# SPELLING-GATE: POLITICS, PROPRIETY AND POWER.

Some years ago, a British Labour Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, became a target of personal criticism from a citizen, Jacqui Janes, for his deficiencies as a writer. The citizen’s young soldier son Jamie had lost his life on active duty in Afghanistan. The Prime Minister hand-wrote a personal letter of condolence to Mrs Janes, as he did in all such cases, but the letter was not received well, and it made front page news in *The Sun*, a UK tabloid newspaper, which amplified the criticism for a national audience, in print and online. It was not *what* Brown wrote that offended its addressee (quoted in full in the next section): it was the *way* that he wrote it, the way it *looked*, on the headed notepaper, making it an interesting socio-semiotic episode which allows some general conclusions to be drawn. The article will accordingly use the case study (a) to demonstrate the power of “spelling” as a leveller of hierarchical differences in the national political culture, based on Janes’ criticism of the letter as *badly-spelled*. In doing so, it will also show (b) that *unintended* non-standard spellings can carry semiotic meaning (in this case, the meaning of ‘disrespect’) just as deliberate “mis”-spelling can, and (c) that in this particular historical episode, the semiotic meaning mediated by handwriting (in this case, the meaning of ‘the personal touch’) intersected with that mediated by spelling, thus giving further force to the argument that writing must be approached in sociolinguistics as a *multimodal* practice.

## INTRODUCTION

Although this paper is not only about spelling, the incident in question made “spelling errors” its touchstone, and thereby tapped into a culturally rich area of social meaning. Research in a range of contexts has shown that deliberate “mis”-spelling can be exploited, especially in less regulated communicative spaces, as a device in the expression of countercultural values and/or political insurgency (Androutsopoulos 2000; Sebba 2003; 2007a, 2007b; 2010; 2012). Unconventional spelling also has value for creative writers, broadly construed, to mark different kinds of distinctiveness, such as *brands* in the case of marketing discourse (Davies 1987; Wong 2013) or *fictional characters* in the case of literary works, one facet of a phenomenon known as *literary dialect* (Ives 1950, Kretzschmar 2001), which can also involve dialect vocabulary and grammar as well as spelling. Ferguson (1998) for example focuses on the role of literary dialect for characterisation and storytelling in Emily Brontë’s Wuthering Heights as well as other English Victorian novels. In scholarship, linguistic transcription practices involving nonstandard spellings also risk caricature and stereotyping in the representation of research subjects (Jaffe 2000, 2008), although “regiolectal” respelling can also be a source of quantitative sociolinguistic data (Honeybone and Watson 2013).

The present article is also concerned with spelling as social practice but unlike the work referred to above, its focus is on the social meaning of *inadvertent* mis-spelling, that is to say, on spelling errors, even though extent and nature of these “errors”, and even their existence, were in dispute during the Spelling-gate affair. Whilst “spelling errors” was the signature defective feature of this particular handwritten letter, the discourse to be examined also focuses attention on the semiotic meaning of *handwriting*, where a “graphic ideology” (Spitzmüller 2012) was at work, focused on chirographic deficiency, just as an orthographic ideology was focussed on spelling deficiency.

Social and cultural appropriations of spelling are possible because of its normative character:

Spelling is that bit of linguistic practice where issues of authority, of control, of conformity can be most sharply focused. Spelling is the domain par excellence – no matter how tiny it may seem – where the politics of conformity can be sheeted home. (Kress 2000 x)

When a writer flouts convention on purpose, for example in a literary context, readers will hopefully understand and positively appreciate the semiotic “value added” that the writer has designed, though there may be issues with stereotyping, caricature and stigmatisation. If the mistake is inadvertent, through ignorance or carelessness, the writer is at the mercy of the reader’s orthographic ideology. Texts in the public domain complicate reception issues because they both construct, and potentially open up divergent views between, different kinds of readers: addressees, bystanders and eavesdroppers (Goffman 1981), with varying contextual frames. The condolence letter from Brown to James had a single addressee, and perhaps anticipated some “bystanders” within the local family and community, but its publication in *The Sun* extended reception well beyond these contained communicative relationships, and generated further texts including many designed for public rather than private consumption (cf. Jaffe 2000: 508 on questions of orthography and audience).

