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Writing as a problem: African grassroots writing, economies of literacy, and globalization

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes a set of handwritten documents produced by a Burundese asylum seeker in Belgium. The documents are instances of "grassroots writing": their authorship is collective, and they display considerable problems with "remembering." They are also rather typical text-artifacts of globalization processes, in which literacy products from one part of the world meet literacy expectations from another part. Two general points are derived from the analysis. (i) The function of documents such as these is not "reading," but rather a complex of reading, viewing, and decoding. The documents are at least partially VISUAL bearers of information. Such functions need to be investigated ethnographically. (ii) The reason for this is the fact that the production and reception of such documents has to be set against the background of widely different economies of literacy. Consequently, the differences between text production and text reception are grounded in worldwide patterns of inequality. This casts doubt on a number of popular theses about the nature of contemporary societies and the role of discourse in late modernity. (Literacy, Burundi, asylum seekers, ethnography of writing, globalization.)*

INTRODUCTION

In a characteristically stimulating and provocative essay, Johannes Fabian (2001) argues that the confrontation of ethnographers with written texts leads to a rediscovery of orality, and "this rediscovery is based on the realization that a reading of ethnographic texts demands attention to speech and oral performance" (2001:68). These remarks are made in a retrospective discussion of analytical practices from his own work on grassroots literacy in Shaba/Katanga, Congo, notably the editing and interpretation of the *Vocabulaire d'Elisabethville* (Fabian 1990). When confronted with the erratic and less than consistent writing practices of its author, André Yav (a former houseboy from Lubumbashi), Fabian had to rely on a local informant, who was asked to read the text aloud and transcribe the recording of this "reoralization."

In this article I intend to take Fabian's argument somewhat further, arguing that we not only seem to recover orality as a (possible) function of literacy, but that we may indeed want to revisit the whole issue of the FUNCTIONS of written text. In addition, I wish to take issue with another remark made by Fabian in the same essay. Concluding his discussion of reoralization practices as a way to overcome the difficulties posed by grassroots writing and its often peculiar products, Fabian offers this comment: "What is negatively deplored as lack of exactitude should be seen positively as expressive of a great degree of freedom which the native speaker enjoys both as a writer and a reader" (2001:66). In my view, "freedom" is not the right word for this kind of phenomenon, and qualifying particular features of grassroots writing as instances of freedom – freedom from normativity and writing conventions valid (and oppressive) elsewhere – may obscure precisely the theme that connects the argument on functions with that on freedom: the way in which such writing practices have to be understood against the background of differing economies of linguistic resources in which function-value allocation, stratification, and determination are powerful operators.

I will support my argument with an analysis of a handwritten document from East Central Africa that was produced in the sort of transnational and intercultural context typically labeled with the term "globalized": a text written by someone (presumably from Burundi) as part of his application for asylum in Belgium. The document will compel us to think about what happens when writing styles and conventions get TRANSFERRED from one particular social, cultural, communicative, and linguistic environment to another. This, I would emphasize, is not unusual: It is one of the things that writing, precisely, allows people to do – get their statements moved and circulated and read, reread, and deciphered in other places and at other times than those of original production. The point I will stress, however, is that whereas this is often seen as one of the great potential opportunities offered by literacy, it is simultaneously one of its great potential problems, precisely because of what I want to formulate as the economic backdrop against which writing practices must be seen.

PRELIMINARIES

Before we embark on the argument itself, it needs to be set against a background of several viewpoints and theoretical positions. To start with, it is clear that literacy is not just part of "language" in general; it is a particular manifestation of language use, related to spoken language but different as a field of action (Hymes 1996:34ff.; see also Collins & Blot 2003). It requires the mobilization of highly specialized skills and techniques, and its products and patterns of reception are different from those of spoken language, both in type and in function. Whereas spoken language is a structured complex of meaningful sounds, the main feature of which is the fact that it disappears as soon as it has been produced, writing results in crafted artifacts that have – at least typically – the capacity to be last-

ing, to be archived. The orientations to meaning that people display in spoken versus written language are again different, as are the actions that they perform in order to retrieve meaning. We cannot attribute a different tone or intonation contour to spoken utterances we hear; but we can do that, and far more, while reading. Consequently, we can organize different complexes of reusing practices for written languages: quotation, copying, interpreting, translating, and so on (see Urban 1996 on the notion of "replication"). Writing reorganizes the cognitive, epistemic, affective, and identity frames of language.

A consequence of this is that written language should be addressed not as an object loosely attached to the study of speech but as an object in its own right, requiring the kinds of divisions into genre, style, register, and so forth usually reserved for spoken language. What is needed is an "ethnography of writing" (Basso 1974), in which writing is approached as a complex of language-organizing actions, stylistically and generically variable, and intrinsically connected to domains of use and social value attributions in people's lives. Little can be taken for granted here: Neither the conventional practices nor the attached functions or domains, and even less the specific place writing occupies in the repertoires of its users, are things that one can define a priori. They all need to be established empirically, through analysis.

One of the obstacles we are facing here is the strong historical "loadedness" of writing as both the "best" form of language – the most developed one, the most elaborate one, the "literary" one – which is manifest, for example, in the way unwritten languages used to be (and to some extent still are) catalogued as "primitive," or at least "incomplete" (Fabian 1986, Rafael 1993, Errington 2001). Writing – alphabetical, normative, and generically and stylistically elaborate writing – is the prestige modus of language, and a language is not seen as "complete" unless it has acquired a standard orthography. Graphocentrism and textualism are, consequently, powerful language ideologies that organize a lot of what we pretend to detect in language and a lot of how we believe it functions (Collins 1996). We tend to project these images and functions onto writing at large, and thus take far too much for granted. Such rapid projections have given rise to widespread and widely supported assumptions about the empowering and liberating effects of literacy – assumptions underpinning, for example, UNESCO's view on education in development, many NGO activities involving alphabetization efforts, and many modern (or late modern) discourses on sustainable development in general (see Rogers 2001 for a critical appraisal). They also account for the fact that, wherever writing is introduced into a society's repertoire, it becomes a highly valued, prestige-bearing resource.[1]

Within this tradition, the connection between speaking and writing was long addressed in a rather casual way. A language could be "improved" by introducing writing, and those who could write could also speak, and vice versa. Only recently have we witnessed the emergence of studies of literacy as a different complex of situated practices of language use, partly responding to what hap-

pens in spoken language but partly autonomous (Street 1995, Collins 1995, Collins & Blot 2003). The theses articulated in these studies revolve around the social embeddedness and situatedness of writing, and around the fact that literacy occurs in the shape of specific literacy practices performed in specific social contexts (Gee 1990, Besnier 1995, Street 1995, Barton 1994, Barton & Hamilton 1998, Graddol et al. 1991, Baynham 1995, Prinsloo & Breier 1996). Furthermore, apart from the genesis of this paradigm, the field of literacy has been divided into studies of writing (with a focus on orthography; e.g., Jaffe 2000), circulating (e.g., Barton & Hamilton 1998), multimodal text construction (e.g., Kress & Van Leeuwen 1996), and reading (e.g., Boyarin 1992), and studies have been devoted to the developmental dimensions of acquiring literacy-as-practices (Kress 1996, 2000) and to the politics of orthography and literacy (e.g., Schieffelin & Doucet 1992, Collins & Blot 2003).

The discussion in this article needs to be read against the background of this collection of works. I subscribe to broadly the same set of assumptions about literacy-as-contextualized-practice, although I would add more emphasis on the social evaluatedness of language practices in general, and on the specific "values" of writing in particular – writing as a mode of production of language. This will be thematized in the case analysis. I shall first introduce the particular documents on which it will be based.

