

People incorrectly correcting other people: The pragmatics of (re-) corrections and their negotiation in a Facebook group

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ABSTRACT

In highly standardized literate cultures, orthographic norms are perceived as socially binding, giving rise to negative evaluations of ‘incorrect’ writing, i.e., writing that deviates from the norm. This is evident in prescriptive practices in interactions on social media including direct corrections of a deviance (*you’re) or comments more or less implicitly referring to it (“would be great if you knew how to spell”). In this study, we focus on a special type of corrections and the reactions to them: incorrect corrections. They are often corrected in so-called re-corrections, which frequently give rise to entire chains of corrections and comments that reflect diverse practices and attitudes both shaped by and towards normativity. By conducting an exploratory case study, we investigate (meta-)pragmatic strategies of stancetaking – such as mocking or doing being an expert – as well as their negotiation in (re-)corrections. Specifically, we focus on three posts taken from the public Facebook group *People Incorrectly Correcting Other People* consisting of, on the one hand, decontextualized screenshots showing an incorrect correction and ensuing re-corrections framed by the reaction of the poster posting them to the group. On the other hand, given the large number of group members, they include a myriad of additional comments discussing (re-)corrections at a meta-level. Our analysis suggests that re-correcting serves to criticize not a mistake but the positioning of correctors as superior. Thus, it implicitly challenges the normativity of standard language ideologies by exposing the hypocrisy of prescriptive practices.

1. Introduction

Members of literate communities often feel strongly about their orthography, which they view as a common good. It is thus unsurprising that they claim ownership of ‘their’ way of writing and may even demand the right of co-determination in wide-reaching decisions pertaining it (such as orthography reforms, cf. Johnson, 2002, 2012). This makes orthography an important locus and form of social action (cf. Jaffe et al., 2012) and power negotiation,² something that is strikingly apparent in social media contexts: On the one hand, everyday digital communication itself is frequently at the core of debates of linguistic criticism that center on, for instance, linguistic correctness and creativity, norms and deviations from them, as well as writing competence (s) or the lack thereof. In this respect, linguistics has made contributions through both the empirical study of linguistic phenomena (such as norm

deviations) and, at a metalevel, an analysis of the very debates just mentioned (cf. Thurlow, 2006; Brommer, 2007; Dürscheid/Wagner/Brommer, 2010; Busch, 2021). On the other hand, the adoption of a more pragmatic and user-based perspective reveals that norms are habitually negotiated within certain communities of practice: For example, comments on Facebook or other social media platforms that deviate from linguistic norms are frequently corrected by people who are sometimes colloquially referred to as *grammar* or *spelling nazis* (cf. Albert and Hahn, 2015; Arendt/Kiesendahl, 2014, 2015; Bahlo/Becker/Steckbauer, 2016; Hammel, 2013; Heuman, 2020, 2022; Lukač, 2018; Meletis, 2022; Švelch/Sherman, 2018).

Corrections (and, in a next step, re-corrections) of language (use) occur in various forms in digital communication (see Table 1). Following the classification of repairs and corrections in conversation analysis (cf. Schegloff/Jefferson/Sacks, 1977, or Meredith/Stokoe, 2014; Mostovaia,

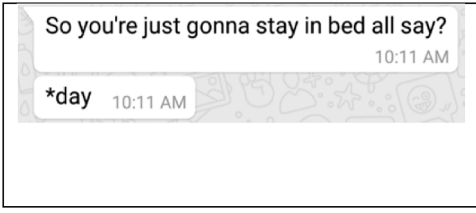

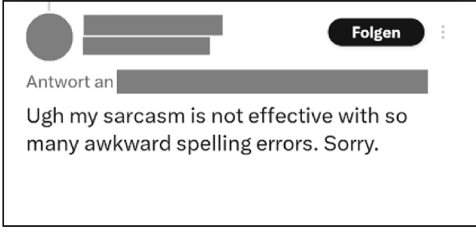
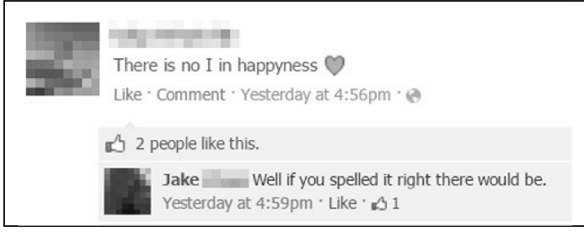
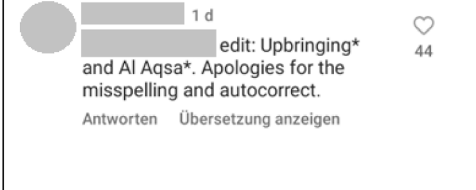
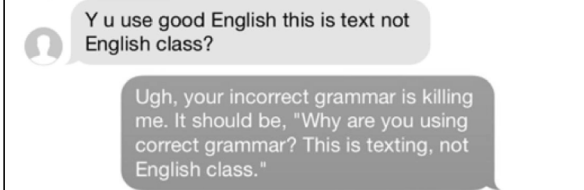
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² Woolard/Schieffelin (1994: 64) already underlined that “orthographic systems cannot be conceptualized simply as reducing speech to writing, but rather they are symbols that carry historical, cultural, and political meanings”.

Table 1
Types of corrections and comments.

	Self	Other
Correction		
Comment		
Comment with correction		

2021 for written contexts), we differentiate between self- and other-corrections,³ a distinction that can lead to significant pragmatic differences (when it comes to saving vs. threatening one's face, see below). All of the types presented here occur in both of these forms; the focus of our study will be other-corrections.⁴ Note that only slips of performance (or mistakes, cf. Section 2) are self-correctible and thus the primary target of self-corrections, whereas deviance due to a lack of competence (i.e., errors) are predominantly corrected by others.⁵

In case of the mere self-correction, in the example in Table 1, the writer corrects what is most likely a typo, “say”, to “day” by adding a

³ Notably, in conversation analysis, a distinction is made between ‘repair’ and ‘correction’. As Macbeth (2004: 707) explains: “[...] though repair can entail correction, correction is a lesser domain both conceptually and empirically. Correction premises ‘error’, yet studies of repair routinely find repairs where no accountable ‘error’ can be heard”. Thus, in our paper, and in the case of ‘incorrect corrections’, we are dealing with instances of ‘correction’ only when adopting the perspective of correctors since it is precisely the fact that they premise an error that does not actually exist that motivates their corrective – or rather repairing – practice(s). Since our paper deals with corrective practices as a means of stancetaking, we adopt this agent-oriented perspective and thus speak of ‘corrections’. It should be kept in mind, however, that technically, incorrect corrections are not instances of ‘correction’ but more broadly of ‘repair’.

⁴ Another dimension is added by the question of who initiated a correction, leading to the distinction of self-initiated vs. other-initiated corrections (cf. also Heuman 2020: 2, who categorizes corrections “in terms of self- or other-initiated, and self- or other-completed”). An important type in the context of this study is the other-initiated self-correction, as negative comments by others (see below) may lead to self-corrections.

