

## INTRODUCTION: THE NEW LITERACY STUDIES

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The field of literacy studies has expanded considerably in recent years and new, more anthropological and cross-cultural frameworks have been developed to replace those of a previous era, in which psychologistic and culturally narrow approaches predominated (as they arguably still do in much educational and development literature). Where, for instance, educationalists and psychologists have focused on discrete elements of reading and writing skills, anthropologists and sociolinguists concentrate on literacies – the social practices and conceptions of reading and writing. The rich cultural variation in these practices and conceptions leads us to rethink what we mean by them and to be wary of assuming a single literacy where we may simply be imposing assumptions derived from our own cultural practice onto other people's literacies. Research in cultures that have newly acquired reading and writing draws our attention to the creative and original ways in which people transform literacy to their own cultural concerns and interests. Research into the role of literacies in the construction of ethnicity, gender and religious identities makes us wary of accepting the uniform model of literacy that tends to be purveyed with the modern nation state: the relationship of literacy and nationalism is itself in need of research at a time when the dominant or standard model of literacy frequently subserves the interests of national politics. Research into 'vernacular' literacies within modern urban settings has begun to show the richness and diversity of literacy practices and meanings despite the pressures for uniformity exerted by the nation state and modern education systems. Whilst in the last decade a number of researchers have made these points separately, there is now a need to bring the arguments together in one place, and to make the rich array of supporting data accessible to a wider audience. This volume, then, presents a series of papers which illustrate what is now a developing and influential trend in anthropological and sociolinguistic approaches to the analysis of literacy – but one as yet represented in rather scattered publications and for this reason not always as well known as it deserves.

The authors all take an ethnographic perspective on literacy, that is they assume that an understanding of literacy requires detailed, in-depth accounts of actual practice in different cultural settings. It is not sufficient, however, to extol simply the richness and variety of literacy

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practices made accessible through such ethnographic detail: we also need bold theoretical models that recognise the central role of power relations in literacy practices. I elaborate below on the ideological model of literacy that, I suggest, enables us to focus on the ways in which the apparent neutrality of literacy practices disguises their significance for the distribution of power in society and for authority relations: the acquisition, use and meanings of different literacies have an ideological character that has not been sufficiently recognised until recently. Most of the contributions to this volume, though to varying degrees, show a broad commitment to the new theoretical approaches to literacy generated by the ideological model. They all, distinctively, illustrate the theoretical implications of these recent shifts in perspective through one or more specific case studies. They argue that the key questions that have concerned literacy scholars – the uses, consequences and meanings of literacy; the differences and similarities between written and spoken registers and inter-register variation within spoken and written modes; and the problem of what is culture specific and what universal in literacy practices – must be answered with reference to close descriptions of the actual uses and conceptions of literacy in specific cultural contexts. The experimental methods or the broad conjectures of previous scholars in this field have not provided satisfactory answers to these questions.

Besnier, for instance, criticising traditional approaches, finds it ‘surprising’ that ‘little research has focused on the run-of-the-mill written registers’ (such as personal letters) and argues that as a result the kinds of research question in which he is interested cannot be answered. Wishing to explore the relationship between writing and affect, he finds that previous research in this area has focused mainly on western literary genres, such as the essay. Shuman similarly argues that not all writing belongs to the genre of the essay – that deemed most consequential according to the autonomous model – and that not only literacy – the channel of communication in Hymes’ sense – but also genre can be an important way of distributing knowledge and attitudes towards texts in a community. For Besnier, the lack of attention to the ‘day-to-day written output of members of the speech communities’ and to their local genres, means that ‘we do not have a basis on which to compare the role of affect in spoken and written communication’. Not only have variationists and discourse analysts focused almost exclusively on western literacy situations, but they have also used highly biased data bases on literacy processes and products in western settings, namely the literate activities and output of the intellectual elite. Typically discourse produced by academics is what they have studied and compared across registers and modes (Besnier 1988). Both Shuman and Camitta in this volume demonstrate the variation of genres and literacies within a western context and

provide the beginnings of a new and less restricted data basis for cross-cultural comparison of the kind Besnier is seeking.

