

## Introduction: society and orthography

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### Some questions about spelling

On a suburban bus shelter in Lancaster during 1997 the following graffiti could be seen (Figure 0.1):



Figure 0.1 Bus shelter, Lancaster, 1997

The names CHRIS and KRIS are among the most prominent written there. *Chris* is the standard short form of a very common English name, either male or female. *Kris*, on the other hand, is unusual in England. It is not a usual spelling of the name *Chris* nor is it a distinct name in its own right. Passing this spot on a daily basis and seeing these names together, I would speculate: Who, or rather, *why*, is *Kris*? Are *Chris* and *Kris* the same person, or are they two



Figure 0.2 Telephone booth in Manchester, 1996

people, both called Chris, who differentiate themselves by one of them adopting an idiosyncratic spelling for his/her name? Whatever the answer, there is an interesting issue: *Kris*, being a highly unconventional spelling, is much more striking than *Chris*. Both sets of letters represent the same sounds, approximately [k<sup>h</sup>ɪs],<sup>1</sup> and apparently represent the same word, the name *Chris*; nevertheless, these representations are not equivalent. There is some symbolism that attaches itself to *Kris* but not to *Chris*; the *K* is significant, it is ‘other’. As it happens, in this book, we shall come across many examples of a symbolic significance attaching to this particular letter. So the first of many orthographic questions which this book will ask is this: *how can we give an account for the apparently intentionally ‘deviant’ or unconventional spelling of this person’s name?*

In a busy street in the inner city of Manchester, England, in 1995 the graffiti below could be seen on the outside of a phonebox (Figure 0.2):

**K. O. ov B/w<sup>2</sup>**  
**woz ere**  
**livin’ ina**

<sup>1</sup> By convention, square brackets are used around phonetic transcriptions, diagonals // around phonemic representations and angle brackets <> around spellings, thus: [c<sup>h</sup>æt], /kæt/ <cat>.

<sup>2</sup> K. O. may be the initials of a person or a group; B/w could be ‘Black and White’ but is also a common abbreviation for the Beswick area of Manchester.

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**dredd<sup>3</sup> time**  
**runnin' tings**  
**as usual**  
**like di**  
**original**  
**Rude**  
**Gal does!**

From the vocabulary and some of the spellings, as well as the content and the location of this text, it is safe to say that it is not intended as a representation of Standard English, but of a British variety of English-lexicon Creole, similar to Jamaican Creole.<sup>4</sup> Certain typically Creole pronunciations, such as /tɪŋ/ for *thing*, are represented in the spelling by deviating from the conventional Standard English spellings; thus, <tings>. This is easily explained as the writer's attempt to represent 'Creole' pronunciations more accurately by using 'phonetic spelling'.

But what of <ov>, <woz>, <ere> and <dredd> for <of>, <was>, <here> and <dread>? These spellings do not represent pronunciations which are in any way significantly different in Creole and in Manchester English. The writer has chosen to spell these words 'phonetically' even though they would be sounded out just the same way if they were spelt according to the conventions of Standard English spelling. The motivation cannot be simply to represent the Creole pronunciation as the standard spellings would do this equally well; therefore there must be other, social or cultural, reasons for choosing to use these spellings. Hence my second question: *how can we give an account for this writer's decision to use 'phonetic' spellings for words which would be read aloud in exactly the same way if they were conventionally spelt?*

My third example, also graffiti, comes from further afield. The photograph (Figure 0.3) was taken in Ripoll, a mountain town in Catalonia (the language of the graffiti is Spanish (Castilian), not Catalan).

The word <OKUPACI6N> (<Ocupación> in standard Spanish orthography) here means that the building has been subject to 'occupation', that is squatted. Again, a <k> functions as a symbol of 'otherness', of resistance to convention; but in this case, arguably, not just to orthographic conventions, but to social conventions more generally. According to Castilla (1997), a journalist writing in the newspaper *El País*, 'in the last decade [<k>] has turned itself into the favourite letter of *okupas* ['occupations'], war resisters, *bakalaeros* [adherents of a type of techno music, also associated (in stereotype at least)

<sup>3</sup> *Dread* (<dredd>) in this language variety is a positive evaluation, and could be glossed as 'very good'.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Sebba 1993.



Figure 0.3 Wall in Ripoll, Spain (1997)

with recreational drugs], *ákratas* [‘anarchists’, university students and high school teenagers who are anti-establishment] and gay movements’.<sup>5</sup> Indeed it seems that among those who engage in or sympathise with these activities, the spelling with <k> is almost obligatory, not only in graffiti but in all writing: to use the prescribed standard spelling produces a contradiction as it shows a compliant, rather than resistant, attitude to the status quo.

