

African Literacies

African Literacies:
Ideologies, Scripts, Education

Edited by

Kasper Juffermans, Yonas Mesfun Asfaha
and Ashraf Abdelhay

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P U B L I S H I N G

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For Caroline and Inca; Soliana and Aram; Lina and Mahgoub

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FOREWORD

MARILYN MARTIN JONES

This volume sets a new agenda for research on literacy in Africa, and for research in the global South more generally. The three editors – Kasper Juffermans, Ashraf Abdelhay and Yonas Asfaha – have already made their own distinctive contributions to the study of literacy in different settings in Africa, by developing new historical and ethnographic approaches and by challenging existing theory and method. In this joint project, they have assembled a rich collection of papers based on detailed empirical research into literacy discourses and practices in different social and political contexts. The volume is framed with a substantive, theoretically-grounded introductory chapter which clearly locates the collection at the interface between two fields of research, New Literacy Studies (NLS) and Critical Sociolinguistic Ethnography of Multilingualism. The Introduction is complemented by a thought-provoking final commentary by Sinfree Makoni.

In their Introduction, the editors provide finely-tuned conceptual and methodological compasses for charting new directions for research on literacy in different multilingual settings. They do this in two broad ways: (1) by exploring the changing conceptual interface between research within the NLS tradition and critical sociolinguistic approaches to multilingualism and by foregrounding the epistemological shifts that have taken place in both fields within the last decade or so; (2) by adopting a broad historical lens on contemporary African literacies and by stressing the need to take account of the traces of colonialism in current monoglossic institutional discourses about language and literacy.

The changing conceptual interface between the two fields

The 1990s saw the first moves towards research at the interface between NLS and critical sociolinguistic and ethnographic research on multilingualism and towards the development of detailed ethnographies of multilingual literacy practices. Prior to this there had been relatively little interaction between researchers in both fields.

Within the NLS tradition, the main concerns had been with the development of a critique of the “autonomous” model of literacy – described so well in the Introduction to this volume – and to the reconceptualization of literacy as a profoundly social and cultural practice, imbued with values, which is embedded in and shaped by particular historical conditions. The development of the NLS approach was achieved through a combination of critical historical research into long-entrenched ideologies of literacy and ethnographic research that focused on local, situated literacy practices and on the ways in which those practices mediated social life and the relationships between individuals and groups.

Within the critical tradition of sociolinguistic research on multilingualism, the focus had been largely on spoken language, on situated interactions in institutional settings and in local life worlds and on the agentive ways in which local social actors constructed their cultural worlds by drawing on the communicative resources within their repertoire. With the development of a critical dimension to these studies, there had been growing interest in the ways in which language ideologies were indexed in multilingual interactions and on the ways in which local, social and political conditions (e.g. language policies in schools) shaped the language biographies and repertoires of interactants and ultimately the nature of these interactions.

The gradual intermeshing of the NLS research tradition with critical sociolinguistic and ethnographic research into multilingualism in the 1990s deepened our understanding of the complex and plural ways in which social life is constructed through talk and text. This period saw the development of a rich body of ethnographic work on the everyday practices of reading and writing and on the uses of culturally-specific texts and scripts in particular multilingual settings: in local life worlds and neighbourhoods, in complementary schools, in spaces reserved for religious observance or in public, institutional contexts. Most of the research sites for these studies were in the countries of the global North and West and the focus was largely, though not exclusively, on urban settings.

In the early twenty first century, we saw the beginnings of significant epistemological shifts within the NLS and within critical sociolinguistic research on multilingualism. These shifts came in the wake of globalization. The new theoretical and methodological challenges for NLS research now lay in the need to revisit the notion of “local”, to take account of local/global interactions and to build an understanding of how texts travel and how they serve as a means of linking multiple contexts (as, for example, in transnational diaspora). There was, in particular, a new urgency to the task of theorising the nature and significance of reading,

writing and uses of texts (along with other semiotic resources) in communication on-line and via mobile technologies (Baynham and Prinsloo, 2009). The new theoretical and methodological challenges for critical sociolinguistic and ethnographic studies of multilingualism (and multilingual literacy) lay in taking account of the new “ethnoscapes” (Appadurai, 1996) created as a result of the new mobilities of the global age and in building an understanding of the ways in which language and literacy resources traverse these ethnoscapes, in different social spaces and on different scales. Over the last decade or so, there has been an intense theoretical and methodological recasting of the field and the forging of a new critical sociolinguistics for our times (Martin-Jones, Blackledge and Creese, 2012). There has, for example, been a move away from viewing communities as homogeneous and as spatially defined entities, there has been a critique of long dominant ideologies about language and national identity and there has been illuminating analysis of the ways in which monoglossic institutional practices (especially literacy practices and uses of texts in educational institutions), have contributed to the representation of languages as fixed and bounded.

This newly recast critical sociolinguistics of multilingualism and multilingual literacy is better attuned to the conditions of late modernity and it lays the groundwork for this volume. The Introduction by Ashraf Abdelhay, Yonas Asfaha and Kasper Juffermans provides a detailed, scholarly and illuminating genealogy of the fields of NLS and critical sociolinguistic research into multilingualism. They trace the specific ways in which these two fields have become intertwined as researchers have begun to respond to the wide-ranging social and cultural changes ushered in by globalization. They also foreground the notion of “communicative resource”, in place of the notion of “language”. The plural notion of “resources” encompasses aspects of speech and writing such as styles, genres and registers, as well as other semiotic resources that are brought into play in contemporary communication, on screen, on paper or face-to-face.

