado, Boodberg responded sharply and specifically to Poebel's critique (as quoted and summarized by Creel), prompting the following editorial caveat at the bottom of the first page of the article: “While we gladly publish the present article by Mr. Boodberg, we consider that it must conclude, as far as *T'oung Pao* is concerned, a controversy whose Sumerian elements exceed the scope and competence of our journal” (Boodberg, 1940, p. 266).<sup>15</sup>

Depending in part on how one interprets their incompatible views of the proper approach to language, the exchange between Creel and Boodberg can be seen as a clash within a large, multi-disciplinary framework of ‘Sinology,’ or as an argument about the proper methodology for a unified discipline bearing the same name. Regardless, Boodberg's contribution foreshadows in many respects the Critique of the Ideographic Myth. For the present paper, the most significant of these is the strength of the connection between the critique of ‘ideography’ and the disciplinary position of the critic. Despite this continuity, there are also clear differences in tone and content, caused, at least in part, by an intervening transformation of the academic terrain on which both campaigns were fought. One aspect of that transformation was the solidification of linguistics as a discipline. Another important component was the postwar emergence of Asian studies, a field that had a complex relationship to Sinology, which it both absorbed and opposed.<sup>16</sup>

### 3. Linguistics and the Critique of the Ideographic Myth

The Critique of the Ideographic Myth was first articulated in DeFrancis (1984), a debunking of misconceptions entitled *The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy*. After a satirical introduction mocking the notion of Chinese as a universal written language,

<sup>14</sup> The parallel between Sinology, on the one hand, and Sumerology (or ‘Assyriology’) and Egyptology, on the other, is another important component to the Creel/Boodberg debate.

<sup>15</sup> “Tout en publiant volontiers le present article de M. Boodberg, nous considérons qu'il doit clore, en ce qui concerne le *T'oung Pao*, une controverse dont les elements sumériens sortent du cadre et de la competence de notre revue”.

<sup>16</sup> Sinology was an already contested field, but it was torn by rivalries among scholars with differing disciplinary affiliations as ‘Asian studies’ developed in the cold war context of the rise of area studies. Some of the attendant bitterness is apparent in Schafer (1958). For discussion of this complex transition, see the overview in Zurndorfer (1999 [1995], pp. 31–44), and also Levenson (1964) and the other papers and responses from a 1964 symposium on “Chinese Studies and the Disciplines” (at the annual meeting of the Association of Asian Studies) that are collected in the *Journal of Asian Studies* 23 (4) and 24 (1).

the book begins again with a brief chapter entitled “On Defining ‘Chinese’ and ‘Language,’” in which the conceptual and disciplinary grounding of the nascent Critique is explicitly indicated at the outset:

Take the word “language”. Linguists—not polyglots but scholars concerned with linguistics, the science of language—generally use the term in the restricted meaning of speech. In their view language must be clearly distinguished from writing. Speech is primary, writing secondary. [...] The attempt by linguists to reserve the term “language” as a designation for speech is part of their persistent but largely unsuccessful battle against the confusion resulting from the popular use of the term to encompass diverse forms of human communication without distinguishing the properties specific to each (DeFrancis, 1984, p. 37).

It is not incidental that the status of linguistics as “*the science of language*” and the priority of speech over writing are linked so explicitly at the beginning of DeFrancis’s assault on misconceptions about Chinese speech and writing. Focusing as it does on definitions, this initial chapter provides an axiomatic basis for subsequent discussion, but it also links that basis to a particular, *scientific* academic community.<sup>17</sup> (As will become apparent, this concept of ‘science’ is very different from that deployed by Boodberg.)

That the Critique is animated by a sense of a disciplinary community and its obligations is apparent from the following lines from *Visible Speech*, a work that extends analysis of the Chinese script (and metadiscourse on works about it) into a general theory of world writing systems:

Particularly astonishing is the failure of linguists to insist that writing—real writing, full writing—first and foremost represents speech, however, well or badly it may do its job, even if its role is acknowledged as not being limited to representing speech.

The basis for my insistence is no mere assumption of the primacy of speech. The historical reality is that all full systems of writing have been based on speech, and that no set of nonphonetic symbols has ever shown itself capable of conveying anything more than an extremely limited range of thought. [...]

The failure of linguists in this area comprises a major dereliction of duty that reflects very badly on their discipline. [...]

The claim of linguists to any authority for their discipline is seriously compromised by such irresponsible scholarship. The primacy of speech and the primacy of the graphic principle based on speech need to receive the categorical support of scholars concerned with the nature of writing and the progress of linguistic science (DeFrancis, 1989, pp. 217–218).

