

Part I

The Anthropology of Writing: Writing as Social and Cultural Practice

Chapter One

What Is the Anthropology of Writing?

David Barton and Uta Papen

Introduction

Writing is an everyday communicative practice which pervades our lives, at individual as well as societal level. Given the omnipresence of the written word, research into the role of written language in everyday communication is at the heart of understanding contemporary forms of social interaction, between institutions and communities as well as between individuals. A range of new technologies have led people to develop extensive new writing practices. These new ways of writing are central to how we work and live, to how governments communicate and how economies operate. Thus, writing research is essential for understanding contemporary life and contemporary institutions.

The present book brings together two substantial research traditions on writing: the Anthropology of Writing, developed largely in France, and the (New) Literacy Studies, originating mainly in Britain, North America and other English speaking countries. For the past decades, these two traditions have developed separately from each other within different theoretical and disciplinary traditions, and there has been little exchange of expertise and cross-referencing of work. With notable exceptions, francophone research on writing is virtually unknown in the English-speaking world and anglophone researchers are little known in the francophone world. The present book aims to change this and to open up a dialogue between these two strands of writing researching. Its 11 chapters offer examples of current research and provide insights into prominent themes and key theoretical concepts of writing research in franco- and anglophone contexts. In this first chapter, we set the scene for the remaining sections. We start with an introduction to the study of writing and its link to different disciplines, particularly anthropology. This is followed by a discussion of what we mean when we

talk about the anthropology of writing. In the third and fourth sections of this chapter, we introduce the anglo- and francophone research traditions. The perspective is comparative, identifying similarities and differences in theory and research in both contexts.

The Study of Writing within Anthropology and Other Disciplines

We are participating in broad cultural shifts in the nature of knowledge and the nature of communication. Writing is crucial to these and its role is changing. We live in a textually mediated world where writing is central to society, its cultural practices and institutions. Writing also plays a major part in people's everyday activities, be it at home or at work.

Writing is an appropriate topic for anthropological scrutiny: It was created by people and is passed on culturally; it has symbolic value and material aspects; and it is crucial to interaction between people and central to knowledge creation. However, traditional anthropology had little interest in the study of writing and written texts. The reason for this is simple. When the discipline of anthropology was born, its eyes were firmly fixed on the 'exotic' or the cultural 'other'. In most cases this 'other' was a society that did not rely on writing for communication. Anthropologists studied oral cultures. The 'texts' they examined were oral genres such as songs, poems and incantations. In British anthropology of the classical structural-functionalist period, as Barber (2007) points out, even these locally produced oral texts were mostly treated as 'data' to provide insights into the beliefs and morals of a group of people. Hardly ever were anthropologists interested in these oral texts as themselves located in cultural practices. The focus in American anthropology was also on traditional oral cultures within the Americas. By defining the other as 'oral' cultures, writing implicitly, and later explicitly (in the work of Goody, 1977), provided the dividing line between the researcher and the researched. Anthropologists of the early to mid-twentieth century usually studied societies in isolation without making relation to the complexity of the global relations they were part of. They hardly acknowledged the (mostly) colonial links which enabled them to be present in these societies and in fact sometimes to contribute to bringing new practices, including writing, to these societies.

Writing was something which belonged to the anthropologists and they did not turn their gaze upon themselves and their own writing.

In contemporary anthropology, much of this has changed. Key turning points were the demise of colonial regimes from the 1950s onwards and later the publication of Clifford and Marcus' 'Writing culture' (1986) and the responses to it (such as Behar & Gordon, 1996; James, Hockey & Dawson, 1997). Since then anthropology has moved away from a sole focus on the exotic and turned its gaze towards the researchers' own societies. With anthropology no longer necessarily being an anthropology of the other, writing has become part of what constitutes the discipline's subject matter. To understand contemporary Western cultures, writing and written texts can hardly be ignored. We live, as sociologist Dorothy Smith (1999) has suggested in a 'textually mediated social world'. But writing has also become a common tool of communication in societies that were previously oral and which are part of the 'exotic' world that classical anthropology studied. Thus writing, as the subject of enquiry, should be regarded as a cross-cultural and global phenomenon.

Examining written texts is essential for understanding how societies operate and are organized, how institutions communicate with the public, how work is being done, how individuals and social groups organize their lives and make sense of their experiences and how cultures in all their variations are produced and reproduced. It has been observed that much contemporary social change brings with it an increasing 'textualisation' of social interaction (as in Iedema & Scheeres, 2003). This is, for example, the case of many workplaces and work-related policies such as the move towards global structures of quality control in manufacturing (Folinsbee, 2004). Cultures of work and production therefore have changed and the increased use of written texts is a central element of these transitions. Writing is also more and more prominently used in private and leisure-oriented contexts, where the growing availability of digital technologies allows more and more people to create social bonds and affinity groups (Gee, 2004) often focussing around specific interests, such as video games. Such networks rely on writing as their primary mode of communication, although as the studies in this book will show, this writing is located in multimodal meaning making. These and other studies show that written texts are central to culture, understood here in a broad sense.

The case for studying writing from an anthropological perspective thus is compelling. As both a key cultural practice and a product of culture itself, writing is certainly explored in many anthropological works. Nevertheless, there have only been a few studies where writing has been a central concern for contemporary anthropologists, such as the studies in Behar and Gordon (1996). Anthropologists have rarely used literacy as an entry point or as a lens to study broader cultural phenomena. This, however, is what in our view constitutes the anthropology of writing. We will return to this in the next subsection.