Researching literacy in a postcolonial context

In the Introduction to the volume, the three editors also make a strong case for adopting a critical, historical approach to literacy in Africa, and in other postcolonial settings, with a view to problematising dominant discourses about language(s) and literacy. The dominant discourses explicitly mentioned here (and in specific chapters) include the technicist representations of adult literacy and “illiteracy”, the privileging of just one

way of reading and writing the world in different educational regimes, the monoglossic discourses about language(s) and literacy that bear the imprint of colonialism and the still prevalent and mistaken belief that literacy only spread with the advent of Islam and the arrival of Christian missionaries. Abdelhay, Asfaha and Juffermans argue that much critical historical research still needs to be undertaken to unveil the “natural histories of discourse” (Silverstein and Urban, 1996) about literacy in multilingual settings, in Africa and in other regions of the global South.

Together, the Introduction and the eleven other chapters of the volume provide us with a wealth of insights into literacy discourses and practices, past and present, in diverse multilingual settings in Africa. While all of the chapters are informed by an NLS approach to literacy, there are differences in the focus and design of the research reported by different contributors. The research presented in some chapters was developed “ground up”, starting from everyday literacy practices and multilingual interactions in particular social spaces and on different scales. Here, we are given revealing insights into the fluid and heteroglossic realities of everyday communicative life in particular settings. In some of these chapters we also see a concern with the careful building of researcher-researched relationships in the field and with giving as full an account as possible of the emic perspectives of those participating in the research. In other chapters, the focus is on “studying up” (Nader, 1974) and with providing accounts of discourses about language(s) and literacies, including struggles over particular orthographic resources or the politics of vernacular literacy movements. We also learn about the use and significance of some of the indigenous writing systems of Africa, such as the Ajami script (associated with Islamic observance) and the Ge’ez script (associated with the Coptic Christian tradition).

The contributions come from a range of geographical settings, from the Maghreb, from West Africa (The Gambia and Senegal) and from the Cameroon, Eritrea, Mozambique, South Africa, Sudan and Uganda. On publication, the volume will, I am sure, serve as a beacon for future research on literacy and multilingualism in Africa and in other settings in the global South. It is grounded in new thinking about literacy and multilingualism, it opens up new vistas on diverse and dynamic literacy landscapes and it illuminates new pathways for critical, historical and ethnographic research in the future.

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For various reasons within and without our professional lives, it took us a long while to deliver this edited volume. All three of us changed jobs and relocated at least once since we started planning this volume some time back in 2008. We also got married or became fathers during this period. Looking back, we experienced the editing of this book as a long and inspiring dialogue between the three of us and the contributors of the individual chapters – as well as many others – since we came together at the third *European African Studies Conference* in Leipzig in June 2009.

Co-editing a collective volume is a tremendous job, we discovered, and living and working in different and distant countries across Europe, Africa and the Middle East while at that instable and insecure early stage of our careers certainly added to that. It would not have been without the encouragement and support of our colleagues and mentors in Tilburg, Edinburgh, Cambridge, Hamburg, Asmara, Luxembourg and Jeddah that this book finally sees the light. We're especially grateful to Sjaak Kroon, Jeanne Kurvers, Jan Blommaert, Sinfree Makoni and many others, colleagues and friends, for their support and guidance through this process and the discussions we've had on various occasions. They are too many to mention here. We're also grateful to the following colleagues for agreeing to review one or more of the chapters: Ad Backus, Danielle Boon, Chefena Hailemariam, Busi Makoni, Gertrud Schneider-Blum, Lameen Souag, Massimiliano Spotti, Evgeniya Gutova, Hakim Abbas, Mohamed Mohieldin and Jef Van der Aa. Of course none of them is responsible for any shortcomings in this book.

Finally, we wish to inscribe our gratitude on these pages to our emerging families for believing in and bearing with us. It is to them that we dedicate this volume.

*Kasper Juffermans
Yonas Mesfun Asfaha
Ashraf Abdelhay
(November 2013)*

CHAPTER ONE

AFRICAN LITERACY IDEOLOGIES, SCRIPTS AND EDUCATION

ASHRAF ABDELHAY,
YONAS MESFUN ASFAHA
AND KASPER JUFFERMANS

What is literacy? Do you mean literacy as opposed to illiteracy – not being able to read and write? So your work is about being able to read and write – about reading and writing, is that right? (an educated layperson in conversation with two of the authors, Edinburgh, January 2012)

Introduction: Illiteracy as an artefact of oppression

The above words are a reaction that professional linguists quite often get from the layperson to their conceptual metaphors of the trade. Institutional and public discourses all over the world normally recognise “illiteracy” and not “literacy”. Barton (2007: 214) was right when he made the following observation in a footnote: “in everyday writing the pejorative terms illiterate and illiteracy seem more common than the positive terms literate and ‘literacy’”. Functional literacy or “Literacy” with a big L (i.e., the sort of knowledge which enables you to write your name) is relatively devalued, in Bialostok’s (2002: 348) words, as “equivalent of the poverty line” (for a discussion see Cook-Gumperz 2006; Freire 1970; Mayo 1995; Kaplan and Baldauf 1997, 2003; Stierer and Bloome 1994). Similarly Liddicoat (2004) noted that functional perspectives on literacy aim to “equip literacy learners only with sufficient competence to operate at the lowest levels of mechanical performance required to meet the demands of a print-dominated culture”. It is also (un)remarkable that hegemonic institutional discourses tend to treat literacy as a “measurable skill”. And consequently “poor/low literacy rates” have ideologically become associated with specific macro-categories of identification such as Africa.

