Introduction: society and orthography

Some questions about spelling

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

![Graffiti image]

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
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 [kʰris],¹ 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/w²
woz ere
livin' ina

¹ By convention, square brackets are used around phonetic transcriptions, diagonals // around phonemic representations and angle brackets <> around spellings, thus: [kʰəʃ], /kəʃ/ /kəʃ/.
² 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.
Introduction

dread³ 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.⁴ Certain typically Creole pronunciations, such as /lit/ 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 <OKUPACiÓN> (<Ocupación> in standard Spanish ortho-
graphy) 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)

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

⁴ See, for example, Sebba 1993.
with recreational drugs], ákratas ['anarchists', university students and high school teenagers who are anti-establishment] and gay movements. 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.

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>, <bucalaeros> and <ácrratas>. 
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 /ˈfeɪðərstəʊnəhɔː/; Woolfardsworthy /ˈwʊlfərdswɜːθ/ and Beaudieu /ˈbjuːdiu/ (1994: 449). While the writer of K. O. ov Bw 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). 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). 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. 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

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6 See Chapter 5.
7 See Chapter 4.
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.  

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’.  

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):  

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.

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

10 Quoted by Barros 1995: 283.

Introduction

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 Fonapean 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 Kupf is not quite just a Kuss,12 and in Galician, dia is distinct in its connotations, though not in its reference, from dis.13

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.14 In Germany, orthographic reform has provoked a constitutional crisis,15 in Galicia, a ‘war of orthographies’ parallels an intense public debate on national identity;16 on walls, bridges and trains globally, PUNX and ANARKISTS proclaim their identities orthographically.17

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

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
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 sociocultural 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.
1 Approaching orthography

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 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
writing words of the language, while the latter is the application of those conventions to write actual words. Hence I can truthfully write now, ‘I am spelling the words of this sentence according to the orthography of English using the Roman writing system (or script)’.

The academic study of orthography touches a number of different areas of the study of language. Putting it another way, it sits uneasily on the boundary between several fields of scholarship. Within linguistics, a few scholars — for example, Venezky,¹ Haas,² Albrow³ and Carney⁴ — have treated it as a subject in its own right, mainly focussing on the relationship between sound, grammar and writing; researchers in this tradition have, therefore, discussed orthographic systems in relation to the phonology, morphology and lexicon of a language. Elsewhere in linguistics, orthography has mainly been seen as concerned with the representation in writing of the sounds of a spoken language, and so related almost exclusively to phonology or ‘phonemics’, though with some attention to the morphological level. This approach has informed a number of classic texts, such as that of Pike (1947), and underlies much of the work concerned with developing orthographies for languages without a written tradition. It is closely connected with another fundamental activity of descriptive linguists, namely transcription.

Scholars of language history have also taken an interest in orthography, either as a study in its own right (e.g. Scruggs 1974) or for the light it sheds on phonological change. Since written records are the only evidence for any varieties of language which are no longer spoken, students of historical phonology may be concerned with reconstructing the sound-to-character correspondences which will allow them to determine how the written words were pronounced at the time of writing. For these researchers as well, orthography is mainly interesting as a (presumed) transcription of spoken language. Some scholars, however, have gone beyond this to draw conclusions about the social context in which orthographic changes took place — for example, Toon (1983).

Psycholinguists and cognitive psychologists with an interest in reading and writing have been obliged to take an interest in orthography too. For researchers in this area, the interest lies in the relationship between the form of the written word and the cognitive processes involved in reading and writing. In alphabetic writing systems, such as those used for the European languages, there is (typically) a complex relationship between orthography and phonology. Controversy continues over the question of whether a phonemic orthography (on the principle ‘one sound one symbol’) is necessary, beneficial or

¹ For example 1970. ² For example 1970. ³ For example 1972.
⁴ For example 1994.
⁵ See, for example, the collection edited by Downing, Lima and Noonan (1992).
simply irrelevant to learners and/or mature readers. Research in this area contributes to practice both in education, for example the teaching of reading and writing, and in speech therapy.

