2017

Orthography, Standardization, and Register: The Case of Manding

Coleman Donaldson
University of Pennsylvania, coleman.donaldson@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.upenn.edu/gse_grad_pubs

Part of the Education Commons, and the Linguistics Commons

Donaldson, Coleman, 'Orthography, Standardization, and Register: The Case of Manding' (2017). GSE Graduate Student Research. 2. https://repository.upenn.edu/gse_grad_pubs/2

The Open Access version of this book, available at www.taylorfrancis.com, has been made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivatives 4.0 license.

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. https://repository.upenn.edu/gse_grad_pubs/2
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.
Orthography, Standardization, and Register: The Case of Manding

Abstract
Since at least the rise of nineteenth-century European nationalism, Westerners have in large part judged languages by whether they are written and standardized (Anderson 2006; Bauman and Briggs 2000; Blommaert 2006; Flores 2014). As the colonial era came to an end across much of the world in the 1960s, this tendency intermingled with the rising interest in development: what would be the place of the long minoritized indigenous languages of Africa, Asia and Latin America in the educational and political projects of postcolonial states? In Africa in particular, this led to a flourishing of orthographies for a large number of languages which had previously been excluded from domains of government and schooling. The initiatives of the post-independence period, however, did not lead to one single orthography, script or standard for many of these languages. This chapter examines one such case, the West African trade language of Manding, which is written in at least three distinct scripts today: Arabic, N’ko (ߒߞߏ) and Latin. Emerging respectively from before, during and after colonial rule, these three writing systems are variably embraced and wielded by distinct West African actors today.

Disciplines
Education | Linguistics

Comments

The Open Access version of this book, available at www.taylorfrancis.com, has been made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives 4.0 license.

This book chapter is available at ScholarlyCommons: https://repository.upenn.edu/gse_grad_pubs/2
10 Orthography, Standardization, and Register
The Case of Manding

Coleman Donaldson

1. Introduction

Since at least the rise of nineteenth-century European nationalism, Westerners have in large part judged languages by whether they are written and standardized (Anderson 2006; Bauman and Briggs 2000; Blommaert 2006; Flores 2014). As the colonial era came to an end across much of the world in the 1960s, this tendency mingled with the rising interest in development: what would be the place of the long minoritized indigenous languages of Africa, Asia and Latin America in the educational and political projects of postcolonial states? In Africa in particular, this led to a flourishing of orthographies for a large number of languages which had previously been excluded from domains of government and schooling. The initiatives of the post-independence period, however, did not lead to one single orthography, script or standard for many of these languages. This chapter examines one such case, the West African trade language of Manding, which is written in at least three distinct scripts today: Arabic, N’ko (ߞߊߣߊߣߌ߱) and Latin. Emerging respectively from before, during and after colonial rule, these three writing systems are variably embraced and wielded by distinct West African actors today.

Which of these scripts provides the best system for peoples’ needs in classrooms, at home or on their mobile devices? A typical linguistic approach views orthography development as an objective scientific endeavor involving the adoption of graphic principals for mapping the phonemic system of a language. Other approaches focus on efficiency or usability as judged by speakers’ ability to quickly and accurately read text. While these questions of linguistic fidelity and usability are worthwhile, my own research in Manding-language literacy and education suggests that too narrow a focus on these elements obscures the ways in which social actors’ choices of script, orthography or spelling can align with competing sociopolitical projects.

To reason about both Manding and other minoritized languages, in this chapter I develop a framework for taking into account not only the technical side of orthography but also its language ideological component as manifest
in the practices and commentaries of individuals. Drawing on historical and ethnographic data collected since 2011, viewed through a lens built from the perspectives of linguistic anthropology and New Literacy Studies, I focus on the competing post-independence initiatives behind N’ko-, Arabic- and Latin-based Manding orthographies. Following discussion of the context, methodology, and conceptual framing of this chapter (section 2), I investigate choices of script and spelling to demonstrate how the graphic side of orthographic standards are debated and established in everyday practice by social actors (section 3). Next, I explore orthography’s connection to speech by looking at the historical development and social actors involved in N’ko and Latin-based orthographies (section 4). Analyzing these competing initiatives, I demonstrate how the success of orthographic development and standardization efforts often—independent from questions of linguistic accuracy—hinges on cultivating locally salient models of usage amongst speakers and writers (section 5).

2. Background and Conceptual Framework

From a linguistic perspective, Manding1 is a language and dialect continuum stretching across West Africa from Senegal to Burkina Faso, spoken by upwards of 30 million people (see Figure 10.1) (Vydrine 1995). Manding varieties that are frequently treated as languages (i.e., Maninka in Guinea, Bamanan in Mali and Jula in Côte d’Ivoire and Burkina Faso) are widely used in their respective zones as trade languages between different peoples and language groups (Dalby 1971; Mansour 1993) (see Figure 10.2). While linguists clearly acknowledge their connectedness and overlap (Creissels 2009; Dumestre 2003), national language policies and linguistic work typically treat them largely as distinct though related varieties or even languages (Calvet 1987).

From a political perspective, the varieties that make up Manding can be considered minoritized despite the language and dialect continuum’s reach as a major African lingua franca. The marginalization of African languages in favor of French was part of the French colonial drive for domination under the banner of a civilizing mission (Conklin 1997; Lehmil 2007). While they are widely spoken and are often recognized as so-called “national languages” (UNESCO Regional Office for Education in Africa 1985) in the postcolonial era, speakers of Manding varieties, like almost all African languages, remain marginalized in that access to civil-service, secondary education and general social mobility requires knowledge of French (or English or Portuguese as appropriate).

