LITERACY, DISCOURSE, AND LINGUISTICS: INTRODUCTION

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What I propose in the following papers, in the main, is a way of talking about literacy and linguistics. I believe that a new field of study, integrating "psycho" and "socio" approaches to language from a variety of disciplines, is emerging, a field which we might call literacy studies. Much of this work, I think (and hope), shares at least some of the assumptions of the following papers. These papers, though written at different times, and for different purposes, are, nonetheless, based on the claim that the focus of literacy studies or applied linguistics should not be language, or literacy, but social practices. This claim, I believe, has a number of socially important and cognitively interesting consequences.

"Language" is a misleading term; it too often suggests "grammar." It is a truism that a person can know perfectly the grammar of a language and not know how to use that language. It is not just what you say, but how you say it. If I enter my neighborhood bar and say to my tattooed drinking buddy, as I sit down, "May I have a match please?" my grammar is perfect, but what I have said is wrong nonetheless. It is less often remarked that a person could be able to use a language perfectly and still not make sense. It is not just how you say it, but what you are and do when you say it. If I enter my neighborhood bar and say to my drinking buddy, as I sit down, "Gime a match, wouldya?" while placing a napkin on the bar stool to avoid getting my newly pressed designer jeans dirty, I have said the right thing, but my "saying-doing" combination is nonetheless all wrong.

I am deeply indebted to Candy Mitchell for editing this collection of papers, and to Jim O'Brien for copy-editing the papers appearing here for the first time. The following people are responsible (they may be aghast to hear) for having helped to lead me to the views I hold. First, a set of people whose writings have inspired me: Wallace Chafe, Michael Cole, John Gumperz, Shirley Brice Heath, Dell Hymes, William Labov, Roger and Suzanne Scollon, Brian Street, Gordon Wells, and Jim Wertsch. Second, a group of people not only whose writings have inspired me, but whose discussion of the issues in these papers with me, as well as whose friendship, has left me always in their debt: Elaine Andersen, Maria Brisk, Chip Bruce, Courtney Cazden, David Dickenson, Steve Krashen, Steve Gordon, Steve Griffin, Henry Giroux, Donald Macedo, Sarah Michaels, Bea Mikulecky, Elliot Mishler, Candy Mitchell, Catherine Snow, and Dennie Wolf. These papers ultimately all have their origin in the kindness that Sarah Michaels and Courtney Cazden extended to me when I first arrived in Boston by inviting me to take an interest in their concerns.
F. Niyi Akinnaso and Cheryl Ajiirotutu (1982) present "simulated job interviews" from two welfare mothers in a CETA job training program. The first woman, asked whether she has ever shown initiative in a previous job, responds: "Well, yes, there's this Walgreen's Agency, I worked as a microfilm operator, OK. And it was a snow storm, OK. And it was usually six people workin' in a group..." and so forth (p. 34). This woman is simply using the wrong grammar (the wrong "dialect") for this type of (middle-class) interview. It's a perfectly good grammar (dialect), it just won't get you this type of job in this type of society.

The second woman (the authors' "success" case) responds to a similar question by saying: "...I was left alone to handle the office... I didn't really have a lot of experience. But I had enough experience to deal with any situations that came up... and those that I couldn't handle at the time, if there was someone who had more experience than myself, I asked questions to find out what procedure I would use. If something came up and if I didn't know who to really go to, I would jot it down... on a piece of paper, so that I wouldn't forget that if anyone that was more qualified than myself, I could ask them about it and how I would go about solving it. So I feel I'm capable of handling just about any situation, whether it's on my own or under supervision" (p. 34). This woman hasn't got a real problem with her grammar (remember this is speech, not writing), nor is there any real problem with the use to which she puts that grammar, but she is expressing the wrong values. She views being left in charge as just another form of supervision, namely, supervision by "other people's" knowledge and expertise. And she fails to characterize her own expertise in the overly optimistic form called for by such interviews. Using this response as an example of "successful training" is only possible because the authors, aware that language is more than grammar (namely, "use"), are unaware that communication is more than language use.

