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## SOCIETY

### DISCOURSES

In the preceding chapters I have linked the workings of the mind/brain to social practices which I have called "Discourses" (Gee 1989a, 1990c). Each Discourse in a society is "owned" and "operated" by a socioculturally defined group of people. These people are accepted as "members" of the Discourse and play various "roles," give various "performances," within it. Each Discourse involves ways of talking, acting, interacting, valuing, and believing, as well as the spaces and material "props" the group uses to carry out its social practices. Discourses integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes.

Discourses are always ways of displaying (through words, actions, values, and beliefs) *membership* in a particular social group or social network (people who associate with each other around a common set of interests, goals, and activities). Being trained (apprenticed) as a linguist meant that I learned to speak, think, and act like a linguist and to recognize others when they do so (not just that I learned lots of facts about language and linguistics). So "being a linguist" is one of the Discourses I have mastered.

Actually, matters are not that simple: the larger Discourse of linguistics contains many sub-Discourses, different socially accepted ways of being a linguist. But the master Discourse is not just the sum of its parts, it is something also over and above them. Every act of speaking, writing, and behaving that a linguist does as a linguist is meaningful only against the

background of the whole social institution of linguistics, and that institution is made up of concrete things like people, books, and buildings; abstract things like bodies of knowledge, values, norms, and beliefs; mixtures of concrete and abstract things like universities, journals, and publishers; and shared history and shared stories.

There are innumerable Discourses in any modern, technological, urban-based society: for example, (enacting) being (a type of) an American or an Afro-American, a man or a woman, a member of a certain socioeconomic class, a factory worker or an executive, a doctor or a hospital patient, a teacher, an administrator, or a student, a student of physics or of literature, a member of a club or a street gang, or a regular at the local bar. Discourses are always embedded in a medley of social institutions and often involve various "props" like books and magazines of various sorts, laboratories, classrooms, buildings of various sorts, various technologies, and a myriad of other objects from sewing needles (for sewing circles) through birds (for bird-watchers) to basketball courts and basketballs (for basketball players).

Discourses ensure that their members (1) get apprenticed; (2) gain similar associative links in their mental networks, similar enough for the practice to continue; and (3) pick up folk theories common to the group. The Discourse "disciplines" people's networks and folk theories so as to keep them "in line." If people's networks or folk theory get too "deviant," the Discourse ensures that they have experiences that bring their networks and/or folk theories back toward the "norm," or that they leave the practice. The Discourse rewards and sanctions characteristic ways of acting, talking, believing, valuing, and interacting, and in doing so it incorporates a normative or ideal set of mental associations and folk theories, toward which its members more or less converge. These norms, discoverable by ethnographic study, are, in fact, where the *meanings* of the acts, beliefs, values, and words of the group reside.

There are multiple and complex relationships among Discourses, individuals, and their actions. We can distinguish between "primary Discourses" and "secondary Discourses" (the following discussion is based, in part, on my 1990 book *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideologies in Discourses*). Primary Discourses are Discourses to which people are apprenticed early in life during their primary socialization as members of particular families within their sociocultural settings. They are our first social identity, a base within which we acquire or resist later Discourses. Secondary Discourses are Discourses to which people are apprenticed as part of their socializations within various local, state, and

national groups and institutions outside early home and peer-group socialization—for example, churches, gangs, schools, offices.

Our primary Discourse establishes those people who count as "people like us" in our private and informal lives. Our primary Discourse, which always effects behaviors in secondary Discourses to a certain extent, is like a theme that runs through all of our behaviors (sometimes very submerged, sometimes quite apparent). It constitutes our *personal persona* and is part of what gives a sense of unity and identity to our multiple social selves (constituted by our many secondary Discourses). Many complicated things can happen in the case of primary Discourses. For example, certain social circumstances can lead to an individual not having (much) of one, or having several of them (sometimes conflicting), or disowning "people like us (me)" and engaging in various degrees of self-hatred.

As we enter the "public" world beyond our families and kin group, we take on new identities as members of various secondary Discourses, from school- and community-based Discourses through a large number of later ones (for example, the army, business, fraternities, job sites, professions, and the like). Each secondary Discourse is a tradition passed down through time—ways people who "belong" to the Discourse tend to behave now and have behaved in the past in certain settings. This tradition constrains what can happen in the present, since only what is similar enough to what has happened in the past will be recognizable as a meaningful performance in the Discourse. Yet, at the same time, actual acts (performances) constitute the ever-growing and changing history of the Discourse. Each performance must be similar enough to earlier ones to get recognized, but each has the capacity to be just "new" enough to also change what counts as a recognizable performance in the future.

It is an interesting fact about the human condition that we can actually be members of two conflicting Discourses, thus living out internally and in the world the opposition between our Discourses. This happens to nearly everyone at some level, but is, of course, particularly acute, for example, in the case of many urban black teenagers who want to be members of "street culture" (which uses resistance to the school as a sign of membership) and still succeed in school (Erickson, 1987; Hewitt, 1986; McDermott, 1987a, b; Ogbu, 1978, 1983, 1987; Trueba, 1989). And, of course, there are deep conflicts between many minority home-based primary Discourses and various dominant Discourses in the schools and the society at large, which are often controlled in the interest of elites who are reluctant to truly share power with minorities.

Any human action is meaningful and recognizable only within some Discourse. Secondary Discourses are the Discourses we belong to thanks to our "public" apprenticeships in Discourses beyond the home and family, rooted in the "public" world of the community, state, or nation. They constitute the recognizability and meaningfulness of our "public" (more formal) acts. A particular woman, for instance, might be recognized as a *businesswoman*, *political activist*, *feminist*, *church member*, *National Organization of Women official*, *PTA member*, *teacher's aide*, *volunteer Planned Parenthood counselor*, and many more, by carrying out performances that are recognizable within and by these Discourses.

Primary Discourses and secondary Discourses are related. We saw above in Chapter 1, in the discussion of the five-year-old's birthday-party story, that behaviors (ways of talking, acting, thinking, valuing, and so on) can *filter* or drift from various secondary Discourses (for example, various school-based Discourses) into the home-based practices of primary Discourses. Thus, many mainstream, middle-class homes incorporate some school-based (secondary Discourse) practices into their dinner-time talk or "book-reading" episodes with their children. On the other hand, behaviors from primary Discourses can also *filter* or drift from primary Discourses into various secondary Discourses. Schools have adopted many values, attitudes, and ways of behaving (having little actually to do with education) from middle-class homes (Cazden, 1988; Gee, 1990c; Heath, 1983). Black churches have been deeply influenced by black primary Discourses and have in turn influenced them (Davis, 1985; Smitherman, 1977; Stuckey, 1987).

It makes equal sense to say that an act belongs to an individual and that it belongs to a Discourse. People act, but since it is Discourses that render their acts meaningful and recognizable, it is also Discourses that act (Clifford, 1988; Douglas, 1986; Eagleton, 1984; Fleck, 1979; Foucault, 1972, 1973, 1977, 1980, 1985; Giddens, 1984; H. J. Graff, 1987; Holton, 1988; Luke, 1988; White, 1973). A person's different acts are rendered recognizable by a variety of different and sometimes conflicting Discourses, and thus, the individual is not really a unified creature, but rather the center (agent/actor) of varied, and sometimes conflicting, acts (performances).

