



## **Diversity in the Approach to Writing: a Teaching Obstacle or an Advantage?**

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I am extremely grateful for the privilege of giving the inaugural conference of this Congress, for several reasons: first of all, because I have been allowed to speak in Spanish (an enormous advantage because we are being forced to write and speak in English more and more); the second, because my paternal grandfather – who I did not actually get to know – emigrated to Argentina, but was originally from these Galician lands. I am especially grateful because I am neither an author of literary works nor an editor, but I am a passionate specialist in children's thinking. I therefore interpret this acknowledgment as giving children the floor in this forum, and I will try to be consistent with this.

Finally, I am grateful for this privilege because the theme of this Congress concerns me at a personal level. I am a psycholinguist by vocation, a professional researcher and I have dedicated my career to understanding how children think about writing and how they manage to learn to read and write. When I published my first book about this subject (1979), nobody was interested in looking into children's thinking about writing. Children simply had to be mature enough to associate letters with sounds, hold the pencil properly and copy figures with the required appearance. The arguments between teaching methods (analytical or synthetic) were never-ending. In these disputes, children were absent as the subject of their own teaching. The prevailing confusion between teaching methods and learning processes meant that the subject of the teaching could not be seen. Not only the subject of the teaching was invisible; but the written language also disappeared behind the tedious swarm of repetitive exercises. Reduced to a code of correspondence – incidentally, riddled with exceptions –, writing was foreign to the language. Writing as a system that was socially constructed by means of long historical processes did not exist either.

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I have spoken in the past tense, as if all this no longer existed. It no longer exists in theory, that much is true, but it survives in practice. Fortunately, some new ideas have also started to be put into practice and the theory has changed radically. Nowadays we understand learning to read and write as a process with a long duration, which is begun much before the age of six and is prolonged much further than compulsory education. A long process whose objective is the training of citizens who are able to live in society with confidence, curiosity and without fear of the complicated structure of written culture. Who can enjoy the beauty that manifests itself in a particular way of “saying it in writing”, and who can also look for information to build knowledge about the world, a world which is larger and larger and more and more diverse. And who can also – let it never be forgotten – express their own words in writing.

Which language is used to teach children how to read and write nowadays? It is tempting to reply straightaway: their mother tongue.

Nevertheless, the expression “mother tongue” can no longer be used with the same peace of mind as it was used before, for two fundamental reasons. First of all, because during the times of true feminism, fathers (men) also demanded their rights over the first language of their children. Secondly, because it neglects the complicated realities of multilingualism. This is why we should talk about “cradle tongue”. I believe that we all know of cases of cradle multilingualism. I shall give just two examples.

A colleague of Hispanic origin, who has settled in the south of the United States of America, got married to a Chinese man. They had a baby girl who was looked after by her paternal grandmother, a Chinese grandmother who refuses to speak English. The girl is six years old, she is trilingual (Spanish, English, Chinese) and she is responsible for translating the agreements or disagreements between her Hispanic mother and Chinese grandmother. Children as translators ... a great subject for investigation.

The second example is from another part of the world. A renowned sociolinguist from India, Pattanayak, reminds us that it is not difficult to find, in that country, children who grow up listening to four or six spoken languages:

One of my students, a Young Oriya, married to a Tamil, also speaks English at home. He lives in a Bengali neighbourhood of Calcutta and his children are raised by a Hindustani nursemaid and a Nepalese-Ghurkha servant. Those children are raised with six “mother



tongues”: the father’s *Oriya*, the mother’s *Tamil*, both parents’ *English*, the nursemaid’s *Hindi* and the servant’s *Gurkhali*.

The conclusion of this quote is, in itself, a declaration in favour of multilingualism: “Each of those languages represents a different culture and contributes to a common Hindu culture”.

Psycholinguistic investigation into cradle multilingualism is at a very early stage because it has taken a great deal of effort to destroy the cobwebs that hide it from view. The suspicions regarding these situations – considered “anomalous” – were supported by the ideological conviction that monolingualism is the ideal, normal and natural situation.

Let me go back to the question: Is teaching children to read and write in their cradle tongue the most common situation?