The data for this study comprises:

1. the offending letter itself in an online facsimile representation (Drury and Chapman 2009). Here is my (orthographically correct) transcript of what Brown wrote:

It is with the greatest of sadness that I write to offer you and your family my personal condolences on the death of your son Jamie. I know from colleagues that Jamie was a brave, selfless and wholly professional soldier who was held in the highest regard by all who worked with him. I know that words can offer little comfort at a time of grief but I hope that, over time, you will find some consolation in your son’s great courage and bravery and in the huge contribution he made to the security of our country. If I can help in any way, please tell me.

My sincere condolences

Yours sincerely

Gordon Brown.

(2) a *Sun* newspaper article about that letter and how its recipient reacted to it (Dunn 2009),

(3) a recording of a telephone call between Brown and Janes, also temporarily made available by *The Sun* on its website,

(4) a transcription of that recording published by *The Sun*, and reproduced in other papers too (The Sun 2009b, Drury and Chapman 2009),

(5) a *Sun* news story about the phone call (Dunn and Smith 2009).

Other sources were consulted by way of background, including below-the-line commentary by members of the public on *The Sun*’s website (no longer available) as well as reports in other publications.

## CONTEXT

The war in Afghanistan, triggered by the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre, in 2001, had been intended to suppress Al Qaeda’s operation there and to remove the Taleban regime. By 2009, British lives were being lost in a cause that was coming to seem unwinnable and never-ending. The military casualties were extremely problematic for the British Labour government, and Brown’s beleaguered administration was attracting much critical coverage in the press. Early the following year it would lose power in a General Election. *The Sun*, a tabloid paper within Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation, which had supported Labour in three previous elections, switched its allegiance back to the Conservative party in September 2009 and from then on became a constant critic of the Government. It was in this period actively promoting interest in “our boys”: the armed forces as a grouping which particularly deserved public and government support (*The Sun* 2009a). *The Sun* was interested in the condolence letter and Mrs Janes’ reception of it in that context.

Jamie Janes died on October 5 2009 when he stepped on an explosive device whilst on foot patrol in Helmand Province. Mrs Janes believed he would have survived if there had been a helicopter to airlift him to a military hospital. The helicopter issue was a live one in November public debate about the conduct of the war, following the widely reported release of a leaked memo from a senior military officer, Rupert Thorneloe:

"I have tried to avoid griping about helicopters – we all know we don't have enough. We cannot move people, so this month we have conducted a great deal of administrative movement by road. This increases the IED [improvised explosive device] threat and our exposure to it." Thorneloe, quoted in Shipman (2009); also BBC 2009; Hosenball 2009; The Express 2009; Batty 2009).

Thorneloe warned the Government of the risks in June and was himself killed by an IED in July. The memo was leaked to an MP who distributed it to the press at the end of October (Holloway 2009). The “Spelling-gate” (Ashley 2009) row erupted nine days later when *The Sun* publicised the letter on November 9th. Gordon Brown privately rang Mrs Janes that evening to express his condolences orally and establish better relations with her. A neighbour recorded the conversation in Janes’ living room, and made the recording available to *The Sun*, which then uploaded it to their website, though it did not long remain there. Legal considerations may have persuaded the editor that this was a step too far in the violation of Brown’s privacy. The transcript was included in the paper’s print edition (*The Sun* 2009b) and remained accessible online until *The Sun* began using a paywall in August 2013. It can still be found in some online secondary sources, e.g., Drury and Chapman (2009) in the *Mail Online* as part of their own coverage of the row (this item also reproduces a facsimile of the offending letter).

## THEORY

Within the sociolinguistics of writing (Lillis and McKinney 2013), the so-called New Literacy Studies (Street 1984; Barton 2007), emerged as the study of writing as social practice, which now has a specific subfield focused on *orthography* as social practice. Sebba (2012) in an introduction to Jaffe et al (2012) provides an extensive bibliographic record of the relevant literature, including his own key monograph (Sebba 2007b). Since 2012 there has been, amongst other things, a 2015 special issue of the journal *Written Language and Literacy* with a historical focus (Villa and Vosters 2015), whilst Sebba (2015) develops additional theoretical apparatus.