This dynamic has not escaped the attention of local actors, where a formidable social movement based around vernacular literacy promotion in the N’ko script has flourished (Amselle 2001; Hellweg 2013; Oyler 1995; Vydrin 2011; Vydrine 2001b; Wyrod 2003). Invented in 1949 by the Guinean “peasant intellectual” (Feierman 1990) Sûlemáana Kânte,2 N’ko
Figure 10.1 Manding languages: variants of Manding as lingua-franca
Used by permission, © SIL (Vydrin, Bergman, and Benjamin 2001). Permission required for further distribution.
Coleman Donaldson

is a non-Latin, non-Arabic-based writing system for Manding. Despite his lack of formal training, Kantè’s alphabet is a perfect phonological analysis of his native Manding variety and remarkably includes a set of diacritics for marking contrastive length, nasalization and tone (Vydrine 2001b, 128–129). Critically, Kantè also used his unique script to write over 100 books on a vast range of topics spanning across linguistics, history, traditional medicine and Islam (including a translation of the Quran), which continue to be typeset and sold alongside the works of current N’ko intellectuals today.

Manding-language texts, however, are produced in at least two other writing systems. Many Manding speakers spontaneously use adapted forms of the Arabic script for short jottings in a practice known as Ajami, stemming from the centuries old Quranic schooling tradition (I. Diallo 2012; Mumin 2014). The Latin script, originally applied to Manding varieties by colonial agents and missionaries (Van den Avenne 2015), has informed a range of disparate orthographies in postcolonial efforts to promote adult literacy and bilingual/mother-tongue education (Calvet 1987; Skattum 2000; Trefault 1999; Yerende 2005).

In the sections that follow, I explore the interplay among these social actors and their orthographic choices based on linguistic anthropological research conducted with and amongst N’ko students and teachers between 2012 and 2016, as well as archival and library-based research focused on Manding linguistics, education and language policy. My data were collected through the ethnographic tools of participant observation, recorded and unrecorded informal interviews and artifact collection (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). A critical source of so-called artifacts are the writings (linguistic and otherwise) of Sulemaana Kantè (2003; 2004; 2007; 2008a; 2008b; 2009) and other N’ko intellectuals whose books circulate today.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local Name</th>
<th>Etymology</th>
<th>French Name</th>
<th>English Name</th>
<th>Alternative Spellings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mândinkakán</td>
<td>“Language of the people of Manden”</td>
<td>mandingue,</td>
<td>Mandinka,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>malinké</td>
<td>Mandingo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>máninkakán</td>
<td>“Language of the people of Manden”</td>
<td>malinké</td>
<td>Maninka</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bàmanankán</td>
<td>“Language of those that refuse (Islam)”</td>
<td>bambara</td>
<td>Bamanan</td>
<td>Bamana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jùlakán</td>
<td>“Trader’s language”</td>
<td>dioula</td>
<td>Jula</td>
<td>Dyula, Diula, Dyoula</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 10.2 Major Manding varieties
2.1 Orthography as Practice

The written word is often regarded as having unique properties allowing for spiritual, intellectual or cognitive benefits depending on the society. While not particularly Western, this idea became strongly linked to Europeans’ conceptualizations of their own superiority during the imperial and colonial periods (Mignolo 2003). In Sub-Saharan Africa, where the literate tradition was limited for indigenous languages and not widespread in the case of Arabic, this colonial ideology gave rise to a Western understanding of Africans being on the wrong side of humanity’s great Oral-Literate divide (Goody 1968). On this view, lack of literacy was responsible for the continent’s subordinate place in the world. In the aftermath of World War II, as the Cold War heated up and independence loomed for many African countries, literacy arose as a major social and political cause for both certain African intellectuals and international organizations such as UNESCO (Dorn and Ghodsee 2012). The seeming link between literacy and progress then is in part responsible for the marginalized position of even widespread postcolonial languages such as Manding which lacked an institutionalized written tradition.

The linguistic hierarchies and development agendas that the Oral-Literate divide has engendered are based on a view of literacy as “autonomous” (Street 1984)—it is an isolatable and singular skill-set that correlates with a range of desirable economic outcomes. The basic premise of this understanding, however, is now largely rejected by scholars of literacy thanks to the writings of those working under the banner of New Literacy Studies (Gee 1989; Gee 2008; Street 1984). In the foundational work of this school, Street (1984) opts to ethnographically probe the literate/illiterate distinction in Iran. Contrary to the premise undergirding the ideas of Goody (1968) as well as UNESCO’s functional literacy programs, he finds that being literate often has little to do with one’s ability to graphically decode symbols representing speech on a page. Indeed, by this measure, many of those deemed illiterate in the world are, in fact, literate. For Street, therefore, literacy must be approached ideologically and understood to manifest itself in various culturally embedded forms without any natural or inherent consequence for the brain, intellect or spirit.

There are important parallels between the autonomous approach to literacy and theorizations of orthography (Sebba 2011, 14). Frequently, laypeople and scholars alike assume that there is evolutionary progress in orthographies from pictographic to logographic, syllabic and finally alphabetic systems (Gelb 1963; Goody and Watt 1968). Alphabets are to be phonemic (Pike 1947); they are to assign one graphic character to each phoneme of a language, thereby offering supposed benefits in cognitive processing because of a closer matching to the proposed psychological reality of the phoneme (Sapir 1985; Sebba 2011, 17). Psycholinguists and
scholars of reading have dedicated years to studying this idea now known as the “Orthographic Depth Hypothesis”, which posits that the closer (i.e., shallower [Klima 1972]) to phonemic representation an orthography is, the easier it is to read (Frost and Katz 1992).

