

FEELING DEAF AND DUMB: THE COSTS OF LITERACY

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"We have confused reason with literacy, and rationalism with a single technology"

— McLuhan

The current effort to replace illiteracy with literacy is an attempt to eradicate something we do not fully understand for the sake of something upon whose definition we cannot even agree. The American people and schools have become enamored of the idea that there are two kinds of cultures and people—those who read and write and those who don't.

This separation of peoples into literate and oral, or illiterate, and the assumption that the literate is better, more advanced, more civilized, more intelligent than the oral, has found its way from a theory concerning the development of language and thought over the last 2500 years into our theories of teaching individuals in an already developed society. It provides us with a justification not only to convert developing nations into readers and writers, and thus literates, but also to address what have come to be called "nontraditional" students in our own society as though they were ignorant and devoid of language. It is, after all, for their own good.

But what if the theories that align literacy with intelligence are finally unable to substantiate their claims? And even if they are right in that print literacy does indeed produce a certain kind of intelligence, what about other kinds of intelligence? What exactly are we eliminating when we conquer illiteracy? What is the cost of literacy? What is lost in its definition and establishment? What is the nature of the silence to which those outside its confines are relegated? In the silence of the outside, the "illiterate" can neither give nor receive the language of power; they are, in effect deaf and dumb. I will develop this metaphor by examining two groups—women and the deaf/hearing-impaired—as examples of those who have known silence both metaphorically and literally.¹

"Literacy" is currently used to denote a variety of levels along a hierarchy of language use and awareness. According to Resnick and Resnick, the term has evolved through time from the ability to sign one's name, to the ability to read aloud and summarize a familiar text, to the current notion of the ability to derive new meaning from unfamiliar materials (371). For Project PLUS, literacy is the ability to function in an economy based on print literacy. But implicit in their commercials is the promise that "literacy," the ability to read and write, will enhance the quality of life.

Such a connection between literacy and quality of life, intelligence, and economic success, is common. However, in *On Literacy*, Robert Pattison warns that this connection is "perfectly valid if literacy is properly defined but dangerously misleading where it is not" (122). Pattison is addressing such endeavors as Project PLUS that promise better lives through a literacy defined as reading and writing and Thomas Farrell's promise of "intellectual liberation" through Standard English usage, questioning the power of a literacy narrowly defined as skills. It is a misleading promise, for the literacy of the schools, the gatekeepers of reading, writing, and speaking in the "officially sanctioned

manner," demands something far more complex and sophisticated (Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality* 1; *Writing Instruction* 72). The literacy of the schools, the literacy of power, demands a hierarchy of mental operations discerned by Jay Robinson in the MLA volume, *Literacy for Life*. This five-point definition includes:

1. the ability to crack a code: to make sense of marks on paper;
2. the ability to derive information from that code;
3. the ability to derive personal, social, cognitive meaning from the information derived;
4. the ability to act on such meanings;
5. the ability to make inferential and other cognitive structures from the meanings acquired in order to find new meanings (16).

Learning to read and write a language with a phonetic alphabet has been credited with bringing about this mastery. But it is the value we place on abstract and logical thought that stands behind the push for literacy. Concerning our valuing of such thought, Robinson warns,

those of us who teach [literacy and literature] acquired our educations through contact with the printed word, and we are tied, more than we sometimes realize, to a single literate tradition and its particular biases . . . Our own bias toward print has led some of us to equate literacy—the possession of letters—with learning itself . . . The same bias has caused us, in some of our testing, to equate literacy with intelligence (12).

Any dialect of English, especially those that do not follow standard usage of the verb "to be," some allege, cannot lead to logical thought or intelligence. Indeed, Farrell claims that it is imperative to "supplant" oral uses of language, such as dialects and their accompanying structures and processes of composing, with literate ones if the student is to become intelligent ("IQ and Standard English" 479). In order to achieve full intellectual or cognitive development, students should move from the narrative forms associated with orality through and beyond rhetoric into logic. Literacy (apparently) is logic or, at least, logical thinking as a more highly developed form of thinking than rhetorical.

The conflation of literacy, intelligence, and learning often rests on Piaget as a model of development toward abstract thinking that all students must follow. Farrell claims that if dialect users do not learn the literate language—Standard Written English—they will not develop to Piaget's stage of developed abstract thinking. Their continued low scores on standardized tests will demonstrate this "non-learning" ("A Defense for Requiring Standard English" 170). This reliance on Piaget ignores problems within his studies—problems I will return to later.

Ethnographers such as Scribner and Cole, Shirley Brice Heath, Deborah Tannen, and David Olson consider literacy within its particular cultural contexts. The work of Scribner and Cole with the literacy of the Vai does not dispute Farrell's claim that correct use of English is literacy and a form of intelligence; it does, however, suggest that literacy and intelligence are culturally defined concepts learned in specific settings. As a result of their research, they conclude that ignorance of the cultural aspect of literacy and intelligence and an exclusive emphasis on its textual aspect lead to "a serious underestimation of the cognitive skills involved" in writing and thinking not tested by standardized tests and "an overestimation of the intellectual skills that [these tests] 'necessarily' entail" (24).

