1 Introduction

1.1 What Is Historical Orthography?

Anyone with an interest in historical linguistics will be aware of a few fundamental truths about studying the historical development of language – all of which are inevitable products of the limitations intrinsic to what linguists commonly call evidence. First of all, we only know historical languages from what we have evidence for to the present day, whether direct or indirect. Secondly, there is only so much evidence available to us, depending on the moment in history and the specific historical language that we are interested in; this means that the linguistic material that we work with today may not only be partial but perhaps even unfairly distorted. The third and last point embraces the two points established above: most of the evidence that we have about any aspect of historical languages, whether it is about how they were taught, structured or even pronounced, comes from writing. This last point about writing as a paramount form of evidence in historical linguistics is central and yet sometimes forgotten or, perhaps worse, taken for granted. Writing constitutes the first-order witness of the more distant linguistic past and, as such, it is of fundamental importance to anyone with an interest in any aspect of the history of language. Despite the importance and relevance of writing in historical linguistics, only recently has this area of academic endeavour outgrown its traditional status of a subsidiary or even illegitimate area of linguistic discussion. A useful quote that can be used for the purposes of illustrating the stigmatic approach of the early fathers of modern linguistics is that from Fred Householder. The well-known American linguist and professor of classics and linguistics at Indiana University once affirmed that among “the propositions intuitively felt to be basic by friend and enemy alike”, in the American Structuralist School of Linguistics, was that “language is basically speech, and writing is of no theoretical interest” (Householder, 1969: 886). Other relevant names that are often associated with and identified as precursors of the same opinion to the one expressed above are those of Ferdinand de Saussure, Edward Sapir and Leonard Bloomfield – the last one being the main point of reference for Householder when making his statement about writing.
The superlicious attitude that originated from the fathers of modern linguistics has fostered a long-lived tradition of neglect for writing as a subject of rigorous, scientific endeavour, in favour of a prescriptive approach aimed to lay down rules for how to minimise errors in writing. Embarking on a review of most of the prescriptive efforts aimed specifically to perfect the art of writing goes beyond the remits of the present book, but there is one quick example that is particularly telling and worthy of mention here. Ironically, my example stems from writing itself: think about the word orthography, which is indeed a key word in the title to this book. A search for this word in the Oxford English Dictionary gives something quite revealing about the traditional approach to writing that we have all inherited from the past. The word orthography comes from Hellenistic Greek ὀρθογραφία, ‘orthographia’, which is a compound form made of ὀρθό-, ‘ortho’, which means ‘correct’ and -γραφία, ‘grafia’, which means ‘writing’ or even ‘spelling’. As evident from this brief etymological overview, the very word orthography carries in its own ‘genetic’ material, its etymology, the inescapable idea of correctness, intended as a set of rules that should be followed in order to ensure systematicity and predictability in writing. Interestingly, the word orthography found its way into English from Anglo-Norman and Middle French ortografiè. The French have a long prescriptivist tradition in linguistics, which eventually culminated in the establishment of the Académie Française, the French Academy, in the early seventeenth century. While the English never had an institution which formally regulated the English language, the French Academy was, and still is, a pre-eminent authority on the usages, vocabulary and grammar of the French language.

While some of the key words that we have inherited for writing provide food for thought about how much the past may have influenced our view of orthography, a lot has changed since the American Structuralist School of Linguistics cast a shadow on orthography as an unworthy element of study in higher education. One might say that much of the change has been encouraged by the pressures exerted by modern society on ‘correct’ writing, that is to say, the way in which a writing system is expected to be used and the rules by which it should abide. Because of the long-recognised complexities arising from orthography, and the fact that these were never fully resolved in present-day systems, there is a tendency, today, to view correct spelling “as an index of intelligence, moral fibre and general trustworthiness” (Horobin, 2013: 15). The social value of spelling correctly has led to a paradoxical scenario, where, Horobin continues, “[p]eople who can’t spell properly are considered to be ignorant and slovenly, and certainly shouldn’t be trusted with running the free world”. In addition to the social value of writing correctly, orthography also holds the power of bridging a successful intellectual relationship between teachers and students, as reflected, for example, by the fact that most of our
university assessments in the arts and humanities are conducted in the form of essays and other written assignments. If using correct spelling is so important in our society, then why is orthography still not a core subject for most courses in linguistics? And if orthography is in its turn so important within the context of the historical study of languages, then why is historical orthography not yet an area of teaching and research with its own publicly and widely acknowledged place under the sun? Why is it perhaps not even co-habiting the evergreen tangled forest that is historical linguistics? I am sure that there will be many more answers to these questions besides the fact that the subject is essentially comparable to a child, that is looking to find their own steps in the complex world of adulthood.