For instance, if you search the word “literacy” on Wikipedia (a public resource of relatively regimented knowledge), you get the following one-liner statement under the sub-heading “literacy in Africa”: “Currently, Africa is the continent with the lowest literacy rate in the world.” (Wikipedia: Literacy, last accessed July 2013). Suffice it to say that this essentialising collocation (“Africa” + “the continent” + “the lowest literacy rate” + “in the world”) crafted in “the ethnographic present” is ideological from top to bottom. This widely held ideology of literacy has significantly contributed to the construction of a particular “image” of Africa (imagined by this model of literacy as a bounded continent). By focusing on the cognitive (in)ability of a person to read and write, this ideological scheme of classification constructs what counts as “a normal person” (read: “modern”) in the process. The Eurocentric image of Africa is largely constructed through the variants of this technical discourse (i.e., a monolithic discourse on “literacy in Africa”). Hence a one-size-fits-all definition of literacy is assumed regardless of the cultural context and is couched in “either/or” terms: an individual is either “literate” or “illiterate”, a society, by extension, is made up of a percentage of literates and illiterates, and regions and countries and continents can be ranked according to such numerical logics (Bhola 1990). This renders “illiteracy” as an indexical statement of “shame and blame” into a form of “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu 1991; Bartlett and Holland 2002; Carrington 2001).

It is needless to assert that the above classroom-shaped and encyclopaedic-taxonomic view of literacy has reigned supreme in and out of formal regimes of socialisation. Literacy, as both a theoretical construct and empirical phenomenon, indeed incorporates print-based activities of reading and writing, but also significantly goes beyond them. To put it in more technical terms, writing and reading are not simply, even if ideologically made to mean, cognitive skills of encoding and decoding textual messages (“letteracy” in Shankar’s 2006 sense). Rather, they are basically communicative or pragmatic processes mutually shaped by the social orders (macro-structures) in which they are conducted. Hence, text artefacts (inscriptions) as visualised products (e.g., typewritten, published, painted, etc.) are traces of broader cultural practices and complex processes. However, with the risk of indexing the crude Marxist category of ideology (as false consciousness), the layperson may react to the technical word “complexity” in the same way she or he would react to the strange species of “literacies”, let alone compound metaphors such as “multimodal literacies”, “literacy ideologies”, “livelihood literacies”, “literacy performances”, to name just a few of the concepts discussed in this volume (see also Sinfree Makoni’s commentary chapter in this volume

on this point). Commenting on a set of technical concepts developed by professional linguistics, Barbe (2001:96) noted that:

Language itself is not really complex since everybody seems to be able to use it without any trouble. Many people in this world, even the so-called uneducated, are bi- or tri-lingual. It is like saying the actions of “walking” and “eating” are very complex. The complexity only appears in the process of analysis. Perhaps we like to give ourselves a pat on the back about our ability to be complex but it seems a rather empty praise.

As shown by colonial linguistic studies, the complex multilingual realities in Africa were studied (and in the process constructed) from an enumerating linguistic ideological perspective. In doing so, the colonial “regimes of language” (Kroskrity 2000a) created an epistemological version of multilingualism which devastatingly reduced the complexity of the interactional practices to a collection of well-demarcated monolingualisms (Errington 2008; Irvine and Gal 2000; Makalela 2005; Pennycook and Makoni 2005). This linguistic ideology is more visible in the discourses on “language endangerments” backed up by language-counting institutions such as the Ethnologue database of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) (see Duchêne and Heller 2007 and the articles therein; Said 1978; Moore, Piëtikainen and Blommaert 2010).

The point here is that a historically as well as an ethnographically informed understanding of literacy practices and discourses in Africa which rightly integrate these practices into the contexts in which they are used is needed as a way of questioning the applicability of instrumentalist ideologies of language. A critical historiography of African literacies is primarily concerned with the study of issues of “voice” and power in contexts through a problematising inspection of the “natural history” (Silverstein and Urban 1996) of literacy discourses, processes, and products. As the contributions in this volume show, and others elsewhere (e.g., Adejunmobi 2008; Canut 2001, 2010; Gafaranga 2007; Lüpke 2010; Martin-Jones, Kroon and Kurvers 2011; Mbodj-Pouye 2013; Mc Laughlin 2009), everyday communicative practices in Africa and its diaspora are inherently heteroglossic and fluid. And this observation, which is still widely unrecognised by formal educational institutions, challenges the institutional view of languages as self-contained and bounded objects.

The chapters in this volume interrogate the above normative “image” of Africa through the study of colonial and postcolonial histories, scripts, ideologies, and texts deployed in specific contexts by community members as part of their everyday practice. The contributors provide situated accounts about various literacy practices in Africa to critique the hegemonic

ideologies of literacy and language which mediationally shape our interpretations of the world. Focusing on the various cultural forms of literacy in Africa rather than on the singular-literacy-in-Africa discourse helps develop a critical sociolinguistics of literacy to understand the ways in which textual practices and their associated ideologies contribute to the production of a plurality of images of Africa and its people. And it allows us to comprehend how and why instructional regimes of knowledge legitimate only one ortho-graphic way of “reading the world” (Freire 1970). The key aim of the volume, among others, is to investigate the histories and social-cultural conditions that have informed our (mis)understanding of literacies in various contexts in Africa through a focus on specific case studies. Most of the chapters engage with the task of critically inspecting both the ideological effects and perspectives on literacy development situated within the material conditions of existence. As a disclaimer, although the book contains works from recent and ongoing research carried out in/on Africa, it makes no claim to be comprehensive or sufficiently representative for the entire “continent”, neither geographically, nor in scope of the literacy practices surveyed.

