



**University of
Zurich**^{UZH}

**Zurich Open Repository and
Archive**

University of Zurich
University Library
Strickhofstrasse 39
CH-8057 Zurich
www.zora.uzh.ch

Year: 2020

On Being a Grapholinguist

Meletis, Dimitrios

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36824/2020-graf-mele>

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-210224>

Conference or Workshop Item

Published Version

Originally published at:

Meletis, Dimitrios (2020). On Being a Grapholinguist. In: Grapholinguistics in the 21st Century, Online, 17 June 2020 - 15 June 2020. Fluxus Editions, 125-141.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36824/2020-graf-mele>

On Being a Grapholinguist

Dimitrios Meletis

Abstract. In this essay, I discuss the challenges of (engaging in) grapholinguistics, a young field that focuses on writing, a topic mostly marginalized within ‘mainstream’ linguistics to this day. Issues that are raised include the lack of writing-related classes in linguistic study programs, institutionalization (e.g., departments or chairs for grapholinguistics), and pertinent publication and presentation outlets. Furthermore, the essay highlights problems caused by the interdisciplinarity of grapholinguistics, including linguistic, theoretical, methodological, and terminological boundaries that must be crossed. These issues are partially addressed through a personal lens, i.e. my own ‘journey’ in the field thus far. This allows me to speak from (some) experience not only about the risks of focusing on a topic at the periphery of many disciplines and some of the setbacks this entails but also about my motivation behind proposing a (sketch of a) theory of writing in my PhD thesis that—based on linguistic Naturalness Theory—aims to offer a unified descriptive and explanatory framework for studying writing systems and writing in general. It also gives me a chance to argue that writing, which can be studied with many of the concepts firmly established in other fields of linguistics (as well as additional writing-specific concepts), is central to every language that is spoken, signed and written in literate language communities and should therefore be an integral rather than an optional part of linguistic theories and paradigms in general. Essentially, this essay highlights why doing research in grapholinguistics should be embraced rather than justified.

The *Grapholinguistics in the 21st Century* conference was a chance for many people from different disciplines¹ to get together and present their writing-related research—research whose breadth is showcased by the contributions in the present proceedings. Interestingly, despite the encouraging vibrance of such conferences (to which one can also count the workshops of the *Association of Written Language and Literacy*), even well into the 21st century, the perception of a coherent discipline dealing with all

Dimitrios Meletis  0000-0002-8889-6459
Schönberggasse 9, 8001 Zurich, Switzerland
E-mail: dimitrios.meletis@outlook.com

1. According to the conference website (<https://grafematik2020.sciencesconf.org/>, December 7th, 2020), these were computer science and information technology, linguistics, communication, pedagogy, psychology, history, and the social sciences.

Y. Haralambous (Ed.), *Grapholinguistics in the 21st Century 2020. Proceedings*
Grapholinguistics and Its Applications (ISSN: 2681-8566, e-ISSN: 2534-5192), Vol. 4.
Fluxus Editions, Brest, 2021, pp. 125–141. <https://doi.org/10.36824/2020-graf-mele>
ISBN: 978-2-9570549-6-1, e-ISBN: 978-2-9570549-8-5

questions pertaining to writing, i.e., a ‘grapholinguistics’ (or grammatology, or graphonomy, or whatever one prefers to call it, really),² is everything but widespread. And this is not only a terminological problem—yes, researchers invested in writing (often unproductively) disagree on how to call such a discipline (in English³) and the concepts studied by it and spend a lot of time arguing about labels (cf. a note on terminology below)—but, more importantly, an issue deeply rooted in the history of linguistics and the (mis)treatment of writing as an object of research. It is also a problem caused by the unwillingness to move beyond one’s own disciplinary boundaries and outside of one’s comfort zone. In this essay, I will reflect on the discipline and its slow but steady emancipation, partially through the lens of my personal journey in it.⁴

My personal interest in writing was already strong when I started my studies in linguistics in 2010. Soon, however, I had to realize that writing was not covered in the classes I took (at the University of Graz, Austria), and sadly (but unsurprisingly), there also existed no classes specifically dedicated to the topic of writing. Yet, my interest persisted, and as soon as I had mastered the basics of linguistics, I insisted on working on writing-related questions, having to do so under the pretext of other disciplines so that my professors would tolerate it. As a result, the first thesis that I wrote was psycholinguistic in nature—but it focused on the comma. The second thesis likewise incorporated a psycholinguistic perspective, if only partially—it dealt primarily with the formal and material aspects of writing, something that, according

2. As I argue elsewhere (cf. Meletis, 2020a), the term *grapholinguistics* highlights that, following the narrow definition of writing—in which it is defined exclusively as a system relating to language (and not ideas, referents, etc.)—writing is always tied to language, which is of course the subject at the center of linguistics. Notably, this does not change no matter from which perspective (or discipline) one studies writing and thus does not contradict the field’s interdisciplinarity. Also, the term is similar to terms such as *sociolinguistics* and *psycholinguistics* that also designate interdisciplinary fields with questions of language at their core. However, unlike them, grapholinguistics does not merge only two disciplines (like psycholinguistics, which is at the interface of psychology and linguistics, for example) but the *grapho-* is meant to include all disciplines interested in writing. Lastly, German *Grapholinguistik* was given as a synonym of *Schriftlinguistik* by the term’s founder, Dieter Nerius (cf. Nerius, 1988, p. 1), which *grapholinguistics* acknowledges.

