Confluences of Writing Studies and the History of the English Language: An Introduction[1]

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The flowing of rivers is a common metaphor for language diversity within historical studies of English (Morse-Gagné, 2019; Smith & Kim, 2018). A confluence occurs when two rivers, like languages, come together, often in powerful and surprising ways. This metaphor can also extend beyond the specific topic of language diversity to describe the innovation that occurs when we challenge our disciplinary assumptions—when we scout other fields and dive into other bodies of scholarship. We see the confluence of writing studies and the history of the English language (HEL) as an underexamined area needing additional exploration and mapping.

The relationship between writing and language studies is one that has not always flowed smoothly. On the one hand, the field of writing studies has engaged with language in exciting, productive ways, particularly as it relates to translanguaging, language rights, and world/global Englishes. On the other hand, the confluence has also been characterized in terms related to misunderstanding, othering, and disciplinary division (Donahue, 2018; McComiskey, 2006). As noted by Paul Kei Matsuda (2014), writing studies scholarship—even when it focuses on language—rarely incorporates the work of linguists and language historians. Even explicitly historical scholarship often exhibits similar traits: language historians often draw heavily on writing as an object of study but do not always acknowledge their own work as part of writing studies, while historians of writing studies have primarily focused on the field's emergence in university teaching contexts (Harris, 2012; Horner, 1990; McComiskey, 2016; Shepley, 2015). This raises the question of how else historical perspectives can contribute to the fields of writing studies, language studies, and their confluences.

This double special issue extends the historical scope of writing studies broadly—including composition studies, creative writing, WAC/WID, and related subdisciplines—to account for these fields' cross-currents with HEL. Examining these confluences can yield dynamic and innovative insights, including situating "proper English" as a social and historical construct, illuminating the ideological roots of emphasizing English in writing classrooms, and broadening understandings of the roots of writing practices in various institutional and professional contexts within and outside university halls.

Over the past several years, we have observed and participated in an increasing number of conversations about this confluence at conferences, including Studies in the History of the English Language (SHEL) and the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC). We have found in these conversations a network of scholars like ourselves whose work engages with questions that bridge the cross-disciplinary chasms that characterize many contemporary English departments and that have even led, in some cases, to their fragmentation. From our respective positions—Amanda as a WPA and scholar of composition and Basic Writing who advocates for

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language rights in her teaching and scholarship; Chris as a researcher of historical morphology, historical sociolinguistics, and educational linguistics who teaches courses in literature, linguistics, and professional writing; and Jennifer as an English education and literacy studies specialist—we have experienced powerful connections between HEL and writing studies for both us and our students.

A Shared History of HEL and Writing Studies: Some Myths and Misperceptions

While HEL and writing studies might seem like vastly different disciplines to scholars outside and perhaps even inside these fields, they share common origins and concerns. Colette Moore and Chris Palmer (2019) remind us that writing studies and HEL emerge from shared traditions in the earliest English departments of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; they are each "descendants of the early field built on English philology" (pp. 7-8). Even though HEL is now sometimes seen as a discipline within linguistics, and writing studies in some institutions exists in departments outside of English, the philological headwaters at the source of these fields explain why there have been and still are so many potential cross-channels to explore.

Even so, because the fields have been so separated from one another in many institutional and scholarly contexts in recent decades (in university departments, journals, conferences, and so on), several myths have emerged about the sort of work that counts as HEL or writing studies. We even encountered these (mis)perceptions as we heard from a range of scholars about the topic of this special issue.

Myth #1: HEL is only about the old stuff.

It's not unusual to encounter scholars in English and writing studies who assume that *history of the English language* is code for explorations of Old, Middle, and maybe Early Modern English—i.e., material before the nineteenth century. This perception may perhaps be due to job trends in the field, as it's quite common for HEL scholars to also be trained as medievalists (and vice versa). But as the authors in this special issue illustrate, HEL can and should be open to local and recent histories, many of which can help illuminate twentieth and twenty-first century trends in composition and creative writing research and pedagogy.

Myth #2: History matters most when it explains the present.