Rather than indulging in any more suppositions and metaphors, therefore, this book will focus on potential solutions in order to give historical orthography more relevance in the academic scenario. I am indeed confident that there is enough material, to date, in order to justify a book like this, where concepts and ideas inherent to historical orthography finally find their home in a hopefully coherent whole. In order to get started, thus, let us address what is perhaps the most important question in this book: what is historical orthography? Providing a definition of historical orthography is important, given the fact that it is a relatively new name and has been used in the past in ways that could mislead some unexpert readers and confuse more seasoned others. Potential ambiguity might arise as a result of the combined use of the terms historical and orthography, which does not give sufficient information about whether the perspective is that of individual philologies or that of historical linguistics as a comparative umbrella. For example, one may say that they are reading a book about the historical orthography of French, which could be taken to mean that they are learning about the history of the French writing system. The term historical orthography, however, by analogy with other subfields of historical linguistics such as historical phonology and historical morphology, can also refer to something broader, I argue, than that applicable to individual philologies. In this book, historical orthography is intended as an international field of theoretical and empirical inquiry, mainly centred around four components—a linguistic core, which is the primary subject, and also general history, palaeography and bibliography, which work as ancillary, informing disciplines.

Historical orthography is, therefore, the scientific study of writing in history. The field focuses on the description and study of orthographies, their development over time, as well as the forces and the processes which shaped and directed modifications in historical writing features, from the creation of the first writing systems to our contemporary era. With this definition, writing systems are intended as a hyponym to orthography, since a set of conventions for writing a language may in principle stem from the overlap of multiple...
writing systems. That said, there are of course also conceptual and practical overlaps between writing and orthography, one being broadly intended as the act or art of forming visible letters or characters specifically, and the other being more specifically understood as the conventional set of rules underlying writing. While I am, to my knowledge, the first person to write a definition of historical orthography and one of the first contributors responsible for actively defending the identity of historical orthography as a subdiscipline of international academic inquiry, orthography in historical linguistics rests on a solid, albeit relatively recent, scholarly tradition. The study of orthography in history has followed a variety of venues and was shaped by different approaches and methods, according to various geographical areas and periods of time. Areas of discussion and investigation have ranged from the question of biscriptality, the topics of codification and nation-building, to spelling reform, and the role of the introduction of printing technology in orthographic developments and standardisation. The variation related to the study of historical orthography around the world should not surprise us, if we consider the obvious differences across languages in Europe alone on different linguistic levels (including orthographic, phonological and syntactic) and the different political decisions made in the administration of educational curricula, especially at university level. The natural divergence of interests in orthography may also be owed to profound historical, cultural and political differences in every corner of Europe – all of which undoubtedly represent an element of richness and diversity which should be valued and fostered in the future for the sake of progress in the field. As a result of the great diversity in the field, the relevance of historical orthography as a branch of scholarly inquiry is not defined only in the constraints of a community of those who are interested in orthography per se, but rather it is applicable to a much broader audience of scholars, not least those interested in phonology, etymology, lexicography, sociolinguistics, corpus linguistics, philology, literature, social history, art history, history of writing, palaeography and bibliography.

The lack of homogeneity existing in historical orthography is also owed to historically grounded approaches to philology more generally. In Europe especially, philologies had and still have a strong national orientation. This holds true with respect to the research structures as well as to the nationally limited thematic contexts which characterise the historical study of a given language. From a historical perspective, these patterns could be explained by the fact that philologies are the product of the national age, i.e. the formative period of the European nation-states. The dichotomy between generalised perspectives and individual philologies has been discussed extensively in Condorelli and Voeste (2020), and I do not intend to repeat here the argument presented in previous work. There is, however, one important point that needs to be made at this stage about the relationship between orthography as
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a synergic branch of historical linguistics and as a topic of interest within the context of individual philologies. The attention to historical orthography within the histories of individual languages has been and continues to be strong, and has provided a solid foundation for historical orthography more broadly. It is also thanks to the growth of individual philologies that the renewed interest in orthography has redeemed the subject from its traditional status of a subsidiary or illegitimate area of linguistic discussion (see de Saussure, [1915] 1993: 41; Sapir, [1921] 1949: 20; Bloomfield, 1933: 21) and encouraged the growth of a large amount of scholarship aimed especially at language-specific orthographies.