It is clear that at the very beginning, in Europe reading and writing was taught in a language that was not spoken, namely Latin. It was not a question of reading a variety of books but rather a reduced range of texts authorised by the Church authorities. The advent of the French Revolution brought about the introduction of texts in French, specifically to impose the French language as the national language; therefore, many French children were taught to read and write in a language that was not their own spoken tongue, because at that time France was multilingual (as much as it is today, although it may be hard to admit). Moreover, the school of thought in question fought against any local forms of speech, describing them as dialectal languages and varieties with the pejorative *patois*.

But even today many children are taught to read and write in a language that they hardly understand at an oral level. They are children of expatriates, here in Europe. They are indigenous children in many Latin American countries. They are many children in Africa and Asia.

50 years ago (in 1951), the UNESCO established the need to teach reading and writing in the mother tongue, as a way of overcoming the terrible percentages of illiteracy in countries of what was then known as the “Third World”. At that time, the concept of teaching reading and writing was very narrow (something very much like decodification and far removed from the introduction of writing into cultures, stressing



the plural). Putting into practice this principle (which I am not going to discuss here) is what I think is important now.

Teaching each and every social group reading and writing in their mother tongue is a utopia which is difficult to achieve because it entails too many conditions to be fulfilled (even if we turn a blind eye to the precariousness of education systems, with improvised classrooms, badly trained and paid teachers and a lack of any type of materials).

There are countries with more than 50, more than 80 living languages.

There are as many oppressed and marginalized languages as the communities that speak them, communities that are not able to “produce” teachers for their own children.

There are still languages that confine themselves to an oral level, almost maintaining themselves as secret communication codes, with no volition to open up those secrets to other speakers or other worlds, because doing so brings about writing.

In Mexico there are indigenous communities that want their children to speak and write in Spanish as soon as possible, “because they screw us in Spanish”, a popular way to say that they are mistreated in the dominant language, just like during the colonial period. For them, it is of the utmost importance to know how to speak and write in the language of the dominator in order to defend themselves and to defend their own community.

Given that nobody can actually prescribe the attitudes of groups of humans towards these minority languages, it is not enough to praise the teaching of reading and writing in the mother tongue (sorry, in the crib tongue) in order to convince everybody straightaway.

Those languages without a written tradition can have an alphabet, drawn up by well-meaning linguists, but lack native users. They can also have a few precarious teaching books. But that is not enough. It is not enough for a long list of reasons, some of which are the following: the teachers can be speakers of the language of the community, but they have no practical experience writing in that language. As a result, they limit themselves to writing random words on the board or stereotypical sentences. They do not know, in fact, how varied texts are written in a language that does not have



a tradition of writing. They do not know, because, in reality, it is not enough to simply speak and know the alphabet to be able to write. These teachers can only teach reading and writing without textual consistency.

Let us remember that when Catalan was imposed in Cataluña for primary education, they had the sound judgment to offer areas for discussion and teaching support for the teachers who, although they were native speakers of Catalan, and although Catalan had a long tradition of writing, they themselves were unable to write texts in that language. Their doubts and uncertainties required a place to be discussed, simply for them to be able to teach with the conviction that they were “teaching well”.

The same thing happens with the native languages in America, but with two aggravating circumstances: first, there are no areas for discussion with teaching support and secondly, they are dealing with languages that have no tradition of writing. During lengthy conversations, a teacher of the language *tzotzil*, a Mayan language spoken in Chiapas, Mexico, told me how difficult it was for her to teach her pupils how to read and write in the *tzotzil* language, simply because she did not know how to write texts in that language herself, even though she was a native speaker. She did not have difficulties with the alphabet but rather with textual construction. Only when she approached communities with natives who were willing to become writers, did she begin to become aware of her own difficulties. The greatest difficulty is related to the processes of awareness that is forced upon us by the written language. By trying to give an oral discussion a written shape, we begin to adopt an analytical attitude with respect to speaking. By fixing words, when we put them into a certain order, writing forces us to distance ourselves with respect to the spoken language, to distinguish the nuances in the flow of what we say, as well as the emphasis, the periphrases, the alternative ways of saying... In short, an analytical attitude that does not exist in the actions of oral speech.

