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Weth, C. and K. Juffermans (eds.) (2018). *The Tyranny of Writing: Ideologies of the Written Word*. London: Bloomsbury. 240 pages; ISBN: 978147427; £26.09 (pbk); £85.50 (hbk); £82.08 (e-book).

This provocatively-entitled book takes as its starting point Saussure's denouncement of writing as exerting tyrannical power *over* while nevertheless remaining inferior *to* speech; it was of course the primacy of speech which Saussure (1916) recognised in his famous model of the linguistic sign, in which a sound image was united with a concept, these conceptualised by Saussure as combining to leave a psychological impression on the senses. Saussure was irritated with writing on the understanding that, despite having been produced with the purpose of merely representing speech, writing then contrived to interfere with the dynamic processes of linguistic change while providing for linguists a distorted view of how languages are structured.

Saussure's frustration with writing is nevertheless fully engaged with only in the editors' preface and introduction, and in the opening chapter of this volume, written by Florian Coulmas, though Manuela Böhm in Chapter Four subsequently returns to Saussure briefly. In the preface, the editors explain that the 'tyranny of writing' in their title is a metaphor through which ideologies of writing in society can be explored. They add that 'tyrannical' ideologies so examined in this volume include standardisation, prescriptivism, reification of class distinctions, and denial of access to education, but also acknowledge that some of their contributors had expressed ambivalence towards the conceptual metaphor of writing as 'tyranny', and had resisted it in their chapters. Unfortunately, this ambivalence does seem to impact the book's overall coherence, a point I will return to later.

First, though, with regard to Saussure's claim that writing is essentially tyrannical (the notion that inspired the volume), an erudite rebuttal is offered by Florian Coulmas in Chapter One. Building on arguments he had earlier presented in a widely acclaimed treatment of the topic (Coulmas 2003), Coulmas explains that had Saussure considered writing systems not based on alphabetical principles more closely, he may have recognised that writing can supplement rather than just replace speech. Drawing on a careful reading of

history, Coulmas argues persuasively that it is rather inevitable that writing, together with other forms of technology, should impact language. While rejecting the notion that writing is inherently tyrannical, Coulmas highlights the need for a greater understanding of the relationship between speech and the written word; he suggests that linguists might explore the effects of writing more closely, for example by comparing written and unwritten languages, and issues such as standardisation, lexical borrowing, spelling and pronunciation. In a sense, this is pointing the way towards the rest of the volume.

Ensuing chapters that relate well to the metaphor of the ‘tyranny of writing’ include those that focus on the marginalisation of minority language users and users of less prestigious language forms. Indeed, a heartening aspect of this focus is that accounts are provided of marginalised groups finding ways to circumvent the ‘tyrannies’ of standardised writing practices, in the process managing to succeed to some extent in the attempt to express their own identities. These accounts include Daniel Bunčić’s analysis of birch-bark letters produced in vernacular orthography in medieval Novgorod, in what is now northern Russia (Chapter Two). Bunčić suggests that these birch-bark letters, which have been described due to their brevity, subject matter and use of in-group spelling conventions as resembling 12th century SMS text messages, facilitated the development, expression and sharing of a local identity that was highly distinctive in relation to that of the dominant culture of the remote capital, where standard orthography produced on more conventional writing surfaces held sway. Another fascinating example of the written standard being subverted in the expression of cultural identity is provided by Xuan Wang (Chapter Ten), who explores the linguistic landscape of a heritage site in central China, where a highly endangered minority language is spoken. The heritage signs are written in the local *fangyan* (dialect), which is otherwise very rarely seen; these signs thus provide the *fangyan* and its speakers an (albeit limited) public legitimacy.

However, not all the chapters that explore themes of language and power, in relation to the ‘tyranny of writing’, provide equally strong arguments. In Chapter Seven, for example, Harshana Rambukwella deconstructs a famous speech from 2011, which was given to a privileged audience in London by the privately-educated Sri Lankan cricketer, Kumar Sangakkara, and contrasts the positive reception this speech garnered with the negative reception (including ridicule) that an example of code-switching into Sinhala, produced by another famous Sri Lankan cricketer (one from a modest rural background), Sanath Jayasuriya, attracted; this code-switching occurred during English cricket commentary. There are ironies in this contrast which Rambukwella highlights, including Jayasuriya being the brand ambassador for a state-sponsored ‘Speak English Our Way’ campaign (i.e. a campaign celebrating and promoting the vernacular); furthermore, in Sangakkara’s speech, Jayasuriya, as a pioneering hero on the cricket field, is praised fulsomely by name but in language that, reflecting the traditions of cricket writing, appropriates colonial discourse, in Rambukwella’s analysis. Rambukwella goes on to suggest that, besides positioning himself as part of the elite club he was speaking to, Sangakkara was aiming through his speech to sanitise the image of his country as a site of multicultural tolerance, post-civil war. This may have been the case. However, particularly since Sangakkara’s speech is so recent and received so much attention at the time, multiple other readings of it are available. It is quite

