

**On being declared illiterate:**

**Language-ideological disqualification in Dutch classes  
for immigrants in Belgium.**

**Jan Blommaert, Lies Creve, Evita Willaert**

Ghent University

Author's address

Jan Blommaert  
Department of African Languages and Cultures  
Ghent University  
Rozier 44, B-9000 Ghent  
Belgium  
[Jan.blommaert@ugent.be](mailto:Jan.blommaert@ugent.be)

Running head:      On      being      declared      illiterate

## **Abstract**

## **On being declared illiterate:**

### **Language-ideological disqualification in Dutch classes for immigrants in Belgium.**

#### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

It is hard to overestimate the degree to which, in contemporary affluent Western societies, our lives are oriented towards texts; it is therefore easy to take the stuff of texts – literacy skills, material as well as cognitive and sociocultural – as an unproblematic given. In such societies deeply saturated by literacy, being able to read and write is something which defines normalcy, and not being able to do so qualifies one as marginal, a problem in and for society.<sup>2</sup> Literacy has become, in our cultural imagination, something that defines us as human beings, i.e. as normal members of our cultures.

Evidently, this complex of assumptions belongs to what Street (1984) called the ‘ideological model of literacy’, and none of the ingredients of this complex is empirically unproblematic. Wherever it occurs, literacy is an ‘expensive’ semiotic resource, tightly controlled and regimented, and very hard to acquire without passing through gate-keeping institutions. We also know that literacy is an emphatically normative field, and that “what may be tolerable in speech may become a symbolic issue if visible in chalk or print” (Hymes 1996: 69; also Collins 1996; Collins & Blot 2003). It is literacy that constructs one of the most powerful linguistic ideologies: that of the unquestionable existence of a thing called ‘language’ – a transparent, stable denotational code which has a name and is countable (cf. Milroy & Milroy 1991, chapter 3). The way in which literacy circulates in a society is strongly tied up with political and ideological arguments about what that society should (ideally) look like, and who can count as a (full) citizen in such a society. These connections are *indexical*: forms of literacy provide extremely strong indexes of identity, social status, perceived relations between people. Such indexicalities are not random, they are ordered in stratified, evaluative patterns (Silverstein 2003; Blommaert 2004a) and provide what Goffman (1974) called ‘frames’ and Gumperz (1982) called ‘contextualization cues’: relatively stable complexes of linguistically and semiotically signalled social and cultural meanings that can be presupposed from the use of signs and are entailed by their usage. It is characteristic that such indexical meanings remain *implicit*; they provide the cultural and ideological layer of language use and operate as sets of unspoken assumptions about relations between signs and social meanings. Retrieving them is a matter of inferencing, of inferring indexical meaning from signs (Gumperz 2003: 113).

This paper will investigate this ideological complex by examining ethnographic data drawn from the margins of the system: Dutch literacy classes given to so-called ‘newcomers’, recently immigrated children in Belgium. It is in the margins of the system that the systemic indexical patterns discussed above become clearest. Immigrants are ‘brought into’ Belgian society through induction into a regimented field of language and literacy practices, and whereas such regimentations can be kept largely implicit in non-immigrant classroom environments, they very often need to be made explicit in the trans-cultural, trans-lingual (or ‘transidiomatic’, Jacquemet 2001) environment of the classes for immigrant children (Jaspers 2004). It is in such moments of indexical explicitness that we see how institutional concepts of ‘language’ are being articulated, and how they revolve around literate standards. In particular, we will show how in Dutch literacy classes demarcations are being made between

what counts as language and what does not – or more precisely: how teachers apply common-sense (ideological and professionally habituated) distinctions between some linguistic resources and others in the emergent repertoire of their pupils. Some linguistic resources are recognized as ‘language’ and others are disqualified as such.

We will address a classic instance of Bourdieu’s *misrecognition*. The linguistic resources disqualified by teachers are perfectly valuable *as resources per se*; but they do not qualify *symbolically* as language, that is, they do not only index ‘(degrees of) knowledge of Dutch’ but serve as powerful indexes of immigrant identity and dynamics of cultural adaptation (Bourdieu 1990, ch. 7; also Heller 1999 and Jaffe 1999). Teachers view performance in writing as instances of school performance marking a stage in the acquisition of a particular, ideological conception of Dutch; in the same move they see it as emblematic of identity processes. Immigrant identity in the Flemish part of Belgium is strongly associated with *language problems*. It is an axiom of the dominant views on immigrants that one of their main problems is their lack of proficiency in Dutch (Blommaert & Verschueren 1998). Thus, rather than as reflective of the particular linguistic-communicative functions of literacy in a classroom context, or of the particular sociolinguistic economies that characterize the pupils’ backgrounds, minority pupils’ speech and writing is ‘taken out’ to signify socio-political processes – to mark points on a trajectory from ‘foreignness’ to ‘integrated’.

This indexical order, in which linguistic norm-violation begins to index the perceived inherent deficits of particular ethnic identities, is of course reminiscent of McDermott & Gospodinoff (1979; also Collins 2003), where the sociolinguistic backgrounds of pupils coincided with ethnic identities and, through the indexical projection described here, became ethnic(ized) barriers for success in schools. The more and longer we see such things happening, the greater and more pressing is the need “to understand objectively the school child’s communicative world”, his/her repertoire organization, the way in which elements of the repertoire relate to one another, and the functions of elements within the repertoire (Hymes 1980: 142, inspired by Bernstein 1971).

In what follows, we will examine first the broad underlying linguistic ideology detectable in teachers’ statements and practices; next, we will investigate processes of eliminating ‘non-standard’, i.e. hetero-graphic literacy resources used by pupils.<sup>3</sup>

## **Literacy and monoglot ideologies**

As mentioned above, one of the powerful effects of literacy is the shaping of a particular image of language. That image is characterized by stability and order, transparency, purity and an emphasis on referential functions.<sup>4</sup> And such an image of language is precipitated into ‘standard’ codes: codes sensed to embody the qualifications of stability, order, etc. and often institutionalized, by the State or by other authoritative actors in the field of language codification (Silverstein 1996, 2003; Blommaert 2004a, 2005). Wherever perceptions of ‘standard’ language occur, the standard is supported by (and grounded in) literacy norms of a particular kind. We shall call such complexes of norms ‘*ortho-graphic* literacy’ – literacy which revolves around writing ‘correctly’, around writing as a reproduction of standard writing norms (often related to spelling, see below) and around distinguishing ‘correct’ writing from ‘incorrect’ writing (Kress 1996; 2000).

