

Grassroots Literacy

Writing, Identity and Voice in Central Africa

Jan Blommaert



GRASSROOTS LITERACY

'Grassroots Literacy helps us see the realities of inscription – writing in longhand – at the non-elite peripheries of our globally stratified system of communication. Two Congolese texts, one autobiographical, one historiographic, float upward and inward like messages in a bottle: in telling their story, Jan Blommaert illustrates and passionately advocates for an ethics of interpretation that confronts and overcomes the tiers of exclusion that otherwise mute such writers' voices.'

Michael Silverstein, University of Chicago, USA

What effect has globalisation had on our understanding of literacy? *Grassroots Literacy* seeks to address the relationship between globalisation and the widening gap between 'grassroots' literacies, or writings from ordinary people and local communities, and 'elite' literacies.

Displaced from their original context to elite literacy environments in the form of letters, police declarations and pieces of creative writing, 'grassroots' literacies are unsurprisingly easily disqualified, either as 'bad' forms of literacy, or as messages that fail to be understood. Through close analysis of two unique, handwritten documents from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Jan Blommaert considers how 'grassroots' literacy in the Third World develops outside the literacy-saturated environments of the developed world. In examining these documents produced by socially and economically marginalised writers Blommaert demonstrates how literacy environments should be understood as relatively autonomous systems.

Grassroots Literacy will be key reading for students of language and literacy studies as well as an invaluable resource for anyone with an interest in understanding the implications of globalisation on local literacy practices.

Jan Blommaert is Finland Distinguished Professor of Linguistic Anthropology at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, as well as Professor of Linguistic Anthropology at Tilburg University. His publications include *Debating Diversity* (co-author, Routledge, 1998), *Language Ideological Debates* (editor, 1999) and *Discourse: A Critical Introduction* (author, 2005).

LITERACIES
Series Editor: David Barton
Lancaster University

Literacy practices are changing rapidly in contemporary society in response to broad social, economic and technological changes: in education, the workplace, the media and in everyday life. This series reflects the burgeoning research and scholarship in the field of literacy studies and its increasingly interdisciplinary nature. The series aims to provide a home for books on reading and writing which consider literacy as a social practice and which situate it within broader institutional contexts. The books develop and draw together work in the field; they aim to be accessible, interdisciplinary and international in scope, and to cover a wide range of social and institutional contexts.

LITERACY, LIVES AND LEARNING
David Barton, Roz Ivanic, Yvon Appleby, Rachel Hodge and Karin Tusting

LITERACY AND GENDER
Gemma Moss

HIPHOP LITERACIES
Elaine Richardson

LITERACY IN THE NEW MEDIA AGE
Gunther Kress

CITY LITERACIES
Learning to Read Across Generations and Cultures
Eve Gregory and Ann Williams

LITERACY AND DEVELOPMENT
Ethnographic Perspectives
Edited by Brian V. Street

SITUATED LITERACIES
Theorising Reading and Writing in Context
Edited by David Barton, Mary Hamilton and Roz Ivanic

MULTILITERACIES

Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures

Edited by Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis

GLOBAL LITERACIES AND THE WORLD-WIDE WEB

Edited by Gail E. Hawisher and Cynthia L. Seffe

STUDENT WRITING

Access, Regulation, Desire

Theresa M. Lillis

SILICON LITERACIES

Communication, Innovation and Education in the Electronic Age

Edited by Ilana Snyder

AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERACIES

Elaine Richardson

Editorial Board:

Elsa Auerbach *Boston University*

Mike Baynham *University of Leeds*

David Bloome *Vanderbilt University*

Norman Fairclough *Lancaster University*

James Gee *University of Wisconsin*

Nigel Hall *Manchester Metropolitan
University*

Mary Hamilton *Lancaster University*

Peter Hannon *Sheffield University*

Shirley Brice Heath *Stanford University*

Roz Ivanic *Lancaster University*

Gunther Kress *University of London*

Jane Mace *Southbank University*

Janet Maybin *Open University*

Greg Myers *Lancaster University*

Mastin Prinsloo *University of Cape Town*

Brian Street *University of London*

Michael Stubbs *University of Trier*

Denny Taylor *Hofstra University*

Daniel Wagner *University of Pennsylvania*

GRASSROOTS LITERACY

Writing, identity and voice in Central Africa

Jan Blommaert

First published 2008
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2008 Jan Blommaert

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2008.

