



Why *Writing Systems* Create *Norms*

Structure, Literacy, and Regulation

Dimitrios Meletis, University of Vienna / 29.04.2026 / University of Helsinki



The total grapholinguistic fact

'the total linguistic fact'

Silverstein 1985

Silverstein, Michael. 1985. Language and the culture of gender: At the intersection of structure, usage, and ideology. In Elizabeth Mertz & Richard J. Parmentier (eds.), Semiotic mediation: Sociocultural and psychological perspectives, 219–259. New York: Academic.

"To complain about a font is pedantic."
 "People who complain about mistakes have too much time."

Ideologies:
 Which attitudes and ideologies are associated with writing systems and their use?

Structure: How are writing systems structured?

"Comic Sans is ugly."
 "Chinese writing is difficult."
 "Comma rules make no sense."

Use: How are writing systems used?

"Your/you're mistakes are embarrassing."
 "Too many emojis come off unserious"

Grapholinguistics: A definition

SO FAR label for efforts of gaining consistent descriptions
ONGOING and analyses of the written form of language and
OPEN of developing them to a general theory of writing
as a constitutive part of a general theory of
language

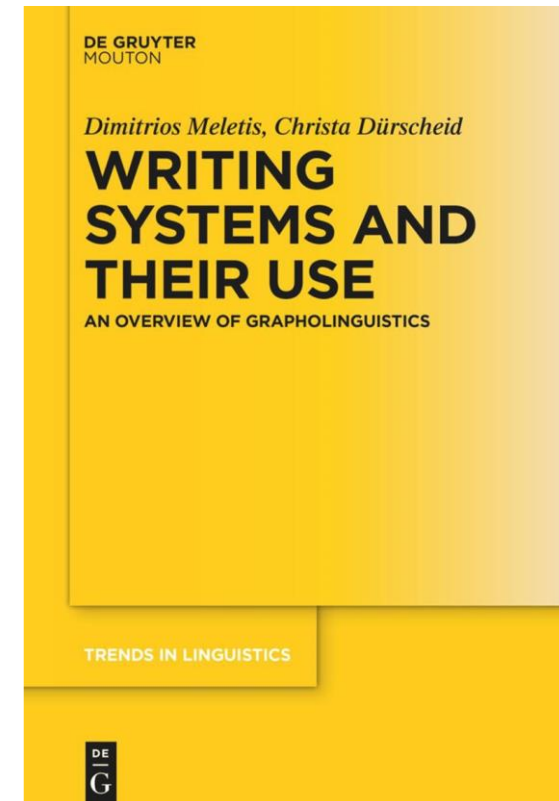
Glück 2016: 596, my translation

Glück, Helmut. 2016. Schriftlinguistik. In Helmut Glück & Michael Rödel (eds.), Metzler Lexikon Sprache, 5th edn., 596. Stuttgart: Metzler.

(already exactly the same in the first edn. of 1993: 533–534)

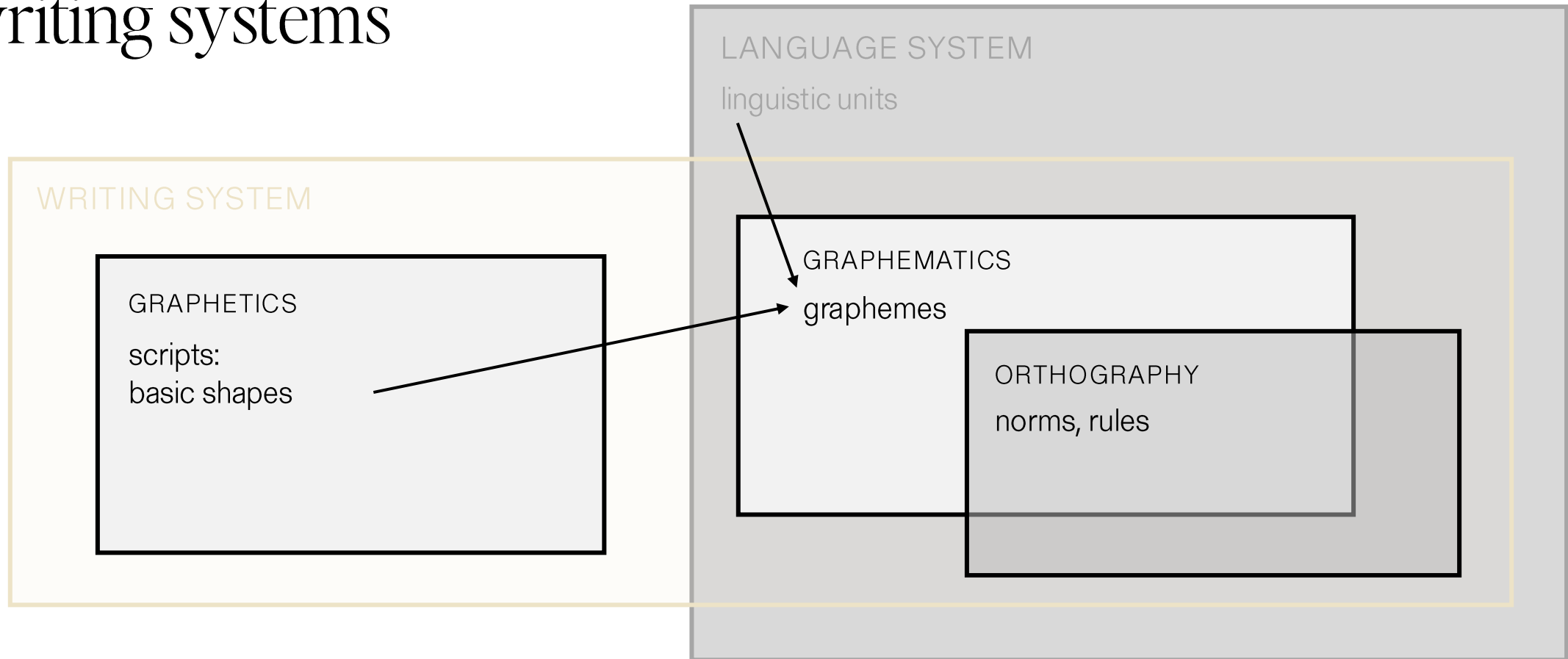
Main motivations

- integration of different perspectives from diverse disciplines
 - including – but not limited to – anthropology and cultural studies, psychology and cognitive science(s), sociolinguistics
- combination of synchronic and diachronic perspectives
 - diachrony informs synchrony and vice versa
- establishment of a unified descriptive and explanatory framework – including methodology and concepts (e.g., allography) for all writing systems regardless of type
- publication of findings (at least additionally) in English to foster international visibility and exchange



