Writing as a sociolinguistic object[1]

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Writing has never been a core object of sociolinguistics, and this paper argues for a mature sociolinguistics of writing. Seen from a sociolinguistic viewpoint, writing needs to be seen as a complex of specific resources subject to patterns of distribution, of availability and accessibility. If we take this approach to the field of writing, and unthank the unproductive distinction between 'language' and 'writing', we can distinguish several specific sets of resources that are required for writing: from infrastructural ones, over graphic ones, linguistic, semantic, pragmatic and metapragmatic ones, to social and cultural ones. These resources form the 'sub-molecular' structure of writing and each of them is subject to different patterns of distribution, leading to specific configurations of writing resources in people's repertoires. Thus, we can arrive at vastly more precise diagnostic analyses of 'problems' in writing, and this has a range of important effects.

Schrijven is noot een kernobject van sociolinguïstische studie geweest, en dit artikel wil bijdragen tot een mature sociolinguïstiek van het schrijven. Vanuit een sociolinguïstisch standpunt moet schrijven gezien worden als een complex van specifieke semiotische middelen die onderworpen zijn aan patronen van distributie, beschikbaarheid en toegankelijkheid. Als we deze aanpak overbrengen naar het veld van schrijven, en komaf maken met het onproductieve tussen 'taal' en 'schrijven', dan kunnen we verschillende specifieke gehelen aan semiotische middelen onderscheiden die allemaal nodig zijn bij het schrijven: van infrastructurele middelen, over grafische, taalkundige, semantische, pragmatische en metapragmatische, tot en met sociale en culturele middelen. Het zijn deze middelen die de 'sub-moleculaire' structuur van het schrijven uitmaken. Elk van hen is het voorwerp van verschillende distributiepatronen, die zorgen voor uiteenlopende configuraties van aan schrijven gerelateerde middelen in de repertoires van mensen. Via deze weg kunnen we meer accurate diagnostische analyses uitvoeren van schrijf-'problemen', en dit heeft een aantal belangrijke gevolgen. [Dutch]

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INTRODUCTION

It has taken quite a while for literacy to make it to the major league of sociolinguistics. The early discipline displayed remarkably little interest in writing, often dismissing it as a derivative of 'real' – spoken – speech, as 'a record of something already existing' (Hymes 1996: 35; cf. also Basso 1974) rather than as an object of sociolinguistic inquiry in its own right. New Literacy Studies have, since the 1980s, broken ground in identifying writing and reading as sociolinguistically sensitive areas of practice (e.g. Heath 1983; Street 1995; Collins and Blot 2003), and the emerging ethnography of writing has demonstrated the complexities of writing practices as embedded in specific social and cultural contexts (Barton 1994; Barton and Hamilton 1998; Blommaert 2008a). More recently, inquiries into new digital literacies (Kress 2003; Prinsloo 2005) and into Linguistic Landscapes (Scollon and Scollon 2003; Stroud and Mpendukana 2009) have invited an increasingly sophisticated view of written language as a complex of practices as well as a semiotic object.

This paper is theoretical and methodological in nature. It will attempt to sketch an object of inquiry, or at least to make such an object visible as a target of research, and will formulate suggestions for an analytic framework by means of which it can be examined. This attempt needs to be seen against the background of the gradual emergence of written language as an object of sociolinguistic inquiry. In doing so, I will return to the key questions in *Grassroots Literacy* (Blommaert 2008a) and some comments on this earlier work might be useful here.

The central question in *Grassroots Literacy* was: what is the place of literacy in the repertoires of people, and more precisely, what are the specific literacy resources that enter into people's repertoires? Inspiration for this question was obviously found in earlier work on repertoires by Hymes, Gumperz and other early sociolinguistics (see Blommaert and Backus 2011 for a discussion). The fact that this question would not be all that easy to answer was anticipated in seminal New Literacies work such as that of Brian Street (1995) and Gunther Kress (1997), and warnings that literacy was becoming vastly more complex as a theme of research due to contemporary technological innovations were not lost on me either (e.g. Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996; Kress 2003). I chose, therefore, to examine texts 'from the margins', texts that might offer me a minimal or skeleton variety of literacy, its resources and its practices: long handwritten narrative and historiographic texts from the Congo. I assumed that such objects would expose most eloquently the complex and challenging play of available and accessible literacy resources, their organization in relation to a perceived addressee through imagined genres, their constraints and effects.