The nonstandard practices of language users are assumed in this literature to be deliberate. But there are also ideologies around *inadvertent* uses of nonstandard forms. Queen and Boland (2015) provide an experimental attempt to enter this area. Spelling “errors” in the mainstream Anglophone world are traditional shibboleths of education and social class (Carney 1994: 79). English language users who have mastered schoolroom spelling are able to look down on those who have not with condescension, disdain, pity, scorn or any combination of attitudes where the common denominator is the superiority of the judger over the judged. Errors made through ignorance, perhaps omitting a silent letter, are corrigible by others; errors made through carelessness are also corrigible by those who made them.

When the sociolinguistic issues concern deliberate nonstandard spellings in relation to issues of identity and self/other representation (e.g., Jaffe 2000), the visual qualities of the writing are not necessarily relevant. The same ideological - or sociocultural, to use Sebba’s (2007) term - reasoning might well apply whether the graphic units (“letters”, in alphabetic writing systems) are large or small, sloped or upright, typographic or handwritten, red or black. Visual qualities have been acknowledged in some case studies. In the choice of standard <c> versus nonstandard <k> in written Spanish, the “look” of the <k> forms may aid the symbolism of mainstream versus subcultural allegiance (Sebba 2007b 48-50). also Sebba (2015) for some theoretical discussion. Sebba’s argument does not require consideration of whether the appearance of a handwritten /k/ versus a typographic /k/ would have semiotic implications.

Taking this visual sensibility forward (Androutsopoulos 2000, Jaffe 2000), involves recognising that there is more to the visuality of textual form, including but not limited to, letter-shapes, than just contrastive indexical power (Goodman 1996). The social-semiotic perspective of van Leeuwen (2006) attends to the meaningful properties of such typographic features as weight, expansion, slope, curvature, etc., separately and in combination. Van Leeuwen’s focus is on typography, not chirography, but he includes one example that introduces handwriting into the account. The following quote comes from his discussion of a printed advertisement, where letters are formed in imitation of messy but readable handwriting, with highly irregular dispositions of thin and thick “pen strokes”:

In our own physical experiences of writing, such irregularities stem from an inability or unwillingness to apply the rules of “neat writing” we are taught in school. As a result, irregularity has, amongst other things, the potential to signify a kind of rebellion against the norms of the school, or, by extension, other coercive institutions. (2006 p. 147)

1. The physical experience of producing the “messy” handwritten style would include how the writer holds her body, her pen, how her hand moves and whether/how the pen moves in her hand. Mangen (2016) refers to such considerations as the *haptics* of writing, whilst Sharifi (2012) discusses handwriting as an embodied practice in an Iranian-American heritage school: “Children’s bodies in time and space, like the texts they produced, were subject to regulated postures, position, orientation, and alignment as their handwriting was considered a reflection of their personalities and the children’s handwriting was subject to constant surveillance by the teacher”. (p. 240)

In van Leeuwen’s example, the letters we see in the printed advert were perhaps *never* “written”, in that commonsense way; they may, for instance, have been *painted*, produced as a graphic element of the advert’s overall artful design, with the resulting output offering through its visual properties a *simulation* of processes which, in less contrived contexts, provide the source domain for this metaphoric transfer. The specifics of process, those of the metaphor’s source domain and those of the target application in the advertisement, are hinted at but erased in favour of a visual account where a normative standard (schooled handwriting) is used to interpret and judge a messy style.

For Spitzmüller (2012), the principal limitation of the social-semiotic approach to writing as graphic practice is that social-semioticians:

usually do not go beyond attempts to categorize visual graphic means. At least as far as scriptality is concerned, they very much highlight the *semiotic*, while hiding the *social* part of their research manifesto. (p. 255).

