

# THE TEXTS OF EVERYDAY LIFE: PUBLIC AND PRIVATE IDENTITIES IN VERNACULAR LITERACY PRACTICES

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## Abstract

This paper draws on data collected during an ethnographic study of literacy practices in one local community. It focuses on a case study of one woman, who was editor of a Residents Association newsletter and the editorials she wrote. We look at the “text world” of these editorials and examine the ways in which the editor positions herself in relation to the other inhabitants – groups and individuals – who populate this world. Three kinds of data were collected and juxtaposed in our research: observations of literacy practices, in-depth interviews with participants and the documents entailed in the literacy practices. This research, which starts from a study of literacy practices, leads us to discover new categories of vernacular texts – in this case community group newsletters – which provide a rich and unusual source of data for exploring many issues to do with writer identity, genre, authorship and collaborative writing practices in everyday life. We argue that bringing together the study of *practices* and the study of *texts* offers an enhanced methodology for researching discourse in society.

Key Words: Literacy Practices; Texts; Community; Vernacular; Identity; Change.

## 1. Introduction and general context

In the past few years, a new field of literacy studies has come into being. Researchers have questioned what is meant by literacy and have examined the literacy practices of specific individuals and social groups. The notion of “literacy practices” developed by writers such as Scribner and Cole, 1981; Gee, 1990; Street, 1993 and Reder, 1994 include both mate-

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rial and discursive activities (events) which are mediated by written texts and patterned by social institutions. This new focus has led researchers to move beyond educational and literary settings to explore the practical uses and meanings of literacy to people in their everyday lives and the value these hold for them. It has led to an emphasis on social interactions, power relations and identities in researching literacy and to a consideration of both oral and literate communication strategies and their interconnections. Qualitative research methods from a variety of disciplinary traditions, including anthropology and sociolinguistics have been used, and research has often focused on the detailed description of specific literacy events (as in Heath, 1983; Street, 1993; Hamilton, Barton & Ivanic, 1994). This has been a productive and revealing period and has led to a greater understanding of the nature of literacy (see Barton, 1994; Ivanic, 1997).

At the same time as these developments, linguistics more generally has shifted away from the analysis of words and sentences in isolation towards the study of whole texts and acknowledgement of their social context of use and meaning; there has been an explosion of new ways of analysing texts of all sorts. There are many analyses of discourse, many ways of dealing with texts in order to discover how they actively organise and mediate social relationships (see for example Gee, 1990; Fairclough, 1992; Schiffrin, 1993; Halliday, 1994).

In this paper we bring together the study of literacy practices and the study of texts. The research approach described here starts from a study of everyday literacy practices and events, which are part of the more general socio-cultural practices in which people engage (see Barton and Hamilton, 1998 for further explanation of this approach). Our main sources of research data are a mixture of observation and in-depth interviews with people in their households and local community. In the course of this study of literacy practices, we encounter and collect specific texts. These are the texts of everyday life, the texts of personal life, vernacular texts, generated in the course of everyday activities which are created by people and circulated locally. This is a distinctive constellation of texts which are not usually studied by the analysts of discourse. These are not educational texts, not mass media texts, not the published texts that emanate from and reflect dominant institutions and discourses. Because they are not defined

and constrained by such dominant discourses, the texts of everyday life are more fluid, inventive and hybrid in their discourse characteristics. They provide rich ground for pursuing particular theoretical issues, such as questions of identity and how these are negotiated within the text.

In our analysis of the data generated by our research study, literacy *practices* remain central and we examine how written texts fit into the practices of people's lives, rather than the other way round. In this way we believe that researchers in literacy studies can provide a distinctive contribution to the study of written texts. In this paper we illustrate our approach by focusing on a particular set of literacy practices entailed in the activities of a local residents association. Specifically we will look at the production of a neighbourhood newsletter, the involvement of one of the residents as newsletter editor and the issues of public and private identities which are raised by this example.

### ***The literacy in the community project***

The data on which this paper is based is taken from a 4 year ethnographic study of everyday literacy practices in one local community, Lancaster, in the North West of England. During one full year of this study we carried out interviews and observations with people in 14 case study households in a particular neighbourhood of Lancaster, which we refer to as Springside. We supplemented these sources of information by collecting documents, photographs and other information about the wider community in which the neighbourhood is situated. We have already reported on several aspects of this study, for example in Barton and Padmore, 1991; Padmore, 1994; Barton and Hamilton, 1995; Hamilton, 1998. The research and its theoretical basis are fully described in Barton and Hamilton 1998.

One of our case study households focusses on a 32 year old woman, Shirley Bowker and her family. She is of special interest to us because of the key role she appears to play in the local community and because she appears to be at a point of transition in her life, thus raising interesting issues about her identity. All the people in our study had extensive networks of personal contacts in Springside and beyond, networks which frame their

literacy practices. Shirley is unusual in going beyond her personal, informal networks into more public spheres, mobilising official resources and putting her networks to use to try to get things done in and for the neighbourhood. In her own words, she is “willing to set a ball rolling”. She has strong opinions about local issues and a desire for change.