When we teach reading and writing in the “crib tongue” we do not reproduce conversational orality. The language used to teach reading and writing – when it is based on texts and not on random words – exhibits a vocabulary which is not commonplace, an ordering of words that is far removed from the conventional, twists, metaphors and expressions that surprise because they are uncommon. In conclusion,



written texts exhibit a language which is different from everyday orality. In his autobiographical memoirs, Jean Paul Sartre offers us a magnificent reconstruction of this experience of peculiarity when faced with our own language:

Anne Marie sat me down opposite her, on my little chair. She bent forward, lowered her eyelids, fell asleep. From that statue-like face came a plaster voice. I was bewildered: who was telling what and to whom? My mother had gone off: not a smile, not a sign of complicity, I was in exile. And besides, *I didn't recognize her speech*. Where had she got that assurance? A moment later, I realized: it was the book that was speaking. Frightening sentences emerged from it: they were real centipedes, they swarmed with syllables and letters, stretched their diphthongs, made the double consonants vibrate [...]. As for the story, it had got dressed up: the woodcutter, his wife and their daughters, the fairies, all these little people, our fellow creatures, had taken on majesty. Their rags were spoken of with magnificence; the words coloured the things, transforming actions into rites and events into ceremonies (Jean Paul Sartre, *Les Mots*, Paris: Gallimard, 1964, pp. 34-35. The translation and the italics are mine).

It is compulsory for it to be so, even in those cases which are the closest to the conversational: I begin a letter by writing the place and date of my act of writing and I finish by writing my name. In the middle, a long monologue with no interruptions. Something very removed from conversational orality, although I may be writing to my little grandmother.

The distance between the oral language and the written language is undeniable. Of course, everything is a question of degrees and of social acceptance: if the oral language is looked down upon, everything will be very difficult, if it is valued, bilingualism (and the teaching of reading and writing in two languages) will be made easier.

I went to primary school in Argentina, at a time when the education system fought against the *voseo* and tried to impose the *tú* in communication at school<sup>2</sup>. The *voseo* was fought against with the imperative slogan: “speak properly in order to write properly”. In other words, the naive idea according to which writing reproduces speech transformed into its contradiction in terms: modifying speech in order to guarantee good writing (according to rules and stipulated by manuals). Therefore, we did not write our mother tongue in its local variety either. And when reading, the situation was even worse: we had to orally distinguish between the *double l* and the *y* in contexts where

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<sup>2</sup> The *voseo* is a variation of the grammatical second person, which affects verbal endings: *tú tienes* (you have) vs. *vos tenés* (you have).



there is no difference when speaking<sup>3</sup>. A forced and affected pronunciation made us read *lluvia*, *pollo*, *calle* (rain, chicken, street) and other words with double *l*, creating prestigious but incomprehensible oral meanings, because the words we recognised were *yuvia*, *poyo*, *caye*. Many years later, when I was already a researcher, I had the opportunity to interview boys and girls from marginalised neighbourhoods in Buenos Aires about this very same problem. About this very same problem, because you should not think that we were dealing with a temporary fashion: decades had passed and schools were still impervious to the dominant orality, which continued along its path as impassive as the schools themselves. Those children explained to me how they tried to understand that strange dichotomy: *pollo* (chicken) was the one that was alive and *poyo* was the one that was already dead and bought to be cooked; the *calles* (streets) were asphalted whereas the *cayes* were made of dirt and turned to mud when it *yovía* (rained), because *lluvia* only existed in books.

The conclusion is that teaching reading and writing is also the discovery of linguistic diversity, although we may be dealing with variations of the language itself.

But let us return to our main theme: is it possible to implement diversity in compulsory schooling? Is it possible to do this in such a way that they offer challenging teaching situations, which are equally important to all children? Let us remember that the philosophy of basic compulsory teaching has always confused equality with standardisation. It had to educate citizens with the same obligations and rights in the eyes of the law. They adopted the slogan: “one country, one language”. And we can add: a language spoken properly, the only one that could provide access to writing.

