Tools to master writing: Historical glimpses

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Explorations in Socio-Cultural Studies

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LITERACY AND OTHER FORMS OF MEDIATED ACTION

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"Written language is the algebra of language [...] it allows the child, when he or she grasps it, to attain the most abstract level of language, which implies also the internal reorganisation of the previous psychic system of oral language" (Vygotsky, 1985b, p. 261; my translation). Although many times cited, this utterance by Vygotsky is still unheeded. The revolutionary conception of language development it proposes - revolutionary in both senses: a radically new conception of language development and a conception which sees development as undergoing radical changes, as construction of completely new forms of functioning - leads almost necessarily to the question how this transformation is made possible for the child. There is of course, on the one hand, education, "the artificial development of the child" which "restructures in a fundamental way all mental functions." (Vygotsky, 1985a, p. 45), but there is also, on the other hand, the complex process of internalisation of outside tools by the complex process of appropriation Marx and Engels (1845-1869) described in the following terms in their German Ideology: "The appropriation [...] is nothing else than the development of the individual capacities corresponding to the material tools of production. The appropriation of a totality of tools of production is [...] the development of a totality of capacities in the individuals themselves." (p. 67s)

TOOLS AND MENTAL FUNCTIONS

This seems quite obvious - even if careful analysis would be necessary by looking at production systems and their integration in social relationships - for the use of technical tools like spoons (Valsiner, 1984) which transfer radically the relationship to eating or like axes (Léončev, 1973, see page 208) which transform the relationship of man to the tree and the forest. One could of course also analyze on the same line the effects of the sewing machine (Projektgruppe Automation und Qualifikation, 1978) and the computer (Projektgruppe Automation und Qualifikation, 1987). But which tools can one use to transform mental functions like memory, concept formation or the production of language? We know of course the answer Vygotsky gave to this question in his theses about the instrumental method in psychology, by applying the notion of tool to the internal nature of human beings, to inner processes: "Psychological tools are artificial elaborations; they are social in nature and not organic or individual; they are conceived for controlling the process of men's own behavior or the behavior of others, in the same way as the techniques are conceived for controlling the processus of nature. [...] Integrated in the behavioral process, the psychological instrument modifies the unfolding and the structure of mental functions, determining, by their own properties, the structure of the novel instrumental act, in the same way as the technical instrument modifies the process of natural adaptation in determining the formes of work operations." (Vygotsky, 1985a, p. 39ss; my translation).
How can this same general principle be applied to writing which is itself the production of signs. Are there signs, system or sub-systems of signs elaborated to control, transform, revolutionize the process of production of signs? My claim in this programmatic paper is precisely that writing practices - a term I use to designate the numerous ways in which language in written form is produced -, besides being based on the use of specific technical tools, are necessarily mediated by specialized semiotic systems in- and outside the language which materialize these practices and give them by this way a specific form. These systems become thus tools for mastering writing, for mastering the production processes of speech in written form. Their appropriation, to rephrase Marx, develops on the side of the individual new capacities, namely the different practices of writing objectified in these sign systems.

GENRES

How then is this process of transformation and differentiation of so called “natural” language, that means of language used mainly in dialogical situations, possible through the appropriation of new sign systems related to language in written form? The concept of genre, as proposed by Bakhtin, helps us to understand generally how this can work. Bakhtine says: “To speak [and to write, BS] we use always discourse genres, in other words all our utterances dispose of a stereotyped and relatively stable form of structuration of a whole. We possess a rich repertoire of genres of discourse. In practice, we use them easily and without difficulty even if we are totally unaware of their theoretical existence. As Jourdain in Molière who spoke in prose without knowing it, we speak and write in varied genres without knowing even their existence.” (Bakhtine, 1979, p. 284; my translation)

As society develops, genres of course also do, and among them written genres which interest us more particularly here. Look for instance at the period of the end of 17th century in France where the huge use of paper - 500 million sheets a year, about hundred A4 sheets by head - testifies to the importance writing had already acquired in society (Martin, 1988, p. 283). But what for? A brief enumeration of the domains in which writing is important gives us an idea about the diversity of genres already existing: the extension of the economic market requires transactions, letters of exchange, actions, accounts; there are public writings for controlling society; writing is used in justice and for taxes; personal letters appear; leaflets, commercial circulars, reports on political events circulate in society; the first newspapers are already published with their different genres, and of course books of different types, “this most complete form of written discourse” (ibid.).