Spitzmüller’s own attempt to redress this lies in focusing on graphic practices used to express aspects of “being German”, specifically, graphemes such as <ß> found only in German, and blackletter type. Spitzmüller does not have much to say about the semiotics of handwriting as against typography, and again it is distinctive practices *viewed as intentional* which are of interest to him, not the inadvertent characteristics that are at issue in Spelling-gate.

Unlike spelling, English-language handwriting in the present day in mainstream British society is subject to very little explicit training after elementary school, and little or no policing in the adult world (Sassoon 2007). Handwriting in the UK is an affair of private lives, and the historic shift from paper to screen (Kress 2003) as the dominant domain of contemporary literacy practices, has marginalised it against the rise of typography. Any sociolinguistic research in this area is therefore likely to be historically based, as in the work on British Edwardian postcards by Gillen and Hall (2010). Cultures with live calligraphic traditions may regard these things differently (Sharifi 2012).

## THE PERSONAL TOUCH

The requirement on military leaders to write condolence letters to the relations of those over whom they hold power and responsibility puts pressure on sincerity, when the basic message is always the same: “I am sorry your loved one died in my service”. The sincerity problem gets worse as the distance between leader and led increases, and the writer has less direct knowledge of the deceased. Jacqui Janes also received condolence letters from the Duke of Edinburgh, the Government Defence Secretary, and from Jamie’s regiment. All of these letters pleased her: “they were all written from the heart and made me feel Jamie’s death was important to them” (Dunn 2009). As Janes’ reaction shows, the routinisation of this communicative genre and the practice it represents need not be at the expense of perceived sincerity.

The points to note about Brown’s condolence letters in this context are firstly that they came from *him*, as the person with ultimate responsibility for all the troops, and secondly that they were hand-written. The letters were private, one-to-one messages to the next of kin, from a war leader trying to shore up morale in the military community at a difficult time. He introduced the personal touch by hand-writing it rather than signing a typed/printed version.

The content of Brown’s letter is generic, with nothing but the names to individualise the author, the addressee or the subject (see the facsimile in Drury and Chapman 2009). In Goffman’s (1981) terms, transposed to written language, Brown was the undisputed author, principal and animator of the letter, and it was the “animator” role which caused the problems. To see the hand-written characters on the page keeps the reader that much closer to the embodied writing experience of putting pen to paper, the “imprint of action” (Longcamp, Tanskanen, and Hari 2006) than seeing characters that have been produced by a machine. The letter, as a material textual object, retained a *visible* connection with the writer’s *body*, his hands and his eyes. What could be more personal than that? The haptics (Mangen 2016) of these two modes of animation are very different and as an indexical result, their visual outputs have different semiotic attributes. The former have individual specificity – they could only have been produced by that one person. The latter could have been produced by anyone with access to the right kind of machine and the ability to use it.

The concept of “experiential meaning potential” (van Leeuwen 1999; Kress and van Leeuwen 2001) is relevant here: the idea that signs have meanings deriving from (what readers assume about) our physical experiences when we produce them. The handwriting of the letter did allow Brown to give it a personal touch, as he intended, but the *fact* of its personalisation was damaged by the *quality* of it. Janes did not generate the intended, benign meaning of a high-ranking individual so concerned about her son that he wanted to animate his personal investment. She looked at specific *properties* of that animation, and generated critical meanings. The semiotic evidence for her (and later for others) showed him to be hasty and careless, and indifferent to the consequences of revealing himself in that way.

## DISRESPECT

Locating Brown’s epistolary offences specifically as matters of his *spelling* may have come, in fact, as much from *The Sun* as it did from Jacqui Janes. The quotes from Janes which *The Sun* reproduced on November 9th are indeterminate on the question of spelling:

He couldn't even be bothered to get our family name right. That made me so angry.

Then I saw he had scribbled out a mistake in Jamie's name.

The very least I would expect from Gordon Brown is to get his name right.

The letter was scrawled so quickly I could hardly even read it and some of the words were half-finished. It's just disrespectful.

I only got through the first four lines before I threw it across the room in disgust.