DATA

The data I shall discuss here came to me by "structured accident": a coincidence conditioned by my social position. In my capacity as professor of African linguistics and sociolinguistics, I am summoned rather frequently by official services – the police, the prosecutor's office, the immigration and asylum services – to provide linguistic expertise on African languages. Over the past few years, asylum applications have become a major domain in which African text material is being produced in the form of statements, testimonies and so forth. As such, in 2001 I received the set of seven documents shown in Figures 1–7. The request added to the documents was to "translate these documents into Dutch" – a request in itself speaking to the pervasiveness of textualist ideologies. The request came from the prosecutor's office, and though I was not (and never am) informed about the specifics of the case (apart from the cursory mentioning of a male subject), I could see that this was a rather typical document from an asylum application. The applicant had claimed to be from a particular country, Burundi. Being from a country suffering from war or civil war is an advantage in the Belgian asylum procedure, which is highly selective and has the highest rejection rate in the European Union, approximately 96%. As often occurs, the applicant had no official documents substantiating his claim to Burundese citizenship, and the authorities almost automatically refused to accept this claim and demanded proof. The proof, in this case, was to produce "as much information

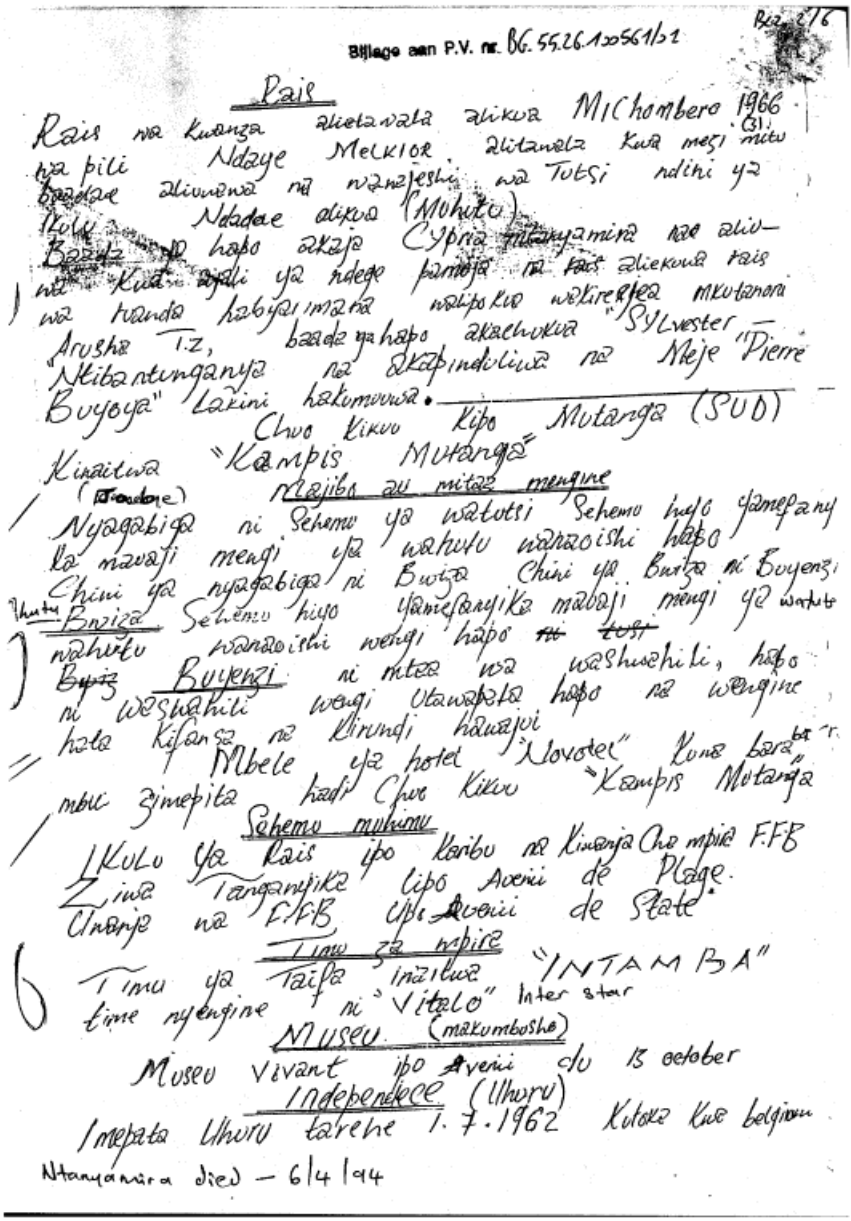

FIGURE 1: Document 1.

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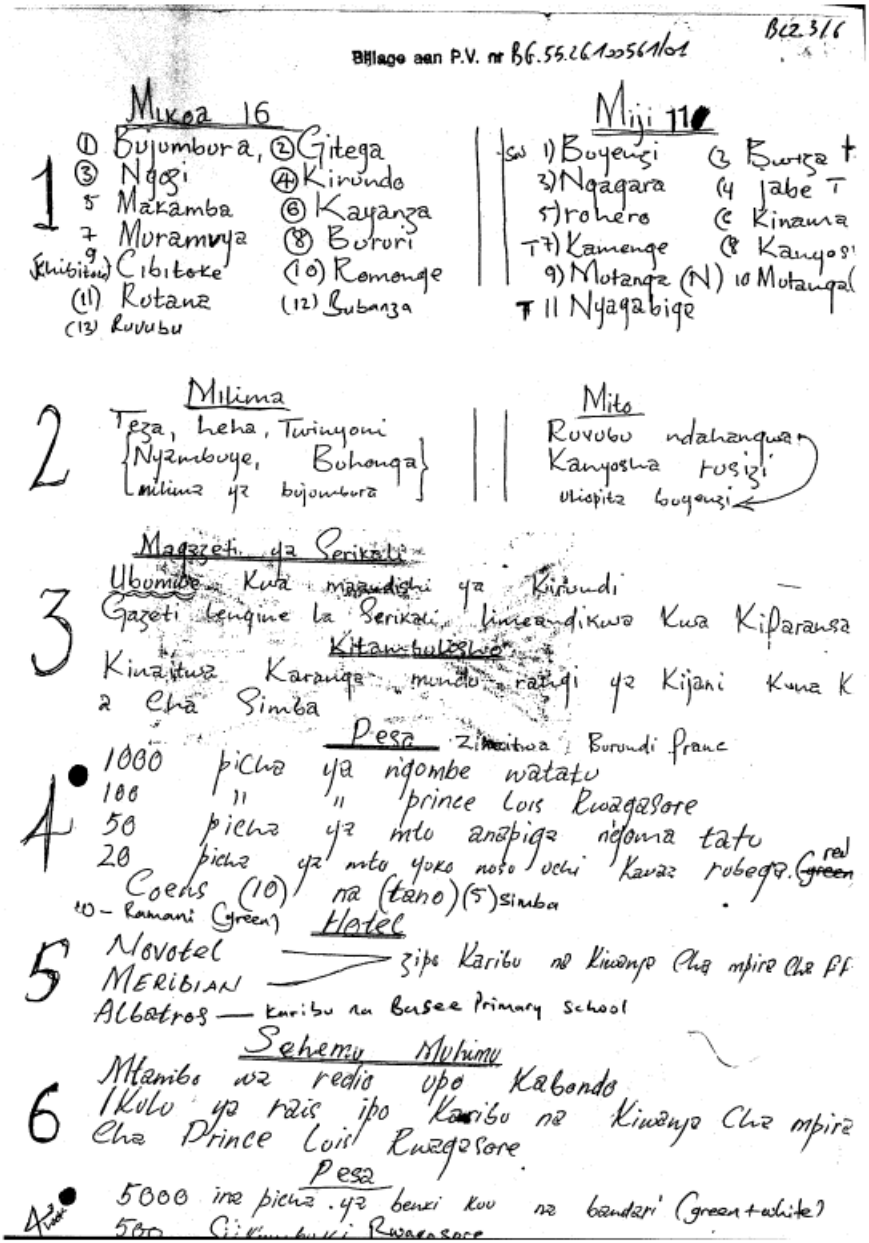

FIGURE 2: Document 2.

