

Local emplacement and global identities in signboard and billboard literacies in urban Gambia

Kasper Juffermans
The University of Hong Kong

1. Introduction ¹

The first signboard that grasped our attention when we started photographing street signs in urban Gambia carried the inscription SPECIAL SIGN WRITING (figure 1). It appeared to be a workshop for the production of car number plates that was, at the time of our visit, run by two tenth graders on a voluntary work placement ('attachment' in Gambian English coinage). The boys seemed pleased with our interest in their work and enthusiastically allowed us to photograph them with some examples of their work. It struck us that this kind of work was done manually instead of mechanically, and that it was done in the busiest street of The Gambia, instead of in an anonymous factory somewhere in the industrial zone. Literacy in Africa, we thought, appears to be more handicraft than in so-called post-industrial societies.

The signboard of THE GROCERY SHOP (figure 2) reveals the making-of process of this board. Grey pencil lines a layer under the final red-blue-green paint show how the words were initially planned and re-planned to fit on the board. Also the traces of two mobile phone numbers that did not make it to the final full-colour version are still visible in a 'hidden layer'.

On JERE JEF SALLAH (figure 3), there is, besides the name, address and phone number of the shop, also a signature, *K. CHAW*, referring to the artist of the board. Similar to visual art, this piece of work is signed by the artist. It is interesting to look at this kind of literacy as 'artistic manufacture' (cf. Tythacott 1994), or as social practice, as has been asserted in the so-called new literacy studies (Street 1995; Collins 1995; Barton and Hamilton 1998; Papen 2005a; see Jahan-darie 1999 for a critique). New literacy studies offers an ethnographic alternative to monolithic and 'autonomous' conceptions of literacy in development studies, and places the community and the use of literacy in everyday life in the centre of their understanding of diverse 'literacies'. This chapter is tributary to new literacy studies and tries to enrich it with recent work in social semiotics (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996; van Leeuwen 2005; and esp. Scollon and Scollon 2003) and linguistic anthropology, notably Blommaert's concept of grassroots literacy (1999, 2001, 2003, 2004a, b, 2005).



*Figure 1: SPECIAL SIGN WRITING,
Sayerr Jobe Avenue*



*Figure 2: THE GROCERY
SHOP, Sayerr Jobe Avenue*



Figure 3: JERE JEF SALLAH, Sayerr Jobe Avenue

The observations in this chapter are based on an analysis of two sets of what I suggest to call ‘public literacy’. The data were collected in July and August 2005 with a digital camera in two different sites in urban Gambia, West Africa, and are part of a larger ethnographic research on English and literacy practices in The Gambia (Juffermans 2006).² On the first site, the Sayerr Jobe Avenue, 60 shop signboards were photographed and on the second site, the Banjul-Serrekunda Highway, 44 billboards were captured.

In the following, I will first outline the spatial setting of the data and define the two sets as two different literacy genres and then explore the concepts of grassroots literacy and multimodality in relation to my data. From there, I will contrast both genres from a 'place semiotic' point of view, and finally look at the work of discourse in relation to identity and globalisation.

2. The setting: Sayerr Jobe Avenue and Banjul-Serrekunda Highway

Both sites are situated in the urban centre of the country near the Atlantic Ocean. The Sayerr Jobe Avenue (SJA) runs from London Corner over Serrekunda Central in the direction of Westfield. Nowhere in The Gambia is it more expensive to rent a business place than here at the SJA. The street is also a busy traffic artery connecting the suburbs south of Serrekunda (Ibo Town, Bundung, Talinding, Fajikunda, Tabokoto...) with Westfield, the major transit point from where Banjul (east), Bakau (west) and Brikama (south) can be reached. The SJA is saturated with literacy: it has a very high degree of written text per square meter. Every self-respecting shop has a signboard with its name, logo, products or services offered and contact details mentioned.

The Banjul-Serrekunda Highway (BSH) runs from Westfield and the industrial zone of Kanifing through the mangroves over Denton Bridge to the capital Banjul. Thousands of daily commuters living in Greater Serrekunda, but working in Banjul, have to pass here every morning and evening. In both directions are huge double-sided billboards placed on the verge of the road that expose the passer-by to health issues information, political propaganda and commercial advertisement.

We can expect a difference between the literacies in a city centre shopping street and a highway that merely connects two places. The function of literacy at the side of the highway is either commercial advertisement or public information (with political propaganda somewhere in-between). The function of literacy in a city centre shopping street is rather to entice potential customers. The commercial advertisements at the highway are also meant to entice customers, but only indirectly as the place of the advertisement for the products/services and the actual place where the products/services are offered are distant. If you can read English,³ the shop signboards in the SJA help to find what you are looking for: mobile telephone accessories, sanitary services, sponges, motor spare parts, an Internet café or a video club, herbal medicines, a money exchange bureau, used clothing, IT training, hair dressing, electrical appliances, a jackpot casino, beauty products, ladies' shoes, and so on. The signboards here function to attract customers directly, but also indirectly to familiarise potential customers with the products and services offered.

