Graphosphaera/Graphosphere/ Graphosphère/Grafosfera/ графосфера: Words, Concepts, Approaches*

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Abstract. "Graphosphaera" and related words have appeared in various forms and languages in recent years. This article considers "graphospheric" vocabulary in two respects: semantic, and functional. The semantic fields are created both implicitly and explicitly. The implied meanings are suggested in part by the etymology of the word forms, and partly by association with similar words that include "-sphere" (e. g. semiosphere, noosphere, biosphere etc.). The explicit meanings are given in several published definitions, not all of which coincide with each other. A broad semantic field is appropriate with respect to the *object of study*. However, graphospheric vocabulary may serve a useful function when it implies a specific kind of *approach* to the object of study. The article outlines the main features of a "graphospheric approach" to the study of material texts and cultures of writing. Treating graphospheres as real spaces (like ecosystems), not as theoretical construct, the graphospheric approach is holistic, inclusive, systemic, non-hierarchical and dynamic. It can be an effective tool not only for the study of specific sources but also in the comparative study of information technologies (technologies of the word) in history.

Key words: graphosphere, information technology, material texts, inscriptions, writing

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Graphosphaera/Graphosphere/Graphosphère /Grafosfera/графосфера: Слова, понятия, подходы

Аннотация. Слово «графосфера» в последние годы было предложено сразу на нескольких языках и нескольких формах. В статье этот круг терминов рассматривается в двух аспектах – семантическом и функциональном. Семантические поля создаются как имплицитно, так и эксплицитно. Ипмлицитно значение слова отчасти предопределено его этимологией, а отчасти – ассоциацией с другими терминами на *-сфера* (семиосфера, ноосфера, биосфера и пр.). Эксплицитно же в нашем распоряжении есть несколько опубликованных определений, иногда довольно различных. Сам *объект исследования* подразумевает широкое семантическое поле. Однако термин «графосфера» всё же полезен, ибо указывает на определенный *подход* к этому объекту. В статье раскрываются важнейшие черты «графосферного подхода» к исследованию материальных текстов и культур письма. Если мы рассматриваем графосферы как реальные пространства (подобно *экосистемам*), а не как теоретические конструкты, мы можем указать на следующие черты подхода, подразумеваемого словом «графосфера»: это подход холистский, инклюзивный, системный, анти-иерархический и динамический. Он эффективен и полезен не только при исследовании конкретных источников, но и как инструмент компаративного изучения информационных технологий (технологий слова) в истории.

Ключевые слова: графосфера, информационные технологии, материальные тексты, надписи, письменность

“Graphosphaera” is a word without a history. Words without histories can be problematic for lexicographers. There is no difficulty if a neologism is strictly terminological, like the name of a new chemical element, for example, or an internet application, or a political party, or a variant of a virus. In such cases the word is straightforwardly defined by the thing that it is devised to represent. The semantic field of “graphosphaera” is different. Lexicographers (and, more importantly, readers) cannot rely on a simple and single definition provided by the term’s inventors, nor can they arrive at their own precise definitions through extrapolating from previous usage of the word itself.

Nevertheless, the neologism “graphosphaera” does not float free of any semantic orientation. It is not a signifier in search of something to be signified. Even the uninitiated reader will sense, in general, the kind of thing

that the word is supposed to represent. There are three types of clue: etymological, associative, and explanatory.

The etymological clue is in the word's Greek-derived components: something to do with the sphere of the written, or of the depicted (this is a tricky distinction, to which we will return later). The associative clues are of two kinds. First, the word "graphosphaera" situates itself within or close to the semantic field of the variant spelling of the same lexical formation: the orthographically differentiated "graphosphere" in English. Except insofar as "graphosphaera" makes a strange word visually stranger by emphasizing its Greek roots, this is a differentiation without a difference. In Russian both forms transliterate identically as «графосфера». For present purposes we can treat them as synonyms. Graphosphere/графосфера, although almost as history-free as graphosphaera, nevertheless already comes with accumulated meanings both through recent usage and through several attempts at explicit definitions. And finally, graphosphaera/graphosphere/графосфера evokes some kind of conceptual echo of other equivalent compound words with "-sphere". In a culturological context the most obvious parallel is Lotman's "semiosphere", which in turn resonates with similar forms such as biosphere or ecosphere, not to mention atmosphere.

