

Meaning and ideology

Words and their meanings

A great many people believe that words have fixed and settled meanings, the sorts of things we can find in a dictionary. So, for example, a word like “bachelor” means “unmarried male” and that’s the end of the matter. Furthermore, they believe that the meaning of a word is something that resides in people’s heads, perhaps in terms of what some people call a “concept.” When people hear or see a word they can consult this concept or definition in their heads to know what the word means. Of course, since other people also understand words, we must then assume, for communication to work, that everyone (rather mysteriously) has the same concepts or definitions in their heads. However, thanks to the fact that the insides of people’s heads are private, we can never really check this.

These ideas about words and their meanings are quite common, so common they are, for many people, a form of common sense. These ideas are, in fact, a “theory” that many people believe, though they may not be all that conscious of the fact that they hold this theory; they may not have ever tried to put it into words; and they may just pretty much take it for granted. In that case, it is what we can call a “tacit theory.” Or, perhaps, they are more consciously aware that this is their theory of how words and meaning work. Then the theory is overt. Either way, tacit or overt, this is a theory that many “everyday” people—that is, people who are not linguists or specialists of any other sort—believe. But, of course, it is also a theory that some (but not all) professional linguists and psychologists believe and argue for, as well (see Clark 1989 and Gee 2004 for further discussion). In that case, the theory is certainly overt and is usually more formal, explicit, and elaborated. In such a situation, we have a professional theory that also reflects a commonsense, taken-for-granted and often tacit everyday theory.

We can see how this theory might influence educational practice. Vocabulary is important for success in school. This theory that words have fixed meanings would imply we can teach word meaning by giving young people lists and definitions and having them write sentences containing the new words. We can tell them to memorize the meaning of the word, presumably by memorizing its definition. And, indeed, this is how vocabulary was traditionally taught in schools, and still is in some cases.

We don’t often think about everyday people—non-specialists—having theories, especially tacit ones. We tend to say that such people—all of us when we are not doing our specialist jobs, if we have one—have beliefs, viewpoints, or perspectives on things, even prejudices. Nonetheless, I will say that people hold theories about all sorts of things, because in many cases—like this one—people’s beliefs (and even prejudices) hang together and cohere in ways that are certainly like theories. Sometimes these theories contradict professional theories, sometimes they don’t. In some cases, everyday people have picked up their theories from having heard about professional theories from other people, the media, or from their own studies. On the other hand, in some cases, though not all, the professionals’ more formal theories are simply reflections of their commonsense everyday theories.

Some people are uncomfortable using the word “theory” both for people’s everyday beliefs and for the perspectives of professionals like linguists. And it is true that logical consistency may sometimes be less common in everyday theories than in professional ones (diSessa 2006). For this reason, some people have used the phrase “cultural model” for what I have just been calling people’s everyday theories (D’Andrade and Strauss 1992; Gee 2005; Holland and Quinn 1987). They retain the word “theory” just for professional theories. And this is fine with me. In this case, then, we can say that the cultural model that words have fixed meanings in terms of concepts or definitions stored in people’s heads (an everyday theory) is similar to a theory (professional theory) held by and elaborated much further by professional linguists and psychologists.

Even when cultural models match a professional theory to a certain extent—and they often don’t—this does not mean that either of them are right or useful. Both everyday people and professionals can be wrong, of course. In fact, I will argue in this book, along with some other linguists (though, of course, not all), that the cultural model that words have fixed meanings in terms of concepts or definitions stored in people’s heads is misguided. So, too, is the professional theory version of this cultural model. Thus, in this regard, both “common sense” and some professionals are wrong.

Most words don't have fixed meanings. Take even so simple a word as "coffee" (Clark 1989). If I say, "The coffee spilled, go get a mop," the word betokens a liquid. If I say, "The coffee spilled, go get a broom," the word betokens beans or grains. If I say, "The coffee spilled, stack it again," the word betokens tins or cans. If I say, "Coffee growers exploit their workers," the word betokens coffee berries and the trees they grow on.

You can see that the word "coffee" is really related not to a definite concept so much as a little "story" (using the word loosely) about how coffee products are produced and used. (Berries grow on trees, get picked, their husks are removed and they are made into beans, then ground up, used as a flavoring or made into a liquid which is drunk or used for other purposes, for instance, to stain things.) And, indeed, you can fail to know parts of the story (as I most surely do) and still be quite happy using the word. You trust other people know the full story or, at least, that such a full story could be discovered if the need arose (which it rarely does). And, of course, new meanings can arise in new contexts. For example, though you have never heard it, you would probably know what I meant if I said, "Big coffee is opposed to the new legislation" (which you might take to mean something like "Powerful coffee growers, producers, and other businesses connected to coffee opposed the new legislation").

We can also call the little "story" connected to "coffee" a "cultural model." Cultural models are "models." Think about what a model is, for example a toy plane or a blueprint for a house. A model is just a scaled-down and simplified way of thinking about something that is more complicated and complex. Children can use toy planes to fantasize about real flight and scientists can use model planes to test ideas about real planes. Architects can use cardboard models of houses or blueprints (just quite abstract models) to think about designing real houses. So, too, theories and stories, whether used by everyday people or professionals, are, in this sense, models, tools used to simplify complex matters somewhat so they can be better understood and dealt with.

We will have a lot more to say about cultural models in Chapter 5. For now, we take them to be everyday theories, stories, images, metaphors, or any other device through which people try to simplify a complex reality in order to better understand it and deal with it. Such models help people to go about their lives efficiently without having to think through everything thoroughly at all times. We pick up our cultural models through interactions in society and often don't think all that much about them, using them as we go about our business on "automatic pilot," so to speak.

Of course, a word like "coffee" seems to mean something pretty simple, at least compared to words like "honor," "love," or "democracy." But even the "coffee" example shows that the meanings of words are more like encyclopedia entries—even Wiki entries, as we will see below, since people can negotiate, contest, and change meaning—than they are like formal dictionary definitions. Words are connected more to knowledge and beliefs, encapsulated into the stories or theories that constitute cultural models, than they are to definitions. Lots of information based on history and what people do in the world is connected to each word, even a word like "coffee." Lots of this information is picked up in conversation and in our dealings with texts and the media; not all or even most of it is attained in school. Some people know more or less of this information than do others. And, since history and what people do change, meanings change, as well.

Take another simple word, the word "bachelor" (Fillmore 1975). If any word has a definite definition, this word would seem to be it: "unmarried male." However, now let me ask you, Is the Pope a bachelor? Is an older man who has lived with his homosexual lover for thirty years a bachelor? Is a young man in a permanent coma a bachelor? We are not really comfortable saying "yes" in each of these cases, even though in each case these people are unmarried males. Why? Because we really use the word "bachelor," like the word "coffee," in relation to a little "story," a story like this: People usually get married to a member of the opposite sex by a certain age, men who stay unmarried, but available to members of the opposite sex, past a certain age are bachelors. In fact, this little story is our everyday theory of how the world usually goes or even, for some people, how it should go. It is, in that sense, a cultural model (an everyday theory), just like the cultural model that words have fixed meanings in terms of concepts or definitions in people's heads. We humans, as we will see, have lots and lots of cultural models about all sorts of things.

The Pope, the committed gay, and the young man in the coma just don't fit well in this story. For different reasons they aren't really available to members of the opposite sex. So we are uncomfortable calling them "bachelors." We go with the story and not the definition. Furthermore, people have for some time now actually challenged the story connected to the word "bachelor." They have made a tacit cultural model overt by saying the story is sexist, especially since "bachelor" seemed once to carry a positive connotation while its twin, "spinster," did not. Some of these people started calling available unmarried women "bachelors," others starting using the word "spinster" as a term of praise.

We could even imagine the day when the Catholic Church both ordains women and allows priests to marry and where we are willing, then, to call the Pope a bachelor and the Pope happens to be a woman! Words and their meanings can travel far as their stories change and as our knowledge about the world changes.

So here is where we have gotten so far. The meanings of words are not fixed and settled once and for all in terms of definitions. They vary across contexts (remember “The coffee spilled, go get a mop” versus “The coffee spilled, go get a broom”). And they are tied to cultural models (stories and theories that are meant to simplify and help us deal with complexity). In fact, it is the cultural models that allow people to understand words differently in different contexts and even to understand new uses of a word for new contexts (e.g., remember “Big Coffee opposed the new legislation”). Now we will add a third point: that the meanings of words is also tied to negotiation and social interactions.

To see this point, let’s take yet another simple word—again, nothing fancy like “love” or “honor”—the word “sausage” and consider what the African-American activist and lawyer Patricia Williams (1991) had to say in court once about this seemingly simple word. Williams was prosecuting a sausage manufacturer for selling impure products. The manufacturer insisted that the word “sausage” meant “pig meat and lots of impurities.” Williams, in her summation, told the jury the following:

You have this thing called a sausage-making machine. You put pork and spices in at the top and crank it up, and because it is a sausage-making machine, what comes out the other end is a sausage. Over time, everyone knows that anything that comes out of the sausage-making machine is known as a sausage. In fact, there is a law passed that says it is indisputably sausage.

One day, we throw in a few small rodents of questionable pedigree and a teddy bear and a chicken. We crank the machine up and wait to see what comes out the other end. (1) Do we prove the validity of the machine if we call the product sausage? (2) Or do we enlarge and enhance the meaning of “sausage” if we call the product sausage? (3) Or do we have any success in breaking out of the bind if we call it something different from “sausage”?

In fact, I’m not sure it makes any difference whether we call it sausage or if we scramble the letters of the alphabet over this thing that comes out, full of sawdust and tiny claws. What will make a difference, however, is a recognition of our shifting relation to the word ‘sausage,’ by:

(1) enlarging the authority of sausage makers and enhancing the awesome, cruel inevitability of the workings of sausage machines—that is, everything they touch turns to sausage or else it doesn’t exist; or by

(2) expanding the definition of sausage itself to encompass a wealth of variation: chicken, rodent, or teddy-bear sausage; or, finally, by

(3) challenging our own comprehension of what it is we really mean by sausage—that is, by making clear the consensual limits of sausage and reacquainting ourselves with the sources of its authority and legitimation.

Realizing that there are at least three different ways to relate to the facts of this case, to this product, this thing, is to define and acknowledge your role as jury and as trier of fact; is to acknowledge your own participation in the creation of reality.

(pp. 107–108)

It’s pretty clear that Williams approves of option 3. But, exactly what are the consensual limits of a word’s meaning? When does sausage cease to be sausage? How far can a company stretch the meaning of the word? What are the sources that authorize and legitimate the meaning of a word? These are not the sorts of questions we are used to thinking about in regard to words and meaning when we are tempted to just open a dictionary to settle what the meaning of a word is.

So let’s look at the sausage issue—the sausage story, knowledge about sausage in the world—a bit more deeply. The sausage company engages in a social practice that involves making sausage in a certain way and selling it. Its social practice is fully caught up with a vested interest: making a profit. Consumers of sausage have another social practice, one involving buying and eating sausage. Their practice too is fully caught up with vested interests, namely, buying sausage for a low price and feeling well after eating it.

These two social practices exist only in relation to each other. Furthermore, the two practices happen to share some common interests. For example, it is not in the interest of either party to get too fussy about what gets labeled “sausage,” otherwise it will cost too much to buy or sell. But, the producers and consumers may conflict in exactly where they want to draw the boundary between what is and what is not sausage. This conflict opens up a negotiation about what the word “sausage” will mean. The negotiation can take place in court or in the supermarket where people buy or refuse to buy what the sausage company labels “sausage.”

In this negotiation, power plays a role—the power of the producers is pitted against the power of the consumers.

But, can this negotiation come out just any old way? Are there no limits to it? Williams says there are consensual limits. The producers and consumers are, though engaged in different practices, members of a larger community that has a consensus around certain values. One of these values is the health and well-being of its members, if only so that they can buy and sell more sausage. If one side of the negotiation violates these values, they can lose the negotiation, provided the community has the power to exclude them if they refuse to concede. Law is one way to try to do this. Boycotting the company is another. Systematically failing to apply the word “sausage” to the company’s products is still another.

Meanings are ultimately rooted in negotiation between different social practices with different interests by people who share or seek to share some common ground. Power plays an important role in these negotiations. The negotiations can be settled for the time, in which case meaning becomes conventional and routine. But the settlement can be reopened, perhaps when a particular company introduces a new element into its social practice and into its sausage. The negotiations which constitute meaning are limited by values emanating from “communities”—though we need to realize it can be contentious what constitutes a “community”—or from attempts by people to establish and stabilize, perhaps only for here and now, enough common ground to agree on meaning.

But how can we characterize what constitutes such a community, for example, the community of people that authorizes and legitimates, for a given time and place, the meaning of the word “sausage”? Following the lead of Amy Shuman, in her paper “Literacy: Local Uses and Global Perspectives” (1992), I will characterize these communities as persons whose paths through life have for a given time and place fallen together. I do not want to characterize them as people “united by mutual interest in achieving a common end,” since groups may negotiate a consensus around meaning when they share few substantive interests and have no common goals, or at least, when they have many conflicting interests and goals.

The word “community” here is probably not a good one. (See, I am negotiating meaning with you.) We might hope for—and, of course, often get—a more robust sense of community supporting the meanings of words and the shared communication of people. But, in the end, we often get more tenuous connections among people, ones in terms of which even foes can communicate, though there may always come a point where “words run out,” agreement (on words, or facts, or actions) can’t be

reached, and there is the risk of violence. (How well we know this in our current world.) In the end, one and the same person can be a “terrorist” to some and a “freedom fighter” to others, and communication is on the verge of failure and with it, perhaps, understanding, common ground, and peace.

So this is a different way to look at meaning. Meaning is not something locked away in heads, rendering communication possible by the mysterious fact that everyone has the same thing in their heads, though we don’t know how that happened. Meaning is something we negotiate and contest over socially. It is something that has its roots in “culture” in the very deep and extended sense that it resides in an attempt to find common ground. That common ground is very often rooted in the sorts of things we think of as “cultures,” whether something like “American culture” or “African-American culture,” though we will see the notion of “culture” (like “sausage”) is itself problematic.

But meaning, as I have argued above, can be rooted in relationships that are less stable, long-term, enduring, or encompassing as “cultures” in the traditional sense. Two people don’t need to “share a culture” to communicate. They need to negotiate and seek common ground on the spot of the here and now of social interaction and communication. In fact, we see such a thing every day in our current world in chat rooms and massive multiplayer worlds (like *World of Warcraft* or *Second Life*) where people of sometimes quite different ages, races, ethnicities, countries, genders, and social and political orientations of all sorts group together to engage in joint action and communication. Here very often the processes of negotiation, contestation, and the seeking or forestalling of common ground are obvious and foregrounded. Such processes are, I suggest, always part and parcel of language and communication, but they are often more hidden and taken for granted in our everyday lives in the “real” world, though they became obvious in Patricia Williams’s trial, as well.

Take, for example, a married couple. They each think that the meaning of the word “work” is clear and definite. Further, they each think they mean the same things by the word. Then, one day one of them says to the other, “I don’t think this relationship is working, because relationships shouldn’t take work.” The other partner, stunned, says, “But I have worked hard on this relationship and I think relationships require work.” They realize that they don’t really know, once and for all, what “work” means, that the word is being used in several different ways in these very utterances, and that here and now, in a quite consequential way, they have to negotiate the matter. (Perhaps, they should have done so earlier.) They

realize as well that they may hold different cultural models about work and relationships or that there are competing models available in society.