In trying to answer this question, I was forced to disassemble, so to speak, the writing practices of the Congolese sub-elite subjects whose texts I was

investigating, since analytical and interpretative problems arose with respect to very different aspects of 'writing': the material conditions of writing, the languages and codes involved, the archival and generic resources required to arrive at the specific texts crafted by the Congolese authors, and so on. 'Writing', I had to conclude, was best not treated as a unified object but rather as an agglomerate of very different resources, and each of these resources demanded separate attention, for access to different resources tended to differ considerably. Thus, for instance, access to a language variety used in writing differed from access to genres; and both differed from access to what I called the infrastructure of writing in areas such as the South-Eastern Congo – the material conditions under which writing could take place, which proved to be concentrated in specific places in the area.

Mentioning access evidently connects resources to patterns of distribution, and we so arrive at a classical sociolinguistic object. A mature sociolinguistics of writing needs to be able to tell us something about the patterns of distribution of particular, specific resources required for performing writing practices, the different forms of competence involved in the act of writing texts destined to be understood by others, and the ways in which people manage or fail to incorporate these resources and competences into their repertoires. The point of this paper is precisely this: to define writing as a sociolinguistic object which can be approached by means of established sociolinguistic questions, and which needs to be thus approached if we wish to build a comprehensive, a 'complete' sociolinguistics. Such a sociolinguistics, I'm afraid, does not yet exist, and this explains the broadly conceived theoretical and explorative character of this paper: I'm venturing in waters for which only fragmentary navigation charts exist, and I must cover large chunks of terrain with poorly developed equipment.

I will first refine this issue by means of a set of observations on the distinction between 'language' and 'writing'. These general comments will be followed by a discussion of the different features that enter into writing and to the issues of distribution and access that determine them. After that, a more detailed picture will emerge of resources required for writing, and I will make a case for a renewed study of repertoires. Addressing repertoires in a more sophisticated way, I shall argue, offers important intellectual and practical advantages, especially in the era of globalization and superdiversity.

ONE COMPLEX AND COMPOSITE SIGN

Language and writing are usually seen as separate, and expressions such as 'English writing' (as different from, say, 'Swahili writing') or 'writing in English' (versus 'writing in Swahili') emphasize this fundamental distinction. We *write* a *language* or we *write* in a *language*. The facts of language are not coterminous with those of literacy, and both demand different analytical approaches – traditionally, sociolinguistics and literacy studies.

It is good to remind ourselves, however, that whenever we consider actual samples of 'English writing', we are looking at *one complex sign,* which is judged, in its totality, in terms of *communicability.* If we stay within the familiar region of our own academic literacy practices, we can see that whenever we read and assess an essay written in English, we mark the paper in its totality, as *one single* object. And even if, in more sophisticated systems of marking, we distinguish between e.g. 'contents', 'style' and some other specific characteristics, we still process a totalizing judgment in statements such as 'this is a fine paper'. Likewise, the millions of examples on 'funny English' circulating on the Internet are overwhelmingly examples of *written* English, and we judge the quality of 'language' from the quality of writing. We appear to have, in other words, *one normative complex,* which we can and do apply to the total semiotic fact of 'written language'. We apply this normative complex whenever we 'read' a written text, and even if our overall judgment can be dominated by specific features such as stylistic fluency or the strength of argumentation, we appear to fold such more specific normative judgments into one total judgment of 'the text'. A 'good writer' is, thus, a synthetic or composite judgment that summarizes a range of different judgments attached to specific features of the texts produced by this good writer.

This composite judgment can be disassembled, and we can see this one normative complex as composed of a range of micro-norms related to specific mappings of form over function. That is: we can distinguish a range of 'components' of writing, each of which needs to be 'in order' if we wish to provoke an overall positive judgment on our writings. Each of the components of writing, thus, needs to be organized according to specific micro-norms, and the judgment of the complex sign – 'English writing' – will only be positive if the different components are brought within the area of normative 'normalcy'. I can refer again to *Grassroots Literacy* to illustrate this.

