

Difference in context: The meanings of orthographic variation

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Social meaning has received increasing attention from sociolinguists in recent years (e.g., Campbell-Kibler 2010, Eckert 2008, Podesva et al. forthcoming). However, researchers have focused primarily on phonetic variables. This study furthers their efforts by using a perception-focused methodology to investigate how orthography – specifically, the use of unconventional spelling in brand names (e.g., Bratz) – conveys meaning. It demonstrates how respondents' attitudes and word meaning influence the kinds of meanings that unconventional spelling expresses. This study focuses on the unconventional spellings of organic and poetic. To gather perception data, interviews were conducted with 160 native English speakers (80 men and 80 women) with similar social backgrounds. Divided into four groups, interviewees were shown one of the four spellings (ORGANIC, ORGANIQ, POETIC, POETIQ) and were informed that it was a clothing brand. Based on the name alone, they were told to describe the clothes and the consumer in detail. They were subsequently asked if their impression of the clothes and/or the consumer would change if the other spelling was used instead (and if so, how).

For many respondents, regardless of their attitudes toward unconventional spelling, ORGANIQ and POETIQ evoked several recurring social types. Respondents overwhelmingly associated both brands with young consumers because of their perception of teenagers' frequent use of nonstandard language. ORGANIQ and POETIQ also had an urban feel to them since they brought to mind urban subcultures, especially those associated with African-Americans (e.g., rap, hip-hop, slam poetry). In addition, they came across as somewhat feminine due to their resemblance to women's names of French origin such as *Monique and Dominique*. Despite this general consensus, ORGANIQ and POETIQ inspired a sense of difference, which in turn generated both positive and negative interpretations. For those who were positively predisposed toward unconventional spelling, the two names gave the impression of a sophisticated clothing line because of their perceived foreign (specifically, French) origin. They also triggered notions around newness: they suggested something unique, original, and modern. In the case of POETIQ, the unconventional spelling further enhanced the artistic qualities conveyed by the word and gave a heightened sense of creativity. For those who were negatively predisposed toward unconventional spelling, however, ORGANIQ and POETIQ were perceived as low-end because of their association with lack of education and lower-income consumers. They also stimulated ideas around artificiality: they suggested a rip-off of the original, a product that is trying too hard to be something it is not, as well as target consumers who are posers and wannabes. In the case of ORGANIQ, the unconventional spelling also diluted the "purity" connotation of the word and suggested something adulterated. This study uncovers the polarizing nature of unconventional spelling and shows that orthographic variables have rather general meanings that become specific when they are placed in context. It contributes to the "sociolinguistics of spelling" (Sebba 2007) by proposing a perception-focused methodology for investigating the social meaning of orthography and by laying the foundations for quantitative research on the effects of interviewees' demographic categories on the perception of unconventional spelling.