It was an insult to Jamie and all the good men and women who have died out there. How low a priority was my son that he could send me that disgraceful, hastily scrawled insult of a letter? (Dunn 2009)

The quotes show that Janes was particularly concerned about the family name, Jamie’s given name, and the handwriting. Evidence in the handwriting of *speed* is reprehensible: “hastily scrawled” for example; unseemly speed is also responsible for incompleteness (“half-finished”).

The Sun journalist goes further than Janes in drawing attention to specific mis-spellings:

In the letter – seen by The Sun – Mr Brown SPELLED Jamie incorrectly and then corrected it by scrawling over the last letter. COMMITTED four other spelling mistakes: Greatst for greatest, “condolencs” for condolences, you instead of your, and “colleagus” instead of colleagues. He also wrote the letter “i” incorrectly 18 times, mostly by leaving the dots off them but once by using two in “security”.

In the subsequent clandestinely recorded phone call, Jacqui Janes appeared to be more aligned with the spelling critique, with an emphasis on quantity:

JJ: The letter that you wrote to me Mr Brown...

GB: Yes

JJ: I don't want to sound disrespectful here, but was an insult to my child. There was 25 spelling mistakes, 25! [(The Sun 2009b)](#sun10novb)

The question of the *name* is still key:

GB: You know I did write the letter because I was concerned about the death of your son and I don't think what I said in it was disrespectful at all.

JJ: I never said it was disrespectful. The spelling mistakes are disrespectful.

GB: Er...

JJ: The fact that you named me Mrs James was disrespectful.

1. If there unconventional spellings in the letter, they are not errors of ignorance, or deliberate mis-spellings. They must be due to indifference or carelessness. But as we have seen, handwriting can be careless too. The specific problems enumerated by Dunn as the journalist responsible for the report as a whole includes spelling errors for those who chose to see them as such. For others, these same properties were handwriting deficiencies, possibly excusable ones from a writer known to have an eyesight problem. Brown’s autobiography reveals that 2009 was the year he feared losing his sight completely (Stewart 2017), and Brown himself tried to deflect criticism along these lines:

I understand that he was only 20 years old but I'm sorry I don't think I did have spelling mistakes. My writing is maybe so badly founded that you can't read it and I'm sorry.

The specific question of proper names and Jacqui’s commentary on these deserves separate attention. The rendering of both the family name, *Janes*, and the soldier’s given name, *Jamie*, comes in for particular criticism. In the case of the given name, Jacqui’s perception was that Brown moved from an incorrect version of the name to a correct one, but did it by over-writing the former with the latter. The carelessness here is chirographic rather than orthographic. Brown is aware of what the correct spelling should be *and he gets it right*, though not at his first attempt. He allows the letter to be despatched in a version where the addressee can witness *both* attempts and reconstruct the temporal sequence of their production. It is his indifference to the visibility of the first attempt under the second which is to his discredit.

In the case of the family name, most readers have seen the letter’s salutation, “Dear Mrs Janes/James” as the use of a letter “m” (grapheme <m>) where a letter “n” (grapheme <n>) was required (Letters in scare quotes indicates the layperson’s understanding of written language; angle brackets indicate a linguistic understanding of written symbols as graphemes). This is a prima facie case of mis-spelling, but when poor handwriting has already been used to account for “condolencs” etc., the same argument should have been available in this case too, as a letter “n” but one malformed by a handicapped writer. However, even if the critics are right, and Brown has wrongly written an “m” here, it is still possible to say that “James” is a perfectly acceptable spelling, but of a different name, a different word. This is not bad spelling. Since the word in question is not just any word, but a proper noun, a name, tied to reference rather than sense for its meaning, it is potentially a case of mistaken identity. As Carney (1994: 449) shows, special considerations apply to the spelling of names which can be more idiosyncratic than other kinds of words, and regarded as a kind of personal property, with their owners having the power to determine what they will regard as correct. Carney also considers that “Jonson” and “Johnson” are different names symbolising different people, but that because they have identical pronunciations, the one could also be considered as a mis-spelling of the other if used for the wrong referent. But that does not apply here: “James” and “Janes” are not homonyms. “Chris” and “Kris” in Sebba (2007a: 1-2) illustrate the same point.