Notice, too, that there is no good way to clearly distinguish fighting over words and fighting over things and actions in the world. One partner doesn't like what he or she is being required to do, but if he or she didn't see—didn't feel—this was “work” or if he or she saw such “work” as good for relationships, then there wouldn't be a problem. Words, meanings, and the world are married and will stay together even if this couple doesn't. They are married because the primary way we humans deal with the world is by getting words to attach to the world in certain ways—like “sausage” above—and this is a matter we have to negotiate over and contest with in the face of other people, their practices and their interests.

Now I have made it seem like we are always fighting over words and their meanings. But, of course, we are not. Most of the time there is peace. But the question is why and how there is peace. There is peace because in many cases and for many parts of their lives people have come to agreements about what words will mean in different situations. These are “conventions.” We take them for granted until someone proposes to break them or we find areas or situations they don't really cover. We become party to these conventions by leading our lives with other people, by being parts of shared histories, groups, and institutions.

Indeed, we can see these histories, groups, and institutions as, in part, existing in order to stabilize and conventionalize meanings so that people can get on with their lives and their interests (unfortunately, sometimes at the cost of other people's interests). Looking at things this way shows us another side of the claim that meaning is social and cultural and not really just a matter of what is inside your head. It takes massive amounts of social work on the parts of groups and institutions to “police” meaning, to settle negotiations in terms of more or less stabilized conventions that everyone will abide by, often without giving the matter too much thought.

At one time in U.S. history, our government and military encouraged right-wing forces in some South American countries to harm civilians in order to encourage these civilians to oppose left-wing governments or left-wing revolutionary forces (Sikkink 2004). Some members of our government called such people “freedom fighters.” When Islamic fighters did the same thing to us and our allies, they, however, were called “terrorists.” Such a distinction takes work to uphold in terms of policies, media treatments, and political arguments, and is, in turn, contested by some people.

To see another example of the same sort of thing, consider a video game made in Syria called *Under Ash* (Gee 2003), a game whose hero

is a young Palestinian who throws stones to fight Israeli soldiers and settlers. The game operates by a cultural model that holds that while “civilians” should not be harmed, Israeli settlers don't count as civilians, but rather as the “advance” troops of an occupation army. Of course, Israeli settlers don't in reality count as anything until they are “modeled” in terms of their relationships to other things and people. If we see them as “civilians” (not combatants), then people who harm them are “terrorists.” If we see them as combatants and not civilians, then people who harm them are, at worst, fighting a war and, at best, are “freedom fighters.” Needless to say, lots of political works needs to go on to “enforce” the meanings we give words like “civilian” or “terrorist” in the face of people who wish to contest these meanings.

All this does *not* mean that “anything goes,” that it doesn't matter whether we call someone a “civilian” or a “terrorist,” that “it's all just words.” Nor is the matter “merely political” in the sense that it just all amounts to political rhetoric to advance one party over another. What it means is that what meanings we give to words is based on knowledge we acquire and choices we make, as well as values and beliefs—and, yes, even interests—we have. Words are consequential. They matter. Words and the world are married.

So we have developed a viewpoint (a theory) that the meanings of words:

- 1 Can vary across contexts of use.
- 2 Are composed of changing stories, knowledge, beliefs, and values that are encapsulated in cultural models, not definitions.
- 3 Are a matter, as well, of social negotiations rooted in culture if only in the broad sense of a search for common ground.
- 4 For many words at many points in their histories meaning is relatively stabilized thanks to the fact that many people accept and share a convention about what they mean in different contexts of use.
- 5 These conventions can be undone, contested, and changed.
- 6 Finally, it takes social work to enforce and police the meanings of words, work that never in the end can ensure their meanings will not change or be contested.

Combining words

So the theory of words and their meanings we have developed so far makes learning word meanings via lists and definitions—the sort of thing that sometimes goes on in school—pretty implausible. But the

situation is actually worse for lists and definitions. First, there really is no definitive list of the words one needs to know. Partly this is so because new words arise all the time and old ones die. Furthermore, each specialty area in society—from video gamers to gangster and lawyers—has its own words, some of which eventually filter into more general use (as have Freud's terms like "ego" and "subconscious," for example). But, worse, it is also so because we don't always use single words, but often combine words into combinations that have their own meanings, that function, more or less, like single words. We saw this above with "Big Coffee." You probably have never heard this combination before, but you can give it a meaning because you have heard things like "Big Oil" and "Big Business" and can, by analogy, guess a meaning for "Big Coffee."

Our daily communication is filled with word combinations that take on their own life and meaning. And I am not now referring to idioms like "kick the bucket." I am referring to compounds and phrases that take on their own non-idiomatic meanings in terms of stories, knowledge, beliefs, and values encapsulated in cultural models. No list could ever suffice. For example, consider the word combination "correct English" or "good English" or even "to speak English correctly." These combinations—just like single words like "sausage" or "democracy"—have their own connections to cultural models in terms of which people can give them specific meanings in specific contexts, negotiate over such meanings, or contest them.

To see how matters work here—the sorts of trouble we can get ourselves into with words, words in this case that are not listed in any dictionary—consider the following sentence, uttered by a seven-year African-American child in the course of telling a story at "sharing time" ("show and tell") at school (Gee 1985: 32–35; see also Gee 2005 and Chapter 7 in this book):

1 My puppy, he always be followin' me.

Let's consider a possible reaction to this sentence. From my years of teaching introductory linguistics, I know that many people on hearing a sentence like this one will say (or think) something like the following:

This child does not know how to speak correct English. This is probably because she attends a poor and neglected school and comes from an impoverished home with few or no books in it, a home which gives little support for and encouragement to education.

Note our word combination "correct English" and the work it is doing. This word combination (and related ones like "good English" or "to speak English correctly") is connected to a cultural model something like this: There are right ways and wrong ways to speak English. How educated people speak and write determines which ways are right. If there is dispute about the matter, there are experts (grammarians) who can settle the matter, because they know how educated people do speak or, at least, how they should speak (because, of course, even educated people have lapses). This cultural model is often associated with another one (Finegan 1980) that holds that languages are always deteriorating over time because uneducated people and other debilitating social forces change them and that historically earlier forms of language are, thus, often more correct than later ones, something that can be put right, if it all, by experts telling us how we ought to speak (and write).

The "correct English" cultural model tells us the little girl is "wrong" (alas, then, she doesn't even really know her native language) and the "language is deteriorating" model tells us she is part of a larger problem. There are two things in this little girl's sentence that contribute to these claims. First is the juxtaposition of the subject "my puppy" to the front of the sentence, followed by the pronoun "he." People who hold the above cultural models may well feel that this is simply "sloppy" or "colloquial," much as is, they will say, using "followin'" instead of "following," rather like slurping one's soup. We all are prone in moments of carelessness to do things like this, but this little girl, they may feel, probably does it more than she ought to.

People with the above cultural models are likely to be more seriously disturbed by the "bare" helping verb "be," rather than "is." Why can't the child say, "My puppy is always following me"? Can it be that hard? The problem will get worse when we add the fact that this child can be heard to say such things as "My puppy followin' me" on other occasions. The child will now be said to be inconsistent, simply varying between different forms because she doesn't really know the right form, doesn't really know the language in this regard, despite the fact that it is her first and only language.

Let's now juxtapose to the above cultural models what a linguist who has actually studied the matter might say about the little girl's sentence. This is a case where cultural models and professional theories differ. So what is the linguist's theory about sentence 1? We will start with the most striking feature, the bare "be."

To understand how this "bare be" form is used, and to grasp its significance, we must first explicate a part of the English aspect system

(Comrie 1976). "Aspect" is a term that stands for how a language signals the viewpoint it takes on the way in which an action is situated in time. Almost all languages in the world make a primary distinction between the perfective aspect and the imperfective aspect.

The imperfective aspect is used when the action is viewed as on-going or repeated. English uses the progressive (the verb "to be" plus the ending -ing on the following verb) to mark the imperfective, as in "John is working/John was working" or "Mary is jumping/Mary was jumping." In the first of these cases, John's working is viewed as on-going, still in progress in the present ("is") or the past ("was"); in the second, Mary's jumping is viewed as having being repeated over and over again in the present ("is") or past ("was").

The perfective is used when an action is viewed as a discrete whole, treated as if it is a point in time (whether or not, in reality, the act took a significant amount of time or not). English uses the simple present or past for the perfective, as in "Smith dives for the ball!" (sportscast), in the present, or "Smith dived for the ball," in the past. The imperfective of these sentences would be: "Smith is diving for the ball" and "Smith was diving for the ball."

Linguists refer to the distinctive English dialect that many, but by no means all, African-American speakers speak as "Black Vernacular English"—"BVE" for short—or African-American English—"AAE" for short (Baugh 1983, 1999; Green 2002; Labov 1972a, b; Mufwene *et al.* 1998; Rickford and Rickford 2000). Some people prefer the term "Ebonics" (see Baugh 2000 for discussion) here, but, for better or worse, terms like "BVE" or "AAE" are in wider currency in linguistics (and, in general, linguists don't name languages or dialects after the color of their speakers). Of course, there is, just as we would expect, negotiation and contestation to be had over "AAE" versus "Ebonics" (and, thus, we see that what we said about words above applies to specialist "jargon" as well). We will refer to the English that elites in society are perceived as speaking and that many others accept and do their best to emulate as "Standard English." (There are actually different varieties of Standard English, see Bex 1999; Finegan and Rickford 2004; Milroy and Milroy 1985.)

AAE and Standard English do not differ in the perfective, though an older form of AAE used to distinguish between a simple perfective ("John drank the milk") and a completive that stressed that the action was finished, complete and done with ("John done drank the milk up"). Like all languages, AAE (a dialect of English) has changed and is changing through time.

AAE and standard English do differ in the imperfective. Young African-American-speakers make a distinction between on-going or repeated (thus, imperfective) events which are of limited duration and on-going or repeated events which are of extended duration. For limited duration events they use the absent copula, as in "My puppy following me," and for extended events they use the "bare be" as in "My puppy be following me." Thus, the following sorts of contrast are regular in the variety of English spoken by many young African-American speakers in the United States (Bailey and Maynor 1987):

Limited duration events

- 2a In health class, we talking about the eye.
[Standard English: "In health class, we are talking about the eye"]
- b He trying to scare us.
[Standard English: "He is trying to scare us"]

Extended duration events

- 3a He always be fighting.
[Standard English: "He is always fighting"]
- b Sometimes them big boys be throwing the ball, and . . .
[Standard English: "Sometimes those big boys are throwing the ball, and . . ."]

In 2a, the talk about the eye in health class will go on only for a short while compared to the duration of the whole class. Thus, the speaker uses the absent copula form ("we talking"). In 2b, "he" is trying to scare us now, but this doesn't always happen or happen repeatedly and often, so once again the speaker uses the absent be ("he trying"). On the other hand, in 3a, the fighting is always taking place, is something that "he" characteristically does, thus the speaker uses the bare be form ("he be fighting"). And in 3b, the speaker is talking about a situation that has happened often and will in all likelihood continue to happen. Thus, she uses the bare be ("big boys be throwing"). Standard English makes no such contrast, having to rely on the context of the utterance, or the addition of extra words, to make the meaning apparent.

Two things are particularly interesting about this contrast in AAE. First, it is one that is made in many other languages. It is one linguists expect to find in languages, though it is not always found—for instance,

it is not found in Standard English (Comrie 1976). That Standard English fails to overtly draw this contrast is then somewhat odd, but, then, all languages fail to make some contrasts that others make.

Second, older African-American speakers did not use “bare be” in this way, but somewhat differently. Young African-American people redrew their dialect to make this distinction, using forms that already existed in AAE (the absent “be” and the bare “be”), but with somewhat different uses (Bailey and Maynor 1987). That is, they are changing their language, as all children have done through all the time language has been around. It is as if they have (unconsciously) seen a gap or hole in the English system—the failure to clearly signal in the imperfective a distinction between limited and extended duration—and filled it in. All languages have gaps or holes, and children are always attempting to fill them in (Slobin 1985). Indeed, AAE has changed in certain respects since the first edition of this book (1990)—as, of course, has Standard English, though dialects less tied to writing than Standard English change more rapidly.

This is one of the major ways languages change through time. Children invent distinctions that they think (unconsciously) should be in the language. Some linguists believe this invention is based on a biologically specified view of what the optimal design of a human language ought to be (Chomsky 1986: 1–50; Pinker 1994). Other linguists believe this sort of invention is based on children’s social and cognitive development, their ways of thinking about the world that they gain through their early interactions with the world and people in it (see Hoff 2004 for general discussion).

Linguists disagree about exactly how to phrase the matter, though they do not disagree about the creativity of children as language acquirers or on the important role of children in language change. Languages are changing all the time, losing and gaining various contrasts. If a language loses the ability to draw a certain contrast, and the contrast seems to be an important one from the perspective humans take on the world, children may well replace it.

But, one might ask, why has the non-standard dialect introduced this distinction, and not also the standard dialect? One price speakers pay for standard dialects is that they change more slowly, since the fact that a standard dialect is used in writing and public media puts something of a brake on change. This is good in that the dialect remains relatively constant across time, thus serving the purposes of standardization (Milroy and Milroy 1985).

However, since non-standard dialects are freer to change on the basis of the human child’s linguistic and cognitive systems, non-standard

dialects are, in a sense, often “more logical” or “more elegant” from a linguistic point of view. That is, they are “more logical” or “more elegant” from the viewpoint of what is typical across languages or from the viewpoint of what seems to be the basic design of the human linguistic system.

Non-standard dialects and standard ones often serve different purposes: the former signal identification with a local, often non-mainstream community, and the latter with a wider, plural and technological society, and its views of who are elite and worth emulating (Bex 1999; Chambers 1995; Finegan and Rickford 2004; Milroy 1987a, b; Milroy and Milroy 1985). In fact, a change in a non-standard dialect, since it makes the non-standard dialect different from the standard, may enhance its ability to signal identification with a “local” community as over against the wider “mainstream” society.

However, we should keep in mind that in today’s complex, global world, where people can communicate with each other nearly endlessly via a wide variety of media, “local varieties” can spread and be used for political activism and as a badge of identity in contesting what is and what is not “mainstream.” In turn, what is or was “mainstream” in a given context can change as people adopt “local varieties” for the purposes of creating new consumer niches in a global market place. Both things have happened with AAE as it plays a role in rap and hip hop, for instance.

But both standard and non-standard dialects are marvels of human mastery. Neither is better or worse. Furthermore, it is an accident of history as to which dialect gets to be taken to be the standard—a reversal of power and prestige in the history of the United States could have led to a form of AAE being the standard, and the concomitant need here to save from negative judgments dialects that are closer to what is currently viewed as Standard English.

The other features of our sentence are also quite common across languages. The juxtaposition of the subject “my puppy” to the front of the sentence is a way to signal that a speaker is switching topics or returning to an old one. It is actually common in many dialects of spoken English and in many other languages (Ochs and Schieffelin 1983).

