

Literacy and self-prescriptivism !

A metapragmatic discourse analysis of attitudes towards orthographic regulation

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Background

- desire to reorient myself towards usage-based sociolinguistics/pragmatics to complement my research on descriptive [structural] grapholinguistics [Meletis 2020a]
- studies on metapragmatic online discourses on the **dislike for typeface Comic Sans** [Meletis 2020b] and the use of **cultural typographic mimicry** [accepted for publication in *Social Semiotics*] showed important aspects of how the appropriateness of certain literacy practices and choices is negotiated among users

Comic Sans
Korean

Attitudes on orthography: Interviews

- three parts: **(1)** implicit knowledge, beliefs and opinions about orthography, **(2)** experience with and opinions about orthographic shaming, **(3)** reaction to and questions about a specific example of orthographic shaming
- **21 interviews** (13f, 8m) conducted in 2018 and 2019 in German ranging from 13 to 55 min (average 30 min)
- interviewees had responded to an ad in the Department of Linguistics (*University of Graz*) and were paid € 10 to participate
- homogeneous group: most participants were highly literalized students, ages range from 18 to 29, similar educational backgrounds, all of them (with minor exceptions) assess their own orthographic competence as very good

The sociolinguistic context

- in the German-language realm, orthography is **doubly codified** [in official rulebooks by the *Council for German Orthography* and dictionaries based on them]
- orthography is **phenomenologically primary** to the graphematics of the writing system [Schmidt 2018: 28]—from the outset, children learn not to write but to write *correctly*; orthography serves not as a guideline but as a corset of normativity [Maas 2015]
- ever since the latest **spelling reforms** [1996/2006], orthography has entered the public’s awareness, spawning myriad different discourses [Johnson 2002]

Omnipresent normativity & self-censorship

Because every time that I'm writing somewhere, I'm writing, and *therefore* it must be correct, because otherwise I could just let it be. [B01]

... as soon as you write something, it [= orthography] is certainly very dominant... [A02]

Self-censorship. [A01]

Automatic ascription of negative traits

... usually, I value that people can spell correctly, because if they can't, that makes their IQ sink in my head. [A05]

... so I would like to avoid thinking that these people are then, uhm, intellectually a bit inferior to others, but it just easily gives this impression...

[A04]

Automatic ascription of positive traits

... so whoever has very good spelling,
I assume that they were very
hardworking and that they attended
a very good school or maybe even
have an academic degree. [A06]

Fine-grained awareness of mistakes

... then one recognizes quite fast whether something was written incorrectly from ignorance or whether someone has simply mistyped when typing or has written somehow a little too hastily. [A01]

... they don't bother to prepare the text appropriately for me, and more like... it's kind of like they don't follow the etiquette. [A05]

Social bindingness

... people act as if this [= orthography] were the Traffic Code when actually it's just a suggestion and one must – I don't know, in public spaces, [...] in university and the like, one must adhere to it, but actually it would just be a proposal for the general public. [A05]

Orthography is important in all domains of written life. [B01]

Authorities of orthography

... people who understand it. [A01]

... scientists ... [A02]

... people who also deal intensively with language ... [A04]

... bright minds ... [B03]

... I think that should be left to the experts ... [B02]

... Germanists [...] those are the professionals, they must know about that, they have to know what is good for the German language ... [B04]

Common threads

- 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)
- there is a **strong distinction between mistakes, errors, and [unlicensed] variation** (e.g., dialect, youth language, older orthographic variants, choices); mistakes 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, leading to social sanctions
- only **experts** should be allowed to make decisions about orthography (reforms)

Preliminary conclusions

- all registers of writing are affected by **normativity** (much more so than the registers used in speech?) which people are aware of
- knowledge of norms is considered **social/cultural capital** and power; this is instrumentalized in strategies such as orthographic shaming, the response to which is, however, largely negative, although most people (involuntarily) engage in a passive form of it
- the **public's attitudes** (and the public *does* have attitudes!) towards orthography are valuable in further investigating the complex function of orthographies and their status as a central cornerstone and instrument of linguistic policy

Outlook

- it is necessary to study the attitudes of a **more heterogeneous group of people** (concerning age, literalization, etc.)
- different **cultures with diverse literacies** and literacy practices need to be considered
- ...

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**Thank you
for your attention!**