The storyline of *Grassroots Literacy* started from the observation that the two sets of documents analyzed there had failed as acts of communication. Three versions of an autobiography by the Congolese man, Julien, had been sent to his former employer, friend and sponsor, a Belgian lady, in view of her ambition to write a novel on her life in Congo. She had asked Julien to 'write his life' – to produce a genre called 'autobiography' in other words. Julien's three texts, sent over a period of five years, revealed a massive and amazing effort to arrive at such a genre. Every form of communication is inherently *proleptic*: that is, whenever we communicate, we do so with an anticipated effect in mind. We wish to make sense, and be understood as producers of *specific* meanings. So too with Julien: he wanted to be understood by his Belgian patron in specific ways, in ways that satisfied her expectations of him. For that purpose, Julien had gathered all the literacy resources he could get to achieve that target; yet he failed because of the absence of some crucial literacy resources. For instance, Julien wrote the stories of his life without access to what can best be called an 'archive': documentation of specific moments and

events in his life, enabling him to order such elements of a story chronologically in what could qualify as a successful enactment of the genre 'autobiography'. The three versions of his life history, consequently, reveal one big and protracted effort to *remember* accurately, and to situate such remembered events in a coherent chronology. None of the three versions, however, can be called conclusive: the third and final version did not display significantly superior temporal coherence to the second one. These constraints – *structural* constraints that mark the literacy environment in which he lived – turned his texts away from the genre 'autobiography' and reduced them to a curiosum, a mere souvenir of old times for the Belgian lady.

The same applied to the astonishing effort by the famous Congolese painter, Tshibumba, to write the history of his country – the second set of texts analyzed in *Grassroots Literacy*. He sent his 70-plus pages of handwritten text off to a Canadian historian, in a deliberate and explicit attempt – the semiotically proleptic aspect of his effort – to produce a genre called historiography. The text remained dormant in the archives of the professional historian and was never used as a legitimate historical source for the same reasons as the ones we identified in the case of Julien's autobiography: Tshibumba lacked access to certain crucial literacy resources required to accomplish the genre-writing task he had set for himself, and his text remained, like those of Julien, just a curiosum potentially useful only as 'data' for anthropological analysis. In Tshibumba's case, he lacked access to and dialogue with crucial historiographic sources on his country in general. His historical narrative is very well documented with regard to what happened in Tshibumba's own region; clearly, Tshibumba had been a direct or indirect witness to local and regional events. But events in other parts of the country were severely under-documented, leading to (literally) blank pages in his *Histoire*. Like in the case of Julien, Tshibumba's attempt at history writing revealed structural constraints characterizing the economy of information, knowledge and literacy within which he had to operate.

What these two exercises taught me was that written documents can be disqualified – they can fail to communicate – whenever specific literacy resources are lacking or 'dis-ordered', i.e. when specific micro-norms have not been satisfied. Julien and Tshibumba 'could write', to be sure, and seen from within the local economies of literacy in which they performed their writing, the texts they delivered were truly astonishing literacy achievements. The more detailed analysis of the texts, however, revealed the extent to which expectations about successful writing depended on the mastery of and control over a wide range of specific forms of competence and resources. And so, while the texts were surely successful at some levels of expectation, they failed to respond to other levels. This, therefore, is where we need to dis-assemble writing into more specific sets of resources and competences to deploy them. If we metaphorically take a composite sign such as 'English writing' to be a

'molecule' of sociolinguistic substance, it is towards the 'sub-molecular' structure of it that we should direct our attention.

THE SUB-MOLECULAR STRUCTURE OF WRITING

What does it take to write in a way readers can judge adequate? I suggest that at least the following categories of resources and competences need to be available, accessible, and deployable. Note that in the shift to an analytic focus on functionally organized and ordered 'resources', I will necessarily have to draw, rather clumsily, on a vocabulary that may seem to contradict it – a vocabulary of 'languages', 'adequacy' and 'appropriateness'. I see no alternative as yet to this, and must request the patience of the reader for possible paradoxical undertones. If we keep in mind, in the terms of Jørgensen et al. (2011), that 'languages' are conventionalized ideological projections of semiotic form-and-function, and are therefore artefactual projections of language-ideological interpretation, we can avoid major misunderstandings (cf. also Blommaert 2008b artefactual). The same goes for widespread notions such as 'adequacy', 'correctness' and so forth: if we see them as locally produced judgments passed on recognizably (i.e. conventionally) ordered semiotic resources, as a recognition of semiotic order to use Silverstein's (2003) and Agha's (2007) terms instead of as universal and objective criteria for using language, readers should be able to keep track of my argument. Thus, whenever I refer to norms and normativity in what follows, I beg the reader to understand these terms as locally produced and situated, not abstract and absolute phenomena.

Technological/infrastructural resources

Writing always requires a material infrastructure: pen and paper, a computer, an Internet connection, a mobile phone with airtime, and so on. Specific genres of writing require vastly more. The specific demands of intertextuality in academic writing, for instance, require access to a library, databases or archives, and to academic peer groups. Money is required for publishing most kinds of texts, and legal criteria and restrictions need to be observed for the same purposes.