Meletis, Dimitrios, and Christa Dürscheid. 2022. *Writing Systems and Their Use: An Overview of Grapholinguistics*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110757835>

A model of writing systems



Descriptive grapholinguistics

A. **Graphetics** – Materiality (What does writing look/feel like?)

- 1 Comic Sans: The font is ugly. / Its use in specific contexts is inappropriate. / To complain about the font is justified/pedantic/ableist.
Typographic mimicry: Emulating fonts are often designed unprofessionally. / Their use is problematic/racist. / Only people who belong to a culture in question are allowed to make judgments about the appropriateness of the use of such fonts.

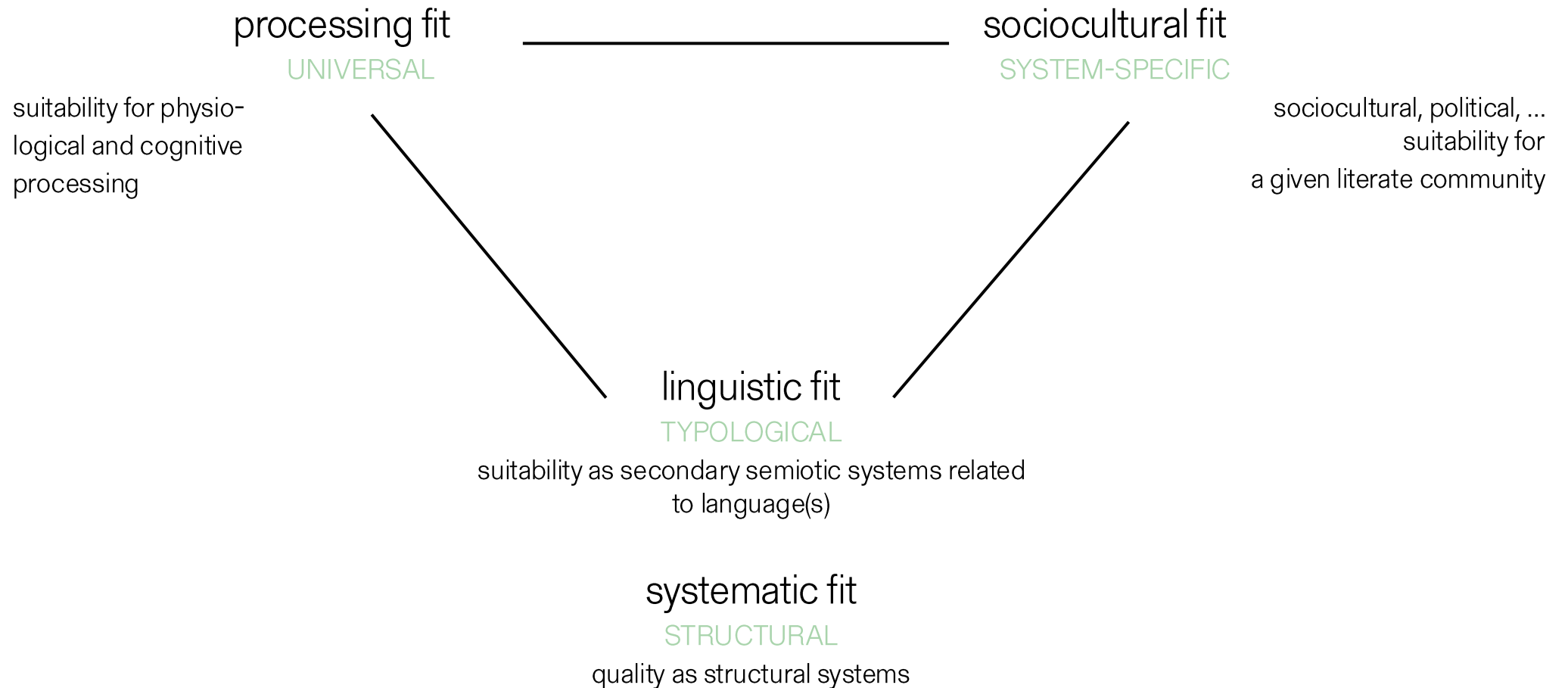
B. **Graphematics** – Linguistic function (How is writing related to language?)

- 3 Attitudes about writing systems, their learnability and difficulty: The more phonetic, the better a writing system. / There is no 'optimal' writing system, as the quality of a writing system in a given context depends on users' prior literacy experience. / Writing systems can be beautiful/ugly/chaotic/elegant/hard/complex/ingenious.

C. **Orthography** – Normativity (What are the conventions/rules?)

- 4 Attitudes about orthography: Orthographic rules are important. / Everyone should adhere to existing norms. / It's futile to complain about spelling reforms.
- 5 Correction of incorrect corrections: Spelling mistakes are embarrassing. / To correct a spelling mistake is pedantic. / It is wrong to judge someone as 'dumb' only because they have made a spelling mistake.

Explanation (which entails comparison)





Because every time I'm writing,
I'm writing, and therefore it needs
to be correct, otherwise I could
just let it be.

