

In this paper I will describe the process of dictating letters in a contemporary illiterate setting in West Africa and use the observations to shed new light on what we see in papyrus letters from Greek and Roman Egypt. Many of the papyri from Egypt are private and official letters. Some of them were written by the author of the letter him- or herself, but many were dictated by the author to a scribe. This is obviously the case when the author of the letter is illiterate, but also occurs in cases where she or he is not. Dictated letters can be identified as largely spoken language by internal markers such as paratactic style and the inclusion of direct speech in the letter. External markers sometimes corroborate this internal evidence, e.g. the change of hand in the conclusion of a letter, often identified as the autograph of the literate author of the letter. For the most recent discussion of markers of dictation, see Roger Bagnall – Raffaella Cribiore, *Women's Letters from Ancient Egypt*, 2006, p. 61-63.

Dictated papyrus letters display the result of dictation but are not very informative about the process. What happens when somebody dictates a letter to somebody else? What are the interactions between the author and the scribe? What are the contributions of others in this process? In order to get some sense of the process of dictation it is worthwhile to get a comparative perspective, by seeing what happens during the dictation of a letter in a modern, but highly illiterate society. In the context of my wife's anthropological research (completely unrelated to letter writing) our family spent over a year in rural West Africa. During this period, I was able to observe the process of letter writing first hand on several occasions when members of the village community where we stayed asked my wife to write (and deliver) letters for them, and later read them to the addressees in other villages.