

Literacy fosters normativity: Exploring how material and functional features of writing relate to linguistic norms

Dimitrios Meletis

University of Vienna, Austria

Although spoken language remains the main subject of mainstream linguistic research, it is undeniable that the concept of *orthography* ‘correct writing’ greatly overshadows that of *orthoepy* ‘correct speech’, reflecting that normativity and prescriptivism are closely tied to writing and written language. This is the starting point of this paper, in which it is argued that literacy facilitates and promotes normative reflection about (not only written) language, rendering it a cornerstone of linguistic norms. The main question is: How does literacy shape both static conventions or ‘rules’ concerning the language system and dynamic prescriptive practices and ideologies affecting the manifold processes of reading and writing?

First, the advent of the normative concept of *orthography* is traced within the diachrony of writing (cf. Desbordes 1997) to then characterize structurally, psycholinguistically, and sociolinguistically how “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)” (Dąbrowska 2020: 75). A key piece of evidence presented is the lack of metalinguistic awareness in illiterates (cf. Kurvers, Vallen & van Hout 2006).

Next, prototypical material and functional features of literacy facilitating normativity are presented; they include the segmentality, spatiality, permanence, and ontogenesis (through educational instruction instead of through natural acquisition) of writing as well as the vital role it assumes in, e.g., ritual and authoritative contexts as well as political standardization and unification.

Finally, a discussion of the implications of assuming a causal relation between literacy and linguistic normativity is complemented by an outlook of how investigating normativity across different writing systems and the literate cultures in which they are embedded uncovers an orthographic relativity affecting, for example, differences in what is considered a spelling ‘mistake’ vs. acceptable variation.

Dąbrowska, 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>

Desbordes, Françoise (1997): The notion of orthography: A Latin inheritance. In Clotilde Pontecorvo (ed.), *Writing development: An interdisciplinary view*, 117–128. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
<https://doi.org/10.1075/swll.6.10des>

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.