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SPECIAL ISSUE

The Historical Sociolinguistics of Spelling

Edited by Laura Villa & Rik Vosters

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Language ideological debates over orthography in European linguistic history

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Keywords: orthography; language ideological debates; language and politics;
standardization; linguistic variation; historical sociolinguistics; discourse studies;
writing and literacy

The study of the sociopolitical aspects of spelling has gained scholarly attention in the last decades (e.g. Jaffe 2000; Sebba 2007; Jaffe, Androutsopoulos, Sebba & Johnson 2012; Baddeley & Voeste 2012). The introduction of writing systems in oral communities in decolonization contexts, the intense standardization of national and minority languages in the twentieth century, the bitter public debates triggered by orthographic reforms, and the exploitation of non-standard spelling norms as sources of group identity are among the processes that have clearly underlined the non-linguistic significance of orthography.

This sociopolitical dimension of language – and spelling – becomes particularly visible in the course of public debates over linguistic matters as the participants in those debates propose discursive representations of the self and the other – and the self and the other’s linguistic practices and ideas about language. When such controversies arise, external factors move to the forefront, revealing, in fact, that linguistic controversies “are part of more general sociopolitical processes” (Blommaert 1999: 3). Accordingly, approaching linguistic conflicts as language ideological debates allows us to emphasize concepts such as human agency, power, and authority and, therefore, better explain the complex “relationship between language and power/social structures” (Blommaert 1999: 1). As spelling is – and was – often at the core of linguistics controversies in the public sphere – to some extent as a result of its obvious visual salience (cf. Sebba, this issue) – orthographic conflicts are an excellent object of study to illustrate the social, cultural and historical issues that are often at stake in discussions about language.

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Studies focused on language ideological debates over orthographic issues are often concerned with one or more of the following issues:

1. the selection of official orthographic norms in nation-building contexts: how are orthographic norms established and maintained, particularly as part of emerging or dominant “standard language cultures” (Milroy 2012) in Early and Late Modern Europe (Baddeley & Voeste 2012; Portebois 2003; cf. the contributions of Kramer, Marquilhas, Tamošiūnaitė and Villa, in this issue)?
2. the public use of non-standard (or non-official) spelling in connection with social demands: in which way can language users – in the present or in the past – draw on orthographic variation to negotiate divergent linguistic identities and political projects (Jaffe 2000; cf. the contributions of Tamošiūnaitė, Villa and Vosters & Rutten in this issue)?
3. the non-linguistic dimension of public debates over the reform of orthographic systems: to which extent do public discourses about orthographic changes reflect societal tensions, how are linguistic arguments used as substitutes for extra-linguistic concerns, and how do political needs (related, for instance, to the development of national structures) and even technical constraints (associated, for example, with a changing printing market) impact orthographical changes (Johnson 2005; Bermel 2007; cf. the contributions of Kramer, Tamošiūnaitė, Villa and Voeste in this issue)?
4. the politically laden discursive representation of orthographic variation: how are spelling differences exploited within broader contexts of language conflict and colliding linguistic identities (Nelde 1997; cf. the contributions of Kramer, Tamošiūnaitė and Vosters & Rutten in this issue)?

The articles included in this special issue touch on several of these aspects of the significance of spelling in society by studying language ideological debates that took place in different European settings since the Early Modern period until recent times. In particular, we have gathered in this volume works that approach the linguistic history of Europe and some of its former colonies from a sociopolitical perspective and, accordingly, study orthographic conflicts as powerful sources to understand language change, geopolitical orders and social structures.

Before delving into the case studies of different languages, the first paper of this special issue offers the reader a theoretical introduction to some central concepts in the sociolinguistics of spelling, orthographies and scripts. Mark Sebba, in his contribution on “Iconisation, attribution and branding in orthography”, discusses three processes by which social meaning can be ascribed to script. Iconization, first of all, involves the well-known “transformation of the sign relationship between linguistic features (or varieties) and the social images to which they are

linked” (Irvine & Gal 2000: 37), as a result of which speakers will assume linguistic features in the language use of a particular group as inherent and iconic representations of such a group as a whole. While this process is certainly not limited to spelling features *per se*, many cases of iconization do involve elements of orthographies or scripts, even if language-political issues more generally are debated. Building on this, however, Sebba also introduces the concept of *attribution*, which he proposes as a necessary first step before iconization can take place. Through attribution, a specific feature or practice of language use is strongly and often exclusively associated with a specific group of language users, often through the discursive process that Irvine & Gal (2000: 38) called erasure. Finally, and more specific for orthographical features, Sebba introduces the process of branding. Through branding, particularly salient orthographical choices or elements from a script, because of their graphical nature as visual signs, start to be seen as emblematic of the language users who make use of the branded element. Sebba’s paper discusses all three processes in detail, also exploring the interrelation between iconization, attribution and branding, as well as offering examples from a variety of languages and linguistic communities.

