

Language and literacy

The sociolinguistics of reading
and writing

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Preface

On the one hand, books on reading and writing proliferate, and it requires some hesitation before adding yet another one. On the other hand, the literature on literacy is so vast and inconclusive, and still contains so many basic confusions and unanswered questions, that there is a clear need for books which attempt to make some sense of the state of the art.

I suspect that what may be required in work on literacy is not so much yet more basic research on small and isolated topics; but rather attempts to evaluate and integrate the incoherent masses of findings, and attempts to relate reading and writing to the communicative functions that written language serves in our society. There is nothing even approaching a coherent theory of reading or literacy. One reason for this is that there is also nothing approaching a coherent theory about the relations between reading and writing, or between written and spoken language, or about the place of written language in society and the purposes it serves. As a result, research on reading, although vast and stretching back over some seventy-five years of concentrated work, is unintegrated and inconclusive. In addition, this work is often unrelated to relevant research on language and on the uses of language in different social situations.

This book therefore attempts to provide the basis for such a theory, and to place reading within a discussion of the formal and functional characteristics of language in use in social settings. In some areas the argument will not be able to progress further than common-sense observations. For whilst some subjects are now quite well understood (such as the relation between the English spelling system and spoken English, or the problems of setting up a writing system for a previously unwritten language), in other areas the basic research has not yet been done. One such area, which would require concentrated analyses of a large corpus of written and spoken texts, is the formal

differences in vocabulary and grammar between written and spoken English.

I hope the argument will be of interest to educationalists, especially those concerned with teaching reading and writing, and more generally with problems of language in education. It should also be of interest to students on courses of language study or linguistics, who require a discussion of the relation between spoken and written language and of the place of written language in society. The argument assumes that the reader has no previous knowledge of linguistics, and should therefore be accessible to students in most related disciplines, including English, linguistics, sociology, psychology and education, and to students in teacher-training. A peculiar feature of printed and published material is that the author never knows precisely who will read it: books are written for ill-defined, mythical social groups, such as 'student teachers' or 'second-year sociology students'. Since reading and writing are skills demanded of almost everyone in modern urbanized societies, this book may also interest the 'intelligent layman', if such a group of readers exists.

So the book is mainly intended as an introduction to the subject, a discussion of the state of the art, and a textbook, and is written so that non-linguists can read it. I would not have been entirely sanguine about writing it, however, if it had been merely a review of the field. But in preparing the material, I have constantly come up against problems which linguists have not yet solved, often because most linguists have simply ignored them for many years. This makes me hope that the book may also be of interest to those who are primarily interested in language.

Linguists often use the powerful research strategy of studying language apart from its social contexts of use, and therefore of ignoring its different realizations in speech and writing. There is no doubt whatsoever that this quite deliberate idealization has brought about enormous advances in our understanding of language structure, particularly in phonology (sound structure) and grammar. But there is equally no doubt that the strategy simply conceals certain types of linguistic phenomena, including the interaction between different realizations of language (spoken and written), the differences in form and function between speech and writing, the relation between written language and ways of thinking, and so on. Some of these topics concern predominantly social issues of language planning or initial literacy, but others raise problems of interest to the professional theoretical linguist, such as the parallelism between phonemes and graphemes, the relation of different writing systems to different levels of language (phonemic, lexical and grammatical), how literacy affects the rate of language change, and the possibility of identifying various linguistic universals.

Preface

There is a separate point which linguists might consider. Linguists are often reluctant to become involved in educational debates. They argue that it is their job to describe and explain language, but not to encroach on other people's professional territory by making statements about education. This is often due to admirable modesty and caution. Linguists are rightly unwilling, for example, to tell teachers how to behave in the classroom, and are clearly unqualified to do so merely by virtue of being linguists. In addition, the relation between linguistic theory (or psychology or sociological theory, for that matter) and classroom practice is seldom obvious. On the other hand, only linguists with a full-time professional interest in language could possibly hope to assimilate a large amount of contemporary linguistic theory and sift out from it those bits which are likely to be relevant to education. No educationalists, starting from scratch, could be expected to do this, since linguistics is now such a large area of study, much of which is clearly of no immediate interest to educationalists. It does seem then that linguists have the responsibility of trying to present in a helpful way those parts of the subject which could be of use to others. A great deal is now known about language which is of immediate use to teachers, if only it can be made accessible. A lot of detailed work has now been done, for example, on: the English spelling system, and writing systems in general; the nature of language standardization; children's language acquisition; the nature of an adult's knowledge of his native language; regional and social variation in language; and so on. All these are areas in which teachers need basic information, and linguistics can supply some of it.

Precisely how this information affects classroom teaching is a separate pedagogical problem; although linguists doubtless have their own personal ideas about it, they do not have any particular professional expertise to offer. Just one example, for the present. A lot is now known about English spelling, which turns out to be much more highly organized than many people think, but very complex (see Chapter 3). It seems clear that, ideally, all teachers of reading should have a sophisticated and up-to-date understanding of what is known about English spelling. But it is not at all obvious just how this knowledge ought to inform the teaching of reading, and how this knowledge ought to be presented, if at all, to children. The idea behind the Initial Teaching Alphabet (ITA), for example, is initially to protect children from the complexities of the system, until they have gained confidence and understood some of the principles. This might be an excellent pedagogical strategy, but it neither follows from nor contradicts the linguistic findings about English spelling.