The book reveals a particular disciplinary perspective on literacy. In the various chapters, literacy is studied from a usage-, practice-, or performance-based perspective, highlighting the social, cultural, historical and ideological dimensions of literacy in context. The contributors to this book broadly subscribe to the assumptions underlying the framework of New Literacy Studies (henceforth NLS). The NLS engages with the above issues and draws on various research traditions including semiotics, social anthropology, social theory, and critical discourse analysis. The remaining part of this introduction is structured in the following way: in the next section we review the key assumptions underlying the hegemonic (skills-oriented) perspective on literacy and illiteracy, i.e., technically termed by Street (1984) an “autonomous” view of literacy. Then we discuss the conceptual model of NLS which basically emerged as a critique of the autonomous view of literacy. The final two sections provide a broad overview of a cluster of key concepts used in the field of NLS with a focus on the notions of “superdiversity” and “supervernacular”. We conclude this introductory chapter with an overview of the different contributions in this book.

Before we proceed we should flag up the following caveat. The field of literacy studies continues to be substantially updated and productively extended with the development of new conceptual tools and theories which are (being) tested with a huge amount of empirical research. It is beyond the capacity of an editorial chapter of this size to do justice to the

entire literature in the field of literacy studies. So we have settled for a broad review of key issues and themes in the field as a foundation for contextualising the contributions to the volume, revealing that this at the same time marks our limitations and biases in surveying the field.

We will begin our review with a discussion of Africa's old endogenous literacy traditions and newer script inventions.

Africa's script traditions and inventions

The development of literacy in Africa seen as a whole certainly predates the histories of European colonialism and Islamic conquest. Among Africa's ancient script traditions are the world's oldest known scripts, including the Egyptian "sacred carvings", the hieroglyphs (since ca. 3000 BCE), and the other scripts and literacy/literary traditions found in the old Nile Valley civilizations, including Hieratic, Demotic, Coptic, Old Nubian, and Meroitic (Baines 1983). Those ancient scripts that are still (or again) in use today, include Ge'ez, Nsibidi and Tifinagh. In the Horn of Africa syllabic Ge'ez developed since 500 BCE as the liturgical language and holy script of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and survived until today as the common script for Amharic and Tigrinya in Ethiopia and Eritrea (cf. Hailemariam 2002; Asfaha 2009; Ashafa, Kurvers and Kroon 2008 and in this volume). The thousand-year-old Nsibidi system of ideo- and pictographic symbols is used by the Ekoi, Efik and Igbo people in present-day Akwa Ibom and Cross River states in Southeast Nigeria (around Uyo and Calabar) and consists of common, decorative signs, "dark signs" representing danger and extremity, and the secret signs of rank and ritual known only by initiated elites (Akinasso 1996; Macgregor 1909; Nwosu 2010). There are other documented forms of proto-writing indigenous to Africa, including the Adinkra symbols of the Ashanti of Ghana (Danzy 2009) and various traditions of graphic symbols and arts in Congo (Faik-Nzuji 2000). In the Maghreb, Tifinagh (or Neo-Tifinagh), currently one of the three official scripts in Morocco, is the 20th-century revived version of the ancient syllabic script of the Phoenician-Carthaginian Empire (3rd century BCE to 3rd century CE) (see also El Aissati in this volume).

Notwithstanding these ancient literacy traditions, it was mainly the Christian and Islamic missions who actively developed vernacular literacies in the Roman and Arabic scripts associated with Christianity and Islam, respectively. These missionary views of literacy and religion not only created their own versions of social reality, they also invested the Latin and Arabic script (and their orthographies) with specific indexicalities or cultural images of "modernity", "clarity", "reason", as opposed to pre-

Christian and pre-Islamic belief and knowledge systems. In other words, missionary literacy planning succeeded in the creation of “standard images” of African linguistic continua, either as delineated and compartmentalised African languages modelled after European nation-statism accomplished in Bible translations, or as vernacular scribal practices existing in the shadow of the sublime Classical Arabic of the untranslatable Qur’an, but destroyed the local cultures once integrated with local ways of speaking (Barton 2007; Canut 2001; Pennycook and Makoni 2005; Sanneh 1989).

This point needs to be nuanced. For the Ethio-Eritrea region at least, Christianity and Islam, and their Ge’ez and Arabic literacy practices, pre-date European missionaries and colonialism by at least a 1000 years. Protestant and Catholic missionaries came to the region to convert Copts and Muslims and tried to shake the existing traditions in these two communities by for example writing the Bible in local languages undermining the authority of the Orthodox Church only much later. So Christianity does not necessarily equate with European colonialism in this part of Africa, because Christianity was already present and what European missionaries sought to do was “modernize” the Orthodox Church by local language Bible translations.

Colonialism has made an impact on Africa’s language and literacy ecology not only by importing scripts and traditions from elsewhere, but equally in the indigenous creative reactions it triggered. Within the historical conditions of, but also in response to, colonialism, and as part of local religious practices and spiritual movements, a series of indigenous African writing systems were developed in the 19th and 20th centuries, particularly in West Africa, but also in other parts of the continent (see Dalby 1967, 1968, 1969; Mafundikwa 2004; Rovenchak 2010; Slager 2008).

Cooper (1991), with reference to Dalby (1967, 1968, 1969), points out that the writing systems that emerged in colonial West Africa commonly derived their legitimacy from divine revelation and inspiration. This is the case, for instance, for the Loma of Liberia and Guinea, whose script was revealed in the 1930s to inventor Wido Zobo in a dream. On Wido Zobo’s request, God granted the power of writing (exclusively to men) on the condition that his people would respect their traditions and the secrets of initiation. A similar myth is reported for the Vai syllabary, which was developed a century earlier (around 1830) and is the oldest and perhaps most well-known of the modern invented indigenous West African scripts. This is also the script that features in Scribner and Cole’s (1981) classic study on the psychology of literacy. The Vai script was revealed to inventor Momolu Duwalu Bukele of Jondu in spiritual revelation.

Following the invention of the Vai script by a century, other notable indigenous writing systems that were developed in the same region, i.e. the region formed by current states of Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea, include the Mende (1921), Bambara Masaba (1930), Kpelle (1930s), and Bété (1950s) syllabaries and the Bassa Vah (1920) and N'ko (1949) alphabets.

