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# Digital writing in Low German: between elite and grassroots literacies

Birte Arendt <sup>a</sup> and Gertrud Reershemius <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of German Philology, Competence Centre for the Teaching of Low German, University of Greifswald, Greifswald, Germany; <sup>b</sup>School of Social Sciences and Humanities, Aston University Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

## ABSTRACT

This article analyses digital writing in Low German, a regional language spoken mainly in Northern Germany and currently undergoing a process of language shift towards German. Since medieval times, a substantial body of Low German literature has been written; however, today, the language serves mainly as a vernacular. The aim of this study is to examine whether digital writing could become a new domain for Low German speakers, thus forming a buffer in the ongoing struggle against language loss. In order to analyse digital writing in Low German, we apply Jan Blommaert's concept of elite versus grassroots literacies (Blommaert, J. 2008. *Grassroot Literacies. Writing, Identity and Voice in Central Africa*. London, New York: Routledge) and examine two communities of practice: Wikipedia authors and experts working for Low German institutions using Low German online, and speakers communicating via Low German on social media. The results show two communities of practice among Low German speakers with distinctive writing practices and values: while elite writers aim to implement a standardised form of spelling, grassroots writers tend to reject prescriptivism and create ways to negotiate communication across variation.

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Low German, digital writing, elite and grassroots literacy

## Introduction

This article analyses the direction that writing in Low German is taking in the increasingly mediated and digitised environments of the twenty-first century. It is the first study with a focus on digital writing in Low German, and as a case study it adds to the growing body of research on smaller or lesser used languages in the digital age (see, for example, Reershemius and Arendt 2024). The effective use of digital communication is seen by many as the mainstay of successful language maintenance efforts in the future: 'An endangered language will progress if its speakers can make use of electronic technology' (Crystal 2001, 141). Low German is the English name for *Platt* or *Plattdütsch*, as the language is referred to by its speakers, who at present number approximately 2.5 million, mainly in northern Germany (Adler et al. 2016). Low German shares typical characteristics of German dialects, for example, it is primarily used as a vernacular, mainly by the older generation. Once a widespread supraregional language with highly developed levels of literacy until the sixteenth century, it is undergoing a process of dialectalisation, which has become increasingly significant since the nineteenth century and has led to an expansion of local, small-scale variants at all linguistic

**CONTACT** Birte Arendt  arendt@uni-greifswald.de

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levels (see, for example, Stellmacher 2005). Low German is part of a complex spectrum of varieties with German as an overarching standard language, regionally specific varieties of standard German, regiolects and local dialects (see, for example, Stellmacher 2005). In this paper, labels such as *German* or *Low German* are used as umbrella terms for all varieties that form the totality of what would be referred to as a language. German, for example, would include standard German, regional varieties, sociolects, etc. (Blommaert 2005, 10). The linguistic development of the last fifty years shows a convergence process towards standard German, both with regard to language structure (Ehlers 2018; Elmentaler and Rosenberg 2022) and language sociology in terms of an increasing loss of communicative domains and decreasing transmission across generations within families (see, for example, Ehlers 2022; Möller 2008). A minority of 34 per cent the population of northern Germany (federal states Schleswig-Holstein, Hamburg, Niedersachsen, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Bremen and partially Brandenburg, Sachsen-Anhalt and Nordrhein-Westfalen) can speak Low German well, 47 per cent claims to have passive competence (Adler et al. 2016). Low German increasingly serves symbolic purposes rather than as a day-to-day vernacular, and speakers include Low German as part of their multilingual repertoires alongside German. These repertoires are not necessarily balanced and can vary considerably: while some speakers routinely speak Low German on a day-to-day basis, others rely on a limited repository of words and phrases. Speakers of Low German acquire literacy skills via German as their main language of education. Thus, the average speaker of Low German learns reading and writing at school and applies their German literacy skills to Low German, if necessary; a feasible practice since German and Low German are both West Germanic languages and share a considerable number of morpho-syntactic features. The Low German varieties enjoy a certain level of legal support and protection: as a consequence of Germany ratifying the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* in 1999 (Arendt 2022; European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages 1992; Goltz and Möller 2013; Goltz, Lesle, and Möller 2011), the teaching of Low German has been partially integrated into the curricula of the northern German federal states. It remains, however, a niche subject, catering for a small number of pupils only.<sup>1</sup>

Recently, attention has been drawn to the way speakers apply Low German in online communication, especially on social media (Arendt and Stern 2024; Fenske 2021; Reershemius 2010; 2017; 2024; Schürmann 2016). The results of these studies reveal a mixed picture. Whereas spontaneous exchanges in Low German could be observed on Facebook (Reershemius 2017), Low German seems to be used predominantly in a symbolic way on Instagram (Reershemius 2024). The reasons for these differences could be the communicative frames of different social media portals but also the demographic groups preferring certain social media platforms over others: Instagram, for example, is predominantly used by younger generations (Statista 2023) while Low German speakers observed on Facebook tended to be forty years or older.