3. In German, there is no terminological debate: the term *Schriftlinguistik* (see below) has been adopted and is, at this point, well-established.

4. I am well aware that it is wholly uncommon—especially for a young and little-established researcher—to write an essay reflecting on a discipline (and a personal one on top of that). But when Yannis Haralambous, organizer of the conference and editor of these proceedings, invited me to do so, I still agreed because it is a chance to share my views on a topic that is, evidently, of personal importance to me. Of course, all views here are my own, and (however general they are phrased) they are based on my own experience in the field; I do not mean to speak for others.

to the structuralist-oriented branch of German research on writing, is treated by a field called *graphetics* (a term in part analogous to *phonetics*).⁵ After that, at least in my department, I was already known as ‘that writing guy’ (word does get around quickly if your interests are ‘non-traditional’). Unsurprisingly, for my PhD thesis, arguably the first big project in which one can (or better *must*) show academic independence, I had to go all the way (see below). All of this was, of course, only possible because my supervisors had a certain openness to (or even curiosity for) topics that were new and foreign to them and trusted that I knew what I was doing. The flip side of the coin is that as soon as they saw potential in me and believed I could advance to an academic career, they warned me about the risk or even aimlessness of devoting myself to a topic that (from their point of view) stands at the very periphery of linguistics, far removed from what is considered mainstream. As you are reading this, you already know how I decided.

Funnily, even if the predominant lack of writing-related classes in linguistics programs implies it, it is not as if linguistics has ignored writing completely. In 1952, with Gelb’s *A Study of Writing*, an important and influential book was published on the topic. In 1988, in the German-language area, the term *Schriftlinguistik* was first used (cf. Nerius and Augst, 1988). In 2002, a successful textbook on said *Schriftlinguistik* was released that has since been (re)incarnated in five editions (the latest being Dürscheid, 2016). In the late 1990’s, with the workshops of the *Association of Written Language and Literacy*, a writing-related conference series emerged and the first journal explicitly dedicated to writing was founded—*Written Language and Literacy*. In 2018, Peter T. Daniels, widely considered the most important scholar invested in historical and typological aspects of writing, published a book encompassing decades of his research. In 2019, an open-access book series was conceived that is explicitly devoted to grapholinguistics, *Grapholinguistics and Its Applications*. And in 2020, a chair for *Schriftlinguistik* was advertised at the University of Hamburg.

By only looking at this very selective list of highlights in the history of grapholinguistics, it is undeniable that there have been (and still are) many (ongoing) positive developments. Within the exclusive club of ‘graphologists’ (or whatever one might call them/us), that is. This exclusivity gets palpable when you attend a general linguistics conference, where it may happen that you’re treated as if you were an alien—by linguists who, of course, all know what a phoneme or a morpheme is (as do you), since that is uncontroversially considered required knowledge among linguists, but often have no idea about even the basic concepts of writing, which is again a symptom of the general lack of writing-related classes in the curricula of linguistic programs and the low status it oc-

5. A modified version of this thesis was published as a book, Meletis (2015).

cupies in linguistics in general. Concerning said status, it certainly does not help that one of the few journals specifically devoted to writing, *Writing Systems Research*, was ceased in 2020 (see below for other journals). In a note in the final issue, the publisher states as a reason “difficult decisions about where and how [publishers, editors, and authors] focus their attention” and thanks “the readers and authors from across the world, for your support and commitment to the Journal’s vision of creating a community around shared interests in writing systems” (Routledge and Francis, 2019, p. 239). Well, a community that now has lost an important outlet for publishing its research. Let me explain why this is by no means a trivial loss, again with a personal example.

For one paper that I wrote, I intentionally attempted to find a journal that was *not* specifically focused on writing since I believe once in a while it is important to underline in the context of general linguistic journals that writing is a phenomenon that people are studying (and thereby show that it is worthy of linguistic study). I will not name the journals here, but the paper was rejected three times. The first two times, the editors had not read the paper and had not sent it out to reviewers. In the first of those cases, the editor asked me whether I had even familiarized myself with the content the journal publishes (I had) and explained to me that, even though this is a journal about reading and writing, and structural, i.e., descriptive works on writing systems had been published there before, my research did not fit the journal. The editor of the second journal, a fairly young open access journal, responded almost immediately that my paper sounded very interesting but that it unfortunately would not fit the journal. Honestly, it does get a bit frustrating when you are rejected not on the grounds of poor quality of your work but because of what you chose to work on. At the third journal, finally, the editors did read my paper, and according to the editor who then sent me the rejection, they had discussed my paper and came to the conclusion that it is interesting and good but does not fit the journal—it would rather be a good fit for a handbook (well, show me a handbook and I’ll gladly submit it there). I was on the verge of giving up when the fourth journal (fortunately also a general linguistics journal) sent my paper out to reviewers. A few months later I was sent two of the most positive reviews I have ever received, and soon after, my paper was published. This leads me back to what I said before: that *Writing Systems Research* was ceased is not trivial. We need journals for (purely) grapholinguistic research. I want to complement this with an example that additionally highlights the relevance of grapholinguistic conferences: as James Myers, whose illuminating and innovative work on the Chinese writing system was published in Myers (2019) and, in my opinion, is an invaluable contribution to grapholinguistics, noted anecdotally at *Grapholinguistics in the 21st Century*, a paper in which he aimed to present his writing-related research was rejected at a linguistics conference. The first negative review