As DeFrancis insists, his arguments about the relationship between speech and script are grounded in empirical claims about the “historical reality” of what he defines as “full systems of writing”. But those claims themselves are not the concern here; rather, what is of

<sup>17</sup> An important component of DeFrancis (1984), and of the Critique in general, is the role played by advocacy for script reform. In this connection see also Hannas (1997), which builds on DeFrancis’s work (and has a foreword by him) as it surveys the history of writing in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, arguing for the necessity—and the difficulty—of script reform in all four countries. Unger’s largely critical review (1998a) of this work focuses on theoretical and rhetorical issues, and does not take exception to Hannas’s pro-script reform perspective, which in its broad outlines is not fundamentally different from the viewpoint of Unger (1987) and Unger (1996).

interest is the strength with which they are related to the integrity of linguistics as a scientific discipline.

That a particular academic lineage contributes to this connection is suggested by an earlier passage of *Visible Speech*, in which Leonard Bloomfield (1887–1949) is a touchstone for a discussion of the relationship between speech and writing, with *Language* (Bloomfield, 1933) introduced as a “book [...] that can be said to mark the founding of the American school of descriptive linguistics” (DeFrancis, 1989, pp. 47–48). A similar statement of affiliation appears in DeFrancis and Unger (1997), a review of Daniels and Bright (1996) that, while generally favorable, chides the editors for not rejecting with sufficient firmness notions, not just of ideography, but also of logography:

An authoritative reference text on all known writing systems is needed today, especially because the hard-won principle that speech is primary in language is under attack, despite the overwhelming weight of the evidence, and it needs to be vigorously reaffirmed in the closing years of the 20th century. The pioneering achievements of Franz Boas, Leonard Bloomfield, Edward Sapir, and the other scholars who liberated linguistics from the tyranny of the written word, and made it the cornerstone of cultural anthropology, are nowadays belittled, or worse, forgotten (p. 437).<sup>18</sup>

Appearing as it did in the journal *Language and Society*, this reference to pioneering scholars addresses a conglomeration of disciplines (linguistics, anthropology, sociology) with potentially competing claims to the study of human communication. It is clear that the Critique involves more than taking a side in a debate over the nature of writing, or, indeed, of language: the way in which its assertions are framed suggests that, for its partisans, the authority of their discipline—and, more narrowly, of a particular academic lineage within it—is at stake.

It is worth pausing at this point to consider the earlier approach to writing that seems to be most influential here: that which was so famously advanced by Bloomfield (1933). This will further clarify some important characteristics of the Critique of the Ideographic Myth, animated as it is by an avowedly Bloomfieldian perspective on writing, but it is also of interest because the best-known of Bloomfield’s remarks on writing has overshadowed the complexity of his thinking about the subject.<sup>19</sup>

#### 4. Leonard Bloomfield on writing

Among the most famous of the pronouncements in *Language* is the oft-quoted declaration that “writing is not language, but merely a way of recording language by means of

<sup>18</sup> John Fought points out that “for Boas and his first generation of students, much more than for anthropologists since, language lay near the heart of anthropology” (Fought, 1995 [1994], p. 296). As the final sentence of the passage quoted from the review suggests, dissatisfaction with this shift away from a linguistics-centered anthropology is a component of the inter-disciplinary awareness of the Critique.

<sup>19</sup> Examination of Bloomfield’s approach to writing provides necessary, but by no means sufficient, background to the Critique. Another crucial influence is the work of I.J. Gelb (1907–1985), who strongly rejected the notion of ‘ideography’ in his pioneering treatise on the world history of writing (Gelb, 1963, pp. 35–36 and 106–107). Gelb’s influence is explicitly acknowledged by DeFrancis (1984, pp. 73, 137–138; 1989, p. 61), though not uncritically (1989, pp. 148, 224–225, 253). As is clear from the editorial direction taken in Daniels and Bright (1996) (see Daniels, 1996, pp. 8–9), Gelb has exerted a major influence on the overall trend away from use of the term ‘ideograph’ in general studies of writing.



visible marks”; this is followed, a few sentences later, by the amplifying assertion that “a language is the same no matter what system of writing may be used to record it, just as a person is the same no matter how you take his picture” (1933, p. 21). It is significant that these assertions take place very early in Bloomfield’s manifesto, at a point where he is taking pains to distinguish “linguistic science” from the “relatively practical preoccupations” that preceded it, but did not in themselves amount to “the study of language”: “the use of writing, the study of literature and especially of older records, and the prescription of elegant speech” (1933, p. 21). This catalogue sums up the philological, grammarian, and prescriptivist traditions confronted by linguistics as it emerged as a discipline, and suggests something of what is at stake in the insistence on writing as a secondary phenomenon.

