

Self-organization and utilization in spelling

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How did we arrive at the complex writing systems English and German have today? What forces shaped them? How ‚natural‘ is graphemic change? In the proposed talk, I will explore these and related questions on the basis of two phenomena, graphemic uniformity and minimal weight constraints.

Graphemic uniformity (cf. Berg 2019) refers to the fact that in practically all European writing systems, there is one and only one graphemic form for each grammatical word form. Variation on the level of word spelling exists, but it is comparatively rare and socially stigmatized. Of course, it has not always been this way: In English and German printed texts until well into the 17th century, variation in word spelling was ubiquitous. How did this change come about, and why?

Lexical words in English and German need to fulfill certain *minimal weight constraints* (Evertz 2018, Berg 2019). For example, graphemically monosyllabic words have to be at least three letters long, even when it would be phonographically possible to spell them with just two letters (cf. e.g. English *foe/*fo*, *die/*di*; German *Aal/*Al*, *eel‘*, *Ohr/*Or*, *ear‘*). These constraints do not hold for ‚function words‘ (pronouns, articles, prepositions etc.) like English *a*, *I*, *me*, *he*, *we*, *us*, *in*, *on* or German *du*, *er*, *es*, *an*, *in*, *um* etc. As with graphemic uniformity, this state of affairs has not always been like this, and the question is, how did it come about, and why?

To tackle these questions, I use the large diachronic corpora ‚Early English Books Online‘ (~500 million words) and ‚Eighteenth Century Collections Online‘ (~75 million words) for English, and the corpus ‚Deutsches Textarchiv‘ (~250 million words) for German. Both phenomena are investigated from a birds-eye view and with an exemplary focus on specific word forms.

Preliminary results show that both changes happened gradually over long periods of time. This suggests that they were unguided – instances of the self-organization of the writing system, and as such comparable to language change in other linguistic domains (e.g., they exhibit the characteristic S-shaped curves first noted in syntactic change, cf. Ellegard 1953).

This only addresses the question of how these changes came about, not why. I do not want to imply that the processes were teleologically directed. Instead, I will use the last section to speculate how these specific patterns are utilized by today’s readers and writers. In short, uniformity may increase the lexical quality of a word’s mental representation (in the sense of Perfetti 2007), and minimal weight constraints may help readers distinguish lexical from non-lexical words and thus facilitate parsing.

References: Berg, K. (2019). *Die Graphematik der Morpheme im Deutschen und Englischen*. Berlin u.a.: De Gruyter. Ellegard, A. (1953). *The auxiliary do: the establishment and regulation of its use in English*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell. Evertz, M. (2018). *Visual Prosody*. Berlin u.a.: De Gruyter. Perfetti, C. (2007). *Reading Ability: Lexical Quality to Comprehension*. *Scientific Studies of Reading* 11, 357–383.

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