(which is available to read on Myers' website),⁶ whose overall evaluation was "strong reject," states, among other things, that "[t]here is no parallel between orthographies, created by man and to be learnt/taught explicitly, on the one hand, and human language, which is precisely acquired by any child without explicit learning/teaching" (cf. also Daniels, 1991 for a similar view from—arguably—*within* grapholinguistics). Personally, I would give a 'strong reject' to this incredibly reductive and simplistic view. The second review, whose overall evaluation is "reject," plainly reads: "This paper does not deal with linguistic matters, it only discusses graphic and orthographic points." It is a slap in the face that general linguists' horizons can be so utterly limited and that writing so often is not considered a 'linguistic matter'. This is why we *need* grapholinguistic journals and conferences. However, at the same time—however frustrating the process may be—it is also paramount that research on writing becomes more visible also in outlets that are reserved for general linguistics and the fields that are uncontroversially believed to be a part of it. Writing is no marginal phenomenon, certainly not in our everyday lives but also not in many scientific disciplines, no matter how one puts it. Why, then, is studying it marginalized so much?

A further issue that an emerging grapholinguistics faces is that the diverse backgrounds brought to the table by different researchers are not always seen as a strength but instead lead to fragmentation and often unfruitful debates within the 'discipline'. No one would deny that writing is a complex phenomenon and as such can be comprehensively treated only by a combination of multiple disciplines. In this vein, it is paramount to keep in mind that even though one (understandably) often thinks one's own perspective is the most relevant one, other perspectives also have a *raison d'être*. Also, different perspectives usually do not exclude let alone negate one another. When a scholar carries out psycholinguistic research on writing, this does not mean that sociolinguistic research on writing is not also important. In turn, when one works on sociolinguistic questions, this does not mean descriptive structural questions are irrelevant. I have experienced this first-hand: much of my work, starting with my description of the materiality-oriented field of graphetics and moving on to attempts at defining comparative concepts such as *grapheme* and *allography*, can undeniably be interpreted as being influenced by the structuralist paradigm (although I would not call myself a structuralist). This has been criticized by sociolinguists despite the fact that nowhere in my work do I state that sociolinguistic research is unimportant or unnecessary (because I don't, in fact, believe that it is unimportant). One can strive to descriptively systematize structural concepts and terminology that concern writing and still believe that,

6. Both reviews can be found at http://personal.ccu.edu.tw/~lngmyers/CharFormBorrowing_Reviews.txt (October 21st, 2020).

since writing is at its core a cultural technique and a way of communicating, scribal practices of users in literate communities are of course a form of social action and of the utmost importance. In other words, the first of those questions does in no way devalue the second. Indeed, both of them are indispensable and should be *combined* (sometimes unthinkable for scholars deeply rooted in a particular paradigm) rather than secluded from one another. Of course, through our academic socialization, we all have come to position ourselves in specific paradigms within our respective disciplines. But when we all study the same phenomenon, we need to make sure the walls of these paradigms and disciplines are permeable.

Conferences like *Grapholinguistics in the 21st Century* offer opportunities to gather and share with each other respective expertises and perspectives on writing. The question, now, is whether one wants to stop at being in awe for such different perspectives (usually displayed by expressing gratefulness to presenters right after they've finished presenting, e.g., by saying "Thank you for this interesting talk, I've never thought about it that way/I've never even considered this/this was completely new to me") or rather wants to incorporate them into their own research—either through collaboration or through going the extra mile and immersing oneself in them. This is not to say that either of those alternatives is the 'right' one. But it is almost trivial to state that an interdisciplinary grapholinguistics can benefit more when we cease to (only) do 'our own thing'. This, of course, is much easier said than done. A challenge one must face in this vein is breaking through language barriers. A literal language barrier is constituted by the fact that valuable research on writing has been published in countless languages, including German, Russian, French, Italian, Japanese, Korean, and many more. In the past, this has led to unproductive discourses due to a lack of reception of non-English literature⁷ (of which I myself am guilty, with the exception of German-language literature, which as an L1 reader of German I did of course consider). A metaphorical language barrier is erected by specific methods and terminology that are used in different disciplines. As concerns the future of grapholinguistics, researchers can contribute to improving this situation. Firstly, by publishing important findings (also) in English. I want to emphasize that this does *not* mean one should cease to publish in one's own language (as the dominance of English as an academic *lingua franca* is indeed to be scrutinized); yet, if one wants ideas to be adopted more globally (or even noticed in the first place), at least key points need to be made available and dis-

7. This leads to situations like Peter T. Daniels' rejection of a structural graphem(at)ics (Daniels, 1991), which, however, had been firmly and uncontroversially established in the German-language grapholinguistic realm (cf., for example, Günther, 1988).

persed in English so that other scholars become aware of the original work in whatever language it was published (cf. for terminological discrepancies when publishing in English below). The second problem, unfortunately, is not as easily solved given that we cannot simply start to—put very crassly, apologies—‘dumb down’ research in order to make it more easily comprehensible to scholars foreign to our discipline. At least not if we strive to publish it in (conservative) outlets that are positioned firmly in the centers of respective disciplines, which of course in this day and age is vital for our careers. But then there’s *Written Language and Literacy*, for example, or *Scripta*, or *Visible Language*—journals that are openly interdisciplinary and that publish research that may require less specialist knowledge in a given area. Research that speaks to a broader audience.

