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Book Review of 'On Writteness: the cultural politics of academic writing' by Joan Turner

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On Writteness: The cultural politics of academic writing, Joan Turner. Bloomsbury, London (2018). pp. 296. UK £67.50, Hardback ISBN: 9781472505071, Ebook ISBN: 9781472514455 UK £64.80, Paperback [19th September 2019] ISBN: 9781350133044 UK £26.09

Writing a review of a book *On Writteness* is bound to be a considerable challenge in reflexivity – a challenge that is intensified given that part of the data set on which Turner builds her argument is a corpus of academic book reviews. Nevertheless, the opportunity to read carefully and reflect on the book has richly repaid the time involved for this reader and is likely to do so for other readers as well.

Turner's central argument is that a gap has opened up between persistent ideologies of writteness which have their origins in the European enlightenment and in the rise of print culture on the one hand, and on the other, the contemporary realities of writing as a phenomenon in flux and even turmoil. Turner shows how common-sense notions of what constitutes good academic writing that are premised on beliefs about textual and linguistic stability, a binary division of language and content, and the ideology of sole authorship, remain remarkably resilient despite the new and rapidly evolving facts of globalization, mobility, linguistic diversity and technological change. Turner pinpoints with particular clarity what she identifies as the 'smooth read' ideology of Anglo-Western written culture, a concept which has affinities with Hinds' (1987) notion of 'writer responsibility'. Turner dissects the operations of this ideology in which responsibility lies predominantly with the writer to provide the reader with an unencumbered and easy pathway through the text. One of the satisfying features of this book is the way in which Turner manages to defamiliarise this deeply embedded concept of the 'smooth read', and to cause the reader to question long-established common-sense assumptions. She skilfully exposes and holds up for scrutiny the familiar metaphors we routinely use to conceptualise and to evaluate writing, for example those allied to 'clarity', 'cleanness', 'elegance' and 'conciseness'.

This widening gap between established Anglo-Western rhetorical values and the centrifugal realities of contemporary academic text production and reception, Turner argues, is consequential for those whose own linguistic practice departs from centripetal norms, such as multilingual scholars outside the Anglophone centre, and, of particular interest to Turner, multilingual students writing in English. Turner argues that the practices of those who operate within this gap; namely, language practitioners and literacy brokers of various kinds and particularly proof readers, routinely remain unregulated and hidden, which enables institutions to 'paper over' the cracks and ignore the ethical and intellectual issues which are raised. A further consequence is the tendency to misrecognise and undervalue the textual and intellectual labour which such brokering often entails, resulting in the continued low status and marginalisation of work in this contested area. Turner suggests that the academy (and individuals within it) need to move towards embracing greater diversity, to respond to difference less often as 'error' and more as 'accent', and to 'develop a willingness to move away from the smooth read expectation' (p. 260).

Turner does not shy away from crafting a sustained argument at an abstract level, and the book has a clear philosophical quality. She draws deftly on theory, particularly on Bourdieu's concepts of the symbolic economy and misrecognition (e.g. Bourdieu, 1998). At the same time, Turner uses some superbly illustrative, detailed worked examples which the EAP practitioner will find familiar, and which help to ground the argument and make it rich and complex, but not difficult to follow. For example, she unpacks a detailed example of an examiner's correction to a PhD thesis to illustrate the potentially idiosyncratic, contingent and variable nature of such textual interventions (pp. 248 – 250). The book draws on a number of different data sets, most notably a corpus of academic book reviews in the *Times Higher Education*, interviews with academics and PhD students, focus group

data, and professional listserv contributions. Turner also occasionally draws on other data which do not appear to derive from these data sets, and sometimes the source of a particular extract is not completely clear (as in the example given above, presumably from an unpublished thesis with which Turner is familiar). However, this book is the culmination of many years of experience, observation and reflection, and the eclectic approach to data does not detract from a sense of cohesion and a cumulatively assembled, careful argument.

The book is divided into nine chapters, all of which bear somewhat lengthy titles beginning 'On...', in an echo of the book title (for example, Chapter 2 has one of the shorter titles: *On the historical construction of writtenness as an ideological regime*). With this repeated chapter title phrasing, Turner seems to be deliberately playing with a formal and highly nominalised version of writtenness, reminiscent of the essayist literary style of the Enlightenment authors in whose work she traces the origins of our contemporary written culture. Chapter 1 provides an overview; Chapter 2 as its title suggests explores the genealogy of writtenness, charting the rise of the notion of 'plain style' in the latter part of the seventeenth century and linking this with its more recent twentieth century iterations for example in C.K. Ogden's concept of Basic English (1940) and as described by Deborah Cameron (1995) in her analysis of post-war 'verbal hygiene'. In Chapter 3, Turner draws specifically on her corpus of *Times Higher Education* reviews to make a case for contemporary 'underlying values of writtenness' as a powerful transdisciplinary phenomenon. Chapter 4 exposes the foundations of an entire 'style industry' predicated on the entrenched division of style from substance. Turner's rich critical discussion ranges from the 'tips and tricks' literature to the problematic implications for those charged with 'polishing' or 'tidying up' other people's prose, whose work is often misrecognised as limited in scope and low in value.