While digital literacy includes a complex set of competences (Jones and Hafner 2021), there is still a clear focus on practices of reading and writing in digital communication at this stage of its technological development. For digital communication in Low German to be developed into a viable new domain for its speakers, some formidable obstacles will need to be overcome by its speakers for two main reasons: Firstly, Low German is still a predominantly spoken language. Studies have repeatedly shown that a majority of Low German speakers feel uncomfortable when writing in Low German – (see, for example, Adler et al. 2016; Möller 2008) – despite the existence of a substantial body of literature in Low German since medieval times to which a literary scene has added ever since (see, for example, Möhn and Goltz 2016). Secondly, standardisation efforts have been only partly successful, mainly due to strong variation between Low German dialects and fairly marginal institutional support. Among speakers, standardisation can be contentious and lead to ongoing and controversial discussions between speakers, linguists and teaching professionals (Arendt and Langhanke 2021). The lowest common denominator of standardisation currently lies in orthographic approaches. Within educational contexts, two orthographic systems have been established for the teaching of Low German: Saß (1957/2002) for the former federal states of West Germany, and Herrmann-Winter (2003) for Mecklenburg-Vorpommern which used to

be part of the former GDR. Both orthographic systems attempt a compromise between supra-regionality and phonetic truthfulness, based on historically developed isoglosses of East and West Low German varieties (Bieberstedt 2021) as well as on the main orthographic principles of German. Nevertheless, there is currently no standardised orthography in place for all Low German varieties (Goltz 2013).

Based on Jan Blommaert's theoretical framework of *Elite versus Grassroot Literacies* (Blommaert 2008) we will analyse two communities of practice (Wenger 1998) actively writing in Low German online: Wikipedia authors and experts working for Low German institutions (elite literacy), and individuals writing in Low German on social media (grassroot literacy).

We will focus on the following research questions:

1. Are online platforms developing into communicative domains where Low German speakers apply their language in written form?
2. Which writing practices by Low German speakers can be observed online?

### Elite versus grassroot literacies

Blommaert's approach to literacy is based explicitly on the work of *New Literacy Studies* as a field of research that examines reading and writing as social and cultural practices rather than predominantly cognitive procedures.<sup>2</sup> Writing involves complex semiotic practices to express concepts and ideas visually and materially, making sure they can be saved and shared over time and space. The material and conceptual aspects of writing practices are shaped by society, culture, history, economy, and politics (Béreziat-Lang et al. 2023; Blommaert 2008, 4).

One of the most relevant aspects of the materiality of writing for this study is writing and reading by using electronic devices, and addressees reached via the internet as individuals, groups of 'friends', subscribers to 'hashtags', or even as the total community of world-wide internet users. We conceptualise writing as part of a speaker's communicative repertoire, which includes the linguistic resources and knowledge each individual has acquired, as well as a conventionalised, learned understanding of how to apply them. An individual's repertoire also includes their specific literacy resources. Considering repertoires makes us move away from general ideas about language and communication and focus on the actual practices speakers are involved in (Blommaert 2008, 5).

The term *elite literacy* describes access to a wide range of formal and informal writing practices by individuals fully integrated into economies of information, language, and literacy. Grassroots literacy, on the other hand, describes non-elite, informal writing performed by individuals who often have little or no access to elite economies of information, language, and literacy (Blommaert 2008, 7).

Blommaert defines grassroot literacy by five characteristics: heterography; vernacular language varieties used in writing; distant genres; partial insertion in knowledge economies; and constrained mobility. Some of these characteristics apply to Low German speakers: the lack of formal training in writing and the absence of a unified standard orthography leads for most speakers to heterography, 'the deployment of graphic symbols in ways that defy orthographic norms' (Blommaert 2008, 7). Speakers also tend to use vernacular language in writing since Low German serves first and foremost as a vernacular for most of them. Consequently, they tend to write in 'so-called "sub-standard" varieties of language, they use code-switching, colloquialisms and other "impurities" in their written texts' (Blommaert 2008, 7).

However, some of Blommaert's five characteristics do not (quite) apply to writing in Low German: *Distant genres* refers to people writing 'in genres to which they have only been marginally exposed and for whose full realisation they often lack the required resources'. (Blommaert 2008, 7). Due to formal education and training in reading and writing in German, the application of genres is probably less of a problem for the average speaker of Low German, and they are not partially

but fully inserted in the knowledge economies of the twenty-first century. The fifth category of *constrained mobility* – ‘texts are often only *locally* meaningful and valuable. As soon as they move to other geographical and/or social spaces, they lose “voice” (Blommaert 2008, 7) – involves the concept of place which is an interesting one when applied to Low German online: writing in Low German is used by many speakers as a means to place themselves, for example as someone who is from northern Germany, lives in or visits the region (Reershemius 2024). The combination of referencing place and using Low German leads to texts which may be first and foremost locally meaningful.

