

# Literacy and Multilingualism in Africa

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## Abstract

A sufficient review of literacy and multilingualism in their full complexity in a continent as immensely and densely diverse as Africa is simply unachievable within the scope of an encyclopedic article if it were not for the relative marginality of Africa in global scholarship. With the exception of South Africa, Africa is not at the forefront of discussions in socio- and educational linguistics. This marginality, however, is greatly undeserved: African sociolinguistic realities are among the world's most complex and there is much to gain if it could inform literacy and multilingualism research more generally. In fact, this peripherality has recently been a productive source for a radical revision of some of the metropolitan epistemologies about multilingualism and literacy.

Literacy and multilingualism in Africa does not form a unified field of research and is approached here rather as a field of practice. As such this field presents a

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24 crucial paradox. African contexts present some of the world's most diverse,  
25 linguistically creative, and vital multilingual situations in the world (Vigouroux  
26 and Mufwene, *Globalization and language vitality: Perspectives from Africa*,  
27 Continuum, London, 2008) but also feature in the world's poorest literacy rates  
28 and are routinely said to lack a literate tradition altogether. This chapter offers  
29 counter-evidence for this deceptive view by reviewing Africa's literacy traditions  
30 and script inventions but also points at problems and difficulties in African  
31 multilingualism and literacies. It then outlines two relatively young fields of  
32 practice and/or study that have begun to make major contributions to literacy  
33 and multilingualism in Africa: digital literacy and linguistic landscape.

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#### 34 Keywords

35 Adlam script • African digital literacy • African linguistic landscapes • African  
36 multilingualism • Ajami script • Bourdieu's theory of distinction • Camel script •  
37 Gambian language • International Telecommunications Union (ITU) • IsiXhosa •  
38 Jola • Khayelitsha township • Latin script • Liberia • Manding cluster • Mandinka •  
39 Mandombé script • Metrolingualism • Mobile phone • N'ko • Oromia • Socio-  
40 linguistic superdiversity • Tigray • Vai syllabary • Zaghawa Beria script

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### 41 Early Developments

42 "Widespread assumptions on literacy (or its absence) in Africa," Lüpke and Storch  
43 (2013, p. 65) argue, "turn out not to be true as soon as one looks beyond literacy in  
44 the formal education sector dominated by the official languages." Indeed, some  
45 literacies are more visible than others. The issue of (in)visibility should be kept in  
46 mind since it directs us to inspect the metadiscursive practices in and through which  
47 certain forms of literacy are made "visible" while others are "erased" altogether from  
48 history.

49 The development of literacy in Africa certainly predates the histories of European  
50 colonialism and Islamic conquest. Some of the world's oldest known scripts  
51 emerged in the Nile Valley and are indeed African scripts. These include the  
52 Egyptian hieroglyphs and the later Hieratic, Demotic, Coptic, Old Nubian, and  
53 Meroitic scripts. In the Horn of Africa Ge'ez developed since 500 BCE as the  
54 holy script of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and still is the common script for  
55 Amharic and Tigrinya in Ethiopia and Eritrea today. In the Maghreb, (Neo-)Tifinagh,  
56 revived from the ancient syllabic script of the Phoenician-Carthaginian Empire, is  
57 currently one of the three official scripts in Morocco. We can further add forms of  
58 proto-writing such as Nsibidi in southeast Nigeria and the Adinkra symbols of  
59 Ashanti in Ghana (see Abdelhay et al. 2014 for details and citations).

60 Notwithstanding these ancient literacy traditions, it was mainly the Christian and  
61 Islamic missions that developed vernacular literacies in the Roman and Arabic  
62 scripts associated with Christianity and Islam, respectively. These missionary  
63 views of literacy invested the Latin and Arabic script with specific cultural images

64 of “modernity,” “clarity,” and “reason,” as opposed to pre-Christian and pre-Islamic  
65 belief and knowledge systems. Paradoxically, at the same time the Latin script was  
66 promoted in the West as a “modernist,” nonideological tool of written communica-  
67 tion. Christian missionaries systematically imbued it with deep cultural meanings in  
68 Africa. The same practice was exercised by its relationally constituted rival Arabic  
69 script. Colonialism has made an impact on Africa’s language and literacy ecology,  
70 however also in the indigenous creative reactions it triggered. In the colonial  
71 encounter, a series of indigenous writing systems emerged in nineteenth and twenti-  
72 eth century colonial West Africa (Dalby 1967 and later publications).

