Until the early part of the twentieth century, the ability to read and write was commonly thought to be the crucial factor distinguishing 'civilized' from 'primitive' peoples, history from prehistory. While contemporary anthropology has for the most part eschewed such overarching determinism, traces of it remain in much anthropological work on literacy and its consequences for society and the individual. What follows is a critical examination of current thought about literacy, its role in society, and its place in sociopolitical life.

Literacy has been viewed alternatively as a technology and as a social phenomenon. First, it is a system of secondary signs, in that written signs refer to another semiotic system consisting of the signs of spoken language. The encoding and decoding of this secondary semiotic system require certain cognitive skills akin to the skills associated with various technologies. Second, using literacy in normative ways presupposes certain kinds of sociocultural knowledge: constructing written texts; knowing when, where, and how to consume them; and understanding the associations of literacy with other aspects of the life of the group are all essential for a person to function as a literate member of society. In exploring these various aspects of literacy, we here opt for a strategy that differs from more traditional accounts in at least two ways. Rather than seeking broad generalizations regarding the impact of literacy on society, culture, and the human mind, we demonstrate that literacy is a varied phenomenon, and that an investigation of this variety must take priority over the search for a priori, universalist generalizations. Further, we argue that technological and social aspects of literacy are so intricately interwoven that it may be counterproductive to address them through separate analytic approaches. In particular, both aspects are heavily constrained, even probably determined, by culturally constructed ideologies.
LITERACY AS TECHNOLOGY

In this section we present a brief overview of the historical development of writing systems, and of their diversity as technologies. For more detailed discussion of both topics, the reader is referred to Diringer (1968), Gaur (1984) and Gelb (1963); works more specifically concerned with the origin of writing are Harris (1986) and Senner (1989); on writing systems, see Coulmas (1989), DeFrancis (1989) and Sampson (1985).

The origin of writing

It is generally agreed that writing is semiotically different from pictographic representation, or 'pre-writing', and this difference is commonly used to define writing operationally in opposition to other semiotic systems. Graphic representations of objects, ideas, and notions (e.g. road signs, maps, drawings) differ from writing in that they are iconic signs with non-linguistic (notional) referents, while written signs are symbols, which refer to (spoken) linguistic units.

Little is known for sure about the antiquity and purposes of the earliest literacies, and of the processes which led up to their invention. Commonly thought to have been first invented in the third or fourth millennium BC in Sumerian Mesopotamia, writing appeared in various parts of the world shortly after that date: in Egypt around 3000 BC, in the Indus Valley around 2500 BC, and in China around 2000 BC. Everywhere, there seems at first to have been a strong connection between early literacy and religious practices; the uses of writing diversified only slowly over the course of their history. In Sumeria, this connection was probably mediated by economic needs, like record keeping in economic transactions, but these clearly fell under the jurisdiction of religious officialdom. In Mesoamerica, more than a dozen literacy traditions flourished between the third century AD and the Spanish Conquest. There again, writing arose as a religious practice, particularly in connection with extremely complex calendrical systems, and remained an élite art until its disappearance (Lounsbury 1989). While some archaic writing systems may have been the result of diffusion, particularly in the Middle East, writing was invented independently in at least Sumeria, the Far East, and Mesoamerica. (However, the later spread of literacy in the Mediterranean region, throughout south and south-east Asia, in the Far East, and elsewhere was certainly due to diffusional processes.) In each case, writing was developed from pictograms through a shift from iconicity to symbolization, and from non-linguistic to linguistic reference, accompanied by a trend toward greater stylization of the signs. All evidence underscores the gradual and complex nature of this process. For many centuries, graphic representations consisted of an amalgam of pictographs and different writing systems.

Types of writing systems

Three major types of writing systems are commonly recognized. The type usually taken to be the earliest is logographic (or ideographic) writing, a system in which each symbol represents a word. In syllabic writing, by contrast, individual symbols refer to syllables, and in alphabetic writing they refer to contrasting sound units, or phonemes. A consonantal alphabet provides symbols exclusively for consonants, a phonemic alphabet includes symbols for both consonants and vowels, while the symbols of a feature alphabet are made up of graphic elements that refer to the phonological characteristics of sounds. Commonly invoked as illustrations of each of these types are Chinese characters, early Egyptian hieroglyphics, and Mayan hieroglyphics for logographic writing; Japanese katakana and late Assyrian cuneiform for syllabic writing; the systems used for Hebrew and Arabic for consonantal alphabets; the Greek, Roman, and Cyrillic systems for phonemic alphabetic writing; and the Korean writing system for feature alphabets.

The three systems, according to the orthodox view (e.g. Goody 1977, 1986, 1987, Goody and Watt 1963, Ong 1982), follow an evolutionary order. According to this view, logographic systems were the first to arise in history, are the closest in nature to pictographic representations, and constitute the most 'primitive', cumbersome, and inefficient technology of literacy, in that knowledge of many symbols is required to represent even simple utterances. Gradually, logographic symbols became more stylized and came to represent syllables (i.e. sequences of sounds) rather than whole words. At the same time, the inventory of symbols needed to represent a comprehensive range of linguistic meanings decreased radically. Eventually, syllabic symbols came to represent single sounds, their inventory again decreased radically, and the system reached maximal technological efficiency.

But a closer look at the writing systems that are attested today or reconstructed from historical records demonstrates that none fits these prototypes. For example, the system used for writing Chinese does not exhibit the sort of one-to-one correspondence between written symbol and word (or even morpheme) associated with prototypical logography. Most words in spoken Mandarin Chinese are compounds of two or three morpheme-like monosyllabic elements, the meanings of which frequently do not add up straightforwardly to the meaning of the whole, and each of these elements is written with...
The trichotomy between logographic, syllabic and alphabetic writing, which may be of some use as a theoretical model based on largely unattested prototypic nature, is inadequate as a descriptive device. Furthermore, evolutionary models of writing systems, which are frequently based more on enduring stereotypes than on empirical observations, often fail to recognize that writing systems are used in particular contexts. It is particularly sobering to note that these evolutionary accounts identify the historical ‘perfectioning’ of writing with the rise of Western civilization in the Mediterranean region. But even in Middle Eastern and Greek antiquity, the development of writing from logographs to the alphabet via syllabic systems was by no means a straight road: in the course of the history of many writing systems, logographic elements were discarded and then reintroduced, because they were viewed as more efficient representations of linguistic units in written texts (Davies 1986). Rather than ranking all writing systems in a single order from the most unwieldy and cumbersome to the most efficient and learnable, a comparative perspective should approach the question as a problem of adaptation (Barton 1988). For example, the very complex character of a writing system may serve specific social functions, as Crump (1988) argues for Japanese writing, and ‘complexity’ itself is very difficult to define precisely. Writing systems are adapted to the structural characteristics of the linguistic code and the macrosociolinguistic context. Situations in which different writing systems compete or coexist, and situations of transition from one writing system to another (e.g. the change from a Sinitic-derived syllabary to the Roman alphabet in Vietnam between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries) offer fruitful grounds for investigating the different adaptive dimensions of writing systems. The physical characteristics of writing systems also bear the imprint of the technological and social practices surrounding literacy. For example, incisions made with a stylus in clay, as practised in ancient Sumeria, necessarily have a very different shape from handbrushed classical Chinese characters on paper and from Mayan hieroglyphics carved on stone monuments.