feasible, for example, that Sangakkara may have been using rhetorical devices and colonial cricket discourse quite deliberately in preparing his audience for a climax that Rambukwella makes no reference to; the BBC reported the next day that Sangakkara had used the speech to attack corruption in his home country (Pathirana 2011). Moreover, he did so not in print but through delivering a high profile speech to a live audience, and with some degree of skill; contemporary published accounts of Sangakkara's performance used expressions such as 'spellbound' to describe the reaction of his listeners. So to what extent can the speech, though likely very largely scripted but drawing on an element of schooling in the ancient art of rhetoric, be seen merely as the 'verbalisation of a written code', as Rambukwella (p. 113), describes it?

Despite these reservations, this chapter and the others discussed above, are generally very well-written, highly scholarly, carefully-edited pieces. However, unfortunately the same cannot be said for everything in the volume. In Chapter Three, for example, Joop van der Horst, with the help of a translator, attempts to summarise a whole book he has written on standards and the rise and fall of a European language culture, but there are problems with the execution. These extend to the writing itself, in which there are numerous superfluities. For instance, we are informed of a European language culture: 'fading away, evaporating, ceasing to exist. In order to make room for another new language culture, undoubtedly, but for the time being it's so young that not very much can be said about it yet' (p. 49). A more serious issue is that the chapter appears to generalise to too great an extent with insufficient literature support. In an acknowledgement at the end of the chapter, the author does refer the reader to his book (published in 2008 in Dutch) for the original sources, but this is of little immediate help. I would have liked to have known more, for example, about the claim that there was a 'tyrannical' resistance, as standards developed in European languages, to lexical as well as grammatical influence 'from outside' (p. 51). I had understood, based on sources such as Baugh and Cable (2002), that the grammarians in England in the 18th century, for example, were more bothered about grammar than lexis (which was constantly being enriched by other languages), so a supporting citation here would have been useful. In terms of the overall purpose of this volume, I thought this chapter also missed an opportunity. The development of printing presses played a huge role in the standardising of European languages, for example in spelling, and more could have been made of that here. There could also have been more on the invention of the telephone and phonograph in the 1870s; these inventions acted in a sense against the tyranny of written standards, and there could have been an elaborated discussion of this point, perhaps provided, if not by the author, by the editors in a postscript.

Deeper linking to the central metaphor provided by the title of the book would also have been welcome elsewhere. Such linking is explicit in some chapters, for example Chapter Four, which provides a very interesting account of tyranny related to orthography in 19th century France. However, 'tyranny' in several other chapters is referred to almost as an afterthought or becomes a rather slippery concept that is not fully engaged with, perhaps since, as noted above and acknowledged in the preface, several contributors had expressed ambivalence towards the central metaphor of writing as 'tyranny' designed to bind the volume together. Moreover, the self-declared stance of the editors, outlined in their preface, was to use Occam's razor tyrannically, i.e. to avoid

more complex explanations in favour of simpler ones where possible. Yet, given the complexity of the sociolinguistic issues the volume addresses, more extensive analytic commentary, perhaps in a concluding chapter pulling the different threads together, would have been a welcome means of supporting overall coherence.

Nevertheless, despite this issue of the volume's relatively limited overall coherence, distinguished individual chapters, such as those by Coulmas and Bunčić, will deservedly attract the attention of linguists interested in exploring relationships between writing and speech, and language and power in society, at different points in history including the near present, and in different parts of the world; the book's geographical range is impressive, including contributions from China and Africa. However, there are omissions in other ways; for instance, I was surprised to see almost nothing on gender anywhere. I would have thought that there could have been space for a chapter on a topic such as women overcoming the 'tyranny' of male-dominated book publishing, for example.

References

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