To summarise, the concept of grassroot literacy can be applied to the majority of Low German speakers writing online, albeit based on only three of Blommaert’s five characteristics: heterography, vernacular language used in writing, and constrained mobility.

In the following, we will analyse digital writing in Low German by examining two distinct communities of practice which we categorise as contributing to elite and grassroot literacies respectively. Blommaert’s study focuses on writing practices observed in Central Africa, so his notion of elite access needs to be adapted to writing in Low German. Compared with the realities described in Blommaert’s study about literacy in Africa, the average person using Low German online appears as privileged: It can be assumed that they have high levels of literacy skills in their main other language – German – due to the legal obligation to attend school for a minimum of ten years. The fact that they write digitally means that they have access to computer-based communication technology. Low German speakers we encounter online can be described as computer-literate individuals who have access to Low German as part of their multilingual repertoires. At the same time, most of them tend to have only limited experience of writing in Low German.

Most literary Low German authors still predominantly publish in print media (see, for example, Bund niederdeutscher Autoren 2023). When we looked for examples of elite literacy in Low German, we turned to Low German language institutions and to contributors to the Low German Wikipedia. The focus of this part of the study is to determine whether the community of practice of elite digital writers in Low German can agree on a particular standardised orthographic system.

### Elite literacy in Low German

In order to capture elite literacy online, this study focuses on relevant, normative multipliers who are explicitly committed to language maintenance and language teaching. The following four Low German institutions were included in the study: (1) *Institut für Niederdeutsche Sprache* (INS) (<https://ins-bremen.de/>), (2) *Länderzentrum Niederdeutsch* (LZN) (<https://www.laenderzentrum-für-niederdeutsch.de/>), (3) *Niederdeutschsekretariat und Bunnnsraat för Nedderdüütsch* (BfN) (<https://www.niederdeutschsekretariat.de/>) and the (4) *Kompetenzzentrum für Niederdeutschdidaktik* (KND). For the analysis, we examined the language use on the respective home pages and main tabs of institutional online portals both quantitatively, to evaluate the proportion of Low German use, and qualitatively, to assess approaches to orthography as of April 2023. Additionally, we conducted interviews with the portal administrators regarding the enforcement of orthographic standards on their respective institutional websites.

Contributions to the Low German Wikipedia (LGW) form the second dataset for digital elite literacies. Wikipedia represents an educationally oriented, relatively formal, low-threshold reception and production offer of knowledge, which is collaboratively and dynamically constructed (Arendt and Dreesen 2015; Deumert 2014; Wolf 2007). However, authorship tends to be far less dispersed than might be assumed; articles are created by a group of ‘Wikipedians’ whose administrative rights are defined according to a hierarchical structure (Deumert 2014; Pentzold 2009). For this study, all content and discussion pages addressing the topic of orthography were examined.<sup>3</sup> For the year 2022–2023, the official statistics of the Low German Wikipedia record an average of just ten active authors per month (see, for example, <https://stats.wikimedia.org/#/nds.wikipedia.org>). For synchronous analysis, the entire content of all Low German Wikipedia websites between February and May 2023 was included, with a focus on meta-linguistic statements and on the

orthographic systems applied by authors. Additionally, a random sample survey was conducted to examine whether authors for the Low German Wikipedia in general adhered to a specific spelling system.

### Low German institutions

The four institutions analysed for the purpose of this study present both Low German and German contributions on their websites, with varying degrees of weighting. None of them adhered to a stringent monolingual ‘Low German only’ policy, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 illustrates that on the Home Pages of LZN and INS, content is primarily presented in Low German. For BfN, contributions are either in Low German or German, resulting in a combination of texts in both languages, classified as bilingual content for this analysis. Between 2018 and 2022, KND had a bilingual website with all content available in both languages, but it is currently in German only. LZN, INS, and BfN show a strong emphasis on Low German, particularly evident in the use of Low German headlines. Figure 1 shows an example from one of these portals to illustrate the distribution of Low German and German:

The visibility of Low German decreases at the lower hierarchical levels of the hypertexts. A detailed analysis of the tabs in April 2023 revealed that the majority of present content is in German (see Table 1). The exception is BfN, particularly the *Junge Lüüd* ‘Young People’ tab, with two-thirds of the content in Low German. Across their Low German contributions, all four institutions adhere to standardised orthographic norms, with three of them following the Saß system (INS, LZN, and BfN), while one uses the Herrmann-Winter system (KND).

### Low German Wikipedia

The Low German Wikipedia (LGW) was set up in April 2003 and currently comprises 84,151 articles (as of 09 March 2023), all of them written in Low German, with the exception of some quotations, references or images in other languages, mainly German. LGW has established itself as an encyclopedia addressing supra-regional topics and recording around 144 million requests since its inception, with the majority coming from the US (149 K), Germany (43 K), India (26 K) and the Russian Federation (19 K), as examples for the month of March 2023 indicate (cf. <https://stats.wikimedia.org/#/nds.wikipedia.org>).

