

Book Review

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Lillis, Theresa: *The Sociolinguistics of Writing. Edinburgh Sociolinguistics*. Edinburgh University Press, 2013. ISBN 978-0-7486-3750-8. 200 pages, 22.99£.

“The primary concern of sociolinguistics is the relationship between language and society” while language has “been understood as spoken language”, Theresa Lillis begins her book on the sociolinguistics of writing (p. 1). “Writing has never been a core subject to sociolinguistics” Jan Blommaert agrees (Blommaert 2014:440). Nevertheless, Lillis puts writing in the centre of sociolinguistic inquiry – following the key question: what do we mean by “writing” in this day and age?

This book is an outcome of research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council UK (ESCR) with the project title “the sociolinguistics of writing in a global context”, led by Theresa Lillis. Besides a “state of the art review of research on writing in sociolinguistics” (Lillis 2012:02), this project aimed to “critically review the meaning of ‘writing’” in general (ibid.) with a focus on academic writing later on. Whilst some other publications from this research take the global context into account (e.g. Curry/Lillis 2010), the present book concentrates on the writing itself – seen from a sociolinguistic viewpoint. From this viewpoint, “writing needs to be seen as a complex of specific resources subject to patterns of distribution, of availability and accessibility” (Blommaert 2014:440). Lillis deals with this complexity by discussing the topic in eight different chapters:

Chapter 1 gives an overview of sociolinguistics by outlining the core principles of sociolinguistics. Mentioning spoken language as the object of the sociolinguistic gaze, she follows with “there is clearly no reason to justify the exclusion of other communicative modes, including writing” (p. 4). Positioning writing in sociolinguistics, she differentiates between speech and writing and its binary opposition. By calling this binary opposition into question, she quotes Miller and Chafe (p. 9) – from German linguistics, the work of Koch and Oesterreicher (Koch/Oesterreicher 1985) would have complemented her argumentation here nicely by outlining the different written and verbal grades. Lillis concludes her first chapter with a description of her understanding of writing as a social everyday practice within the broader frame of the field of sociolinguistics. In the following chapter, headed with “the question of mode” (p. 21), she outlines the very detailed different forms of writing: writing as inscription, writing as verbal, writing as

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material, writing as technologies, writing as visual, and writing as spatial. Introducing writing as a social practice, she rounds out her descriptions with visualisations, such as photos from graffiti or Facebook. Focusing on the verbal dimension of writing, Lillis gives in Chapter 3 an overview of different ways for textual analysis – analysing content, form, and function. Additionally, she also outlines different multi-disciplinary methods, such as discourse analysis, stylistics, rhetoric and contrastive rhetorics. The following Chapter 4 asks: “what counts as writing and literacy?” Lillis answers this question with several examples of writing as an everyday practice, social practice nicely complemented by examples of traditional writings (e.g. reports) and more actual writings (e.g. YouTube messages and blogs). Together with highlighting the necessary resources for writing (materials and people) and the essential connection of these resources (e.g. to communities) she uses a broad sociolinguistic approach for putting the dynamic of writing across in Chapter 5. Quoting Bloomaert and her own work, she focuses on academic writing produced in institutions. As very interesting feature in this chapter, could her writing on “text trajectories” (p. 113 ff.) be considered – meaning the different steps a text has to go through on its way to publication, including the implementation of feedback given by reviewers or different stakeholders – a typical process in academia. She illustrates this with examples from her publication on academic research networks (Lillis/Curry 2010) (p. 118). After giving a detailed overview on identity studies in writing research, Lillis defines in Chapter 6, identity work with “a general way to encompass the range of traditions signaling the active nature of being, doing, and construing identity” (p. 125) for discussing the relationship between identities and writing resources. Chapter 7 includes a very advantageous summary table (p. 160 f.) with all key academic domains and frames for theorising writing. This chapter also describes the research of Theresa Lillis – including workplace writing and academic writing for publication. The 8th and last chapter gives a summary of the key arguments of this book and closes with a call for further research on writing, complemented by a few questions we all should ask ourselves if we think about doing research on writing.

In her book Theresa Lillis aims “to provide an introductory overview of approaches to writing which engage directly with the project of sociolinguistics” (p. 15) which she fulfills in an excellent way. She gives a very interesting and detailed overview of writing, seen from a sociolinguistic perspective. For analysing the writing from a sociolinguistic viewpoint, the authors also need to be included – a topic, which could be more elaborated in the present book. She mentions authorship in different situations, for example by asking “who are writers?” (p. 85 ff.) and providing a brief history of authorship. However, she gives the impression that authorship would be an easy-going process – also in multi-authored

settings; here she mentions Wikipedia as an example (p. 87) but especially in academia – where she works and where her research focus is on the writing – discussing about authorship is common practice. For example, where she writes about “text trajectories” (p. 113 ff.), she should also include how authorship is developed in academia and the content of the different discussions surrounding them. Maybe she could also focus on multi-discipline research partnerships, as Roger Jeffery does it (Jeffery 2014) but at least a note on co-authoring in academia (as described in Day/Eodice 2001) could be considered as necessary.

The book is very well illustrated and every chapter is a coherent entity consisting of introduction, main part, conclusion and notes. This makes the book easy to read and an interesting reading also for students.

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