*Shirley is in her mid-thirties. She lives with her partner, Jack and two sons, aged 9 and 10 years. She was brought up in Lancaster and went to local schools, leaving with 6 CSE's. She moved to Springside – years ago. When she left school she worked for 18 months as a multi litho offset printer in the print unit at the university. After a brief stint in London doing bar-work and printing she returned to Lancaster. She has done a variety of paid part-time jobs since her children were born, including catering, barwork, and slimming and aerobics instructor. She is active in a number of ways in the local community: another resident from Springside, who had moved to the area and been through a particularly traumatic time in her personal life, described Shirley to me as “Springside's Dr. Spock”. Shirley is both formally and informally an important community figure: people depend on her. When her children get older, she is thinking of becoming a local councillor.*

*Shirley does not feel she has any problems with literacy herself and uses it a lot in her day to day life. However, one of her sons has difficulties with reading and writing (he now has a statement of special educational needs as “dyslexic”) and so does her mother. She is aware of a strong literacy tradition and values from her paternal grandparents.*

(extract from field notes)

In both her personal and family life and in her public activities Shirley is constantly linking people, passing on information and resources, and making use of personal contacts and official bodies to achieve her ends. These activities frequently involve print literacy, as well as a whole range of other communicative strategies. For example, she runs a book exchange at a car boot sale, makes machine knitting graphs for friends, works with the local dyslexia association. She sorts out her children's problems at school

and organises a petition among her neighbours. She is confident in her own literacy, and freely both gives and asks for help on tasks that involve written communication. A good example of this is what she did when we asked her to write her pensketch, checking it out with a friend of her son's who had also asked her to look through something he had written for his football club. Of particular interest to us is her involvement in the local Residents' Association, for which she is newsletter editor. The texts we have chosen to look at in this paper are her contributions to 13 monthly newsletters which we collected during the year of our study in Springside.

### ***The residents association and the newsletter texts***

We documented the activities of The Residents Association in detail during our study of the neighbourhood. It was especially interesting to us because as a local organization that aimed to serve and represent the whole neighbourhood, it impinged on all of our case study households in different ways.

The Residents Association was linked to a Housing Action Project which was responsible for housing improvements in the Springside area. The Housing Action Project (HAP) was sponsored by a mixture of private building contractors, local and central government grants. Crucially, it had two paid workers and a local office in Springside which was used as a resource and advice centre for the neighbourhood.

The Residents Association, in contrast, was run by volunteers and had no material resources of its own. Its general function was to develop community activity and a feeling of neighbourhood. It also acted as a conduit for residents' views on issues to do with the building work being carried out through the Housing Action Project. We can see, therefore, that the relationship between the Residents Association and the Housing Action Project is an important one and the nexus of interests involved is quite complex, with scope for conflicts and different perspectives on issues that arose. As we shall see later, there were a number of disputes over the work carried out by the building contractors, including eligibility for grants and responsibilities for clearing up the debris left by the building work.

The residents newsletter was physically produced by Des, one of the paid workers in the HAP office. He typed it onto the office word-processor, pasted it up and duplicated it. It was then hand-delivered by volunteers to all households in Springside. Shirley's editorials are just one part of the text of the newsletter. She wrote them out by hand and gave them to Des in the project office for him to type out. Interesting features of it are that it doesn't look like a professional publication from the type face, it includes graphics and contributions by HAP workers, occasional residents letters and a mixture of news and information. (See Fig. 1) We get the impression from the cajoling tone of Shirley's editorials that it was not always easy to fill the the newsletter so editorial decisions about what to include are generally not hard to make. It is more a case of persuading people to write for it: "please, please send in items for the Newsletter....Come on, put pen to paper" (See Fig. 2., lines 21 - 32).

## **2. Analysing the texts of the residents newsletter**

Having come across these texts, we decided to look more closely at them to see how they fit into and further illuminate what we had already found out about Shirley's broader communicative and literacy practices and the many varied relationships she has with people in the Springside community. We have studied the *text world* of her newsletter editorials, the *textual practices* and the *expressions of identity* contained in them. Although we looked in detail at all thirteen newsletters and the editorials in them, we have chosen one example – from an early newsletter – to discuss in this paper and to illustrate features that are common to all the texts. This text is reproduced as Fig. 2.

### ***The text world of Shirley's editorials***

From examining all thirteen texts we have built up a picture of the *text world* of these newsletters. The *text world* is made up of the people represented or discussed by Shirley in her editorials and what they are doing. Fig. 3 contains a list of the participants in this text world and what they are doing. These are all the people, real and fictional, who are mentioned