At any moment we are using language we must say or write the right thing in the right way while playing the right social role and (appearing) to hold the right values, beliefs, and attitudes. Thus, what is important is not language, and surely not grammar, but saying (writing)—doing—being—valuing—believing combinations. These combinations I call "Discourses," with a capital "D" ("discourse" with a little "d," to me, means connected stretches of language that make sense, so "discourse" is part of "Discourse"). Discourses are ways of being in the world; they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, and so forth.

*A combined reference list for all the articles in this issue of the Journal is found at the back of the issue. In the case of previously published articles that are reprinted here, citations that originally read "in press" have been updated where appropriate. In the case of multiple listings for the same author(s) and the same year, the letters "a," "b," and so forth have been added to the original citations.

**Editor's note: "Discourse" as used here with a capital "D" marks a slight shift from Gee's earlier use of the term. See the essay "What Is Literacy?" in this volume.
attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes.

A Discourse is a sort of "identity kit" which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize. Being "trained" as a linguist meant that I learned to speak, think, and act like a linguist, and to recognize others when they do so. Some other examples of Discourses: (enacting) being an American or a Russian, a man or a woman, a member of a certain socioeconomic class, a factory worker or a boardroom executive, a doctor or a hospital patient, a teacher, an administrator, or a student, a student of physics or a student of literature, a member of a sewing circle, a club, a street gang, a lunchtime social gathering, or a regular at a local bar. We all have many Discourses.

How does one acquire a Discourse? It turns out that much that is claimed, controversially, to be true of second language acquisition or socially situated cognition (Beebe, 1988; Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982; Grosjean, 1982; Krashen, 1982, 1985a, 1985b; Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Lave, 1988; Rogoff & Lave, 1984) is, in fact, more obviously true of the acquisition of Discourses. Discourses are not mastered by overt instruction (even less so than languages, and hardly anyone ever fluently acquired a second language sitting in a classroom), but by enculturation ("apprenticeship") into social practices through scaffolded and supported interaction with people who have already mastered the Discourse (Cazden, 1988; Heath, 1983). This is how we all acquired our native language and our home-based Discourse. It is how we acquire all later, more public-oriented Discourses. If you have no access to the social practice, you don't get in the Discourse, you don't have it. You cannot overtly teach anyone a Discourse, in a classroom or anywhere else. Discourses are not bodies of knowledge like physics or archeology or linguistics. Therefore, ironically, while you can overtly teach someone linguistics, a body of knowledge, you can't teach them to be a linguist, that is, to use a Discourse. The most you can do is to let them practice being a linguist with you.

The various Discourses which constitute each of us as persons are changing and often are not fully consistent with each other; there is often conflict and tension between the values, beliefs, attitudes, interactional styles, uses of language, and ways of being in the world which two or more Discourses represent. Thus, there is no real sense in which we humans are consistent or well integrated creatures from a cognitive or social viewpoint, though, in fact, most Discourses assume that we are (and thus we do too, while we are in them).

All of us, through our primary socialization early in life in the home and peer group, acquire (at least) one initial Discourse. This initial Discourse, which I call our primary Discourse, is the one we first use to make sense of the world and interact with others. Our primary Discourse constitutes our
original and home-based sense of identity, and, I believe, it can be seen whenever we are interacting with "intimates" in totally casual (unmonitored) social interaction. We acquire this primary Discourse, not by overt instruction, but by being a member of a primary socializing group (family, clan, peer group). Further, aspects and pieces of the primary Discourse become a "carrier" or "foundation" for Discourses acquired later in life. Primary Discourses differ significantly across various social (cultural, ethnic, regional, and economic) groups in the United States.

After our initial socialization in our home community, each of us interacts with various non-home-based social institutions— institutions in the public sphere, beyond the family and immediate kin and peer group. These may be local stores and churches, schools, community groups, state and national businesses, agencies and organizations, and so forth. Each of these social institutions commands and demands one or more Discourses and we acquire these fluently to the extent that we are given access to these institutions and are allowed apprenticeships within them. Such Discourses I call secondary Discourses.