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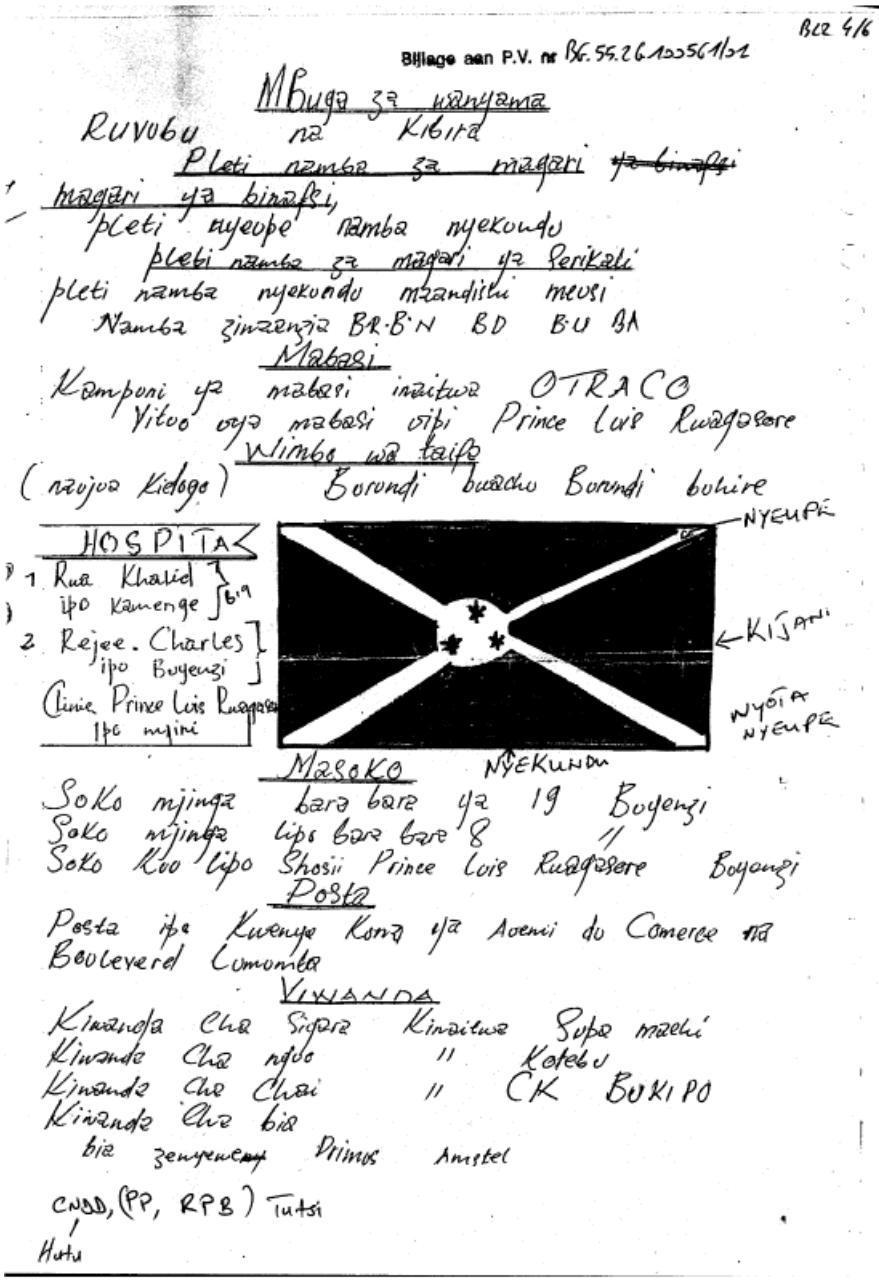

FIGURE 3: Document 3.

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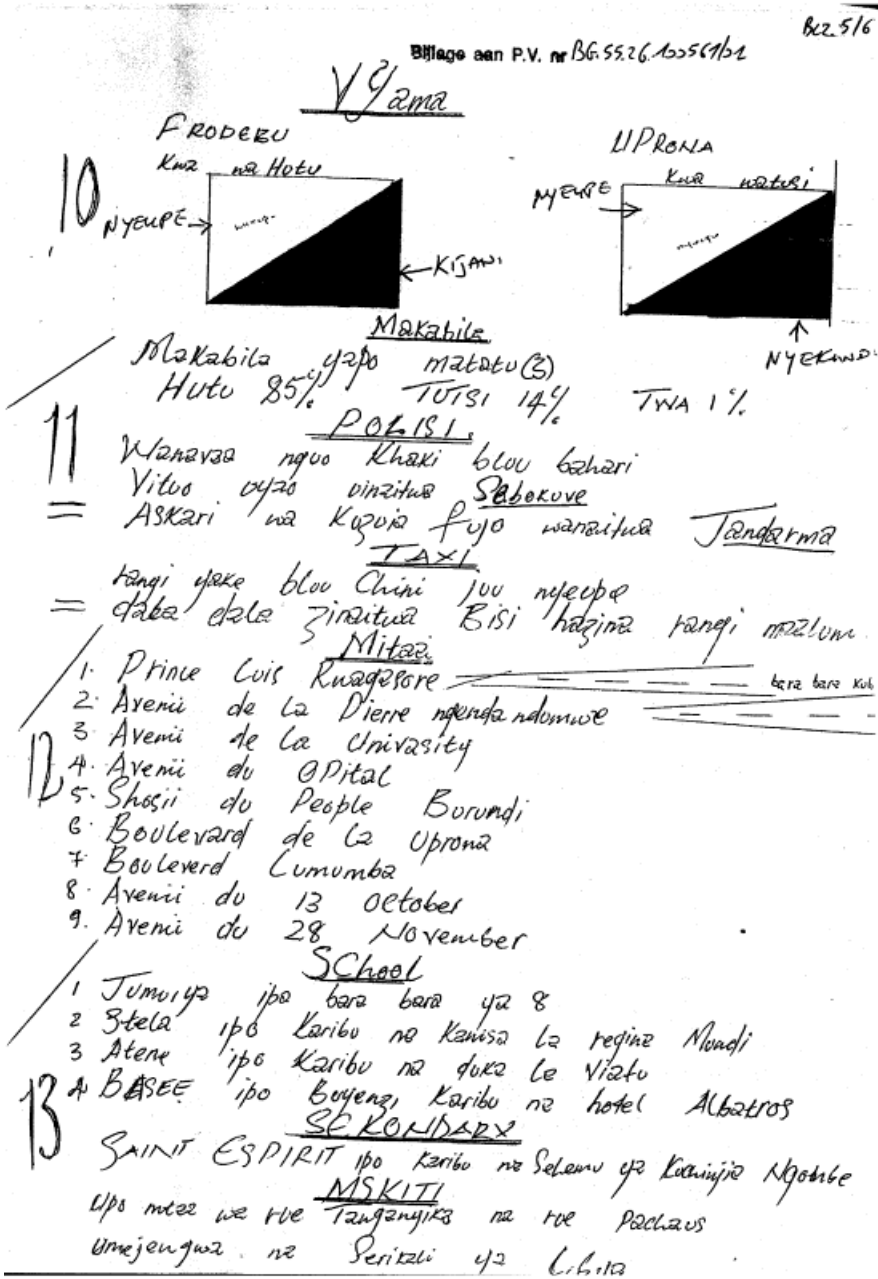

FIGURE 4: Document 4.

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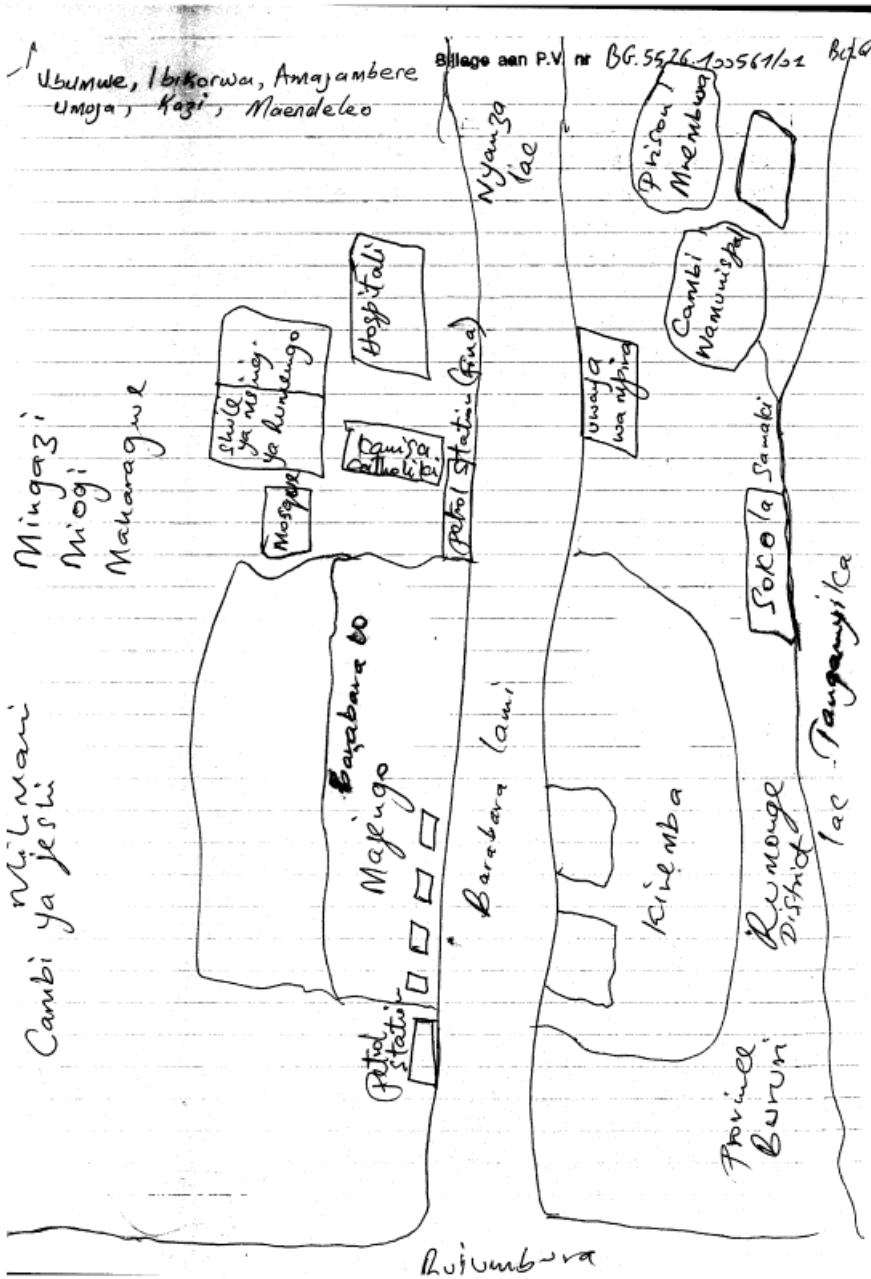