While a large body of research has investigated this hypothesis (see Venezky 1977), firm conclusions have been hard to come by because different readers seem to benefit from different kinds of orthographies:

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 a ‘fixed word-images’ which help the full-fledged reader.

(Sebba 2011, 23)

As such, Sebba finds that “the structuralist insistence on ‘perfect’ phonemic orthographies was at best unnecessary, at worst bad science in its claim to deliver ‘learnability’” (22). This conclusion is echoed in Bird’s (1999a; 1999b) research on tone and orthography in Cameroon, which uncovers that orthographies with different depths afford distinct advantages in different kinds of sentences.

These findings harken back to the framing of literacy as practice because it suggests that, ideally, developing an orthography must take into account for whom and for what literacy practices it will be used. Deciding upon an orthography’s so-called learnability for a particular user however is not just about accurately gauging their reading level; it is also about what an orthography represents culturally to people (Bird 2001). In short, the question of determining a correct orthography cannot simply be reduced to a linguist’s or a technician’s task, but hinges on social actors and practices, as emphasized throughout this volume. My goal in this chapter therefore is to provide some ways of approaching the case of Manding orthography as a social practice.

3. Orthography as Writing: Normative vs. Normalized

To begin to analyze how individuals use and evaluate Manding orthography, it is helpful to refine our analytic vocabulary for understanding and evaluating different systems. Scholars of writing have given us a robust set of ways of classifying different kinds of writing systems or scripts (Latin, Arabic, Cyrillic, Chinese etc.) based on the linguistic level that they tend to represent (Rogers 2005). An alphabet, for instance, refers to a writing system that in general tends towards the graphic representation of phonemes. Other scripts, such as the Chinese character system, however, may tend to focus on the level of words (a logographic system) or morphemes (a morphographic system). These qualities, of course, do not adhere in the scripts, but are based on convention. Any script in principal can be used phonemically, logographically etc., although certain ones lend themselves to one
system more readily than others. Regardless, while useful for description, such categorizations are of little use in evaluating an orthography’s adoption or actual deployment in social practice. This requires an entirely different set of constructs.

We typically think of orthography as the so-called proper, correct or standard way of writing speech down. However, it is critical to see that an orthography or set of norms for writing can exist even without explicit rules. In other words, orthographies exist along “thresholds of normativity” (Agha 2007, 126). In the case of so-called “grassroots literacies” (Blommaert 2008), users typically do not respect a single system of conventions for penning language; they write in non-elite local languages using the resources at their disposal, often with little regard for adhering to one standard of writing. In the case of so-called Manding Ajami, for instance, there are no official decrees or written documents for articulating a normative model for writing (see Donaldson 2013; Vydrin 1998; Vydrin 2014). Normative in this sense refers to a standard that is “linked to judgments of appropriateness, to values schemes of ‘good’ vs. ‘bad’ behavior, and so on” (Agha 2007, 125). Nonetheless, given that Ajami is frequently used in correspondence, there exists a normalized model or de facto standard that writers in general respect albeit with some variation. All of this suggests that we need not conceive of orthography as exclusively the realm of top-down policy makers or institutions; users themselves can be understood as forging orthographies. Even when orthographies are standardized through normative models by linguists or policy makers, they have a social life of their own that can lead to revisions. Each and every time we write, whether we respect or flaunt an orthographic norm, we orient ourselves to a model for writing a language (in other words, an orthography) and provide a reflexive comment (Lucy 1993) or metacommentary (Rymes 2014) on it. These metacommentaries are visible in a variety of writing practices, including choice of script and graphemic conventions, as illustrated below.

### 3.1 Script

In the case of written Manding, the choice of script constitutes a metacommendary which is often transparently aligned with actors’ sociopolitical stances. For instance, in June 2013, while in Bamako, I was invited to participate as part of one N’ko association’s delegation to meet with members of the National Assembly’s “Education and Culture Committee” (currently the Commission de l’Éducation, de la Culture, des Nouvelles Technologies de l’Information et de la Communication). While the country was still in the transition period following the botched coup of 2012 and French troops of Operation Serval had only just begun to withdraw, there was no halt to daily life and concerns for most—including deputies and N’ko activists. After our disconcertingly simple entrance into the parliament’s grounds, our group of four men, two women and myself made its way to the room where we would be meeting.
Following greetings, and prior to sitting down for the official start of the meeting (the only time during which any of us would hear or speak French for the following two hours), a staffer asked for us to sign in for the purpose of record-keeping. Faced with a table laid out entirely in French, I reciprocated, writing out my name, affiliation and number in the alphabet that French and English share before passing the sheet on. It was only after the piece of paper made the rounds and my eyes strayed upon it again that I understood the choice I had been presented with; the leader of our delegation, Mamadi had written out his name and number in N’ko.

While this moment of banal government record-keeping did not lead to any major confrontation or debate, it is useful in how it highlights the most overt part of orthography’s social life: script. In writing his name and number, Mamadi could arguably not even be accused of writing in an inappropriate language since in graphic form (e.g., <12> and <Mamadi> in Latin script), neither can be definitively attributed to a single grammatical code or language. Our only means of evaluating his writing therefore is at the level of script or orthography. Mamadi’s spelling, or act of choosing the N’ko orthography over Latin or Arabic, then transparently provides its own metacommentary (Rymes 2014) that is an implicit message valuing this orthography and distinct from the actual propositional content of any written words.

