

**THE ECOLOGY OF LITERACY: A METAPHOR FOR EMPOWERMENT**

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*The success or failure of literacy programmes "starts in many ways from the language used to talk about reading and writing, the metaphors for literacy: the language affects the way the issue is defined, what counts as a 'problem' and what counts as a 'solution'".*

(Barton 1994:213)

**Introduction: the power of metaphor**

Barton's (1994) words, quoted above, neatly encapsulate the argument put forward in this paper that it is important to seek an enabling metaphor for literacy. First, the nature of metaphors will be examined. Next, four possible metaphors for literacy will be explored and their implications for literacy practices in South Africa at the present time will be discussed. The paper concludes with the examination of a metaphor for literacy which, it is argued, is likely to be an enabling one for all concerned in the field.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980:5), in their seminal work *Metaphors we live by*, observe that. "*The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another*" Metaphors usually depend on points of similarity in otherwise dissimilar things, or domains; these similarities are highlighted by the use of metaphor. Simultaneously, though, elements in the domains concerned may be hidden, so that blindly accepting a metaphor may be dangerous. This may seem to be an odd observation to make. How can a figure of speech, considered by many to be merely a kind of literary embellishment, be considered dangerous?

This paper supports and amplifies the following argument put forward by Lakoff and Johnson (1980:3): first, that metaphors are not merely figures of speech, but that "[o]ur ordinary

conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature"; further, that "[o]ur concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people"; and that "[o]ur conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities"

Here is an example of how a metaphor may constitute existential reality - and may, indeed, be dangerous for the person who lives by it. Some years ago, this writer was a lecturer in the Department of English at the University of South Africa, which is a distance education institution. Students receive study packages and tutorial letters but are expected to work on their own. The English department at that time was endeavoring to teach students how to carry out a critical analysis of literary prose. The prescribed works were *Lord of the Flies* and *Animal Farm*. Students had a great deal of difficulty with this task since it demands application rather than memorization. Towards the end of the year, the following letter was received from a desperate student:

"Dear Dr Heese, I am having difficulty with critical analysis. Please will you send me the critical analysis of *Lord of the Flies* and *Animal Farm* by return of post. I am sure that, when I have it, I will be able to pass the exam."

Clearly, this student lived according to the metaphor *education is a commodity* with the corollary *a student is a customer*. The domain of learning was understood in terms of the domain of business. What was highlighted was that one paid for a course and received a package in the post. What was hidden was the fact that it takes effort on the part of the learner to acquire an education which is more than merely a feat of memory.

Further reflection should demonstrate the truth of the proposition that metaphors are fundamental to our everyday realities. It is perhaps less easy to accept another proposition put forward by Lakoff and Johnson (1980:235): "New metaphors are capable of creating new understandings and, therefore, new realities" How could this be? Let us take, as an example, the case of a businessman who lives by the metaphor *Time is money*. This metaphor has numerous corollaries such as *time is precious*, *time should not be wasted*, *a lot of time has been invested in this*

*project, I am battling to budget my time.*

Now imagine that this businessman suffers from burnout. He gives up his job and travels to the East. There he encounters a Buddhist monk meditating under a tree. This monk does not live by the metaphor that time is money. The way he thinks, feels and acts will probably be a revelation to our burntout businessman who, if he relinquishes his "time is money" metaphor, will probably live a totally different kind of life thereafter. If a new metaphor can lead to new insight and thus to appropriate action then that metaphor has created new understanding and a new reality.

If it is indeed true that metaphors are capable of constituting reality, and that they may exert a major influence on how people think, feel, and above all act, it could be fruitful to explore a number of metaphors for literacy, to examine the implications of each one, and to identify a metaphor for literacy which is more likely than others to empower than to disempower people.

#### **Terminology**

Before we proceed with this task, though, it is necessary to define two key terms: literacy and empowerment. As a concept, literacy is notoriously difficult to define, but one cannot avoid the issue. Scribner (1984:6) makes the following observations on the topic:

The definitional controversy has more than academic significance. Each formulation of an answer to the question "What is literacy?" leads to a different evaluation of the scope of the problem (i.e., the extent of illiteracy) and to different objectives for programs aimed at the formation of a literate citizenry .... A chorus of clashing answers also creates problems for literacy planners and educators.