FIGURE 5: Document 5.

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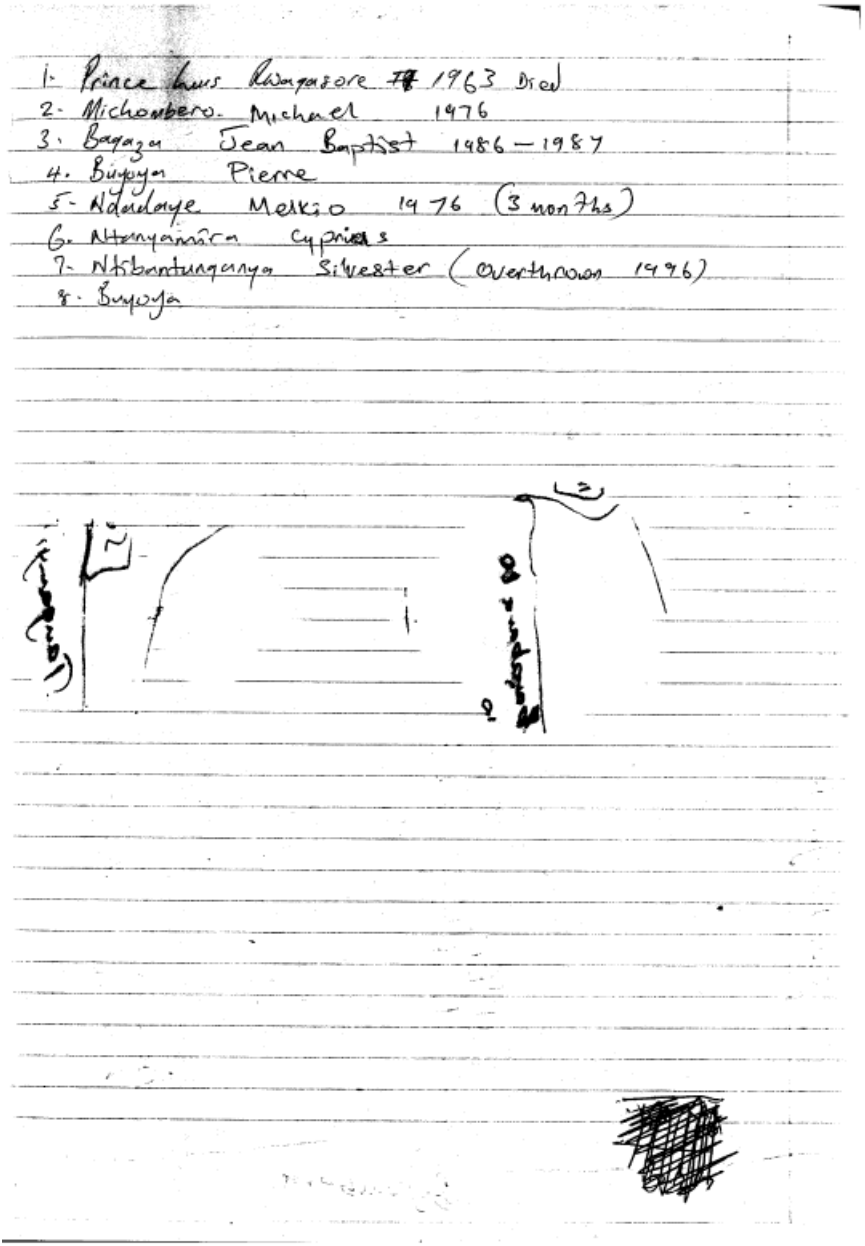

FIGURE 6: Document 6.

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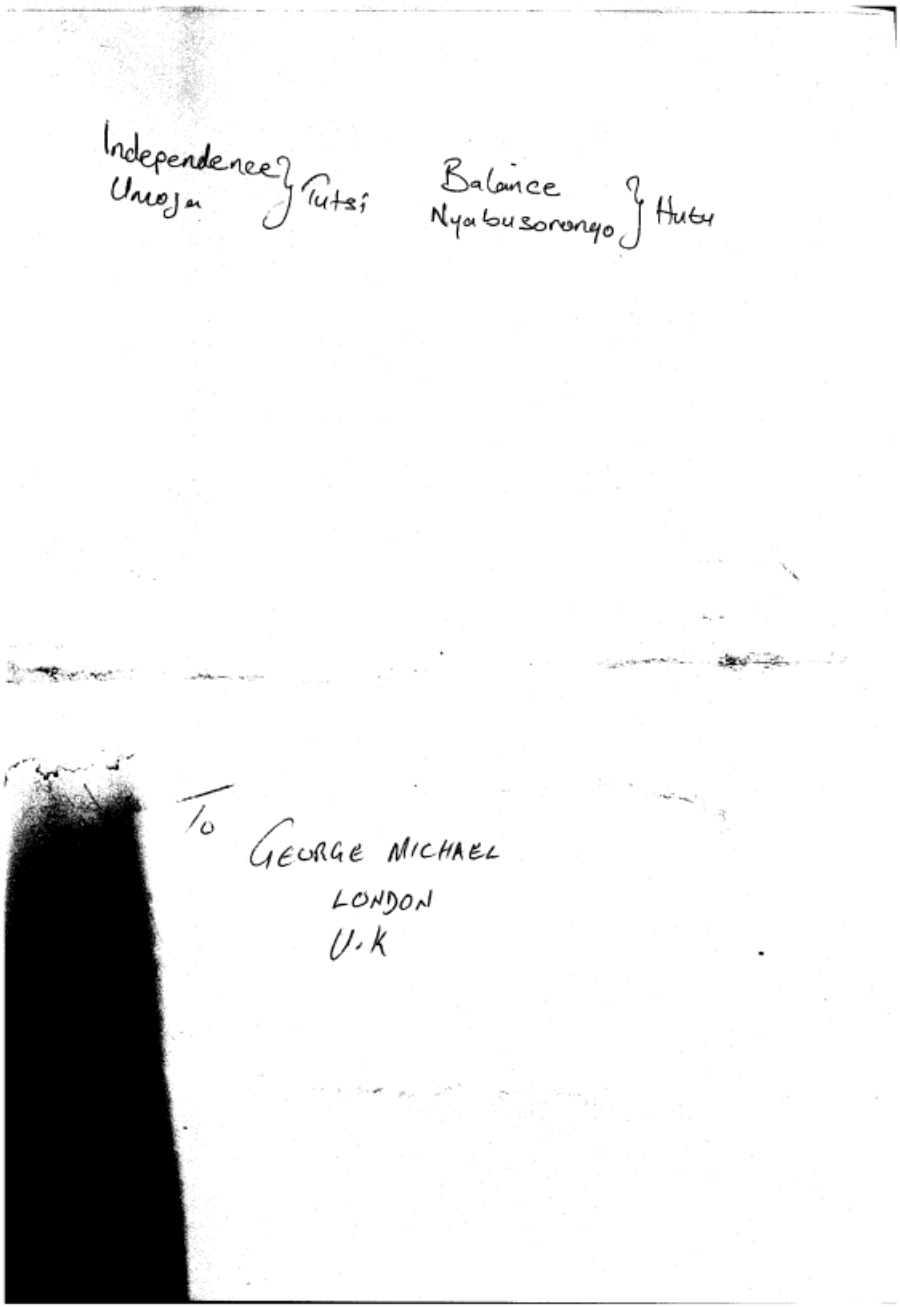

FIGURE 7: Document 7.