This famous discussion of writing is foreshadowed by several passages in the initial chapter on “The Study of Language”, which serve to clarify the links between writing and the earlier forms of linguistic knowledge to which the discipline of linguistics is opposed:

[Eighteenth-century scholars] had not observed the sounds of speech, and confused them with the written symbols of the alphabet. This failure to distinguish between actual speech and the use of writing distorted also their notions about the history of language. They saw that in medieval and modern times highly cultivated persons wrote (and even spoke) good Latin, while less educated or careless scribes made many mistakes: failing to see that this Latin-writing was an artificial and academic exercise, they concluded that languages are preserved by the usage of educated and careful people and changed by the corruptions of the vulgar. In the case of modern languages like English, they believed, accordingly, that the speech-forms of books and of upper-class conversation represented an older and purer level, from which the “vulgarisms” of the common people had branched off as “corruptions” by a process of “linguistic decay”. The grammarians felt free, therefore, to prescribe fanciful rules which they derived from considerations of logic (1933, p. 8).

Just as this passage provides a context for the renowned pronouncement on the separation of writing and language, another remark from the initial survey of linguistic thought helps to explicate the photograph metaphor:

Languages change in the course of time. Apparent exceptions, such as the medieval and modern use of Latin [...] amount only to this, that by long schooling people can be trained to imitate the language of ancient writings. This antiquarian feat is utterly different from the normal transmission of speech from parents to children. All writing, in fact, is a relatively recent invention, and has remained, almost to our day, the property of only a chosen few: the effect of writing upon the forms and the development of actual speech is very slight (1933, p. 13).

Two points bear emphasis here: the first is the implicit connection, again, to the world of grammarians and philologists (“by long schooling people can be trained”, “antiquarian feat”); the second is the categorical separation of writing from the “normal transmission of speech”, and the lightly qualified claim that its influence on “the development of *actual speech* is very slight”.

Of course, one area where writing obviously cannot be excluded is in the study of the language of the past, and Bloomfield is careful to acknowledge this immediately:

To be sure, we get our information about the speech of past times largely from written records—and for this reason we shall, in another connection, study the history of writing—but we find this to be a handicap. We have to use great care in interpreting the written symbols into terms of actual speech; often we fail in this, and always we should prefer to have the audible word (1933, p. 21).

As forecasted here, later on in *Language* there is a brief overview of the history of writing systems, in the chapter on “Written Records” that begins the portion of the book that is devoted to the history of language. Introducing this history, Bloomfield makes a cross-reference to the previously quoted discussion of writing as “not language”, reiterates that writing is a “relatively recent invention”, and adds an expanded restatement of its inconsequentiality:

A speech-utterance is the same, whether it receives a written record or not, and, in principle, a language is the same, regardless of the extent to which speech-utterances of this language are recorded in writing. For the linguist, writing is, except for certain matters of detail, merely an external device, like the use of the phonograph, which happens to preserve for our observation some features of the speech of past times (1933, p. 282).

Although the potential usefulness of sound-recordings for linguistic research gives this reference to phonography a literal significance that was absent from the photography metaphor of the earlier dismissal of writing, it is similarly intended to emphasize the sameness of language whether or not it is associated with writing. Note, however, that in addition to being more extensive and explicit, this restatement also introduces new qualifications: writing is “merely an external device” “*except in certain matters of detail*”, and language is “*in principle*” unchanged by it.

A writer as careful as Bloomfield does not insert such qualifications lightly, especially in connection with a point as fundamental for his agenda as the nature of writing. It is, therefore, less surprising than it may initially seem that examination of other portions of *Language* reveals several points where the power of writing to change language is explicitly acknowledged. For example, the final paragraphs of the chapter on “The Uses of Language” (the same one that begins with the categorical assertion that “writing is not language”) extol the cumulative, progressive consequences of writing:

The art of symbolizing particular forms of speech by means of particular visible marks adds a great deal to the effective uses of language. A speaker can be heard only a short ways and only for an instant or two. A written record can be carried to any place and preserved for any length of time. We can see more things at one time than we can hear, and we can deal better with visible things: charts diagrams, written calculations, and similar devices, enable us to deal with very complex matters. The speech-stimuli of distant people, and especially persons in the past, are available to us through writing. This makes possible an accumulation of knowledge. The man of science (but not always the amateur) surveys the results of earlier students and applies his energies at the point where they left off. Instead of always starting over again from the beginning, science progresses cumulatively and with acceleration. It has been said that, as we preserve more and more records of more and more speech-reactions of highly gifted and highly specialized individuals, we approach, as an ideal limit, a condition where all the events in the universe, past,

present, and future, are reduced (in a symbolic form to which any reader may react) to the dimensions of a large library (1933, p. 40).