Scribner's (1984:8) response to the problem of "clashing answers" is helpful: "Literacy has neither a static nor universal essence". She recognizes that any single definition is unlikely to be entirely satisfactory, and therefore suggests that definitions must allow for multiple literacies. Time does

not allow us to examine a variety of possible literacies. For the purposes of this paper, literacy is thus defined somewhat narrowly as the individual's ability to read and write (including encoding and decoding skills as well as higher level cognitive operations such as analyzing and evaluating) effectively in the context of the environment in which he or she functions.

The next term to be considered is the notion of empowerment - a word that has become one of many tired political clichés and also somewhat fuzzy. For the purposes of this paper, O'Donovan's (1995:9) definition is chosen to clarify what is meant: empowerment is "the process of equipping individuals, and thus their communities, with the skills, knowledge, attitudes and resources which enable them to take control of their lives". It is argued that the metaphor which drives thinking and decision-making about literacy practices, especially in the field of education, will be crucial in enabling individuals and communities to take control of their lives.

#### **Four metaphors for literacy**

This paper will now proceed to explore four metaphors for literacy, investigating each one in turn as regards its implications for literacy practices in the context of South African society. The writer is indebted to Sylvia Scribner (1984) for identifying the first three metaphors to be discussed and to David Barton (1994) for the fourth metaphor.

#### **The first metaphor**

The first metaphor identified by Scribner (1984:9) is that of literacy as adaptation. This metaphor explains the domain of literacy in terms of what seems to be the biological domain: how do organisms adapt to their environments in order to survive? - A question as relevant to literacy as to bodily survival.

The metaphor of literacy as adaptation is a way of expressing the concept of functional literacy. According to Scribner (1984:9), functional literacy is "conceived broadly as the level of proficiency necessary for effective performance in a range of settings and customary activities". We have seen that metaphors operate by highlighting certain aspects of the two domains they link,

while other aspects are hidden. The metaphor of literacy as adaptation highlights the concept of functional competence. What it hides is the differing nature of functional competence in a variety of settings.

Thus, in spite of the apparent commonsense foundation for viewing literacy in functional terms, the problem of specifying a uniform set of skills which determines minimal functional competence remains, partly because the demands which the future might make are as yet unclear, and partly because different communities and groups hold different subjective views regarding the uses of reading and writing activities (Scribner 1984:11).

It is no simple task to determine what constitutes functional competency, and probably impossible in absolute terms. On the other hand, if one employs an approach which allows one to describe basic functional needs within the framework of a particular setting, it should become possible to devise effective functional literacy programmes. One would not, for example, think simplistically about workplace literacy education. One would respond to the particular literacy needs of specific workplaces, perhaps encouraging the workforce to help generate learning objectives and develop their own texts rather than providing a ready-made "literacy kit".

It is clear, then, that the metaphor of literacy as adaptation has something to contribute to the debate on the topic, but, since it only concerns one level of literacy, it is not adequate to express the full complexities of the issues involved. It will not, by itself, promote adequate empowerment.

#### **The second metaphor**

The second metaphor identified by Scribner (1984:11) is that of "literacy as power". This metaphor essentially connects the domains of literacy and politics. According to Scribner it "emphasizes a relationship between literacy, and group or community advancement". In a contemporary framework, expansion of literacy skills is often viewed as a means for poor and politically powerless groups to claim their place in the world.

In this connection, Freire (1977:13) is an influential voice. He states that "education is cultural

action for freedom and therefore an act of knowing and not of memorization". In contrast to cultural action for freedom Freire (1977:76) identifies cultural action for domination which serves to domesticate the people. The first problematizes, the second sloganizes, according to Freire, which implies that not to be literate is a state of victimization.

Freire, however, considers naive the supposition that the development of literacy by itself will necessarily empower the poor (1977:25). He states that "merely teaching men to read and write does not work miracles; if there are not enough jobs for men able to work, teaching more men to read and write will not create them".