For English, there are several broad as well as detailed accounts of historical orthographic developments, see especially Scragg (1974), Carney (1994), Upward and Davidson (2011), Crystal (2012) and Horobin (2013). Other relevant monograph-long titles for other languages include Osipov (1992), Baddeley (1993), Elmentaler (2003, 2018), Rössler (2005), Voeste (2008), Bunčić et al. (2016), Franklin (2019) and Schäeken (2019). There are also volumes and shorter contributions which focus on the interrelation between orthography and cognate areas of investigation like palaeography, typography and transmission from manuscript to print, e.g. Dumville (1993), Traxel (2004), Janečková (2009), Kaverina (2010), Hellinga (2014), Shute (2017) and Condorelli (2020b, 2020c, 2022). The knowledge available from these and many other titles omitted here for the sake of brevity provides present-day scholars with a set of guidelines and material for research in orthography, but also a vision of spelling that is, generally, focused on individual languages or specific geographical areas. If we are to adopt a cross-linguistic perspective that encompasses the diversity of scholarly efforts in historical orthography, we must strive, I believe, to get language-specific publications to work also as individual components of a bigger picture. The knowledge available from all of the language-specific titles existing to date provides present-day scholars with information that is undoubtedly useful to those interested in diachronic orthography more broadly – as long as the national perspective of each reference material is not made historically absolute in retrospect.

Despite the differences existing today in how historical orthography is approached across different corners of the world, some common threads are identifiable in our attempt, as human beings and as researchers, to understand writing across languages and cultures of the past. Spelling evidence can be and has been widely employed by historical phonologists and dialectologists as a primary source for uncovering distinctive features of phonological and morphological systems of languages and dialects in history. Spelling evidence has been used for these purposes both from a synchronic perspective, at a given point in time, and diachronically, at different chronological lengths. For a few decades, orthographic evidence has also been used by historical sociolinguists...
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in their search for correlations between socio-historical and socio-cultural factors and linguistic features. The end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century in particular have marked the beginning of a change in the field of historical orthography, thanks to the advent of historical sociolinguistics. For approximately two decades now, historical orthography has enjoyed a worldwide renaissance, which has fostered enthusiasm not only in various sociolinguistic aspects of writing systems but also in orthography as a much more complex linguistic universe than has even been portrayed in the past.

As briefly mentioned above, there is to date sufficient seminal work which provides some useful background information for an informed introductory volume to historical orthography. The Handbook of Orthography and Literacy (Joshi & Aaron, 2014), Writing Systems (Coulmas, 2012) and The Nature of Writing (Meletis, 2020), for example, are some of the most relevant titles which provide an informative basis for key elements in orthography from a present-day perspective. Unfortunately, a great deal of the theoretical system that we have to date derives directly from discussions applied to present-day orthographies, so much of the work done for this volume with respect to theory has been that of synthesising and evaluating what was relevant for historical writing systems and what had to be discarded. From a historical point of view, recent years have seen an upsurge of useful collecting contributions, such as The Cambridge Handbook of Historical Orthography (Condorelli & Rutkowska, forthcoming). This volume, in particular, is a collection of more than thirty chapters. It represents the most extensive platform where linguistic issues related to historical orthography are discussed at length, and, as such, it provided a solid basis for informing chapters in this volume.

Key chapter contributions that were paraphrased and followed more or less closely for making sections of the present volume, besides my own, are those written by Per Ambrosiani and Elena Llamas-Pombo (Chapter 6, section 6.2), Javier Calle-Martín and Juan Lorente-Sánchez (Chapter 4, subsection 4.2.3), Stefan Hartmann and Renata Szczepaniak (Chapter 4, section 4.2), Amalia E. Gnanadesikan (Chapter 4, section 4.1), Gijsbert Rutten et al. (Chapter 9, sections 9.2, 9.3 and 9.4), Annina Seiler and Christine Wallis (Chapter 6, subsection 6.1.1), Aurelija Tamušiūnaitė (Chapter 7, especially paragraphs in sections 7.1 and 7.2) and Anja Voeste (Chapter 6, subsection 6.1.2). Many of the references and linguistic examples which inform the chapters in my book directly reflect the material made available in these contributions, thus inevitably leaning towards some languages and topics more than others. Some of my chapters often contain simplified, student-friendly syntheses of the handbook contributions above (or, rarely, rephrased versions of salient chapters). Thus, readers who would like to follow up on most of the topics touched upon in this book are encouraged to get hold of those chapters for more complex, richer perspectives. In addition to the handbook, there are a number of recently edited
collections of research-oriented contributions, which have a focus on language-specific aspects of orthography in historical linguistics, and which have also informed this book. Among the most relevant, *Advances in Historical Orthography, c. 1500–1800* (Condorelli, 2020d), *The Historical Sociolinguistics of Spelling* (Villa & Vosters, 2015) and *Orthographies in Early Modern Europe* (Baddeley & Voste, 2012b) are key flagship titles. Other relevant focus-specific titles include single-authored contributions on the history of writing (e.g. Christin, 2002; Fischer, 2003; Gnanadesikan, 2009; Robinson, 2009), palaeography (e.g. Sperry, 1998; Žagar, 2019) and bibliography (e.g. Gaskell, 1972; Bland, 2010).