Similarly, Kulick and Stroud, interested in the consequences of literacy acquisition in previously non-literate cultures, find that previous research has failed to take account of how the people themselves 'actually think about literacy and how they apply their literacy skills in their day-to-day lives'. 'Lack of this fundamental knowledge' has led those interested in the transition to literacy to 'downplay the creativity and cultural concerns of the people being taught to read and write'. As a result the emphasis has been on the 'impact' of literacy on supposedly passive recipients and on the apparently neutral and universal character of the providers' models of literacy. Trapped within approaches such as this, it is difficult to learn anything new or to see anything different in the world of literacy since we see only our own reflections when we look at others, our own literacy when we look at the literacies of other people.

As a result of these limitations in traditional approaches to literacy, 'ethnographic' perspectives have become popular in a number of disciplines in recent years: amongst for instance progressive educators in the United States, within the sociology of education in the United Kingdom and in some branches of sociolinguistics. The papers collected here mainly derive their conception of ethnography from the discipline of social anthropology, although a number of the pieces also owe much to recent developments of discourse analysis in sociolinguistics and many are conscious of the challenging educational implications of these approaches. In an earlier paper I suggested that it is at the interface between sociolinguistic and anthropological theories, on the one hand, and between discourse and ethnographic method on the other, that I envisaged future research in the field of literacy studies being conducted (Street 1988). These papers share that distinctive theoretical and methodological focus. The collection aims to represent a state-of-the-art sample of the most promising current research in these areas. The object, then, is not simply to provide a student reader but – more ambitiously – a programmatic document of the new literacy studies. Having criticised the generalisations of previous eras (Goody, Ong, Olson and others), it is now timely to try to develop some new generalisations about literacy, with the benefit of these new approaches.

The papers have been selected to provide a balance of Third World and 'Western' ethnography; of material focused upon urban and upon rural areas; of previously unpublished work by young scholars deserving of a wider audience; and of articles by established scholars that have been published in journals not always accessible to non-specialist readers. This introduction attempts to put their broad aims and aspirations into perspective, by outlining the state of literacy studies at the end of the 1980s

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and charting the shifts in theory and method that lie behind the research presented here.

**The new literacy studies**

During the early 1980s there appeared a number of collections of academic papers that claimed to represent the relationship between literacy and orality as a 'continuum' rather than, as in much of the previous literature, as a 'divide' (see Coulmans and Ehlich 1983; Frawley 1982; Nystrand 1982; Tannen 1982; Wagner 1983; Whiteman 1981; Olson et al 1985). It appeared that the differences between literate and oral channels of communication had been overstated in the past and that scholars were now more concerned with overlap, mix and diverse functions in social context. A number of books appeared whose titles deliberately signalled this perspective: *The social construction of literacy* edited by J. Cook-Gumperz; *Literacy in social context* by K. Levine; *Literacy and society* edited by K. Schousboe and M. T. Larsen; *The logic of writing and the organisation of society* by J. Goody. I have argued that the supposed shift from 'divide' to 'continuum' was more rhetorical than real: that, in fact, many of the writers in this field continued to represent literacy as sufficiently different from orality in its social and cognitive consequences, that their findings scarcely differ from the classic concept of the 'great divide' evident in Goody's earlier work (1977). This was to be explained by reference to the methodological and theoretical assumptions that underlay their work: in particular a narrow definition of social context; the reification of literacy in itself at the expense of recognition of its location in structures of power and ideology, related to assumptions about the 'neutrality' of the object of study; and, from the point of view of linguistics, the restriction of 'meaning' to the level of syntax. Besnier further points out that the concept of a 'continuum' is inadequate because spoken and written activities and products do not in fact line up along a continuum but differ from one another in a complex, multidimensional way both within speech communities and across them. The criticism of 'continuum' approaches is, therefore, even more fundamental than saying their proponents do not practice what they preach (Besnier 1988).

An alternative approach, which would avoid some of the problems generated by these assumptions begins with the distinction between 'autonomous' and 'ideological' models of literacy that I proposed some years ago (Street 1985) and that I would now like to clarify and extend in the light of subsequent comments and criticisms.