As one approach, the field of linguistic anthropology, as framed in Duranti (1997, chapter 1), brings anthropological approaches to address language issues. Linguistic anthropology has focussed attention on themes such as participation, indexicality and performance, but largely in relation to spoken language. The researchers' focus here has been on spoken interaction; writing has been seen as something which researchers do and has not been subject to academic scrutiny. Frequently, literacy is dealt with primarily in relation to learning (as in Baquedano-López, 2004) and the general cultural uses and meaning of literacy are not addressed. However, other work such as Foley (1997) and Duranti (2001) provide a broader view, arguing for the study of literacy practices to be an integral part of anthropological linguistics.

A further reason explaining the marginal role of writing as a field of research within anthropology is that literacy has always been an interdisciplinary field of research. Whilst some key researchers are anthropologists, much research on writing is also done by linguists, literary theorists, historians, education researchers, sociologists and psychologists, often drawing upon ethnographic methods derived from anthropology, but not identifying themselves as anthropologists. Even where anthropologists are amongst those studying writing, as literacy researchers they are more likely to be affiliated to interdisciplinary teams of researchers or to the disciplines of linguistics or education rather than working with anthropology as their primary frame of reference.

What is the anthropology of writing?

In the previous section, we have made the case for studying writing as a central aspect of culture and society. In doing so, we have argued for the need to develop an anthropology of writing. What, however, is this

Anthropology of Writing and what makes it specific and distinguishable from other research on writing? We begin to address this question by looking at the variety of approaches to the study of literacy that exist and how they relate to what we are doing in the present book.

There is growing interest in written language across disciplines. To some extent these areas are converging and an anthropological approach, although different from some of these perspectives, builds upon them and puts them in a broader context. A major strand of research within linguistics is the *discourse analysis of texts* (Fairclough, 2003; Wodak & Krzyzanowski, 2008) where the focus is on the role of language in the reproduction and transformation of social processes and structures. Compared to this approach, an anthropological perspective on writing, as the chapters in this book illustrate, goes beyond analysing the products of writing, that is, the texts that writers produce. Its core interest is to examine the processes of production and use of texts.

A second strand of research on writing is informed by a *literary perspective*. This research is focussed on highly visible and valued pieces of writing, primarily the work of novelists. The focus is on the texts and increasingly the practices of producing and using them, providing a history of books and of literary reading. Examples of this important strand of research include Altick (1957); Boyarin (1993); Eliot and Rose (2007) and Colclough (2007). Allied to this are studies of the book as a cultural object (as in Finkelstein & McCleery, 2002), again focussing primarily but not exclusively on literary production. The *Anthropology of Writing* includes research of a different kind. As the chapters contained in this book show, we do not privilege literary forms of writing and we have broad notions of authorship and creativity (as in Pontille, 2004, and Papen & Tusting, 2008). Furthermore, the studies in this book examine everyday acts of writing and their significance in relation to private life and to work. Such writing may at times appear to be mundane and routine. But it is central to how societies operate and to the ways individuals relate to each other and to institutions. Examples discussed in the book include writing in areas such as farming, photo-sharing, childcare work and healthcare.

As a third approach, writing is often studied by *historians*. Many historical studies of writing share a great deal with studies of contemporary cultures of written texts. There are studies tracing the historical development of practices around texts, such as those by Cressy (1980)

and Clanchy (1993). Historians of culture approach the study of writing from a similar perspective to researchers studying writing in contemporary societies. Both share the interest in the role of writing in specific social and cultural contexts and the focus on a variety of genres and practices. In France, the work of Roger Chartier, discussed below, is particularly important and it is widely drawn on by those researching contemporary writing. There are three chapters on historical writing practices included in Part IV of the present book.

Finally, writing is of course studied from an *educational perspective*. As noted above, writing is often viewed in terms of only learning and education. This has been as true of anthropological approaches to writing as of other disciplines, and issues of learning provided the framing for a key early call for the study of writing to take a broader view (Szwed, 1981). The field of literacy education, populated by psychologists, education researchers, linguists and others, examines how writing is taught and learned, what forms of texts are valued by educational institutions and what writing skills children and adults need as members of their communities and societies. From an anthropological point of view, the forms and structures of literacy education are an object of study in themselves. However, they are not at the centre of what the anthropology of writing aims to achieve. Generally speaking, we are interested in writing as 'more than skills' (Papen, 2005). We focus on writing as an activity or as something people do. What people do with written texts does of course relate to the abilities they have. But the focus here is not on measuring people's skills levels and we study writing in a great variety of social and cultural contexts beyond education. Accepting the importance of this body of studies on writing outside education, Baynham (2004) examines how ethnographers of literacy can re-engage with education.

In summary, we can see that various approaches to the study of writing exist, all of which to greater or lesser extent overlap with the perspective we present here and which we will define now. Primarily, an anthropological perspective on writing means to examine writing as both cultural and social practice. Anthropologists define culture as the 'abilities, notions and forms of behaviour persons have acquired as members of society' (Eriksen, 2001: 3). Culture refers to those aspects of humanity that are not natural but which are created. Writing certainly is part of culture understood in this way. Culture is closely related to society, and anthropology has always concerned itself with both the

cultural and the social. Society is everything that has to do with how humans interact and organize their life. We may want to say that society is the space, physical as well as mental, within which culture 'lives'. It is through individuals' participation in social life, through their interaction with others and their relationship to others and to institutions, that culture emerges and is played out. Drawing on the association of culture with society, the anthropology of writing can then be defined as the comparative study of writing as social and cultural practice.

The idea of writing as an activity and studying what people do with texts is central to our approach. As such, writing is always located within specific social and cultural contexts. Studying writing means examining how different social and institutional contexts generate and shape specific forms of writing. This includes understanding what functions these texts serve and how different actors appropriate and make sense of them. But writing is not only social, it also relates to culture. In order to understand how writing and written texts are used by different people in different contexts, we need to examine the values, beliefs and behaviours that are associated with different forms of writing. This is where analysis of the social and the cultural merge.

