

## Writing as Language in Use: On the Growing Engagement between Sociolinguistics and Writing Studies

**The Sociolinguistics of Writing**, by Theresa Lillis. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2013. 200 pp.

**Writing and Society**, by Florian Coulmas. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013. 192 pp.

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Several years ago, while searching for a quote from a Singaporean film, I came across a blog that astounded me. The author wrote in a mixed code the likes of which I had never seen in actual use, though I am trained in approaches to writing as a socially situated, multimodal, and even potentially multilingual practice. The author wrote her blog in a flowing, florid mixture of standard written English, Singlish, Mandarin, and other Chinese dialects, represented by both the Latin alphabet and Chinese characters; her registers moved between more or less formal written English and informal registers used in personal diaries, social media, texting, and face-to-face communication; her blog made meaningful use of pictures, video, music, and changes in font style, color, and size. As a text, it was a researcher's dream.

I was equally astounded, then, when I met a Singaporean linguist at a conference not long after I discovered the blog. In his presentation, he discussed the use of mixed codes, registers, and varieties of English in the Singaporean context. I asked him about multilingual writing in Singapore and he replied that this was something Singaporeans never did, since writing was always for formal purposes. I brought up the blog and told him I had recently seen a Singaporean write in a creative mix of English, Chinese, and other varieties on a blog.

"But blogging is not really writing," he said.

When is writing not writing? This puzzling question goes back to some fundamental assumptions of linguistics and sociolinguistics regarding the differences between form and function in written and spoken language. And while many of the arguments for these differences have been carefully made—Walter Ong's reasoned distinction between literacy and orality springs to mind—they have also shut down many potentially revelatory avenues of research.

Two important new books highlight this paradox. Theresa Lillis's *The Sociolinguistics of Writing* and Florian Coulmas's *Writing and Society* make persuasive arguments that writing, like speech, is an everyday language practice whose use can be studied in its social context just as speech has traditionally been,

from a sociolinguistic perspective. These books compellingly point the way toward the need for greater engagement between sociolinguistics and writing research, particularly when it comes to what Lillis calls “uptake” (which she defines as how writing will be read; that is, how readers react to texts) and its social consequences. Writing is said to be a highly standardized form of language, but variation in both usage and uptake surrounds us. Even at the sentence or word level, enormous variation can be seen online and in print, in formal and informal spaces, and in how people react to a range of variation, from acceptance to tolerance to hostility. There is, for example, little agreement among editors, readers, and teachers about what constitutes error and what is merely an acceptable variation.

The ideas expressed in these books are complementary, though they do not directly address each other. Lillis and Coulmas both recognize the need for more engagement between sociolinguistics and writing, but Lillis is primarily a writing specialist calling for greater engagement with sociolinguistics, while Coulmas is a (socio)linguist arguing for more engagement with writing. Taken together, the two books make a convincing argument for cross-pollination between the two approaches: a sociolinguistics of writing, or a writing-influence approach to sociolinguistics. Both should be of interest to composition scholars who are attuned to social and linguistic issues in writing.

The primary goal of Lillis’ book is to show that although sociolinguistic theory has been biased toward the study of speech, writing—an everyday language practice—is a worthy and indeed necessary object of sociolinguistic study. In the first chapter of this meticulously organized book, “Writing in Sociolinguistics,” Lillis explains the aims of each chapter in bullet points at its outset. This is helpful, as she marshals evidence and arguments from many different quarters to bolster her arguments and lays out three points that form the basis of her argument: theoretically, “writing cannot and should not be viewed as separate from contexts of use and users[;]” empirically, “texts, uses, and users need to be the subject” of empirical research; and ideologically, “power, identity, participation and access” need to be considered in how writing is conceptualized (16). Lillis announces her intention to draw on numerous sociolinguistics-influenced areas of study (e.g., new literacy studies, multimodality, discourse studies, new rhetoric, and academic literacies, among many others), which is borne out by the rest of the book.