The variation between “followin’” in informal contexts and “following” in more formal contexts occurs in all dialects of English, including dialects closer to the standard. It turns out that people aren’t very good at actually hearing what they and others are really saying—though they think they are good at it—so you can’t trust your ears in this regard, you have to make tape-recordings and listen repeatedly and carefully.

The two forms ("followin'" and "following"), in all dialects of English, actually have different social implications (Milroy and Milroy 1985: 95). The form "followin'" means that the speaker is signaling more solidarity with and less deference toward the hearer, treating the hearer more as a peer, friend, or comrade. The "following" form signals that the speaker is signaling less solidarity with and more deference towards the hearer, treating the hearer less as a peer and intimate and more as one higher in status than the speaker. Of course, these matters are matters of degree, and so one can (unconsciously) mix and match various degrees of "-in'" and "-ing" in a stretch of language to achieve just the right level of solidarity and deference (Labov 1972a, b; Chambers 1995; Gee 1993a, Gee 2005; Milroy 1987a).

So we have a conflict between a theory in linguistics—one that says that this little girl speaks "correct English" in terms of her own dialect—and an everyday, often taken-for-granted tacit cultural model (theory) that says the little girl doesn't speak English correctly—indeed, claims that she speaks "bad English." Of course, this doesn't settle the matter. Common sense can be wrong, but so can experts.

Many readers are probably saying at this point, "Look, the issue is not what to mean by a combination of words like 'correct English', rather it's a matter of what is true, a matter of whether the linguist's facts are correct or everyday people's facts." Alas, you already know I don't think language and the world can be separated that cleanly. What is at issue between the linguist's theory and the everyday cultural model is not solely or only a disagreement over whose generalizations or facts are "true" or accurate or whatever. People who hold the everyday cultural model—even after they have heard the linguist's views—can still choose to use the words "correct English" to mean "the dialect people speak (and write) whom we (or elites in society) view as intelligent and educated." In this case they have conceded the linguist's point about dialects, but have shored up their cultural model to claim that only Standard English is correct and other dialects are not, or some are not, namely ones like the one this little girl speaks. Such people can also, of course, just ignore linguists (probably the more common course).

Meaning is a matter of negotiation and contestation, and people by no means just give into experts. In fact, this point was made clear during the Oakland "Ebonics controversy." The Oakland School Board had sought federal funds to aid African-American students who spoke AAE. The controversy had many aspects. But when newspapers and other media claimed that AAE was "bad English" or "slang," linguists sought to correct them. The claim that these children were not speaking "bad

English" or "slang" was one that linguists had taken as proven for several decades by the point of the controversy. Nonetheless, many people in the media and many everyday people refused to change their cultural model and agree with the linguists, though, of course, they became more consciously aware of their model.

The final and ultimately the real issue for those who hold the everyday cultural model associated with "correct English," once their tacit theory has been made explicit by being juxtaposed to the linguist's theory, is this: Do they really want to define "correct English" in the way their cultural model does? Or, do they want, rather, to adopt the linguist's framework? This choice is, of course, partly based on how people assess the linguist's factual claims. But, in the end, the choice can only be based, for the most part, on a value judgment about the current social world and about what one takes to be both possible and desired changes in this world.

Such judgments are ultimately ethical or moral decisions. It is clear, also, that I personally believe that, exposed to the linguist's theory and the everyday cultural model, the only ethical choice is to use "correct English" the way linguists use it. This is so because the linguists' theory, I believe, will lead to a more just, humane, and happier world. I haven't spelled this argument out here in full, but I believe that it is fairly obvious. In any case, the following chapters will make clear why I hold this belief.

A further moral we can draw here is this: Arguing about what words (ought to) mean is not a trivial business—it is not "quibbling over mere words," "hair splitting," "just semantics." Such arguments are what lead to the adoption of social beliefs and values and, in turn, these beliefs and values lead to social action and the maintenance and creation of social worlds. Such arguments are, in this sense, often a species of moral argumentation.

Before going on, let me hasten to add that it is simply a piece of inaccurate "folk wisdom," encouraged by the popular press and other media, that linguists claim that people never say anything wrong or can't make mistakes in language. The sentence "Whom should I say is calling?" exists in the grammar of no variety (dialect) of English. It fails to fit any pattern of generalizations that characterizes any dialect of English. Some speakers do not use the "who/whom" contrast in their dialects; this is, in fact, true of the informal, colloquial speech of many speakers of dialects close to Standard English. Such speakers will sometimes say such a thing as "Whom should I say is calling?" when they are trying to sound very formal and sound as if they know where Standard (in this case, for the most part, written) English calls for the placement of

“whom” and “who.” This is called “hypercorrection” and it is indeed a mistake. People do such things, and linguists know they do.

Linguists do not claim that “anything goes.” They do, however, perfectly well know that the sentence uttered by our seven-year-old is grammatical (“correct”) in her dialect. And they know it is grammatical because it fits the “rules” of her variety of English, the pattern of generalizations that characterize her speech and that of her fellow community members sharing her dialect. These rules or generalizations are acquired through exposure to the language as a child, and not through overt instruction at home or school. Children come to school already well along in the acquisition of their dialect of English. To me—as well as to other linguists—it would seem important for teachers to realize this if they wish this little girl to acquire Standard English (another dialect) in school and affiliate with school as an institution that respects her, her family, and her culture.

What we have seen is that when we interrogate the cultural models associated with some words and word combinations we get to moral decisions. Attributing certain meanings to such words and word combinations leads to value-laden moral decisions about how the world is and should be and how we could make it better or worse. It leads to claims and beliefs about who and what is “good,” “right,” “normal,” “acceptable,” and who and what are not, judgments that have consequences in the world. When people negotiate over such words and word combinations they are also negotiating over social issues of moral import. I will call such words and word combinations “socially contested terms.” “Correct English” is one such term, but so, we will see in this book, is “literacy.”

Socially contested terms are words and word combinations whose cultural models hold implications about “right” and “wrong,” “good” and “bad,” “acceptable” and “not acceptable,” “appropriate” and “not appropriate,” and other such value-laden distinctions. When these distinctions are applied to people they have implications for how “social goods” are or should be distributed in the world, and this is, for me, ultimately a moral matter. Saying a child does not know how to speak her own native language correctly has implications about that child, her abilities and her deficits—and these carry over into how she is treated in school and society.

Morality and communication

We have seen that people hold cultural models and that these are theories. Such theories—like the one about “correct” English—are often tacit in the sense that people have not thought about them much and take them for granted. They seem “obvious,” even commonsense. If people have thought about them more explicitly, then they are overt and now, at least, people who hold them can engage in overt argument with people who don’t.

We can always ask where a person got his or her cultural models. In most cases, they picked them up from talk, interaction, and engagement with texts and media in society and within their own cultural spheres. In some cases, the cultural models may have come from that person’s thought and research into the matter, carried out in discussion and debate with others, especially if their models have been challenged by others or they have become, for whatever reason, aware they hold them and have become wary of them. Such thought and research, I will call “primary research.”

Even if the person has not engaged in primary research, he or she may have thoughtfully consulted, through discussion, listening or reading, a variety of such original thought and research, and discussed it with others. In either of these cases—where the person has actually carried out primary research or, at least, thoughtfully considered it—I will say that the person is operating now with “a primary theory,” something on the way from a cultural model to a more explicit theory. The issue here is not whether the person is “right,” rather it is this: Have people allowed their viewpoints to be formed through serious reflection on multiple competing viewpoints (Bakhtin 1981, 1986; Billig 1987)?

Primary theories are not the possession solely of academics. My twenty-seven-year-old son was ten when I first wrote this book (1990). When he was ten, his theories about *Iron Man*, a comic book super-hero, were quite assuredly primary theories. He had read the books and discussed them with others, as well as, in fact, looked into something of the history of *Iron Man*. My theories of *Iron Man* were and are, however, not primary theories, as all I know about the matter I have heard in snippets from him and picked up in informal conversations with others about their children’s reading of “super-hero” comics. I have never studied the matter or confronted alternative viewpoints and opinions.

Basil Bernstein (1971, 1975) pointed out that the theories presented to teachers in training are very often “third-hand” knowledge. The teachers do not themselves read primary literature in linguistics, for example.

Nor do they read secondary sources written by linguists summarizing and discussing that literature. Nor do they do any research themselves. Rather, they are presented, orally and in their reading, with third-hand reports presented by people, not themselves trained in linguistics, summarizing and discussing secondary sources at best. Thus, the teachers hold their theories about language at some remove from being a primary theory.

In our daily lives, the beliefs we have and the claims we make on the basis of these beliefs have effects on other people, sometimes harmful, sometimes beneficial, sometimes a bit of both, and sometimes neither. There are, I believe, two conceptual principles that serve as the basis of ethical human communication and interaction. These principles are grounded in no further ones, save that the second relies on the first, and, if someone fails to accept them, then argument has "run out." They are absolutely basic. The first principle (Wheatley 1970: 115–134) is:

First principle. That something would harm someone else (deprive them of what they or the society they are in view as "goods") is always a good reason (though perhaps not a sufficient reason) not to do it.

What this principle says is that when we consider whether to believe, claim, or do anything, then it is always a good reason not to do it if we believe that our believing, claiming, or doing it would harm someone else. This does not mean that there may not be other reasons that override this one, reasons that lead us to do the harmful thing nonetheless.

I have, and can have, I believe, no argument for this principle, and, in particular, for well known reasons, utilitarian arguments for it won't work (Smith 1988: ch. 6). The principle is simply a basic part of what it means to be a moral human being. All I, or anyone, can say is that if people do not accept it, or if they act as though they do not accept it, then I and most others are simply not going to interact with them. We have come to a point at which one must simply offer resistance, not argument.

The second conceptual principle is yet more specific, and is couched in terms of our distinctions about different types of theories:

Second principle. One always has the moral obligation to change a cultural model into a primary theory when there is reason to believe that the cultural model advantages oneself or one's group over other people or other groups.

What this principle says is that if I have good reason to believe, or others argue convincingly that I ought to have good reason to believe, that a cultural model or theory I hold gives me or people like me (however this is defined) an advantage over other people or other groups of people, then my continuing to hold this theory in a tacit way or on the basis of little thought and study is unethical. I have an ethical obligation to explicate my theory, make it overt, and to engage in the sort of thought, discussion, and research that would render it a primary theory for me. It is not enough just to be able to put it into words (to be able to argue): it is necessary, as well, to confront evidence and alternative viewpoints and to be open to change. I have to have engaged in dialogue with alternatives (so consulting only sources that I already agree with is not enough).

By "advantage" in this second principle I simply mean "bring oneself or one's group more of what counts, in the society one is in, as a good, whether this be status, wealth, power, control, or whatever." Once again, I do not argue that there is any "transcendental" argument for this principle, only that if one fails to accept it, argument has "run out" and all that one can do is fail to interact with such people and offer them resistance if one must interact with them. At some point we have to cease to argue with people who will not open themselves to learning when their viewpoints have the potential to harm people. Such opening up does not mean, in the end, they will change their viewpoints, but it does mean they have seriously confronted other viewpoints. This second principle is, I would claim, also the ethical basis and main rationale for schools and schooling. An unexamined life isn't moral because it has the potential to hurt other people needlessly.

Ideology

When I wrote the first edition of this book (1990), the term "ideology" was a matter of considerable interest and debate in education and the social sciences more generally (see, e.g., Giddens 1984, 1987; Jameson 1981; Thompson 1984, Voloshinov 1986; in reference to ideology and education, see Freire and Macedo 1987; Giroux 1988; Lankshear with Lawler 1987; Luke 1988; McLaren 1989). This was partly due to the deep influence of Marxist approaches to education and society that were prevalent in U.S. universities from the 1960s until well in the 1980s. People are somewhat less directly concerned with the term today, but the debates about ideology and the notion itself are still crucial.

Marx believed that human knowledge, beliefs, and behavior reflected and were shaped by the economic relationships that existed in society

(Williams 1985; Marx and Engels 1970; Marx 1977). By “economic relationships” he meant something fairly broad, something like the relationships people contracted with each other in society in order to produce and consume “wealth.” (“Wealth” originally meant “well-being” and in the economic sense is still connected to the resources in terms of which people and institutions can sustain their well being, at least materially.)

In a society where power, wealth, and status are quite unequally distributed (like ours), Marx claimed that the social and political ideas of those groups with the most power, status, and wealth “are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships” (Williams 1985: 155–156; Marx and Engels 1970; Marx 1977). That is, what people in power believe is simply an expression of their controlling and powerful positions in the social hierarchy, and their desire, whether conscious or not, to retain and enhance their power. Elites in a society believe what they do because it helps them keep control of power and status and to feel validated in doing so.

It is the failure of the elite and powerful in a society to realize that their views of reality follow from, and support, their positions of power that, in Marx’s view, creates ideology. “Ideology” is an “upside-down” version of reality. Things are not really the way the elite and powerful believe them to be, rather their beliefs invert reality to make it appear the way they would like it to be, the way it “needs” to be if their power is to be enhanced and sustained.

Marx also believed that the elite and powerful could get others with less power and status to accept their “inverted” view of reality in two ways. They could accomplish this through “intellectuals” who actively promote the views of the rich and powerful and who “make the perfecting of the illusion of the [ruling class] about itself their chief source of livelihood” (Williams 1985: 155–156; Marx and Engels 1970). And, they accomplish it, as well, through organizing society and its institutions so as to encourage ways of thinking and behaving which enhance their interests, even if these ways are, in reality, at variance with the “true” interests of many people engaged in such thinking and acting (Fiske 1993; Gramsci 1971).

There is still great power in this viewpoint. In this book we are going to be talking about language and literacy, including how language and literacy are used at school and in institutions of power. Marx warns us to reflect on the fact that people with power have a vested interest to use language and literacy in their own favor, to express views of the world that support and validated their power. He warns us not to facilely assume highly educated people see reality as it is and less educated people don’t.

In fact, he suggests that to the extent that extended education and high literacy skills ally people with the rich and powerful in society, they may invest people in believing and arguing for viewpoints—and seeing the world in ways—that better reflect the interests of the rich and powerful than the way things actually are or should be.

Unfortunately, Marx seems to assume that some people see reality only through a warped ideological lens, coloring reality in their own favor, while others see reality as it is. But none of us can see or deal with reality without words or other symbols. To discuss and debate—even to think about—reality we have to attach words to it. These words are, as we have seen, always connected to negotiable, changeable, and sometimes contested stories, histories, knowledge, beliefs, and values encapsulated into cultural models (theories) about the world. Nobody looks at the world other than through lenses supplied by language or some other symbol system. (This applies even to our senses—vision, for example, must be interpreted before it is meaningful, and such interpretation is done in language or some other symbol system.)

Of course, we can always ask whether the stories, histories, knowledge, beliefs, and values about the world that someone—even someone in some specific social group or class—uses are “correct” or “useful” or “moral.” But we can’t settle this by assuming members of one group or class are always wrong and members of some other group or class are always right. We all use words in ways that are colored by our lives, interests, values, and desires. We all have ample opportunity to be wrong. We all have ample opportunity—even a moral obligation—sometimes to change and do better. We all live and communicate with and through “ideology.” We cannot do otherwise, but we can seek to interrogate our ideology when we come to believe that aspects of it are wrong or hurtful to others.