**The 'autonomous' model of literacy**

The exponents of an 'autonomous' model of literacy conceptualise literacy in technical terms, treating it as independent of social context, an autonomous variable whose consequences for society and cognition can be derived from its intrinsic character. The writers I characterise in this way do not necessarily themselves use the phrase 'autonomous model of literacy' but I nevertheless found the term model useful to describe their perspective as it draws attention to the underlying coherence and relationship of ideas which on the surface might appear unconnected and haphazard. No one practitioner necessarily adopts all of the characteristics of the model, but the use of the concept helps us to see what is entailed by adopting particular positions, to fill in gaps left by untheorised statements about literacy and to adopt a broader perspective than is apparent in any one writer. The term autonomous itself appears in many of the authors I cite, and is closely linked in their minds with writing. Goody and Watt, for instance, in their seminal article to which much subsequent literature refers, maintain that writing is distinctive because it is, at least potentially, 'an autonomous mode of communication' (in Goody 1968: 40). Walter Ong, probably the most influential writer on literacy in the United States, develops this idea more fully: 'By isolating thought on a written surface, detached from any interlocutor, making utterance in this sense autonomous and indifferent to attack, writing presents utterance and thought as uninvolved in all else, somehow self-contained, complete' (1982: 132). David Olson has perhaps been the most explicit exponent of the 'autonomous' model, arguing that 'there is a transition from utterance to text both culturally and developmentally and that this transition can be described as one of increasing explicitness with language increasingly able to stand as an unambiguous and autonomous representation of meaning' (1977: 258). Where Goody has recently denied that his argument involves technological determinism or 'autonomy' (see Goody 1986 and 1987, especially the preface), Olson holds enthusiastically to the strong version of the autonomous model, repeating in a recent article the claim that 'the media of communication, including writing, do not simply extend the existing structures of knowledge; they alter it' (Olson 1988: 28). For him it is writing itself that has these major consequences: 'writing did not simply extend the structure and uses of oral language and oral memory but altered the content and form in important ways'. He represents the consequences of literacy not only in terms of social development and progress but also in terms of individual cognitive processes: 'when writing began to serve the memory function, the mind could be redeployed to carry out more analytic activities such as examining contradictions and deriving logical implications. It is the availability of an explicit written

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record and its use for representing thought that impart to literacy its distinctive properties' (Olson 1988: 28). Hill and Parry (forthcoming) note further extensions of this claim that literacy has distinctive, 'autonomous' properties:

That text is autonomous is the basic premise of this model of literacy, but we have found the word 'autonomous' used in other ways as well. Goody (1986), for example, applies it to both institutions and individuals. As an anthropologist, he is particularly interested in institutions and so it is to institutional autonomy that he generally refers. In writing about religion he claims: 'Literate religions have some kind of autonomous boundary. Practitioners are committed to one alone and may be defined by their attachment to a Holy Book, their recognition of a Credo, as well as by their practice of certain rituals, prayers, modes of propitiation ... Contrast the situation in societies without writing. You cannot practise Asante religion unless you are an Asante: and what is Asante religion now may be very different from Asante religion one hundred years ago'.

(Goody 1986: 4-5; quoted in Hill and Parry, forthcoming)

Probst's analysis of the Aladura movement in western Nigeria in this volume suggests, contra Goody, that literacy is not necessarily an autonomous factor in differences between local and central religions and that the distinction between oral and literate is overstated here as in other domains. For Probst as for other contributors, the concept of an autonomous literacy is unhelpful with regard to both the social nature of literacy itself and to its relationship with other institutions. Goody, however, has recently extended the argument about the autonomy of literate religions to other kinds of organisation, to law, and bureaucracy: 'writing has tended to promote the autonomy of organisations that developed their own modes of procedure, their own corpus of written tradition, their own specialists and possibly their own system of support' (1986: 90). Again many of the authors included here address these claims and find them wanting with respect to the specific ethnographic contexts that they know in detail (Lewis, Bledsoe and Robey).

Hill and Parry also note Goody's extension of the concept of autonomy to the literate individual and cite his recent comments on the relationship between literacy and development: 'If we take recent moves to expand the economies of countries of the Third World, a certain rate of literacy is often seen as necessary to radical change, partly from the limited standpoint of being able to read the instructions on the seed packet, partly because of the increased autonomy (even with regard to the seed packet) of the autodidact' (Goody 1986: 46). This idea frequently lies behind

characterisations of literate individuals as more ‘modern’, ‘cosmopolitan’, ‘innovative’ and ‘empathetic’ than non-literates (Oxenham 1980: 15; Clammer 1976: 94; Lerner 1958). Lerner, for instance, interviewed some 300 individuals in middle eastern countries and found that ‘those who rated high in empathy were also more likely to be literate, urban, mass media users and generally non-traditional in their orientations’ (in Rogers 1969: 45). Literacy, then, has come to be associated with crude and often ethnocentric stereotypes of ‘other cultures’ and represents a way of perpetuating the notion of a ‘great divide’ between ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ societies that is less acceptable when expressed in other terms. The recognition of these problems was a major impulse behind the development of an alternative model of literacy that could provide a more theoretically sound and ethnographic understanding of the actual significance of literacy practices in people’s lives.

