

# **Naturalness of scripts and writing systems**

## **Prolegomena to a *Natural Grapholinguistics***

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*Natural Linguistics* (with its most notable subdivisions *Natural Phonology* and *Natural Morphology*) investigates the notion of ‘naturalness’ and claims that if a linguistic element or structure can be processed with little effort both sensomotorically – articulatory and perceptually – as well as cognitively, it is more natural compared with other, more complex linguistic phenomena. Naturalness is thus understood to be a gradual notion closely related to concepts such as optimality, markedness, and complexity. Drawing on external evidence such as language change, language acquisition and language disorders, various parameters of naturalness (e.g. ease of production/perception, transparency, uniformity, iconism/iconicity) have been postulated and described, focusing on the phonological and morphological systems of language.

Since a subcomponent of *Natural Linguistics* pertaining to scripts and writing systems is still lacking, it is the main purpose of this paper to give an outline of how the concept of naturalness can be extended in order to account for grapholinguistic phenomena. It is shown how a method such as comparative graphematics can help reveal naturalness parameters that apply to both the material (graphetic) as well as the functional (graphematic) aspects of writing. Examples from various writing systems (mainly German, Chinese, Thai, and Arabic) such as the development of writing direction, the reduction of symmetry, the systematic visual composition of characters, and the re-iconization of writing are given in order to illustrate that there exist not only system-specific, but also underlying universal natural preferences that shape scripts and writing systems.

The systematic integration of these findings into the framework of *Naturalness Theory* demonstrates that a so-called *Natural Grapholinguistics* could offer promising new insights into the nature of writing as well as a *tertium comparationis* for future comparative analyses of writing systems.