

Structural, psycholinguistic, and sociolinguistic typologies of writing

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‘Writing system typology’, thus far, is closely associated with a descriptive classification of writing systems focusing on the linguistic level (phonemic, syllabic, morphemic) that the basic units of writing systems relate to – their main underlying criterion, thus, is ‘dominant level of representational mapping’ (cf. Joyce/Meletis in press). Such typologies have been used to show how writing systems function at their core as well as to highlight both similarities and differences between them. Arguably, however, due their narrow scope, many potentially relevant features and parallels remain blind spots.

These start already at the structural level, as the restricted focus on the relation between writing and language results in a disregard of systematic structural features that are intrinsic to writing systems, i.e., not determined by their relation to language. These include, for example, allography, i.e., systematic variation of variant units in writing, or graphotactics, the rules of how units of writing may combine to form larger units (such as written words, sentences, etc.). Notably, a restriction to structure dismisses paramount questions concerning the use of writing systems, e.g., how they are processed and used for communication, bringing to the fore psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic perspectives. Potential criteria for possible psycholinguistic typologies of writing include, for example, spacing between graphemes or written words, or the visual complexity exhibited by the script used for a writing system. A candidate for a sociolinguistic typology is the degree of normativity and prescriptivism characterizing a literate culture, which is established, among other things, by asking if and how the writing system in question is orthographically regulated and how this affects users’ literacy practices and ideologies pertaining to writing.

Since, in a comprehensive and integrated theory of writing, a writing system must always simultaneously be considered as a system with its own idiosyncratic features, a semiotic system relating to a given language, a graphic medium that must be physiologically and cognitively processed, and a communication tool and a cultural technique embedded in a given context and culture, structural, psycholinguistic, and sociolinguistic perspectives arguably should never be adopted completely divorced from each other (cf. Meletis 2020). This talk aims not only to present different structural and use-based typologies of writing that go beyond those brought forth by ‘traditional’ writing system typology but also to show how they are connected and interact with each other and, importantly, how this can increase our knowledge of the fundamental nature of writing.

References

- Joyce, Terry & Dimitrios Meletis (in press): Alternative criteria for writing system typology. Cross-linguistic observations from the German and Japanese writing systems. *Zeitschrift für Sprachwissenschaft* Special Issue.
- Meletis, Dimitrios (2020): *The nature of writing. A theory of grapholinguistics* (= Grapholinguistics and Its Applications; 3). Brest: Fluxus Editions. DOI: 10.36824/2020-meletis.