Mistaken identity is a worse offence than a spelling mistake. A full-fledged mistaken identity interpretation is not viable here, and Janes does not claim that it is. The letter was sent to the right person at the right address, talking about the right war victim. But the inaccurate rendering of the name may have indicated to the addressee some indifference on the author’s part to this aspect of the content. Calling it a “spelling error” is a placeholder for this much more serious interpersonal offence. As she reportedly says herself, “He couldn’t even be bothered to get our family name right”.

## ADDING INSULT TO INJURY

The death of Jamie Janes was life-changing, whilst the scruffy writing and spelling errors were, in comparison, “merely” offensive. Jacqui Janes blamed Gordon Brown for both, but on November 9th only her (ortho/chiro)graphic critique made it into the public domain. Her outrage mobilized the news value of novelty, in comparison with otherwise similar war fatalities, and got the attention of *The Sun*. The resulting unexpected phone call was her opportunity to raise the military issues as well. On the question of English spelling the leader has no superiority over the citizen. Both are equally subject to the same laws of writing, and they know they are. And so it is “spelling”, rhetorically speaking, which levelled the playing field between them and brought Gordon Brown on to that playing field in direct engagement with his opponent. Once he was so engaged, Janes could use the unexpected opportunity of direct interpersonal contact to explore even more serious matters.

### Insult

The stance (Englebretson 2007; Jaffe 2009) that might be expected on Jacqui Janes’ part, given the occasion of the call, is that of “victim of (ortho/chiro)graphic insult”. But this occupies surprisingly little of their talk. In all, this topic amounts to 269 words, in comparison with 1849 words about the war and a further 57 which are arguably about both. Janes and Brown disagree about the letter’s defects, and despite some mitigation of the face-threatening acts involved, neither backs down, eventually provoking Jacqui’s metacomment: “I cannot believe I’ve been brought down to the level of having an argument with the Prime Minister of my own country”. (*The Sun* 2009b)

### Injury

Mrs Janes has sustained the injury of bereavement, but her discourse of blame goes beyond the specific case affecting her. With respect to the war, and her son’s death in it, Jacqui does adopt the stance of “victim” but she also mobilises a stance of “spokesperson” and one of “citizen”. She invokes the “victim” stance when she talks about Jamie’s death in particular, the “spokesperson” stance when she talks about the conduct and resourcing of the war in general and the “citizen” stance when she talks about the war’s justification as a matter of national policy. The “citizen” stance is the least developed, perhaps because she agrees with government policy. Her otherwise oppositional stance towards Brown makes it necessary for her to make this one area of agreement explicit:

they should be out there by the way, I do truly believe in my heart of hearts that the troops should be out there.

#### Victim

The victim stance is where Janes is the most emotionally vulnerable:

JJ: No, Mr Brown, Mr Brown, listen to me... I know every injury that my child sustained that day. I know that my son could have survived but my son bled to death. How would you like it if one of your children, God forbid, went to a war doing something that he thought, where he was helping protect his Queen and country and because of lack, LACK of helicopters, lack of equipment your child bled to death and then you had the coroner have to tell you his every injury?

Do you understand Mr Brown? Lack of equipment. (The Sun 2009b)

An analysis of the recording on which this transcription is based, using van Leeuwen’s (1999) social-semiotic framework would attend to such important vocal characteristics as the repetition, the emphasis, the rise in volume, the rise in pitch at “injury”, the pacing of the delivery (quite staccato in places, e.g., “my – son – bled – to – death”, the rhetorical questions and the rougher voice qualities over this passage. All of these mark it out as more emotional than the rest of her talk. Yet even here, where she is most overtly a victim, her “spokesperson” identity is also engaged. She does not refer to the non-deployment of *a* helicopter to rescue Jamie, but, like Thorneloe, to the lack of helicopters more generally. Throughout the conversation, “victim” and “spokesperson” stances are entwined: sometimes, as above, the victim is in the ascendant, sometimes the spokesperson. In the following, she attempts as a spokesperson to enhance her discursive power by mobilising the authority of knowledgeable sources in her social network as part of the military community.