⁵ Of course, there is also the possibility that writers gain the knowledge necessary to correct their own errors and return to correct them themselves.

second message introduced by an asterisk, which in digital contexts has developed into an index for corrections,⁶ followed by the correct spelling. As the second type, a comment without correction (such as “Well if you spelled it right there would be”) alludes – in varying degrees of explicitness – to a perceived deviance without actually correcting it. In the public contexts that we will focus on here, where interlocutors commonly do not know each other personally, comments of this type often aim at depicting the person who made an error or mistake as stupid, incompetent, etc., and thus constitute face-threatening acts (FTAs, see below).⁷ Such comments may refer explicitly to language or rather its use (“if you spelled it right”) or may not address language at all (which could be something like “You are so stupid”); notably, even in the latter case, the motivation underlying the comment arguably remains the evaluation of others’ norm-defying language use, which (en)actors of such practices likely see as an index for personal attributes such as intelligence (see next section). By contrast, the third type is a combination of a correction (often also marked with an asterisk) and a preceding or following comment.

All these forms can – and often do – lead to subsequent communication (“Anschlusskommunikation”, cf. Klemm/Michel, 2014; Androutsopoulos, 2016). Decisive factors, here, appear to be whether in a given (public) context, a correction is considered justified or not (both by the corrected person as well as possible third parties following the conversation), which is tied to the question of whether it is itself ‘correct’, i.e., conforms to norms of language (use) and/or makes factually correct claims. If this is not the case, meaning a correction is itself in

⁶ Note that in German, the asterisk has also come into use as a word-internal marker for gender-sensitive language, which is also how it has become ideologically charged (cf. Kotthoff/Nübling, 2018: 218–222). However, its word- or (more generally) utterance-initial use is associated closely with the function or act of correcting and thus likely free of (at least gender-associated) ideologies.

⁷ If it is an implicit self-correction, it can simultaneously also be seen as a face-saving strategy as actors may prefer to correct themselves before someone else does.

some way incorrect, this can lead to the development of entire correction chains⁸ in which (incorrect) corrections are iteratively re-corrected or commented on. Terminologically, we call such corrections of (incorrect) corrections *re-corrections*. From a pragmatic perspective, the utterances in these chains are often not neutral but aimed at degrading and invalidating (the opinion of) people who have made mistakes, with the mistake-related shaming not seldom guising ad hominem-attacks. Given this underlying motivation, the public correction of language-related deviations from the norm as a prescriptive literate practice can be termed *orthographic shaming* (cf. Meletis, 2022). At the center of such shaming practices are users who interpret linguistic knowledge (and primarily that of commonly highly regulated orthographic norms, which is among the most palpable and widespread)⁹ as power: knowing something others do not – and pointing it out publicly by displaying one’s own expertise – serves the validation of one’s superiority, which means that at its core, it is a positioning strategy.¹⁰

The present paper focuses on the socio-pragmatic aspects of prescriptive shaming practices in correction chains evoked by incorrect corrections as we seek to study the following research question: How does the referencing of linguistic norms as well as other types of linguistic and (meta-)pragmatic strategies serve as means of stancetaking? In a first step, we will present the theoretical basis of our analysis (Section 2). Subsequently, we describe our data and methodology as well as associated limitations (Section 3) before presenting our case study, an in-depth analysis of three examples of stancetaking in correction chains (Section 4). In the discussion (Section 5) we draw conclusions about the pragmatic behavior surrounding prescriptive (re-) correction practices, which is followed by an outlook.

2. Theoretical perspectives: prescriptive stancetaking strategies

With accessibility to the internet and digital technology steadily growing, engagement in digital communication is booming as we live in a polymedia environment (cf. Tagg/Lyons, 2021). This offers researchers ample opportunities to study not only diverse kinds of texts but – given important features of the written modality – particularly linguistic normativity and ways in which it is negotiated. Unlike prototypical spoken utterances, written utterances are (semi-)permanent (cf. Meletis/Dürscheid, 2022: 22f.), making them (re-)accessible over extended periods of time. At the same time, writing is highly indexical, rendering literacy practices (from writing emails to posting comments under an Instagram post) and their products forms of social action: posting a comment under a Facebook post not only has a communicative function but its features (including its form) signal certain facets about the comment’s author, the context in which it was written/posted, the intended addressee(s), etc. In other words, the permanence and the indexicality of writing foster not only metalinguistic and metapragmatic awareness and activity, but in particular a sense of normativity. It is unsurprising, thus, that writing – both as a process and as a product – is evaluated not only by ‘experts’ like linguists but also by everyday users who hold and express their own ideologies about it (cf., for example, Spitzmüller, 2013a; Heuman, 2020) – ideologies that are often

⁸ In this context, a recent study by Pfurtscheller (2022) is worth mentioning, in which he investigates how reflexive citation practices and recontextualization serve quick-witted retaliating responses or reactions in social media.

⁹ Users often conflate different types of mistakes such as spelling vs. grammar mistakes. Arguably, on the one hand, many common mistakes such as “you’re” instead of “your” are indeed a mixture of both, and on the other, even mistakes that are more clearly grammar mistakes can be interpreted as ‘spelling mistakes’ when they are materialized in the written modality. Note that this conflation is also obvious in the concurrent and largely synonymous use of labels such as *grammar nazi* and *spelling nazi*.

¹⁰ These practices are also reminiscent of Cameron’s (2012: 20) concept of “verbal hygiene”, that is practices that are “born of an urge to improve or ‘clean up’ language”.

(depending on the literate community in question) influenced by standard language ideologies (cf. Woolard/Schieffelin, 1994; Woolard, 2020). All this makes “the social mediaspace [...] a contested space where dominant language ideologies are both reinforced and subverted” (Phyak, 2015: 379).

This also shifts into focus the question of how deviances from the written norm – knowledge of which is rarely equally distributed among members of literate communities – are perceived and negotiated by users. In his book *Does spelling matter?*, Simon Horobin provocatively claims that “[r]ather than being seen simply as mistakes, incorrect spellings are often viewed as a reflection of a person’s intelligence, social class, and even morality” (Horobin, 2013: 250). Even the very possibility of such an association underlines the indexical potential of adhering to vs. deviating from norms and the personal ascriptions that are being made on that basis – ascriptions that, in a next step, can have ‘real-life’ consequences such as (not) getting a job or (not) receiving a response on a dating app. Interestingly, this question has – thus far – been treated most extensively in social psychology, resulting in heterogeneous findings (cf., e.g., Beason, 2001; Kreiner et al., 2002; Figueredo/Varnhagen, 2005; Chaney/Martin, 2007; Stiff, 2012; Scott et al., 2014).

An observation that is central to a linguistic and (meta-)pragmatic perspective on the topic is that everyday language users make fine-grained – if often unconscious – distinctions between deviance at the competence vs. the performance level; the former is referred to as *error*, the second as *mistake* (cf. Corder, 1967). In the written modality, errors are deviant spellings due to wrong or lacking knowledge of orthographic norms, whereas mistakes are basically typos (or, in handwriting, slips of the pen). The decisive difference between them is that mistakes are self-correctible, meaning authors could, on second reading, spot and correct them; errors, by contrast, are not. Additionally, readers can often identify conscious deviation – such as writing without capitalization in German – as a form of non-standard variation, thus ascribing to writers the agency of (knowing but) willingly subverting certain norms. Findings on personality-associated ascriptions due to deviances are contradictory: in line with Horobin’s bold claim, some suggest that deviances are being correlated with intelligence (cf. Figueredo/Varnhagen, 2005) while other findings support the possibility that they are associated only with writing ability (cf. Kreiner et al., 2002). An interesting study in this regard (cf. Boland/Queen, 2016) suggests that ascriptions ultimately depend on the personality and/or the reading skill of the reader or ‘judge’ (cf. also Varnhagen, 2000; Johnson et al., 2017; see Morin-Lessard/McKelvie, 2019 for a recent overview). Note, however, that these studies have focused predominantly on writing in formal contexts and registers, which are intricately associated with more correct, i.e., norm-conforming writing. This cannot be claimed to the same degree for digital communication and its registers (cf. Squires, 2010; Busch, 2021), which are the focus of our study.

