Orthographic shaming

Attitudes towards orthography and orthographic mistakes in German

Dimitrios Meletis
Recipient of a DOC Fellowship of the Austrian Academy of Sciences at the Department of Linguistics, University of Graz (Austria)

Crossing borders: South, North, East, West
Sociolinguistics Symposium 22
University of Auckland, New Zealand
June 29th, 2018
Outline

1. State of the arts: *perception of mistakes, orthographic discourses*

2. What is **orthographic shaming**? – *Outlining my study*
   a. Methods and data
   b. Examples
   c. Results of a preliminary analysis

3. Attitudes towards orthography
   a. Highlighted aspects from the interviews
   b. Common threads

4. Conclusions

5. References
1. **State of the arts**

- The more or less established term **grammar nazi** (less frequently **spelling nazi**) refers to actors, not pragmatic actions [about the phenomenon in general cf. Sherman & Švelch 2015, Švelch & Sherman 2017; in youth language cf. Bahlo, Becker & Steckbauer 2016]

- It is mainly **psychological research** that has dealt with the question of how mistakes/errors are perceived and what traits etc. are ascribed based on them
  - Typing errors or typos [= performance] as well as ‘real’ orthographic mistakes [= competence] are associated with a **lack of spelling competence**, but not with general cognitive abilities [cf. Kreiner et al. 2002]
  - Readers can distinguish between ‘real’ mistakes and intentional non-standard spellings [cf. Scott et al. 2014]
  - In other studies, however, orthographic mistakes were associated with intelligence; non-homophonous mistakes were perceived as graver than mistakes that resulted from homophony, e.g. *rite* instead of *right* [cf. Figueredo & Varnhagen 2005]
  - The evaluation of a writer who makes mistakes on behalf of a reader is dependent on the personality of the reader; errors (= typos) are sanctioned more strictly and perceived as graver than mistakes; the authors hypothesize that this is due to the fact that errors are more easily and more frequently recognized by readers [vgl. Boland & Queen 2016]

- **Discourses on orthography** have also not been elaborately studied
  - If so, focus is on **orthographic reforms** [cf. Johnson 2005] and in this context, especially on political, media, and technical/linguistic discourses [cf. Schimmel-Fijalkowytscsh 2018]; **public discourses** are not treated thoroughly

+ Research on language and linguistic behavior in social media, (im)politeness research, critical discourse analysis
What is orthographic shaming?

= my terminological proposal that labels the behavior of publicly commenting on the orthographic mistakes of a person with the intention of (more or less) humiliating this person.
2a. Methods and data

preparing a corpus with 100 examples
- every example consists of: (1) the comment that includes the initial mistake, (2) the comment(s) including orthographic shaming, (3) possible responses to the orthographic shaming comment(s), and (4) the context in which all of this occurred (the original Facebook posting)
- the examples are collected on Facebook with my private profile; the data collection is thus limited to my “bubble”, only comments from public pages that I have liked or subscribed can be included (with the exception of some examples that have been sent in by friends and colleagues)
- qualitative analysis of the pragmatic contexts, comparison; formation of categories and hypotheses that inform the guideline for the interviews

conducting 10 interviews (at this point: 14 interviews, 9 female, 5 male, new plan: 20 interviews; all interviews range between 20-38 minutes and have been transcribed and analyzed)
- qualitative analysis of the interviews (MaxQDA)
2b. **Examples**

Angesichts mehrerer Beißattacken soll die Sachkunde aller Hundehalter verbessert werden. Bislang gibt es eine entsprechende Nachweispflicht nur in Niedersachsen.

**Süddeutsche Zeitung**
Am 17. Apr. um 13:20 • 📸

Angesichts mehrerer Rechtschreibfehler soll die Sachkunde aller Journalisten verbessert werden. Bislang gibt es eine entsprechende Nachweispflicht nur in der Grundschule.

#RechtschreibNazi
#DoYouThinkSpellingIsAGame


Oder sitzt Ihr gerade in der Sonne und seit leich abgeleckt?

**SÜDDEUTSCHE.DE**

Tierschutz bund fordert bundesweiten Hundeführerschein

SUEDEUTSCHE.DE

115 Kommentare • 6 Mal geteilt

Gefällt mir • Kommentieren • Teilen

Ay, auf den letzten Metern dem bösen seid/seit-Fehler erlegen ...

