

## INTRODUCTION: LANGUAGE IDEOLOGIES AND WRITING SYSTEMS

Jennifer A. Dickinson

### Abstract

This special issue of *Pragmatics* brings together a collection of articles by linguistic anthropologists studying the interplay between the production and interpretation of written language on one hand, and the language ideologies that organize that production and interpretation on the other. This introductory essay offers an overview of the common theoretical foundations upon which the authors in this volume build their analyses of language ideologies and writing systems and underscores the thematic connections across the articles.

**Keywords:** Language ideology; Writing systems; Digraphia; Orthography.

### 1. Situating the study of social meaning and writing systems

This special issue of *Pragmatics* brings together a collection of articles by linguistic anthropologists studying the interplay between the production and interpretation of written language on one hand, and the language ideologies that organize that production and interpretation on the other. Combining ethnographic data with analysis of texts in which the writing system or systems are foregrounded and directly impact the texts' pragmatic effects, the authors offer analyses of written language embedded in richly described contexts of interpretation. All of the articles also focus on writing systems, here broadly interpreted to include elements ranging from orthography to grapheme sets and their manipulation through typographic choices. While seemingly wide-ranging, each of these elements of writing involves consideration of the physical form of written language as part of the meaning of a piece of writing in context. As with spoken language, a focus on the pragmatic effects of systematicity, variation and choice in written language in context can illuminate the influence of language ideologies, while the reverse is also true. As Webster (2006) has argued, often the significance of a written form can only be found embedded in the totality of contexts surrounding writing and reading, for encoding and decoding.

These articles, while covering a broad geographic and topical range, are united in their interest in how language ideologies are implicated in the contextual creation and interpretation of written language. As such, they contribute materially to Blommaert's renewed call for nuanced, culturally situated approaches to writing as linguistic practice:

“What is needed is an ‘ethnography of writing’ (Basso 1974), in which writing is approached as a complex of language-organizing actions, stylistically and generically variable, and intrinsically connected to domains of use and social value attribution in people’s lives.” (2004: 645). All of the articles in this volume contribute to the development of an approach to studying written language by focusing on the paralanguage of written communication, what Smith and Schmidt have termed “paragraphemic” elements (1996: 50). Visual cues such as text formatting, font choice, and choice or manipulation of orthography and writing systems produce complex indexical meanings that are part of the “content” of a piece of writing, just as intonation, volume and prosody become part of the contextually embedded meaning of a spoken utterance. Below, I outline four areas of linguistic inquiry that lay the groundwork for the approach to language ideologies and the making of meaning for written language: digraphia; approaches to literacy in cultural context; the concept of “public language”; and approaches to language standardization and orthography, including non-standard writing practices that mix elements from distinctive writing systems. After introducing some of the literature each of these areas, I offer an overview of the case studies undertaken by the authors in this volume.

### 1.1. *Digraphia*

All of the articles in this volume consider cultural values associated with the physical properties of writing, such as stylistic choices in text production (Lange), or the transformation of handwritten texts into typeset text (Frekko), and several specifically consider choices between or combinations of distinct writing systems (Dickinson, Pine, Riskedahl). The theoretical issues involved in these discussions align somewhat with those inherent in the study of the phenomenon of *digraphia*, the use, synchronically or diachronically, of multiple writing systems to write a single language. Digraphia has attracted some attention from linguists either seeking to describe it as a linguistic feature (see e.g. Dale 1980; DeFrancis 1984; Grivelet 2001a; Zima 1974), or as an issue with language policy implications, most recently as it relates to issues of language standardization (Grivelet 2001b; King 2001; Tiun 1998) and computer mediated communication (Androutopoulos 2009; Feng et al. 2000; Miller 2004; Spilioti 2009; Tsiplakou 2009). Digraphia has sometimes been defined narrowly as the synchronic use of parallel writing systems, as with Serbian and Croatian or Hindi and Urdu, rather than focusing on more subtle issues of orthographic variation within a single alphabetic system, or even on change in the writing system employed to represent a language at different points in time. Earlier descriptions of digraphia relied on these narrower definitions, presupposing a textualist model of hegemonic monolingualism where a single, presumably unified or standardized language is represented by a single writing system (Sebba 2013), which in turn represents a single, unified national or ethnic group (Blommaert 2004; Blommaert and Verschuere 1998), with only a very few examples of “true digraphia” available to linguists.