I would suggest we are dealing with two distinct literacy genres here: shop signboards and highway billboards. The first genre of shop signboard literacies

that we find at the SJA typically consists of: (i) the name of the shop, (ii) a slogan or motto, (iii) a (detailed) description of the products or services offered (both in text and image), and (iv) contact details: full address and telephone numbers. The genre of highway billboard literacies, found on both sides of the BSH, could be subdivided into two subgenres: commercial billboards and billboards of public concern. Commercial highway billboards typically consist of (i) a company or brand name, (ii) a recognisable image that represents the company or brand, (iii) a slogan, and (iv) contact details. Highway billboards of public concern typically consist of (i) a striking image with a clear message, (ii) a slogan message in text, and (iii) the name of the organization responsible for this public message.

3. Grassroots and multimodality

Considering Blommaert's definition of grassroots literacy as 'sub-elite literacy' that 'must be situated not in categorical terms of literate-illiterate but rather in terms of a gradient of literacy, ranging from fully literate (multimodal and polygeneric, elite-language variety literacy) to fully illiterate' (2004a: 9), we should classify both genres as clearly grassroots, with the precaution that even this kind of grassroots literacy is typically multimodal and polygeneric.⁴ All four features of grassroots literacy that Blommaert notes (instability in orthography, the use of non-standard language varieties in writing, problems with genre-conventions and poor environmental conditions of literacy production) are prominently present in the SJA signboards and somewhat less so on the BSH billboards. The first genre is therefore more grassroots than the latter that overall stands a bit higher on the gradient of illiteracy to élite-literacy. I will now take these four features of grassroots literacy as a checklist and compare the two genres.



Figure 4: JOBE KUNDA COSMETIC, Sayerr Jobe Avenue

3.1. *Instable orthography*

A typical example of instability in orthography is the interchangeable and unsystematic use of lower case and capital letters. At INTER PARFUM, the 'd' of 'GOOD' in 'GENERAL GOOD' is small instead of capitalised as the rest of the text. At JOBE KUNDA COSMETIC (figure 4), lower case and capital letters are inconsistently used in the address line: 'SERREKUNDA / HIGH WAY / 38 SAYERR JOBE AVENUE'. Further, the 'S' in 'COSMETIC' of 'JOBE KUNDA COSMETIC' and in 'BEST' of 'BEST IN TOWN', appears to belong to a different font from the other letters and is not used consistently through in 'SERREKUNDA' and 'SAYERR' of the address line.

Less important for this kind of literacy is the minimal or erratic punctuation Blommaert notes. Although on signboards punctuation does not play a major role since it contains mainly titles and slogans, there is something strange going on with punctuation in our sample. Punctuation is not minimal, rather superfluous in contrary. Shopkeepers or literacy artists perchance want to be too correct, i.e. hypercorrect, in their use of dots on the boards. In a number of cases, we find commas and full stops where we would not normally expect them (e.g., see figures 16). In abbreviations as well, there is a tendency to interpunct rather too much than too little (e.g., U.S.A instead of USA, or P.O. BOX instead of PO BOX). Full stops are also unconventionally found in address lines and after telephone numbers.

There is further limited control over the organisation of lines on the board. At JOBE KUNDA COSMETIC (figure 4), we observe that the text lines are not straight but wiggle a bit and that the lower address line is placed too much on the edge of the board, which does not improve its readability and general design. Writing is obviously a problem here (Blommaert 2004b). At NIGERIAN CASSETTE (figure 5) for instance, the 'N' of 'NIGERIAN' is inversed as **N**, and the 'E' of 'CASSETTIE' takes a part of the next board, as with the last digits of the telephone numbers, and the 'OM' of '.CLOM' of the email address. Although 'Photocopy' and 'Video Club' are Gothically inscribed on the board with great care, generally the board lacks planning. The use of an old, rusty board betrays that this is clearly not the work of a highly skilled and well-paid literacy professional. In the telephone numbers, we notice that an extra digit was scribbled in front of the old number, when Gambian telephone numbers in February 2004 changed from six to seven digits. Unlike with mechanically printed boards, handcrafted signboards allow for a certain discursive multi-layeredness and dynamism in text whenever reality changes. The boards are not immediately replaced when the information requires updating. Instead, the new or adjusted information is simply added onto the old version. The traces of the 'natural history of discourse' (Silverstein and Urban 1996) are not destroyed on grassroots signboards but remain inertly present.



Figure 5: NIGERIAN CASSETTE, Sayerr Jobe Avenue



Figure 6: TOPRANK ALUMINIUM, Sayerr Jobe Avenue



Figure 7: TOUBA DARU KHOUDOS, Sayerr Jobe Avenue

Generally, the words and letters at the BSH appear steadier and typographically more proportional. While at the BSH, most or all billboards are obviously the work of professional literacy artists, in the SJA, some signboards are rather amateurishly delivered. A small number of signboards in the SJA, however, are designed with the same degree of professionalism as the BSH billboards (e.g. TOPRANK ALUMINIUM, figure 6).

3.2. No(n)-standard language in writing

A first category of non-standard writing consists of common spelling “errors” (e.g., *cassete* ‘cassette’, *spong* ‘sponge’, *whole sales/retails* ‘wholesale/retail’). Often, multiple spellings of a single word exist without clear norms of correctness. For instance, there does not seem to be much consensus on the spelling of Serrekunda and SJA. Serrekunda is spelled both with single and double ‘r’ (*Serrekunda*, *Serekunda*) and in ‘Sayerr Jobe Avenue’, ‘Sayerr’ is spelled in three different ways (*Sayerr*, *Sayer*, *Sayeer*) and ‘Avenue’ is either written out or abbreviated in two different fashions (*Av.*, *Ave.*). ‘Jobe’, however, is consistently written in the Anglo-Gambian spelling, never in its Franco-Senegalese style ‘Diop’.