Elsewhere, in the Cameroonian Grassfields, the pictographic-syllabic scripts of Bamum and Eghap/Bagam – the latter considered “lost” until recently (Tuchscherer 1999) – were devised and in use for only a few decades around 1900 (1896-1931 for Bamum). At the same time in the Horn of Africa, around 1920, the Osmanya alphabet for Somali was devised, the first and most widely used of three scripts proposed by members of different clans – the others being Borama (ca. 1933) and Kaddare (ca. 1952). Another idiosyncratic form of literacy is informed by the functional need to identify livestock (particularly camels). Drawing on literacy work created by the local Sudanese in the 1950s, the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) developed a script built around a sampling of the markings on livestock in western Sudan and eastern Chad, the so-called Zaghawa Beria or “camel” script (see SIL International 2006). Examples of scripts devised around independence include the Garay alphabet for Wolof (1961), the Nwagu Aneke Igbo syllabary (1960), the Ba and Dita alphabets for Fula developed in Mali (1963 and 1958-1966).

More recently in Central Africa, in the D.R. Congo, the Mandombé script was invented by Wabeladio Payi in the Lower Congo in 1978 after it was revealed to him, also in a dream, by the then already deceased Simon Kimbangu, founder and prophet (“*envoyé spécial de Jésus Christ*”) of the Kimbanguist Church. Yet other more recently invented scripts include the Mwangwego alphabet for Malawian languages (developed by Nolence Mwangwego since 1979 and officially “inaugurated” in 1997, see <http://mwangwego.com>, last accessed November 2013). Even more recently in West Africa, the Adlam script was created in 1987 in N'Zérékoré (south Guinea) by the brothers Abdoulaye and Ibrahima Barry. It is an alphabetic script influenced by N'ko and reported to be used for dialects of Pular. There are a couple of primers published for the Adlam script and there is a website dedicated to the script and related education and literacy promotional activities: <http://windenjangen.org>. (Davydov, in press; Dmitry Bondarev, personal communication). The website, operated from the organisation's headquarters in New York City, gives the following pragmatic account of the genesis of the script:

My brother and I were in the habit of reading the letters that were sent to my Dad after he had finished reading them. Therefore we experienced

firsthand the challenge of reading these letters [written in Pular using the Arabic script] that we found amusing at the end. We got so good at reading them or more like guessing them that my Dad finally preferred to hand me or my brother the letters to read to him. It was in this context that one day we asked our Dad if the Fulbhe had their own alphabet and he responded no. On that day we promised him that we will invent our Alphabet to make reading letters and communication much easier between the Fulbhe. (http://windenjangen.org/what_is_adlam).

The most recent African script invention known to us is the Miriden alphabet for Maninka. Strongly influenced by N'ko, Miriden (meaning “fruit of mind”, lit. “thought-child”) is a one-user script created in 2011 by Yacouba Diakité in the town of Siguiri in northeast Guinea. Although Diakité published an ABC-primer in Miriden, he is reported (by Davydov, in press) to be the only user of his script (Bondarev, personal communication).

The majority of scripts devised in the early 20th Century have not proven to be very viable alternatives for the great imperial script traditions transplanted to Africa as part of European colonialisms and the spread of Islam. Unseth (2011: 27) notes that most of the (West) African invented scripts are unsuccessful, “failed scripts”. Rovenchak (2012) even maintains that “in most cases new scripts can be classified as ‘individual writing systems’ rarely expanding beyond a closed circle of friends and relatives”. It is not clear how widely King Ibrahim Njoya’s invention, the Bamum script, was used since its invention in 1896, but it apparently ceased to be used when Njoya was exiled in 1931 and died two years later; Romanised Wolof and Wolofal (Wolof transcribed in Ajami) are much more generally used in Senegal today than Garay; in Somalia none of the three indigenous scripts, but Latin, has been promoted for Somali literacy since 1972. Today, only Ethiopia, Eritrea and Morocco have granted official status to (languages making use of) scripts other than Latin and Arabic, i.e. to Ge’ez or Ethiopic for Amharic and Tigrinya and Tifinagh for Berber respectively. In fact, it remains to be seen if the more recent African script inventions such as Mwangwego and Adlam will be able to acquire and maintain large and sustainable communities of users and generate a diversified range of contexts for its use. Meanwhile, the only two more successful modern invented scripts are Vai and N’ko.

N’ko is a special case as this alphabet, modelled after Arabic in 1949 by Souleyman Kanté in Kankan, Guinea, has been disseminated beyond the original Maninka speaking area in northeast Guinea, into Dyula and Bamanankan (Bambara) speaking communities in Côte d’Ivoire and southern Mali respectively. The social movement of N’ko (meaning “I say” in the various Manding language varieties) promotes N’ko as a script

for the whole Manding cluster, as a harmonised literary koiné that unites the scattered Manding peoples across state borders and Anglo- and Francophone divides, and reconnects with their common, precolonial past (Oyler 2005; Wyrod 2008).

Dalby (1969: 180; cited in Unseth 2011) points out that

Many – if not all – of the inventors were impelled by the desire to demonstrate the ability of Africans to create their own forms of writing, independent of either European or Arabic systems. In this respect, the scripts have a motivation that is comparable to that of the indigenous African churches. This search for African “independence” is reflected in the way that Kantè maintains the independence of his script from either the occidental or oriental influence ... and by the claim that both [these scripts] are suitable for writing *all* African languages.