“To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge’s collection of thousands of eBooks please go to www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk.”

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Blommaert, Jan.

Grassroots literacy : writing, identity, and voice in central Africa / Jan Blommaert.
p. cm. — (Literacies)

Includes bibliographical references.

1. Anthropological linguistics—Congo (Democratic Republic) 2. Literacy—Congo (Democratic Republic) I. Title.

P35.5.C75B56 2008
306.44096751—dc22
2007048548

ISBN 0-203-89548-7 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN10: 0-415-42631-6 (hbk)
ISBN10: 0-415-42630-8 (pbk)
ISBN10: 0-203-89548-7 (ebk)

ISBN13: 978-0-415-42631-2 (hbk)
ISBN13: 978-0-415-42630-5 (pbk)
ISBN13: 978-0-203-89548-1 (ebk)

FOR GUNTHER KRESS

CONTENTS

<i>List of figures</i>	xi
<i>Preface</i>	xiii

PART I

Grassroots literacy	1
----------------------------	----------

1	Introduction: grassroots literacy and literacy regimes	3
	<i>Yes I can write</i>	3
	<i>Writing</i>	4
	<i>Grassroots literacy</i>	7
	<i>Ethnographies of text</i>	12
	<i>Globalisation</i>	23

PART II

The lives of Julien	27
----------------------------	-----------

2	Three lives for Mrs Arens	29
	<i>Three versions of a life</i>	29
	<i>Writing with an accent</i>	30
	<i>Julien's life: a storyline</i>	35
	<i>Writing (as) a (way of) life</i>	37
	<i>Context and pretext</i>	40
3	Genres and repertoires	42
	<i>Resources</i>	42
	<i>On genre</i>	43
	<i>Emerging genres in an emerging tradition</i>	47
	<i>Histories and letters</i>	49
	<i>The repertoire</i>	68
	<i>The misfit</i>	72

CONTENTS

4	Writing, remembering and being <i>Emerging genres, emerging lives</i> 74 <i>Writing and remembering</i> 75 <i>Who is Julien?</i> 85 <i>Textuality and subjectivity</i> 95	74
---	---	----

PART III

Tshibumba the historian 97

5	Tshibumba: artist, painter, historian <i>Paintings, conversations and texts</i> 99 <i>Tshibumba Kanda Matulu</i> 103 <i>The storyline</i> 108	99
6	The aesthetics of grassroots literacy <i>Writing as drawing</i> 113 <i>Tshibumba's writing and drawing</i> 118 <i>Tshibumba's voice</i> 129 <i>A disciplined voice</i> 135	113
7	Sources as resources <i>The archive again</i> 137 <i>A national history with local resources</i> 140 <i>Tshibumba's voices</i> 162	137
8	The grassroots historian's craft <i>Tshibumba's historiographic methodology</i> 165 <i>Grassroots historiography and popular consciousness</i> 171 <i>Artist, painter, grassroots historian</i> 180	165

PART IV

Julien, Tshibumba, and beyond 183

9	Reflections <i>Lives, literacy, subjectivity</i> 187 <i>The skeleton of literacy practices</i> 191 <i>Grassroots literacy in globalisation</i> 194 <i>History from below</i> 197 <i>Conclusion</i> 199	185
	<i>Notes</i>	203
	<i>References</i>	209
	<i>Index</i>	215

FIGURES

1.1	Democratic Republic of the Congo	25
1.2	The Katanga and Kasai region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo	26
2.1	Copy of 1/5	32
3.1	Copy of 2/14	57
3.2	Copy of 3/20	63
5.1	Copy of pages 31–2 of Tshibumba’s <i>Histoire</i>	106
6.1	Tourism assignment, Wesbank	115
6.2	The six drawings in the <i>Histoire</i>	124–5
7.1	The empty chapters, pages 10–11 of the <i>Histoire</i>	159
9.1	Questionnaire response, Wesbank	195