Taken together, these types of semantic clue create a kind of aura, a vague and general sense of the sort of thing that "graphosphaera" and its cognates could reasonably be assumed to imply. It must encompass multiple aspects of writing, whether as an object or as an activity. Or, since the word seems capacious, perhaps not just *multiple* aspects of writing, but *any and every* aspect of writing. The "sphere", in this instance, could be so vast that it encompasses the totality. Alternatively, it is metaphorical – not just a set of activities and sources but a sphere of culture and its manifestations.

The third type of semantic indication, after the etymological and associative clues, is explanatory, derived from already existing definitions of the word in at least one of its variant forms.

A rather limited meaning is given to the word "graphosphere" (or rather, "graphosphère") by the French philosopher and journalist Régis Debray (2007. P. 5–28). For him it designates a particular period in the history of technologies of the word. First came the "logosphere", the age of manuscript; then the "graphosphere", the age of print; and finally the "videosphere". Debray dates the graphosphere quite precisely: from 1448 to around 1968. This schema is not helpful in the present context. It is also etymologically strange. Why should "graph-" relate specifically to print? Or, indeed, why should "logo-" relate specifically to handwriting rather than to speech? Yet the logic of etymology is not necessarily helpful either. If Debray's theory is too restrictive, etymological pedantry may produce some-

thing too amorphous. In principle the idea of a graphosphere could include any form of depiction, any form of graphic sign, not restricted only to those signs which most directly encode language (alphabets, ideograms). After all, Russian follows Greek in making no necessary lexical distinction between the technology of writing and the technology of painting. In English "life-writing" refers to biography or autobiography, not to fine art.

One cannot be dictatorial. If anybody wishes either to follow Debray in restricting the graphosphere to the age of print, or, conversely, to expand the semantic fields of graphosphaera/graphosphere/графосфера to include all visual representation, they are free to do so. The words are not patented, and we should be mindful of the voluntaristic but occasionally useful semantic principle articulated by the distinguished philologist Humpty Dumpty in Lewis Carroll's *Alice Through the Looking Glass*: "When I use a word... it means just what I choose it to mean." Aside from Debray, do we have a choice of definitions that are more suitable to the intended theme?

A confession: I have myself given two different definitions of "graphosphere". In an article published in 2011 I explained it as "the totality of graphic devices used to record, store, display and disseminate messages and information, and the social and cultural spaces in which they figure" (Franklin 2011. P. 531). This definition juxtaposes two components: the material (objects which display graphic signs), and the spatial (the spaces created by the existence of such objects). The two aspects in the definition presuppose each other and are necessary to each other. A graphospheric space cannot exist without the relevant objects, and the existence of the objects creates a set of spatial relationships. In principle the 2011 definition potentially included all graphic signs, although I added that I would use it particularly with reference to writing. Over time, this seemed unnecessarily cumbersome. In a book published eight years later I radically simplified the definition. The 25-word definition was reduced to just five words, and the application to verbal signs was embedded in the definition rather than requiring yet more verbiage in the form of a supplementary additional explanation. The graphosphere became merely "the space of visible words" (Franklin 2019. P. 1; Франклин 2020. C. 9). The spatial definition embraces everything else. The study of the space must require the study of all the written objects within it. To this sequence of definitions or quasi-definitions we can now add the subtitle of the journal "Graphosphaera": "writing and written practices". Here also there are two components, but now the material component (writing) is combined not with a spatial element but with reference to processes of its production (written practices – although, strictly speaking, both elements are already present in "writing", which can refer either to the activity or to its result). Still more general is the subtitle of the Spanish website

and blog *Grafosfera*: "Bitácora sobre cultura escrita" (http://grafosfera.blogspot.com/). Putting these definitions and glosses and paraphrases together we could arrive at a sequence of three stages in the life of the material text: the process of its production; its nature as an object; and the spaces created through its existence. For completeness we should add a fourth stage: the experience of visible words by those who encounter them (i.e. reception and perception, subjectivity, reading).

