

MARK SEBBA. 2007. *Spelling and society: The culture and politics of orthography around the world*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press. xix + 189pp.: ill, maps, glossary. ISBN 978-0-521-84845-9, cloth.

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Spelling and society is a very important book, making a very important point. Orthography is more than simply technology. It is fraught with social and cultural implications and is used in social and cultural contexts. Sebba explores these contexts thoroughly, making a strong case for the development of a sociolinguistics of orthography, and developing a coherent theoretical framework for such a field. Highly engaging and exceptionally well-written, Sebba's exploration of "spelling matters" should be at the top of every linguist's reading list. It would also be an outstanding text for classes in language documentation.

The book is organized into an introduction and seven chapters. Well-structured and reader-friendly, each chapter is subdivided into sections with headings and sub-headings, and the flow from chapter to chapter is clearly and logically explained. Two maps show the locations of languages discussed in the book. A table of International Phonetic Alphabet symbols gives typical orthographic representations in a variety of languages, a separate chart shows the IPA vowel symbols used in the book, and a transcription note explains phonetic, phonemic, and orthographic bracketing. These aids, plus the presence of a glossary at the end, and Sebba's reader-friendly writing style, suggest its use not only as a focal text in advanced classes but also as an adjunct reading in introductory classes in linguistics and linguistic anthropology.

The introduction engages us immediately with illustrations of European graffiti showing "deviant" spellings such as <Kris> for <Chris> (on the same wall), <ov> for <of> and <woz> for <was> in English, and <okupación> for <ocupación> in Spanish, and poses several questions for us to consider. What symbolic significance might these graffiti writers be attaching to these alternative spellings? Why do these writers use "deviant" rather than conventional spellings, even in cases where both spellings lead to exactly the same pronunciations? To illustrate that distinctive spellings are not just the purview of adolescents, or marginalized populations, Sebba shows us a few English surnames like <Featherstonehaugh> /fæɪnʃɔ:/, or <Beaulieu> /bju:li/, and cautions us that there are good social explanations for distinctive spellings and for orthographic choices. What is needed, he explains, is a "framework for accounting for orthographic choices in their social context—at the individual, group, societal and national level" (5).

Having raised our interest in "spelling matters" Sebba next introduces us to standard "traditional" twentieth-century linguistic approaches to orthography, in particular that of Kenneth Pike (1938, 1947). The ideal of one letter per phoneme has long dominated traditional linguistic approaches to language documentation, and only occasionally do we read of instances in which a linguist or anthropologist has come up against social and cultural issues surrounding orthographic choice. Paul Garvin (1954), for example, documented his experiences in Pohnpei (Ponape), and I have written a bit about mine in the Comoro Islands (see, for example, Ottenheimer 2001). William Powers (1990) and Alexandra Jaffe (1996) have weighed in similarly. What is significant about each of these experiences is

the revelation that each of us did not really encounter the complex relationships between ideology and orthography until we began our fieldwork. Citing these kinds of experiences, Sebba argues that what is needed is a developed theory of the cultural and social aspects of orthography. *Spelling and society* is a welcome beginning in this direction.

Each of the next six chapters of the book surveys a particular issue or perspective, describing existing approaches to orthography, presenting orthography as social practice, documenting language contact and the emergence of orthographies, examining postcolonial orthographies, delving into the relationships between language, dialect, and orthography, and discussing issues of reform and revolution in orthography. A final chapter sums everything up, explores the overall role of spelling in society, and discusses the responsibilities of linguists (and linguistic anthropologists) with regard to orthographies and the people who use them.

Chapter 1 introduces the subject matter of orthography and presents different perspectives from which it has been approached, including linguistics, language history, psycholinguistics, and cognitive psychology. Although much has been written about orthography in general, it appears that the social and cultural aspects of orthography have never received much formal attention within linguistics. Drawing from Brian Street's (1984) work on literacy, Sebba distinguishes two models of orthography, calling them the autonomous model and the sociocultural model. The autonomous model attempts a "culturally neutral" stance, viewing orthography as a technology independent of social context. It considers the "phonemic principle" to be the ideal method for "reducing a language to writing" and it considers alphabetic phonemic writing as the ideal orthography. This is, in fact, the perspective that most of us bring to our initial fieldwork experiences. The sociocultural model, in contrast, takes into account ideologies and expectations about spelling as well as about reading and writing, and argues for understanding orthography as social practice. Although it is introduced in chapter 1, it is more fully expanded in chapter 2.