The LGW Home Page, the Help Page and a Translation Page show discussions of spelling issues in the form of metalinguistic debates.<sup>4</sup>

LGW’s Home Page and Discussion Page list three spelling related issues with a total of eight posts by four users, and the replies of Wikipedians (e.g. *sloxox*) between 2009 and 2017. On LGW’s Home Page, Wikipedians actively encourage users to write in Low German as they see fit, thereby acknowledging that many Low German speakers have never received formal literacy training and likely have few opportunities to use Low German in writing. An overall orientation

**Table 1.** Proportion of Low German (LG) content on portals of four institutions supporting Low German

	Home Page	Tabs monolingual German	Tabs monolingual LG	Tabs bilingual: German & LG	Main tabs/ total number
INS (Institut für Niederdeutsche Sprache)	Monolingual LG	6	1	–	7
LZN (Länderzentrum Niederdeutsch)	Bilingual (mostly LG)	3	–	1 (mostly German)	4
BfN (Bunnsraat för Nedderdüütsch)	Bilingual (mostly German)	3	–	4 (mostly German)	7
KND (Kompetenzzentrum für Niederdeuschdidaktik)	Bilingual (2018–2022), German only since 2022				

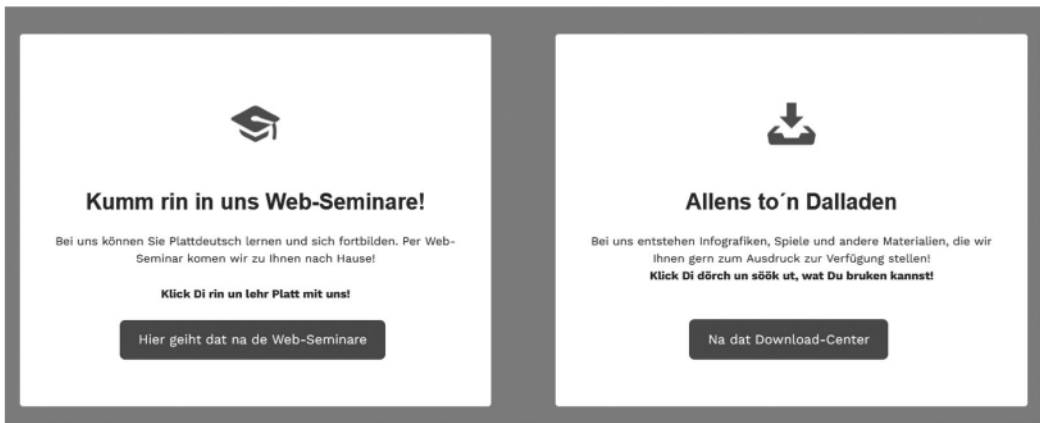


Figure 1. Example for bilingual language use with Low German mostly in headings. Source: LZN home page (access 16.02.2024).

towards the Saß spelling system is presented as a suggestion rather than as a general directive by using modal verbs such as *wült* ‘would like to’ and *können* ‘can’ in the 3rd person pl., partly in the subjunctive mode, and by relativising modal adverbs *geern* ‘gladly’ or *so’n beten* ‘a little’.<sup>5</sup> The tenor of encouragement prevails in a participatory setting characterised by an egalitarian relationship between Wikipedians and potential authors. On the Discussion Page we find comments from authors, answered by Wikipedians. On this page, the recommendation to apply the Saß spelling system is perceived as a rule by an author, who raises questions about its applicability to various Low German varieties. The responding Wikipedians argue for Saß while other authors put forward their own approaches to Low German orthography. Here, authors and Wikipedians discuss the question of spelling with reference to literary traditions and current variational differences.

A different picture emerges on the Help Page (posted in 2005, according to LGW page history), where writing is one of three central themes. Here, spelling according to Saß is not introduced as a suggestion or an option, but as the norm, by phrases such as ‘The Plattdeutsch Wikipedia users have agreed that ...’ and ‘you have to bear in mind’ as a common and binding determination of the community (Example 1):

#### Example 1:

De Brukers vun de Wikipedia op Plattdöötsch hebbt utmaakt, dat se de Saß-Schriewies na dat Wöörbook vun Johannes Saß ... bruken doot. [...] En Schriewies, de eenheitlich is, hett aver vele Vördelen. De mutt een bedenken. [...] De Idee, dat elk Ünnerscheid in’e Töön ok bi’t Schrieven anners utsehn schall, de maakt also blot Problemen. De Schriewies mutt also op de Egenoorden vun’t Plattdöötsche ingahn, man nich op de Egenoorden vun de velen plattdöötschen Dialekten. Sünst warrt se nich vun alle Lüüd verstahn. [...] Nu seggt welke Lüüd, dat een ja twee Versionen vun’n Text hebben kann. [...] Dor is jümmer noch wedder wat to verbetern. Un denn hebbt wi de dubbelte Arbeit, twee Versionen to verbetern.

