

Dialogue on dialect standardization

David Roberts

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BOOK REVIEW

Dialogue on dialect standardization, by Dyck, Carrie, Granadillo, Tania, Rice, Keren, & Labrada, Jorge Emilio Rosés. Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars, £47.99, 2014.

The subject of dialect standardisation has attracted considerable interest since the turn of the millennium (e.g., Habash, Diab, & Rambow, 2012; Hildenbrandt, Moosmüller, & Neubarth, 2013; Wmffre, 2008). The advantage of the current volume is that it brings a wide variety of studies under one cover—for the first time as far as I am aware. Nine of the chapters that follow the Introduction are based on papers presented at the *14th Methods in Dialectology Conference* held at the University of Western Ontario, Canada, in August 2011. A further chapter, by André Bourcier, is an invited chapter.

The introductory chapter lists the 56 languages mentioned in the book (pp. 2–4).¹ The geographical scope is broad, covering all the populated continents, although mainland South East Asia is conspicuously absent. Clifton takes us closest to this region with his case studies of four languages spoken in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh (pp. 85–87, 91–94). Africa, with examples from 14 countries, is particularly well represented, as it is in the wider literature (e.g., Chebanne, 2016; Hasselbring, 2006; Koffi, 2006).

On the one hand we find references to powerful, prestigious international languages spoken by large populations and having a long history of literacy such as Russian, Chinese, English, French and German. On the other hand, authors refer to multiple minority languages, spoken by marginalised populations such as Bine (Papua New Guinea), Kok Borok (Bangladesh and India), Kaingang (Brazil) and Majang (Ethiopia), whose written languages have only begun to emerge much more recently.

Of course, the language count is disputable depending on where splitters and clumpers draw their respective boundaries between languages and dialects. Indeed, several of the languages listed in the Introduction are represented by multiple variants each with its own unique ISO code, meaning that, at least provisionally, they are considered to be separate languages (Simons & Fennig, 2018). This is notably the case with Caribbean English-lexified Creole (16 varieties), Kichwa (eight varieties) and Mixe (eight varieties). To these we could add Gbe, although the list in the introductory chapter does not draw attention to the 20 distinct varieties that extensive sociolinguistic survey has identified in this West African continuum (Kluge, 2007, 2011).

The book is firmly rooted in the existing sociolinguistic literature. Armosti et al. discuss Cypriot Greek as a possible case of diglossia (Ferguson, 1959), noting that standard modern (high) and Cypriot (low) Greek are not in strict complementary distribution since, for example, written Cypriot Greek is used for courtroom and House of Representative transcripts, formal settings where accuracy of the written record is paramount (pp. 24–25, 28). Decker summarises Fishman's (2010) four attributes necessary for successful literacy development—vitality, historicity, autonomy and standardisation—and applies them to an analysis of Caribbean English-lexified Creole (pp. 100–101). Dyck et al., espouse Wilson's (2007) *Indigenist Research Paradigm*, which harnesses indigenous knowledge to interpret reality and uses this approach to investigate the orthographies of two Iroquoian languages, Cayuga and Oneida (p. 118). Bourcier evokes Kloss's (1967) distinction between *Ausbausprachen* (literally 'built out languages'), i.e., those that are chosen as a standard from a dialect cluster and shaped to become a standard tool of literary expression, and *Abstandsprachen* (literally 'distance languages'), i.e., those that are distinct from each by intrinsic linguistic differences, having evolved over time through separation (p. 130). Bourcier questions whether *Ausbau* and *Abstand* are really independent parameters, and this becomes a springboard for articulating his own argument that standardisation may be detrimental to revitalisation efforts, illustrating this with an example from Inuktitut.

In addition to the existing literature, other authors develop their own novel theoretical frameworks. Karan and Corbett present what they term a *Perceived Benefit Model of Language Shift and Change* to describe the way speakers tend to choose languages, speech styles and dialects on the basis of how advantageous they will be for them or their offspring (p. 57). They illustrate this with case studies from Fur (pp. 58–60) and Kichwa (pp. 60–61). Unseth maps out four approaches to standardisation—unilectal (e.g., Indonesian), union (e.g., Kalenjin and Igbo), incomplete (e.g., Mayan) and multi-dialectal (e.g., Anyi and Majang)—discussing their respective values and limitations, and in conclusion advocating the latter approach (pp. 14–18).

Unseth's chapter also contains a carefully calibrated and, I think, fair assessment of the approach to language family standardisation promoted by the *Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society* (CASAS) in Cape Town (pp. 10–12). Unseth's perspective matches my own observations of this group's efforts to harmonise the orthographies of two language families in West Africa: Gur (Nikiéma et al., 2005) and Gbe (Capo et al., 2005). Twelve years after the publication of these two documents, there is as yet no evidence of any successful implementation of the proposed standardisations, or that most orthography stakeholders in the languages concerned are even aware of their existence. One of the difficulties is that, by now, some of the existing orthographies have a long pedigree. Kabiye, for example, has been written for 80 years and standardised for 50. In such a context, the *Académie Kabiye* will never look favourably on any attempts at radical reform in an effort to harmonise their language with the hundred or so other Gur languages that hardly any Kabiye people speak or need to learn. Faced with such realities, it remains unclear why CASAS considers family-level standardisation to be such a high priority.

