

WRITING AS SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PRACTICES:

A Personal but Reflective Note¹

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I should like, in this brief paper, first to express my gratitude and appreciation to the committee of the seminar who has invited me to speak about the above-mentioned topic. Writing is too sexy to be left out as it is the most deterministic language skill, without which civilization can never grow. I also would like to congratulate Pak Andi Muhtar, one of my good colleagues for years, who has served as a lecturer for more than 35 years teaching of English, where writing is his subject of interest. It is, therefore, the topic of the seminar today is about writing. I believe that Pak Andi Muhtar has ended his long-life dedication as a civil servant flawlessly, which for me is still a dream whether I could be like Pak Andi at the end of my service. Above all, I also feel happy and honored, since through this seminar I could meet my lecturers and some class mates, where in 1979 we used to be together as students in this department up to 1984.

To begin the discussion, let us have a brief look at what writing is. Writing is an invention that came late in human history and until recent times applied to a minority of languages. Even within literate societies, literacy was a long time the preserve of the few. Children learn their first language as an oral entity by socialization. Writing comes later by conscious teaching. These statements imply

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that language is basically oral as emphasized by Bloomfield, Saussure and other structuralists. It is on this base that a linguistic study, like sociolinguistics, concentrates the study of social interaction through human speech, including more informal types of speech among friends, relatives, or family members. It is reasonable for both Bloomfield and Saussure to consider that writing is not language, but a merely a way of recording language by means of visible marks.

Despite its debating perspectives on the essence of writing, let me quote some notes from Coulmas (1989), Fishman (1972), and Barton (1984) to examine the world of writing in human life as follows: (1) Writing system must be viewed separately from the spoken code, i.e. that it could not properly be viewed as merely the phonetic transcription of the spoken code, and it was basically a “visual system” with regularities all its own, (2) Writing makes a society language-conscious. Without writing, modern societies cannot function. Generally writing enlarges the functional potential of languages.

In linguistics writing is not just visible speech, but rather a mode of verbal communication in its own right where someone conveys messages. In Critical Discourse Analysis writing is an arena where power struggle and distribution work. For centuries writing has also been the main concern for philosophers of analytic philosophy. In philosophical hermeneutics, writing renders the text autonomous with respect to the intentions of the author. In hermeneutics the readers will find that textual meaning and psychological meaning have different destinies. Henceforth, writing is a complex activity which involves mental, emotional and cognitive processes. Writing develops understanding. Writing is one of the most pervasive literate activities in human societies and widespread across a range of social and cultural contexts.

Do I write? Yes, I do. But I am not a writing teacher, as Pak Andi Muhtar is. It is, therefore, this brief paper does not follow the logic and theory of writing as one of language skills. What I can share in this very happy moment, is only

my own experience. My writing experiences range from a short passage posted in facebook to formal academic manuscripts, like Master and Doctoral theses, articles and several books. In other words, I will speak the general steps and ideas. More specifically, I will focus on the substantial components of writing process. Of course, this will be very personal. I write about things in terms of my own experiences.

To start writing, I need, of course, a good idea as a topic of the embryo. What I mean by a good idea is a topic that is not only interesting personally, but also significant or important objectively. It has to be interesting because writing is energy consuming. I need an intrinsic motivation to complete it. It is easy to start writing, but it might be very frustrating sometimes in the course of the process. Indeed, I have to be highly motivated personally to keep writing. The motivational aspect of the topic is obligatory.

However, a friend of mine always reminds me that the ultimate goal of writing is to be read by the readers. That is why, before writing I need to ask myself questions: is my work beneficial to other people and society in general? If so, what kind of benefit do I give them? Knowledge, a solution, or a lesson? If it is knowledge, is it just descriptive, explorative or explanatory one? If it is a solution, what practical actions should be taken? Through writing knowledge is mentally represented. All those questions are related to the objective importance of the topic. In other words, how important should the topic or the work be judged objectively. By asking those questions, I do not want to be an egocentric or selfish writer who just think of my own needs.