The users of Plattdeutsch Wikipedia have agreed that they use the Saß spelling. [...] A uniform spelling has many advantages. That’s something you have to bear in mind. The idea that every difference in pronunciation should also look different in writing only causes problems. The spelling should therefore take into account the idiosyncrasies of Low German, but not the idiosyncrasies of the many Low German dialects. Otherwise it will not be understood by everyone. [...] Now some people say that you can have two versions of a text [...] There is always something to improve. And then we have twice as much work to improve two versions. (<https://nds.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Saß>)

In Example 1, Wikipedians continue to justify the choice of the Saß spelling system in detail with reference to comprehensibility, readability, usability and version maintenance. The normative and

prescriptive tenor persists through the frequent use of the modal verbs *schall* ‘shall’ and *mutt* ‘have to’. On the Discussion Page, authors and Wikipedians argue emotionally about the topic (Example 2):

**Example 2:**

De Nedderlanners hebbt ‘s ruutökelt, de ölleren Plattsnackers [...] wüür’n tou Idiouten un’ Separatisten affstempelt. Kritik möögn ‘s amend ne’!!!!

Ick froog Jau- wosou hebbt Jii sou laang bruukt, dat tou begriepen???

Man- nu’ denkt joo ne, ick wull Jau jüst un’ alleen an ‘t Been miegen. Door givvt heel keen Verdouhn: Jii mookt Jaun Arbeid goud! [...] Man- Jaun Glööv, de Heben haar Jau uutkeeken, de nedderdüütsche Welt tou verbeetern, de höört sick ne. Dat is meist Blasphemii, door sünd Jii ne Manns naugh föör’.

The Dutch have been booted out, the older Platt-speakers [...] have been labelled idiots and separatists. In the end, they don’t like criticism. I ask you, how did it take you so long to realize this?

But now don’t think I’m just trying to piss you off. There’s no mistaking it: you’re doing a good job! [...] But your belief that heaven has chosen you to improve the Low German world is not appropriate. That is blasphemy, you are not man enough for that!

fid: [https://nds.wikipe.org/wiki/Wikipedia\\_Diskuschoon:Saß](https://nds.wikipe.org/wiki/Wikipedia_Diskuschoon:Saß) (2005)

In Example 2, an author appeals to the Wikipedians to consider the negative consequences of treating the Saß spelling system as a rule, and shifts the discussion to a personal and emotionally heated level. The Wikipedian’s reply, not included in Example 2, insists on Saß equally forcefully. The discussion does not end with a compromise, instead, the Saß directive remains unchanged. It is apparent that more than a spelling system is at stake here: for the user, the question has implications for identity construction and social positioning in relation to hierarchies and power. For them this is about exclusionary demarcations through editing practices. The Discussion Pages show how regional identities are expressed through the visibility of small-scale regional spelling variants, leading to the rejection of supraregional standardised spelling systems such as Saß. In the meta-linguistic reflections, the Saß spelling becomes enregistered (Agha 2007) as an institutional, artificial, top-down and prescriptive social emblem that negates regional difference. According to the comments, prescriptive editing practices by Wikipedians strip Low German texts of their constitutive regional features. Both sides accuse each other of exclusion: the Wikipedians allegedly exclude authentic non-standard Low German writing practices and thereby their writers from the Wikipedia community. The non-Saß authors, in turn, are blamed for excluding a potential majority of Wikipedia users who might struggle to comprehend regional linguistic variation.

For the reconstruction of the actual language use in LGW, the spelling of ten randomly selected Wikipedia articles was analysed. The articles, totalling 7000 words, reveal a homogeneous picture: the Saß spelling system is indeed followed, with only minimal deviations.<sup>6</sup>

To summarize: LGW’s editing practices establish it as a significant actor in the orthographic standardisation of Low German writing online. Three key points can be highlighted as an interim conclusion: Firstly, contributors to elite literacy in Low German online demonstrate a strong commitment to implementing an orthographic standard. Secondly, within this community of practice, two spelling systems – Saß (1957/2002) and Herrmann-Winter (2003) – coexist. Thirdly, the Discussion Pages on LGW indicate that these practices are controversial. Interestingly, a diachronic comparison of metalinguistic statements reveals that in the early days of LGW (as seen in Example 1 from 2005), the Saß spelling system was advocated more strictly, whereas in later entries on the Home Page (as seen on the LGW Home Page from 2009), it is merely recommended. This decreasing prescriptivity could be explained by the fact that the majority of articles within LGW adhering to the Saß spelling establish it as an implicit standard norm. Therefore, an explicit demand no longer seems necessary.