A particularly rich illustration of the way in which a writing system refracts broader technological and social dynamics is provided by the Hanunóo of Mindoro island (Philippines). The Hanunóo Sanskritic-derived syllabary is most commonly carved on green bamboo stalks (but also tattooed on human arms), and both the shape of the characters and their usual bottom-to-top directionality are a direct consequence of the position of the carver with respect to the bamboo stalk and of the nature of the tools involved. But the patterns go further. Norms governing Hanunóo writing are remarkably flexible: for example, the symbols can be written in mirror-image fashion and in any direction besides the standard one (thus easing the task for left-handed individuals); certain phonemic contrasts in the language are indicated in writing by some individuals, but not by others. The systemic laxness of the writing system can only be understood in its broader social context, as a token of the non-directive and egalitarian ethos which the Hanunóo value. The
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Hanunóo case illustrates that many aspects of writing systems can only be understood in relation to their technological and social contexts.

LITERACY AS A SOCIO-CULTURAL CONSTRUCT

Much has been written on the relationship, on the one hand, between literacy and its converse, orality, and on the other hand, between social and cultural institutions and the intellectual makeup of individuals. In this section, two broad schools of thought are first contrasted critically; two case studies are then presented; and the question of the impact of literacy on language is broached.

Literacy and its consequences

Anthropological interest in literacy is deeply embedded in the history of anthropological thought and that of related disciplines. Early in the development of social-scientific thinking, literacy was implicated, more or less explicitly, as a determinant of differences between ‘primitive’ and ‘civilized’ thought and action (Tylor), collective and individualistic consciousness (Durkheim, Mauss), prelogical and logical mentalities (Lévy-Bruhl, Luria), closed and open systems (Popper), pensee sauvage and pensee domesticuee (Levi-Strauss), mythopoetic and scientific thinking (Levi-Strauss, Cassirer), and context-bound and context-free cognitive processes (Vygotsky). The view that literacy plays a pivotal role in bringing about fundamental changes in the individual and society has been most clearly articulated by Goody (in increasingly mitigated terms, in Goody and Watt 1963, Goody 1977, 1986, 1987; also Havelock 1976, Illich and Sanders 1988, Innis 1972, McLuhan 1962, Parsons 1966). This work, represented in what has come to be referred to as the ‘autonomous’ or ‘Great Divide’ model of literacy, takes to task earlier dichotomies for their lack of an explanatory dimension, and proposes that ‘many of the valid aspects of these somewhat vague dichotomies can be related to changes in the mode of communication, especially the introduction of various forms of writing’ (Goody 1977: 16).

According to the autonomous model, literacy, particularly alphabetic literacy, causes (or, in more recent versions, facilitates) basic changes in the makeup of both society and the individual because of its inherent properties. For example, writing leads to permanent records which can be subjected to critical scrutiny, and as a result it gives rise to historical and scientific verifiability and concomitant social designs. Similarly, bureaucratic institutions and complex state structures depend crucially on the types of long-distance communication that literacy makes possible. The individual’s psychological functions are also altered by literacy: a written text, particularly if written in an alphabetic script, is in some sense more abstract and less context-dependent than a comparable spoken text, and the ability to produce and process written texts presupposes and brings about context-free thinking (Olson 1977). Further, literacy affects memory in significant ways, making possible rigorous recall of lengthy texts, compared with the imprecise, pattern-driven memory of preliterate individuals (Hunter 1985).

The premises and claims of the autonomous model have been subjected to severe critical scrutiny by researchers in a variety of fields, including social anthropology (Street 1984), sociolinguistics (Heath 1983), psychology (Scribner and Cole 1981), rhetoric (Pattison 1982), folklore (Finnegan 1988) and history (Clanchy 1979, Graff 1979, Harris 1989). For most critics, literacy should be viewed not as a monolithic phenomenon but as a multi-faceted one, whose meaning, including any consequences it may have for the individual and society, depends crucially on the social practices surrounding it and on the ideological system in which it is embedded. Proponents of an ‘ideological model’ view literacy as a socio-cultural construct, and propose that literacy cannot be studied independently of the social, political, and historical forces which shape it (Street 1984). They point out, for example, that literacy is found in many societies of the world without the social and cognitive characteristics which the autonomous model predicts should accompany it.

To meet these objections, advocates of the autonomous model have proposed that there exist various situations of so-called restricted literacy (Goody 1977), in which constraints on the scope of literacy have inhibited the full realization of its expected social and cognitive potentials. Thus literacy is said to be socially restricted when it is available only to a political or intellectual (usually male) elite, which uses it as a tool for control; is said to be functionally restricted when it is used by many people, but for a narrow range of purposes; and it is said to be intellectually restricted when, for some reason, it has failed to trigger the intellectual changes that are engendered in ‘fully’ literate individuals and groups. Advocates of the ideological perspective view with suspicion the assumptions underlying these qualifications, which more or less explicitly equate non-restricted literacy with Western middle-class standards, and ask whether any society is in fact ‘fully’ literate in this sense. For example, the use of literacy and associated institutions by the political and intellectual elites of Western societies, in order to control access to symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1984), fits the description of a socially restricted literacy. By contrast, in sixteenth-century insular South-east Asia, literacy was deeply ingrained in the everyday life of every social stratum, particularly among women (Reid 1988). Even though this situation clearly does not fit the definition of restricted literacy, it did not give rise to Western-style history, science, political structures, or even schooling.

The ideological reaction to autonomous approaches to literacy represents a retreat from generalization, a call back to the ethnographic drawing board, which some have criticized for its sociological reductionism (Cole and Nicolopoulou 1992). Underlying the ideological view is the belief that generalizations are much more likely to be discovered in the relationship between
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literacy and its socio-cultural, political, and ideological context than in the inherent properties of literacy itself (Besnier 1991). In fact, these very properties are frequently the subject of contention. Compare, for example, the premise that 'speech is transient, writing is permanent' (Crystal and Davy 1969: 69) with the contradictory premise that 'speech, once uttered, can rarely be revised, no matter how much we might struggle to unsay something we wish we had not said. But writing can be reflected upon, and even erased at will' (Smith 1983: 82). Clearly, what is represented in these two statements is the articulation of two different ideologies, or perhaps two facets of the same ideology.

Literacy and literacies

The diversity of literacy experiences, which the ideological model takes as the object of its inquiry, is illustrated here with two case studies: Scribner and Cole's (1981) work on literacy among the Vai of Liberia, and Heath's (1983) analysis of literacy in three rural Appalachian communities in the United States. These now classic studies complement one another in several ways: while Scribner and Cole examine the cognitive consequences that the autonomous model ascribes to literacy, Heath is concerned with the social and cultural correlates of literacy; the former demonstrates the intrinsic variety of literacy experiences within a single group, whereas the latter illustrates variety across social groups in a complex society; both studies demonstrate how ethnographically informed work in two different disciplines, psychology and sociolinguistics respectively, leads to congruent conclusions on the meaning of literacy; and they illustrate how an ideological approach can inform work on the role of literacy in both 'traditional' and Western societies. In both works, a common theme will emerge, which will be taken up later in this article: the complex intertwining of literacy and schooling.