This situation was inevitable. The constitution of the Nation States, particularly in Europe, defended unstable borders and, within the defined territory, found enormous differences. The difference that most affected the educational endeavour is the linguistic difference: different languages coexist within the same national territory, besides dialectal variations of the same language. One nation, one language... and the same system of weights and measures, a calendar, a single currency, the same flag. Language

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<sup>3</sup> The *yeísmo* exists in most of the Hispanic world, consisting in recognising the pronunciation of *ll* as *y*. Below, I use the opposition *ll/y* to indicate the following (in cases where the standardised spelling of words is with an initial *ll*): I write those words with an initial *y* to indicate the pronunciation used in Buenos Aires, with a consonant similar to the *j* in the French word *jambe*. The affected pronunciation of *ll* corresponds to a lateral dorso-palatal consonant (like *gl* in the Italian word *figlio*).



forms part of the symbolic objects of national unification. Therefore, the denial of any differences.

But linguistic differences are persistent. They survive in the worst conditions: persecuted, degraded, mistreated. It is clear that not all of them survive, but some of those that suffered explicit persecution – such as Basque under the regime of Franco – seem to have achieved new vitality.

What about diversity in the field of teaching?

For historical-political-ideological reasons, the education system has historically tended to deny diversity. Given that denial is not one of the best mechanisms of defence, the differences would reappear. The first recognised differences were not differences between social groups but rather individual differences. Differences in academic performance brought about the first intelligence tests, as well as special schools. As a result, these recognised individual differences did not modify at all the school ideology. “Exceptional” children were taken out of normal schools to attend “special schools”. Schools were devised for all types of deficiencies: intellectual, hearing, visual... and so on.

But the catalogue of specific deficiencies has slowly continued to grow (and now they are not deficiencies but rather “children with specific needs”). We cannot reach the absurd situation of having as many special schools as diagnosed cases (including the new, debatable and medicated “hyperactivity syndrome and attention deficit disorder”). Therefore, we bear witness to a trend in the opposite direction, towards the integration of the “exceptional” children into normal groups.

However, the most tenacious differences, the ones that affect the schooling ideology the most, are not individual (blindness, deafness or whatever) but rather those that come from socio-cultural groups that struggle to be recognised and appreciated.

How can we deal with this in terms of a local, regional or national education system? Migrations in the globalised scene are no longer what they used to be. Refugees because of political persecution survive and, unfortunately will continue to survive.

But expatriates – not refugees – for economic reasons at present are the majority. Here in Europe and over there, in America. Western Europe has in its sights the inhabitants of the former colonies and also of Eastern Europe. Latin America, the land





of colonisation, has internal differences to deal with. Mexico does not know what to do with the Central Americans that chose it as a thoroughfare to the northern border (the USA or Canada) and Argentina does not know what to do with the Bolivians or Paraguayans that chose it as the promised land (given that the USA is too far away).

Countries consisting of a mixture of Spaniards with Indian women (such as Mexico), countries consisting of black slaves and a miscellaneous population of European and Asian origin (such as Brazil) or countries basically consisting of European immigration (such as Argentina) cannot think about the purity of blood (supposing that such a thing exists), but they also discriminate. There are no populations that discriminate intrinsically, but rather socio-historical and political circumstances that bring about discriminatory attitudes.

It is easy to be tolerant towards “the others” when there is wealth and employment to be shared, when a work force is needed to exploit the riches from the soil or subsoil. During periods of crisis things change: immigrants turn into dirty, foul-smelling, rowdy, insubordinate people... in other words, unwanted. From here we quickly move on to accusations with no evidence: delinquents or likely to turn to crime. Probable individuals “at the service of organized crime”, as we say nowadays. There are countless examples: the recent controversial Arizona law against illegal Hispanic immigrants, as well as the expulsion of gypsies in France are the most recent.

Public schools in Europe are full of the children of immigrants. They can no longer be ignored. The easiest and most superficial tendency is towards folkloric integration, happily celebrating diversity. For example: how is the New Year celebrated in your country? What types of parties are held? What type of food is eaten? (forgetting about the fact that the beginning of the year is different for each calendar system and about the reasons behind these differences).