Of course, most of us tell ourselves we are unified wholes, but even this telling will vary, depending upon the secondary or primary Discourse (or mixture thereof) out of which we attempt it each time we "renew" our story of ourselves (Connerton, 1989; Middleton & Edwards, 1990). Thus, even our "story" about who we are is a performance that varies with the stage on which we carry it out.

This Discourse-based theory allows room for both individual *creativity* and for social *resistance* to domination and hegemony (see Callinicos, 1988, for an interesting discussion of these issues). Creativity is allowed both by the fact that every act can vary just so long as it still "counts" as within the Discourse and by the fact that one can balance roles that actually simultaneously "count" in two or more Discourses and in the act of this admixture create rather "novel" performances. Both of these can change Discourses and even lead to new ones: the "style" with which I carry out a recognizable act "catches on" with others; or the simultaneous balancing/mixing of several roles begins to count as the single role in a new emergent Discourse.

Possible change in Discourses and the emergence of new ones can open up possibilities for resistance to domination and hegemony. For example, a person from a dominated primary Discourse (say an urban, lower-socioeconomic black person), if she is allowed access to a dominant secondary Discourse, can "pull off" performances with enough influence from her dominated primary Discourse so as to eventually widen what counts as an acceptable performance (and thus an acceptable person) in the dominant Discourse. Of course, only people who get access can do this and only people able and willing to live with the initial cognitive dissonance and conflicts. Such people are one of the leading edges of resistance and change.

Furthermore, one Discourse can always openly oppose another one. Such open warfare does not always end in the victory of the dominant Discourse. Since Discourses can't exist unless their sanctioned roles and performances get acted out by individuals, to the extent that these roles and performances are frustrated, the Discourse, no matter how dominant, is endangered.

This discussion has reviewed a number of important points that one can make about Discourses (Belsey, 1980; Eagleton, 1983; Gee, 1987; Jameson, 1981; Macdonell, 1986; Thompson, 1984). I have summarized them in the list below:

1. Discourses are inherently "ideological." They crucially involve a set of values and viewpoints about the social and political (power) relationships between people and the distribution of social goods (at the very least about who is an insider and who isn't, but often many others as well). One must speak and act and at least appear to think and feel in terms of these values and viewpoints while being in the Discourse; otherwise one doesn't count as being in it.

2. Discourses are resistant to internal criticism and self-scrutiny since uttering viewpoints that seriously undermine them defines one as being outside them. The Discourse itself defines what counts as acceptable criticism. Of course, one can criticize a particular Discourse from the viewpoint of another one (for example, psychology criticizing linguistics). But what one cannot do is stand outside all Discourses and criticize any or all of them. Criticism must always be lodged from some set of assumed values, attitudes, beliefs, and ways of talking/writing and, thus, from within some Discourse.
3. Discourse-defined positions from which to speak and behave are not, however, just defined internal to a Discourse, but also as standpoints taken up by the Discourse in its relation to other, ultimately opposing, Discourses. The Discourse of managers in an industry is partly defined as a set of views, norms, and standpoints defined by their opposition to analogous points in the Discourse of workers (Macdonell, 1986, 1-7). The Discourse we identify with being a feminist is radically changed if all male Discourses disappear. The Discourse of a regular drinking group at a bar is partly defined by its points of opposition to a variety of other viewpoints (nondrinkers, people who dislike bars as places of meeting people, Yuppies, and so forth).
4. Any Discourse concerns itself with certain objects and puts forward certain concepts, viewpoints, and values at the expense of others. In doing so it will *marginalize* viewpoints and values central to other Discourses (Macdonell, 1986, 1-7). In fact, a Discourse can call for one to accept values in conflict with other Discourses of which one is also a member. For example, the Discourse used in literature departments used to marginalize popular literature and women's writings (though times are changing in this regard). Further, women readers of Hemingway, for instance, when acting as "acceptable readers" by the standards of the Discourse of traditional literary criticism might find themselves complicit with values which conflicted with the values of various other Discourses they belonged to as women (for example, various feminist Discourses; see Culler, 1982, 43-64; Greene & Kahn, 1985; Toril, 1985; Todd, 1988).
5. Finally, Discourses are intimately related to the distribution of social power and hierarchical structure in society (this is why they are always and everywhere ideological; see point 1). Control over certain Discourses can lead to the acquisition of social goods (money, power, status) in a society (for example, the Discourse of successful "mainstream," middle-class job interviewing, in which one takes an overly optimistic view of one's abilities and role-plays confidence one doesn't have, and which many minorities and women have not mastered). These Discourses empower those groups who have the fewest or most minor conflicts with their other Discourses when they use them. For

example, many academic, legalistic, and bureaucratic Discourses in our society contain a moral sub-Discourse that sees "right" as what is derivable from general abstract principles. This can conflict to a degree with a Discourse about morality that appears to be more often associated with women than men in terms of which "wrong" is seen as the disruption of social networks, and "right" as the repair of those networks (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982, 1986). Or, to take another example, the Discourse of traditional literary criticism used to be a standard route to success as a professor of literature. Since it conflicted less with the other Discourses of white, middle-class men than it did with those of women, men were empowered by it. Women were not, as they were often at cross-purposes when engaging in it.

### ACQUISITION VERSUS LEARNING

How do people come by the Discourses they are members of? Here it is necessary, before answering the question, to make an important distinction, a distinction that does not exist in nontechnical parlance: a distinction between *acquisition* and *learning*. I will distinguish these two as follows:

*Acquisition* is a process of acquiring something subconsciously by exposure to models, a process of trial and error, and practice within social groups, without formal teaching. It happens in natural settings that are meaningful and functional in the sense that acquirers know that they need to acquire the thing they are exposed to in order to function and that they in fact want to so function. This is how most people come to control their first language.

*Learning* is a process that involves conscious knowledge gained through teaching (though not necessarily from someone officially designated a teacher) or through certain life experiences that trigger conscious reflection. This teaching or reflection involves explanation and analysis, that is, breaking down the thing to be learned into its analytic parts. It inherently involves attaining, along with the matter being taught, some degree of metaknowledge about the matter.

Much of what we come by in life, after our initial enculturation, involves a mixture of acquisition and learning. However, the balance between the two can be quite different in different cases and different at different stages in the developmental process. For instance, I initially learned to drive a car by instruction, but thereafter acquired, rather than learned, most of what I know.

Some cultures highly value acquisition and so tend simply to expose children to adults modeling some activity; eventually the child picks it up, as a gestalt rather than as a series of analytic bits (Heath, 1983; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Street, 1984). Other cultural groups highly value teaching and thus break down what is to be mastered into sequential steps and analytic parts and engage in explicit explanation.

Both acquisition and learning have an up side and a downside that can be expressed as follows: we are better at performing what we acquire, but we consciously know more about what we have learned. For most of us, playing a musical instrument or dancing or using a second language are skills we attained by some mixture of acquisition and learning. But it is a safe bet that, over the same amount of time, people are better at (performing) these activities if acquisition predominated during that time.