PREFACE

In an ideal world, this book would be three times its current size, two-thirds of which would be consumed by an appendix in which I present facsimiles, transcripts, translations and annotations of the texts on which most of the discussion is based. This would have had the advantage that the materials would be open for inspection by others, and that, perhaps, others might be infected by the endless fascination I have for them. All the same, this would make the production of the book complex and expensive, and would so risk making the retail copies unaffordable for most of the readership I hope to reach. I will have to find another channel and format for presenting the documents. Given this constraint, this book is necessarily a compromise which I tried to turn into a benefit. Rather than focusing on a critical edition and detailed exegesis of the documents I chose to focus on the general issues they raise.

These issues are, I think, fundamental. Globalisation is a process that forces us to take the world as a context. This world is complex and highly diverse, and developments in the ‘centre’ of this world – the development of new telecommunication systems and media, for instance – have effects on the ‘margins’ of the world. Literacy is a case in point, and what the documents I examine here show us is that there is a growing gap between different literacy regimes in the world. Texts such as the ones I will discuss here do not quickly or easily communicate the messages they contain. Their meanings increasingly disappear in the widening gap between literacy regimes in diverse parts of the world. The problem is obviously not academic but very real, of immediate life-or-death importance to many people. Voice is a pressing concern in a globalising context in which less and less can be taken for granted with respect to the communicative repertoires of people interacting with one another. I have addressed these concerns in an earlier book called *Discourse: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge University Press 2005), and in many ways the present study is a sequel to *Discourse*. It picks up, and develops, points embryonically made there, focusing on literacy because of the reasons specified above, and bringing literacy analysis into the same theoretical field of force as the one described in *Discourse*.

This purpose offers me the opportunity to write about a corpus of texts that has puzzled, intrigued and mesmerised me for more than a decade. I came

across Julien's life histories in the mid-1990s, by what I would call 'structured accident'. The documents are rare instances of grassroots life-writing, and they offered me more theoretical and descriptive challenges than I could imagine at the time. My encounter with these documents coincided with a period in my life when I was deeply engaged with Johannes Fabian's work. I had read and reviewed his *History from Below* (Fabian 1990a), and few books ever had such a profound impact on me. Fabian has definitely been one of my *maîtres à penser* and the present book is, consequently, very much the upshot of a protracted dialogue with Fabian's work. This dialogue intensified when, again by accident, I started working on a handwritten history of the Congo written by the Congolese painter Tshibumba, about whose historical paintings Fabian had published the magnificent *Remembering the Present* (Fabian 1996). I received a copy of this massively intriguing document from Bogumil Jewsiewicki, and quickly spotted the similarities between this history and Julien's life-writing. Both displayed the constraints of sub-elite writing, and both produced a grassroots voice on history. In both, the very act of writing appeared to produce all sorts of things: texts, but also particular positions, subjectivities. The question guiding my work then became: *what does this kind of grassroots literacy make possible* for people such as Julien and Tshibumba?

I had, in the meantime, started realising that the notion of *constraint* is central in considering this issue. Since the mid-1990s, I had frequently been requested by my national authorities to translate written statements by African refugees and Africans arrested by the police. Gradually, a corpus of texts had emerged in which I clearly saw that literacy achievements that had some value in sub-elite African contexts rather systematically failed to be seen as valuable in Belgium. The question about the possibilities of grassroots writing thus acquired a dimension of globalisation: 'grassroots' equals local, and the local effectiveness and adequacy of communicative resources raises questions of *mobility*. Texts travel, and they do not necessarily travel well. In the transfer from one place to another, they cross from one regime into another, and the changed orders of indexicality mean that they are understood differently. Having clearly understood that both Julien's and Tshibumba's texts were *mobile texts* – both were written for addressees in the West – I started realising that these documents might offer exceptional possibilities for exploring and identifying the main issues of literacy in the age of globalisation: issues that have to do with the locality of literacy regimes, with mobility and inequality.