In “Official orthographies, spelling debates and nation-building projects after the fall of the Spanish Empire,” Laura Villa studies three language ideological debates over Spanish orthography – occurring in the central decades of the nineteenth century – where spelling is exploited as a powerful identity marker and a political tool. The first debate arose from the initiative of an association of teachers to reform the Spanish alphabet – i.e. to keep control over language in education – which resulted in the officialization of the Royal Spanish Academy’s orthography in 1844. The second orthographic conflict revolved around Domingo Faustino Sarmiento’s proposal to simplify spelling according to the pronunciation of Latin American people – i.e. to emancipate linguistic norms, authorities and institutions from Spain – and ended with the recognition of Andrés Bello’s more conservative (but nevertheless innovative) orthography by the University of Chile, also in 1844. The last debate analyzed in this article shows the encounter of these two orthographic systems – i.e. the symbolic clash between the former colonial order and the new reality of American independence – during Sarmiento’s trip to Spain in 1846. All three debates occurred amidst the intense nation-building activity that, both in Spain and Latin America, followed the collapse of the Spanish Empire in the first half of the century.

Anja Voeste, in “Proficiency and efficiency: Why German spelling changed in Early Modern times,” studies the impact of the modernization of printing and the increasing proficiency of related crafts on German spelling in late medieval and early modern times. The challenges of microtypography, especially of text alignment, led to a bundle of new spelling variants, such as the use of ‘redundant’

consonants or double ⟨n⟩, which was often criticized in early grammatographical works. In her analysis, Voeste draws attention to the study of common practice in manuscripts and prints, which leads her to argue that orthographic innovations in the sixteenth century were less influenced by the debates of grammarians than by political and economic forces and realities. On the one hand, the increasing bureaucratization brought about by the Imperial Reform triggered a significant increase in the amount of written records. This, in turn, contributed to the professionalization of typesetters and printers who, nevertheless, were paid based on different – and conflicting – standards. On the other hand, the flourishing of the book market favored the production of low-quality, cheap and easy-to-read books that targeted unskilled readers. Voeste concludes that these conflict-ridden working conditions in the printing shops and the needs of the market appear to be the decisive factors in the materialization of novel spelling strategies that were aimed at accessing new consumer groups.

Next, Rik Vosters & Gijsbert Rutten discuss “Three Southern shibboleths. Spelling features as conflicting identity markers in the Low Countries.” Their contribution focuses on the Southern Low Countries (roughly present-day Flanders), where spelling was placed at the heart of a growing metalinguistic awareness of ‘Flemishness’ or ‘Southernness’ in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Their approach focuses on three orthographical variables which were highly salient at the time: the spelling of the long vowels *a* and *u* in closed syllables (‘vowel lengthening’), the ending ⟨-n⟩ or ⟨-ø⟩ in masculine adnominals (‘masculine adnominals’), and the orthographic representation of etymologically different *e* and *o* sounds, often involving accent spellings (‘diacritics’). By analysing how these features are dealt with in orthographies, grammars and other normative publications of the period, they demonstrate how, through the processes of iconization and erasure, these three seemingly insignificant variables were often presented as symbolizing an unbridgeable linguistic gap between the Northern and Southern Low Countries. By juxtaposing these metalinguistic findings with an analysis of these features in a corpus of handwritten texts from the Southern Netherlands, however, they also show how this strong opposition of Southern and Northern forms at the discursive level is absent in actual language use: Southern usage was not very different from what was at least perceived to be Northern usage. The authors conclude that the symbolic North-South division which was constructed at the discursive level may not have been very deep in practice, demonstrating how orthographic variation which is inherently present in any sort of (hand)written texts from the early nineteenth century can be reinterpreted to fit discursive schemas and oppositions in the specific language political context at hand.