Besides non-standard forms of language, there is often no-standard language in writing, or no clear norm which standard to choose from in case of two or more competing standards. Lasisi (2005) notes that British and American spellings coexist in The Gambia (e.g., ‘centre’ vs. ‘center’), with many Gambians not being aware of the disparities between the two linguistic authorities.

More interesting are those unconventional spellings that bear traces of oral vernacular language as in TOUBA DARU KHOUDOS MOBILE CENTER (figure 7), which features eight non-standard spellings on a total of 22 words. A common mistake we find is ‘WE SALE’ instead of ‘we sell’. Less common are the phonetically induced mistakes such as ‘CREEN’ instead of ‘screen(s)’ and ‘ANTINAS’ instead of ‘antennas’. Yet more striking are the wrong spellings of the mobile telephone brands. Out of six, only ‘NOKIA’ and ‘SAMSUNG’ are spelled correctly. ‘Triumpf’ becomes ‘TRIUME’, ‘Siemens’ becomes ‘SIEMENTS’, ‘Motorola’ becomes ‘MOTOROLAR’ and ‘Ericsson’ is hardly recognisable as ‘ERRICINE’. Admittedly, some of the mobile telephone brands have an awkward and exotic spelling (at least to Gambians). Using the web as corpus (de Schryver 2002), we find that Ericsson is often mistyped. While the correct spelling of this brand is Ericsson, *Google* finds 3,860,000 entries for ‘Sony Ericson’, 1,490,000 entries for ‘Sony Ericcson’, 104,000 for ‘Sony Erricsson’, 6,000 for ‘Sony Erriccson’. With 31,800,000 hits for the correct spelling, ‘Sony Ericsson’, this means that at least 15% of the times Ericsson is spelled on the Internet, it is spelled incorrectly. At the SJA, however, a unique spelling error is made – ‘ERRICINE’. For Triumpf, Siemens and Motorola, the numbers are less impressive, but the same and other mistakes do occur on the Internet. Finally, *et cetera* is abbreviated as ‘EC’ instead of the standard ‘etc.’



Figure 8: KAWSU COLLEY'S INTERNATIONAL HAIR DRESSING SALON, Sayerr Jobe Av.



Figure 9: SHOES DOCTA POLISH, Sayerr Jobe Avenue

Likewise, Kawsu Colley in his INTERNATIONAL HAIR DRESSING SALON (figure 8) offers 'COSMETICS', 'FACIALS', 'MECHE' (*mèche*, a French loan for coloured hair locks), 'PEDICURE' and 'MEDICURE'. Presumably, the artist and shopkeeper of this signboard has never noticed that 'manicure' is pronounced and written with an 'n' in the middle and not with a 'd' as in 'pedicure', and has thus written 'manicure' by analogy with 'pedicure': 'MEDICURE'. The association of manicure and pedicure as something medical too may have played a role in this error.

Both the spelling errors in TOUBA DARU KHOUDOS (figure 7) and in KAWSU COLLEY'S INTERNATIONAL HAIR DRESSING SALON (figure 8) are typical examples of non-standard writing 'bearing strong traces of oral vernacular language proficiency' (Blommaert 2004a: 9). We could also call this colloquialism: the actual colloquial pronunciation, or a distant image of how the word is supposed to be pronounced, is reflected in the unconventional way the word is put on paper.

An equally interesting feature of non-standard spelling is what has been called eye-dialect: 'familiar words are respelled in a way that violates orthographic norms' without 'reveal[ing] any particularities of pronunciation, style, dialect or sociolect' (Berthele 2000: 596). In NICE HAIR CUT, for instance, the gerund ending 'ing' in 'sportin waves' has been reduced to 'in', which is an orthographic rather than enunciative marker of non-standardness. The same happens in SHOES DOCTA (figure 9) and HARLEM NIGGAZ (figure 16), where it makes only a minor difference of pronunciation whether you write 'doctor' as 'doctor' or as 'docta' and 'niggers' as 'niggers' or as 'niggaz', but it makes a great difference in print!⁵ 'Shoes docta' is more hip than 'shoes doctor' or – worse – 'shoemaker'. The use of non-standard writing does not always imply unintentional spelling mistakes and language errors. As is the case here, it can equally be applied as a means to be creative with language, to consciously convey difference from an imposed or supposed standard, to suggest a particular ethnolinguistic identity (cf. Jaffe 2000a, b; Androutsopoulos 2000).

Also on the BSH unconventional spellings can be found. On two billboards of malaria prevention that were issued by the Gambian Centre for Innovation Against Malaria (CIAM), a partner organisation of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, the centre's Internet address is spelled in two different ways: www.ciam.gm and www.ciaim.gm. Of course, only the former URL brings us the right website. On the billboard of TERANGA BEACH CLUB, 'entertainment' is spelled without a 't' in the middle of the word. On the billboard of the NO 1 SPORT SHOP features a spelling error in the address line: 'Libration Ave' instead of 'Liberation Ave'. Only this last example could be argued to be a case of colloquialism. The first two, however, are mistakes that are most likely the result of the handicrafted way in which the billboards were designed. When drawing the billboard, the literacy artist has to focus on the text letter-by-letter and thus risks losing the words and sentences out of sight.