## Grassroot literacies in Low German

In the following we apply Jan Blommaert's notion of grassroot literacy to informal digital writing in Low German. The data for this part of the study is writing in Low German as observed on the social network site Facebook. Data collection and analysis is based on online ethnography involving blended data gathering. This includes collecting screen-based and user-based data through observation during regular visits to selected social networking sites, as well as collecting screen data. Subsequently, contact is established with a sample of participants (Androutsopoulos 2013, 240–243). This approach mirrors that of earlier studies on Low German online (Reershemius 2010; 2017; 2024), thus contributing to an ongoing, long-term study on digital practices in Low German. For the present study, all activities related to Low German on the social network site Facebook were observed over a two-months period (January and February 2023). In addition to individual Facebook pages, users can create topical groups centered around themes such as Low German, Platt, Plattdeutsch, or Plattdütsch. The creators of these groups decide whether they want them to be publicly available for all Facebook users (open) or keep them private (closed), where potential participants have to enroll, typically a mere formality, subject to the discretion of the group's administrators. For the purpose of this study, all Facebook groups pertaining to Low German were initially selected as potential data sources.

During the observation period, there were 40 Facebook groups dedicated, in some form or another, to Low German. This is in comparison to 51 groups documented eight years ago (Reershemius 2017, 4). However, the overall membership of these groups has increased considerably. Between 2010 and 2018, thirteen groups with more than 100 members were created, indicating that some of them have been active for over a decade now. The four most substantial groups have between 28,651 members (*Plattdütsch schnacken* 'Speaking Low German') and 2,622 members (*Lustige plattdeutsche Wörter* 'Funny words in Low German'). Among these groups, three have new posts added every day (see Table 2). Compared with the fieldwork conducted eight years ago, Low German Facebook groups have evolved into an established domain of communication, with thousands of contributors and readers.

Table 2 also demonstrates that larger memberships in certain Facebook groups do not necessarily indicate activity. Among the thirteen groups listed, four showed no new contributions for weeks or even months.

For this study, the Low German Facebook group with the largest number of subscribers and the highest frequency of posts per day<sup>7</sup> – *Plattdütsch schnacken* 'Speaking Low German' – was chosen for a detailed analysis. This analysis involved daily online observation for one month, taking regular ethnographic field notes, collection of screen data, and examination of publicly accessible Facebook user profiles. The collected data were analysed using a mixed approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods (Androutsopoulos and Ziegler 2004).

**Table 2.** Low German Facebook groups in February 2023 (Low German titles in *Italics*).

	Name	Open/ Closed	Members	Year of creation	Frequency of contributions
1	<i>Plattdütsch schnacken</i>	Closed	28651	2011	10/day
2	<i>Leckerst un Best van stolt Ostfreesen</i>	Open	11993	2018	10+ /day
3	<i>Plattddeutsch – de sassische språke</i>	Open	9546	2008	3/day
4	<i>Lustige plattdeutsche Wörter</i>	Open	2622	2012	15/month
5	<i>Plattddeutsch, die schönste Sprache der Welt</i>	Open	903	2016	7/week
6	<i>Vergessene plattdeutsche Wörter und Sprüche</i>	Closed	811	2013	0/last month
7	<i>Plattdütsch in de Kark</i>	Open	697	2011	10/week
8	<i>Plattddeutsch-Plattform Hamburg</i>	Open	621	2012	4/week
9	<i>Freunde, denen Plattdeutsch gefällt</i>	Open	570	2016	8/week
10	<i>Institut für niederdeutsche Sprache</i>	Open	444	2016	7/week
11	<i>Umfrage Plattdeutsch</i>	Open	190	2013	0/last month
12	<i>Der erste plattdeutsche Song in den Charts</i>	Open	169	2010	0/last 5 years
13	<i>Plattddeutsches Theater Metelen</i>	Open	138	2013	0/last month

*Plattdütsch schnacken* ‘Speaking Low German’ is a closed group, established in 2011, with currently 28651 members. During the observation period (January and February 2023), its membership increased by an average of 65 new members every week. More than ten new daily posts could be observed, many of which were commented on, thus generating exchanges between users. Posts and comments appear mainly in Low German, but German is also used frequently, with code-switching being the norm. This is in line with the general language policy of the group as communicated by the administrators: *hier schall jeder snacken, wat he will, ok Hochdüütsch is keen Problem. Natürllich is dat so, dat nich jeden een up Platt schrieben kann, so lang dat thematisch um Plattdüütsch geit*. ‘Everyone can speak here as he likes, German isn’t a problem either. Obviously, it is a fact that not everyone can write in Low German, as long as the topic has to do with Low German’.

