

Sounding things out: using non-standard spelling as phonological evidence

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In Memoriam: Margaret Laing (1953-2023)

For most budding linguists, one of the first steps in the discipline is a certain amount of unlearning. Among the many myths and deep-seated ideological convictions to be cast off is the identification of ‘language’ with ‘written words’. Indeed, in highly literate societies speakers often operate under the illusion that they speak in full sentences or that they pronounce all letters in their orthographic representations. Learning to hear language, rather than just describe the conventions of the written standard is a key skill for linguists.

Because of this initial unlearning, the study of orthographic practice is often perceived as peripheral or as a proxy for the more ‘authentic’ targets of linguistic inquiry: spoken and signed languages. This swing of the pendulum hides the fact that written language does represent its own kind of linguistic knowledge and that its investigation provides a unique view of cognition, interfacing with other sub-domains of language, such as phonology.

In this workshop I attempt to revindicate the study of spelling systems, especially in non-standard contexts. This is particularly topical today, as innovative orthography becomes increasingly visible due to the proliferation public, informal writing. Such writing, which occurs mostly online, does not fully mirror spoken informal speech, but often stylises or indexes its features. As a result, online spelling variation allows us a window into phonological representations of present-day language users, much as pre-standard written materials have long allowed historical linguists to reconstruct past phonological systems.

Whether the result of limited access to the standard, conscious subversion of common orthographic practice, or the total absence of relevant conventions in the target language, non-standard writing can be analysed with a common toolkit. The workshop will introduce a framework for grapho-phonological mapping (see Laing and Lass 2003, Alcorn et al. 2017, Kopaczyk et al 2018), allowing us to analyse some examples of historical and contemporary non-standard spelling variation. We will further be asking what level of phonological

representations such orthographic evidence allows us to reconstruct, probing the relationship between the alphabetic principle and the phonemic principle.