From the above survey, it will be clear that orthographic questions are of interest to researchers in a number of different areas. However, orthography is not central to any of these. Furthermore, insofar as there is a body of theory concerned with orthography, it relates to the relationship between the phonology, morphology and lexicon of a language and the orthographic system; it does not engage with the social and cultural aspects of orthography except in passing. It would be quite wrong, however, to suggest that there is no body of literature relating to these social and cultural issues. The long list of references in this book will testify to that. Nevertheless, we can truthfully say two things:

1. Social and/or cultural aspects of orthography are not currently the main focus of any area of linguistics. Sociolinguistics, a discipline which pays special attention to these social matters, has never taken an interest in orthography: there are few papers by sociolinguists on orthographic topics, and the main textbooks in the field overlook it completely. Most linguists who have studied orthography in depth have not been primarily interested in its social aspects.

2. There has been no serious attempt to produce a theoretical framework which addresses the social/cultural aspects of orthography. Although there are numerous articles and papers which discuss and problematise these issues, they tend to have been written in isolation, to ‘reinvent the wheel’, and to suffer from the lack of a theoretical base.

It is these aspects, neglected so far in theories of orthography, which are to be the focus of this book, examined through a framework which will be described in the next section.

2. Orthography as literacy

Orthography has its niche within linguistics, but the scholarly approaches mentioned above have paid little or no attention to its social and cultural aspects. In seeking to make social issues the central theme of a new area of linguistics, I have chosen to take an altogether different approach, treating orthography as one aspect of literacy. Since orthography of some sort is fundamental to reading and writing, the connection with ‘literacy’ – which

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6 There have been a few specialist volumes devoted to the societal aspects of orthography, for example, Fishman (ed.) 1977.
(however you define it) is somehow also to do with reading and writing – is self-evident. In fact, some researchers in the area of literacy have already paid attention to orthographic issues. These mainly fall under the headings of providing orthographies for previously unwritten languages and literacy education programmes. These studies occasionally engage with social and cultural issues, but when they do, they typically do not do so in any very theoretical way. They tend to treat the issues as practical ones of getting an orthography ‘accepted’ by its potential users. There is thus no substantial existing body of theory relating to social and cultural aspects of orthography within the research literature on literacy either.

Nevertheless, the area of ‘Literacy Studies’ (Barton 1994: 22) seems a promising home for the study of these social aspects of orthography. This is because recent developments in the theory of literacy make it possible to understand orthography, like literacy itself, in terms of social practice.

In the period since 1980, an approach to literacy has developed which has acquired the name ‘The New Literacy Studies’ (Gee 1990). Barton (1994: 22–23) describes how the concept of ‘literacy’ developed rapidly over this period, emerging as ‘a code-word across a range of disciplines for new views of reading and writing’. Fundamental to this view of literacy is that reading and writing are seen as situated within a social context. Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole were among the first to develop a practice account of literacy, viewing literacy as a set of social and cultural practices. They conclude their early, important contribution to this field as follows (1981: 236):

Instead of focusing exclusively on the technology of a writing system and its reputed consequences . . . we approach literacy as a set of socially organized practices which make use of a symbol system and a technology for producing and disseminating it. Literacy is not simply knowing how to read and write a particular script but applying this knowledge for specific purposes in specific contexts of use.

The connection with orthography is apparent from the quotation above: orthography is part of the ‘technology of a writing system’ but that writing system is itself a symbolic system embedded in a culture, shaping and yet also shaped by a set of cultural practices to which it gives, and by which it is given, meaning. While ‘orthography’ and ‘literacy’ are by no means synonymous, orthography is a fundamental element of written language; therefore, orthography too is situated in social practice. Orthography, too, needs and deserves a ‘practice account’.