3.2 Graphemic Conventions

While this instance at the Malian parliament hinged on different scripts, it is important to see that these same issues also apply to the level of the graphic conventions that an orthography fixes within one script. For instance, even within Latin-based Manding systems, writers must regularly make socially marked and potentially political choices. While a Maninka-speaking Guinean may freely converse with a Bamanan-speaking Malian or a Jula-speaking Burkinabè, their three countries have distinct Latin-based orthographies for this language (Calvet 1987). In Mali alone, Bamanan speakers may opt to write their language in any number of ways: with post-1982 International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) characters, with the pre-1982 Latin system, with French spelling conventions or with or without tonal diacritics (Balenghien 1987; Vydrin and Konta 2014). While the prescribed variants of Manding orthography circulate in official instances, they are largely absent in advertisements and informal usage by Malians. In these cases, orthography is indeed Latin-based but manifests itself in a variety of forms that can be placed on a continuum from more Linguistics-like, or normative, to more French-like, or normalized. The normalized or French-like end of the continuum is the de facto norm recognized by many speakers and writers of Manding, but not subject to authoritative judgements of correctness. Normative or Linguistics-like, on the other hand, refers to the institutionally prescribed forms, which, while not common in the writing of most Manding speakers, are understood as a baseline for judging correctness in certain
contexts. This idea is illustrated with the word yóро ‘place’ as an example in Figure 10.3, with the continuum extending from French-influenced spelling through historical and current official orthographies, to the normative IPA model prescribed by linguists.

One thing that is striking in the range of Manding textual artifacts that I have encountered is how little one actually encounters any of the official orthographies in daily life besides some token government signs. On store signs, taxis, trucks and in Facebook and text messages, the overwhelming tendency is something between “French-like” and “Pre-1982”. For instance, Orange, the dominant Telecommunications company in Mali, has partially integrated the country’s “national languages” into its services and advertisements. In July 2016, while stuck in traffic in the chaotic shopping days leading up to Ramadan, I happened upon a huge billboard on top of one of Bamako’s taller buildings. The advertisement is laid out in Figure 10.4 above. Below a simple text announcing their new automated voice menu system, “Kuma” (“talk” in Manding), which works in five of Mali’s supposed national languages (French, Bamanan, Fulani, Songhay and Soninké), there was a small slogan written out in Bamanan:

(1) <Fóyi té wáriko nienabo ka témé Orange kan> ‘Nothing resolves the issue of money like Orange Money’

Fóyi té wáriko jéna ko témé Orange kán ‘Money

Nothing NEG money.affair resolve INF pass Orange on Money
This written form of Manding as seen in (1) clearly uses the Latin-script, but it is far from the official Malian government norm as well as the Linguistic norm. In short: it under-distinguishes phonemes, it variably marks graphemes; it doesn’t respect word boundaries; it ignores both pre- and post-1982 graphemic conventions; and it omits tone entirely.

How does one account for this? One way of responding would be to chalk this up to an incomplete or ineffective adoption of the normative orthography via official education channels. While this certainly plays a part, there have been decades of major post-independence literacy and bilingual education programs in Manding-speaking Mali (Dumont 1973; Skattum 2000; Traoré 2009). As such, I argue that a more complete account must also focus on this orthographic usage as a social practice.

Just as the usage of N’ko orthography on a Latin-based French form outlined above was a transparent metacommentary in favor of N’ko script, one’s graphic conventions can also be reflexive commentaries which index various stances. In a context where there is no shortage of people trained in official Bamanan orthography, the fact that the multinational telecommunications firm Orange fails to respect the official conventions is not simply a case of shoddy work; it is in fact part of the message. That is, choosing to not fully mark tone like linguists and choosing not to use IPA characters like government functionaries is itself a metacommentary. Orange, Malian T-shirt designers and other social actors are taking their standards from the normalized orthographies established by their clients and flaunting the normative standards at their disposal.

The two instances of orthographic behavior laid out above have important implications for our social practice understanding of orthography, demonstrating the crucial role of individuals over institutions in deciding orthography practice. The Manding case reveals that sufficient metacommendaries on a normative orthography through divergent usage (e.g., by Malian shop owners, Orange etc.) can lead to a shift or the emergence of a normalized or de facto model that circulates amongst users. It is institutions as individual creators of texts, and not as institutions per se, that establish orthographies. In this sense, an orthography is the accumulated sediment of actual instances of spelling a language. Such acts reflexively formulate a model of usage which may be understood socially as varying on a threshold between normative and normalized.

4. Orthography as Speech: Transcription vs. Registers

So far, our analysis of orthography as a social practice has only touched upon the purely graphic aspects of written discourse. However, orthography is not just a set of conventions for using a script to write; more precisely, it is a set of conventions for using a script to write an actual language. As such, one’s approach to language and languages is an important part of orthography development. To explore this point, it is useful to compare
and contrast the linguistic approaches undergirding the original formulations of the two dominant systems for writing Manding that arose following World War II and continue to compete today: State-sponsored Latin and Sulemaana Kanté’s N’ko.