The point can be made using second language as the example: most people aren't very good at attaining a second language in any very functional way through formal instruction in a classroom. That's why teaching grammar is not a very good way of getting people to control a language. However, people who have acquired a second language in a natural setting don't thereby make good linguists, and some good linguists can't speak the languages they learned in a classroom.

What is said here about second languages is true, I believe, of all Discourses: acquisition is good for performance, learning is good for metalevel knowledge. Acquisition and learning are thus, too, differential sources of power: acquirers usually beat learners at performance, whereas learners usually beat acquirers at talking about it—that is, at explanation, explanation, analysis, and criticism.

What has been argued, controversially, to be true in the case of second-language development is, I would argue, much less controversially true of Discourses: Discourses are mastered through *acquisition*, not *learning*. That is, 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 (Newman, Griffin, & Cole, 1989; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). 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.

As a Discourse is being mastered (or after it has been) by acquisition, then, of course, learning can facilitate "metaknowledge," but learning

can facilitate nothing unless the acquisition process has already begun. You cannot overtly teach anyone a Discourse, in a classroom or anywhere else. This is not to say that acquisition can't go on in a classroom but only that if it does, this isn't because of overt "teaching," but because of a process of "apprenticeship" and social practice. Acquisition must (at least, partially) precede learning; apprenticeship must precede overt teaching. Classrooms that do not properly balance acquisition and learning, and realize which is which, and which student has acquired what, simply privilege those students who have begun the acquisition process at home, engaging these students in a teaching/learning process, while the others simply "fail."

It is very important to realize that the English language often leads us to confuse terms for products/props/content and terms for Discourses. Thus, take an academic discipline like linguistics. You can overtly teach someone (the content knowledge of the discipline of *linguistics*, which is a body of facts and theories; however, while knowledge of some significant part of these facts and theories is necessary to actually being a linguist, you cannot overtly teach anyone *to be (to behave like) a linguist*, which is a Discourse—you can just let them practice being a linguist (apprentice them) with people who are already in the Discourse. A person could know a great deal about linguistics and still not be (accepted as) a linguist (not able to signal membership in the "club" by the right type of talk, writing, values, attitudes, and behaviors). "Autodidacts" are precisely people who, while often extremely knowledgeable, trained themselves and thus were trained outside a process of group practice and socialization. They are almost never accepted as "insiders," "members of the club (profession, group)." Our Western focus on individualism makes us constantly forget the importance of having been properly socialized.

Let me turn now to the proviso in the definition of learning above about "certain life experiences that trigger conscious reflection," causing the same effects as overt teaching. In my definition of learning, I am concerned with what usually or prototypically counts as "teaching" in our culture. This involves breaking down what is to be taught into its analytic bits and getting learners to learn it in such a way that they can "talk about," "describe," "explain" it. That is, the learner is meant to have "metaknowledge" about what is learned and to be able to engage in "metatalk" about it (what often goes under the name "critical thinking"). We often teach even things like driving this way. But not all cultures engage in this sort of teaching, and not all of them use the concept "teaching" in this way; nor, indeed, do all instances of what is sometimes

called "teaching" in our own culture fit this characterization (Heath, 1983; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Street, 1984).

In many cultures where there is no such overt analytical teaching, some people still gain a good deal of "metaknowledge" about what they know and do. This appears to come about by that fact they have had certain experiences which have caused them to think about a particular Discourse in a reflective and critical way (Goody, 1977; 1986, 1-44). When we have really mastered anything (for example, 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 in which we are unable to accommodate or adapt, we become consciously aware of what we are trying to do or are being called upon to do (Vygotsky, 1987, 167-241). While such an experience can happen to anyone, they are common among people who are somewhat "marginal" to a Discourse or culture, and, thus, such people often have insights into the workings of these Discourses or cultures that more "mainstream" members do not. This is, in fact, the advantage to being "socially maladapted" (as long as the maladaptation is not too dysfunctional and, to be sure, this is not to say that there are not also disadvantages). And, of course, people in our culture can have such experiences apart from classrooms (and often have them *in* classrooms when it is the classroom, school, or teacher that is causing the maladaptation).

Let me give an example that works similarly, and which further illuminates the nature of learning via teaching or reflective life experiences: 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 "metaknowledge" can actually make one better able to manipulate one's first language.

Vygotsky says that learning "a foreign language allows the child to understand his native language as a single instantiation of a linguistic system" (1987, 222). Ruth Finnegan (1988), in a study of the Limba, a nonliterate group in Sierra Leone, points out that the Limba have a great deal of metalinguistic and reflective sophistication in their talk about language, sophistication of the sort that we normally think is the product of writing and formal schooling, neither of which the Limba have. Finnegan attributes this sophistication to the Limba's multiple contacts with speakers of other languages and with those languages themselves.

And here we have a clue, then. Classroom instruction (in composition, 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 those you are trying to acquire relate to self and society.

There is no doubt that many minority and lower socioeconomic students have great difficulty accommodating to or adapting to certain "mainstream" Discourses, in particular, many school-based Discourses. These Discourses often conflict seriously (in values, attitudes, ways of acting, thinking, and talking) with their own home- and community-based Discourses (Erickson, 1987; McDermott, 1987a, b; Rosaldo, 1989; Trueba, 1987, 1989). And, furthermore, these mainstream Discourses often incorporate attitudes and values hostile to, and even in part define themselves in opposition to, these minority students and their home- and community-based Discourses.

This difficulty of accommodation can certainly give rise to large problems in gaining the social goods that the society ties to mastery of mainstream Discourses, but it can also lead to reflective insight and metaknowledge (even in the absence of equitable or successful classroom teaching). Metaknowledge is 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.

Today, attention to "process," "content," "meaning" as against the superficialities of "form" and "mechanical correctness" is a hallmark of "liberal," "humanist" approaches to writing instruction, and education generally. Nancy Mack (1989, 162), for instance, says: "Good listeners pay attention to the meaning of an utterance and not its correctness—unless, of course, there is some ideological benefit to be gained by stressing the surface features of the language." And as far as acquisition goes, there is some sense to this.

Unfortunately, however, many middle-class, mainstream, status-giving Discourses often *do* stress surface features of language. Why? Precisely because such surface features are the best test as to whether one was apprenticed in the "right" place, at the "right" time, with the "right" people. Such surface features are exactly the parts of Discourses most impervious to overt instruction and are only fully mastered (acquired) 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 surface features are ideal. A native English speaker 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), and 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 (1987), much-talked about book *Cultural Literacy*—he is right 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; he is wrong 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.

But there is a partial way out of this dilemma (there is no total way out without serious change of the social structure). We have seen that raising such concerns to *overt considerations* can lead not to acquisition certainly (although that must be going on too) but to learning, melaknowledge. Thus, the "liberal" classroom that avoids overt talk of form and superficialities, of how things work, as well as of their sociocultural-political basis, are 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). And, of course, such talk is always political talk, but then the absence of such talk is itself a political act (choice, however tacit).<sup>2</sup>

Further, even when true acquisition is not possible, and it is not in many cases where students come into the game late and with little opportunity for real apprenticeships within dominant Discourses outside what they can get in the classroom, what I will call "mushfake Discourse" is possible. "Mushfake" is a term from prison culture (see Mack, 1989, 161–62, from whom I got the term) meaning to make 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 matchsticks are another example of mushfake.