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about his country as he possibly could." The product of this exercise would then be subjected to an examination of its "credibility" (a common practice in asylum applications; see Blommaert 2001a). This examination relies heavily on textualist criteria of coherence, transparency, and correctness – in short, those discourse features which we tend to associate with "truth."

As for formal features, we here confront a heterogeneous collection of documents with different authors (or, at least, *scriptores*). The first five pages of the text are on official police case stationery, recognizable from the case register number and page number at the top right-hand corner. The two remaining pages are unnumbered and less structured, probably a set of "notes" separate from the more structured text. Furthermore, the first four pages are in one handwriting – Author A – and highly structured; the notes on document 6 are clearly written by someone else – Author B – and are messier. The map (document 5) and the notes scribbled above the address on document 7 are authored by yet another scriptor – Author C. Fragments of Author B's handwriting also appear in the first four documents (see, e.g., the bottom of document 1) as well as at the top of the map, document 5. We witness traces of different stages of collaborative text production, with Author B as the "desk editor" filling in and correcting here and there. We also witness issues of materiality here: Some of the documents are done on official police stationery, imposing a particular organizational grid on the documents. This is "special" paper, inviting "special" writing. Other documents are on different kinds of paper, and these differences are reflected in stylistic and generic differences, as we shall see. Notwithstanding these differences, the whole set of seven pages was sent to me as ONE document requiring one act of translation.

I will now embark on two series of reflections. First, how must we appraise the function of these documents? And second (deriving from the first), how can we comprehend such documents against the background of general, and different, economies of literacy on a worldwide scale?

DOCUMENTS MADE FOR READING?

In a society saturated by literacy, the typical set of activities connected to written *langue* is "reading": a complex of physical and cognitive actions organized so as to extract "meaning" from a written text. The purpose of writing is to be read. The relation between writing and reading is assumed to be direct and unmediated: One "reads what is written." If things are not written, they are not made for reading; few people would qualify the perceptual activity organized around a photograph, a building, or a painting as "reading." We READ written text, we LOOK AT photographs, buildings, and paintings.

This unmediated one-to-one view has been challenged by several scholars (see in particular the collection of essays in Boyarin 1992b). What is understood by "reading" can differ across communities and contexts, as well as across genres:

We read an academic paper differently from a poem or a newspaper. Particular documents invite (and are designed for) particular kinds of reading – in fact, what we understand by "genre" in writing may be reflected in GENRES OF READING as well. Looking at the documents under scrutiny here, we already sense that the question of whether these documents are designed for reading will not receive a simple answer.

Kress & Van Leeuwen 1996 discuss the complex, multimodal design of contemporary documents such as advertisements, textbooks, and video clips. New forms of literacy have emerged in which the visual and the textual combine in one sign. This forces text consumers to combine different activities – "reading" as well as "looking at" – and synthetic (the whole sign) as well as analytic (different constituent parts of the sign) decodings. Furthermore, such forms emphasize the primarily VISUAL and MATERIAL character of written text, and they advocate the visual as the point of entrance into any text: "Writing is only one way of visualizing meaning, a very exceptional one" (Kress & Van Leeuwen 1996:18). In fact, what we call alphabetical writing may be a residue of original, more complex multimodal ways of visualizing meaning, the result of a gradual restriction of the scope of visualizing meaning to writing. In the same move, writing became less and less an object of visual inspection – it became devisualized (and dematerialized) – and it became the object of a new, exclusive activity-type, reading. Kress 1996 expands the argument by looking at the development of writing skills in children, arguing that children move from highly multimodal representations of meanings (drawings with some written texts) to devisualized "text only" representations. Learning how to write is unlearning how to produce multimodal, visual meaning representations. This, it should be underscored, is an ideological process. Every written document is a visual document, and when we write we continuously deploy a wide range of meaningful visual tactics (differences in font and size, lines, arrows, indentation, etc.). Reading, similarly, involves the visual decoding of the document. Thus, visuality is not lost in PRACTICE, but it is lost in the IDEOLOGICAL CONCEPTION of the writing and reading process.

The documents produced by the Burundese man are overwhelmingly visual and distinctly multimodal. Textual features combine with drawings: the map (document 5), the national flag (document 3), and the banners of the political parties Frodebu and Uprona (document 4). But these are only the most striking visual items. In document 4 we also see how the part headed by *mitaa* 'roads' has drawings of two roads (or lanes of a highway) next to it, with the note *bara bara kub*[*wa*] 'main road, highway'. Furthermore, the texts are replete with solidly visual structuring features: chapter headings completely or partially in capitals, with single or double horizontal lines marking them; double vertical lines separating columns (document 2); a play with different sizes of symbols, highlighting specific words or parts (e.g., *INTAMBA* in document 1, or *OTRACO* in document 3), and of course, the enormous numbers in the left margin, marking

"chapters" or "sections" in the document. Note also the careful spatial alignment of parallel series, such as at the bottom of document 3:

Kiwanda cha sigara
Kiwanda cha nguo
Kiwanda cha chai
Kiwanda cha bia

In sum, we see how the author deploys several outspokenly visual-graphic techniques to provide clear, transparent structure and meaning in the documents.[2] Just like the highly "modern" documents from the Internet age discussed by Kress & Van Leeuwen, these documents are multimodal and require VISUAL tactics of inspection.

The documents are highly structured, and that gives us one clue as to what kind of text is being produced here. But in order to get the full picture, we need to turn to WHAT the author is trying to express. In the Appendix, I provide a translation of the "textual" parts of the documents, which incorporates as many as possible of the textual/linguistic features of the Swahili originals.

The texts are written in a vernacular variety of Swahili, with traces of vernacular French and English in the parts written by Author A, and English in the parts written by Author B. Author A, for instance, uses loans from French reflecting local phonetics of spoken vernacular French. The same goes for a couple of English loans in Author A's text. Examples are:

Kampis (French *campus*) document 1
Avenii de Plage (French *Avenue de la Plage*) document 1
Avenii de State (French *Avenue du Stade*) document 1
Museu vivant (French *musée vivant*) document 1
Independece (French *independence*) document 1.
Coens (English *coins*) document 2
Supa machi (French *Super Marché*) document 3
Jandarma (French *gendarmes*) document 4
Shosii (French *chaussée*) document 4
bisi (French *bus*) document 4
Avenii de la Univasity (French *Avenue de l'Université*, English *University*) document 4
Avenii du Opital (French *Avenue de l'Hôpital*) document 4

Note that the French loans *Museu* and *Independece* are accompanied by standard Swahili glosses, *makumbusho* and *uhuru* respectively, indicating the fact that the author probably would use the French loans in everyday, mixed-language speech (see Blommaert 1999; similar "reverse glosses" appear in Fabian 1990). The French loans produced by Author A are almost all vernacular – that is, a graphic replica of spoken forms, marked, for example, by unrounding of vowels, as in

avenue > *avenii*, *campus* > *kampis*, (French) *bus* > *bisi* (English *bus* would most likely result in *basi*).

Author B uses English terms such as *died* (document 1), *green* + *white* (document 2) and *overthrown* (document 6), and all of them are correctly spelled. Author C uses colloquial Swahili with embedded, unglossed loans such as *cambi wamunisipal* (*le camp municipal*), *prison*, and *mosque*, as well as the English loan *petrol station*. We are confronted with probably three different levels of literacy competence here – three different individuals with differing control over writing skills. Authors A and C use vernacular spoken language varieties as the basis for writing, which is a clear indicator of subelite literacy. This is most striking in the case of place names (*avenii*, *shosii*, *cambi wamunisipal*). The point of reference in writing here is not how they know these names are spelled, but how these names are pronounced.

This is important, for the collective effort of these three *scriptores* is one of REMEMBERING. It is a painstaking effort, the clearest sign of which is the fact that the whole set of documents – the four "structured," numbered pages as well as the map and the notes – was submitted to the authorities as the answer to the initial assignment. Throughout the documents, we see a struggle with "getting things right." Witness, for example, how Author B makes a list of street names on top of document 5, to be added to the map drawn by Author C. Similarly, document 6 is a list of the presidents of Burundi in chronological order, but with dates lacking for several of them. Incomplete lists are rather frequent: In document 2, Author A announces *16 districts* but only provides a list of 13; the name of the *beer factory* in document 3 is not provided; in document 2, the section numbered 4, on money, is complemented by another one at the bottom of the page (marked by Author B with *4 – look*); and Author B appears to have added elements of remembering in several places (see, e.g., document 2, the location of the Albatros Hotel). Author C has made notes on Hutu-Tutsi divisions on document 7, but they have not found their way into the text.

