INTRODUCING AFRICAN LITERACIES

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1   *Rationale*

Throughout the world more than 900 million adults are illiterate, and 1.3 billion people are living in extreme poverty. Those who are not literate are, for the most part, the same people who are living in poverty (Williams & Cooke, 2002). The majority of illiterate individuals in the world are from multilingual non-western countries where the language of literacy is in most cases not the native language of the speakers. While much research has been conducted combating the causes of illiteracy, the majority of the research has taken place in literate monolingual contexts in western countries (Van de Craats, Kurvers & Young-Scholten, 2006). In these contexts, where it might have most to contribute, research about literacy is fairly scarce (see also Paran & Williams, 2007). There is, therefore, great need for further research into issues relating to language and literacy in developing countries.[2]

The 2008 LESLLA workshop in Antwerp featured a special panel on African Literacies that was dedicated to the uses of English language and literacy in African contexts. Although the contributions in this panel did not in the most direct way address LESLLA learners, they were scheduled in the workshop because they were believed to add to knowledge building about the language and literacy roots LESLLA learners bring to their second language classes in Europe and North America from their home countries. For an overwhelming majority of Africans, education at all levels, including its most basic levels, prominently takes place in a second or third language. Literacy instruction is often only offered in an ex-imperial language, which brings about a lot of learning difficulties for many students. Together with often poor material conditions for schooling in Africa, many Africans are indeed low-educated, have learned (to read and write) in school only through a second or third language.

We believe that a thorough understanding of the linguistic ecology and the sociolinguistic situation surrounding literacy and illiteracy in their learners' countries of origin, may help inform LESLLA practitioners about the social and linguistic constraints

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[1] The papers following this introduction were presented in a panel on African Literacies at the Fourth LESLLA Symposium in Antwerp, 23-25 October 2008. We would like to thank the organisers for giving us this opportunity to come together as a group of Africa focused researchers, and Sandra Barasa as well as our discussant Abder El Aissati for sustaining an interesting dialogue during and after that panel.

[2] This paragraph is based on the introduction of Danielle Beckman's masters thesis (Beckman, 2008) on language and literacy in Namibia.

their learners face in and outside of the classroom. We also believe that it is important to bridge classroom practices with practices of literacy in people's everyday lives (Martin-Jones & Heller, 1996; Prinsloo, 2004; Cook, 2009). Similarly, we argue that knowing how low-educated, low-literate migrants were involved in literacy practices prior to their migration, has a lot to contribute to our understanding of their functioning in the LESLLA classroom.

2   *Towards a sociolinguistics of literacy and illiteracy in Africa*

Linguists have since long remarked that the African continent is characterised by a tremendous language diversity. Ethnologue (2005) reports 2,029 living languages for a population of 675 million people. This means that 30% of the world's languages are spoken by only 12% of the world's population. African individuals are indeed often praised for their multingualism. In most African countries, tri- or quadrilingual individuals are more common than monolingual persons. In short, in Africa, multilingualism is the norm. This makes the entire African continent beyond doubt among the richest areas on earth for language studies of all kinds.

However, much like its natural resources, Africa's linguistic diversity is rarely only a blessing, but very often also perceived as a burden for organising accessible, high quality education. The number one Google hit on 'literacy' and 'Africa' (October 2008 through July 2009), the UNESCO portal of education, introduces the theme of literacy in Africa as follows:

> Literacy remains a major barrier to the development of African countries. […] In 2000, the average literacy rate in Sub-Saharan Africa was 52 per cent for women and 68.9 per cent for men […]. These figures often hide complex social, cultural and economical realities.

In this short introduction to literacy in Africa, we very briefly want to outline the sociolinguistic situation of the African continent in relation to literacy. For a more comprehensive treatment of the language situation in Africa, we can direct the reader to Blommaert (2007), Vigouroux & Mufwene (2008) or Kleifgen & Bond (2009). At risk of overgeneralisation, we would like to suggest that African communities are sociolinguistically characterised by at least the following four key characteristics.