Among the Vai of Liberia, three different types of literacies are attested, each being associated with different languages, institutions, and social activities: Vai literacy, which exploits a locally devised syllabary and is used to write letters and keep records of economic transactions; Koranic literacy, which is learnt in religious schools and used to read Muslim scriptures; and English literacy, learnt in school and used in transactions with the outside world. In this ideal comparative laboratory, Scribner and Cole (1981) set out to test two claims put forward in 'autonomous' approaches: that significant cognitive consequences can be ascribed to literacy; and that alphabetic writing in particular fosters analytic thought. They administered a battery of psychological tests adapted to the Vai situation, such as syllogistic problems, memory tasks, and rebus games. The results demonstrated that literacy itself is not a good predictor of cognitive skills. Rather, the cognitive performance of different Vai subpopulations is best explained in terms of the psychological and social accompaniments of each literacy tradition, particularly those that are given salience during apprenticeship in literacy. For example, Koranic literates perform well on incremental recall tests, a reflection of the importance of memory work in Koranic schools. Subjects literate in the Vai syllabary perform well in rebus-solving tests, because using the Vai syllabary involves rebus-like problems. Vai subjects literate in English, who all attend Western-style schools, do well on tests that resemble school activities, like syllogisms. Thus the pedagogical practices that characterize each literacy experience, rather than literacy itself, shape the individual's cognitive makeup: particular practices promote particular skills (Scribner and Cole 1981: 258).

Learning how to read and write is not simply a process of developing cognitive skills associated with these activities, but also of learning how these skills are to be used in their social context. Heath (1983) investigates the implications of this proposition in three communities of the rural American South: Maintown, a white middle-class community; Roadville, a white working-class town; and Trackton, a black working-class community. She found strikingly divergent patterns in how children are socialized in these three groups with respect to such language-related activities as story-telling and reading books. In Maintown, pre-school children are taught to pay attention to books from an early age. Bedtime stories are accompanied by pedagogical practices like question-answer and 'initiation-reply-evaluation' sequences. In particular, questions like 'What did you like about the story?' resemble the sort of analytic questions that children are expected to answer early on in school contexts. Similarly, Maintown children learn turn-taking mechanisms (i.e. when to be silent, when to speak) and fictionalization skills that are valued in schools. In contrast, Roadville children learn to find connections between literacy and 'truth'. Christian Roadville parents use literacy for instruction and moral improvement, and explicitly value the 'real' over the 'fictional'. Reading to children in Roadville is an uncommon performance in which children are passive participants, and written materials are not connected to everyday life. Finally, Trackton children learn early in life how to defend themselves orally and to engage in verbal play. Young children receive attention from adults if they can offer a good verbal performance. Adult Trackton residents are not literacy-oriented, and do not read to children. Children are not asked pedagogical questions about their surroundings; Trackton adults assume that they will learn through their own efforts and observations of adults. In these three communities, children are thus exposed to different pedagogical practices, and learn very different associations with literacy in pre-school years, which will accompany them to school and in large part determine their performance in such middle-class-dominated institutions.

The two case studies summarized here demonstrate the pronounced heterogeneity of literacy experiences both within and across social groups. Literacy is deeply embedded in, and derives its meaning from, the social practices which are most clearly articulated in pedagogical contexts. Both case studies
demonstrate that it is futile to try to arrive at a decontextualized characterization of the cognitive and social consequences of literacy, and they provide an alternative route: a focus on the activities and events in which literacy plays a central role (Basso 1974, Szwed 1981).

Spoken and written language

The important question of the impact of literacy on language is one which has received little attention until recently. Here again, one finds in the evolution of the problem a history of a priori overgeneralizations followed by a return to 'thicker' descriptive approaches.

Ever since de Saussure, Bloomfield, and Sapir, arguably the founders of modern linguistics, emphasized that the primary goal of linguistics was the study of spoken language, few scholars in that field had paid much attention to literacy. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, two subfields of linguistics, sociolinguistics and discourse analysis, witnessed a surge of interest in the study of written language. Primarily motivated by questions of structural comparison between spoken and written language, studies of this sort would typically take particular linguistic structures (e.g. complex-sentence structures) and analyse their distribution across various types of spoken and written texts (for a comprehensive overview of this research, see Chafe and Tannen 1987). The resulting correlations would then be explained in terms of what the researcher perceives as the 'natural' adaptation of language users to various communicative environments. This leads on to discussion of various oral and literate 'strategies', viewed as the overall patterns of language users' structural and stylistic 'choices' in adapting to such factors as the presence or absence of an immediate audience, and the degree of personal 'involvement' or 'detachment' that the language producer experiences vis-à-vis the text (Tannen 1985).

Work in this vein recognizes that spoken and written communication are neither structurally nor functionally opposed, but lie on a continuum from most literate-like (e.g. academic writing) to most oral-like (e.g. informal conversation); most registers, or situational varieties of language use, fall between these two extremes. Thus the pitfalls of the 'Great Divide' approach are to a certain extent overcome. But problems remain. For example, in order for there to be a continuum, there must be well-defined extremes, the most literate-like of which is pretheoretically associated with such features as the effacement of the authorial voice, structural complexity, and informational 'repleneness' (for the text to be amenable to processing with little knowledge of the extratextual context). Furthermore, the responses of communicators to different communicative contexts along this continuum, which are evident in the structural characteristics of the texts they produce, are explained in cognitive terms; in this respect, this tradition of work does not differ from other areas of mainstream linguistics, which defines its task as a search for universal cognitive explanations for language (of course, there are many different accounts of what 'cognition' consists of). In addition, there is evidence that a uni-dimensional continuum is inadequate to accommodate the variations in linguistic behaviour across contexts of oral and written communication (Biber 1988).

Sociolinguistic investigations of literacy can be better contextualized in the perspective of a broader socio-cultural issues. Most work to date suffers from the virtual lack of a cross-cultural and cross-social perspective, being largely based on the speaking and writing activities of the Western middle-class academic elite. This has led researchers to confuse cognitive behaviour and socio-cultural norms which have become, in the process of a long socio-historical evolution, 'naturalized', i.e. made to appear as if they were the only valid way to communicate through the medium of literacy. As we go on to show, this naturalization is a powerful device in controlling access to such institutions as schooling, and is thus pivotal in the maintenance of socio-cultural hegemony.

THE SPREAD OF LITERACY

Goody (1968) has stressed the importance of writing as a means of communication in a society formerly without it, or where writing has been confined to particular groups. Yet the processes which lead up to, accompany, and follow the introduction of literacy to preliterate groups remain largely undocumented. From what is known of such situations, a variety of patterns emerges. These patterns can be characterized in terms of tensions between preliterate and literacy, between introduced and locally devised literacies, and between different literacy practices.

Tensions between preliterate and literacy

Literacy is commonly introduced to preliterate groups in conjunction with many other technologies, institutions, and practices, among which religion figures prominently. While historically, literacy had accompanied the spread of Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, since the nineteenth century Christian missionization has provided the most common vehicle and rationale for the spread of literacy, and this has frequently been underscored by a First-World–Third-World dichotomy. Since the middle of the twentieth century, many agents of proselytization have legitimized their existence by invoking their literacy-promoting campaigns, in tune with Western middle-class ideology which views literacy, and in particular essayist literacy, as an essential tool for 'progress', 'happiness', and integration into the post-modern world. The explicitness with which literacy, religious conversion, and political economy are intermeshed in missionizing discourse clearly calls for an analytic stance that recognizes the complexity of these relationships.

