

# Language Rich Africa

## Policy dialogue

### The Cape Town Language and Development Conference: Looking beyond 2015

Edited by Hamish McIlwraith

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# Contents

- 3 The Cape Town Letter: to our leaders**
- 5 Foreword**  
Sir Martin Davidson KCMG, Chief Executive,  
British Council
- 8 Introduction**  
Hamish McIlwraith, Editor
- 10 Contributors**
- 15 Section 1: Language policy**
- 16 Searching for an optimal national language policy for sustainable development  
Herman M Batibo, University of Botswana
- 21 Development of national language policies in East Africa: the interplay of opportunity, equity and identity  
Angelina Nduku Kioko, United States International University, Kenya
- 30 The fallacy of multilingual and bilingual policies in African countries  
Dr Mompoloki Mmangaka Bagwasi, University Of Botswana
- 38 From policy to practice: the incremental introduction of African languages in all South African schools  
Jennifer Joshua, Department of Basic Education, South Africa
- 43 Lingua francas as languages of education: implications for other languages  
Andy Kirkpatrick, Griffith University, Australia
- 49 Section 2: Language, literacy and education**
- 50 Growing young readers and writers: underpinnings of the Nal'ibali National Reading-for-Enjoyment Campaign  
Carole Bloch, PRAESA, University of Cape Town, South Africa
- 57 A frame of reference on quality youth and adult literacy in multilingual contexts  
Hassana Alidou, UNESCO Regional and Multi-sectoral Office, Abuja, Nigeria and Christine Glanz, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, Hamburg, Germany
- 65 Literacy, language and development: a social practices perspective  
Mastin Prinsloo, University of Cape Town, South Africa and Brian Street, King's College, UK
- 71 Measuring literacy post-2015: some social justice issues  
Dr Angeline Mbogo Barrett, University of Bristol, UK
- 80 Multilingualism, the 'African lingua franca' and the 'new linguistic dispensation'  
Kathleen Heugh, University of South Australia
- 88 The role of Kiswahili as a lingua franca in Sub-Saharan Africa  
Nancy Kahaviza Ayodi, Maasai Mara University, Kenya
- 92 The African Storybook Project: an interim report  
Tessa Welch, South African Institute for Distance Education (Saide), Juliet Tembe and Dorcas Wepukhulu, Saide co-ordinators, Judith Baker, Literacy Adviser and Bonny Norton, University of British Columbia, Canada

**97 Section 3: Language in socio-economic development****98 The language factor in development goals**

Ayo Bamgbose, University of Ibadan, Nigeria

**108 African languages: towards an African cultural renaissance**

Sozinho Francisco Matsinhe,  
Executive Secretary, ACALAN

**114 Language as a contributor to post-MDG development perspectives in Africa**

Birgit Brock-Utne, University of Oslo, Norway

**123 Section 4: Language, culture, identity and inclusion****124 How languages get their mojo**

John E Joseph, University of Edinburgh, UK

**132 Local languages and primary education in Northern Uganda: post-conflict community and local partnerships**

Godfrey Sentumbwe, Literacy and Adult Basic Education, Uganda and Kathleen Heugh, University of South Australia

**136 Accepting and including learners with special educational needs: essential requirements in achieving universal primary education standards**

Phil Dexter, British Council, UK

**141 Appendix: The Language and Development Conference publications**

# Literacy, language and development: a social practices perspective

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and Brian Street, King's College, UK

## Introduction

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and discussions of these at the recent Language and Development conference (Cape Town, November 2013) have a particular focus on schooling, but we would like to take a broader focus in this paper that encompasses adult education as well as attention to aspects of language and literacy in everyday practices. Literacy and language of the everyday takes place in people's homes and neighbourhoods, but also in workplaces, places of trade, local government offices, religious institutional settings, community centres, sports, leisure and entertainment venues, as well as at a number of other sites and settings. While these various and diverse language and literacy-linked activities occur outside of schooling, we argue that they have an important effect on children's and youths' successes and failures in schools as well as on adult literacy interventions.

