NEWS LESSON

Did Writing Really Make Languages More Complicated?



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. When you write an email or a message, how much do you plan and edit before you send it?
2. What is the longest or most complicated sentence you can remember reading, and where did you find it?
3. Do you think language changes faster now than it did in the past? Why?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**analysis** ☐	A	decide that something is true after thinking about the facts
2	**universal** ☐	B	a careful study of something to understand it
3	**conclude** ☐	C	with a higher or more important position
4	**senior** ☐	D	the way you think and feel about something
5	**extension** ☐	E	something added to make an idea go further
6	**grain of salt** ☐	F	sudden and very big
7	**dramatic** ☐	G	a small amount of doubt when you hear something
8	**attitudes** ☐	H	true for everyone or everywhere

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

A large study of about 100,000 sentences in 30 languages found no universal pattern showing that writing makes sentences more complex. It does not say that writing never changes a language.

1 Most of us carry around a quiet assumption about writing. When you write, you can plan, revise and edit, so it feels obvious that written sentences should be more elaborate than the ones we speak. On the face of it, that seems like common sense. It has also led many people to believe that a language gains complexity when it gets a writing system, and that languages without one are somehow more basic.

2 A team from the University of Zurich and the University of Passau set out to test this. Their paper, which appeared in PNAS in 2026, is led by Carlo Meloni, with Chundra Cathcart and Balthasar Bickel as senior authors. Meloni points out that earlier studies supporting the idea looked at only a handful of languages, mostly from Europe. The new study casts a much wider net.

3 The researchers carried out two kinds of analysis. In the first, they examined around 100,000 spoken and written sentences from 30 languages. They counted the clauses in each sentence and measured how deeply those clauses were nested inside one another. In the second, they looked at the grammar of 59 languages to ask whether grammar had become more complicated after writing was introduced.

4 Neither test produced a consistent result. Written sentences were not always more complex than spoken ones, and languages did not systematically develop more grammatical structures once they were written down. The authors conclude that there is no universal effect of writing on how complex sentences are, either in everyday use or over the long history of a language.

5 It is worth being clear about what this does not show. The study measured one specific thing, the structure of sentences, so it says nothing about vocabulary, style or how writing changes the way people think. A finding of no universal effect also leaves room for effects in particular languages. The paper does not claim that writing makes no difference anywhere.

6 The authors suggest that social attitudes may matter more than the technology. Cathcart notes that Western society tends to link complex sentences with social standing, but across the world, sentences can be highly complex for any speaker in any setting. Meloni adds that many people wrongly assume languages become more complex when they get writing, and the release says this invites us to reconsider how we judge languages with no written tradition.

7 Bickel draws a parallel with today's worries about social media and artificial intelligence. If a technology as big as writing did not reshape sentence structure in any universal way, he suggests, newer tools may not either. That is the authors' extension of the result rather than something the study tested, so it deserves a grain of salt. Still, the finding is a useful reminder that a dramatic new tool does not always change a language as much as we fear.

Sources: Phys.org, Writing changes language less than we think; NCCR Evolving Language, Writing changes language less than we think. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. The 59 languages in the grammar analysis outnumber the 30 languages in the sentence analysis. T F NG
2. The earlier studies behind the idea covered a wider range of languages than the new study. T F NG
3. The study checked which of the 30 languages has the longest sentences. T F NG
4. The authors accept that their link between writing and AI is not proven by their own data. T F NG
5. The authors say that newer tools will not change language, and their study proves it. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

assembled	assumption	consistent	handful	parallel	reluctant	revise	standing

1. Only a _____ of students passed the test, so the teacher called a meeting.
2. It's a common _____ that older languages are simpler, but nobody has really tested it.
3. Before you hand in an essay, it's wise to _____ it carefully.
4. The experiment gave a _____ result every time, so the team trusted it.
5. A person's social _____ can affect how other people judge the way they speak.
6. The writer draws a _____ between the printing press and the internet.

6 Verb forms

Write the correct form of the verb in brackets.

1. The paper, which _____ in PNAS in 2026, is led by Carlo Meloni. (APPEAR)
2. In the second analysis, the grammar of 59 languages _____ at. (LOOK)
3. By the time the new study appeared, earlier researchers _____ only a handful of languages. (STUDY)
4. It is worth _____ clear about what this does not show. (BE)
5. A finding of no universal effect _____ room for effects in particular languages. (LEAVE)

7 Language focus: linking words

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Check what follows the gap. Some linkers join a clause, some need an -ing form, and some stand alone with a comma.

although	as a result	instead of	next	otherwise	still	unless

1. _____ the study was very large, it measured only one thing.
2. Writers can plan and edit before they publish. _____ , many people expect written sentences to be longer.
3. The AI link was not tested. _____ , it is a useful reminder that new tools do not always change language.
4. _____ saying that writing changes nothing, the authors say there is no universal effect.
5. They first counted clauses in 100,000 sentences. _____ , they compared the grammar of 59 languages.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. Does it surprise you that writing does not make sentences more complex in every language? Why or why not?
2. How should people judge a language that has no written tradition?
3. Do you think the authors are right to compare writing with social media and AI?

9 Role-play: does writing make a language better?

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the believer

You think a language with a long written history is more advanced. Give two reasons. Ask your partner why they disagree, and try to change their mind.

Student B · the sceptic

You read about a big study of 30 languages. It found no universal pattern. Explain what the researchers did and say why the old idea may be wrong. Be polite but firm.

Useful phrases

I've always thought that writing makes language more serious.

That's what many people believe, but the study didn't find that.

Could you give me an example?

I'm not convinced, because they only measured sentences.

That's a fair point, but it doesn't prove anything.

Let's agree to disagree.

Afterwards, tell the class: did you change your partner's mind, and what is one thing you both agree on?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 B · 2 H · 3 A · 4 C · 5 E · 6 G · 7 F · 8 D

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 NG · 4 T · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 handful · 2 assumption · 3 revise · 4 consistent · 5 standing · 6 parallel

6 Verb forms

1 appeared · 2 was looked · 3 had studied · 4 being · 5 leaves

7 Language focus

1 Although · 2 As a result · 3 Still · 4 Instead of · 5 Next

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