Mr Brown, Mr Brown can I just step in here. My sons are fifth generation infantry I'm not silly. I have had lots of info from different people who I know from within the Army. I know about Chinooks that, er, were meant to be brought up to the Mark III standards but went wrong so they're no good.

I know about the Merlins that have been brought back from Iraq and are still sitting in this country.

The dialogic encounter, precipitated by “bad spelling” allows the equality that Brown and Janes unequivocally enjoy as users of written English, both equally subject to the inflexible rules of writing, to be transferred into their unequal relationship as military leader and citizen/subject. Janes’ engagement on the subject of helicopters is just as direct, confrontational and lacking in deference (beyond basic concessions to everyday civility) as her engagement on the subject of spelling errors, and in the phone call occupies much more space.

Bad handwriting and bad spelling both help with the levelling, and there are advantages and disadvantages with each. “Bad handwriting” was an empirically more sustainable criticism in the particular circumstances, was acknowledged by the author, and the national public could judge for itself to what extent it made the letter difficult to read, aesthetically unsatisfactory, and a conduit for other misjudgements. But because handwriting is now so marginal to public discourse about language use, it did not allow an appeal to non-negotiable chirographic values in the way that spelling allowed appeal to assumed non-negotiable orthographic values. In addition, Brown’s idiosyncrasies as a writer, if not widely known before the incident, became so as a result of it and afforded him some “cover” in the eyes of more sympathetic commentators:

The PM has NOT made spelling mistakes, it is just his style of handwriting - the "o" in “comfort'” was not joined up at the top, making it look like a “u”- BIG DEAL! I think the PM can be forgiven for letters not looking neat when he has taken the time to personally handwrite it - we grieve for the lady but for God's sake, cut the PM some slack and find something VALID to criticize! (from anonymised below-the-line commentary on The Sun’s website).

Bad spelling on the other hand can more easily be grounded in shared values, finessed in different ways by different critics with more or less awareness of spelling’s arbitrary basis. This is its advantage: its disadvantage was the rhetorical difficulty of establishing *beyond argument* that the letter was indeed mis-spelled, as the foregoing reader comment illustrates.

## CONCLUSIONS

### Spelling-gate and the sociolinguistics of writing

Spelling-gate has many characteristics which qualify it for analysis in terms of Lillis and McKinney’s (2013) recommendations for the sociolinguistics of writing. For example, although “spelling” was a touchstone for the row as a whole, only a very inclusive multimodal approach could do justice to all the details. In the first place, the events played out over an impressive range of communicative platforms with their associated genres and text types. This included personal correspondence, traditional mainstream print media, personal one-to-one telephone call; online public websites including short videos as well as discussion forums. Secondly, the modes of communication involved included images (still and moving), speech (dialogic and monologic) and writing (chirographic and typographic). Not all of these have been reviewed in the present article. The interpenetrations across platforms, media, modes and genres is also striking, with “private” texts making their way into public media in both raw (audio-recording, facsimile) and transposed forms (from handwriting to print; from speech to writing). Thirdly, metalinguistic and metasemiotic discourses, with attendant social values, are in play, attempting, not always successfully, to get readers/voters to see things specifically as matters of “spelling” or else as matters of “handwriting”. I have argued that the normativity of spelling is what made it rhetorically useful, as against the more obvious, but also more defensible, “bad” chirography. Fourthly, the existence of online platforms for “ordinary citizens” as well as more traditional ones for professional commentators, meant that there was space for contestation of dominant discourses as well as endorsement. And in the fifth place, it very precisely speaks to the 8th point in Lillis and McKinney’s characterisation of what “writing” is:

…. A social practice that is both intrinsically part of other activities and purposes and consequently inevitably bound up with relations of power and contested social needs and interests. (Lillis and McKinney 2013 444).