By "mushfake Discourse," I mean partial acquisition coupled with melaknowledge and strategies to "make do." Such strategies might include always having a memo edited to ensure no plural, possessive, or agreement errors (such as "he ask" in the present tense), as well as active use of black-culture skills at "psyching out" interviewers or "rising to the metalevel" in an interview so that the interviewer is thrown off stride by having the rules of the game implicitly referred to in the act of carrying them out. We cannot pretend mushfake Discourse will put an end to the effects of racism or classism, nor that it will open all doors. We can hope it will open some doors, while helping to change the society in the process. It is, at least, something to do while "waiting for the revolution."

So I propose that we ought to produce "muskaking," resisting students, full of melaknowledge. 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 successful teaching, that is, teaching that inculcates Discourse and not just content, is political. That is simply a truism.

## DISCOURSES AND EDUCATION

A central concern in education today is in the question of why children from some minority groups fail in school at a disproportionate rate as compared to children from "mainstream," middle-class white culture. This topic, in fact, exemplifies in important ways the themes about Discourses that I have been developing in this chapter. However, let me begin to get at the issues here by initially discussing the unlikely topic of *phonics*.

Educators have been debating for decades whether schools ought to teach phonics or not, and this debate is a good example of how educational debates typically become polarized around opposite ends of a political spectrum (Adams, 1990; Chall, 1967). Proponents of phonics are perceived as "back-to-basics," reactionary conservatives; anti-phonics proponents are perceived as progressive, permissive liberals coddling children. The fact of the matter is that we know a good many successful ways to teach any child to read. We even perfectly well know the answer to the phonics question, and it doesn't remotely fall into these stereotypes of liberal and conservative camps. Next to no interesting issue in literacy education does.

Innumerable studies have been done on the phonics question and innumerable more on other curricular questions. The most robust result of this immense research, as far as I can see, is the following (Adams, 1990; Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). The success of a curriculum has less to do with its nature than with whether the people teaching it believe in it, advocate it, and see themselves as innovating it. Such people are reflective and involved when they teach; they lift difficulty ceilings and involve parents in education. They do so regardless of the particular philosophy or methods of their usually newly adopted program. Related to this fact is the additional fact that student engagement in literacy depends, more than anything else, on the momentum, support, and expectations created by the teacher.

Years ago I used work on the linguistics of American Sign Language and, connected with this interest, occasionally taught students who were going to become teachers of the deaf. As a linguist I realized that many methods of teaching deaf children English—for example, “cued speech,” lip reading, various oral methods, invented sign systems, and other curricula that avoid American Sign Language are, *from a linguistic point of view*, quite unintelligent. I also knew that a robust result in the deaf education literature was that nearly *any* method, no matter how unintelligent it is, works *if* the teachers believe in it and the parents support it at home (Quigley & Paul, 1984). Let’s be clear what all this means: it means that people who, from a scientific point of view, don’t know what their doing, very often do just fine, *if* they strongly believe in what they’re doing. The very best methods, without this strength of belief, fail miserably.

This result rather surprised me until I reflected on the fact that the *very best* teachers of school-based literacy the world has ever seen have never been trained and, from the point of view of educational science, have no idea what they are doing. And who are these master teachers? They are contemporary mainstream, middle- and upper-middle-class, “super baby”—producing parents. Under the great strain of the 1940s baby boom and the increased demand for spaces in the middle class and for ego-satisfying jobs, middle-class parents from the 1970s on have realized that they must actively *advantage* their children for school success by early home-based literacy practices (Toffler, 1990). What these parents have done and are doing works perfectly well, and we very well know *what* they are doing. We will look, a little later, at what *it* is they do.

So we must allow that enthusiasm and belief, advocacy and parental support, very often count for more than methods and research, regardless of what we say in our grant proposals. However, if we grant that we have

enthusiasm (which, unfortunately, we very often don’t), what is the answer to the heated phonics debate? Are the liberals or the conservatives right? They are both right, and they are both wrong.

The answer to the phonics question tells us something very important about child development, something we know from other sources as well. The answer to the question—now (and for some time, actually) supported by immense research is fourfold. I base my answer on my interpretation of Chall’s work (Chall, 1967; Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990) and Adams’s (1990) masterful survey of the whole debate (see also Strickland & Cullinan’s afterword to Adams’s book, pp. 426–34, for a position similar to mine).

First, no one learns how to read, or knows how to read, who doesn’t come to know, early and well, phonics in the sense of the relationship between the spoken code of the language and the written code. Second, leaving children to simply induce phonics by simple exposure to books, with no more overt scaffolding, is a waste of time, as much a waste of time as letting someone discover for themselves how to get to your house when you could give them a map—they may get there (and they may not), but it wasn’t worth the effort.

Third, drilling students, especially minority students, on phonics rules, having them fill in missing letters on paper and pencil tests, and restricting them to basal readers and restricted literacy environments until they have mastered their “letters” is equally pointless and overtly harmful to boot. Fourth, no one learns to read, or knows how to read, who doesn’t come to know, early and well, what one can *do* with print and what good it will do them to do it.

To see these principles in action, let’s turn to a group of “teachers,” many of whom manifestly succeed, namely, middle-class parents who incorporate “school-based” early literacy practices into their homes (Bruner, 1977, 1988; Cazden, 1988; Graff, 1987; Heath, 1983; Rogoff, 1990; Rose, 1989; Snow, 1983). Study of these parents has been the basis of an “industry” of work on “emergent literacy” (for some examples, see Bissess, 1980; Clay, 1976; Schickendanz, 1986; Taylor, 1983; Teale, 1986; Teale & Sulzby, 1986; for an excellent study devoted to lower socioeconomic black children, see Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1987).

Most of these parents couldn’t remember more than two phonics rules even if you paid them; and few of them would care to teach their children one in any case. But none of them fails to make a *big deal* out of *the sound and the form* of the language, out of letters, and out of decoding print into sounds. And none of them remotely thinks that sounds and letters are the beginning or the end of literacy. They discovered, as far

as I am concerned, the answer to the phonics question without carrying out any research whatsoever.

There is a paradox in the answer to the phonics question. The paradox is related to the old saying that "you have to have money to make money." Paradoxically, children need phonics practice (practice in letter-word-sound-syllable correspondences) to become literate, but *it benefits them only when they are already, in a sense, literate*. Furthermore, this practice can take a great many forms, many of which look like play, or like engaging in "real"-world activities, and none of which need be memorizing rules.

To see what I mean, consider the following: Ask a preschool child to break off the first phoneme of a word or syllable, say, the /p/ in "pink," and then pronounce what's left, for example, /ink/. Success on tasks like this one correlates very strongly with concurrent and future reading acquisition. Such tasks imply that the child not only knows how to effortlessly speak and understand the language, as all children do, but that the child is, in addition, aware at a *metalevel* of the *code* of the spoken language; namely, the child is aware that words are made up of individual sounds (which we call phonemes) and characteristic clusters of these sounds (which we call syllables). The child has structural *metaknowledge* that directly relates to the fact that our writing system is alphabetic, that is, based on letters corresponding to sounds and on clusters of letters that constitute common spelling patterns.