‘Standard’ codes are *singular* codes, codes that allow only one ‘correct’ realization; the ‘standard’ language is a singular object, imagined as one clear set of rules, patterns and conventions, the reproduction of which is assumed to produce clear, understandable meanings ‘in Language X’. Ideologically, ‘standard’ language forms are invariably seen as *monoglot* (Silverstein 1996): forms that can be captured in terms of a singular set of codified norms (such as ‘the’ grammar or ‘the’ lexicon) and that can thus be (ideologically) classified as

‘belonging’ to *one* language. Meanings are only ‘pure’, transparent and unambiguous when they are produced in one single language. Mixing and hybridity are, in monoglot ideologies, qualified as transgressive, as breaking the rule of the production of (singular) meanings in a singular language. Thus, for instance, code-switching is often seen as a special, problematic kind of language usage, bespeaking special (i.e. abnormal), more complex and more puzzling social and sociolinguistic phenomena (e.g. Myers-Scotton 1993). Similarly, societal multilingualism is often problematized as an ‘abnormal’ sociolinguistic condition, often seen as problematic in se, even potentially conflictual, and surely in need of regulation (as in much of the language planning literature; see Williams 1992, ch. 4-5; also Blommaert 1996; Silverstein 1998; Blommaert & Verschueren 1998).

In the field of literacy, the focus on singularity of norms is converted into a focus on ‘correct’ *spelling*, and this applies to writing as well as reading (cf. Kress 2000). Spelling is the normative side *par excellence* in the field of literacy. It is spelling that accounts for ‘ortho-graphy’ in the strict sense of the term, ‘writing right’. Spelling, as a set of rules, is based on the assumption of the conventional linear, one-to-one mapping of graphic symbols on sounds, syllables or other units of speech. The set of graphic symbols is finite, the units of speech aren’t, and as a consequence, it is through spelling conventions that variation in (spoken) language can be ‘reduced’ to standard representations that embody the monoglot features: stability, transparency, clarity, etc. In other words, the perception that a language such as English really exists emerges out of the capacity of ortho-graphic writing to reduce every dialect, sociolect, accent or idiolect to a single representation: ‘English’ – *e pluribus unum*. Conversely, it allows people speaking a wide range of different varieties of English to read one single ‘English’, sensed to tie all the varieties together into one monoglot language. Thus, indexically, correct spelling produces images of group belonging, of ‘language-ness’, of the primarily referential (i.e. underlying and stable) phenomenology of the language, and so on.

The standard is always imagined as *neutral*; it is seen as the form of language that underlies all other varieties, and consequently, it is not a variety in its own right, it is *the* language. Standards for spoken realizations of the language are often seen as accent-less, not identifiable on grounds of regional, occupational, gender, age or class belonging. Of course, the standard is always accented, it is perhaps even the most salient accent available, indexical of middle-class, national, middle-age identities as well as of a certain level of educational background, ethnicity, geographical or even racial identity (Lippi-Green 1997; Bonfiglio 2002; Agha 2003). The same goes for orthographic standards: writing ortho-graphically produces strong indexicalities of normalcy within the monoglot ideology; writing incorrectly produces strong indexicalities of abnormality, of non-membership of the ideal member categories defining the language (cf. Jaffe 2000). Very often, writing also produces associative attributions of intelligence and general character disposition. Writing incorrectly is seen as a mark of less than average intelligence; sloppy writing is often seen as a symptom of a sloppy mind. In Jim Collins’ words (echoing those of Street 1984), the dominant ideology of literacy sees “a straightforward connection between literacy, social progress, and mental development” (Collins 2000:70); literacy, in other words, is “a set of skills that ensure individuals’ economic fitness, [...] as a socially neutral technology of the intellect” (Collins 2000:70-71). Thus, we see that ortho-graphic writing becomes a powerful instrument for marking the distinction between normal and abnormal in general, for being a good versus a bad member of society, a good versus a bad pupil, student, employee, citizen (cf. Kress 1996; Collins & Blot 2003).

There is some allowance for what we could call *hetero-graphic* writing, i.e. writing which does not follow the orthographic standards but mobilizes the repertoire of visual symbols in different ways, as e.g. in “4 U” (‘for you’), “w8” (‘wait’) or similar creative reorderings of the correspondence between visual and spoken signs. But this allowance is

restricted, conditional and confined to particular genres such as e-mail messages, cell phone text messaging, advertisements, popular culture or graphic arts. Taking such hetero-graphic writing into other genre fields, however, is seen as transgression and leads to negative sanctioning. We shall come back to the issue of hetero-graphic writing further in this paper.

As a consequence of this ideological load, the literacy performance of children is given enormous weight on scales of assessment of their performance and capacities in general. Literacy is a focal field of primary education, both as a central tool for induction into 'the language' (in the monoglot sense developed above), but also for induction into highly valued regimes of knowledge, particular identities, particular ways of being a member of society. In the cases we shall discuss here, it is a focal point in a form of education developed for children who do not possess so-called 'native speaker' competence in the language, Dutch. So, in the eyes of their teachers, the stakes are even higher here. It is through acquiring the monoglot literacy standard that the children will be enabled to become 'integrated' citizens in a foreign country, Belgium. This trajectory is seen as a trajectory of 'learning'; and in order to be able to learn, children have to 'know the language'; which, in turn, means that they have to become literate in it.

### **Becoming a monoglot literate: some ethnographic observations**

Between October 2001 and February 2003, we conducted ethnographic research in three primary schools in Antwerp. All three schools – schools A, B and C in the discussion below – were situated in the inner city, in neighborhoods characterized by low average income and high density of immigrant inhabitants, both 'older' immigrants (Moroccans, Turks) and 'new' migrants (post-1990). The three schools, consequently, all had a significant number of 'newcomer' pupils of very heterogeneous backgrounds in Africa, Eastern Europe, the Mediterranean and Asia. This investigation was part of a larger project involving research in other Belgian schools and directed at detecting the language-related pedagogical practices used in Dutch immersion classes for 'newcomers'. The Belgian State provides such language immersion classes for recently immigrated children. For several hours per week, they are separated from the other pupils in schools, and taught an intensive induction-into-Dutch program which takes at least one year. Such classes are a legal provision: school networks have to set them up as soon as a significant number of 'newcomers' is enrolled; special subsidies are being allocated for such classes and teachers are allocated for the task as well.

