

Grapholinguistics as an interdisciplinary framework for the synchronic and diachronic study of writing

Dimitrios Meletis, *University of Vienna*

Grammatology, graphonomy, graphem(at)ics, writing systems research – many labels exist for a field that emerged in linguistics only towards the second half of the last century. They are by no means synonyms as they stem from different paradigms and research traditions. What they have in common, however, is that they address (different) facets of the topic of writing. These aspects are subsumed under the broad heading of *grapholinguistics* – a designation that is already well-established in German-language research (as ‘Schriftlinguistik’) and is now gaining traction in the Anglophone world as well. Grapholinguistics is defined as an interdisciplinary field that covers not only descriptive questions concerning the structure of writing but also adopts sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic, as well as several other perspectives and methodologies to account for questions of the use of writing (cf. Meletis/Dürscheid 2022).

One of the main aims of grapholinguistic research as outlined in Meletis (2020) is the establishment of a framework for the systematic investigation of writing systems, which in a first step entails the proposal of descriptive concepts. Notably, such a framework must be maximally inclusive and thus capable of accounting for all writing systems – not just alphabets and not just modern (i.e., living) writing systems. Against this background, a trichotomy of subbranches has been proposed as the core of a comparative descriptive grapholinguistics: (1) *graphetics*, studying all aspects concerning the materiality of writing; (2) *graphematics*, examining the linguistic and communicative functions of writing, and (3) *orthography*, dealing with the normative aspects of writing such as the regulation of written structures. With a combination of concepts from these three subbranches and an acknowledgement of their interaction, a thorough description of various writing systems can be achieved, allowing a comparison and typologization that moves beyond the mere question of which linguistic levels (phoneme, syllable, morpheme, ...) their basic units predominantly correspond with (cf. Joyce/Meletis 2021).

Furthermore, in enriching the resulting descriptive accounts of writing systems with usage-based perspectives as well as extralinguistic evidence and thus complementing a descriptive theory of writing with an explanatory component, a fuller picture of writing as a structural and communicative phenomenon emerges. This search for explanations can be guided by four categories that assess how ‘well’ writing systems meet different criteria or fulfil given functions: the (I) *systematic fit* evaluates how systematic a writing system is in and of itself, the (II) *linguistic fit* asks how well a writing system suits the structure(s) of the language it is used for, the (III) *processing fit* assesses how well a writing system suits the physiological and cognitive capacities of human readers and writers, and the (IV) *sociocultural fit* explores whether a writing system fulfils a literate community’s sociocommunicative and cultural needs and wishes.

This talk will give an overview of the mentioned descriptive and explanatory components of grapholinguistics and discuss their implications for both the (re-)assessment of existing research on modern and ancient writing systems as well as the future of their study.

Joyce, Terry, and Dimitrios Meletis (2021). Alternative criteria for writing system typology. Cross-linguistic observations from the German and Japanese writing systems. *Zeitschrift für Sprachwissenschaft* 40.3: 257–77. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zfs-2021-2030>

Meletis, Dimitrios (2020). *The nature of writing. A theory of grapholinguistics* (Grapholinguistics and Its Applications 3). Brest: Fluxus Editions. <https://doi.org/10.36824/2020-meletis>

Meletis, Dimitrios, and Christa Dürscheid (2022). *Writing systems and their use. An overview of grapholinguistics* (Trends in Linguistics. Studies and Monographs 369). Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Mouton. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110757835>