The next few chapters deal with conceptualizations of writing. In the second chapter, “The Question of Mode,” rather than viewing writing as transcription of speech (as linguists sometimes do), Lillis characterizes writing as verbal, material, technological, visual, and spatial. She ends her consideration of writing’s modalities with an excerpt of research participants’ evaluations of a shop sign in Hong Kong—they had only to read the four characters on the sign—which

showed that people of different backgrounds considered a number of factors, including aesthetics, political history, business and economics, and geopolitical relations and attitudes when they read and evaluated the effectiveness of the text. Having established the highly contextual nature of writing in society, Lillis devotes chapters three and four, respectively, to “Writing as Verbal” (which is how it is most traditionally understood by linguistic analysts) and “Writing as Everyday Practice.” She makes the case that writing is as “ordinary” as speech and should thus have a more prominent place in sociolinguistic research that seeks to understand language as a social practice. Of particular note is Lillis’s assertion that an enormous amount of writing takes place in most people’s everyday lives and is ignored by researchers (and language users themselves) because texts like YouTube comments, homemade banners, Wikipedia edits, or reports made for work supervisors usually go unrecognized as “writing.” Lillis introduces a variety of tools for the empirical study of everyday writing, and its participants, artifacts, and practices.

The next two chapters look at studies of various contextual aspects of writing, including “Resources, Networks and Trajectories” (chapter five) and “Identity, Inscription and Voice” (chapter six). Chapter five highlights the dynamic social nature of writing in terms of how it is constructed from existing semiotic resources and how writing moves through time and space via social networks. Lillis uses several examples—including a genre typically seen as static, the academic research article—to show that the way writing is conceived, shaped, and taken up by readers depends on social relationships. Chapter six describes recent research on the relationship between language and identity and argues for “the importance of writing as identity work” by discussing material on blogs, YouTube, fanfiction websites, and in writing classrooms (147).

The seventh chapter, “Theorising Writing-Reading-Texts: Domains and Frames,” contrasts the approach to writing advanced by Lillis—writing as a social practice—with other prominent perspectives on writing in various disciplines. This invaluable “cheat sheet” outlines eight different approaches to understanding writing, writers, texts, and a host of other concerns in writing studies. This chapter has the potential to yield deep insights as it delineates the many possible approaches to composing and analyzing texts and encourages their cross-pollination: why not a critical discourse analysis of a text composed in an expressionist writing course, for example, or a rhetorical perspective on a poet’s *oeuvre*? The book ends with Lillis proposing possible future research questions. She particularly encourages researchers to think carefully about what aspects of writing we wish to analyze and what theoretical tools we have at our disposal, in part influenced by the approaches outlined in chapter seven with which we align ourselves.

*The Sociolinguistics of Writing* draws on work that will be familiar to compositionists, particularly new literacy studies (itself a more sociocultural, if not sociolinguistic, approach to writing and reading). Lillis's book will probably be more accessible to teachers and scholars of composition, while Coulmas's is grounded in disciplines like history and linguistics. This may make *Writing and Society* less familiar territory for writing scholars, but it is readable and welcome as an overview of the importance of writing across eras and cultures.

While it covers less familiar ground, Coulmas's short book helpfully provides a broad historical scope. He begins with a chapter called "The Tyranny of Writing and the Dominance of Vernacular Speech," a detailed and fascinating account of why linguistics resisted "the tyranny of writing" when establishing itself as a field. Coulmas looks at work by Ferdinand de Saussure, who felt an emphasis on writing obscured knowledge about language in general, and Leonard Bloomfield, who argued that because writing tends not to reflect the changes that spoken languages undergo, written texts are imperfect as language data. The second chapter, "The Past in the Present and the Seeds of the Public Sphere," deals with writing in public domains, showing that even such feted historical texts as the Code of Hammurabi and the Rosetta Stone are ultimately communicative. He links these texts to modern-day urban linguistic landscapes (not unlike Lillis's example of Hong Kong signage) and argues that this form of public writing is an historical development unique to urban settings. Coulmas situates writing as a social act in human history dating back to eighth-century Greece, showing that the public forms of writing we see as innovative today (like Facebook) are perhaps simply the latest manifestations of writing as a public, social practice.

