

“Orthographic Shaming”

Attitudes towards orthography and orthographic mistakes in German

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Literate communities feel strongly about orthography: they claim ownership of ‘their’ orthographies and demand the right of co-determination. This is evident in highly emotional debates surrounding orthographic reforms (cf. Johnson 2005).

A context in which it becomes strikingly apparent that orthography is a form of social action (cf. Jaffe 2012; Sebba 2007) is social media. Frequently, written utterances on Facebook etc. that include orthographic mistakes are corrected by others. In numerous cases, this is done not neutrally but in a manner that ostentatiously degrades the person who made the mistake. I call this phenomenon *orthographic shaming*. It is characterized by the fact that people interpret linguistic knowledge, in this case the knowledge of orthographic norms, as a source of power: knowing something others do not – and pointing this out to them – validates their superiority.

In this talk, I discuss the results of a study that employs a combination of three methods to investigate orthographic shaming in German: (1) an analysis of 100 correction samples including the respective contexts on Facebook, (2) interviews with people of different backgrounds regarding their attitudes towards orthography, mistakes, and orthographic shaming, and (3) an internet survey based on Likert scales and open questions investigating the severity of different types of mistakes as well as possible reactions to them.

Questions that are addressed include: What criteria must be met for a correction to count as orthographic shaming? What are the contexts in which this phenomenon occurs? Which mistakes are most often corrected – is there a scale of severity? What are the motivations for people to engage in orthographic shaming? What are the reactions to orthographic shaming? And finally, what are general attitudes towards (German) orthography?

Jaffe, Alexandra M. (et al.) (eds.) (2012): *Orthography as social action: Scripts, spelling, identity and power*. Berlin: DeGruyter.

Johnson, Sally (2005): *Spelling trouble? Language, ideology, and the reform of German orthography*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Sebba, Mark (2007): *Spelling and society: The culture and politics of orthography around the world*. Cambridge: CUP.