The infrastructure of writing is very often taken for granted (and thereby overlooked as an issue) but proved to be of substantial importance in documenting the problems encountered by Julien. Julien described in his texts the phenomenal distances he had to travel to be able to write and send letters to his Belgian friend. The resources for the kind of literacy practice he intended to engage in – its infrastructure – appeared to be concentrated in cities such as Lubumbashi, some 800 kilometers away; they were not available in the rural areas where Julien lived. In literacy-poor environments, infrastructural issues are obvious and crucial constraints on literacy achievements, and the digital

revolution has broadened the gap between various literacy economies in the world (see e.g. Blommaert 2004). The more intricate and costly the infrastructure for writing becomes, the bigger the gaps between those who have access to it and those who do not will be.

In general, it is safe to assume that writing can only proceed when one has access to the material infrastructure for writing, and that differential access at this level is a critical source of inequality in the field of literacy (also discussed by Canagarajah 1996). And in addition, we should not forget that all technologies for writing come with affordances as well as constraints. Thus, Twitter enables the extraordinarily fast, continuous and vast circulation of messages; but the messages cannot be longer than 144 characters and long disquisitions are, consequently, very hard to organize on Twitter. Different scripts all offer something – Chinese characters, for instance, offer different forms of expression than the Latin alphabet – but they never offer everything. The rapid development of alternative ('heterographic') forms of writing in new social media contexts shows us the dynamic interplay of affordances and constraints in real time, offering us a kind of laboratory to observe the creation of new writing systems (e.g. Velghe 2011). This brings us to the second set of resources.

Graphic resources

The work of Gunther Kress (1997, 2000; Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996) has done much to sharpen our understanding of the importance of graphic competences in writing. An important part of writing revolves around the capacity to 'draw', 'design' and order visual symbols in a highly specific and usually strictly regimented way. Terms such as 'orthography' and 'spelling' refer to the compellingly normative connections between ordered graphic symbols and institutional criteria of 'correctness'. Words can be written in several ways, but usually just one of these options will be normatively qualified as 'correct', and the others can be dismissed as 'wrong'. For such orthographic and spelling correctness, well-defined complexes of explicit rules are available: the 'spelling rules'.

Distinctions between correctness and error are densely packed with social indexicalities: writing 'errors' is quickly seen as a sign of poor education, a lack of intelligence or a sloppy mind. Thus, one often encounters 'emblematic' errors – errors that allow a straight judgmental line between graphic realization and social character, such as the apostrophe error in English ('it's' instead of 'its').

Note, however, that the graphic complex of micro-norms is broader than just the rules of spelling. Terms such as 'layout', 'editing' and 'graphic design' suggest considerably broader requirements for graphic adequacy. In research in language classes for immigrant children in Antwerp, we found that children not only had to learn how to spell words, but also to reproduce an exact

graphic replica of the teacher's handwriting (Blommaert et al., 2006; also Blommaert 2010: 173–178). What they were expected to achieve was not just 'spelling' but 'drawing', 'designing' lines on paper in a highly regulated way.

This designing aspect of writing is also present whenever we use punctuation marks, divide texts into paragraphs, sections and chapters, tick boxes and write on dotted lines, or use particular text-shaping resources for highlighting and emphasizing specific fragments of a text (bold, italic, underline, capitals, etc.). Even more: it is very often the graphic shape of a text that serves as first pointer towards its genre. We can recognize poetry instantly from the specific ordering of lines on paper; we recognize graffiti by the shape of its signs; we can recognize publicity from the play of color, font and image in an advertisement, and so forth. Such recognitions often happen before we start 'reading' the text; and they condition our reading: when we have identified a text as a poem, using our own ideas of how poems relate to specific forms of indexical order, we will read it as a poem.

Linguistic resources

The 'language' or language variety that enters into writing – say, the variety many people would identify as standard English – needs to be ordered in specific ways as well: morphosyntactic and other norms of grammar need to be observed in order to achieve adequacy. Depending on the genre, strong expectations of linguistic 'purity' can prevail, forcing writers to avoid vernacular forms and/or codeswitching into other languages or varieties, or the use of emoticons and other graphic forms that are not seen as belonging to 'the' language. In general, when a piece of writing enters the public domain – via media, advertisements and so forth – one can expect heavy normative pressures to comply with rules of purity. If transgression of such norms is in itself an expectation, as in forms of publicity or popular culture targeting young audiences, one is expected to vernacularize 'correctly' as well, i.e. to proleptically adjust to the normative expectations that organize such patterns of language-in-action. Nothing is less cool than a failed public attempt at coolness.