We can also make an important distinction between dominant Discourses and nondominant Discourses. Dominant Discourses are secondary Discourses the mastery of which, at a particular place and time, brings with it the (potential) acquisition of social "goods" (money, prestige, status, etc.). Nondominant Discourses are secondary Discourses the mastery of which often brings solidarity with a particular social network, but not wider status and social goods in the society at large.

Finally, and yet more importantly, we can always ask about how much tension or conflict is present between two or more of a person's Discourses (Rosaldo, 1989). We have argued above that some degree of conflict and tension (if only because of the discrete historical origins of particular Discourses) will almost always be present. However, some people experience more overt and direct conflicts between two or more of their Discourses than do others (for example, many women academics feel conflict between certain feminist Discourses and certain standard academic Discourses such as traditional literary criticism). I argue that when such conflict or tension exists, it can deter acquisition of one or the other or both of the conflicting Discourses, or, at least, affect the fluency of a mastered Discourse on certain occasions of use (e.g., in stressful situations such as interviews).

Very often dominant groups in a society apply rather constant "tests" of the fluency of the dominant Discourses in which their power is symbolized. These tests take on two functions: they are tests of "natives" or, at least, "fluent users" of the Discourse, and they are gates to exclude "non-natives" (people whose very conflicts with dominant Discourses show they were not, in fact, "born" to them). The sorts of tension and conflict we have mentioned here are particularly acute when they involve tension and conflict between one's primary Discourse and a dominant secondary Discourse.
Discourses, primary and secondary, can be studied, in some ways, like languages. And, in fact, some of what we know about second language acquisition is relevant to them, if only in a metaphorical way. Two Discourses can interfere with one another, like two languages; aspects of one Discourse can be transferred to another Discourse, as one can transfer a grammatical feature from one language to another. For instance, the primary Discourse of many middle-class homes has been influenced by secondary Discourses like those used in schools and business. This is much less true of the primary Discourse in many lower socio-economic black homes, though this primary Discourse has influenced the secondary Discourse used in black churches.

Furthermore, if one has not mastered a particular secondary Discourse which nonetheless one must try to use, several things can happen, things which rather resemble what can happen when one has failed to fluently master a second language. One can fall back on one's primary Discourse, adjusting it in various ways to try to fit it to the needed functions; this response is very common, but almost always socially disastrous. Or one can use another, perhaps related, secondary Discourse. Or one can use a simplified, or stereotyped version of the required secondary Discourse. These processes are similar to those linguists study under the rubrics of language contact, pidginization, and creolization.

I believe that any socially useful definition of "literacy" must be couched in terms of the notion of Discourse. Thus, I define "literacy" as the mastery of or fluent control over a secondary Discourse. Therefore, literacy is always plural: literacies [there are many of them, since there are many secondary Discourses, and we all have some and fail to have others]. If we wanted to be rather pedantic and literalistic, then we could define "literacy" as "mastery of or fluent control over secondary Discourses involving print" (which is almost all of them in a modern society). But I see no gain from the addition of the phrase "involving print," other than to assuage the feelings of people committed (as I am not) to reading and writing as decontextualized and isolable skills. We can talk about dominant literacies and nondominant literacies in terms of whether they involve mastery of dominant or nondominant secondary Discourses. We can also talk about a literacy being liberating ("powerful") if it can be used as a "meta-language" [a set of meta-words, meta-values, meta-beliefs] for the critique of other literacies and the way they constitute us as persons and situate us in society. Liberating literacies can reconstitute and resituate us.

My definition of "literacy" may seem innocuous, at least to someone already convinced that decontextualized views of print are meaningless. Nonetheless, several "theorems" follow from it, theorems that have rather direct and unsettling consequences.