No definition is without problems or ambiguity. For example, my most recent and preferred definition ("the space of visible words") leaves scope for potentially contradictory interpretations of one of its key components. What is meant by "visible" words? The phrase can be understood very narrowly, or very broadly. In the narrowest interpretation, visibility is tied to *reception*, the final stage in the journey of the word from the mind through its physical encoding and storage to its eventual release to the end user. In this interpretation a word is visible only when it is actually on display, when anybody located in the relevant space can see it. At the other extreme, in the broadest interpretation of the phrase, visibility could be tied to *production*, to the first stage of encoding the word as or on an object. If we focus on the narrow interpretation we risk excluding huge quantities of objects. Most obviously, we could exclude most books most of the time. A book makes words visible in the process of production and when it is opened for reading, but for most of its existence a book functions as a storage device. The overwhelming majority of words in books in a library are openly visible for only a very tiny fraction of their lifespan (the same can be said about documents in an archive). A book stores words with the potential to be made visible, but the potential can only be realised by the actions of a user. In this sense it performs physically the same function as a computer memory performs electronically. In a library the most regularly visible words are not those *in* the books but those *on* the books: the lettering on the spines.

If one of its key concepts can be interpreted in such radically different ways, is the definition fatally undermined? No. The contradiction is logical but not critical. Indeed, it highlights an important additional dimension of graphospheric study. Books, like archival documents, *can* be part of a graphosphere even according to a narrow definition of visibility. On the one hand, no word in a book or archival document is openly visible at *every* stage of its existence (unlike, say, a shop sign, or the inscription on a statue). But on the other hand, every word in every book and document *must* inevitably be visible at *some* stage in its existence. The graphospheric status of words in books changes over the life cycle of the object. Therefore the possibility of a narrow understanding of the phrase "visible words" does not affect the status of books and documents as necessary objects of graphospheric study ac-

cording to this definition. The problem is not a problem. Rather the opposite, it opens paths of investigation. Highlighting the relationship between potential and actual visibility can add an important dimension to the study of the spatial and cultural dynamics of words as objects.

This last example shows the limitations of trying to define exactly what the "graphospheric" cluster of words should mean. Lexicographers need definitions, philosophers probe ambiguities, and scholars in general meticulously apply their intellectual scalpels to expose incongruity and contradiction. However, if the graphospheric vocabulary adds value, it is not because of the precision or absolute consistency of its definitions. The *object of study* is not seriously in doubt, but there are other available words and phrases that can encompass the equivalent set of materials, without resort to jargon or neologism. If the graphospheric label is to be useful, it not because the words point to unique range of sources, but because they may imply a particular *approach* to the study of visible words. Here I list some key features which may characterise a graphospheric approach. I stress, however, that the list is neither exhaustive nor obligatory.

1. A graphosphere is a real space. As real space, a graphosphere has physical properties: form, boundaries or border zones, areas of greater or lesser density, different combinations and configurations of constituent features, and so on. A graphosphere can be described and circumscribed. As a metaphorical sphere of human activity, "graphosphaera" is singular. As real space, graphospheres can be plural. There is a global graphosphere, but there are also local graphospheres: of a country, or a city, or a street, or a house, or a room. In this respect graphospheres are like atmospheres (which can also be both real and metaphorical). We can speak of the atmosphere of the Earth or of Mars, or of the atmosphere in the room where you are sitting. In an earlier study I used the phrase "graphic environment" (Franklin 2002. P. 16 ff.)[1]. This expression is approximately equivalent to graphosphere, but it represents a less clearly conceptualised understanding of the spatial specificity.

2. Because graphospheres are real, the graphospheric approach is not a theory. We may choose to develop theories about how graphospheres emerge and develop, or about why graphospheres differ from each other in various contexts, ages and places, or about factors that affect the patterns of change in their internal dynamics, or about cross-cultural comparisons. But the basis of graphospheric study is empirical, starting from specific observation and analysis.

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[1] In the Russian edition "graphic environment" became «графическая среда» (Франклин 2010. С. 43 и сл.).

3. The graphospheric approach is holistic, inclusive, systemic. While it requires the study of individual sources, it implies an interest in their inter-relationships, in the configuration of a graphosphere as a whole, not just in its constituent elements. This does not mean that every piece of graphospheric research must be about the wider graphospheric system. Naturally, any material text can be an object of study in itself. It is entirely possible, legitimate, and normal to focus on a part without concern for the whole. Nevertheless, a graphospheric perspective implies that at some level the study of individual sources can potentially shed light on workings of the wider system. An obvious analogy here would be with ecology. An ecologist can spend decades in the study of a single organism. In order to do so, the ecologist must first be a biologist. If a subset of biologists reckon themselves to be ecologists, then this implies that sooner or later they intend that the research on the individual organism will have implications for the systemic study of the ecosphere. I stress that this is an option, not an obligation. Just as not every biologist is obliged to be an ecologist, so not every epigrapher or palaeographer or codicologist is obliged to adopt a graphospheric approach to their research – still less to define themselves as a graphospherologist.