There is no fully-fledged curriculum for these Dutch immersion classes. The authorities have provided a brief set of guidelines, but they have not recommended specific pedagogies, curriculum contents of teaching materials. They specify, though, that in this first year of Dutch immersion the focus should be on *spoken* competence, not on literacy. Children should acquire an amount of Dutch vocabulary, and develop general conversational routines in spoken Dutch as well as specific classroom genre competences, so as to be exposed to the methods and discursive patterns characterizing the regime of knowledge in the education system and so as to be able to shift into regular (Dutch-medium) classes after one year. Despite this official focus on oral proficiency, literacy creeps in at a very early stage of this process, as we shall see.

#### *Writing, Language, Learning*

Let us turn to some of our data and first establish the ideological connection between literacy and learning trajectories. In school A, children of newcomers in the first year of primary school learned to write before they learned a basic vocabulary in Dutch. The procedure used was that the teacher would first pronounce a 'new' word, then write it on the blackboard and

ask the children to pronounce (i.e. *read*) the word. The results were, of course, quite unsatisfactory, for the children were still in the process of acquiring literacy skills and could therefore technically not read the word; instead they were just guessing what was on the blackboard. The school's rationale for this rather odd procedure was that these children needed to learn to write in the first year of primary school, just like their Dutch mother tongue peers, so that "they would be able to follow the lessons in the following years", i.e. so as to enable them to fit into regular classes after one year. One teacher T from school C formulated this as follows:

### Fragment 1

J: nu {slo, hi} \*principeel is AN [Anderstalige Nieuwkomers] NIET schrijven en NIET leren lezen\ maar ik heb zoiets ik had mannekes

L : [mm\

J : die moeten=die moesten dit jaar in 't vierde en 't vijfde leerjaar meekunnen\ hoe kunnen die mee

E : [ja tuurlijk\

J : als die nie kunnen lezen en nie kunnen schrijven dus ge houdt u daar \*toch mee bezig hoor\ wettelijk gezien mag je 't \*niet mer ja in de praktijk euh\ oké als ik inspectie had gehad ik ging kik waarschijnlijk op 't matje geroepen worre mer da's ook een afspraak da ge maakt met den directeur van \*kijk anders \*gaat 't gewoon nie om=ge moet naar die kinderen ook een beetje zien é?\

E : [mm\

[mm\

### TRANSLATION

J: well {slo, hi} \*in principle DSL [Dutch as a Second Language] is NOT writing and NOT learning to read\ but I was thinking like hey these kids

L : [mm\

J: who have to=who had to this year be able to follow in fourth and fifth year \ how can they follow

E : [yes of course\

J: if they can't read and can't write so you're keeping yourself busy with it \*anyway\ legally your are \*not allowed but yes in practice eh\ ok if I would have had inspection I would have been reprimanded but that's also a deal you make with the principal like \*look otherwise it just doesn't \*work to=you

E : [mm\

J: also have to consider those children a bit eh?\

E : [mm\

The teacher starts by mentioning the curriculum focus which is *not* on literacy; in the same breath she emphasises the importance of literacy in class practice in general: "how can they follow [i.e. follow class routines] if they can't read or write". The teacher, in other words, defines literacy as a prerequisite for children to be able to embark on learning trajectories in Flemish education, and there is no alternative to that: "\*look otherwise it just doesn't \*work". So, in spite of the curricular focus on spoken competence, she finds herself "keeping yourself busy with it [literacy training] anyway". Later in the interview, she returns to this issue, and argues that literacy training is also a precondition enabling her own teaching practices:

### Fragment 2

J: en zelfs da lezen en da schrijven \*houd da

E : [ja\

J : der in 'k bedoel pfff \ hier benejen ligt der nen boek en der staat letterlijk in \*an \*niet \*lezen en \*niet \*schrijven\ oké ja pfff ik had ook zoiets van ik heb da d'eerste=ik heb da d'eerste maand dus

E : [das nie echt realistisch é\

J: gedaan\ en ik had zoiets van manne \*zo da kan kik geen heel jaar volhouwen\ dat is\

## TRANSLATION

- T: and even that writing and reading \*keep it  
E : [ja\  
J: there I mean pfff .\ here downstairs there lays a book and there is literally said \*DSL \*not \*reading  
and \*not \*writing\ ok yes pfff I was thinking then that I have that the first=so I have the first month  
E : [that's  
not really realistic eh?\
- J: done that\ and I was thinking people like \*this I can't keep up for a whole year\ that's just\

So in the eyes of this teacher (as well as in those of all the other teachers we observed, except for one), literacy is seen as a necessary precondition for efficient educational practice, for the teacher as well as for the pupils. However, *not every kind of literacy* qualifies for that function; we are talking about *specific* forms of writing and reading.

All the teachers we interviewed held a restricted view of 'literacy': literacy, in practice, is *Dutch-language literacy in the Latin alphabet*. Other kinds of literacy were disqualified as lower-value or even value-less linguistic-communicative resources, and pupils were in effect being declared and treated as illiterate when they were not literate in this *specific* variety of literacy. A simple dichotomy is thus constructed, in which 'literacy' stands for 'standard Dutch alphabetical literacy', which is then opposed to 'illiteracy', i.e. lacking the capacity to produce 'good' literate language forms. Let us take a look at some examples of such disqualifications.

### *Disqualifying existing basic writing skills*

A first type of disqualifications we encountered was the disqualification of 'bad' or 'incomplete' writing skills already acquired by the pupils. Consider the following illustrations, related to a 10-year old boy from Sierra Leone in school A, Emmanuel. According to his teacher, Emmanuel was *illiterate* and his school performance was highly problematical. In his exercise book, however, we found this transcription of what we think was a dictation:

#### Figure 1:

The left column is a reproduction of dictated words, the middle column contains the corrections made by the teacher, and the right column contains Emmanuel's own corrections. From what we see here, Emmanuel clearly has a literacy background – a limited one, but a background nevertheless, and probably one characteristic of the wider sociolinguistic backgrounds of people from that part of the world. Concretely, Emmanuel's literacy performance is an instance of 'grassroots literacy', a widespread form of sub-elite literacy in Africa and elsewhere, characterized by erratic spelling, difficulties in graphically organizing text on a page, grammatical instability etc. (for a fuller discussion, see Blommaert 1999, 2001, 2004b).