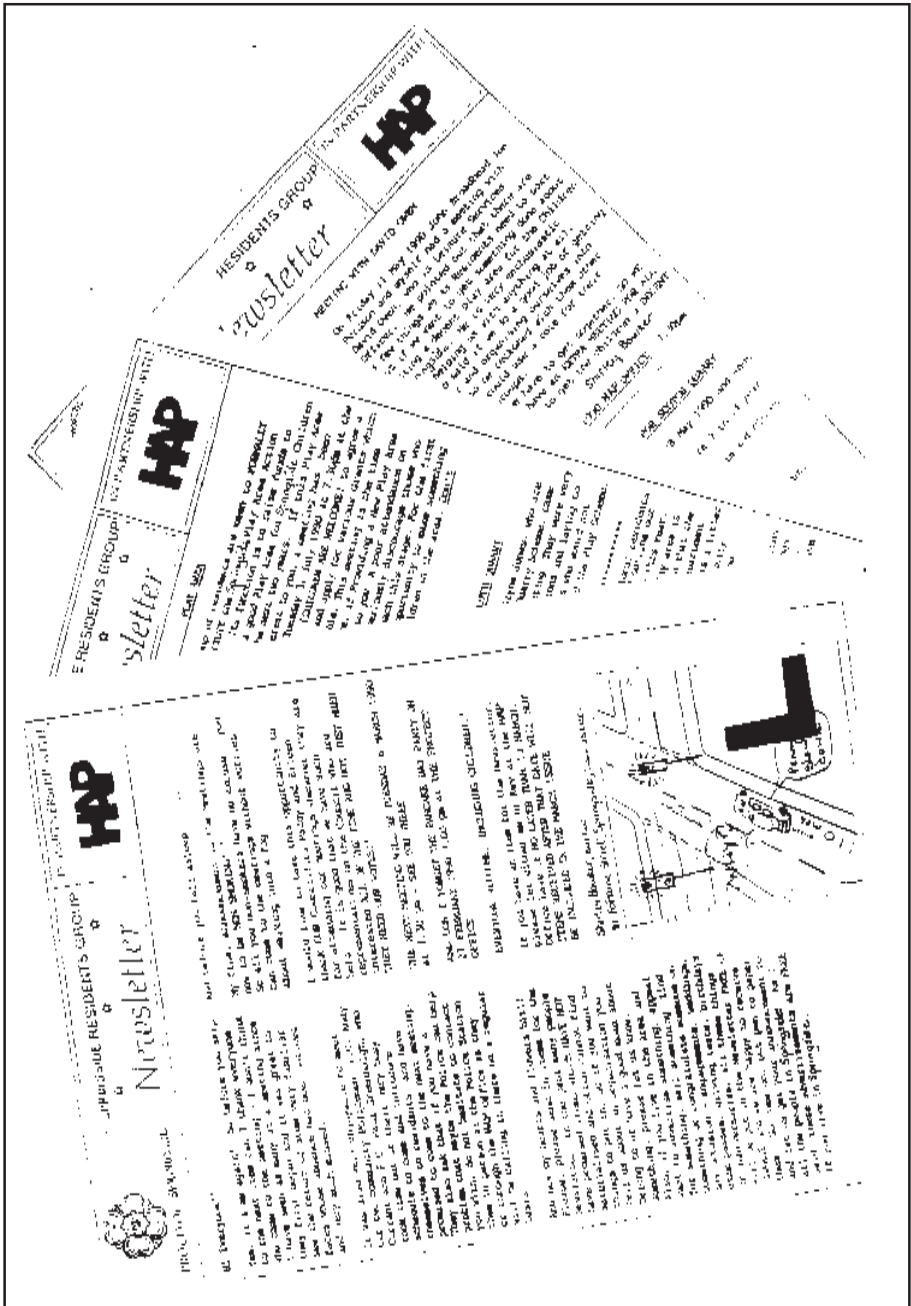
in the texts, along with the activities which are ascribed to them. It includes two policemen, residents, non-smokers, councillors, children, people with dyslexia. The people are thinking, thanking, seeing, noticing, missing coming to meetings, taking time out of busy schedules, calling in. We can see that it contains primarily local people and family members. It also includes some officials from public worlds who are usually named, such as “Mr Ken Hartley, Private Housing Officer” as well as Jason Donovan, Mork and Romanian babies, illustrating Shirley’s use of intertextuality to draw on the assumed shared knowledge with her readers from the mass media, mainly television. Fig. 4 is an artist’s impression of this bustling text world, which we commissioned<sup>1</sup> to give a more vivid impression of the many characters in it and the wide range of activities they are engaged in. This is the world that we as readers of all thirteen newsletters, have constructed.

This is the world on paper created by Shirley. It is not the definitive guide to what is actually happening in Springside, it is Shirley’s version as editor and as represented in the texts of the newsletter. Each person we have interviewed in our ethnographic study constructs their own different (though overlapping) world of Springside in their interview texts. Shirley’s world as seen through interviews with her is not identical to the one she constructs as editor. The world that we glimpse from minutes and observations of residents meetings is again different from what is presented in the newsletters. For example, we know from our interviews with her that Shirley is aware of racism and conflicting self-interests in Springside, but in the newsletter she addresses the residents as one coherent community, all with the same interests at heart. The editorials obliterate or downplay possible differences of interest. Shirley chooses carefully who and what to include in this text. We know from our observations that residents do not participate evenly in the public life of the neighbourhood: meetings are not always well-attended and people do not always come with a single agenda. From all these different sources we can begin to see the interplay of perspectives and the different voices that interrupt our working notion of an unproblematic “community” of Springside.

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<sup>1</sup> The artists impression was drawn by Fiona Ormerod, Lancaster University.

FIGURE 1: Samples of the Springside Residents Newsletter





**FIGURE 2: Extracts from newsletter, written by Shirley.**

Hi Everyone!

Yes, it's me again! So before you skip to the next item can I thank everyone who came to the meeting – I don't think I have seen as many at a meeting since they first began and it was great to see the return of some very familiar faces whose absence had been noticed and very much missed.

It was also very enjoyable to meet our two community Policemen, P.C. Richard Whiteleigh and P.C. Martin Rainford, who took time out of their very busy schedule to come and introduce themselves to residents, and have promised to come to the next meeting. They also ask that if you have a problem that maybe the Police can help you with, do not hesitate to contact them in person at the Police Station or through the Project Office as they will be calling in there on a regular basis.

And now my hearts and flowers bit!! Please, please send in items for the Newsletter, in the past many people have promised items which HAVE NOT materialised and often cannot find things to put in, so if you want to tell us about an organisation you belong to or have a good moan about something, please let us know. Also, if you live in the area and want to advertise something, appeal for something, sell something, find something or congratulate someone on any occasion – engagements, weddings, exam passes, driving tests, birthdays or anniversaries, all these things will be put in the Newsletter FREE OF CHARGE and we are happy to receive them. So come on, put pen to paper and let us get your announcement to all the people in Springside! As I said, these advertisements are FREE if you live in Springside.

And before you fall asleep.....

