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Beware, Grammar Police: Grammar and Spelling (Norms) as Positioning Tools on the Internet

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Die Alltagskommunikation in digitalen Medien steht immer wieder im Mittelpunkt sprachkritischer Debatten um Korrektheit und Kreativität, um Normen und Normabweichungen, um fehlende oder vorhandene Schreibkompetenzen. Im Beitrag wird die Perspektive gewechselt und sprachliche Normen, mit einem Fokus auf Grammatik und Orthografie, durch die Augen der Nutzer: innen und somit genuin akteur: innenbezogen betrachtet. Dabei wird untersucht, wie Nutzer: innen digitaler Medien selbst durch sprachkritische Äusserungen metasprachlich auf grammatische und orthographische Normen verweisen bzw. diese interaktiv aushandeln. Die explorative Analyse im Beitrag macht deutlich, dass solche Äusserungen nicht nur ein ausgeprägtes Bewusstsein für bzw. Interesse an sprachliche Normen belegen, sondern dass die Bezugnahme auf Grammatik- oder Rechtschreibnormen darüber hinaus auch ein Mittel sozialer Positionierung sein kann.

Keywords:

Normen, Grammatik-Polizei, Orthographie, Positionierung, Meta-Diskurs, digitale Kommunikation.

Keywords:

norms, grammar police, orthography, positioning, metadiscourse, digital communication.

1. Introduction¹

Digital communication often makes itself the subject of discussion. Or, put differently: digital communication, the linguistic features attributed to it, the practices carried out through it and the positioning associated with it, are regularly also the content of digital communication in a metapragmatic sense. This is especially, but not exclusively, true for questions regarding (in)correctness – and related norm issues – of digital language uses: The fears about language decay, allegedly triggered by everyday language on the Internet, are widespread and well known (cf. e.g., Thurlow 2006 or Brommer 2007). Although numerous linguistic studies (cf. for a pioneering study in this regard Dürscheid et al. 2010 or for a more recent one Busch 2021) have demonstrated that digital writing does not necessarily have a negative impact on writing in school, these fears persist, especially in lay discourse. In this article, I will, however, focus on the metadiscursive negotiation concerning grammatical and orthographic norms amongst users on social media platforms

¹ I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for their very helpful and appreciative comments on an earlier version of this article.



and the positioning practices carried out with it. I will start with two introductory examples that illustrate the course of my exploratory study and subsequently I will introduce the key terminology as well as the methodological approach.

Fig. 1 shows a tweet from a person having prepared the traditional Swiss dish Raclette that – as the person claims – can also be enjoyed alone. The picture accompanying the tweet, however, raises some questions, mainly from Swiss Twitter users, concerning the type of cheese. Several people offer their opinion, amongst others a person that disapprovingly identifies the type of cheese as *Schmelzkäse aus der Plastikfolie* (*processed cheese in plastic wrap*). Referring to the typographical error in the word *Schmezzllzkäse* the tweet initiator answers as follows: *Go back home, practise spelling and then feel free to come back, before that I'm afraid, I can't really take you seriously.*



Sure, you can make raclette with yourself. There!

Question from Switzerland: What kind of cheese is that?

processed cheese in plastic wrap

Go back home, practise spelling and then feel free to come back, before that I'm afraid, I can't really take you seriously.

Oh, come on... that was mean

Fig 1: Processed cheese in plastic wrap (Screenshot Twitter, 2022-01-03)

The example, as one of many similar ones in German speaking² online communication, shows how the indication of spelling mistakes is a means of invalidating someone else’s opinion (see chapter 3.1):³ One does not seem to be entitled to express one’s views on a subject if this is not done with flawless – meaning normative or standard – orthography. Of course, the context of the example here is a playful one (also demonstrated by the following answer accompanied by the cat GIF) and as seriously as Swiss people take their cheese, the presented sequence does not actually reveal a grave conflict, let alone involve invective speech as is otherwise often found at the root of these kind of spelling norm discussions on social media (cf. Albert & Hahn 2015: 166).

It is important, however, that this is by no means a new phenomenon; rather, discussions about norms in general and spelling norms in specific go far back in digital communication, in fact they have always been a central aspect of linguistic research into it (cf. Weingarten 1997 or Schlobinski 2000).⁴ Fig. 2, a screenshot from 2010, may serve as an example. The initiator of the post calls on the other users to follow spelling rules, even on Facebook. Two things are evident: First, Facebook is evaluated differently than other writing environments, as evidenced by the use of the dialectal word *only* (in the German original expressed by the dialectal word *no*). What is especially striking about this example is, secondly, the fact that the post is written in Swiss German dialect. In the comment section, this leads to the question – ratified as a good question in the following comment – of whether there are spelling rules for dialect at all.



Fig. 2: It is only Facebook! (Screenshot Facebook, 2010-02-16)

² Although this is certainly not a language-specific phenomenon, the data for my study is predominantly German (except for the memes, as they are often in English even in German-speaking contexts as this increases their chance of going viral).

³ Moreover, it is also an interesting example for positioning practices via food preferences as well as nationally conditioned food sovereignty. For a linguistic examination of food communities and food ideologies cf. Rüdiger & Mühleisen 2020 or Karrebæk 2021.

⁴ Švelch & Sherman (2018: 2392) show that the term 'Grammar Nazi' first appeared in English-speaking internet discussions in the 1990s.

The example thus shows that there is not only an awareness of (spelling) norms in digital writing but also an urge to discuss them. However, it becomes equally clear that these norms seem to be subject to different evaluation criteria and they also seem to be relative: there may be *a little bit of spelling* in dialect or on Facebook but probably not as much as in standard varieties or in other contexts. After all, it is only Facebook!

Based on these introductory examples, I will now proceed to the main part of my article. The case study presented therein is located at the intersection of media linguistics, grammar, and sociolinguistics, and links to research on language norms and appropriateness, language criticism, but also language reflection including digital metapragmatics. Thus, in a first step, a terminological foundation for the subsequent empirical case study is laid out (see chapter 2). Based on this, I examine different positioning practices linked to grammar and spelling (norms) in digital communication (see chapter 3). To that effect, I conduct an exploratory case study with empirical data from different sources (see chapter 3.1), which I categorized according to the different strategies used within them. Finally, I discuss the empirical findings resulting from the study by taking recourse to the terminological basis (see chapter 4) and draw conclusions, identifying some connecting points and questions.