It seems, in fact, that Sir James Pitman, the inventor of ITA, seriously misunderstands how English spelling works as a linguistic system. He

wrongly believes, for example, that it is grossly 'inconsistent' and 'illogical' (Pitman and St John, 1969, pp. 41-4). The question of whether ITA is a good teaching medium seems, however, to a large extent independent of our understanding of the writing system. ITA might be based on a seriously defective theory of English spelling, and yet still work as a teaching strategy, since so many other factors come into teaching: not least the child's confidence. In general, then, the relation between linguistic theory and educational practice will be indirect.

Only relatively few linguists have made contributions in these areas. There are, for example, substantial discussions of different topics by Josef Vachek, W. Haas and K. H. Albrow, and important contributions by Dwight Bolinger, Martin Joos and others, as well as by the many sociolinguists primarily interested in language planning, standardization and literacy, including Kenneth Pike, Charles A. Ferguson, Joshua A. Fishman, Jack Berry, Eugene A. Nida and Sarah Gudschinsky. I have necessarily drawn on much of this work in preparing this book. Throughout, these sources are acknowledged in the normal way, but I would like to mention one influence in particular. I first discovered K. H. Albrow's short book on the English writing system some years ago, and for the first time realized that the English spelling system was (a) more interesting than I had thought, and (b) not as odd as I had thought. I had, in fact, never seriously thought about it, never having realized that it could be an interesting subject. I recommend this book (Albrow, 1972) to anyone interested in the area; having read it, I understood something for the first time about how English spelling works. My students are now often astonished when I point out to them some regularity in English spelling which they had never noticed and which I first discovered in Albrow's book.

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Part one

The state of the art

Chapter 1

The state of the art and some definitions

It is generally agreed that we do not understand the process of reading, or what happens when a child does or does not learn to read. (Labov, 1970)

... the incredibly confused and inconclusive state of reading research ... (Smith, 1973, p. 5)

Very little of the great mass published on the subject (of the teaching of reading) is significant in contributing to a theory of literacy. Indeed much of it reflects the absence of a theory, and the absence of any awareness of the need for a theory. (Mackay *et al.*, 1970, p. 78)

One reason why the literature on reading is so vast and unintegrated is that topics have been approached from different directions from within different disciplines, including psychology, education and linguistics. Often these approaches have been largely self-contained, making little reference to work within other approaches, and, in fact, putting forward contradictory definitions of *reading* and *literacy*. Furthermore, research on reading has been dominated by experimental psychology, which has seen reading as primarily a perceptual process. Until relatively recently, reading has been regarded only peripherally as a process of handling written *language* or as an activity with particular *social functions*. Certainly, the vast majority of research has concentrated on the psychological processes of reading in the individual reader, and therefore on the internal relations between perceptual processes, orthographic systems and, to a lesser extent, the reader's knowledge of his own language. But it has neglected the relation of reading to writing, the place written language plays in different societies, and so on.

As a result, we know quite a lot about reading as a psychological process, although findings tend to remain unintegrated, sometimes

contradictory, and often unrelated to linguistic and sociological approaches to reading and writing. But we know relatively little about reading and writing as linguistic processes, and even less about the social functions of reading and writing.

Research on reading has been carried on in a concentrated fashion since the beginning of the twentieth century. Compulsory education, with the minimum requirement of literacy for all, was introduced by the Education Acts of 1870 in England and Wales and of 1872 in Scotland, and systematic research was underway by the 1900s. The discovery that the eyes move in a jerky fashion during reading, fixing on a span of words or letters, then moving on rapidly to another fixation point, was made as early as 1879 by Javal. The term 'congenital word blindness' was first used by Morgan (1896) in an article in the *British Medical Journal*. And as early as 1897, Pillsbury had shown the importance of expectation on the perception of words: he presented words with deliberate typographical errors for very short periods by tachistoscope. Subjects were often certain they saw letters which were not present. The Armed Forces revealed high levels of illiteracy during the First World War and this provided fresh impetus for research. And National Reading Surveys have been carried out since 1940 (Morris, 1972). But despite seventy-five years or more of research, there is still nothing approaching a coherent theory. In a recent major book, Smith (1973) declares simply that reading research is 'incredibly confused and inconclusive'. A fashionable disclaimer at present is that we have not learned much more about the psychology of reading than is set out in Huey's classic book of 1908 (e.g., see Gibson, 1972, in Kavanagh and Maddingley, 1972; Kolars, 1968, cited by Gudschinsky, 1976, p. 9). Often, in fact, researchers appear to have despaired and relapsed into a mystic belief that it is all too complex to describe and involves the whole man. One finds unhelpful statements such as: 'Perhaps reading, like mystery, can only be described and evoked.... Reading must engage the total organism' (Jenkinson, 1969, p. 107). It is probably unfair to pick out this particular quote, as any one of so many might have been quoted in its place.

It will be useful to begin with a simple list of some of the potential confusions that will have to be borne in mind as the argument proceeds. Many of these distinctions appear obvious enough once they are pointed out, but they are often not made explicit in the literature.

1.1 Some potential confusions

Definitions of reading and writing

There is, first of all, still no general agreement on what is meant by