What each of these examples shows is that writers may choose to deviate from established conventions of spelling. In so doing, they create forms which are (usually) just as easy to read as the conventional ones, but are less familiar to the reader who has learnt the standard forms at school. These unconventional forms have, or may have, a symbolic significance which the conventional forms do not. This leads to two questions: firstly, what lies behind the choice of these particular forms – for example, why <k> rather than <c>? Secondly, how precisely does the chosen form derive this symbolism or symbolic power in the given context? The answers cannot lie solely in phonetics or phonology or in the history of the orthography, though these may well be relevant. But in addition, there must be some *social* account for what is going on.

<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Melissa Moyer and Maria Carme Torras i Calvo for their explanations of, and comments on, these terms. The Standard Castilian spellings of these words are <ocupas>, <bacalaeros> and <ácratas>.

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While my examples are all taken, as it happens, from graffiti, it is not satisfactory to dismiss these phenomena as the activities of marginal or antisocial groups. Each of the examples finds its counterpart in more widespread or 'mainstream' practices. Though 'Kris' may be an individual youth trying to display an anti-establishment attitude to society or just draw attention to himself or herself, Carney (1994) points out that in English, generally, and in other languages, names, especially surnames 'are the totem-poles of language. The pressure of distinctive function puts a value on different and even bizarre spellings'; witness the English surnames normally spelt *Featherstonehaugh* / fæn ʃɔːl/, *Woolfardsworthy* /wʊlʒɜːrɪ/ and *Beaulieu* /'bjɜːli/ (1994: 449). While the writer of *K. O. ov B/w woz ere* may be making up his or her own conventions for writing Creole, research has shown that professional writers writing in English-lexicon Creole tend to use un-English conventions in order to distance the variety they are representing from Standard English (Sebba 1998).<sup>6</sup> In Haiti, a major (and acrimonious) national debate has taken place over whether or not to adopt an orthography which would make Haitian Creole look more similar to its lexifier, French (Schieffelin and Doucet 1994).<sup>7</sup> And while the preference for writing Spanish words with <k> instead of <c> or <qu> may be characteristic of youth subculture and anarchist groups in Spain, it has wider resonances, as Catalan, Basque and (in some written varieties) Galician have chosen to adopt standard conventions which differentiate those languages from the official national language of the Spanish state.<sup>8</sup> In looking for a social explanation for these things, it is not enough to treat them merely as behavioural oddities of adolescents or particular social groups.

So where shall we look for the answers to my questions? At the moment, there is no academic field which can provide them. A framework for accounting for orthographic choices in their social context – at the individual, group, societal and national level – is missing from the literature on orthography so far. Certainly, these issues are discussed – but mainly in isolation from each other. There is no 'field' of orthographic sociolinguistics and no theoretical framework for understanding these phenomena. To begin to create such a field – a *sociolinguistics of orthography* – and develop such a theoretical framework is one aim of this book.

### Orthography: whose concern?

In linguistics, orthography has certainly had its niche for a long time, but it is just that – a niche, a small preserve. Some standard linguistic reference works

<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 5.    <sup>7</sup> See Chapter 4.

<sup>8</sup> Álvarez-Cáccamo and Herrero Valeiro 1996: 148–9. See Chapter 5.

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have no entry for it at all; in others it receives scant attention. The main textbooks in the field neglect it comprehensively. Yet orthography, as the above examples show, is a topic of great interest not least because it is a point where issues of language as a formal object and of language as a social and cultural phenomenon intersect. It touches on matters of social identity, national identity, cultural politics, representation and voice. It foregrounds familiar linguistic issues of dialect and standard, of 'norm' and 'variation'. It affects, and is affected by, technology and economics. In the words of one commentator, it is

an area of extremely interesting problems, in which the concerns of pure linguistics combined with social, pedagogical, literary, cultural, economic, governmental, national and finally emotional considerations, each fastened to the question of orthography by some kind of invisible hook.<sup>9</sup>

Orthography has always been a topic of some interest to linguists. However, it is fair to say that many linguists have overlooked what could be the most interesting aspects of orthography – the social and cultural ones. This is very likely a consequence of the recent history of linguistics, in which emphasis has been on studying spoken language. In mainstream twentieth-century linguistics, orthography was seen as closely related to phonology, with the ideal orthography being close to, if not identical to, a standardised phonemic transcription of a selected variety of a language. This is the view put forward by, for example, Kenneth Pike (1938: 87) in his writings on developing alphabets for unwritten languages of Central America: 'the ideal alphabet should have one letter, and one letter only for each phoneme, or the learning process will be retarded'.<sup>10</sup> The same view informs Pike's influential textbook, *Phonemics: A technique for reducing languages to writing* (1947). Thus orthography became a branch of descriptive linguistics, with technological 'efficiency' the main criterion for success. In the worst case, the concerns of the users of the language, even where recognised, have been dismissed, as in the following exhortation by Tauli (1968: 131):<sup>11</sup>

In new literary languages there may be various social, political, psychological, typographical and economic conditions in conflict with the phonemic principle. Nevertheless, they should not be overestimated. They often depend on prejudices which should be combated, instead of yielding to them . . . It would be scarcely wise to yield to such pressure and introduce such absurdities in a new orthography. Instead one should try to explain to the natives that their orthography is superior to that of French and Spanish.

