Introducing graphetics

The study of the materiality of writing, its questions, and its problems

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DEFINITION

Graphetics studies the materiality of writing and investigates all phenomena and questions pertaining to it. As such, it is not only a subdiscipline of graphology and the material aspects of handwriting, but it also approaches questions that pertain not primarily to linguistics but to a number of other neighboring disciplines such as philosophy, didactics, neuropsychology, art history, and many more. Thus, graphetics can be broadly defined as an interdisciplinary area of research in which questions about the materiality of writing are concentrated and negotiated (cf. Meletis 2015).

SUBDISCIPLINES

I. Productional graphetics

Productional graphetics asks questions that pertain to the material aspects of the writing process. On the one hand, it focuses on the cognitively lower and unconscious levels of writing: which fundamental processes are involved in producing sequences of basic shapes in handwriting? To consider modern technologies as well: which processes are involved when typing on a keyboard or wiping on a touchscreen? These questions are primarily of physiological and psycholinguistic nature. An example for productional graphetic research is the study of script change in Azerbaijan: acts of cultural appropriation as influenced by Islamic calligraphy (cf. Chirman 2015), where a person forgets how to produce specific characters that they could formerly write. Interestingly, in many cases, they are still able to read these characters, implying that reading and writing processes are to some degree independent of one another. On the other hand, choices that are located at a higher conscious level of production but are still concerned with visual aspects are also of interest for productional graphetics: from a sociolinguistic perspective, for example, questions about the motivations of the writer to choose a specific font or a specific form of highlighting (bold instead of italics or underlining etc.) can be asked. Choices on all levels of writing, including the material, are — to some degree — “acts of identity” (cf. Hatcher 2008), whether conscious or unconscious. What is the writer’s intention to design a text in a specific way, and was it motivated socio-culturally — if so, how? Does the producer of a text want its graphetics to convey belonging to or distance from a certain social group?

II. Descriptive graphetics

The second subbranch of graphetics is likely the most ‘traditionally’ linguistic one in that it is solely descriptive. Script-graphetics or descriptive graphetics (from German Skriptgraphik or alternatively Script-Grafi
tetik, cf. Meletis 2015, Fuhrhop & Peters 2013) analyzes products of writing divorced from the processes of production and perception. This, however, does not mean that a descriptive analysis cannot approach graphetics questions pertaining to other graphetics sub-
disciplines as well, for example on how the production (and the involved surfaces and instruments) could have affected the visual shape of a product of writing. This question of why a product of writing looks the way it does is indeed of importance. An example comes in the form of the visual character of a whole script: the Burmese script, which is also called ca-tønh ‘round script’ (cf. Coul-
mas 1996: 55; Watkins 2009: 197), is so visually round in nature because it was traditionally written on palm leaves; these have linear fibers, which is why angular basic shapes would have caused the leaves to rip. In regarding these issues, script-graphetics is similarly neighboring (pre-
dominantly historic) disciplines such as palaeography and epigraphy. They are, in this understan-
ding, specialized subdisciplines of descriptive graphetics. The different levels of graphetics that are presented below are based on a description of the spatial arrangement of writing (a cartography of the writing surface) and, thus, are themselves a product of a script-graphetic analysis.

Cartography of the writing surface

When segmental spaces are concatenated, they form the so-called linear space. When only part of the linear space is filled (and encompassed by empty spaces), this unit is termed the ONE-DIMENSIONAL GRAPHETIC SEQUENCE, LINE UNIT or one line.

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