Types of orthographic standardization: A sociolinguistic approach

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In grapholinguistics (and linguistics in general), 'orthography' remains a contentious term let alone concept. Since English is a self-regulating writing system (cf. Berg/Aronoff 2017, 2018) not orthographically regulated by any official authority of linguistic policy, 'orthography' has often been used as a descriptive term more or less synonymous to 'writing system' in central and highly visible Anglophone literature. In contrast, in other grapholinguistic traditions – such as the Germanophone –, 'orthography' is interpreted prescriptively and tied to notions of normativity and system-external regulation (cf. Dürscheid 2016, Neef 2015, Meletis 2020). While descriptive grapholinguistics (and its most prominent subbranch of graphematics) is concerned with what is systematic (or 'grammatical'), i.e., conforms to the regularities of the system, orthography adds to this the evaluative and (meta)pragmatically relevant notion of correctness.

However, the existence of orthographic standardization cannot be captured by a simplifying dichotomy, with systems like English classified unregulated and systems like German as officially regulated; instead, there is a whole variety of different orthographies that serve as a normative benchmark in writing systems and render their respective users aware of the (in)correctness of scribal practices. In this paper, such different types of orthography will be described with the help of several criteria that form the basis of a preliminary typology. In systems that are occupied with one, an orthography becomes a structural matter; however, it always originates as a social phenomenon, which is echoed by the sociolinguistic nature of the following criteria (cf. also Cahill 2014, Hinton 2014):

— **Natural vs. artificial** captures whether the orthographic conventions in a writing system have developed naturally, through implicit negotiations among users during the prolonged continued use of the writing system (cf. Mihm 2016 for premodern orthographies), to become a 'phenomenon of the third kind' (cf. Keller 2014), or whether they are artificial (and potentially arbitrary, although these two features do not necessarily correlate, cf. below) in the sense of having either been (1) implemented for an existing and established writing system without considerations of the actual use of that system (whether said system already had an orthographic standardization or not), or (2) implemented immediately during/after the creation of a new writing system which thus has never been in use without a standardization.

— **Regulated vs. unregulated** describes, in a narrow sense, whether an orthographic standardization is officially regulated by an external stakeholder of linguistic policy (such as the *Council for German Orthography* in the case of German orthography) or not (such as English orthographies; cf. also Karan 2014).

— **Codified vs. uncodified** reflects whether orthographic conventions are externally codified as rules through rule explications – whether these are officially regulated or not. Types of codifications include rulebooks, guidelines, and dictionaries. Notably, orthographies can be unregulated but codified (such as English orthographies, for which there exist dictionaries with – strictly speaking – only nonofficial status).

— **Original vs. reformed** is a subcriterion assessing whether a regulated codified orthography exists in its first, i.e., original form, or whether it has been reformed, i.e., re-codified, at least once.

— **Community involvement vs. no community involvement** (or a continuum of bottom-up vs. top-down standardization): In a loose sense, this criterion pertains to the involvement of users in the (implicit or explicit, gradual or onetime) establishment of orthographic conventions, their codification as rules, and their potential reform, i.e., bottom-up processes of standardization (cf. Bow 2013, Page 2013 for case studies). In a narrow sense, it describes whether community members are involved in the (initial) explicit regulation and possibly codification of orthographic rules – which is the case mostly in the context of literacy development (cf. Lüpke 2011, the contributions in Cahill/Rice 2014), i.e., the creation of new writing systems from scratch.

— As the first of two criteria that are structural in nature, **variable vs. nonvariable** establishes a continuum capturing the degree of writing systems' graphematic variability. It thus determines the possibility of (licensed or unlicensed) graphematic variation and with it, the expression of social (non-denotative) meaning and creativity etc. in writing. The Japanese writing system, for ex-

ample, often affords multiple ways of writing the same word (or, more generally, utterance) without a deviance from the norm automatically being perceived as strictly 'incorrect' (cf. Joyce/Masuda 2019). It is crucial whether these variable parts of a writing system are unregulated, as there may exist graphematically very variable writing systems which are highly regulated and thus do not afford the same possibilities for 'correct' graphematic variation.

— **Motivated vs. arbitrary** is used to evaluate whether orthographic conventions/rules are based on the graphematics of the writing system, i.e., its internal systematics and its actual usage, in which case they are motivated, or whether they are arbitrary and based on other (external) considerations.

It is important to emphasize that this list is, of course, non-exhaustive. However, the proposed criteria make it possible to categorize and compare different types of orthographic standardization. This can (finally) further our understanding of the status that diverse kinds of norms assume in different writing systems. Notably, these norms arguably play a more prominent role in the written modality than in the spoken one – they possibly even originate in writing and literacy (cf. Mäkillähde/Leppänen/Itkonen 2019 for normativity in language).

In this paper, not only the listed criteria will be presented – along with examples of writing systems and their orthographies to which they apply in various combinations – but another important question that will be raised is what bearing this typology has on central normative concepts such as 'orthographic rule' and 'orthographic mistake'. Specifically, differences in the perception of prescriptivity will be highlighted – what to members of one literate community may be a rule (and a deviation from it a mistake), may for members of another community merely be a convention (and a 'deviation' from it variation). Fleshing out the basis of grapholinguistic normativity is expected to not only improve our understanding of writing and literacy practices, but pragmatics – and metapragmatic beliefs – regarding the linguistic and communicative behavior of members of literate communities in general. Lastly, it is relevant to applied fields such as literacy development and the reform of existing orthographies.

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