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Oration by Professor Anthony J. Frendo, Head of the Department of Oriental Studies and Co-Director of the Confucius Institute

Address by Michael Refalo, a Ph.D graduand and representative of the students

Conferment of Degrees

Solemn Declaration by Graduates

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The Congregation rises when the Dignitaries leave the Church

Literacy and the electronic Revolution:
back to the Past, or back to Basics?

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Circa 3500 BC in ancient Sumer, which is the equivalent of the southernmost part of modern Iraq, society had developed to such an extent that the need for jotting down economic transactions was deeply felt and this in turn led to the invention of writing which at first was tantamount to numerical notations. Eventually writing proper was invented, and despite the cumbersome system used, written communication between humans became possible with the result that there emerged the first sophisticated piece of literature, namely the well-known epic of Gilgamesh which discusses in poetic form the problem of the mortality of human beings.

In fact this system of writing had developed in ancient Mesopotamia (which is practically the equivalent of modern Iraq) from pictograms to logograms and/or ideograms, and finally to a syllabic script written in the well-known cuneiform script, namely a wedge-shaped script. Sometimes the three writing systems were combined, and it is important to note that this means that pictures were at first used simply to communicate the objects depicted by the picture used; thus, for example, the picture of a fish simply meant 'fish'. Later on, pictures were combined to indicate words and/or ideas such as, for example, when the picture of the face of a man was represented with a bowl in front of his mouth to indicate the verbs 'to eat' or 'to drink'. Eventually the pictures were rendered in a more stylized and wedge-shaped form until each sign was used to indicate a syllable. This was a great step forward which was amply used by the Akkadians, a Semitic people to the north of ancient Sumer, but whose territory was still found in the southern part of modern Iraq. This syllabic system of writing, where each sign represented a syllable, was used to draw up great pieces of writing such as the famous second millennium BC law code of Hammurabi of Babylon.

Despite the great step forward in communication between human beings which was possible because of the invention of writing, in Mesopotamia this was still a very complicated system which was in fact restricted to a few members of society. The great step forward really came from another quarter of the ancient near East, namely from the coast of the Levant where the Phoenicians, a Semitic people mainly concentrated on the coast of modern Lebanon, invented the alphabet which consisted of

twenty-two consonantal signs (since there was no need to mark the vowels in their language just as is the case in modern Arabic and Israeli Hebrew) where each sign represented one sound and each sound was represented by one sign. This invention was not only a major development in the system of written communication between humans; it also turned out to be a great democratic victory which enhanced the economic and mercantile networks of the Phoenicians all over the Mediterranean as well as in most parts of the ancient near East and in Egypt. The Phoenician alphabet was easy to learn, and in fact we have archaeological evidence of abecedaries which demonstrate that people were practicing how to write. Twenty-two letters could by learnt by anybody, including children, and one should not underestimate the fact that one could write about any topic whatsoever simply by using twenty-two simple curvilinear signs. Eventually, the Greeks took over the Phoenician alphabet supplying the necessary vowel signs (which had to be represented in Greek) in turn bequeathing to us our alphabet via the Romans.

I can now focus on my main points. The history of Europe and the Mediterranean of the past two and a half millennia bears clear witness to the fact that the invention of writing, and particularly of the alphabet, allowed societies to share their ideas and inventions in writing in a precise and generally unambiguous manner. Although research has shown that any idea, even if abstract, can be communicated through any system of writing, even when this is not alphabetic,[1] the fact remains that the alphabet happens to be a very simple and effective tool of communication. However the alphabet on its own will not work miracles, and it is clear that in order to use it effectively one should learn how to transmit one's ideas in a crisp and precise manner. This means that we should learn how to study well the grammar of the language which we choose to communicate in, and to ascertain that when we write we do so effectively, clearly, and precisely so as to actually write what we have in mind.

If we think carefully about this latter point, we realize that the act of writing is actually tantamount to what we could call the hermeneutics of our intentions, namely the interpretation of what in the first instance we mean to say. In practice this can only be done properly if we write clearly and accurately what we intend to say. This means that we have to observe the grammatical 'rules' no matter how conventional or useless they may appear. There is no other way, and not to do this is to get into trouble; indeed, if we do not write well according to the grammatical rules of the language we employ, the end result could very well be misunderstanding, conflict, unease, and embarrassment. Imagine using imprecise language when we write to communicate our ideas in our law courts, at our

university, in our schools, in our insurance and business companies, and so on: in such a scenario, we would be either at the losing end, or at best we would be asked to rewrite what we had set out to say in the first instance by making the necessary corrections thereby ensuring that we communicate what we had in mind.

The foregoing points mean that there is no way of bypassing the rules of grammar in all its areas, including that of syntax. My dictionary defines syntax as 'the grammatical arrangement of words, showing their connection and relation' and, as a consequence, also as 'a set of rules for an analysis of this'[2]. I have chosen to mention in particular the rules which govern the order and link between words because in our contemporary society we could be easily prone to ignore such rules owing to the abuse we make of the multiple electronic devices which we use every day. Think, for example, about the SMSs which we send to each other and which we are often tempted to write in imprecise and ambiguous language. We often ignore correct spelling besides messing up the order of words – something which could sometimes lead us into trouble or sorrow. Business deals could be ruined and romantic experiences could end up in smithereens simply because of an incorrect placement of words.

