

What is a *grapheme*? Do we need it?

Re-evaluating one of grapholinguistics' core notions

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Grapheme is a controversial and ambiguous concept within grapholinguistics. Numerous researchers have argued against it (cf. Daniels 1991), some for it (cf. Herrick 1994), and many have not employed it at all (cf. Neef 2015). If it is addressed, a distinction is commonly made between two contrasting conceptions: one assumes that it is the main function of graphemes to refer to phonemes, while the other argues that written language – including the grapheme – is (relatively) independent from speech and should be analyzed in its own right (cf. Bazell 1956; Kohrt 1986). However, this simplistic juxtaposition seemingly fails to grasp the complexity of the matter and entails a number of conceptual and terminological problems. In my presentation I will aim to address and discuss these issues.

I will argue that the misleading reductionist analogy between phonology/phonetics and graphematics/graphetics as well as the lack of commitment to one of the views listed above have contributed to a false hierarchizing within grapholinguistics. This has e. g. led to the ambiguity of terms such as *allography*, referring both to material ($|a|$ and $|a|$) as well as functional variation ($\langle ph \rangle$ and $\langle f \rangle$ for $/f/$). Therefore, a consistent distinction between graphetic and graphematic units seems inevitable: by postulating a central graphetic unit termed *basic shape* (cf. Rezec 2013), the grapheme is relieved of its duty of being both functional and material.

Furthermore, I will address the challenge of finding a conception of *grapheme* that holds across various types of writing systems (cf. Lockwood 2009). Can e. g. Chinese and German graphemes be compared? How does comparison inform our understanding of the grapheme? And can the grapheme further our understanding of what is at the core of all writing systems?

I will close my talk with refined terminological suggestions for grapholinguistics and a possible answer to the question if there is indeed a need for the concept of *grapheme*.

References

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