Types of orthographic standardization

A SOCIOLINGUISTIC approach

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Preliminaries: What is orthography?

- **Assumption**: There is normativity (of some kind) in every language with a written modality, be it an officially regulated and codified orthography (such as in German) or an unofficially codified orthography (such as in English).

- **Definition**: orthography is
  
  - that restricted part of a writing system that is deemed correct (structural perspective); there must be some form of explicit recording and awareness of it, otherwise I speak of pre-orthography [cf. also MIHM 2016]
  
  - a pragmatic process; in a dynamic reading, it denotes the practice(s) of writing correctly as well as metapragmatically evaluating one’s own and others’ writing as (in)correct (sociolinguistic/pragmatic perspective)

- **Relevance**: (1) orthography is highly relevant as it is the ‘surface representation’ of a writing system [SCHMIDT 2018] and (2) many people in literate cultures take it *pars pro toto* to be (their) language (partially because it is more palpable – by being visible – than spoken language)

- **Goal**: finding out how this normativity in the form of orthographies manifests across diverse writing systems and literate cultures with the help of descriptive – structural and sociolinguistic – criteria
Origin: natural vs. artificial

- **time and use**: a natural orthography is based on the prior use of a writing system (it has gradually developed), an artificial one is not (it has been designed and implemented at a given point in time)

- **synchronic** criterion that is diachronically informed (unlike an artificial orthography, a natural orthography cannot be ahistorical)

- **local criterion**: does not pertain to an entire orthography but just parts of it (e.g., an orthography can be largely natural but have artificial components, such as German)

- A natural orthography implies community involvement in an unofficial, loose sense, as users of literate communities (mostly implicitly and unconsciously) partake in the negotiation and shaping of orthographic conventions that, down the road, are considered in a regulation and codification
Origin: example trajectories

- development
- implementation of a regulation/codification
- reform
- creation
- time and use, internalization
Regulation (*how is an orthography regulated*)

- regulation is interpreted as an active process, so there needs to be awareness of it; this means that regulation distinguishes between pre-orthography and orthography.

- What is the regulatory process? Is it official? Is there an external authority who regulates? [Does there need to be an identifiable (authoritative) stakeholder to speak of a regulation?]
  Who are possible stakeholders (academies, ministries)?
  - More questions: What are their motivations? What is the public’s awareness of these regulators? Are they national or plurinational? Who are ‘unofficial’ regulators in a literate community (from the public to dictionaries, grammars, etc.)?

- Do these regulators work regularly (ensuring the adherence to an orthography/public’s proficiency in an orthography), or do they just work on the initial implementation and/or later reform of an orthography?
Modification: original vs. reformed

- What constitutes a reform – (renewed) regulatory activity and recodification? As for scope, do minor (codified) changes already count as reforms, e.g., the introduction of uppercase \(<ß>\) in German?

- reforms are sociolinguistic and (meta-)pragmatic minefields and goldmines as they are crucial for/in people’s attitudes (towards reforms themselves, previous orthographies, new orthographies, stakeholders, motivations underlying reform etc.)

- If every stage of a writing system is considered pre-orthographic (instead of purely graphematic), is every (first) implementation of an orthography in an existing writing system already a reform (cf. orthography development and ‘legacy orthographies’ [JONES/MOONEY 2017])?
Codification: codified vs. uncodified

- **official codifications** (rulebooks, guidelines, prescriptive dictionaries such as in Thai) are issued by authorities in charge of regulation

- examples of ‘unofficial’ codifications: **dictionaries**; they are still ascribed authority by the public
  - local in-house rules of newspapers [SCHIMMEL-FIJALKOWYTSCH 2018]
  - as for unofficial codifications, at a more local level, there can be, for example, trendsetters who are consulted by other users in their orthographic choices [SANEI 2021], meaning their writing also somehow represents a ‘micro-codification’

- **complete** vs. **incomplete** codifications: in incomplete ones, there is room for licensed variation as they have ‘blind spots’

- one must differentiate between different uncodified resources: uncodified parts of what is considered the standard (e.g., freedom in use of punctuation signs in German) vs. non-standardized writing in general (for which, however, there still exist normative judgements)
Community involvement (i.e., actors)

