Literacy

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Abstract

Literacy, as a concept, transcends mere ability in reading and writing; it embodies a spectrum of practices deeply entwined with cultural, social, and political dynamics. This article delves into the multifaceted nature of literacy by examining different disciplinary conceptions and definitions, methodological approaches, ideological underpinnings, and educational implications.

Keywords

Great Divide, anthropology of literacy, autonomous model of literacy, ideological model of literacy, digital literacy, critical literacy, multiliteracies, New Literacy Studies, literacy event, literacy practice

Key points

- As subjects in their own right, writing and literacy were historically marginalized in linguistic research, which focused on spoken language despite relying on methods and data rooted in writing – a paradox known as 'written language bias'.
- The 'Great Divide' between orality and literacy propagated in anthropological research of the 1960s and 1970s assumed them to be discontinuous and in and of themselves homogenous phenomena, perpetuating ethnocentric biases and oversimplifying cultural differences.
- The autonomous model of literacy is universalist in its approach and views literacy as a decontextualized cognitive skill.
- The ideological model of literacy emphasizes the socio-cultural embeddedness and diversity of literacy practices. It is particularist as well as ethnographic in its approach and closely associated with a paradigm known as the New Literacy Studies.
- Education – especially mass schooling – plays a pivotal role in shaping literacy practices and outcomes, but standardized curricula may be hegemonic in favoring specific dominant language varieties and linguistic communities and overlooking diverse literacy needs.
- Multiliteracies and critical literacy emerged to address the complexities of contemporary communication (arising from an increasingly multilingual/-cultural, digital, and multimodal landscape) as well as sociopolitical engagement, empowering readers to deconstruct texts, recognize power dynamics, and advocate for social change.

Introduction: writing vs. literacy, linguistics vs. anthropology

For a long time, modern linguistics ignored or marginalized writing and literacy as research subjects. This can be attributed to influential linguists of the early 20th century—including Ferdinand de Saussure and Leonard Bloomfield—proclaiming that spoken language is the true subject of linguistics. On the other hand, written language is merely a way of recording it devoid of interesting independent features of its own—i.e., features that would warrant serious linguistic study. Ironically, this marginalization of writing was accompanied by a reliance on linguistic methods and data such as transcription(s) that were predominantly of written nature or rooted in writing. This is partly due to the limited availability of resources for acoustically recording and systematically collecting and analyzing spoken data at that time. Additionally, another factor contributing to this limitation was the status of the languages under investigation, often being ancient or extinct languages no longer spoken, thus rendering their spoken modality inaccessible for study. This situation in which writing was actively ignored as a research subject while linguistic research was heavily biased by it has been

termed written language bias (Linell, 2005), and it is closely related to an unconscious for written language, i.e., scripti(ci)sm (Harris, 1980).

Within dominant linguistic research paradigms, writing never gained traction, and its study remains at the periphery of linguistics. Notably, the latter half of the 20th century saw the emergence of productive non-Anglophone research communities[1] that championed the structuralist study of writing and explored, among others, fundamental questions of the relationship between spoken and written language. Meanwhile, to this day, questions of the history and typology of writing systems predominate in English-language research on writing. An interdisciplinary study of writing with the goal of attaining a more holistic picture of writing remains in its infancy; it aims not only to juxtapose or supplement structural questions with perspectives from psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics but to merge them into an explanatory theory (Meletis, 2020). Terminologically and conceptually, linguistics has focused on questions of *writing* as a linguistic product of literate activity but has not developed theories and tools to adequately study *literacy* as a broader phenomenon, which must imperatively acknowledge how written language is produced, perceived, and embedded in societies. These very questions were negotiated in a different discipline—anthropology.

Before delving into anthropological approaches, it is crucial to note that there is not *one* definition of 'literacy', and defining it is never a neutral endeavor. Quite to the contrary, given the topic's relevance for large parts of the world's population, any attempt to define it inevitably carries sociopolitical and educational implications, making it a political act (de Castell, 1992). Against this background, the concept of literacy has been interpreted in various ways depending on diverse disciplinary perspectives and theoretical frameworks. At the heart of anthropological discourses on literacy lie the status and relationship of orality and literacy and the distinction between what are referred to as the autonomous and ideological models of literacy, contrasting paradigms that will be discussed in the following sections.

