Tuesday, June 24th, 15:00-15:30, room 201

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Literacy revisited:
Semiotic Convergences between Alphabetic Writing, Coined Money and Geometry

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Did literacy play a fundamental role in the making of Modern Civilisation? There has been a considerable controversy in answering the question. Advocates – such as J. Goody (1963, 1968, 1977), E. Havelock (1976) and W. Ong (1986) among many others – argued that literacy should be interpreted as a genuine technology of the Mind and that it had a deep impact on the perception of space (homogeneity versus heterogeneity) and time (linearity versus circularity), on types of discourse (distinction for the first time made between rhetoric and logic) and knowledge (emergence of grammar, mathematics, astronomy and the law) as well as on the very notion of a social order (in maintaining hierarchical relationships through the notions of commodity and individual property). On the other hand, detractors, even if they are more scarce – see for example J. Halverson (1992) and D. Piotrowski (2004) –, answered back that literacy cannot be proved to be instrumental in reshaping the Mind for no direct relationship between a technology such as literacy and specific changes either in space-time perception, in the evolution of types of discourse and knowledge or in specific forms of power has ever been made. Nevertheless, it seems obvious that, if the notion of an extended Mind (A. Clark & D. Chalmers 1998) is to be taken seriously, literacy participates in deep changes both in cognitive and social skills. This protracted controversy amply shows therefore that we still lack ways of significantly measuring the impact of literacy and even more of clarifying the semiotic modalities of its diffusion at cognitive and social levels.

The purpose of this talk is therefore to empirically engage in the debate by focusing on a semiotic tool developed in Ancient Greece which contributed to the first diffusion of literacy: the rebus as it appears on coined money. We shall argue that it is less the capacity to read and write itself that was spread out through this particular technique than the notions of recorded notation and of finite index including not only alphabetic letters but also standardised quantities and geometrical figures. We shall use three examples of Greek coins from Phocaea, Argos and Aegina to show that the particular use of rebus on coins speaks in favour of a sociologically differentiated diffusion implying different layers of understanding, addressed to the complete illiterate as well as to the mathematically knowledgeable. These layers are interconnected by way of the rebus principle (Houston 2004).

The incentive to learn how to read and write is therefore part and parcel of the incentive to participate in a monetary economy by keeping on learning how to interpret letters, numbers and figures in a more and more sophisticated way. The diffusion of a differentiated literacy is therefore related to specific semiotic tools developed in specific social contexts and should therefore be understood in wider ways.