The reactions of target groups to the introduction of literacy depend on
many different factors, among which figure the relationship between the group and the introducing agents, attitudes toward socio-cultural elements concurrently being introduced to the group, and the social and political associations of literacy (Spolsky et al. 1983). Frequently, where literacy is initially viewed as a means of gaining access to the economic or symbolic capital associated with the agents of introduction, it is readily incorporated into the communicative repertoire of the target group. Witness, for example, nineteenth-century missionary reports of the enthusiastic acceptance of literacy in various parts of the insular Pacific (cf. Parsonson 1967, Jackson 1975). However, the reconstruction of a group’s ideological reaction to literacy is primarily an exercise in historical critique; the texts on which it relies must be read as much for the ideology in which they are embedded (e.g. the belief that ‘low culture’ can only be attracted to and awed by ‘high culture’ and its tokens) as for what they say about the people observed (MacKenzie 1987).

A group’s reaction to literacy can also function as an idiom of resistance: among many post-contact Native American groups, one witnesses a basic suspicion towards literacy, which is viewed as yet another element of socio-cultural hegemony and an encroachment from the outside, associated with the American government’s Bureau of Indian Affairs, Christian proselytizers, and other institutions of the dominant culture (Leap 1991, Philips 1975, Spolsky and Irvine 1982; but see McLaughlin 1989). Comparable disinterest is encountered in contemporary Papua New Guinea, the theatre of many missionizing and literacizing onslaughts (Schieffelin and Cochran-Smith 1984). The acceptance or rejection of literacy technologies and practices can thus play a symbolic role in defining a group’s stance towards powerful outsiders, and the nature of its involvement in socio-political and ideological dynamics imposed from without the group. In all cases, it is important to view the group to which literacy is being introduced as actively ‘taking hold’ of literacy, rather than remaining a passive participant in the process (Kulick and Stroud 1990).

The spread of literacy can be accompanied by various types of engineering efforts on the part either of the group introducing literacy or of those on the receiving end. Outside agents may devise orthographies for the language of the newly literate group, translate texts, and set up pedagogical institutions, as many contemporary missionizing agencies do. There are even cases where the party introducing literacy has devised new writing systems; such systems were invented for Cree, Kutchin Athapaskan, and Inuit in Northern and Western Canada, where they are still in use (Scollon and Scollon 1981, Walker 1981). On the other hand, agents of introduction may provide no more than training in literacy consumption, in an attempt to restrict their trainees’ access to writing; such is the case of nineteenth-century missionaries in much of Polynesia, who brought printing presses with them, printed catechisms and other religious literature, but left the islanders to fend for themselves when it came to writing. The spread of literacy from literate to preliterate groups often accompanies the introduction (sometimes the imposition) of a new language, be it a ‘major’ language like English or Arabic or a locally based lingua franca, often a creole (e.g. Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea). Even when it is the policy of the introducing agent to base literacy on local languages, a lingua franca generally looms not far behind. In contemporary Mexico, education policy-makers advocate the use of Mesoamerican languages as a medium for instruction in literacy for Native American minorities, but view it only as a bridge to literacy in Spanish (King 1994). Thus arise compartmentalized situations, whereby a ‘local’ or ‘vernacular’ literacy is used in some contexts, and a more ‘global’ literacy (commonly equated with print and ‘national’ literacies) in another set of contexts. The spread of literacy must thus be placed in the context of histories of contact between intrusive languages and local languages.

At the ‘receiving’ end, many aspects of literacy undergo redefinition, in that the literacy practices developed by newly literate groups frequently differ from those of introducing agents. For example, in the later half of the nineteenth century, the Diyarri of central Australia were taught to read and write by Lutheran missionaries for the purpose of reading the Scriptures. They cooperated in the process because schooling gave them access to food and other economic resources. But soon, empowering the technology, they began to write letters and keep records, neither of which were encouraged by the missionaries. Thus literacy acquired a very different cultural meaning from the one it had had for the agents of introduction (Ferguson 1987). Similarly, on Nukulaelae Atoll in the Central Pacific, letter writing developed very soon after the introduction of literacy in the 1860s, even though literacy was first brought there, again, to turn Nukulaelae Islanders into consumers of Christian Scriptures. Letter writing quickly became well integrated into the secular life of the community, in which it fulfilled specific functions, such as the expression of certain types of affect (Bensnier 1989). Literacy can also become a new vessel for communicative practices already extant in the oral mode. Among the Gapun of Papua New Guinea, face-to-face interaction frequently involves tension between two conflicting aspects of the Gapun self, individualism and other-centredness, and the very same conflict can be witnessed in the Gapun’s literate activities (Kulick and Stroud 1990).

The diversity of initial literacy experiences illustrated here leads one to hypothesize that newly literate groups do not necessarily perceive literacy as a homogeneous, monolithic phenomenon, but rather as a set of diverse communicative possibilities, defined in part with the contextual background to the introduction of literacy technologies and ideologies, and in part by the communicative dynamics already in place (Street 1993). Situations where preliteracy and literacy come into contact are often extremely complex, and commonly occur together with great social and cultural upheavals, which are usually brought about by the very same agents introducing literacy.
with different social groups. Heath's (1983) work on three Appalachian communities, reviewed above, demonstrates how tensions between the literacy practices of middle-class, white working-class, and black working-class groups both reflect and reinforce inequality, oppression, and hegemony.

Second, distinct literacy practices may be associated with different contexts of use, and may thus play divergent roles in the lives of members of a society. In a rural community in pre-revolutionary Iran, three sets of literacy practices have been described, which Street (1984) calls 'maktub' literacy, 'commercial' literacy, and 'school' literacy. Before state schools were introduced into the rural areas, villagers learnt reading and writing in Koranic schools, or maktubs. While these have been denigrated by many Western commentators and educationalists as involving only rote learning and repetition, in this case the literacy learnt in that context was transferred to other contexts. During the boom years of the early 1970s, there was a growing demand from urban areas for village produce, and villagers developed entrepreneurial skills in marketing and distributing their fruit that required an ability to write, make out bills, mark boxes, use cheque-books, etc. These literate skills were particularly evident among those who had been to the maktub and had continued their Koranic learning in their homes; they were able to transfer literacy skills from one context to another, at the same time extending both their content and their function. School literacy remained relatively one-dimensional from this point of view, and did not provide an entry into commercial literacy. It did however provide a novel social and economic route to urban professional employment, notably through entry to urban schools. The three literacies belonged to different social domains, although a single individual might learn more than one of them.

Third, situations abound in which different literacy practices compete for the same or for closely related intellectual and social spaces in the lives of members of a group. In Seal Bay, an Aleut village in Alaska, one finds two sets of literacy practices, having different historical antecedents, and conflicting social and symbolic associations: a 'village' literacy, associated with the Russian Orthodox church and conducted in Aleut (written in Cyrillic); and 'outside' literacy, which is associated with English, schooling, economic transactions, and Baptist missionarics (Reder and Green 1983). These two literacies, which until recently remained functionally separate, have begun to compete in certain contexts. Characteristically, the competition between literacies is both a reflection and an enactment of conflicts between 'tradition' and 'intrusion', between different economic systems, and between competing religious ideologies.