Several recent works deal specifically with prescriptivism in digital public communication. Arendt/Kiesendahl (2014, 2015), for instance, analyze online language criticism voiced by everyday users, which, in German, they label ‘Laiensprachkritik’ (‘lay language criticism’). They discuss examples of users correcting others’ deviances in public digital contexts such as in comment sections of newspaper websites and try to categorize them with regard to their form, function, and effect. These prescriptivist practices between peers as well as bottom-up practices performed by ‘lay’ users aimed at institutions or professions which are expected to master linguistic norms (such as journalists) have also been termed *grassroots prescriptivism* (cf. Drackley, 2018; Lukač, 2022; Lukač/Heyd, 2023). They rely on (mostly negative) evaluations of language use based on a particular ideologically coined understanding of language norms. What is important for the present study, now, is that such acts of evaluation also function as instruments of social positioning, meaning that users are “taking stances within interaction [...] by multiple modes of communication (e.g., written and spoken text, tone of voice, physical arrangement, etc.)” (Marino, 2023: 1).

Social media are especially “stance-rich” (Vásquez, 2021: 43),

usually asynchronous environments, and when it comes to prescriptive shaming practices (see also the concept of *cyberprescriptivism*, Schaffer, 2010), users position themselves in relation to language use(s), as described by Spitzmüller (2013b: 272): Agents evaluate and/or practice language use in a certain way (as authenticating, alienating, etc.). By doing so, and by the way they do so, they position themselves in a certain way (affirmatively, ironically, etc.) with respect to this language use.

Regarding prescriptive shaming practices, different stancetaking strategies can be identified (cf. also Frick, 2022): through their comments, people may (1) mock each other (*mockery*), (2) position themselves as experts (*doing being an expert*), (3) invalidate their conversation partners (both opinions on a content-related level but also people in the form of ad hominem arguments; *invalidation*). These practices may also be based on the (4) social *registration* of certain linguistic features (e.g., the iterative use of exclamation marks), resulting in the need to uncover these registrations by pointing at their underlying normativity and their prescriptivist claim; at the same time, registrations are reproduced through the practice of orthographic shaming, as is often the case with re-corrections.

As we are going to demonstrate in our case study, these stancetaking strategies often overlap. Moreover, the picture is even more complex than it may at first appear as positioning in these contexts is commonly multilayered: taking a direct stance by either shaming incorrect language use or criticizing such shaming practices can itself result in a shaming practice and may lead, at a (pragmatic) level focused on the addressees and their reactions, to face-threatening acts in the sense of Brown/Levinson (1987). This is relevant since such FTAs may invoke, for instance, possible mitigating strategies used by the involved parties (the corrector, the corrected person, or third parties) such as the use of emojis (cf. Dainas/Herring, 2021; Beißwenger/Pappert, 2019) or humor (cf. Norrick/Spitz, 2008; Werner-García, 2014). In our study, an additional level of complexity is constituted by the fact that the corrected deviance is part of an attempted correction itself – in other words, an FTA serves as a reaction to what is itself likely an FTA (see also next section).

3. Data and methods

Our exploratory qualitative study is based on examples we collected in the context of our research interest in digital prescriptive practices. Specifically, we encountered them by following Androutsopoulos' (2013: 241) suggestion to virtually visit and roam around on different platforms we use, looking out for the phenomenon we are interested in. While such an approach – labeled as digital “guerilla ethnography” by Giaxoglou (2020) – may initially lack systematicity, it does have its advantages. On the one hand, in adopting it, “the cultural and linguistic context is not pre-determined” but emerges as it is made relevant by the users themselves, and on the other, such an approach “helps to point to patterned behaviours and social norms in the everyday” (Giaxoglou, 2020: 65). However, it is essential to reflect not only on the significance of the results but also on the analytical assumptions made from the researchers' viewpoint(s), which as such also represent positionings (see Giaxoglou, 2020: 66 for similar considerations); thus, our analysis also involved auto-phenomenology, i.e., “the researcher's reflexivity about his or her own position, stakes, and interests in the field of social media engagements” (Georgakopoulou, 2016: 184).

It was in the course of such exploratory ethnographic observations of the phenomenon of prescriptive shaming practices in online environments that we discovered and chose as our data source the public Facebook group *People Incorrectly Correcting Other People*,¹¹ which is steadily growing with 2,8 million members as of June 2024. Consequently, the communication we analyze here is public and, in most

cases, likely carried out between people who do not know each other personally, i.e., do not have a pre-existing relationship outside of the analyzed digital communication. The group's focus is, as its name suggests, corrections that are themselves in some way incorrect. Specialized groups like this are particularly suitable as a research object and thus also the focus of other studies as they “offer their users a safe space to share deviations discovered elsewhere. Because these pages are constructed as spaces reserved for humor and entertainment, critique of ‘bad grammar’ is more acceptable” there (Sherman and Svelch, 2015: 323). Although in the three prototypical examples we selected for an in-depth analysis (see Section 4), the incorrectness of the corrections concerns the linguistic level, it can also be of factual nature.¹² Further research will be necessary to determine whether reactions to linguistic deviances vs. ‘false’ facts are reacted to differently. Note also that we do not further distinguish between different types of linguistic deviances (for mistakes vs. errors, see above, but here we refer to different subtypes of errors such as grammar vs. spelling errors), which appears to be an important variable in determining (the gravity of) reactions (see, for instance, Kreiner et al., 2002; Figueredo/Varnhagen, 2005; Surkyn/Sandra/Vanderkerckhove, 2023).

In the group, incorrect corrections (and possible reactions to them) are most often posted in the form of screenshots (for screenshots as a form of citation device, see Pfurtscheller, 2023). In other words, they are presented as images that show closed contexts (pre-)selected by the users who took the screenshots, who in many cases are the same users who then posted them to the group (and sometimes even participated themselves in the conversation pictured on the screenshot, see below). Given that our primary data are screenshots that were taken by someone else, we are facing multiple limitations: most importantly, we only have access to a given portion of a conversation and cannot retrieve it in its entirety; this authentically emulates the experience of other members of the group when reading such posts. Also, and related to this point, the examples are most often posted without a mention of the source, meaning we have no knowledge of the original context in which a portion of a conversation took place (e.g., the topic of the specific post or even the Facebook page or profile on which it was posted, its purpose, etc.). Also, no further inquiries can be made even within the limited portion of a conversation shown on a static screenshot, regarding, for example, the number of different reactions a comment received (e.g., how many users reacted by giving a Like vs. a Haha-reaction). Furthermore, before posting screenshots, per the group's rules, users anonymize pictured users,¹³ meaning no sociodemographic information can be gathered¹⁴ – which would in any case raise complex ethical considerations (see, e.g., Mancosu/Vegetti, 2020).

The remarks thus far concern the contexts shown *within* these (static) examples posted as screenshots. However, another level of analysis focuses on the recontextualization and negotiation of these examples within the group (i.e., at a metalevel), including any stancetaking performed by the poster of the example in how they introduce or present it. Indeed, these two levels are often connected as users who post screenshots in the group are often also actors involved in the very contexts

¹² An example is a reaction to a post claiming “The feather and the bowling ball fall at the same speed into the vacuum chamber”, under which someone posted the incorrect correction “That's [sic] cannot be true. The heavier it is, the faster and harder it falls”.