2. Terminological foundation

2.1 Norms as perceived through the user's eyes

In the first decade of the new millennium, there was a very actively conducted debate in German linguistics (see footnote 1) about 'norms', 'deviations', 'mistakes', 'appropriateness', 'competence', and other similar terms from and around this lexical field (cf. e.g. Brommer 2007; Ágel 2008; Schneider 2008; Hennig 2009; Hennig & Müller 2009; Klein 2010; Dürscheid 2012; Hennig 2012; Feilke 2015 to name but a few). On the one hand, this was due to the increasing popularity of popular-science language guides, which seemed to meet the need of the language-interested public.⁵ On the other hand, the rise of digital communication technologies and the practices carried out with them played their part according to the argumentation in some of these publications (cf. e.g., Brommer 2007, Dürscheid & Frick 2016).

However, linguistics has made its contribution to the debate, not only through empirically based studies of linguistic phenomena (cf. Dürscheid et al. 2010, Busch 2021) and theoretical considerations concerning the above-named terms (see above, but also Eichinger & Kallmeyer 2005; Konopka & Strecker 2009;

⁵ Particularly famous – and therefore targeted – were the ones written by Bastian Sick to name but one example. Sick's books were repeatedly subjected to critical examination by linguists: For example, an article by Vilmos Ágel (2008) read "Bastian Sick und die Grammatik. Ein ungleiches Duell", Jan Georg Schneider (2008) wrote about "Das Phänomen Zwiebelbisch. Bastian Sicks Sprachkritik und die Rolle der Linguistik" and Tereick (2014) was "Sick of Sickness".

Schneider 2013; Arendt & Schäfer 2015 and others) but also through metadiscursive⁶ analyses of said debates. In this article I would therefore like to take a different perspective and look at norms, grammar, and orthography through the eyes of the users, by including a genuinely agent-related perspective (cf. also Albert & Hahn 2015 or Lukač 2018). So, in other words, I will investigate how users themselves metalinguistically refer to 'norms' and/or interactively negotiate them; a phenomenon that, according to Arendt & Kiesendahl (2015: 159), is systematically detectable in the Web 2.0⁷ and forms a relevant part of digital language use. Such norm-related utterances not only reveal a strong awareness of and urge to discuss linguistic norms and their (ideologically coined) relevance, but they also make them reconstructable by explicitly or implicitly referring to them. However, the norms underlying (or rather referred to in) such statements are often quite vague.⁸

Die meisten Menschen haben eine ungefähre Vorstellung von sprachlichen Normen, die der alltäglichen Kommunikation zugrunde liegen, empfinden es aber oft als schwierig, diese explizit zu formulieren. Viele Versuche, die Norm zu erfassen, blieben daher allgemein und vage.⁹ (Arendt & Kiesendahl 2014: 103).

The introductory example (see Fig. 2) illustrates this nicely by stating that there is *certainly a little bit of orthography in dialect as well* and the next example (see Fig. 3) also points in a similar direction. The depicted post from the YouTube comments section claims in a supposedly ironic way that knowledge of norms – and not only language norms – is usually selective; however, this should not prevent anyone from correcting someone else should they discover something that needs to be corrected in their opinion. The analogical example from the field of mathematics is drawn on to make clear that even a low level of knowledge – respectively vague knowledge – about a topic is sufficient to that end. This example thus already indicates that this form of language criticism is by no means only about linguistic norms but is rather based on affective positioning and attributions and the underlying ideologies. The functions of this practice go far beyond the content-related demand for standard-compliant writing, as I will show in the analysis (see chapter 3.)

⁶ Following an understanding of 'metacommunication' (or 'metalinguistic') as communication about communication or talking about language (cf. Spitzmüller 2022: 267), 'metadiscourse' means talking about discourses. For a definition of the term 'metapragmatic' see footnote 10.

⁷ The key feature of the Web 2.0 being participation (as opposed to just being a source of information); for a detailed discussion cf. Androutsopoulos 2010.

⁸ As Woolard & Schieffelin (1994: 70) note, such limited awareness of linguistic structures and their varying degrees of reflection also lead to generalizations on the part of users, which in turn can affect the phenomena themselves (see below).

⁹ Translation: *Most people have a rough idea of linguistic norms that underlie everyday communication, but often find it difficult to state them explicitly. Many attempts to capture the norm have therefore remained general and vague.*

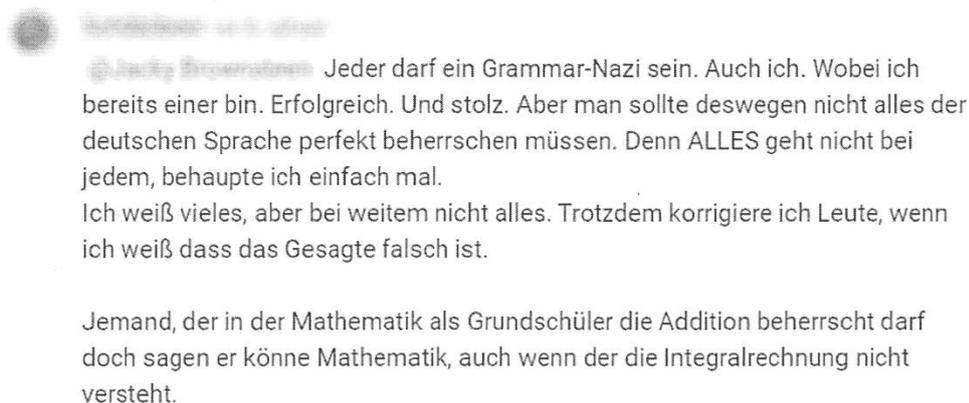


Fig. 3: Successful and proud (Screenshot YouTube, 2022-01-15)

2.2 Grammar Nazis – Orthography Police

The example just quoted brings me to the ethno-categorical labelling of such forms of metapragmatic language criticism.¹⁰ In the example above, the user describes themselves – and others who carry out such practices – as a 'Grammar Nazi'. For obvious reasons I prefer the expression 'Grammar Police' (also used in the title of this article) to the term Grammar Nazi, which is, as can be seen in Fig. 4, also increasingly criticised by the users themselves due to the *very strange positive nazi affiliation*. It thus loses relevance as an ethno-categorical label. Whereas one of the commenting users prefers the term *comma fucker*, the other refers to him- or herself as an *orthography pedant* – which is, by the way, visually marked as a correction by the crossed-out word *nazis* and thus graphically fitted into the discourse content.¹¹

¹⁰ Supplementary to Arendt & Kiesendahl (2014, 2015) I will not only speak of "sprachkritische Äusserungen" (*critical language comments*) but rather classify these kinds of language practices as genuinely metapragmatic. In the sense of Spitzmüller (2013: 264), this means that linguistic actions in turn refer to linguistic actions, also asking how agents reflect on and conceptualize communicative action.

¹¹ The example in Fig. 4 also shows that there are indeed grammar police who think they have extensive knowledge of language norms and think very carefully about the kind of norms they criticize. It is observable though that the display of norm knowledge and competence varies broadly, compared e.g. with the example in Fig. 3.