Some people have taken this to mean that the knowledge such tasks implicate is the all-important preliminary foundations for being able to read and, thus, that we should drill students on such tasks when they get to school. However, it turns out that children who succeed at these tasks succeed because they have already had extensive exposure to *print* in their home-based early literacy practices. They are already, in an important sense, to be explicated in the next section below, *literate*.

There is a very real and very important *circle* here: there is no getting literate without gaining metaknowledge of the spoken and written code, and there is no getting this knowledge without being literate. Drilling children on phonics who aren't already literate won't work; attempting to get them literate without an explicit focus on the code is equally misguided. The key to this paradox is that being literate is not primarily a matter of being able to read and write in the sense of encoding and decoding print. Being literate is *not* primarily a mental ability, but rather a social one. Once we see this—a truth foreign to our Western individualism and focus on

"intelligence" and private capacities—the paradox disappears, and the trick behind the magic of "super babies" becomes clear. Perhaps, then, we can buy some of this magic for all children.

Mainstream parents very often spend a huge amount of time *practicing (school-based) literacy* with their children, and what this means is that they *mentor or apprentice* their children into certain Discourses that schools and the wider mainstream culture reward. They engage their children in conversations and keep them on a single topic even when the children can hardly talk at all (Snow, 1983, 1986). They play alphabet games, recite nursery rhymes, read books aloud with great affect. They ask their children "What's that?" and "What's that say?" of pictures in a book they've both seen a hundred times (Heath, 1983). They encourage children to pretend they can read when they can't; they let them manipulate magnetic letters on a refrigerator; and they get them to watch "Sesame Street" for hours on end. They send them to preschool and constantly relate what the children have seen or heard in books to the children's daily experience of the world.

Most important of all, they make clear to their children that *people like us* use language, think, value, and talk *in these ways, with these objects at these times and in these places*. They introduce their children to Discourses that have, for social, historical, political, and social reasons to come to overlap their homes and our schools. These Discourses are not "natural" and "normal"—lots of other groups neither do them nor find them very sensible (Gee, 1990c; Graff, 1987; Heath, 1983; Rose, 1989; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Smitherman, 1977; Street, 1984). Long before the child can decode print, she has become a member of one or more school-based literacy Discourses—ways of thinking, acting, valuing with words and objects—that undergird school-based and mainstream literacy practices.

It is one of the main results of current research on cognition that human beings *know only what they have practiced over and over again*, and when they cease to practice it, it turns out, they cease to be any good at it, though they continue to be quite good at talking about it *as if* they were still good at it doing it—a result that warms a linguist's heart (Scribner & Cole, 1981). And how much does a mainstream child practice these school-based literacy activities at home and in preschool prior to going to first grade? Adams (1990) estimates a good deal over 3,000 hours prior to first grade. In contrast, the child's first grade teacher will spend about 360 hours, with a group of 20 or more children, on such literacy activities. On

the other hand, based on a recent study of a group of lower socioeconomic families (Teale, 1986), Adams estimates that these families spent 225 hours per child on early school-based sorts of literacy activities (25 hours of storybook experience and perhaps 200 hours of general guidance about the form and nature of print).

It is crucial to stress that these social practices are *not* a magic set of "methodologies." What is happening is that the child is being *socialized* into certain ways of being in the world, ways intimately connected to the sociocultural identity of the child's group, as well as to their power and status in the world. These children are not learning and their parents are not teaching *skills*, though the children are most certainly picking up skills as a concomitant to the apprenticeship process. When a parent asks a young child "What's that?" of a picture in a picture book, the parent is not, in fact, trying to teach the child (the skills of) how to answer "what questions." Rather, this is merely a small part of what the parent does with the child in order to introduce the child into a characteristic (socially and culturally specific) *way of doing things*, into a particular *form of life*, in this case, how people "like us" approach books (talk about, read, value, use, and integrate them with other activities).

If you want to see how important these practices are, consider for a moment the Bristol Language Project in Great Britain, a longitudinal study of the language development of a representative sample of children born in the Bristol area in the years 1969-70 and 1971-72 (Wells, 1981, 1985, 1986). The school success of these children at age 10 was found to relate strongly to the children's preparedness for literacy upon entry to school as judged by a Test of Knowledge of Literacy given at age five. The results of this test, in turn, related directly to early literacy practices in the home, the sort we have just been discussing, practices taking place long before the age of five. Finally, both these practices and the results of the Test of Knowledge of Literacy related most directly to the children's social class (the lower their class, the worse they did).

If the children's early home-based preparedness for literacy is still strongly predicting their success in school at age ten, then school itself is not having much of an impact, save "to make the rich richer and the poor poorer." Current research coming out of the project continues to show the same picture even in regard to foreign-language instruction (Skehan, 1989, 31-34): the success of these children at age 14 in foreign-language classes correlates quite highly with their family backgrounds, for example, social class and parental education.

### SOME EXAMPLES

All real learning is a form of apprenticeship, and apprenticeships are always apprenticeships into Discourses. I want to exemplify the points I have been raising in this chapter by looking at three concrete examples of Discourses in action in educationally relevant ways. Then I want to close with an example of successful teaching.

The first example is just the one we discussed in Chapter 1—the five-year-old's birthday story. This story clearly shows what I mean about a child's being literate prior to knowing how to read and write (in the sense of being able to decode and encode print). I reprint the story from Chapter 1 below:

#### How the Friends Got Unfriend

##### *Stanza One (Introduction)*

1. This is a story
2. About some kids who were once friends
3. But got into a big fight
4. And were not

##### *Stanza Two (Frame: Signaling 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, Palls, 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

##### *Stanza Six (Crisis: Fight)*

14. But then one day they got into a fight on who would be which team
15. It was a very bad fight
16. They were punching
17. And they were pulling
18. And they were banging

*Stanza Seven (Resolution 1: Storm)*

19. Then all of a sudden the sky turned dark
20. The rain began to fall
21. There was lightning going on
22. And they were not friends

*Stanza Eight (Resolution 2: Mothers Punish)*

23. Then um the mothers came shooting out 'n saying
24. "What are you punching for?"
25. You are going to be punished for a whole year"

*Stanza Nine (Frame)*

26. The end
27. Wasn't it fun reading together?
28. Let's do it again
29. Real soon!

Let's consider how this text relates to our theory of Discourse. The child had started by telling a story about her birthday, to various relatives, over a couple of days, presumably in her home-based, primary Discourse. Then, on a given day, in the course of repeated book-reading episodes, she reshapes this story into another genre. She incorporates aspects of the book-reading episode into her story. Note, for example, the introduction in stanza 1, the frame in stanza 2, the title in stanza 3, and then the start of the story proper in stanza 4. She closes the frame, stanza 4). This overall structure and style shapes the text into "storybook reading," though, in fact, there is no book, and the child can't read (proponents of traditional accounts of literacy are going to have deep conceptual problems here, because they trouble themselves too much over things like books and decoding and not enough over social practices).