The cultural models that are connected to words are indispensable. We cannot go about our lives and contest every cultural model we use. They exist to help us cope with complexity and get on with our businesses. Cultural models are not all wrong or all right. In fact, like all models, they are simplifications of reality. They are the ideology through which we all see our worlds. In that sense, we are all both “beneficiaries” and “victims” of ideology, thanks to the fact that we speak a language and live in culture. But we can—or at times are morally obligated to—interrogate our cultural models and replace them with others, sometimes even with explicit and well developed theories. Ultimately, these new theories are models too, but, we hope, better ones. This ability is what education owes us and why we need education, though not necessarily education just in schools.

This book is about using some tools from linguistics (e.g., discourse analysis) to reflect on and interrogate some of our cultural models germane to language, literacy, learning, and people in society. In the end, you do not need to agree with me, but I hope to have suggested here that to reflect on these matters is in the end a moral matter. We will throughout be on socially contested terrain.

Chapter 2

Literacy crises and the significance of literacy

Literacy as a socially contested term

Literacy is what I called a “socially contested term” in the last chapter. We can choose to use this word in several different ways and such choices, in the end, have social and moral consequences, as we will see. The traditional meaning of the word “literacy”—the “ability to read and write”—appears “innocent” and “obvious.” But, it is no such thing. Literacy as “the ability to write and read” situates literacy in the individual person, rather than in society. As such it obscures the multiple ways in which literacy interrelates with the workings of power. To make this clear, I will first discuss historical “literacy crises,” showing that they are as much about social and political dilemmas as they are about who has the ability to read and write. Then I will turn to an argument as to why we might want to define “literacy” in social and cultural terms, not just in terms of an ability that resides inside people’s heads. Then in the next chapter I will pursue these matters further by looking at literacy in its historical contexts.

Massive claims have been made for the ability that literacy is supposed to name. The next chapter will examine these claims. The history of literacy leads us to reject the traditional view of literacy and to replace it with a socially and culturally situated perspective, a perspective which will be developed throughout this book. I will argue that any view of literacy is inherently political, in the sense of involving relations of power among people. The next chapter will take us from Plato, one of the originators of modern Western discursive writing and ironically literacy’s first great critic, through Harvey Graff, a contemporary social historian of literacy, to Paulo Freire, the chief proponent of “emancipatory literacy” within a revolutionary political context.

But first, I want to consider, in this chapter, how talk about “literacy” and “literacy crises” is often a displacement of deeper social fears, an

The literacy myth and the history of literacy

The literacy myth

Now and throughout history, language has seemed to us a large part of what makes us human and what distinguishes us from other creatures on earth. Literacy, on the other hand, has played a different role (Gee 2004; Graff 1981a, b; 1987a, b, Goody 1977, 1986; Goody and Watt 1963; Graff and Arnone 1987; Musgrove 1982; Olson 1977; Ong 1982; Pattison 1982; Scribner and Cole 1981). Across history and across various cultures, literacy has seemed to many people what distinguishes one kind of person from another kind of person. Literate people, it is widely believed, are more intelligent, more modern, more moral. Countries with high literacy rates are better developed, more modern, better behaved. Literacy, it is felt, freed some of humanity from a "primitive" state, from an earlier stage of human development. If language is what makes us human, literacy, it seems, is what makes us "civilized."

Claims for the powers of literacy are, indeed, yet more specific than this. Literacy leads to logical, analytical, critical, and rational thinking, general and abstract uses of language, skeptical and questioning attitudes, a distinction between myth and history, a recognition of the importance of time and space, complex and modern governments (with separation of church and state), political democracy and greater social equity, a lower crime rate, better citizens, economic development, wealth and productivity, political stability, urbanization, and a lower birth rate.

This is, indeed, quite a list. But there are those who dispute this omnipotent view of literacy. They refer to it as a "myth"—"the literacy myth" (Graff 1979, 1987a, b). There is, we will see below, precious little historical evidence for these claims about literacy. And where such evidence does exist, the role of literacy is always much more complex

and contradictory, more deeply intertwined with other factors, than the literacy myth allows.

As the final products of nearly 4,000 years of an alphabetic literacy, we all tend to believe strongly in the powerful and redeeming effects of literacy, especially in times of complex social and economic crises (Goody and Watt 1963; Goody 1977; Havelock 1963, 1976; Olson 1977; Ong 1982). The literacy myth is, in fact, one of the "master myths" of our society; it is foundational to how we make sense of reality, though it is not necessarily an accurate reflection of that reality, nor does it necessarily lead to a just, equitable, and humane world.

Plato

It is significant that the first shot in the battle against the literacy myth was fired a bare 300 years or so after the invention of alphabetic literacy. And, in many ways the first shot was the best; it was, at any rate, pregnant with implications for the thousands of years of literacy that have followed it. The Greeks invented the basis of Western literacy, and Plato was one of the first great writers in Western culture (in fact, his dialogues were both great literature and great discursive, expository writing).

Plato has also the distinction of being the first writer to attack writing in writing, primarily in his brilliant dialogue the *Phaedrus*. (All quotations, and page and line references, to Plato's dialogue below are from Rowe 1986; see also Burger 1980; Derrida 1972; De Vries 1969; Griswold 1986.) To start with, Plato thought writing led to the deterioration of human memory and a view of knowledge that was both facile and false. Given writing, knowledge no longer had to be internalized, made "part of oneself." Rather, writing allowed, perhaps even encouraged, reliance on the written text as an "external crutch" or "reminder." For Plato, one knew only what one could reflectively defend in face-to-face dialogue with someone else. The written text tempted one to take its words as authoritative and final, because of its illusory quality of seeming to be explicit, clear, complete, closed, and self-sufficient, i.e., "unanswerable" (precisely the properties which have been seen as the hallmarks of the essay and so-called "essayist literacy," see Scollon and Scollon 1981).

In addition to these flaws in writing there are two others which are far more important to Plato. To cite the dialogue, the first of these is:

SOCRATES: . . . I think writing has this strange feature, which makes it like painting. The offspring of painting stand there as if alive, but if you ask them something, they preserve a quite solemn

silence. Similarly with written words: you might think that they spoke as if they had some thought in their heads, but if you ever ask them about any of the things they say out of a desire to learn, they point to just one thing, the same thing each time.

(275 d 4–e 1)

Socrates goes on immediately to the second charge:

And when once it is written, every composition is trundled about everywhere in the same way, in the presence both of those who know about the subject and of those who have nothing at all to do with it, and it does not know how to address those it should address and not those it should not. When it is ill-treated and unjustly abused, it always needs its father to help it; for it is incapable of defending or helping itself.

(275 e 1–275 e 6)

These charges are connected: what writing can't do is defend itself; it can't stand up to questioning. For Plato true knowledge comes about when one person makes a statement and another asks, "What do you mean?" Such a request forces speakers to "re-say," say in different words, what they mean. In the process they come to see more deeply what they mean, and come to respond to the perspective of another voice/viewpoint. In one sense, writing can only respond to the question of "What do you mean?" by repeating what it has said, the text itself.

It is at this juncture of the argument that Plato extends his charges against writing to an attack also on rhetoricians and politicians—he referred to both as "speech writers." They sought, in their writing and speeches, to forestall questioning altogether, since their primary interest was to persuade through language that claimed to be logically complete and self-sufficient, standing in no need of supplement or rethinking, authoritative in its own right, not to mutually discover the truth in dialogue.

However, there is a sense in which writing can respond to the question "What do you mean?" It can do so by readers "re-saying," saying in other words, namely their own words, what the text means. But this is a problem, not a solution, for Plato. It is, in fact, part of what he has in mind when he says that writing "does not know how to address those it should address and not those it should not." By its very nature writing can travel in time and space away from its "author" (for Plato, its "father") to be read by just anyone, interpreted however they will,

regardless of the reader's training, effort or ignorance (witness what happened to Nietzsche in the hands of the Nazis; to the Bible in the hands of those who have used it to justify wealth, racism, imperialism, war and exploitation). The voice behind the text cannot respond or defend itself. And it cannot vary its substance and tone to speak differently to different readers based on their natures and contexts.

Plato was too sophisticated to make a crude distinction, so popular today, between speech and writing, orality and literacy. He extended his attack on writing, rhetoricians, and politicians yet further to include the poets, in particular Homer, the great representative of the flourishing oral culture that preceded Greek literacy. The oral culture stored its knowledge, values, and norms in great oral epics (e.g., the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*), passed down from generation to generation. To ensure that these epics were not lost to memory, and with them the cultural knowledge and values they stored, they had to be highly memorable. Thus, they were highly dramatic (built around action) and rhythmical (a species of song), features that facilitate human memory. That is, they had to be a form of poetry (Havelock 1963; Ong 1982). But, Plato argued, the oral tradition via its very drama and poetry lulled the Greeks to sleep and encouraged them to "take for granted" the content of the epics, thus allowing them to accept uncritically the traditional values of their culture.

The oral epic could not stand up to the question "What do you mean?" either. Such a question was a request to poets to "re-say" their words in a different form, to take them out of poetry and put them into prose, and the words thereby lost the power which had lulled the Greeks into a "dream state" (Havelock 1963). In fact, here writing facilitated the critical process. Once written down, the epics could be scanned at leisure, various parts of the text could be juxtaposed, and in the process contradictions and inconsistencies were all the easier to find, no longer hiding under the waves of rhythm and the limitations of human aural memory (Havelock 1963; Ong 1982; Goody 1977, 1986, 1988).

Plato's deeper attack, then, is against any form of language or thought that cannot stand up to the question "What do you mean?" That question is an attempt to unmask attempts to persuade, whether by poets, rhetoricians, or politicians, based on self-interested claims to authority or traditionalism, and not on a genuine disinterested search for truth. In this regard, he reminds one of the currently popular Russian writer, Bakhtin (1981, 1986):

Bakhtin continually sought and found unexpected ways to show that people never utter a final word, only a penultimate one. The

opportunity always remains for appending a qualification that may lead to yet another unanticipated dialogue. . . .

Perhaps the sudden and dramatic interest in Bakhtin arises from his emphasis on debate as open, fruitful, and existentially meaningful at a time when our theoretical writings have become increasingly closed, repetitive, and "professional." . . . Genuine dialogue always presupposes that something, but not everything, can be known. "It should be noted," Bakhtin wrote . . . "that both relativism and dogmatism equally exclude all argumentation, all authentic dialogue, by making it either unnecessary (relativism) or impossible (dogmatism)."

(Morson 1986: vii-viii)

Plato, then, thought that only dialogic thought, speaking, and writing were authentic, with the proviso that writing was inherently prone to anti-dialogic properties. Plato's own resolution to this conflict, as a writer, was to write dialogues and to warn that writing of any sort should never be taken too seriously. It should never be taken as seriously as the "writing" that is "written together with knowledge in the soul of the learner, capable of defending itself, and knowing how to speak and keep silent in relation to the people it should" (276 a 5-a 8). In fact, for Plato, authentic uses of language were always educational in the root sense of "drawing out" of oneself and others what was good, beautiful, and true.

All this may make Plato sound like a progressive educator defending discussion, collaboration, and inquiry. He was no such thing. Plato's concerns about writing had a darker, more political side, one pregnant for the future of literacy.

Both Socrates and Plato were opponents of the traditional order of their societies, and in that sense revolutionaries. In the *Republic*, Plato drew a blueprint for a utopian, "perfect" state, the sort which he wished to put in the place of the current order. Plato's perfect state was an authoritarian one based on the view that people are, by and large, born suited to a particular place in a naturally given hierarchy, with "philosopher-kings" (i.e. Plato or people like him) at the top. At the very least, people should be given differential access to higher places in society based on their inborn characteristics and various tests. The philosopher-kings rule in the best interests of those below them, many of whom have no actual say in government, the philosopher-king knowing their interests better than they do.

Homer, the rhetoricians, and the politicians can be seen as Plato's political opposition, competitors to the philosopher-king's assertion to

power. In the case of Homer, as long as Greek culture was swept away in rhapsody by Homer's epic verse, its members were not listening to either the oral or the written dialogues of Plato.

In this light, Plato's attack on writing takes on additional meaning. His objection that the written text can get into the wrong hands, that it cannot defend itself, is an objection to the fact that the reader can freely interpret the text without the author ("authority") being able to "correct" that interpretation. In this sense, Plato wants the author to stand as a voice behind the text not (just) to engage in responsive dialogue, but to enforce canonical interpretations. And these canonical interpretations are rendered correct by the inherently higher nature of the philosopher-king, backed up by the advantages (which the *Republic* ensures) of socially situated power and state-supported practice in verbal and literacy skills (which the United States and many other countries today ensure that the children of the economically elite get).

As a writer, Plato also had a resolution to this problem, the problem of how to enforce "correct" interpretations. First, he believed that his writings should by and large be restricted to his own inner circle of students and followers. Second, it appears he may not have actually written down his most serious thoughts, but only spoken them. (None of his dialogues contain a discussion between two equally mature philosophers.) And, finally, he built into his written dialogues various layers of meaning such that they announce their deeper message only to those readers skilled enough to find it, where this skill is tied to being trained (or "initiated") so as to interpret the way one is "supposed" to (Griswold 1986)—the same strategy is used in many sacred writings, e.g. the New Testament (Kermode 1979).

Plato's ultimate solution, however, would have been the instantiation of the society delineated in the *Republic*, where the structure of the state and its institutions would have ensured "correct" interpretations. As we will see, this last solution is the one that has in fact been realized most often in history, though not by states realizing all the other aspects of the *Republic*.

There is a contradiction here. In Plato we see two sides to literacy: literacy as liberator and literacy as weapon. Plato wants to ensure that there is always a voice behind the spoken or written text that can dialogically respond, but he also wants to ensure that this voice is not overridden by respondents who are careless, ignorant, lazy, self-interested, or ignoble. One must somehow empower the voice behind the text, privilege it, at least to the extent of ruling out some interpretations and some interpreters (readers/listeners). And such a ruling out will always be self-interested

to the extent that it must be based on some (privileged) view of what the text means, what correct interpretations are, and who are acceptable readers, where acceptable readers will perforce include the one making the ruling.

The ruling is also self-interested in that it has a political dimension, an assertion to power, a power that may reside in institutions that seek to enforce it, whether modern schools and universities or Plato's governing classes in the *Republic*. But then we are close to an authority that kills dialogue by dictating who is to count as a respondent and what is to count as a response.

There is, however, no easy way out of this dilemma: If all interpretations ("re-sayings") count, then none does, as the text then says everything and therefore nothing. And if it takes no discipline, experience, or "credentials" to interpret, then it seems all interpretations will count. If they can't all count, then someone has to say who does and who does not have the necessary "credentials" to interpret. A desire to honor the thoughtful and critical voice behind the text, to allow it to defend itself (often coupled with a will to power), leads us to Plato's authoritarianism. In fleeing it we are in danger of being led right into the lap of Plato's poets, speech writers, and politicians. For them, all that counts is the persuasiveness or cunning of their language, its ability to capture readers or listeners, to tell them what they want to hear, to validate the *status quo*. Their interest is decidedly not in the capacity of their language to educate in the root sense discussed above.

Religion and literacy

There have been many facile attempts to get out of Plato's dilemma. But there is no easy way out. Lévi-Strauss has argued that what creates and energizes mythology is the existence of a real contradiction that cannot in reality be removed, e.g., life and death, nature and culture, God and human (Lévi-Strauss 1979). The contradiction can only be continually worked over by the imagination in an ultimately vain, but temporarily satisfying, attempt to remove it. Plato's dilemma is real and the literacy myth can be seen as a response to it.