This is the story of this book. There is irony in the story, because, naturally, it was hard not to reflect on my own writing practices while I was investigating those of Julien, Tshibumba and others. I saw my own literacy regime in action – writing in a globalised language that is not my own, in a particular register and genre, on a sophisticated laptop, in a solitary comfortable space surrounded by an archive and a working library, and with Google on the toolbar. All these material conditions: I don't take them for granted anymore. There is so much inequality inscribed in the production of this book. The main inequality is in

the result: voice. I can produce a globalised voice, they can't; I can produce a prestige genre, they can't; I can speak from within a recognisable position and identity, they can't.

There are ethical issues here. I can write about Julien and Tshibumba in ways they themselves could not, for reasons that will become all too clear in the chapters of this book. And I could not consult them while writing. I never had contact with Julien, only with his patron, Mrs Arens. She informed Julien about my academic work on his texts, and she gave me, on his behalf, permission for pursuing it. As for Tshibumba, he disappeared from the radar screen and no one has been able to inform me of his whereabouts. Julien and Tshibumba, we should recall, live in the southern part of the Congo, in an area marked by deep poverty and marginalisation, and torn by unrest and war since the second half of the 1990s. As for the refugees and police suspects whose documents I have analysed, I hardly ever had any contact with them either, often because I did not even know their names and because my role as state-appointed translator proscribed contacts with these subjects.

I am aware of these issues, have reflected on them over and over again, and come across the bitter irony of contemporary realities. Customary ethical codes for research presuppose a particular socio-political environment in which everyone has a name, an administrative existence, a recognisable and recognised subjectivity that demands respect and distance. We can only use a pseudonym when people's real names are known and when knowledge and possession of that name is connected to inalienable rights, to subjectivity and, consequently, to norms that separate the public from the private sphere. Underlying is the image of a fully integrated Modern society in which such elementary features are attached to everyone and recorded – officially – somewhere. Real societies, alas, are different. There are people in our own Modern societies that do not possess such elementary features and rights. Illegal immigrants have no name and no identifiable 'official' existence. Their 'lives' and stories are, for all practical purposes, non-existent. Their anonymity is not the result of a desire for 'privacy', it is the effect of erasure and silencing; not of choice but of oppression. And there are even more people elsewhere in the world to whom these conditions apply. African works of art kept in museums are only rarely attributed to an individual artist, they are attributed to an ethnic group or to a region somewhere in Africa. Millions of people there live 'unofficial' lives, and no one cares about their names, birth dates, addresses, or, in a wider sense, subjectivity. I write about their subjectivity, about their existence and lives – or seen from a different perspective, I invade their privacy – because I have voice and they don't. I can invade their privacy because I have shaped a private sphere for them, and this act is an effect of global inequalities. I am not comfortable with that situation. But I believe there is great virtue in caring about their lives and in getting to know them, and if that exposes me to ethical criticisms, I will live with that. It is a lesson I have already learned about research in contemporary societies. I have also learned that it is good to stop and reflect on such questions,

PREFACE

and to realise (in Gunnar Myrdal's footsteps) that existing ethical codes do not solve the moral dilemmas of social research. They merely highlight them.

Given the many years that I have worked, talked and lectured on these texts, I cannot possibly mention everyone who ever had an influence on what this book has now become. I must however, acknowledge my debt of gratitude to several people. First I need to thank the people I have dubbed Mrs and Mr Arens, as well as (a real name) Bogumil Jewsiwiecki. They were the ones who gave me the documents that became the core of this book, and they talked or corresponded with me about their features and significance. Those were acts of generosity that triggered a long process of reflection and writing, and led to this product. Johannes Fabian has already been mentioned as an obvious source of inspiration for work along the lines developed in the following chapters, and Michael Silverstein, Dell Hymes, John Gumperz, Aaron Cicourel, Sue Gal, Kit Woolard and Misty Jaffe, among others, have been influential beyond measure on my work and have always been wonderful interlocutors on all sorts of issues.