[B01: L. 149-150]



Because every time I'm writing,
I'm writing, and therefore it needs
to be correct, otherwise I could
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[B01: L. 149-150]

Literacy

- psycholinguistic perspective: literacy as (context-independent) skills of reading and writing → autonomous approach
- cultural studies/anthropological perspective: literacy as embedded in (sociocultural, sociopolitical, individual) contexts → ideological approach
 - 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*



Linguistic normativity

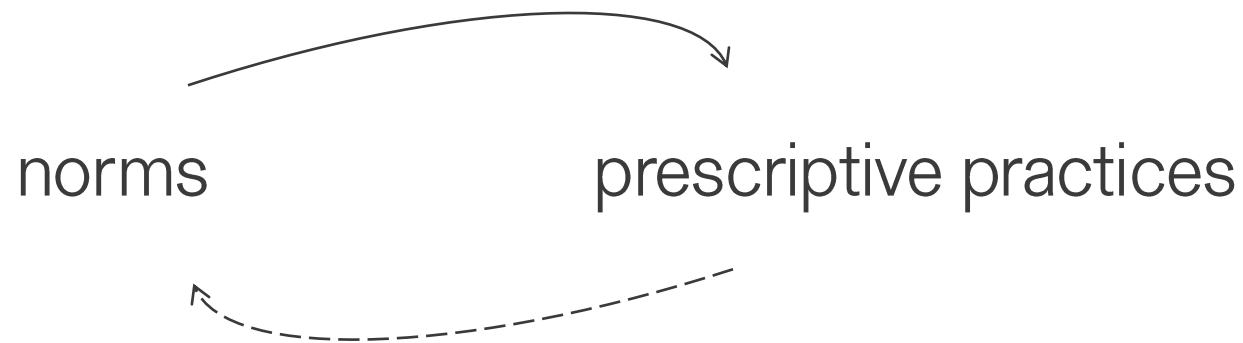
shared conventions or norms that govern the use of a language (variety) within a given community or society

- 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)
- is the basis of prescriptivism

Prescriptivism

prescriptivism: enforcement or promotion of norms related to language
(use) [Rawlins/Chapman 2020](#)

- active application of norms (to maintain a certain status of language)



Rawlins, Jacob D. & Don Chapman. 2020. Introduction: Values and binaries in language evaluation. In Don Chapman & Jacob D. Rawlins (eds.), *Language prescription: Values, ideologies and identity*, 1-11. Bristol: Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781788928380-002>

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

Jaffe, Alexandra. 2021. Polynomic standards. The enactment of legitimate variation. In Wendy Ayres-Bennett & John Bellamy (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Language Standardization*, 442–469. Cambridge: CUP.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108559249.017>

Meletis, Dimitrios. 2020. *The nature of writing. A theory of grapholinguistics.* (Grapholinguistics and Its Applications 3). Brest: Fluxus Éditions.
<https://doi.org/10.36824/2020-meletis>

How writing fosters norms

features of: [1] writing, [2] communication situations, and [3] 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. Thus, 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, ...).

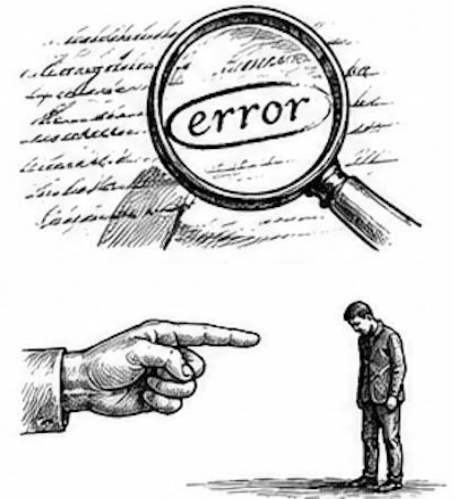
How writing fosters norms

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).



How writing fosters norms

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.

How writing fosters norms

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

+ acquisition: learned through instruction

Normativity *without* 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; restricted 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

Davidson, Andrew. 2019. Writing: The re-construction of language. *Language Sciences* 72. 134–149. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2018.09.004>

De Gelder, Béatrice, Jean Vroomen & Paul Bertelson. 1993. The effects of alphabetic-reading competence on language representation in bilingual Chinese subjects. *Psychological Research* 55. 315–321. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00419691>

Kurvers, Jeanne, Ton Vallen, and Roeland van Hout. 2006. Discovering features of language: Metalinguistic awareness of adult illiterates. In Jeanne Kurvers, Ineke van de Craats & Martha Young-Scholten (eds.), *Low-educated second language and literacy acquisition: Proceedings of the inaugural symposium*, 69–88. Utrecht: LOT.

Content. 1987. The relationships between segmental analysis and alphabetic literacy: An interactive view. *Cahiers de Psychologie Cognitive/Current Psychology of Cognition* 7.5. 415–438.

Nagy, William E. & Richard C. Anderson. 1995. Metalinguistic awareness and literacy acquisition in different languages. Technical Report No. 618. Champaign: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Read, Charles, Zhang Yun-Fei, Nie Hong-Yin, Ding Bao-Qing. 1986. The ability to manipulate speech sounds depends on knowing alphabetic writing. *Cognition* 24.1-2. 31–44. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0010-0277\(86\)90003-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0010-0277(86)90003-X)

Scholes, Richard J. (ed.). 1993. *Literacy and*

New York: Routledge.

Wydell, Taeko N. 2023. Are phonological skills as crucial for literacy acquisition in Japanese as in English as well as in accounting for developmental dyslexia in English and in Japanese? *Journal of Cultural Cognitive Science* 7. 175–196. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41809-023-00126-2>

Normativity *without* literacy?

- to conquer the Eurocentrist bias: What about orality?
- orality is as much a complex bundle of practices as literacy 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

Finnegan, Ruth. 1990. What is orality - if anything? *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 14. 130-150.
<https://doi.org/10.1179/byz.1990.14.1.130>

Foley, William A. 2003. Genre, register and language documentation in literate and preliterate communities. In Peter K. Austin (ed.) *Language Documentation and Description, Vol 1*, 85-98. London: SOAS.

Literacy *without* 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' Karan 2014

Karan, Elke. 2014. Standardization: What's the hurry? In Michael Cahill & Keren Rice (eds.), *Developing orthographies for unwritten languages*, 107-138. Dallas: SIL International.

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

Coulmas, Florian. 2016. Prescriptivism and writing systems. In Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade & Carol Percy (eds.), Prescription and tradition in language: Establishing standards across time and space, 39–56. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
<https://doi.org/10.21832/9781783096510-005>

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 *Dabrowska 2020*
 - this means while language may be viewed as an amodal system, modalities (including the written modality) shape this amodal system
 - in conclusion, the study of writing is not an 'add-on' to linguistics but should be included in mainstream linguistic paradigms

Dabrowska, Ewa. 2020. How writing changes language. In Anna Mauranen & Svetlana Vetchinnikova (eds.), Language change: The impact of English as a lingua franca, 75-94. Cambridge: CUP. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108675000.006>

My research

Dimitrios Meletis Warum hassen alle *Comic Sans*?