For a variety of reasons, including the pressures of political imperatives, educational planners have often ignored the variability and complexity of the language and literacy resources that they encounter outside of educational provision (Errington, 2008; Rogers 2013; Street, forthcoming). It has been common for approaches to literacy and language in developmental goal-setting to see language as a standardised resource and literacy as something which individuals acquire through instruction, a unified 'autonomous' set of neutral skills that can be applied across all contexts. Policy, curriculum and teaching methods in schooling as well as in adult education have, as a result, sometimes ignored the situated and variable nature of language and literacy practices and have not grappled closely with what it is that children, youths and adults bring with them to literacy learning in educational settings and to the use of language in those settings (see Rogers and Street, 2012). This gap has led to a flawed set of assumptions about language, literacy and society in much of the developmental literature, leading to assessments of language and literacy situations that are empirically not sustainable. Our starting point is that effective policy making should be based on a close understanding of what language and literacy are and how they are practised, not what we project on to them.

In this paper we discuss how approaches from research and theory relate to those approaches widely evident in policy accounts. We bring together approaches to literacy in theory and in practice that have been developed and applied over a number of decades. We start with Brian Street's work in Iran, where he developed a grounded approach to the study of literacy as situated practices in specific contexts, distributed among co-participants and embedded within relations of culture and power (Street, 1984, 1995, 2001). This work, along with that of Scribner and Cole (1981), Scollon and Scollon (1981) and Heath (1983) led to a rethinking of what literacy is and how social inequalities are produced and reproduced by way of literacy and language, in schools, in adult literacy provision and in the wider society.

## Studies of literacies

Street's early work among the mountain fruit-growers in a village in north-eastern Iran identified three kinds of literacies that were prevalent in the village where he was based as a researcher: a *maktab* literacy associated with Islam and Qu'ranic (or *maktab*) religious schools; a commercial literacy involved in village fruit sales (and based on prior development of *maktab* literacy); and literacy acquired in the secular and modernising context of the state school system. Street identified each of these as distinct practices associated with particular social activities and identities: the uses and meanings of literacy that characterised the *maktab* literacy were practices associated with the primary Qur'anic school and religious practices; school literacy practices took place in the secular and modernising context of the state school; and the commercial literacy practices took place in the context of buying and selling fruit for transport to the city and the market. *Maktab* literacy was associated with older authority traditions in the village, located in Qur'anic learning and located in a social hierarchy dominated by men. The stereotypical view of Qu'ranic literacy instruction that is sometimes presented is that it is not proper literacy because it is simply memorisation of passages. But Street found interesting variety and complexity instead. The texts

were differently organised on the page compared to Western linear writing, the writing was inserted in different forms, angles and in varying relationships with other units of text, so that students learned that reading is not just about language written down, but that organisation of text also carried meaning in particular ways. The distinct commercial literacy practices that had emerged in response to the economic activity of selling fruit to the nearby cities at a time of economic boom involved writing notes, cheques, lists, names on crates, and so on, to facilitate the purchase and sale of quantities of fruit.

Street studied these different literacies through a focus on literacy events and practices, where events were any social interaction or exchange where reading and writing were part of the activity or were spoken of; and practices were the particular socio-cultural ways of acting, interacting and attaching value that characterised distinct domains of activity. These resources helped provide an explanation for why commercial literacy was mainly undertaken by those who had been taught at the Qur'anic school rather than those from the modern state school, even though at first sight one might expect the literacy skills of the formal school to be more functionally oriented to commercial practices. Those with Qur'anic literacy had the status and authority within the village to carry on these commercial practices, while those trained in the state school were seen to be oriented outwards and lacked the integral relations to everyday village life that underpinned the trust necessary for such transactions.

In this village context, then, literacy was not simply a set of functional skills, as much modern schooling and many literacy agencies represent it, but rather it was a set of social practices deeply associated with identity and social position. Approaching literacy as a social practice provides a way of making sense of variations in the uses and meanings of literacy in such contexts rather than reliance on the problematic notions of literacy skills, rates and levels that dominate much contemporary discussion of literacy.