Everything taken together, the text is a sequence of 13 rather loosely ordered sections of "factual" remembering, strongly organized around naming practices and geographical location. Three people have collaborated in this reconstruction of a school-atlas kind of inventory of facts about Burundi and its capital, Bujumbura. The writing process itself structures remembering; numerous traces of this process of writing-as-remembering can be found in the form of notes, corrections, or additions in the text; remembering has to be done on the basis of highly fragmentary material, textually – visually – organized in a particular format (cf. Fabian 1996; Blommaert 2001b, 2003b, 2004a).

This brings us to another aspect. Apart from an effort at remembering, the texts are also an effort at GENERICALLY REGIMENTED TEXT PRODUCTION – a text that satisfies both the purpose of structured remembering and the generic requirements (real or perceived) of "official," literate, "on record" discourse. The authors are not constructing just any text; they are trying to craft an ordered,

Cartesian text full of tables, lists, and separate, neatly marked topical divisions in sections and chapters – an ENCYCLOPEDIC TEXT. This encyclopedic text emerges in different formats complementing one another: "official" bits on official police stationery, and drafts, notes, and sketches supplementing the official parts. I am avoiding the verb "writing" here, for what they do is more than writing; it is "document design." It is all there: textual, visual, and spatial architecture, generic differentiation. – Every available linguistic and communicative skill (including the skills of others) is mobilized in order to make sense.[3] Consequently, the kinds of actions we have to deploy in order to make sense of the text are wider and more varied than "reading." If we reduced the text to its propositional content, what would stand out would be the gaps, incomplete lists, corrections, and errors. We have to add "reading" to the visual inspection mentioned earlier, and accept the fact that a lot of what the text tells us is lodged in its visual make-up, for the visual aspects of the text inform us about its history and modes of production. To quote Fabian, "Much of WHAT the document tells us … is inscribed in HOW it was conceived, composed, presented and diffused" (1990:164). These visual-material features tell us a lot, consequently, about who the author is – he is more than one individual – as well as how remembering comes into being. We have here not a product but a generically structured PROCESS of knowledge-construction.

What we have to learn from this, I believe, is that the function of a set of documents such as these one is not primarily or exclusively reading. The documents are crafted in such a way that they have to be *looked at*, read, decoded, and reconstructed; the activities we need to deploy in order to make sense of them are as varied as the modes of activity that went into their production. Fabian is to be credited for his suggestion about orality being a function of literacy, and he has pushed us to recognize that the functions of literacy are potentially even more numerous. We need to keep this relativity of functions in mind (Hymes 1966; cf. Blommaert 2004b), especially when we are facing writing that originated in different economies of literacy, because such writing often confronts us with HETERO-GRAPHY from our point of view – that is, with the deployment of writing skills for functions we do not usually allocate to them. To this I now turn.

FREEDOM OR CONSTRAINT? THE NON-EXCHANGEABILITY OF LITERACY VALUES

As mentioned in the introduction, Fabian interprets the particular shapes of literacy in the *Vocabulaire d'Elisabethville* not as "deficient" writing, but as "liberating," creative practice. By this, he means that "it is a literacy which works despite an amazingly high degree of indeterminacy and freedom (visible in erratic orthography, a great disdain for word and sentence boundaries, and many other instances of seemingly unmotivated variation)" (Fabian 2001:65). I certainly would not want to challenge the creative dimensions of writing practices

such as the ones discussed here. What I want to qualify, though, is the general association of writing with opportunity and freedom. My argument will be that the question of whether or not writing offers opportunities for its practitioners is to be answered by ethnographic and sociolinguistic analysis.

Let us return to the issue of functions. I hope to have made sufficiently clear in the previous section that functions are a matter of uptake, of reception. I had to make this clear because it is amazing to see how often this fundamental aspect is overlooked or neglected, even in studies that claim to analyze interaction. Discourse HAS no intrinsic function; it is GRANTED a function by others in a process that Bakhtin 1986 described as "dialogical." Furthermore, there is no way in which we can detach "function" from "value"; discourse modes are made meaningful because of their insertion in stratified, indexical scales of social value-attribution (see Bourdieu 1982, 1991; Hymes 1996; see also the essays in Gal & Woolard 2001 and Kroskrity 2000). And like a second-hand car, a chunk of discourse is worth precisely as much as other people are willing to give for it.

In such scales of value-attribution, particular instances of discourse will receive function-value depending on the overall structure of the repertoires of language users. In contexts where few people have access to standard varieties of a particular language, the use of such standard varieties will typically be attributed much value. The reverse is also possible: Particular socially stigmatized slangs can be granted high value in small peer groups where the use of such slangs defines group membership and identity. Literacy – or at least particular forms of literacy – is often a crucial, highly valued resource offering elite status or membership to those who have access to it. In sum, particular formats of language use derive function-value from their place in hierarchies of linguistic resources, and from contrasts with other members of the hierarchies.

The problematic point, however, is, that such hierarchies are primarily LOCAL, even though they obviously connect with scales and hierarchies at many other levels. For instance, the high value attributed to slang in urban youth subcultures is valid only within such subcultures, but it derives its status from contrasts with the different norms held by the parents of members of such subcultures (which often stigmatize slang), and from society-wide ideologies of a standard (again, often stigmatizing slang). Yet such slangs often connect with transnational groups or networks in which ingredients of slang have high value and carry enormous prestige (e.g., Hiphop slang in East Africa; see Fenn & Perullo 2000).[4] As a consequence – and here we encounter the issue of relativity of function – what works well in one context may not work at all in other contexts. To put it simply, ways of using language that are prestigious in one community may be stigmatized in other communities, and discourse forms may "lose function" – stop making sense, or be interpreted in terms of completely different frames of reference – as soon as they are moved into different environments.

Examples of this are not hard to find. One obvious and well-documented domain of such transfer from one environment into another, with effects on func-

tion, is the courtroom. Colloquial speech and lapidary accounts of events couched in a world of experience that is local and articulates local relationships and conflicts get lifted out of their locality and moved to the level of law, society, the "case," and so on – a contextual universe to which completely different rules of relevance and interpretation apply (e.g., Conley & O'Barr 1990, Jacquemet 1996). Consequently, what is a strong case in the neighborhood may not be a strong case in court. Similar phenomena are rife in bureaucratic environments, the education system, and many other places in society. One feature of contemporary societies is the enormous and intense traffic of discourse across contexts in so-called text trajectories, and each stage of such a trajectory recontextualizes, reinterprets, and re-creates the "original" discourse in other contexts and in spaces where different norms and conditions of uptake apply (Briggs 1997; Urban 1996; Blommaert 2001c, 2004b).

Let us now consider our present example. The text was produced in a transnational context: a Burundese subject producing text in Belgium addressed to Belgian legal officials. The Burundese subject clearly mobilized the resources he could mobilize: his own literacy skills, his own memory, and the skills and memories of two of his friends. But, as said above, this complex of resources betrays an economy of literacy that is different from the one that applies in societies with fully saturated literacy environments, in that both the writing itself and the remembering were "incomplete" when measured against the textualist norms used by the addressees. So what we have here is a clash of two different economies of literacy, one guiding the production of the documents, and the other guiding their uptake. The bridge between them is formed by the documents themselves: texts that are moving from one place into another, from Africa into Belgium, or to be more precise, from a subelite stratum of society in Burundi through a diasporic community of Africans in Europe (where the two other *scriptores* come in) to the core of the bureaucratic system in Belgium.

Let us assume for the moment that the form of writing displayed by the Burundese subject would qualify as acceptable writing skills in his place of origin and in his current place in his diasporic community; let us assume, in other words, that it is locally ORTHO-GRAPHIC in the etymological sense. This may be good, useful, and functionally adequate literacy in the subelite stratum of society in Burundi and in the African diaspora in Belgium. It may also be the "best possible" document in terms of the subject's available skills and competence (e.g., with respect to remembering place names, presidents, schools, etc., in Bujumbura). But in fact, it is not good, useful, and functionally adequate literacy in the Belgian bureaucratic world. When transferred from one place to another, the documents get repositioned in a different economy of literacy, and they lose function at a rather dramatic rate: They become HETERO-GRAPHIC.[5] In the Belgian bureaucratic world, features such as incomplete lists, vernacular writing of street names, and different orthographies of the same name (e.g., *Ndaye* and *Ndadae*, document 1) are sufficient to cast doubts as to

the truthfulness of the account produced by the Burundese subject. From the perspective of a literacy-saturated society, the name of the president, street names, and the provinces of one's country are things one is supposed to "know," to remember exhaustively and to reproduce "correctly." Failing to do so is either a sign of individual deficiency (e.g., low intelligence – a current and widespread association of communicative skills with personality features) or of a lack of truthfulness in the act of communication.