Finally, the anthropology of writing is defined by its methodology. In order to understand writing as social and cultural practice, we need research tools allowing us to explore the activity and contexts of writing and the meaning their users, readers and writers, bring to these. Our methods are ethnographic and, in some cases, historical. They have in common an emphasis on the users and producers of texts and on the ways they engage with the broader social practices and discourses their actions are part of. Historical studies, while obviously relying on a different set of methods, adopt a similar perspective and provide insights into people's practices. In moving from researching only the other to including our own culture, ethnographic approaches have developed alongside other qualitative approaches to provide more explicit methodologies (Heath & Street, 2008) and to address issues of research methods common to all the social sciences (as in Silverman, 2004; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Davies, 2007).

One of the main principles of ethnography, as Latour and Woolgar (1986: 279) point out, is that 'the anthropologist *does not know* the nature of the society under study, nor where to draw the boundaries between the realms of technical, social, scientific, natural and so on . . . We retain from ethnography the working principle of *uncertainty* rather than the

notion of exoticism.’ This is also important for the anthropology of writing. We do not presume that we know the kind of writing practices that are used in the communities we study.

In the following section, we carry on to define the anthropology of writing by looking at its scope of inquiry.

The scope of the anthropology of writing

An anthropological gaze on writing includes all forms and types of writing practices. It covers a variety of areas of social and institutional life. As the chapters in this book illustrate, such a gaze goes beyond known genres and established views of what constitutes writing and what writing has authority in specific contexts. We look at forms of writing that are incipient and ordinary, often invisible and hardly known, frequently ignored or mistakenly taken for irrelevant. Several of the chapters in this book examine what could be called ‘ordinary’ (Lyons, 2007) or ‘vernacular’ (Barton, 2007) forms of writing. Vernacular, in our understanding, may be ‘ordinary’ in the sense of being mundane and routine. It may be incidental and not recognized as valid and valuable by dominant institutions of society. But ordinary writing is not necessarily associated with the writing of the poor and the uneducated. It is not necessarily a sign of an ‘incomplete or transitional literacy’, as Lyons (2007: 29) defines it. Highly educated people produce ordinary types of writing and something that is routine and incidental does not necessarily neglect standard spelling and grammar. Vernacular writings may contrast with formal genres less because of an inadequate mastery of correct writing by those who engage with it but because of the nature of communication and social interaction in the given context.

Ordinary or not, the types of texts that the chapters in this book examine are all discussed in relation to events and practices that whilst being part of people’s ‘ordinary’ life, are often related to broad, complex and at times extraordinary social events. These are discussed in relation to issues that are at the heart of contemporary anthropology: knowledge and power, identity, social change and the interface between local and global spaces. These broader dimensions reveal the significance of acts of writing or writing practices (for explanations of these two phrases see further below) in relation to individual people’s lives as much as they shed light on wider processes of social and cultural change.

Having discussed the nature and scope of the anthropology of writing, the two following sections provide an overview of anglo- and francophone research on writing.

The Anglophone Tradition of Literacy Studies Research

In the past 30 years, the anglophone field of (new) literacy studies has developed and built up a range of studies of the role of reading and writing in society. Its inspiration has been multidisciplinary but it is strongly influenced by anthropological traditions, particularly in the way that its methodology has been primarily ethnographic.

In the United States, a key foundation of literacy studies was the work of Shirley Brice Heath (1983) researching the disjuncture between family and school ways of using language and literacy in Appalachian communities in the United States. This research can be located as part of a broader tradition of using anthropological approaches to understanding social aspects of language identified with the work of Dell Hymes and his associates in the early 1970s, with a call to 'reinvent anthropology', partly by making ethnographic approaches central (Hymes, 1972; 1982). This work was crucial in the development of the fields of sociolinguistics and the ethnography of communication. These areas focussed largely on spoken language but they provided a strong influence on the field of literacy studies, as it developed in the Anglo-American context. Early on, Basso (1974) referred to the ethnography of writing. Heath's use of the concept of 'literacy event' became central to literacy studies and was partly developed in parallel to the idea of the sociolinguistic notion of 'speech event'.

The other key idea for literacy studies alongside literacy events is that of literacy practices, that reading and writing are located in social practices. Applying the term practices to literacy has its roots in the work of the anthropologist Brian Street researching in Iran (1984) and the cultural psychologists Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole's studies in Liberia (1981). Taken together, the terms event and practice are key units of analysis which link theory and methodology and which have proved useful in understanding reading and writing. Literacy practices refer to the general cultural ways of using reading and writing and a literacy event is a particular instance of people drawing upon their cultural knowledge (Barton, 2007: 35–37). Researchers identify particular

configurations of literacy practices in different contexts which can then be referred to as different literacies. The notion of event becomes an empirical phenomenon, providing a starting point for analysing interactions (Papen, 2005). The concept has proved useful in research in different domains of life, although research has also identified the complexity of events nested within events and chains of events linked together (Barton & Hamilton, 2005; Kell, 2005). The concept of literacy practices provides a way of bringing in broader cultural and structural aspects and linking to issues of power. Practices can be seen as more theoretical, providing regularities and patterns which are abstracted from particular events (Barton, 2007).

There have now been a wide range of studies identifying the distinct literacies in different domains of life, including studies of everyday life (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Gregory & Williams, 2000), multilingual contexts (Perez, 1998; Martin-Jones & Jones, 2000); religion (Kapitske, 1995) and workplaces (Gowen, 1992; Hull, 1997; Belfiore et al., 2004). Work covers a range of cultures including Street's work in Iran (1993); Besnier's in Tuvalu (1995), Ahearn's study of the writing of love letters in western Nepal (2001); a set of studies in South Africa (Prinsloo & Breier, 1996). There have been studies of indigenous literacies in the Americas (Boone & Mignolo, 1994), including the place of writing in an indigenous community in Ecuador (Wogan, 2004) and a study of scribes and their clients in Mexico (Kalman, 1999). Vernacular texts and practices have been studied in Central Africa (Blommaert, 2008) and in Namibia (Papen, 2007). Work has also begun to unpack the dynamics of different literacies within any specific context (as in Ivanic et al., 2009, in relation to education).