73 The oldest and most well-known of the West African invented/indigenous scripts,  
74 the Vai syllabary was invented around 1830 by Momolu Duwalu Bukele of Jondu in  
75 western Liberia. It is this script that features in Scribner and Cole’s (1981) classic  
76 study on the psychology of literacy. They remark: “The Vai are extremely proud of  
77 their writing system, and they know it distinguishes them from other tribal people in  
78 Liberia. They also know that from time to time foreign scholars have come to study  
79 the Vai script, and this attention has helped to bring the Vai status in the eyes of their  
80 countrymen.” Other writing systems in the same region (from present-day Côte  
81 d’Ivoire to Guinea) emerged in the 1920s–1950s and include syllabaries for Mende,  
82 Bambara Masaba, Loma, Kpelle, and Bété and alphabets for Bassa Vah and N’ko.  
83 N’ko is a special case as this alphabet, modelled after Arabic in 1949 by Souleyman  
84 Kanté in Kankan, northeastern Guinea, has been disseminated beyond the original  
85 Maninka speaking area in northeast Guinea, into Dyula and Bamanankan (Bambara)  
86 speaking communities in Côte d’Ivoire and southern Mali, respectively. The social  
87 movement of N’ko (meaning “I say”) promotes N’ko as a script for the whole  
88 Manding cluster, as a harmonized literary koiné that unites Manding peoples across  
89 state borders and Anglo- and Francophone divides, and reconnects with their  
90 common, precolonial past (Oyler 2005; Wyrod 2008).

91 Elsewhere, in the Cameroonian Grassfields, the pictographic-syllabic scripts of  
92 Bamum and Bagam were devised around 1900. In the Horn of Africa, the Osmanya  
93 alphabet for Somali – one in a series of three – was devised around 1920. In the  
94 1950s, the Summer Institute of Linguistics developed a script built around a sam-  
95 pling of the markings on livestock in western Sudan and eastern Chad, the so-called  
96 Zaghawa Beria or “camel” script. Several other scripts emerged around indepen-  
97 dence, including the Garay alphabet for Wolof, the Nwagu Aneke Igbo syllabary,  
98 and the Ba and Dita alphabets for Fula in Mali. More recently in the Democratic  
99 Republic of Congo, the Mandombé script was invented by Wabeladio Payi of the  
100 Kimbanguist Church in 1978. Yet more recent are Nolence Mwangwego’s alphabet  
101 for Malawian languages (“inaugurated” in 1997) and – both in Guinea – the Adlam  
102 script for Pular created by the Barry brothers of N’Zérékoré in 1987 and Yacouba  
103 Diakité’s Miriden alphabet for Maninka created in 2011 (see Abdelhay et al. 2014 for  
104 details and citations).

105 These more recent African script inventions do not seem to have received much  
106 scholarly attention so far, and it remains to be seen if they will be able to acquire and  
107 maintain sustainable communities of users and generate diversified contexts for its  
108 use. With the exception of Vai and N’ko, the majority of these scripts have not

109 proven to be very viable alternatives for the great imperial script traditions  
110 transplanted to Africa as part of European colonization and the spread of Islam.  
111 Most of the (West) African invented scripts are indeed “failed scripts” Unseth (2011,  
112 p. 27). They were invented mostly not out of practical considerations given that other  
113 scripts were already available and locally rooted but out of ideological consider-  
114 ations, as “efforts to strengthen ethnic identities” (Unseth 2011, p. 23) or as proofs of  
115 dignity in the face of colonial humiliation. Scripts typically thrive through associa-  
116 tion with states and empires (consider Greek, Roman, Cyrillic, Chinese, or Devana-  
117 gari but also Tifinagh and Ge’ez). These associations with state power are generally  
118 lacking or weak in the case of Africa’s modern script inventions. Even N’ko, one of  
119 the most successful modern African scripts, remains subjected “to a kind of margi-  
120 nalization akin to that of a minority language” (Wyrod 2008, p. 31), i.e.,  
121 unsupported by an infrastructure of formal education and broadcast media and left  
122 entirely in the informal sector.