The point of all of this is that, in the present globalized world, we encounter more and more instances of texts moving from the peripheries of the world system to its centers, and this move in space is also a move across different economies of literacy, involving differential allocation of function and value to texts as they travel across these economies, and a transition from ortho-graphy to hetero-graphy. Consequently, the relativity of functions needs to be placed against the wider frames of different economies of linguistic resources on a worldwide scale. The inferior value of texts from the peripheries – for instance, from Africa – is relatively PREDICTABLE and SYSTEMIC: Given Africa's peripheral position in the world system, resources that have exceptional value there do not necessarily have this value in Europe. The transfer of linguistic signs does not entail the transfer of their functions and values; the latter is determined by the general structure of the world system, by global patterns of inequality.

As linguists and anthropologists, we can reconstruct the value of such dislodged, displaced, hetero-graphic texts. In fact, perhaps we are the only ones capable of restoring and reconstructing non-local, ortho-graphic meaning in such texts, meaning understandable FOR US. The problem, however, is that we have to engage in expert practices in order to retrieve such meanings; they do not come automatically. The voice of the communicating subject has to be reconstructed and restored, for it is not in itself hearable.

Hence, the image of "freedom" attached to these literacy practices sounds literally out of place. The inconsistencies and different forms of coherence observed by Fabian in his Shaba texts may be a feature of freedom and may offer immense semiotic opportunities to their producers in Shaba. As soon as they start to travel across the world, however, all these features become objects not of difference but of INEQUALITY. The opportunities offered by particular, creative forms of literacy in Shaba or Burundi may turn into foci of discrimination, disenfranchisement, and injustice elsewhere. Opportunities, just like function and value, do not as a rule travel along with the texts; they are often left behind. In the global system, values of semiotic forms are not always exchangeable, and consequently, whereas writing may be a tremendously rich instrument for social mobility in the peripheries, it may be just a problem in the center – a problem of "fixing," of tying subjects to their place of origin with its own economies of literacy. In sum, it may become a problem of denying mobility to communicative resources.

CONCLUSIONS: VOICE AND GLOBALIZATION

Let me now try to sketch some possible implications of what I have argued so far in this essay. First, in approaching documents such as those analyzed here, we are confronting a problem of VOICE. This problem is epistemological, and it can be summarized in general with the questions: How do we get knowledge, and what sort of knowledge do we get, from investigating documents such as these ones? How do we construct documents such as these as bearers of particular forms of knowledge? The problem can be summarized more specifically as: How do we construct African voices from investigating African written documents? How do we get to the fullness of voice-as-knowledge in such documents?

Second, this is an old problem in various ways. On the one hand, the formulations here reflect an age-old anthropological concern with the "insider's view" and "native perspective" or "native categorization" – a concern that guided the importance attached by the Boasian anthropological tradition to a philology of native texts (Darnell 2001). The problem has not changed in substance, but I believe it has changed in degree. We now have to see the insider's view as something that can be situated only vis-à-vis global patterns of POSSIBILITIES FOR VOICE, not something that emerges out of a one-to-one mapping of what we see in our own society upon what we perceive in another society, but something that relates to wider patterns of circulation, distribution, and value-attribution of cultural materials. In other words, the "place" where we intend to situate the native perspective has changed; the structure and scope of the anthropological dialogue has changed; and consequently, the critical role of anthropology has changed as well. Whereas once an investigation of the native perspective was felt to produce a critique of the analyst's culture, it now has to be framed globally – and finding its place and value is not a straightforward matter. The scale at which anthropologically constructed knowledge now has to be weighted is global, not simply intercultural.

Third, this is an old problem in African studies as well. The general view of Africa as a continent containing predominantly oral cultures has influenced our treatment of its history, cultures, and societies, and the historiographic "problem of the document" is perhaps nowhere as acute as in the study of Africa (Blommaert 2001b, 2004a). Africa has become a writing continent in our alphabetical-orthographic understanding of it; this much is clear. But its products of writing may not be directly accessible as bearers of historical, cultural, and social knowledge, and consequently we may fail to see, detect, and identify documents as bearers of such knowledge. The traditional and very respectable techniques of historical criticism applied to documents may need to be complemented with the kind of ethnographic, linguistic, and sociolinguistic apparatus of which this article aspires to be an illustration, bearing in mind that analysis is just as much a move of documents across spaces and economies of literacy as the bureaucratic practices described above. Thus, what we need is a greater sensitivity to the

document as formally as well as functionally relative to particular sociolinguistic systems.

Fourth, it is an old problem, but some formulations of it are rather new and disturbing for their lack of precision. In many studies of discourse in late modernity and globalization, we get statements to the effect that contemporary late (or post-) modern society – often presented as shorthand for the whole world, without specification as to where in particular the term would apply – is characterized by an increasing flow of mass-produced images and multimedia discourses, resulting in multilevel, complex messages and signs (of the type discussed by Kress & Van Leeuwen 1996), with significant effects on identities and subjectivities (Blommaert 2004a). Thus, conclude Chouliaraki & Fairclough, we now have to come to terms with "the plurality and fragmentation of late modern social life" (1999:5), sedimented in "late modern discourse" (1999:10) – a new, and general, condition under which discourse is being produced in the late modern world.

I shall not deny that we are witnessing processes of global interconnection of a scale and intensity hitherto unknown, and I will not challenge the suggestions that we are facing transformations of identities and subjectivities, individual as well as collective, as a result of that. I also strongly support the thesis that we need to set any form of discourse analysis nowadays against a wider background of worldwide processes and phenomena; see my earlier remarks on this topic. But I do have a problem with the suggestion that these phenomena can serve as a general model for communication in contemporary societies. A possible reaction to an unqualified generic phrase such as "late modern discourse" is "Late modern discourse *where*?" I can imagine that complex and multilayered images such as the ones studied by Kress & Van Leeuwen are widely circulated among the globalized urban elites in First World centers such as New York or London. But what about a village in southern Tanzania or a Johannesburg slum? Indeed, what about the lower-class and immigrant neighborhoods of New York and London?

It is important to realize that when it comes to literacy, the world still consists of relatively separated or loosely connected environments. I hope to have shown this in the analysis above. And to the extent that arguments about the increased importance of the dense circulation of (new) literacy modes underlie these new models of social life – condensed in phrases such as "the plurality and fragmentation of social life" and "late modern discourse" – I find these models very doubtful. At best, they are adequate descriptions of particular social environments: First World, cosmopolitan, urban middle-class societies (usually characterizing the environments of their authors).[6] At worst, they are statements about what is today the most prestigious form of discourse in the worldwide economy of signs offered (in a move all too familiar) as the norm. BUT SUCH MODELS ARE NOT SIMPLY APPLICABLE WHEREVER SUCH LITERACY CONDITIONS ARE WHOLLY (OR EVEN PARTIALLY) ABSENT. There, we need to go and find out, not to project our own life-worlds onto the rest of the world. We will be able to provide a decent analysis of language in the contemporary world only when such analysis

is supported by ethnographies of communication that pay attention to the specific environment in which discourse operates and from which particular forms of voice are constructed. If, indeed, discourse is becoming more and more important in this world, as Chouliaraki & Fairclough (1999:2–6) claim it is, we need to investigate how important it is, and in what ways, in the different, loosely connected parts of this world.

APPENDIX

English translation of the textual parts of the documents. Roman = Author A; *italics* = Author B; **Bold** = Author C; (xxx) = unreadable original.