The book gives considerable space to analyses of phonographic correspondences in various orthographies. Clifton lays out the issues in the two dialects of Vanimo with simple clarity (pp. 84–85). The Vanimo dialect has a contrast between /g/ and /h/ that is neutralised as a glottal stop in the Waromo dialect. Should the orthography overdifferentiate in Waromo, underdifferentiate in Vanimo, or write each dialect phonemically at the expense of unity? None of these solutions proved acceptable to decision-makers. Instead, they opted for <g, h> to represent the Vanimo contrastive phonemes and <gh> to represent the Waromo glottal stop, a neat solution that obeys the phonemic principle in both dialects while preserving a degree of visual unity between them. Jany bravely tackles a detailed comparison of no less than 10 Mixe orthographies (pp. 153–158), where dialectal particularity won over multi-dialectal uniformity. We learn that some orthographies render allophony explicit; that some differ in their symbolisation of glottal stops and labial glides; that some choose diacritics for vowels not found in Spanish; and that differing conventions exist for palatalisation, with some shadowing Spanish <ñ, ch>, while others opt for a systematic use of <y> following all the palatalised consonants.

Several contributors take us into the realm of script choice. Two chapters—rather oddly they are presented non-sequentially—discuss and illustrate the adaptation of Greek script to Cypriot Greek (pp. 29, 33, 75–76). The first presents the *Syntychies Project*, one of whose aims was a concrete proposal for the written representation of Cypriot Greek, which involved some difficult lexical choices concerning obsolete words, false friends, loan words, morphological variants and spelling variants (p. 35). The second chapter presents a statistical analysis of responses to an online questionnaire investigating attitudes, preferences and use of Cypriot Greek spelling, in particular with regard to the series of post-alveolar consonants [ʃ, ʒ, tʃ, dʒ] which are absent in standard Greek (pp. 70–78). Turning to Podlachian, four of the seven orthography alternatives for this language use Cyrillic script, whether based on Belarusian, Ukrainian or Russian (pp. 51–52), although Maksymiuk himself advocates a Roman script orthography to facilitate transfer to and from Polish (p. 48). Chakma speakers, in spite of being in Bangladesh, recently chose to base their orthography on the Burmese rather than the Bangla script. Tanchangya, in turn, based its own new alphabet on Chakma, simultaneously affirming their closeness to and their difference from their neighbours (pp. 92–94).

Various authors touch on the subject of IT compatibility. Armostis et al. allude to the *Syntychies Project's* decision to type diacritics over certain consonants as a combining character in Cypriot Greek—a solution made possible by Microsoft's recent developments of Clear Type Fonts—and the subsequent designing of a special keyboard layout to facilitate this. The authors consider this solution to be less than optimal because of the limited number of available fonts, and plead for an expansion of the Unicode set to include glyphs for Cypriot Greek (p. 37). Maksymiuk defends his proposal to represent Podlachian diphthongs /uo, ie/ as <ô, ê>, respectively, partly on the grounds of their ease of reproduction on standard keyboards (pp. 49, 52). In Bine, the presence of <ä> on all standard fonts was a factor that swung decision-makers in favour of using it to represent the phoneme /æ/. Conversely, they opted for <ng> instead of <ŋ> to represent /ŋ/ to avoid having to install special characters in a remote rural context where, at the time, Unicode had not yet penetrated (p. 91).

On a personal note, I read this book to help me better understand the social context of my own fieldwork on Dan (Yacouba), a Mande language spoken mainly in Côte d'Ivoire. The estimated 1.6 million Dan people speak over 40 distinct dialects, a situation reminiscent of Mixe (pp. 145–146) and just as understudied. Since a sociolinguistic survey (Bolli, Flik, & Bendor-Samuel, 1972) had revealed 100% mutual intelligibility between neighbouring dialects, but only 30% for the most geographically distant, decision-makers opted to develop two standards: Eastern (based on the Gweetaa dialect) and Western (based on the Blo dialect). Perhaps it would be helpful to refer to this as a *bilectal* approach, as a logical extension of Unseth's concept of a *unilectal* approach (p. 13). Furthermore, a nationally imposed spelling reform in the 1980s that deliberately moved away from the influence of French had an extremely negative impact on motivation for literacy. This has echoes of the power that Spanish has over decisions about Mixe spelling conventions (pp. 149–151) and the even more complex influence of Belarusian, Ukrainian, Polish and Russian on Podlachian (pp. 39–48).

My research on Eastern Dan is largely to do with tone orthography, and here I have to admit that I came away empty-handed—tone is not even listed in the index—in spite of the fact that many of the languages referred to are tonal. I am by no means voicing this as a criticism. Rather, the book's silence on this subject is a salutary reminder that hardly any research exists investigating inter-dialectal tonal differences in tone languages, so we are far from being well placed to dialogue about tone as it pertains to dialect standardisation. Let's hope that this important subject will begin to get more attention and that future volumes may one day be able to do justice to it.

The book will be of interest to researchers working in several disciplines. Those developing orthographies for previously unwritten languages can learn important lessons from the social processes described in the case studies. Those pursuing the quest for a universal theory of writing systems will benefit from exposure to a broad range of lesser-known minority languages. Sociolinguists will be drawn into the discussions identifying the pressure points at which written language and society meet. Any documentary linguists who consider language revitalisation to be part of their brief now have another tool in their kit. Overall, this volume represents a major contribution in a sparse field and I hope it will stimulate further research.

Note


1. References to the book under review are cited with page numbers only.

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David Roberts
Independent researcher
 rbrdvd@gmail.com

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