123 Ajami is another case in point. Despite being (near to) invisible to educators,  
124 language planners, and development activists, a precolonial literacy tradition con-  
125 tinues to be practiced throughout those areas that are in the sphere of influence of  
126 Islam. This writing tradition uses Arabic-based scripts for the writing of African  
127 languages. The historical role of the most influential Ajami scripts – for Swahili,  
128 Kanuri/Kanembu, Hausa, Fula, Soninke, and Wolof – is well documented (e.g.,  
129 Lüpke and Bao-Diop 2014). Their contemporary weight is less well understood,  
130 partly because of their survival in informal and religious contexts only and partly  
131 because of dominant ideologies of missionaries, language planners, and official  
132 bodies that insist on literacy in Roman scripts (Pasch 2008).

133 We can only conclude that Africa’s literacy inventions are in fact rich and diverse,  
134 even if they often lacked and still lack support from governments to compete with  
135 Latin- and Arabic-based literacies in the public domain. The above discussion has  
136 shown that writing scripts in Africa are always “social scripts” and ordered in a way  
137 that narrates how different ideological forces and conflicts were inscribed in them.

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## 138 **Problems and Difficulties**

139 With the exception of North Africa and only very few sub-Saharan countries the  
140 overwhelming majority of African populations are highly multilingual. In urban and  
141 rural areas alike, people speaking (and identifying with) three or more languages as  
142 part of their everyday lives are much more likely to be encountered than monolingual  
143 or even bilingual people. Multilingualism is so self-evident in much of Africa that  
144 the word “bilingual” tends to be reserved for people in command of two former  
145 colonial languages irrespective of their repertoire in African languages.  
146 Metrolingualism or sociolinguistic superdiversity as a phenomenon is hardly spec-  
147 tacular when compared to African sociolinguistic realities. Large parts of rural  
148 Africa are characterized by similar patterns of intense diversity sometimes thought  
149 to be exclusive for metropolitan areas (cf. Wang et al. 2014). Yet, the same lack of  
150 state support for African scripts and literacies observed above also applies to

151 multilingualism. With some exceptions, African states do nothing substantial to  
152 support or promote multilingualism or the learning and teaching of African lan-  
153 guages. Yet African multilingualism thrives as nowhere else, despite a nearly  
154 complete lack of infrastructure supporting it. This is in stark contrast with the  
155 everyday monolingualism that prevails in Europe despite all the efforts and invest-  
156 ments, at supranational level mostly, to promote multilingualism.

157 Whereas African multilingualism may serve as a positive model (Lüpke and  
158 Storch 2013), African formal education certainly cannot. Critiques of African  
159 education are abundant (e.g., Dumestre 2000) and – ironically – not rarely seen in  
160 connection with linguistic diversity. What appears as highly successful in informal  
161 domains is seen as the very problem in the formal education system built on  
162 European ideas about language and society. Many sub-Saharan states therefore settle  
163 for a postcolonial status quo in their national education systems, endorsing former  
164 colonial languages (English, French, Portuguese) as only or dominant languages of  
165 instruction at the cost of unacceptably low learning outcomes and high dropout rates.  
166 Decades of international arguments in favour of mother tongue education are  
167 passionately ignored. Time and again literacy programs and multilingual education  
168 policies fail to move beyond the mere rhetoric of policy texts (Omoniyi 2003; Stroud  
169 2001). The debate on African languages in education may be fuelled by *fallacies* as  
170 Obanya (1999) points out, but given their sustainability and purchase over time and  
171 across the continent, we should perhaps also suspect valid reasons for this structural  
172 resistance.

173 The following example is illustrative. Juffermans and Van Camp (2013) analyzed  
174 an English/Mandinka interpreted focus group discussion with parents, teachers, and  
175 community leaders on the question what local language should be used as medium of  
176 instruction once the new education policy would be implemented in their school in  
177 rural Gambia. The policy text prescribed that “during the first three years of basic  
178 education (grades 1–3), the medium of instruction will be in the predominant  
179 Gambian language of the area in which the child lives” (*Education Policy*  
180 *2004–15*). Throughout the discussion the interviewees stated their support for the  
181 new education policy but collectively avoided choosing which language should be  
182 chosen, no matter how the interviewer phrased the question. The most obvious  
183 candidates would be Jola and Mandinka, two languages with a complex historical  
184 relationship. In not choosing the interviewees made a statement against compart-  
185 mentalizing African multilingualism which they conceptualized in the singular as  
186 *moo fing kango* (black people’s language, in Mandinka) as opposed to the  
187 researcher’s plural conceptualization of *local languages* in English.