### **The ‘ideological’ model of literacy**

Researchers dissatisfied with the autonomous model of literacy and with the assumptions outlined above, have come to view literacy practices as inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in society, and to recognise the variety of cultural practices associated with reading and writing in different contexts. Avoiding the reification of the autonomous model, they study these social practices rather than literacy-in-itself for their relationship to other aspects of social life. A number of researchers in the new literacy studies have also paid greater attention to the role of literacy practices in reproducing or challenging structures of power and domination. Their recognition of the ideological character of the processes of acquisition and of the meanings and uses of different literacies led me to characterise this approach as an ‘ideological’ model (Street 1985).

I use the term ‘ideological’ to describe this approach, rather than less contentious or loaded terms such as ‘cultural’, ‘sociological’ or ‘pragmatic’ (see Hill and Parry 1988) because it signals quite explicitly that literacy practices are aspects not only of ‘culture’ but also of power structures. The very emphasis on the ‘neutrality’ and ‘autonomy’ of literacy by writers such as Goody, Olson and Ong is itself ‘ideological’ in the sense of disguising this power dimension. Any ethnographic account of literacy will, by implication, attest its significance for power, authority and social differentiation in terms of the author’s own interpretation of these concepts. Since all approaches to literacy in practice will involve some such bias, it is better scholarship to admit to and expose the particular ‘ideological’ framework being employed from the very beginning: it can then be opened to scrutiny, challenged and refined in ways

which are more difficult when the ideology remains hidden. This is to use the term 'ideological' not in its old-fashioned Marxist (and current anti-Marxist) sense of 'false consciousness' and simple-minded dogma, but rather in the sense employed within contemporary anthropology, sociolinguistics and cultural studies, where ideology is the site of tension between authority and power on the one hand and resistance and creativity on the other (Bourdieu 1976; Mace 1979; Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies 1977; Asad 1980; Strathern 1985; Grillo 1989; Fairclough 1989; Thompson 1984). This tension operates through the medium of a variety of cultural practices, including particularly language and, of course, literacy. It is in this sense that it is important to approach the study of literacy in terms of an explicit 'ideological' model.

Individual writers do not always employ the term to describe their own work, nor do they necessarily subscribe to all of the positions with which I associate the ideological model: but the use of the term model is a useful heuristic for drawing attention to a cluster of concepts and assumptions that have underlying coherence where on the surface they may appear disconnected. It helps us to see what is involved in adopting particular positions, to fill in gaps left by untheorised statements about literacy and to adopt a broader perspective than is apparent in any one writer. Lewis, for instance, writing about the meanings and uses of literacy in Somalia and Ethiopia, does not employ the concept of an ideological model of literacy, but his work does fit with this new direction in literacy studies in a number of ways: he rejects the 'great divide' between literacy and orality intrinsic to the autonomous model of literacy; he demonstrates the role of mixed literate and oral modes of communication in local politics, in the assertion of identity and in factional struggles; and he relates the particularities of local literacies to wider issues of nationalism and religion in the Horn of Africa. Similarly, Rockhill's account of the politics of literacy among Hispanic women in Los Angeles, with its focus on literacy as power, is implicitly located within the ideological model of literacy. She sees her research as demonstrating the multiple and contradictory ways in which ideology works. Women adopt new literacy genres that they hope will open up new worlds and identities and overcome their oppressive situations but these genres also reproduce dominant gender stereotypes – for instance, of the magazine or TV secretary/receptionist. Their faith in the symbolic power of literacy and education represents a threat to their male partners and to traditional domestic authority relations: but it also represents a threat to the women themselves as they abandon local relations and networks to enter the alienating world of middle class America. These complex examples, Rockhill argues, demonstrate that 'the construction of literacy is embedded in the discursive practices and power relations of everyday life – it is socially constructed, materially



produced, morally regulated and carries a symbolic significance which cannot be captured by its reduction to any one of these’.