We see, for instance, that Emmanuel uses capitals where it is not warranted, in the middle or in the end of a word, e.g. <baNK>, <BeRg>, <BABj>, <WolK>, etc. Even after the teacher's correction, he persists in using unwarranted capitals, as in <Plan> in the right column. The use of unwarranted capitals is a recurrent feature of grassroots literacy, and it indicates an incomplete exposure to the ortho-graphic function allocation for upper and lower case symbols. But there is more. Let us take a look at Emmanuel's transcription of the word 'bril' ('glasses' in English) which was probably uttered like this: [b l], with a Northern Dutch accent, since the teacher is from the Netherlands. A less Netherlands and more Belgian



realization would sound more like [brɪl]. Emmanuel's orthography of [bɪl] as <BAIl> indicates that he is able to connect graphic symbols to phonemes: probably he has been introduced to basic forms of literacy in English, which is why he uses <AI> as a representation of the sound [ɪ]. Since [ɪ] is an approximant, and since it is here followed by a vowel, that graphic representation is phonetically not inaccurate. Emmanuel clearly has the capability of linking graphic symbols to phonemes, the very condition for literacy.

Thus, Emmanuel clearly has some degree of literacy competence and experience: basic, grassroots literacy skills probably developed in English in the context of Sierra-Leonese primary education. Yet, this degree of literacy competence is not perceived or used as a resource. It does not count as 'literacy', and Emmanuel has to start from scratch with basic exercises in writing, using one of the most widespread methods in Flemish primary schools, the so-called 'Maan-roos-vis' method ('moon-rose-fish'). The teacher writes down the example 'roos' in the left column and underscores the ortho-graphic realization of it. Emmanuel then copies it several times for better or worse:

### Figure 2

Notice in the top left corner his own writing (<roSe>), contrasted with the difficult copying of the example, which is indeed highly problematic: he even transposes letters in the word (soor). We also remark difficulties in joining the symbols in one string, in this example and in the next exercise, where he copies the word 'maan' ('moon' in English):

### Figure 3

The following examples show us how problematic and cumbersome the reconstruction of Dutch literacy is to him:

### Figure 4

### Figure 5

What we see in figures 3, 4 and 5 is that Emmanuel is painstakingly trying to *copy the graphic characteristics of the teacher's writing*. Consider the following example, where we see how, starting from the teacher's writing, Emmanuel gradually tries to copy the particular lines, curves and shapes of the symbols: the left hand tail of the <m>, for instance, and the joining of both <a> symbols:

### Figure 6:

Similarly, in figure 7 we see how Emmanuel first writes 'vis' ('fish') using his grassroots literacy instruments – disjoined symbols and a capital <S> - but then gradually moves on to a conversion of both the <v> and, especially, the <s> symbol, in an attempt to reproduce graphically and visually the particular way of writing these symbols given by the teacher.

### Figure 7:

Interestingly, from the perspective of *writing*, Emmanuel's first, 'grassroots' version is perfectly adequate as an instrument for rendering a visual, accurate image of the new Dutch term 'vis'. The point is that he does tremendous efforts to remodel this grassroots version into

a version which *graphically* belongs to the realm of ‘correct writing’. His original version is apparently something that needs to be corrected.

Thus we see that Emmanuel’s basic literacy skills were disqualified. This is remarkable, for even if they contain multiple hetero-graphic features (e.g. the erratic use of capitals), they still represent a degree of literacy capacity and experience sufficient to skip some very basic stages in literacy training and allow him, for instance, to use his grassroots literacy skills as an instrument for copying the new vocabulary items which he was acquiring at the time, like in figure 7. Instead, the teacher opted to have Emmanuel start from scratch and to induce him into the ortho-graphic normative codes of standard Dutch literacy. The opportunities offered by his hetero-graphic skills are thus not used, and Emmanuel now faces a double task: to acquire normative, ortho-graphic literacy while at the same time acquiring new vocabulary – which he has to write down in a medium he is clearly struggling with. Emmanuel can *write*; he knows how to create adequate correspondences between graphic signs and spoken sounds. But his writing is judged inadequate unless he can also *spell* and perform *letter design*. Pending that accomplishment, the effective literacy skills he possesses are disqualified, and he is treated like a novice to the field of writing.

The possibilities of using hetero-graphic means become clear when we look at a case where the teacher allowed such non-normative writing skills as practical tools. A teacher in school C told us in an interview that “all his pupils are literate”. A closer look at some of the pupils’ exercise books revealed that he made this judgment on approximately the same materials as the opposite judgment of the teacher in school A. Consider the following example from the exercise book of Sali, a 12 year old Bulgarian boy.

#### Figure 8

Like Emmanuel, Sali uses capitals in the beginning, in the middle and in end of the word, e.g. <FietS>, <fiFlin>, <locomotieF>, etc. He also has problems with the size of the letters, e.g. the very small <l> in <vi egtuig>. And he writes phonically; consider the following words:

#### Figure 9

The words <zeivanentvintihii> and <enentwintiih> are rather accurate phonic replica’s of Sali’s own, accented pronunciation of the Dutch terms ‘zevenentwintig’ (twenty-seven) and ‘eenentwintig’ (twenty-one) respectively. ‘Zevenentwintig’, for instance, would be pronounced in Standard Dutch as [ze:v\_n\_ntwIntl\_]. The transitions from [e:] to <ei>, [ ] to <a>, and the devoicing of [w] to <v> and [ ] to [h] are fully consistent with an East-European accent in spoken Dutch. Furthermore, we see inconsistency. In <enentwintiih>, Sali represents the [e:] as <e>, not as <ei>; the [w] is represented as <w> and not as <v>. Sali clearly tries to detect a system in his writing of Dutch and explores various possibilities.

So Sali’s basic writing skills offer us writing products that document his own stage in the acquisition of vocabulary and pronunciation. In contrast to the teacher in school A, this teacher does not disqualify Sali’s grassroots writing competence but uses it as an instrument in his teaching. Sali is thus able to produce visualized replica’s of complex new words such as ‘zevenentwintig’ and ‘eenentwintig’, and to use his hetero-graphic way of writing as an instrument for reminding him of their pronunciation – phonic writing at its best. We could note, in passing, that hetero-graphic writing such as Sali’s offers teachers excellent materials to monitor the pupil’s learning trajectory. Precisely the fact that writing here documents the pupil’s own accent and the complexities of mapping a pronunciation that deviates from his own (viz. the standard pronunciation) onto graphic symbols offers a terrific opportunity for the teacher to trace the specific linguistic and literacy difficulties Sali is struggling with.

