The pragmatics of orthographic shaming

Written speech acts and the negotiation of power, normativity, and discussion culture

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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 (who are sometimes referred to as *grammar* or *spelling nazis*). 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 present the results of a study that employs a combination of three methods to investigate orthographic shaming in German: (1) a qualitative analysis of 100 correction samples including the respective contexts on Facebook, (2) semi-structured oral interviews with 14 participants regarding their attitudes towards orthography, mistakes, and orthographic shaming, and (3) written interviews with 'orthographic shamers.'

In the analysis, I focus on the pragmatic aspects of orthographic shaming. Informed by previous studies on speech acts in social media (cf. Carr, Schrock & Dauterman 2012), speech acts within orthographic shaming comments and the reactions to them are identified. Conclusions are drawn as to the pragmatic behavior surrounding orthographic shaming as well as the attitudes towards this behavior. Ultimately, the phenomenon of orthographic shaming is an expression of a negotiation of power and normativity and a gradual change of discussion culture.

References

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