I describe this rapprochement (very popular in the USA) as folkloric because it ignores the dramatic and inescapable dimensions of the recognition of diversity. It is not easy to understand each other when “the other” tells us that the future is behind us, because we cannot see it, whereas the past is in front of us, because we can see it (this is how the Mayan people think). It is not easy to understand each other when the way we express friendship can be interpreted as invasive. And so on.



Neither does this folkloric rapprochement “anchor” the cognitive aspects of diversity.

I stress the cognitive dimensions of diversity because the principal function of academic institutions is to produce new knowledge and to avoid ignorance (just like the public health system has a principal function, namely to keep the population healthy and to avoid illnesses). There are many other functions that can be added to the education system, but the only one that differentiates it from other public systems is the aforementioned: to produce new knowledge and to avoid ignorance.

How can the diversity of languages (and of writing systems) become part of the initial teaching of reading and writing, and manage to make children face cognitive challenges to help them understand the complexities of writing? Will it be possible to change diversity from a teaching obstacle and transform that very same diversity into a teaching advantage?

I am going to dedicate the last part of my presentation to describing an experience with children aged between 3 and 6 who think about and discuss the diversity of writing. They are Italian children, from the Comune di Torino, in Northern Italy (a region which is famous for its teaching innovations).

I am going to present some brief examples of a recent experience which tries to understand diversity in a very creative way: namely by trying to transform it into a collective reason for debate. We are dealing with partially published data<sup>4</sup>, that I am presenting to you with the authorisation of the authors and which have been carried out in public preschools and primary schools in the Comune di Torino, in Italy. Several teams, coordinated by professor Lilia Teruggi, from the University of Milan, who have several years of experience at an extraordinary bilingual school where hearing and deaf children learn together. The school is strictly bilingual: the hearing children learn sign language and the deaf children learn Italian (emphasising written Italian). But I am not going to talk about the deaf.

Let us look at the problems that arise in schools where the Italian students share their school time with the children of immigrants. Let us look at what happens when the

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<sup>4</sup> L. Teruggi, *Sistemi di scrittura in altre lingue, l'apporto dell'aprendimento dell'italiano*, in *Quaderni di didattica della scrittura*, II, 2009, pgs. 65-82.



teachers endeavour to open up the range of different languages and different writings with children aged 4 – 5, at the beginning of their familiarisation with reading and writing, and with children at the age of 6, at the beginning of their primary education. The didactic situations, lead by the teachers, consist in working in small groups where there is a variable number of foreign children. The teacher provides a traditional story (that the children know) written in Italian and in another language. The children are then invited to explore the books and to listen to the reading in both languages. If the teacher is bilingual, she does this herself; if she is not, she asks a parent of the foreign children.

Children between 4 and 5 years of age, under these conditions, make very important discoveries<sup>5</sup>. For example, faced with a version in Arab of a story they know, the children recognise that the writing is different:

Matteo: -Non lo so, io non conosco queste scritte [I don't know, I don't recognise this writing].

Francesca: -Anch'io non le conosco [I don't recognise it either].

Rocco: -Ma non c'è la mia lettera, la R [My letter isn't there, R].

Matteo: -Non c'è neanche la M [Neither is M].

Matteo: -Questa è una scritta e questa è un'altra (confrontando i due libri) sono diverse [This is one writing and this is another (comparing the two books) they are different].

Francesca: -La nostra scritta è in italiano [Our writing is in Italian].

The confusion at not being able to find the initial of his own name (Rocco looks for R and Matteo looks for M) does not stop them from continuing to explore the text and Matteo – probably guided by the cover of the unknown book – spontaneously discovers that the way “to open the book” is the opposite:

Matteo: -Questo libro lo apri diverso! [This book opens the opposite way!].

Teacher: -Ci stai dicendo che questo libro lo apri diverso, ti puoi spiegare meglio? [You are saying that the book opens a different way, can you explain that better?].

Matteo: -Questo si apre così (libro en árabe, orden correcto de páginas) e questo così (libro italiano, orden correcto de páginas) e vuol dire che è diverso! [This book opens like this (Arab book, the correct order of pages) and this one like this (Italian book, the correct order of pages) and it means that it is different!].