These invented scripts were developed, mostly not out of practical considerations given that other scripts were already available and firmly established, but out of ideological considerations, as “efforts to strengthen ethnic identities” (Unseth 2011: 23). Coupled with strong claims of identity and dignity, these scripts can be seen as articulations of ethnic and/or pan-Africanist revival, as projects developing intellectual independence and autonomy in reaction to European colonisation. No invention, however, happens in isolation of earlier inventions, in absence of inspiration from what has gone before. And indeed, like all other scripts, the African script inventions were inspired by, or modelled after existent scripts, including Arabic and Latin. As Unseth, again citing Dalby (1968: 160), notes, “all creators of WAIS [West African invented scripts] had previously been exposed to linear writing in the Arabic and/or Roman alphabets” and “were aware of the Vai script, and often one of the other WAIS that it had inspired.” Vai, in its turn, may have been inspired by the Cherokee syllabary, brought to Liberia from the US by Cherokee emigrant Austin Curtis who may have explained its basic workings, directly or indirectly, to inventor Bukele (Tuchscherer and Hair 2002).

Collins (2006: 251) notes that “orthographies (systems of inscription) are never neutral phenomena. They are instead often the object of sharp controversy over the best (i.e., the most authentic or scientific) way to represent a given language”. These debates passionately run through the histories of the African invented script. However, it is literacy in ex-colonial languages that prevailed in postcolonial Africa. Even N’ko, with Vai, one of the most successful African scripts remains relatively marginalised:

Since ... speakers of Mande languages maintain a significant presence throughout West Africa, Mande language literacy in N’ko cannot be

considered a minority language phenomenon. However, the institutional dominance of European language literacy and Latin-based literacy has subjected N'ko to a kind of marginalization akin to that of a minority language. (Wyrod 2008: 31)

However, we should note that although there have been indigenous literacy traditions in Africa, the concept of “indigeneity” cannot always be unproblematically interpreted as “local” (read: non-Western). On the contrary, in some African contexts, western discourses on language and literacy rights were enforced through what is perceived as local practice (see Abdelhay 2010a, and in this volume).

Monoglossic ideologies of language and literacy

Cook-Gumperz (2005, 2006) argued that literacy as a sociocultural phenomenon should be regarded as part of an ideology of language. Language ideologies are defined from a linguistic anthropological perspective as “sets of beliefs about language articulated by the users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use” (Silverstein 1979: 193; for a detailed discussion see the volumes by Blommaert 1999; Joseph and Taylor 1990; Kroskrity 2000a; Schieffelin, Woolard and Kroskrity 1998). The anthropological work of Sapir (1921) and Whorf (1956) on non-Anglo-Saxon cultures provided the foundational insights for much of this ideological frame which was based on the premise that “the way people who speak a certain language form an ideology of reference, an understanding at the conceptual level of how their language represents ‘nature’” (Silverstein 1979: 202). The ultimate aim is “to capture the ideological structuring of society in and through language and discourse” (Mertz and Yovel 2000: 5). In other words, the objective is to understand the ways in which the wider social structure is reproduced, maintained or resisted in and through actual social practices. Kroskrity (2000b) suggested that language ideologies as a meta-level metaphor should be treated as a cluster concept with four related aspects: (a) as a socially-shared perception of language and discourse constructed to serve the interests of a specific community; (b) as profitably multiple as an effect of the plurality of meaningful social differentiation (e.g. class, gender); (c) as an articulated metapragmatic awareness with varying degrees, and (d) as a nexus of social structures and forms of speech.

The focus on language ideologies with respect to literacies should allow us to highlight issues of agency, power relations and social inequality. Most important, the concept of language ideology as theorised by linguistic anthropology is employed to link micro-interactional events

with macro-social structures such as identity and power. For example, Woolard (1998a: 3) stated that

Ideologies of language are not about language alone. Rather, they envision and enact ties of language to identity, to aesthetics, to morality, and to epistemology. Through such linkages, they underpin not only linguistic form and use but also the very notion of the person and the social group, as well as such fundamental social institutions as religious ritual, child socialization, gender relations, the nation state, schooling, and law.

As we detail in the next section, the NLS as a research strand to literacy views the acts of reading and writing as fundamentally social practices that embody “nonobservable ideologies” (Bialostok 2002: 348) or “a cognitive-ideological dimension” (Collins 2006: 247) of what counts as writing and reading. Asfaha, Kurvers and Kroon in this volume situate their study on literacy instruction in Eritrea within this perspective by viewing literacy not only as a social practice rooted in the cultural practices of the communities under study but also as cognitive processes of learning codes among school children. Ideologies of language and literacy are also profitably multiple as a result of the plurality of the interested positions. Language ideologies are inherently implicated in the temporality of social existence in that as historical products, they structure and shape the ways in which communicative practices are interpreted. Hence, language ideologies are basically cultural models of temporalities (Eisenlohr 2004).

Harmonising ideologies of language (Bakhtin’s 1981 “monoglossia”) are constructed to ensure verbal and social unification. Variation or difference (Bakhtin’s 1981 “heteroglossia”) which is a micro-interactional reality often manifested in a single utterance is valued by these macro-centralising frames as a problem (Kamberelis and Scott 1992). Hegemonic ideologies conceptualise language and literacy as, among others, uniform, autonomous, permanently fixed, invariably stable, regardless of the context in which they are used (Street 1984; also García and Torres-Guevara 2010). The point here is that human language viewed as a concrete cultural practice is “polyglot from top to bottom” (Bakhtin 1981: 291). Yet, the view of language and literacy as monolithic is an “invention” (Makoni and Pennycook 2007) through processes of nation-state ideologies aiming at the creation and maintenance of an “imagined community” (Anderson 1991). That is, the trajectory that led to the emergence of the autonomous view of literacy is the 19th-century ideology of nationalism (Gal and Irvine 1995; Heller 2007; Joseph and Taylor 1990). In their critical historiographical study of a local literacy movement

in the Nuba Mountains of Sudan, Abdel Rahim Mugaddam and Ashraf Abdelhay in this volume exemplify how colonial (missionary) activities used “Romanisation” as a discursive strategy of social differentiation between the Arabised groups and the Nuba.