In this book, the notion of orthography as social practice will be elaborated and many examples will be given from different situations around the world.
3. ‘Autonomous’ and ‘ideological’ models of literacy

The concept of ‘autonomous’ and ‘ideological’ models of literacy originated with Brian Street (1984). Street was reacting against models of literacy which treated it as an independent variable, isolated from other social and cultural factors, which was either ‘present’ or ‘absent’ in a society. According to him, the ‘autonomous’ model is based ‘on the assumption that [literacy] is a neutral technology that can be detached from specific social contexts’ (Street 1984: 1). Researchers working with this model claim to be able to study specific consequences of literacy — effects on a society as it changes from ‘pre-literate’ to ‘literate’ — ‘classically represented in terms of economic “take off” or in terms of cognitive skills’ (Street 1984: 2). In contrast, an ideological model of literacy according to Street focusses on the ‘specific social practices of reading and writing’, recognising ‘the ideological and therefore culturally embedded nature of these practices’ (Street 1984: 1). Paradoxically, as Street shows, claims made by proponents of the autonomous model, ‘as well as the literacy practices they purport to describe, in fact derive from specific ideologies which, in much of the literature, are not made explicit’ (Street 1984: 1).

Given this observation by Street, that the ‘autonomous’ model of literacy is in fact just as ideological as the social practice model, it seems appropriate to treat all models of orthography as fundamentally ideological. Nevertheless, the same broad distinction that Street made for literacy can be made for orthography as well. We will call autonomous models those that treat orthography as a ‘neutral technology that can be detached from specific social contexts’. Sociocultural models are those that recognise the cultural nature of orthographic practice. Both models are ‘ideological’ in that they are based on (possibly implicit) theories about the nature of society and how it should be (see Gee 1990, Chapter I for more detailed discussion). ‘Autonomous’ models, however, are much less likely than sociocultural models to make this ideology explicit. In much of the linguistics literature, an autonomous model of orthography is taken for granted. This book will take the opposite view: that any explanatory account of orthography-as-practice must be sociocultural in nature.

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7 An example, taken in this case from the literature on orthography (Sjöberg 1966: 261): ‘To promote modernisation and industrialisation, governmental leaders are finding it mandatory to absorb the surviving pre-literates into the overall administrative and cultural system. Essentially, the goal is for all groups within modern nation-state systems to become literate. In many cases, particularly in Africa, the new nation-states include within their boundaries diverse language groups having little or no acquaintance with a written heritage. Uniting these divergent elements into some semblance of a national society where industrialisation can proceed requires improved communication and, above all, widespread literacy.’
contact. There is not a ‘best’ system; different writing systems suit different languages and there are broad and conflicting demands on writing systems.

It could also be argued that Goody and Watt show little awareness of the innovative and productive capabilities of logographic systems, or of the fuzzy dividing line between those and phonetically based writing systems. Chinese, for example, although often cited as a clear example of an ‘ideographic’ or ‘logographic’ writing system, involves a substantial proportion of phonetic elements. On the other hand, the written forms of ‘alphabetic’ languages like English are not simply transcriptions of sounds; in many cases the phonetic forms of words are virtually irrecoverable from the spelling, so the system is logographic at least to some extent. Furthermore, more recent scholars like Sampson and DeFrancis have vigorously opposed the idea that Chinese script is a primitive or intrinsically inferior vehicle for intellectual communication by comparison with alphabetic European writing (Sampson 1994: 118).

Thus the claims by Goody and Watt for the superiority and neutrality of phonetic scripts seem to rest on shaky assumptions. They are, however, in accordance with the mainstream approach within European scholarship, then and now.

Taking to task the ‘profound ethnocentricity of Western perceptions of writing’ Roy Harris writes:

The assumed supremacy of the alphabet underlies virtually all modern classifications of writing systems. European scholars closeted in their libraries and irritated by the sheer proliferation of marks on paper constructed for themselves the theoretical fantasy of a ‘perfect alphabet’, in which each letter would unambiguously represent one sound and no other. (Harris 2000: 31)

While perhaps it did not happen quite like that, there is no doubt that ethnocentricity played a role here. It is surely not a coincidence that the very scholars and scientists who ‘discovered’ the superiority of phonemic writing systems are virtually all speakers of languages which use alphabetic (i.e. quasiphonemic) scripts. Such beliefs, though no doubt older than the beginning of

9 Recent scholarship is divided on the issue of whether or not these are two fundamentally distinct types. Sampson, for example, argues that there is a fundamental difference between phonographic and logographic writing systems, but this view is contested by DeFrancis (1989) as well as others. Sampson (1994: 117), while disagreeing with DeFrancis, concedes that ‘the clear consensus is that DeFrancis has successfully made his case for the universality of a phonetic principle in writing systems’.