I wrote this book at a time when I was leaving the Institute of Education of the University of London. The years spent in close proximity with Gunther Kress – to whom I dedicate this book – were invaluable humanly and intellectually, and much of what I was able to put in the pages of this book was learned in conversations with him, Diane Mavers, Mary Scott, Brian Street, Ben Ramp-ton, Jeff Bezemer, Cathie Wallace, Adam Lefstein, Norbert Pachler and other members of the London Gang. Many of them read draft chapters of this book and commented perceptively on them. David Barton gave me excellent feedback on the draft, and Thomas Bearth, Michael Meeuwis, Katrijn Maryns and Vincent de Rooij offered important suggestions on parts of it. If this book is judged to be good, it is largely because of their impact on it; if it is judged to be bad, I take full responsibility for it.

Part of the research that went into this book was facilitated by a personal research grant from the Belgian National Science Foundation-Flanders (FWO-V) in 1998 and 1999. The greatest facilitators, however, were Pika, Frederik and Alexander, who sacrificed part of their summer holiday to enable me to write this book.

Antwerp, November 2007

Part I

GRASSROOTS LITERACY

INTRODUCTION

Grassroots literacy and literacy regimes

Yes I can write

baKANGi NGAI NAYIBI, eZALI YALOKUTA
 baKANGi NGAI na bilamba minei
 4 Pantalon na ye bi ~~ba~~tu te moSuSu
 oyo baZALAKI na MAGASIN te

This text was written by a woman from the Congo, who was arrested by the Belgian police on grounds of shoplifting. The text was written on official police stationery. In the Belgian legal system, everyone has the right to go on record with his/her own account. That means: one would be asked whether one ‘can write’, and if so, one would be invited to write one’s own account of the events. This document, then, becomes a legally consequential element in the criminal prosecution case: it is ‘the story of the accused’ and both the defence lawyer and the prosecution will refer to it as such. Observe that under Belgian law, suspects have the right to write in a language of their choice. In this case, the woman obviously confirmed that she ‘could write’, and she chose to write in Lingala, the lingua franca of Kinshasa and of the Congolese diaspora.

The phrase ‘can write’, however, is deceptively simple. In a country such as the Congo, literacy skills are generally rare and access to advanced and sophisticated forms of literacy is severely restricted. That means: while Congolese say they ‘can write’ when they are able to perform basic writing skills, that description would not cover the production of a long, nuanced and detailed written narrative in a standard, normative language variety and a standard orthography. Let us have a closer look at what and how the woman wrote. Here is a transcript of the text, followed by a translation. In the transcript I will try to preserve the graphic features of the original:

BaKANGI NGAI NAYIBI, eZALI YALOKUTA
 baKANGI NGAI na bilamba minei
 4 Pantalon na ye bi [nb]atu te moSuSu
 oyo baZALAKI na MAGASIN te

They caught me (because) I had stolen, that is a lie
 They caught me with four pieces of clothing
 4 *pantalons* I don't know the other people
 who were with me in the *magasin*

This text, I should emphasise, enters an institutional space of literacy, a rather strict and punitive one. And if we take this strict and punitive viewpoint, the woman – even if her writing was procedurally prefaced by a clear affirmation that she ‘could write’ – obviously struggles with several very basic literacy requirements. There is orthographic instability articulated through the alteration of upper case and lower case; punctuation is erratic, and several corrections betray a struggle with the grammatical and narrative norms she knows are at play here. She also switches to French – ‘pantalons’, ‘magasin’ – and so offers us a glimpse of the vernacular everyday (but ‘non-standard’) Lingala she speaks. And finally, she manifestly fails to produce a narrative that can stand as her ‘account of the events’. There is no sequential development of actions, no plot nor storyline, no argued conclusion. The woman has written *something*, but in the legal procedure this something will not be of much use to her. Her writing has failed to produce voice in the specific communicative environment in which it was produced, and writing here silences her voice. The simple question ‘can you write?’ seems to be one that does not withstand the test of globalisation. Answers to it refer to practices and skills that belong to local, and very divergent, economies of literacy. Institutional regimes that emphasise uniformity in communication practices will exclude, marginalise and silence people whose repertoires do not match the normative expectations. Globalisation is likely to intensify this form of exclusion, because the super-diversity it spawns precludes any presupposability of linguistic or literacy resources among growing numbers of people. Processes and phenomena such as those are the topic of this book.