Figure 10: MORIBOLONG COMMUNICATION CENTRE, Sayerr Jobe Avenue



Figure 11: LONDON TRAINING CENTRE, Sayerr Jobe Avenue



Figure 12: COCA COLA, Banjul Serrekunda Highway

3.3. Problems with genre-conventions

The third feature of grassroots literacy Blommaert discusses are problems with genre-conventions. Although there do not appear to exist clear and strict rules or conventions for the genre of shop signboards, there are some peculiarities with regard to the genre of shop signboards, at least to a Western observer. First, there is a high degree of explicitness and detail. Many signboards simply display every service or good the shop offers, leaving little reason for the client to actually enter the shop and discover more. The MORIBOLONG COMMUNICATION CENTRE (figure 10) and the LONDON TRAINING CENTRE (figure 11) display long lists of the various services offered: 'Internet Café', 'Browsing', 'E-mail Sending - Receiving', 'Scanning', 'Chatting', 'Lamination', 'Make Friends all over the World on the Net', 'etc.'.⁶

It could be argued that the high degree of explicitness and detail in the shop signboards has to do with problems with genre-conventions, on the premise that abundant information is unconventional for signboards in shopping streets. But what is at stake here are arguably not problems with genre-conventions, but the fusion of two separate genres into a single new genre that is best suited to the local conditions and needs of the users. To a Western observer, detailed and elaborated information about the goods and services offered in a commercial enterprise may rather be expected in a publicity brochure that is distributed in the surrounding region or neighbourhood, or in a newspaper advertisement.⁷ In The Gambia, however, small enterprises may want to budget their publicity expenses and opt for a more permanent publicity in a space that is owned and controlled by themselves instead of paying a newspaper or investing in the production or distribution of brochures that would give them an only transitory public notice. This could be the rationale for shopkeepers to prefer the hybrid genre of detailed, elaborate signboards that function not only to attract, but also to inform potential customers. In this case, there may thus not be case of problems with genre-conventions, rather different, i.e. locally entextualised, genre-conventions for shop signboards.⁸

3.4. Poor conditions of literacy production

The fourth of Blommaert's features of grassroots literacy is the poor environmental production conditions of literacy. The many spelling errors that can be found on the shop signboards are a direct result of the scarcity of dictionaries and reference works in the Gambian economy of literacy. Excluding the elitist Timbooktoo Bookshop in Bakau where the prices of some books easily exceed an ordinary person's monthly wage, there is only a limited supply of books in The Gambia. Beyond the thin national newspapers, only Macmillan's schoolbooks, a limited selection of low-cost Western and African novels in English or French, and a few locally or regionally produced textbooks on Senegambian and general African history, are widely and democratically available in The Gambia, both new and second hand.

Not only books, also technical literacy aids are poorly available. The signboards at the SJA are thus produced without computers with advanced graphic software, spellcheckers, electronic dictionaries, or the Internet to quickly google something. Both the shop signboards and the highway billboards are essentially unmediated human work. The NISSAN PATROL billboard (figure 15), is not printed but painted. The same is true for the quasi universally recognisable logo of COCA COLA (figure 12), which is carefully delineated on the board in the exact manner and colour scheme of the well-known soft drink company (cf. Scollon and Scollon 2003: 130).

3.5. Multimodal grassroots literacy

Multimodality and creative writing are not restricted to élite literacies, but can be achieved under poor conditions of literacy production as well. Uta Papen (2006) notes that although creativity has a material aspect, it does not only take place in exceptional, idealised circumstances, but indeed ‘often happens in situations which at first glance do not appear to be conducive to creative activity at all’. Even under poor conditions of literacy production, people manage to produce rich, creative and multimodal literacies. At HIGH CLASS FASHION SHOP (figure 13) for instance, text and image work together to convey the meaning of the message. That this shop self-declaredly specialises in high class ladies’ wears and shoes is not only readable from the words ‘high class’, but is simultaneously supported by the image of expensive-looking women’s shoes.⁹ Basically, it does not matter whether one just looks at the images or also reads the text, to know that this shop offers high class ladies shoes and related products (handbags, beauty products). Whether or not this is the main motivation behind the multimodal designs, through the use of multimodal literacy, illiterates are not excluded from reading the public message on the shop doors and façade. Furthermore, some information (i.e. that handbags are being sold) is only conveyed through the mode of the image, making it the primary modality of this façade.

The shift from text to image as the dominant modality of visual communication that Gunther Kress (2003, ch.1) foresees as the future of literacy, or rather describes as already taking place, is not limited to literacy in high-tech post-industrial societies, but is just as much discernible in so-called developing countries such as The Gambia. That ‘language-as-writing will increasingly be displaced by image in many domains of public communication’ (Kress 2003: 1) is an interesting development for a continent where classic forms of literacy (i.e. literacy as alphabetic writing) are least mastered and illiteracy rates are higher than anywhere else (cf. Bhola 1990).