188 This example suggests that introducing local language(s) in Gambian schools  
189 should be done without determining what part of the local multilingual repertoire  
190 should be used as this would imply excluding other parts of that same local  
191 repertoire, formalizing existing inequalities in multilingual patterns, and essentializ-  
192 ing relations between Gambian language communities. It further suggests that  
193 mother tongue education is a Eurocentric construct and that there are passionate  
194 reasons for keeping African multilingualism out of the formal education system.  
195 “The insistence on ‘mother tongue education’,” write Lüpke and Storch (2013,

196 p. 273), “is harmful, because it creates attitudes and expectations that are not in line  
197 with the lived linguistic context, just as the insistence on the exclusive use of the  
198 colonial languages in formal contexts has.” Asking a community to choose which of  
199 its languages should receive institutional support is like asking a mother to choose  
200 which of her children should be given new clothes. Makoni and Mashiri (2007) have  
201 argued in this respect that language planning in Africa best proceeds without a  
202 construct of language, or if that is too radical, with an African, flexible construct of  
203 language.

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## 204 Major Contribution 1: African Digital Literacy

205 In October 2014 several news media headlined that there are now more mobile  
206 phones than people in the world. Figures from the UN’s International Telecommu-  
207 nications Union (ITU) show that while access to fixed-line telephony has remained  
208 stable or even moderately declined (at 1.5–1.3 %), access to mobile phones in Africa  
209 has risen spectacularly in the last decade: at the turn of the Millennium, only one in  
210 fifty Africans had access to a mobile phone (de Bruijn et al. 2009, p. 11), in 2005 this  
211 was one in eight, in 2008 one in three, in 2011 one in two, and in 2013 two in three.  
212 Several countries that ITU collects data for show figures of over 100 % indicating  
213 that on average people maintain more than one mobile phone line. Whereas many  
214 African countries (Eritrea, Burundi, Ethiopia, Madagascar) do rank low, third on this  
215 list, after Macau and Hong Kong, is Gabon with 214 mobile-cellular telephone  
216 subscriptions per 100 inhabitants. Several other African countries (e.g., Botswana,  
217 South Africa, Egypt, Ghana) are also above the 100 mark ([www.ntu.int](http://www.ntu.int)).

218 Mobile phones and smartphones with Internet connections introduce a broad  
219 range of possibilities for communication and social relations that bring about social  
220 changes and development. De Bruijn et al. (2009, p. 14) note that the mobile phone  
221 is “an instrument of power, capable of positive and negative outcomes like a double-  
222 edged sword. Even if evil, the mobile phone is perceived as a necessary evil –  
223 something that has become and should stay as part and parcel of the communication  
224 landscape of Africa and Africans rural and urban, at home and in the diaspora.” They  
225 refer to mobile phones as “the new talking drums of Africa.” Digital technologies are  
226 appropriated into local contexts and integrated into everyday life and make it easier  
227 to relate over distances and across towns, countries and continents, redefining centre-  
228 periphery relations in the process. Africanist scholarship, however, warns us to see  
229 this new connectivity as a naïve global village utopia counteracting all inequality and  
230 poverty (McIntosh 2010) or as an alternative for physical mobility and migration.  
231 Quite in contrary, Burrell (2009, p. 153) emphasizes, “the Internet has not  
232 transformed young Ghanaians’ migratory impulses into the kinds of information  
233 practices often promoted by governments and development institutions. Instead, the  
234 Internet has provided new resources for seeking migration opportunities and increas-  
235 ing one’s mobility.”

236 Turning to literacy and multilingualism now, it has been noted that through  
237 texting and instant messaging mobile phones open up a niched domain of written

238 communication that challenges and changes conventional spelling practices. In  
239 Europe, this has been cause for some consternation over falling standards and loss  
240 of verbal hygiene in writing. In Africa, in contrary, language scholars recognize  
241 mobile phones' potential to promote African language literacy from below, i.e.,  
242 away from formal education and top-down language policy and planning.