As the recent resurgence of interest in digraphia in the context of computer use demonstrates, the emerging dominance of the Latin (Roman) alphabet in computerized contexts has revealed the limitations of both these traditionally narrow definitions of digraphia, and the assumptions in which they were grounded. Foremost among the

assumptions challenged by recent political, economic and social trends is that of the monographic norm. Like ideologies that present monolingualism as the hegemonic norm, studies of digraphia were often based in a “monographic” norm. Increased studies not only of multilingual contexts for writing, but also of contexts in which writers avail themselves of multiple writing systems often draw parallels to multilingualism and code-switching phenomena. Like work demonstrating the pragmatic richness of codeswitching phenomena, contemporary studies of digraphia disrupt the idea that users are rarely able to utilize or combine multiple linguistic systems effectively and in ways that reflect community-based communicative competencies. Angermeyer’s (2005) work on script hybridity in Russian diaspora writing, Miller’s (2004) discussion of mixed script writing and Japanese *kogal* identity, LaDousa’s (2002) work on script choices in advertising for language schools in North India, King’s (2001) exploration of the complex cultural meanings and consequences of distinct script usage for Hindi and Urdu, and White’s (2006) work on the biscriptual social contexts of reading in Serbia are a few examples of research that explores the wide range of competencies, uses, and meanings attached to the use of more than one writing system.

## **1.2. Approaches to ideology and literacy in cultural context**

Foundational work in “New Literacy Studies” by authors such as Barton (1994); Gee (2012[1990], 1992) and Street (1984, 1993, 1995) sought to redefine literacy and overturn assumptions that literacy is monolithic in form and unitary in its cultural and linguistic effects. While a considerable subset of this work focuses on literacy practices in educational institutions as well as on political and media discourses on literacy, work such as Street’s (1993) edited volume on cross-cultural literacy practices established the importance of studying the wide range of institutional and non-institutional contexts for literacy. Gee’s (2012[1990]) discussion of ideology and its relationship to evaluations of literacy and other linguistic practices resonates with work published by linguistic anthropologists, such as Woolard and Schieffelin’s (1994) review article on language ideology. This work, while touching on processes of standardization and their relationship to literacy practices (see section 1.3 below) has focused both on the analysis of culturally embedded linguistic interactions, and on broader evaluations of social processes by which ideologies emerge and become hegemonic modes for the interpretation of both written and spoken language.

In demonstrating that literacy is not a singular practice, or even a singular set of practices, New Literacy Studies scholarship has developed models for recognizing and analyzing the range of ways in which people read and produce texts in context, and how literacy practices may be multimodal, involving interpretations of accompanying images and non-linguistic or paragramemic elements (see e.g. Barton et al. 2000). This approach to literacy not only seeks to document diverse literacies, but also to demonstrate social and political practices by which hegemonic literacies support established power structures. All of the papers in this volume provide analyses of literacy practices as the production and consumption of texts in social context. In each case, the authors also attend to the ways in which the creation and interpretation of texts are organized by ideologies that attach political, social and historical significance to choices made by writers and readers.

### **1.3. Standardization and orthographic choice**

Theoretical work on the ideological underpinnings of arguments over language standardization (see e.g. Milroy and Milroy 1994; Irvine and Gal 2000; Errington 2001) and case studies exploring the ideological underpinnings of specific orthographies (see e.g. Androutsopoulos 2000, 2012; Jaffe 1999, 2000; Jaffe et al. 2012; Olivo 2001; Schieffelin and Doucet 1992; Sebba 2007; Smith and Schmidt 1996) have demonstrated that both the elite and everyday practices through which the systematicity of a writing system is maintained are always intertwined with language ideologies. Indeed, Irvine and Gal (2000) have argued that standardization can be seen as the process by which systematic regulation of writing becomes a means of cementing a visible, iconic representation of a language. Graphocentric ideologies of standard language then posit these written forms as the norm against which not only other written forms, but also spoken forms are judged (Blommaert 2004; Milroy and Milroy 1994; see also Frekko, and Pine, this volume). Variation in written forms is thereby both constrained and imbued with social meaning through the creation of indexical links between orthographic variation and/or orthographic variants, and ideological positions (Sebba 2007: 32-33; see also Kataoka 1997; Miller 2004; Noy 2008).