We can see a parallel with other communication technologies: although there were only few Africans participating in earlier stages of these technologies (i.e. houseline phones and off-line personal computers), mobile telephones and the Internet are now thriving in many parts of Africa. Even in the most remote and rural areas of The Gambia, far up-river, with a mobile phone, you stay in

touch with relatives in the urban west of the country and even overseas. In the coming decades, with support of the efforts towards literacy and education for all, Africans might very well be able to bridge the gap with the West in literacy competencies by subscribing to the new dominant multimodal and multimedia literacies of the new media age (Kress 2003). Perhaps the public literacies I document in this chapter are already part of this development.



Figure 13: HIGH CLASS FASHION SHOP, Sayerr Jobe Avenue

4. Literacies in place

Hitherto, I have described samples of public literacy from two sites in urban Gambia and argued that the literacies at both places are two distinct literacy genres: signboard and billboard literacies. I have also argued that the shop signboard literacies from the Sayerr Jobe Avenue are more grassroots than the billboard literacies from the Banjul Serrekunda Highway. I will now continue to outline the two genres from a geosemiotic point of view. The two public literacy genres differ not only in economic conditions of literacy production (degree of professionalism/amateurism; more or less grassroots), but also in their emplacement in the material world. The difference in function of directly or indirectly enticing and informing potential customers is precisely due to its emplacement near a shop (on its façade) or away from it (somewhere on the verge of a highway). Discursive meaning is not constructed in a semiotic vacuum, but is anchored in place (cf. Scollon and Scollon 2003; Blommaert, Collins and Slembrouck 2005). The grammar of visual design (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996) depends on the place the image takes in the material world (Scollon and Scollon 2003).

Let us now compare a typical billboard of the SJA, BOUTIQUE – YA NJAMEH (figure 14), and one of the BSH, NISSAN PATROL (figure 15) and look at how both are designed to be read. A first, rather obvious observation is that the NISSAN PATROL billboard in the BSH is much larger than the BOUTIQUE YA NJAMEH signboard in the SJA (figure 14 is a close-up while figure 15 is a long shot). There are also much more signboards in the SJA compared to the BSH. The difference in size and density of literacy at the SJA and the BSH is a logical result of its emplaced semiotic functioning. In the SJA, traffic runs slowly because of the narrowness, the steady flow of pedestrians and the many potholes in the road. Passers-by here have significantly more time to read the billboards than on the dual carriageway of the BSH with its smooth road-surface where cars usually pass with high speed.

To absorb the BOUTIQUE signboard, one has to stop and read the text from line to line. Only if you stop to carefully read the signboard and the green doors will you find out that it is a ‘FASHION SHOP FOR LADIES, GENTS AND CHILDREN’ and that besides clothes, also ‘COSMETICS, FLOWER VASES & SCHOOLBAGS ETC.’ are offered for sale. On the left green door, the name of the shop is repeated with the extra information that one can also find ‘T SHIRTS AND SINGLETS’ for men here. On the right door, the kind of ladies’ wear the shop specialises in is further specified: ‘*Half-Slip, bra, Workingbags, Nail Polish n file, Lipstick & Powder.*’ In a smaller typeset, one can also read the address of the shop and the PO Box in Banjul. All of this could never be read when speeding by in a car at 80 kmph. This shop sign is obviously designed to be read by pedestrians that are not too hurried, and perhaps passengers in slowly moving vehicles.



Figure 14: BOUTIQUE – YA NJAMEH, Sayerr Jobe Avenue



Figure 15: NISSAN PATROL, Banjul-Serrekunda Highway

When speeding by the NISSAN PATROL advertisement, you do not have quite that much time to stop and start reading what the billboard is about. In a split-second it should be clear that this is publicity for a particular type of car. In

order to be read by people in fast moving cars, a larger type-face is needed and more use is made of visual material to create the message. The image of the blue Nissan Patrol can easily be recognised as is the red-and-blue Nissan logo on the left. Above the image of the car, in the red frame around the inner plane, there is the name of the company distributing these cars in The Gambia: Shyben A. Madi & Sons Ltd. The main function of this advertisement billboard is to make people dream about driving their own Nissan Patrol. The advertisement offers the car to people passing by with the message that 'you could drive this car'. The majority of passers-by, however, would never be in a position to buy a Nissan Patrol or to do business with Shyben A. Madi & Sons, simply because the majority of Gambians cannot afford such an expensive car. Every day, however, passers-by are reminded of this message. The place of this billboard remains well chosen because all powerful, important, and rich people in The Gambia are expected to pass here every now and then when doing business in the capital, not to speak of those civil servants and business people who live outside Banjul but have their office in the capital.

Emplacement, to use the most fundamental concept of geosemiotics, is crucial in the construction of the whole meaning of the signboard or billboard. Where in the physical world an image is located makes an important difference in how the message is read and constructed to be read (Scollon and Scollon 2003, ch.8). The signboard of BOUTIQUE YA NJAMEH does not convey the same meaning if placed inside the shop behind the counter, or found somewhere on a rubbish dump. The signboard only indexes BOUTIQUE YA NJAMEH if placed on the façade of the boutique. The closed green doors not only tell that the shop is closed but also inform potential customers of the products it offers when opened.

