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978-0-521-52567-1 - The Social Construction of Literacy, Second Edition

Edited by Jenny Cook-Gumperz

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The Social Construction of Literacy

Literacy – the ability to produce and interpret written text – has long been viewed as the basis of all school achievement; a measure of success that defines both an ‘educated’ person, and an educable one. In this volume, a team of leading experts raise questions central to the acquisition of literacy. Why do children with similar classroom experiences show different levels of educational achievement? And why do these differences in literacy, and ultimately employability, persist? By looking critically at the western view of a ‘literate’ person, the authors present a new perspective on literacy acquisition, viewing it as a socially constructed skill, whereby children must acquire discourse strategies that are socially ‘approved’. This extensively revised second edition contains an updated introduction and bibliography, and each chapter has been rewritten to account for the most recent research. Groundbreaking and revealing, this volume will continue to have far-reaching implications for educational theory and practice.

JENNY COOK-GUMPERZ is Professor in the Gervirtz Graduate School of Education, University of California, Santa Barbara. She has previously published *The Social Construction of Literacy* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), *Children’s Worlds and Children’s Languages* (1986), and *Social Control and Socialization: A Study of Class Differences in the Language of Maternal Control* (1973).

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Contributors

DOUGLAS R. CAMPBELL School of Education, Michigan State
University, East Lansing, MI

JAMES COLLINS School of Education, University at Albany, State
University of New York

JENNY COOK-GUMPERZ Professor, Gervirtz Graduate School of
Education, University of California, Santa Barbara

DONNA EDER Professor of Sociology, Indiana University

JOHN J. GUMPERZ Professor Emeritus, University of California,
Berkeley

SARAH MICHAELS Associate Professor, Department of Education,
Clark University, Worcester MA

SANDRA MURPHY Professor, School of Education, University of
California, Davis

MARY CATHERINE O'CONNOR Director, Program in Applied
Linguistics, and Associate Professor of Education, School of
Education, Boston University

HERBERT D. SIMONS Associate Professor, Graduate School of
Education, University of California, Berkeley

GORDON WELLS Professor, Department of Education, University of
California, Santa Cruz

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Preface

First published in an earlier edition twenty years ago, this book was part of a new wave of studies exploring literacy from anthropological and social historical perspectives that began to appear from the late 1970s, beginning with the publication of Goody's *Domestication of the Savage Mind* (1977). The volume differs from others in that it focuses on literacy as a sociolinguistic process, in which language and language use in all their ramifications are central to the study of literacy. Most usually described as the production and interpretation of written text, literacy in this volume is seen as interactively and therefore socially constructed through verbal exchanges that take place over time in many communicative settings. It is literacy in this broader sense that defines not just an educated person, but also and more importantly, an educable one.

Like others in the Interactional Sociolinguistics series, this volume seeks to provide insights into the workings of institutional processes in contemporary urban societies through case studies of verbal encounters that typify individuals' experiences in these institutions. The assumption is that many issues that have long been at the center of public debate such as equal access to educational opportunity arise at least in part as a result of inferences and judgments made in the course of everyday interactive experience. By studying the often unstated beliefs and preconceptions on which such judgments are based along with the verbal exchanges in which interactants participate, we can gain an understanding of how evaluations and educational outcomes are socially constructed. In this way the process of schooling, a key constituent of social reproduction, can be opened up to micro-analytic scrutiny through

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in-depth analysis of verbal communication in specific educational settings.

The immediate context for the book was a two-year investigation of classroom interaction in an ethnically diverse Northern California school system (Cook-Gumperz et al. 1981), funded by the US National Institute of Education (NIE) under the ‘Teaching as a Linguistic Process’ program which sought to apply ethnographic and linguistic perspectives on language use to educational problems of learning and school achievement. Although classroom interaction studies have a long history most existing research has tended to concentrate either solely on macro-societal issues or on psychometric assessments of test performance and teacher–student relations. It is only during the last decades that the potential of in-depth analysis of the context-bound ways in which information is conveyed, and understandings are negotiated, has come to be realized. Earlier on such research was influenced by studies in the ethnography of communication where language use was treated as a social phenomenon and the grammatical characteristics of verbal behavior were analyzed in the context of cultural values and social attributes of participants in naturally occurring situations (Gumperz and Hymes, *Directions in Sociolinguistics* 1972/86; Cazden, John and Hymes *Functions of Language in the Classroom* 1972/85).

The historical impetus for the work reported in this volume were the studies conducted at the Language Behavior Research Laboratory in University of California, Berkeley. Beginning with a summer workshop, ‘Language, Society and the Child’, held shortly after the Laboratory was founded in 1968, researchers set out to explore perspectives on language socialization concentrating on cross-cultural and cross-class comparisons in context specific settings. Many of the participants in the work of the Laboratory and in the original conference have gone on to play important roles in developing new approaches to language acquisition, language use, and language in education.

From this newly emergent focus, the classroom came to be seen as an important setting for research on social issues in urban society. The volume owes an intellectual debt to this tradition. The chapters by Campbell, Collins, Michaels, O’Connor, Simons and Murphy, Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz continue this tradition

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in some part while taking the approach to language use further through detailed sociolinguistic analyses of key interactive situations. In selecting from the original NIE research materials for this volume it seemed necessary to add additional comparative perspectives to document the importance of findings which might otherwise be seen as specific to the particular socio-ecological setting of Berkeley, a city with an ethnically diverse population and a largely white upper middle class known for its commitment to social/cultural heterogeneity. To this end several additional studies were incorporated: one, from an urban setting in Britain (Wells), that looked at a traditional white middle and working class, a second from an American mid-Western suburb of exclusively middle-class families (Eder), and a third from a bilingual parochial school in the Philippines with a predominantly middle-class population (Campbell). Not only do these studies widen the range of settings explored but they also reflect additional contrasting traditions and ideologies of learning.

Finally, this book focuses on what is one of the most urgent problems of recent educational policy making: the need to achieve a higher level of literacy through public education. Behind the statistics of annual school test results and school-leaver employment lies an accumulation of knowledge about classroom-based interactional processes and on-site teacher evaluations. The use of interactional sociolinguistics to explore the way in which these moment-to-moment decisions are made and how they result in school-career patterns is a special focus of these studies. However, no work on literacy can ignore the essential vagueness and the often prescriptively charged meaning of the term 'literacy'. We hope that by setting these detailed interactional studies in a critical historical perspective this book can contribute to the creation of a non-prejudicial climate in which the inevitable social constraints that affect schooling and literacy acquisition can be reconsidered.

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