The ways in which literacy can symbolize processes of conflict in society are thus varied. Different literacy traditions and practices may be associated with various social groups, social contexts, and historical antecedents. The resulting tensions between literacies frequently become a focus of struggle between
groups, contexts, and individuals. Literacy practices are thus part and parcel of broader social and cultural processes.

**LITERACY AND SOCIO-POLITICAL PROCESSES**

The emphasis on social rather than cognitive processes in the study of literacy practices has opened up new and fruitful areas of inquiry for social anthropology. We now examine four connected themes in the light of the concepts and approaches outlined in the earlier sections: the relationship between literacy and nationalism; literacy and gender relations; literacy and education; and literacy and development.

**Literacy and nationalism**

A number of recent studies of the emergence and persistence of nationalism have attributed a significant role in these processes to literacy. Those who argue that nationalism is a relatively modern phenomenon ground a great deal of their case on the supposed nature of literacy. Gellner (1983), for instance, sees the homogeneity required by the modern state as being made possible only through a common national literacy, unavailable in previous 'agro-literate' stages of social development. The literacy of these agro-literate societies was of what Goody (1977) calls the 'restricted' kind. In the modern state, on the other hand, literacy has to be available to the mass of the population and not simply to an élite: indeed, in Gellner's view, it is the development of such mass literacy that explains the rise of the modern nation state itself. Modern industry requires a mobile, literate, technologically equipped population and the nation state, Gellner claims, is the only agency capable of providing such a workforce, through its support for a mass, public, compulsory and standardized education system.

The literacy being referred to here is that of the 'autonomous' model. A single, nationally sanctioned literacy supposedly rises above the claims of the different ethnic communities that may constitute the state. The education system, according to Gellner, genuinely provides a neutral means of authenticating knowledge through reasonably impartial centres of learning, which issue certificates 'on the basis of honest, impartially administered examination'. Scholars who have focused upon the concept of a plurality of literacies, rather than a single autonomous literacy, are less inclined to take these claims at face value: while they are evidently part of the rhetoric of nationalism, they do not necessarily correspond to the social reality, in which it is much more usual to find a variety of different literacy practices. Accounts of the uses of literacy to express identity among youth groups in urban situations (Shuman 1986, Weinstein 1993, Camitta 1993), of mode-switching as well as code-switching in the Moroccan community in London (Baynham 1993), of mother-tongue literacy among Latin American migrants in Toronto (Klassen 1991), and of 'community' literacy in Lancaster, England (Barton and Ivanič 1991), challenge the view of the modern world as consisting of homogeneous nations each with a single, homogenizing literacy.

Likewise, scholars who stress the symbolic and cultural dimensions of ethnic ties and nations focus upon the variety of routes to nationalism and put less weight on the claims made for literacy in its emergence (Smith 1986, and this volume, Article 25). The account of the growth and persistence of modern nationalism requires analysis not only of the exigencies of modern technology and economy but also of the ideological and cultural aspects of literacy practices in nationalism's 'prehistory'. Recent studies of medieval and early modern Europe have thrown into question the extent to which literacy was the preserve simply of an élite, and describe a range of different literacies there too (Houston 1988, Graff 1987). McKitterick (1990) argues that literacy in eighth- and ninth-century Carolingian France and Germany was not confined to a clerical élite, but was dispersed in lay society and used for government and administration as well as for ordinary legal transactions among the people of the Frankish kingdom. Clanchy (1979) describes the shift to a 'literate mentality' in the centuries following the Norman Conquest in England, where the growth of a bureaucratic centralized system was associated with the colonizers' claims for legitimacy and was resisted over a long period through counter-claims for orality and for indigenous language and literacy. Thomas (1986) describes the association of literacy with religious beliefs and teaching, such that terms like 'primer' referred not so much to an aid in the process of learning to read and write as to one in the process of learning to pray.

A similar story of variation in the uses and meanings of literacy in the pre-modern period and subsequently is emerging with regard to other parts of the world. In South-east Asia, literacy was widespread in the era preceding Western impact. This was a matter neither of élite nor of commercial interests but of a variety of local customs and practices. Writing in the Philippines in the sixteenth century, for instance, served no religious, judicial or historical purposes, but was used only for notes and letters. Elsewhere women actively used writing for exchanging notes and recording debts, while in southern Sumatra as late as 1930 a large proportion of the population employed literacy for poetic courting contests (Reid 1988). The arrival of Islam and Christianity had the effect of reducing literacy rates, particularly among women, by restricting writing to the male, sacral, and monastic domains. In the Philippines knowledge of the traditional scripts disappeared within a century of Christianization and a similar fate befell pre-Islamic scripts in Malay and parts of Sumatra. The Indic-based script used by the Hanunóo, as described above, represents perhaps one of the few modern survivals of these local literacies. The variety and complexity of social and ideological uses of literacies in the pre-modern era suggest that simple accounts of 'agro-literate' society, as divided between a literate élite and an illiterate peasantry, may have to be
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revised. Theories of the rise of nationalism founded on such assumptions are consequently being subjected to serious critique.

Some scholars have attempted to engage with this complexity by describing how the social and linguistic hierarchies that Gellner attributes to agro-literate society have persisted into modern society. Adapting Ferguson's (1964) concept of 'diglossia' – the distinction between 'high' and 'low' language uses within a speech community – Fishman (1986) attempts to predict the course of modern nationalism with respect to language conflict. He constructs a typology of modern nation states that differs slightly from that offered by Smith, coining the term 'natism' where the emphasis is on politico-geographic boundaries and retaining 'nationalism' for cases where the emphasis is on socio-cultural and ideological identities. Many of the 'old' nations, he suggests, may have begun as forms of nationalism, in which socio-cultural identity emerged first and only later became attached to the geographically bounded 'nation'. For these nations language was a prior criterion of national identity, in the sense of 'nationalism', and only later became an issue at the level of 'nation', once these societies had made the transition from nationalism to nativism. For the 'new' nations, however, Fishman identifies a different development. They have begun in many cases as geographical-political entities and are not yet 'ethnic nations'. In these cases, he suggests, the trend in language and politics is more likely to be towards 'diglossian compromises' (Fishman 1986: 47): local languages may continue to be used for local purposes, while a different, often international language such as English will be employed for educational and technological purposes. The spread of new literacies plays a major part in these processes. The effect of campaigns to introduce all members of the nation to a single literacy, for instance, may be to counter the trend towards 'diglossian compromise' and to underscore the process of 'nationalism' rather than 'nativism'. Once the dominant literacy has become enshrined, there is pressure for the language associated with it to acquire similar dominance, thus marginalizing other languages that might have survived with oral diglossia. The 'English only' movement in some parts of the United States, which has lobbied to exclude Spanish from schools, may stem from the dominant role and significance attributed to English literacy there (Rockhill 1987a, Woodward 1989).

These questions have yet to be investigated in any depth with regard to the role of literacy, although recent studies on literacy campaigns in Mexico (King 1994), on the persistence of oral speech conventions in Somalia despite a mass literacy campaign there in the 1970s (Lewis 1986), and on the significance of 'politicized ethnicity' in the Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade (Bourgois 1986) suggest that a more complex pattern is emerging than that suggested either by Fishman, in terms of the concept of diglossia, or by Gellner, in his proposed linkage of modern nationalism with autonomous literacy.