Metapragmatische Onlinediskurse zu einer typographischen Hassliebe

1 Einleitung

If you love it, you don't know much about typography, and if you hate Comic Sans you don't know very much about typography either, and you should probably get another hobby.

Vincent Connare, Designer von *Comic Sans*¹

SOCIAL SEMIOTICS
2023, VOL. 33, NO. 5, 1046–1068
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2021.1989296>



OPEN ACCESS Check for updates

“Is your font racist?” Metapragmatic online discourses on the use of typographic mimicry and its appropriateness

Dimitrios Meletis

Department of German Studies, University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland

ABSTRACT

Typographic mimicry is the wrapping of writing in a “foreign dress,” i.e. the use of typefaces in which one’s script (e.g. Latin) is made to visually resemble a different script (e.g. Chinese) with the goal of evoking associations with a “foreign” culture. First, this paper addresses the formal aspects of this practice, specifically the choice of visual features to be mimicked. The core part then focuses on typographic mimicry as a social practice and includes

KEYWORDS

Typographic mimicry; cultural stereotypes; indexicality; metapragmatic discourse; typographic ideologies; cultural (re)appropriation

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journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/dcm

ELSEVIER

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

Karina Frick^{a,1}, Dimitrios Meletis^{b,*,1}

^a *Leopoldo Universität Linz, Institut für Deutsche Sprache und Literatur und ihre Didaktik, Universitätsallee 1, 21335 Linz, Germany*
^b *Universität Wien, Institut für Sprachwissenschaft, Sennergasse 3A, 1090 Wien, Austria*

ARTICLE INFO

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Linguistic normativity
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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.

Journal of Pragmatics 259 (2026) 28–41

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Check for updates

Correcting correction as social action: Critical metaprescriptivism in online interaction

Dimitrios Meletis^{*}

Department of Linguistics, University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria

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Stance and alignment
Norm enforcement
Humor and affect
Online interaction

ABSTRACT

Drawing on a qualitative analysis of 14 comment threads from the Facebook group *People Incorrectly Correcting Other People*, this article examines correction and re-correction as forms of social action in online interaction. It shows how participants respond to misguided corrections along multiple dimensions: linguistic accuracy, tone, motive, and social legitimacy of corrective acts. These responses frequently rely on humor and playful reframing, through which users position themselves, (dis)align with others, and manage face. To capture this reflexive dimension, the article introduces the concept of *critical metaprescriptivism*, defined as second-order metapragmatic practice that scrutinizes the social acceptability of prescriptive logic in the very act of reproducing it. The analysis demonstrates how (re)corrections function as stance-taking practices shaped by shared moral expectations and affective norms within the interactional context. These practices reconfigure prescriptivism as an interactional resource through which authority is claimed, performed, contested, and parodied. The study contributes to research on metapragmatics, stance, as well as norm enforcement by showing how prescriptive orientations are negotiated in interaction and how correction operates as a socially and morally embedded practice in online discourse.

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DiskursGlossar

Grammatiknazi / Grammar Nazi

Kategorie: Schlagwörter

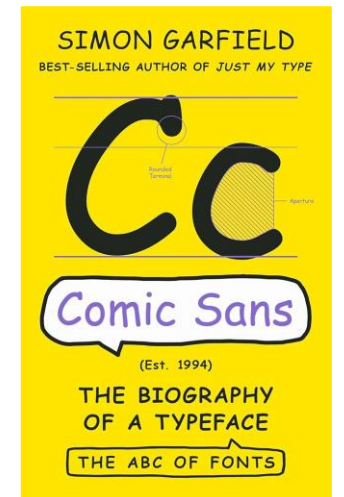
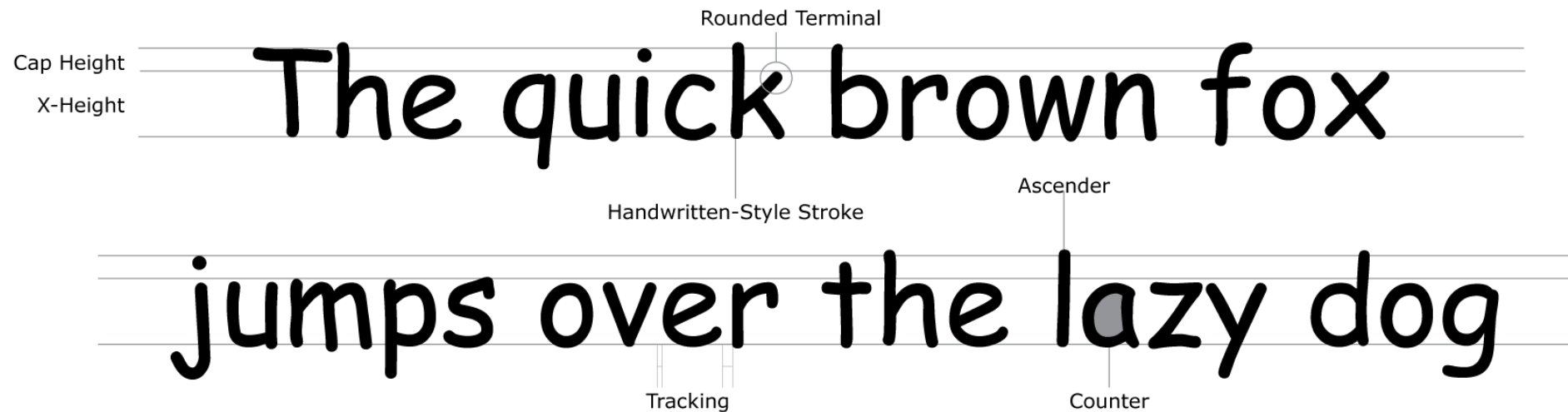
Verwandte Ausdrücke: Rechtschreibnazi, Sprachpolizei, Laiensprachkritik, orthographisches Shaming, Sprachkritik