The next two chapters look at the consequences of the development of writing as a communicative practice in human societies: chapter three, "Written and Unwritten Language," deals with the differentiation between writing and speech, showing that each offers unique linguistic resources and has different social characteristics. Coulmas points out that the historical division of labor between writing and speech has had real effects on both language and society in Arabic, Sinhala, Greek, and many other cultures. The fourth chapter, "Literacy and Inequality," looks in more detail at the material consequences of widespread literacy and how the social significance of writing has led to literacy reinforcing social inequalities of class, gender, race, and ethnicity. Coulmas draws on examples involving suffrage and education to show that, paradoxically, the sheer importance of writing in society has allowed a "higher level of participation and equality" but has been complicit in maintaining and even introducing new inequalities (79).

Chapter five, "The Society of Letters," looks further at the role of social institutions—government, religious bodies, and schooling—in the promo-

tion and preservation of written language. Coulmas uses examples from the language of legal statutes, the translation of scriptures, and the use of literacy and spelling in schools, further illustrating the division of labor between speaking and writing and showing the mutually constitutive nature of formal writing and powerful social institutions. Chapter six, “Writing Reform,” looks specifically at the issue of writing reform as a way of showing the mutual influences of writing and society—connecting writing systems research in linguistics to more sociocultural concerns involving language, power, and politics. In the final chapter, “Writing and Literacy in the Digitalized World,” Coulmas deals with writing and literacy in digital contexts, in which he sees “a profound culture change” that must be taken seriously by scholars (128). He connects technological developments back to issues of public writing raised at the beginning of the book, using Facebook, Wikipedia, and WikiLeaks as examples, and concludes by addressing unique challenges of the digital age, including the speed at which written communication can now occur and the overwhelming virtual flood of information that modern readers sometimes struggle to keep up with.

*Writing and Society* is valuable for anyone interested in expanding the conversation about the role of writing in society and how it should be understood. The book does seem to alternate between a theoretical exploration of the problems and complexities that emerge from linguists’ division of writing from speech on the one hand and a catalogue of innovative examples of writing in society on the other, but this is not a weakness. In fact, the book is made more readable by the author’s apparent indifference to winning an academic argument and desiring, instead, to introduce readers to a broader perspective on writing. Lillis’s book more obviously introduces a research agenda, but at their core the two books suggest a very similar way forward: we have to start with writing *as language*—not as a technology or recorded speech—if we are going to make progress in the sociolinguistics of writing.

Read side by side (and alongside recent work in applied linguistics and composition), Lillis’s and Coulmas’s books seem to signal a kind of inevitable coming together of writing and sociolinguistics. Composition studies itself may be in the midst of a sociolinguistic moment. As I write, Suresh Canagarajah has just been awarded the Mina P. Shaughnessy Prize by the Modern Language Association for his 2013 book on translingual practices in writing, a work whose intellectual trajectory is similar to those reviewed here. Indeed if we, like sociolinguists, simply take writing and speech to be two different channels, or two ways of doing language, there is no reason to avoid using the tools developed for studying one to study the other. Why not apply sociolinguistic approaches to the variation of English in writing?

Both Coulmas and Lillis use wide-ranging examples of writing from across the globe in their analyses, and their work has important implications for how we view academic writing in a globalized context. The growing interest in written English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)—an emerging function and/or variety of English developing among worldwide users of the language, as distinct from so-called native Englishes, perhaps better known in composition circles as Lingua Franca English—is instructive here. In the past, ELF has been treated as a wholly spoken phenomenon emerging between two nonnative English speakers (NNES) in conversation. Usage has been seen as highly contextual and less dependent on rules of correctness (or ideologies of correctness) than on the goal of communication.

This is where writing studies speaks back to sociolinguistics: we know from years of theory and research that writing, too, is socially and contextually bound. Thus, written ELF is a legitimate and growing area of study, even if it does not involve the face-to-face communication of two NNES (Bruce Horner, for example, introduced this idea in his 2011 chapter, and the University of Helsinki is currently engaged in large-scale empirical research on written ELF). The sheer number of NNES involved in roles that require written English make written ELF worth investigating, and the fact that we can identify ELF features in the written academic English of NNES academics proves that an appeal to the supposedly more standardized or fixed written code has no more a factual or linguistic basis than the same prescriptive appeals many language scholars condemn when applied to speech.