This is a remarkable development from earlier online communication forums where contributors hardly dared to use Low German because they were reprimanded by self-proclaimed gatekeepers of what the latter perceived as correct Low German and Low German orthography (Reershemius 2010). The creators and administrators of *Plattdütsch schnacken* actively encourage users to write in Low German as they see fit, thus acknowledging that many speakers have never had formal literacy training in the language and probably not many opportunities to use it for writing. Using German is not frowned upon, which reflects an acknowledgment of the bilingual practices that most Low German speakers are typically involved in. The primary purpose for contributing to *Plattdütsch schnacken* is entertainment: users share jokes, post or forward funny or thought-provoking pictures, and quiz each other about Low German words and phrases. This aligns closely with observations from an earlier study (Reershemius 2017).

A lack of formal writing skills and different perceptions of ‘correct’ Low German is sometimes the explicit topic of the exchanges within *Plattdütsch schnacken*, as the following Example 3 shows:

### Example 3:

A: Moin het dat, moin moin is gesabbel

B: Jo (Thumbs up)

C: Jo

D: Jau

E: Jo.

F: Genau so is dat

G: So sücht dat ut

H: Jup

...

I: Oha, dah hest du over ehn Thema anschnackt. Wenn Bertha to mi moin segt, seg ik trög: moin moin. Dat heb ik so leert. Schrieven un lesen hev ik nich leehrt. Koomt mi nich an mi dat oknoch antokriedn. Denn hohl ik ers mol vörn Tied mien Schnut. Ick schriev as ick schnack.

A: ‘It’s supposed to be moin, moin moin is chatter’

B: ‘Yes’

C: ‘Yes’

D: ‘Yes’

E: ‘Yes’

F: ‘That’s how it is’

G: ‘That’s what it looks like’

H: ‘Yes’

...

I: ‘Oh dear, now you have approached a (sensitive) topic. When Bertha greets me with moin I reply with moin moin. That’s how I have learnt it. Writing and reading I haven’t learnt. Now don’t you tell me it’s my fault. In that case I’ll shut my trap for the time being. I write as I speak.’

The background for this exchange is the question how to use the Low German greeting *moin* ‘beautiful (day)’. Originating from East Frisia, it is now widely used in parts of Lower Saxony, Hamburg,

Bremen and Schleswig-Holstein (Atlas zur deutschen Alltagssprache 2023). More recently, a doubling of *moin* (*moin moin*) has become popular, although mostly among speakers with no or limited competence in Low German. The statement posted by speaker A, *Moin het dat, moin moin is gesabel* ‘It’s supposed to be moin, moin moin is chatter’, thus receives considerable agreement from speakers B, C, D, E, F, G and H. However, it apparently raises the heckles of Speaker I who does not like to be told how to use *moin*. Speaker I defends their language use based on what they have or haven’t learnt, stating: *Schrieven un lesen hev ik nich leehrt. ... Ick schriev asick schnack*. ‘Writing and reading I haven’t learnt. ... I write as I speak’. Speaker I explicitly and proudly states that he applies his vernacular language in writing. He uses the orthographic conventions of German, for example to indicate vowel-length: the central vowel in the word *leehrt* ‘learnt’ is shown to be long by combining two German orthographic conventions, the doubling of the letter *-e* and the addition of *-h-*. He does not consistently apply this strategy to all long vowels in his text. For example, when marking the vowel *-i-* in *ik* (‘I’) as short, he applies the German orthographic convention of using the letters *-ck-*, while he does not do this for all instances of *ik/ick*. Speaker I also inadvertently writes two words together as if they were one: *oknoch* instead of *ok noch*, thus exhibiting traits specific to digital writing, such as quickly composing and posting texts without double-checking their spelling. The following Example 4 shows that it may not be necessary to insist on prescriptive rules or statements for effective communication:

#### Example 4: (German in bold typeface)

- A: Wel kernt dann noch een Rieff  
 B: Ich kann nicht mal den Satz verstehen ... . Sorry, kernt?  
 C: Woar is dej Rieff dann in? In Autodoer ...  
 D: Bi uns sächt man dat tau ein “Reibe”  
 A: Ne dat ist bi uns een Holzthark  
 E: Holthark  
 A: Jaa, ik weet dat, dat wer mien Handy, der Lümmel 😊 😊  
 A: ‘Who still knows a Rieff’  
 B: ‘I can’t even understand the sentence ... Sorry, kernt?’  
 C: ‘Where is the Rieff in? In a car door ...’  
 D: ‘We used to call it a “Reibe”’  
 A: ‘No for us it is a wooden rake’  
 E: ‘Wooden rake’  
 A: ‘Yes, I know, that was my mobile, the rascal’

Example 4 represents a common practice among Low German speakers on social media: quizzing each other on Low German words (Reershemius 2017). The exchange is conducted in Low German, German, and English, negotiating language variation and the challenging behaviour of spell checkers: Speaker A tries to accommodate the specific phonology of their variant of Low German in writing (*kernt* ‘knows’), which leads to B admitting in German that they don’t understand the question. C and D try to solve the puzzle of the word *rieff* by asking for context and making translation suggestions. When A provides the answer (a *rieff* is a wooden rake), her Low German is corrected by E, which leads to A admitting that the spell checker on her mobile phone keeps interfering with her Low German spelling, for example by changing the Low German word *holthark* ‘wooden rake’ to *Holzthark*.