One repeated finding from literacy studies research has been the importance of other people in a person's literacy practices. Barton and Hamilton (1998), for instance, have shown the importance of networks of support. Other research has referred to the scribes, mentors, brokers and mediators of literacy practices (see Malan, 1996; Baynham & Masing, 2000; articles in Baynham & Prinsloo, 2009) and the significance of groups, whether they be communities of practice or affinity groups (Barton & Tusting, 2005). Deborah Brandt (1998, 2009) refers to sponsors: she talks of the role of individuals and institutions acting as sponsors of literacy practices and as supporters and facilitators for people. Institutional sponsors can include businesses, governments and religions. Such sponsors support specific views of the nature of reading

and writing and advocate on behalf of these views. The detailed work of literacy studies also shows the ways in which written texts are detachable from the social situation that originally produced them or from the place where they were first used (Blommaert, 2008). Written documents are constantly being reused and recontextualized and they move between physical places and social spaces. Texts therefore need to be studied in terms of what they are beyond a specific moment of use, beyond a specific 'literacy event' or 'writing act'. They need to be studied in context and 'in place' (as in Scollon & Scollon, 2003) while also considering the fact that these contexts and spaces vary, multiply and overlap.

Researchers in literacy studies have realized that in order to understand the role of writing in relation to culture they need to bring in broader framings of other socio-cultural theories. When linking to broader socio-cultural frameworks, two areas of research which have been drawn upon in Anglo-American research on writing are work on communities of practice (as in Barton & Tusting, 2005) and Actor Network Theory (ANT) (e.g. Brandt & Clinton, 2002; Clarke, 2002; Hamilton, 2009; Leander & Loworn, 2006, as well as French researchers discussed below). Interestingly, the originators of both these approaches identify the roots of their work to be in anthropology and the theories they developed to be based upon detailed ethnographic data (Lave, 1988; Wenger, 1998; Latour & Woolgar, 1986). We would also argue that both communities of practices researchers and ANT researchers put written language as central, even if they don't make this explicit. Both of these approaches talk of stable entities which are portable across contexts: Wenger talks of 'reifications' as a crucial aspect of communities of practice (1998: 58–60) and, similarly, Latour talks of 'immutable mobiles' which can be used to coordinate action across distances (1987: 227–229). Although in both cases they provide details of a wide range of semiotic resources, most of their examples, and the ones they examine in detail, are in fact literacy related. (See Barton & Hamilton, 2005: 25–31 for more on this.) Researchers with similar frameworks in other disciplines are also contributing, as with the institutional ethnography of sociologist Dorothy Smith which draws upon feminist theory (1990, 2005) using concepts such as embodied knowledge. Elsewhere she details ways of bringing texts into ethnographic research (Smith, 2006). Linguist Graham Smart has examined the role of texts in financial institutions drawing on notions of discourses and genres (Smart, 2006). Bourdieu's work has also been drawn upon in literacy studies,

where researchers have utilized concepts including habitus, field, cultural capital and symbolic activity; see, for example, the studies in Williams and Zengler (2007), Purcell-Gates (2007), and Albright and Luke (2008), and also the study by Collins and Slembrouck (2007). Literacy studies can also be located in the broader developing field of linguistic ethnography in Britain which includes literacy as a key topic (Rampton, Maybin & Tusting, 2007; Creese, 2008; Maybin & Tusting, 2010). Other researchers locate the study of writing within multimodal meaning making (such as Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; Jewitt, 2009), and we do not cover the extensive literature on literacy and education here.

One final anthropological approach has been the work of Jack Goody, an influential British anthropologist who has written extensively about literacy and other topics, arguing that there is a 'great divide' between oral and literate both at the level of cultures and of individuals (Goody, 1977). A critique of this thesis from the point of view of literacy studies has been made in detail by Street (1984), Gee (1996), Barton and Hamilton (1996) and others. The strong rejection of the claim of a great divide between literate and non-literate people and cultures has been central to the development of the field of literacy studies. An empirical ethnographic approach has been crucial in demonstrating, for example, that people who cannot read and write and people with low levels of literacy nevertheless participate in complex literacy practices (as in Reder, 1994, and as some of the studies in Prinsloo & Breier, 1996, amongst others, show). Literacy does not in itself have effects, but is located in practices as Collins and Blot (2003) work through in detail in relation to Goody's work. They show the changes in Goody's thinking over time, so that for instance in Goody (2000) the notion of technology is broadened and seems to include social practices (see Collins & Blot, 2003: 169–170), but they remain unconvinced that Goody's more recent work takes account of the empirical evidence of literacy studies research. More recently, Olson and Cole (2006) have brought together a re-evaluation of Goody's work, looking more broadly at his contribution and we return to the importance of Goody's influence when discussing francophone research.

Francophone Research on Writing

Writing has long been a topic of interest in francophone research. Contemporary work is influenced by a variety of theoretical positions

and academic disciplines, including history, anthropology, sociology and linguistics. There is, however, less of a recognizable and established 'tradition' of work comparable to literacy studies in the anglophone world. Nevertheless, francophone research on writing is informed by similar theoretical perspectives and methodologies, which can be recognized if not as a 'tradition' then as a set of studies with identifiable features. In the following sections, we provide an overview of this body of research. Using examples of the studies in this volume and elsewhere, we focus in particular on the theoretical concepts which francophone researchers draw on, comparing these with the work done by anglophone researchers.

