

Types of orthographic standardization

A SOCIOLINGUISTIC approach

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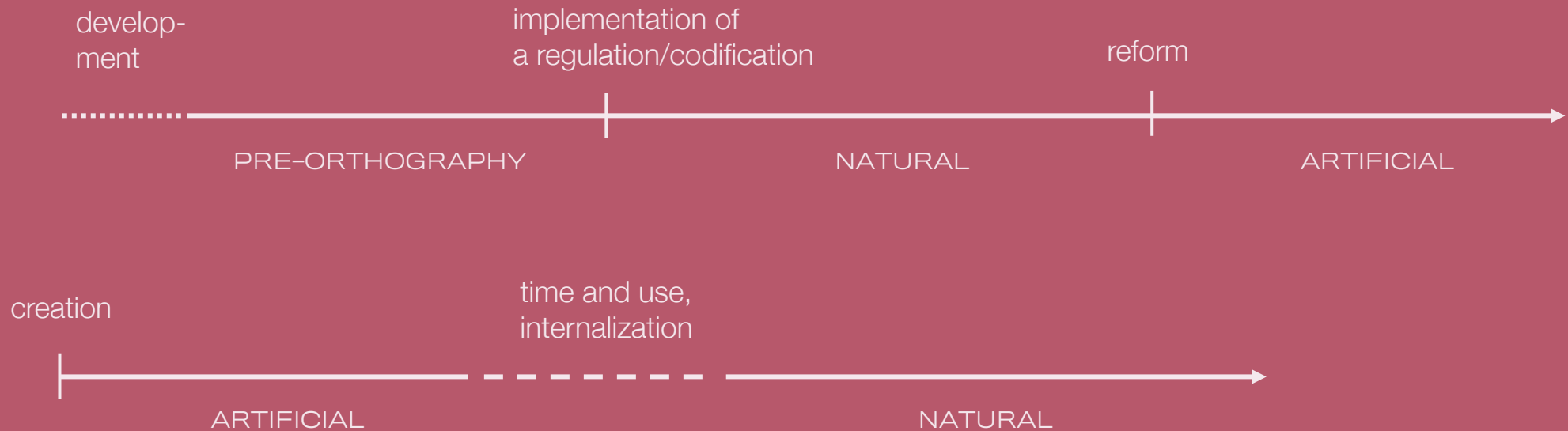
Preliminaries: What is orthography?

- **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



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. uncoded

- **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 uncoded resources: uncoded 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 **STATUS**) of an orthography [CAHILL 2014]
- **direct** and **official** (as part of the initial design/implementation or **REFORM** process)
- **indirect** and **official** (when the actual use of the writing system is taken into consideration in the design/reform of an orthography **ORIGIN**)
- **indirect** and **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/DÜRSCHIED 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 **MOTIVATION, VARIABILITY** depending on how it was conceived **ORIGIN** and how it is implemented/upheld **CODIFICATION, MODIFICATION**
 - as a mechanism (i.e., complex process), it is encapsulated by the actors involved and the question of *how* they are involved **REGULATION, COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT**
- 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**

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Thank you for your attention!

UNTIL NEXT TIME!