¹³ Posts that are not anonymized will be declined. This is addressed in a post from one of the administrators that was published on August 4, 2023: “Please refer to Rule #6 about censoring names. So many posts being declined because all the names are visible.” The discussion that develops in reaction to this post highlights that there exist quite different views on this – views that also reveal positionings vis-à-vis the shaming practices that are the group's focus.

¹⁴ We also have to trust a user's anonymization techniques in identifying the participants of a conversation, e.g., whether multiple comments posted by the same person were anonymized using the same color to ‘scratch out’ the names, thus allowing their assignment to the same participant.

¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/2502328646536341/> (July 1, 2024).

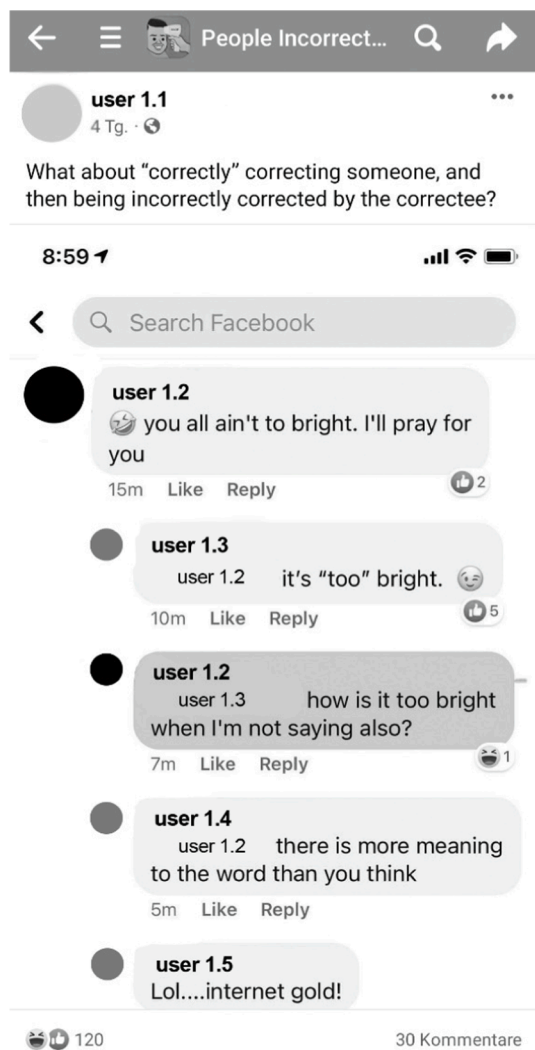


Fig. 1. You all ain't to bright.

captured on the screenshots, which is how they have become aware of these contexts in the first place. More specifically, a common situation is that the poster of a screenshot is simultaneously the corrector of the incorrect correction in the correction chain pictured on it; this is evident since in such cases, posters anonymize everyone on the screenshots but themselves. Under such a screenshot – and given the group's many active members – often many comments are posted that take the (re-)correction as a starting point for a negotiation of associated norms, beliefs, and language ideologies (which we conceptualize as indirect stancetaking, see Section 5). While those are not the starting point or the rationale behind our selection of examples, they also feature in the analysis of two of them.

With these limitations and critical reflections on the broader and narrower context of the data in mind, we are going to analyze in detail three examples from the Facebook group below. As a form of “sampling by phenomenon” (Androutsopoulos, 2013: 238; Herring, 2004: 351), these examples were selected as particularly prototypical in the context of our in-depth ethnographic examination of the site. Specifically, in the course of evaluating numerous examples, we found that the following three allow for an “in-depth analysis of the phenomenon [...]” (Herring, 2004: 351) of stancetaking within (re-)corrective practices as they effectively showcase several of its core features that recur in many of the group's posts.

4. Case study

4.1. Example 1: You all ain't to bright

Our first example (Fig. 1) shows a screenshot that is framed by a metapragmatic comment – in the form of a question – on the practices of correcting and then being incorrectly corrected: “What about ‘correctly’ correcting someone, and then being incorrectly corrected by the correctee?” The recursiveness – and in part absurdity – of this question implies an awareness of how complex and layered these (re-)corrective practices as well as the roles of the involved actors can be,¹⁵ which also translates to the ideologies associated with them. Also, this question is intertextual in two respects (cf. West/Trester, 2013): it is a play on the group's name and, since such play is actually a recurring strategy in many of its posts, also refers to those pre-existing posts that have done the same.

In the screenshot of a Facebook comment thread posted by user 1.1, these practices can be seen in action: user 1.2 is corrected by user 1.3 but does not (quite) accept the correction and thus attempts to save their face, clinging to their own knowledge about the usage conventions of the word ‘too’ – but, notably, phrasing it as a question (“how is it too bright when I'm not saying also?”). In such situations, often, more participants – such as users 1.4 and 1.5 here – join a discussion. The comment by user 1.4 on the meaning of ‘too’ and user 1.2's knowledge (or lack of knowledge) of it is arguably an implicit correction in the form of a comment. While it is not overtly or explicitly condescending, such a reading is possibly favored based on our expectations of language-related comments of this nature in digital communication (especially when encountered on a recontextualized screenshot in the discussed group) and/or the intentions that we commonly ascribe to them. Pragmatically, the comment by user 1.4 does not represent an instance of shaming *per se*; instead, user 1.4 presents themselves as an ‘expert’ to some degree by knowing something user 1.2 does not. By contrast, shaming was likely intended by user 1.2 in their mocking/invalidating and thus face-threatening comment “you all ain't to [sic] bright”¹⁶ that includes the personal metadiscursive audience-mention ‘you all’ intended to signal distance (cf. Biri, 2021), and possibly to some degree by user 1.3 given a possible interpretation of the wink emoji as signaling ‘smugness’. Finally, located at an entirely different level is the comment by user 1.5. It evaluates the preceding correction chain as “internet gold”, specifically for being humorous, a reading that is also supported by the initial “lol”. This view is arguably shared by the poster (user 1.1) who saw its entertainment value as a motivation to capture the conversation on a screenshot and post it in the Facebook group.

Stancetaking is also practiced by different non-verbal Facebook reactions (Like, Love, Haha, Wow, Sad, Angry): At the meta-level, the posting of the screenshot is reacted to mostly with the inherently ambiguous Haha-reaction, which here can be interpreted¹⁷ as ‘laughing with’ the poster (and at the pictured incorrect correction), thus legitimating or ratifying the post(er) and providing the validation that motivated the post in the first place. As for the comments shown on the screenshot, the one by user 1.3 has the most traditional Likes, five. The second posting by user 1.2 has one Haha-reaction, which, however, is

¹⁵ It also highlights that here, in fact, what is incorrectly corrected is itself already a correction, adding a layer of pragmatic complexity.

¹⁶ Given that the comment is part of a decontextualized screenshot, we have no way of retrieving information on what prompted user 1.2's FTA. In that way, our analysis of the example emulates its reception by members of the Facebook group (see Section 3).

¹⁷ Note that Paolillo (2023) cautions against intuitive interpretations of the different Facebook reactions as their “distribution is complex and unstable across samples and the available aggregate data does not reveal face-work patterns which are otherwise readily available”; in other words, their meanings are polysemous and nuanced.