First theorem: Discourses (and therefore literacies) are not like languages in one very important regard. Someone can speak English, but not fluently. However, someone cannot engage in a Discourse in a less than fully fluent manner. You are either in it or you're not. Discourses are connected with dis-
plays of an identity; failing to fully display an identity is tantamount to announcing you don't have that identity, that at best you're a pretender or a beginner. Very often, learners of second languages “fossilize” at a stage of development significantly short of fluency. This can't happen with Discourses. If you’ve fossilized in the acquisition of a Discourse prior to full “fluency” (and are no longer in the process of apprenticeship), then your very lack of fluency marks you as a non-member of the group that controls this Discourse. That is, you don't have the identity or social role which is the basis for the existence of the Discourse in the first place. In fact, the lack of fluency may very well mark you as a pretender to the social role instantiated in the Discourse (an outsider with pretensions to being an insider).

There is, thus, no workable “affirmative action” for Discourses: you can’t be let into the game after missing the apprenticeship and be expected to have a fair shot at playing it. Social groups will not, usually, give their social goods—whether these are status or solidarity or both—to those who are not “natives” or “fluent users” (though “mushfake,” discussed below, may sometimes provide a way for non-initiates to gain access). While this is an empirical claim, I believe it is one vastly supported by the sociolinguistic literature (Milroy, 1980, 1987; Milroy & Milroy, 1985).

This theorem (that there are no people who are partially literate or semi-literate, or, in any other way, literate but not fluently so) has one practical consequence: notions like “functional literacy” and “competency-based literacy” are simply incoherent. As far as literacy goes, there are only “fluent speakers” and “apprentices” (metaphorically speaking, because remember, Discourses are not just ways of talking, but ways of talking, acting, thinking, valuing, etc.).

Second theorem: Primary Discourses, no matter whose they are, can never really be liberating literacies. For a literacy to be liberating it must contain both the Discourse it is going to critique and a set of meta-elements (language, words, attitudes, values) in terms of which an analysis and criticism can be carried out. Primary Discourses are initial and contain only themselves. They can be embedded in later Discourses and critiqued, but they can never serve as a meta-language in terms of which a critique of secondary Discourses can be carried out. Our second theorem is not likely to be very popular. Theorem 2 says that all primary Discourses are limited. “Liberation” (“power”), in the sense I am using the term here, resides in acquiring at least one more Discourse in terms of which our own primary Discourse can be analyzed and critiqued.

This is not to say that primary Discourses do not contain critical attitudes and critical language (indeed, many of them contain implicit and explicit racism and classism). It is to say that they cannot carry out an authentic criticism, because they cannot verbalize the words, acts, values, and attitudes they use, and they cannot mobilize explicit meta-knowledge. Theorem 2 is quite traditional and conservative—it is the analogue of Socrates’s theorem that the
unexamined life is not worth living. Interestingly enough, Vygotsky (1987, chapter 6) comes very closely to stating this theorem explicitly.

Other theorems can be deduced from the theory of literacy here developed, but these two should make clear what sorts of consequences the theory has. It should also make it quite clear that the theory is not a neutral meta-language in terms of which one can argue for just any conclusions about literacy.

Not all Discourses involve writing or reading, though many do. However, all writing and reading is embedded in some Discourse, and that Discourse always involves more than writing and reading (e.g., ways of talking, acting, valuing, and so forth). You cannot teach anyone to write or read outside any Discourse (there is no such thing, unless it is called “moving a pen” or “typing” in the case of writing, or “moving one’s lips” or “mouthing words” in the case of reading). Within a Discourse you are always teaching more than writing or reading. When I say “teach” here, I mean “apprentice someone in a master-apprentice relationship in a social practice (Discourse) wherein you scaffold their growing ability to say, do, value, believe, and so forth, within that Discourse, through demonstrating your mastery and supporting theirs even when it barely exists (i.e., you make it look as if they can do what they really can’t do).” That is, you do much the same thing middle-class, “super baby” producing parents do when they “do books” with their children.