Genres which developed in these contexts guide our practice of writing, are the tools so to speak to master writing practices in a given society. But in the same way that a factory, which is a tool for producing complex objects in articulating different processes of production in a complex way, is made up of an ensemble of tools which materialize different actions and operations on material objects and which is embedded in a system of other factories and in social relationships, genres have to be looked at as a synthesis of a multiplicity of tools acting at different levels, some of them very specific, linked to a particular genre, others more general, common to other discourse genres. Writing practices relate, on the one hand, to technical tools which shape, in function of social needs, the ways writing is concretely realized. As we will see, the writing process itself takes different forms in practices based on the use of different technical tools. But besides them, there are on the other hand different semiotic systems which can be classified in four types:

1. First of all there are the writing systems (Coulmas 1989) themselves which allow
language to become visible, be they pleremic or cenemic, these systems being adapted in very complex way to the needs of particular languages (orthography).

2. Writing practices produce their own discourse forms, *internally* so to speak. A variety of verbal means contribute to give the discourse a form according to its functions in a given historical context. The language (in the Saussurian sense of “langue”) becomes differentiated, creates new forms, syntactical as well as textual, to meet the necessities of new verbal or linguistic activities, crystallizing finally into genres, into purposeful, staged linguistic activities.

3. As one knows, language is “auto-reflexive,” language can refer to itself; being, as Saussure puts it, the interpreter of all other sign-systems, it is also its own possible interpreter. More concretely speaking, speech practices, and consequently, writing practices always produce at the same time, when they develop and solidify, when they crystallize or conventionalize, tools to speak and write on themselves: one can name the practices, one can to a certain degree describe them and the genres they produce and one can evaluate them. These tools are *exterior* to the practices named and to the discourse forms produced; they are in a certain sense above them but are necessary for their functioning.

4. The changes of writing practices and of the tools that accompany them change the process of producing *written* language and at a certain point writing itself becomes *its own tool* of production.

The technical tools and semiotic systems related to writing practices are historically situated and change profoundly over time. I will illustrate this in taking some examples in the five areas just mentioned.

**TECHNICAL TOOLS FOR WRITING**

Writing, in contrast to speaking, needs material tools, artificially created by men and which can undergo important changes. Without having an automatic effect on the way one writes, they open nonetheless new possibilities which, once realized, can transform radically the process of writing as a whole. One can think here, to give but some examples, of wax tablets used already by some Roman writers to take notes and to prepare texts (Rouse, & Rouse, 1989); the invention of cursive writing already by the Egyptians, a form which almost disappeared by the Middle Ages (Martin, 1988); the uniformization of the numerous ways of writing which made its appropriation a very difficult task, accessible only to the few (Jensen, 1969). But let us mention also the invention of paper in the 15th century which led to a banalization of the support for writing (Martin, 1988). And last but not least, the invention, in the 19th century, of the pen which transformed the writing often discribed as painful activity (Furet, & Ozouf, 1977, p. 90; Keith, 1986; Clanchy, 1979) into a more decent and acceptable one, leading finally to overcoming a long-lasting division of labor between composition, the fine work of the thinker, and writing down what is dictated, the hard work of the scribe.

These technical changes can have consequences on the writing process itself. To give some examples: drafting, although theoretically possible at every stage of writing, is facilitated by certain technical innovations like the invention of paper, the use of pencils, not to speak of the use of word processors. Writing instruction was heavily influenced by the invention of the steel pencil in France in the beginning of 19th century since preparing the quill pen took a very long time and was too difficult in mass education.
WRITING SYSTEMS

As has been shown by several authors (Haarmann 1990; Leroi-Gourhan 1964; Schmandt-Besserat 1978 among others), the roots of writing are varied: religious practices are as important as economic ones. However, writing becomes language only by representing not extralinguistic referents but language itself as the complex unity of communication and representation realized by the system of arbitrary signs. In representing language as such, writing becomes writing in a true sense, that is a new form of language, visible language, potentially independant from language in its oral form. There are in principle two ways to represent language: in making visible its "signifiant" - or its "signific" - side (Haas, 1983). But in practice, all systems are more or less mixed (Catach, 1988) and in addition to that, the general systems have to be adapted to every concrete language becoming a historically concrete system, an orthography.

