The Ideology of "Monographism" and the Advantages of Digraphia. The Case of Lombard

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Abstract. This paper discusses the ideology of monographism and its possible overcoming through digraphia, i.e., the use of two or more writing systems for the same language. After a general introduction, the specific case of Lombard will be discussed as an example. Lombard, a regional language spoken in Northern Italy, is written using different writing systems, more specifically three main ones for the Western variety. As each of these writing systems has advantages and disadvantages, the author sees digraphia as a possible and workable solution, not only for Lombard but also for many other minority or regional languages in the world that find themselves in a similar situation.

1. Introduction

Even though many languages still exist in the world that do not have a writing system and are only oral, there is no doubt that in modern times a minority or regional language stands more chances to survive if it can be written down. The fact that the language has a written form can greatly help its status and allows for many strategies of revitalization to be attempted than if it were just oral.

For the same language many writing systems are of course possible; the problem is that sometimes the minority community gets divided over this issue of "graphization" and long and even harsh diatribes have arisen. Believing that one language should have only one writing system can be seen as an ideology of "monographism," an ideology that is closely related to that of "standard language". The problem with this ideology is that it is an "either-or" ideology, and it is normally the orthography which gets official support that wins out. The alternative orthography/ies, however, may be around for a long time together with resentment and division, which is not good for language revitalization.

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Lombard, an endangered regional language spoken in Northern Italy, is going to be used as a case study in this paper to exemplify the problem with this ideology and its possible solution. After a brief outline on digraphia, this paper is going to discuss the ideology of "monographism," followed by a general outline of the Lombard used to write Lombard and on how adopting a digraphic or multigraphic system may help the maintenance of the language.

2. Digraphia

Digraphia refers to the use of more than one orthography or script to write the same language. For more than two writing systems, the term "multigraphia" could also be used. There are two main types of digraphia: diachronic and synchronic (Dale, 1980). Diachronic digraphia, the most common case, refers to different orthographies or scripts that have succeeded each other over time. Turkish is one example, which was written using Arabic characters until 1928 and is now written using Roman characters. Synchronic digraphia, on the other hand, refers to the contemporary use of two or in some cases more than two orthographies. This may be due to different reasons, mostly religious and political (ibid.), but also because the language itself may require different scripts to be written (see for example Japanese) or for didactic reasons (a marginal case according to Dale (ibid.)), which is for example the case of Mandarin, which can also be written using pinyin, the official Romanized form. As Dale has explained (1980, p. 12): "The most common type of situation in which a marginal type of digraphia is said to occur is the language-learning situation, or the attempt to communicate something of the sounds of the language to people who don't know the usual script in which the language is written."

3. The Ideology of "Monographism"

Despite what many people may think, this ideology, which is closely related to the ideology of standard language, has been very strong and pervasive, to the point of having disrupted and hindered quite a few minority language planning efforts. Often, when a writing system is devised by experts or activists for a language that did not have one, some other individuals or groups within the local community or even the academic community may come up with alternative orthographies which are considered better, i.e., more precise, authentic, inclusive or simply more peculiar and distinct from the majority language in the country. For the same language many writing systems are of course possible, some "deeper," some "shallower," some using the Latin script, others using

other scripts, such as Cyrillic or Arabic. It largely depends on the purposes or cultural/political orientation of the proposers, and any of these systems has advantages and disadvantages. The problem is that sometimes the minority community gets divided over this issue of "graphization" and long and even harsh diatribes have arisen. I've come across a few examples of this ideology and its consequences, such as the opposition between the official orthography for Galician, closer to the Spanish one, and the "reintegrationist" one closer to the Portuguese spelling;[1] or the official orthography for Friulian in Friuli (Italy) and the Faggin system using *ħaček* diacritics which make it look more Slavic (see Coluzzi (2007) and Coluzzi, Brasca, and Miola (2019)).[2] Something similar is happening in Lombardy, but this will be discussed further on.

4. Lombard

Lombard is one of the languages of the Gallo-Italic group or, perhaps better, of the Gallo-Romance Cisalpine group belonging to the Western Romance family of Indo-European languages, genealogically closer to French and Occitan varieties than to Italian.

According to the 2006 ISTAT survey, about 3.5 million people in the Lombardy region can speak Lombard, i.e., about 36% of the regional population. However, to this figure the speakers of related varieties in bordering areas such as Eastern Piedmont, Canton Ticino and the southern valleys of Chantun Grischun in Switzerland and most areas in Western Trentino should be added. In any case these 3.5 million speakers (and we don't know how proficient their Lombard may be) are on the decrease—even just by looking at the results of the ISTAT survey carried out only six years before, we can see a decrease of almost 3 percentage points, from 38.6% in 2000 to 35.7% in 2006. We could reasonably deduce that Lombard, in the same way as other Italian regional languages, is losing at least 1/4 of its speakers in every successive generation, which clearly places Lombard among endangered languages.