10 In an ‘ideographic’ system each symbol or character conveys an idea. DeFrancis and Unger regard the notion that Chinese and Japanese are ‘ideographic‘ as a ‘misconception’ which has had a ‘pernicious influence’ on, inter alia, theories of reading (1994: 553). The consensus among scholars of these languages is that they are logographic, that is, each character represents a specific word of the language.
the twentieth century, could be justified by reference to the structuralist view of phonology associated with Saussure. Within the structuralist paradigm the phonology of a language was viewed as a self-contained system with a fixed number of contrasting elements. This could be interpreted to mean that the optimum writing system was one which had written symbols in a one-to-one relationship with sounds (phonemes), and this is precisely how many linguists of that school did interpret it. Indeed, any other kind of relationship between phonemes and symbols would not reflect the elegant symmetry of the phonological system, and could only confuse and hamper the user of the writing system.

An early example of such thinking is found in Daniel Jones’s introduction to a *Sichuan Reader* co-authored with Sol Plaatje (Jones and Plaatje 1916: xi–xii).

In our opinion, no system of writing can be considered adequate which allows two words which are pronounced differently to be written the same. . . . The introduction of some new letters enables us to write any language on the ‘one sound one letter’ principle. A system based on this principle is necessarily easier than any other for natives to learn, and is at the same time the most accurate guide for pronunciation for the foreign learner.

Much of the linguistic work carried out during the first part of the 20th Century was among indigenous peoples of the Americas in the context of Bible translation and literacy teaching. The most important of the organisations devoted to this kind of work was the Summer Institute of Linguistics, whose own members were among the leading proponents of the phonemic principle of writing. According to Barros (1995: 282)

The idea that every language has a limited set of sounds with intuitive value for native speakers led to the position that an alphabet could only be ‘natural’ and ‘efficient’ (Swadesh, 1940a, p. 273) if it reproduced this psychological level of language, that is, its phonology (Swadesh 1940b). The linguistic principle, ‘for each phoneme only one symbol’, became the basic rule of the indigenous alphabet. (Swadesh 1940c: 289)

It is not coincidental that this orthodoxy was so much in keeping with the principles of American structuralism, for many of the most influential American linguists (for example, Pike and Gleason) were also associates of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL). Furthermore, as Barros points out (1995: 285), the evangelical model of indigenous education in Central America (as put forward by the SIL) became secularised by means of linguistic arguments which allowed it to be seen as ‘scientific’: since the phonemes of the language had psychological reality, a phonemic orthography (and hence ‘literacy skills’) could be acquired easily by the speaker of an indigenous language. Thus, linguistics was used in support of the thesis of the naturalness of the literacy process in a non-written culture, since it considered the transformation of an oral community into a literate one as a neutral cultural process,
depending exclusively on the existence of a phonological orthography’ (Barros 1995: 285).

We can see here the essentially ideological nature of the process whereby the phonemic principle came to be accepted widely both within linguistics and outside (for example, in the fields of education and literacy) as the only truly scientific answer to the problem of ‘reducing a language to writing’. It is indeed remarkable that other ancient and historically successful writing systems such as those of China, Japan and Korea were completely ignored in this process. This was easy to justify if conventional wisdom saw them as ‘less evolved’ than alphabetic systems. At the same time, even well-established alphabetic systems such as those of English or French could come to be seen as ‘unscientific’ because they deviated from the phonemic principle, providing an additional argument for spelling reform.

5. The learnability issue

While presenting alphabetic phonemic writing systems as ideologically neutral and ‘good for everyone’, their proponents have always claimed a very specific advantage for them over all other types of writing systems: such systems are easiest to learn for native speakers.