ASPECTS OF LITERACY

Literacy practices and the construction of gender

The example of widespread literacy in South-east Asia, prior to western expansion there, raises novel questions about the relative participation of men and women in literacy, and about the uses made of it. Since literacy was not taught in any formal institution and had no vocational or religious value, its transmission tended to be mainly a domestic matter, largely the responsibility of mothers and older siblings. The social context in which literacy practices were learned probably facilitated their use by women, who employed them not only in the poetic courting contests mentioned above but also for exchanging notes, recording debts and other commercial matters which were in the female domain (Reid 1988). As a result, literacy rates for women were at least as high as those for men, and some travellers found them even higher (Reid 1988: 219). The advent of Westerners, with their male-oriented religious institutions, shifted the balance towards male literacy and formal schooling. Such imbalance characterizes many accounts of gendered literacy practices in the contemporary world.

Until recently, statistical and quantitative surveys of the gender imbalance in schooling have dominated the agenda in studies of literacy, gender and development (Kelly 1987, Stromquist 1989). Bown, for instance, writes: 'In the Third World countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America, women's enrolment in schools lags behind that of men ... fewer girls go to schools than boys, and they remain in schools for a shorter time than boys' (Bown 1990). Where researchers have attended to literacy, statistics invariably demonstrate that rural women are the least likely to be literate, while urban men have retained the command of the secular and bureaucratic literacy of the state that they had previously held in religions of the book (Kaneko 1987).

Recently, researchers have begun to ask the subjects themselves for their opinions, studying for instance adult women's motivations in coming forward for literacy programmes (Opiyo 1981, Saraswathi and Ravindram 1982). The balance between economic and 'personal' motives is frequently cited, government agencies tending to focus on the former while women themselves, when given the opportunity, frequently express the latter (MacCaffrey 1988, Mac- Keracher 1989), although Saraswathi and Ravindram (1982) put women's interest in 'economic and gender justice' above their concern for literacy. A project undertaken by the Council for Social Development of India (1972, 1975) highlights the extent to which groups may differentiate between male and female models of literacy. Local women assumed that literacy was associated with male, white-collar, urban labour and saw no reason for attending classes. The project team's model was likewise male-oriented, but focused on the role of women as wives and mothers, directing literacy to them as a means of improving their health management. It thus ignored the significance of the major economic role played by women in family and village life, and the role of structural poverty in explaining their children's poor
health. It assumed that literacy was associated with cognitive advance, whereas oral skills were presumed to be ‘weak’ when it came to acquiring new knowledge. Literacy itself would improve ‘general skills for efficient functioning’. These classic assumptions of the autonomous model of literacy were undermined by the outcome of the project: those classes that involved practical health-care support and oral instruction, but no literacy, were successful by the project’s criteria, while classes that involved only functional literacy, but lacked practical backup, registered the highest drop-out rates. The message was that it is not women’s lack of literacy that leads to poor nutrition and high infant mortality, but the structural problems of poverty, employment and gender relations.

Some writers are beginning to address these social dimensions of gender and literacy, to shift the focus away from ‘women’ as a given category and from the problems associated with their access to ‘literacy’, and to focus on questions of definition rather than of access: which literacies are which women and men gaining access to and who has the power to define and name them? Other work has emphasized the association between specific literacy practices and the formation of particular gender identities. Horsman (1989), for instance, claims that the complexity of literacy and illiteracy in women’s lives has been lost in traditional frameworks, which concentrate on motivation and which see literacy as a simple set of skills that a woman needs to acquire in order to function adequately in society. For the women she interviewed in Eastern Canada, literacy was bound up with identity and the relationships in their lives: when they attended classes, they were seeking to find meaning in their lives and often to pursue a dream for their children. A number of other studies have focused on meaning rather than function and have introduced an anthropological perspective into the complex relations of women and men to writing processes. In counter-balancing the dominant accounts of male literacy, they have provided evidence of what women in different places and times actually do with literacy and what it means to them. For instance, Ko (1989) describes how, in seventeenth-century China, educated middle-class women wrote poetry as a means of constructing a private female culture, against the homogenizing male character of late Imperial Chinese culture; and Mikulecky (1985) records the uses by fifteenth-century English women of the literacy skills being developed by the rising gentry to write letters concerning the ‘business affairs of the family, personal intrigues, duty and death’ (Mikulecky 1985: 2).

Rockhill (1987a, b) attempts to provide a theoretical framework for the study of how literacy is gendered. She points out how literacy practices are significant in constructing different identities for women and men. For Hispanic women in Los Angeles, among whom she conducted life history interviews, literacy practices are defined and ruled by the men in their lives, and resistance involves considerable personal and political strain. Women do the literacy work of the household, purchasing goods, paying bills, transacting with social services, and dealing with children’s schooling. These forms of literacy remain invisible, as do many of women’s contributions to the household. The women are labelled by men as ‘illiterate’ while the men, who acquire and use more spoken English to obtain jobs in the ‘public’ domain, consider themselves ‘literate’.

Women sometimes attempt to break the cycle of dependency and to undertake the schooling necessary to acquire the kind of literacy skills required in public jobs. Their husbands, however, frequently try to prevent them, often through the use of violence. Rockhill characterizes the women’s approach to public literacy in terms of ‘threat/desire’. They expressed their wish for schooling in terms of a desire, initially for self-defence or survival, but subsequently they often shifted towards espousing an ideal of advancement, of ‘getting ahead’. The first, limited sense of literacy learning fitted with the functional domestic chores the women already performed, and represented little change in their situation. But literacy in the second sense, associated with the weight placed upon education for citizenship and self-fulfilment in American society, carries the symbolic connotation of a movement into a better, more powerful class and culture, another world, and another life, which is both desired and feared. The men fear this movement because it represents a threat to their control over women and to their assumed superiority; women themselves fear it because it appears to require a move out of the known and secure, albeit violent and impoverished, world towards that alien but desired culture apparent in media representations of the smart secretary and the woman of the world: to become literate in this sense is to change identity, to become a ‘lady’ (Rockhill 1987b).

‘Literacy practices’, then, help to position women and men in relation to authority and submission, to the public and private domains and to personal identity (Cameron 1985, Moore 1988). Models of literacy are differentiated by gender as well as by class and ethnicity. Research has only begun in this field, but it is evident that it will have to be informed by insights from the ‘New Literacy Studies’ (Street 1993) of multiple and socially varied literacies, on the one hand, and by feminist writing on multiple and socially varied constructions of gender, on the other.

**Literacy and development**

The shifts in approaches to literacy practices evident in many of the publications of the 1980s have considerable implications for policy on literacy and development. The theory and findings of the new literacy studies should have made it harder for development and literacy agencies to persist with a single, dominant, and frequently ethnocentric view of literacy. But in many cases the assumptions of earlier times have persisted. Wagner asserts that while ‘specialists have been developing a much more complete understanding of literacy and the kinds of skills required in the coming millennium ... the
transfers of information between researchers and policymakers are fragile at best' (1989). In the post-war era it was assumed that 'development' for Third World countries meant following in the footsteps of the 'West' (Rogers 1992). With regard to education and literacy, this meant providing institutions and procedures that would enable Western literacy to be disseminated throughout a population. Literacy was seen as a causal factor in development.