It is true that this discussion does not contradict Bloomfield's fundamental insistence on writing as a record of speech. The Borgesian image of a library in which "all events in the universe [...] are reduced [...] in a symbolic form" may appear to imply a different evaluation of writing, but it should be taken as assuming, rather than denying, the *linguistic* nature of the symbols in question. One can also see the broad cultural and historical developments discussed here as phenomena that do not pertain directly to the specific problems of language structure that are the real focus of the work. The tenor of the passage, however, is difficult to reconcile with repeated insistence on writing as a marginal phenomenon that should—or even could—be largely excluded from the study of language.<sup>20</sup>

A more striking contradiction of the externality of writing—one that may reveal the misgivings that presumably underlay the qualifications discussed above—appears in a remarkable passage toward the end of *Language*, where a discussion of prestige and language-standardization in the chapter on "Dialect Borrowing" contains an extended consideration of how speech can be transformed by writing. Remarks on the effects on "actual speech" of "written convention" and on how it is both difficult and necessary to relate orthographic practice to standardizing pronunciation lead to the observation that "in syntax and vocabulary the message of the written record is unmistakable, and it exerts a tremendous influence upon the standard language" (Bloomfield, 1933, p. 486). This is then followed by extensive discussion of phenomena, including diglossia, that involve "written notation exercising an influence upon language" (1933, p. 495). These pages abound in formulations that implicitly challenge the dismissive approach to writing that inaugurated Bloomfield's scientific linguistics, as in the following:

If there is any rivalry between speech-forms, the chances are weighted in favor of the form that is represented by the written convention; consequently, if the written convention deviates from the spoken form, people are likely to infer that there exists a preferable variant that matches the written form. Especially, it would seem, in the last centuries, with the spread of literacy and the great influx of dialect-speakers and sub-standard speakers into the ranks of standard-speakers, the influence of the written form has grown—for these speakers, unsure of themselves in what is, after all, a foreign dialect, look to the written convention for guidance. [...] A great deal of *spelling-pronunciation* that has become prevalent in English and in French, is due to this source. In a standard language like the German, which belongs originally to no one class or district, this factor is even more deep-seated: the spoken standard is there largely derived from the written (1933, p. 487).

Perhaps the most striking of such observations is a paragraph on abbreviations and acronyms, treated as cases in which "purely graphic devices lead to novel speech forms" (1933, p. 488).<sup>21</sup> Of course, Bloomfield never acknowledges that such aspects of writing could

<sup>20</sup> One might also note the irony that while the rejection of writing is crucial for the establishment of linguistics as *the* science of language, in this passage writing itself is seen as the crucial prerequisite for science in general; this is reminiscent of the contradictions involved in claiming that "in order to study writing, we must know something about language, but the reverse is not true" (Bloomfield, 1933, p. 21).

<sup>21</sup> Although he does not confront the implications of this phenomenon, here Bloomfield anticipates Roy Harris's discussion of the theoretical significance of abbreviation (2001 [2000], pp. 149–151).

disrupt theoretical assumptions about its externality to language. Indeed, as the following paragraph suggests, he presents such phenomena as abnormal and exceptional (as in the earlier remark about the “normal transmission of speech from parents to children”):

The influence of written notation works through the standard language, but features that are thus introduced may in time seep down into other levels of speech. Needless to say, this influence can be described only in a superficial sense as conservative or regularizing: the loans from written notation deviate from the results of ordinary development (Bloomfield, 1933, pp. 488–489).

The references here to “conservative” and “regularizing” approaches to language are surely meant to suggest the prescriptivist grammarian tradition that is one of the principal foils of scientific linguistics in *Language*. In fact, much of this discussion of the powerful influence of writing on speech can be taken as an implicit analysis of the sources of that denigrated form of ‘prescientific’ thought, and thus as further evidence of one of Bloomfield’s motives for the opening dismissal of writing. But it is also important to note that this discussion of the “tremendous influence” of “written notation” is incommensurable with earlier claims that writing, like a photograph or a phonograph, is simply an external record that has no effect on that which it represents.