Scribner (1984:12) also reports widespread doubts as to whether higher literacy rates automatically improve the social and material conditions of the very poor. The opposite, suggests Scribner, may well be true; which is that rapid extensions of literacy have been accomplished after effective movements to transform social reality have mobilized masses of people for action towards change.

The metaphor of literacy as power thus highlights the concept of "cultural action for freedom". It hides the fact that the mere act of acquiring literacy is not necessarily empowering in itself but depends on further enabling conditions in society.

It also hides another danger: the possibility suggested by Goodman (1964) in his contentious work *Compulsory Miseducation*, that increased literacy may empower politicians rather than populations. Similarly, Armove and Graff (1987) contend that assumptions that literacy will bring about social improvement, economic upliftment, critical awareness and democracy are all myths. Instead, they argue, literacy has often been utilized as a means for cynically manipulating the masses for political purposes. Should one therefore conclude that the ideal of general literacy should be abandoned, as Goodman seems to believe? This paper argues that although literacy does not necessarily lead to social upliftment and may in fact promote mind control, this need not result in the dismissal of literacy *per se*, but should rather prompt one to examine both the nature and the aims of the literacy which is being taught.

It seems therefore that a critical view of the literacy-as-power metaphor will not equate literacy with power, but will specify certain conditions for the empowering effects of literacy. These conditions would necessarily specify that the educational materials and methods should not be directed at mere memorization, but should promote critical awareness. Problems relating to poverty and political powerlessness would have to be simultaneously addressed (Scribner 1984:12). Ways would need to be found of mobilizing communities for literacy, which may be effected around local needs and small-scale activism, or as part of broader political and social movements, and will probably necessitate the deep involvement of community leaders (Scribner 1984:12-13).

As in the case of functional literacy, literacy as power may be seen as a necessary but not sufficient component in empowering large numbers of illiterate or semiliterate people in the Republic of South Africa. One may speculate on the danger that the previously disenfranchised majority could find themselves, now that the much-vaunted "New South Africa" has become a reality, once again stratified into an underclass being dominated and manipulated by a power élite which allows them no more voice than did the previous one. One may thus conclude that literacy as power is a potent metaphor in the South African context; but its limitations and dangers will have to be taken into account by educators concerned with the development of literacy skills.

### **The third metaphor**

The third metaphor relating to the significance of literacy is identified by Scribner as literacy as "a state of grace" (1984:13). This metaphor, Scribner reports, has ancient roots in both religious and secular traditions. It refers to a tendency in many societies to endow the literate person with special virtues, a notion which still underpins the concept of a liberal education. According to this view, literacy has self-enhancing aspects including intellectual, aesthetic and spiritual elements

Interesting pictorial proof that this metaphor operates in South Africa is presented by the cover design of the May 1992 issue of the journal *Language Projects Review*. This journal includes articles on the then topical controversy surrounding the issue of the official status of languages in this country. It quotes, among others, the proposal of the English Academy of Southern Africa

that English should be the main official language while the rest should have secondary official status (possibly determined along regional lines). The cover design depicts a British-looking stereotype image of a male in a three-piece suit with mustache and glasses, sprouting wings and clutching a book to his chest entitled *Holy English Dictionary*. Around him loudhailers spout Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho and Venda. This clearly indicates that the domains concerned in this metaphor are those of literacy and religion.

The metaphor of literacy as a state of grace highlights the self-enhancing properties of the development of literacy. What it hides is the fact that it tends towards exclusionary and elitist views of education and may thus negatively influence practice. An ANC policy document on language dated 1992 expresses a fear that linguistic privilege might continue to concentrate power, influence and information in the hands of an élite. It seems possible that, if the elitist tendency of this metaphor is allowed emphasis, it will be resisted. This is likely to be counterproductive for educators attempting to address the problem of under-educated people and will not serve to empower them. If, on the other hand, the development of literacy skills is seen as democratically promoting self-enhancement, this metaphor could provide impetus to developmental programmes.