Semantic, pragmatic and metapragmatic resources

As mentioned earlier, all communication has a proleptic character. Specific, nonrandom meanings need to be conveyed in writing, and this of course involves subscribing to the normative lexicosemantic conventions associated with meaningful expression in 'languages' or language varieties. Thus, when the term 'jacket' is used, one should not refer to an object commonly denoted by the terms 'couch' or 'bottle'. In that sense, writers need to submit to the same norms as speakers: to draw from a common set of 'sayable' things in the languages and varieties used, to 'speak within the archive' of what can be expressed, as I called it earlier (Blommaert 2005: 99–107). Neologisms,

metaphorical or other extensions of meaning and alternative meaning-attribution need to be clearly flagged and need to be made understandable within the interlocutor's interpretive universes. Thus, deliberate norm-violations, deviations and subcultural expressions are themselves norm-governed (e.g. Varis and Wang 2011; Wang, Juffermans and Du 2012; also Blommaert and Varis 2012).

Meanings are conveyed in patterns of language usage in which, apart from denotation, indexicals and other indirect, associative features of meaning are transmitted, captured under terms such as 'appropriateness' and 'coherence' (cf. Silverstein 1985; Verschueren 1999; Agha 2007). It is at this level, in which meaning is intrinsically interconnected with patterns of usage, that we often situate judgments of 'fluency', of 'adequacy' and general communicability of texts. The language, syntax and orthography may be correct, yet the ways in which all of these resources are brought into concrete speech acts, in relation to other acts from interlocutors, can fail to satisfy the locally dominant normative expectations. Texts can be judged to be too direct, impolite, too informal, not to the point, aggressive and so forth: we see that the pragmatic and metapragmatic features of texts are features of linguistic and sociolinguistic structuring apart from the levels discussed earlier. And such features are grounded into language ideologies that drive their production and uptake: people write and read texts very much from within the frames of perception they ideologically attach to specific formats of text; changes within such frames prompt large-scale reorderings of the features that index the frames (Silverstein and Urban 1996; Silverstein 2003). Thus, recognizing 'irony' in a message enables us to understand several features of the text 'upside down', so to speak, as the reverse of what they would usually mean.

Social and cultural resources

The previous set of features naturally spills over into the broader field in which every form of language usage is contextualized, and made sense of, from within social and cultural conventions for meaning-making – the relatively slow development, and perduring character, of social and cultural patterns of normative organization we often capture under terms such as 'genre' and 'register' (Agha 2007; also Goffman 1974). These patterns are patterns of recognizability: whenever we read something, we recognize it 'as something', as English, vernacular English, a text message, a friendly one, one which also demands instant response, and so forth.

We recognize such texts on the basis of indexical connections between specific formal features and contextual ones. For instance, we read 'Dear Sir' at the beginning of an email; we know that these characteristics point towards formality and deference; and we thus expect that the message is not written in the capacity of 'friend', 'lover' and so forth. We can make such inferences because our language usage is largely ritualized, i.e. based on the iteration of

similar patterns of ordering in the features we deploy (cf. Goffman 1967; Gumperz 1982; Rampton 2006). Such patterns are also aesthetic patterns, and whenever we say that something is 'well' or 'beautifully' written we point towards the ways in which texts are organized euphonically or poetically in ways we find appealing, that is, in ways that we socially and culturally recognize as aesthetically appealing (cf. Hymes 1996; also Jakobson 1960; Burke 1989).

I have reviewed five sets of features, all of which, I would argue, are required for writing 'adequately', i.e. in a way that enables others to recognize our writing as meaningful in the ways that we, the authors, designed them to be. If I intend to sound 'nice' in a message, I must deploy resources in such a way that the reader finds the texts 'nice-sounding'; the same if I intend to write a 'serious' text, a 'funny' one, a 'learned' one or a 'melancholy' one; and the same when I intend to write a poem, a love letter, a Tweet, a letter to the editor of my newspaper, and so forth. In earlier work, I called such congruence between production and uptake 'voice': if I manage to make my readers perceive my text as 'funny' when I intended it to be 'funny', I have voice. If not, I lost voice in my writing (Blommaert 2005: chapter 4). This, now, takes us to another aspect of the issue.