In spite of their complex relationships, differences between writing systems are quite often seen as a factor that can help explicate differences in thinking or culture. One is simply astonished to read sentences like: "Phonetic writing was essential to the intellectual development in the West. No such development occurred in the East" (Logan, 1986, p. 24). Or: "The Greeks did produce a technology [alphabetic writing; B.S.] - the first of its kind, which did in the long range have some revolutionary effects upon both the ways we think and the ways we behave" (Havelock, 1989, p. 87). Or even: "Without the phonetic alphabet [cultures] remain tribal as do the Chinese and the Japanese" (McLuhan, cited in Coulmas 1989, p. 160). As is the case for cultural differences, cultural specific language practices, are not mainly situated and objectified at the level of phonetics. In writing the practices are not differentiated mainly on the basis of writing systems, all the more so as most systems are mixed. If one takes seriously into account the arbitrary character of language as a sign system, it is no more possible to locate cultural significance at the level of the "signifiant." It seems thus theoretically dangerous to postulate an Japanese brain on the basis of a different writing system or an alphabet effect from the Greeks onwards.

There is of course an influence that the concrete form of the writing system, and the orthography of a given language have on the way a child reconstructs his relationship to language when acquiring the written code. They are tools whose form imposes a certain way of looking at language functioning. But this influence depends as much on the concrete form of writing in a given language as on the writing system, and even more on the significance of writing in a given social context. The evolution and the social significance of the French orthographic system is most revealing in this respect (Catach 1978). In his most interesting study on the history of the teaching of French mother tongue language, Chervel (1977) shows that the teaching practices tend to "canonize orthography and to identify in the minds the French orthography and French language" (p. 28; my translation).

GENRES AND THEIR CHARACTERISTICS

When one speaks of genre, at least two levels have to be distinguished:

- what are the possible contents?

- what are the given textual and syntactical forms necessary to realize a given discourse genre?

The two aspects are of course interrelated, but partially independant. Take a simple argumentative discourse as the one which happened to occur recently in Geneva on doing homework in school, or on the necessity to have an army in Switzerland, or on the
Maastricht treaty in Europe. One can distinguish positions, or voices as Wertsch calls them in accordance with Bakhtin, speaking from a certain point of view in favor or against a given position. These voices are organized in discourse genres with specific characteristics: say an official discourse read in a meeting, a letter to a journal, a scientific discourse on the consequences of homework, or the Maastricht treaty or a newspaper editorial, to take just a few examples.

A most interesting example of the appearance of a new discourse genre concurrently with new contents becoming possible has been discussed by Giesecke (1991): the constitution of technical discourse in the sixteenth century in German where printing and a higher degree of literacy led to a description of technical processes of craftsmen in written texts. Knowledge that before was only transmitted orally become explicit and accessible in written form. To achieve this, a new linguistic form had to be created, the "common German" (gemeine teutsch), the language having to be, as Ickelsamer said it, very rapidly accessible to everybody.

Take as another example landscape descriptions whose history is presented by Petitejean (1989). He shows that historically one can distinguish four types, each being characterized by certain possible contents and by specific linguistic procedures:

- ornamental: this appears already in Greek literature but continues in the Middle Ages, the most important aspect being the common place, the topos;

- expressive: this mainly characterizes the 18th century with the emergence of literature as a social institution; originality is important; a landscape expresses the inner life and can be presented in different ways; the metaphor is the central mechanism of description;

- representative: in the 19th century, under the influence of positivists, description had to become objective, neutral and true; different textual procedures are elaborated to accomplish this like letting a specialist speak in the text, citing texts or visiting a landscape guided by somebody who knows it;

- productive: this appears in the Nouveau Roman in France where the author shows the artefact, the technique itself of describing by different linguistic means like hesitation, contradiction in the text, taking into account the significant side of words, and so on.