The existence of motivated nonstandard orthographic practices as reviewed in the Theory section of this paper, show that spelling conformity is *not* a fully inclusive evaluative frame. But the effectiveness of nonstandard forms in fanzines, graffiti and other less regulated orthographic spaces (Sebba 2007b) plays off the existence of the standard repertoire and its power to authorise or condemn, and often refracts cultural, social and political fault lines. Ideological resistance to spelling conformity did come into play during Spelling-gate, but in rather marginal ways, along the lines of “why all the fuss about spelling?” and not in the primary material. For some readers, the prima facie *triviality* of the focus on spelling raised the possibility of strategic intention to embarrass and undermine the PM, not on the part of Jacqui Janes but on the part of *The Sun*:

But what this article really shows is that The Sun has declared open season on Gordon Brown. His sincerity is beyond doubt, and there is no greater patriot. I wonder how many other Prime Ministers or Presidents write to the families of soldiers in Afghanistan who are killed? (from anonymised below-the-line commentary on The Sun’s website).

This kind of interpretation usefully bridges the gap between sociolinguistic discussion and discussion of political culture, the subject of my final conclusions.

### Spelling-gate and British political culture: beyond partisanship.

“Political culture” in this context refers to widely shared frameworks of knowledge, belief and value around the business of politics, which in Britain (certainly in England) is centred on government conducted from Westminster (Author et al 2013). Although I have focused on the primary texts and the main actors in the row: Brown, Janes, *The Sun*, rather than the wider debate, the commentary available at the time suggested that it would have been too simplistic to look for alignment between political partisanship and metasemiotic values: not all of Brown’s political opponents followed *The Sun*’s lead and found him guilty of bad spelling; not all supporters dismissed the “errors” and excused the handwriting. There were too many instances where even opponents wanted to say that the “errors” were nothing of the kind, or that they were trivial in the wider context.

There are some significant points of connection between the Spelling-gate row and the more recent controversy about a condolence phone-call from US President Donald Trump to the widow of an African-American soldier, Sergeant La David T Johnson, who lost his life on active service in Niger, October 2013 (Alcindor and Davies 2017). Although there are no orthography/chirography issues in the Trump case, there are semiotic equivalences between the two incidents. On the plane of meaning, there is very certainly offence at the lack of respect shown by Trump in allegedly failing to remember the sergeant’s name, a lack of respect that is not mitigated by the president’s personal gesture in himself making phone call. On the plane of form, there may also be some equivalence between Jacqui Janes’ reaction to the orthography and Myeshia Johnson’s quoted reaction to properties of vocal delivery. She refers to Trump ‘stumbling’ over the name: she also says ‘I was very angry at the tone in his voice and how he said it’, describing her reaction when claiming Trump said ‘He knew what he signed up for’. In both cases: ‘its not what he said/wrote, it’s the way he said/wrote it’. There are further points of comparison involving difference as well as similarity. The US victim is not ‘David’ but ‘LaDavid’, signifying a heritage different from Trump’s. To what extent is this comparable to the status of the British victim’s unusual surname? What should we make of the ‘remedial’ work attempted by both leaders after the media had exposed the offence? In both cases some of the remedial work made things worse rather than better, but only in America was Twitter a vehicle for that work.

Returning to the British case, we may note that, excluding that of *The Sun* itself, party affiliation is of less interest in Spelling-gate than two other key features of contemporary British political culture: its strong reliance on a few “celebrity” politicians (Street 2004; Corner 2003) as points of reference, exemplified here by the PM himself, and its lack of deference, escalating for some, at least rhetorically, to the level of contempt, towards the political class in general. a key point of reference for this contempt is the recent row over MPs expenses (Corner et al 2009) and the even more recent one, still ongoing at the time of writing, into sexual harassment at Westminster. Arguably, given the second of these characteristics, Mrs Janes would not need a “levelling” device to put her on an equal footing with Brown. She would already have possessed sufficient disrespect to experience no hesitation in squaring up to him when opportunity presented itself, and be further emboldened by knowing herself to share that disrespect with a large proportion of her fellow citizens. Constitutionally however she occupies the subordinate position, instrumentally she lacks his direct power to dictate to the Treasury and the military generals, and her victimhood in the war is not on its own sufficient to command the attention of mainstream media. Despite some awkwardness in the application, where the specific details don’t unequivocally support the case being made, it is “spelling” which provides her with a point of entry to deploy her lack of deference to rhetorical effect.

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