Apart from disqualifications of restricted literacy competences, we also observed disqualifications of more developed literacy competences that do not correspond to the orthographic literacy standards of Dutch. Thus, A teacher in school C, commenting on difficulties she might have with Moroccan children who are literate in Arabic, contrasted these children to Polish children. Where the latter “have approximately the same letters as we”, “the Moroccans have to start all over from the very beginning”. The main reason given by the teacher was that “in Arabic, people write from right to left, while we write from left to right”. Here, we see a disqualification of the capacity of Arabic-literate children to systematically link phonemes to graphemes - the very condition for writing and reading. The same phenomenon could be observed with respect to children who were literate in Cyrillic alphabet, Chinese or Amharic (all of these forms of literacy did occur in the classroom populations we observed): writing systems different from those of standard Dutch orthography, but nevertheless providing important basic literacy competences that would allow the teacher to skip the very first stages of literacy training and move on, capitalizing on the experience in mapping graphemes on phonemes present with these children.

### *Disqualifying deviation: spoken and written accent*

Another widespread form of disqualification occurred when ‘accent’ was detected in either the speaking or writing competences of the pupils. In such disqualification practices, teachers often assumed an isomorphism between speaking and writing. One teacher put it very explicitly: “If the children don’t learn to pronounce the words in the right way, they will not be able to write them down properly”. In other words: ortho-graphy is strongly associated with the capacity to *say* things ‘right’. Again, this is framed in a monoglot ideology: only Dutch ortho-graphy is sensed to provide the clues for saying things correctly. Traces of literacy competence in other languages or writing systems are treated as sub-standard ‘accent’ and are negatively sanctioned. Consider the following fragment, in which a teacher (J) in school A approaches a boy from Ecuador, Alvaro (A), who is doing a reading assignment (other pupils are M, K and Ta).

#### Fragment 3

J : euh oké\ we gaan even de \*titel lezen\ wat is de titel\ wat \*bovenaan staat [wijst naar boven]\  
ketevan\  
M : de drie mu=munten\  
K : [de drie munten\  
J : één twee drie munten [legt geldstukken één voor één op tafel\  
M : [twee \*drie\ [drie munten\  
J : è we hebben het over centjes gehad veertig frank zeventig frank . dat zijn ook minte=munten nu  
A : [twintig frank\  
J : gaat het over drie munten ja? . [wijst op blad van T] \*één . Alvaro [wijst naar A]  
M : neem drie .\  
A : nem=\*neem\  
J : neem\  
M : neem\  
A,M,K : [lezen samen onverstaanbaar: ‘neem drie dezelfde munten en leg ze naast elkaar’]  
J : zijn deze drie dezelfde munten?  
M : ja [knikt]  
J : ja\ en webben ze \*naast elkaar gelegd [legt de munten naast elkaar op tafel]\ ja?\ nummer twee\  
J : draai je om\  
A : [draai gè om=draai [draait met hand]  
J : \*draai \*je \*om\ nog een keer\ mooi lezen\  
Ta, M : [{f} draai je om\

A : draai gè=gè=gè\  
M : je\  
J : \*draai \*je \*om\  
A : juffrouw juffrouw [steekt vinger op]\ jè . jè . of gè?\  
M : draai je om\  
J : oké \*je . we zeggen \*je .\ in spanje is dat gè è\ hier \*niet [schudt ontkennend het hoofd]\ hier is dat  
J : [[leest onverstaanbaar verder]\  
J : een \*je\ we gaan nog één keer Alvaro helpen [handgebaar]\  
M : [ \*je . draai \*je\  
J : draai . je . om\  
M : draai\ [draai \*je om\  
A : [draai [draai je\  
J : [Alvaro luister es naar maya [handgebaar]\  
M : draai je om [in de richting van A]\  
A : nee nee nee (da's goed ja ja) [klopt M op de schouder]\  
J : goed zo\ \*draai \*je \*om\ nummer drie\  
J : (xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx)\  
A : [(xx) en ik tel tot \*tien\ {f}  
één twee drie vier (xxx) zeven (enzoverder) [handgebaar]\  
J : we gaan het nog een keer lezen\  
A : draai=draai gè=jè . . è\  
M : [ \*je\  
L : [je\  
J : \*draai je \*weer \*om\

#### TRANSLATION

J: euh okay\ let's read the title\ what's the title\ what is \*on \*top of the page [points to the top]\  
ketevan\  
M : the three co=coins\  
K : [the three coins\  
J: one two three coins [puts the coins one by one on the table]\  
M: [two \*three\ [three coins\  
J: è we talked about coins forty francs seventy francs . that are also ci=coins well it's about three  
A: [twenty francs\  
J: coins yes?. [points at the sheet of Ta] \*one . Alvaro [points at A]\  
M: take three . \  
A : tak=\*take\  
J: take\  
M : take\  
A,M,K : [read together in a not understandable way: 'take three the same coins and put them next to  
each other']\  
J: are these three the same coins?\  
M : yes [nods]\  
J: yes and we have put them next to each other [puts the coins next to each other on the table]\ yes?  
number two\  
Ta : turn yourself around\  
A : [turn yourself around=turn [turns his hand around]\  
J: \*turn \*yourself \*around\ once again\ read properly\  
Ta, M : [{f} turn around\  
A : turn you=you=you\  
M : you\  
J: \*turn \*yourself \*around\  
A : miss miss [raises his finger]\ you . you or you?\  
M : turn yourself around\  
J: okay \*you . we say \*you .\ in spain that's you isn't it\ here it isn't\ here it's a \*you\ let's help Alvaro

Ta: [[reads further in a not understandable way]\

M: [\*you . turn \*yourself\

J: once again [makes a gesture with her hand]\ turn . yourself . around\

M: turn\ [turn yourself\

J: [Alvaro listen to maya [hand gesture]\

M: turn yourself around [directed to Alvaro]

A: no no no (that's good yes yes) [gives a little knock on the shoulder of M]\

J: good\ \*turn \*yourself \*around\ number three\

Ta: (xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx)\

A: [(xx) and I count to \*ten\ {f} one two three four (xxx) seven (and so on) [hand gesture]\

J: let's read it once again\

A: turn=turn you=you . . è\

M: [\*you\

L: [you\

J: \*turn yourself \*around \*again\

The boy from Ecuador, Alvaro (A), who has Spanish as his mother tongue and obviously has a literacy background in Spanish, has problems with the pronunciation of the Dutch personal pronoun second person singular 'je' ('you' in English). He associates the grapheme <j> to the phoneme [ɟ], as in Spanish, and not to [j] as it is in Dutch. The boy is confused about this and signals his confusion to his teacher. The teacher picks it up and says: "okay \*je [y\_] . we say \*je [y\_] \ in Spain that's gè [ɟ\_e] isn't it\ here it isn't\ here it's a \*je [y\_]. So in this fragment the assumption of an isomorphism between speaking and writing/reading is framed in terms of 'writing accent' by explaining the difference between the pronunciation of the grapheme <j> in Dutch as opposed to Spanish, and by indicating that the Dutch spelling provides the right clues for pronouncing the word correctly.