An issue of geosemiotics that is treated by the Scollons in their discussion of a complex road sign in Washington, DC (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 39-40), is the place relation of the sign and the speed of the passing reader. They point out that the sign is not well designed for its emplacement because it is 'uninterpretable in real time for a driver who arrives at this point and tries to decide if it is safe or allowable to enter the road'. There is always a 'real-time window' for an interpreter that is 'positioned in time and space' (op cit: 40-41). The makers of signboards and billboards in The Gambia have naturally designed their texts according to this geosemiotic law. On the BSH where the real time window of passing interpreters in fast moving cars is short, the textual message too is kept short and in a well readable and large enough type-set. On the SJA, the real time window of passers-by (pedestrians) is generally larger and the possibility is there to stop or slow down to read the signboard in more detail if necessary.

To recapitulate, billboards at the BSH are designed for quick visual consumption, whereas in the SJA, people are expected to have more time to absorb the message. Literacy takes a shape according to its context in place and the way it is supposed to be read.

5. The work of discourse: literacies and identity

With SHOES DOCTA (figure 9, above) and HARLEM NIGGAZ (figure 16, here), we already mentioned that orthography can be used as an identity tool to manage sociocultural difference linguistically and visually (Jaffe 2000). In HARLEM NIGGAZ, not only eye-dialect is deliberately used as a ‘cue of subcultural positioning’ (Androutsopoulos 2000: 527), but also lexical means. In The Gambia too, the word ‘nigger’ is politically incorrect. Multiple linguistic levels are manipulated here to create a subversive identity referring to the idolised music and subculture of African-American gangsta rap.



Figure 16: HARLEM NIGGAZ, London Highway (continuation of Sayerr Jobe Avenue)



Figure 17: NEW TESTAMENT UPHOLSTRY SHOP, Sayerr Jobe Avenue

Besides African-American rap culture, many other identities are called upon in the SJA and the BSH. A first identity for the shop signboards and high-way billboards is typical for advertising discourse, that is an identity of quality. According to sound business principles, the commercial enterprises in the SJA and those advertising on the BSH often create an image of being the 'best in town', as JOBE KUNDA COSMETIC coins. Likewise, FIND BOUTIQUE uses the slogan that they are the 'best specialist in town'. AMERICAN USED CLOTHING states that 'quality is our concern', WE TWO SHOP attempts to establish the same by noting that they have the 'Best specials in town'. M.J. INTER PARFUM in its turn has the 'Best Quality from U.S.A' and JOBE KUNDA TEXTILES says of itself that it is 'Always the first in fashion'. TOPRANK ALUMINIUM already bears a token of quality in its name: 'toprank'. Similarly, HIGH CLASS FASHION SHOP uses the words 'high class' and 'the latest' to create a self image of quality. Finally, CROWN SHOP TEXTILES appeals to the customer with the phrase that 'We supply the best quality at affordable prices'.

Many shopkeepers also opt for a religious ingredient in the name of their shop. Religious identities in The Gambia can be either Islamic or Christian. Although The Gambia is a predominantly Muslim country, Christianity is fairly pervasive in the urban public sphere. This is largely due to the substantial participation of (Christian) Nigerians in small to medium-sized enterprises in urban Gambia. Christianity is further present in the SJA through the many signboards of churches that are, despite their minority status, a major player in the Gambian public sphere. Also in Gambian newspapers, Christianity has a clear voice with regular contributions by Christian religious leaders. For an Islamic identity, Santayala (i.e. 'the holy Allah' in Wolof, e.g. SANTAYALA COSMETICS & MOBILE SHOP) and Touba are popular names. It is astonishing how easily discursive connections are made between divinity and secularity. Touba, the holy place of pilgrimage for the Mouridiyya (the Islamic brotherhood founded by Sheikh Amadu Bamba, cf. Rosander & Westerlund 1999; Babou 2003, 2005) is linked to something as down-to-earth as mobile telephones (TOUBA GSM-WAKEUR BOROM TOUBA; TOUBA DARU KHOUDOS MOBILE CENTER, figure 7), just as easily as the Bible's New Testament gets linked up with a Nigerian owned upholstery shop (NEW TESTAMENT UPHOLSTRY SHOP, figure 17).

In the SJA, much identity work is further being done by small enterprises to create a self-image of being participants in a global world order. Names of appealing places such as London and the USA are appropriated to suggest a sense of world-mindedness. The worldling of African cities does not only happen in terms of real economic connections (Simone 2001), but equally in terms of discursive, imaginary projections.

The word 'international' can simply be used to stress or suggest the international identity of the enterprise. KAWSU COLLEY'S SALON (figure 8) is an international hair dressing salon. LONDON TELECENTRE not only functions to connect people in various locations all over the world, but refers to the global metropolis

London for an international self-image, while at the same time affirming the local neighbourhood of London Corner, where the telecentre is based. EDU-BRAZIL uses the nickname of its Nigerian owner for its motor spare parts workshop, while at the same time pointing at Brazil with possible associations to the country as a football nation. Also HARLEM NIGGAZ (figure 16) creates an international cultural identity with its reference to a North American musical genre.

Another means to be international is by underscoring that the products are imported from abroad. M.J. INTER PARFUM, for instance, notes that they offer the 'Best quality from U.S.A' and AMERICAN USED CLOTHING offers not just any used clothing for sale, but *American* used clothing.