In sum, Bloomfield’s approach in *Language* combines an outright—and subsequently renowned—dismissal of writing with implicit—and less well-known—acknowledgement of its linguistic consequences. This contrast is worth pursuing in other of his works, where even cursory examination reveals discussions of writing that echo these contradictions.<sup>22</sup> For example, his earlier survey, *An Introduction to the Study of Language* (Bloomfield, 1914), has only a brief section on writing, which focuses on the *gap* between writing and speech. This gap is described as reflective of an “imperfect analysis” (p. 19) for “the scientific investigator” (p. 23), but the younger Bloomfield also points out that “much of the value of writing is actually dependent on its not conveying the exact manner of pronunciation” (p. 23). An article on mathematics he published a few years after *Language* calls attention to the “remarkable fact [...] that many of the scientist’s utterances cannot be made in actual speech, but only in writing: their structure is so complex that a visual record, for simultaneous survey and back-reference, is indispensable” (1970 [1935], p. 308). This statement is followed by a long note that begins by reiterating, verbatim, the dismissive case that had been made early in *Language*, but that then departs from it in the following dramatic fashion:

A system of writing opens the possibility of graphic notations that cannot be successfully paralleled in actual speech. This is true because visual symbols possess charac-

<sup>22</sup> A fuller account of Bloomfield’s approach to writing would also require attention to similar dismissive pronouncements by theorists of language contemporary to him. The section on the “history of linguistic science” in Jespersen’s *Language* contains a strikingly similar discussion of the late discovery that “all language is primarily spoken and only secondarily written down” (Jespersen, 1922, p. 23), and Sapir, who devotes very little attention to the subject in his own *Language*, does conclude that “written language is [...] a point-to-point equivalence, to borrow a mathematical phrase, to its spoken counterpart” (Sapir, 2004 [1921], p. 14). Most importantly, Saussure’s famous pronouncement on the subject parallels—and likely influenced—Bloomfield’s in its early placement and disciplinary import: “A language and its written form constitute two separate systems of signs. The sole reason for the existence of the latter is to represent the former. The object of study in linguistics is not a combination of the written word and the spoken word. The spoken word alone constitutes that object” (De Saussure, 1983 [1916], pp. 24–25).

teristics that are foreign to the sound-waves of speech: chiefly, they provide an enduring instead of an immediately vanished stimulus, and offer possibilities of arrangement (tabulation) that cannot be matched in the succession of acoustic stimuli. Graphic notations that cannot be matched in actual speech have arisen in the case of classical Chinese (which is unintelligible in modern pronunciation, but is read and written by Chinese scholars [...]) and in the case which here interests us, of mathematical and allied notations (Bloomfield, 1970, p. 308 n. 2 [1935]).

In the body of this article, Bloomfield takes pains to emphasize that the “relation of writing to language appears in a peculiar and highly specialized shape [...] in the utterances of the scientist” (1970 [1935], p. 308), but this note suggests that he was also thinking in terms of inherent features of all writing.

Such passages suggest that Bloomfield’s reputation for an uncompromising dismissal of writing is parallel in some respects to his reputation for ignoring meaning: his work itself contains more complex and nuanced perspectives than that of many of his ‘post-Bloomfieldian’ successors. Regardless, it is clear that, despite the complications that are apparent upon closer inspection, the most influential element of Bloomfield’s approach to writing is the clear and forceful statement of its phoneticity and basic irrelevance to linguistics that is placed early in *Language*. The disciplinary character of that well-known statement is not incidental: placing writing outside of language, and thus outside of the new science of linguistics, was a crucial method of distinguishing that discipline from earlier philological and prescriptivist-grammarians scholarship. It seems likely that the unequivocal nature of the introductory dismissal of writing itself, despite its subsequent qualification and contradiction, stems in part from the polemical need for such a distinction.

## 5. Linguistics and Asian studies

The link between insistence on the narrowly phonographic nature of writing and the scientific nature of linguistics as a discipline is also a hallmark of the Critique of the Ideographic Myth. In addition to the straightforward statements connecting the primacy of speech to “the science of language” (DeFrancis, 1984, p. 37) and “linguistic science” (DeFrancis, 1989, p. 218), rejection of ideography and science in general are also figuratively linked in several texts of the Critique. For example, the general abstract for the 1995 Association for Asian Studies annual meeting panel on “The Ideographic Myth and Its Impact on Asian Studies” begins its brief summary of the positive claims of the Critique by emphasizing that “decades of careful research refute the ideographic myth, rendering it as outdated as creationism or the flat earth hypothesis” (Erbaugh et al., 1995, p. 265). Similarly, in the review of Daniels and Bright (1996) quoted above, the sentence about Boas, Bloomfield, and Sapir is followed by: “*Natural History* magazine gives Stephen Jay Gould a monthly column from which to argue point by point against the meritless claims of ‘scientific creationists’; yet as recently as April 18, 1996, the *New York Review*, with a straight editorial face, printed the equally absurd and pernicious claim of ‘a unique anteriority of script over speech’ in Chinese” (DeFrancis and Unger, 1997, pp. 437–438).<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> The quoted phrase is from Leys (1996, 30), a review of Billeter (1990).