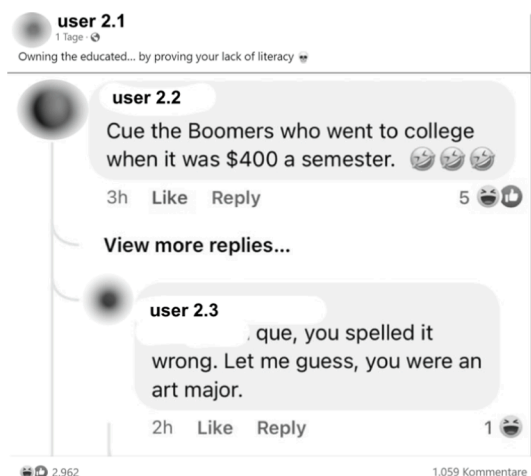


Fig. 2. Cue the Boomers.

likely a ‘laughing at’ the user, i.e., an expression of superiority-based humor (Švelch/Sherman, 2018: 2395).

4.2. Example 2: Cue the queue of boomer corrections

Our second example contains a multilayered, extensive and in parts heated discussion about an initial post in which user 2.2 is corrected by user 2.3 regarding their use of ‘cue’ (see Fig. 2). User 2.3 not only explicitly points out the supposedly wrong spelling and provides an alternative (‘que’) that they deem correct but also aims at invalidating user 2.2 by indicating what they see as an inferior educational background (an “art major”) – positioning themselves as superior both linguistically and in terms of their education, and thus strongly disaligning themselves from user 2.2. The obvious FTAs that are present here – the initial one actually performed by user 2.2, who derogatorily distances themselves from “the Boomers who went to college when it was \$400 a semester” – give rise to the discussion that unfolds as a reaction to the screenshot at the metalevel of the Facebook group. As it is very extensive (with over one thousand comments), we will focus on three central discussion points or prescriptive strategies by illustrating selected examples.

One repeated strategy is the reference to institutionalized linguistic authorities (‘doing being an expert’ by consulting supposedly professional experts, and legitimation by ‘authorization’, see van Leeuwen, 2007), as seen in the exchange between user 2.4 and 2.5 (see Fig. 3). The former advises the latter to do their research while presenting their own research in the form of a screenshot; the screenshot serves as proof that they did, in fact, do their research. However, user 2.5 contradicts them on two levels: firstly, by saying that they, too, did their research, and secondly by rating their own sources of claimed expertise higher than the ones cited by user 2.4 (“any real, published dictionary”). There seems to be a hierarchy in terms of quotable expertise (and also [in] correctly quoted expertise, as emphasized by the two Haha-reactions) – much like there is also a hierarchy of shaming legitimacy.¹⁸ In general, the reference to authorities signals the users’ awareness of top-down institutional prescriptivism and the social bindingness of orthographic norms and can be interpreted as an adherence to standard language ideologies.

¹⁸ In terms of expertise, in addition to the reference to institutionalized sources, it can be observed that there are very detailed explanations of the ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’ use of ‘cue’ and ‘que’ in the thread; although these are not supported by sources, they are probably intended to signal, by their comprehensiveness alone, an expertise that in the commenters’ view justifies lecturing.

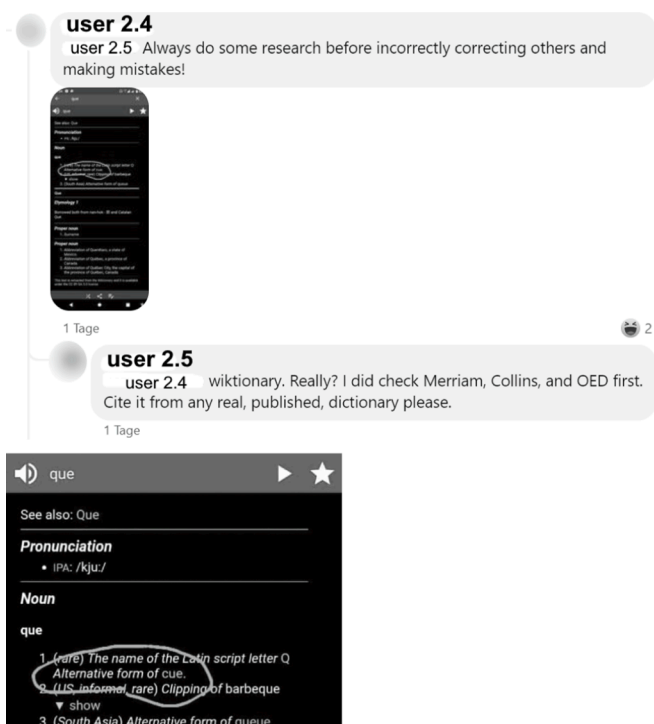


Fig. 3. Cite it from any real dictionary please (with an enlarged version of the relevant section of the screenshot posted by user 2.4).

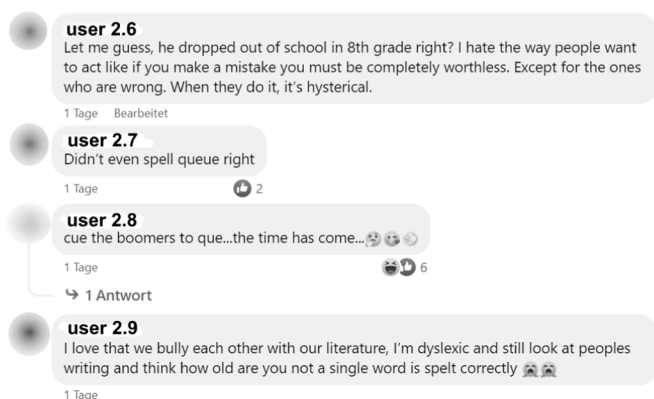


Fig. 4. When they do it, it’s hysterical.

This brings us to the second point as another discussion thread in the comment section revolves around the topic of education as raised by user 2.3; their reference to user 2.2’s education – implied as being inferior – is repeatedly taken up and criticized by the other discussants (e.g., by user 2.9 who addresses their struggle with dyslexia and aims at the hurtful aspect – and thus the face-threatening potential – of corrections, see Fig. 4, or by users 2.11 and 2.12, see Fig. 5). These forms are thus also linked to trivialization, as described by Heuman (2022: 52): “trivialisation [is] a key strategy for challenging standard language ideology, and also for critiquing subjects who defend standard language”. It also demonstrates that language norms are not equally accessible to everyone but are rather a question of social distribution (cf. also Sherman/Švelch, 2015: 316).

This also illustrates the complexity regarding the legitimacy of shaming given that re-correcting, as compared to mere correcting, is considered more justified because it is also understood as a form of (othered) face-saving – especially when the initial correction was a direct FTA aimed at a supposed inferior educational level.

Following this, a last discussion thread consists of a metapragmatic,

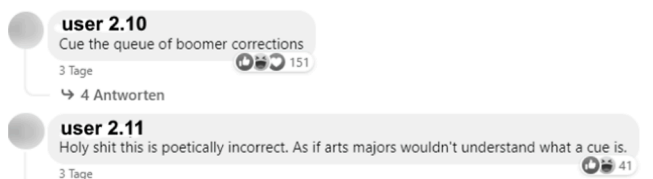


Fig. 5. Poetically incorrect.

