

GRAPHEMICS AND THE HISTORY OF PHONOLOGY

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It has often been said that the invention of the alphabet marked the beginning of phonology, of course meant in a pre-scientific sense of the word. On the other hand, it has also been said that "the phoneme concept would never have been developed without the alphabetic script" (F. Balk-Smit Duyzentkunst, 1978, p. 2). Apart, however, from this question the assumption of Mrs. Balk is in itself a sign that something has altered in linguistics during the last decennia. Writing has come into the picture in linguistics again. Linguistic structuralism was based exclusively on spoken language, but thanks to the works of such scholars as H.J. Uldall, J. Vachek and W. Haas the insight has grown that writing is worth studying also linguistically.

Now, however, the following question arises: What remains of the above mentioned relation between phoneme and alphabet (or vice versa), if T.G.G. is right in saying that a phonological level corresponding to a psycho-linguistic reality does not exist (cf. Chomsky and Halle 1968)? Mrs. Balk has proved in her article that, in any case, the notion phoneme does exist and that certain specifications and elaborations of this concept contain alphabetic elements. T.G.G. acknowledges only a morphonological and a phonetic level, both levels being connected with each other by a set of general rules. So most orthographies are morphonological and not merely phonological. The history of writing, now, also teaches us that not only the alphabetic but also the syllabographic scripts were from the beginning already of a morphonological kind. Especially such grammatologists and semitists as I.J. Gelb and E. Reiner have drawn attention to the use of what they call: "morphographemics" (= morphophonemic spellings) in the ancient writing systems. So, perhaps, we have to conclude to some unconscious activity of a morphophoneme concept in the human mind.

References

- Balk-Smit Duyzentkunst, F. (1978): "Phoneme and alphabet", in Linguistics in the Netherlands 1974-1976, 1-6, W. Zonneveld (ed.), Lisse.
- Chomsky, N.A. and M. Halle (1968): The Sound Pattern of English, New York: Harper and Row.