The perniciousness of ‘scientific creationism’ is that, by importing untestable beliefs into biology, it so contaminates science—a rational form of inquiry based on the experimental testing and refinement of hypotheses about the physical world—that it loses meaning and coherence. Similarly, the passages quoted above imply, insistence on an unexamined and untested notion of “ideography” (in the face of data suggesting it is incorrect) risks contaminating the discipline of linguistics, which is by analogy claimed as a science along the lines of modern biology. Comparing belief in the ‘ideographic’ nature of Chinese characters to creationism is thus not merely a figurative way of emphasizing the detrimental implications of an erroneous belief about writing; it also contains an implicit assertion about the nature of linguistics as a scientific discipline, and, therefore, about the sources of its authority. In this connection it is interesting to recall the penultimate sentence of *Language*: “The methods and results of linguistics, in spite of their modest scope, resemble those of natural science, the domain in which science has been most successful” (Bloomfield, 1933, p. 509).

One of the clearest differences between Boodberg’s side of his debate with Creel and the Critique is this newly developed sense of linguistics as an autonomous and *scientific* discipline. Given the crucial role that the insistence on the phoneticity of writing played in Bloomfield’s initial assertion of scientific status, it is natural that further attention should be paid to that status in assertions about the wrongheadedness of the Ideographic Myth. Another major difference between Boodberg’s articles and the texts of the Critique is also related to the emergence of linguistics as a discipline, but even more so to its relationship with the new field of Asian studies.

The summary of the Critique from the general abstract of the 1995 Association for Asian Studies panel continues from the comparison of the “ideographic myth” to “creationism or the flat earth hypothesis” with the following lines:

Experiments show that characters function very much like other writing systems, including alphabets and syllabaries, to convey the sounds of spoken words. *Linguists* are frustrated when *our fellow Asianists* indolently persist in discussing Asia in crude and discredited 18th century terms (Erbaugh et al., 1995, p. 265; *emphasis added*).

This passage clearly indicates another position of the linguists associated with the Critique: in certain contexts, they are conducting an internal argument with implications for a particular conception of, or lineage within, their discipline, but in other contexts they argue on behalf of their discipline, addressing scholars in others. An important context for the latter position is the field of Asian studies.

Despite the existence of Asian studies departments, scholarly journals, societies, and conferences, I do not use the term ‘discipline’ because the field exists on a different level than the academic specialties of the scholars who inhabit it. Like the other ‘area studies’ that arose in the postwar American academy, Asian studies has a problematic status, comprising as it does scholars with specialist training in disciplines ranging from social sciences like sociology, economics, and anthropology to humanities like literature, art history, religious studies, and history.<sup>24</sup> As a supra- or multi-disciplinary space, ‘Asian studies’ is rife

<sup>24</sup> History, of course, can occupy an intermediate position, considered at times a ‘social science.’ On area studies and Asian studies, especially as concerns China, Korea, and Japan, see Zurndorfer (1999, pp. 31–39), Kwan and Oh (1998) and Hardacre (1998); for a recent collection of critical essays on the topic, see Miyoshi and Harootunian (2002).

with potential and actual disciplinary collisions, in which debates about materials or methodology incorporate issues of scholarly identity: in certain cases, at least, the Critique has involved such a collision.

A striking example is the controversy over a 1993 article in the *Journal of Asian Studies* (JAS; the quarterly journal of the Association of Asian Studies) by Chad Hansen, a professor of Chinese philosophy at the University of Hong Kong. The article, entitled “Chinese Ideographs and Western Ideas”, attempts to bring “Chinese folk theory of language” to bear on the western theory of ideas. Ultimately it argues that the “ideograph” concept is both appropriate for Chinese writing and replete with insight for understanding the nature of language in general; this involves a critique of the “dependency principle”, by which Hansen means the view that “writing is semantically (representationally) dependent on speech” (1993a, p. 376). Here, the specific logical and empirical claims made by this article are not at issue. Rather, it is important to note that it is written within the framework of contemporary analytic philosophy, and can be interpreted, in part, as a critique of linguistic scholarship on writing from that disciplinary perspective.