Virtually every aspect of the history of literacy since Plato can be read as a commentary on Plato's thoughts. This can be seen clearly if we consider the ground-breaking work of Harvey Graff on the history of literacy (1979, 1981a, b, 1987a, b). The central contradiction that emerges in that history is the disparity between the claims in the literacy myth and the actual history of literacy, much of it produced by people

who firmly believed in the literacy myth. Let us take one snapshot from the history of literacy, though a particularly revealing one: Sweden (Graff 1987b).

Sweden was the first country in the West to achieve near-universal literacy, having done so before the end of the eighteenth century. It was also unprecedented in that women had equality with men in literacy, an equality that still does not exist in most of the world today. By the tenets of the literacy myth, Sweden should have been an international example of modernization, social equality, economic development, and cognitive growth. In fact it was no such thing.

Sweden's remarkable achievement took place in a land of widespread poverty, for the most part without formal institutional schooling, and it neither followed from nor stimulated economic development. Sweden achieved its impressive level of reading diffusion without writing, which did not become a part of popular literacy until the mid-nineteenth century.

So how did Sweden manage the feat of universal literacy? The Swedish literacy campaign, one of the most successful in the Western world, was stimulated by the Reformation and Lutheran Protestantism. Teaching was done on a household basis (hence the emphasis on the literacy of women), supervised and reinforced by the parish church and clergy, with regular compulsory examinations (Johansson 1977; Graff 1987b: 149).

The goal of literacy in Sweden was the promotion of Christian faith and life; the promotion of character and citizenship training in a religiously dominated state. The campaign was based not just on compulsion, but on a felt religious need on the part of the individual, a need internalized in village reading and family prayers. Religious, social, and political ideologies were transmitted to virtually everyone through literacy learning. The Church Law of 1686 stated that children, farmhands, and maidservants should "learn to read and see with their own eyes what God bids and commands in His Holy Word" (Graff 1987b: 150). Note the phrase "with their own eyes": literally they see it with their own eyes, figuratively they see it through the eyes of the state church, which dictates how it is to be seen.

Plato's dilemma haunts us. The people are given the text for themselves, but then something must ensure they see it "right"—not in reality through their own eyes, but rather from the perspective of an authoritative institution that delimits correct interpretations. Clearly, in this case, the individual reader does not need any very deep comprehension skills, and surely doesn't need to write.

This problem—that people might not see the text in the “right” way—was a problem in both Protestant and Catholic countries, but the two hit on somewhat different solutions. Catholic-dominated countries were much more reluctant to put the Bible and other sacred texts into the hands of the people, for fear they would not interpret them correctly (for example, they might use them as the basis for political or religious dissent). Catholic countries preferred to leave interpretation to the oral word of Church authorities. When the Catholic Church did allow sacred texts into the hands of the people, it attempted to fix their meaning by orthodox exposition and standardized religious illustrations (Graff 1987b: 147).

As a result of these different attitudes, Catholic countries tended to be behind areas of intense Protestant piety (such as Sweden, lowland Scotland, New England, Huguenot French centers, and places within Germany and Switzerland). But we should ask: Is there any essential difference between the sort of literacy in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Sweden and a country with quantitatively more restricted literacy, but equally dominant modes of interpretation ensconced in their powerful religious and civil institutions? Some would argue that there is a difference and that the difference is in the capacity of literacy to give rise to dissent and critical awareness (Plato’s liberating, dialogic side to language) and not in the actual reality of eighteenth and nineteenth-century Catholic France and Protestant Sweden, for instance.

Literacy, “higher-order cognitive abilities,” and schools

What are the capacities of literacy? That is the heart of the matter. The example of Sweden raises deep questions about the literacy myth, but we are still left with the question: What good does (could?) literacy do? It has been assumed for centuries that literacy gives rise to higher-order cognitive abilities, to more analytic and logical thought than is typical of oral cultures. However, this almost commonsense assumption is disputed by ground-breaking work on the Vai in Liberia, carried out by the psychologists Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole (1981).

Among the Vai, literacy and schooling don’t always go together. There are three sorts of literacy among the Vai, with some people having none, one, two, or all three: (1) English literacy acquired in formal school settings; (2) an indigenous Vai script (syllabic, not alphabetic) transmitted outside an institutional setting (i.e. among peers and family) and with no connection with Western-style schooling; and (3) a form of literacy in Arabic.

Scribner and Cole found that neither syllabic Vai literacy nor Arabic alphabetic literacy is associated with what have been considered higher-order intellectual skills as these are tested by our typical school-based tests. Neither of these types of literacy enhanced the use of taxonomic skills, nor did either contribute to a shift toward syllogistic reasoning. In contrast, literacy in English, the only form associated with formal schooling of the Western sort, was associated with some types of decontextualization and abstract reasoning.

However, after English literates had been out of school a few years, they did better than nonliterates only on verbal explanation tasks (“talking about” tasks). They did no better on actual problem solving, e.g., on categorization and abstract reasoning tasks. School skills, beyond talk, are transitory, unless they are repeatedly practiced in people’s daily lives. In the Scribner and Cole study, literacy in and of itself led to no grandiose cognitive abilities, and formal schooling ultimately led to rather specific abilities that are rather useless without institutions which reward “expository talk in contrived situations” (such as schools, courts, bureaucracies).

Any discussion of jobs and education brings us immediately to the question of the point of education. The history of literacy shows that education has not, for the most part, been directed primarily at vocational training or personal growth and development. Rather, it has stressed behaviors and attitudes appropriate to good citizenship and moral behavior, largely as these are perceived by the elites of the society. And this has often meant, especially over the last century, different sorts of behaviors and attitudes for different classes of individuals: docility, discipline, time management, honesty, and respect for the lower classes, suiting them for industrial or service jobs; verbal and analytical skills, “critical thinking,” discursive thought and writing for the higher classes, suiting them for management jobs.

While there have been, since the 1970s, rampant changes in global capitalism, it remains to see how these will play out in terms of schooling and access to its “higher forms” (Gee *et al.* 1996). Many industrial jobs have now been out-sourced to low-cost centers (e.g., Mexico, Thailand, India, China), leaving many people to argue our schools are still producing people for an old economic structure that has now changed significantly. I argued above that one reason we leave our school structures intact, at least in urban public schools, is the need for service workers in developed global economies. (Think, for instance, of the economic power of Wal-Mart and other superstores that pay their employees less than living wages.)

There is ample evidence that, in contemporary U.S. schools, tracking systems, which are pervasive, have exactly the effect of distributing different skills and different values to different “kinds” of people. In a massive study of tracking in junior and senior high schools across the United States, Jeannie Oakes found that a student’s race, class, or family-based access to knowledge about college and career routes has more to do with what track the student ends up in than does inherent intelligence or actual potential (Oakes 1985; see also Oakes 2005). Once in a lower track, however, a child almost always stays there, and eventually behaves in ways that appear to validate the track the child is in (Rose 1989).

Oakes cites a number of typical interview responses on the part of students and teachers to questions about the teaching and learning that go on in classes at various tracks. These responses eloquently speak to the shaping of social inequality in schools. They demonstrate clearly the way in which two quite different sorts of literacy are being taught, one stressing thinking for oneself and suited to higher positions in the social hierarchy and one stressing deference and suited to lower positions. Some examples, taken at random from the book (Oakes 1985: 85–89):

What are the . . . most critical things you [the teacher] want the students in your class to learn?

Deal with thinking activities—Think for basic answers—essay-type questions.

(High-track English—junior high)

To think critically—to analyze—ask questions.

(High-track Social Science—junior high)

Ability to use reading as a tool—e.g., how to fill out forms, write a check, get a job.

(Low-track English—junior high)

To be able to work with other students. To be able to work alone. To be able to follow directions.

(Low-track English—junior high)

What is the most important thing you [the student] have learned?

To know how to communicate with my teachers like friends and as teachers at the same time. To have confidence in myself other than my skills and class work.

(High-track English—junior high)

I have learned to form my own opinion on situations. I have also learned to not be swayed so much by another person’s opinion but to look at both opinions with an open mind. I know now that to have a good solid opinion on a subject I must have facts to support my opinion. Decisions in later life will probably be made easier because of this.

(High-track English—senior high)

I have learned about many things like having good manners, respecting other people, not talking when the teacher is talking.

(Low-track English—junior high)

In this class, I have learned manners.

(Low-track English—junior high)

The most striking continuity in the history of literacy is the way in which literacy has been used, in age after age, to solidify the social hierarchy, empower elites, and ensure that people lower on the hierarchy accept the values, norms, and beliefs of the elites, even when it is not in their self-interest or group interest to do so (Gramsci 1971). Our new global capitalism may well change the sorts of skills and values the society wishes to distribute to “lower” and “higher” “kinds” of people, but, without strong resistance, it will not eradicate these “kinds.” Indeed, it can be argued that the new hypercompetitive, science and technology-driven global capitalism will need three classes of workers, leading to three classes of students: poorly paid service workers; “knowledge workers” who must bring technical, collaborative, and communicational skills to the workplace and commit themselves body and soul to the company and its “core values” under conditions of little stability; and, finally, leaders and “symbol analysts” (Reich 1992; see also Reich 2000) who create innovations and “core values” and who will benefit most from the new capitalism (Drucker 1993; Gee *et al.* 1996). Reich (1992) estimates that three-fifths or more of workers will fall into the first category.

The history of literacy can be looked at as a “great debate.” On the one side are elites (whether social, religious, economic, or hereditary) arguing that the lower classes should not be given literacy, because it will make them unhappy with their lot, politically critical and restive, and unwilling to do the menial jobs of society. On the other side are elites who argue that literacy will not have this effect. Rather, they argue, if literacy is delivered in the right moral and civil framework, one that upholds the values of the elites, it will make the lower classes accept those values and

seek to behave in a manner more like the middle classes (i.e. they will become more "moral" and "better citizens"). This debate, carried out in quite explicit terms, goes on well into the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth (Donald 1983).

In today's modern "post-industrial" societies the older contrast between literate elites and the nonliterate masses has simply become a highly stratified social ranking based not on literacy *per se*, but on the degree to which one controls a certain type of school-based literacy (in speech and behavior, as well as writing). This school-based literacy is associated with the values and aspirations of what Bernstein has called the "new middle class," that is, elites who do not actually own the sources of production, as the elites of the older capitalism did, but control knowledge, ideas, "culture," and values.

Freire and emancipatory literacy

Up to this point, I have built a somewhat one-sided case, concentrating on the authoritarian side of Plato's dilemma. But there is another side, the liberating side of the dilemma, that is, the use of an emancipatory literacy for religious, political, and cultural resistance to domination (Graff 1987b: 324):

Literacy was one of the core elements of England's centuries-old radical tradition. In the context of a complex interweaving of political, cultural, social, and economic changes, an essentially new element in literacy's history was formed: the association of literacy with radical political activities, as well as with "useful knowledge", one of the many factors in the making of an English working class. . . . Reading and striving for education helped the working class to form a political picture of the organization of their society and their experience in it.

No name is more closely associated with emancipatory literacy than that of Paulo Freire (1970, 1973, 1985; Freire and Macedo 1987). Like Bakhtin and Plato, Freire believes that literacy empowers people only when it renders them active questioners of the social reality around them:

Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world. . . . In a way, however, we can go further and say that reading the word is not preceded merely by reading the world, but by a certain form of writing it or

rewriting it, that is, of transforming it by means of conscious, practical work. For me, this dynamic movement is central to the literacy process.

(Freire and Macedo, 1987: 35)

In a chapter entitled "The people speak their word: literacy in action" in his book with Donaldo Macedo, Freire discusses and cites material from learner Workbooks he helped design for a national literacy campaign in the republic of São Tomé and Príncipe, a nation that had recently freed itself from "the colonial yoke to which it was subjected for centuries" (p. 65). He calls attention to the way in which "the challenge to the critical perception of those becoming literate gradually grows, page by page" (p. 72). The second Notebook begins by "provoking a debate" (p. 76) and goes on to say to the learner: "To study is not easy, because to study is to create and re-create and not to repeat what others say" (p. 77). The Notebook tells the learner that education is meant to develop "a critical spirit and creativity, not passivity" (p. 91). Freire says that in these materials "one does not particularly deal with delivering or transferring to the people more rigorous explanations of the facts, as though these facts were finalized, rigid, and ready to be digested. One is concerned with stimulating and challenging them" (p. 78).

All this sounds open and liberating, much as Plato initially did, and in not dissimilar terms. But there's another note here as well. Freire comes up square against Plato's problem: What is to ensure that when people read (either a text or the world) they will do so "correctly"? Thus, the second Notebook also reads:

When we learn to read and write, it is also important to learn to think correctly. To think correctly we should think about our practice in work. We should think about our daily lives.

(p. 76)

Our principal objective in writing the texts of this Notebook is to challenge you, comrades, to think correctly. . . .

(p. 87)

Now try to do an exercise, attempting to think correctly. Write on a piece of paper how you see this problem: "Can the education of children and adults, after the Independence of our country, be equal to the education that we had before Independence?"

(p. 88)

Let's think about some qualities that characterize the new man and the new woman. One of these qualities is agreement with the People's cause and the defense of the People's interests. . . . The correct sense of political militancy, in which we are learning to overcome individualism and egoism, is also a sign of the new man and the new woman.

To study [a revolutionary duty], to think correctly, . . . all these are characteristics of the new man and the new woman.

(p. 92)

It is startling that a pedagogy that Freire says is "more a pedagogy of question than a pedagogy of answer," a pedagogy that is radical because it is "less certain of certainties" (p. 54), in fact knows what it is to think correctly. Learners are told not to repeat what others say, but then the problem becomes that in "re-saying" what they read for themselves they may say it wrong, i.e. conflict with Freire's or the state's political perspective. Thus, the literacy materials must ensure that they think correctly, that is, "re-say" or interpret text and world "correctly."

Freire is well aware that no literacy is politically neutral, including the institutionally based literacy of church, state, business, and school that has undergirded and continues to undergird the hegemonic process in Western society. There is no way out of Plato's dilemma. Literacy always comes with a perspective on interpretation that is ultimately political. One can hide that perspective the better to claim it isn't there, or one can put it out in the open. Plato, Sweden, Freire all have a perspective, and a strong one. One thing that makes both Plato and Freire great is that neither attempts to hide his political perspective, or to pretend that politics can be separated from literacy.

In the end, we might say that, contrary to the literacy myth, nothing follows from literacy or schooling. Much follows, however, from what comes with literacy and schooling, what literacy and schooling come wrapped up in, namely the attitudes, values, norms, and beliefs (at once social, cultural, and political) that always accompany literacy and schooling. These consequences may be work habits that facilitate industrialization, abilities in "expository talk in contrived situations," a religiously or politically quiescent population, radical opposition to colonial oppressors, and any number of other things. A text, whether written on paper, or on the soul (Plato), or on the world (Freire), is a loaded weapon. The person, the educator, who hands over the gun hands over the bullets (the perspective) and must own up to the consequences. There is no way out of having an opinion, an ideology, and a

strong one, as did Plato, as does Freire. Literacy education is not for the timid.