Figure 18: GAMBIA INTERNATIONAL AIRLINES, Banjul-Serrekunda Highway



Figure 19: THE GAMBIA EXPERIENCE, Banjul-Serrekunda Highway

On the BSH then, real airline connections are offered day by day to thousands of passers-by (figures 18 and 19). Here, the same could be said as with the NISSAN PATROL signboard (figure 15): although unattainable to many, all daily commuters are exposed to these messages every day. With the vector of the airplane pointing at the red line running from Banjul to the UK, the GAMBIA INTERNATIONAL AIRLINES billboard (figure 18) makes people believe in the feasibility of global travel for their own lives. Of course, the entire hassle of visa requirements for south-north travel is kept silent here. Air travel is not presented as something that is exclusive for the happy few, but as something within arms' reach: 'Choice of Flights', 'Convenient & Direct' (THE GAMBIA EXPERIENCE, figure 19), 'Your Satisfaction is Our Pride' (GIA, figure 18). As recognisable images that have their place in the visual linguistic landscape along the BSH, the role these billboards play in globalising the world vision of many urban dwellers should not be underestimated (cf. Thurlow and Jaworski 2003: 602).

Besides international identities, local identities are played upon as well in the shop names in the SJA. In its name, the SAMORY TURAY TIMBUCKTOO BEAK & MASK SHOP displays Samory Turay, a nineteenth century Manding trader-warrior who became famous for its heroic resistance against French colonialism, together with the legendary precolonial Sahel city of Timbuktu. As a bead and mask shop, with Western tourists as their main commercial target, ancient West African history is used here to create an identity of deep and authentic African culture that should appeal to tourists. At the same time, this discourse of authenticity (Papen 2005b), is a semiotic construction that blends two distinct monuments of West African history.

The names of the precolonial Mandinka kingdoms such as Kombo, Fonyi, Kiang, Jarra, Niumi, Niamina, Kantora, Wuli (cf. Sonko-Godwin 2003:9-10; Social Studies Atlas 1995:13) are still used in everyday speech as area names in the Senegambian region. The existence of joking relationships between inhabitants (or descendants) of different areas (e.g., between Jarrankas and Niuminkas) strengthens the cultural reality of these pre-colonial structures up to contemporary times. Many shops therefore use these old geographic indications of the origin of the owner instead of his/her family name as the name for the shop (e.g. MAN & BROTHERS SHOP NIAMINA and NIAMINA SHOP NO.2).

International and local identities, however, do not necessarily exclude each other as ROOTS INTERNATIONAL RECORD'S & TAPES MUSIC DISTRIBUTOR shows (figure 20). The name 'Roots' is inspired by Alex Haley's 1976 novel in which he traces his family history (roots) back to the life of Kunta Kinteh from Juffureh, Niumi (North Bank). *Roots* tells the family history of the author starting with his ancestor Kunta Kinteh who was reportedly captured and exported as a slave to America, over the lives of all the subsequent generations until Haley's own life and search for his roots. The book *Roots* in itself is a worldly enterprise bringing an African-American writer after long research in the USA and the UK, to his roots in a small place in The Gambia. With tens of millions of copies sold

in dozens of translations, and a television series, *Roots* is, moreover, a typical product of globalisation. By choosing the title of this book as the name for a music shop, together with the qualification ‘international’, an attempt is made to inscribe oneself in a Pan-African cultural venture that serves both local and international audiences.

The choice of the colours – green, yellow and red – further evokes an association with Jamaican reggae music and culture, that have, in their turn, appropriated the colours of the Ethiopian flag, whose then emperor Haile Selassie counted as the symbolic leader to the Rastafaria movement. The same colours – green, yellow and red – also constitute the Senegalese flag whose *mbalax* (i.e. popular Wolof music, made world-famous by Youssou N’Dour, cf. Duran 1989) is possibly even more popular in The Gambia than reggae music. The contours of the African continent that are inconspicuously placed in the middle of the signboard on top of the text further confirms the desired international, continent-wide, Pan-African identity of the music distribution enterprise.

With a name of ROOTS INTERNATIONAL, various local and global ingredients are blended together into a glocal cultural and commercial identity of worldly African-ness that connects ‘African Africans’ with diasporic (American and Caribbean) Africans through shared historical roots, preferred colours and musical culture.



Figure 20: ROOTS INTERNATIONAL RECORD'S & TAPES, Sayerr Jobe Avenue

6. In conclusion

By exploring two related very common literacy genres that have as yet not received much scholarly attention, I hope to have contributed to an understanding of the dynamics and complexity of language use in Africa. I also hope to have shown that multimodality in visual communication is fairly well compatible with grassroots literacy. Though produced (or ‘emplaced’) in a typical economy of literacy where both English and writing are expensive symbolic capital, the signboards and billboards in urban Gambia are highly creative and often multimodal pieces of writing. Furthermore, in grassroots literacy, it may not necessarily be problems with genre-conventions, if we can also interpret it as localised

genre-conventions within a particular social and cultural context. Notwithstanding these two conceptual sophistications, grassroots literacy remains an immensely useful concept to an understanding of written language in/and society in the margins of the world.