As a student of linguistics with some knowledge of social sciences, I am consciously and unconsciously interested in observing language phenomena. In doing so I adopt naturally linguistic concepts, theories or lenses. Why? Because the observed phenomena will be meaningless and cannot be understood without concepts, theories or lenses.

Let me give a simple example. A friend of mine informs me about the Gini Ratio of Indonesia, that is 0, 237. And she asks me to give a comment on the number. I don't know what I have to say. Why? It is simply because I have no understanding about the concept and definition of the Gini Ratio, while it is so basic for the students of economics.

Does everyone here know the meaning of GR? If and if only you have understanding about the GR, you will certainly be able to give a meaningful comment. As Popper said, data or phenomena are important, but the more important thing is how we interpret them. Without interpretation, data do not mean anything. No one could write fluently without concepts and theories. Generating ideas means reading the facts or phenomena using concepts and theories that results in (new) understanding.

Anytime I observe the language phenomena, I always ask a question: what is the meaning of the phenomena? Do we have any concept or theory to clarify them? Are the available concepts and theories clear enough to interpret the phenomena? Are there any debatable and conflicting theories which try to explain the phenomena?

From my personal experiences it is impossible to produce a readable text without concepts and theories. I once wrote a short article without concepts and theories in my mind. Yes I could, but the readers got nothing, nor knowledge, solution and lesson from it. Thousands of words are merely a set of phonetic meaningless symbols. And that makes me feel very shy.

The lesson I get from those experiences, I have to sharpen my theoretical sensitivity by reading and discussing more. Theoretical sensitivity here refers to the ability to examine our basic assumptions and interpretation of the phenomena I try to elaborate, and the things I've read, absorbed and used in writing. Theoretical sensitivity can be raised by memoing, the process of recording

thoughts, feelings, decisions, ideas, processes and analytical insights. Writing needs all these mental components.

For me to write is just like the process of language acquisition, it is hard to be able to speak without listening first, it is impossible also to be a good writer without being a good reader first. The value of reading does not end in sharpening our theoretical sensitivity, but it also enlarges to the *stylistics*. My former style of writing was narrative, but develops to the argumentative one. The value of reading, then, also becomes an intellectual exercise. Reading from various writers also sharpen the fifth language skill, namely socio-cultural sensitivity. The more we read, the more we can sharpen our theoretical sensitivity.

It is highly important to consider the approach of your work before start your first paragraph. I am often used to following the logic of the approach to develop the discourse. It often happens that the great temptation to write is someone wants to be an eclectic writer by mixing two more incongruent approaches. This results in a blunt and obscure conclusion. Sometimes I need to escape from my own cultural burdens. The tendency to be an eclectic writer is one of the examples of cultural burdens.

To be honest, I am always impressed with an article that does not give only a clear conclusion, but also a reflection. Conclusion denotes knowledge, while reflection denotes a lesson. A useful note needs to be added here about the difference between a reflective writer and a reflexive one. A reflective thinking will describe, analyze and infer what has happened. While, a reflexive thinking will consciously *self-evaluate* and respond to the studied phenomena.

Though this brief summary does not show sub-chapters, I use an outline as my flexible guideline. I need to say that a good writer always starts his work by outlining the paper or article. I believe that writing without an outline will be

misleading, disoriented and unfocused. An outline for me is an explicated mental map. Can you go to a certain place without any directive map?

Writing is a floating process where new ideas may come up and modify the logic and dialectic process. When this brief summary needs to be revised, I will certainly add a new vision. Keep in mind that revision here means adding a new vision to the work.

Observing a number of language phenomena, where the pronunciation, spellings, grammar and the discourse principles are not obeyed anymore, I try to propose a new label (*neologism*) of this era as a post-grammarians linguistics. I really wonder the future of language if such phenomena keep going. Is there anyone here, my friend, interested to explore such phenomena further? Let me know, I will join you.

To sum up my presentation, I would like to conclude that writing is a complex process which tells everything about its writer (his knowledge, logic, social and cultural background).

Thank you.

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