My final announcement is the Meetings are now to be NON-SMOKING!!! So all you non-smokers have no excuse – you can come to the meetings without worries about walking into a fog.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank OUR Councillors Will and Elaine for attending our Meetings whenever they are held. It is good that we have such representatives on the Council who are interested ALL OF THE TIME AND NOT JUST WHEN THEY NEED OUR VOTES!!

THE NEXT MEETING WILL BE TUESDAY 6 MARCH 1990 at 7.30 pm – SEE YOU THERE.

AND DON'T FORGET THE PANCAKE DAY PARTY ON 27 FEBRUARY 1990 7.00 pm at THE PROJECT OFFICE. EVERYONE WELCOME, INCLUDING CHILDREN!!

If you have an item for the Newsletter please let either me or Des at the Project Office have it NO LATER THAN 13 MARCH. ITEMS RECEIVED AFTER THAT DATE WILL NOT BE INCLUDED IN THE MARCH ISSUE.

#### DYSLEXIA AWARENESS CAMPAIGN

Can I take this opportunity to thank all the people who supported this campaign, hopefully now many more people have become aware of Dyslexia and the problems that arise for people who have Dyslexia.

Leaflets are available at the Project Office, the Citizens Advice Bureau and various other places which have a local number for people to ring in if they need advice or information on Dyslexia, but if you can't find one of the leaflets then the numbers to ring are:

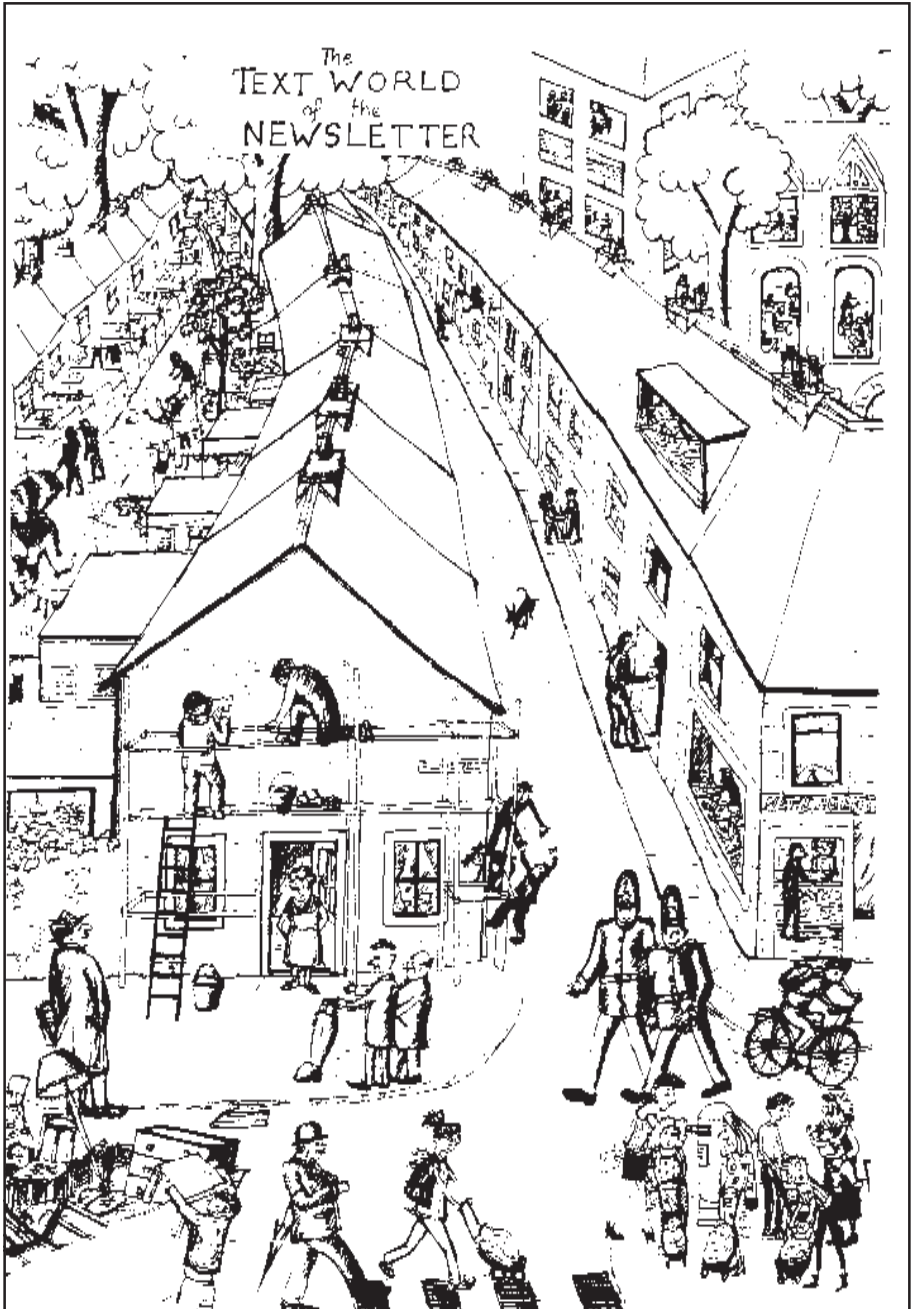
Lancaster 6666- or 7777-

FIGURE 3: The text world of the newsletter

1. **My son** *walked into a lampost*
2. *for adults who also have Dyslexia, writing can be a real chore*
3. **our two community Policemen, P.C. Richard Whiteleigh and P.C. Martin Rainford,** *took time out of their busy schedule*
4. **residents** *are filling skips with household items*
5. **the Police** *can help*
6. **non-smokers** *can come to meetings without worry*
7. **our Councillors Will and Elaine** *attend the meetings*
8. **Children** *welcome*
9. *let Des have newsletter items*
10. *a play by* **Therese Collings**
11. *go and see* **a Street Rep**
12. **a young lady** *hurled abuse*
13. *if you see* **someone looking at your property**
14. **one of the surveyors**
15. **everyone who smokes** *lit up*
16. **Mr A Smith of the Civic Trust** *had ideas*
17. **Geoff, Jeff Brown** *met*
18. **work men** *are sandblasting*
19. **Mr Jim Robson from the Traffic department** *will be here to tell us the results*
20. **two young men** *relieved themselves in a back alley*
21. **Ann** *ringing around, doing hard work*
22. **Sue** *has joined the office*
23. **David Owen who is Leisure Services Officer** *had a meeting*
24. **the bin men** *have been*
25. *You will remember* **Audrey and Kev Manning in the corner shop**
26. *I asked* **the chaps from the Electric board**
27. **Jason Donovan** *is not available*
28. *I want to thank* **Mr Robson**
29. **Mr White the liason officer for Jacksons** *asked me*
30. **children** *are climbing on the scaffolding*
31. **a friend of mine** *fell off the scaffolding*
32. *In the words of* **Mork**
33. *I want to thank* **all deliverers of the newsletter**

34. **Don Black of D T Black Builders** *sponsored the newsletter*
35. **the chaps who were working on my house** *refused a cuppa*
36. **a Liaison Officer** *will deal with problems*
37. **a resident** *had a rat in the kitchen*
38. *thoughtlessness to* **neighbours**
39. *Welcome* **Jill** *to the office*
40. **a couple of young men** *tried to sell me a vacuum cleaner*
41. **my friend's brother** *kept telling me*
42. **our Councillors Elaine Fenton and William O'Neill** *fighting to secure funds*
43. **supporters of the Play Area Action Group** *decided to accept a constitution*
44. *can I thank* **all of Jacksons workers**
45. *Thanks from us* **nerve racked mums**
46. **our little darlings** *have returned to their various institutes of education*
47. **Paul – the Liaison Officer for Tarmac** *is available to residents*
48. *The petition for* **residents who are not in the enveloping scheme** *has been presented*
49. *A letter has been sent to* **the Minister of Housing**
50. **a lady who received some terrible injuries** *falling on the back alley*
51. **Brian, from Morecambe Bay Glass** *has had a heart attack*
52. *the plight of* **the children in Romania**
53. **group of mums with Baby Buggies** *will start a sponsored walk*
54. **Dot** *for more information*
55. **the whole family** *can go along*
56. **Kim Stevens**
57. **our Liason Officers, Paul and Bill** *sit in the dark*
58. *support from* **Ward Councillors, Community Policemen, and Local Builders**
59. *a meeting with* **Mr Ken Hartley, Private Housing Officer**
60. *telephone numbers* **Stan Forrester and Jon** *are*
61. **a certain Officer in the City Council** *is eliminating what he feels is a threat*

FIGURE 4



### ***The textual practices***

Shirley is in some sense at the centre of this text world, since she has created it and chooses who and what is represented in it. Our next step was to look through all the texts to see what Shirley is doing, how she is making the text work for her purposes: her *textual practices*. All thirteen texts are similar in their presentation, length and content and the same kinds of textual practices can be seen throughout. We have chosen one sample text (reproduced in Figs 1 and 2) to illustrate these practices in detail here. The text we have chosen was written in February 1990, and is the second in our series of thirteen editorials.

There is a great deal going on in this text and it may be useful for the reader to peruse it at this point.

In her editorials, Shirley is doing the following:

1. She introduces and thanks people, for example in line 8 of the sample text: *can I thank everyone*, L40 *I would like to take this opportunity to thank*, and similarly L56.
2. She encourages and berates others, often evaluating behaviour, for example in line 17 *do not hesitate*, L21 *please send in items*, L10 *it was great to see...*
3. She informs people about local news. This is a mixture of personal and official news, including the pancake day party, the shopkeeper's heart attack; and imminent builders' deliveries.
4. She represents people. At some times she represents the local community, passing on information and requests to the officials; at other times she represents the official world addressing the local residents, for example in L16 *They [the policemen] also ask*.
5. She tells stories, personal narratives, about local activities. These stories are of particular interest as they usually have a moral to them concerning local life. Her story about her son walking into a disused lamp-post leads to a request that it be removed. The point of her humorous story about the

two young men urinating in the back alley is to stamp out such activity. She personalises local community concerns and introduces serious issues in a humourous way.

One general point to be made about these textual practices that they seem to draw heavily on the discursive conventions of addressing a meeting orally and indeed, this is a familiar context to Shirley where she regularly meets other residents as a group. She is adapting these oral conventions to the written form of the newsletter. There are also traces in some of the editorials of the oral discourse of radio and TV presenters, as in “Yes, it’s me again” and “This is me signing off” and also of letter-writing conventions as in the way she starts the editorial with “Hi everyone!” and signs her name at the end.