Supported by her mother and older sister, This five-year-old is mastering the Discourse of "storybook reading." But this Discourse is itself an aspect of apprenticeship in another, more mature Discourse, namely, "literature" (as well as, in other respects, "essayist Discourse," but that is *another* story).<sup>3</sup>

This child, when she goes to school to begin her more public apprenticeship into the Discourse of literature, will *itôk* like a quick study indeed. It will appear that her success was inevitable, given her native intelligence and verbal abilities. Her success was inevitable, indeed, but because of her earlier apprenticeship.

Note too how her mastery of this "storybook reading" Discourse leads to the incorporation of a set of values and attitudes (about gender and the naturalness of middle-class ways of behaving) that are shared by many other dominant Discourses in our society. This will facilitate the acquisition of other dominant Discourses, some that may, at first, appear quite disparate from "literature" or "storybook reading."

This little girl, at five, unable to read in the sense of being able to decode print, is already in a very real sense "literate"—she has mastered the form of several Discourses relevant to school success. She already, in fact, knows a good deal about sounds and letters, from other home practices, and she can benefit perfectly well from an overt focus on sounds, letters, syllables, spelling patterns, and words. Such a focus is a flashlight on a field that is already well in place, illuminating a narrow range of that field for further practice.

My next example is a "sharing time" story (Cazden, 1988; Michaels, 1981) told at school by a seven-year-old black girl from a lower socioeconomic background. This girl is now in her early teens, and she has not been particularly successful at school-based literacy. Below I give the black child's sharing time story, which I call "Cakes." Although "sharing time" stories are normally told while the teacher is in the classroom, in this case the teacher had been called out, and the child simply told the story to her peers.

This child's "sharing time" stories were not viewed as successful by her teachers, who thought she "rambled," "exaggerated," "contradicted herself," moved from topic to topic just to extend her turn, and was sometimes "confused." We know from research by Sarah Michaels and others (Michaels, 1981; Michaels & Collins, 1984; Cazden, 1988), that during "sharing time" teachers are listening for stories that are organized quite differently than the stories black children often tell. Thus, in a sense, teachers fail to "hear" the stories black children are actually telling (and hear, instead, "disorganized" versions of the stories they are listening for).

The stories that many middle-class children tell at sharing time, and which teachers are listening for, are organized in a linear, chronological, repetitive fashion typical of a number of these children's home-based language practices. Such stories are not "literary" like the five-year-old's story above, nor are they like the stories many black children tell; rather, they are like little "news reports." Black children's stories also link to various home-based practices, but different ones, practices the school knows (and often cares) little about. In fact, the stories Black children

tell are embedded in a very rich and historically very old context of specific verbal practices in black culture.

### Cakes

#### *Stanza 1*

1. Today
2. it's Friday the thirteenth
3. an' it's bad luck day
4. an' my grandmother's birthday is on bad luck day

#### PART 1: MAKING CAKES

#### *Stanza 2*

5. an' my mother's bakin a cake
6. an' I went up my grandmother's house while my mother's bakin' a cake
7. an' my mother was bakin' a cheesecake
8. my grandmother was bakin a whipped cream cupcakes

#### *Stanza 3*

9. an' we bof went over my mother's house
10. an' then my grandmother had made a chocolate cake
11. an' then we went over my aunt's house
12. an' she had make a cake

#### *Stanza 4*

13. an' everybody had made a cake for nana
14. so we came out with six cakes

#### PART 2: GRANDMOTHER EATS CAKES

#### *Stanza 5*

15. last night
16. my grandmother snuck out
17. an' she ate all the cake
18. an' we hadda make more

#### *Stanza 6*

(she knew we was makin' cakes)

19. an' we was sleepin'
20. an' she went in the room
21. an' gobbled em up
22. an' we hadda bake a whole bunch more

#### *Stanza 7*

23. she said mmmmm

24. she had all chocolate on her face, cream, strawberries
25. she said mmmmm
26. that was good

#### *Stanza 8*

27. an' then an' then all came out
28. an' my grandmother had ate all of it
29. she said "what's this cheesecake doin' here"—she didn't like cheesecakes
30. an' she told everybody that she didn't like cheesecakes

#### *Stanza 9*

31. an' we kept makin' cakes
32. an' she kept eatin' 'em
33. an' we finally got tired of makin' cakes
34. an' so we all ate 'em

#### PART 3: GRANDMOTHER GOES OUTSIDE THE HOME (Nonnarrative Section, Frames 35–41)

#### *Stanza 10*

35. an' now
36. today's my grandmother's birthday
37. an' a lot o' people's makin' a cake again
38. but my grandmother is goin' t' get her own cake at her bakery
39. an' she's gonna come out with a cake
40. that we didn't make
41. cause she likes chocolate cream

#### *Stanza 11*

42. an' I went t' the bakery with her
43. an' my grandmother ate cupcakes
44. an' an' she finally got sick on today
45. an' she was growling like a dog cause she ate so many cakes

#### *Stanza 12*

46. an' I finally told her that it was
47. it was Friday the thirteenth bad luck day. (Gee 1990c: 119–20)

Laid out in terms of its lines and stanzas, the overall organization of the text is readily apparent. The text is in three parts: Part 1 about baking cakes, Part 2 about the grandmother eating up the cakes, and Part 3 about the grandmother getting her own cakes at the bakery. Just before the close of the story, in stanza 10, the child engages in some nonnarrative, expository material. This is typical of the child's storytelling: she often places such material right before her final narrative stanza. Such material

has what the sociolinguist William Labov (1972b) has called an "evaluative" role; that is, it signals what in the storyteller's view makes the story "tellable," "significant," or "interesting."

The style of the language of the text is also fairly obvious, and recognizably part of a black cultural tradition (Smitherman, 1977). The child uses language in a "poetic," rather than a "prosaic" way; she tries to "involve" the audience, rather than just to "inform" them (Nichols, 1989). She uses considerable syntactic parallelism, repetition, and sound devices to set up rhythmic and poetic patterning within and across her stanzas. For example, stanzas 2 and 3 have the sort of structuring I have diagrammed below:

*Stanza 2*

- |    |                    |                  |
|----|--------------------|------------------|
| 5. | my mother's        | bakin' a cake    |
| 6. | my grandmother's   | bakin' a cake    |
| 7. | my mother          | bakin' an X cake |
| 8. | my grandmother was | bakin' an X cake |

*Stanza 3*

- |     |                   |                        |
|-----|-------------------|------------------------|
| 9.  | we                | went over my X's       |
| 10. | Y had made a cake | house                  |
| 11. | we                | went over my Z's house |
| 12. | Z had made a cake |                        |

Stanza 6 repeats line by line, with different language, the content of stanza 5; stanza 8 is just a "different take" on the same episode enacted by stanza 7. Stanza 4 is a two-line summary of all of Part 1, while stanza 9 is a four-line summary of all of Part 2. We can see clearly in stanza 2 that the child is working with structural formats. In this stanza she is working with the pattern: "... bakin' a cake / ... bakin' a cake / ... bakin' a Type of cake / ... bakin' a Type of cake." But the last line involves a plural (cupcakes) and thus can't take the indefinite singular article "a." The girl, driven by the pattern, uses "a" anyway, a "speech error" that gives us some insight into the schemalike patterns that are helping to drive production and that are freeing her to invest cognitive energy in creating meaning and building larger patterns throughout the text as a whole.

