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# LITERACY FOSTERS NORMATIVITY

Exploring how material and functional features of writing relate to ↗ linguistic norms

**WRITING/READING  
INTERFACE (AWLL 14)**

*Temple University Rome*

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“

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[B01: L. 149-150]

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# STRUCTURE

1. **Definitions:** Literacy, normativity, prescriptivism, orthography
2. **Observations:** Features of writing, communication, and communicators
3. **Link:** Literacy without normativity? Normativity without literacy?
4. **Relativity:** From graphic to orthographic relativity
5. **Outlook:** Writing shapes language (use)

# LITERACY

- psycholinguistic perspective: literacy as (context-independent) **skills of reading and writing**
- cultural studies/anthropological perspective: literacy as embedded in (sociocultural, sociopolitical, individual) **contexts**
  - predominantly acquired in formal educational settings
  - and enacted in **literacy practices** (reading a book, writing an email, scribbling a note, ...)

# LITERACY

- postdoc project Orthographic relativity: Comparing the relation between literacy and normativity across writing systems and literate cultures

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# [LINGUISTIC] NORMATIVITY

- **normativity**: shared conventions or norms that govern the use of a language (variety) within a given community or society
  - norms encompass various aspects of language: grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling
  - serve as guidelines for what is **correct** (absolute, context-independent, product-oriented) or **appropriate** (gradual, context-dependent, use-oriented)
  - a phenomenon that can be described but that is also the basis (and/or result) of a mindset: **prescriptivism**

# PRESCRIPTIVISM

- **prescriptivism:** enforcement or promotion of norms related to language (use) (cf. Rawlins/Chapman 2020)
  - active application of norms (to maintain a certain status of language)



# ORTHOGRAPHY

- as a **normative** phenomenon (Meletis 2020)
  - this reading is prevalent in non-Anglophone research (e.g., German)
  - **static reading**: orthography as ‘correct’ text
  - **dynamic reading**: orthography as production of ‘correct’ texts
  - **broad reading**: awareness of conventions/norms among users, no official regulation by an authority of language policy (e.g., *Council for German Orthography*) needed
    - this awareness arguably exists even in the absence of an implemented standard (cf. polynomic language such as Corsican, see Jaffe 2021)

# OBSERVATIONS

features of: writing, communication situations, and humans as social communicators

Writing as **communication**: Writers write to be understood, readers read to understand, which makes necessary conventions. These are more important in written communication as it occurs (prototypically) asynchronously: Writing is not bound to a shared time *or* place. Texts must stand on their own (leading to explicitness, ...). They cannot rely on some of the features of (prototypical) spoken communication (facial expressions, gestures, prosody, ...).

# OBSERVATIONS

Writing is more **salient** than speech due to its graphic (visual/tactile) nature. It is (prototypically) **semi-permanent**, making it possible to revisit what someone has written, including deviances from a standard. As individuals in a society in which such a standard is perceived as (socially) binding, we want to be **accepted** and write correctly to save our face. Deviating could lead to sanctions and stigmatization. This renders (the unevenly spread knowledge of) norms a form of **power** used in prescriptive practices (e.g., as positioning strategies).

# OBSERVATIONS

At the collective level, standards have developed historically for political reasons (e.g., **unification**, see the emergence of nation states). Standards carry connotations of **prestige** while other – including exclusively or predominantly spoken – varieties (or ‘dialects’) are devalued.

Ontogenetically, with respect to acquisition, writing is **learned** through instruction. This instruction (usually) aims at teaching children to write *correctly*.

# OBSERVATIONS

writing	communication	humans (individually and societally)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– material/visual salience</li><li>– permanence</li><li>– devoid of extralinguistic features of spoken communication</li><li>– (prototypically) more explicit and elaborated than spoken language</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– not bound to a shared communication situation (i.e., prototypically asynchronous and independent of a given place)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– desire to be accepted<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– fear of social sanctions</li><li>– wish to assert power/position oneself</li></ul></li><li>– desire to be connected to others (unification)</li></ul>