Siehe auch: Memes, Konnotation, Kritik, Hashtag, Schlagwort, Whataboutism

Autor: Dimitrios Meletis

Version: 1.2 / **Datum:** 15.11.2022

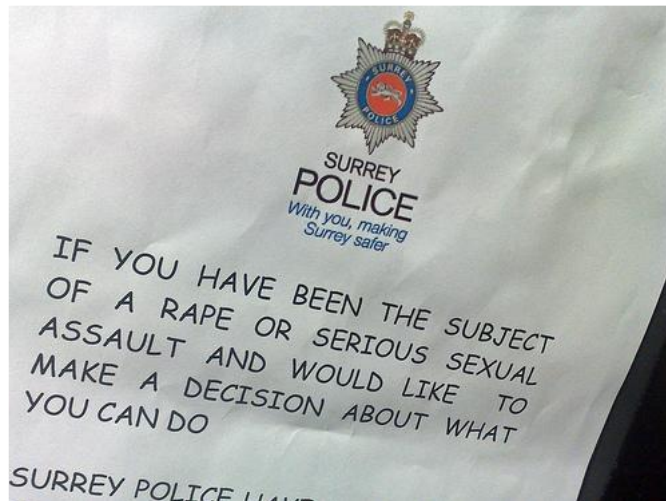
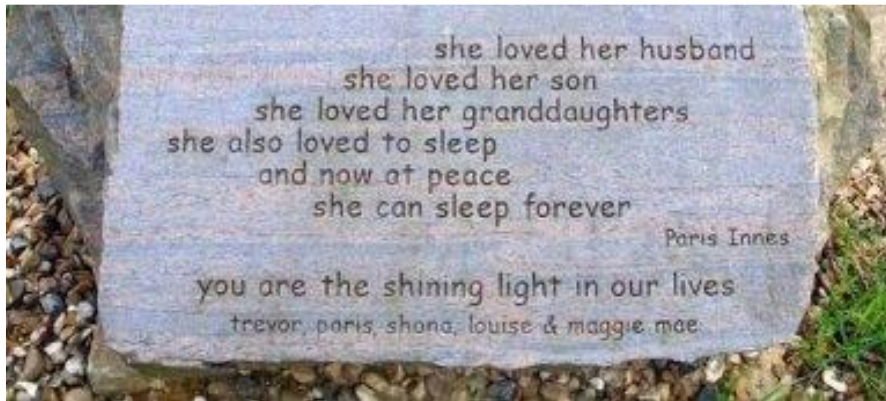
Comic Sans



Against

- ‘inappropriate’ contexts of use and high frequency of use (oversaturation) as biggest arguments
 - appears like children’s writing: “it is so irritably simple, so apparently written by a small child”
 - concern not the quality of the typeface per se, but its use; thus, it is (also) a criticism of the people who use the typeface ‘incorrectly’ or ‘inappropriately’
- quality of the design of Comic Sans is mainly criticized by designers and typographers
- question of which actors participate in which discourses

'Inappropriate' uses



Voices

- “Comic Sans isn’t bad when it’s used in appropriate cases like comics (obviously). It’s purposefully designed to have a more ‘silly’ look [...], so when professors use Comic Sans in their powerpoints, it seems out of place.”
- “Times New Roman is a font that one can stop noticing; even in large doses it doesn’t come between the reader and the text. The very commonly used fonts are mostly designed like that. Comic Sans... not so much.”
- “the sweatpants of the font world”
- “So, the story of Comic Sans is not that of a really terrible font, but rather of a mediocre font, used incorrectly on a massive scale.”

Meaning-making potential

- it is, at this point, accepted that the visual appearance of writing can also contribute to the meaning of a written utterance
 - and it is not necessarily secondary; the degree of its contribution must be evaluated individually in each case



Cultural typographic mimicry

- expressive, indicating/indexical, connotative functions of typography
 - this is a more dynamic semiotic process that views typographic mimicry as a literacy practice
- a source script (such as Roman script) is made to look like a target script (such as Chinese script) in some way

ABCDEFGHI
 JKLMNOPQR
 STUVWXYZ
 abcdefghijklm
 nopqrstuvwxyz
 0123456789

作二铁板，一板印刷，
 自布字。此印者才毕，
 板已具。更互用之，瞬
 时。每一字皆有数印，如
 等字，每字有二十余印
 一板内有重复者。不用
 贴之，每韵为一贴，木

Examples

देवनागरी

CHINESE

عربى

Racism?



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DUMPLINGS

Dim Sum Made Easy

SHOP NOW

Cultural appropriation

- there was a debate whether uses of typographic mimicry are racist Meletis 2021, especially if practiced by non-members of the indexed culture
 - in some cases, typefaces' names are also problematic (cf. Circumcision)
- through using typographic mimicry instead of the actual target script, 'Westerners' do not have to educate themselves in different cultures and their scripts, they are always accommodated
 - this also means that members of different cultures prioritize a distorted public image over their authentic self-image (however, this is often done for personal, e.g., commercial, gain)

Meletis, Dimitrios. 2021. 'Is your font racist?' – Metapragmatic online discourses on the use of typographic mimicry and its appropriateness. *Social Semiotics*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2021.1989296>

Sources

REDDIT

Is there such thing as a "bad" writing system for a language and how do you recognise it?

What's your least favorite writing system for a language?

i made the worst writing system known to man kind.

What's the worst script/language pairing you can think of?

Writing system alignment chart, ngl it was difficult

What languages have the least adapted writing systems?

Has there ever been a study to determine which type of writing system is the easiest to learn?

What does r/linguisticshumor consider a bad orthography?

Most efficient writing system?

Written Chinese seems to be objectively worse than English...?

Any thoughts on this?

QUORA

What is the worst writing system?

What are the pros and cons of the various writing systems?

What languages have a worse spelling system than English?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of major writing systems in the world?

What is the worst alphabet/writing system of an ancient language?

Which are the worst written languages in the world?

What is the least effective writing system?

What is the ugliest writing system?

From a linguist's perspective, which is the most effective writing system?

What are some of the best and worst writing systems?

YOUTUBE

How to make a language: Writing systems

World's Hardest Spelling Bee... is a writing systems bee! But what even is writing?

The Hardest Language To Spell

Ranking the Best Writing Systems in the Universe

The Top 7 Craziest Writing Systems in the World

Top Ten Coolest Writing Systems

World's Most Complicated Writing System (corrections in the description)

The Hebrew Alphabet is bad

Why Does India Have So Many Writing Systems?