While as Sebba notes there are socially and linguistically defined constraints that limit the range of variation in written forms, these theoretical discussions highlight the importance of understanding variation as a key element in the negotiation of indexical meanings for written forms. In situations of digraphia or of competing standards and orthographies, the choice of writing system, or the choice to combine elements of available writing systems, simultaneously acknowledges parallel symbolic systems as sets of graphemes that can represent the linguistic segment in question, and also highlights the ideological layering of meaning. While not all of the articles in this volume deal explicitly with digraphia, this aspect of optional marking of meaning through the manipulation of choices in producing writing inheres throughout the volume.

Shared meanings for scripts, typefaces or other elements of written forms can also emerge across linked contexts over time, a process explored in different ways in all of the papers in this volume. Whether it is a series of linked, themed chatrooms across which community members circulate and communicate, an advertising campaign in dialogue with preceding ads and with competing campaigns, or a newspaper editorial page that utilizes a particular style or written standard day after day, the authors include these intertextual relations in their analysis of the situated interpretation of a given instance of written language.

### **1.4. Public language**

Gal and Woolard, in their foundational article on languages and publics (1994) focused particular attention on the role of language ideologies and the leveraging of political authority in creating indexical linkages between linguistic behavior and socially defined groups, or ‘publics’ that “supposedly or potentially include ‘everyone’ but abstract from each person’s interest-bearing and privately-defined characteristics.” (1994: 134). A

focus on languages and publics, they note, also offers opportunities to balance the study of face-to-face communication with rigorous analysis of the broader social contexts that inform these interactions. Inherent in the study of languages and their relation to publics then, must be recognition of both the processes by which power and authority to create and define publics, and the hegemonic language ideologies intertwined with them. As discussed in the next section, the establishment and maintenance of written standards is certainly one avenue by which this occurs, although as many of the papers in this volume demonstrate, the creation of publics may also involve the regularized violation of those standards in the construction of political or social authority.

Threaded throughout the articles in the present volume are variable notions of “publicness,” reflected in the ways that imagined audiences and their interpretations of the referential and the indexical value of written language influence the shape of that text. Thus readers capable of interpreting political slogans in English, Arabic and French (Riskedahl) or store signs written in Latin and Cyrillic (Dickinson) and creating the indexical links desired by their authors, are projected outward from public writing on billboards and signs. In Frekko’s analysis of a Catalan newspaper editorial page, the imagination of an idealized Catalan-reading public motivates editorial changes to printed letters, de-individualizing the “public” written form of Catalan. For Pine’s informants, reluctance to encode tone markings in their transcriptions of Lahu speech revealed the indexical constraints on their graphemically projected, and therefore “public” identity, while Lange’s analysis of interactions between members of a gaming community considers the public nature of troubled online encounters in which conflicting notions of idealized interlocutors result in variable sanctioning of particular writing practices.

## **2. Case studies in the intersection of writing systems and language ideologies**

The development of the concept of language ideology and its application to the study of pragmatics within the fields of linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics has opened new avenues for the interpretation of choice in the production and interpretation of written language far beyond the unproblematic equation of languages with scripts, or even the simple equation of script choices with particular indexical meanings. The papers in this volume each focus on a case study in which language ideologies come to the fore in the management of multiple writing systems, whether through the regulation of community standards in the creation of a public language (Lange, Frekko), the negotiation and representation of publics through manipulation of written language (Frekko, Riskedahl) or the representation of historically salient ideological associations through print choices (Pine, Dickinson). In these papers, these issues are related both to variation in the systematic representation of language and to the complex array of ways that indexical meaning is attached to different representations. In all of these cases, it is the negotiation of systematicity, whether through the enforcing of community or editorial standards, the linking of texts through perceived similarities in font or style, or the purposeful mixing of distinctive systems to create systematically “heterogenous” texts, that involves language ideologies in processes of writing.

Frekko examines the role of editors in enacting processes of erasure of variation in the creation of public written language that embodies notions of a unified written

standard and its links to national identity while also creating a homogenized version of letters to the editor that were originally much more diverse. As Frekko points out, standardization of the linguistic forms in the letters not only creates a unified (or homogenized) version of print Catalan *linguistically*, but also *visually*. Thus handwritten, typed or computer printed letters to the editor, many marked with handwritten signatures and with linguistic and other cues indexing the social diversity of the letter writers are rewritten to standardize language use, set into a single typeface, and reformatted to fit the editorial layout, creating sameness out of diversity. What might be lost in this process, the author argues, is a sense of Catalan speakers' individual and stylistically distinct voices, an often unspoken complement to the unified, anonymous print voice associated with literary languages.