The 'Great Divide' between orality and literacy and the autonomous model of literacy

Unlike linguistics, anthropology did actively engage with questions of the nature of literacy, with several central works on the topic emerging in the 1960s and 1970s. As an example, take anthropologist Jack Goody's research, most prominently manifested in his co-authored paper 'The Consequences of Literacy' (Goody & Watt, 1963) and his book 'The Domestication of the Savage Mind' (Goody, 1977). Goody focused on attributes associated with 'primitive' vs. advanced cultures, particularly on changes in communication induced by the introduction of various forms of literacy. From ancient Greek society to contemporary nonliterate, semi-literate, and literate cultures, he argued that shifts in cultural organization and thought processes are closely tied to literacy, portraying it—and especially segmental alphabetic literacy (*see* Alphabet)—as a transformative 'technology of the intellect'. This as well as related works of the time share the often implicit assumption of a so-called 'Great Divide' between orality and literacy and respective 'oral' and 'literate' cultures. This divide is often associated with a range of binary oppositions such as primitive vs. civilized, pre-logical vs. logical, and traditional vs. modern. As such, it carries ethnocentric undertones because it not only devalorizes orality but also defines literacy based on Western standards, thus devaluing and othering different forms of literacy such as those found in China or India and reinforcing claims of Western supremacy (Collins, 1995). In brief, the central beliefs inherent in Great Divide theories include the superiority of literacy over orality, the technological superiority of alphabetic writing systems, and the transformative power of literacy on social, cultural, and cognitive development (Olson, 1994). Critics have subsumed them under the heading of 'literacy myth' (also 'literacy thesis'), echoing that they oversimplify both orality and literacy as discontinuous[2] and in and of themselves homogenous

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[1] Examples include the Germanist and French traditions of structural(ist) research on writing.

[2] A noteworthy approach that distinguishes between medial and conceptual dimensions of orality and literacy is the one by Koch and Oesterreicher (2012). It shows that certain linguistic resources and registers that are commonly believed to be associated with orality or literacy are actually not bound to spoken utterances or

phenomena and overstate the latter's effects in a techno-deterministic manner (Graff, 2010). At a metalevel, it is important to note that these beliefs were especially prevalent in American and Canadian scholarship[3] and reflect(ed) the biases and conventions of Western academic subcultures that scholars socialized in these cultures often could not eschew (Street, 1995).

The 'Great Divide' is rooted in psychological perspectives and interprets literacy predominantly as a mental phenomenon, a decontextualized cognitive skill(set), thus focusing on abilities and processes of reading and writing. It is a universalist approach that has become known as the autonomous model of literacy. While it may have justifiable and valid applications depending on specific epistemological interests and is still often upheld especially in experimental cognitive and psychological research on literacy acquisition and processing[4] (a prominent example being research on a causal connection between literacy and phonological awareness; Goswami, 2006), when considering a holistic understanding of literacy, it neglects to capture the fact that acts of reading and writing are never neutral and that the 'consequences' of literacy are largely not autonomous but contingent upon the complex interplay of socio-historical, cultural, and political factors. Against this background, it is unsurprising that challenges of the autonomous model were ushered in by a 'social turn' (Gee, 2000) in research on literacy in which it was reconceptualized as a sociocultural practice.

The ideological model: the social turn

One of the primary challenges with the 'Great Divide' and the autonomous conception of literacy lies in its attribution of effects solely to literacy without a consideration of other influencing factors. It is, in fact, exceedingly difficult to isolate literacy as the sole cause amidst the complexity of cognitive and societal changes attributed to it. A significant factor often overlooked is schooling, a focal point of psychologists Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole's influential 'Psychology of Literacy' (Scribner & Cole, 1981). They observed various types of literacy among the Vai people in Liberia, with each type serving different purposes, such as alphabetic English for government and education, syllabic Vai for record-keeping and correspondence, and consonantal (i.e., abjadic) Arabic for religious study. This diversity in both writing systems and contexts of usage allowed for a disentanglement of the effects of literacy vs. schooling, with the findings indicating that certain cognitive effects previously attributed solely to literacy were produced by the institutions of modern schooling.

This study is widely considered to provide compelling counterarguments to the autonomous model, shifting the focus of literacy research towards the so-called ideological model of literacy.[5] This alternative model, championed by scholars like anthropologist Brian V. Street, ushered in a paradigm shift by emphasizing that literacy is embedded in and shaped by social and institutional contexts and cultural specificity, thus rejecting the autonomous model's notion of literacy as a decontextualized mental ability with an inherent transformational potential (Street, 1995; Gee, 2007). In essence, the ideological model recognizes literacy (as well as orality) as a collection of diverse social practices and a site of ideological struggle where dominant cultural and historical narratives and power structures intersect with individual agency and identity formation. It has become closely associated with a paradigm called *New Literacy Studies* (NLS), emerging in the 1980s when several scholars challenged the autonomous view in what have become classic anthropological works on literacy (see Gee, 2023, for examples and a reconstruction of the paradigm's development).