243 Drawing on a corpus of text messages from Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria,  
244 Senegal, and South Africa, Deumert and Lexander (2013) note that writers draw  
245 on local as well as global linguistic resources within their multilingual repertoires to  
246 perform a range of emotional and romantic meanings. The examples they show  
247 clearly go beyond monolithic orthodoxies and the authors resisted the temptation to  
248 quantify their corpus in simplistic counts of codes. Instead, their analysis builds on  
249 the assumption that English and French are integrated into local ecologies of  
250 language as much as Nouchi, Wolof, and isiXhosa are and that contrasts are  
251 exploited to negotiate subtle differences in meaning as strategically relevant in,  
252 e.g., courtship discourse. Their quantitative analysis shows that in the Anglophone  
253 African countries (Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa) nonstandard spellings are more  
254 ubiquitous when compared to British and American text message corpora, both for  
255 globally attested texting abbreviations and for eye-dialect spellings. These nonstan-  
256 dard spelling features are creative word-play invested into impression management  
257 through "textual linguistic dexterity" – nimble-fingeredness and translanguaging  
258 virtuosity on a small keyboard. In her study of ideologies surrounding text messag-  
259 ing among Giriama in urban Kenya, McIntosh argues that rapid code-switching and  
260 condensed, abbreviated English "does not emerge simply from hurry" but are  
261 "means of 'showing off' that one is 'modern' (*ya kisasa*), 'developed,' 'fashionable,'  
262 'Western,' 'dot com,' or a 'town boy.'" Interestingly, both Deumert and Lexander  
263 (2013) and McIntosh (2010) indicate that nonstandard or condensed orthography  
264 applies to the former colonial languages only: "African languages, on the other hand,  
265 are usually spelt out in full and the texts are appreciated by readers as being 'special'  
266 [indexing] sincerity and seriousness as well as respect" (Deumert and Lexander  
267 2013, p. 541).

268 Using a reflexive ethnographic perspective in a study of mobile phone literacies  
269 in a post-apartheid township in South Africa, Velghe (2014) comments than many  
270 nonstandard features in text messaging are nonetheless norm-governed orthographic  
271 forms that requires an (informal) learning trajectory. The textspeak she analyses is  
272 predominantly done in "global medialect" (McIntosh 2010) based on English but  
273 with localizing accents in Afrikaans and isiXhosa. Despite its hybrid and seemingly  
274 chaotic appearance, it is possible to make mistakes against the (unwritten) rules of  
275 Cape Town textspeak just as it is possible to make mistakes against the grammar of  
276 Standard English or Afrikaans: "one has to be as literate to read or write textspeak as  
277 to read or write standard English and one entering this new communicative envi-  
278 ronment has to become 'literate' in this new repertoire if one wants to be regarded as  
279 a participant" (p. 83).

280 The examples Velghe discusses are messages sent to her and represent a mix of  
281 English and Afrikaans but exclude instances of isiXhosa. This may be seen as  
282 evidence for the flexibility of the digital multilingual repertoire in function of the

283 addressee. Exploring the digital repertoires of Senegalese on a diaspora web portal,  
284 Mc Laughlin (2014) similarly finds that Senegalese circumscribe their broader  
285 individual repertoires by limiting themselves to those linguistic resources in their  
286 repertoires that are shared by the community, i.e., French and urban Wolof. Linguistic  
287 resources not shared in the diverse community break through only minimally and  
288 are restricted to emblematic functions.

289 These varied studies on digital literacy practices suggest that mobile phones and  
290 the Internet carve out a new domain for multilingual writing in which African  
291 languages feature more prominently than ever before in predigital genres such as  
292 letter writing. In this digital space, a new register seems to be in formation. Their  
293 findings also suggest that this digital register of African multilingualism is quite  
294 pragmatic, making use not primarily of the ethnic languages but a flexible repertoire  
295 of the most widely shared linguistic resources circulating in the given context.

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## 296 Major Contribution 2: African Linguistic Landscapes

297 A second field of practice holds similar opportunities for African multilingualism  
298 and literacy and the study of it – linguistic landscapes. Whereas digital literacy is  
299 new both as a phenomenon and as a field of study, linguistic landscaping is only new  
300 as a scientific methodology or field of study, the phenomenon being as old as writing  
301 itself. Linguistic landscape refers to visible language or meaningful objects that mark  
302 the public space, comprising public notices, road signs, advertising billboards, shop  
303 signboards, graffiti, and any inscription or text in the built environment. Linguistic  
304 landscape studies opened up a new approach to multilingualism, enabled by the  
305 availability and affordability of digital cameras with practically limitless storage  
306 capacity. Early days linguistic landscape studies tended to be rather positivistic in the  
307 sense that it was primarily concerned with counting occurrences of different lan-  
308 guages in a given multilingual space in order to measure linguistic diversity or assess  
309 the vitality of minority languages. However, the field quickly expanded to include  
310 broader semiotic, critical, and ethnographic concerns and methodologies.