In what follows, I will concentrate on the second aspect I mentioned before: genres as characterized by their form. It is of course impossible here to give a theory of forms of genre in all its complexity, all the more so as, following Swales (1990, p. 89), there are still very few empirical studies on genres and the existing one are often anecdotal. To show, nonetheless, how linguistic genre features can function as a psychological tool for writing, I will point here to ensembles of linguistic units particularly frequent and important in written texts and which assume what Hickmann (1985) calls an intralinguistic function, i.e., they all refer to a linguistically created context; or to put it more simple: they are units referring to other linguistic units in a text. As such they function as models, in the way they function, of an attitude to text which can be described by terms like "distance" or "consciousness" - they refer from the text back to the text. The sign sub-systems realizing these functions are on one hand different linguistic categories like the system of tenses and their changes (Dolz et al., 1991), textual organizers (Schneuwly et al., 1989) and certain types of anaphora (de Weck & Schneuwly, to appear) in different genres and on the other hand semiotic systems Anis (1988) calls "topograms" and which include aspects like punctuation (Schneuwly, 1988) and typographic means like paragraphs, space between words, italics, use of space on the page and so on.
Let us take one simple example to illustrate the functioning of a linguistic sign subsystem in a given discourse genre and the intralinguistic function it can realize.

In a historically quite recent text genre in French, namely explanatory texts in encyclopedias for children, one can find a rather frequent syntactic construction which has the form “ce + nominalisation” (“this + nominalisation”), i.e., the transformation of a verbal phrase, of a sentence, or of a whole paragraph into a nominal phrase. Take the following examples: “La formation des nuages résulte souvent de l’ascendance d’air humide au dessus d’une étendue continentale ou maritime chauffée par le soleil. Cet abaissement de la terre et de la mer crée aussi des zones de basses pressions là où l’air monte.” (The formation of clouds is often the result of the rising of humid air over a continental or maritime area heated by the sun. This heating of the soil and of the sea creates zones of low pressure where the air rises.) One can easily see, that a syntactic structure like this can be analyzed as materialization in linguistic form of a complex textual operation which can be described as: condense a whole verbal phrase, sentence or even subparagraph in one nominal phrase and use this nominal phrase to refer to the condensed content. This is particularly important in explanatory texts where the description of a fact becomes the starting point. This means that the already constituted text becomes the object of a complex operation of condensation to get a starting point to continue the text. Clearly, such operations on the text change the relationship of the writer to its own text which becomes an object of more or less conscious operations.

Because these units as objectified means for operating on linguistically created context prefigure and presuppose at the same time a new relationship to the text as object to be operated on, their appropriation constitutes a tool to create, on the side of the individual a relationship to his own mental processes which Vygotsky called conscious and voluntary.

Let us look now at topograms which are in a certain sense more specifically related to writing than the intralinguistic function since they are strictly related to its material nature, namely to be visual communication (Olson, 1992): the graphic space and visual units are used for constructing new semiotic systems in relation with different writing practices. Vachek calls them “the purely material means serving stylistic purposes” (1989, 43) Netchine and Netchine (1992) give an interesting analysis of the use of this space during history. One could also look at the history of punctuation in relation to the change of status of written texts when passing from a conception where it is a thing to be read to another where it is decoded directly on the visual level. Martin (1988) for instance shows that the antic punctuation - if it existed - was essentially rhetorical, more linked to the necessity of respiration, that is of reading aloud, than to sense or to syntactic analysis. And it is only the Renaissance, in the eleventh and twelfth century, that each word was separated from another.

In a quite different field, but still related to the use of graphic signs specific to writing, Tébeaux (1991) shows that numerous aspects of today’s technical writing, i.e., texts used to say how to do something, were invented during English renaissance; clarity is of course a central aspect and she shows “that writers demonstrate awareness of literacy level of their reader [...] in the late sixteenth century readable visual designs was the writer’s intent” (412). The typography is used for the organization of the content of the text. “Paragraphs and centered headings appear, tables are utilized more and more until occasionally whole folio editions are put out with every bit of the text worked piecemeal onto bracketed outlines in dichotomized division which show diagrammatically how ‘specials’ are subordinated to ‘generals’” (424).

Thus, the semiotic systems used in the text materialize the way of doing the action that a given genre realizes in a given culture. My general thesis is that their
appropriation is at the same time the result and the presupposition for really mastering a given genre.

WRITING PRACTICES AS OBJECTS OF DISCOURSE

Discourse on writing practices strongly guides and influences the practices themselves. Social psychologist and linguists have shown how discourse can function as an epistemological obstacle to a real appropriation of writing practices (Bourgain 1990; Dabène 1987). Let us give just two examples which show historical changes in these metalinguistic discourses are held.