In fact, according to EGIDS, one of the most well-known scales for the assessment of language vitality, developed by Lewis and Simons in 2010, Lombard like some other Italian regional languages may score, according to the areas, between 6b and 8a. 6b corresponds to the label 'threatened', whereas 8a corresponds to the label 'moribund'. Only two more grades separate the latter grade from the last, 10 'extinct', and this is another clear sign of the predicament Lombard finds itself in.

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1. For example, "iniciación" and "deseño" would be written respectively as "iniciaçom" and "desenho" in the reintegrationist system.

2. For example, "cjan" and "palaç" would be written respectively as "čhan" and "palač" in the Faggin system.

Even though the total number of speakers is gradually shrinking, a small pool of new speakers is present and very active. For these mostly young speakers Lombard is a second language they have at some point decided to learn, even though chances for using it are not many, particularly in the big cities. In many cases the main domain where they can use the language is the Internet (see Coluzzi (2019)).

The Lombard language can be roughly divided into four main varieties (Sanga, 1997, pp. 255–259; Lurati, 2002, pp. 226–227; Bonfadini, 2010, p. 22):

- Western Lombard (spoken in the provinces of Varese, Como, Lecco, Sondrio, Milan, Monza, Pavia and Lodi, in addition to Novara and Verbania in Piedmont and Canton Ticino in Switzerland);
- Eastern Lombard (spoken in the provinces of Bergamo, Brescia, Northern Cremona and Northern Mantua);
- Alpine Lombard (spoken in the provinces of Sondrio, Trento and Verbania, in Canton Ticino and Canton Grischun in Switzerland);
- the so-called peripheral varieties of the lower lands (spoken in the provinces of Pavia, Lodi, Cremona and Mantua).

So far, each Lombard variety has been written using different orthographies, some more phonetic, some more etymological. For example, the western variety of Lombard, and more specifically Milanese, has been written so far using two main systems (see also Coluzzi (2007; 2008) and Miola (2015): the traditional one, more etymological, and the modern one, more phonetic, used in Switzerland as well. The two systems differ mainly in the way vowels are represented (see Table 1).

IPA	Traditional	Modern
ɔ	ò	o
u	ó (or 'o' if unstressed)	u
ø	oeu	ö
y	u	ü

Table 1. The main differences between the traditional Milanese orthography and the modern system as far as vowels are concerned

In both orthographies the consonants are spelt as in Italian, with the addition of the digraph <sg> before <e> and <i> to represent the sound /ʒ/ which does not exist in Italian, and the use of an apostrophe to separate the <s> from <c> and <g> before <e> and <i> so that they are read respectively as /stʃ/ (s'c) and /zʤ/ (s'g), sound combinations that do not exist in Italian.

However, a new writing system was devised by the linguist Lissander Brasca about 14 years ago, and published in 2011, which is currently used

by a dozen activists and "freely" interpreted/adapted by others. The system has been called "Scriver Lombard" and defined as a local-polynomic orthography and its aim is to allow the speakers of all Lombard varieties to write their own local variety in a graphic form which is very similar or even identical to the form in which the speakers of any other Lombard variety would write it, so that the identity and meaning of the words would be easily recognised by speakers of other varieties. This implies that the system cannot reflect directly all the phonetic features of any variety, and the speakers of each variety will need to learn how to write this system that is necessarily the most etymological (deep) and least phonetic (shallow) among the ones used so far.

"Scriver Lombard" looks quite different from the orthographies that have been used so far for the Lombard varieties, which are mostly based on Italian spelling. Whereas the use of vowels is similar to that in the traditional Milanese orthography, consonants are used that are not found in the Italian alphabet, such as <ç>, <j> and <x>, while others are used differently from Italian, such as <q> that can be followed directly by <e> and <i> without the interposition of <u> (corresponding to /ke/ and /ki/), or <g> which is mostly pronounced as /g/ even before <e> and <i>. On the whole, whereas the traditional Milanese orthography is, at least as far as vowels are concerned, a little closer to French and the modern one to German, "Scriver Lombard" is closer to the way Lombard was spelt in medieval literature.

