

Writing is (at least in part) immaterial

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1 Materiality of writing

1. Much recent focus on the materiality of writing, asking questions such as the following:¹
 - (a) What materials do people use for writing?
 - (b) How do those materials affect:
 - i. The shapes of letters?
 - ii. What linguistic (or non-linguistic) elements are recorded in writing?
 - (c) What is the social and material context of writing?
 - (d) How do these affect:
 - i. The uses to which writing is put?
 - ii. Who in society is equipped to write?

2 Immateriality of writing

2. I want to focus on the *immaterial or metaphysical context of writing*
3. Writing may ultimately be defined metaphysically:
 - (a) ‘Graphemes’ / ‘letters’:
 - i. What are they?
 - ii. Catach 1979: 27, from Daniels 2018: 170:

“the smallest unit of the written channel having a phonic and/or semantic correspondence susceptible to linguistic analysis”
 - iii. But what constitutes a ‘unit of the written channel’?
 - iv. Not dependent on a physical description, e.g. Ancient Greek beta (Jeffery 1961: 23)²:

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²Characters from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archaic_Greek_alphabets

“*Beta* has more local variations than any other letter”

‘Standard’	β
Gortyn	β̄
Thera	β̄, β̅
Argos	β̄
Melos, Selinous	β̅
Corinth	β̅
Megara, Byzantium	β̅

- v. Knowledge of what a letter is ultimately dependent on a lookup table, which asserts that two given sign shapes are of equivalent value in the writing system
 - vi. Such a table must ultimately exist *metaphysically* in the minds of the writing system’s users
- (b) Allowing for metaphysics in one’s framework allows one to take account of hierarchies of:

i. Letters:

ἐν γούν γραμματικῇ τὰ ἄριστα τῶν στοιχείων καὶ πλείστην δύναμιν ἔχοντα ἑπτὰ ἐστὶν ἀριθμῶ, τὰ φωνήεντα. *Legum allegoriarum* 1.14 (text Cohn 1896)³

“In grammar the best of the elements and those which have the greatest power are seven in number, namely the vowels.”

In Philo’s conceptual framework, the number seven is very important for ‘goodness’. Accordingly, vowels are better than other letters because there are seven of them.

ii. Position: Orthotactics, i.e. sets of abstract rules that determine e.g. the order in which things are written.

A. e.g. honorific transposition in Egyptian hieroglyphic writing:

𓆎𓆏 not 𓆏𓆎 *hm ntr*, lit. ‘servant of the god’

where 𓆎 = *hm* ‘servant’, 𓆏 = *ntr* ‘god’

B. Position of the characters determined by a value system which places gods before other items; no relation to phonological representation of language

C. Metaphysical concerns determine the relative position of the characters

3 Metaphysical agents

- 4. Recent focus on the deeply interconnected roles of humans and ‘inanimate’ objects, viz. personification of objects, e.g. the formula on Greek pots “*x* made me” (cf. Elvira Astoreca 2019)

³ *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, <http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu>

5. There is an important third type of agent to consider: metaphysical agents.
6. Regardless of the actual existence of such beings, whether a given writer thinks that they exist may well have an important effect on writing in the material world. Questions that follow:
 - (a) Can God / the gods write?
 - (b) Does writing pre-exist with God / the gods (i.e. is it a principle of the universe), or is it created?
 - (c) What role do artefacts written by God / the gods have in the physical world?
 - (d) What relationship do written objects in the physical realm bear to written objects in the metaphysical realm?

4 Immateriality: writing in the digital age

7. What is the status of writing in the digital age, when increasingly writing is encountered as a projection on to a screen?
 - (a) What *is* writing in this case?
 - (b) Each character that we see on a (web)page is an instance of an abstract entity, identified e.g. by a unicode index, which exists not in a human mind, but in a computer
 - (c) The instantiation of that index location can in principle be any shape
8. Cf. emoji, where each emoji character denotes an idea, but the representation of that idea can vary considerably across devices, cf. <https://unicode.org/emoji/charts/full-emoji-list.html>
9. What holds each emoji character together is an *idea*, e.g. ‘grinning face’, ‘snowman’, ‘chair’
10. What actually defines a glyph as an instance of a given grapheme is potentially limited only by what actually defines them for human(?) cognition, e.g.



References

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