“The Portuguese Language Spelling Accord” recently ratified by all but two Portuguese-speaking countries is studied by Rita Marquilhas. First, the author

describes the historical process that constituted the adoption of an official orthography in Portugal in 1911 as an independent process from the officialization made by the Brazilian Letters Academy in 1907. Adopting a contemporary point of view, Marquilhas argues that the unilateral decisions made by the Portuguese Sciences Academy – designers of the 1911 orthography – would slow down the unification between Portuguese and Brazilian spelling norms. However, she explains, the particular graphemic solutions favored and the exclusion of Brazilian intellectuals in the configuration of the 1911 orthographic norm were not motivated by post-colonial tensions but rather by the Romantic and Enlightenment ideas of the times. During the course of the twentieth century there were countless diplomatic negotiations in order to unify Portuguese spelling – first between Brazil and Portugal and, in due time, including other former Portuguese colonies as well. The paper ends with several reflections on the unified orthography finally achieved in the 1990 *Portuguese Language Spelling Accord*, which was ratified and implemented in Portugal, Brazil and most other lusophone countries from 2006 onwards. The author points out that, although this spelling reform mainly tried to aim at greater graphematic transparency, it caused great public outcry in Portugal, where opponents argued that concessions to non-European forms of pronunciation were symptomatic of the motherland selling its national pride to “catch the Brazilian train.” Also here, we see how orthographic variation gets imbued with sociopolitical meaning and comes to represent colliding linguistic identities.

In “Macedonian orthographic controversies”, Christina Kramer offers an overview of the debates surrounding the selection and reforms of Macedonian orthography since the 1940s. In the first period (1944–1945), the many spelling proposals discussed intended to find a compromised alphabetic solution between Serbian Cyrillic and Bulgarian Cyrillic. Kramer studies a 1945 little known alphabet by Blaže Koneski, where he supports the implementation of Vuk’s Serbian alphabet, rejecting the introduction of new letters and disfavoring the use of diacritics. The latter solution was finally preferred by the codifiers of Macedonian standard. In the late 1980s, a new public debate over orthography emerged. The 1945 spelling norms were questioned as an instance of the Serbianization of Macedonian and the reintroduction of the mid-vowel schwa – an orthographic feature that brings Macedonian closer to Bulgarian and that had been rejected by the 1940s codifiers – was discussed although ultimately discarded by the 2013 *Pravopis* dictionary. Finally, Kramer examines the use of Cyrillic and new debates surrounding the use of different systems of transliteration in the Latin alphabet that compete in the linguistic landscape as well as in online fora leading to new proposals for orthographic reform. In sum, Kramer argues that the standardization of Macedonian occurred amidst competing nationalisms, the pressure of neighbouring literary languages, shifting borders and changing political alliances

and, therefore, orthographic choices were loaded with the weight of national traditions, religious history and competing alliances.

Aurelija Tamošiūnaitė closes the volume with a contribution on “Defining ‘Lithuanian’: Orthographic debates at the end of the nineteenth century.” The imposition of the Cyrillic alphabet for Lithuanian – a response from the Russian Empire to the unsuccessful uprising of 1863 – and the persistent use of the Latin script in clandestine publications are core issues that triggered the language ideological debate over Lithuanian spelling at the turn of the century. Tamošiūnaitė analyzes official documents and newspaper articles – both in favor of and opposed to the forced implementation of Cyrillic – dated between 1883 and 1904, in order to uncover competing language ideologies underlying the orthographic shift. She demonstrates how, in the context of rivalling notions of national identity, the imposed Cyrillic script came to index Russianness, Orthodoxy and Russian Imperial authority – and was ultimately rejected, when the ban on the use of the Latin script was lifted in 1904. Over the course of the forty years of the Cyrillic script being imposed, a large majority of books continued to be published in the Latin script, which in turn came to index ‘Polishness’, Catholicism and a form of anti-Russian and anti-imperial dissidence. This strong language-ideological work in favor of the Latin script still used in modern-day Lithuanian, Tamošiūnaitė argues, helped to establish and develop a distinct Lithuanian identity free of the powerful Russian influence of the time, thus helping to shape and define the notion of a modern Lithuanian alphabet.

In sum, this special issue brings together scholars working on a range of languages in different periods of history, whose research all stresses the potential of orthographic competence and orthographic conflicts to better understand the intricate relations between spelling and society – i.e. scholars interested in the reproduction of broader sociopolitical processes in specific spelling ideological debates. With this issue, we aim to offer a broad comparative overview of orthographical conflicts in different standard and non-standard language varieties in Europe, from the Early Modern period to the present.

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