When I wrote this section on Paulo Freire (1921–97) in 1990/96 he was still alive. He was a man I had the great privilege to know personally. Freire was a towering figure, as an intellectual and as a person. Some people have, over the years, taken this section on Freire as a criticism of his work. It was never intended as that: it is reflection on the strength of mind both Plato and Freire had to confront the nature of literacy and the need to acknowledge openly and honestly the role of values, ideology, and world views. Literacy involves real dilemmas and both Plato and Freire confronted them head-on, though from different points of view and different value systems.

Freire in his classic book *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) argued for a number of points that are as important today as when he first made them. Indeed, they are integral to the arguments about language and literacy I make in this book:

- 1 A "banking model" of learning does not "work." By a "banking model," Freire meant a model where learning is seen as a "teacher" transmitting *information* to a "student." Learning involves an active engagement with the world, with words, and with other people. It is not just about information. It is about actions, dialogue, producing knowledge, and changing ourselves and the world, as well.
- 2 "Reading the world" and "reading the word" are deeply similar—at some level, equivalent—processes. This should have been clear even from our discussion of the aspirin bottle in the last chapter. One cannot learn to "read the word" (make sense of a text) in some domain unless one has learned to "read the world" (make sense of the world that text is about) in that domain. How one "reads the word" and how one "reads the world" are heavily dependent on each other and inextricably interdependent.
- 3 Dialogue (that is, both face-to-face conversational interaction and conversation-like interaction at a distance through reflection on what one has heard or read) in which diverse viewpoints and perspectives are juxtaposed is, at several levels, essential for learning to "read the world" and to "read the word." Literacy cannot, then, be defined primarily in terms of either "private" individuals (and their mental states) or single isolated texts. Multiple and diverse perspectives juxtaposed in talk or in reflection on multiple texts are essential to literacy for Freire.

- 4 "Politics" (in the sense of assumptions, attitudes, values, and perspectives about the distribution of "social goods" in society, where, by "social goods," I mean anything that is considered "good," "appropriate," or "right" to have, do, or be in the society) doesn't stand outside of and is not peripheral to literacy. Rather, politics, in the sense just given, and literacy are integrally and inextricably interwoven. This is so because "reading the world" always involves an interpretation of the "way things are" in terms of what is "appropriate," "normal," "natural," or "right" in regard to the distribution of social goods. Since "reading the world" and "reading the word" are inextricably interwoven, so, too, then, are politics and literacy. This is a point I attempted to make in the first chapter when I pointed out that our cultural models determine what and how words will mean and in ways that are consequential for us and others in the world.

The New Literacy Studies

Literacy

The last chapter argued that the traditional view of literacy as the ability to read and write rips literacy out of its sociocultural contexts and treats it as an asocial cognitive skill with little or nothing to do with human relationships. It cloaks literacy's connections to power, to social identity, and to ideologies, often in the service of privileging certain types of literacy and certain types of people.

Nonetheless, as we saw in the last chapter, great claims have been made for "literacy" in the traditional sense. In fact, literacy has been argued to be the basis of a "great divide" between cultures: "oral cultures" versus "literate cultures." At the cultural level, literacy is supposed to be the *sine qua non* of "modern," "sophisticated," "complex" cultures; at the individual level it is supposed to lead to higher orders of intelligence. However, the last chapter argued that literacy has different effects in different social settings, and none apart from such settings.

A large body of work, which I referred to in the last chapter as "the New Literacy Studies," has begun to replace the traditional notion of literacy with a sociocultural approach. This chapter will survey some of the key developments that led up to the sociocultural approach. We will see that the New Literacy Studies has its origins in the collapse of the old "oral culture–literate culture" contrast. Out of the deconstruction of this contrast come more contemporary approaches to literacy not as a singular thing but as a plural set of social practices: literacies.

The primitive and the civilized

Humans tend to think in dichotomies, and no dichotomy has played on the popular and the academic mind more insidiously than the contrast

between "the primitive" ("the savage") and "the civilized." This contrast has often been used, on the one hand, to trace an evolutionary process, with modern "man" at its pinnacle, and, on the other hand, to romanticize the primitive as an Eden from which Civilization represents a Fall. Neither extreme is warranted.

In anthropological research primitive societies have been characterized as small, homogeneous, nonliterate, highly personal, and held together by a strong sense of group solidarity. They are claimed to be regulated by face-to-face encounters rather than by abstract rules (Douglas 1973; Evans-Pritchard 1951; Musgrove 1982). In less sedate terms, they have been said to be "mystical and prelogical" (Levi-Bruhl 1910), incapable of abstract thought, irrational, childlike ("half devil and half child" in Kipling's phrase), and inferior to modern man. ("Man" is used advisedly: modern women were often seen as intermediary between savages/children and modern males, see Gould 1977: 126-135.)

On the other hand, modern urban societies (our best current exemplars of "civilization") are typified by their large and diverse groupings of people, widespread literacy and technology, and sense of science and history. Cities are places where many social relations tend to be impersonal and life is lived within "grids of impersonal forces and rules" (Douglas 1973: 88).

However, this primitive-civilized dichotomy eventually broke down at the hands of modern social anthropology. "Primitive societies" are not primitive in thought, word, or deed, or in any evolutionary sense. Anthropologists like Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead championed many of the practices of primitive societies (Benedict 1959; Mead 1928). Lévi-Strauss showed that the classification of the natural world amongst South American Indian tribes is as complex and as interesting as those of the academic biologist, at an intellectual as well as a utilitarian level (1963, 1966, 1975). E. E. Evans-Pritchard argued in the 1930s that the views on witchcraft of the Azande of Central Africa, a technologically simple society, were not irrational, illogical or "mystical" (1937). If one accepts the initial premise of statements about witchcraft, the processes of thought involved can be shown to be the same as those involved in scientific thought. Robin Horton broke down the elements of scientific thinking in order to demonstrate that so-called "primitive" peoples such as the Azande did in fact make use of the same elements of thought, although applied to different content (Horton 1967). Sapir in his 1921 classic *Language* demonstrated that there are no primitive languages and that the languages of many primitive cultures are among the world's most complex.

The science of the concrete versus the science of the abstract: recoding the primitive-civilized distinction

The primitive-civilized distinction has repeatedly resurfaced in other guises even in work that ostensibly tried to put it to rest. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963, 1966, 1975, 1979; all page references following are to Lévi-Strauss 1966), the founder of structuralism in anthropology, demonstrated that there was nothing primitive about thought in primitive cultures. Nonetheless, he reintroduced a dichotomy between primitive and modern cultures in terms of two distinct ways of knowing, what he called "two distinct modes of scientific thought." These were not a function of different stages of development, but rather of two different levels at which nature is accessible to scientific inquiry:

Certainly the properties to which the savage mind has access are not the same as those which have commanded the attention of scientists. The physical world is approached from opposite ends in the two cases: one is supremely concrete, the other supremely abstract; one proceeds from the angle of sensible qualities and the other from that of formal properties.

(p. 269)

Primitive cultures use events from the natural world, ordered in myths and totem systems, for instance, to create structures by means of which they can think about, and explain, the world of experience. For example, in a "pure totemic structure" (p. 115), a certain clan associated with a particular species, e.g. the bear, may be viewed to differ from another clan associated with a different species, e.g. the eagle, as the bear differs from the eagle in the natural world. Thus, a type of homology between culture and nature is created. Modern science, on the other hand, manipulates not objects and images from the natural world, but abstract systems, whether numerical, logical, or linguistic, and through these systems seeks to change the world.

In an influential insight, Lévi-Strauss characterized the systems of stories that make up mythical thought as a kind of intellectual *bricolage*. The *bricoleur* (no real English equivalent, but something like a "handyman") is adept at performing a large number of tasks. Unlike modern engineers, bricoleurs do not design tools for the specific task at hand; rather, their universe of instruments is closed and the rules of the game are always to make do with "whatever is at hand." What is at hand is always a contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew

or enrich the stock or to maintain it with the remains of previous constructions or destructions (p. 17). Mythical thought, with its stories of gods, animals, and ancestors, is "imprisoned in the events and experiences which it never tires of ordering and re-ordering in its search to find meaning" in stories, rather than the sorts of abstract theories our sort of science trusts in (p. 22).

Literacy: a great divide?

Lévi-Strauss's work raises, without answering, the question as to how cultures move from the science of the concrete to the science of the abstract, and through which stages. Two influential pieces of work have suggested that the answer is literacy: Eric Havelock's *Preface to Plato* (1963; see also Havelock 1982, 1986) and Jack Goody's *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (1977; see also 1968, 1986, 1988). I will discuss Havelock first (all page references below are to Havelock 1963).

Havelock argues that Homeric Greek culture was an oral (nonliterate) culture. His characterization of that culture has been used both as a characterization of oral cultures generally and as a cornerstone in the argument that it is literacy that makes for a "great divide" between human cultures and their ways of thinking.

The Greek oral epic—such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in their original forms—was a storehouse of social directives, an "encyclopedia of conduct" in the form of contrived and memorized speech. It was the way the culture passed down its values and knowledge. Havelock argues that the epic took the form it did due to the demands of human memory in the absence of writing. It was recited with a heavy metrical rhythm and constructed out of a large set of pre-given, memorized formulas (short phrases that would fit the meter), as well as a large set of pre-given motifs (stereotypical characters, actions and events) and wider themes which recurred throughout the epic (Finnegan 1977, 1988; Foley 1988; Lord 1960; Parry 1971).

There was, however, scope for creativity in how these building blocks were arranged and ordered on any occasion of recitation; recitation was always sensitive to the reactions of the audience. This characterization reminds one of Lévi-Strauss's view of *bricolage* in mythic thought, which indeed is what the Homeric epics were.

Oral poetry constituted didactic entertainment, and if it ceased to entertain, it ceased to be effectively didactic. It was rhythm that underlay this pleasure, the rhythm of recurrent meter, formulas, motifs, and themes. Further, since knowledge in an oral culture is compelled to be

obedient to the psychological requirements imposed by memory and the story form, it is couched in the contingent, dealing with actions and actors, not abstractions and principles. Havelock argues that this kind of discourse, since it is the only form of speech in the culture that enjoys a certain autonomy and preservation, represents "the limits within which the mind of the members of that culture can express itself, the degree of sophistication to which they can attain" (p. 182).

Havelock argues—along the same lines, in fact, as Plato did—that the teller of tales and his audience were under a "spell." The epic poet was under the spell of the epic rhythm created by meter and recurrent themes; the hearer in fully identifying with the telling of the tale also entered the spell. The epic was an acting out of, an identification with, the values and beliefs of the society. Innovation in values and ideas was difficult—the cost of giving up what one has memorized and memorizing anew was too great.

As we saw in the last chapter, Plato, one of the first great writers of Greek civilization, sought to reorder Greek society, to relocate power. To do so he had to break the power of the epic poet ("Homer"), because in his care resided the moral and intellectual heritage of society. No surprise then that in Plato's "perfect" society, described in *The Republic*, he excludes poets ("Homer").

What woke the Greeks? Havelock's answer: alphabetic-script literacy, a changed technology of communication. Refreshment of memory through written signs enabled a reader to dispense with most of that emotional identification by which alone the acoustic record was sure of recall. This could release psychic energy, for a review and rearrangement of what had now been written down. What had been written could be seen as an object (a "text") and not just heard and felt. You could, as it were, take a second look.

When Socrates asked the poets what their poems said:

The poets are his victims because in their keeping reposes the Greek cultural tradition, the fundamental "thinking" (we can use this word in only a non-Platonic sense) of the Greeks in moral, social and historical matters. Here was the tribal encyclopedia, and to ask what it was saying amounted to a demand that it be said differently, non-poetically, non-rhythmically, and non-imagistically. What Plato is pleading for could be shortly put as the invention of an abstract language of descriptive science to replace a concrete language of oral memory.

(p. 209)

Thus, we have returned via Havelock's orality and literacy to something like Lévi-Strauss's contrast between the science of the concrete and the science of the abstract contrasted as two fundamentally different ways of knowing the world.

Literacy as "the domestication of the savage mind"

Jack Goody's *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (1977) moves beyond ancient Greek culture to modern nonliterate and semi-literate societies. He sees the development and spread of literacy as a crucial factor in explaining how modes of thought and cultural organization change over time.

Goody and Ian Watt (1963), in a now famous earlier paper, laid out some of the outcomes that they saw as linked to the advent of writing and in particular to the invention of the alphabetic system that made widespread literacy possible. They suggested that "logic," in the restricted sense of an instrument of analytic procedures, seemed to be a function of writing, since it was the setting down of speech that enabled humans clearly to separate words, to manipulate their order, to develop syllogistic forms of reasoning, and to perceive contradictions. With writing one could arrest the flow of speech and compare side by side utterances that had been made at different times and places.

Essentially, Goody's procedure is to take certain of the characteristics that Lévi-Strauss and others have regarded as marking the distinction between primitive and advanced cultures, and to suggest that many of the valid aspects of this distinction can be related to changes in the mode of communication, especially the introduction of various forms of writing. Goody relates the development of writing to the growth of individualism, the growth of bureaucracy and of more depersonalized and more abstract systems of government, as well as to the development of the abstract thought and syllogistic reasoning that culminate in modern science. Goody sees the acquisition of writing as effectively transforming the nature of both cognitive and social processes.

Of course, characteristics which Goody attributes to orality persist in societies with literacy. Indeed, this fact might well seem to undermine the case for the "intrinsic" effects of literacy. However, Goody appeals here to a claim that many people in such societies (like ours) have "restricted literacy" as against "full literacy." In fact, Goody comes close to suggesting that "restricted literacy" is the norm in almost all non-technological societies today, and, perhaps, in large pockets of modern technological ones as well.

Orality and literacy as two different worlds

The work of Havelock and Goody is translated into a sweeping philosophical, linguistic, and anthropological statement about orality and literacy as a great divide in human culture, thought, and history in Walter Ong's influential and entertaining book *Orality and Literacy* (1982).

Ong argues that work on oral and literate cultures has made us revise our understanding of human identity. Writing—commitment of the word to space—enlarges the potentiality of language "almost beyond measure" and "restructures thought":

Oral cultures indeed produce powerful and beautiful verbal performances of high artistic and human worth, which are no longer even possible once writing has taken possession of the psyche. Nevertheless, without writing, human consciousness cannot achieve its fuller potentials, cannot produce other beautiful and powerful creations. In this sense, orality needs to produce and is destined to produce writing. Literacy, as will be seen, is absolutely necessary for the development not only of science but also history, philosophy, explicative understanding of literature and of any art, and indeed for the explanation of language (including oral speech) itself. There is hardly an oral culture or a predominantly oral culture left in the world today that is not somehow aware of the vast complex of powers forever inaccessible without literacy. This awareness is agony for persons rooted in primary orality, who want literacy passionately but who also know very well that moving into the exciting world of literacy means leaving behind much that is exciting and deeply loved in the earlier oral world. We have to die to continue living.