Reading through dense and theoretically sophisticated ethnographies of literacy such as this, it becomes apparent that literacy can no longer be addressed as a neutral technology as in the reductionist ‘autonomous’ model, but is already a social and ideological practice involving fundamental aspects of epistemology, power and politics: the acquisition of literacy involves challenges to dominant discourses (Lewis), shifts in what constitutes the agenda of proper literacy (Weinstein-Shr; Carmetti; Shuman) and struggles for power and position (Rockhill, Probst). In this sense, then, literacy practices are saturated with ideology.

Some critics have taken the distinction between ideological and autonomous models to involve an unnecessary polarisation and would prefer a synthesis. However, I take the ‘ideological’ model to provide such a synthesis, since it avoids the polarisation introduced by any attempt to separate out the ‘technical’ features of literacy, as though the ‘cultural bits’ could be added on later. It is those who have employed an ‘autonomous’ model, and who have generally dominated the field of literacy studies until recently, who were responsible for setting up a false polarity between the ‘technical’ and ‘cultural’ aspects of literacy. The ideological model, on the other hand, does not attempt to deny technical skill or the cognitive aspects of reading and writing, but rather understands them as they are encapsulated within cultural wholes and within structures of power. In that sense the ‘ideological’ model subsumes rather than excludes the work undertaken within the ‘autonomous’ model.

Other critics have objected that my resistance to the assumption of a ‘great divide’ between literacy and orality has led me to underplay the real differences between these media. Miyoshi, for instance, claims that ‘by denying or underplaying the distinction between orality and literacy, Street collapses the social variables into a single model of oral and literate mix, thereby licensing clearly against his intent the universalist reading of cultures and societies’ (Miyoshi 1988: 17). Commenting on this discussion in a recent edition of *Literacy and Society* Mogens Trolle Larsen asserts: ‘The proper balance in our evaluation of such high-level questions must be based on a series of informed analyses which scrutinise the empirical evidence in the light of the theoretical discussion’ (Larsen 1989: 10). The present volume represents, I believe, a distinctive contribution to such empirical scrutiny, based in the kind of theoretical development outlined above. However, the papers in this volume should make it clear that challenging the great divide in favour of an oral/literate ‘mix’ does not necessarily entail naive universalism: what I had in mind, and what I believe many of these accounts demonstrate, is that the relation of oral and literate practices differs from one context to another. In that sense the

unit of study is best not taken as either literacy or orality in isolation, since the values associated with either in our own culture tend to determine the boundaries between them.

Weinstein-Shr's comparison of the different literacies, or rather the different oral/literate mixes, of two Hmong refugees in Philadelphia brings out both the theoretical and methodological points involved here. She is concerned to demonstrate, like Kulick and Stroud, that newcomers to school literacy are not necessarily passive 'victims' but take an active role in employing it as a 'resource'. The question that this forces us to ask is what precisely is the 'resource' under consideration? It turns out not simply to be school literacy itself, but nor is it simply traditional 'oral' skills. For one Hmong refugee in Philadelphia that resource begins from the uses and meanings of literacy constructed in an educational context (what we have referred to elsewhere as 'pedagogised' literacy, Street and Street 1991), whilst for another it derives from cultural assumptions about the representation – in the form of scrap books, pictures and text – of history and the role of great men. In the one case the oral/literate 'resource' that a young man has acquired in school enables him to act as a broker between the host society and some of the Hmong around him; in the other the resource is derived from traditional cultural norms regarding authority and history, adapted through forms of literacy that are often at variance with that purveyed through formal classes. In this context it makes little sense to talk of 'literacy', when what is involved are different literacies: and equally it makes little sense to compare the two subjects by distinguishing between their oral and literate practices when what is involved are different mixes of orality and literacy. The concept of oral/literate practices provides us with a unit of study that enables more precise cross-cultural comparison than when we attempt to compare literacy or orality in isolation. This is not quite the 'universalism' that Miyoshi fears, although in the long run all of the authors here are interested in more than just local description and I would hope that we can begin to make some useful generalisations, of the kind Weinstein-Shr proposes in her conclusion, as data of this quality begin to amass.

### **Research implications of the two models of literacy**

The development of an alternative approach to literacy study during the 1980s, then, involving a move towards an ideological model, rejection of the great divide and attention to an oral/literate mix, has I believe, opened up the possibility of different kinds of account than those which previously dominated the field. From the point of view of research, the autonomous model of literacy had generated two main strands of inquiry, one concerned with questions about the consequences of reading and