Gefällt mir

Wenn Sie schon derartig auf den Putz hauen, sollte Ihnen wenigstens der Unterschied zwischen seid & seit geläufig sein.

Bearbeitet

Gefällt mir

https://www.seid-seit.de/

Seid-seit.de • Der Unterschied zwischen ‘...
2c. Results of a preliminary analysis

- most often, a polarizing (most frequently a political) context is necessary for orthographic shaming to occur
- orthographic shaming as a “knock-out argument” that is not only meant to disrupt, but to end a discussion by discrediting people actively engaged in it
- spelling abilities are associated with intelligence and educational level
- comments are much more frequent than corrections
- reactions to orthographic shaming from “victims” either fail to materialize or are negative
- orthography and grammar are mixed (cf. the term grammar nazi); every mistake that is written appears to be considered orthographic
- mistakes/errors in orthographic shaming comments are very likely (and reliably) commented on/corrected to point out hypocrisy
3. **Attitudes towards orthography: interviews**

- three batches of questions: (1) (implicit) knowledge, beliefs, and opinions about orthography and orthographic errors/mistakes, (2) experience with and opinions about orthographic shaming, (3) reaction to and questions about a specific example of orthographic shaming
- duration of interviews ranged from **20 to 38 minutes**
- interviewees had responded to an ad in the linguistics department of the University of Graz and were **paid € 10 each**
- **homogenous**, highly non-representative group: all of the interviewees are students and between 19 and 29 years old, have similar educational backgrounds and assess their own spelling abilities as very good (with one interesting exception); also, many of them are not heavy users of social media
3a. **Highlighted aspects:** *normativity*

"Because every time that I’m writing somewhere, I’m writing, and therefore it has to be correct, because otherwise I could just let it be. [interview B01: L. 149-150]"
3a. **Highlighted aspects:** ascriptions

“...usually I value that people can spell correctly, because if they can’t, that makes their IQ sink in my head. [interview A05: L. 26-27]”
... half a year ago, when I still had Facebook installed on my phone, I did it almost daily *(laughs)* – guilty pleasure, no, it just bothered me, but mostly it was because I didn’t want to argue about the content of the discussion and so I just corrected people’s spelling to maybe anger them a bit. [interview B04: L. 74-77]
orthography plays an **important role** in the interviewees’ lives; for most of them in all contexts (informal/formal), all registers, and in all domains of life (private/professional)

almost all of them [13/14] assess their own spelling abilities as very good

there is a **strong distinction between mistakes, errors, and [unlicensed] variation** (e.g. dialect, youth language, older orthographic variants, choices); errors are seen as more problematic and evaluated more critically

**nuanced statements** are made about people who make a great number of spelling errors (e.g. dyslexia is also mentioned, albeit seldom); however, most interviewees admitted to **judging a person “unconsciously”** based on low spelling performance
most interviewees [13/14] state they would never consider orthographically shaming another person and generally object to this behavior; however, they do not make blanket statements about orthographic shamers. Regarding their own mistakes, interviewees state they feel shame and remorse; corrections of their own mistakes are silently accepted.
4. Conclusions

- writing is deeply entrenched in norms (unlike speech?)
- knowledge of these norms is considered social/cultural capital and power; this is used in strategies such as orthographic shaming, the response to which is, however, largely negative
- the public’s attitudes (and the public has attitudes) towards orthography are valuable in further investigating the complex (also linguistic) function of orthographies and their status as a central cornerstone of linguistic policy
5. References


Boland, Julie E. & Robin Queen (2016): If you’re still available, send me an email: personality influences reactions to written errors in email messages. PLoS One 11(3): e0149885. DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0149885

Figueredo, Lauren & Connie K. Varnhagen (2005): Didn’t you run the spell checker? Effects of type and spelling error and use of a spell checker on perceptions of the author. Reading Psychology 24(4-5): 441-458. DOI: 10.1080/02702710500400495


Švelch, Jaroslav & Tamah Sherman (2017): “I see your garbage”: participatory practices and literary privilege on “Grammar Nazi” Facebook pages in different sociolinguistic contexts. new media & society. DOI: 10.1177/1461444817719087
Thank u! * you