The Japanese Writing System in a Nutshell

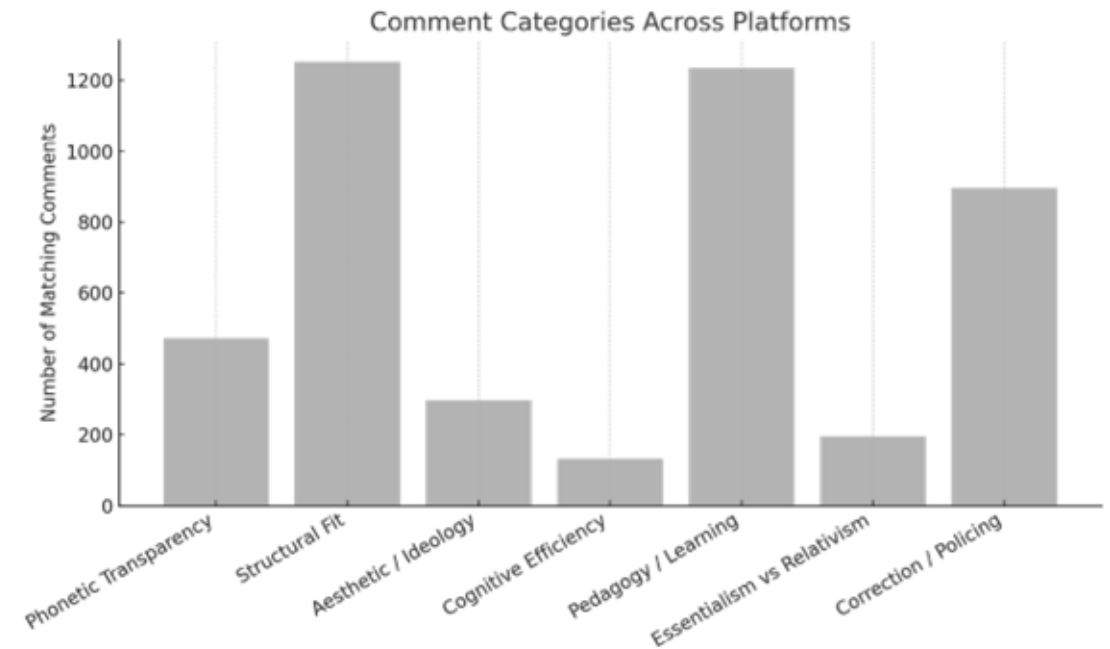
French Spelling Isn't That Bad

Why I think the Chinese writing system is TERRIBLE

Categories

Seven main discourse types :

1. Phonetic transparency
2. Structural fit
3. Aesthetic and ideological evaluation
4. Cognitive efficiency
5. Pedagogy and learning trajectory
6. Script essentialism vs relativism
7. Correction and expertise displays



Phonetic transparency

I'm a native speaker of french and I can't write without making a bunch of mistakes everywhere. A ton of people can't. If it was written phonetically at least native speakers wouldn't have so much trouble writing things that should be easy. And for non native learner of french it would still be probably easier to just learn masculine and feminine versions of words (alongside with liason letters) rather than to deal with that mess. At least reading would be easy. (YouTube, French spelling isn't that bad)

Polish. I don't know much about the language, but if only they had went with the Cyrillic alphabet instead I bet it would've made more sense phonetically. (Reddit, What languages have the least adapted writing systems?)

Some writing systems take less time and effort for people to learn, whether these are children in school learning how to write their native language, or adults learning a foreign language for professional purposes. If a writing system is mostly phonetic, it will be easier to learn. (Quora, What is the least effective writing system)

- transparency as moral virtue (“logical”, “fair”, “respectful to learners”)
- irregularity (and features such as silent letters) criticized
- alphabetic ideology as default
- users equate sound-letter correspondence with “good” writing system

Structural fit

I'm sorry - what utter utter rot. I remember when this clip first came out and it frustrated me just because of the sheer degree of misinformation and misunderstanding and subsequent explanations of the Thai writing system which is actually one of the most beautiful, rational, logical, symmetrical systems where consonants, vowels and tones all fit like a glove. (...) this clip has done more to turn people off learning Thai, or give them an excuse to give up more than possibly any other clip on the internet. (YouTube, World's Most Complicated Writing System (corrections in the description))

It's just a side-effect of colonization and modern linguistics springing out of regions where roman script is most commonly used. And Latin is the most common script, regardless, so of course it will have strange mutations depending on where it lands. And yes it doesn't work well outside IE languages but IE is also the most common family in the world, so (...). (Reddit, Is there such a thing as a "bad" writing system for a language and how do you recognize it?)

Korean is a great one. It's an alphabet which pretty much sticks to one symbol for one sound. You can literally learn to read and write the language in an afternoon. (Quora, From a linguist's perspective, what is the most effective writing system?)

- ideology: "Good writing systems fit their language."
 - goes beyond sound-symbol fit to system-wide coherence
 - critiques of mismatches in morphology, syllables, redundancy
- folk typology mirroring expert discourse

Pedagogy and experience

I am a Tibetan and studied for 12 years still can't read and write properly .. learned other languages in less years and atleast could read local news papers . I still can't read Tibetan news paper even though I speak the language fluently . It's difficult to form works in Tibetan as well (YouTube, The hardest language to spell)

(...) for someone who has never encountered hànzi, memorising the thousands of symbols seems like, and is, a Herculean task. Many of my classmates and I flunked Chinese test after Chinese test just because we forget what word to write. In fact, when writing an essay in Chinese, we are allowed (and even encouraged) to bring an e-dictionary to find out what words to use (...) One example of two Chinese words that seem like they should sound similar due to appearance are "免" (to waive) and "兔" (rabbit) . Though the difference is just a dot (点) that "兔" has but "免" doesn't, the pronunciations are worlds apart. (Reddit, Writing system alignment chart, ngl it was difficult)

(...) from the European languages the worst is unquestionably the Greek. I'm a native Greek speaker and after 12 years in school learning Greek day and night i cannot write a single Greek word correctly. I refused to learn it because from 6 years old i couldn't comprehend why i should learn something that is so stupid. My educated compatriots usually commend the complexity of the Greek language and they see it as a virtue, but let's face it. They are just idiots. (Quora, Which are the worst written languages in the world?)

- personal narratives of learning difficulties or breakthroughs
- scripts judged by how long they take to “click”
- frequent mentions of memorization, fear, joy, or frustration
- learning experience seen as measure of script effectiveness

What is orthography?