The preliminary investigations into written ELF make it clear that variation in writing is real and is happening: the traditionally uncountable noun “research,” for example, is rapidly becoming “researches” to many writers and readers; changes in preposition usage is making it increasingly as possible to “discuss about” things as it is to “discuss” them; articles like “the” are beginning to show up in places they were not previously, and to disappear in places where conventional usage would have them. Lillis’s book is itself replete with samples of “nonstandard” writing, academic and otherwise, which is shown to exist in a kind of dynamic interrelationship with standard writing and the language ideologies of those who interact with texts.

These usages are “wrong” according to standard language ideology, which, as James and Lesley Milroy argue in their classic text *Authority in Language*, has the primary goal of suppressing optional variety in language use. But just because standard language ideology has not been particularly successful in regulating speech does not mean that written language is permanently fixed. Language change may be slower in writing, but it does occur. There is strong evidence to suggest that nonstandard ELF writing usage is beginning to be accepted, albeit slowly (for example, the editorial policies of the *Journal of English*

as a *Lingua Franca* do not require a native speaker standard and discourage “polishing” by copyeditors).

Our understanding of standard written English is based on the ideologically monolingual contexts of Great Britain and the United States. The “authority” that complainants against nonstandard language usually invoke come from the written norms of these two countries (especially associated with great national literary traditions). As English continues its worldwide dominance in academic circles, one might expect that its standard written forms also would continue to dominate, since, as Coulmas argues in his third chapter, standardized, written, national languages tend to offer more functional possibilities than minority languages or dialects. But people in countries in which written ELF is emerging do not come to English as a “national” language. Because of the transnational movement and embrace of English, speakers (and writers) of the language are now less likely to see themselves as the continuers and upholders of a grand literary tradition dating back to Shakespeare, Chaucer, Swift, and Dickens. This may still happen with trained language professionals who were educated in humanities-oriented, British-based English education settings, but an enormous number of NNES write in English today, for a number of purposes. There are simply not likely to be the same type of complaints in these societies, and standard English—not only spoken, but very significantly, written English—is not likely to be maintained in the same way.

The challenge that the globalization of English presents to sociolinguistic understandings of how standardization in writing is maintained is also a challenge for teachers and researchers of writing in this Brave New World that has such variation in it. “Foreign” writing in English is hardly the only place where shifting standards occur; one need only to look at the multilingual, multimodal discourse worlds so many of our students live in. Writing studies needs to pay more attention than ever to the influence of social factors on writers and texts that Lillis and Coulmas draw our attention to, not only at the macro level (in terms of social positioning, rhetoric, and discourse styles), but at the micro level as well: syntax, grammar, and diction are all ripe areas of research when we consider—to recontextualize an aphorism about speech from sociolinguist William Labov—why anyone writes anything. Recent approaches to writing influenced by the globalization of English have begun to make these arguments, but the full toolbox of sociolinguistic theory has not been brought to bear on writing yet.

Writing and sociolinguistics have many opportunities to move closer together, not only through the more tolerant approaches to language difference in writing as proposed by the translingual camp—who are certainly influenced by sociolinguistics—but also by importing the important concepts of variation and style from sociolinguistics as an alternative to a focus on errors, especially

since composition studies has been successful in showing that the notion of error itself can be an ideologically inflected construct.

It is time, I think, that writing scholars look more closely at sociolinguistic approaches. Lillis and Coulmas have proven that writing—in every possible sense of the word, from graffiti to poetry to academic essays to Facebook to novels—is as embedded in social context as spoken language is, and that it is worth studying in a way analogous to speech. And while the internationalization of academic writing in English is only one reason for doing so, it remains compelling. Questions like “Whose standard? Which variations?” take on a new, more complex sheen when comparing the published English of academic journals in India and Canada, or China and Singapore, to say nothing of essays, blogs, tweets, texts, and diaries written in those contexts. Not only can we start to see that so-called “errors” in writing may not be—they can be markers of identity, features of other Englishes, purposeful transgressions of a hegemonic standard English—but also we can begin to more broadly investigate ideologies, looking at the uptake of texts by readers, teachers, editors, and other authorities in a variety of contexts. Sociolinguistics and writing studies need each other and need the insights and approaches that the other has developed in order to bring forth deeper, richer areas of inquiry about what writing is, what it does, and the infinitely many ways in which it is done.

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