In Chapters 5 to 8 Turner focuses the discussion more particularly in contexts of university study, teaching and learning. In Chapter 5 she considers the 'internationalised' academy, in which English plays a symbolic role in what Turner calls the 'elite economy' of contemporary higher education, with serious consequences for students whose language does not match monolingual and monocultural expectations and who are therefore routinely stigmatised as cognitively, or even morally (for example through concerns about plagiarism) 'weak'. Chapter 6 documents the consequences of ideological values of writtenness for the misunderstanding of work with texts, including the work of language specialists and proof readers as well as the efforts of student writers themselves. Chapter 7 focuses on the often messy and conflicting practices which arise around supporting students writing for assessment. Turner dissects institutional complicity in the confusions surrounding ethical issues such as plagiarism, essay mills and equitable access to support. Chapter 8 deals with proof reading in detail and its role in maintaining writtenness as a cultural value. Turner carefully explores the ambiguity of the term 'proofreading', which covers a wide range of practices ranging from spell-checking to major textual interventions. She shows that proofreading functions both as a crucial face-saver for individuals and institutions while at the same being categorised as unskilled work with low status. Finally, Chapter 9 returns to the 'smooth read' ideology and sets it (and the prescriptive ethos which accompanies it) against the background of contemporary written practice in a state of incessant flux and heterogeneity; for example, the current reality where English is increasingly used as an academic lingua franca in an internationalised academy. Turner powerfully argues that the centripetal values of fixity, stability and consistency which are the legacies of print culture are increasingly buckling under the centrifugal pressures of globalised, mobilised and digital communication.

One question which arises for the reader, but which may be the subject of another book, is the question of the social, political and economic forces which militate against the acknowledgement of flux, diversity and complexity in contemporary writtenness. Turner is right to challenge the 'smooth read' ideology and recommend greater tolerance for a 'bumpier' read; for example, where a reader-assessor encounters a text with English as a Lingua Franca features such as a non-'native'-like use of definite and indefinite articles and unusual nominalisations ('the conduction of the study'), or where a text is less heavily signposted than might be expected in standard UK academic English. However, this does not alter the fact that many of those working at the higher education 'textface' (Tuck 2018), both within and outside the disciplines, experience working conditions and payment terms predicated on the old 'smooth read' ideologies. For example, the limited time which university teachers are given to read students' written work for assessment purposes rarely allows for the careful and thorough reading which many do in fact carry out; nor are such limited time allocations realistically compatible with the good practice of making substantial formative comments. Unfortunately, it is precisely because these ideologies conveniently downplay the labour involved in both writing and reading, and thus justify minimal resourcing, that they are able to stubbornly persist. Turner herself has written about the impact of economic pressures on the way in which EAP is positioned in the globalised and marketised university, and the consequent risk that EAP work continues to be regarded as an 'economic and intellectual short cut' (Turner, 2004: 96). Individuals may have little scope to 'read differently' in the ways which Turner recommends, to take their time, or work harder in meeting a text half way, if this labour is not acknowledged in the allocation of time and resources. Given the current market-driven, cost-reduction imperatives in most contemporary higher education institutions, this seems unlikely to happen any time soon. EAP practitioners are also highly aware of the difficulties they face in bringing about change in institutional language policy; for example, in convincing academic colleagues of the acceptability of lingua franca varieties of English in the context of assessed written work. However, while readers may well bring to this book an awareness of the practical challenges associated with Turner's proposals, the author's purpose is intentionally radical, aimed at stimulating broad debate rather than recommending strategies for achieving change 'on the ground'.

Although Turner's arguments are focused on the field of academic writing as this is Turner's chief area of concern, and their consequences for international students in particular (and to some extent multilingual academics seeking publication in English), they have wide applicability beyond academia. They also make a valuable contribution to wider public debates about contemporary language and communication. Turner points to changes in some corners of the academic publishing world; for example, where regional forms of English and English as a lingua franca are becoming more accepted in the published form of journal articles. However, the academy is not the only institution which continues to exert centripetal authority, at least on the surface, in matters of language. Public discourses of publishing, journalism and education continue to foreground moral panic about declining standards, and are troubled rather than energised by diversity.

When it comes to judging the book's own 'writtenness', which as Turner shows is frequently a key element of evaluation in academic book reviews, it is hard to comment unselfconsciously, given Turner's incisive critique of contemporary values of writtenness related to textual aesthetics (such as the clichéd 'beautifully written'), tropes of pristine prose, lucidity, succinctness and so on. I'll therefore frame my comments in terms of my personal experience as a reader. This is that the book is both a 'smooth read' (with my apologies to the author) and *also* invites the type of slower reading process which involves flicking back and forth, digesting and re-reading, resulting in a reading experience which is satisfying and thought-provoking, rather than easy or particularly quick, but

which derives from the very fundamental challenge to thinking that the book represents. It's a work of slow (in the best sense) and deep scholarship which deserves to be read in the same spirit. It is likely to provide food for thought for academic writers, writing researchers, language specialists including EAP, teachers within the disciplines, publishers, editors, journalists and those involved in the writing of educational materials, provided they are willing to have some fundamental assumptions challenged.

Jackie Tuck

Open University, United Kingdom

Email address; jackie.tuck@open.ac.uk

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