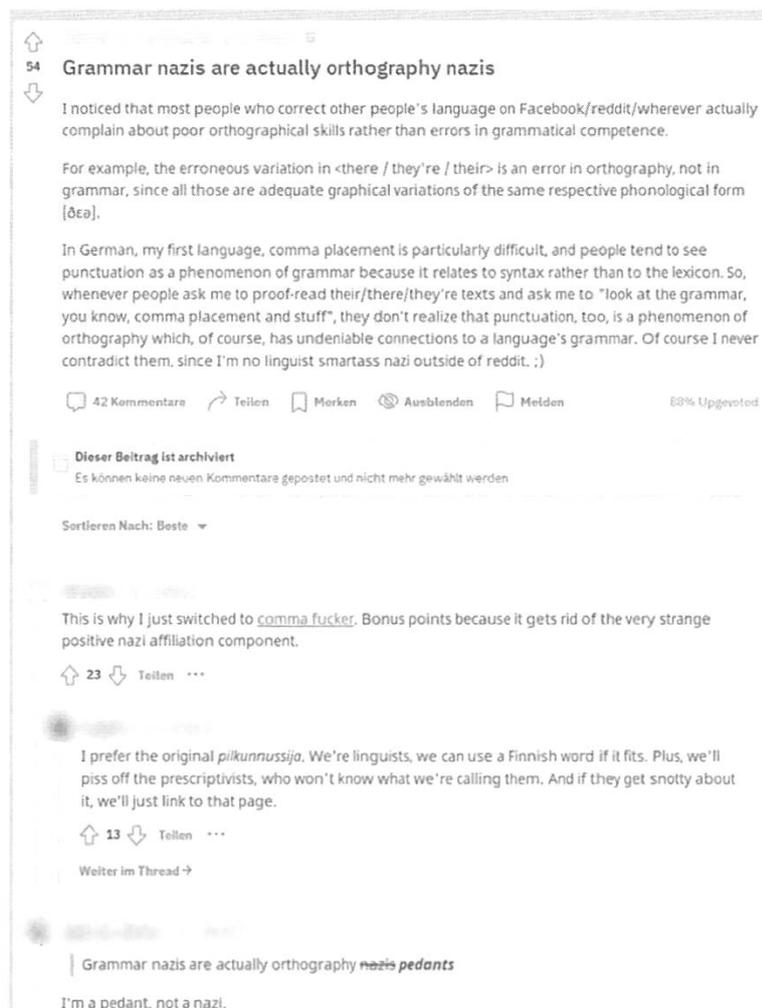


Fig. 4: Orthography pedants (Screenshot reddit 2022-02-07)

The user's observation that it is mainly orthographic norms that are corrected in such contexts, however, is also consistent with the (so far quite sparse) German-language specific linguistic research on this phenomenon.¹² For instance, Bahlo et al. (2016: 283) write that orthography is the most popular subject of such debates, since the self-proclaimed guardians of norms can always refer to the code, i.e., the official set of rules.

Nevertheless, in the following I will refer to these practices as 'grammar policing'¹³ as the goal of my case study is not so much to reconstruct the understanding of specific grammatical or orthographic¹⁴ norms by the users.

¹² Švelch & Sherman (2018: 2392) also emphasize the lack of research into this practice, it is therefore not just a German-language desideratum.

¹³ Meletis (2018) suggests the expression 'orthographic shaming'. Although I find the term very fitting in many respects, it does not adequately describe the hypothesis put forward in this article as shaming is only one of the functions of 'grammar policing'. However, it is definitely a form of 'grassroots prescriptivism' as "initiated by lay members of the general public, especially in contrast to top-down prescriptivism that is carried out institutionally" (Lukač 2018: 5).

¹⁴ Both areas do indeed play a role, as well as stylistic choices, so I use 'grammar' as an (admittedly vague) umbrella term – thereby matching the users' vague understanding of norms.

Rather, I am interested in the way in which referring to said norms can be a means of social positioning (cf. also Arendt & Kiesendahl 2014: 106); not only to position oneself higher in relation to the interaction partners, as Arendt & Kiesendahl (*Ibid.*) state – that is certainly one of the functions, but by far not the only one – but also by taking a certain (political) stance (see below). Even if, as Bahlo et al. (2016: 283) note, compliance with standard norms is the main requirement content-wise, the communicative functions of these requirements are manifold. The German-language specific research on grammar police practices mentioned so far (in particular Hammel 2013; Arendt & Kiesendahl 2014, 2015; Albert & Hahn 2015 and Bahlo et al. 2016) also discuss several of these functions but they have not been categorized systematically to date. I will present a first attempt at this in this article by means of an explorative ethnographic study (see chapter 3.1) which will be theoretically framed by positioning theories. The basis for the latter will be laid out in the following section.

2.3 Digital positioning practices

As already mentioned above, I conceive 'grammar policing' as a language critical practice, carried out by linguistic laypersons (cf. Lukač 2018), that are genuinely metapragmatic. Beyond that, however, they are also characterised by the fact that they are *digital* practices; thus, their performance is also subject to specific conditions. Based on a discourse-analytic understanding of practices (cf. e.g. Scollon 2001), Jones et al. (2015: 3) specify *digital* practices as

'assemblages' of actions involving tools associated with digital technologies, which have come to be recognised by specific groups of people as ways of attaining particular social goals, enacting particular social identities, and reproducing particular sets of social relationships. The assumption is that digital technologies, [...], both make possible new kinds of social practices and alter the way people engage in old ones.

In this sense, digital practices are, to a certain extent, shaped and restricted by media-technological framework conditions or "affordances and constraints" (Giaxoglou 2020: 5; e.g. sign restrictions, accessibility and so on), but they also shape these framework conditions, explore them, redefine them (cf. also Hauser et al. 2019). This is also true for the metapragmatic grammar police practices investigated here as they can only be adequately understood in their specific mediality: Important prerequisites¹⁵ are, for example, the existence of a (semi-) public audience of some kind that identifies a presumed deviation from the norm (or rather reacts in turn to said identification) and associated with this, the possibility for a (usually timely) response or rather for reciprocal references. More generally speaking, metapragmatic grammar police practices are subject to 'shareability' (cf. Tienken 2013 or Giaxoglou 2020) as they require the

¹⁵ Since I do not only examine comments in a specific online environment (as for example Arendt & Kiesendahl 2014, 2015 or Hammel 2013 do), but look at different contexts (see chapter 3.1 for more detailed information), the prerequisites mentioned here remain relatively general.

identification of a presumed deviation from the norm that is considered shareable in an environment with the necessary technical preconditions for it.

