

Regimes of Multilingualism and the Language of Literacy in The Gambia

HKU Constituent Theme
*Languages, Media & Communication:
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Speaker

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Abstract

In September 2004, I witnessed a 'letter writing event', whereby an old, illiterate man dictates a letter in Mandinka to a young man, who on its turn drafts and re-writes it in English, even though the addressee is fluent in Mandinka. I argue that the code choice for English instead of Mandinka here, is the result of a regime of multilingualism, emanated from the formal school system, that privileges English (and Arabic) as exclusive language(s) of literacy. In the Gambian sociolinguistic landscape, English and Arabic are predominantly visible languages, whereas local languages are typically only audible. I will further document this with data from three different studies I conducted in the past three years: (1) an English writing contest in a rural lower basic school, (2) a survey of multilingualism in two communities (urban and rural), and (3) a discourse analysis of signboard and billboard literacies in urban Gambia.

Kasper Juffermans is a doctoral student in the School of English where he prepares a thesis on Gambian Englishes and intercultural communication in relation to tourism and migration. Before coming to HKU, he studied African studies and sociolinguistics at Ghent University in Belgium where he obtained an MA in 2006 with a thesis on English and literacy practices in The Gambia.

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