4.1 Latin-Based Transcription

The Latin-based orthography’s application to Manding emerged in the nineteenth century at first in close connection with Christian missionaries and colonial agents, and later researchers within the rising fields of phonetics and linguistics (Pawliková-Vilhanová 2009; Tucker 1971). Founded in 1924, the International African Institute (IAI) stemmed directly from this close intertwining. Concerned with the “linguistic question” in light of increasingly dangerous contact between Western civilization and African minds (Smith 1934), the Institute’s benevolent members sought to revise the disparate practices of the nineteenth century into a “practical orthography of African languages” based on scientific principles (IILAC 1930). Their efforts appear to have had little direct influence on scripting practices in French West Africa (Dalby 1978; Houis 1957; Sebeni Kalan Kitabu (Syllabaire Bambara) 1936), but their alphabet reared its head in the region following independence through a series of conferences sponsored by UNESCO (Sow 1977; Sow and Abdulaziz 1993). The group’s 1966 meeting in Bamako was particularly important as it brought together experts and government representatives of West African countries to determine and unify the alphabets of six major languages, including Manding (Dumont 1973; Sow 1977; UNESCO 1966).

While both Mali and Guinea participated in the Manding working group of Bamako in 1966, the materials subsequently developed by their governments were for particular varieties of Manding. The Malian and Guinean representatives in the Manding working group of 1966 each describe their countries’ language policies in terms of bambara and malinke as opposed to Manding, despite each purporting to represent a common West African lingua franca (Sow 1977). And yet, the Bamako 1966 conference focused not on Bamanan or Maninka, but rather Manding. How to account for this dynamic? The Western linguistics tradition has grappled with Manding dialectology since at least the end of the eighteenth century (Van den Avenne 2015), so the divergence of Mali and Guinea’s paths cannot be attributed solely to their distinct sovereignties. Nonetheless, the 1966 Bamako conference was an important moment when their paths diverged along the lines of Maninka and Bamanan instead of forging a common Manding orthography or literary tradition and, as such, is worth inspecting more closely.

The 1966 UNESCO-sponsored meeting on the unification of national language alphabets in Bamako was meant to provide a forum for 31 experts and government representatives to determine and unify the alphabets of six West African languages (Dumont 1973; Sow 1977; UNESCO 1966).
Divided into teams that each focused on particular language, the overall objective was not the creation of orthographies per se, but rather “the elaboration of alphabets and their unification” (UNESCO 1966, 3). The task of Manding group—which included linguists from France, the United States, the USSR, as well as literacy services representatives from Guinea, Mali and Burkina Faso—therefore was to create an inventory of letters that would be both suitable for Manding phonemes and in line with the proposals for the other languages (Dalby 1978; UNESCO 1966).

The goal of the participants was not to define the contours of Manding; it was rather to catalogue the phonemic inventory of all the dialects across the language and dialect continuum (UNESCO 1966, 5). Linguists such as the Manding specialist Houis (1966) focused on explicating the concept of the phoneme and how to extract it from all of its contextual realizations. While this linguistic notion underlying orthography was duly exploited, its other half—the delineation of the language itself—was given short shrift. Thus, while Houis spoke of “the Manding language”, he did not engage with this entity (3). The Frenchman’s approach to language in this setting was distinctly ahistorical. The purpose of the conference was not to develop orthographies for sociohistorical languages but rather to come up with “unified transcriptions” (ibid, 1) that could serve the task of accurately representing synchronic phonemes. Working groups were advised not to take etymological considerations or “graphic habits” of language users into account and instead to aim to account for the phonemic inventories of all of the language’s varieties (ibid, 8). Houis’s own words in a 1964 letter to Sulemaana Kantè are telling in this sense: “[. . .] the choice of an orthography is a question of convention. What matters the most for me is to produce the most accurate description possible of maninkamorikan” (Vydrine 2001a, 136). What was most important was not creating an orthography for the Manding language, but rather a graphemic inventory that could take a synchronic snapshot of any dialect. This phonemicist ideology of orthography did not just lead to inventories of the sound categories of the Manding dialect continuum, however; it also provided the basis for regimenting what could be viewed as the Manding language into the dialect boxes of Maninka, Bamanan and Jula etc. Per this ideological view, Manding orthography is not a standard for writing a language—it is a system for dialect transcription. French and Arabic have writing conventions which are understood as right and wrong, high and low, and which do not reflect the variations of oral usage. Languages like Manding, however, are viewed as simply a collection of diverse dialects to be transcribed according to oral realizations, with no unified written register.

The conference did not result in an enduring standard orthography for Manding; neither Mali nor Guinea upheld the alphabet of Bamako 1966 as their official orthography. Guinea opted for an orthography that could use a standard AZERTY typewriter (Balenghien 1987). Mali, on the other hand, decided to unify their Manding orthography with that of their other national
languages. Burkina Faso and Côte d’Ivoire each devised their own related, albeit distinct, Latin-based orthographies beginning in the 1970s (M. Diallo 2001; Dumestre 1970; Dumestre and Retord 1981). In short, each country pursued promoting Manding along the lines of named national varieties: Bamanan, Maninka and Jula. Not only did this lead to a loss of economies of scale in terms of printing, but it also led to the irony that mutually intelligible spoken varieties use different orthographies depending on where they are printed (Calvet 1987, 220).

4.2 Sulemaana Kantè’s N’ko

The approach of Kantè to Manding and its orthography was radically distinct from the transcription ideology of Bamako 1966. Kantè directly engaged with the object that the linguists and specialists of Bamako 1966 would not approach: the Manding language itself, as an entity above and beyond the varieties and phonological systems that constitute it. In his letters to Maurice Houis regarding the Frenchman’s interest in mànínkamórirán, a Maninka variety from Kankan in Guinea, Kantè states that “Le dialecte malinké-morine diffère pas du malinké proprement dit que par quelque point, et voici les principaux [sic throughout]” “The mànínkamórí dialect does not differ from true Maninka except by a few points, and here are the major ones” (Vydrine 2001a, 138). From his perspective, mànínkamóri, while a recognizable dialect, it is not the language itself; it is a derivative of it.