The last term I would like to elaborate on before transitioning to the case study is 'positioning'. As described above, the metapragmatic grammar police practices rely on (mostly negative) evaluations of language use, based on a particular usually ideologically coined¹⁶ understanding of norms, whereby the language-critical utterances make a decisive contribution to relational positioning activities (Arendt & Kiesendahl 2014: 106). These acts of evaluation are thus also an instrument of social positioning, in the sense of "stancetaking in discourse" (Spitzmüller et al. 2017: 8).¹⁷ However, according to Du Bois (2007: 143), evaluation happens not only with reference to a certain object, but also with reference to other agents: "In general terms, evaluation can be defined as the process whereby a stancetaker orients to an object of stance and characterizes it as having some specific quality or value." This is schematically captured in his – captivatingly plain and therefore broadly referenced – stance triangle (see Fig. 5). Du Bois (2007: 163) elaborates: "I evaluate something, and thereby position myself, and thereby align with you."¹⁸ Evaluations are thus an essential component of positioning practices and evaluation actions, in turn, are a central function of metapragmatic grammar policing practices.

Spitzmüller adapts (and specifies) DuBois' stance triangle for linguistic needs (see Fig. 5): According to his approach, it is no longer an 'object' that is evaluated, but rather 'Sprachgebrauch', thus language use, which can also be evaluated by practising it. Spitzmüller (2013: 272) points out:

Ein Akteur *bewertet* und/oder *praktiziert* eine Sprachgebrauchsform in einer bestimmten Art und Weise (*authentifizierend, verfremdend* usw.). Dadurch, *dass* er das tut, und dadurch, *wie* er das tut, *positioniert* er sich selbst in einer bestimmten Art und Weise (*affirmativ, ironisch* usw.) zu diesem Sprachgebrauch.¹⁹

¹⁶ Woolard & Schieffelin (1994: 64) show that "orthographic systems cannot be conceptualized simply as reducing speech to writing, but rather they are symbols that carry historical, cultural, and political meanings". This is also due to the fact that the people involved in standardization processes that legitimise or delegitimise certain variants are motivated by certain political, social and economic positions (cf. Busch 2021: 135). Without being able to go into the large field of standard ideology research in this article I would like to emphasize its linkability to my study (cf. also Heumann 2022).

¹⁷ The concept of 'stancetaking in discourse' thereby emphasizes that positioning always goes hand in hand with acts of evaluation (and thus with ideology) (cf. Spitzmüller et al. 2017: 8 and also Englebretson 2007).

¹⁸ This is, in my understanding, not supposed to mean that agents always end up aligning but that evaluation is usually a collaborative process.

¹⁹ Translation: *An agent evaluates and/or practices language use in a certain way (authenticating, alienating, etc.). By doing so, and by the way he does so, he positions himself in a certain way (affirmatively, ironically, etc.) to this language use.*

In my opinion, this model is particularly well suited for capturing the investigated practices, which I will try to demonstrate in the following case study and the subsequent discussion.

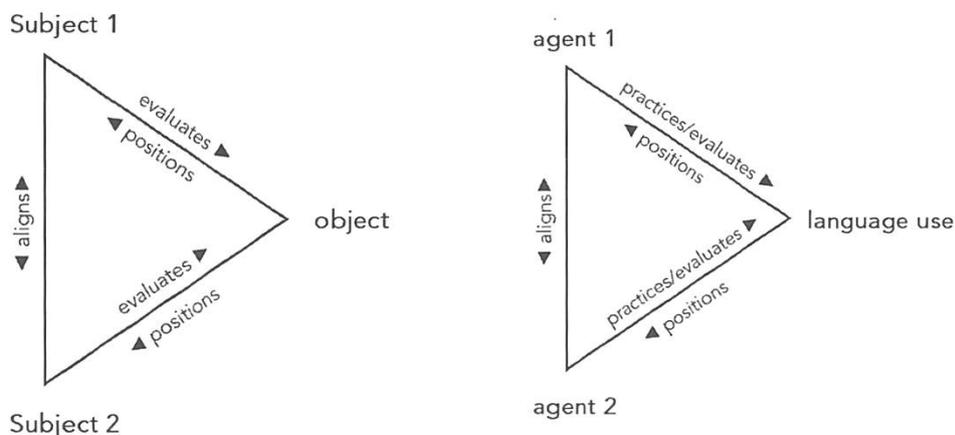


Fig. 5: stance triangle: Du Bois' (2007) original on the left and Spitzmüller's (2013) adaption on the right

3. Case study

3.1 Data and methodology

The empirical examples underlying the case study were collected through online observation²⁰ – an established method, as Marx (2017: 133) points out. However, rather than conducting a fully-fledged, systematic ethnographic investigation I chose to follow Giaxoglou's (2020) 'guerrilla ethnography' approach, which she describes as follows:

By 'guerilla ethnography', I refer to an alternative to the highly systematic type of ethnography [...]. It is based on the basic principle of 'observation', making the familiar strange and the strange familiar, synthesizing different types of sources, reports, self-reflections as a guide for interpretation and a critical reading of contemporary reality (Giaxoglou 2020: 65).²¹

In order to achieve this, I was, as Androutsopoulos (2013: 241) recommends, virtually there, revisiting and roaming around on different platforms I use to frequent, thereby always keeping an eye open for metapragmatic grammar policing practices. In addition, I also explicitly searched for terms like 'grammar nazi', 'grammar police' etc. in order to discover new spaces and environments

²⁰ I owe some of the examples to my students from Zurich and Basel, who studied similar phenomena in one of my seminars. I would hereby like to thank them.

²¹ This approach does, of course, have its disadvantages, first and foremost, the fact that it is not systematic. That is why it is all the more important to reflect not only on the significance of the results but also on the analysis itself, which is always also an act of positioning on the author's side (see also Giaxoglou 2020: 66 for similar considerations). Nevertheless, bearing these limitations in mind, it is also a very promising approach insofar as it "helps to point to patterned behaviours and social norms in the everyday" (cf. *ibid.*: 65) and thus provide an important first approximation to a phenomenon – and thereby lay an important foundation for further, quantitatively supported investigations.

where norms were discussed. As stated in footnote 20, some of the examples also stem from a seminar in which my students collected data.²² The collection of examples gathered through these techniques therefore includes tweets as well as comments on YouTube videos, memes, Reddit posts, or entries in thematic forums. Based on these examples or rather emerging from the data, I have developed four categories of language system-based positioning strategies, which I will present in the chapters below, each illustrated with one or more examples. The four main categories, of which the fourth has further subcategories, are as follows:

- a) Mockery
- b) Doing being an expert
- c) Invalidation
- d) Registration
 - i. of linguistic features
 - ii. of communication spaces
 - iii. reversed

It is important to note, however, that this is not a conclusive categorization (which would not be possible due to the data situation), but rather a preliminary one that still needs to be quantitatively verified using larger and systematically collected data sets. Furthermore, the categories also overlap in that the examples may also pursue more than one of the illustrated strategies simultaneously (see also Arendt & Kiesendahl 2014: 109).