(pp. 14–15)

Ong goes on to offer a strongly stated characterization of thought and expression in oral cultures. But in doing so he makes a crucial move in claiming that "to varying degrees many cultures and subcultures, even in a high-technology ambience, preserve much of the mind-set of primary orality" (p. 11). And indeed many of the features he cites have been claimed to be characteristic of, for instance, lower-socioeconomic African-American culture in the United States. Many lower-socioeconomic African-American people in the United States still have ties to a former rich oral culture, both from the days of slavery in the United States and from African cultures, and are at the same time less influenced than mainstream middle-class groups by essay-text literacy and the school

systems that perpetuate it (Baugh 1983, 1999; Green 2002; Labov 1972a, b; Mufwene *et al.* 1998; Rickford and Rickford 2000; Smitherman 1977; Stucky 1987).

Ong goes on to claim that many modern cultures which have known writing for centuries have not fully interiorized it. He uses as examples Arabic culture and certain other Mediterranean cultures (e.g., ironically, after Havelock's work, including modern Greek culture). He also points out that oral habits of thought and expression, including massive use of formulaic elements of a type similar to those in Homer, still marked prose style of almost every sort in Tudor England some 2,000 years after Plato's campaign in writing against oral poets. Thus, the range of application of Ong's contrast between literacy and orality is greatly expanded by his inclusion of groups with what he refers to as "residual orality" on the oral side of the dichotomy.

Ong offers a set of features that characterize thought and expression in a primary oral culture. The first of these, expanding on Havelock, is "formulaic thought and expression," defined as "more or less exactly repeated set phrases or set expressions (such as proverbs)" (p. 26). Beyond formulaicness, Ong argues that thought and expression in an oral culture are (1) additive (strung together by additive relations like simple adjunction or terms/concepts like "and") rather than subordinative; (2) aggregative (elements of thought or expression come in clusters, e.g., not "the princess" but "the beautiful princess") rather than analytic; (3) redundant or "copious"; (4) conservative or traditionalist, inhibiting experimentation; (5) close to the human life world; (6) agonistically toned; (7) empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced; (8) situational rather than abstract.

Though Ong restricts these features to primary rather than residually oral cultures, it is striking how similar some of these features are to characterizations linguists have offered of the differences between speech and writing, educators have offered of the differences between "good" and "bad" writers, and sociolinguists have offered of differences between forms of (prosaic versus poetic) storytelling at school and in society at large (Bauman 1986; Bauman and Sherzer 1974; Michaels 1981).

Thus we get to one of the main implications of the Havelock-Goody-Ong line of work: in modern technological societies like the United States something akin to the oral-literate distinction may apply between groups with "residual orality" or "restricted literacy" (usually lower socioeconomic) and groups with full access to the literacy taught in the schools (usually middle and upper middle-class). Lévi-Strauss's recasting of the primitive-civilized distinction in terms of a contrast

between concrete and abstract thought, now explained by literacy, comes then to roost in our "modern" society.

Integration versus involvement, not literacy versus orality

The linguist Wally Chafe, in contrasting writing (essays) and speech (spontaneous conversation), suggests that differences in the processes of speaking and writing have led to specific differences in the products (Chafe 1985; see also Gee 2004; Tannen 1985). The fact that writing is much slower than speech, while speaking is much faster, allows written language to be less fragmented, more syntactically integrated, than speech. Writers have the time to mold their ideas into a more complex, coherent, integrated whole, making use of complicated lexical and syntactic devices seldom used in speech, such as heavy use of nominalizations, participles, attributive adjectives, and various subordinating devices (Halliday and Martin 1993).

In addition to its integrated quality, Chafe calls attention to the fact that written language fosters more detachment than speech, which is face-to-face and usually more highly socially involved than writing. Thus, writing is integrated and detached, while speech is fragmented and involved.

Chafe is aware that these are in reality poles of a continuum, and that there are uses of spoken and written language that do not fit these characterizations (e.g. lectures as a form of integrated and detached speech; letters as a form of fragmented and involved writing; literature, where involvement features are used for aesthetic effects). However, integration and detachment are part of the potential that writing offers, thanks to the processes by which it is produced.

It is interesting to note, however, that Richardson *et al.* (1983) argued that in many junior colleges in the United States, given the pervasiveness of multiple-choice tests and note taking, as well as ever present bureaucratic forms to fill out, and a lack of essay writing or discursive exams, literacy has become fragmented, but socially detached. Thus, it partakes of features of both speech (fragmentation) and writing (detachment) in Chafe's terms.

Furthermore, in many oral cultures, there are formal ritual-traditional uses of language that have many of the features of poetry (e.g., rhythm, repetition and syntactic parallelism), but which are also formal and detached (like much writing in our culture). Here, again, we see a case where we get features of both writing (detachment) and speech (in this case, poetry-like features).

As Chafe well knows, these mixed cases show us that the speech-writing or orality-literacy distinction is problematic. What is really involved is different cultural practices that in certain contexts call for certain uses of language, language patterned in certain ways and trading on features like integration/fragmentation and detachment/involvement (and, we might add, prose/poetry) to various degrees. It is better to study the features within their social practices than to stay at the level of writing versus speech. This is one of the major motifs of a contemporary socio-cultural approach to language and literacy.

Literacy and higher-order cognitive skills

The previous section suggests the need for a new approach to the oral-literate divide that studies different uses of language, spoken and written, in their sociocultural contexts. However, there is one major factor that keeps literacy as a personal cognitive skill, apart from any cultural context, in focus: the claim that literacy leads to higher-order cognitive skills.

This claim is founded on a large number of empirical studies that go back to the famous work of Vygotsky and Luria in Soviet Central Asia in the 1930s (Luria 1976; see also Wertsch 1985). Soviet Central Asia in the 1930s was in the midst of collectivization and many previously nonliterate populations were rapidly introduced to literacy and other practices and skills of modern technological society. Vygotsky and Luria compared nonliterate and recently literate subjects on a series of reasoning tasks. The tasks required them to do such things as categorize familiar objects or deduce the conclusion that follows from the premises of a syllogism.

For example, in one task subjects were given pictures of a hammer, a saw, a log, and a hatchet and asked to say which three go together. Literate subjects were generally willing to say that the hammer, hatchet, and saw go together because they are all tools, thus grouping the objects on the basis of abstract word meanings. In contrast, the answers of nonliterate subjects indicated a strong tendency to group items on the basis of concrete settings with which they were familiar (saw, logs, hatchet). Thus they said things like "the log has to be here too," and resisted suggestions by the experimenter (based on decontextualized word meanings) that the hammer, hatchet, and saw could be grouped together. Performance on syllogistic reasoning tasks yielded analogous results.

It was concluded that major differences exist between literate and nonliterate subjects in their use of abstract reasoning processes. The

responses of nonliterate were dominated by their immediate practical experience and they resisted using language in a decontextualized manner. These results, of course, fit well with the claims of Havelock, Goody, and Ong, as well as with claims made about semi-literate groups in the United States and Britain.

However, there is a major empirical problem in the Vygotsky-Luria work. It is unclear whether the results were caused by "the ability to write and/or read" ("literacy" in the traditional sense), or by schooling, or even the new social institutions to which the Russian revolution exposed these subjects. It is extremely difficult to separate the influence of literacy as "reading and writing" from that of formal schooling, since in most parts of the world the two go together. But school involves much more than becoming literate in the traditional sense: "A student is involved in learning a set of complex role relationships, general cognitive techniques, ways of approaching problems, different genres of talk and interaction, and an intricate set of values concerned with communication, interaction, and society as a whole . . ." (Wertsch 1985: 35-36).

The whole question of the cognitive effects of literacy (defined as the "ability to write and read") was redefined by the ground-breaking work on the Vai in Liberia by Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole (1981) in *The Psychology of Literacy*, mentioned in the last chapter. Scribner and Cole examine two crucial questions: Is it literacy or formal schooling that affects mental functioning? Can one distinguish among the effects of forms of literacy used for different functions in the life of an individual or a society?

Among the Vai, literacy and schooling are not always coterminous. In addition to literacy in English acquired in formal school settings, the Vai have an indigenous (syllabic, not alphabetic) script transmitted outside an institutional setting and with no connection with Western-style schooling, as well as a form of literacy in Arabic.

Each of these literacies is tied to a particular set of uses: English literacy is associated with government and education; Vai literacy is used primarily for keeping records and for letters, many of them involving commercial matters; Arabic literacy is used for reading, writing, and memorizing the Koran. (Many Arabic literates do not know Arabic, but have memorized and can recite large sections of the Koran in Arabic.)

Since some Vai are versed in only one of these forms of literacy, others in two or more, and still others are nonliterate altogether, Scribner and Cole could disentangle various effects of literacy from effects of formal schooling, which affected only the English literates. If literacy

is what is affecting mental abilities, then all literates (English, Vai, and Arabic) should show the same effects, but if schooling is responsible, then only schooled literates will show the effects.

Scribner and Cole examined subjects' performance on categorization and syllogistic reasoning tasks similar to those used by Vygotsky and Luria. Their results call into question much work on the cognitive consequences of literacy. Neither syllabic Vai script, nor Arabic alphabetic literacy, was associated with what have been considered higher-order intellectual skills. Neither literacy enhanced the use of taxonomic skills, nor did either contribute to a shift toward syllogistic reasoning. In contrast, literacy in English, the only form associated with formal schooling, was associated with some types of decontextualization and abstract reasoning.

But schooling does not give rise to "higher intelligence" or "higher mental abilities" in any general or global sense. Rather, it has quite narrow and specific effects:

A convenient way of grasping the role of school is to consider first those tasks on which it was the highest ranking determinant of performance. These were: explanation of sorting, logic explanation, explanation of grammatical rules, game instructions (communication), and answers to hypothetical questions about name switching. All of these are "talking about" tasks.

... Once we move away from verbal exposition, we find no other general patterns of cross-task superiority.

... school fosters abilities in expository talk in contrived situations (Scribner and Cole, 1973). All primary influences of schooling in the present research fit this description.

(pp. 242-243)

Scribner and Cole did not find that schooled, English-literate subjects, many of whom had been out of school a number of years, differed from other groups in their actual performance on categorization and abstract reasoning tasks. They simply talked about them better, providing informative verbal descriptions and justifications of their task activity. However, those who had recently been in school did do better on the tasks, suggesting that both task performance and verbal description of task performance improved as a result of schooled literacy, but the former was transient, unless practiced in the years after school.

There is another very important finding in the Scribner and Cole work. Each literacy was associated with some quite specific skills. For example,

Vai script literacy was associated with specific skills in synthesizing spoken Vai in an auditory integration task (repeating back Vai sentences decomposed, by pauses between syllables, into their constituent syllables), in using graphic symbols to represent language, in using language as a means of instruction, and in talking about correct Vai speech. All of these skills are closely related to everyday practices of Vai script literacy. For instance, the ability to synthesize spoken Vai appears to follow from the practice Vai readers get in synthesizing language when they decode a syllabic script that does not mark word divisions. To construct meaning out of a chain of syllables, Vai script readers must often hold a sequence of syllables in working memory until they can determine what words they belong to. Or, to take another example: the Vai, in writing letters, often discuss the quality of the letters and whether they are written in "good Vai." This practice appears to enhance their ability to talk about correct speech on a grammar task.

Scribner and Cole, on the basis of such evidence, opt for what they call "a practice account of literacy." A type of literacy enhances quite specific skills that are practiced in carrying out that literacy. Grandiose claims for large and global cognitive skills resulting from literacy are not, in fact, indicated. One can also point out that the effect of formal schooling—being able to engage in expository talk in contrived situations—is itself a fairly specific skill practiced a good deal in school. Thus, we might extend Scribner and Cole's "practice account" to schooling as well as literacy.

In summing up, Scribner and Cole bring out another variable, beside schooling, that enhances some cognitive skills that have been attributed to literacy, namely living in a city:

Our results are in direct conflict with persistent claims that "deep psychological differences" divide literate and nonliterate populations . . . On no task—logic, abstraction, memory, communication—did we find all nonliterate performing at lower levels than all literates. . . . We can and do claim that literacy promotes skills among the Vai, but we cannot and do not claim that literacy is a necessary and sufficient condition for any of the skills we assessed.

One explanation for the variegated pattern of nonliterate performance is that other life experiences besides school and literacy were potent influences on some of our tasks. Principal among these was urban residency. Living in cities was a major influence in shifting people away from reliance on functional modes of classification to use of taxonomic categories . . .

The evidence we have summarized . . . strongly favors the conclusion that literacy is not a surrogate for schooling with respect to its intellectual consequences.

(pp. 251–252)

The Scribner and Cole research clearly indicates that what matters is not “literacy” as some decontextualized “ability” to write or read, but the social practices into which people are apprenticed as part of a social group, whether as “students” in school, “letter writers” in the local community, or members of a religious group.

Literacy: the ideological model

The work of Scribner and Cole calls into question what Brian Street, in his book *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (1984), calls “the autonomous model” of literacy: the claim that literacy (or schooling for that matter) has cognitive effects apart from the context in which it exists and the uses to which it is put in a given culture. Claims for literacy, in particular for essay-text literacy values, whether in speech or writing, are thus “ideological.” They are part of “an armoury of concepts, conventions and practices” that privilege one social formation as if it were natural, universal, or, at the least, the end point of a normal developmental progression (achieved only by some cultures, thanks either to their intelligence or their technology).

Street proposes, in opposition to the “autonomous model” of literacy, an “ideological model.” The ideological model attempts to understand literacy in terms of concrete social practices and to theorize it in terms of the ideologies in which different literacies are embedded. Literacy—of whatever type—has consequences only as it acts together with a large number of other social factors, including political and economic conditions, social structure, and local ideologies.

Any technology, including writing, is a cultural form, a social product whose shape and influence depend upon prior political and ideological factors. Despite Havelock’s brilliant characterization of the transition from orality to literacy in ancient Greece, it now appears that the Greek situation has rarely if ever been replicated. The particular social, political, economic and ideological circumstances in which literacy (of a particular sort) was embedded in Greece explain what happened there. Abstracting literacy from its social setting in order to make claims for literacy as an autonomous force in shaping the mind or a culture simply leads to a dead end.

There is, however, a last refuge for someone who wants to see literacy as an autonomous force. One could claim that essay-text literacy, and the uses of language connected with it, lead, if not to general cognitive consequences, to social mobility and success in the society. While this argument may be true, there is precious little evidence that literacy in history or across cultures has had this effect either.

Street discusses, in this regard, Harvey Graff’s (1979) study of the role of literacy in nineteenth-century Canada. While some individuals did gain through the acquisition of literacy, Graff demonstrates that this was not a statistically significant effect and that deprived classes and ethnic groups as a whole were, if anything, further oppressed through literacy. Greater literacy did not correlate with increased equality and democracy nor with better conditions for the working class, but in fact with continuing social stratification.

Graff argues that the teaching of literacy in fact involved a contradiction: illiterates were considered dangerous to the social order, thus they must be made literate; yet the potentialities of reading and writing for an underclass could well be radical and inflammatory. So the framework for the teaching of literacy had to be severely controlled, and this involved specific forms of control of the pedagogic process and specific ideological associations of the literacy being purveyed.

While the workers were led to believe that acquiring literacy was in their benefit, Graff produces statistics that show that in reality this literacy was not advantageous to the poorer groups in terms of either income or power. The extent to which literacy was an advantage or not in relation to job opportunities depended on ethnicity. It was not because you were “illiterate” that you finished up in the worst jobs but because of your background (e.g. being black or an Irish Catholic rendered literacy much less efficacious than it was for English Protestants).