Central to the ideological model is the recognition of multiple literacies and the diverse ways in which individuals engage with texts and meaning-making practices. Thus, rather than viewing literacy

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written texts but determined by communicative parameters (especially the immediacy or distance involved in an interaction).

[3] Other scholars often associated with the 'Great Divide' are philosopher/priest Walter J. Ong and cognitive psychologist David R. Olson.

[4] See, for example, the book series *Literacy Studies: Perspectives from Cognitive Neurosciences, Linguistics, Psychology and Education* (Springer), https://www.springer.com/series/7206/books.

[5] See Stephens (2000) for a critical discussion of how this 'canonization' of Scribner and Cole's study into the New Literacy Studies has partially concealed that some of its findings do indeed strongly suggest some direct consequences of literacy.

as a monolithic skill set, scholars advocate for an appreciation of the plurality and diversity of practicing literacy across different cultural and social contexts. Core concepts in this respect are literacy events and literacy practices. A literacy event—a term coined by Heath (1983)—is "a social action going on around a piece of writing in which the writing matters to the way people interact" (Brandt & Clinton, 2002, p. 342); an example is a person looking up something in a dictionary. Literacy practices, on the other hand, are abstract, recurrent, and more global phenomena as they are "patterns or ways of doing literacy that are associated with different domains of life" (Pahl, 2016, p. 2). As such, they represent spatially, historically, and socioculturally situated communicative practices which are "almost always fully integrated with, interwoven into, constituted part of, the very texture of wider practices that involve talk, interaction, values, and beliefs" (Gee, 2023, p. 472). Literacy practices are doubly articulated insofar as they are enacted in literacy events "while also informed by ideological overlays" (Collins, 2006, p. 252). They—rather than concrete and observable literacy events, which can also be singular, i.e., non-recurrent—can be regarded as 'capital' in education, professional life, and other domains of society (Kerschhofer-Puhalo, 2021).

Methodologically, the ideological model advocates for a particularistic and ethnographic approach to literacy studies and integrates methods from discourse analytic and sociolinguistic methods (Besnier, 2000; Malette & Duke, 2021).

Despite its valuable insights into the socio-cultural dimensions of literacy, the ideological model has not been without criticism. Critiques mainly revolve around the polarization between the older autonomous and newer ideological conceptions, which has occasionally been labelled as a 'new great divide' in literacy studies (Maddox, 2007). It is argued that this dichotomy risks oversimplifying the complex interplay between cognitive processes and socio-cultural contexts by neglecting the potential synergies between these perspectives. Specifically, by striving to completely negate the tenets inherent in the autonomous model, the ideological model may veer too far in downplaying any actual techn(olog)ical 'consequences' of literacy. In other words, by focusing exclusively on socio-cultural factors and often succumbing to relativism, the ideological model may overlook the importance of universal—and not only cognitive—patterns in literacy acquisition and development. Thus, some scholars argue that it "maintains its own, tacit great divide – one that assumes separations between the local and the global, agency and social structure, and literacy and its technology" (Brandt & Clinton, 2002, p. 338). Furthermore, the model has been criticized for not being readily applicable by practitioners in real-life educational contexts (Maccabe, 1998; Stephens, 2000).

Schooling and education

The intersection of literacy and mass schooling underscores the pivotal role educational institutions play in shaping literacy practices and outcomes. Modern schooling has been instrumental in disseminating standardized literacy skills and norms by contributing to the widespread adoption of print-based literacy in many societies. Notably, its impact in the actual acquisition of the necessary prerequisites or foundations of literacy is vaguer; as Gee (2023, p. 476) notes, schools are "good places to practice mainstream literacy once you have its foundations, but they are not good places to acquire those foundations".

Indeed, schooled literacy has not been without criticism. One key point revolves around the displacement of nonstandard varieties of language and the marginalization of alternative literacies within formal educational settings. The privileging of standard language varieties in classrooms often perpetuates linguistic hierarchies, reinforcing dominant cultural norms and excluding marginalized linguistic communities, rendering schooled literacy a 'hegemonic project' (Collins, 1995). This also means that the emphasis on standardized literacy skills may overlook the rich linguistic resources and cultural practices that students bring from their homes and communities. Nowadays, it also marginalizes digital literacy practices that involve multimodality and nonstandard registers (Busch, 2021). A response to this has been the development of the concept of multiliteracies (see below).