"So, it's about someone writing something that can be read by others, and about adhering to the specified conventions that most language communities have now agreed upon with varying degrees of bindingness."

Karg, Ina. 2015.
Orthographie:
Öffentlichkeit,
Wissenschaft und Erwerb.
(Germanistische
Arbeitshefte 46).
Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110366679>

Karg 2015: 5, my translation

Semi-structured interview study

- three parts: (1) implicit knowledge, beliefs and opinions about orthography, (2) experience with and opinions about orthographic shaming, (3) reaction to and questions about a specific example of orthographic shaming
- 21 interviews (13f, 8m) conducted in 2018 and 2019 in German ranging from 13 to 55 min (average 30 min)
- interviewees had responded to an ad in the Department of Linguistics (University of Graz) and were paid € 10 to participate
- homogeneous group: most participants were highly literalized students, ages range from 18 to 29, similar educational backgrounds, all of them (with minor exceptions) assess their own orthographic competence as very good

Sociolinguistic context

- in the German-language realm, orthography is doubly codified [in official rulebooks by the Council for German Orthography and dictionaries based on them]
- orthography is phenomenologically primary to the graphematics of the writing system Schmidt 2018: 28—from the outset, children learn not to write but to write correctly; orthography serves not as a guideline but as a corset of normativity Maas 2015
- ever since the latest spelling reforms [1996/2006], orthography has entered the public's awareness, spawning myriad different discourses Johnson 2002

Johnson, Sally. 2002. On the origin of linguistic norms: Orthography, ideology and the first constitutional challenge to the 1996 reform of German. *Language in Society* 31. 549–576.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404502314039>

Maas, Utz. 2015. Vom Sinn der Rechtschreibung. *Networx* 68. <http://www.mediensprache.net/networx/networx-68.pdf> (accessed 25 September 2021)

Schmidt, Karsten. 2018. *Phonographie und Morphographie im Deutschen. Grundzüge einer wortbasierten Graphematik.* (Stauffenburg Linguistik 107). Tübingen: Stauffenburg.

Questions

Leitfragen zum Interview: *Orthographic Shaming*

1. Was verstehst du unter „Rechtschreibung“? Was fällt für dich unter diesen Begriff? Was verstehst du unter einem Rechtschreibfehler?
2. Wie stehst du zum Thema Rechtschreibung? Welchen Lebensbereich würdest du am ehesten diesem Thema zuordnen? Welche Rolle spielt Rechtschreibung in deinem Leben?
3. Was denkst du über Personen, die häufig Rechtschreibfehler machen?
4. Hast du schon einmal die Rechtschreibung von jemandem im Internet ausgebessert? (Wenn ja, wie oft? Wo?)
 - a. wenn ja: In welchem Kontext? Warum? Gab es Reaktionen darauf? Wenn ja, welche? Wie stehst du im Nachhinein dazu, dass du das getan hast? |
 - b. wenn nein: Würdest du das jemals in Erwägung ziehen? Wenn ja, in welchem Kontext – was wäre für dich ausschlaggebend, um das zu machen? Wie würde deine Reaktion aussehen? Welche Fehler würdest du eher ausbessern als andere?
5. Wurde deine Rechtschreibung im Internet einmal ausgebessert?
 - a. wenn ja: In welchem Kontext? Wie hat diese Verbesserung ausgesehen? Wie war das Klima in diesem Gespräch? Wie hast du dich gefühlt? Hast du darauf reagiert – wenn ja, wie? Gab es Reaktionen von anderen Personen? Wie sahen diese aus?

Negative ascriptions

... usually I value that people can spell correctly, because if they can't, that makes their IQ sink in my head. [A05]

... so I would like to avoid thinking that these people are then, uhm, intellectually a bit inferior to others, but it just easily gives this impression... [A04]

Positive ascriptions

... so whoever has very good spelling, I assume that they were very hardworking and that they attended a very good school or maybe even have an academic degree.

[A06]

Awareness of deviance

... then one recognizes quite fast whether something was written incorrectly from ignorance or whether someone has simply mistyped when typing or has written somehow a little too hastily. [A01]

... they don't bother to prepare the text appropriately for me, and more like... it's kind of like they don't follow the etiquette. [A05]

Social bindingness

... people act as if this [= orthography] were the Traffic Code when actually it's just a suggestion and one must – I don't know, in public spaces, [...] in university and the like, one must adhere to it, but actually it would just be a proposal for the general public. [A05]

Orthography is important in all domains of written life. [B01]

Functions of re-corrections

recorrection post

● Recorrector
Of course it's 'you're'. Can you believe the gall of some people?

● Correctee
Haha you're funny!

● Corrector
*your


screenshot


(de-/recontextualized
discourse fragment)






recorrections as (mostly other-)corrections of incorrect corrections


- (1) factually correct a perceived mistake/misconception, and (2) subject the (incorrect) corrector to the same negative effects of an FTA they had wanted to bring upon the addressee(s) of their initial correction
- thus mitigate effects of attempted FTAs – by acting as FTAs themselves
- function also as (implicit) criticisms of the practice of correcting including the smugness and supposed superiority ascribed to correctors (also by themselves)
- not only mock a mistake but also the mocking practiced by correctors, with which those aim to position themselves as superior; thus, recorrectors may implicitly challenge standard language ideologies by exposing the hypocrisy of prescriptive practices but also position themselves as (morally) superior with respect to prescriptivism



Criticism of linguistic prescriptivism


 **User 6.1**
What's terrifying is the unforgiving needle nosed assholes social media has turned us all into. You understood it, right? Shut the fuck up then.
2d Like Reply Share

 **User 6.2**
If you are intelligent enough to correct then you should be intelligent enough to know you only do it to prove you're better than someone else. Seems like adding substance to conversations is lost on majority of humans when any grammatical error occurs tho.
2d Like Reply Share

 **User 7.1**
It was made with copper. It is made of copper. It was and is made from copper. This is the epitome of pedantry. They're both correct. Both past and present tense is correct. It was made with copper. That did not change, which means it is still made from copper.
5d Like Reply Share 157    

 **User 7.2**
Things like this will always spur arguments because language is plastic and its meaning is determined by what we collectively decide. When it was made, it was indeed made with copper (and steel and iron), and it is also still made of those things. Both of these are correct statements and the intent of the statement is clear either way. All of that being said, the pedantry of arguing which is MORE correct almost always comes from a place of Let Me Take Any And Every Opportunity To Show That I'm So Much Smarter Than Everyone Else, and honestly, it's so fucking tiresome.
5d Like Reply Share