[document 1]

The president

The first president who ruled was Michombero in 1966
The second Ndaye Melkior. He ruled for three months (3)
Afterwards he was assassinated by Tutsi soldiers in the
Palace. Ndadae was a (Hutu)
Afterwards came Cypria Mtayamira and he too
Was assassinated in a plane crash together with the one who was president
Of Rwanda habiyarimana while returning from a meeting
In Arusha Tanzania, after that came Sylvester
Ntibantunganya and that one was ousted by Major Pierre
Buyoya but he was not assassinated.----------

The University is in Mutanga (South)
It is called 'kampis Mutanga'
(xxxx) various quarters and roads
Nyagabiga is the Tutsi part. In that quarter there are
Many houses of Hutu who live there
Below Nyagabiga lies Bwiza. Below Bwiza lies Buyenzi
Hutu
Bwiza In this part there are many houses of Tutsi
Hutu who live there in great number ~~they are tusi~~
~~Byiz~~ Buyenzi is the Swahili quarter, there
are many Swahili people that you'll get there and many
don't speak French and Kirundi
In front of the hotel "Novotel" There are two roads
That go all the way to the university "Kampis Mutanga"

Important places
The presidential palace is close to the soccer stadium FFB
Lake Tanganyika is on Avenii de Plage
The FFB stadium is on Avenii de State

Soccer teams
The national team is called “INTAMBA”
Another team is “Vitalo” *Inter Star*
Musea (makumbusho)
The Museu vivant is on Avenue du 13 October
Independe(n)ce (Uhuru)
It obtained independence on 1.7.1972 from Belgium
Ntanyamira died – 6/4/94

[document 2]

16 districts
1. Bujumbura
2. Gitega
3. Ngozi
4. Kirundo
5. Makamba
6. Kayanza
7. Bururi
9. (Khibitoke) Cibitoke
10. Romonge
11. Rutana
12. Bubanza
13. Ruvubu

11 cities
1. Buyenzi
2. Bunza (?)
3. Ngagara
4. Jabe
5. Rohero
6. Kinama
7. Kamenge
8. Kanyosi
9. Mutanga (N)
10. Mutanga (?)
11. Nyagabige

2 Mountains
Teza, heha, Twinyoni
Nyambuye, Buhonga
The Bujumbura mountains

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Rivers
Ruvubu ndahangwa
Kanyosha tusizi
That passes through Buyenzi

3 The government newspapers
Ubumwe written in Kirundi
Another government newspaper is written in French
Passport
It is called Karanga mundu yellow color and there is a head of a Lion
4 Money *it is called : Burundi Franc*
1000 a picture of three cows
100 ≪ of prince Luis Rwagasore
50 a picture of a man beating three drums
20 a picture of a man he is half naked and wears a rubega *(~~green~~ red)*
coins (10) and (five) (5) *a lion*
xx – a map (green)
5 Hotels
NOVotel close to the FFB football stadium
MERIDIAN
Albatros — *close to Busee Primary School*
6 Important places
The radio station is in Kabondo
The State House is close to the football stadium
Of Prince Luis Rwagasore
4 look• Money
5000 has a picture of the national bank and the harbor *(green + white)*
500 (xxxxxxx) Rwagasore

[document 3]

7 National parks
RUVUGU and Kibira
License plates ~~of individuals' cars~~
Individuals' cars
White plates red numbers
License plates of government cars
Red plates white letters
Numbers begin with BR.BN BD BU BA
Buses
The bus company is called OTRACO
The bus stations are on Prince Luis Rwagasore

National anthem
(I know it a little bit) Burundi buachu Burundi buhire

---

8 HOSPITALS<
1. Rua Khalid *big*
is in Kamenge
2. rejee Charles [DRAWING]
is in Buyenzi
The Prince Luis Rwagasore Clinic
Is in town
---
9 MARKETS
Crazy market is on 19 street
Crazy market is on 8 street
Main market is on Shosii Prince Luis Rwagasore Buyenzi
Post office
The post office is on the corner of Avenii du Commerce and Boulevard Lumumba
Factories

The sigar	factory	is called	Supa machi
The textile	factory	≪	Kotebu
The tea	factory	≪	CK BUKIPO
The beer	factory		

The beers themselves ~~ny~~ Primus Amstel

CNDD, (PP, RPB) Tutsi
Hutu

[document 4]

10
PARties

FRODEBU	UPRONA
By the Hutu	by the Tutsi
[DRAWING]	[DRAWING]

Ethnic groups
There are three (3) ethnic groups
Hutu 85% TUTSI 14% TWA 1%

11 POLICE
They wear khaki and marine blue clothes
The police offices are called Sebokuve
Officers to counter chaos are called Jandarma
TAXI
Their colors are blue at the bottom and white on top
The dala dalas are called 'bisi' and they have no special colors

12 Roads
1. Prince Luis Rwagasore [drawing] *highway*
2. Avenii de la Pierre ngenda ndumwe
3. Avenii de la Univasity
4. Avenii du Opital
5. Shosii du people Burundi
6. Boulevard de la Uprona
7. Boulevard Lumumba
8. Avenii du 13 october
9. Avenii du 28 November

13 school
1. Jumuiya is on 8 street
2. Stela is close to the regina Mundi church
3. Athenée is close to the shoe shop
4. Basee is in Buyenzi close to hotel Albatros

SECONDARY
SAINT ESPRIT is close to the slaughterhouse
MOSQUE
Is on Rue Tanganyika and rue Packaus
It was built by the government of Lybia

[document 5]

Ubumwe, Ibikorwa, Amajambere
Umoja, Kazi, Maendeleo

[MAP OF DOWNTOWN BUJUMBURA]

[document 6]

1. *prince Luis Rwagasore (~~XX~~) 1963 died*
2. *Michombero Michael 1976*
3. *Bagaza jean Baptis 1986–1987*

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4. Buyoya Pierre
5. Ndadaye Melkio 1976 (3 months)
6. Ntanyamire Cyprias
7. Ntibantungunga Silvester (overthrown 1996)
8. Buyoya

[document 7]

Independence **Balance**
Tutsi **Hutu**
Umoja **Nyabusoronyo**

To
GEORGE MICHAEL
London
UK

NOTES

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[1] Paradoxically, "nonliterate" societies have long been considered to be the typical anthropological object of inquiry. Boyarin (1992a:2) mentions "the lingering anthropological prejudice that literate cultures were somehow less authentic, less 'anthropological', than cultures that relied strictly on oral communication." Mufwene (2002:20) caustically notes that "the very linguists whose party line is that language is primarily oral and spoken have privileged the school system and the written medium as ways of saving the endangered languages." See Blommaert 1999 for an extensive discussion of writing in relation to the sociolinguistic image of Africa.

[2] None of these features is unexpected: They are present in a great number of "grassroots literacy" documents from Africa. Blommaert 1999, 2001b, 2003a, 2003b, 2004a provides examples and discussion.

[3] This is an extreme case of what Hymes (1996:37) calls "communicative plenitude": "meaningfulness expands to fill available means," the fact that available linguistic resources can acquire multiple meanings. But "plenitude" may not be the best denominator here, for the process develops in a context of scarcity of linguistic-communicative resources. Consequently, the (few) available resources get inflated with all kinds of new and often unexpected functions, forms of "meaningfulness."

[4] Empirical research on such local hierarchies is in its infant stage, though the description of such local systems of communicative practices was the core of the ethnography of speaking program (Gumperz & Hymes 1972, Hymes 1974, Bauman & Sherzer 1974). Rampton 1995 provides an excellent first step toward a full description of local linguistic economies among ethnically mixed adolescent groups in urban Britain. While saying this, I wish to warn against a certain degree of analytical stereotyping in which transnational but localized "slang" is often stereotypically identified as "low," stigmatized speech or "antilanguage" (as with Hiphop or Rasta slang). Similar features are to be found in "high," prestigious forms of speech such as business jargon.

[5] Rafael 1993 provides excellent illustrations of heterography in his discussion of literacy among the Tagalog under early Spanish rule. He describes how a Tagalog writer, Tomas Pinpin, adopted Castilian phrases in a Tagalog text in such a way that the code-switching so accomplished contrib-

uted to a poetic, rhythmic structure of the text. Rather than denotational meaning, poetic effect was the motive and function for this textual move. Further, Rafael shows how Castilian numbers were appropriated as a new and effective way of counting. In general, Rafael shows how writing and language got remodeled in a set of different language ideologies.

[6] I thus see works such as Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999 and Fairclough 1989, 1992 as adequate descriptions of language regimes in contemporary western Europe (and Britain in particular), but not as a theory of discourse with general validity. The embeddedness of linguistic analysis in social theory aspired to in much of CDA unfortunately often boils down to providing an ethnographic grounding for observations of societies in the center of the world system. I would encourage CDA scholars to turn to André Gunder Frank, Samir Amin, or Immanuel Wallerstein rather than to Anthony Giddens or Jürgen Habermas in their search for an adequate social-theoretical framework.

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