Street, along with Graff (1979), identified what they called the 'literacy myth' and its influences on educators and planners, as being a prevalent but problematic view that literacy is the highest form of language use, and where literacy is seen to lead to and is linked to a whole lot of social positives – objectivity, abstract thinking, analytical thinking, logic, scientific reasoning, etc. Street also identified the prevalence in views of literacy and language of what he called *scriptism* – a view of the influence of writing on the conceptualisation of speech – a belief in the superiority in various respects of written languages over spoken languages and the view that some forms or uses of language are more 'context-dependent' or 'objective' than others.

A literature has emerged that builds upon these critical insights and a growing body of ethnographic research describes and explains variation in literacy practices across settings. Examples from a wider literature include Papen's (2005) study of tourism, governmentality and literacy in Namibia; Robinson-Pant's (1997) account of literacy and development among women in Nepal, which focuses on the processes by which women in Nepal acquire literacy and deploy its use for their own purposes; Kalman's (1999) study of mediated literacy practices in Mexico City; Maddox and Esposito's (2012) research around literacy inequalities and social distance in Nepal; Achen and Openjuru's (2012) research on language and literacy as globalised practices in the poorer residential areas of Kampala, Uganda; Pahl and Rowsell's application of these insights to classroom work (2012); Kell's (2008) study of literacy and housing disputes near Cape Town; and Prinsloo and Breier's (1996) study of the everyday literacy practices of persons without schooling across multiple settings in South Africa.

These studies have shown us particular things about language and literacy: that they are not practised in a vacuum; language and literacy are always embedded within some socio-cultural set of activities, and it is these activities, not the literacy itself that provide the material for the analysis of literacy practices. What is often taken to be a problem with the abilities or language resources on the part of underclass or minority children and adults, it often turns out, is primarily one of lack of familiarity with particular ways of doing literacy. If teachers and testers make deficit assumptions about what it is children have and what they bring to school or what adults bring to their learning activities, they fail to identify what language and literacy resources children or adults do have and how they might be engaged with and built upon.

With regard to adult literacy concerns, particularly as regards gender disparities, the recently published OECD Skills Outlook (2013) Survey of Adult Skills, a product of the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), points out there is not necessarily a one-to-one relationship between gender and literacy levels. Rather, that relationship is mediated by social factors. For instance, if part-time work and low-level jobs are associated with lower literacy skills and women are more likely to be found in such work, then gender inequality in literacy levels follows. Other policy debates (see Street, forthcoming), such as those associated with the recent PISA and GMR reports which remain more 'traditional' in their view of literacy, will need to take on board such complexity in addressing the concern that women's literacy remains one of the most neglected areas of the Education for All agenda. Educational interventions that do not take into account the social dynamics that produce inequalities of particular sorts are most likely just to repeat previous failures.

The distinction between an 'autonomous' model and an 'ideological' model of literacy (Street, 1984, 1995) has been widely used in literacy studies (see Prinsloo and Baynham, 2013 for a five-volume selection of a representative literature). The 'autonomous' model of literacy works from the assumption that literacy in itself – autonomously – will have effects on other social and cognitive practices. Street argued that this model disguises the cultural and ideological assumptions that underpin it and that can then be presented as though they are neutral and universal. Research in the social practices approach challenges this view and suggests that dominant approaches based on the autonomous model simply impose Western, urban or class-based conceptions of literacy onto other socio-cultural settings; the autonomous model is, in fact, 'ideological' but this remains hidden (Street, 2000).

The explicit ideological model of literacy offers a view that literacy is always embedded in particular views of the world, of knowledge and of values, and is shaped by relations of power. The ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity and being. Literacy, therefore, is always contested, both in its meanings and its practices. The ways in which teachers or facilitators and their students interact is already a social practice that affects the nature of the literacy being learned and the ideas about literacy held by the participants, especially the new learners and their position in relations of power (Cook-Gumperz, 2006). It is not valid to suggest that 'literacy' can be 'given' neutrally and then its 'social' effects only experienced or 'added on' afterwards. Because of the failure of many traditional literacy programmes (Rogers and Street, 2012; Street, 2001), academics, researchers and practitioners working in literacy in different parts of the world are beginning to come to the conclusion that the autonomous model of literacy on which much of the practice and programmes have been based is not an appropriate intellectual tool, either for understanding the diversity of reading and writing around the world or for designing the practical programmes this requires, which may be better suited to an ideological model (Robinson-Pant, 1997; Wagner, 1993).