Kantè also engaged with etymology and language use, recognizing the historical variations and social linkages across the sprawling Manding speech community. Again from his letters to Houis:

It must be noted that the letter <g> no longer exists in Manding, it is only used by races—assimilated at the height of the Manding empire—that can no longer pronounce the typically Manding group <gb> and that they replace by <j> or <g>, for example: jeman ‘white’, gón ‘gorilla’ which in Manding are gbèman and gbon.

(Vydrine 2001a, 138)

Not only did Kantè see phonemes (viz. “letters” in his usage here) as historically constituted, but he also delved into accounting for the sociohistorical process that gave rise to such a divergence (that is, the conquering of later assimilated races [viz. ethnic groups] during the spread of the Manding/Mali empire). Indeed, he dedicated an entire work towards documenting the phonological divergences from what he promoted as the true form of Manding (Kántè 2009). Kantè’s interest in proto-forms, however, was not limited to a linguist’s interest in etymology; he endeavored to uncover them because he wished to develop unifying conventions for writing the language. How, though, did Kantè conceptualize and lay out a case that could hold the Manding language within one orthography?
First and foremost, it is important to highlight that for Kantè, the proper name N’ko did not apply solely or even primarily to the writing system that he invented in 1949. According to Kantè, N’ko is the name of the Manding language itself. As he writes in his first N’ko grammar volume, a work that figures prominently for many students in N’ko curriculum:

*Màndèn’ nù yè kán’ mèn’ fò lá, ò lè N’ko’ di*

The language which the Mandings speak is N’ko.

(Kántè 2008b, 1)

Nonetheless, even in this first N’ko grammar book, Kantè does not shy away from addressing the diversity within the language:

*Màndèn’ nù lá N’ko’ yè kànbolón’ kùnba’á 4 nè di. Ò lù félè nin: (bàn-bàran, mànènka, mànènko, à ní jùla)*

The Mandings’ N’ko is 4 principal dialects. Take a look at them: (Bamanan, Maninka, Mandinka, and Jula).

(ibid, 1)

Here, we see that for Kantè, then, “N’ko” is the baptismal hypernym for what linguists conceptualize as the Manding language and dialect continuum (e.g., Vydrin 1995). Indeed, the term Manding (viz., màndènékàn) is a technical term that no speakers of Manding varieties actually use as their own glottonym. Kantè’s N’ko parallels linguists’ Manding, but unlike the linguistic label, his dubbing is also tied to an envisioned community.

Kantè’s N’ko orthography in this sense aims to be a tool that matches or calls into being not necessarily a *speech community* but rather a *language community* (Silverstein 1998). While a speech community is defined “by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs” (Gumperz 2001, 66), language communities are not definable by actual interaction. This is clearly demonstrated by the case of French being spoken in both France and West Africa, for instance. Regardless of the expansive reach of information communication technologies, the majority of French and West African citizens are not connected by regular and frequent interaction, and the same is true of many speakers of Manding. N’ko’s inventor does not claim that Manding is homogeneous; he clearly acknowledges that Manding is made up of at least four major varieties, which themselves can be divided into still smaller units. If Kantè’s alphabet respects the phonemic principal, how can written N’ko be all of the varieties at once?
4.3 Kantè’s “Clear Language” Register

Scholars have suggested that through their so-called “cultural fundamentalism” N’ko students aggressively take only Maninka to be correct in spelling and pronunciation (Amselle 1996, 825). Indeed, the forms metadiscursively prescribed in N’ko documents show evidence of being primarily congruent with Maninka (see Davydov 2012; Vydrine 1996; Vydrin 2010). But Kantè did not clumsily claim that only Maninka was appropriate for writing Manding. Just as he historically anchored the baptismal title “N’ko” for both Manding and its script, he sought to call into being a historically rooted register that would act as a mediating standard in his pedagogical language works. Registers are not simply different ways of saying the same thing, but rather are “cultural models of action” within a language that are identifiable by: linguistic features, enactable pragmatic values and a set of users (Agha 2007, 169). Within N’ko circles, a register has been taken up by a community of teachers and learners who produce and circulate the linguistic features and pragmatic values that Kantè developed.

Kantè laid out a linear progression for learning N’ko and even developed a series of N’ko degrees that could be earned based off of the mastery of different subject matter (Vydrin 2012, 73). One of the most important domains in the study of N’ko is that of grammar, or what Kantè terms kàngbe (አአንብ):

Because mastering a language in writing is very hard, experience has shown that every language has its rules. Grasping a language’s rules facilitates knowing its writing. As such, people created explanatory books. These books clarify the language properly, remove blemishes from it, and make knowing the language much easier! The name of the book of established rules of a language is ‘kàngbe’.

(Kânte 2008a, 4–5)

Here, Kantè is clearly developing both a technical term, kàngbe, which is best glossed as “grammar”, and the basis for a standard language register. Kàngbe is a tonally compact compound noun made up of the noun kán ‘language’ and the polysemous qualitative verb gbé, which can variably be glossed as ‘white’, ‘clean’, ‘clear’ (Bailleul 2007). While Kantè makes his vision of logical and rule-bound language explicit in the above quote, his
term further naturalizes the idea of grammar as something that serves to clarify and order a language.