There is no doubt that it's vitally important for teachers and scholars to explain to audiences—from students to administrators to the broader public—how our work is relevant to present-day concerns. This importance has felt more acute in the face of recent declines in enrollments and of administrative cuts in programs in the humanities, including historically oriented ones. But this perspective should not diminish our recognition of the value of historical work in studies of writing and language, even when that work is not immediately relevant or focused on the present day. HEL has perhaps been too disconnected from present-day relevance, though recent work shows that historical linguists (Bowern & Dockum, 2024) and HEL instructors (Moore & Palmer, 2019, pp. 6-7, 11) are prioritizing the present-day relevance of the field. From its earliest days, writing studies scholarship has shown ample interest in present-day composition and other writing contexts—and yet the field should also continue to embrace historical studies of writing that choose not to focus on the present moment. Interdisciplinary work in HEL and writing studies can help us paint a fuller picture of developments in writing and language use over the long run—in many different cultural contexts and in many different historical periods.

Myth #3: HEL sees writing as incidental rather than primary.

Although it may seem obvious to outside observers, it's important to acknowledge that HEL scholarship has always very much been about studies of writing. Because historical audio records are not available before the nineteenth century, and can still be spotty in decades after the first available recordings, the primary form of data analyzed by HEL scholars has been the written word. And yet, it's been rare for HEL scholars to frame their work as part of writing studies. HEL scholarship would benefit from more engagement with work in WAC/WID and other research on histories of writing and writing disciplines. As can be seen in several articles in this special issue, for example, HEL work on language ideologies and standardization has a lot to say about writing studies research on language norms in academia and industry. Likewise, research on the development of language standards and the resistance to and acceptance of variation and multilingualism in writing contexts can very much inform HEL scholarship. In recent years there has been more overt interest in bridging these rivers: e.g., there have been multiple well-attended panels on writing studies at the SHEL Conference over the last decade; the Language, Linguistics, and Writing standing group at CCCC retains strong membership; and language is a consistently popular topic in writing studies articles, conference presentations, and CFPs, though—as discussed below—the extent to which this scholarship engages historical linguistics is often inconsistent.

Myth #4: The language turn in writing studies in recent years has already accounted for the work of language historians.

Paul Kei Matsuda (2013) describes composition studies' somewhat recent unprecedented attention to language issues, attention which is demonstrated via a long list of conference and journal themes, books, and award-winning scholarship. Matsuda contends that this

> linguistic turn stems from multiple exigencies and multiple lines of research and scholarship. It was in part stimulated by the continued effort to address the state of language diversity for linguistic minority students . . . [as well as] an intellectual movement to see languages not as discrete entities but as situated, dynamic, and negotiated. (p. 130)

Missing in this exigence is a focus on language history. Indeed, Matsuda later critiques writing scholars for embracing only the newest, most exciting ideas in language research at the expense of established scholarship. This is particularly true of established HEL scholarship. At the 2022 SHEL Conference, Anne Curzan noted in her plenary address that writing studies research on language rights and translingualism would benefit from engaging more extensively with scholarship on language standardization—work HEL scholars have been doing for decades. The articles in this issue further demonstrate the ways in which writing studies and HEL scholarship can mutually enrich each other: by citing and building off of research findings and pedagogical strategies from both fields; by interrogating and reflecting on terms and concepts used in both fields; and by adapting and integrating research methods from both fields.

Myth #5: HEL and writing studies are English-Only or Standard-English-Only disciplines.

There has been a "misperception that HEL is an archaic or outdated subject devoted only to premodern English and to simplistic narratives of the rise of Standard English" (Moore & Palmer, 2019, p. 3). Similarly, writing studies has gone through decades of (self-)criticism regarding composition programs, histories, and writing classrooms that promote monolingual and standard

English norms in student writing (e.g., Brown, 2020; Horner & Tetreault, 2017; Horner & Trimbur, 2002; Matsuda, 2006). What scholars of language and writing should recognize, though, is that both of these fields have increasingly adopted multilectal, multilingual, and translingual frameworks (e.g., Bhatt 2017; Blackmore 2019; Canagarajah 2013; Percy 2017; Saltzman 2017; Shapiro 2022). This multilingual alignment provides exciting opportunities for writing studies to lean on language history when tracing the emergence of linguistic norms and ideologies in writing practices and institutions. And it allows HEL and writing studies to better understand the jargon and concepts in each other's fields and to co-develop richer investigations into language(s) and writing(s), including topics such as dialects, literacies, language contact, language revitalization, and translanguaging.