Many people labelled 'illiterate' within the autonomous model of literacy may, from a more culturally sensitive viewpoint, be seen to make significant use of literacy practices for specific purposes and in specific contexts. For instance, studies suggest that non-literate persons find themselves engaged in literacy activities, so the boundary between literate and non-literate is less obvious than individual 'measures' of literacy suggest (Prinsloo and

Breier, 1996). Street's more recent work with Alan Rogers in adult education attempts to bring together the principles outlined above regarding literacy as social practice, rejecting the autonomous model and drawing upon ethnographic perspectives (Rogers and Street, 2012; Rogers, 2002). Their LETTER project (Learning for Empowerment Through Training in Ethnographic Research) started in India from discussions with a local women's NGO dedicated to women's empowerment through education. The programme commenced in 2005 with a series of workshops held with participants from Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan and India, with a main focus on approaches to exploring everyday literacy and numeracy in local communities, using ethnographic-style methodologies. A book was published, based on the workshops, titled *Exploring the Everyday: ethnographic studies of literacy and numeracy* (Nirantar, 2007) and since then, the local non-government agency has been developing new teaching-learning approaches based on the findings of surveys and studies of everyday literacies and practices. The key element in this approach is to help teachers and community activists to learn about the existing community literacy and numeracy activities of each particular learning group; indeed, to help the learners themselves to become more aware of what they do with and what they feel about literacy and numeracy.

The project has since moved on to Ethiopia, where a group of about 20 trainers of literacy facilitators from around the country participated in a series of three workshops. The first was devoted to ethnographic approaches, with a field visit during the workshop; then each participant, individually or in small groups, undertook a more detailed case study in their home context. The second workshop finalised these case studies and began work on curriculum development for adult learning programmes. The third workshop finalised both strands, and again a book was written locally and published, *Everyday Literacies in Africa: ethnographic studies of literacy and numeracy in Ethiopia* (Gebre et al., 2009). Currently a programme is being held in Uganda with the involvement of some of those engaged on the Ethiopia and India programmes to ensure that LETTER is a rolling programme in which both the trainers and the participant learners build on previous workshops. Ethnographic studies are being completed; curriculum building has been started. Two new features are the writing of reading material for learners, using ethnographic approaches to explore original (oral) material such as local stories (cf Touray et al., 2010) and practices, and, secondly, each of the participants has been asked to develop and teach a short training programme in literacy for adults using ethnographic material.

## Language as variable social practice

The focus in literacy work, outlined above, on practices and local accounts confronts 'great divide' assumptions, which have seen literacy as a pivotal and uniform social technology that distinguishes 'modern' from 'other' cultures. This focus has made this work compatible with recent shifts to a social view of language and its functions, which regards language as located in social practice (Heller, 2007) and which helps us to make sense of some of the challenges of societal multilingualism and policy responses. The social practices view of language that has been developed by sociolinguistics (e.g. Makoni and Pennycook, 2007; Bailey, 2007; Blommaert, 2010) is that users draw on linguistic resources that are organised in ways that make sense under specific conditions.

From this perspective the term 'English', or any other named language, is shorthand for a diverse range of language varieties, genres, registers and practices (see Leung and Street, in press). Such a social practices view of language contrasts with widely held systemic views of language, where a named language, English for example, is seen to have certain stable, bounded, systemic features (syntactic, lexical and orthographic) which should be the focus of language instruction. This systemic view of languages as standard forms with generic functions appears increasingly problematic under conditions of linguistic diversity and language shifts and changes, common in most African settings, as well as increasingly a feature elsewhere, including European cities (Vertovec, 2007; Blommaert and Rampton, 2011; Leung and Street, 2012).

