



BOOK REVIEW

A Review of: The Cambridge Handbook of Language Standardization

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The Cambridge Handbook of Language Standardization. Edited by Wendy Ayres-Bennett and John Bellamy. Cambridge Handbooks in Language and Linguistics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108559249>.

From the outset, I was taught, as a descriptive linguist, to be suspicious of attempts at language standardization, especially since they are often accompanied by prescriptive attempts to make usage conform to the dialect of privileged rule-makers. My responsibility as a linguist was to avoid being prescriptive. I preferred to let any reduction in variation within a language community happen naturally, as people representing different varieties interacted with each other and adjusted their language use to facilitate communication across dialect boundaries. From reading the papers in this volume, I learned that sociolinguists recognize both approaches to standardization, often described as standardization “from above” and “from below.” Further, although I may not appreciate efforts at standardization from above, they certainly exist, and from a descriptive perspective, it is important to understand them.

The handbook provides an in-depth exploration of language standardization from many perspectives, offering theoretical models, case studies, and analyses of contemporary practices. Divided into three distinct parts, the book addresses the historical, sociopolitical, and cultural dynamics of language standardization, the role of authority and legitimacy in shaping written forms, and modern shifts in standardization practices. These themes are examined across many languages and countries, offering a comprehensive picture of how language standards evolve, change, and reflect broader societal forces.

The first part of the book revisits key models and theories of language standardization, with a special focus on the seminal work of Haugen and subsequent developments in the field. The opening chapters address the two key approaches of standardization from above (or top-down) and from below (or bottom-up). While standardization from above has historically been the dominant model, particularly in European nation-states since the eighteenth century, scholars are increasingly turning their attention to the grassroots,

bottom-up emergence of standards, especially in multilingual and minority language contexts. This shift in focus recognizes that standardization is not solely the work of state institutions but can emerge organically through everyday language use. The early chapters also address the complexities of multilingualism, the symbolic nature of language standardization, and the delicate balance between linguistic uniformity and diversity. A notable contribution in this part is the consideration of standardization in highly multilingual and post-colonial contexts, highlighting the ongoing challenges of defining and implementing language norms in countries with complex sociolinguistic landscapes.

The second part of the volume delves into the role of authority and legitimacy in the establishment and maintenance of written language standards. Key chapters explore the interaction between language policy, planning, and standardization, using case studies from France, the United States, and the Spanish-speaking world. The discussion on state-appointed institutions such as the Spanish Royal Academy reveals the complex interplay between prescriptive and descriptive approaches to standardization. While these institutions claim authority over the language, they must also navigate the shifting tides of social media and grassroots activism, which challenge their control over language norms. The role of metalinguistic texts, such as grammars and dictionaries, is also examined in this part. These texts are presented not only as tools for standardization but also as products that reflect the linguistic changes already taking place within society. In particular, online dictionaries offer a more inclusive representation of linguistic diversity, marking a shift away from traditional top-down standardization methods.

The third part of the book focuses on recent developments, exploring the impact of globalization, digital media, and multilingualism on the processes of language standardization. As the digital era encourages informal, spoken-like written forms, standardization practices are increasingly influenced by standards from below—those that emerge through popular usage rather than formal institutional mandates. This section highlights how new urban vernaculars and the use of social media platforms are shaping language norms, often bypassing traditional linguistic authorities. It shows that language norms are not static but are continuously shaped by sociopolitical, cultural, and technological forces.

Chapters on language endangerment and revitalization shed light on the paradoxical role that standardization can play in both the preservation and erosion of minority languages. Standardization efforts, while aiming to unify and revitalize, can also exacerbate tensions between traditional and modern varieties. These chapters also address destandardization as a concept in its own right, exploring how the abandonment of the belief that there should be a single language norm can reflect broader social changes, such as the rise of linguistic diversity and the devaluation of standardized forms in

certain contexts. The final chapters introduce more nuanced perspectives on the standardization of minority and indigenous languages, such as sign languages, which often face pressure from external authorities to conform to standardized forms whereas the community would prefer to allow for greater variation.

I found the handbook especially helpful in the numerous case studies included, as theoretical concepts are illustrated in specific language situations such as Irish, Breton, French, Spanish, Innu, Mayan, Hindi, Māori, and CJK radicals (across Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese). The papers are well-edited and each has its own bibliography. Through its rich theoretical insights and diverse case studies, the volume provides a valuable resource for linguists and sociolinguists interested in the complexities of language policy, planning, and use in a rapidly changing world.



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