### ***Expressions of identity in the texts***

In carrying out these textual practices Shirley is constantly shifting identities and positioning herself and her readers in different ways. This can be clearly seen in her use of the pronouns *I*, *me*, *we*, *us* and *you*. She asserts the following identities:

1. *I* and *you* are used interpersonally to identify author and reader explicitly. She does this frequently, as can be seen at the beginning of the sample text in lines 8, 21 and 34. It begins informally as a letter “*Hi everyone! Yes, it’s me again!*” where *it’s me again* has the intimacy of oral discourse between friends and *me* identifies the author. The reader is addressed in line 8 as *you* and *before you skip*, so from the beginning there is a close link being made between author and reader. This intimacy is reinforced by Shirley’s frequent use of personal names, identifying people and locations around Springside which demonstrates her own close knowledge of the local area and the networks within it. She signs her name at the end “Shirley Bowker, Editor” with her address.

At the end of line 8 *can I thank*, is a slightly different *I*. This is Shirley as editor, and representative of the resident’s association, invested with the authority to thank on behalf of the residents.

2. There are distinct community voices which thread throughout the texts and which Shirley constantly shifts between. These set up boundaries and contrasts between groups in the neighbourhood which are significant to her.

Firstly, we the Springside residents, where she refers to *our area, us as a community*

Secondly, we the residents association, for example L25, *please let us know; L29 we are happy to receive them.*

Thirdly, though not in the current sample, the residents and the association are sometimes combined so that *we* is used to contrast with official outsiders such as the council or the Minister for Housing.

Fourthly, *we* is used to refer to the Housing Action Project as an official organization with paid workers. Although Shirley is a volunteer resident, not a paid worker of the HAP, she sometimes speaks as one of them.

Overall, there is an interesting ambivalence in Shirley's shifting use of *we* in the editorials and there are a considerable number of instances where it is hard to identify for use which voice she is using, as in line 40: *OUR councillors Will and Elaine for attending our meetings.*

3. There are other, specific identities which she draws upon from time to time:

a) *nerve racked mums*. It is as a parent that she brings in the Dyslexia Awareness campaign and where the pancake party is *including children!!*

b) *as a smoker myself*, L 36-8 in relation to smoking policy at meetings.

c) *people who have dyslexia*, are implicitly contrasted with Shirley herself as someone who is able to read in L58.

4. Where Shirley does use the impersonal voice, this in itself is interesting given the highly personalised tone of most of the text. For example, at the end of the first paragraph the impersonalised *it was great, and had been noticed* might cause you to wonder – who noticed? Similarly the next paragraph begins impersonally with *It was also very enjoyable* although they are *our* policemen. A further example of the slide between personal and impersonal voices can be found in line 45, versus lines 50-52. These are all evaluative statements and Shirley is asserting her right as editor to evaluate



on behalf of all residents. She also repeatedly uses the impersonal voice when reporting on the activities of the building contractors, perhaps in order to reinforce the impression of them as an impartial, outside organization.

5. Finally, there are instances that are difficult to classify or appear only once in the texts such as the following:

In line 15 they *have promised to come to the meetings*, this may well be addressing the policemen as much as the residents, a device that Silverman has referred to as “the silent overhearing audience” (see Silverman, 1993).

In L9 *I don't think I have seen* she makes it clear that that she was at the meeting and in fact at all earlier meetings;

These detailed shifts of voice are textual evidence of the complex ways in which Shirley is positioning herself in relation to other people in her text world and we think it provides additional support to our interpretation of her role in the community that has emerged from our other sources of data (interviews and observations) as we will go on to show. In particular they give evidence of Shirley's active stance in bridging the public and private spheres in her neighbourhood, and her desire to act as a catalyst in community activities and to represent the interests of others. The textual evidence of shifting identities adopted by the newsletter editor also interestingly reflects some of the real tensions within the residents association itself, between its role as an informal social group and its more formal functions as a representative body supported by the HAP. There is a real ambiguity here that poses a dilemma for the authority claimed by the newsletter and its editor, and which requires sensitivity to the different interest groups who may be reading it.

### **3. Reflections and practices: other sources of data**

In this section we will look at how this evidence from the newsletters relates to other information we have about Shirley, including her own perceptions of herself. As we have noted above, these sources are complementary rather than identical in what they reveal and each adds depth to our understanding. We have juxtaposed the newsletter

editorials with an extract from our final interview with Shirley (Fig. 5) in which the interviewer is confronting Shirley with our (the researchers) interpretations of her practices for her comments. We had identified her as a key figure in the community, a suggestion which made her laugh. We also identified her as someone whose life is in a state of change, an evaluation with which she agreed.

We want to draw your attention to four points in the interview extract where she is reflecting on her identity and communicative practices, including literacy, and indicate how these are relevant to the earlier points we have made about the textual practices evident in the editorials.

**Crossing between domains:** We have noted in Shirley's editorials that she frequently makes public points using personal examples, and moves frequently between official and unofficial voices. In the interviews with her she articulates a strong perception of herself as crossing boundaries and linking public and private domains. Firstly, in lines 69-78, the interviewer suggests to Shirley that she has a "public self and a private self". This suggestion is the result of earlier conversations with Shirley, in particular a discussion about her aversion to reading newspapers because of the way the media distort and intervene in peoples private lives. Shirley has personal experience of this happening to a friend of hers. Although Shirley recognises this distinction of public/private roles, she is also resists and qualifies it in this interview, emphasising the links between the two domains: "what crosses over". This seems to be very characteristic of her practices in the neighbourhood, where she frequently mobilises her personal networks for public ends and, conversely, makes use of "official" contacts to achieve personal and family goals. She links people with resources and with each other whether it is in running a book exchange, getting a job or organizing a petition amongst her neighbours. The idea of being able to cross between domains, bring people together, is a crucial part of her strategies for getting things done. Her interpretation of what constitutes the private and the public domain is also interesting – family and friends are also neighbours and residents, and her public world is still a very local one. Private is secret and personal (as in "picking your nose", line 81).