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<sup>5</sup> For reasons of space, here I have put together interventions from different groups, which in the oral presentation were distinguished.



The children manage to link the different writing with different spoken languages:

Sara: -Non capisci perché si scrive diverso, è un altro modo di scrivere [We don't understand it because it is written differently, it is a different way of writing].  
Ilaria: -Sì, perché noi parliamo l'italiano perché siamo in Italia e in Francia si parla il francese [Yes, because we speak Italian because we are in Italy and in France they speak French].  
Federica: -Sono due modi diversi di parlare [They are two different ways of speaking].  
Alex: -Anche di scrivere [And also of writing].

With great subtlety, they confront the problems of translation (in the case of a consecutive reading, by the teacher, of the same text in Italian and in Portuguese):

Giovanni: -Ho capito, ma certo è scritta in un'altra lingua! [I understood, it is written in another language!].  
Cristina: -Sì, sì, è in inglese [Yes, yes, it is English].  
Giorgio: -No, no, è in francese [No, no, it is French].  
Giovanni: -Forse è spagnolo [Maybe it is Spanish].  
Jacopo: -Sì, sì, è spagnolo, ha ragione Giovanni [Yes, yes, it is Spanish, Giovanni is right].  
Teacher: -Ma come avete fatto a capire? [How did you know?].  
Cristina: -L'ho capito perché una parla in italiano e l'altra in un'altra lingua [I understood because one speaks in Italian and the other in another language].  
Giorgio: -Lo abbiamo capito quando la maestra l'ha letta [We understood when the teacher read it].  
Teacher: -Ma perché? [But why?].  
Giovanni: -Perché hai cambiato la voce [Because she changed her voice].  
Daniele: -Non la voce, ma il suono delle lettere [Not her voice, but the sound of the letters].  
Coco: -Ha ragione Daniele, la voce della maestra è sempre uguale [Daniele is right, the teacher's voice is always the same].

The five year old children manage to efficiently compare the “Italian letters” and the “similar” letters, by comparing a text in Italian with another in French (*Le Petit Prince*). Then the teacher asks them a challenging question:

Teacher: -Bambini ma se queste lettere sono uguali alle nostre perché noi non riusciamo a leggerle? [Children, if these letters are the same as ours, why can't we read them?].  
Giovanni: -Perché sono messe in un altro modo [Because they are put in a different way].  
Ivan: -Le lettere sono uguali ma non la scritta [The letters are the same but not the writing].



The children make a fundamental discovery: with the same letters, but in a different order, you can write different languages.

In a group of first year primary school pupils, the exploration of a text in Spanish brings about a series of reflections about Italian, on account of the word *llama*:

Marco: -Non è una parola italiana perché in italiano non ci sono lettere che iniziano con la doppia [It isn't an Italian word because in Italian there are no letters that begin with the "doppia"]

Cristian: -È vero, perché in italiano la doppia si trova in mezzo [That's true, because in Italian the "doppia" is put in the middle].

Alessandro: -La doppia non può essere né all'inizio né alla fine [The "doppia" can't go at the beginning or at the end].

These first year primary school children are facing, thanks to the comparison with an unknown written language, a difficult orthographic problem of the Italian language (namely, double consonants) which appears in the syllabus in later years. The teacher endeavours to raise this as a problem to be investigated and the children think up a very reasonable list of rules for the use of double consonants, based on the comparison of the written languages.

Consequently, the diversity of written texts is not an obstacle to teaching reading and writing. The differences help to distinguish familiar letters from those that are strange, a familiar sentence structure to a strange one, when the graphs are the same. It is the strangeness that awakens intellectual curiosity, not prejudice.

Linguistic exchanges mean communication between differences, in spite of the differences, without the utopian desire to cancel out the differences. The great linguist Roman Jakobson wrote the following: "Equivalence in difference is the cardinal problem of language". A translation is not the same: it only permits a comparison.

When linguistic minorities are positively highlighted, everybody wins: those in the minority, because they are appreciated. But those who win the most are the majority.

The strength of minorities consists of making the majorities think.



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