As I mentioned above, if one is not already tenured (and maybe even then), devoting oneself to grapholinguistics entails a few risks. One of them is that by wanting to be part of many clubs, you’re not really part of any one of them. With one exception (see above), there are no grapholinguistic chairs (that I know of) and it is unlikely that this will drastically change in the near future. When it comes to job profiles, thus, no matter whether you are originally a linguist, psychologist, anthropologist, computer scientist, etc., when applying for academic positions, grapholinguistic research is not ‘worth’ the same as research tackling mainstream questions at the center of these disciplines. It is sometimes seen as icing on the cake—a special interest or even a ‘hobby’ (cf. Meletis, 2020a). It is none of those things. It is the study of one of if not *the* most important inventions and technologies of humankind that has implications for a myriad of fields. However, as long as this lack of institutionalization exists (which starts with the above-mentioned lack of writing-related classes), scholars who engage only or predominantly in grapholinguistics (such as yours truly) will remain exceptions (who will likely struggle to find suitable positions in academia).⁸

When looking at the last few paragraphs, it appears that musing about grapholinguistics tends to turn pessimistic fairly quickly, which raises the question: why even be(come) a graphologist? Well, let’s start with the most important (if of course subjective) point: it is an in-

8. At this point, I have to admit that when I was asked for career advice once (I was very surprised that someone would come to me for that), I suggested the person embrace their interest for writing *but* make sure their research is also firmly rooted in another field—such as psycholinguistics—and labeled primarily as such—i.e., psycholinguistic research—in order to ensure that the person has better chances of getting a job down the road. So I am guilty of acting in a way that contradicts most of what I state in this essay. But while I myself ‘took the risk’ of concentrating on the subject of writing and may not get a job at some point for this very reason, I did not want to be responsible for someone else not succeeding—even if that means there will never be many people who ‘just’ or primarily do grapholinguistics.

credibly fascinating field. Ironically, some of the reasons for this were already named above—but as challenges of grapholinguistics: it is an utterly interdisciplinary and, technically, still nascent field. The former results in the fact that there are countless questions one can ask about writing from many different (combinations of) perspectives, and the latter means that many of those questions have actually not yet been studied. Grapholinguistics, to a large degree, is uncharted territory. For scholars who see research as a discovery process (probably most of them), this is a very attractive quality. Don't get me wrong: many aspects of writing have of course already been illuminated, including large portions of its history, many facets of its processing (i.e., reading and writing, although research to this day remains largely alphabocentric, cf. Share, 2014), and even the structure of many major and some minor writing systems (cf., for example, the many chapters in Daniels and Bright, 1996 or Günther and Ludwig, 1994). What is missing in this impressive accumulation of research, however, is a guiding thread, which one could argue is the substantial equivalent (and simultaneously symptom) of the lack of institutionalization and the fact that everyone is doing 'their own thing'. A guiding thread would need to address questions such as: how is the history of writing connected to how humans process written words? How is processing affected by the structure of writing systems? Questions like these require the establishment of links between different disciplines (linguistics, psychology, sociology, cognitive sciences, computer sciences, etc.) and the consideration of diverse types of data. However, even within a single of the listed areas, links are often scarce: when linguistic descriptions of individual writing systems stand side by side and are not put into a larger context, for example, we are wasting the potential that these otherwise invaluable descriptions may have for comparison and the establishment of a unified conceptual and terminological framework that is, for this very reason, still lacking (cf. Meletis, 2019 for the specific example of the concept of *grapheme*). Since new research should be informed by past research and not everyone who works on a specific question has the time to excessively search for everything that has been said about a topic from different perspectives, what we also require but largely lack thus far is, at a meta-level, a historiography of grapholinguistics—which is also a fascinating area and one that I aim to attend to in the future.