Anderson, for instance, links a 40 per cent 'literacy threshold' to the attainment of 'economic take off', a principle to be found in many agency accounts (Anderson and Bowman 1965). Development workers interested in education also tended to associate cognitive change with the acquisition of literacy (Oxenham 1980). For Lerner (1958), literacy would effect the change from a 'traditional' to a 'modern' mentality, the latter characterized by 'empathy', flexibility, adaptability, willingness to accept change, and an entrepreneurial and confidently outgoing spirit. Traditional societies were seen to embody the negation of all of these qualities: they were perceived to be ignorant, narrow-minded, and, from the evidence of early development campaigns, to be intransigent to 'modern' ideas. As a catalyst of the transition to modernity, literacy was supposed to be 'functional', a term that, being sufficiently ambiguous to embrace the political interests of the many different governments and agencies involved in literacy work, came to dominate the field. Unesco, for instance, adopted in 1965 a programme of 'Work-Oriented Functional Literacy Campaigns' that targeted social groups which, once literate, would be expected to contribute to the functioning of the modern economy in their country (Furter 1973, Unesco 1973). The programme failed, among other reasons, because of the lack of attention to local uses and meanings of literacy, and because of the narrow, Western interpretation of 'functionality' it employed (Unesco 1976, Berggren and Berggren 1975, Lankshear and Lawler 1987).

Alternative approaches to the spread of literacy have favoured 'mass' campaigns, such as that used in early Soviet Russia (Unesco 1965a), Cuba (Unesco 1965b, Kozol 1978) and Nicaragua (Black and Bevan 1980). Bhola (1984) has advocated this model for non-revolutionary situations too. However, many of these approaches have also been criticized for being ethnocentric and for their lack of attention to local meanings and uses of literacy and orality. Much development literature is still characterized by programmatic and moral pronouncements that assume that literacy is monolithic, autonomous, and Western (Amove and Graff 1987, Hamdache and Martin 1986).

The work of Freire, a Brazilian educator whose ideas have underpinned many literacy campaigns, is frequently cited as representing a challenge to this view (Berggren and Berggren 1975). Freire (1972, 1978, 1985) places greater emphasis on the political aspect of literacy education, believing that programmes should be about 'conscientization', helping the oppressed to understand the reasons for their disadvantage. 'Functional' approaches, he believes, disguise the true power relations beneath a spurious optimism about the enhanced life prospects that will follow from the acquisition of literacy.

Educators who follow Freire's approach see themselves as animators or facilitators rather than top-down teachers. They start from local knowledge and concerns, beginning a literacy class, for instance, by writing a key local word on a board and using it to generate a discussion that raises student consciousness. The term favela ('slum'), for example, would generate discussion about the social conditions that lead to such poverty and inequality. The educational process, including the decoding of letters for their sounds and the building of words out of syllables, is not simply one of filling previously empty minds, as envisaged in the 'banking' theory of education, but a process of collective consciousness-raising.

From an anthropological perspective, however, there are a number of problems with this apparently more culturally sensitive approach. The identification of local 'key words', for instance, raises problems regarding interpretation and authority as well as of methodology. In Nicaragua, the Sandinistas, despite their use of Freirean perspectives in the Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade, did not at first understand the cultural differences evident on the Atlantic coast (Freeland 1988, Bourgois 1986). Their imposition of Spanish culture, language and literacy was seen there as differing little from that of the Samoan regime before them. In this case, accounts of cultural variation, as well as the growing political disaffection of ethnic groups on the Atlantic coast, led to changes in the literacy programme. These problems may not arise simply from the implementation of Freire's approach but may be endemic to it: how well it is really capable of taking account of local meanings and of cultural and ethnic variation within a nation state, and how far teachers are able and prepared to give up their positions of authority and adopt a facilitating role on a level of equality with students, need further research. Despite evident problems, until recently very few commentators have dared to criticize Freire's work in any depth (but see Mackie 1980, Freire and Macedo 1987, Verhelst 1990).

With regard to the role of literacy in formal schooling and development, some research has begun to take account of the kinds of questions regarding knowledge and meaning familiar to anthropological inquiry. Schooling, like literacy, has been seen as far more uniform than it really is. We need to ask what actually is being communicated in processes of instruction, if we want to know what carries over from school experience into social and economic 'effects'. Drawing on experimental and ethnographic data from the Msambweni region of coastal Kenya, Eisemon (1988) examines ways in which the school experience is transformed into school effects. It was not literacy itself, he concludes, nor simply the experience of school, that enabled students to interpret written material, but rather 'prior knowledge' and 'procedural skills': schools, however, often fail to make this kind of knowledge explicit or to help students organize it. How to make inferences from particular written texts, and how to apply the scientific principles that the texts assume, need as much attention as the technical skills of reading and writing and the mere
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attendance at school that appear to remain the aims of many development programmes.

Studies such as Eisomom's highlight the possibility both of linking theory and practice, and of extending anthropological perspectives in the field of education and development (Robert and Akinsanya 1976, Vulliamy et al. 1990, Fetterman and Pitman 1986). The many ethnographies of literacy produced in the last decade and summarised above have suggested the kinds of questions that need to be asked in the context of development programmes, whether formal or informal: what literacy actually means, why it is being imparted, for whom and by whom; which literacies are developed in which contexts, how they relate to literacies that were there before the campaign; and what complex relations are set up between oral and written language uses in these situations (Wagner 1987, Street 1984, 1987, Schieffelin and Gilmore 1986, Bledsoe and Robey 1986, Finnegan 1988, Fingeret 1983). There is also considerable scope for ethnographies of the literacy campaigns themselves. Who engages in the campaign as organizers, animators and teachers, and why? How do ethnic variations within a country affect the content and form of a literacy campaign? (King 1994, Sjostrom and Sjostrom 1983.) These questions have not traditionally been on the agendas of either development workers or anthropologists, but shifts in approaches to literacy of the kind outlined in this chapter, and recent shifts in anthropological approaches to development (Grillo and Rew 1985), suggest that they may become considerably more prominent in future research.

ASPECTS OF LITERACY

Literacy and education

Since the time of Boas and Mead, social and cultural anthropologists in the United States have been concerned with issues of education and society (Erikson and Bekker 1986), whereas in Britain the level of interest in this field has remained fairly low. However, with the development of new directions in literacy studies, particular aspects of the education process are being opened up to anthropological analysis in both American and British traditions.

From a sociological and educational perspective, the major questions have focused on the underperformance in school of children from specific, 'disadvantaged' backgrounds, whether defined in class or in ethnic terms. Anthropological insights have suggested both a broadening and a narrowing of this focus. They are broadening in the sense that they lead to the study of educational institutions and processes themselves as social phenomena rather than allowing the institutions and processes of education to remain as the sole arbiters of what is to be regarded as problematic. Anthropologists have been interested in questions of socialization (Spindler 1974, Hanson 1979), social reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, Collins 1986, 1988) and the ritual and symbolic aspects of schooling (McLaren 1986, Turner 1982). Anthropological perspectives have also narrowed the focus in the sense that they suggest ethnographies of the school (Willis 1977, Everhardt 1983, Schieffelin and Gilmore 1986), of the classroom (Cazden 1978, Michaels and Cazden 1986) and of the home (McDermott and Varene 1982, Taylor 1985). Thus the minutiae of daily literacy and education-related behaviours such as 'homework' are analysed as social and cultural processes and not simply in terms of their educational objectives and success. Bloome (1989), for instance, has criticized the emphasis, in studies of schooling, on efficiency and access and has called for analysis of the nature of classroom communities as social groups, while micro-studies of the language of the classroom (Erikson 1982, 1984, Collins 1986) have linked local ethnography, including family literacy, to wider political and economic currents in the culture.

