

Lynne J. Miles  
Wabash College

Thinking in Printed Verbs:  
Does a Reading Public Make For a (Syntactically) More Complex Language?

In this paper, I present evidence for a correspondence between increased literate use of Early New High German and increased syntactic complexity of the printed language. Situating language-change evidence in a neurological portrait of the reading brain, I argue that the co-evolution of a spreading print culture and of an increased proportion of clausal framing in ENHG has an explanation in the cognitive effects of learning to read.

I am defining *syntactic complexity* specifically in terms of clausal framing. Many scholars, such as Utz Maas (in Sampson et al. 2009), have noted the increased use of the verbal frame (*Satzklammer*) to differentiate between main and subordinate clauses during ENHG, a distinction that was well developed in the printed language by the eighteenth century. While clausal framing was certainly extant in the language before the ENHG era, it did not show the near-universality among either main or embedded (subordinate) clauses that characterizes later and post-ENHG.

Recent neuroscientific scholarship on reading emphasizes the profound redistribution of cognitive resources as we learn to read. Maryanne Wolf (2007) and Uta Frith (1985) both situate the stages along the path toward proficient reading in an initially more visual-pictorial mode of cognition, which gives way to a primarily auditory or “alphabetic/phonemic awareness” mode, concludes in a final, orthographic phase that involves a complex cognitive blending of multiple sensory modes. The mental translation from orthography to the sounds of language that the orthography represents has developed in this stage to a deeply automatic process which is no longer a consciously auditory mode at all. This expert reading involves increased automaticity and speed means that orthographic readers can understand longer and more complex sentences than listeners. Thus, “the abnormal quickness of reading fits together with the abnormal slowness of writing to foster a kind of language in which ideas are combined to form more complex idea units and sentences” (W. Chafe, 1985). Heli Numminen argues that “as the phonological working memory becomes automated, more room is left in the working memory for understanding the meanings of words and text” (2002).

Stanislas Dehaene (2009) posits a *neuronal recycling* that is central to learning to read, and this reciprocity between the brain’s development and its environment took place historically among our species (and more than once), and it takes place in each reader’s brain.

In this context of growing literacy among the populace, the cognitive dynamics were the same as in an individual brain, and learning to read, with its associated cognitive changes, I am arguing, changed the printed language.