3.2 Strategy 1: Mockery

A first – and overall quite dominant – strategy that can be identified in the collected examples is *mockery*.²³ This is primarily about making fun of what is perceived as linguistically incorrect. The example in Fig. 6 stems from a thread in a forum, specializing in IT questions, called *creative orthography: the Grammar Nazi Thread*. As the opening post states, the purpose of the thread is to collect interestingly spelled words in order to make fun of them. This can be seen in the example below (see Fig. 6), in which a user is upset about what

²² The examples cannot easily be counted as some of them are single occurrences and others are part of long threads discussing a lot of different phenomena. Depending on how one counts, there are probably about 100 examples in my constantly growing collection so far.

²³ Heumann (2022: 54) describes mockery as a trivialization strategy: "In sum, trivialization is generally analyzed as a strategy that is characterized by its aim – namely, to reduce the validity or importance of something." However, as depicted at the beginning of the chapter, I consider mockery and invalidation as two separate categories, keeping in mind that – as mentioned above – the categories do overlap and are not conclusive. Mockery is also taken into account in Švelch & Shermans (2018) study on 'Grammar Nazis' on Facebook where they introduce the concept of "superiority-based humor, which implies an unequal power distribution between joker and the butt of the joke." (cf. *ibid*: 2395, see also below).

she/he considers to be an incorrect use of the abbreviated forms of the indefinite pronouns *ein/einen*, that is *en* and *nen*. Reacting to this, the following user states how she/he hates it when people use that incorrectly when speaking, so the user applies different evaluation standards to spoken and written language. For the fun of it, she/he subsequently uses the form previously classified as wrong in her/his second sentence. Another user then corrects her/his posting by indicating that it should read *während des Sprechens* (*while speaking*) and not *beim Sprechen* (*when speaking*). A fourth user finally corrects the *dass/das* mistake (according to Duden online²⁴ one of the most common mistakes in German) of his/her predecessor. Thus, a whole chain of corrections unfolds, thereby humorously – and presumably unknowingly – demonstrating the relationality and inconclusiveness²⁵ of linguistic norms.

 <p><small>Registriert: 2007-03-16 Beiträge: 3.228</small></p>	<p>Re: Kreative Rechtschreibung (Der Grammar Nazi Thread)</p> <p>gibt ja auch ein paar spezialisten, die "en" und "nen" vertauschen. ausgeschrieben ist es dann wieder korrekt, aber wenn ich "ein" und "einen" schon abkürzen muss, dann doch bitte richtig.</p> <p><i>There are also some specialists who mix up "en" und "nen". Written out it is correct again but if you really feel the need to abbreviate "en" und "nen" then please do it correctly.</i></p>
 <p><small>Registriert: 2010-12-21 Beiträge: 16.007</small></p>	<p>Ich HASSE das, wenn Leute das beim Sprechen(!!!!!) falsch benutzen. Das ist nen Fehler, hmkay?</p> <p><i>I HATE it when people use that incorrectly when speaking. That is a mistake, hmkay?</i></p>
 <p><small>Beiträge: n/a</small></p>	<p>"während des Sprechens", das dass klar ist!</p> <p><i>"While speaking", that this is clear!</i></p>
 <p><small>Registriert: 2012-06-01 Beiträge: 1.583</small></p>	<p>*dass das</p> <p><i>*that this</i></p>

Fig. 6: Creative orthography (transcript of a thread in the 3DCenter Forum)

²⁴ See <https://www.duden.de/suchen/sprachwissen/dass%20das> <25.05.2022>

²⁵ Relating to the fact that language and norms are more often ambiguous than not on the one hand but also relating to the users' inconclusive knowledge of norms (see above) on the other hands.

The second example in this category (see Fig. 7) is a screenshot of a YouTube video that was recorded for the sole purpose of finding a spelling mistake in the comments section of another video. As you can see, the video is only 1 minute and 17 seconds long whereby this brevity is of course intended to emphasize the humorous component. However, the mistake that ends the video is a misspelled name. The video maker himself expresses doubts as to whether this is in fact an error but ends the video anyway. This demonstrates an uncertainty in dealing with norms and the vagueness of norms mentioned earlier.²⁶



Fig. 7: This video ends (Screenshot YouTube, 2022-01-26)

The third and last example for this category stems from Twitter (see Fig. 8). An academic ironically expresses his (as in this case it is a *Herr*) joy about having been politely greeted with his PhD title – and beyond that even in the dative case. The 'face-with-open-mouth-emoji' (see unicode.org) used at the end of the tweet thereby implies that the chosen case is, if not wrong, then at least unexpected (evident through the use of the word *sogar*, engl. *even*). The Twitter user thereby points to the perceived contrast of a very formal salutation alongside a non-normative grammatical feature.



Fig. 8: Even in the dative case (Twitter Screenshot, 2022-01-31)

As we can see from the three depicted examples, the metapragmatic language critical strategy in this first category is all about humorously addressing different

²⁶ It is also imaginable that misspelling a name is not perceived as bad as other 'errors' as names often have different spellings.

linguistic phenomena (from punctuation to case) that are perceived as wrong and/or as deviations from an assumed norm.

3.3 Strategy 2: Doing being an expert

In addition to staging as humour experts (cf. Arendt & Kiesendahl 2015: 159), demonstrating linguistic expertise is another relevant metapragmatic strategy in dealing with language norms. The example in Fig. 9 may serve as an illustration for this category. The Twitter user in this example criticizes a news platform for its prescriptivist approach to language.

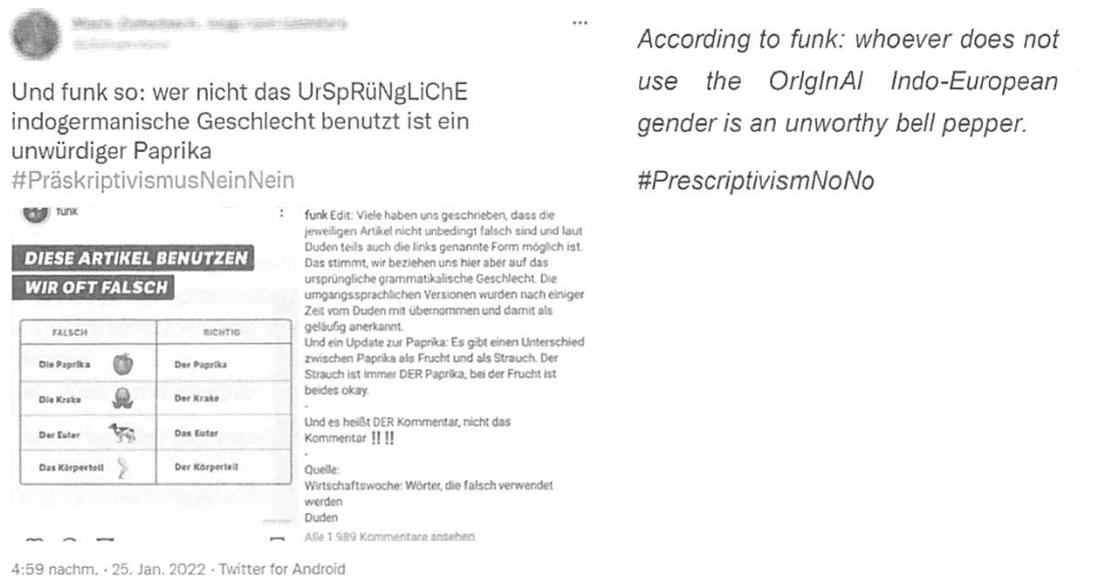


Fig. 9: No to prescriptivism (Twitter Screenshot, 2022-01-26)