To begin with, historical studies are prominent within francophone research on writing. Comparing British and French work, it is fair to say that there have been more historical studies in French and that overall the work by historians has had greater influence on studies of contemporary practices than is the case in the anglophone world. The act of reading and the development of a culture of book reading, for example, have been prominently studied (Chartier, 1994; Martin & Chartier, 1982). Chapters Ten and Eleven of this volume exemplify the strength of historical studies. Both chapters also show the similarities in perspective and theoretical orientation between historical and contemporary studies. This is partly a result of the influence historians, in particular Roger Chartier, have had on the development of writing research in France. Chartier and colleagues have not only shaped the ideas of historians interested in writing, but their work is frequently drawn on by sociologists, anthropologists and others studying contemporary practices and cultures of writing (see, for example, Mbodj-Pouye, Chapter Seven and Joly, Chapter Five in this volume). Several of the contributors to this book acknowledge the influence of Chartier, either directly, or indirectly via the work of French sociologist Bernard Lahire, whose contribution will be discussed further below.

The notion of *pratiques de l'écrit*, which Chartier was not the first one to use, but which he developed, is used by many francophone researchers. *Pratiques de l'écrit* cover both reading and writing (Chartier, 1986). While Chartier was primarily interested in the development of reading practices from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, he examined reading in the broader contexts of how within a specific society at a given point in time texts were being produced and used. Reading, he argues, cannot be understood without taking account of writing practices and

of the processes of the production of books and other texts (Chartier, 1994). The French-Canadian researcher B elisle (2006) specifies that *pratiques de l' crit* denotes the use of written language in the broad sense and that written texts are not only used by those who are able to decode them. *Pratiques de l' crit* include the 'production, dissemination, consuming, reproduction and transformation' (B elisle, 2006: 7, our translation) of texts.

In 'The order of books' (1994) Chartier explains what a history of reading must capture: incorporating elements of literary analysis and bibliographical study such a project aims to understand the 'specific mechanisms that distinguish the various communities of readers and traditions of reading' (Chartier, 1994: 4). In order to understand how people read, he argues, we need to ascertain the conventions and norms of reading that are specific to different communities of readers, what they deem to be legitimate uses of books and legitimate ways of reading and understanding written texts. We could also say that we need to identify different reading and writing *practices*. Talking about such practices allows Chartier to draw the researcher's attention away from the book or the text to the reader and their 'tactics' (de Certeau, 1984) of reading and meaning making.

We can see from the above that Chartier's *pratiques de l' crit* is conceptually very similar to the English 'literacy practices', described earlier. Both phrases highlight the socially situated nature of reading and writing. Literacy practices are understood to be always embedded in broader social practices. Chartier too talks about reading, writing and books as 'anchored in the practices and the institutions of the social world' (Chartier, 1994: x). Because of the similarities of Chartier's ideas with those in anglophone literacy studies, Mbodj-Pouye (2007: 255) and other francophone researchers use *pratiques de l' crit* as a translation for literacy practices.

When French researchers talk about *pratiques* [practices] references to Bourdieu's work are unavoidable. They draw on Bourdieu's concept when postulating that practices are always the result of an interaction between a specific situation with its own circumstances on the one hand and regularities in people's activities, interiorized models of thinking and behaving (*habitus*) and the broader social and economic structures on the other (Mbodj-Pouye, 2007: 252). This understanding of practices is very similar to how anglophone researchers of literacy define their object of study. Chartier also argues that the relationship between what

is inscribed and what is received is always a dialectic one and that 'reception invents, shifts about, distorts' (1994: x). Written works are open to appropriation and they can be used in different ways, not all of which are limited to reading in the sense of decoding. Chartier's (1987: 11, 12) reference to how in the rituals of ancient cultures written texts were used in the middle of otherwise primarily oral ceremonies echoes the findings of studies into the role of texts in various social and religious contexts in, for example, South Africa (Prinsloo & Breier, 1996).

With regard to methodology, Chartier invites researchers of reading and writing to adopt approaches that are broader than pure text analysis and which question explanations of differences in reading practices that are based on known social divisions such as the elite on the one hand or the people on the other (Chartier, 1994). In francophone research – as in anglophone studies – ethnographic approaches which investigate specific social contexts without starting from a priori assumptions about how different groups of people read or write are prominently used. Historians too, while bound by the availability of sources, examine practices and favour contextualized approaches (see Bérroujon, Chapter Ten and Artières, Chapter Eleven in this volume).

Another aspect of Chartier's work that has been taken up in francophone research on writing is his interest in books and other printed matter as objects and in how they are produced and disseminated. Chartier himself, however, was not the first to pursue this line of research. Amongst others he drew on the work of McKenzie (1986), which had been translated into French. The analysis of practices, as Chartier understands it, includes attention to the material form of texts (e.g. books) and the processes of production and dissemination of written matter. Text only exist through their readers (de Certeau, 1988), but the process of 'actualization' (Chartier, 1994: IX) while shaped by the acts and habits of the readers and the social and cultural space they inhabit also depends on the material form through which meaning is received. Chartier argues that we cannot deny the effects of meaning the material forms produce. Drawing on his ideas, Mbodj-Pouye (this volume, Chapter Seven) shows how villagers make use of notebooks, received as part of agricultural trainings or left by their school-attending children, to develop a new form of personal writing. The notebook itself, with its specific affordances (Kress, 2003; 2005) for the writer has a bearing on what shape the author's writing takes.