There is, at this point, one important message that needs to be conveyed about the nature of this book, in relation to historical orthography and its current limitations. This is a very ambitious project: it sets out to articulate a field that is definitely not as fully or clearly codified as other branches of historical linguistics might be, for example historical syntax or historical phonology. The book is envisioned mainly as a pedagogical resource used in the classroom, but given the current gaps in the field it may also serve as a scholarly point of reference, and it is hoped that it will be applicable to and up to the standards of as many readers as possible. Because of the relatively early stage of development in which historical orthography is placed, one cannot compare the present volume to some of the hugely monumental introductions existing, for example, in historical linguistics (e.g. Campbell’s *Historical Linguistics: An Introduction* (2021), a 500-plus-page volume). Rather, my book-length contribution aims to work as a compendium of some of the most important pieces of information that stem from what we know so far about diachronic orthography. In other words, the book does not attempt to propose or frame anything more than what is already out there in the existing material – however incomplete and frustratingly one-sided it may sometimes be. Inevitably, this conservative approach means that there might be gaps and limitations (but hopefully no glaring oversights). These are a natural product of the relatively young state of the field itself and may be used by future writers as points of departure to extend our knowledge in historical orthography, on the basis of more substantial empirical evidence.

The reason for remaining a conservative reporter – or selective synthesiser, even – of what is known today within the field is that there are many areas of discussion that are simply impossible to contribute to without a consensus from the scholarly community. One of the most relevant examples here is that of a definition of historical orthography as a field and as an object of inquiry. The two spheres – a field and an object of inquiry – are clearly not always the same thing, but even in more mature fields like historical phonology and historical syntax there is still, to date, a tendency to blend together objects of inquiry and the overall field profile. In order to set out or even outline parameters across
languages and across the scholarly community that belongs to historical linguistics, one would need to work towards a shared apparatus, including common protocols of academic practice to be generally accepted by researchers in the field. This shared apparatus can be achieved only by improving scholarly communication, and overcoming some of the conceptual boundaries which stem directly from scholarly disunity, egoistical competitiveness and individualism. Unless some common ground is built, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to overcome the differences existing in the approaches and policies used to study individual orthographies, which are largely owed to the very history of each individual language.

While I had to take every step to retain a serious approach to writing the book, careful definition and negotiation of terms and concepts within historical orthography is a key objective in any volume of the kind proposed here. Since general agreements on orthography, writing system and script are not always a given, I take in the book the following functional definitions. The definition of script is that of a set of graphic signs for writing languages, that of writing system a set of graphic features working together to write a given language and that of orthography a standardised way of writing the graphic signs that make up a particular writing system. Script is therefore the actual physical symbols of the writing system, for instance Roman or Cyrillic alphabets; orthography, on the other hand, is the rules for using a script in a particular writing system, that is to say, how the symbols spell out words, etc. In less precise usage, the terms writing system and script may be used synonymously, focusing on the sets of signs and their basic typological relationship to linguistic units rather than the specifics of a given language’s spelling rules. In such usage, for instance, the Roman alphabet could be referred to as either a script or a writing system. Philip Baker makes a particularly neat distinction between writing system and orthography, instead, and, where possible, I employ the same distinction as follows. A writing system refers to “any means of representing graphically any language or group of languages”, while “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” (Baker, 1997: 93; cf. Sebba, 2007: 10). That said, the three terms are inevitably overlapping from many angles, and it is possible that slips in the uses of the three may be found in the volume, especially where context may ambiguously allow for more than one of the three words.

These explanations are simple but sufficient for the purpose of serving my own narrative and my own book, rather than presumptuously prescribing a set

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1 However, these terms vary considerably in meaning between writers. Sproat (2000: 25), for example, uses the terms orthography and writing system interchangeably.