4. Because it is systemic, the graphospheric approach must be non-hierarchical. Others may choose to give precedence to writings that reflect high culture, or popular culture, or to sources which provide information about major historical events or about the lives of prominent individuals, or which illuminate modish themes, or which for any other reason may have been regarded as prestigious. For the graphospherologist no category of material text is more prestigious than any other. Nothing is trivial, nothing is subsidiary. An ephemeral scrap of paper is as valid as a richly illuminated manuscript. The graphospheric approach resists any notion of status except as a mutable category that can change according to cultural fashion and context. Thus, for example, the status of inscription has varied hugely over the past couple of millennia. On the one hand, inscription has at times enjoyed high prominence and cultural prestige: public writing in antiquity and the Renaissance; the inscriptional imagination of the baroque or sentimentalist literary mode; the romance of inscriptional discovery in the age of archaeology – from papyri in the sands of Egypt through to birchbark fragments in the mud of Novgorod. On the other hand, in other contexts inscriptions have habitually been downgraded, at least by implication. In many institutions of modern academe, epigraphy still tends to be reckoned an ancillary, subsidiary, secondary discipline, as one element (albeit a necessary element) in the base of a pyramid with history or literature at the top. Even when epigraphic discoveries become objects of popular interest and excitement, the pride in their significance is sometimes tinged with condescension: just as for

Karamzin even peasant girls turn out to be capable of love, so even Novgorodian townspeople turn out to be capable of writing. Well, some of them; almost like real culture. I caricature, of course. Serious scholarship has moved a long way beyond a crude perception of literacy levels as straightforward indexes of cultural levels and civilisational progress. However, in wider discourse about significances of writing the caricature remains uncomfortably recognisable.

5. Although the graphospheric approach is itself non-hierarchical, it is nevertheless concerned with hierarchies. Graphospheres reflect, embody and project various structures of authority, whether social, political, economic or cultural. Paradoxically, the graphospheric approach can be an effective means of exploring and comparing such internal structures of authority precisely because it avoids (as far as possible) filtering the materials through external assumptions about hierarchies of writing.

6. Graphospheres tend to be dynamic. Again like ecosystems, change in any part of them can affect the balance and complexion of the whole.

The graphospheric approach has affinities with many other ways of looking at the history of writing and written practices. It does not represent a claim to superiority or exclusivity. Ultimately the test of its value lies not in the rhetoric of its advocacy but in the extent to which it turns out to be empirically useful in helping to generate fresh insights.

The graphospheric approach may also be of use beyond the boundaries of its own sources and problems. It brings potential added value in some broader interdisciplinary contexts. Here I highlight just one of them. Because it is systemic and holistic and non-hierarchical and dynamic, the graphospheric approach is a particularly appropriate device for the comparative study of information technologies (technologies of the word) in human history and culture.

In linking the graphospheric approach with the study of information technologies, do we in effect re-establish a link with the use of the word by Régis Debray, as outlined above? Not really. Debray used the word to designate the age of print. Aside from the etymological peculiarity, this proposal also reflects a broader conceptual problem in the way in which the history of information technologies is commonly represented. Often the focus is either on "revolutions" (e.g. the print revolution, the electronic revolution), or – as in Debray's proposal – on a supposed succession of "ages" that such revolutions bring about. This, in turn, can produces an impression of rather crude sequence, of a progression, or even of progress, enhanced by a techno-deterministic idea of causation: each new technology is more advanced than its predecessor, hence it causes or facilitates major significant advances in human society and culture, and therefore displaces the old. An extreme and

widely propagated version of such a schema is the notion that we now live in the "information age". The flaw should be obvious: all ages are information ages. Human society cannot otherwise survive and function. Nevertheless the phrase remains resonant.

Why is a graphospheric approach helpful in (re-)conceptualising the history of information technologies? Because the combination of its characteristic features is not tied to linearity but presupposes a more nuanced view of complex dynamic systems, of shifting balances in the "ecology" of the visible word. The great leap in imagination was the idea of making the word flesh; or, without the theological overtones, the idea of encoding language by means of graphic signs, of embodying words in material, visible form. Beyond that, linear schemes confuse more than they reveal.