In chapter 2 Sebba explains how social meaning is created through orthographic choice and then explores strategies for variation ("wrong" spellings, spellings that represent non-standard pronunciations, archaic spellings, and so on). Although we usually think of the orthographies of standardized languages as fixed and inflexible, there is actually quite a bit of flexibility available to us. Sebba draws a continuum between fully regulated and unregulated spaces for variation. Published texts and school writing represent the fully regulated end of the continuum. Somewhat greater flexibility is found in advertisements, poetry, and personal letters. The internet probably provides the most unregulated space nowadays. Here individuals are able (and perhaps even encouraged) to make and display choices that establish and display their individual identity, group membership, and even their distinctiveness from the mainstream. Sebba's analysis of the "Ali G" (Sacha Baron Cohen) website is a high point of this chapter, showing not only how orthographic variation occurs, but how it conforms to specific norms of difference and distinctiveness. A section on Spanish <k> reminds us that orthographic choices can take on even wider political significance.

Chapter 3 considers situations in which orthographies have been developed for formerly unwritten languages. Sebba observes that new orthographies are often the result of language contact, and that in most cases the key roles are played by cultural elites such as literate bilinguals or linguistic "experts," with or without formal linguistic training. Case studies of Manx and Sranan Tongo (Surinamese Creole) reveal that these kinds of "colo-

nial” orthographies are best seen as products of bilingualism. As Sebba notes, sometimes such orthographies are accepted, sometimes not. Sometimes they lead to language preservation, and sometimes to language death. The key, it seems, to understanding the outcomes lies in understanding the pre-existing cultural practices of the language community for which the orthographies are developed and the range of literacy practices that develop in those communities. If an orthography is designed primarily for preachers to enable them to write and present sermons in the local language, how likely is it to be adopted by congregants for everyday use? The answer, it is clear, depends more on social and ideological factors than on technological ones. Writing may be a great technology, but it must also become an embedded social practice in order for it to survive and function in a culture. As Sebba points out “the introduction of writing is no prophylactic against language endangerment, shift, or death” (79).

The post-independence orthographic upheavals that have taken place in the Third World, as well as similar developments in the former Soviet Union, are the focus of chapter 4. Here the emphasis is on the power of orthography to symbolize change as well as political identity. Case studies in this chapter include Albanian, Moldovan, Haitian, Sranan Tongo (again), and Malay/Indonesian. Sebba identifies several common themes including the rejection of scripts identified with the former dominant country, a desire to adopt more “scientific” (read: phonemic) orthographies, a desire for the adoption of “neutral” or “international” orthographies, and a desire for an orthography to harmonize with the most educationally or economically important language in the region. If such a language is the colonial language, then the desire to use its conventions (and its associated prestige) can conflict with the desire to reflect independence and difference from that same language. Standard French will probably always be an important language in Haiti, and well-educated elites will probably always be able to read French, so it seems that the debate about whether to adopt the more phonemic <kreyòl> or maintain the more etymological <Creole> is, at bottom, a debate about Haitian linguistic and cultural identity, revealing more about language ideology than about orthography (Schieffelin and Doucet 1994).

Issues similar to the Haitian one can be found in many Creole languages. Chapter 5 discusses orthography in these and other unstandardized vernaculars. Case studies include Caribbean English-lexicon Creole (in particular Jamaican Creole) and Galician, and illustrate how problems with orthography choice are usually reflections of problems at the sociopolitical level. In the case of Galician, debates about language are “suffused with politics and ideological positioning” (130). It is possible to symbolically separate these language varieties from one another by the absence or presence of a cedilla or a tilde, which Sebba refers to as “icons of difference” (131). Similar—although much less politically fraught—uses of icons of difference can be seen in English-lexicon Creole in Jamaica. English-lexicon Creole is not widely written, nor is there much of a movement to do so, and most attempts to write it take place outside of any official arena. Poets and writers of fiction thus must rely on their own ideologies of language to develop orthographies for their works. More often than not, the spellings that they choose tend to stress differences from Standard English, even where there is little to no phonetic difference (<mi> for <me>, for example, or <tuff> for <tough>). Wherever vernaculars exist, it seems, orthographic practice can contribute to creating and signaling distinctive group identities.