- crucial for the acceptance (the \textit{status}) of an orthography [CAHILL 2014]
- \textbf{direct} and \textit{official} (as part of the initial design/implementation or \textit{reform} process)
- \textbf{indirect} and \textit{official} (when the actual use of the writing system is taken into consideration in the design/reform of an orthography \textit{origin})
- \textbf{indirect} and \textit{unofficial} (concerns literacy practices, e.g., grassroots prescriptivism on the internet, cf. DRACKLEY 2019, intra-community curbing of how to write correctly/appropriately; concerns also material aspects such as typography, cf. MELETIS 2020b, 2021b)
- people want to have a say but at the same time want ‘experts’ to make final decisions, opposing/fearing orthographic ‘anarchy’ [MELETIS 2020a]
- problematic (partially colonialist) binaries in literacy/orthography development: insiders vs. outsiders, experts vs. non-experts
Variability: variable vs. nonvariable

- structural criterion referring to the relation between graphematics (graphematic solution space) and orthography [MELETIS 2020a, MELETIS/DÜRSCHEID 2022]

- What is the potential for **CODIFIED** licensed variation, **UNCODIFIED** licensed variation (if the rules are underspecified, e.g., when new words are concerned), and **unlicensed variation** (orthographically incorrect but still decodable and communicatively relevant, often with social meaning)? [SEBBA 2007]

- affects the perception of **mistakes**, specifically the difference between (intended) variation and mistake and thus the possibility for **creativity** with or without deviance

- even variation (both licensed and of course unlicensed) is interpreted normatively (and judged as better/more acceptable/more correct or the opposite), so ‘correctness’, in the minds of people, is not absolute, especially if there is no codification to fall back on
Linguistic motivation: motivated vs. arbitrary

- Are orthographic rules systematic in that they predictably pick variants from the graphematic solution space?
- Orthographic ‘principles’ [cf. KARG 2015] that can establish a motivation: etymological, phonographic, etc.
- Distinguishes explainable from exceptional spellings (general rules from particular rules, cf. MELETIS 2020a)
- Diachronic dimension: if motivation is no longer there, a spelling becomes arbitrary; depending on how and why arbitrary spellings may have emerged, they may make an orthography susceptible to REFORM
- For several reasons, motivated spellings may not be NATURAL ones (as other – especially sociolinguistic – factors can override linguistic factors)
  - Motivated ≠ NATURAL and arbitrary ≠ ARTIFICIAL; artificial orthographies can indeed be very motivated, but motivation is no guarantee for success
Criterion or result? – Ascribed status

- question of how important an orthography is in a literate community, especially to users
- determines the existence/nature/severity of sanctions following deviations depending on how socially binding an orthography is perceived to be [MELETIS 2020a]
- influences (and/or is influenced by) awareness of and interest for orthography in the public (cf. discussion of topics such as emojis and decay of writing/language)
- Does orthography ‘belong’ to every ‘class’ of society? Orthography arguably needs to arrive at the ‘lowest’ level to be widespread and successful, and this is the motivation behind many reforms (to make writing systems easier by interfering through their orthography, cf. character simplification in Chinese).
Conclusion

- due to a descriptive reading in the dominant Anglophone realm, orthography in a prescriptive sense is understudied; however, the descriptive dimension of analyzing the inner functioning of writing systems must be distinguished from (always?) existing normative components that are not just relevant for scholars but also a daily reality for writers and readers
  - graphematics can only be reconstructed theoretically by (grapho)linguistics and is ‘invisible’ to users; by contrast, orthography is the lens through which people in most literate communities are introduced to literacy
- orthography is a curbing tool and mechanism (with the curbing also having its benefits)
  - as a tool, it is in a structural relation with the graphematics of a system depending on how it was conceived and how it is implemented/upheld
  - as a mechanism (i.e., complex process), it is encapsulated by the actors involved and the question of how they are involved
- the criteria presented here are meant to facilitate a description and comparison of diverse types of orthographic standardization; a next step is studying their interaction
References


Sebba, Mark. 2007. Spelling and society: The culture and politics of orthography around the world. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511486739
Thank you for your attention!

UNTIL NEXT TIME!