Turning to existing grapholinguistic research to discover commonalities and systematize them in order to arrive at the above-mentioned guiding thread is in itself certainly not a 'flashy' endeavor. It is definitely not as innovative as carrying out your own research (and data collection) to answer your own (new) exciting questions. However, it is undeniably necessary in establishing a firm theoretical ground for grapholinguistics. Thus, not only innovation but also systematization is vital to the advancement of grapholinguistics (and any field, for that

matter). And it should be emphasized that when it is successful, systematization can actually enable innovation. Which leads back to my own grapholinguistic ‘journey’: At one point—arguably also due to my affinity for theory—I realized my biggest goal would be to systematize some of what was already there, i.e., to take a step back and see the bigger picture, to connect dots that were yet unconnected. Years ago, I had stumbled across the many compelling reviews semiotician W. C. Watt had written about important works on writing. In one of them (Watt, 1998) he assessed that there was no ‘theory of writing’ yet. In other words, he, too, observed that much great work had been done to study writing from many angles, but the fact that scholars from diverse disciplines did not seem to actively notice research from disciplines other than their own held back the development of what Watt termed a theory of writing—a theory that does not exist to this day. A central quote in Watt’s (1998, p. 118) review further specifies what kind of theory he envisioned, “a theory that would explain [...] why each [...] writing system is the way it is, instead of some other way, and why all [...] writing systems have in common what they have in common.” This quote obviously shifts the perspective from description—*how* writing systems are structured—to the additional and more elaborate perspective of explanation—*why* they are structured that way. This desideratum of an explanatory theory of writing became one of the driving forces behind my PhD thesis.

The second driving force was my encounter with an—at least nowadays—little-known linguistic theory, Naturalness Theory, which is actually a collection of subtheories, the main ones of which deal with phonology and morphology. As mentioned above, during my studies, I seized every opportunity to work on writing-related topics, so my thinking had already been tuned to ‘what could/does this mean for writing?’ when I encountered Naturalness Theory. And indeed, this theory appeared to offer so much of what was needed for a prospective theory of writing: it describes structures *and* asks how they affect processing while also considering sociocommunicative needs and practices. Also, what was immediately attractive was the explicit distinction of a universal level, a typological level, and a system-dependent level of analysis. Grapholinguistic research has been carried out predominantly at the system-specific level, partially also at the typological level (which, however, is not to be reduced to the assumption of writing system typologies, which have been proposed quite productively, cf. Joyce and Borgwaldt, 2011). The universal level, by contrast, has remained largely unstudied. All of these facets of Naturalness Theory, of course, do not sound unique to linguists, as they are characteristic of the functionalist paradigm (the most prominent approaches of which are, nowadays, usage-based approaches). Furthermore, what has been frequently scrutinized when it comes to the naturalist paradigm is the eponymous notion of ‘naturalness’ itself. On the surface, because of its evaluative na-

ture as an everyday term, it appears to be a potentially controversial concept, but in fact it is roughly the opposite of ‘markedness’ (as established in markedness theories) and, in usage-based terms, simply means ‘easy to process for users’. Thus, searching for what is ‘natural’ in writing—which is important for the discovery of universals of writing—does not contradict the fact that writing is, of course, an artifact, a *cultural* technique that differs in fundamental respects from language *per se*. It is rather a search for natural features *in* or *about* the cultural and artificial—features that were presumably introduced by prolonged use by humans (and their physiology, cognition, etc.).

In short, being familiarized with Naturalness Theory was the second piece of the puzzle that led me to the topic of my PhD thesis. Interestingly, two scholars (cf. Munske, 1994, Baroni, 2011) had already attempted to (partially) transfer naturalist concepts to writing. It was my goal to take this further. The first challenge in doing so, however, was that the original linguistic branches given the naturalist treatment—phonology and morphology—were already well-described when Natural Phonology (cf., exemplarily, Donegan and Stampe, 2009) and Natural Morphology (cf., exemplarily, Dressler, Mayerthaler, Panagl, and Wurzel, 1987), the respective main subbranches of Naturalness Theory, were conceived. The same cannot be said for grapholinguistics. What I have commented on at great length in various publications is that there is no unified descriptive—terminological as well as conceptual—framework for describing diverse writing systems. Such a framework would allow comparisons, but it appears that up until a while ago, scholars of writing adhered to a particularist view (cf. Meletis accepted) and thus believed the diversity of writing systems made the definition of grapholinguistic concepts (such as grapheme, allography, graphotactics) unfeasible.⁹ A general shift in perspective that could help in this respect is the one from narrow descriptive categories to looser comparative concepts (cf. Haspelmath, 2010). Graphemes of different writing systems, for example, have to share several core features which are thus inherent to the definition of the grapheme. When the grapheme is conceived of as a comparative concept, now, the details that go beyond these core features are not set in stone. This means, for example, that the obvious fact that Chinese and English graphemes differ in some respects ceases to be a counterargument against the feasibility of defin-

9. Indeed, when considering major works on writing systems such as Coulmas (2003), Rogers (2005), Gnanadesikan (2009), Sampson (2015), or Daniels (2018), it becomes obvious that they all juxtapose different systems (mostly by treating them in dedicated chapters). Thus, an individual, system-specific perspective clearly dominates, sometimes with contrastive undertones (i.e., alphabets differ from abjads in these respects: ...), whereas a comparative perspective is seldom adopted. Comparison, however, is needed for the definition of grapholinguistic concepts such as *grapheme*.

ing a grapheme in the first place. The same can be argued for other graphological concepts. Being a theoretician at heart and seeking order, it is those descriptive comparative concepts that I first turned to before turning to explanation, which was my main goal. These concepts are in many ways preliminary and likely error-prone because at this stage, they have not incorporated all diverse types of writing systems. My personal aim was to at least take into account major representatives of each type of writing system (following Daniels' 2017 typology), which inevitably leaves many more marginal systems and exceptions unaccounted for. (Which—if you feel addressed at this point—is where you could step in.)