<sup>9</sup> The writer and translator Tadeusz Boy-Zelenski, on the Polish orthographic reforms of the 1930s, quoted by Rothstein, 1977: 234.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted by Barros 1995: 283. <sup>11</sup> Quoted by Buttner 1991: 62.

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So distant have social and ideological issues seemed from the business of orthography that linguists who have come up against them have often reacted with surprise. Witness Paul Garvin, working on developing a unified orthography for Ponapean in the 1940s:

The problem of devising an acceptable spelling system, which initially might have appeared purely, or at least primarily, a linguistic matter, upon closer inspection thus turned out to be a language and culture problem par excellence. (Garvin, 1954: 129)

For want of discussion and debate, for lack of challenge to the tenets of Pike and others, and above all for want of a *theory* of the social and cultural aspects of orthography, successive generations of linguists have had to rediscover what Garvin found out for himself in the field. Almost forty years later, in connection with developing an orthography for the Slovene dialect Selsq, Tom Priestly had cause to remark: ‘it is clear that the “linguist’s dream” of having a hand in devising a new orthography may prove to be more of a nightmare if the linguist involved in this exercise is not aware of potential psychological, sociological and political factors’.

This book takes the opposite starting point from the ‘traditional’ linguistic orthographers. Orthography is *par excellence* a matter of language and culture. It is a matter of linguistics too, of course, but one where the classic principle of sociolinguistics comes into play: the signs carry not only linguistic meaning, but also social meaning at the same time. In English today, *vulcanising a tyre* is not exactly the same as *vulcanizing a tire*; in written German, a *Kuß* is not quite just a *Kuss*;<sup>12</sup> and in Galician, *dia* is distinct in its connotations, though not in its reference, from *día*.<sup>13</sup>

Outside the world of linguistics, it is clear that orthography matters to people. In Britain and America, every day members of the public write to the media on spelling issues, and take part in spelling contests.<sup>14</sup> In Germany, orthographic reform has provoked a constitutional crisis;<sup>15</sup> in Galicia, a ‘war of orthographies’ parallels an intense public debate on national identity;<sup>16</sup> on walls, bridges and trains globally, *PUNX* and *ANARKISTS* proclaim their identities orthographically.<sup>17</sup>

Orthography is a professional concern for many groups of people. Educators in most countries are concerned with spelling. One role of schools in many societies is to teach ‘correct spelling’ (even where this is recognised to present great difficulties); indeed, in some school systems a great deal of time and effort is expended on this because the consequences of failure to learn to spell properly are quite severe. In some languages – again English is an example – there may be a feeling that the spelling system hinders learning to

<sup>12</sup> See Johnson 1999:162.    <sup>13</sup> See Herrero Valeiro 1993.    <sup>14</sup> See Chapter 7.

<sup>15</sup> See Chapter 6.    <sup>16</sup> See Chapter 5.    <sup>17</sup> See Chapter 2.



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read, at least for some learners. Teachers are concerned to find pedagogical methods which will enable their students to succeed as readers and writers. Here another branch of linguistics has become involved, as a research paradigm has developed within psycholinguistics which studies the relationship between spelling, phonology and the cognitive processes involved in reading and writing. Thus some studies of cognitive aspects of spelling present themselves as contributions to the theory and practice of learning to read and write.

Educational interests are also a motivation for two other groups; those developing new orthographies for previously unwritten languages and those proposing to reform an existing one. The former are mainly trained linguists; the latter are more diverse, depending to some extent on whether they have been appointed to the task by an academy or government department, or are extra-governmental campaigners hoping to bring about spelling reform. In both cases, there is a concern that orthography should facilitate learning to read and write, or at least should present the minimum of obstacles to a learner.

Professional writers are concerned about orthography. This may only become apparent when (as in German-speaking countries at the moment) they are faced with changes. While educators are concerned with young (would-be) readers, writers tend to be concerned with established readers – their public, who are already familiar with an orthography. Professional writers are therefore likely to be conservatives in matters of orthographic reform. Writers who use ‘dialect’ or non-standardised varieties of language have a particular concern with orthography. They may develop their own system, or use systems which have been developed by other writers which have not been codified.