A system based on this principle [‘one sound one letter’] is necessarily easier than any other for natives to learn. (Jones and Plaatje 1916: xii)

The ideal alphabet should have one letter, and one letter only for each phoneme, or the learning process will be retarded. (Pike 1938: 87, quoted by Barros 1995)

In spite of these assertions, the relationship between phonemic representations and reading remains the subject of much research, controversy and speculation.

Richard Venezky, for example, takes a view opposed to the two just cited:

It may be true that children who learn to read with highly phonemic orthographies, like Finnish, learn to relate specific letters to specific sounds quite quickly, but this is not in itself reading. When attempts are made to compare reading abilities across cultures, one of the few valid observations that can be made is that regardless of the phonemic regularity of the orthography, a significant percentage of children in all countries will be classed as remedial readers, and within this group most will come from lower socio-economic environments. It has been observed in practice, furthermore, that certain deviations from a one-letter, one-sound system do not have a significant effect upon learning to read. (Venezky 1977: 47)

But Valter Tauli (1977: 35 (fn. 67)) disagrees with Venezky: ‘a reading problem such as some have with English or French is unknown with Finnish or
Estonian’. Tauli considers that ‘the most efficient orthography is phonemic. It is essential to stress this simple BASIC, phonemic principle of orthography, in spite of practical difficulties in applying it in many languages’ (1977: 24).

Reading and spelling research has been largely the preserve of psycholinguists. Within the psycholinguistic research paradigm, there is relatively little focus on writing, much more on reading and the process of learning to read. The terms ‘deep orthography’ and ‘shallow orthography’ (Klima 1972) are used to distinguish types of orthographic system. A shallow orthography is one where the relationship between sounds and characters is close to one-to-one, so that the written word closely corresponds to the pronunciation of the word in the context where it occurs. Fully phonemic orthographies are therefore shallow. A deep orthography is one where the relationship between sounds and letters is more complex. In deep orthographies words may sound the same but be spelt differently (soul and sole) or sound different but have the same spelling (row, lead). English and Hebrew are often cited as examples of languages with deep orthographies, and Spanish, Italian and Finnish as examples of languages with shallow ones.

The claim that phonemic writing systems are easiest to learn has been recast in terms of the orthographic depth hypothesis (Katz and Frost 1992), which states that in languages with shallow orthography the learner reader will rely mainly on phonemic cues, obtained directly from the graphemes (letters) to recognise words. In a deep orthography, word recognition will rely more (though not exclusively) on recognising the orthographic form of the word, its visual ‘shape’. From this, we could predict that learning to read a ‘shallow’ language requires less time than learning to read a ‘deep’ language, since the learner only needs to learn a fairly small set of regular sound–grapheme correspondences.

Much of the research which has been carried out by psycholinguists has attempted to establish to what extent the process of reading, or learning to read, is dependent on various types of phonological awareness in the learner (usually a child). Phonological awareness includes an ability to recognise and manipulate sounds at various levels: in particular, syllables, onsets (the first sound of a word), rhymes or rimes (the rest of the word) and phonemes. In a recent review of research in this area, Castles and Coltheart (2004: 91) observe that there is equivocal evidence that an awareness of the larger units – syllables, onsets and rhymes – has a positive effect on the learning of reading, but that there is much stronger evidence that awareness of the ‘small units’ – phonemic awareness – makes ‘a significant unique contribution to subsequent reading or spelling’. They conclude that ‘if phonological awareness indeed plays a causal role in reading and spelling acquisition, the nature of that awareness is most likely to be the ability to perceive and manipulate phonemes’.
Proponents of the hypothesis that phonemic awareness promotes learning to read propose that acquiring an alphabetic orthography primarily requires gaining access to and awareness of a phonemic level of speech representation. That is, learning to read involves developing the understanding that letters (or graphemes) represent the most basic sounds in speech. Once this alphabetic principle is understood, a child can then use it as a basis for sounding out words and ultimately for acquiring lexical knowledge (Castles and Coltheart 2004: 91).