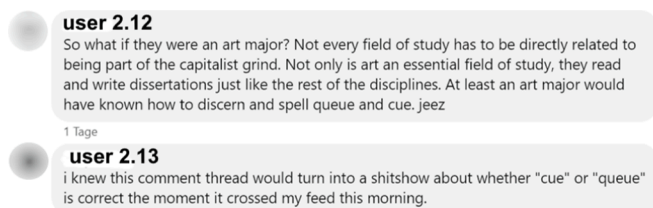


Fig. 6. Shitshow.

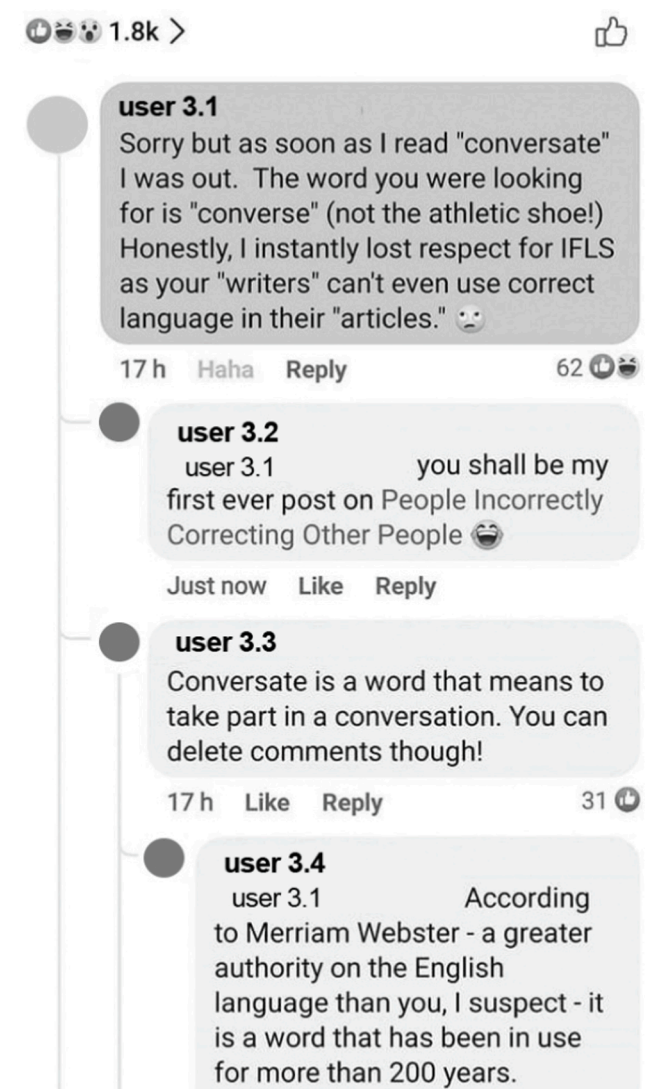


Fig. 7. Sorry but as soon as I read “conversate” I was out.

mostly humorous take on the discussion itself, e.g., using wordplays (see user 2.10: “cue the queue of boomer corrections”) or by aiming at the seriousness with which the whole discussion is conducted (see user 2.13: “i knew this comment thread would turn into a shitshow”, see Fig. 6).

Strikingly, these intertextual comments are the ones that receive the most reactions from the community – presumably because they remind readers of the humorous impetus of the group and thereby take some of the heat out of the discussion as well as create a sense of in-group belonging among members.

Finally, consider user 2.6’s comment (see Fig. 4), who condemns corrections but is entertained by wrong corrections (“I hate the way people want to act like if you make a mistake you must be completely worthless. Except for the ones who are wrong. When they do it, it’s hysterical.”); this aptly illustrates the inherent (and inadvertent) humorous potential of incorrect corrections (as opposed to face-threatening ‘correct’ corrections), which is arguably the reason this Facebook group exists – and thrives – in the first place.

4.3. Example 3: The word you were looking for is “converse”

Our final example also highlights the negotiation of linguistic norms, the distribution of knowledge about these norms, as well as the socio-cultural and pragmatic power users associate with it. What must be mentioned first is that the post whose use of a specific word (‘conversate’) is being discussed by user 3.1 (see Fig. 7) was likely posted to Facebook by an institution through its official page, meaning not an individual user via their private profile. This appears to influence how criticism is expressed, especially concerning its tone and severity; since no individual is explicitly criticized but an entire institution to which commenters ascribe certain linguistic authority and mastery, the bottom-up criticism can be more scathing, reflecting the disappointment over the fact that such linguistic authorities also make mistakes and thus fail to meet certain normative expectations. In this vein, user 3.1 goes so far as to claim they have “lost respect”. This is also reflected by the writing-related nouns ‘writers’ and ‘articles’ being enclosed in pragmatically distancing quotation marks (cf. Androutsopoulos, 2023) and an eye-roll emoji ending the comment, both aimed at invalidating the institution responsible for the mistakes. This comment is perfectly in line with the ‘complaint tradition’ described by Milroy/Milroy (2012: 31), which is continued today also in these digital and grassroots contexts.

Numerous readers of user 3.1’s comment appear to agree with the sentiment, as is evidenced by the number of traditional Likes on the posting. However, some of them are possibly ‘in on’ the correction being incorrect and thus give it a Haha-reaction.¹⁹ User 3.2 then explicitly refers to and links (or ‘tags’)²⁰ the group in which we found the example, without explaining, however, why they believe user 3.1’s comment is suitable for this group. Note that in the screenshot as we found it, user 3.2’s name was also not anonymized, revealing that they took the screenshot and then posted it to the group. As mentioned in Section 3, it is fairly common for users to have first engaged in correction chains themselves before documenting and posting them to the group, thereby effectively de- or rather recontextualizing them (cf. Pfurtscheller, 2022). Their motivation for doing so is arguably to position themselves and seek validation from the group’s other – supposedly like-minded – members.

Actual (in the sense of correct) corrections are then provided in the subsequent posts by users 3.3 and 3.4, who contend that ‘conversate’ is

¹⁹ Given that this example is on hand only as a screenshot, we cannot see how many users reacted exactly with which of the two reactions. However, the order in which they appear at least shows a ratio, i.e., that there are more Likes than Haha-reactions.

²⁰ Here, the group’s name is syntactically and semantically integrated into a sentence and thus forms only one part of a comment. However, it is also found in Facebook comments all by itself (as a clickable link that leads to the group’s feed), i.e., without any further content. This is common for so-called tag groups that arguably exist primarily to be tagged in comments; other examples include *I’m disappointed, but I still love you or this post mugged and murdered my parents in an alleyway* (Lorenz 2019).

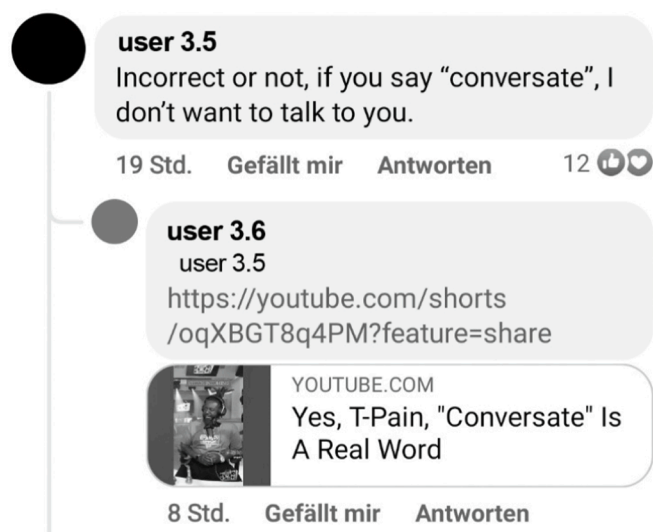


Fig. 8. Incorrect or not, if you say “conversate”, I don’t want to talk to you.