That Alvaro possessed a rather developed degree of literacy competence in Spanish became clear when we observed him writing down words on the blackboard. He looked at pictures and then wrote down the terms corresponding to the images – terms that were almost entirely known to him. In this reverse exercise, from image to sound to grapheme, Alvaro wrote the Dutch phonemes with 'Spanish' graphemes. For example he systematically used the symbol <ll> for the phoneme [y], where in Dutch one would write a <j>; and the phoneme [u] became the grapheme <u>, where we would expect the grapheme <oe> in Dutch. So the Dutch word for 'coat' - 'jas' - became <llas> in the writing of Alvaro and 'schoen' - 'shoe' in English - became <schun>, and even <eschun>. Alvaro wrote systematically, using his Spanish literacy skills (which to him, no doubt, offered a clear connection between "speaking right and writing right").

But this awareness of accent variation is often not reflected in the language use of the teachers themselves. Despite the emphasis on the use of Standard Dutch in schools, most of the teachers in the classrooms had a recognizable Antwerp accent in their speech, causing teaching problems whenever the direct link between speaking and writing was emphasized. In line with monoglot assumptions, the use of an Antwerp accent would not be corrected, because the Antwerp accent in Standard Dutch functioned as an ideological zero point in the Antwerp schools we observed. But the use of an accent in Dutch caused by interference from the speaker's mother tongue was seen as a deviation of the norm subject to negative sanctioning. In school A, we observed a lesson on 'Sinterklaas', the Belgian equivalent of Santa Claus. Whenever 'Sinterklaas' – nicknamed 'Sint' - appears, he is usually accompanied by some black helpers called 'Zwarte Pieten' ('Black Petes', a remnant of colonial imagination). During her exposé on Sinterklaas, the teacher frequently used the words 'Sint' and 'Piet', and she used them to teach the children the difference between the phonemes [I]

and [i], each relating to different graphemes in Dutch, <i> and <ie> respectively. The catch, however, is that the Antwerp dialect has a tendency towards impoverishment in the pronunciation of vowels compared to Standard Dutch, so that there is hardly any difference between the pronunciation of the graphemes <i> and <ie>. Both sound, in an Antwerp accent, as [i:], and so we get [si:nt] and [pi:t] instead of [slnt] and [pi:t]. Consequently, the difference between the sounds that need to be converted into the different graphemes <i> and <ie> is hardly audible to the children, and this then violates the isomorphism between written and spoken speech which the teacher uses as a rule. The results of this exercise were, of course, poor.

The point here is the asymmetry between the disqualification of ‘foreign’ accent in speaking or writing, and the neutralization of ‘native’ accents. The home accent is not an accent, but it is the spoken norm which should then be matched by an ortho-graphic norm, and this in an assumed simple, ‘phonetic’ way: correctly spelling a word provides the logic of speaking and vice versa.

### **The politics of disqualification**

Let us now summarize our argument so far. We saw two major forms of disqualification: the disqualification of existing basic writing skills acquired in other linguistic or literacy contexts but potentially valuable as an instrument for learning; and disqualifications of deviations in the form of perceived interferences from other languages or writing systems in the normative complex of standard Dutch.

In both cases, we saw misrecognition in the sense of Bourdieu: the literacy skills used by the pupils could potentially or did effectively function as adequate *writing skills*. They allowed the pupil to adequately map graphemes onto phonemes, to keep a record of acquired vocabulary and to provide an appropriately spelled graphic representation of a spoken word or image (as in the example of ‘vis’ above). At the same time, teachers denied them the status of adequate writing skills and replaced them with a different instrumentarium: a suggested direct (and transparent) mapping of Dutch grapheme onto Dutch phoneme, and particular visual-graphic shapes of such graphemes. In each case, there was an astonishingly strong ideological connection between *particular forms of literacy* and *adequate learning of the language*. To summarize this connection: teachers assumed that only standard Dutch ortho-graphy (including its peculiar visual-graphic shapes) could represent spoken Dutch, or in other words, that the only way to write Dutch words was through Dutch ortho-graphy. Hence their strong emphasis on acquiring such ortho-graphic literacy skills early in their learning trajectory, despite the government’s emphasis on spoken competence in the first year. Teachers believed that unless a thorough knowledge of the specifics of Dutch standard literacy codes had been acquired, no learning could take place at all.

This is an extremely strong conduit metaphor in which writing is seen as the only adequate carrier for knowledge and information. While defensible in general in the context of a schooling system heavily bent on the production and consumption of literate information, it is problematic because of its specifics. It is not writing in general which is given this key instrumental function, but *a highly specific, regimented and codified way of writing*. And it follows from this that unless the child has not acquired that specific kind of writing, it has not acquired writing at all, and cannot function as a learner in the school system.

There is no reason why spoken Dutch could not be written in a literacy code derived from Spanish, French or German orthography, or even from Cyrillic or other writing systems. There is also no reason to overestimate the logic and transparency of the Dutch orthographic system, for like any other literacy standard for West-European languages, it is replete with archaisms and features that violate the phonetic correspondence between sound and

grapheme. The fact is, nevertheless, that teachers focus very strongly and energetically on Dutch standard literacy, in a firm and well-meant but mistaken belief that *only* this literacy will offer educational opportunities to their pupils. They emphasise a monoglot image of the linguistic regime in which their pupils have entered, and in doing so declare them illiterate even when they possess valuable literacy skills.