It is most interesting to observe changes, at crucial periods, of the structure of vocabulary related to literacy in general and more particularly to writing. Traugott (1987) shows, in a very subtle analyses, that during Middle English and Early Modern English an impressive number of assertive speech act verbs appear, related to literacy practices in new institutions like school, trade and court. She explains it not so much by the important development of literacy and writing itself, but says that it concerns 'specific practices, some oral, some literate, in different societies.' She goes on to argue that "if anything, it is awareness of the necessity for reconstituting the speaker-hearer relationships of interactive language that tend to get lost in the objectivizing force of literacy, that is reflected in the growth of speech act verbs in English" (p. 125s). In other words, changes in linguistic practices, in discourse genres, require new ensembles of linguistic units to master these practices, the changes in vocabulary observed are but an indication of these new forms of speaking about practices.

The most important institution in which tools of this sort are introduced is of course school. When one looks at the history of the teaching of writing, one observes that reading and writing were clearly separated for a very long time and that even when important mass literacy was achieved, writing was essentially limited to the mechanical act of writing, like writing a signature (Furer, et al., 1977). Methods of teaching of writing were essentially conceived of as teaching transcription of an oral message into a written one. Teaching writing on a mass level appeared really only in the midst of the 19th century at least in most European countries. The initial aim of this writing instruction was not so much to give children access to an autonomous mastery of writing - mastering of different genres - but a reproductive capacity for closely imitating very simple text forms. Most simple metapragmatic tools were sufficient to achieve this aim (Schneuwly, 1986).

In a second phase, during the 1930s, the idea of the child expressing himself in texts emerged, the ideology of literate texts, of the isolated subject expressing his or her deeply grounded ideas and feelings, became more and more important also in primary school. But curiously enough, no real methods for teaching this kind of writing was introduced, with the exception of general rules like being "sincere" or "depicting reality like it is." At the same time an important new emphasis was given to grammar instruction which had the role of saying how to write "correctly". Through discourse on written language, school created in this way at one and the same time an ideology of freedom of creation and its form of domination by a restrictive general norm.

These two examples of teaching writing show that school creates a certain relationship to writing, teaches certain ways of speaking about writing, privileges certain aspects of the production of texts. The semiotic systems created to speak and reflect writing practices - and this would be a most important topic to discuss - can become as much tools for mastering as for preventing the mastery of writing.
WRITING IS NOT WRITING

Writing is not just simply writing; the writing process can take different forms in various genres and it has changed profoundly in history.

The oral-written language continuum for instance seems to have been much more continuous, I might say, in the Middle Age of our culture, as several authors point out (Clanchy, 1979). In the same way as reading was essentially reading aloud, very often by another person for the addressee, writing was not writing down, was not the complex process of writing and revising of writing and rewriting; it was decomposed into two clearly separated acts, each assumed by a different person; composing, on the one hand, having a visible result, dictating, writing it down, i.e. transforming the orally composed text into a written sequence. Writing was more completely embedded in oral language than it is today.

Writing as the unity of these two processes and as clearly separated from oral language, at least in what concerns certain of its more complex forms (books, essays, stories, etc) appeared much later (this doesn’t mean that certain rudimentary form didn’t appear already quite early, as the beautiful analysis of Rouse and Rouse 1989 on the uses of wax-tablets shows us). This is true to an even greater extent for the conception of writing as an activity that can be organized by writing itself, where writing becomes so to speak its own tool, as Alacorta shows in speaking about drafts of students (1992). But one could also take in account marginal notes, notes, plans and so on, the whole panoply of tools writing itselfs gives the competent writer (Keseling, G., Wrobel, A., & Rau,1987)

CONCLUSION

This sketchy outline of the tools necessary to master writing, illustrated by some historical glimpses suffices, I hope, to demonstrate how important it is to look at writing as a mental process that can and has to be controlled with the aid of psychological tools. How complex, how changing, and how varied these instruments are has become clear. It is useless to stress again the importance nowadays of having a real mastery of writing. In a period where, as Umberto Eco puts it, the screen of images is transformed into a screen of letters, nobody can really be excluded anymore from access to active writing. This involves, as Vygorsky said, transforming the system of producing language itself, and for this the tools acting at different levels of the writing process are necessary as is education that makes their appropriation possible.