Part 1: Against the Flow

The articles in the first part of the special issue move against the flow of commonplace ideas found in HEL and writing studies, including rubrics, translingualism, genre, and placement testing. They challenge norms of standardization and common practice. They look at how history bears on the present and investigate different histories of writing to inform how we might challenge the status quo.

The first two articles place writing studies and language studies side by side and examine conceptual tensions between the two fields. The article by Kristen di Gennaro and Meaghan Brewer traces how terminology from applied linguistics has been taken up and reinterpreted in writing studies, often creating turbulence between the two disciplines. Laura Aull's piece draws together scholarship on writing and linguistics to develop a continuum for examining how particular registers, fields, and genres historically have been included and excluded from college writing.

The next two articles take a historical look at the texts used to guide the teaching of writing. Don Chapman traces the emergence of stylistic preferences of Good Writing and Good English that developed in 20th-century usage guides. Dan Martin's essay focuses on how popular composition textbooks from the turn of the 20th century used standard English and standard American English to support nationalism in the United States.

The final two articles draw on historical perspectives to challenge current-day practices in writing assessment and curricula. Taylor Lewis and Jenni Eaton examine how lack of faculty preparation for using contract- and labor-based rubrics can perpetuate linguistic violence for speakers of Black Language in writing classrooms. Joseph Wilson engages with key questions about how institutional, cross-disciplinary conversations about writing curricula can be informed by anticolonial translation initiatives and translingual activism.

Part 2: Redefining the River(s)

The articles in the second part of the special issue push the boundaries of what the confluence between writing studies and HEL includes, as well as demonstrate how to approach the confluence both conceptually and methodologically. They argue for diversifying experiences and genres from a historical perspective and, in so doing, challenge what counts as writing studies. The articles in Part 2 open up conversations among writing studies, HEL, and other disciplines.

The first three articles offer methodological insights into the confluence between writing studies and HEL. Coleman Riggins and Amanda Sladek draw on grounded theory and corpus linguistics to track the development of gendered language in writing studies journals between 1970 and 2020. Wen Xin uses word-frequency lists and keyness analysis from diachronic corpus linguistics to identify large-scale disciplinary trends in writing studies since the mid-1990s. In contrast, Shakil Rabbi and Md Mijanur Rahman engage in autoethnography to illustrate how translingualism acts as a gateway for

World Englishes speakers into writing studies and how histories of English mediated their experiences in the discipline.

The next three articles locate the confluence between writing studies and HEL in specific disciplines. J.A. Rice and Trini Stickle describe how they have used common historical legal documents in their WID and HEL courses. Sharon Emmerichs discusses how she used adaptation theory to apply HEL to her creative writing craft while writing the novel *Shield Maiden.* Mitch Olson and Chris C. Palmer look at dialect, slang, and historical language use in screenwriting through analyses of screenwriters' manuals, survey data from practicing screenwriters, and their own teaching practices in creative writing and English linguistics courses.

The final two pieces in the special issue explore how the confluence between writing studies and HEL might also spill over into related fields including literacy studies and Indigenous studies. In his article, Harvey Graff challenges us to think about how centering literacy might reshape theoretical approaches to both writing studies and HEL. Finally, in a write-up of an interview conducted in summer 2024, Ellen Cushman and Naomi Trevino discuss their community-based work on the Digital Archive for Indigenous Language Persistence and the implications of that project for rethinking the confluence both theoretically and methodologically.

Conclusion

The convergence of these various perspectives on writing and language generates exciting new waters to explore, including ample opportunities for innovative research, teaching, and community engagement. It is our hope that this double special issue opens up future channels within and between disciplines and industries, not only for the benefit of HEL and writing studies as reservoirs of academic knowledge, but also for individuals and communities participating in writing and other language practices beyond academic halls.

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Note

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