

*The Sociolinguistics of Writing*  
Theresa Lillis (2013)

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*Reviewed by Tracey Costley*

In this engaging book, Lillis calls for a reconceptualization of the field of sociolinguistics in which writing, rather than being positioned as “the stuff around the edges” (p. 12), is recognized as central to the project of sociolinguistics. The book provides a thoughtful overview of the field of sociolinguistics and shows how, in regard to the study of language, spoken language tends to take precedence over writing. For Lillis, such precedence fails to recognize or fully understand the contribution writing has to make to our understanding of language use. A key goal of the book, therefore, is to offer alternative perspectives on the role of writing within sociolinguistics.

Lillis identifies three common ways in which writing tends to be positioned within sociolinguistics: “as verbal, as fundamentally connected with notions of ‘standard’ (language and literacy) and as primarily linked to socially prestigious texts” (p. 172). For Lillis, these conceptualizations of writing are restrictive, not only because they fail to take account of the multiple and varied ways in which writing is manifested in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but also because they constrain our understanding of writing in terms of what it *is* rather than what it *does*.

In order to move away from these views, the opening chapter argues for an alternative starting point in regard to writing. To this end, Lillis proposes three positions from which to begin to revise our understanding of writing:

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1. A *theoretical position* on writing which states that writing cannot and should not be viewed as separate from context of use and users.
2. An *empirical position* which states that texts, uses and users need to be the subjects of empirical research rather than being driven by *a priori* assumptions and value positions.
3. An *ideological position* on writing which posits that issues of power, identity, participation and access are central to writing practices and as such need to be taken account of in exploring what writing is and does. (p. 16, emphasis in the original)

Rather than starting from a position that risks reifying writing, these positions constitute writing as a social practice and foreground the need to understand what people are doing in, through, and with writing. It is this understanding which Lillis, in line with other scholars working in the New Literacy Studies (NLS) tradition, strongly advocates and which is taken up and expanded throughout the book.

Chapters 2 and 3 take up the challenges posed in this introductory chapter through exploring “the question of mode” and “writing as verbal.” These two chapters each explore some of the commonly held views within sociolinguistics with specific reference to the modality and materiality of writing. Drawing from a range of different disciplines and research traditions, Lillis problematizes what she sees as the dominant assumptions made in regard to writing and calls, for example, for a shift away from narrow understandings of mode that only foreground “writing as inscription (making of forms and symbols) and [writing] as verbal (grammar, syntax, discourse)” (p. 40). She discusses the need for analytical approaches that recognize what she identifies as the materiality and technology of writing, as well as the visual and spatial modal dimensions. Similarly, in Chapter 3, Lillis calls for an awareness of the limitations of analytical approaches that tend to focus on form and function only, suggesting that we might make better use of tools that focus on content, as well as approaches that potentially collapse or obscure these divides. The major point raised by these chapters – and which is a dominant theme throughout the book – is that our analytical tools shape and define what we see, and that, while those of us who are interested in understanding writing have developed a wide range of tools and approaches, we need to be aware of the affordances and constraints that these offer us, particularly in relation to digital texts and new media.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 focus on the where, when, how, and who of writing. Studying language in its everyday context is, Lillis suggests, one of the main endeavors of sociolinguistics but is something that tends to be associated more with speaking than writing. These chapters challenge this position

through exploring the ubiquity or “everyday-ness” of writing and writing practices in people’s day-to-day lives. The chapters explore the ways in which any act of writing requires writers to make use of the resources available to them, arguing that writing is always embedded in the socially situated realities in which people are located. An overarching point made across these chapters is that writing must be understood as a dynamic social practice, and, as such, our analyses need to take account of the complex histories and trajectories of texts, as well as the relationships to power and resources, and agency and identity they forge and reflect.