We have now examined three metaphors for literacy: literacy as adaptation, literacy as power, and literacy as a state of grace. We have shown that, while each metaphor highlights useful elements, those that it hides are potentially dangerous. It has also become clear that each metaphor tends to invite simplistic thinking, which would not promote general empowerment in the complex world of literacy practice.

#### **The fourth metaphor**

It is suggested that a fourth metaphor, fully explored by Barton (1994), has a great deal more to offer. It is the metaphor of literacy as ecology.

Barton (1994:29) observes:

Originating in biology, ecology is the study of the interrelationship of an organism and its environment. When applied to humans, it is the interrelationship of an area of human activity and its environment. It is concerned with how the activity - literacy in this case - is part of the environment and at the same time influences and is influenced by the environment. An ecological approach takes as its starting-point this interaction between individuals and their environments.

It is this writer's contention that the ecological metaphor is a particularly rich one. It succeeds in highlighting a number of important literacy issues. One example is the "issue of endangered languages and the role of literacy in sustaining them" (Barton 1994:31). If this insight leads to the protection of endangered languages, it would have the effect of empowering speakers of such languages.

The ecological metaphor also highlights the issue of language diversity, which, if considered in biological terms, may be considered a virtue. This supports the view that one should regard multilingualism as a resource rather than a problem (Cluver 1996). If this view is implemented in South African education in a manner that promotes additive bilingualism (Reynolds 1991), it should empower learners who were formerly cognitively disadvantaged.

Perhaps the most valuable contribution of the ecological metaphor, though, is the fact that it highlights the notions of complexity and contextualization, concepts which counteract the dangerous tendency toward simplistic thinking demonstrated by other metaphorical frameworks. Barton explains (32):

Rather than isolating literacy activities from everything else in order to understand them, an ecological approach aims to understand how literacy is embedded in other human activity, its embeddedness in social life and thought, and its position in history, language and learning.

A clear grasp of the embeddedness of literacy in all elements of the learning environment should, one hopes, prevent language policy decision makers from attempting to implement practices

without carefully considering the implications of whether or not curricula exist and the availability of human, material and financial learning resources.

For example: the discussion document on an educational language policy for SA (1995) suggests that institutions of higher education should be strongly encouraged to teach in a variety of languages. The implications of using African languages at university level have not been thought through. Such languages with the possible exception of Swahili do not at present possess either the lexicon or the learning resources for tertiary study. Msimang (1995) supports this view.

It is of course possible that African languages may swiftly be developed until they have become fully viable academic languages. However, even if this were to eventuate, and even if students were to be taught in their various home languages, we would probably still not have solved the problems that many students experience in university studies. The reason for this is that students do not struggle simply because they lack language proficiency; they are faced with a challenge that far exceeds the issue of language skills. Flower *et al* (1990) explain that students must attempt "to enter a new discourse community ... To enter such a community, students need to learn the textual conventions, the expectations, the habits of mind, and the methods of thought that allow one to operate in an academic conversation" Simply adding languages of instruction and learning will not solve this issue and may in fact exacerbate it. What is required, is that academics should explicitly teach the rules of their discipline's discourse. How this might be done is a topic that probably requires another conference, but the observation serves to illustrate the point that so-called "language problems" are complex and that many factors impinge upon them.

One may ask what the ecological metaphor may hide and whether whatever may be hidden is likely to be dangerous. Since this is a complex metaphor with a number of correspondences (and, of course, differences) between the domains of biological ecology and literacy, a full understanding of how it could operate would necessitate a much more detailed analysis of both domains than the scope of this paper allows. In contrast to the other metaphors discussed, though, an obvious hidden implication which could be dangerous does not easily come to mind.

It is also clear that the ecological metaphor for literacy avoids the trap of thinking about a

complex issue with many interrelated and interdependent variables within an oversimplified and thus limiting framework. The ecological metaphor for literacy warns against simplistic policy decisions and practices. If it can promote awareness of complexity, contextualization and interrelatedness in literacy issues, it may indeed serve to empower individuals, communities and ultimately, society.

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