

Linguistic Society of America Workshop, Braun Auditorium,  
Stanford University, 11 July 2007

## **Abstract**

### **The Strange Case of the So-Called Indus Script: Distinguishing Writing from Non-Linguistic Symbols**

[Steve Farmer, Ph.D.](#)

Evidence of many types has accumulated over the last half decade that the so-called Indus script was not a speech-encoding or writing system in the strict linguistic sense, as has been assumed since the first artifact carrying Indus symbols showed up in the 1870s ([Farmer, Henderson, and Witzel 2002](#); [Farmer, Sproat, and Witzel 2004](#); [Sproat and Farmer 2005](#)). This unexpected find is radically changing views of the oldest Indian civilization and has awakened new interest in issues involving non-linguistic symbols, pseudo-decipherments, and related topics addressed in this Workshop. In this talk I illustrate a wide range of nonlinguistic symbol systems, propose a typology of scripts and non-scripts based on semantic and phonological criteria, and discuss the light recent studies of Indus symbols throw on ways of distinguishing the two classes of symbols. The talk ends with a discussion of ways in which our archaeological understanding of Indus society is paradoxically deepening as a result of abandoning the old Indus-script thesis ([Farmer, Weber, et al. 2005](#); [Weber, Fuller, and Farmer 2007](#)).