To conclude, the image we get if we read *The Gambia* from these signboards and billboards is that of a diverse nation participating or at least aspiring to participate in a globalising world, and of a nation where all kinds of different identity categories intersect (Christian and Islamic, local and international, price/quality and the latest fashion in music and clothing, etc.). Although signboards and billboards in urban Gambia are produced and emplaced in this ‘very small place in Africa’ (Wright 2004), with all the constraints of grassroots literacy, shop owners and literacy artists manage to be creative and express identities that break out of that hyper-locality into global registers, reaching a wider audience – both in imagination and in reality.

Notes

1. This chapter was written while I was an MA student at Ghent University in Belgium and fieldwork for this paper was conducted together with Ellen Vanantwerpen in July and August 2005 on a Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR) research travel grant. The authorial ‘we’ at some places in this chapter reflects this pleasant collective experience. Inspiration for this paper came from Jim Collins and Stef Slembrouck (2004), who carried out similar research in multilingual neighbourhoods in Ghent. I received useful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter from Marloes Janson, Uta Papen, Karel Arnaut, Hans-Georg Wolf, Adam Jaworski, and Augustin Simo Bobda, who are all gratefully acknowledged for so much intellectual generosity. I also wish to thank my fellow students at The University of Hong Kong, Xia Xiaoyan, Sun Li, and Liang Yan for their supportive criticism during our research seminar, and my supervisor Hans-Georg Wolf for bringing this paper to the attention of Augustin Simo Bobda who in his turn accepted it for publication in this volume, for which I am equally grateful. My American – or should I say Shanghainese? – friend in Hong Kong, Steven Sorensen, kindly agreed to read over this chapter, for which he deserves commendation. Needless to say, I alone shall be held accountable for all possible remaining inadequacies and inaccuracies. Finally, it is with a taste of sorrow, that I wish to dedicate this chapter, my first real international publication, to my younger brother *IJsbrand*, who, before he departed us all too soon, added shared brotherhood to my life.

2. On the use of photography for the study of literacy practices, see Barton et. al. (1990).

3. Both the signboards and the billboards are almost exclusively in English. Although *The Gambia* is audibly a highly multilingual country with an only restricted role for English, visibly this is much less so. The visible/readable linguistic landscape of urban Gambia is thoroughly dominated by English. Also in other sectors of Gambian society (e.g., education, written media), the language of literacy is English and often English-only (cf. Juffermans 2005, 2006).

4. Although signboards and billboards in urban Gambia are characterisable as grassroots literacy, many of them are still multimodal and polygeneric. They are multimodal be-

cause text and image often together construe meaning. They are polygeneric because the intellectual author (inventor) and the technical author (scribe) are not necessarily one and the same person in the signboards and billboards. Often, a signboard professional is hired as a literacy mediator. The end-product is a polygeneric result of a cooperation between the initiator and the mediator.

5. Hans-Georg Wolf and Augustin Simo Bobda have pointed out that ‘niggaz’ and ‘docta’ do reveal pronunciation particularities of West African English. Although I agree with them that this is the case, the point I want to make is that the non-standard spelling of these words is a conscious linguistic choice that is more non-standard in written form in its own right, than it is a reflection of non-standardness in speech. ‘Niggaz’ and ‘docta’ are more dialect to the eye than to the ear.

6. Within the constraints and unequal opportunities of worldwide travel for people from the global south, young urban Gambians are encouraged to participate in global communication, and – as LTC promises – to ‘make friends al over the world on the net’. Literacy is more than just the writing skills one can acquire in the formal grade system of education. New literacy competences as required by the new media age are offered (at a cost) by the private sector in the shape of communication and training centres such as Moribolong and LTC. In a changing world, new forms of literacy (digital literacies: e-mails, chatting, mobile telephone text messages, etc.) are not so much a problem in Africa, but rather an opportunity. Blommaert and Omoniyi (2006) describe how digital literacies are used by dishonest internauts in the margins of the world system to commit fraud in the form of e-mail spam messages. As a more positive development, Moore (2000a, 2000b), in two freely accessible Internet articles, describes how ICT developments may prelude a digital revolution for Africa.

7. In The Gambia, there are only national newspapers, which does not mean, though, that they are distributed nation-wide. Due to the small size of the country and unequal geographical distribution of printed press, newspapers in The Gambia roughly function as both local and national at the same time – reporting both on local events, and national and international politics. For a comprehensive history of the written media in The Gambia, see Grey-Johnson (2004). See chapter 5 of Juffermans (2006) for a corpus-based exploration of English in/and newspapers in The Gambia.

8. I am grateful to Uta Papen for pointing this out to me.

9. In discussions with Adam Jaworski during his stay at The University of Hong Kong in the Spring of 2007 he has made the point that the shoes and handbags portrayed here do not, at least from a global or Western point of view, look expensive and high-class. Connotations and value judgements are always contextualised and culture-specific. As the HIGH CLASS FASHION SHOP sign is designed to be consumed by a principally local, Gambian, audience, I think the right frame of interpretation for this sign is local, not global or Western. Informed by my ethnographic fieldwork, I think that in the sociolinguistic and semiotic ecology of The Gambia, these shoes and handbags do connote costliness, stylishness, and urbanite elitism, whatever its connotations for a Westerner.

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