The teachers we observed also held other intriguing beliefs about language patterns and relations. Some provided us with elaborate analyses of differences between languages characterized by a ‘rich vocabulary’ and others by a ‘poor vocabulary’; of pupils whose national or linguistic backgrounds offered better opportunities for acquiring proficiency in Dutch than those of others. Thus, a teacher in school B saw a difference between “speakers of Germanic languages” and others, the former having a better chance of acquiring Dutch than the latter. Others referred to children from Mongolia and Russia as “better capable of fitting into our school system” than children from African countries or Islamic countries such as Uzbekistan. In each case, the argument offered for explaining such differences referred to intrinsic qualities of different ethno-national, cultural or religious communities – essentialist notions of identity, to which language, literacy, religion and general behaviour could be added as indexes instantiating the essential features. A similar essentialism operated at the level of Dutch: we saw a static, immutable and singular image of Dutch, characterized as a transparent, logical language – with the presumed direct correspondence between writing and speaking as a case in point. Thus, we see how in the margins of the system of linguistic regimentation, the borderline zone where ‘newcomers’ need to be introduced to Dutch, ideologies of language in society, language variation and literacy that are usually a matter of tacit cultural understanding, becomes robustly visible, explicit and enforceable.

Entering Belgium as an immigrant meant, consequently, entering this homogeneous space of a monoglot linguistic community, in which every form of upward social trajectory was closely tied to steps in the acquisition of standard Dutch – spoken and written. It also meant that one enters this space stripped of any other symbolically valued resources. Unless one speaks standard Dutch, or unless one possesses the specific literacy skills associated with Dutch ortho-graphy, one is language-less and illiterate, even if one is a proficient multilingual individual, and even if one is a sophisticated literate in a writing system different from that of Dutch. In the age of globalization, it seems that State symbols such as (monoglot) language operate as ever stronger criteria for demarcating ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’. That this quite structurally disenfranchises – misrecognizes – almost anyone who isn’t like us, should be a cause of concern for everyone.

## Notes

1. Research for this paper was supported by the King Baudoin Foundation, to whom we express our gratitude. We are grateful to the Antwerp City administration for Education and to the Principals, teachers and pupils of the schools in which fieldwork was carried out. Though education for immigrants is a political minefield in Belgium (and particularly in Antwerp, where the extreme right is the single largest political fraction), their cooperativeness and openness allowed us to delve deep into this topic. A preliminary version of this paper was presented and discussed at the *International Pragmatics Conference*, Toronto, July 2003, and we gratefully acknowledge the input provided by Jim Collins, Kate Pahl, Ben Rampton and Brian Street during the discussion there.
2. Collins & Blot (2003, chapter 1) provide succinct statements on this large issue. Consider the following example as just one illustration of the widespread nature of this ideology. Reporting on a recent study on literacy levels in Belgium, a major Belgian newspaper observed that between 700.000 and 850.000 Flemish adults “lack sufficient control over language and mathematics to be able to function in a modern society” (*De Standaard* 20-21 July 2004, p.9).
3. Fieldwork was carried out by Lies Creve and Evita Willaert. Classroom practices were videotaped, teaching materials, pupils’ and teachers’ notes were examined, pupils and teachers were interviewed, and macro-contextual institutional information (legislation, curriculum materials, training programs) was examined.
4. Collins (1996) calls this the ‘textualist ideology’, an ideology profoundly shaped by normative orientations to orthographic literacy.
5. In our presentation of the recorded data, we shall use a simplified transcription system, in which the following symbols are being used: xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx. The original Dutch statements will be followed by an approximate English translation, done by the authors. The reader should note that these translations do not do full justice to the expressive power and nuance of the Dutch statements.
6. In another school, we witnessed an interaction between the principal and the father of a ‘newcomer’ pupil. The principal asked the father which languages he spoke; his answer was “Bulgarian, Russian, Czech, German and a bit of French”, whereupon the principal summarized this as “ah, so it is French”.



## References

- Agha, Asif (2003) The social life of cultural value. *Language & Communication* 23: 231-273.
- Bernstein, Basil (1971) *Class, Codes and Control, Vol. 1: Theoretical Studies Towards a Sociology of Language*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Blommaert, Jan (1996) Language planning as a discourse on language and society: The linguistic ideology of a scholarly tradition. *Language Problems and Language Planning* 20/3: 199-222.
- Blommaert, Jan (1999) Reconstructing the sociolinguistic image of Africa: Grassroots writing in Shaba (Congo). *Text* 9: 175-200.
- Blommaert, Jan (2001) The other side of history: Grassroots literacy and autobiography in Shaba, Congo. *General Linguistics* 38: 133-155.
- Blommaert, Jan (2004a) *Discourse: A Critical Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Blommaert, Jan (2004b) Writing as a problem: African grassroots writing, economies of literacy and globalization. *Language in Society* 33: 643-671.
- Blommaert, Jan (2005) Language policy and national identity. In Thomas Ricento (ed.) *An Introduction to Language Policy*. London: Blackwell (in press)
- Blommaert, Jan & Jef Verschueren (1998) *Debating Diversity: Analysing the Discourse of Tolerance*. London: Routledge.
- Bonfiglio, Thomas (2002) *Race and the Rise of Standard American*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1990) *The Logic of Practice*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Collins, James (1996) Socialization to text: Structure and contradiction in schoolaged literacy. In Michael Silverstein & Greg Urban (eds.) *Natural Histories of Discourse*: 203-228. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Collins, James (2000) Bernstein, Bourdieu and the New Literacy Studies. *Linguistics and Education* 11/1: 65-78.
- Collins, James (2003) The reading wars in situ. *Pragmatics* 13/1: 85-100.
- Collins, James & Richard Blot (2003) *Literacy and Literacies: Texts, Power and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goffman, Erving (1974) *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. New York: Harper & Row.