Without going into the whole explanation here it becomes evident that the discussion is staged as being on an academic level insofar as technical terms are used (*prescriptivism*), normative authorities are invoked (*Duden*) and etymological or historical explanations (*the original grammatical gender*) are used. In other words, hierarchies of linguistic competence are established here by users presenting themselves as educated, as having a high status²⁷ and as equipped with social capital (see also below), in this case of a linguistic kind; that is, the social capital manifests itself here precisely in the fact that a metalinguistic reflection of appropriateness takes place.

In contrast, norm deviant writing is in some cases associated with a low level of education and thus stigmatized, as Hammel (2013) points out (see also below).²⁸

²⁷ Or, to put it in Hammel's (2014: 161) words: "[...] das Vorhandensein sprachlicher Kompetenz [wird] zum Definitionsmerkmal von Status. (Translation: *The presence of linguistic competence becomes a defining feature of status*).

²⁸ Incidentally, Dürscheid (2017) also discusses these attributions in her study on online dating, in which she shows that orthography can have a gate-keeping function.

So this second strategy is about positioning oneself higher than the other person in terms of linguistic knowledge (cf. Arendt & Kiesendahl 2014: 106).²⁹

3.4 Strategy 3: Invalidation

One strategy repeatedly mentioned in linguistic literature (cf. Arendt & Kiesendahl 2014, 2015; Albert & Hahn 2015; Bahlo et al. 2016) as well as in metadiscourse is the invalidation of arguments based on their form, or, to be more precise, on their claimed incorrectness; the depicted memes (see Fig. 10) illustrate this phenomenon and demonstrate that it seems to be quite widespread or else would not qualify as meme content.³⁰ The meme humorously shows how the correction of an opponent's grammar can be an easy way to elude an argument in which someone lacks substantial argumentative ground. I have already presented a humorous example at the beginning of the article (see Fig. 1) but many of the occurrences do indeed have quite a serious modality and/or tonality and may even include invective language.

When you're getting destroyed in an argument so you correct their grammar

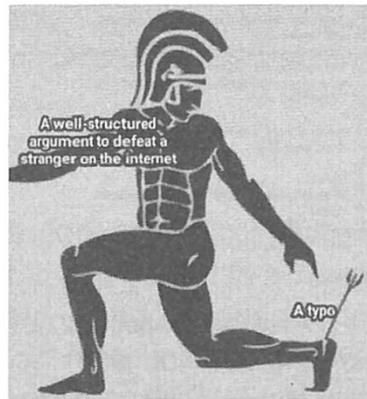


Fig. 10: Correct their grammar (Screenshot keepmeme, 2020-12-02) / a typo (Screenshot reddit, 2022-09-07)

²⁹ There is a strong presumption that in this kind of metapragmatic discussions, linguistic knowledge has a higher value than other expertise. In this way they also tie in with pre-digital practices, one considers, for example, the significance of language as a social symbol of the bourgeoisie. It would be interesting to investigate to what extent parallels arise in the attributions or the distinctive functions of linguistic features in the sense of new wine in old wineskins as for example Elspaß (2002) stated with reference to writing practices in emigrant letters versus digital communication.

³⁰ Since memes are by definition "circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users" (cf. Shifman 2014: 41). Even in the German-speaking context memes are often English which is why I do not have similar German examples in my data.

The second example in this category (see Fig. 11) is a reaction to a comment that was itself written in response to an article on Covid fatigue. The writer claims to get a headache from reading the previous, obviously incorrect comment. Thus, they not only ascribe a physical dimension to incorrect language use, but also deny the comment in question any validity in terms of content. Metapragmatic practices in this sense thus deny other users the qualification to participate in the discourse (cf. Arendt & Kiesendahl 2014: 123) – at the very least their participation is delegitimised or not taken seriously. As Bahlo et al. (2016: 283) elaborate, the linguistic form or the deviation from the norm thus becomes the interpretandum and the previously dominant discourse is interrupted. Consequently, the focus is no longer on the 'what' of a statement, but rather on the 'how' of it.



Fig. 11: I get a headache (Screenshot Zeit comment section, 03-02-2022)

3.5 Strategy 4: Registration

The last strategy, 'registration', has not yet been systematically described in the German-specific linguistic literature on grammar policing. Registration, in Agha's (2007: 81) sense, refers to "processes and practises whereby performable signs become recognized (and regrouped) as belonging to distinct, differentially valorized semiotic registers by a population". It thus aims at the social indexicality of linguistic signs, which is based on the assumption that linguistic signs not only refer to certain facts, but that they always indicate certain values (or ideologies) as well (cf. Spitzmüller 2013: 265). Thus, linguistic signs – in this case: the spelling of certain words – are socially registered, in the sense of an attribution process resulting from the assumption of a patterned language use of certain social groups. In my data collection, this process is, however, observable in different ways, which is why I have established three subcategories that will be presented in the following chapters.

3.5.1 Linguistic features

The first subcategory concerns the registration of linguistic features. I will again illustrate this with an example (see Fig. 12): This time it is a Twitter conversation that starts with an article shared by the Swiss news platform 'Watson' about a

man from Winterthur who is said to have beaten vaccination sceptics at their own game. One of the responses to this tweet reads as follows: *Why don't you run an article on the true vaccination sceptics who draw upon facts.* This reply in turn elicits comments; the following one is particularly interesting: The person commenting here takes up the tweet again, indicates that it is a quotation by the quotation marks, but changes the spelling insofar as it varies between upper- and lower-case letters (so-called 'camel case' writing). The quote is framed by the statement that the writer misspelled it.