Much like Creel, though, Hansen provides no *explicit* disciplinary frame for his critique. Of course, his orientation is clearly marked through references to “philosophers of language” (p. 379), and, more importantly, through conceptual vocabulary such as “word-types and word-tokens” (p. 379) and the “use-mention distinction” (p. 380), and through extensive discussion of the work of such thinkers as Aristotle, Locke, Berkeley, and Wittgenstein. But there is no clear indication of a conscious ‘philosophy vs. linguistics’ awareness in the article, which focuses on a conflict between what Hansen calls “prohibitionists” (of the term “ideograph”) and “ideographers”, and it is arguable how much linguistics itself is a clear disciplinary object in this context.<sup>25</sup>

A far clearer disciplinary frame is apparent in the furious response that Hansen’s article provoked from Unger. The first paragraph of this long “Communication to the Editor”, published in the JAS six months later, contained the following:

I submit this response reluctantly, for merely doing so may suggest to some that I think the ideographic account of Chinese writing as an explanation of distinctive aspects of Chinese culture and thought is more deserving of space in a scholarly journal than, say, “scientific creationism” as an explanation of genetics and fossils. To my mind, both hypotheses belong to the same category and ought not be dignified. Nevertheless, the quality of Hansen’s scholarship is so poor that I feel someone must apprise readers who are not specialists in linguistics of facts and sources Hansen fails to cite (Unger, 1993, 949).

The continuities between the disciplinary frame of this response and those of the earlier quoted passages are apparent. Moreover, the JAS is the journal of the primary academic

<sup>25</sup> Hansen does occasionally use the word to refer to the academic discipline, as in his summary of the view he opposes (“We must reject the Chinese theory of their own language because linguistics proves that such a language is impossible” [p. 376]), but more commonly “linguistic” is an adjective meaning ‘pertaining to language,’ as in “Sinology has masked a conflict between these two wildly different linguistic views behind a debate about the word ‘ideograph’” (p. 374). Moreover, synonymous use of “scientific linguistics” (p. 376) and “linguistic science” (p. 378) implies that, at least in this article, the modern academic discipline, as a discrete object of inquiry, is not a major concern. Repeated references to “Sinology” suggest that it may be a more important frame of reference for Hansen, though after the rise of Asian studies that term no longer has the same meaning that it did for Boodberg.

society devoted to Asian studies, so one of its chief characteristics is that it will inevitably have numerous “readers who are not specialists in linguistics”.

The final sentences of Unger’s response show a particularly clear sense of one of the chief venues of disciplinarity:

It saddens me to think that the reviewers who gave Hansen’s article their imprimatur did not notice or did not care about the points I remarked on above—and I have omitted many others for the sake of brevity. In some ways, I think the reviewers are more culpable than Hansen. He merely gave JAS the opportunity to add another item to the long list of books and essays that mystify and exoticize China; they advised JAS to go ahead (Unger, 1993, p. 953).

This evocation of the formal process by which what Boodberg called a “special article” is sanctioned and published implicitly suggests that the reviewers in question also were “not specialists in linguistics”, and hence “did not notice or did not care about” the perspective of that discipline. Hansen, in his reply, explicitly addresses the problem of “how we should deal with radically different perspectives within an interdisciplinary scholarly community” and is also pushed into more self-conscious disciplinary identification, making reference to “my philosophical colleagues” and discussing “philosophical norms of scholarship” in terms of what “we” do (1993b, p. 954).

If the Critique seems to foster a particularly intense form of disciplinarity, perhaps one reason is that language, and more importantly professionalized knowledge of language, are the source of cohesion for the uneasy conglomeration of disciplines that make up Asian studies: “‘area studies’ committed a student to engage in learning a foreign language, say Chinese or Arabic, while focusing on the history, anthropology, or sociology, i.e., through the methodology of a specific discipline, of the region where the language was spoken” (Zurndorfer, 1999, p. 34). In a dialogue on the causes and consequences of what they see as a resistance to theory in contemporary “Japan studies”, Harry Harootunian and Naoki Sakai argue that “language promised entry and empathetic identification with the native. Once the language was grasped, then you would be able to understand Japan as a coherent and unified totality, as a unified culture” (1999, p. 597).<sup>26</sup> A corollary, of course, is that language offered a kind of unity and coherence for a fractured field of multiple disciplines.<sup>27</sup>

Here, the significance of the fact that the Critique involves, among other things, an intervention by linguists into a broader discourse of Asian studies becomes more apparent. Linguistics lays claim to special, scientific forms of knowledge (not to mention strategies of

<sup>26</sup> This harks back an argument made earlier in their discussion: “the whole project of area studies” had military intelligence origins, meaning that “to defeat the enemy one had to know and understand the enemy. At the heart of this desire for an instrumental knowledge was the acquisition of the enemy’s language. What got reproduced after the war was language training, which was seen by many as the necessary and perhaps only methodological tool capable of understanding a foreign culture” (Harootunian and Sakai, 1999, pp. 596–597). This link between knowledge and the expediences of wartime (and eventually, cold war) education is also typical of American linguistics, for which the imperatives of wartime language teaching functioned as a kind of second act to the original, formative encounter with Native American languages.