Chartier also discusses the notion of culture and how it relates to the study of writing. From an anthropological perspective, culture – as we explained above – is often understood broadly as being part of any practice and activity. While Chartier agrees with this, he also points out that culture can, and frequently is defined more narrowly as meaning those artefacts and practices which are deemed aesthetically or intellectually pleasing and valuable (Chartier, 1992; 1998). This understanding of culture, as Chartier points out, is close to what Bourdieu (1993) calls a ‘cultural field’ and it emphasizes that within given societies there is competition over what is deemed to be ‘cultural’ (Chartier, 1998: 263). With regard to writing, different communities and societies, both past and present, designate and thereby limit what forms of writing are recognized and deemed legitimate. Chartier’s thoughts on culture in relation to writing are comparable to Street’s ideological model of literacy and to notions of dominant and vernacular literacies prevalent in anglophone research on writing, discussed above.

Within the francophone tradition, the notion of cultures of writing as potentially excluding is taken up in Bernard Lahire’s work on popular forms of writing and in his critical analysis of dominant discourses of illiteracy (Lahire, 1993; 1995). Lahire is a key figure in francophone research on writing, having influenced researchers in France as well as in French-speaking Canada (see Bélisle, 2004; 2006). His views show striking parallels with the ideas put forward by Street (see above) and others in the anglophone tradition, an observation that has prompted Bélisle and Bourdon (2006) to note that despite not citing each other, Street and Lahire’s analyses converge on many points. Lahire’s words certainly echo Smith’s view of the textually mediated social world. He argues that ‘writing is present in the whole of the social world [*l’écrit marque sa présence dans l’ensemble du monde social*’, *our translation*] to which he adds that ‘no domain of practices is without its mediation’ [*pas un domaine de pratiques ne s’organisent désormais hors de sa médiation*’, *our translation*] (Lahire, 2006: 43). Challenging the notion of the individual as autonomous and uniform [*unicite*] that underlies quantitative studies of literacy, Lahire argues for an approach that analyses reading and writing as context-specific practices involving individuals who are part of different social relations (friends, family, colleagues) and networks and whose feelings, ideas and behaviours are not always the same and not necessarily consistent (Lahire, 2008). Lahire, as much as Street, Barton, Gee, Papen and others in the anglophone tradition, criticizes

the notion of literacy as a uniform set of skills applicable to different situations (Lahire, 2006: 35). Furthermore, he argues that while some individuals may not be competent readers it is wrong to deduct from this a necessary 'suffering [*souffrance*]' or 'disability [*handicap*]' (Lahire, 2006: 42). In a move similar to those in the anglophone world who challenge the deficit discourse of literacy (Crowther, Hamilton & Tett, 2001), Lahire suggests that the dominant view of the 'illiterates' reinforces their stigmatization and marginalization (2006: 38). Statistical measurements of literacy ignore the fact that skills are frequently acquired collectively. The same discourse that marks some as literate and others as illiterate also fails to identify the many ways in which people of different backgrounds and dispositions engage with written texts. Sociological research can challenge these views by uncovering the 'plurality of the worlds of writing' [*pluralité des mondes de l'écrit*, our translation] (2006: 43). This multiplicity of everyday reading and writing practices, Lahire argues, cannot be adequately characterized by reducing them to identifiable skills and hierarchies of abilities, a model of understanding borrowed from school notions of literacy. This is of course the same critique of the autonomous model of literacy made by Street, see above, and its implementation in national and international surveys such as the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) that is expressed by Hamilton and Barton (2000) and others.

In his earlier books, Lahire (1993, 1995) has studied the reading and writing practices of working class people with limited formal education in the region of Lyon. He was interested in their everyday reading and writing at home or at work, including 'innocuous' texts (Lahire, 1993: 6), such as shopping lists or to do lists. Lahire's work is comparable to Barton and Hamilton's study of reading and writing in a working class community of Lancaster (Barton, 1991; Barton & Hamilton, 1998). In his analysis, Lahire emphasizes the role of literacy in relation to how people construct their relationship with the world around them and how they organize their lives, themes that are also discussed in Barton and Hamilton's study. A further theme elaborated in both studies is the gendered division of writing tasks such as dealing with letters in families. Lahire's study also examined reading and writing in his research participants' work places, typically manual employment.

Another important figure is Daniel Fabre and his notion of 'écritures ordinaires' [ordinary writings] (Fabre, 1993) or 'écritures quotidiennes' [everyday writings] (Fabre, 1997). Conceptually, Fabre's ordinary writings

are close to what Barton and others in the anglophone tradition call vernacular literacies. Fabre characterizes writings [*écrits*] as belonging to a place, a social space they emanate from but which they also help to constitute and define (see Fraenkel, 2001). This echoes the anglophone idea of literacy as social practice. A collection of articles edited by Fabre in 1997 illustrates the role of writing in three different social contexts: the domestic sphere, religion and work. Fabre's intention, similar to that of the (New) Literacy Studies, was to highlight previously neglected forms of writing.

Fabre and Lahire's ideas have also been taken up by researchers interested in writing in social contexts where formal literacy is not widespread, for example, in Mali (Mbodj-Pouye, 2007) and Senegal (Humery, forthcoming). Methodologically, both Lahire and Fabre advocate context-sensitive techniques. The dominant approach in francophone research on writing, as mentioned already, is qualitative and ethnographic. Fraenkel (2001) establishes key principles of research on writing in the workplace, which show similarities with the perspective adopted by anglophone literacy studies. While she acknowledges the need to study the content of what is said in specific documents, she is adamant that writing at work cannot be understood 'hors contexte' [outside the context] but needs to be examined in relation to the ensemble of practices and situations governing the workplace in question (Fraenkel, 2001: 240). Her description of the methodology to adopt for such studies shares much with how those in the (New) Literacy Studies define their approach: the need for direct observations is highlighted but also interviews with the readers and writers themselves in order to understand 'représentations locales' [local representations] (2001: 236). Following Chartier, she adds a need to examine texts not only in terms of what they say, but in relation to their materiality and physical presence, an issue which is also raised in anglophone work, as in Haas (1995), Wilson (2003) Pahl (2002, 2007) and Leander and Sheehy (2004).