311 Several studies of African linguistic landscapes have appeared and contributed to  
312 linguistic landscape research; at the same time linguistic landscapes have become  
313 typical ingredients of monographs on language and literacy in Africa (e.g., Higgins  
314 2009). Lanza and Woldemariam (2014), for instance, analyze phenomena of lan-  
315 guage contact in the linguistic landscape and in educational materials against the  
316 background of the new policy of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia. This policy, with  
317 Eritrea and South Africa one of the most progressive policies for multilingualism in  
318 Africa, consists of decentralizing administrative powers to ethnically based regions  
319 and is meant to emancipate ethnic and linguistic minorities through changes in the  
320 medium of instruction at primary school, in the media, and the linguistic landscape.  
321 In these domains, Amharic makes place for the respective regional languages. These  
322 planned changes in the status of Ethiopian languages are accompanied by rapid  
323 corpus planning for the hitherto practically unwritten regional languages, including

324 script and orthography development (graphization) and the preparation of teaching  
325 materials.

326 Lanza and Woldemariam focus on two important regions – Tigray in the north  
327 and Oromia in the centre and south of the country. They find that signs with a  
328 regional focus are in Tigrinya/Oromo and those with a national focus are in Amharic,  
329 both often accompanied by English, “the de facto official second language.” Trilin-  
330 gual signs or combinations of Amharic and Tigrinya/Oromo are rarer. They also find  
331 that the dominance of Amharic goes beyond the surface level of the signs but is also  
332 attested at a deeper, grammatical level: signs in Tigrinya/Oromo often follow an  
333 Amharic word order. Where noun phrases in spoken Tigrinya/Oromo are normally  
334 “left-headed” in the LL they are often “right-headed” as in Amharic or in English  
335 (compare *writing instrument* vs. *instrument writing*). Similar patterns were found in  
336 Tigrinya/Oromo school books. The researchers suggest that these contact phenom-  
337 ena point at the covert prestige of Amharic which for centuries was the language of  
338 literacy through Ge’ez (see above). Sign writers and authors/translators of the  
339 educational materials not only draw on their spoken language competence in the  
340 respective regional languages but also on their written language competence in  
341 Amharic (and English) in creating a new register for the regional languages. Such  
342 processes of enregisterment rescale regional languages and redefine their relation to  
343 the center. This process needs to be seen not only as straightforward emancipatory  
344 change from unwritten/private/informal into written/public/formal domains but also  
345 as change in the structure of the language itself and as change in their relation to  
346 Amharic on the one hand and the smaller unsponsored minority languages on the  
347 other hand.

348 Not focusing on official policy but on “spontaneous” development, Kasanga  
349 (2010) presents us evidence of the increasing visibility of little bits and pieces of  
350 “streetwise” English in public advertisements in “Francophone” Africa. Although  
351 marginal in the overall linguistic ecology of the Democratic Republic of Congo,  
352 English becomes increasingly salient in public display of creative local language  
353 practices. These intimations of English such as in cloned brand name “Katanga Fried  
354 Chicken” of a Lubumbashi fast-food restaurant serve as “attention-getters” as well as  
355 perform imagined global identities of sophistication and modernity rather than fill  
356 lexical gaps in the local multilingual ecology. Such performative branding is not only  
357 an act of self-styling identity display of the producers of these signs and services but  
358 equally implicates the users of these signs and services – thus representing a  
359 powerful marketing strategy to appeal to all those who desire sophisticated, modern,  
360 and upwardly mobile identities. Targeted largely at a non-English-knowing audi-  
361 ence, these streetwise indexes of English are more about the idea of English in  
362 Congo than they are basic communicative signifiers.