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of rules for the field as a whole. In addition to the elements outlined above, there are some more fine-grained distinctions that had to be made in the book in an attempt to engage with current theories of writing. While individual letters may be intuitively graspable units of analysis, terms like graphematics, grapheme and graphemic inventory refer to categories and units of analysis that are applied on the basis of a particular theoretic model, that of graphematics. These terms are briefly discussed in Chapter 4 and Chapter 6, but I remain fully aware that the present contribution cannot provide an extensive account of theoretical definitions and frameworks existing to date in graphematics. Readers are therefore encouraged to make use of the suggested reading lists provided at the end of the two chapters mentioned above in order to become more familiar with more theoretical background. In Germany, some important contributions to theory formation and methodology have already been made since the 1960s (by Fleischer, 1966; Mihm, 2007; and others). The same applies for French (Völker, 2003) and Italian (Videsott, 2009), and there is therefore plenty to read for the curious mind.

Given the extensiveness of information available, I realise that my intention to focus on the most important pieces of information in orthography, as expressed above, may not be a sufficiently convincing statement for the most cynical reader. How can one judge what is really important for such a broad audience as the one envisaged for the present book? In this case, there might in fact at times be no need to make a conscious judgement at all. One important way in which the book naturally becomes manageable within the languages, time and length constraints existing is by occasionally allowing for a relatively specialised focus. While an effort is made to make a mention of all important elements relevant in the field, the discussion occasionally focuses in greater detail on alphabetic orthographies, defining basic units and elements in historical writing systems that can work as individual foci of analysis or can combine together for a broader empirical perspective. Such a restriction in scope, and especially the focus on predominantly European orthographic traditions, some of which derive specifically from the early modern era (1500–1700), presents a rather limited and narrow view of orthographies; however, it reflects the focus that has prevailed so far in orthographic research, both generally and in my own personal experience.

When a multilayered distinction across different elements of orthographic analysis is not necessary in order to discuss a given topic, preference is given to spelling over, say, capitalisation or punctuation, as a tool for making relevant examples. Even then, the book does not aim to address all characteristics and nuances related to spelling, but rather it makes selective references with a view of following the narrative outlined in the table of contents. The justification for an occasionally selective and focused approach is, besides that of my personal expertise, the practical need to provide a functioning, relatively succinct
narrative. Rather than acting as an articulation of the field of historical orthography by and large, therefore, the book departs from a smaller and more humble objective: that of providing those interested in historical orthography with a first, beginning-level point of reference. If readers will then want to see the present volume as anything more comprehensive than that, this would of course be entirely welcome.

Where appropriate, topics are treated in this book in enough detail to provide definitions and explanations, while avoiding overloading the narrative with too many references. Sometimes, however, leaving out issues related to detailed developments across time, and across social and linguistic contexts is inevitable, and readers are reminded of the importance of understanding these issues in publication material that goes beyond the present book in every chapter, at the cost of sounding repetitive. The reference material provided in this book is not to be taken as a fully exhaustive bibliography of the relevant publications for a given topic, but rather it is aimed to give readers across a range of languages and a number of academic disciplines suggestions for books that they can use as a point of departure. Overall, the present volume aims to build a compendium of knowledge stemming from and summarising some of the patterns and definitions built so far more implicitly in previous work. For this reason, the purpose of my book is subsidiary to—and not in competition with—all other efforts currently being made in the field. The enthusiasm from the academic community for topics related to historical orthography, the extraordinary breadth and diversity of topics in the field, as well as the increased awareness of the relevance of orthography as a subject underlying most areas in historical linguistics, are all convincing indicators of the field’s growing maturity and justify an introductory volume entirely devoted to the subject. In this spirit, the present book aims to offer material of crucial importance to all those interested in the subject and should hopefully become a useful addition to the library of a student of orthography.

1.2 Contents of the Book

This book aims to equip the reader with the necessary skills to trace the historical development of orthography, discussing the components of historical writing and providing some key knowledge tools for those interested in understanding and exploring orthographic variation and standardisation. The volume proposes an understanding of orthography which encompasses strictly regulated writing systems with fixed word writing, as we know them from modern standard languages; this linguistic understanding of orthography thus includes the character units which make up a word (normally referred to as spelling), as well as additional layers of information, like accents, diacritics, punctuation and capitalisation (Condorelli, 2020c: 5). In addition to these elements, my