The story Graff tells can be repeated for many other societies, including Britain and the United States (Donald 1983; Levine 1986). In all these societies literacy served as a socializing tool for the poor, was seen as a possible threat if misused by the poor (for an analysis of their oppression and to make demands for power), and served as a technology for the continued selection of members of one class for the best positions in the society. We have discussed this issue in the last chapter.

Differing world views replace the orality-literacy contrast

Literacy has no effects—indeed, no meaning—apart from particular cultural contexts in which it is used, and it has different effects in different contexts. Two founding works that helped initiate the contemporary project of looking at orality and literacy in the context of the social practices and world views of particular social groups were Ronald and Suzanne Scollon's *Narrative, Literacy and Face in Interethnic Communication* (1981) and Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words* (1983). Both of these works realize that what is at issue in the use of language is different ways of knowing, different ways of making sense of the world of human experience, i.e. different social epistemologies.

The Scollons believe that discourse patterns—ways of using language to communicate, whether in speech or writing—in different cultures reflect particular reality sets or world views adopted by these cultures. Discourse patterns are among the strongest expressions of personal and cultural identity. The Scollons argue that changes in a person's discourse patterns—for example, in acquiring a new form of literacy—may involve a change in identity. They provide a detailed study of the discourse practices and world view of Athabaskans in Alaska and northern Canada, and contrast these with the discourse patterns and world view in much of Anglo-Canadian and Anglo-American society (see also Wieder and Pratt 1990a).

Literacy as it is practiced in European-based education, "essay-text literacy" in the Scollons' phrase, is connected to a reality set or world view the Scollons term "modern consciousness." This reality set is consonant with particular discourse patterns, ones quite different from the discourse patterns used by the Athabaskans. As a result, the acquisition of this sort of literacy is not simply a matter of learning a new technology, it involves complicity with values, social practices, and ways of knowing that conflict with those of the Athabaskans.

Athabaskans differ at various points from mainstream Canadian and American English-speakers in how they engage in discourse. A few examples: (1) Athabaskans have a high degree of respect for the individuality of others and a careful guarding of their own individuality. Thus, they prefer to avoid conversation except when the point of view of all participants is well known. On the other hand, English-speakers feel that the main way to get to know the point of view of people is through conversation with them. (2) For Athabaskans, people in subordinate positions do not display, rather they observe the person in the

superordinate position. For instance, adults as either parents or teachers are supposed to display abilities and qualities for the child to learn. However, in mainstream American society, children are supposed to show off their abilities for teachers and other adults. (3) The English idea of "putting your best foot forward" conflicts directly with an Athabaskan taboo. It is normal in situations of unequal status relations for an English-speaker to display oneself in the best light possible. One will speak highly of the future, as well. It is normal to present a career or life trajectory of success and planning. This English system is very different from the Athabaskan system, in which it is considered inappropriate and bad luck to anticipate good luck, to display oneself in a good light, to predict the future, or to speak ill of another's luck.

The Scollons list many other differences, including differences in systems of pausing that ensure that English-speakers select most of the topics and do most of the talking in interethnic encounters. The net result of these communication problems is that each group ethnically stereotypes the other. English-speakers come to believe that Athabaskans are unsure, aimless, incompetent, and withdrawn. Athabaskans come to believe that English-speakers are boastful, sure they can predict the future, careless with luck, and far too talkative.

The Scollons characterize the different discourse practices of Athabaskans and English-speakers in terms of two different world views or "forms of consciousness": bush consciousness (connected with survival values in the bush) and modern consciousness. These forms of consciousness are "reality sets" in the sense that they are cognitive orientations toward the everyday world, including learning in that world.

Anglo-Canadian and American mainstream culture has adopted a model of literacy, based on the values of essayist prose style, that is highly compatible with modern consciousness. In essayist prose, the important relationships to be signaled are those between sentence and sentence, not those between speakers, nor those between sentence and speaker. For a reader this requires constant monitoring of grammatical and lexical information. With the heightened emphasis on truth value, rather than social or rhetorical conditions, comes the necessity to be explicit about logical implications.

A further significant aspect of essayist prose style is the fictionalization of both the audience and the author. The "reader" of an essayist text is not an ordinary human being, but an idealization, a rational mind formed by the rational body of knowledge of which the essay is a part. By the same token the author is a fiction, since the process of writing and editing essayist texts leads to an effacement of individual and

idiosyncratic identity. The Scollons show the relation of these essayist values to modern consciousness by demonstrating that they are variants of the defining properties of the modern consciousness as given by Berger *et al.* (1973).

For the Athabaskan, writing in this essayist mode can constitute a crisis in ethnic identity. To produce an essay would require the Athabaskan to produce a major display, which would be appropriate only if the Athabaskan was in a position of dominance in relation to the audience. But the audience, and the author, are fictionalized in essayist prose and the text becomes decontextualized. This means that a contextualized, social relationship of dominance is obscured. Where the relationship of the communicants is unknown, the Athabaskan prefers silence.

The paradox of prose for the Athabaskan then is that if it is communication between known author and audience it is contextualized and compatible with Athabaskan values, but not good essayist prose. To the extent that it becomes decontextualized, and thus good essayist prose, it becomes uncharacteristic of Athabaskans to seek to communicate. The Athabaskan set of discourse patterns are to a large extent mutually exclusive of the discourse patterns of essayist prose.

The Scollons go on to detail a number of narrative and non-narrative uses of language in Athabaskan culture, showing how each of these is in turn shaped by the Athabaskan "reality set," especially their respect for the individual and care about not overly intervening in others' affairs (including their knowledge and beliefs). For example, riddles are an important genre in Athabaskan culture. Riddles are seen as schooling in guessing meanings, in reading between the lines, in anticipating outcomes and in indirectness. In short, riddles provide a schooling in non-intervention. And in the best telling of a narrative "little more than the themes are suggested and the audience is able to interpret those themes as highly contextualized in his own experiences" (Scollon and Scollon 1981: 127). This is, of course, just the reverse of the decontextualization valued by essayist prose.

Different ways with words

Shirley Brice Heath's classic *Ways with Words* (1983) is an ethnographic study of the ways in which literacy is embedded in the cultural context of three communities in the Piedmont Carolinas in the United States: Roadville, a white working-class community that has been part of mill life for four generations; Trackton, a working-class African-American

community whose older generation were brought up on the land but which now is also connected to mill life and other light industry; and mainstream middle-class urban-oriented African-Americans and whites (see also Heath 1994).

Heath analyzes the ways these different social groups "take" knowledge from the environment, with particular concern for how "types of literacy events" are involved in this taking. Literacy events are any event involving print, such as group negotiation of meaning in written texts (e.g. an ad), individuals "looking things up" in reference books, writing family records in the Bible, and dozens of other types of occasions when books or other written materials are integral to interpretation in an interaction.

Heath interprets these literacy events in relation to the larger socio-cultural patterns which they may exemplify or reflect, such as patterns of care-giving roles, uses of space and time, age and sex segregation, and so forth. Since language learning and socialization are two sides of the same coin (Schieffelin and Ochs 1986), Heath concentrates on how children in each community acquire language and literacy in the process of becoming socialized into the norms and values of their communities.

As school-oriented, middle-class parents and their children interact in the pre-school years, adults give their children, through modeling and specific instruction, ways of using language and of taking knowledge from books which seem natural in school and in numerous other institutional settings such as banks, post offices, businesses, or government offices. To exemplify this point, Heath analyzes the bedtime story as an example of a major literacy event in mainstream homes (Heath 1982, all page references below are to this article).

The bedtime story sets patterns of behavior that recur repeatedly through the life of mainstream children and adults at school and in other institutions. In the bedtime story routine, the parent sets up a "scaffolding" dialogue (Cazden 1979) with the child by asking questions like "What is X?" and then supplying verbal feedback and a label after the child has vocalized or given a nonverbal response. Before the age of two, the child is thus socialized into the "initiation-reply-evaluation" sequences so typical of classroom lessons (Cazden 1988, 2001; Mehan 1979).

In addition, reading with comprehension involves an internal replaying of the same types of questions adults ask children of bedtime stories. Further, "What is X?" questions and explanations are replayed in the school setting in learning to pick out topic sentences, write outlines, and answer standard tests. Through the bedtime story routine, and similar

practices, in which children learn not only how to take meaning from books, but also how to talk about it, children repeatedly practice routines which parallel those of classroom interaction: "Thus, there is a deep continuity between patterns of socialization and language learning in the home culture and what goes on at school" (p. 56).

Children in both Roadville and Trackton are unsuccessful in school despite the fact that both communities place a high value on success in school. Roadville adults do read books to their children, but they do not extend the habits of literacy events beyond book reading. For instance, they do not, upon seeing an event in the real world, remind children of similar events in a book, or comment on such similarities and differences between book and real events.

The strong Fundamentalist bent of Roadville tends to make parents view any fictionalized account of a real event as a lie; reality is better than fiction and they do not encourage the shifting of the context of items and events characteristic of fictionalization and abstraction. They tend to choose books which emphasize nursery rhymes, alphabet learning, and simplified Bible stories. Even the oral stories that Roadville adults tell, and that children model, are grounded in the actual. The sources of these stories are personal experience. They are tales of transgression which make the point of reiterating the expected norms of behavior.

Thus, Roadville children are not practiced in decontextualizing their knowledge or fictionalizing events known to them, shifting them about into other frames. In school, they are rarely able to take knowledge learned in one context and shift it to another; they do not compare two items or events and point out similarities and differences.

Trackton presents a quite different language and social environment. Babies in Trackton, who are almost always held during their waking hours, are constantly in the midst of a rich stream of verbal and nonverbal communication that goes on around them. Aside from Sunday School materials, there are no reading materials in the home just for children; adults do not sit and read to children. Children do, however, constantly interact verbally with peers and adults.

Adults do not ask children "What is X?" questions, but rather analogical questions which call for non-specific comparisons of one item, event, or person with another (e.g., "What's that like?"). Though children can answer such questions, they can rarely name the specific feature or features which make two items or events alike.

Parents do not believe they have a tutoring role, and they do not simplify their language for children, as mainstream parents do, nor do they label items or features of objects in either books or the environment

at large. They believe children learn when they are provided with experiences from which they can draw global, rather than analytically specific, knowledge. Heath claims that children in Trackton seem to develop connections between situations or items by gestalt patterns, analogs, or general configuration links, not by specification of labels and discrete features in the situation. They do not decontextualize, rather they heavily contextualize nonverbal and verbal language.

Trackton children learn to tell stories by rendering a context and calling on the audience's participation to join in the imaginative creation of the story. In an environment rich with imaginative talk and verbal play, they must be aggressive in inserting their stories into an on-going stream of discourse. Imagination and verbal dexterity are encouraged.

Indeed, group negotiation and participation are a prevalent feature of the social group as a whole. Adults read not alone but in a group. For example, someone may read from a brochure on a new car while listeners relate the text's meaning to their experiences, asking questions and expressing opinions. The group as a whole synthesizes the written text and the associated oral discourse to construct a meaning for the brochure.

At school, most Trackton children not only fail to learn the content of lessons, they also do not adopt the social interactional rules for school literacy events. Print in isolation bears little authority in their world and the kinds of questions asked of reading books are unfamiliar (for example, what-explanations). The children's abilities to metaphorically link two events or situations and to recreate scenes are not tapped in the school. In fact, these abilities often cause difficulties, because they enable children to see parallels teachers did not intend and, indeed, may not recognize until the children point them out. By the time in their education, after the elementary years for the most part, when their imaginative skills and verbal dexterity could really pay off, they have failed to gain the necessary written composition skills they would need to translate their analogical skills into a channel teachers could accept.

Heath's characterization of Trackton, Roadville, and Mainstreamers leads us to see not a binary (oral-literate) contrast, but a set of features that cross-classifies the three groups in various ways. The groups share various features with each other group, and differ from them in yet other regards. The Mainstream group and Trackton both value imagination and fictionalization, while Roadville does not; Roadville and Trackton both share a disregard for decontextualization not shared by Mainstreamers. Both Mainstreamers and Roadville, but not Trackton, believe parents have a tutoring role in language and literacy acquisition (they read to their children and ask questions that require labels), but Roadville shares with

Trackton, not the Mainstream, an experiential, nonanalytic view of learning. (Children learn by doing and watching, not by having the process broken down into its smallest parts.) As we added more groups to the comparison, e.g. the Athabaskans (which share with Trackton a regard for gestalt learning and storage of knowledge, but differ from them in the degree of self-display they allow) we would get more complex cross-classifications.

Heath suggests that in order for a non-mainstream social group to acquire mainstream, school-based literacy practices, with all the oral and written-language skills this implies, individuals, whether children or adults, must "recapitulate," at an appropriate level for their age, of course, the sorts of literacy experiences the mainstream child has had at home. Unfortunately, schools as currently constituted tend to be good places to practice mainstream literacy once you have its foundations, but they are not good places to acquire those foundations.

Heath suggests that this foundation, when it has not been set at home, can be acquired by apprenticing the individual to a school-based literate person, e.g., the teacher in a new and expanded role. Heath has had students, at a variety of ages, engage in ethnographic research with teachers, studying, for instance, the uses of language or languages, or of writing and reading, in their own communities. This serves as one way for students to learn and practice in a meaningful context the various sub-skills of essay-text literacy, e.g., asking questions, taking notes, discussing various points of view—often among people with whom the student doesn't share a lot of mutual knowledge—writing discursive prose, and revising it with feedback, often from non-present readers.

This approach obviously fits perfectly with Scribner and Cole's practice account of literacy. And, in line with Street's ideological approach to literacy, it claims that individuals who have not been socialized into the discourse practices that constitute mainstream school-based literacy must eventually be socialized into them if they are ever to acquire them. The component skills of this form of literacy must be practiced, and one cannot practice a skill one has not been exposed to, cannot engage in a social practice one has not been socialized into, which is what most non-mainstream children are expected to do in school.

But at the same time we must remember the Scollons' warning that for many social groups this practice may well mean a change of identity and the adoption of a reality set at odds with their own at various points. There is a deep paradox here—and there is no facile way of removing it, short of changing our hierarchical social structure and the school systems that by and large perpetuate it.

I have, in this chapter, sketched the way in which sociocultural approaches to language and literacy emerged out of earlier anthropological approaches to "orality" and "literacy." We have seen how "orality" and "literacy" as autonomous categories disappear into a myriad of social practices and their concomitant values and world views. Sociocultural approaches to literacy have come mainly from linguists, sociologists, and anthropologists. During the same period, some cognitive psychologists began to abandon asocial individualist views of thinking and problem solving and to develop insightful approaches to "socially distributed cognition." They began to see thinking as something that is carried out by—distributed across—people, tools, technologies, and social settings working together in intricate alignments (Gee 2004; Hutchins 1995; Lave 1988; Lave and Wenger 1991; Newman *et al.* 1989; Rogoff 1990; Rogoff and Lave 1984).

Though it has different origins, work on "social cognition" is beginning to come together with work on sociocultural approaches to language and literacy (Gee 1992, 2004; Hutchins 1995; Wertsch 1991). The goal for the future is an integrated view of mind, body, and society. But it is to be hoped that this enterprise will not abandon the social activism and calls for social justice that are an inherent part of work on sociocultural approaches to literacy. We ought to be much less interested in creating a "new science" than in creating a new society.