On one hand, Kantè’s theorization clashes with modern theories of language; he relies heavily on the idea that a language has a true or correct form. While this position is antithetical to modern linguistic approaches to grammar, within it lies a sophisticated understanding of languages as inevitably composed of distinct registers. Indeed, just as with the proper name, N’ko, Kantè’s term does not seem to have been chosen randomly. The term *kângbe* figures prominently in the monograph dictionary and grammar of French colonial linguist Delafosse (1929, 22–23):

En dehors de tous ces dialectes plus ou moins localisés, il s’est constitué une sorte de ‘mandingue commun’, auquel les indigènes ont donné le nom de Kangbe (langue blanche, langue claire, langue facile) et qui est compris et parlé par la grande majorité de la population, en plus du dialecte spécial à chaque région. C’est sous la forme de ce parler commun que se fait l’expansion de langue mandingue. C’est lui principalement qu’adoptent les étrangers et qui tend de plus en plus à devenir langue internationale, si l’on peut dire ainsi, de l’Afrique Occidentale. Il a ceci de particulier qu’il répudie toutes les formes et les locutions proprement dialectales et n’use que des expressions ou tout au moins usitées dans le plus grand nombre des dialectes.

These more or less localized dialects aside, a sort of ‘common Manding’ has formed that the indigenous have given the name *kangbe* (white language, clear language, easy language) and which is understood and spoken by the great majority of the population in addition to the special dialect of each region. It is in the form of this common variety that the expansion of the Manding language is happening. It is this one that foreigners typically adopt and is tending to become the international language, if one can put it that way, of West Africa. It has the particularity of rejecting all the truly dialectal forms and locutions it uses only the expressions of or commonly used in the largest number of dialects.

This description of *kângbe* is confirmed in Sanogo’s (2003) tracing of the genesis of the Jula ethnicity in Burkina Faso around the Manding variety of Jula. In fact, Sanogo, an ethnic Jula himself, asserts that “Ethnic Jula continue to designate the linguistic forms that they use at home as *kangbè* or *kangê*” (*ibid*, 373).

Kantè’s selection, then, of the compound noun *kângbe* serves to tie his prescriptive grammar and its standard register to an already circulating historically named lingua franca register. What counts as *kângbe* may be largely congruent with a particular Manding dialect (the so-called *Mânikamórî* of Kankan), but it is nowhere near a *Mânikamórî* orthography. It is rather the basis for a written standard language register that Kantè sought to anchor
for the Manding public that he envisioned. Kantè therefore clearly intuited an important lesson for orthography developers: an ideal orthography for a language community encompasses the divergent grammatical codes that have a social life as one language, while legitimizing its own linguistic form and value amongst the users of these diverse codes.

4.4 The Metapragmatics of N’ko

The case of Sulemaana Kantè’s N’ko holds other interesting lessons about orthography and standardization for minoritized languages in general. It is not simply that Kantè crafted a linguistically sound transcription system or that he created a politically palatable compromise dialect (Unseth 2015); he also sought and successfully cultivated locally compelling language ideologies which value and prescribe the kàngbe register above others. While N’ko writers typically use a register that is quite distinct from the lingua franca registers of the streets of Bamako, Bobo-Dioulasso and Abidjan, new students of N’ko rarely object to the linguistic forms that they read and are instructed to pen out. This can in part be attributed to their uptake of Kantè’s own conceptualization of Manding, writing and kàngbe. N’ko users today, for instance, often decry the prevalence of “public mistakes” ( modelBuilder, fòdoba fili’ lù) in Manding speech.11 For instance, the following are my type-setting and translation of handwritten remarks prepared in advance for a 2012 radio show by one N’ko teacher based in Bobo-Dioulasso:


You know that we say certain thing with mistakes. We call these ‘public mistakes’. We’re not singling out one person; everyone speaks with some mistakes [. . .] But this is how we understand things. If a language is written in its true form, then it is written with its rules. In the street though, one simply says that which is makes mutual comprehension.
easier. It’s not just N’ko [viz. Manding], all languages are this way. Take French, it’s like that. Take Arabic, it’s like that too. We [therefore] are calling all people—schooled or unschooled—to come study it.

This common act of judging whether a form of language is correct or not is a token of *metapragmatic* typification (Agha 2007, 150–154). Such acts—when people “refer to and predicate about language in use” (Wortham 2001, 71)—are instances of larger valorization schemes or *metapragmatic stereotypes* that exist about languages and their registers, and which model norms of use.

Kantè and N’ko teachers today make compelling appeals to notions of Manding “verbal hygiene” (Cameron 1995) that serve to both harness and solidify a positive metapragmatic stereotype of a particular variety (that of màñinkamorikán) while also giving birth to a distinct register that cannot be reduced to the dialect from which it stems. This move exists both implicitly in the grammar books that are central to N’ko classrooms and study sessions, but is also quite explicit at other times. For instance, in his treatise on Manding dialectology, “The Language’s Rules: or the Rules of N’ko” (2009), Kantè dedicates a series of pages to what he calls “public shortcomings”, where, in a table of 51 common expressions, he lays out what he labels as “improper speech” (*fɔ́kojuu*) alongside what he prescribes as their “proper speech” (*fɔ́kojíman*) equivalent. It is clear, then, that N’ko’s inventor knows how people speak in daily life, but he simply views these norms as flawed and not appropriate for this “age of writing” (p. 26). The logic and appeal of Kantè’s conceptualization to many Manding speakers is evident in the N’ko classrooms of Bamako, Abidjan and Bobo-Dioulasso. In all these locales, which I have visited repeatedly between 2012–2016, students express little to no qualms about the fact that the linguistic forms that they, myself and their instructor use orally in the classroom are not those penned in the pages of their proudly upheld mother-tongue education books.

