On Not Seeing Words: Illiteracy and Language

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Although literacy is realized in particular ways in different cultures, it also has a universal, cognitive dimension: namely, that skilled reading accentuates the distinction between language and meaning. The study of adult non-readers in literate cultures provides supporting evidence for this argument.

In this paper, I consider the nature of literacy from the perspective of a literacy tutor, a person who is teaching adults how to read and write. I want to make two related arguments from this perspective: first, that the effects of literacy which are discussed in the literature are not qualitatively different from the effects of language, and, second, that literacy is equivalent to skilled reading.

With regard to the first point, I am going to concentrate on one particular central effect of literacy, awareness of language. This effect has been described somewhat differently by McLuhan (1965), Havelock (1963), Derrida (1976), Olson (1977), Ong (1982), Scribner and Cole (1981), and Scollon and Scollon (1981), but in all of these accounts, it is shown that literacy has the effect of accentuating, in the literate person’s mind, the distinction between language and meaning. The results of concentrating on this distinction vary from culture to culture. In what Scollon and Scollon (1981) refer to as the “Western essayist tradition,” concentrating on this distinction has led to concern for the so-called correct interpretation of texts. Among Buddhist scholars in ancient China, concentrating on this distinction led to the complete devaluation of texts in favor of what were perceived to be their underlying meanings. In this tradition, which Scollon and Scollon refer to as “Buddhist literacy,” there was no attempt to preserve texts word-for-word. The exact language of a text could vary each time it was written down, as long as the underlying meaning of the text was seen to have been preserved. So in the Western tradition, scholars preserved the original language of texts, and puzzled over what language meant in these texts, while in the ancient Chinese Buddhist tradition, scholars dismissed the original language of texts as unimportant, because they believed that they knew what the texts meant. What these traditions have had in common has been an insistence on the distinction between language and meaning, a distinction which does not appear to have been as important in oral traditions (see Ong, 1982).
The Objectification of Language

Why do literate people insist on this distinction between language and meaning? As in all areas of the discussion about literacy, discussion in this area is lacking in empirical support, but in the accounts of literacy that I have mentioned, there does appear to be a convergence of opinion that the distinction between language and meaning becomes important for literate people by means of the objectification of language, that is, by means of recognizing language as an object in its own right, distinct from thought and communication. Because literate people characteristically talk about language, this objectification appears to be more complete than the degree of objectification that is achieved by storytellers in an oral tradition as they perfect their craft, or by listeners in an oral tradition as they perfect the art of listening to storytellers and judging their abilities. To talk about anything is to objectify it completely. We cannot talk about fire or water or music without treating these phenomena as if they were things. This kind of objectification is done differently in different languages. In English, we create nouns for the things we want to talk about, or nominalize verbs. For example, we create the noun dance about an activity to say things like The dance is very dull, or we nominalize the verb dance to create dancing in sentences like Dancing is very dull. Speakers of Mandarin Chinese simply talk about activities represented by verbs, as in tiàowǔ (a verb meaning 'dance') hěn ('very') méiyìsi ('dull'). (This example is found in Hopper and Thompson, 1984.) But, however the speakers of a particular language do it, what they must do, in order to talk about something, is to make it into a grammatical subject. Subject, apparently, is a universal category of human speech.

So what literate people do is to apply language to the description of language, and in doing this, they are forced, by the nature of the language which they speak, to objectify language, as they describe it. I assume that it is not necessary to objectify language or any other phenomenon in thought, that we can think about the way a story was told or the activity of dancing without objectifying these phenomena. But in order to talk about these phenomena, we must turn them into things to talk about.

This is what I meant when I stated at the outset that the effects of literacy are not qualitatively different from the effects of language. What literacy does, at least in the case of awareness of language, is not to bring about a qualitative change in thought. Such qualitative change occurs, I would argue, when a child acquires speech, but it does not occur when a person who has learned how to read and write then begins to objectify language, because this objectification of language is simply the result of applying language to a new object, language itself. This is a quantitative change, brought about by a new application of language.

But why would literate people talk about language in this way while oral people, apparently, do not? The answer which I am proposing to this difficult question is that literate people do this because they are skilled readers, and because skilled reading leads to what I shall call a relational concept of words, a concept under which oral representations are related to mental representations.

The Relational Concept of Words

A skilled reader can read out loud. In doing this, he or she will use written symbols as representations for the oral representations of speech, which, in turn, represent