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Editorial

Scripta manent, verba volant

Nowadays interpretation is “written words will last forever, pronounced words will be lost”. But the original meaning was exactly the opposite. In ancient time until Middle Age words were written to be pronounced aloud by the few that were able to read them for the people not able to read, so that “verba volant” words would have been divulged.

Because books were read aloud, it was not necessary to separate letters in phonetic units so writing was a long uninterrupted sequence of letters without capitals letters nor punctuations and was the capability of the reader to give the sense and the interpretation of the written text.

Depending on the place and time these letters in long sequence were from left to right, right to left, from up to down or in two columns or alternatively one line from right and one from left or others zig-zag on the page. Also Marcus Tullius Cicero needed plenty of training before giving a good lecture on the written text and with the correct interpretation.

Julius Caesar was the first one who requested the division of the continuous text in pages to be sent as messages to his troops. In the IV century written text started to be divided “per cola et commata” in lines with a finished meaning. But only between the VII and IX century we can define the beginning of the “silent reading” the method that today seems so natural to the private reader, reading in silence, needed a long time to mature in the present way as pages, paragraphs, lines and punctuations. Books! Books as papyrus scroll rolls were found in Egypt more than 4000 years ago and until Johannes Gutenberg (XV century) was written by hand. And what is next? Would like to report some thoughts:

“Electronic reading has become progressively easier as computer screens have improved and readers have grown accustomed to using them. Still, people read more slowly on

screen, by as much as 20–30%. Fifteen or 20 years ago, electronic reading also impaired comprehension compared to paper, but those differences have faded in recent studies.” (Sandra Aamodt is a former editor in chief of Nature Neuroscience)

“Initially, any new information medium seems to degrade reading because it disturbs the balance between focal and peripheral attention. This was true as early as the invention of writing, which Plato complained hollowed out focal memory. Similarly, William Wordsworth’s sister complained that he wasted his mind in the newspapers of the day. It takes time and adaptation before a balance can be restored.” (Alan Liu is chairman and professor of English at the University of California, Santa Barbara)

“The tools (as usual) are neutral. It’s up to us to insist that onscreen reading enhance, not replace, traditional book reading. It’s up to us to remember that the medium is not the message; that the meaning and music of the words is what matters, not the glitzy vehicle they arrive in.” (David Gelernter, a professor of computer science at Yale University)

In conclusion, whatever the future of writing and reading will be, on paper or on screen, the contents and the thoughts of the authors is the real treasure we have to appreciate and keep as a precious gift.

Silvano Naretto
 E-mail: silvano.naretto@gmail.com

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.