The continuities and discontinuities between home and school culture have remained an axis of attention, with anthropologists demonstrating how in many non-Western societies schooling tends to be more closely integrated with everyday social life, at least until Western forms of schooling develop (Fishman 1991, Bloch 1993, King 1994). Literacy practices provide a rich ethnographic focus for such inquiry and the development of ethnographies of literacy in the community and the home (Philips 1975, Varene and McDermott 1986, Barton and Ivić 1991) is beginning to undermine still further assumptions regarding the natural dominance of schooled literacy.

In much of the educational literature, the increasingly recognized divergence between home and community literacies was, for a long time, defined as a 'problem': home literacies were seen as 'deficient', requiring to be overcome by the intervention of educational institutions bearing proper, schooled literacy. Thus Heath's (1983) account of the varieties of literacy in three communities in the American South reviewed earlier in this article (p. 535), far from being taken as evidence of rich learning outside of school on which educational institutions might build -- as Heath herself intended and worked to implement practically -- has been interpreted as providing evidence of the failure of home culture. Where Heath recognized that children were learning complex oral and literacy skills that tended to be ignored when they arrived at school, many educationalists pointed to what they saw as the inadequacies of mothers who did not read bedtime stories or 'scaffold' their children's 'emergent literacy' towards school achievement (Teale and Sulby 1986).

Nevertheless, even in middle-class America there are variations in the uses and meanings of literacy that suggest discontinuity between home and school, as well as intra-class and intra-ethnic variation, so much so that heterogeneity rather than homogeneity now appears to be the norm. This raises the question of how it is that the model of a single literacy is sustained: how, amidst this variation, does the model of 'schooled' literacy (Cook-Gumperz 1986) come to be taken as the standard and indeed as the 'natural' form of literacy, thus marginalizing other literacy practices?

Ethnographies of literacy that may begin to answer some of these questions are becoming part of the educational agenda in parts of Britain and the United
States, although Bloome (1989) has warned that 'what passes for ethnographic research in education may or may not be based on theoretical constructs from cultural anthropology, it may have only the trappings of anthropological method'. Nevertheless, the teacher–researcher movement in particular has looked to ethnography as a means whereby teachers may investigate their own practice, combining their considerable knowledge and experience of classrooms with skills traditionally in the domain of the university researcher (Lytle and Cochrane-Smith 1990). One area in which this aspect of ethnographic inquiry has developed is in relation to the teaching of reading and writing in schools. The Writing Process movement, in Britain and the United States, has led to the introduction into the classroom of features of everyday literacy practices such as collaborative literacy, interactive literacy using dialogue journals, the extension of whole-language approaches to reading and writing in school, and the notion of 'real' reading and writing (Dombey 1988, Meek 1991, Lytle and Botel 1988, Bruffee 1986, Erikson 1985, Rudy 1990). Both the process approach to writing and the product approach that it replaced have been exhaustively researched, often employing some aspects of the ethnographic method (Freedman et al. 1987).

Many of these changes stemmed from the work of educationalists such as James Britton, whose classic accounts of how children learn, and notably of the importance of speech in classroom interaction, led to greater attention being paid to the processes of language and literacy acquisition and their implications for pedagogy. Willinsky's summary of the 'new literacy' in the United States, and the focus of Meek and fellow educationalists in Britain on children's own uses of reading and writing from an early age, shifted attention from product to process and from teacher to student (Meek 1991, Willinsky 1990, Kimberley et al. 1992). Czerniewska, for instance, documents the National Writing Project in Britain that attempted to build the writing curriculum on the insight that children brought into the classroom from their homes' and communities' rich knowledge of literacy practices (Czerniewska 1992). The apparent scribbles and badly spelled texts that children passed among themselves were evidence of early understanding of the uses and meanings of literacy, to be built upon rather than rejected and devalued as in traditional schooling. 'Correct' spelling and grammar could be taught once children had a motivation for writing in the first place. They were to be encouraged, for instance, to write reflectively in journals about their experience, and teachers would respond in the same journals, thus making the writing process genuine communicative interaction rather than a dry classroom exercise. Or children would be given the opportunity to read 'real books' in 'book covers' in the classroom, designed as supportive and comfortable environments for enjoying reading, so that reading would no longer seem like a chore, or be undertaken solely in order to pass administered tests.

In the field of adult literacy a similar qualitative movement is under way, both in research and in teaching. The traditional view of adults with literacy needs in modern industrial society has shifted from the confident post-war assumption that the whole society was literate, to the discovery of 'illiteracy', a concept associated on the one hand with metaphors of 'disease' as something to be eradicated as a danger to public health, and on the other with courageous but disadvantaged individuals bravely managing but basically inadequate. More recently, the focus of research, particularly with an ethnographic aspect, has turned attention to more complex analyses of the social and cultural correlates of the many different literacies to be found in different communities and cultural contexts (Levine 1986, Mac 1979, 1992, Hunter and Harman 1979, Barton and Hamilton 1990). Fingeret (1983), for example, investigates the reciprocity associated with literacy and other skills in urban American communities: a person may exchange his or her skills as a mechanic for the literacy skills of a fellow community member, who will help fill in forms and transact with the institutions of the state that lean heavily on writing. Immigrants may get by in similar ways, one member of the community learning standard literacy and acting as a 'cultural broker' for others (Weinstein 1992, Klassen 1991, Grillo 1990).

The design of standard evaluations and tests given to 'screen' people with literacy difficulties has also been subjected to anthropological analysis. Levine shows how these tests may be the product of an employer's own cultural preconceptions about literacy, perhaps stemming from his own experience of schooling rather than being functionally associated with the employment being applied for (Levine 1986). Lytle and Wolfe (1987) show how prospective students' notions of their own 'illiteracy' may not relate to functional skills or incapacities but rather to self-images constructed through popular cultural stereotypes of literacy. Hill and Parry (1988) have examined the tests given to adults in the United States and other parts of the world for evidence of cultural bias, and have noted the common trend in many countries for local cultural features of the 'real' communicative repertoire to be downgraded at the expense of artificially constructed models of communication whose only social reality resides in the test situation itself (Holland and Street, in press).

While the relationship between literacy and education remains a focus for much of this research, the introduction of anthropological perspectives has provided a recognition, not always apparent in the educational literature, of the extent to which literacy exists in social contexts independent of educational institutions. Where literacy is associated with education, anthropological research has drawn attention to the social and cultural nature of schooling, of the classroom environment and of the conceptualizations of knowledge and learning on which they are based. But historical and cross-cultural evidence shows that literacy practices are to be found in many contexts other than those of education, formal learning and essayist conceptions of reading and writing. This has implications both for the model of literacy purveyed in educational settings and for the relationship of school literacy to the literacies of the home and the community. The heterogeneity and complexity of literacy practices,
evident in studies of the relations between literacy and nationalism, gender, and development, are coming to be recognized as equally central to our understanding of the relationship between literacy and education.

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**FURTHER READING**