Chapter 6 looks at attempts to reform existing orthographies. Once established, or-

thographies are generally very difficult to change. Rather than discuss the arguments for and against spelling reform, however, Sebba takes the much more useful approach of examining the discourses of orthographic reform, exploring and explaining what these discourses can tell us about how orthography itself is thought of and used in these debates. Examples include both script reform (Tatar, Moldovan) and spelling reform (English, Polish). Modernizing discourses, for example, emphasize globalization and technological advancement. Discourses of belonging, unity, and separation tend to evoke ideologies of membership, of religion, or of cultural origin. Historical discourses emphasize cultural origins, creation myths, history, permanence, and ideas about possible cultural decline associated with reform. Tatar intellectuals, for example, whose life's work had been published in Cyrillic, invoked historical discourse to point out that their work would become unreadable to younger generations if the alphabet were changed. The French belief that laws were passed in the 1830s regarding French orthography turns out to be a creation myth and part of the historical discourse invoked by opponents of spelling reform in France. Economic discourses invoke the cost of ink, paper, and labor as barriers to reform, while pedagogical discourses emphasize the difficulty or ease of learning proposed new orthographies. Discourses of conformity are those in which the debate is about whether people should be allowed to choose spellings that suit their particular dialects or whether a national orthography should have some prescriptive power. By focusing the chapter on discourse rather than on specific arguments, Sebba is able to show why it is that success in orthographic reform is so rare. Only when a group is seeking symbolic renewal, as seen in the shift from Cyrillic to Roman in Moldova, or the (oddly undiscussed) shift from Arabic to Roman in Turkey, does orthographic reform appear to succeed. In other words, even when discussing orthographic reform, it is clear that it is social forces that dominate the discussion, rather than technological ones.

The final chapter raises the question of why spelling matters at all, and the roles, responsibilities, and dilemmas that linguists and linguistic anthropologists must confront and understand in order to contribute effectively to orthographic issues. Taking spelling bees as a starting point, Sebba attempts to answer the question of "why we spell" and more important, why we care about correct spelling. The autonomous model of orthography suggests that invariant spelling facilitates literacy, which in turn leads to economic success for those who can spell correctly. But no one seems to have shown that advanced readers require invariant spellings in order to read fluently. (Nor, by the way, can it be said that all successful people are perfect spellers.) The sociocultural model provides a very different set of answers to the question. Sebba is worth quoting at length here. "We spell," he suggests, "because orthography is part of the elaboration of our culture; because there is a natural tendency for all human activities which involve choice to take on social meaning; because literacy itself is embedded in and important to our culture and social actions, and orthography is essentially bound up with literacy" (160).

Sebba notes that four themes—identity, iconicity, interlinguality, and authority—are particularly salient to a thorough understanding of orthography as practice, and he devotes a section to each of them in this final chapter. Identity seems the most obvious of these themes, given the clear tendency of orthography to be used as a marker of identity. Iconicity refers to the tendency for individual orthographic elements, and even entire scriptal systems, to become symbolic of group identity. Interlinguality reminds us that orthogra-

phies (and languages) do not exist in isolation, that most orthographies have developed in situations of language contact, and that most users of orthographies are well aware of other, different, orthographies and of how and why their own should be distinct in some way. Authority is a less-obvious but certainly a recurring theme in discussions of orthography. Not only is it important to “have” an orthography, but in order to be recognized as having some legitimacy that orthography must have some semblance of prescriptive power, some idea of “correctness” with regard to spelling. Although these four themes make appearances throughout the book, it is helpful to have them all summarized and linked together here.

Finally, and most important for those of us engaged in the documentation and conservation of languages (and for those of us who work with language in any manner), Sebba discusses the role of linguists with regard to orthography. Citing my own experiences with Shinzwani, Sebba reminds us of the importance of understanding the sociocultural variables we encounter in our work. Stressing the practical side of things, he notes that any project “such as developing or reforming an orthography . . . will certainly meet with popular resistance if it does not harmonise with existing culture and practices and the linguist’s work is likely to be wasted” (166). In other words, a nice, clean, concise phonemic orthography may make perfect structural and analytic sense from the perspective of traditional linguistic discourse, but that is not the discourse of most speakers of most languages. Orthography may be a remarkable technological achievement, but it is also a complex social and cultural practice. Linguists and anthropologists working with languages, and in particular with orthographies, need to pay special attention to the social and cultural contexts in which they are working. All of us would be well served by keeping a copy of Sebba’s *Spelling and society* close at hand, to read and re-read for its insights and examples. It is refreshing indeed to find a work of such depth and perceptiveness which is also written so clearly and concisely. Sebba is to be congratulated.

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