Seemingly at the other end of the spectrum of written language, Lange's article on realtime online chats between members of a gaming community also demonstrates the leveraging of authoritative stances to control linguistic behavior and its interpretation in comparison to an idealized public identity. In particular, Lange argues for the salience of technological skill as a socially marked identity feature like class or gender, one that should also be included when analyzing communication in online environments. The ability to claim authority, and thus, she argues, to control interpretation of particular text features such as the use of ALL CAPS in a given instance is closely linked to the writer's ability to display technological expertise. Examining troubled encounters in the online environment, Lange demonstrates that neither the foregrounding of Grice's maxim of clarity nor the application of cited standards for online written behavior (such as Netiquette) are sufficient to explain the variability in how a given instance of marked text manipulation is interpreted in context. This variability in interpretation is thus a strategy deployed primarily to enforce social hierarchies of technological expertise within the community.

Both Dickinson and Riskedahl discuss multilingual outdoor advertising, but articulate very different relations between these texts and the publics via which they circulate and take on meanings. Dickinson focuses on the pragmatics of alphabet mixing in contemporary Ukrainian shop signs, which simultaneously fulfill legal requirements and support an ideology that links the Latin alphabet to the market economy and prestige goods. She also develops a second plane of analysis based on interviews with advertising executives and graphic designers regarding font choice and alphabet mixing, who argue that such strategies not only index youthful energy, attracting desired customers, but also that Latin graphemes are by nature more "malleable" than Cyrillic ones, and are therefore a greater asset to designers who rely on the "para" features of graphemes – their size, shape and evocative, culturally situated aesthetic values, to visually define and promote brands and products. Dickinson points to the political history of both Cyrillic and Latin alphabets in Ukraine to argue for longstanding associations of Cyrillic with a centralized State monopoly on typography. In this context, alphabet mixing offers designers the opportunity to express a sort of conventional unconventionality, producing the effect of a youthful and contemporary aesthetic.

Riskedahl captures a series of competing political advertisements in Beirut as the ad campaigns unfold and take on additional social meaning during 2006-2007, a period of intense political conflict in Lebanon. The signs utilized multiple languages, scripts, and logograms, manipulating a range of features of writing (font, color, size,

alignment and script choice), all chosen by the advertising agencies in charge of the campaign with the intention of utilizing the indexical value of each element to project a political identity with which viewers could align, thus becoming “embodied” members of an otherwise disembodied political public. Analyzing the signs, Riskedahl considers the complex indexical relations that develop over the course of this campaign, bringing the ad texts into physical, visual and linguistic relation to each other and to viewing publics. A powerful component of the analysis rests in the rich ethnographic context she provides for the signs whose content she considers on both the level of the visual qualities of the text, and the pragmatic effects of those signs, which can be recovered in part from the development of subsequent ads in dialogic relation to the whole series of advertisements. In this analysis, linguistic ideology mediates between writing in these billboards and the projection of an active, coherent political public to which each campaign might speak effectively.

As Pine demonstrates, in cases where the geneologies of competing writing systems are implicated in their very use, ideology intervenes at the point of representation of key linguistic features such as tone marking in writing. Introducing the concept of proprietary orthographies, or writing systems specific to a given language (e.g. Thai, Korean, Vietnamese), Pine considers the power of language ideologies to shape the experience of written language, such that users of a non-proprietary script, for example, the Roman alphabet, may find themselves ideologically positioned as less literate, or even illiterate despite knowing how to read and write their language in an established writing system. Offering an outline of the “ecology of ideas” (Philips 2004) in which Lahu writing is produced, Pine evaluates both the indexicality of writing system choices, and the iconicity of writing produced within a particular system as a given vision of the possibilities and constraints on Lahu literacy defined against that of more politically and socially powerful scripts. Using the example of the representation of tone marks, or their absence, across several writing systems for Lahu, each with a distinct political and religious geneology, Pine considers how choosing among writing systems within this complex ecology of ideas about literacy can ultimately function as a test of Lahu speakers’ claims to an authoritative, literate place within that ecology.

Taken together, the articles in this volume outline “next steps” in the ethnography of writing systems. Building on previous work, they all engage with the semiotic values of writing systems in context, while also incorporating insights from work theorizing the role of language ideological frameworks in structuring interpretation, thus shaping the meaning and pragmatic effects of an instance of writing.

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