I do not mean to suggest here that all Manding speakers accept and use N’ko, nor that orthography development and standardization efforts must adopt the same strategy as Sulemaana Kantè students and N’ko students today. Indeed, the linguistic strategy of N’ko activists is not without controversy, as some opponents of the movement in Mali like to insist that N’ko in fact is not Bamanan, but rather a foreign language unto itself. Ultimately, however, it is not the level of purity but rather the metapragmatic scheme of valorization that better contributes to a register’s use. Developing a successful orthography for minoritized languages must go beyond transcription and engage with register phenomena of the language community. That is, it is peoples’ attitudes about a register (which we can assess through metapragmatic discourse) that potentially motivate individuals to use or learn it. As the case of Manding orthography illustrates, this can be done through attending to registers and their metapragmatic stereotypes as already present in the language community or by attempting to call into being a new scheme of valorization around a register.
5. Conclusion

Through an examination of the role of social actors and their language ideologies in relation to orthographic development and standardization of Manding, we have seen how orthography, as a way of graphically representing speech through choices in script and conventions, is necessarily wrapped up in sociopolitical debates. As such, the use of an orthography provides a metacommentary about the orthography itself and potentially establishes a sociopolitical stance for the user. I have outlined how orthography and writing necessarily engages with the fractionally divergent registers that make up any language. While opting for the de facto or normalized standard register of a language when developing an orthography is, in general, sound advice, we have seen that this alone does not guarantee its acceptance, as the case of N’ko usage in Bamako demonstrates. A register of a language is always subject to distinct valorization schemes, such as N’ko users’ prescriptive valorization of certain spoken and written practices over what is typically regarded as standard in Bamako and elsewhere.

The tools of linguistic analysis provide one approach to orthography and standardization, but as I have shown here, spurring the adoption and use of a standard often ultimately has little to do with efficiency or learnability, and more to do with thresholds of normativity and metapragmatic stereotypes. Proponents of minoritized language standardization or promotion ignore the connections between orthography, literacy and these phenomena at their own peril. This is particularly the case in postcolonial contexts like Manding-speaking West Africa, where seemingly simple choices about script, graphic conventions and linguistic register point to unique sociopolitical positions and the histories behind them.

Notes

1. The word “Manding” is a Western adaptation of the word “Màndén,” the name of both a place and former West African polity now commonly referred to as the Mali Empire that at its apogee encompassed much of modern-day Guinea and Mali, primarily between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries (Levtzion 1973; Simonis 2010, 41–54). In terms of Latin-based transcription of Manding, I follow the de facto official phonemic orthography synthesizing the various national standards that linguists use while also marking tone. Grave diacritics mark low tones and acute diacritics mark high tones. An unmarked vowel carries the same tone as the last marked vowel before it. The tonal article on nouns is noted by an apostrophe but not in citation form.

2. Henceforth <Sulemaana Kantè>, ignoring tonal diacritics and using <ê> in place of <ɛ>, except in citation (e.g., Kanté, 2008). I have opted to write Kantè’s first name as Sulemaana given that it is written as such by Kantè himself in the majority of his works that I have in my personal archive (see Vydrin 2012, 63 for a discussion).

3. Ethnographic fieldwork includes three summers in West Africa primarily between the cities of Bobo-Dioulasso, Bamako and Kankan, as well as sustained research around New York City and Philadelphia. My research also draws
on my past experience as a US Peace Corps Volunteer based in Jula-speaking Burkina Faso between 2009 and 2011, where one of my major projects was running post-literacy (alphabétisation) trainings in Jula.

4. The clerical classes of Islam, for instance, have long had similar understandings of literacy’s power (Chejne 1969).

5. In drawing on Agha’s notion of “thresholds of normativity”, I discuss orthographies as being more normalized or normative. Similar terminology, normalization and normativization, is also used in the Catalan tradition of language policy scholarship (Aracil 1982) in a manner that mirrors the classic distinction between corpus and status planning (Kloss 1969). Agha’s usage refers to how social actors themselves interact with models of behavior. Applied to language policy literature, this distinction more closely parallels that between de facto and de jure (Schiffman 1996).

6. Mamadi is almost surely capable of writing in the Latin script, or he would potentially not have known what to do with the form. Additionally, given his generation and background as someone who grew up near Kankan, it is nearly guaranteed that he is literate in the Arabic script from having attended at least basic-level Quranic school.

7. This tradition of affirming distinct national varieties while insisting on their transnational character has continually been upheld by the countries’ linguists. A Malian researcher stated in 1986 that “[w]e find Baman (Manding) in Guinea, Senegal, Burkina Faso and Côte d’Ivoire” (Ouane 1991, 101), while Guinea’s representative at a 1981 UNESCO conference affirmed that “Maninka is a common language to Guinea, Mali, Côte d’Ivoire and the Gambia” (Doualamou 1981, 174).

8. All translations in this chapter are mine unless otherwise noted.

9. Note this attitude towards graphic habits would exclude not only previously learned Latin-based orthographies but the older traditions in terms of popular usage of Ajami and N’ko.

10. Though it is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is important to note that for Kantè, N’ko is not bis baptismal name; it is rather an archaic name for the language that was used as far back as the founder of the Mali Empire, Sunjata Keïta in the 13th century (Kantè 2007, 7).

11. This notion of “public mistakes” can be traced back to Kantè’s writings on the issue of “public shortcomings (in Jë Fëdoba tânbon’ ni) (Kantè 2009, 26).

References


Unesco Regional Office for Education in Africa. 1985. African Community Languages and Their Use in Literacy and Education: A Regional Survey. Dakar, Senegal: UNESCO.