The abuse or incorrect use of electronic devices can also be found in the area of information technology. This superb invention which has revolutionized our civilization could lead to a dead end and to a regression rather than a development of society at large, if it is not exercised in conjunction with the appropriate development in literacy. We are all aware of electronic icons, templates, links, gateways, and search engines. Most of these items function within predetermined parameters, but the nuances we need in order to make the appropriate links in our quest for knowledge are not always there. Information technology has advanced so much that we can pin down the items of the world's best libraries from the comfort of our home. We can also read whole books or sections thereof in our offices or at home or indeed on buses and whilst travelling anywhere in the world. This is simply magnificent and we all look forward to further development in this area. As far as our University is concerned, the opening of a 'Faculty of Information and Communication Technology' is a godsend. But there is one important thing to keep in mind, namely the nature of human knowledge. It is elementary yet crucial to remember that knowledge is not identical to data; on the contrary, knowledge can only be attained after we understand the data and after we verify whether our insights are true or false by consulting the data again. All this happens in our 'self-correcting process of learning'[3]. Now when we make use of information technology, we should keep this in mind if we are not to end

up simply amassing data without really comprehending them.

In order to achieve true knowledge, we need to combine the best use of information technology with an ever more refined literacy. This means that we have to go beyond icons and templates and learn how to communicate in proper writing and therefore to also learn how to place words in their proper order so as to be able to communicate our thoughts precisely and unambiguously even when these are difficult or abstract. To restrict our research to the use of electronic gateways, icons, templates, and hyperlinks is precisely to 'surf' the field of knowledge and to gather data in one of the most efficient ways. To employ power-point presentations when delivering lectures or public talks is lovely. However, we should remember that such presentations can also restrict the freedom of the association of our ideas as well as our manner of expressing them. If we make too much use of electronic slides, we run the risk of not being able to express ourselves well; indeed, we would be running a serious risk of going back to circa 3500 BC when writing was still restricted to communicating through pictures, and when ambiguity was consequently often unavoidable. What applies to writing is equally pertinent to verbal communication and this means, for example, that to be over-dependent on power-point presentations, even when only written material is concerned, is to run the risk of boring one's audience and to forego crisp and intelligent presentations which captivate one's audience whilst allowing it to concentrate better on one's verbal presentation and to summarize any points which it deems necessary.

This latter point brings me to the thorny and moot question of note-taking in class and the use of electronic equipment. It is a commonplace that now we do have different types of software which are geared also towards note-taking in class. However it is also a well-known fact that there has been a mixed reaction by teachers and professors in the USA to students taking down their notes in class on their computers. Indeed, it is interesting to note that the website of the 'Alexandria Technical College' in Minnesota lists various methods of note-taking in class and that it takes it for granted that such notes are taken down by hand[4]. Moreover, although most of the methods for note-taking in class which are mentioned in the website of the 'Student Academic Services (Academic Skills Center) of the California Polytechnic State University'[5] can be executed on a computer, some of these methods, such as that known as the 'mapping method', cannot as yet really be performed precisely and swiftly enough on a computer. Students seem to be able to give more free rein to their thoughts if they jot down their class notes by hand, since they can make rapid links with arrows and other signs and symbols which they

understand, and for which they would need too much time to do with a computer.

So it seems that literacy as understood traditionally and computer, or indeed electronic literacy, should not be seen as choices. On the contrary, they have to work hand in hand and at the same pace. If we indulge in the use of information technology to the exclusion of proper spelling and correct word order, we run the risk of going back to the primitive stage of writing when people communicated via pictures with the resultant ambiguity which was often inevitable.

The book by Lynne Truss entitled *Eats, shoots and leaves: the zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* illustrates clearly what I mean. This best-seller shows us that we must mind our *p*'s and *q*'s and that a comma can make all the difference. The very main title of this book indicates that its meaning depends on where one places the comma. Indeed, does it mean that the panda referred to first eats, then shoots, and thereafter departs, or does it mean that it eats both shoots and leaves?[6] Unless literacy as traditionally understood with a good grounding in the three *r*'s, namely reading, writing, and arithmetic, and the electronic revolution join forces, we would run the risk of going back to the past in the negative sense of having to face the danger of depending on a pictographic script. On the contrary, if we go back to basics whilst combining these two different but complementary pathways to knowledge, we shall realize that we live in a great age. Finally, as far as going back to basics goes, we should also remember the crucial role which our families play in the transmission of knowledge and wisdom. As an ancient Sumerian proverb states: 'The word of your mother, as if it were the word of your god, do not ignore it.'[7]

References

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[3] B. J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1972, p. 159.

[4] http://www.alextech.edu/en/CollegeServices/SupportServices/StudySkills/LectureNoteTaking/LectureandNoteTakingTips.aspx (downloaded on 7th September 2009).

[5] http://sas.calpoly.edu/asc/ssl/notetaking.systems.html (downloaded on 7th September 2009).

[6] L. Truss, *Eats, shoots & leaves: the zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*, New York, New York: Gotham Books, 2004 (originally published in Great Britain by Profile Books, Ltd in 2003), back page.

[7] B. Alster, *Studies in Sumerian Proverbs*, Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1975, p. 137. See also J. Day, "Foreign Semitic Influence on the Wisdom of Israel and its Appropriation in the Book of Proverbs", in: J. Day, R.P. Gordon, & H.G.M. Williamson, ed., *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J.A. Emerton*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 66.