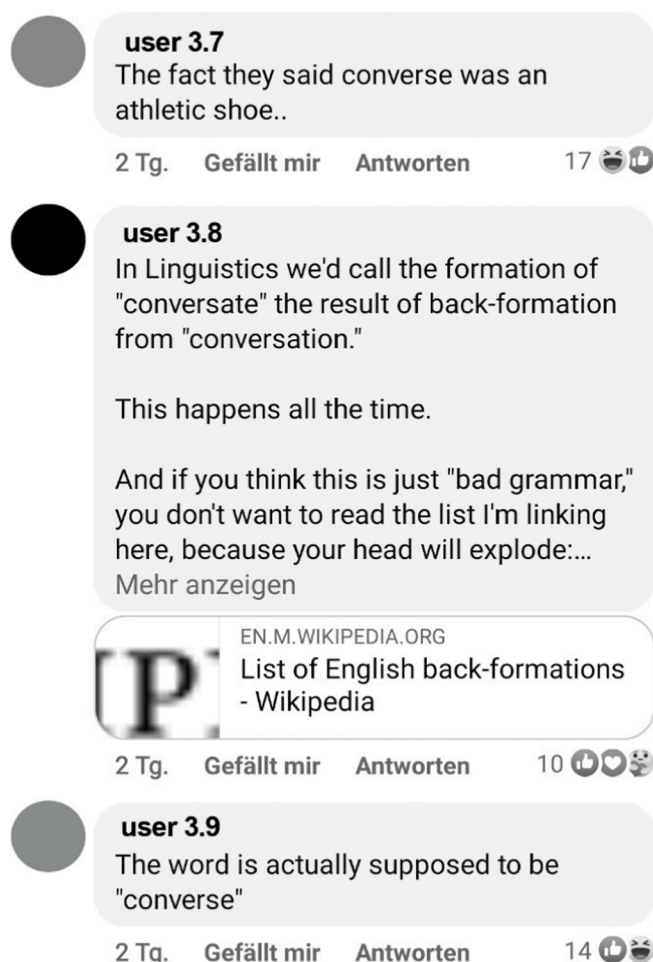


Fig. 9. The fact they said converse was an athletic shoe..

indeed a word. The post by user 3.3 additionally includes a comment (“You can delete comments though!”) conveying disapproval of the incorrect correction. Also, user 3.4 employs a strategy frequently found in correction chains (see also above, Example 2): referencing a linguistic authority, in this case Merriam Webster, which is, interestingly, also used as an explicit positioning device to degrade the incorrect corrector

(“[...] a greater authority on the English language than you, I suspect”). Similarly, what can be seen when considering the post by user 3.8 (in Fig. 9) is that language-related discussions often attract people who follow the strategy of positioning themselves as experts on language (cf. Section 2). In a rather neutral (seemingly descriptivist) tone, user 3.8 explains the linguistic phenomenon of back-formation underlying the word in question. The phrasing of “In Linguistics we’d call [...]”, especially the use of the 1st person plural pronoun (as a metadiscursive collective-mention, cf. Biri, 2021), suggests that user 3.8 identifies themselves as belonging somehow to the field of linguistics. The post itself is appreciated by numerous other readers who reward it with favorable reactions.

While most comments discussed so far (except for the one by user 3.8) appeared on the recontextualized screenshot posted to the group, the remaining comments pictured in Fig. 8 and Fig. 9 were selected by us from the comment thread that unfolded under it. They highlight, generally speaking, the dynamicity and complexity of Facebook comment sections and the fact that one example, in fact, often gives rise to many (sub-)examples in the form of valuable observations. For instance, user 3.5 (see Fig. 8) does not care about the correctness of the use of ‘conversate’ (“Incorrect or not, if you say ‘conversate’, I don’t want to talk to you”). This comment challenges an absolute linguistic norm as it invokes other concepts instead: that of appropriateness and enregisterment, which are more fine-grained and complex than that of a mere (and more or less categorical) ‘correctness’. More importantly, it emphasizes certain ideologies associated with certain instances of not only language (use) but language criticism. User 3.5 thus implicitly agrees with the incorrect corrector and registers the use of ‘conversate’ with a certain type of person that they do not want to talk to. This is a stancetaking strategy but arguably also a type of face-saving strategy: if user 3.5 (also) initially assumed the word ‘conversate’ to be incorrect, this comment defends (part of) this belief despite them being wrong about the norm. In direct response to user 3.5’s comment, there is another (nested) one; it only includes the link to a video²¹ that also addresses the question of ‘conversate’ being a ‘real’ word and highlights the importance of both references to ‘outside’ knowledge and the multimodality observed in (and beyond) the comment sections of social media.

Another noteworthy example of a comment that does not include a correction but pokes fun at (a certain facet of) the incorrect correction comes from user 3.7 (see Fig. 9), whose post reads “The fact they said converse was an athletic shoe..”. Understanding this comment and its humor – which multiple users likely did, as evidenced by the Haha-reactions – requires specific world knowledge: that there are shoes called ‘Converse’, with the comment implying that, contrary to what the incorrect corrector originally insinuated, user 3.7 does not deem them ‘athletic’, signaling disalignment. In some way, thus, this is also a (factual) re-correction. More importantly, here, certain knowledge and implicit stances (signaled also by the use of two periods) make for a comment that likely provides certain users a feeling of ‘being in on the (clever) joke’, maybe even a certain sense of superiority that goes beyond the initial incorrect correction, highlighting the relevance of collective (meta-)mockery as a stancetaking strategy.

Finally, the comment by user 3.9 (“The word is actually supposed to be ‘converse’”) illustrates that not all interactants actually bother to read the other comments before actively engaging in the discussion, creating what is effectively multiple separated sub-discussions or sub-correction chains around the same topic, reproducing the same arguments in the discussion thread of a given post.²²

²¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oqXBGT8q4PM> (July 1, 2024).

²² This non-reading can also be negotiated metacommunicatively, for example when commentators are made aware that the topic has already been discussed elsewhere or that the relevant information is available. These hints also often have a shaming quality as they may be aimed at, for example, a user’s reading skills (e.g., “those who can read have an advantage”).

5. Discussion and outlook

Uncovering the double standard inherent in incorrect corrections as well as the satisfaction brought upon by re-corrections is what gives rise to popular and specialized Facebook groups such as *People Incorrectly Correcting Other People* in the first place. For members of these groups, hunting for incorrect corrections (or correctors) and then sharing them in humorous posts to gain validation from likeminded users has become an internet sport. When a group is public and has many members (likely from diverse cultural, educational, etc. backgrounds), as in our analyzed case, most posts remain ‘open’ indefinitely (i.e., one can continue to comment on them) and thus often aggregate thousands of comments. This makes for a rich – if complex – source and context for digital ethnographic approaches to grassroots prescriptivism.

As our exploratory analysis showed, incorrect corrections evoke largely negative connotations, which motivates their re-corrections – either in their original contexts as direct responses to the incorrect correctors and/or in the form of recontextualized humorous displays (e. g., as commented screenshots in the dedicated Facebook group). These re-corrections have a common ground in that the vast majority of them rely on superiority-based humor (cf. Švelch and Sherman, 2018), with the group’s members using intertextuality and general knowledge of the group’s conventions to accomplish complex facework (cf. West/Trester, 2013: 136). Given that the group, as a highly specific community of practice, is “driven by overt shared ideologies and goals” (Biri, 2021: 139), it is unsurprising that these re-corrections are met mostly with appraisal by their in-group recipients.