- Gumperz, John (1982) *Discourse Strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gumperz, John (2003) Response essay. In Susan Eerdmans, Carlo Prevignano & Paul Thibault (eds.) *Language and Interaction: Discussions with John J. Gumperz*: 105-126. Amsterdam: John Benjamins
- Heller, Monica (1999) *Linguistic Minorities and Modernity: A Sociolinguistic Ethnography*. London: Longman.
- Hymes, Dell (1980) *Language in Education: Ethnolinguistic Essays*. Washington DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Hymes, Dell (1996) *Ethnography, Linguistics, Narrative Inequality: Towards an Understanding of Voice*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Jacquemet, Marco (2001) Transidiomatic practices: Language and the global imagination. Ms.
- Jaffe, Alvaroandra (1999) *Ideologies in Action: Language Politics on Corsica*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter
- Jaffe, Alvaroandra (ed.) (2000) Non-standard orthography and non-standard speech. Special issue of *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 4/4: 497-621.
- Jaspers, Jürgen (2004) *Tegenwerken, Belachelijk Doen: Talige Sabotage van Marokkaanse Jongens op een Antwerpse Middelbare School*. PhD Diss, University of Antwerp.
- Kress, Gunther (1996) *Before Writing: Rethinking the Paths to Literacy*. London: Routledge.
- Kress, Gunther (2000) *Early Spelling: Between Convention and Creativity*. London: Routledge
- Lippi-Green, Rosana (1997) *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology and Discrimination in the United States*. London: Routledge.
- McDermott, Ray & Kenneth Gospodinoff (1979) Social contexts for ethnic borders and school failure. Reprinted in Roxy Harris & Ben Rampton (eds.) (2003) *The Language, Ethnicity and Race Reader*: 277-290. London: Routledge.
- Milroy, James & Lesley Milroy (1001) *Authority in Language: Investigating Language Prescription and Standardization* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). London: Routledge.
- Myers-Scotton, Carol (1993) *Social Motivations for Codeswitching: Evidence from Africa*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Silverstein, Michael (1996) Monoglot 'standard' in America: Standardization and metaphors of linguistic hegemony. In Don Brenneis & Ronald Macaulay (eds.) *The Matrix of Language: Contemporary Linguistic Anthropology*: 284-306. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Silverstein, Michael (1998) Contemporary transformations of local linguistic communities. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 27: 401-426.

Silverstein, Michael (2003) Indexical order and the dialectics of sociolinguistic life. *Language & Communication* 23: 193-229

Street, Brian (1984) *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Williams, Glyn (1992) *Sociolinguistics: A sociological Critique*. London: Routledge

Figure 1

Emmanuel coker		
meisje		
KAAS		
BAKO	boed	boere
WOLK		
Krant		
PLAN	plan	plan
XON		
OMAH		ona
ERUI		
MAM		
LANK	b bank	bank b
KIP		
BOER		
LIETS	fiets	fiet
BABJ		
BAIL	bril	bril
BERG		
ZAK		

Figure 2:

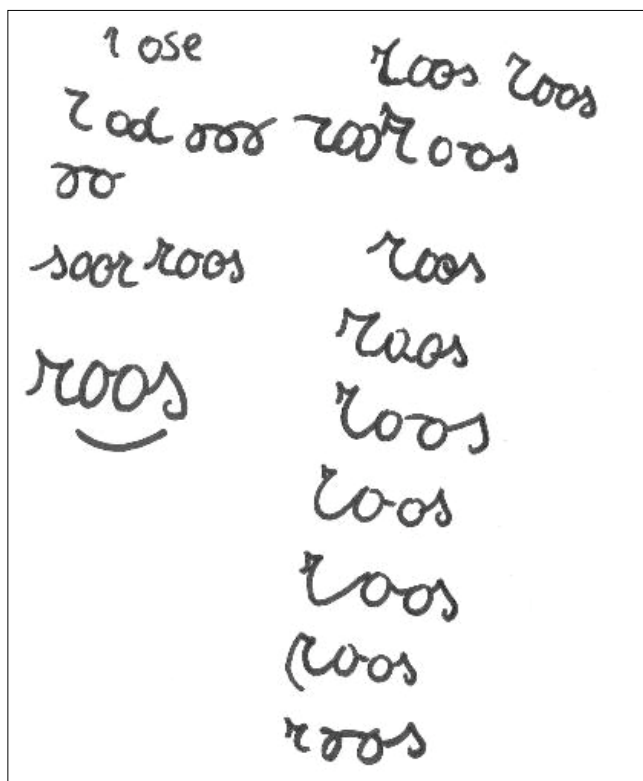


Figure 3:

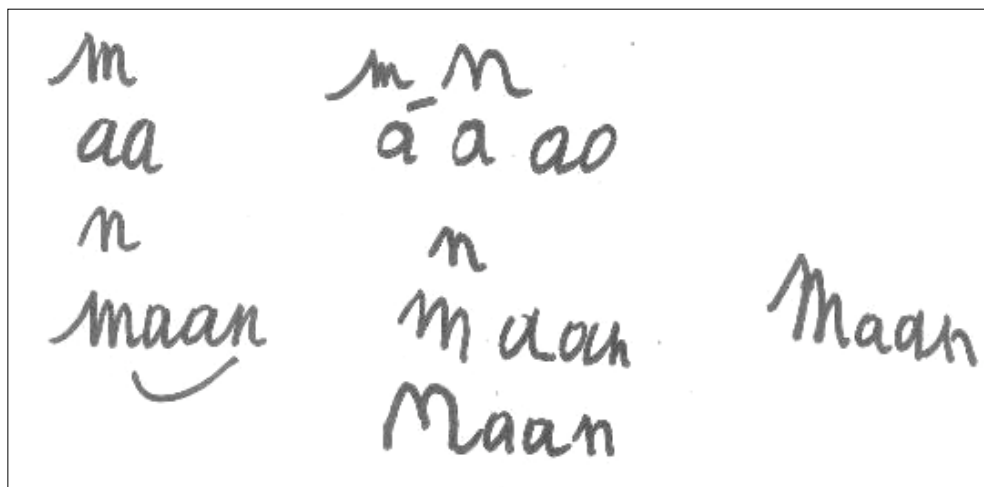


Figure 4:

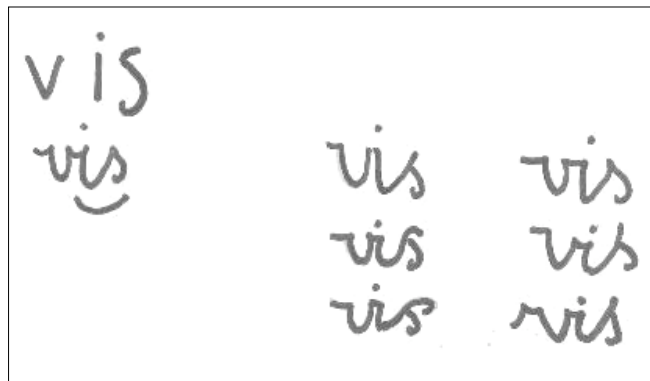


Figure 5:





Figure 6:

maan m daan Maan

Figure 7:

VIS

vis vis

Figure 8:

bus  
fiets  
locomotief  
trein  
het vliegtuig  
auto

fiets  
trein  
bus  
locomotief  
auto

het locomotief  
fiets  
auto  
bus  
trein  
fiets

FIF Lin  
Zelfanentvintih  
enen vintih

vliegtuig locomotief fiets

Figure 9:

Zeivanentventih  
enen tinti ih