



Types of allography: Conceptualizing structural variation in writing at the material and linguistic levels

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Although structural variation in writing is highly frequent both at the material and functional levels, the associated notion of *allography*, although sometimes mentioned in the literature, has not been systematically studied.

In this talk, two major types of allography are proposed: *Graphetic allography*, conceptually comparable to allophony, depends on visual similarity and captures how concrete units are associated with visual abstractions, i.e. how three graphs in <banana> are instances of the basic shape |a|. *Graphematic allography*, on the other hand, is conceptually closer to allomorphy and does not depend on visual similarity but groups together units which share the same function, i.e. represent the same linguistic unit (phoneme, syllable, morpheme, etc.). These are complementarily distributed, i.e. there exist no contexts in which they contrast. A well-known example is the positionally conditioned alternation between |σ| vs. |ç| for the Greek grapheme <σ>, but also the positional allography of shapes in Arabic and radicals in Chinese.

By means of a number of criteria, a typology of subtypes of graphetic and graphematic allography is proposed and illustrated with examples from different writing systems. A special case that is discussed is the complex phenomenon of capitalization in alphabets. Moreover, examples are given of variation phenomena which are not accounted for by the concept of allography. Lastly, it is addressed how orthographic variation, as a type of variation dependent on the externally regulated standardization of the writing system, interacts with the underlying internal regularities of the system. A question present throughout is how the proposed typology could reflect the psychological reality of how readers and writers process written variation.

The theoretical framework for the unified description of variation proposed in this talk facilitates the comparison of variation phenomena across writing systems, which is crucial for the advancement of our understanding of writing systems.