The exchange is a representative example of how speakers negotiate their own way of communicating in Low German in *Plattdütsch schnacken* by addressing and acknowledging problems such as regional or diachronic variation without needing to refer to a standardised spelling or directive language policies.

## Conclusions

This study captures writing in Low German as a relevant practice of digital literacy and illustrates how two communities of practice among Low German speakers have established distinct writing

practices. These practices were analysed by applying an adapted version of Jan Blommaert's theoretical framework of elite and grassroots literacy. The elite writers analysed here consist of a comparatively small group of active contributors to the Low German Wikipedia and institutional portals who are aware of standardisation efforts such as the implementation of a spelling system. There is a tendency to adhere to the Saß spelling system on Wikipedia and the websites of Low German institutions, although this is by no means uncontested, as the analysis has shown.

In contrast, the analysis of Facebook groups indicates that an increasing number of Low German speakers contribute to this social media platform in Low German without attempting to follow a 'Low German only' policy or a specific spelling system. In this community of practice, communicative challenges are negotiated among contributors who appear to enjoy employing their Low German as part of their overall linguistic repertoires. However, two factors in the writing processes of both communities of practice need to be considered.

Firstly, each community of practice analysed in this paper engages in the production of different genres. While elite writers aim to produce informative specialist texts such as Wikipedia entries or texts for portals of institutions dedicated to language maintenance, grassroots writers on Facebook tend to create shorter contributions such as jokes, queries or anecdotes. These are written genres, but in this specific online context they seem to be conceptualised as forms of spoken Low German (Koch and Oesterreicher 1985).

Secondly, writers in the two communities of practice are driven by different motivations. Elite writers produce texts intended for use by Low German speakers. They have potentially multiplying functions by showing how more complex content can be expressed in Low German. The primary motivation of grassroots writers is entertainment and the wish to connect with others who share a similar linguistic and cultural heritage, as revealed by interviews with Facebook users (Reershemius 2017).

This study has shown that digital writing in Low German is still in its infancy. The overarching research question of this study – whether digital communication could become a significant new domain for Low German speakers by using a language in written form which until recently served mainly as a vernacular – clearly needs further investigation. One of the follow-up questions would be how far the two communities of practice analysed here could potentially influence each other. Another area of research would be to observe whether literary authors in Low German may turn to digital writing in the future. Early indicators can be observed, for example on Facebook, where users sometimes present shorter literary genres such as poems. As a community of practice, literary authors would probably occupy a position somewhere between what we have described here as elite and grassroots writers, so that they could play an important role as facilitators.

## Notes

1. In Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, for example, 1772 pupils chose Low German as a school subject out of a total of 145,000 in the academic year 2021/22 (1.2%). (cf. [statista.com](https://www.statista.com) and personal information by the Low German Commissioner for Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania).
2. For an overview of New Literacy Studies, see, for example, Gee (2015).
3. In total, the following three pages with several subpages were considered relevant and thus included in the analysis: (1) *Wikipedia Hööftsiet: Platt, wo schriew ik dat* 'Wikipedia home page: Low German, how do I write it'; (2) *Wikipedia: Ik bruuk hülpe: Saß* 'Wikipedia: I need help: Saß' and (3) *Plattdüütsch-Spraakutkumst: Mi fehlt das Woort* 'Low German language advice: I am looking for a word'.
4. The Translation Page (*Spraakutkumst* 'Language Advice') does not address spelling matters, so it was not considered for this aspect of the analysis.
5. See for example: *Wi hebbt seggt, för de plattdüütsche Wikipedia wüllt wi uns gern so'n beten an de Schrievwies vun Sass hollen*. 'We said that we would like to stick a bit to the spelling of Sass for the Low German Wikipedia'. ([https://nds.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Platt\\_wo\\_schriew\\_ik\\_dat](https://nds.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Platt_wo_schriew_ik_dat), 04/2023.)
6. A detailed analysis of orthographic variation in LGW as a whole will be the topic of a follow-up study.
7. Table 2 needs to be treated as a snapshot in time since some of the data may change from day to day, for example numbers indicating the membership of the fastest growing groups. According to Table 2, the highest number of daily contributions were made to the group *Leckerst un Best van stolt Ostfreesen* 'The best and most

delicious from proud East Frisians'. This group has a Low German name but is mainly dedicated to the exchange of recipes of East Frisian cooking in German.

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## Human participant statement

This research does not involve human participants, human material or personal data. Excerpts from Facebook communication have been anonymised.

## ORCID

Birte Arendt  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3427-5382>

Gertrud Reershemius  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0906-6199>

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