As for the functions of re-corrections, given the (limited) data analyzed, it can be concluded that re-corrections serve two purposes: (1) to factually correct a perceived mistake or misconception, and (2) to subject the (incorrect) corrector to the same negative effects of an FTA that they supposedly wanted to bring upon the addressee of their initial correction; in turn, they also indirectly save that addressee’s face by mitigating the severity of the original FTA. Colloquially put, re-correctors give incorrect correctors a taste of their own medicine. This is achieved through yet another correction, which primarily serves to expose the hypocrisy of prescriptive practices being incorrect; that way, re-correcting simultaneously functions as an implicit criticism or subversion of corrective practices, more specifically their intended negative consequences for the corrected party as well as the smugness and supposed self-perceived superiority ascribed to correctors. In other words, it is possible that re-correctors hold (un)conscious negative attitudes towards standard language ideologies and the associated language policing and are thus driven by a certain sense of justice. This observation also ties in with Heuman’s (2022) concept of ‘trivialization’ (see above), which likewise highlights how standard ideological assumptions are actively challenged by users.

All this paints a multilayered picture when analyzed from the perspective of positioning practices, which frequently overlap: (incorrect) correctors arguably attempt to invalidate their conversation partners by (often mockingly) correcting them and, by doing so, position themselves as ‘experts’. This is mimicked but at the same time subverted by re-correctors who mock not (only) a mistake but also the mocking practiced by correctors and their associated attempt to present themselves as superior. Here, the two layers of stancetaking (cf. Kiesling, 2022) interact: the fact that re-correctors indicate their stance toward (either the incorrectness of or the prescriptivism inherent in) corrective practices affects their relationship with correctors; specifically, it serves the performance of disalignment (see also Georgakopoulou, 2016). It cannot be denied, however, that re-correctors often simultaneously use this also as a strategy to position themselves: not (only) as superior when it comes to (linguistic and/or factual knowledge) but in many cases primarily as more morally enlightened as well as fair (and/or relaxed) when it comes to linguistic normativity and prescriptivism. A relevant open question in this regard is what users navigating digital spheres see as underlying legitimization(s) for both corrective and re-corrective

practices. Following van Leeuwen’s (2007: 91) discourse analytical framework, users who correct others for the sake of ‘being right’ may refer to *authorization*, i.e., “legitimation by reference to the authority of tradition, custom and law, and of persons in whom institutional authority is vested”, and *rationalization*, “legitimation by reference to the goals and uses of institutionalized social action”, as they perceive linguistic – and especially orthographic – norms prescribed by authorities as socially binding. On the other hand, re-correctors may also be driven by *moral evaluation*, “legitimation by reference to discourses of value”, as they either want to simply right a moral wrong or – at a metalevel and subversively – want to question the morality of (publicly) correcting someone as well as the associated adherence to institutionally-driven prescriptivism.

Importantly, the communicative situations in which the analyzed re-corrections occurred are public, with interactants lacking personal closeness or familiarity, which likely explains why FTAs often appear to be the goal rather than being mitigated (either by the (re-)corrector or the corrected party); this renders the examples that we collected and discussed inherently conflictual (see already early work on group dynamics in CMC vs. face-to-face communication, Siegel et al., 1986). Thus, an aspect that is largely absent here but central to communicative situations in which interactants are familiar with each other (such as in the study of Surkyn/Sandra/Vanderkerckhove, 2023) is damage control. As mentioned in the methodology section, one limitation of our study is that the (re-)corrections we analyzed were pictured on screenshots; this means that there may have indeed been damage control that simply was not pictured on the static screenshots we collected.

An important question that must be re-evaluated at this point is: What even counts as a (re-)correction? Our examples have shown that the more implicit corrections become, the more challenging it is to identify them – both for the corrected and third parties involved in a conversation and us as analysts. In this context, it would be interesting to explore also quantitatively whether more explicit (incorrect) corrections – for example ones consisting only of an asterisk and the (in)correct form, which in the framework of Brown/Levinson (1987: 69) would count as bald, i.e., most direct and unambiguous FTAs – are more or less prone to receiving responses, especially re-corrections. In any case, identifying implicit or particularly subtle and ‘clever’ (re-)corrections as forms of criticism and FTAs appears to be a fine-grained skill many internet users are proud of, an interpretation that is supported by the non-verbal ratifying reactions that such implicit (re-)corrections often receive (e.g., via the Haha-reaction). In general, as mentioned in Section 2, users appear to be capable of making fine-grained assessments of normativity, suggesting that in more informal contexts, instead of an absolute category of (in)correctness, an awareness of a more gradient spectrum of (in)appropriateness (cf. Schiewe, 2016) of existing variants and their enregisterment may serve as a normative lens that underlies their prescriptive ideologies and motivates any behavior resulting from them.

Against the background of our results and for future analyses of de- and recontextualized (re-)corrections, we propose a distinction of three layers of stancetaking: (1) primary stancetaking takes the form of directly correcting a mistake/an incorrect correction or commenting on it, while the more mediated form of (2) secondary stancetaking is carried out through merely liking posts or comments (or using any other more indirect affordance such as the other reaction-buttons on Facebook). Finally, (3) indirect stancetaking is performed by commenting at a metalevel, for instance by posting a screenshot of an incorrect correction in a dedicated Facebook group and commenting on it there. In the form and content of the reactions (corrections or comments), indirect stancetaking may resemble primary direct stancetaking, but it is important to highlight that what (or who) is being criticized in this indirect type is most often de- and recontextualized (and, in this course, anonymized), which means that the person whose practices are criticized is likely not aware that this is happening and thus given no chance of reacting the way this would be the case in direct stancetaking. This also means that

indirect stancetaking serves the expression of stances and (dis)alignment at an abstract (meta)level: (re-)correctors are not (only) criticizing a specific correction, but the practice of correcting, and not a specific person, but a 'type' of person. This, as mentioned above, reflects that stancetaking may refer either to an entity (e.g., a mistake) or interactants, with both of these affecting each other (cf. Kiesling, 2022).

To conclude, our examples show, on the one hand, that the prescriptivist stancetaking strategies described by Frick (2022) in fact often co-occur or even overlap in the interactions found in correction chains. Thus, going forward, it would be fruitful to conduct a more systematic large-scale qualitative and quantitative study in which corrections and re-corrections in a large number of posts are coded for different strategies, as this would provide a more reliable picture of the complex interaction of strategies and the contexts in which they are fostered. On the other hand, our study showed that (re-)correction practices are indeed complex and multilayered – not only with regard to stancetaking but also concerning FTAs and (im)politeness in the public digital sphere, and particularly in in-group contexts (cf. Graham, 2007). Against this background, a careful analysis specifically of users' attitudes to deviance but also to standard language ideologies as well as to the grassroots prescriptivism enacted in the group would prove revelatory. Together, all these findings would – when embedded in, for example, a critical discourse analytical framework – continue to enrich our understanding of how the performance or subversion of grassroots prescriptivism contributes to, reflects, and reproduces linguistic and societal hegemonies.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Karina Frick: Writing – original draft, Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – review & editing. **Dimitrios Meletis:** Writing – original draft, Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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