 **User 1.1**
At the end of the day, it was a simple typo and wasn't hurting anybody.
5d Like Reply Share 

 **User 14.1**
linguistic prescriptivism is stupid and you should feel bad
5d Like Reply Share

PRELIMINARY DEFINITION:

metaprescriptivism

metapragmatic ideologies and discourse about prescriptivism that may themselves carry prescriptive undertones, or even practices that subvert prescriptivism but may themselves be prescriptive

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
- 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* vs. *right* vs. *rite*)

Orthographic relativity

- structural differences → different potentials for variation, different potential for norms, different potential for deviation and normativity
- structural differences → different pathways of acquisition, different metalinguistic awareness and knowledge, different categories available for normative evaluation
- structure + ideology = normativity

Errors across writing systems

- **Chinese**: misplaced/forgotten/superfluous strokes; homophony
 - a line too short, an extra dot, wrong orientation
 - stroke order (can be discerned in calligraphy and handwriting)
 - choosing homophonous (but wrong) character
- **Arabic**: visual-form errors; wrong joining of letters; vowel letters
 - certain orthographic rules (use of glottal stop hamza, using ta marbuta)
 - using colloquial Arabic forms in formal writing
- **Thai**: choosing the wrong letter, misplacing a vowel sign, wrong spelling of consonant clusters

Errors across writing systems

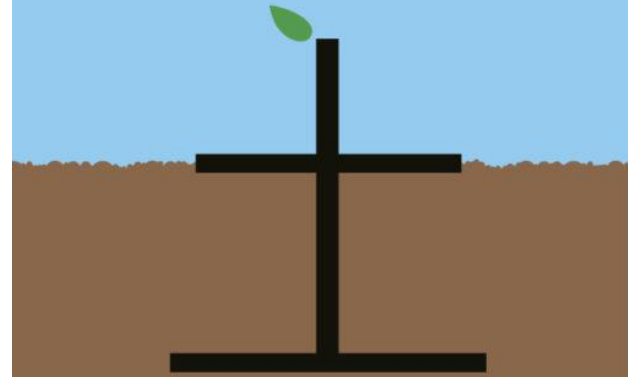
- Japanese
 - kanji mistakes similar to mistakes in Chinese
 - difficulties in different readings of kanji
- Korean
 - morphophonological nature of the writing system leads to spelling errors



未 not yet
wèi



末 final
mò



土 soil/earth
tǔ



士 scholar
shì



鳥 bird
niǎo



烏 crow
wū

#	Error type	Ratio %
1.	أ '>' mistaken as ا 'A'	24.17
2.	splits	16.38
3.	ي 'y' mistaken as ى 'Y'	15.54
4.	إ '<' mistaken as ا 'A'	15.34
5.	ى 'Y' mistaken as ي 'y'	7.25
6.	deletes	4.44
7.	inserts	3.70
8.	ا 'A' mistaken as إ '<'	3.26
9.	ه 'p' mistaken as ه 'h'	1.28



Status of literacy

different societies structure and value literacy in distinct ways, based on history, ideology, and script tradition

- **China**: writing as cultural prestige, moral order, and state power
 - classical Chinese seen as elite code; literacy as Confucian virtue
 - script linked directly to civilization (wen 文)
- **Arabic-speaking cultures**: writing = sacred: Qur'an as revealed, perfect text
 - fuṣḥā upheld in writing; dialects excluded
 - literacy often tied to religious and moral education
- **Hebrew tradition**: historically maintained through written sacred texts
 - revival of Hebrew involved re-establishing writing as national identity
 - script continuity = cultural survival
- **Japanese**: formal writing deeply tied to social etiquette
 - calligraphy valued as aesthetic and moral discipline

Attitudes towards mistakes

- English: mistakes = social marker; strong link between spelling & credibility; “grammar Nazi” culture
 - Arabic: mistakes tied to religious and moral correctness; policing seen as duty but also as arrogance
 - Chinese: public humor + hidden anxiety about literacy decline; typos corrected collectively but laughter conceals prescriptivism
 - Japanese: politeness discourages direct correction; but public figures’ errors (Asō, Abe) = moral failure; norm debates reveal ideological rigidity
- ideology of correctness varies with what “writing” means culturally (sacred text, education, face, identity)

WORLD

Japan PM's reading blunders spark study spree

Reading Japanese isn't easy – even for the Japanese. Take Prime Minister Taro Aso. He's made so many public blunders that an opposition lawmaker tried to give him a reading test.





Sonja M. Lauterbach
@SolautSonja · Folgen



Müssen die Eltern von [@sebastiankurz](#) jetzt zum Gespräch?
Muss der Deutschlehrer von [#Kurz](#) jetzt sein Gehalt zurückzahlen?

Fragen über Fragen



Sebastian Kurz ✓
@sebastiankurz

Haben klares Bekenntnis zum
differenziertem & leistungsförderndem
Schulsystem. Darf nicht sein, dass
Kinder nach d Volksschule nicht
sinnerfassend lesen können und
Jugendliche nach d Schulpflicht nicht
über notwendige Grundkompetenzen
verfügen, d es für weiteren Weg
braucht. 2/2

6:55 vorm. · 29. Nov. 2017



204



Antworten



Link kopier.

[20 Antworten lesen](#)

Writing systems are not neutral

They are social, cultural, and psychological artifacts that shape how we perceive, value, and regulate language.

- **Graphetics**: graphic form → fonts, handwriting, typographic mimicry → aesthetic, affective, and moral evaluations of what writing looks like
- **Graphematics**: linguistic function → system “difficulty,” transparency → ideologies of logic, efficiency, and beauty reflecting cultural bias
- **Orthography**: normativity → correctness, regulation, policing → ideologies of authority, morality, and identity

Attitudes link cognition and culture.

They shape how people see, process, and feel about writing.

Studying them reveals not only how we read and write, but how we think about language, society, and ourselves.

Why writing systems create norms

Because writing is:

1 – visible

2 – persistent

3 – shared

4 – teachable

5 – comparable

variation becomes evaluable →

evaluation becomes social →

social evaluation becomes normativity