However, although studies have established some relationship between phonemic awareness and reading, it is not so clear what that relationship is. As Castles and Coltheart (2004: 92) put it,

although there is support . . . for the hypothesis that phonemic awareness enables, or at least assists, literacy acquisition, there is also considerable support for the proposal that the causality flows in the reverse direction. . . . At the very least, there would clearly seem to be a complex reciprocal relationship between the two sets of skills.

Even if we accept that phoneme recognition does play an important role in learning to read, this does not mean that a phonemic or 'shallow' orthography is necessarily the best type for all languages. In an overview of the arguments for 'shallow' and 'deep' orthographies, Bird (1999b: 25) writes:

In favour of a shallow orthography, the following argument could be advanced. Clearly, our task in designing an orthography is to invent a visual stimulus which cues a word in the mind of a reader. So a visual input serves as an index into the 'mental lexicon'. Now native speakers already possess an indexing structure for accessing the mental lexicon from speech. So it would be maximally efficient if the orthography indicates the speech form as directly as possible.

Thus 'a shallow orthography makes reading and writing into low-level decoding and transcription tasks'. On the other hand,

Moving towards a deep orthography allows homophones to be distinguished while words whose pronunciation varies in context can be given a fixed representation. This latter notion has been referred to using the terms 'unity of visual impression' (Nida 1964: 25f) and 'fixed word-images' (Voorhoeve 1964: 130). Maintaining a fixed word image supports readers in developing a *sight vocabulary*, a set of frequently occurring words that can be recognised as a single unit without being broken down into their component letters. (Bird 1999b: 25)

In a recent paper on the design of orthographies for tonal languages, Bird (1999a) produces experimental evidence to show that marking tones (using diacritic marks above letter characters in a phonemic script) in one language, Dschang, actually *decreases* reading fluency. Bird attributes the difficulty for
readers to the fact that Dschang has a ‘shallow orthography’, which represents the surface contrasts rather than underlying phonological and morphological unities, coupled with a ‘deep tone system’ – where ‘the possible tonal forms of a morpheme are sufficiently diverse that morphophonological representations are distant from the surface forms’ (1999a: 102). This combination ‘makes it impossible to have the fixed word images which are so important for fluent reading’ (1999a: 103). Putting this another way: the Dschang orthography is too much like a transcription. It is good for linguists, not for readers or learners.

Bird concludes that ‘deep’ and ‘shallow’ orthographies have benefits for different kinds of readers. Readers who have ‘phonological maturity’ – a grasp of the relationship between written and spoken forms – can take advantage of a deep orthography which maintains fixed word images. ‘An orthography requiring greater phonological maturity is harder to learn but may facilitate greater fluency’ (Bird 1999b: 26). He suggests that orthography designers should consider the conditions under which literacy will be learnt, in particular the educational context:

The amount of phonological maturity we can expect readers to achieve depends on how steep a learning curve the speakers will tolerate and on the pedagogical resources at our disposal. Our expectations will depend less on linguistic analysis and more on sociological factors. In some settings, the average person might have very limited opportunities for study. New readers may not persevere with a deep orthography long enough to gain enough phonological maturity to make sense of it. So the reward of being able to read may not come early enough to justify the effort. A shallow orthography may be preferable here, since the handicap for a few advanced readers might be outweighed by the needs of the wider community. However, if the pedagogical setting is more favourable, we can opt for a deeper orthography that supports mature users and helps them learn about their language. (Bird 1999b: 27)

As mentioned above, until recently researchers have tended to focus on the process of learning to read. While the consensus within psycholinguistic research may be that ‘regularly spell’ or ‘shallow’ languages present fewer

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11 However, the importance of fixed word-images is itself unclear. Experimental evidence indicates that mixing case (capital and lower case letters) substantially slows down reading though the exact reason for this effect is not clear (see Mayall et al. 1997, for a review of the research). This suggests that the word-image is important. However, other research (Rawlinson 1976) showed that randomising letters in the middle of words had little or no effect on the ability of skilled readers to understand the text. This suggests that while the specific letters may be important, their arrangement within the word may be varied somewhat without detracting from readability.