Clearly, the narrator here is not primarily interested in making rapid and linear progress to "the point." Rather, she is interested in creating a pattern out of language, within and across her stanzas, much like a painting or a poem, a pattern that will generate meaning through the sets

of relationships and contrasts it sets up, like the multiple relationships and contrasts, points of contact and stress, in a painting or a poem.

And what might that meaning be? Of course, there are always multiple plausible interpretations of a text (and many nonplausible ones as well). But if we follow the clues or guides the child has placed in the organization of her text and are sensitive to the child's culture, we can offer a "reading" that accepts the invitations of her text.

The nonnarrative "evaluative" section in stanza 10 suggests that there is something significant in the fact that the grandmother is going to get a cake at the bakery and thus "come out with a cake that we [the family] didn't make." And, indeed, the story as a whole places a great deal of emphasis on the production of cakes within the family, a production that doesn't cease even when the grandmother keeps eating them. The grandmother, the matriarch and repository of the culture's norms, is behaving like a child, sneaking out and eating the cakes and rudely announcing that she doesn't like "cheeseecake" even though the cake has been made by her relatives for her birthday. It must intrigue the child narrator that the grandmother can behave this way and, far from getting in trouble, the family simply makes more cakes. Surely the story carries some messages about family loyalty and respect for age.

But it also, I would argue, raises a problem: the matriarch, the guardian of culturally normative behavior, is behaving in such a way as to violate the home and culture's canons of polite behavior. What might the sanctions be for such a violation? And what is the deeper meaning of the grandmother's violation? Like all real stories, this one raises real problems, problems that the story attempts to resolve (in large part through its structure) in a satisfying manner.

We can get to this deeper level of the text if we consider the constant use of and play on the word "cake" in the story. The story, in fact, contains a humorous paradox about cakes: the grandmother eats innumerable (normal-sized) cakes at home, made by her relatives, and never gets sick. Then she goes outside the home, buys little cakes ("cupcakes") at the bakery, and not only does she get sick, she "grows like a dog," that is, loses her human status and turns into an animal. Why?

What I would argue is this: the grandmother is learning, and the child narrator is enacting, a lesson about signs or symbols. A birthday cake is a material object, but it is also an immaterial sign or symbol of kinship, *wien made within the family*—a celebration of birth and family membership. The cake at the bakery looks the same, but it is a duplicitous symbol—it is not actually a sign of kinship; rather it is a commodity that non-kin have made to sell, not to celebrate the birth of someone they

care about. To mistake the baker's cake as a true symbol of birth and kin is to think, mistakenly, that signs have meaning outside the contexts that give them meaning. In the context of the family, the cake means kinship and celebration; in the context of the bakery and market society, it signals exchange and commodities.

The grandmother, in her greed, overvalues the material base of the sign (its cakehood) and misses its meaning, undervaluing the network of kin that gives meaning to the cakes. This is particularly dangerous when we consider that the grandmother is a senior representative of the family and culture. Her penalty is to momentarily lose her human status, that is, the status of a giver and taker of symbolic meaning—she becomes an animal, merely an eater. The grandmother's behavior and its consequences are the product of fate—it's Friday the thirteenth, bad luck day—rooted in the "nature" of things, not merely a matter of social conventions (a view shared by all cultures, as far as I can see, including our schools, which take their literacy practices to be "ahistorical," "natural," and "inevitable," practices people can fail at only if they are "deprived").

And now, of course, I must face the same question that could have been raised in regard to the five-year-old's story: could this seven-year-old really have meant this? Could she really have this sophisticated a theory of signs? I would argue that these questions seem so compelling to us because we have a much less good theory of signs than this child has. We think meaning is a matter of privatized intentions locked in people's heads and indicative of their individual "intelligence" or "skill." But once we deny this view of meaning, the questions lose most of their force; in fact, they become somewhat odd.

This little girl has inherited, by her apprenticeship in the Discourses of her community, ways of making sense of experience that, in fact, have a long and rich history going back thousands of years. This enculturation/apprenticeship has given her certain *forms of language*, ranging from devices at the word and clause level, through the stanza level, to the story level as a whole, forms of language that are intimately connected to *forms of life*.

These forms of language are not merely structural. Rather, they encapsulate, carry through time and space, *meaning*, meanings shared by and lived out in a variety of ways by the social group. The girl speaks the language, engages in the Discourse, and gets the meanings "free": she is a "carrier" of the Discourse. It is a good performance, indeed, and it should be: the little girl is apprenticed to a group that has been working on it for hundreds of years. It's just a shame that it doesn't "sell"

in our schools, which unfortunately accept a view of signs much closer to the grandmother's momentary lapse.

### SUCCESSFUL TEACHING/RESEARCH

My third example moves us to the classroom and raises very important issues about testing and evaluation. It is also a good example of the close relationship that exists between good ethnography of education and good teaching. They are often very similar activities.

The example comes from a third-fourth, multi-ethnic classroom in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and was discussed in a recent paper by my colleague Sarah Michaels (1990). The class is doing a science activity using a little beam balanced on a small upright pole; the beam has small metal weights of various values placed on it at different points. The students have been asked to predict, by a class vote, whether, with the weights where they are, the balance will tip to the right, to the left, or stay balanced. The students vote for their choice, then debate or discuss their predication with each other as a group. After the discussion, they revote, in case they have changed their minds on the basis of someone else's explanation. Finally, the teacher demonstrates the actual experiment.

During the discussion, a student named Erik is asked why he thinks the beam will balance. Since there are two weights on the right, each with a value of 5, and on the left are three weights with a value of 3 each and one weight with the value of 1, Eric says, "Okay, well there's 10 on the right, cause 2 times 5 is 10, and (on the left) three times 3 is 9, and then you just do 1 times 1, is 1, and 1 and 9 is 10, so it will balance."

Then Elizabeth, a Haitian girl and native speaker of Haitian Creole, asks for a turn. Erik, the previous speaker, calls on her. The following interaction between Elizabeth and the teacher now ensues:

ELIZABETH: I agree with you and Neirika and Semhar, because 1, I was thinking it will tip to the [right], it will, um, be balance[d].

TEACHER: And what was making you think that?

ELIZABETH: Because, I was only siting down and I say, um, remember, um, . . . I think it will be balanced . . . I think, and I think it will be balanced because I was thinking and I say it will tip to the [right], I say, I think, and I think it will be balanced.

TEACHER: So do you remember what made you think that? Were you just persuaded by, were you persuaded by what other children were able to say?

ELIZABETH: [*nods head no*] Uh uh.

TEACHER: Or were you thinking that, can you give us some words for this thinking?

ELIZABETH: I think um, well, I was sitting down like this, and I was thinking, in my head, I think it will tip to the right, but after I been thinking a lot, I think it will balance.

At this point the teacher gives up and asks Elizabeth to pick someone else to speak. Later, a classroom ethnographer who had been studying this lesson asks Elizabeth some more questions, allowing her to first answer in Haitian and then to “translate” her answer into English. The following dialogue ensued:

ETHNOGRAPHER: Can you tell me why you thought it would balance or why you now think it would balance?