Now, there are many Discourses connected to schools (different ones for different types of school activities and different parts of the curriculum) and other public institutions. These “middle-class mainstream” sorts of Discourses often carry with them power and prestige. It is often felt that good listeners and good readers ought to pay attention to meaning and not focus on the petty details of mechanics, “correctness,” the superficial features of language. Unfortunately, many middle-class mainstream status-giving Discourses often do stress superficial features of language. Why? Precisely because such superficial features are the best test as to whether one was apprenticed in the “right” place, at the “right” time, with the “right” people. Such superficial features are exactly the parts of Discourses most impervious to overt instruction and are only fully mastered when everything else in the Discourse is mastered. Since these Discourses are used as “gates” to ensure that the “right” people get to the “right” places in our society, such superficial features are ideal. A person who writes in a petition or office memo: “If you cancel the show, all the performers would have did all that hard work for nothing” has signaled that he or she isn’t the “right sort of person” (was not fully acculturated to the Discourse that supports this identity). That signal stays meaningful long after the content of the memo is forgotten, or even when the content was of no interest in the first place.

Now, one can certainly encourage students to simply “resist” such “superficial features of language.” And, indeed, they will get to do so from the
bottom of society, where their lack of mastery of such superficialities was meant to place them anyway. But, of course, the problem is that such “superficialities” cannot be taught in a regular classroom in any case; they can’t be “picked up” later, outside the full context of an early apprenticeship (at home and at school) in “middle-class-like” school-based ways of doing and being. That is precisely why they work so well as “gates.” This is also precisely the tragedy of E. D. Hirsch, Jr.’s much-talked-about book Cultural Literacy (1987), which points out that without having mastered an extensive list of trivialities people can be (and often are) excluded from “goods” controlled by dominant groups in the society. Hirsch is wrong in thinking that this can be taught (in a classroom of all places!) apart from the socially situated practices that these groups have incorporated into their homes and daily lives. There is a real contradiction here, and we ignore it at the peril of our students and our own “good faith” (no middle-class “super baby” producing parents ignore it).

Beyond changing the social structure, is there much hope? No, there is not. So we better get on about the process of changing the social structure. Now, whose job is that? I would say, people who have been allotted the job of teaching Discourses, for example, English teachers, language teachers, composition teachers, TESOL teachers, studies-skills teachers. We can pause, also, to remark on the paradox that even though Discourses cannot be overtly taught, and cannot readily be mastered late in the game, the University wants teachers to overtly teach and wants students to demonstrate mastery. Teachers of Discourses take on an impossible job, allow themselves to be evaluated on how well they do it, and accept fairly low status all the while for doing it.

So what can teachers of Discourses do? Well, there happens to be an advantage to failing to master mainstream Discourses, that is, there is an advantage to being socially “maladapted.” When we have really mastered anything (e.g., a Discourse), we have little or no conscious awareness of it (indeed, like dancing, Discourses wouldn’t work if people were consciously aware of what they were doing while doing it). However, when we come across a situation where we are unable to accommodate or adapt (as many minority students do on being faced, late in the game, with having to acquire mainstream Discourses), we become consciously aware of what we are trying to do or are being called upon to do. Let me give an example that works similarly, that is, the case of classroom second language learning. Almost no one really acquires a second language in a classroom. However, it can happen that exposure to another language, having to translate it into and otherwise relate it to your own language, can cause you to become consciously aware of how your first language works (how it means). This “meta-knowledge” can actually make you better able to manipulate your first language.

Vygotsky (1987) says that learning a foreign language “allows the child to understand his native language as a single instantiation of a linguistic system” (p. 222). And here we have a clue. Classroom instruction (in language, com-
position, study skills, writing, critical thinking, content-based literacy, or whatever] can lead to metaknowledge, to seeing how the Discourses you have already got relate to those you are attempting to acquire, and how the ones you are trying to acquire relate to self and society. Metaknowledge is liberation and power, because it leads to the ability to manipulate, to analyze, to resist while advancing. Such metaknowledge can make “maladapted” students smarter than “adapted” ones. Thus, the liberal classroom that avoids overt talk of form and superficialities, of how things work, as well as of their socio-cultural-political basis, is no help. Such talk can be powerful so long as one never thinks that in talking about grammar, form, or superficialities one is getting people to actually acquire Discourses (or languages, for that matter). Such talk is always political talk.