**FIGURE 5: Extract from final interview with Shirley**

Int: I was wondering... because you've got these sort of... you play lots of different roles in a sense, that you've got a public self and a private self.

Shi: Yeah.

Int: Are you aware of that? Are you... ?

Shi: Yes I am, yes. I am quite conscious of how I behave in public as opposed to how I behave at home. And I suppose the way the family see me and the way people... friends and neighbours see me tend to be not altogether separate, some of the things cross over obviously like I hope my sense of humour crosses over... I hope the understanding crosses over... but there are things that perhaps you know, I do in my home that I probably... I hope I don't do outside anyway (laughing). You know, whether it's picking my nose or whatever I don't know. (laughs). I'm just hoping that. But I tend to be fairly open all round.

Int: Mm. And are you still thinking of being a Councillor one day?

Shi: Well it's something that keeps cropping up from time to time. Yes. I am hoping that one day a political life perhaps. I feel that as a Councillor I would be able to do more than what I do now. And having good examples in the Councillors that we've got for this ward, I think using them as an example, if I... I'm sure if I followed in their footsteps, yeah, I could certainly do a lot more than what I do now.

Int: And then that thing of the public and private person becomes even more....

Shi: Absolutely. Yeah, yeah.

Int: ....More necessary. It's a strange, strange thing isn't it?

Shi: Yeah, yeah.

Int: Like what you were saying about Paddy Ashdown. I mean suddenly once you become a Councillor or a politician....

Shi: That's right. I don't think I've got anything in my life that I would be ashamed of. Possibly somewhere in my deep and darkest past I possibly have. But...

Int: Also choosing words carefully....

Shi: Mm. Absolutely. Yes. I mean I'd tend to be very... well I am quite well known for being blunt in some of the things that I say. I'm learning very rapidly that my bluntness can be hurtful although sometimes I get quite cross with people. I do lose my temper slightly. I tend to be a good compromiser and if people aren't prepared to compromise then I lose my temper. Because they've then become very tunnel visioned and not prepared to waver from their views and I will at least listen to someone else and I might not agree with their views but I will perhaps then say "Well you know, look, if we then... we're not going to get this if we perhaps go for this instead. Are you happy with that?" And if people are not prepared to come up with a compromise and they're....Then I get very angry with people and sort of say well, you know, sometimes you... sacrifices do have to be made. And you can't always go through life wanting absolutely what you want and going for it come what may. So, yeah, I do think that I am learning very rapidly to be a bit less blunt and to the point. Yeah... calling a spade a spade is one thing but if you call it an object for lifting dirt or whatever from one place to another, it's a very nice or much nicer way of putting it.

**Bringing people together:** We have seen how Shirley creates a harmony of purpose and a feeling of a coherent community group in the way she addresses people in the newsletter editorials. This links in with her statement in the interview in line 110-111 where she says “I tend to be a good compromiser” and we have other examples from her practices that confirm this. For example, she supported a compromise position between the council and local allotment<sup>2</sup> holders when a dispute arose over selling off land for building purposes.

**Getting things done:** Shirley frequently uses her editorials to mobilise people to get things done, whether in the neighbourhood or raising money for Romanian babies. At some points in the editorials she claims authority to represent other people and in the interviews she strongly articulates her interest in being able to do this. In line 87 she says “as a councillor I would be able to do more than what I do now”. What she does now in various ways is to try and bring local people together to influence the council to do things in the neighbourhood: whether it is introducing traffic calming measures, getting children’s play space, defending allotment land or getting more resources for building work. Her statement here confirms her positive view of the councillors that comes over in her editorials and the fact that part of her identity is in aspiring to their role as a more official representative of the local community.<sup>3</sup>

**Choosing words carefully:** Finally, there is evidence in the interview data of some of the choices and pitfalls that Shirley is aware of in the process of writing for a public audience. In line 118 she says “I am learning very rapidly to be a bit less blunt and to the point” – a clear statement of her awareness of being in transition towards a more public figure and the importance of choosing words carefully if you want to get things done and carry others with you. This links in very solidly with evidence we have elsewhere of the everyday writing she does, where she never redrafts personal letters, but has done so very carefully (and in consultation with others) when writing an important official letter to the Education office

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<sup>2</sup> Allotments are communally owned vegetable plots, leased to individual gardeners.

<sup>3</sup> Shirley actually became a local councillor for the first time in April 1995, five years after this data was collected.

about her son. Such awareness is also evident in her astute descriptions of oral strategies she has learned in order to deal with difficult and influential people. Example of these are: Shirley trying to persuade her child's headmistress to make a change by making it seem as if an idea has come from the headmistress herself; and an editorial dilemma she describes about whether to publish material in the newsletter which she felt would polarise opinion and accentuate "negative" feelings. This was a resident's letter which was critical, particularly of the councillors and the compromise plan around the allotment land.

#### **4. Conclusions**

This paper has made two related points about our distinctive contribution to the methodology of discourse analysis, which has been to bring together the study of literacy as socio-cultural practice and the detailed study of texts in a process of triangulation. We have juxtaposed three sources of data: observations of literacy practices, interviews about them and analysis of the documents entailed in them.

