

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Paul Saenger. *Space Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading*. Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1997. xviii + 480 pp. \$49.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-2653-5.

Reviewed by Joseph Feller (Liberal Arts, Ringling School of Art and Design)  
Published on H-SAE (January, 1999)



## The Silent Word

Although Paul Saenger (the George A. Poole III Curator of Rare Books at the Newberry Library, Chicago) is a historian, his work reaches out to a wider intellectual community. I read *Space Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading* through the lens of cultural anthropology, and was consistently impressed by the author's efforts to bridge interdisciplinary gaps. The Introduction and Glossary are extremely helpful to the non-historian, and Saenger is explicit in his desire to "open the study of paleography to those who have not experienced the exciting results it can produce (p. x)." After finishing the book, the source of Saenger's interdisciplinary zeal is obvious; his work draws heavily upon neuro-psychology and, to a lesser extent, ethnohistory. By choosing to participate in this dialogue between scholars, Saenger firms the intellectual rigor of his work and opens the subject to the insights and experiences of his academic readership.

*Space Between Words* rests on the premise that there is tremendous cross-cultural and historical variety in methods of transcription, and that this variety corresponds to different neuro-physiological and cognitive processes (pp. 1-2). Although he is not referenced in the book, those familiar with the work of Walter J. Ong,[1] will find themselves in familiar territory. Specifically, the book explores the shift from the *scriptura continua* of classical Latin (which did not separate or punctuate words, and which was supported by an "oral" reading culture) to the punctuated and space-separated script of the late Middle Ages (which provided the basis for a "silent" reading culture).

Saenger often refers to his work as a "narrative" (p. 18), and the bulk of the book is exactly that, an exceptionally detailed historical narrative of the rise of separated writing in Europe. After an introduction to the vocabulary and methods of paleography, and an informative overview of classical *scriptura continua* transcription, Saenger asserts that "the origins of rapid, silent reading lie in the scribal techniques and grammatical teachings that developed in Ireland and England in the seventh and eighth centuries" (p. 83). It is demonstrated how these "techniques and teachings" led to the emergence of several new genres of writing: alphabetical glossaries, interlinear translations (bilingual writing), pocket Gospels, personal prayer books, cartularies (collections of deeds and titles), and vernacular texts (pp. 90-7).

The next several chapters of the book deal with the spread of separated writing to the Continent, and include a careful catalogue of regional variety. Saenger records a "culture of resistance" to separated script, which stemmed from the monastic character of most Continental writing and reading. However, "after 950, a profound change occurred in the nature of what monks and other clerics chose to read (p.120)." Saenger explores this change in intellectual life, and views protoscholasticism as the key to the Continental acceptance of separated script (pp. 121-23). Following a brief overview of the transcription of numbers and music, Saenger examines the professional biographies of the individuals who helped usher in separated script. Finally, he devotes five chapters to historical-geographic descriptions of writing and reading in England, Northern France, Eastern and

Southern France, Italy, and Northern Europe.

It is the concluding chapter of the book which I believe has the most to offer the cultural anthropologist. In this chapter, "Written Culture at the End of the Middle Ages," Saenger examines the cultural impact of the changes he has recorded as a historian. Saenger describes changes in the cultural role of the book, the classroom, and the library, and the impact of silent reading on privacy, sexuality, and religion. The anthropology (and ethnohistory) of reading is an underrepresented subject, and I believe this essay of 23 pages is a worthwhile contribution to that field.

I noted at the outset that I read *Space Between Words* as an anthropologist, not as a historian. Specifically, I came to the work from two distinct ethnographic field sites. First, I read Saenger's ideas as a researcher of popular Irish Catholicism, a cultural area in which written and oral discourse techniques are often endowed with considerable power and meaning, and in which are visible the long lasting effects which Saenger records in his final chapter. Second, I read *Space Between Words* as an ethnographer of computer-mediated communication and culture (CMC), where the ambiguity of written language has, and continues to be, a key issue. It is to Saenger's

credit that his research can speak across disciplines, and to such a variety of field sites.

Although I would recommend *Space Between Words* as a valuable contribution to research, I do not see it as appropriate for most undergraduate anthropology students. However, I believe it would be an interesting and important addition to a graduate level course in Linguistic Anthropology, or in any field (such as CMC) where the transformation of the technology of language is central.

#### Notes

[1]. Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995. [2]. See, for example, Livingston, Eric. *An Anthropology of Reading*. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995. And Svenbro, Jesper. *Phrasikleia: An Anthropology of Reading in Ancient Greece*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1993.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-sae>

**Citation:** Joseph Feller. Review of Saenger, Paul, *Space Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading*. H-SAE, H-Net Reviews. January, 1999.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2627>

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).