ELIZABETH: [*After her Haitian answer, she says “I say” and continues*] because I was thinking in my brain, and my brain think it will be balance, and it’s . . . I say that.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Okay, now I’m gonna ask you another question. Why? Say more about why.

ELIZABETH: [*looks puzzled*] Say more about why?

ETHNOGRAPHER: Why do you think it will be balanced? What did your brain think to get you to think it would be balanced?

ELIZABETH: I don’t know because I didn’t ask my brain.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Ask your brain about the weights and where they are and why you think it would be balanced or why you think it did balance.

ELIZABETH: [*After a couple of more turns with the ethnographer, and with her actually putting the weights on the right places, she says*] Because you know after I think it would be balanced, I tried it, . . . and it’s right, ta dal

ETHNOGRAPHER: Okay, I’m gonna still keep pushing you on this, this is very helpful, but why does it have to balance? Why doesn’t it tip to the right or to the left?

ELIZABETH: [*saying this as if the ethnographer is really dumb*]: Because I make um multiplication in my head [*and then without a moment’s hesitation, she walks the ethnographer right through the appropriate multiplication in both Creole and English*].

The ethnographer then asks Elizabeth why she didn’t tell her all the “multiplication stuff” in the first place when she had asked Elizabeth why it would balance. Elizabeth says, quietly, “I didn’t understand your question.” The problem that Elizabeth has here is not in her ability to reason or in her control of the requisite multiplication skills. She knows her multiplication facts cold and knows how to apply them to reason through problems like this one.

What Elizabeth fails to know and control is the Discourse of school science. She interpreted the teacher’s *why* questions and the ethnographer’s initial *why* questions as asking about the status of her knowledge as final product—was it a guess, was she simply accepting what her classmates said, or had she figured the answer out by herself?—not as asking about the steps by which she had computed the answer. Elizabeth repeatedly answers the question *she* hears and not the one the teacher hears herself as asking. However, in the Discourse of school science, in order to count as having figured something out by yourself, you have to “return” your reasoning in front of the teacher, making your reasoning public and explicit.

Elizabeth doesn’t need training in multiplication; she needs someone to actively apprentice her in the Discourse of school science. As she builds up the ability to engage in this Discourse—in thought, word, and deed—practice with math and other technical matters will make sense and will take hold, just as phonics will take hold when sown in an already fertile field of membership in literacy-based Discourses, and not otherwise.

Elizabeth’s case also shows up the failure of standard school testing and evaluation. She would have failed any typical school test of this lesson—but, in fact, she had the requisite knowledge. What the ethnographer did was *interactively scaffold* Elizabeth until this knowledge emerged. Elizabeth showed that together with the ethnographer she could come up with the right sort of language. Later she will be able to do this by herself. This is a good example of *developmental evaluation*: working interactively with children to see what they can do with support. In such a process the child learns and develops, and we learn what the child is “ready” for, what she will soon be able to do by herself if we give her the necessary support.

The ethnographer was scaffolding (supporting) Elizabeth, helping her to do with the ethnographer what she could not accomplish alone (engage in answering school science questions). But I have argued above that there is also a role for explicit teaching—telling people exactly what they need to know. However, such teaching must be directed to minds already

prepared through having begun and been supported in apprenticeships within requisite Discourses. The ethnographer was engaged in just such a master-apprenticeship relationship with Elizabeth.

Thus, I want to close by giving you what I consider to be an excellent example of explicit teaching. The example demonstrates one crucial role that teachers must play if children are to master school-based Discourses. But to explicate this role, I must (alas) tell a personal anecdote. Humans can recognize natural beauty, that is, beauty in other people and in nature. And they can come to appreciate the beauty of the artificial creations that we call "art," things like painting or music. However, there is no reason to believe humans can learn to appreciate the beauty of painting, for instance, just by going to a class on the aesthetics of painting or on art history. Plenty of people have taken such classes and are now bored stiff in a museum confronted by a painting and not a test.

Indeed, I confess that I was such a person. Though I had had classes on aesthetics and art history, and though I had read books on painting, I was quite puzzled about why anyone would like Cézanne's paintings, for example. This bothered me because the art books said Cézanne was "the father of modern art" (Lorne, 1943). So I once spent months reading books on modern art and standing in front of the few Cézanne's in the National Museum of Art in Washington. I felt I got nowhere, though I kept looking at and studying these paintings and other examples of modern art.

Discouraged, I returned to Boston, feeling quite the philistine, and quite ready to concede defeat. It so happened that upon my return to Boston a friend of mine wanted to go to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. While I was standing in front of the museum's (at the time) sole Cézanne and telling my companion my sad story, bemoaning the fact that the painting meant nothing to me, an elderly Irish museum guard came up to us and pointed to the painting and said: "Isn't that a great painting?"

Embarrassed, I timidly said, "sure." He then said, "You see how the way that table there is purple, which makes it jut out from its background and seem so solid so that . . .", and on he went telling me what the purple of the table did in the painting. As he spoke, I looked at the table and the painting as a whole, and all of a sudden it made sense. I finally saw it, how the painting worked, how Cézanne worked. Cézanne's paintings seemed at that moment, and have ever since, very wondrous indeed.

What the guard had done was most certainly an act of teaching. After much thought and practice on my own in a natural setting, that is, in front of paintings, the guard called my attention to, focused my attention

on, a piece of the data that I was ready at that point to understand and to relate to everything else I had unconsciously been learning. A piece of the system of modern painting fell into place in my mind at that point, rendering me able to go on, on my own, to learn more about art in general by looking at paintings.

Perhaps I would have finally paid attention to that piece of data, or one like it, and the system would have jelled. Probably I would have given up and, when forced into a museum, would then have been one of those people who, standing in front of a masterpiece, say, "My five-year-old could have painted that."

When I asked the guard how he knew so well how to "introduce" me to the painting, he said that he had noticed in twenty-five years as a guard at the museum that art tours always stopped at that painting. He has listened to twenty-five years of lectures and comments on the painting. That is not, of course, what made him a great teacher. What made him a great teacher is that he knew when and where to strike to get me to see what I needed to see.

Teachers can, at the right moment, point to the right fact, focus the learner's attention on the right thing to look at, to pay attention to at that moment, out of the myriad of things he or she could pay attention to. Good teachers do this all the time, though they don't know they are doing it. Good textbooks do it all the time, though their authors don't think that's what they are doing. There aren't, however, lots of good teachers or good textbooks, and good textbooks are a menace in the hands of teachers who aren't good teachers.

In any case there is evidence that focusing learners on the right input at the right time, namely, when they are ready for it and when they have practiced in natural settings, is a form of teaching that can be successful. Phonics is, in fact, like the purple of Cézanne's table: It is necessary to see it, but it is meaningless and trivial unless you've spent time in a museum; if you have, then it is anything but trivial.

Schools must supply rich, interactive apprenticeships in Discourses to all children, and they must have teachers who know where and how to say "Look at *that*" (where "that" may very well be "when two vowels go walking, the first does the talking" or stripping a /p/ off of the word "pink") at the right time and place. But it does no good to tell people to look at what they cannot see. And we can see only what has already been opened up for our view by an apprenticeship within some Discourse that renders such things "visible" in the first place.