DIFFERENT PATTERNS OF DISTRIBUTION

We have seen that a large and complex collection of resources is needed whenever we wish to write (and read); we have also seen that these resources come in different shapes and effects – the resources needed for writing are *not* uniform and *not* entirely specific to writing. Many of these resources are common to language use. Speaking, having a conversation or giving a public speech, also demand the deployment of linguistic, semantic, pragmatic and socio-cultural resources and thus presuppose access to and control over these resources. Some, however, are specific to writing: the availability and accessibility of technology and infrastructure, for instance, are probably more pressing as conditions on writing than they are on speaking; the same goes for the availability and accessibility of graphic resources such as orthographies and scripts. We now begin to get a more precise picture of the similarities and the differences between spoken and written language.

Each of these sets of resources is subject to specific patterns of distribution. Here, too, we see that 'literacy resources' are not a uniform category and that we need to be precise in what we analyze. Access to, for instance, 'standard' forms of language (more precisely: the enregistered and recognized resources that project 'standardness' in language usage, cf. Silverstein 1996) does not necessarily imply access to the orthographic and spelling norms, nor to the genres and styles governing formal letter writing in that language. One can produce magnificent poetic-dramatic affects in oral speech – think of great joke-tellers – but be a very poor writer and vice versa. And one can control all

Figure 1: English-Chinese shop sign in Lijiang, Yunnan Province, China. © Jan Blommaert 2011

the normative orthographic conventions but quite generally fail to be 'nice' or 'attractive' in writing. The different sets of resources are each of a different nature, and their co-occurrence in successful acts of writing should not blind us to the fact that specific sets of resources can be absent from people's repertoires.

They should certainly not blind us to the fact that writing involves a very demanding range of conditions and forms of knowledge. Errors at one level can trigger misfits at other levels – think of an emblematic spelling error in an otherwise generically immaculate letter of application to a prestigious university. Thus, the adequate realization of a genre – the letter of application – is canceled by an orthographic error. It is important to realize that, even if we pass a totalizing judgment on the texts as composite signs, the specific features of the texts have different patterns of distribution, and that these patterns are not identical for each subject. Consider, for instance, Figure 1, where we can see that access to a professional infrastructure and the graphic skills for sign making does not automatically imply access to the linguistic, pragmatic and cultural conventions that rule such signs. The sample was found in the tourist town Lijiang, in China's Yunnan Province in 2011.

And note how the 14-year-old primary school pupil from the South African township of Wesbank near Cape Town, in Figure 2, appears to lack almost every resource required for writing, but still appears to be 'fluent' in filling the required slots in a school test – a graphic resource which is not absent from his repertoire. While many would qualify this pupil as 'illiterate', he still deploys a very small amount of literacy resources, and, we can assume, still tries to make sense by deploying them.

Figure 2: Questionnaire from Wesbank, South Africa. © Jan Blommaert 2004

The different sets of resources have different trajectories of acquisition and learning as well. Resources such as the fluent use of language varieties typically enter people's repertoires years prior to the resources required to write these varieties. The trajectories of acquisition and learning are thus biographically anchored and reveal the trajectory of an individual through a broad range of normatively organized social spheres (cf. Blommaert and Backus 2011). There are differences in the threshold of accessibility as well. The appropriate usage of emoticons in text messaging or Internet chat code is typically learned in informal settings, while spelling rules are acquired through formal schooled training. Some of these trajectories of acquisition and learning are more 'democratic' than others: informal learning environments such as the media, peer groups or popular culture are generally easier to access than elite institutions of formal learning, for instance.

It is therefore not a surprise that people who display difficulties with orthographic spelling norms are at the same time sometimes extraordinarily fluent users of heterographic codes such as texting and chat codes of the 'w84me' kind. In an earlier paper we documented the case of Linda, a young woman from the Wesbank Township near Cape Town, whose literacy practices

were entirely concentrated in instant messaging through the mobile phone (Blommaert and Velghe 2012). She would, for instance, update her status with a line such as

WU RUN THE WORLD GALZ... WU FOK THE GALZ BOYZ

This is a perfectly fluent heterographic realization of 'who runs the world? Girls. Who fucks the girls? Boys', and we sense the local vernacular English through the peculiar spelling of the phrase. This phrase was followed by another one, hardly comprehensible and seemingly an arbitrary string of random symbols:

LMJ NW HOE NOW::op=csclol=@.

