Mark Sebba. *Spelling and society*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge. 2007, (xix, 189).
.

In this most welcome volume orthography is elevated from the realm of the graphic representation of speech and transcription to "social practice" (26) with consequences in sociolinguistic and cultural spheres (72). The "autonomous" model of orthography, which views it as a mere technical fact, socially neutral and detached from social context (13), is rejected in favor of the recognition that it is "*par excellence* a matter of language and culture" (7). For those without basic linguistics training a glossary of the linguistics nomenclature used is provided, along with a table of English words demonstrating the sound values for IPA symbols that appear. Several indices and a map which depicts the parts of the world whose orthographies are discussed are also helpful.

The book opens in epic style with examples of graffiti recorded in England and Spain which, through analysis of their deviant spellings, reveal the social and political identity of the inscribers. Ch 1, which provides a basic exposition of the general concepts *writing system*, *orthography*, and *script*, could be improved by reference to Florian Coulmas (*Writing Systems of the World*, Oxford, Cambridge: Blackwell,1989), but it is certainly adequate for the purpose. Ch 2 establishes the ground for orthography as social practice through integrating the theory of alphabetic writing, associating graphical signs with speech sounds, with the practices of various languages that employ it to show that certain conventions in fact index linguistic and social identity, and that such associations, along with language specific conventional standards, are part of the focal awareness of users of the system.

For example, English, given conventional sound-grapheme correspondences, could just as well spell [sku:l] <scool> (using values in *scope, tool*) or <skool> (as in *skid, cool*), but <school> is the accepted standard (29); the substitution of other spellings would engender no loss of

intelligibility, but we all would recognize the failure (or refusal) to observe it. In Surinam the association of the digraph <oe> for /u/ as an almost exclusively Dutch convention (see 161- 2), although English employs it <shoe>, led to that spelling being changed to <u> in the 1986 reform, a means of rejecting the Dutch colonial identity (88 f). Likewise Spanish orthography typically represents /k/ with <c> or <qu>, but in the case of the aforementioned graffiti in Catalonia, <k> is typically employed, as in <okupas> for *ocupas* 'occupations', as a mark of rebellion by followers of various underground and countercultural trends, with which <k> associates them (3).

The notion of "regulated" and "unregulated orthographic space" vis-à-vis the standardizing influences of editors, school teachers, and the like, is evoked (43 f) to mark the borders of open prairies where nonstandard orthographies roam freely, such as in the by now well-studied fields of email and text messaging and their highly formalized but nonetheless nonstandard orthographic devices. Other areas recognized as very productive in nonstandard spellings are naming and product labeling (44). The post-sixties generations have spawned an explosion of idiosyncratic spellings of given names, e.g., <Jayde>, <Kris>, and <Jacyn> (44) with obvious implications for marking identity, while at the same time the retention of archaic spellings of family names can be seen has involving certain social associations (38).

We could add to the discussion the fact that often innovative spelling in product and trade names is motivated by the exigencies of trade and service mark registration, thus <Pic-n-Sav®> for the famous (now defunct) discount outlet for low-price house wares in the American Southwest and <Phat Farm®> for the line of clothing and accessories popular in fashion-conscious hip-hop culture, following <phat> as the orthographic representation of the word in the Hip-Hop slang register.

In this connection a point needs to be clarified. In parts of the text we read that a certain device *sympbolizes* (2, 130, *inter alia*) the identity of a given group, in others we hear that a sign

has *iconicity* (82), while *indices* is also cited (129-30, 133, 163). Established in the field of semiotics since the time of C.S. Peirce are the concepts named by the terms *symbol*, *icon*, and *index* (*indice*). *Symbolic* and *iconic* signs are more familiar to students of language than *indices*, which are related to their meaning by physical presence or causality, which forms a "psychological association". It is the physical contiguity of the *signified* withd the *sign* and its influence upon it that produce the sign's meaning (see Charles S. Peirce, 1873 - MS 380). An orthographic practice is psychologically associated with (and conditioned through) the presence of its users, thus *index* is the more faithful term. The barred-u grapheme, for example, exclusively associated with Bamileke, a Bantu language in Cameroon (114), thus *indexes* the cultural identity of its users: it is used *there*, by *them*, so we associate it with them, just as in Surinam the use of <oe> for /u/ was associated psychology with the presence of the Dutch colonizers.