12 But in fact, Bird says (1999b: 27), following Liberman et al. (1980: 148), this is only an issue for languages with relatively complex morphology, where words may change form in different grammatical contexts or functions. Where the morphology is simple, the form of a word (and hence its visual appearance) will remain constant in a shallow orthography anyway.
problems to learner readers, the same languages may not be so easy to learn to spell. Alcock and Ngorosho (2003) studied the spelling of primary school children in Tanzania, who were learning to write Kiswahili. Kiswahili spelling is largely phonemic, although a small amount of grammatical knowledge is helpful for spelling certain words correctly. The children spelled about 80 per cent of words correctly in two experiments. Alcock and Ngorosho concluded that ‘multiple facets of language knowledge are simultaneously necessary to achieve good spelling in even this regularly spelled language with a relatively simple syllabic structure’ (2003: 657). Hence the title of their paper: ‘Learning to spell a regularly spelled language is not a trivial task’.

All this suggests that the structuralist insistence on ‘perfect’ phonemic orthographies was at best unnecessary, at worst bad science in its claim to deliver ‘learnability’. Even if phonemic orthographies benefit learners at the early stages, mature readers may derive benefits from orthographies which have greater depth.

Claims about learnability of orthographies continue to be made, however, without research to substantiate them. For example, Baker (1997: 134) writes that in addition to the extra costs of printing di- and trigraphs,

Another disadvantage of extensive use of di- and trigraphs, though so far as we are aware it has not been studied, is that they complicate literacy teaching in that learners must identify clusters of letters as well as individual letters.

Yet clearly, if there is a reduction in di- and trigraphs, there must be an increased load on the single letter.13 In a passage quoted by Walker (1969) Janheinz Jahn laments (p. 188),

What expense, what trouble, how many auxiliary marks are necessary in order even to write a name such as Lý́jiko Orokúlábę́gba. We can see from the orthography how inadequate an alphabetic script is for rendering this language. [Yoruba]

What can we conclude from all this? The ‘learnability’ question is controversial and not easily resolved because hypotheses are difficult to test; the subjects are usually children, and multiple social and cognitive factors may be involved (for example, children have different levels of reading and phonological knowledge when they arrive at school or preschool, in practice the earliest environments where testing can be carried out). To compare ‘deep’ and ‘shallow’ orthographies requires a comparison between learners of different languages, usually in different countries.

13 Or additional letters in the inventory. Veneţky (1977: 43) notes that ‘it may be more difficult to learn to discriminate a totally new symbol from an existing repertoire than it is to learn that a sequence of two existing symbols has a special significance.’
Approaching orthography

There is a consensus that phonological, in particular phonemic, awareness is beneficial to learning to read, and that shallow orthographies, which make most use of that awareness, are helpful to the learner at an early stage. On the other hand, many, probably most, of the world’s readers use ‘deep’ orthographies where the sound and the letter composition of words are indirectly related or even unrelated. From this it is clear that having a writing system with a one-to-one mapping from phonemes to letters is not a precondition for learning to read successfully. Phonemic or ‘shallow’ orthographies may have advantages for learners at an early stage, but they may also have disadvantages, as morphological changes required by the grammar may result in a lack of ‘fixed word-images’ which help the full-fledged reader. In addition, it seems that phonemically written languages are not necessarily particularly easy to spell.

To conclude, we can quote Venezky (1977: 42, also cited by Bird 1999b: 27):

For the beginner, the orthography is needed as an indicator for the sounds of words (inter alia), but for the advanced reader, meanings, not sounds, are needed. This conflict between the needs of beginning and advanced readers forces certain compromises upon the design of a practical writing system, depending upon the intended function of the system.

6. Orthography for what?

This last point about ‘intended function’ raises an important issue, one which is consistently avoided by ‘autonomous’ models of orthography but which is central to any sociocultural model. What kinds of literacy practice will the orthography support? What social purpose will it serve? What kinds of cultural activities will it be part of? An autonomous model presupposes that the first concern is to find the ‘best’ orthography for the language. Once that matter is settled, it can be put to various uses, independently of how it is designed. For a sociocultural model of orthography, the practices involving literacy in which a community engages are inevitably related to the type of orthography which will emerge as one of the technologies underpinning those practices.