Explanation, then, is of course the even trickier part. According to Naturalness Theory (and many other functional theories), explanations can be attained with the help of external, extralinguistic evidence. In the case of writing, the various forms in which this evidence manifests itself are manifold and come from the most diverse fields, which is of course a challenge for a person who is most often only trained in one field (see above). Indeed, explaining why writing systems are the way they are—as Watt envisioned—is an incredibly ambitious endeavor. What is a prerequisite for it to be successful is knowing *how* one could go about in finding it out. Which is why, with my published PhD thesis *The Nature of Writing: A Theory of Grapholinguistics* (Meletis, 2020a), I am not offering a full-fledged theory of writing but a sketch of a theory of writing, a roadmap of steps necessary to arrive at a theory of writing and, in the process, I actually attempt to take some of those steps myself. This sketch will need to be extended, revised, and, most importantly, filled in with data from writing systems that have not yet been included, as mentioned above.

The basis for explanation is also the very core of usage-based approaches to linguistics: the structure of language and the use of language (and its users) interact. Accordingly, a truly comprehensive theory must consist of a descriptive part and an explanatory part. Considering both structure and use also accounts for the fact that grapholinguistics is interdisciplinary. Structure is mainly attended to by linguistics (or, more generally, semiotics), different facets of use—among them processing and communication—are studied by psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics, among other fields. In short, a theory of writing has to treat writing *simultaneously* as a graphic (i.e., visual and/or tactile) semiotic system that relates to language, a form of data transmission that needs to be processed, a medium of communication, and a cultural technique. Of course, writing can also be studied from only one of those perspectives at a given time, but arguably, a theory of writing must be capable of accounting for all of its functions and 'identities', which leads to an assumption of four intricately interacting 'supercategories' of criteria (which I have termed 'fits', cf. Meletis, 2018; 2020a) that are of system-

atic, semiotic/descriptive, psycholinguistic, and sociolinguistic nature. These supercategories are generally useful in treating individual writing systems or comparing them with one another—but already from an explanatory rather than a purely descriptive perspective.

What I want to emphasize here without reiterating everything that is stated in my thesis is: a theory of writing does not need to be constructed from scratch. And Naturalness Theory is of course not the only theory that can be used as a basic framework for a theory of writing—indeed, a mixture of different theories might actually be the best solution. Transferring concepts from an existing linguistic theory to the study of writing is in a way innovative in that the fewest linguistic theories explicitly treat writing. In a nutshell, the dominant linguistic paradigms largely ignore writing, to this day. This means that grapholinguistics is not just considered ‘niche’ because the object of writing is seen as marginal but also because major theories have not even attempted to include it, which is a shame since writing can be studied with many of the useful tools that have been established in linguistics. For this reason it is not understandable (to me) that linguists often appear to know so little about writing or simply do not care about it: writing, in so many respects, is just like language—only in a microcosm (cf. Meletis, 2020a). This goes against the detrimental misconception (which was cited above) that there are no parallels between language and writing because the former is acquired naturally while the latter is taught. Indeed, the similarities between language and writing are actually unsurprising given that writing, as one of three modalities of language (the others being spoken language and sign(ed) language), *is* language.¹⁰ Also, languages are semiotic systems, as are writing systems. A crucial difference between them is that writing is a much more manageable phenomenon than language. Reasons for this include that there are fewer types of writing systems than language types and, of course, fewer writing systems in total than languages of the world. The history of writing is also much shorter than the history of language, its development much more reconstructable, since writing is not fleeting like speech and we have records of it that go back thousands of years. All of this makes writing an attractive object of research. And given that the majority of linguistic research relies on writing (cf. the *written language bias*, Linell, 1982), it is hypocritical for linguist(ic)s to continue excluding it. I want to go even further to show how fundamentally writing affects us (its users) as well as language: in my next grapholinguistic/sociolinguistic research project, I will investigate how the structure of different writing systems (such as Norwegian, Japanese, German) as well as specific sociolinguistic embeddings/circumstances

10. Take the concept of allography: its different types that are found in the world’s writing systems behave exactly like allophony and allomorphy (cf. Meletis, 2020b), and no one would deny that phonology and morphology are parts of language.

of literacy and scribal practices influence categories of normativity that help users evaluate as (in)correct, (in)appropriate, etc. not only writing but language in general. In a nutshell: whether there is an orthographic relativity to linguistic normativity (cf., for a similar question, the interesting-looking new book by Hye Pae, cf. Pae, 2020). What is clear already at this point—and few people would dispute this—is that in literate cultures, writing has been a game-changer. It is naïve to believe that comprehensive linguistic theories can afford to ignore it (cf., in this context, for the extreme psycholinguistic/cognitive position that units of language such as the phoneme, word, and sentence, are constituted by writing, Davidson, 2019).