In Chapter 7, Lillis draws together the ideas and arguments presented in the book to pull out eight main approaches to theorizing and framing writing (and writers) that she sees as being observable across the broad range of fields and disciplines in which writing is studied. These eight frames are: (1) Poetic-aesthetic, (2) Transactional-rationalist, (3) Process-expressionist, (4) Socio-cognitive, (5) Social semiotic, (6) Socio-discursive, (7) Social practice, and (8) Participatory culture. A goal for Lillis in this chapter is to encourage us to recognize both the strengths and limitations of the disciplinary and ideological boundaries within which we approach writing. The Poetic-aesthetic approach, for example, is traditionally associated with creative writing yet in this chapter Lillis uses it to explore student writing and workplace writing (p. 165). These two domains of everyday writing, Lillis argues, are more commonly understood from a Transactional-rationalist perspective in which the focus of analysis tends to be on the ways in which information is exchanged through texts. In approaching these acts of writing from a Poetic-aesthetic perspective, Lillis demonstrates how the focus of attention shifts more towards the experience and agency of the writer and the creativity involved in the production of these texts. Such a process recasts the texts and refocuses our analytic gaze; and the examples reiterate a key message of the book, which is “if we restrict our frame to a particular academic or institutional domain of observation, we may not notice or recognise what is going on” (p. 169). In this regard, Lillis is not only calling for a reconfiguration of the approaches to writing within sociolinguistics, but also a reconfiguration of how we work within and across different disciplines.

Chapter 8 closes with a review of some of the conceptualizations of writing that Lillis has identified as being dominant within sociolinguistic. These can be summarized as the following three points: (1) that writing tends to be constituted as something that is secondary to speaking; (2) that writing tends to be associated with prestige texts and as a result linked to ideas about standard language and literacy practices; and (3) that a tradition of text-analysis tends to dominate approaches to understanding writing within sociolinguistics. In this final chapter, Lillis reiterates the challenges

she has posed to these understandings of writing, arguing instead for approaches that consider the variety of ways in which writing takes place in our everyday social worlds. She argues for a social practice and ethnographically oriented approach to writing in which the “goal is to reach contextualised understandings of the functions and purposes of specific instances of writing – what it is and does, what it means to whom, what the consequences are in any specific moment – there are major limitations in working only with texts or text analysis” (p. 174).

As someone who is interested in language and literacy practices, I found this text to be thought-provoking and refreshing in the ways that it conceptualizes and presents writing. Lillis’ call for “contextualised understandings” of writing in particular is something that challenges me to reflect upon the ways in which I frame writing in my own work. It also requires me to interrogate the assumptions that are implicit in the analytic approaches I draw upon, asking myself what it is that certain tools and approaches enable or restrict me from seeing.

This is a very readable book. Each chapter begins by providing the reader with clearly stated intentions that are complemented by summary conclusions at the end. This feature, combined with helpful examples and definitions, makes the book highly accessible to readers from a variety of different backgrounds and interests. The book surveys a wide range of approaches to writing and as such it could be used effectively as a textbook for undergraduates and postgraduates within the field of sociolinguistics, as well in the humanities and social sciences where writing is a focus of investigation. The main ideas and arguments put forward in the book will be of interest to readers working in the areas of language and literacy studies, as well as in writing research and teaching. The book has as much to offer those new to the field of sociolinguistics as it does to those more familiar with the field. For both, the book is highly recommended on the grounds of the challenge it poses to the current status quo and the opportunities it presents for future directions.

In sum, Theresa Lillis’ *The Sociolinguistics of Writing* is a well-written and well-argued book that calls, persuasively, for a reconfiguring of the traditional positioning of writing within sociolinguistics, providing a detailed discussion for how these changes can, and should, take place. As Lillis herself says, “this is a very exciting time for writing research” (p. 177).

### **About the Author**

Tracey Costley is Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of English, City University of Hong Kong. Her Ph.D. (Philosophy of Education, King’s College London) focused on literacy and English as an Additional

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