363 In their study of commercial signage in Khayelitsha township in post-apartheid  
364 Cape Town, Stroud and Mpendukana (2009) argue for a material ethnographic and  
365 semiotic approach to linguistic landscaping and propose a theorization of space as  
366 constructed by local economies of literacy production. Drawing on Bourdieu’s  
367 theory of distinction and his notions of taste of necessity and taste of luxury, they  
368 refer to public signage in sites of necessity and sites of luxury. Sites of luxury are

369 economically advantaged spaces that are appropriated (with official authorisation)  
370 by well-resourced companies to advertise expensive products and services by means  
371 of professionally outsourced high-tech modes of literacy production. Sites of neces-  
372 sity on the other hand are lower in the economic hierarchy and predisposed towards  
373 inexpensive and more strictly local products and services for everyday needs by  
374 means of low-tech, locally available (“grassroots,” in Blommaert 2008 sense)  
375 literacy materials. This distinction replaces the idea of top-down and bottom-up  
376 flows in the linguistic landscape by foregrounding social class rather than a flat  
377 public/private distinction. The different technological affordances of (top-down)  
378 luxury signage and (bottom-up) signage of necessity are consequential for the  
379 organization of multilingual and other semiotic resources in a sign and the construc-  
380 tion of public sites themselves. When taken as “a resource for the study of social  
381 circulations of meaning in society” (Stroud and Mpendukana 2009, p. 380), African  
382 linguistic landscapes are powerful tools to interrogate discourses of social stratifica-  
383 tion and power, to read articulations of precarity and hope, and for African language  
384 literacies to enregister in the collapse of tastes of necessity and luxury in streetwise  
385 multilingual practices.

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## 386 Future Directions

387 There are, to conclude, several parallels between these two otherwise disparate fields  
388 of study. For one, mobile phone companies in Africa are often among the most  
389 creative and resourced players in the linguistic landscape, and in their advertising  
390 often draw on streetwise multilingual practices in which local and global literacy  
391 resources alike creatively break through and break with the hegemony of the colonial  
392 languages (compare Kasanga’s creeping of English in Congo with the creeping of  
393 local languages in The Gambia described in Juffermans 2012). The fields of linguis-  
394 tic landscape and digital literacy share a common interest in at least:

- 395 • The materiality of real language as opposed to idealized images of language
- 396 • Multilingualism and the broader semiotics of linguistic and cultural diversity
- 397 • Local agency and creativity in language practices
- 398 • Language as a “site of struggle” (Stroud 2001) for justice, inclusion, upward  
399 mobility, and to have one’s voice heard
- 400 • Globalization, technology, and social and linguistic change

401 Illustrative for all these points, Jørgensen’s concluding words in a paper on the  
402 subversive linguistic landscapes of graffiti still makes sense if graffiti is replaced by  
403 texting: “Currently graffiti presents us with a window to future linguistic norms [. . .].  
404 The most noteworthy aspect of that is the dissolution of boundaries between  
405 languages in the practical linguistic behaviour of graffiti writers” (2008, pp. 251–2).

406 Like digital language practices, linguistic landscapes constitute a domain for  
407 African written multilingualism that is not generally monitored by or dependent on  
408 the support of African states, which may explain their success, a cynic might add.

409 Nor do either domain present simple continuities from colonially inherited language  
410 policies or ideologies, in the way that classrooms do. With some exceptions, African  
411 states seemingly admit to being paralyzed or in a state of immovability with regards  
412 to issues of language education and multilingual citizenship. If formal schooling is  
413 judged to be foreign to Africa, linguistic landscapes and mobile phones are locally  
414 appropriated or appropriately relocalized in African contexts. And as spaces for  
415 semi-public/private texts and writing *par excellence*, linguistic landscapes and text  
416 messaging are likely to contribute to the development of African language literacies  
417 (whether this be standardization or something else). Finally, both digital writing and  
418 linguistic landscapes are shaping what Higgins (2009) refers to as a “new wor(l)d  
419 order,” an order characterized by a simultaneity of reference points – local and global  
420 – and multivoiced meanings in multilingual practices. With her we may ask how  
421 long it will take for language in education to follow suit and open up to these more  
422 dynamic and more African language practices.

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## 423 Cross-References

- 424 ▶ [Language, Literacy, and Knowledge Production in Africa](#)
- 425 ▶ [Literacies In and Out of School in South Africa](#)
- 426 ▶ [The Teaching of Reading in African Classrooms](#)

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