Despite similarities in perspective, French researchers such as Lahire and Fabre have hardly been recognized by anglophone scholars of writing. This is mainly the result of a language barrier. Chartier's work has been widely translated but it is mainly known by historians and there is less of a convergence of historical and contemporary interests than in France (but see Brandt, 2001; 2009, whose historical studies of the United States are used to inform research on the present and the future

of writing). The other French academic whose work is drawn on by anglophone literacy researchers is Bruno Latour, as mentioned in the previous section. Researchers draw on Latour in particular when trying to understand the power of written texts in specific social and institutional situations. Latour talks about objects such as books as actants that have agency, an idea which is utilized by Pontille (this volume Chapter Three, and Fraenkel & Pontille, 2006) and others when discussing the role of texts in different workplaces and public spaces. The notion of actants (a concept that crucially includes humans and non-human objects) allows Latour and his associates to emphasize the role of technologies as active agents, without however falling into the trap of technological determinism. Texts, including diagrams, tables or photographs, function as 'inscription devices' (Latour and Wolgar 1986: 37). As such, writing allows specific forms of knowledge to become 'mobile'. This is made possible through the text in which knowledge is inscribed and which can move between and be drawn on in different contexts (Latour, 1988).

The work of Jack Goody, introduced above, has been widely drawn upon by French authors, but its reception in France has been very different from its treatment by anglophone literacy researchers. Goody's ideas became influential in France after 1979, when a French translation of 'The domestication of the savage mind' was published. In his earlier studies, Lahire drew on Goody when discussing the consequences of literacy and he did this in a way that is largely supportive of Goody's claims about writing as enhancing rational thinking. Lahire argued that even mundane forms of literacy, not just schooling and formal education, support abstract thinking (Lahire, 1998), a position that is likely to be met with criticism by anglophone literacy researchers.

We can see from the above example that despite much convergence in thought, there are also differences between anglo- and francophone approaches to the study of writing. In much anglophone research, Goody's views on the consequences of literacy for individuals and societies have been heavily critiqued while less attention has been paid to the other contributions which Goody has made to the understanding of writing (except for Collins & Blot, 2003 and Olson & Cole, 2006, mentioned above). Francophone researchers, however, have found Goody's work useful when examining specific writing practices in an ethnographic perspective (Fraenkel, 2001; Mbodj-Pouye, 2007). They examine the effects of reading and writing in specific cultural and

institutional contexts, without however pre-judging what these might be and frequently adopting a critical stance. This has led to studies examining in what ways tables, lists, forms, etc. afford bureaucratic rationality and give authority to specific forms of knowledge and social practices. Fraenkel, for example (2007 and this volume Chapter Two), examines the consequences of acts of writing and often it is the act of writing itself that produces an effect, as with writing a signature (Fraenkel & Pontille, 2006).

Prominent themes in francophone research

As well as everyday writing, prominent themes in francophone research include writing in the workplace, writing in public spaces and reading and writing in post-colonial societies. In anglophone settings much research on workplace literacy is shaped by educational concerns. This is not so in France where researchers focus their attention on the micro processes of writing as part of accomplishing work-related tasks. Denis and Pontille (2009), for example, have conducted ethnographic research to understand how the signs of the Paris subway are installed and maintained. In contrast to the work by Fabre and others (see Artières, this volume Chapter Eleven), who are primarily interested in ordinary writing by individuals, Pontille and others examine collective forms of writing. The aim is to show how workplaces are shaped through writing: that is through the texts they use and produce. This kind of research makes a unique contribution to understanding how work processes are mediated by written texts and how knowledge is organized.

A further focus of interest is in how writing gives materiality to cognitive processes, an issue that has also interested Lahire (1995), also drawing upon Latour's work. Texts, such as subway signs, also afford specific actions (Denis & Pontille, 2009 and forthcoming, Fraenkel, 2007; 2008 and this volume Chapter Two). Other examples of research on writing at work are studies of bailiffs (Fraenkel & Pontille, 2003; Pontille, 2006), of scientific authorship (Pontille, 2004; 2006) and of the role of writing in agricultural work (Joly, 2000; 2004, this volume Chapter Five). Similar to the work that was done in the United Kingdom by Jones (2000a and b) researching Welsh farmers, Joly examines how new rules introduced by the European Union (EU) have changed

farmers' daily writing practices. What is interesting here is, again, the historical perspective, comparing farmers' traditional diaries with today's bureaucratic registers and forms. Writing in the workplace, as mentioned already, often appears to be mundane and it may even be invisible. Such ordinary acts of writing are widely studied by the research group 'Anthropologie de l'écriture' (Anthropology of Writing) at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS). From a historical perspective, Artières, a core member of the group, is particularly interested in autobiographical writings. Mbodj-Pouye (2007 and this volume, Chapter Seven) and Humery (forthcoming), also members of the group, work on writing in post-colonial societies. They study ordinary forms of writing in contexts where school-based literacy is particularly dominant and where everyday writing practices are frequently multilingual, mirroring the coexistence of official and vernacular languages in post-colonial societies. Theoretical frameworks drawn on are mainly those developed by Goody, Chartier and Lahire, but Mbodj-Pouye (2004) is one francophone researcher to use ideas from the (New) Literacy Studies.