Publishers are concerned with orthography. Historically, printers and publishers have played a role in the development of standard orthographies for many languages. Having set a standard for a particular language, publishers tend to police it rigidly, imposing it on all writers who wish their work to appear in print. Publishers of dictionaries and similar reference works have a very specific interest in orthography, sometimes in maintaining the status quo, sometimes in seeing it overturned (as this may create a market for new dictionaries). Similarly, publishers may have vested interests in maintaining existing spellings (so they will not have to revise their standards) or in seeing them changed (so they will be able to sell new editions of existing books).

For the general public in many countries, orthography is certainly a concern. Individuals want to be able to *spell correctly*, in other words to have the necessary knowledge or skills not to make ‘spelling mistakes’ in everyday writing. There is also a general concern, strongly manifest in English-speaking countries, that ‘spelling standards’ should be upheld and not allowed to slip. The ceaseless flow of letters to newspapers and other media on this topic, year in and year out, confirms that it is indeed a matter of importance to a part of the



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population. At the same time, other individuals take up an oppositional attitude towards spelling norms, and choose to *break* the rules in various ways.

### About this book

This book will focus on the social symbolic meaning of orthography. It will attempt both to document and to theorise this neglected aspect of written language, by developing new ways of looking at and thinking about orthography. Along the way, it will provide a critique of the existing approaches to orthography within linguistics. The book is divided into chapters, each of which discusses orthography from a particular viewpoint. Chapter 1 is an introduction to the topic of orthography and discusses different ways in which the subject may be approached: it argues the case for seeing orthography as *social practice*, a view which draws on the theoretical tradition of the New Literacy Studies, and distinguishes two models of orthography, an *autonomous* model and a *socio-cultural* model, along the lines of Street's (1984) two models of literacy. Chapter 2 further elaborates the idea of orthography as social practice, drawing both on studies of 'national' orthographies and of in-group (e.g. adolescent peer group) writing. Chapter 3 discusses orthography as *language contact*: since the introduction of a writing system for a previously unwritten language always involves a class of literate bilinguals, I take a perspective which sees orthographies as the product of bilingualism. Case studies include Manx and Sranan Tongo (Surinamese Creole). Chapter 4, 'Postcolonial' orthographies, is about the power of orthography to symbolise political allegiances and changes. It includes case studies of Haitian, Sranan Tongo and Malay/Indonesian. Chapter 5 deals with orthography in unstandardised vernaculars, languages which experience particular problems with orthography choice, often reflecting problems at a sociopolitical level. The main case studies are of Caribbean English-lexicon Creole and Galician. Chapter 6 deals with orthographic reforms and reform movements, looking at 'conflicting discourses' surrounding reforms. Finally, Chapter 7 is the conclusion.

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## 1 Approaching orthography

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### 1. Orthography and spelling

Spelling, says Gunther Kress in his book *Early Spelling*, ‘is knowing how to write words correctly’ (2000: 1) and few would disagree. The idea that there is a ‘right’ and a ‘wrong’ way to write words, although by no means a logical necessity, is one which is very deeply ingrained in many cultures. Indeed ‘writing correctly’ is exactly what is implied by the term used for spelling in many languages, – for example, German (*Rechtschreibung*, ‘correct writing’), Greek (*Orthographia*, ‘correct writing’), and the French, German and Spanish terms which derive from the Greek. The notion of ‘correctness’ implies a norm, hence we might define spelling as ‘writing of words of a language according to the norms or conventions of that language’. We would have to add ‘usually’, however, since it is not a contradiction in terms to talk of ‘deviant’ or ‘unusual’ spellings – in fact such terms will be used many times in this book.

Then what exactly is ‘orthography’ or ‘an orthography’ and how does it differ from ‘writing systems,’ ‘scripts’ and ‘spelling’? Philip Baker (1997: 93) makes a useful distinction between *writing system* and *orthography* by describing a writing system as ‘any means of representing graphically any language or group of languages’, whereas ‘orthography is employed more narrowly to mean a writing system specifically intended for a particular language and which is either already in regular use among a significant proportion of that language’s native speakers, or which is or was proposed for such use’. It would thus make sense to speak of the ‘Roman writing system’ or ‘Cyrillic writing system’ but not the ‘Roman orthography’ or ‘Cyrillic orthography’, except with reference to a particular language. Particular languages or language varieties have, or can develop, their own orthographies, based on a specific writing system such as the Roman or Cyrillic alphabet or the Chinese character system, but adapted in various ways to fit the particular language. *Script* is usually taken to be a synonym of ‘writing system’.

In languages like English, therefore, which make the distinction between orthography and spelling, the former may be seen as the set of conventions for