For example, as every medievalist is aware, public inscription in urban streets and squares, so common and prominent in the antique city, virtually disappeared from the medieval city. Sometimes this is presented as a symptom of the "decline" of the city. In less evaluative terms it is part of the re-imagining of spaces, including a shift of prestige from exterior to interior. Thus, while in Old Rome the most densely saturated public graphospheric space was the open Forum, in New Rome it was the interior of a church. No linear scheme of progress and succession in information technologies can account for such patterns. Nor do linear schemes account adequately for the ways in which technologies of the word tend to coexist and overlap. Rather than displace each other in progressive sequence, their interrelationships and relative functions change in the graphospheric ecosystems. Moreover, the technologies of making words visible are far more numerous and diverse than can easily be accommodated in schemes of linear progression and succession. Thus, every epigrapher knows that, in the era before printing, the creation of texts involved multiple technologies in addition to writing with ink on parchment or paper (incision, stamping, moulding, carving, embroidering, painting, not to mention enamels, mosaics, and so on), so it would be misleading to speak only of the age of handwriting or manuscript. Or: as every archivist knows, the production of handwritten texts continued to expand massively for centuries after the invention and introduction of printing. In many societies handwriting was more common and more diverse and more polyfunctional in the so-called age of print than in the pre-print era. This is an under-acknowledged problem for linear schemes of technological revolutions, but it is entirely consistent with the graphospheric approach. Or, as every print historian knows, the difference between the capacity of the steam-driven cylinder press and the hand press was in its way as great as the difference in capacity between the hand press and the manuscript, yet, not entirely helpfully, both tend to be lumped together as "printing".

The graphospheric approach can help to avoid some of the crude distortions of linearity, but of course it does not deny linearity or sequence as such. To do so would be to deny time in history, or to deny change. However, in focussing on the space(s) of visible words, rather than on a sequence of dominant technologies, a graphospheric approach also suggests different criteria for identifying major change. We spoke above of a very wide diversity of technologies that coexist in what have often been called the ages of handwriting and print. However, in one important respect all these technologies are the same: in their relation to the materiality of the word. Whether inked or incised or stamped or moulded, the word is created as a material, visible object, and remains a material, visible object through all main functional stages: from production (the encoding of language as object), through storage and transmission to retrieval. The monopoly of materiality is broken only by the invention of the telegraph, when encoding and transmission are dematerialised, storage is lost, and material visibility emerges only at the final stage, retrieval. Electronic technologies likewise dematerialise encoding and transmission, add a means of dematerialised storage (at massively increased capacity) and introduce unprecedented flexibility in the material, visible options for retrieval and display. The result is incomparably more flexible than the consistently material technologies. It is also graphospherically destabilising. The visible half-life of electronically displayed words is limited by the need for some form of projection. Electronic display is ephemeral, visible but semi-material, switched on and off. In its permanent materiality it cannot compete with, say, the mosaic inscriptions in St Sophia in Kiev, or the colophon of the Ostromir Gospel, or a Gutenberg Bible, or a birchbark fragment about the collection of a debt.

Nothing here is fundamentally new. These listed features of the graphosphere (or of multiple graphospheres, or of the graphospheric approach to the study of material texts) may read like a catalogue of familiar truisms about the nature and history of cultures of writing, or about "writing and written practices". And if all is old, what is the purpose of a neologism? If new words do not name new things, then why use them? Do they bring any value beyond the mildly frivolous pleasures of their ostensible (or ostentatious) modishness. What, if anything, is gained in using the "graphospheric" label?

One of the effects of neologism can be to make the subject slightly strange. Sometimes the result of making strange is merely the creation of marked jargon by which members of a professional group differentiate themselves and identify each other. Graphospherologists could choose such a path. But sometimes the neologistic mode of making strange is also a heuristic device. It encourages fresh perspectives even in relation to what ap-

pears to be familiar knowledge. If we wish, we can treat graphosphaera/ graphosphere/графосфера simply as a modish label for an old product. Or we can take the opportunity to suggest perspectives and approaches specific to the vocabulary before the words become too stale and habitual. Both choices may comfortably coexist. I insist that I do not insist. In any case, programmatic assertions are not adequate in themselves. They can claim a lot and prove very little. The test is not how many ships set sail with the word painted on their bows or woven into their flags, but whether their exploratory voyages lead to useful discoveries and insights.

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