The fact was that Linda showed signs of severe dysgraphia, and that she had assembled, painstakingly and with the support of friends and relatives, a small collection of stock phrases that she could copy onto her mobile phone. 'Creative' writing, however – writing phrases not part of that rehearsed collection – was beyond the limits of her capacity and led to scrambled sequences of signs such as '::op=csclol=@' (see Miceli, Silveri and Caramazza 1985; Smits-Engelsman and Van Galen 1997). Linda could *only* write in this specific and restricted way, copying a small set of rehearsed phrases. Within this very narrow bandwidth, however, Linda was 'fluent' and perceived and ratified as such, and unless one was familiar with her condition, one would not guess that she was anything but a fully competent writer. Linda acquired these resources informally, at home and with the help of friends and relatives; at school her dysgraphia meant early failure and she obviously never acquired the normative orthographic writing resources typically learned at school. The heterographic resources were available and accessible, even for a severely disabled learner such as her – they were democratic resources in her world.

The patterns of distribution also have effects in the context of mobility. Imagine me in a village in central Tanzania. I am a multilingual, highly educated subject who has access to all the graphic, linguistic, semantic, pragmatic and sociocultural resources required for adequate writing in several languages. The village, however, has no electricity supply and therefore no Internet access; consequently, I am not able to perform my daily blog writing, my Facebook update, or my email check. The spatiality of patterns of distribution of technological and infrastructural resources defines the outcome here. In that village, people such as I can enter with very well developed digital literacy skills, to see them partly disabled by an effect of the structural absence of an infrastructure for Internet-based literacy practices there. My skills and competences, in other words, require a spatial environment that matches them; if not, part of my skills and competences are invalid (cf. Blommaert 2010).

This evidently works the other way around as well. Someone who has never encountered keyboard writing, and has never ventured on the Internet, will

have very little benefit from finding him/herself in a place where there is splendid broadband access. And when, in such places, that person is expected to perform important literacy tasks by means of keyboard and Internet technology, this can become quite a challenge. Imagine that this person can only buy railway tickets online or from a ticket vending machine with a touchscreen; or that an Internet-based application form needs to be filled out prior to seeing a doctor, an employment or real estate agent or a welfare worker. We can see that the specific patterns of distribution here cause problems for people moving into the zones where such resources are concentrated. And the person has but one option: to acquire such skills fast and adequately; the alternative is a mountain of problems in daily life.

We begin to understand that in a globalizing world where people, images, messages and meanings are intrinsically mobile, 'knowing how to' write is becoming an increasingly complex proposition. What *exactly* is required to perform *specific* forms of writing? And how do we get access to the *specific* resources needed for certain writing tasks?

TOWARDS REPERTOIRES

Inquiries into such questions, and insights into them, will help us clarify the nature and structure of contemporary sociolinguistic repertoires. As mentioned at the outset, the question as to the precise place of literacy in people's repertoires was central in *Grassroots Literacy*. We can now begin to see that 'literacy' itself demands further deconstruction, and that the real question is about the different ways in which the various resources required for literacy practices enter people's repertoires – how, when and why or why not?

Answers to such questions will yield a far more nuanced and detailed view of what repertoires effectively are. There is a long tradition in sociolinguistics of neglecting repertoires. The term is widely used, but when it is used it often stands for a list of 'languages' 'spoken' by people. A mature sociolinguistics ought to be able to describe individual repertoires in the greatest possible detail and with the greatest possible analytic precision: as dynamic (i.e. changeable) collections of *specific* semiotic resources that are functionally allocated in form-function relations: form X can perform function Y – a process we call enregisterment (Agha 2007; cf. also Blommaert and Backus 2011). These resources, obviously, cannot be restricted to the spoken varieties of meaningful conduct; they should include the specific resources people control for performing *all* the communicative functions within their scope.

This would lead to a robust sociolinguistics of what people can do in communication, and of what people cannot do. It would lead, consequently, to a very precise and accurate diagnostic of problems in communication. We should be able then, for instance, to distinguish between the problems of communicability we see in Figure 3, and those we see in Figure 4.

