Types of iconicity in phonographic writing systems

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Iconicity remains an understudied topic in grapholinguistics (but cf. Glück 2011; Mersmann 2015; Christin 2016 for first approaches); this is a missed chance given that writing is a fertile ground for the development and analysis of different types of iconicity – such as imagic, diagrammatic, and metaphoric iconicity (Nöth 2001).

Unlike speech and sign language, writing is a secondary semiotic system and thus – from a structural point of view – a secondary modality: written units relate not directly to extralinguistic referents but are instead always associated with units of primarily spoken languages (or, in rare cases of notation systems such as SignWriting or HamNoSys, units of sign languages, Braem 2012). However, this glottographic association does also establish (if only indirectly) a relationship between units of writing and extralinguistic reality: a written word such as <cat> relates not only to the morpheme *cat* and its meaning, but, by doing so, also to the mental concept 'cat' and potentially to a specific specimen of this category.

These intricate relationships between (1) writing as a secondary, (2) speech and signing as primary modalities of language, as well as (3) extralinguistic meaning and the fact that iconicity operates between all three result in several layers of complexity in studying iconicity in writing. Thus, while speech or sign language may be iconic with respect to extralinguistic reality (Perniss, Thompson & Vigliocco 2010; Dingemanse, Perlman & Perniss 2020), writing may be iconic either with respect to (a) itself (e. g., when visually similar units have similar functions, such as the consonant shapes in Cree syllabics), (b) the other modalities of language (e. g., when the kinemes of sign language are pictographically approximated in SignWriting), or (c) extralinguistic referents (e. g., when a sign of writing resembles a tree). These possibilities are not mutually exclusive, and writing can be iconic in all these ways simultaneously, rendering it a multi-iconic modality and highly relevant object of research in the study of linguistic iconicity. Notably, here, iconicity is conceived of as a matter of degree that is dynamic and dependent on interpreters; thus, it is not an inherent structural feature but always in the eye of the beholder (Nänny 1999: 174; see also the perceptual study by Xiao & Treiman 2012).

As for the typology of writing systems, iconicity manifests differently in morphography and phonography. Morphographic graphemes relate to morphemes, meaning-bearing linguistic signs associating a form with a meaning; this meaning makes possible imagic iconic relations between graphemes, morphemes, and extralinguistic reality, such as in Chinese, Egyptian, or Mayan graphemes. This type of iconicity, often referred to as 'pictography', has received the most attention in the study of writing. Phonemes and syllables, however, are meaningless or 'empty' – what do they 'look' like, and can their acoustic form be iconically transposed to the graphic modality? Indeed, such a direct intermodal translation appears impossible (if we disregard graphic representations such as spectrograms, which are not regarded as 'writing'), which is why imagic iconicity assumes a marginal role in the study of phonographic iconicity.

This raises the general question of how and what kind(s) of iconicity occur(s) in phonographic writing systems – segmentaries as well as syllabaries. To provide an answer, the referential perspective implicitly adopted thus far must be extended: while writing systems are secondary, they are also full-fledged systems of their own. Thus, graphemes are not only in relations with other linguistic units such as phonemes but always also in complex relationships with each other, relationships which cannot be explained through recourse to (relations with or

dependencies on) other linguistic levels. These manifold relations bring to the fore the diagrammatic type of iconicity, in which "the similarity between the sign and its object is only a structural or relational one" (Nöth 2001: 21). Notably, the analysis of diagrammaticity in writing is complicated by writing's above-mentioned secondary nature, making for a complex web of relations and constituting multiple types of diagrammaticity: not only are graphemes related to each other, they are also related to phonological units. And to make everything more complex, these phonological units also partake in their own relationships with each other (independently of writing).

After providing a general overview of how iconicity can manifest in writing, this talk aims to provide a systematic (though selective) overview of what and how different types of iconicity occur in phonographic writing systems by discussing a variety of examples: (1) the well-described imagic iconicity in the Korean alphabet (Lee 2009; Kim 2011), with a focus on the central questions it raises regarding the general possibility and feasibility of pictography in phonographic writing (referring also to *Visible Speech*, Bell 1867); (2) the diagrammaticity in Cree syllabics, mostly voweled aksharik segmentaries (Gnanadesikan 2017), as well as the diagrammaticity inherent in Primus' (2004) assumption of form-function correlations in writing systems based on Roman script; and (3) the metaphoric iconicity constituted by the shape of certain Roman shapes in literary works (Nänny 1999) as well as types of typographic variation (such as cultural typographic mimicry, Meletis 2023). Furthermore, to expand the perspective from description to explanation, the final part of the talk is devoted to the cognitive and cultural foundations underlying the genesis and development of the different types of iconicity in writing (Jee, Tamariz & Shillcock 2022).

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