The European (missionary) colonial project in Africa and other parts of the world text-artefactualised local speech (languages converted into “things” through inscription), creating in the process “an official image” of linguistic pluralism and social categories incommensurable with the reality on the ground (Errington 2008; Blommaert 2008b; Irvine and Gal 2000; Makoni and Pennycook 2007; Said 1978; Mugaddam and Abdelhay in this volume). Collins (2006: 252) stated that an “artefactualized language is subject to different dynamics of accumulation and distribution than nonartefactualized language, with different potentials for ideological articulation and institutional consolidation”. The reification of literacy is evidenced in the use of metaphors which treat literacy as a “skill” that can be broken down into a set of sub-skills, and which in turn can be possessed and transferred (thus “transferrable skills”, Barton 2007). In the context of Pacific countries, Mühlhäusler (1996) contended that the reification of literacy has transformed communicative practices into objects we now call “language”. He argued that “the reification of language is basically a result of literacy” (1996: 238; for a discussion see Charpentier 1997; Crowley 1999, 2000; Siegel 1997). It is remarkable that most of campaign-based literacy programmes deploy metaphors of eradication (Kaplan and Baldauf 1997, 2003; Liddicoat 2004; Cushman et al. 2001). Slogans such as “stamp out illiteracy” (rendered literally, for example, in Arabic as *maḥw al-ummiyya*) conceptualise “illiteracy” as a thing to be “erased/eradicated”. So what is ideologically reified here is the absence of alphabetic literacy. The point here is that local literacy programmes should go beyond this “minimalised functionalist concept of literacy” (Agnihotri 1994) to engage with wider issues such as inequality and power relationships in a society (see Freire 1970; Lankshear 1993; Levine 1982; Papen 2001; Tollefson 1996). As Liddicoat (2004) showed, this functionalist view of literacy ignores the construction of emancipatory practices.

The point is that colonialism and imperialisms have political, religious and linguistic components and that contemporary literacy practices and traditions reflect these multilayered histories (see Abdelhay 2010b; Abdelhay et al. 2011). Lüpke and Bao Diop in this volume discuss West Africa’s literacy tradition as exographic, i.e., imported (see also Lüpke 2011). For example, the Roman script was brought along with Christianity and Western-modelled state apparatuses. The Arabic script was brought to larger parts of Africa as a result of immigration and the religious

imperative to spread Islam and its Qur'an which was revealed in Arabic – the variety then spoken in the Arabia peninsula where Islam originated (in Western scholarship it is categorised as “classical/Qur'anic Arabic”). These foreign interventions left an infrastructure of language and literacy that is largely endorsed and normalised by postcolonial governments (on the effect of colonialism on local language policies in North Africa, see Bassiouney 2009). Some social ecologies in Africa, however, have creatively appropriated, incorporated and integrated foreign traditions of learning into their own. Yet, what remains to be known is not just the historical genealogy of literacy traditions in Africa (i.e., whether they are “indigenous” or “imported”), but how, and for whom, they are organised and valued in the given sociolinguistic system. The 19th-century modernist project has reduced the diverse multiple literacy practices at the pedestrian-scale level to one monolithic “literacy” at the official, nation-state scale level; hence literacy or a “named language” has been turned into an instrument of semiotic governance and control with serious consequences (Rockhill 1987; Bauman and Briggs 2003). Blommaert and Rampton (2011: 4) noted that the orthodox concept of “a language” is an “ideological artifact with very considerable power – it operates as a major ingredient in the apparatus of modern governmentality”. This resonates with Romaine's (1994: 84) argument:

The very concept of discrete languages is probably a European cultural artefact fostered by procedures such as literacy and standardization. Any attempt to count languages will be an artefact of classificatory procedures rather than a reflection of communicative practices.

Foucault's (1981) concept of “governmentality” allows us to focus on the ways in which socially constructed categories of interaction (“language”, “dialect”, “ethnicity”, “literacy”, etc.) are deployed in practice to establish particular hierarchical regimes of knowledge and power in which linguistic usage is regulated and controlled. Viewed from this epistemological perspective, language and literacy development take place within dynamic social contexts saturated with power and conflict (García 2009a; García and Torres-Guevara 2010). However, literacy and language education are mechanically defined from the perspective of the state “school” as a technology that can be taught and understood independently of social ecologies of use.

Another monoglossic feature of this literacy paradigm is that it correlates alphabetic literacy with cognitive development (García 2009b; del Valle 2005). It is this ideology of scriptal inscription which is strongly promoted by the school. Here we are talking not just about a particular

form of literacy, but we are talking about a particular “state ideological apparatus” (Althusser 1971) or a regime of contemporary power of identity formation through the authorisation and circulation of “correct” practices of writing and reading (Baquedano-López 1997; Collins 2006; Collins and Blot 2003; Hornberger 2002; Jaffe 1999; Lemke 2002; Rex and Green 2008; Varenne and McDermott 1998; Street 1993; Wang, Juffermans and Du 2014). Hence, out-of-school empirical phenomena such as bilingualism, grassroots literacies, and other globalised semiotic resources are invalidated as “abnormal”, “deviant”, or “incorrect”. Print-based literacy, by contrast, is associated with cognitive development, rationality, and progress, etc. Graff (1979) termed these taken-for-granted beliefs as “literacy myth”.