While there used to be no grapholinguistic community (at least on a global scale, as there did exist local communities such as several writing-related groups in Germany in the 1980's), I am happy to observe that this has changed, and an international community is slowly starting to form itself—not least because of conferences like *Grapholinguistics in the 21st Century* or the workshops of the *Association of Written Language and Literacy*. Since we are few (at least in comparison with communities in other linguistic subfields)—and this may sound overly emotive—we must stick together, also to exude some unity and coherence to outsiders of the field. Thus, I am urging everyone who is interested in writing from any given perspective or discipline to feel included in this community, regardless of whether one agrees with the label or not. In the end, it does not matter whether we call this endeavor 'grapholinguistics'—it is our shared interest in writing that counts, and everyone who studies writing brings something to the table that potentially enriches the field. However, in order to work together, as outlined above, we must (be willing to) cross linguistic, theoretical, and methodological boundaries. Diversity is a strength, not an obstacle. And I am hoping for or—phrased more positively—looking forward to witnessing (and also participating in) many cross-disciplinary collaborations in the future.

A final note on terminology and openness: I am not saying we should not engage in fruitful discussions about certain terms—provided these discussions also bear on the conceptual level of the terms and are not purely terminological. Thus, it is justified to discuss whether there is such a thing as a grapheme while it is unproductive to fight (at least extensively) over how to call it when both arguing parties actually agree on the concept behind it. Since grapholinguistics subsumes so many fields, perspectives, and academic cultures and traditions, it is inevitable that some terms may not be accepted by everyone right from the start. But what I want to argue for here is that one should still be open to them. Let me provide two examples: the term *graphetics*, I was told, because of the *-etics* and the emics/etics dichotomy it connotes, will be dismissed by sociolinguists who believe that the material and formal appearance of writing also has functions (which of course it does), and it will be rejected to

such a degree that—and I was told this by someone standing at the threshold of grapholinguistics and sociolinguistics—sociolinguists will not read a book when it lists *graphetics* as a subject in its table of contents. This, however, would preclude them from finding out that the term may be defined in a manner that includes functional aspects and accounts for all sorts of questions that pertain to the materiality of writing, not just formal and structural ones (as the term admittedly suggests). This is what I mean by ‘openness’, or the lack of it, to be precise. However, being open also means being willing to rethink or abandon certain terms when other perspectives or suggestions come along—such as when a term is proposed that is demonstrably terminologically more inclusive than *graphetics*.

A second example of this concerns the term *orthography*. In anglophone literature, it is largely used in a descriptive sense, sometimes as a synonym of writing system. I have argued in some places (e.g., Meletis, 2018; 2020a) that *orthography* should not be used in this descriptive sense as it more fittingly denotes the prescriptive regulation of a writing system (and, thus, only part of a writing system, which means the two terms are not synonymous), cf. Greek *ὀρθός orthós* ‘right, true (also: straight, erect)’. This is admittedly a hard pill to swallow for people who have become accustomed to using *orthography* descriptively (a perspective for which other traditions have used terms like German *Graphematik*, Italian *grafematica*, or French *graphématique*, which in English is of course *graphematics*). I’ve been told repeatedly that this distinction between orthography and graphematics is Germano-centric as it only pertains to German with its external orthographic regulator (the *Council for German Orthography*) that curtails the theoretically possible variants provided by the graphematics of the writing system. Indeed, the perspective I am coming from is germanophone, and in German, the distinction between *Graphematik* and *Orthographie* has a long tradition. This conceptual distinction, however, is by no means only useful or even necessary for German. There are external orthographic regulations also for the writing systems of Spanish, Norwegian, Dutch, French, Italian, Korean, etc. Thus, it is actually the other way around: insisting that orthography is a descriptive term is Anglo-centric. English is an ‘outlier’ writing system not only when it comes to reading research (cf. Share, 2008) but also when it comes to the self-regulating nature of its prevalent norms. What I want to say is: no one wants to devalue or delegitimize these past uses of *orthography*. Going forward, however, in the sense of a more inclusive and comparative study of writing that brings together different scholarly traditions (such as the Anglo-American and German traditions), it can be good to rethink certain practices, and the use of terminology—again, if it entails conceptual consequences as well—is a part of that.¹¹

11. Another example is the use of *logography* instead of *morphography*, often justified by the claim that one should not abandon established terms.

And again: scholars interested in writing should of course engage in discussions and it is self-evident that they will not always agree on everything. But it is important to ensure discussions have useful outcomes and are not driven by vanity and lead to stagnation or fragmentation. I have revised terms that I had coined myself (such as ‘graphic word’ in Meletis, 2015) because I later found they were actually not fitting. Research is never a done deal, especially so in a still-emerging field like grapholinguistics—which occasionally means it is necessary to revise opinions but also makes the field all the more exciting.

At the end of this essay, I want to cite Baroni’s (2016, p. 291) plea: “Most linguists, when dealing with graphemics, written language, writing systems and orthography, feel the need to justify themselves. It is about time to change this attitude and to stop feeling guilty about treating graphemics as part of linguistics.” In my opinion, there is no better way of putting it. Personally, I have stopped justifying my interest in writing. Thus, this essay is not to be read as a justification, but a reckoning of sorts, outlining why one shouldn’t (have to) justify. You should try it too, it feels good. At the end of the day, it’s very simple: writing is a fascinating and important subject and deserves to be studied for its own sake—which is why I am happy to be a grapholinguist.