+ **acquisition:** learned through instruction

# LINK: NORMATIVITY W/O LITERACY?

- **metalinguistic awareness** as a byproduct of literacy (reciprocity)
  - example of (segmental) phonological awareness as one facet of this awareness (Read et al. 1986, Morais et al. 1987, Scholes [ed.] 1993, De Gelder et al. 1993, Nagy/Anderson 1995, Wydell 2023); metalinguistic awareness in illiterates (Kurvers et al. 2006)
- metalinguistic awareness as a **prerequisite of linguistic normativity** (?)
  - language users often employ descriptive concepts as prescriptive categories : *'This isn't a word/sentence!'* requires an idea of what a word, sentence, ... is
  - this idea may be formed during literacy acquisition because these concepts are more or less bound to writing (see Davidson 2019)
    - more so, expectations of correct/well-formed manifestations of these categories (e.g., *'Speak in full sentences!'*) are shaped by literacy



# LINK: NORMATIVITY W/O LITERACY?

- to conquer the Eurocentrist bias: What about **orality**?
- orality is as much a complex bundle of practices as literacy (cf. Finnegan 1990)
- e.g., recanting texts orally arguably requires an awareness of their form
- what may be lacking (to a certain degree) is a prescriptivist mindset
  - “When linguists move to a fieldwork situation, they inevitably and mostly unconsciously brings [sic] their native ideology of language with them (to a significant extent canonized by their training in linguistics). But preliterate communities are unlikely to share their assumptions.” (Foley 2003: 86)
- research on language ideologies/attitudes with respect to normativity (both in literate and oral language communities) is in its infancy

# LINK: LITERACY W/O NORMATIVITY?

- normativity is not inherent in writing systems (or language)
  - but rather one possible (and an arguably ‘natural’) reaction to the **variation** found in them
  - as a ‘reaction’ manifested in language use and ideologies, normativity may be inherently interactive (and collapse partially with prescriptivism)
    - historically, what is important is the demotisation of writing, i.e., the widening of its user circles from an elite to a majority in a society
  - pattern of a trajectory that places pressure on language communities to undergo standardization due to a ‘normative expectation’ (cf. Karan 2014)

# ORTHOGRAPHIC RELATIVITY



Holding spelling bees in English, with its irregular spelling, makes more sense than in languages that have much more familiar spelling. Some languages, like Hindi, are based fully on phonetics and have regular spellings; and therefore, there are very few spelling bees in these languages. (Wikipedia page ‘Spelling bee’)

- **typological restriction:** idea of (orally!) spelling letter-for-letter is tied to phonography, and arguably segmentaries (for the term, see Gnanadesikan 2017)
- **varying ‘irregularity’:** writing systems vary with respect to their degree of variation
  - one possible operationalization: variation as numbers of possibilities of how to write a given meaningful phonological string (e.g., English *write* – *right* – *rite*)

# ORTHOGRAPHIC RELATIVITY:

Different literacies shape linguistic norms and prescriptive views on language in different ways.

## Comparison

THEORETICAL

- \* **Structural:** Description in one uniform framework
- \* **Sociolinguistic:** Sociocultural and sociopolitical embedding in linguistic communities
- \* **Pragmatic:** Exemplary online discourse analyses focusing on normative and prescriptive actions
- \* **Metapragmatic:** 45 sociolinguistic, language-biographical interviews about ideologies of normativity and/in writing as well as an online survey

EMPIRICAL

# ORTHOGRAPHIC RELATIVITY



- How does the specific makeup of a writing system foster (the development of) norms?
- Which ‘areas’ of a given writing system display variation and are prone to standardization?
- German, Norwegian, and Japanese as case studies and the basis of a comparison

# ORTHOGRAPHIC RELATIVITY

“ [...] it is a legitimate question whether the structural differences between [writing systems] have any implications for prescriptive rules and attitudes.  
(Coulmas 2016: 41)

- **status** of literacy; exercise of diverse literacy practices; attitudes
- **sociolinguistic and sociocultural conditions**, e.g., diglossia, contact between literacies
- **authorities of linguistic policy** that regulate literacy and language in general

# OUTLOOK: WRITING SHAPES LANGUAGE



“the availability of the written form has a profound influence on language structure and representation at both the individual level (mental grammar) and the social level (language as a conventional system shared by a community of speakers)” (Dabrowska 2020: 75)

- users often view writing as *pars pro toto* language (unsurprising given its salience)
- writing not only depicts, but **shapes** language
  - examples include vocabulary and syntactic complexity (see Dabrowska 2020)
  - this means while language may be viewed as an amodal system, modalities (including the written modality) still shape this amodal system
  - in conclusion, the study of writing is not an ‘add-on’ to linguistics but needs to be included in mainstream linguistic paradigms

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