Notes
1. Remember here that remark made by Marx: "Hunger is hunger, but hunger satisfied by cooked meat and eaten with fork and knife is another hunger than the one which gulps down raw meat with hand, nails and teeth." (1857-8/1974, p. 13; my translation)
2. It would be interesting here to discuss more thoroughly the problems of the relationship between oral and written language in relation with the more general and probably more interesting distinction between primary and secondary discourse as seen by Bakhtin. In Thought and Language, Vygostsky hesitates between analyzing written and spoken and dialogic and monologic language.

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INSTRUMENTOS PARA DOMINAR LA ESCRITURA. UNA OJEADA HISTÓRICA.
Resumen en castellano

Cuando alguien considera la escritura como una función mental superior ha de preguntarse acerca de los instrumentos para construirla y dominarla. En esta presentación programática nos proponemos distinguir cinco dominios, todos ellos articulados en torno al concepto de género escrito, en el que tales instrumentos se dan. De un lado, están los medios materiales de la escritura (tablillas de cera, papiro y papel; pincel, pluma, lápiz y ordenador), de otro, cuatro (sub-)sistemas semióticos que forman parte del lenguaje mismo: los sistemas escritos, las características lingüísticas del género, el discurso en torno a los géneros y la propia escritura en tanto que instrumento. Estas áreas han sido ilustradas desde diferentes ojeadas históricas las cuales nos demuestran que la escritura no es simplemente escritura, que sus procesos cambian en la historia con arreglo a las funciones que la escritura tiene en condiciones sociales diferentes y a los medios para realizar tales funciones. Los principales aspectos a considerar que conciernen a estas cinco áreas son los siguientes:

Los instrumentos técnicos de la escritura, aún cuando no representen un factor autónomo para cambiar sus procesos, abren nuevas posibilidades a las prácticas de la escritura y a la enseñanza de la misma. Por todo ello, los instrumentos técnicos terminan por cambiar los procesos mismos.

El efecto de los diferentes sistemas de escritura sobre los procesos de la misma han de ser cuidadosamente analizados tomando en consideración que la mayoría de los sistemas están mezclados e históricamente relacionados de forma compleja con lenguajes concretos y prácticas escritoras. Su influencia sobre el pensamiento y la cultura ha sido a menudo sobrevalorada.

La emergencia de nuevos géneros a lo largo de la historia siempre ha ido acompañada de la creación de nuevos medios lingüísticos, de nuevos subsistemas semióticos o, por
decirlo de otra manera, de configuraciones lingüísticas funcionando como subsistemas del lenguaje. Estos medios permiten realizar los géneros con más eficiencia. Dicha tesis general está ilustrada, de un lado, por dos ejemplos de evolución histórica de géneros (discurso técnico y descripciones paisajísticas) y, de otro, por algunos medios lingüísticos que caracterizan a los nuevos géneros (nominalizaciones en textos enciclopédicos concretos; signos gráficos en el discurso técnico).

Los discursos en las prácticas lingüísticas dan a estas últimas forma y sentido y, por lo tanto, deben ser tomados en consideración como parte de las prácticas mismas. Los medios de estos discursos cambian en ciertos periodos históricos, como la evolución del vocabulario en diferentes lenguas demuestra. La significación de la escritura en términos de práctica social se interpreta de diferentes maneras a lo largo de la historia, como lo demuestran igualmente los cambios discursivos en la enseñanza de la escritura.

La importancia de la escritura por la escritura misma cambia en función de las formas en que ésta se lleva a cabo. Las relaciones entre lenguaje oral y lenguaje escrito experimentan cambios históricos importantes, los cuales transforman profundamente al proceso escritor mismo. Estos hechos sugieren que el uso del lenguaje escrito como instrumento para escribir es probablemente un hecho bastante reciente en la historia, al menos en nuestra cultura.

Concluyendo, las ojeadas históricas expuestas en esta comunicación muestran que la escritura no puede ser modelada como un proceso simple y homogéneo sino que debe ser visto como algo que adquiere diferentes formas de acuerdo con prácticas sociales concretas; las bases de tales formas son los instrumentos que hacen posible la escritura. Los instrumentos existen en diferentes niveles del proceso escritor y son tan diversos como las prácticas mismas.