References

- Baroni, Antonio (2011). “Alphabetic vs. non-alphabetic writing: linguistic fit and natural tendencies.” In: *Rivista di Linguistica* 23.2, pp. 127–159.
- (2016). “Constraint interaction and writing systems typology.” In: *Dossiers d’HEL, SHESL* 9, pp. 290–303.
- Coulmas, Florian (2003). *Writing systems: an introduction to their linguistic analysis*. Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Daniels, Peter T. (1991). “Is a structural graphemics possible?” In: *LACUS Forum* 18, pp. 528–537.
- (2017). “Writing systems.” In: *The handbook of linguistics*. Ed. by Mark Aronoff and Janie Rees-Miller. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 75–94.
- (2018). *An exploration of writing*. Bristol: Equinox.
- Daniels, Peter T. and William Bright (1996). *The world’s writing systems*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Davidson, Andrew (2019). “Writing: the re-construction of language.” In: *Language Sciences* 72, pp. 134–149.
- Donegan, Patricia and David Stampe (2009). “Hypotheses of Natural Phonology.” In: *Poznań Studies in Contemporary Linguistics* 45.1, pp. 1–31.

- Dressler, Wolfgang U. et al. (1987). *Leitmotifs in Natural Morphology*. Vol. 10. Studies in Language Companion Series. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Dürscheid, Christa (2016). *Einführung in die Schriftlinguistik*. 5th ed. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Gelb, Ignace J. (1952). *A Study of Writing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gnanadesikan, Amalia E. (2009). *The Writing Revolution. Cuneiform to the Internet*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Günther, Hartmut (1988). *Schriftliche Sprache: Strukturen geschriebener Wörter und ihre Verarbeitung beim Lesen*. Vol. 40. Konzepte der Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaft. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter.
- Günther, Hartmut and Otto Ludwig, eds. (1994). *Schrift und Schriftlichkeit/Writing and its use*. Vol. 10.1, 10.2. Handbooks of Linguistics and Communication Science. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter.
- Haspelmath, Martin (2010). "Comparative concepts and descriptive categories in crosslinguistic studies." In: *Language* 86.3, pp. 663–687.
- Joyce, Terry and Susanne R. Borgwaldt (2011). "Typology of writing systems: special issue introduction." In: *Written Language & Literacy* 14.1, pp. 1–11.
- Linell, Per (1982). *The written language bias in linguistics*. Linköping: University of Linköping.
- Meletis, Dimitrios (2015). *Graphetik: Form und Materialität von Schrift*. Glückstadt: Verlag Werner Hülsbusch.
- (2018). "What is natural in writing? Prolegomena to a Natural Grapholinguistics." In: *Written Language & Literacy* 21.1, pp. 52–88.
- (2019). "The grapheme as a universal basic unit of writing." In: *Writing Systems Research* 11.1, pp. 26–49.
- (2020a). *The Nature of Writing. A Theory of Grapholinguistics*. Vol. 3. Grapholinguistics and Its Applications. Brest: Fluxus Editions.
- (2020b). "Types of allography." In: *Open Linguistics* 6, pp. 249–266.
- (accepted). "Universality and diversity in writing systems." In: *LACUS Forum* 46.
- Munske, Horst H. (1994). "Ist eine "natürliche" Graphematik möglich?" In: *Probleme der Graphie*. Ed. by Otmar Werner. Vol. 57. Script Oralia. Tübingen: Gunter Narr, pp. 9–24.
- Myers, James (2019). *The grammar of Chinese characters: productive knowledge of formal patterns in an orthographic system*. London: Routledge.
- Nerius, Dieter (1988). "Einleitung." In: *Probleme der geschriebenen Sprache. Beiträge zur Schriftlinguistik auf dem XIV. internationalen Linguistenkongreß 1987 in Berlin*. Ed. by Dieter Nerius and Gerhard Augst. Vol. 173. Linguistische Studien. Berlin: Akademie der Wissenschaften der DDR, pp. 1–3.

- Nerius, Dieter and Gerhard Augst, eds. (1988). *Probleme der geschriebenen Sprache. Beiträge zur Schriftlinguistik auf dem XIV. internationalen Linguistenkongreß 1987 in Berlin*. Vol. 173. Linguistische Studien. Berlin: Akademie der Wissenschaften der DDR.
- Pae, Hye K. (2020). *Script Effects as the Hidden Drive of the Mind, Cognition, and Culture*. Vol. 21. Literacy Studies. Cham: Springer.
- Rogers, Henry (2005). *Writing systems: a linguistic approach*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Routledge, Taylor and Francis (2019). "Note from the publisher." In: *Writing Systems Research* 11.2, p. 239.
- Sampson, Geoffrey (2015). *Writing systems: a linguistic introduction*. 2nd ed. Bristol: Equinox.
- Share, David L. (2008). "On the Anglocentricities of current reading research and practice: the perils of over-reliance on an "outlier" orthography." In: *Psychological Bulletin* 134.4, pp. 584–616.
- (2014). "Alphabetism in reading science." In: *Frontiers in Psychology* 5.752.
- Watt, W.C. (1998). "The old-fashioned way." In: *Semiotica* 122.1–2, pp. 99–138.