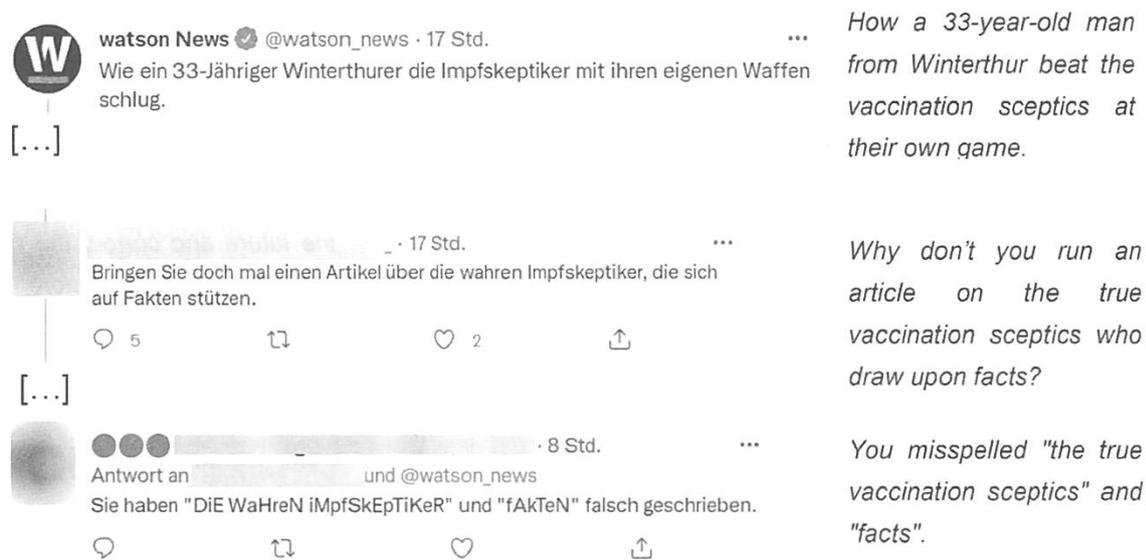


Fig. 12: the true vaccination sceptics (Screenshot Twitter, 2021-01-10)

This implies two things: first, that the content of the tweet can be attributed to a certain discourse position (apparently a debatable one), and second, that this position is associated with certain linguistic features or, to be more precise, spelling patterns (the camel case writing, deliberately marked as norm deviant).³¹ This in turn builds on the assumption described above that norm deviant writing can be stigmatized or used to stigmatize other participants.

The next example (see Fig. 13) works similarly, although here it is the exclamation marks – also referred to as "Aufregezeichen" (*excitement marks*) by Androutsopoulos (2020) – that are emblematic and thus socially registered. The use of such language patterns is based on an alienation effect in order to distinguish oneself from the socially registered use of language and the (often presumably right-wing populist, cf. Androutsopoulos 2020: 88) positions attributed to it (cf. Spitzmüller 2013: 271).

³¹ The assumption that this is a registered spelling is supported by the fact that the norm deviant writing is used deliberately here while other 'mistakes' usually happen unintentionally.

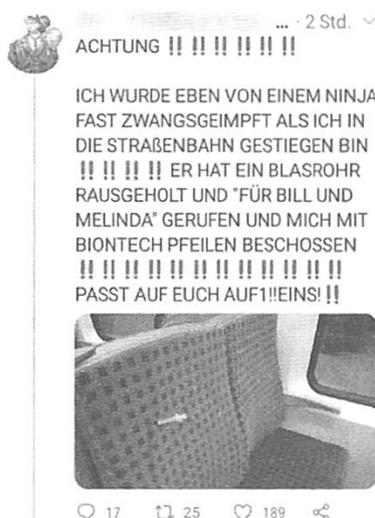


Fig. 13: Attention, watch your backs! (Twitter Screenshot 2020-11-24)

Attention!

*I was almost forcibly vaccinated
by a ninja when I got on the tram.
He pulled out a blowgun and
shouted "for Bill and Melinda"
and shot me with Biontech
arrows. Watch your backs!*

3.5.2 Communication spaces

The next example even goes a significant step further: not only are linguistic features linked to certain values, political stances, and accompanying types of behaviour, but even entire communication platforms or spaces. In Fig. 14, for example, this applies to the messenger service Telegram,³² which is assumed to be predominantly used by people with a discourse position marked as lacking intelligence by the use of the word 'covidiot'. Here again it is evident that the metapragmatic language critical practice serves as a positioning tool, whereby positioning is not exclusively concerned with language anymore, but also with political stances.



Fig. 14: Covidioten, use Telegram! (Screenshot Twitter, 2021-10-02)

³² In my collection, there are many more examples thematizing the use of telegram by an allegedly collectively 'idiotic' group of people. Thus, through the evaluation of the language use there is an implicit or explicit evaluation of the discussion content (in the sense of the proposition) as well as of the people leading the discussion (cf. Arendt & Kiesendahl 2014: 105).

3.5.3 Registration reversed

Registration goes in both directions though. If I wrote earlier that norm competence associates with status and education, while norm deviant writing stigmatizes, the following examples show how this attribution, and its associated evaluations can also be reversed. In the first screenshot (see Fig. 15), a Twitter user writes (in what is an initial post) that they hate it when people make fun of what they claim to be a bad (in the sense of incorrect) application. Meanwhile, the fact that they call it a *genre* implies that it seems to be a widespread practice. Later on in the conversation, a person elaborates by claiming that Germans equate mastery of the German language with intelligence (cf. also Chapman 2012 for similar observations concerning the English language).



Fig. 15: Mastery of the German language (Screenshot Twitter 2022-01-23)

The postings thus show criticism of an elitist approach to language norms, as they are not equally available to all and thus also a question of equal opportunities and social distribution. In this respect, Busch (2021: 136) aptly states that the ability to produce the orthographic standard can be conceived as social-symbolic capital in Bourdieu's (1991) sense and thus concerns issues of social stratification and participation. It therefore always concerns "mechanisms of social control", as Woolard & Schieffelin (1994: 66) emphasize and as the

example here also exposes. Strikingly, the same writing patterns are socially registered here: the camel case. While it indexes a discourse position associated with a low level of education in the first example on Covid (see Fig. 11), it is in contrast meant to satirize the high status of linguistic competence in the examples shown above. However, in both cases the camel case is registered with a discourse position with which one does not agree or wants to mock, thereby again invalidating it.

The German author Margarete Stokowski (see Fig. 16) takes a similar stance, interpreting her claimed non-mastery of the comma rules positively insofar as she can thereby avoid being associated with a group of intellectuals from whom she obviously wants to distance herself. She, too, satirizes the association of intelligence or rather intellectuality with linguistic competence and in the process exposes intellectual language ideologies.



Fig. 16: Not making it on the Intellectuals' list (Screenshot Twitter, 2022-01-27)³³

In this respect, Woolard & Schieffelin (1994: 61) state that "[l]anguage varieties that are regularly associated with (and thus index) particular speakers are often revalorized – or misrecognized – not just as symbols of group identity, but as emblems of political allegiance or of social, intellectual, or moral worth." The meme in Fig. 17, with which I will conclude this category, points to a similar direction by mocking the strategy of portraying oneself as (linguistically) superior by correcting others.