Writing

What we, in everyday parlance, call ‘writing’ is a very complex set of semi-otic practices that involve the visualisation and materialisation of ideas and concepts, their archivability and transferability across time and space. Any consideration of writing, consequently, is forced to address material aspects as well as ideational ones, and both categories of aspects are of course in turn lodged in social, cultural, historical, economic and political contexts. The complexity that is hidden by the simple word ‘writing’ is tremendous, and many studies of writing have been plagued by the legacies of this suggestive simplicity, assuming a degree of homogeneity in the practices of writing, and their products and functions, which can no longer be sustained. As Hymes (1996: 35) observed, ‘[w]riting is usually seen as a record of something already existing’. Writing is an ethnographic object *par excellence*, something which, because of its sheer complexity and context-dependence, can only be fully understood when an

analytical tactic is used that focuses on the object in relation to its contexts and relinquishes a priori claims about what this object would or should mean to the people who use it. For underneath every examination of writing – or literacy more generally – there is the question: *what counts as writing* for people who write and read? What is the meaning of writing practices for those who deploy them as well as for those among whom the products of writing – ‘texts’ or ‘documents’ – circulate?

The question can be reformulated sociolinguistically as: *what is the particular place of writing in the sociolinguistic repertoire of people* (Hymes 1996: 36)? And right from the start we can state that the answer to this is by no means easy or predictable. A repertoire comprises communicative resources as well as knowledge about their function and their conditions of use, and all of this is a very concrete matter. It is not enough to say that ‘literacy’ is part of someone’s repertoire: it matters *which particular literacy resources* are there. It is evident that there is a difference between someone who is able to write with pen and paper and someone who in addition to that skill also writes on a keyboard; between someone who is able to read short and simple texts in one language variety and someone who is a competent reader of multiple genres in multiple languages and language varieties. Thinking about repertoires forces us to abandon totalising notions in the field of language and communication, and to replace them with terms that identify actual, specific practices. The range of factors we need to consider in analysing literacy, consequently, is expanded and now includes social, cultural, historical and political factors.

The distinctions made above do not usually occur by accident: they can be *systemic*, be part of the general structure of societies and characterise societies in distinction from others. Thus, keyboard writing on a computer and access to the kind of reading environment created by broadband internet are more or less widely distributed in a small number of societies while being extraordinarily rare in most other societies. Where such ‘computer literacy’ occurs, it quickly occupies a status position in the repertoires of its users as a ‘higher’ and more sophisticated form of literacy; it starts dominating certain genres of writing and transforms them – think of email as the new form of ‘correspondence’. Becoming educated and getting access to middle-class jobs then depends on being competent in these particular forms of literacy, and while keyboard writing was until recently a highly specialised professional skill (I wrote my very first article with pen and paper and had it typed by an obstinate departmental typist), it is now a skill that defines a large middle-class educated cohort in societies such as mine. To be computer illiterate these days equals being illiterate *tout court*. As soon as I leave my society, however, or even as soon as I leave my middle-class environment, I find myself in a world where keyboard writing is all but absent, and where people pride themselves on being able to produce handwritten texts in a more or less stable orthography and language variety. We see differently organised repertoires there, and the repertoires reflect wider societal divisions and inequalities. Thinking about repertoires thus not only compels us

to focus on actual practices, but it also compels us to set these practices in a field of power and inequality. Repertoires are internally and externally stratified, with all kinds of internal distinctions marking differences between 'better' and 'worse' resources, and external distinctions defining the resources from one repertoire as 'superior' or 'inferior' to those of others (Hymes 1996; Blommaert 2005a). Literacy is organised in *literacy regimes*, in structures of distribution, access, value and use that are closely tied to the general make-up of societies.