A final area of research which has been developed in recent years in France looks at writing in public places and spaces. This work is coordinated by the Anthropology of Writing group at the EHESS. Denis and Pontille's study of subway signs, mentioned earlier, is part of this much larger research project entitled 'Ecologies and politics of writing'. Covering cities from around the globe, it examines how urban spaces are shaped by writings, both legal and illegal (www.iiac.cnrs.fr/ecriture/spip.php?article3). A related study, also comparative, examines how writing in a variety of urban spaces is regulated and policed.

Undoubtedly, as the above overview has shown, francophone research on writing is vibrant and covers a wide range of areas and theoretical perspectives. It has much to offer to those in the anglophone world interested in literacy. There are many parallels between the work of anglo- and francophone researchers, even though little of this is known by researchers on either side of the linguistic divide. The case of Lahire and Street illustrates the current state of affairs and the resulting lack of cross fertilization, notwithstanding differences in perspective that undoubtedly exist. Part of the aim of this book is to make the work of francophone researchers more widely known in the anglophone world and to promote dialogue between French and English speaking academics interested in writing as a social and cultural practice.

The Current Volume

The chapters in this volume are united by their approach to examining writing as cultural and social practice. They were chosen to illustrate the kind of work done by anglo- and francophone researchers and to indicate the similarities in theoretical orientation and empirical scope that makes the comparison between the two traditions so interesting. Together the 11 chapters aim to further our understanding of the place of written language in different social and cultural contexts, past and present. The book consists of four parts. The first part, that is, this chapter and a chapter by French linguist Béatrice Fraenkel (Chapter Two), focuses on theory. In 'Writing acts: When writing is doing', Fraenkel considers writing as an 'act' within speech act theory: writing is not only important for what is being written, but the act of writing itself is significant as an event or as a performance, covering writing as broad as graffiti, road signs, writing in New York after 9/11 and signatures. The chapter offers a first step in the development of a typology of writing acts.

Part II of the book consists of three chapters dealing with writing in the workplace. In Chapter Three, 'Updating a Biomedical Database: writing, reading and invisible contribution', David Pontille explores the central but often overlooked writing work that is involved in building up and maintaining a biomedical database. It shows writing work that may appear to be mundane and routine but is in fact highly sophisticated. The chapter illustrates the crucial role of writing in the construction of knowledge in today's knowledge-based economy. In Chapter Four, 'Eruptions of interruptions: managing tensions between writing and other tasks in a textualized childcare workplace', Karin Tusting takes up a key feature of many contemporary workplaces: their increasing textualization. The example given is that of childcare workers in England, who face a surprising amount of paperwork demands. Tusting's research illustrates changing practices of writing in the workplace in response to growing demands for accountability. In Chapter Five, 'Tracing cows: practical and administrative logics in tension', Nathalie Joly looks at the writing practices of farmers, who keep daily records of their work. Keeping these records is not a new practice but with the modernization of agriculture, farmers' writing has become more rationalized and subject to greater bureaucratic influence. Joly's paper

emphasizes the role of the wider context – in her case the EU and its regulations – in relation to changing writing practices.

Part III examines writing by individuals and institutions. Chapter Six by David Barton, 'Vernacular writing on the web', provides an overview of research on people's 'ordinary writing' and examines the new writing which is now being done on the internet. New online writing practices lead to new genres; this necessitates a re-evaluation of what is meant by vernacular practices of writing. The chapter shows the importance of the internet as a new cultural space for ordinary people's writing. In Chapter Seven, 'Keeping a note-book in rural Mali: a practice in the making', Aïssatou Mbodj-Pouye discusses a new writing practice discovered by the author during her ethnographic research in Mali: personal notebooks. These notebooks illustrate the importance of a personal domain in a society that is often thought of as communal in orientation. Mbodj-Pouye's chapter demonstrates the importance of understanding writing in the context of social and cultural change. In Chapter Eight, 'Writing in healthcare contexts: patients, power and medical knowledge', Uta Papen discusses the central role of writing and written texts in the provision of healthcare. The chapter examines the power of writing as a means of passing on authoritative information and achieving compliance with medical advice and how patients through their own writing react to and engage with healthcare providers' views. The chapter illustrates how vernacular writing responds to dominant discourses.

Part IV is concerned with historical perspectives. Chapter Nine by Julia Gillen and Nigel Hall is entitled 'Edwardian postcards: illuminating ordinary writing'. In Britain, postcards became massively popular after 1902. With up to six deliveries per day they became a huge source of everyday British writing. In their chapter, Gillen and Hall recognize the significance of these postcards as ordinary practices of writing and a sign of the democratization of literacy in Britain in the early twentieth century. This chapter is a good example of the affordances and constraints of particular artefacts of literacy. In Chapter Ten, 'Lawful and unlawful writings in Lyon in the seventeenth century', Anne Bérojon investigates different forms of public writing that were common in seventeenth century France. Based on her research in the city of Lyon, Bérojon describes texts such as epigraphs, public signs and inscriptions on monuments that increasingly became part of the urban environment. Another category of text common at the time were libels: pamphlets or

posters containing defamatory statements about specific individuals. These texts, which were put up at the attacked person's house or in public spaces, were regarded as illegal and their suppression became part of the municipality's efforts to control the urban space. In Chapter Eleven, 'Sexuality in black and white: instructions to write and *Scientia sexualis* in the nineteenth and twentieth century', historian Philippe Artières examines acts of writing that are encouraged or demanded by a third party, for example, doctors inviting their patients to write or social scientists asking their research participants to produce diaries. He discusses the case of a young man who in 1902 had been asked by his doctor to produce a record of his homosexual practices. This resulted in a 'sexual biography', which, as Artières suggests, was not so much liberating for the writer but incorporated him into a wider apparatus of power. Finally, in the Afterword, Brian Street locates the examples of writing presented in the previous chapters within broader discussions about literacy in contemporary culture.

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