The first point we have made is that it is important to *start from socio-cultural practices* as a way of identifying relevant texts to study. We have argued in this paper that research which can integrate the analysis of texts with the analysis of socio-cultural practice offers a powerful strategy for understanding a phenomenon such as literacy. As we have emphasised, it has been our focus on Shirley's literacy practices that brought the newsletter texts to our attention. It is our knowledge about her *practices* that shapes the selection of texts we choose to study. However, once we have them, they themselves complement and enrich our other sources of data. The interview is a kind of text in its own right, one which informs us about the perceptions and meanings of literacy practices to those who engage in them. Observations give us access to the details of material practices and events. Documents offer us the opportunity to carry out detailed analyses of textual practices and, in this case, further confirm and illuminate our understandings of Shirley's literacy practices and how they are implicated in her shifting identity as a community activist.

We have used the newsletter editorials to focus on the identity issues that are particularly interesting in relation to Shirley and the positioning of the Residents Association in the Springside community. These issues are not the only features of the newsletters that could have been pursued: we could have used them to examine other issues, such as the cohesion of the Springside community, the range of social and commercial activities residents engage in, the way local information is disseminated and discussed, the ways in which people participate unevenly in local social networks of this kind.

Close analysis of the texts themselves has an important contribution to make to our understanding of practices when we juxtapose them with other sources. In the texts we have used here, we can track in very specific detail the multiple ways in which this one writer positions herself in relation to other people in her local neighbourhood. This has deepened and focused our analysis of her literacy practices, observing how she is moving from private to public identities, from personal life-world politics to local community politics, identifying the associated tensions and possibilities in these shifts.

The second point we have made in this paper is that *vernacular texts are a relatively unexplored category of texts* that offer a great deal in terms of bringing our attention to particular theoretical issues, such as identity, and provide rich possibilities for analysing such issues.

The newsletters that Shirley produced and which have been the focus of this paper are just one example of a whole genre of local newsletters which we have discovered during the course of our research. We have documented the existence of many other community groups and a number of these have newsletters (Barton and Hamilton, 1995). Other newsletters we have collected examples of include a local evangelical church, the parent-teacher associations of various schools, the organic gardeners group, The Civic Society, the local Labour party and local community centres. Other groups – like some allotment associations and sports groups – have active committee structures but no newsletters. In some allotment associations, all communication is done by word of mouth or posted on allotment bulletin boards near the plots.

We did not set out to look at newsletters from informal community groups but they have emerged as a common and established form of vernacular literacy practice in our local community. We would argue that our research strategy has led us to “discover” this category of texts which have not been attended to by other researchers interested in discourse and society, and which are highly interesting in their own right.

In the example of Shirley, described in detail in this paper, it is very clear what the practices were surrounding the Residents Newsletter, and how these reflect Shirley’s personal stance in relation to her community and the ambiguous position of the residents association as a community group. If we were to look at more broadly at the practices involved in producing community newsletters, we would want to explore some of the following questions, which are prompted by our theoretical approach to literacy as social practice. (Barton 1994). The questions revolve around the nature of informal learning, the variety and invention of literacy genres; notions of domain and purpose, and the social relationships that constitute literacy practices:

**How do people learn how to produce a newsletter and to recognise what is appropriate content, format and presentation for such a document?** The content, style and production process of informal newsletters is not fixed by outside conventions but is fluid, creative and personal, to some extent re-invented by each group. However, people will bring their own personal histories as writers and communicators to bear on this new task (for example their previous experience of writing letters or reports, addressing meetings). They will draw on models from other groups and past traditions – identified either by more experienced members of the group or brought in from elsewhere by new members. For example, we know that Shirley had earlier helped produce the PTA newsletter at her child’s school, offering her a previous model for her editorial work.

The non-professional, unofficial style of writing and presentation that we observed in the resident’s association newsletter and others, may actually be seen as an advantage in this setting, since it signals something about the composition of the group and its local roots and resources – but this may not be a deliberate “image”. Even the type of paper used can be



important: for example, the newsletter of the organic gardeners association was printed on paper that has already been used, with irrelevant writing on the back, and this is in keeping with its commitment to re-cycling resources.

**What discourses and resources do people draw on in writing them?** We have seen how Shirley, in her editorials drew on oral strategies and intertextuality from popular media and humor, incorporating elements of telephone discourse, personal letters, advertising discourse, and official announcements, depending on the content of her editorials and her shifting identities in relation to her reader. We would like to explore the range and variety of discourses that appear in other newsletters and the extent to which each newsletter is idiosyncratic to its editors. Do different newsletter genres exist (for example there may be different traditions in sports- or church-related groups)?

**What are peoples' aims and strategies in engaging in these literacy practices? In what ways are they individual or collective initiatives?** As we have seen Shirley's involvement as editor meshes with her personal concerns, otherwise she would not have taken on the role, but as editor her words are also framed by the function of the group she represents and how it is perceived by other residents.

In the case we have documented, the newsletter was a collective effort, in the sense that the person actually signing their name to it will not necessarily have typed it up or laid it out and they might have asked a friend, relative or other member of the group for ideas and help in writing it. How far is this typical? Are there occasions where the newsletter is more individually produced?

**What authorial, organizational and production roles do people devise for carrying out these aims and strategies?** The authorial stance must be to some extent at least a personal decision and does put a special stamp on the newsletter. Likewise the way the newsletter is produced and what roles people take will depend on the aims and function of the group and the available resources. Local groups will make use of physical resources available in the community, (for example a word-processor) in producing their newsletters. The strategies adopted will depend on the number of people available to do the actual hard work of running a group and producing

a newsletter and the enthusiasm of contributors: how common, for example, is the cajoling, mobilising tone of Shirley's editorials?

These are some of the possible issues for future research into a particular category of vernacular texts, framed by a social theory of literacy. They illustrate the potential richness of data that is generated by a strategy of identifying significant texts from a study of practices and moving between the two in a cyclical way to develop an understanding of contemporary literacies.

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