Universality and diversity in writing systems: What can a universal model of writing systems achieve?

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According to Weingarten (2011:*passim*), writing systems are defined as ordered pairs of languages$_L$ and scripts$_S$, e.g. English WS(English$_L$, Latin$_S$), where graphematic rules relate linguistic units (phonemes, morphemes, etc.) to units of scripts. An orthography, on the other hand, is an external standardization of the possibilities of such a system that (often arbitrarily) selects normatively correct spellings, rendering e.g. <fox> correct and <*foks> incorrect. Starting with Neef (2015:*passim*), a multimodular model of writing systems has been proposed that includes language systems and graphematics as necessary modules, with orthography as an optional module. Aspects related to the material substance, embodied by scripts, are mostly neglected.

Building on these advances in grapholinguistics, the present contribution attempts to further the theoretical understanding of writing systems by achieving two things:

(1) It modifies Neef's alphabetocentric model to account for all types of writing systems. The result is a new model that underlines the universal mechanisms that are the basis for all written language. In this context, not only the modules of script and graphematics are generalized, but the universality of the central units 'graph' and 'grapheme' and their parallelism with other linguistic units (mainly 'phone' and 'phoneme', cf. Lockwood 2001:*passim*) must also be addressed.

(2) This process of generalization leads to the second aim of the talk: to critically reflect on general models such as the proposed when considering the rich diversity of writing systems (for the same question concerning languages, see Evans and Levinson 2009:*passim*). Questions that arise are: What is the point of the high level of abstraction needed for such models – and what can they explain? Do the benefits they offer outweigh the shortcomings?

In addition to the grapheme, the module of orthography will serve as an example to illustrate the tensions between universality and diversity. How can *orthography* be defined in such diverse systems as Chinese, German, Thai, Arabic, etc.? If there is a common denominator, what is it? Is it of theoretical value?

To close the talk, the focus will shift from the linguistics of writing systems to the psychological and cognitive aspects: When considering for example models of reading, are universal models (cf. Frost 2012:*passim*) helpful or do they distort the reality of processing diverse systems? Is there cognitive unity in written diversity?

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