Moreover, the development of schooled literacy has been accompanied by the commodification of knowledge and the homogenization of educational experiences. Standardized

curricula and assessments (such as PISA and PIRLS) tend to prioritize certain forms of literacy deemed essential for economic competitiveness while neglecting the diverse literacy needs and interests of students in their realities of life beyond school. This narrow focus on instrumental literacy skills may undermine students' engagement with meaningful texts and limit their ability to critically engage with complex social issues – what has been called critical literacy (see below).

Towards multiliteracies: the digital turn

In response to a 'digital turn' and the evolving digital and multilingual landscape, the concept of multiliteracies has emerged as a framework for understanding the diverse forms of literacy required in contemporary society. Coined by the New London Group (1996) in their manifesto, the term 'multiliteracies' recognizes the complex interplay between linguistic and cultural diversity, modern technologies, and the proliferation of multimodal texts (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012). This expanded conception of literacy recognizes that literacy is no longer confined to traditional print-based texts but encompasses a wider range of communicative modes, including the visual, aural, gestural, and spatial modes, with multimodality encompassing "the full repertoire of meaning-making resources which people use to communicate and represent […] and how these are 'organized' to make meaning" (Jewitt, 2014, p. 16).

Accordingly, a pedagogy of multiliteracies highlights the need for educational practices that go beyond mere transmission of knowledge and the development of proficiency in traditional literacy skills by integrating the diversity and plurality of communication practices in a globalized world to foster forms of digital and critical literacy, equipping learners with the skills to navigate and engage with and critically evaluate multiple forms of text and meaning-making as well as empowering them to become active participants (Kerschhofer-Puhalo, 2021).

Critical literacy: empowering sociopolitical engagement

Critical literacy represents a paradigm shift in literacy education, moving beyond the acquisition of basic reading and writing skills to cultivate a deeper understanding of the sociopolitical dimensions of texts and discourse. Rooted in critical pedagogy and social justice frameworks (especially the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire), critical literacy encourages learners to interrogate the power dynamics, ideologies, and cultural assumptions embedded within texts and media (Jowallah, 2015).

At its core, critical literacy emphasizes the importance of developing students' capacities to engage critically with texts and to recognize how language constructs and perpetuates social hierarchies and inequalities. Through critical literacy practices, learners are encouraged to deconstruct texts, uncovering embedded meanings, biases, and power relations that shape their production and reception.[6] This process of critical inquiry enables learners to become active participants in their own meaning-making and to challenge dominant narratives that may marginalize or silence certain voices and perspectives. Thus, critical literacy fosters a sense of agency and empowerment, equipping learners with the skills and dispositions necessary to navigate complex sociopolitical landscapes and advocate for social change.

Conclusion

The engagement with literacy—from its marginalization in early linguistic research to its prominence in interdisciplinary discourses spanning anthropology, psychology, and education—reflects a dynamic field grappling with complex sociocultural phenomena. The dichotomies between orality vs. literacy and the autonomous vs. ideological models of literacy symbolize a 'Great Divide' and underscore the ongoing debate surrounding the nature and implications of literacy. While the autonomous model emphasizes literacy as a decontextualized cognitive skill, the ideological model foregrounds its

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[6] For a critical contextualization of critical literacy into the autonomous paradigm of literacy and examples of how ethnographic studies have debunked the assumption of a straightforward link between literacy and empowerment, see Bartlett et al. (2011).

embeddedness within sociohistorical and cultural contexts, challenging universalist assumptions and advocating for a pluralistic and local understanding and study of literacy practices.

The emergence of concepts like multiliteracies and critical literacy signals a broader recognition of the diverse forms of literacy required in contemporary societies, encompassing digital and multimodal modes of communication. This expanded perspective not only acknowledges the complexities of meaning-making in a globalized world but also underscores the role of education in fostering critical engagement with texts and empowering individuals to navigate sociopolitical landscapes. As literacy continues to evolve in response to technological advancements and sociocultural shifts, the challenge lies in reconciling diverse theoretical frameworks and pedagogical approaches to promote inclusive and equitable literacy practices. By embracing the complexities of literacy as a dynamic sociocultural phenomenon, scholars and educators must work together towards fostering informed citizenship, social justice, and empowerment in increasingly diverse and interconnected societies. This article has shown why there cannot be one all-encompassing definition literacy and underlines what Daswani (1994, p. 2236) already wrote in the article on literacy in the first edition of this encyclopedia: that literacy "is a concern in which the politician, the planner, the development economist, the social activist and the social scientist all have a part to play"—not to forget the billions of people engaging in literacy practices worldwide.

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