In other chapters of this book, I will take this question much further, showing through case studies how the social contexts of use have influenced the precise forms which orthography has taken in particular settings. At this stage, I will simply make the point that within autonomous models of orthography, the relevance of the literacy practices which are supported by an orthography is often unacknowledged. This is particularly significant because so much orthography development takes place in colonial and neocolonial contexts, and often under the auspices of religious organisations. Under such circumstances it is often the case, whether intended or not, that the orthography in question is
designed to be used in a very restricted set of literacy practices. This is bound to have consequences for the nature of the orthography.

If, for example, the main or only function of the texts produced in the orthography is to be read out in church by a preacher – who happens to be literate already in some other language – the kind of orthography which is appropriate will be different from the case where reading is a mass activity, carried out by monolinguals/monoliterates. Where texts are produced by a small group for large-scale consumption, the orthography may be different from the case where all ‘literates’ are expected to engage in writing as well as reading. Where an orthography is ‘designed for’ a language, rather than developing organically over a long period, assumptions about the function of texts in the language will have an effect on the orthography itself.

A good example of this comes from the work of Barros (1995) on the controversies between linguists and missionaries concerning appropriate orthographies for indigenous Mexican languages in the 1930s. The ‘indigenists’, linguists in an anthropological tradition who opposed the involvement of missionaries in the education of indigenous peoples, favoured using mural texts – wall-newspapers on topical issues – as a way of spreading literacy. They invoked ‘a model of public reading which preserves features of orality through its collective use’ (Barros 1995: 282). They favoured the use of a writing system ‘completely moulded by the phonetic alphabets’ without such practices as using capital letters: something close, in other words, to a phonemic transcription. The missionaries, members of the SIL, wanted the indigenous languages to be written using an alphabet based as much as possible on the Spanish orthography (Pike 1938: 87). Their model of reading, however, was a different one: ‘the reading material of the missionary was the book, associated with solitary reading, in accordance with the religious model of the Reformation’ (Barros 1995: 282).

Here we can see that different ideologies led to the promotion of different literacy practices, each supported by a different type of orthography. According to Barros, ‘Each group tried to convince the Mexicans that its own alphabet style would accomplish more effectively the Mexican goal of unifying the Nation-State, one [the missionaries] by the use of the national language orthography, the other [the indigenists] by employing the same phonetic symbols for all indigenous languages’ (1995: 282).

The key to understanding the origins of orthography and the role that it plays in society is, I would argue, to see it as a practice which is bound up with other practices to do with literacy, which are themselves embedded in the social and cultural practices of a society or group. The nature of orthographic practice is determined, at the outset, by the kinds of literacy practice for which it is designed. Once an orthography has been established, variation and change are possible; what may happen is related (among other things) to the societal
attitudes towards the literacy practices for which the orthography is used. These societal attitudes are themselves the product of language ideologies – beliefs about what language is, should be, and should be used for. Writing practices which are ‘legitimated’, for example, will by and large be expected to adhere to the accepted norms, while practices which are ‘illegitimate’ (like graffiti writing) or ‘marginal’ (like text messages and online chatroom ‘talk’) have greater freedom to deviate from the norm. These issues will be explored more in Chapter 2.

7. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have introduced the idea of two distinct models of orthography, which I have called the autonomous model and the sociocultural model. I have argued that the autonomous model does not adequately recognise the social nature of orthography, and has tried to define orthography as a culturally neutral technology, in the same way that literacy itself has been characterised as ‘neutral’ and ‘detached from specific social contexts’ (Street 1984: 1). The autonomous model of orthography has furthermore promoted a single type of orthography, alphabetic phonemic writing, as the ‘ideal’ to the exclusion of others, with the supposed advantage that it is easiest to learn. In succeeding chapters, I shall explore the sociocultural model of orthography in more detail, beginning with the notion of ‘orthography as practice’ in Chapter 2.