Ch 4 and 5 discuss numerous highly instructive examples of orthography design in postcolonial regions and for nonstandard dialects and contact varieties, where the associations of orthographies with colonial languages prove favorable, as was the case in Haiti, and unfavorable, as in Surinam. In Haiti in the 1980s an estimated 90% of the population was monolingual in creole, and perhaps 20% literate in any variety (84 f). There the goal of literacy was French, so it was believed that the orthography should be modeled on French conventions. In Surinam, as we have seen, a contrary conclusion was reached (88).

The intriguing fact that orthography can be employed as a tool to facilitate phonological shift and thus the sociopolitical reality of separate languages from what are in fact very near dialects was demonstrated in former Kirghiz dialects. Under both Tsarist and Soviet rule, Cyrillic-based orthographies were developed for Tatar and Kazakh, which through graphemes employed emphasized specific vocabulary and phonological variation, "however minor", and thus established

(the perception of) them as separate 'languages' (78). The historical situation in Indonesia also underscores the necessity that an orthography pass a practical test. One proposal involved the use of IPA symbols and roman letters with diacritics; since these were inconvenient to write and typewriting and typesetting resources were not generally available, the system fell into disuse (91 f).

An interesting subfield unto itself is that of how languages adapt words of foreign origin into their orthographic system. Users of English seem accustomed to its "hybrid" conventions, while languages like Latvian adapt such words to their own conventions, but Catalan, where otherwise /k/ is represented orthographically with <c> or <qu>, marks words of Russian origin orthographically, e.g., <troika> (98-9).

A central question of orthographic design involves whether the orthography to adopt be "shallow," i.e., mark phonemic distinctions, or "deep," in which sound-grapheme relations are more complex. Shallow orthographies facilitate lower level decoding, (19-20), but deeper ones engage at the level of morphological representation (23). This contrast has implications for both design and reform.

The very aptly subtitled Ch 6, "Reform or revolution: where angels fear to tread," traces the primary questions to be faced and problems surrounding orthographic reform through several penetrating case studies. One phenomenon that appears again and again is the "prescriptive power" of orthography (153); S is absolutely correct when he observes that "the creed of relativism cuts little ice with the general public" (154). Changes in established orthographies have both economic and prestige-related consequences for writers, publishers, and governments (133). Typical arguments *pro* and *con* are outlined, along with a categorization of those with a stake in the question (135-7), the last item of which, "public opinion in general" could be detailed to include clerks and

students, tinkers, tailors, soldiers, spies — really anyone who has learned to read and write and who uses the written word in their life.

Linguists often advocate phonetically-based systems with simple sound-grapheme relations (73 f), but these proposals seldom meet the social and ideological needs of prospective users (155), as has been observed in numerous cases. The question that must be considered is for whom the orthography is being proposed (112). A highly significant point about a "phonemic" versus "etymological" (i.e., shallow vs. deep) orthography is made by winner of the 1992 Nobel Prize for Literature Derek Walcott, from St. Lucia (where a French-based creole is officially written in a shallow orthography):

> I have a thing about Kwéyól which has to do with the orthography. I do not like the spelling that is used. I think as a writer, actually writing a word out. I do not want to write like a child -- phonetic philology infuriates me because there is an elegance in letters, not only in words and creole is an elegant language. I do not think the orthography does justice to the elegance of Kwéyól. (Quoted 164)

This volume, readable for nonlinguists despite the degree of complexity of underlying theory and its somewhat technical basis, is of interest to linguists, writers, sociologists, and students of discourse analysis, and the information here is vital to those engaged in language and orthography planning and should be high on the reading list for any person engaged in teaching spelling in particular and written language in general. One stated aim of this book is to create a field, the *sociolinguistics of orthography*, and to develop a framework for it (5). This text raises and investigates central questions in the field of orthographic practices, social and political relations among their users, and the identities they mark, and clearly establishes that orthography *is* social practice. I hope to see articles and books that develop more of this field in the near future.

Robert D. Angus
California State University, Fullerton