The functionalist model frames literacy in a-historical and technological terms effecting the social stratification of groups into “illiterate vs. literate” (though the academic discourse contrasts “literacy” with “orality/oracy”; on the archaeology of the term “literacy” see Barton 2007 and Bartlett 2008). Social differentiation is a fundamental process through which this model of literacy officially operates. Further, this “monoglot” (Silverstein 1996) ideology of literacy holds that a person should learn to read and write in “a language” (Barton 2007). This social restriction is explicitly exercised by national examinations of functional literacy or citizenship tests which allow exams to be conducted in specific languages and not others (see e.g., Extra, Spotti and Van Avermaet 2009). Inspecting institutional or normative restrictions on literacy is key to understanding how literacies are socially patterned and organised (Barton 2007), how literacies dominate, disempower and marginalise, how they can be “powerful” (Crowther, Hamilton and Tett 2001).

Moreover, literacy is treated narrowly as a discrete variable whose effects on the individual and society can be deduced from its intrinsic segregationable structure (Harris 1981) from the context in which it is used. Thus literacy is conceptualised by researchers such as Goody (1968: 40) as “an autonomous mode of communication”. Ong (1982: 132) provided a canonical stance when he noted that “by isolating thought on a written surface, detached from any interlocutor, making utterance in this sense autonomous and indifferent to attack, writing presents utterance and thought as uninvolved in all else, somehow self-contained, complete.” A final remark about this monoglot ideology of literacy is that it views literacy as an abstract cognitive instrument with functional neutrality. For example, Olson (1988: 28), a proponent of this view, held that

When writing began to serve the memory function, the mind could be redeployed to carry out more analytic activities such as examining

contradictions and deriving logical implications. It is the availability of an explicit written record and its use for representing thought that impart to literacy its distinctive properties.

The above perspective on literacy was subjected to intense criticism particularly by social anthropologists who problematised, among other things, the literacy-orality divide. The ethnographic work of Heath (1983), Street (1984), Finnegan (1988), among others, are the classic critiques (see Collins and Blot 2003 for a discussion). Street (1984, 1995) has provided the most influential rebuttal of the above approach to literacy which he termed the “autonomous model of literacy”. Liddicoat (2004: 8) noted:

In an autonomous literacy model, the purpose of literacy learning is to imbue an acceptance of the dominant ideologies and to enhance the economic productivity of the nation. The model is therefore oriented to the development of human capital, in which intellectually trained workers are central to the functioning of the workforce and economy, and knowledge becomes a commodity with economic value.

Street’s (1984, 1995) alternative is called the “New Literacy Studies” (NLS) which is fundamentally developed as an ethnographic critique (with an interventionist agenda) of the autonomous approach to literacy. Generally, sociolinguistic and ethnographic discourse analytic studies of literacy are intended to “reconstitute” (Makoni and Pennycook 2007) the above sketched linguistic view of “literacy”. In the next section, we broadly review the ideological agenda of the NLS.

The end of “Literacy”: A sociolinguistic reconstitution of the field

Ethnographic sociolinguistic insights have shifted the focus on literacy viewed as “autonomous” skill to the actual practices and ideological conceptions of reading and writing (Al-Kahtani 1996; Street 1984, 1993, 1995). In other words, literacy is taken as a “social practice” rather than an individual-psychological skill (Street 1984; Collins 2006; Papen 2005). The NLS as a broad conceptual framework informed by these insights assumes that understanding literacy requires an ethnographic perspective which provides detailed accounts of literacy practices in different social contexts (Street 1993, 2011).

Street’s (1984) concept of literacy practices is patterned on and provides an extension of Heath’s (1983) widely celebrated notion of “literacy event” (more on this term below). Heath (1982: 50) identified “literacy

events” as “occasions in which written language is integral to the nature of participants’ interactions and their interpretive processes and strategies”. Literacy practice is employed in the NLS to refer to two interrelated levels of cultural analysis: at one level it refers to the observable and documentable situated events mediated by literacy resources (e.g., texts) and at another higher-level of generalisation it refers to cultural models or socially recognisable patterns of interaction which are sedimented or traceable from observed literacy practices, i.e., texts are instances of cultural practice (Baynham and Prinsloo 2009; Kell 2011; Rowsell and Pahl 2007; Street 1984; Tusting, Wilson and Ivanič 2000). Thus, the field of NLS goes beyond mere documentation of literacy practices to recognise the role of institutional power embedded in activities (Street 1993). This means that “new literacies” in the NLS are also taken seriously to refer to non-Western, unrecognised, subaltern or grassroots genres and complex patterns of inscription used in and outside the monoglot settings of the nation-state (Blommaert 2008a; Street 1993). The model attempts to relate acts of writing and reading to wider cultural conceptions which provide the normative frame of interpretation for these acts (Collins and Slembrouck 2007). The NLS uncompromisingly operates with an explicit ideological agenda. Street (1993: 7-8) argues that

Since all approaches to literacy in practice will involve some such bias, it is better scholarship to admit to and expose the particular “ideological” framework being employed from the very beginning: it can then be opened to scrutiny, challenged and refined in ways which are more difficult when the ideology remains hidden.

Street deployed the term “ideology” not in its old-fashioned Marxist sense of “false consciousness”, but rather in the linguistic-anthropological sense reviewed in the previous section. Ideology is a site of conflict between power and resistance which is articulated through a variety of cultural practices including language and literacy (Street 1993: 8). Yet, by adopting an overt ideological position on literacies, the NLS does not deny the technical or the cognitive aspects of reading and writing but rather situates them within cultural contexts and structures of power. The point here is that the issue of discursive variation and choice cannot be adequately grasped without the interpretive plane of language ideologies.

Street (1993: 2) argued that “the acquisition, meaning and use of different literacy practices have ideological character” which was disrecognised by the autonomous approach to literacy. Treating literacy as socially constructed phenomenon, socio-cultural approaches to literacy reject the “segregationist” (Harris 1981) assumptions underpinning “school