While in Figure 3 the issue appears to lie in access to semantic resources –
not knowing the precise English term for a certain food product – while most
other resources are in place, Figure 4 seems to struggle with the graphic
baseline conventions of English (left to right writing) versus those of Chinese
(right to left), all other resources also being in place. Such problems, then, can
be analyzed as fundamentally different from the ones we encountered in
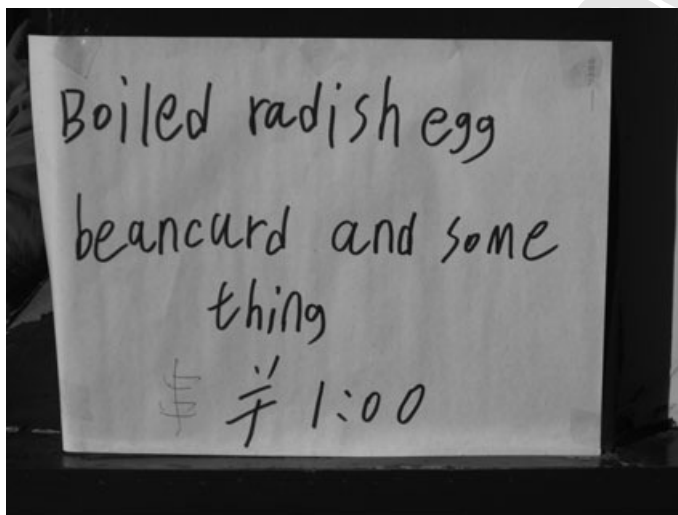
Figure 3: 'beancurd and some thing', Beijing. © Jan Blommaert 2008

Figure 4: 'Steliot', Beijing. © Jan Blommaert and Sjaak Kroon, 2011

Figure 1 and 2. In all four cases, *some* of the required resources have been deployed, while *some* specific others are absent. Thus, while lay people (as on many popular websites engaging with such phenomena, see for instance http://www.engrish.com/) would qualify these four examples uniformly as 'poor', 'weird' or 'amusing' writing (or 'poor English' in Figures 1, 3 and 4), we can see that we are facing very different phenomena in each case, with different origins, different trajectories of becoming, and different effects. So rather than to generalize judgments towards either 'language' or 'writing', we should make specific statements about the precise building blocks for meaning-making that are lacking or insufficiently developed.

We should be able to do that for a variety of reasons. One, there would be great pedagogical benefit in using a considerably more refined analytic and diagnostic toolkit for judging and monitoring writing. Millions of young learners are qualified as 'struggling' or 'underachieving' in 'writing'. As we have seen here, the actual specific problems they have can, however, be deeply different and thus very different routes should be taken in addressing these challenges. The children we observed in the language immersion classes in Antwerp, mentioned earlier, did not display massive or crippling writing problems other than the rather superfluous, aesthetic-graphic ones that prompted the teacher to make them copy specific graphic shapes for hours on end (Blommaert, Creve and Willaert 2006). These children 'could write', and the problems they had were of a very different order to those, for instance, of Linda, the young woman from Wesbank who could perform just a very restricted range of heterographic writing tasks on her mobile phone. 'Problems with writing' are not an adequate diagnostic label; in fact, it would be equivalent to the degree of precision and usefulness of the term 'headache' in the neurology ward of a hospital. It is high time that we become more precise and accurate in our expert assessments.

Two, we need to be far more precise in our inquiries and analyses because the field of literacy is rapidly changing. The widespread use of new media and communication technologies has reshaped the broad field of literacy practices across the world. It has thus fundamentally altered the conditions and the modes of literacy production, and it has created new forms of inequality in access to critical writing infrastructures. Some people have the opportunity to build an extensive and flexible repertoire of writing resources, while others are building a restricted and inflexible one. *Grassroots Literacy* focused on the widening gap between 'economies of literacy' in a globalizing world and argued that we should see literacy as organized in relatively autonomous formations, developing at unequal speed and generating very unequal affordances for users. It is good to keep this in mind whenever we engage in passing judgments on writing products from various parts of the world.

Three, and connected to the previous point: globalization and superdiversity have shaped arenas in which people with extremely different repertoires have encounters and exchange meanings. This too was a point emphatically made

in *Grassroots Literacy*: differences in repertoires are rapidly converted into inequalities in life chances, and scholars need to address the nature of such differences if we want to prevent or overcome spectacular forms of injustice and oppression. Precision in locating communication problems is of vital importance here – socially as well as politically and, why not, economically. Tremendous human potential is wasted by the cavalier dismissal of the potentially valuable resources people bring along.

And finally, there is a sound intellectual reason. Investigating the details of social practices such as writing tells us something about humans as social beings in general: it enriches our view of how people solve problems, organize their lives in relation to others, adjust and create environments, and innovate ideas as well as social structures and modes of conduct. The field of sociolinguistics has too long neglected the potential richness of such explorations, in spite of the fact that the discipline is eminently equipped to address and tap into it. We can no longer avoid this challenge – and challenge is here used not as a euphemism for 'problem', but as an invitation to explore and discover.

NOTE

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