Migrants and mobile persons are a striking feature of the globalised world and raise particular questions for literacy, language and education. While school-based standardised testing often labels youths from minority backgrounds as failing or at risk, language and literacy researchers who pay attention to social practices examine the multilingual resources of both youths and adults from minority backgrounds, and the transnational or cross-border practices they engage in, involving both print and digital literacies (cf Rowsell et al., 2012). Policy and practice in educational provision that approach language and literacy as standardised and decontextualised or autonomous resources offer an inadequate response to the dynamic nature of language and literacy in everyday life under conditions of social diversity. They pay inadequate attention to the social complexity of speakers or to the social uses of language and literacy and can thus have the effect of excluding and marginalising minorities or mobile people whose identity is not defined through older categories of ethnicity or speech community. A social practices approach with regard to language and literacy policies offers a more complex but more relevant view of languages and literacies, where they are situated in particular socio-cultural, historical and economic environments. In this view people draw on linguistic and literacy resources that are organised

in ways that make sense under specific social conditions and which are socially and politically embedded. Speakers are social actors and the boundaries between particular resources are products of social action. There is a recognition of the potential fluidity of language and literacy resources and attention to their often more rigid construction in educational policy and practice. This draws our attention to the ways in which schools function as spaces to select and categorise students, for assessing performance (including linguistic performance) and providing credentials tied to positioning in the world of work. Approaches to language instruction in schooling and in policy development in circumstances of linguistic diversity often work with constructs such as 'home language', 'mother tongue', 'additional language', 'additive' and 'subtractive' multilingualism without attention to local and regional variations within and across designated languages and with little attention to their contexts of use. Such approaches draw on what Heller (2007) identified as a 'common-sense' but in fact highly ideologised view of bilingualism, where the conception is that of the co-existence of two (or more) linguistic systems. Heller (1999) coined the term parallel monolingualism, to describe 'bilingual' language teaching strategies in schools where two or more standard languages are taught as if in separate silos.

In a review of debates about bilingual education Martin-Jones (2007: 167) points out that a good deal of the policy-driven research has shown a strong preference the construction of parallel monolingual spaces for learning, with strict monitoring of those spaces for their monolingualism. Martin-Jones (2007) points to what she calls a 'container metaphor of competence' manifest in terms like 'full bilingual competence', 'balanced bilingualism', 'additive bilingualism' and 'subtractive bilingualism', in effect all conceiving of languages and linguistic competencies as separate containers, side by side, that are more or less full or empty. Creese and Blackledge (2010) similarly describe prevalent approaches to bilingual pedagogy, where languages are kept rigidly separate as a 'two solitudes' approach, and call for a flexible bilingual approach to language teaching and learning in which two or more languages are used alongside each other.

While classrooms commonly maintain clear borders between the languages and learnings of school and the out-of-school languages and literacy practices of bilingual youths, as described above, researchers such as Garcia (2009) have called for 'translanguaging' and situated literacies in the classroom, based on the argument that all language and literacy pedagogical approaches should be contextualised and start with the language and literacy resources that children bring to school. Canagarajah (2006: 58) advocates for a similar strategy of 'code-meshing' where 'students bring in their preferred varieties' of a language into a conventional text in 'rhetorically strategic ways, resulting in a hybrid text'.

## Conclusion

Our conclusion, then, is this: The social relationships around language and literacy are key to identifying what their uses and values are. Policy discussions, for example, around language and literacy in relation to the Millennium Development Goals that were foregrounded at the Language and Development conference, are not best served by models of language and literacy that don't match their actual uses. The ways people take hold of language and literacy resources, or bypass them, is contingent on social and cultural practices, opportunities and constraints. This raises questions that need to be addressed in any language and literacy programme, for children as well as adults: what is the power relation between the participants? What are the resources? Where are people going if they take on one set of language and literacy practices rather than another? How do recipients challenge the dominant conceptions of language and literacy? We suggest that such questions need also to become part of policy considerations regarding language, literacy and development in Sub-Saharan Africa.

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