First of all, there is a high degree of multingualism at both the individual and the community level. Typically there are three categories of languages simultaneously present: (i) the languages of the (minority and majority) ethnic groups, (ii) a local lingua franca, which is either the language of one of the major ethnic groups (e.g., Wolof, Manding, Akan, Hausa, Lingala, Bemba, Xhosa) or of a minority group (e.g., Swahili in East Africa), or an English or Portuguese-based Creole (e.g., Krio in Sierra Leone, Crioulo in Guinea Bissau) and (iii) the ex-colonial language (English, French, Portuguese) which is often the only language with official status. In Islamic African communities, as in most of West Africa, this situation is further complicated with the special position of Arabic as language for religion-related purposes (sermons, praying, greeting, swearing). It is important to note that this high degree of multilingualism does not readily translate into multiliteracies (see Juffermans, this volume). Whereas the

majority of African individuals are multilingual in one or more local languages and often also the former colonial language, only few individuals in Africa are literate in more than one language and script.

Secondly, the education systems are in many cases based on external standards and have given former imperial languages an official, dominant and sometimes even exclusive role. The high drop out-rates and low educational achievements that exists in Africa today are in part caused by these imported foreign standards (cf. Beckman & Kurvers, this volume). A large body of literature exists that critiques the continued use of the ex-colonial languages for formal educational purposes (e.g., Phillipson, 1992; Brock-Utne & Hopson, 2005; Williams, 2006). By neglecting the language of the masses, this educational system (re)produces exclusive social and linguistic identities and inequality.

This gives rise to a heteroglossic situation with a low 'state of literacy' (Spolsky, 2009) for most indigenous languages and a high state of literacy for the ex-colonial languages (English, French, Portuguese) and Arabic. The instrumental and symbolic values attached to reading and writing in exogenous languages are often many times higher than reading and writing in indigenous languages (Coulmas, 1984; see also Beckman & Kurvers, this volume; and Asfaha, this volume). In most African local languages, there is no tradition of reading and writing, nor a body of literature or a community of readers and writers to engage with. (Notable exceptions here are local languages such as Amharic, Hausa and Swahili that do have a tradition of literary or literacy production and circulation of texts – often in religious contexts.) When investments are made in developing literacy in African local languages (by government agencies, development, or missionary organisations) these efforts often remain limited to adult literacy programmes, and are not readily incorporated in the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of the formal education system.

Finally, as a result of this heteroglossia, as well as of the poor material conditions of African states,[3] the majority of African languages are in terms of resources in fact unequal to world languages (Blommaert, 2008; see also Juffermans, this volume). Although the internet and other electronic communication media such as mobile phones have opened a world of new opportunities (de Schryver, 2002; Barasa & Mous, this volume), many of the material infrastructure taken for granted in writing Western languages – i.e., reference works, (electronic) dictionaries, spell checkers, exemplary texts) simply do not exist or are not readily available for users of African languages. It is often only through acquiring a regional lingua franca and a world language that people can gain access to, and actively participate in the modern nation state. Literacy (in the European languages) plays a crucial role in the social make-up of African societies as it operates as a very effective gatekeeper, separating the *haves* from the *have-nots*.

3   Overview

Following this introduction, four papers present different perspectives on literacy from four different corners of the continent. First, Danielle Beckman and Jeanne Kurvers'

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[3] All but three of the fifty African countries for which figures are available, are ranked in the 100 least developed countries in the Human Development Index (UNDP, 2007).

contribution offers a case study of English literacy in school and in the community in a regional capital in Eastern Namibia (Southern Africa). Secondly, Yonas Asfaha deals with a Horn of Africa country, Eritrea, and describes the use of English literacy in public places against the background of Eritrea's multilingual language policy. Third, Kasper Juffermans discusses the collaborative and heterographic nature of an everyday literacy product in a Gambian village (West Africa). Sandra Barasa and Maarten Mous finally broaden our understanding of English language and literacy use in the 21st century with a study from Kenya (East Africa) of literacy practices mediated by new communication technologies.

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