³³ Unlike the previous examples, I have chosen not to anonymize verified accounts due to their public status.

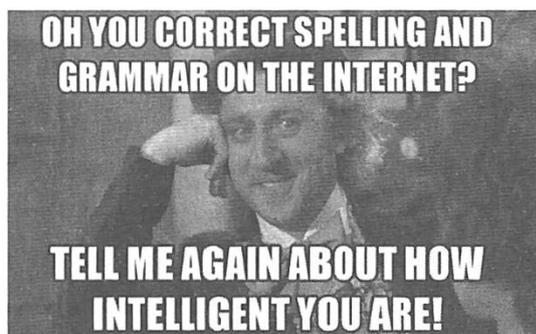


Fig. 17: How intelligent you are! (Screenshot, 2020-09-13)

In summary, the case study suggests that linguistic norms and their thematization take on an important role in the context of digital communication. However, this does not only concern the notion of linguistic norms or of (in)correctness users have. Above all, it also becomes clear how the mastery of linguistic norms and the choice of certain linguistic means is socially registered, or in other words: attributed to a certain discourse position and stance, linked to certain behaviours or types of persons associated with said behaviour. This registration, however, is subject to 'on-line' negotiations – shaped by and shaping digital communication practices on the one hand and emerging in the process on the other hand.

4. Discussion & Conclusion

In this chapter I will now try to align the insights from the case study with the theoretical framework laid out in the beginning of this article. As stated before, Spitzmüller (2013) specifies the triangle for linguistic purposes and replaces DuBois' 'object' by 'language use'. In order to tailor this once again with regard to the presented case study, language use would have to be replaced with 'digital writing norms' (see below, Fig. 16). The first specification, 'digital', is necessary because, as explained earlier, it is precisely the digitality of communication that has an impact not only on the metapragmatically negotiated norms, but also on the negotiations themselves. The second specification, 'writing', is necessary because I only looked at written contexts and some of the previously presented positioning practices only work in written communication (as, for example, the camel case writing, the comma use or the iterated exclamation marks). However, in his adaptation of Du Bois' triangle, Spitzmüller (2013: 272) goes a decisive step further: He mirrors it and thereby shows that language use as a signifier of a register indicates on the one hand social types of persons and on the other hand typified forms of behaviour. Conversely, this means that these types of persons (e.g. young people or right-wing populists or intellectuals) and forms of behaviour are linked to a certain language use (e.g. camel case) or, in our case, to digital writing norms or their (assumed) dealing with these norms (e.g. (non-) indifference towards norms). In turn, agents can

align or position themselves accordingly, for example by satirizing language indicated status and exposing the ideologies behind the meticulously correct use of language (and its implications) attributed to intellectuals (see Fig. 18).

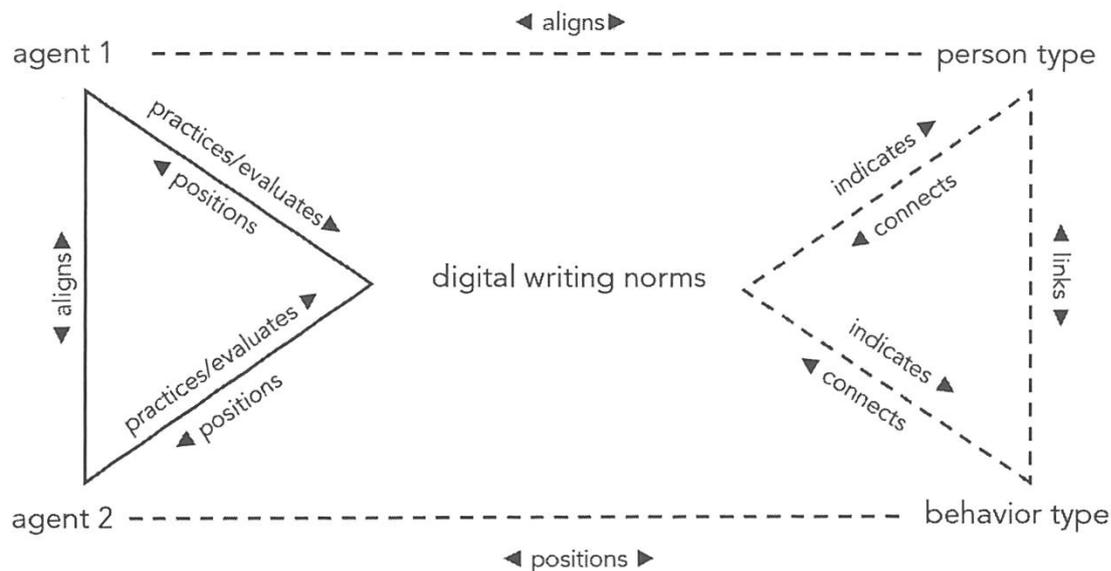


Fig. 18: positioning through on-line negotiated digital writing norms (adaption of Spitzmüller 2013)

I would like to conclude with yet another citation expressing a linguistic 'outside view' on norms:

Ich möchte nur verstehen, wieso wir alle offensichtlich unwichtige und oft unsinnige Normen so ernst nehmen, dass ihre Nichtbefolgung schwere soziale Sanktionen nach sich zieht. Wir halten jene für Deppen, die gegen sie verstoßen, weil sie sie nicht beherrschen, und [...] wir [verteidigen] die überkommene Schreibweise mit Zähnen und Klauen [...]. Und auch wer, wie ich selbst, all dies bei einigem Überlegen nicht so ernst nehmen kann, stört sich daran, wenn er in einer Klausur, in einem Internet-Forum oder wo auch immer auf Rechtschreibfehler stößt.³⁴ (Klein 2010: 85f.)

As appealing as this certainly very pointed quote is at first glance, it falls short with regard to different aspects, especially the following: the analysis presented here reveals that the quote's perspective is far from what linguistic norms (can) mean from an agent's perspective. However, digital writing environments certainly make it especially obvious how language norms and their on-line negotiation have become an indispensable means of social positioning and registration. It can therefore be assumed that norms continue to play an important role: be it as the object of mockery, to highlight one's own expert

³⁴ Translation: *I just want to understand why we all take obviously unimportant and often nonsensical norms so seriously that their non-observance entails severe social sanctions. We consider those who violate them to be morons because they have not mastered them, and we defend the traditional spelling with teeth and claws. And even those who, like myself, cannot take all this too seriously on some reflection, are bothered when they come across spelling mistakes in an exam, on an internet forum or wherever.*

status, to invalidate someone else's opinion or to (socially, ideologically) position oneself.

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