<sup>27</sup> The introductory paragraph of Unger’s response to Hansen concludes as follows: “There are equally wrongheaded writers [...] who deal with the relevant literature [...], get most of the basic facts straight, write clearly, have something original to say, and *may be excused for their missteps because they don’t know an East Asian language*. None of these qualifications applies to Hansen, however, and that is why I am writing” (Unger, 1993, p. 949; *emphasis added*).



language acquisition and pedagogy, that is to say, ‘applied linguistics’), but it struggles with both humanistic and social scientific disciplines for authority over language. The multidisciplinary nature of Asian studies, in itself, would have the potential to exacerbate that struggle, but the role played by language and its study in holding the field together raises the stakes significantly. Also crucial is the problem of writing and its relationship to language. As illustrated repeatedly, insistence on the primacy of speech is intimately related to claims for disciplinary authority and coherence for linguistics. On the other hand, Asian studies—to be more precise, its East Asian component—stands to inherit the unity conferred by textual otherness that marked its Sinological predecessor: as Joseph Levenson pointed out, “the radical difference in scripts doubtless strengthened the disposition to see in China not a subject for history in all its many branches [...] but an -ology” (1964, pp. 507–508).<sup>28</sup> Given these factors, the emphatic disciplinarity of the Critique was, perhaps, inevitable.

## 6. Conclusion

The foregoing analysis of disciplinary discourse in the Critique of the Ideographic Myth is not intended cynically—that is to say, I do not mean to somehow ‘discredit’ the arguments of DeFrancis and Unger (or of Boodberg and Bloomfield before them) by leveling an accusation of ‘bias’ (as if it were possible to speak from a disciplinarily transcendent, ‘unbiased’ position). The arguments about writing and language referred to here involve axiomatic definitions of terminology and specific, empirical assertions about the present and past nature of writing systems, and any full evaluation of those arguments must address those definitions and assertions in detail. The present article is not such an evaluation; rather, my aim has been to consider how certain discussions of writing and language take on particular disciplinary colorations, often adversarial ones involving competing claims to what Steven Jay Gould might have called overlapping magisteria.<sup>29</sup>

This consideration opens out onto larger issues of the histories of Sinology, linguistics, and Asian studies, leaving numerous questions for further inquiry. How parallel was the 20th century development of Sinology with that of apparently cognate disciplines like Egyptology and Sumerology, which unlike the former dealt with ‘civilizations’ that were wholly of the past? Was a conception of writing *as such*, as opposed to language in general, as central to their formation as Levenson suggests? Did all of these fields undergo similar transformations over the course of the 20th century, as literary studies and linguistics emerged from, and defined themselves against, the earlier discipline/methodology of philology? What was the role of linguistics in the postwar emergence of area studies fields in the United States, a phenomenon more often analyzed in terms of such disciplines as sociology and history?

As such broad questions suggest, more is at stake in the Critique of the Ideographic Myth than an argument about specialist terminology or academic turf. The texts of the

<sup>28</sup> The temporal and cultural unity often attributed to writing in East Asia is another target of the Critique: “when ideographic writing is said to be unchanged since 3000 BC, it becomes easier to disregard differences over time[,] genre, and style (classical and vernacular) which span unrelated language families in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam” (Erbaugh et al., 1995, p. 264).

<sup>29</sup> That is, “domain[s] where one form of teaching holds the appropriate tools for meaningful discourse and resolution” (1999, p. 5).

Critique provide a valuable arena for thinking through the complex connections between language as an object of academic inquiry and the disciplinary perspectives that shape that endeavor. The nature of writing and its relationship to language is a topic in which scholarly identity is often at stake, but it is also well suited for the construction of a common space of discussion among—or perhaps alongside—the various academic disciplines.

### Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Carol Gluck, Bob Hymes, Gari Ledyard, Greg Pflugfelder, Henry Smith, and John Whitman for their comments and suggestions, in some cases on much earlier attempts to articulate some of the ideas presented here.

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