But, the big question: If one cannot acquire Discourses save through active social practice, and it is difficult to compete with the mastery of those admitted early to the game when one has entered it as late as high school or college, what can be done to see if that meta-knowledge and resistance are coupled with Discourse development? The problem is deepened by the fact that true acquisition of many mainstream Discourses involves, at least while being in them, active complicity with values that conflict with one’s home- and community-based Discourses, especially for many women and minorities.

The question is too big for me, but I have two views to push nonetheless. First, true acquisition (which is always full fluency) will rarely if ever happen. Even for anything close to acquisition to occur, classrooms must be active apprenticeships in “academic” social practices, and, in most cases, must connect with these social practices as they are also carried on outside the “composition” or “language” class, elsewhere in the University.

Second, though true acquisition is probably not possible, “mushfake” Discourse is possible. Mack [in press] defines “mushfake,” a term from prison culture, as making “do with something less when the real thing is not available. So when prison inmates make hats from underwear to protect their hair from lice, the hats are mushfake. Elaborate craft items made from used wooden match sticks are another example of mushfake.” “Mushfake Discourse” means partial acquisition coupled with meta-knowledge and strategies to “make do” (strategies ranging from always having a memo edited to ensure no plural, possessive, and third-person “s” agreement errors to active use of black culture skills at “psyching out” interviewers, or to strategies of “rising to the meta-level” in an interview so the interviewer is thrown off stride by having the rules of the game implicitly referred to in the act of carrying them out).

“Mushfake,” resistance, and meta-knowledge: this seems to me like a good combination for successful students and successful social change. So I propose that we ought to produce “mushfaking,” resisting students, full of metaknowledge. But isn’t that to politicize teaching? A Discourse is an integration of saying, doing, and valuing, and all socially based valuing is political. All suc-
cessful teaching, that is, teaching that inculcates Discourse and not just content, is political. That too is a truism.

As a linguist I am primarily interested in the functioning of language in Discourses and literacies. And a key question in this sort of linguistics is how language-within-Discourses is acquired (in socially situated apprenticeships) and how the languages from different Discourses transfer into, interfere with, and otherwise influence each other to form the linguistic texture of whole societies and to interrelate various groups in society. To see what is at stake here, I will briefly discuss one text, one which clearly brings out a host of important issues in this domain. The text, with an explanation of its context, is printed below. The text is demarcated in terms of "lines" and "stanzas," units which I believe are the basis of speech:

CONTEXT OF TEXT: A young middle-class mother regularly reads storybooks to both her 5- and 7-year-old daughters. Her 5-year-old had had a birthday party, which had had some problems. In the next few days the 5-year-old has told several relatives about the birthday party, reporting the events in the language of her primary Discourse system. A few days later, when the mother was reading a storybook to her 7-year-old, the 5-year-old said she wanted to "read" (she could not decode), and pretended to be reading a book, while telling what had happened at her birthday party. Her original attempt at this was not very good, but eventually after a few tries, interspersed with the mother reading to the other girl, the 5-year-old produced the following story, which is not (just) in the language of her primary Discourse system:

STANZA ONE [Introduction]
1. This is a story
2. About some kids who we once friends
3. But got into a big fight
4. And were not

STANZA TWO [Frame: Signalling of Genre]
5. You can read along in your storybook
6. I'm gonna read aloud

[story-reading prosody from now on]

STANZA THREE [Title]
7. "How the Friends Got Unfriend"

STANZA FOUR [Setting: Introduction of Characters]
8. Once upon a time there was three boys 'n three girls
9. They were named Betty Lou, Pallis, and Parshin, were the girls
10. And Michael, Jason, and Aaron were the boys
11. They were friends

STANZA FIVE [Problem: Sex Differences]
12. The boys would play Transformers
13. And the girls would play Cabbage Patches