

## Literacy

**L**iteracy can be roughly defined as communication through visually decoded inscriptions, rather than through auditory and gestural channels. Literacy as a human activity has lurked in the background of both anthropological and linguistic research throughout its history, thought about but not investigated systematically, born in mind but marginalized. Social anthropologists have long speculated on the peculiar thinking processes, social structures, and cultural patterns that characterize literate individuals and groups. Until not long ago, linguists viewed literacy as what linguistics does not study, a reaction, in part, to the association in popular thinking of written language with prescriptive normativity. Only in recent decades have these speculations and negative definitions given way to systematic investigations and a more centralized focus in both disciplines.

Several identifiable currents underlie contemporary research on literacy in linguistic anthropology. First, attempts to deconstruct age-old statements about the fundamental differences between literate and pre-literate societies have led researchers to explore the vast patterns of diversity covered under the umbrella term "literacy." (And, of course, the same statement can be made about orality, which is often contrasted with literacy, as Alan Rumsey discusses in this issue.) For example, the pedagogical literacy that children practice at school and the literacy activities that their parents engage in at home can differ widely. Similarly, literacy in the workplace, during leisure time, in the courtroom, and at church all have particular characteristics, associations, and implications. Literacy varies widely in form and context across societies as well: contexts of use, levels of prestige, communicative norms, identities of users, and social dynamics all shape literacy in particular ways in each society or community. Each society or community is literate in ways that differ from the way in which other societies or communities are literate. Research in the diversity and heterogeneity of literacy experiences is thus explicitly particularistic and ethnography-driven.

The drawback of this particularistic approach is that it is potentially too generalization-shy; at worst, it becomes an amalgamation of anecdotes collected by researchers marveling at the diversity of humankind. The second

current in recent works on literacy saves it from these dangers: linguistic anthropologists strive to apprehend the meaning of reading and writing as social, cultural, and cognitive activities. This meaning may consist of symbolic relationships, associations, and connections between reading and writing, on the one hand, and other aspects of human existence, on the other. For example, ethnographers of literacy have demonstrated that for participants in literate communication, the activities that take place "around" literate communication (i.e., simultaneously, in the same social space, with the same people) provide a specific flavor to the literacy activity, a flavor that becomes part of its inherent meaning. Thus, for instance, literacy produced or consumed during religious ceremonies highlights the same aspects of the self, the same emotions, the same power and authority relations that are foregrounded in the religious ritual. These aspects of self, emotions, and relations are evident in the way that participants handle written texts (reading them, memorizing them, talking about them, touching them, etc.) and, often, in the form of the texts themselves. They become an integral part of the social and cultural meaning of the literacy activity.

Arriving at an understanding of this meaning therefore consists in searching for relationships and connections, which leads one to the third current identifiable in the linguistic anthropological investigation of literacy. Like all other communicative activities, most reading and writing activities are often "microscopic," i.e., they consist in messages exchanged over short periods of time between restricted numbers of persons, whose scope and consequences are minimal. (Of course, widely disseminated published writing is potentially more "macroscopic," but it is only one of many manifestations of literacy.) Despite their microscopic form, literate exchanges articulate the larger structures in which they are embedded. For example, when literate communities are embedded in a colonial context, or when they constitute different social classes or gender groups in a complex society, the differences in their literacy activities are no longer simply instances of the heterogeneity of literacy as a mode of communication. Rather, they become part of dynamics of domination and resistance, structure and agency, and reproduction and change. In such contexts, certain literacy activities are valued, exalted, and employed as gate-keepers restricting access to institutions and other organs of power. Other are devalued or simply not defined as literacy or communication at all. In other words, each act of reading and writing potentially reenacts in a moment-by-moment ("microscopic") fashion the macroscopic structures in which it takes place. Literacy, like many other social activities (even beyond the realm of communication), thus mediates between microscopic, person-centered, and agentive behavior and macroscopic, structural, overarching, and reproduction-centered institutions, ideologies, and similar categories. To use terminology now well established in anthropology from the work of Pierre Bourdieu, literacy activities are thus another form of habitus, and linguistic anthropological approaches to literacy take the investigation of how literacy-as-habitus functions as a central beacon in their endeavors.

In the works of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Walter Ong, Jack Goody, and many others, literacy was foregrounded as a cornerstone that

distinguished the "primitive" from the "civilized." Along with the rest of anthropology, students of literacy have reexamined the orientalist and "othering" assumptions and consequences of such statements. Like all other products of human thinking, literacy is a complex and heterogeneous phenomenon, and certainly not one to which we can privilege as a "cornerstone" that would help us distinguish between kinds of people, groups, cultures, and thinking activities. Like all other aspects of human existence, literacy is part of the complex web of activities through which humans organize themselves socially and culturally.

(See also *agency, endangered, ideology, media, orality, translation, truth, writing*)

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