Most of what I have said so far is fairly common and hardly controversial sociolinguistic knowledge. The fact that literacy practices need to be seen and understood as contextualised, socially and culturally (ultra-)sensitive is the cornerstone of the New Literacy Studies and I do not feel I can add much to the arguments developed in some outstanding work within that paradigm (e.g. Gee 1990; Barton 1994; Graddol, Maybin & Stierer, eds. 1994; Baynham 1995; Besnier 1995; Collins 1995; Street 1995; Prinsloo & Breier, eds. 1996; Barton & Hamilton 1998; Collins & Blot 2003). The matter gains complexity as soon as we move these issues into the field of globalisation, when literacy products – texts and documents – move from one society into another in an ever-intensifying flow. What is correct in one society becomes an error in another society; what is perfectly appropriate writing in one place becomes a meaningless sign system in another. Texts may travel easily, but the system of use, value and function in which they were produced usually does not travel with them. Globalisation imposes a new grid on our analysis: we are now facing the task of designing an ethnography, not of locality but of transfer, of mobility – not of product but of process, and not in one 'ecologically' described community but across communities. These are poorly charted waters, and that is where I let my story begin.

This book is an attempt towards an ethnographic understanding of grassroots literacy in an age of globalisation. It will examine documents from the 'periphery': two sets of handwritten texts written by people from the southern province of Katanga in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Both documents are exceptional with respect to their formal features – their length, for instance, and their genre characteristics – as well as with respect to the communicative framework in which they came into being: both are written for a specific purpose and for a 'Western' readership. Both, thus, are instances of grassroots literacy written *for* globalisation, with the explicit purpose of being read by people from outside the community of their composers. The two sets of documents are exceptionally large and complex bodies of grassroots literacy, and it is precisely their exceptional nature and scope that offers us opportunities for generalisation and extrapolation, as I hope to demonstrate in the chapters of this book.

The particular histories of these texts as well as of how they became my data will be told later on in the book. Now, I must introduce some of the basic theoretical considerations that will underlie this study: I must unpick and unpack what I mean by 'an ethnographic understanding of grassroots literacy in an age of globalisation'.

Grassroots literacy

Grassroots literacy is a label I use for a wide variety of ‘non-elite’ forms of writing (and the elite forms will be flagged by means of the hyphenated ‘ortho-graphy’ – ‘writing right’ – in this book). It is writing performed by people who are not fully inserted into elite economies of information, language and literacy. The term can only be defined in a loosely descriptive way here; the analysis further in the book should add detail and clarity. In the materials I examine, grassroots literacy can be identified by:

- 1 *Hetero-graphy*. The deployment of graphic symbols in ways that defy *ortho-graphic* norms. This is manifest in (i) spelling difficulties – words are spelled in different ways, and very often reflect ‘accent’, the way in which they are pronounced in spoken vernacular varieties. (ii) It is also manifest in erratic punctuation and the use of upper and lower case without clear rules apparently guiding their usage. (iii) The texts very often look like ‘drafts’: there are corrections and additions, often revealing uncertainty about linguistic and stylistic rules. (iv) At the same time, and apparently paradoxically, we also often see a clear dimension of *visual aestheticisation* of documents: texts would be ‘drawn’, so to speak, and they would often contain sketches, drawings and other visual means of structuring and representing information. Grassroots writing often looks like calligraphic writing.
- 2 *Vernacular language varieties being used in writing*. The ‘code’ in which documents are written often betrays absence of access to ‘Standard’ normative (and thus prestige) language varieties. People write in local, so-called ‘sub-standard’ varieties of language, they use code-switching, colloquialisms and other ‘impurities’ in their written texts.
- 3 *Distant genres*. People write in genres to which they have only been marginally exposed and for whose full realisation they often lack the required resources. The genres often evoke (and suggest) distant *sources* for the texts: texts are ‘assembled’ out of the available and accessible materials in attempts to construct such perceived genres.
- 4 *Partial insertion in knowledge economies*. People often construct texts on the basis of locally available knowledge resources: the things they can find out by asking or listening rather than by searching in literate corpuses.

These four characteristics combined lead to a fifth one:

- 5 *Constrained mobility*. Texts are often only *locally* meaningful and valuable. As soon as they move to other geographical and/or social spaces, they lose ‘voice’. This is a derived feature of grassroots literacy, and it bears on the ways in which in times of globalisation, grassroots literacy products and resources move around.