5. "Deep" and "Shallow" Systems

As Lüpke has explained (2011, p. 329), "Philologists, linguists and educators have insisted for several centuries that the ideal orthography has a one-to-one correspondence between grapheme and phoneme". Many lay people who have a limited knowledge of linguistic phenomena also seem to share this viewpoint, including some activists for the local languages. However, even though all these individuals tend to believe that "it is better in an orthography to overspecify than to underspecify, underspecification (or the conflation of several phonemes into one grapheme) can be a powerful tool for the creation of a pandialectal orthography in the case of unstandardized and internally diverse speech varieties" (Lüpke, 2011, p. 332), such as the Lombard local-polynomic orthography.

Shallow systems (traditional and modern orthography) have the great disadvantage that they can only be used in a restricted area, or they need a standardised pronunciation, whereas deep systems, such as Scriver Lombard, are more transparent, flexible and allow for local pronunciations of the language. This means that if on the one hand new speakers may find it difficult to learn how to read and write the advan-

tage will be that they will be able to read and understand all Lombard varieties and a sense of unity of the language will be enhanced. This also means that it will be possible to publish more copies of any written document, from poetry to novels to scientific books, enlarging the audience (any Lombard speaker would be able to read them) and reducing costs. It is because learners seem to be helped by shallow orthographies that reflect the actual pronunciation that linguists such as Sallabank and Marquis (2018, p. 249) have affirmed that "a shallow orthography [...] is easier for beginning readers to process".

> There is a consensus that phonological, in particular phonemic, awareness is beneficial to learning to read, and that shallow orthographies, which make most use of that awareness, are helpful to the learner at an early stage. On the other hand, many, probably most, of the world's readers use "deep" orthographies where the sound and the letter composition of words are indirectly related or even unrelated. (Sebba, 2007, p. 23)

Returning to the Lombard language, an example of the same sentence in the Milanese variety written using the traditional, the modern and the local-polynomic system can be seen in Table 2.

English	My cousin heard her voice and rushed out to hug her
Italian	Mio cugino ha sentito la sua voce ed è corso fuori ad abbracciarla
Traditional system	El mè cusin l'ha sentuu la soa vos e l'è cors foeù a brascialla su
Modern system	El mè cüsin l'ha sentüü la sua vus e l'è curs föö a brasciala sü
Local-polynomic system	El mè cusin l'ha sentud la soa vox e l'è cors fœr a braçarla su

TABLE 2. The same sentence written in the different orthographies

Whereas the last sentence would be read like the two previous ones by a Milanese speaker, it could easily be read by a speaker of Bergamasco, for example, and understood just by knowing that "el cusin" in western Lombard stands for the Bergamasco "ol jerman" meaning "the cousin". In fact, the same sentence in the Bergamasco variety would be written as: "Ol mè jerman l'ha sentid la so vox e l'è cors for a braçar-la su," a sentence that is very similar to the one above and perfectly understandable by a Milanese, for instance. The list of frequent words that are completely different in the different varieties is not long and they could all be learnt very quickly.

6.   Discussion and Conclusions

There are differing opinions on the merits of one or another of these orthographies, but the idea is that in the end only one should be adopted. This is, I believe, an aspect of our dualistic Western culture that fails to realise that adopting more than one system may be the best solution to prevent divisions among activists and speakers. In fact, using all these orthographies in different contexts, i.e., accepting a regime of digraphia, would provide speakers with several advantages.

Some may think that this would be burdensome, but as we have already explained, there are languages in the world that use more than one graphic system. Japanese children, for example, have to learn four different systems at school: hiragana, katakana, kanji (which are used in combination) and even romaji, the Latin script, and this does not seem to be particularly problematic. On the other hand, the Malay language can be written using the Latin or Arabic script, even though the latter is not used much these days. If one system is shallower and one deeper like in China (pinyin and the Chinese characters) or in the Lombard case (the classic or modern orthographic system and "Scriver Lombard"), the shallower system could help speakers (especially new speakers) to learn the local language as the shallow form (pinyin in China and the traditional/modern orthographies in Lombardy) would be closer to pronunciation, whereas the deeper system (Chinese characters in China and "Scriver Lombard" in Lombardy) would allow everybody to enjoy wider communication (respectively with all Chinese speakers and with all Lombard speakers in the region) (see Coluzzi, Brasca, and Miola (2019)).

For the specific case of Lombard, specifically Western Lombard, other advantages can also be seen. Learning the modern system would allow speakers to read comfortably material produced in Switzerland, whereas the traditional system would make reading Milanese literature easy as most of it (mostly poetry and plays) has been written using this older system. Using it would also help not to alienate those older speakers and activists who use and are used to the traditional system.

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