Heath and Beth Daniell, a rhetorician investigating literacy, agree with the cultural aspect of literacy stressed by Scribner and Cole. Studying the differing values of literacy from culture to culture, Heath posits that its acquisition is "often a function of society-specific tasks" and that "children read to learn information they judged necessary in their lives" ("The Functions and Uses of Literacy" 126 & 127). Following Scribner and Cole, Daniell asserts that the cognitive skills aligned with literacy are acquired from "Western styles of schooling" (187). In defense of the minority groups targeted by Farrell, she further argues that "it is precisely social conditions that determine what counts as literacy, who has access to literacy, and what uses and functions literacy can be put to" (188).

However, as Deborah Tannen illustrates, the theory of a continuum moving from orality to literacy, from narrative to logic, ignores the social situation of communicating individuals. Daniell points out that this theory "omits such factors as the functions and uses of the discourse, the situation in which the discourse occurs, the cultural norms for the construction of discourse, and the personal motives of speaker or writer" (Daniell 185). In other words, the theory of a single continuum omits rhetoric. It does so in two ways. First, by not taking into account the rhetorical situation of both oral and literate communication, and second by relegating rhetoric to a lower position on the hierarchical continuum and equating literacy with logic.

Against such equations and hierarchies, David Olson suggests that a "realistic assessment of literacy standards and practices" requires a distinction between several literacies: 1) "literacy central to a general education;" 2) "functional literacies relevant to various social and economic groups;" 3) "lay literacies"—understanding about texts and writing regardless of ability; and 4) "scribal literacy"—ability to read and write. By distinguishing and understanding these various literacies, we can come to see talk about illiterates and illiteracy as "the attempt to attribute a variety of social ills, such as poverty, unemployment, and inadequate medical care, to a personal quality or characteristic of the individuals involved" (Olson 4-5). In other words, an understanding of a plurality of evolving literacies, of their rhetorical nature, allows us to see the apparent promise of power through a single literacy as an insidious way of withholding real power and real change.

Literacy can be conceived as intelligence and logic only when removed from social context, only when it is reified into a static form defined across a particular concept of intelligence and learning within a particular social context. It is here that the political nature of literacy comes to the fore. Literacy defined as logical instead of rhetorical demands one right literacy instead of a plurality of literacies based on situational needs and functions. Those with the one right literacy have the power to speak and be heard and those with other literacies are effectively deaf and dumb.

Defining both literacy and illiteracy are, therefore, political acts. Those defined outside literacy are relegated to a netherworld in which their languages become "minority dialects" unworthy of anything save correction, for a definition of literacy states who has power to speak and who must remain silent. Thus, while literacy is empowering, it is also two-way—for it is power that "generally gives people access to literacy" (Power 24). Those in positions of power, therefore, will attempt to protect their power by denying literacy, as has been done historically to Blacks and women. Such denial comes "in the form of legal

statutes, sometimes in the form of pedagogical styles," and in the definitions of literacy (Daniell 188).

A re-examination of literacy demands a corresponding re-examination of its perceived opposite. The label of illiteracy insures not only that its inmates will not speak, but insures as well that even when they do speak they will not be heard. As literacy is power, so illiteracy is powerlessness; as literacy is speaking and being heard, illiteracy is being silent. This concept of illiteracy as silence brings with it certain assumptions. Silence is perceived as passive acceptance, as non-creativity, as empty. Those who do not speak are assumed to have nothing to say, or to agree with the already said. In its early usage, the word "dumb" meant both mute and stupid; when we can't hear what people know or understand, we assume they know nothing (Ilich and Sanders 101). Yet, the silence of the non-literate, like the silence of others, whether enforced or elected, is not without its own rhetorics. Their silence speaks—and with the growing insistence toward total, global literacy, defined as logic or intelligence or economic advantage and held by a dominant power group—their silence begins to scream. So defining literacy allows us to discount those defined outside, allows us to turn a deaf ear, to render them speechless—deaf and dumb. But what are we excluding, what knowledge are we subjugating when we so define them outside, when we render them language-less?

Our bias toward print literacy, our logocentrism, "fosters a tendency to view silence as merely an abstinence from speaking or as an empty interval between utterance" and covers the possibilities of "how richly textured and multidimensional the kinds of meaning of silence can be" (Bauman 11). Ethnographic studies of societies such as the Quakers in which silence plays a major role in communication and meaning-making suggest that silence indeed speaks and gives meaning to the spoken. These studies "also underscore the need to examine the patterns, function, and meanings [the rhetorics] of silence" (Bauman 11).

The concept of literacy as logic has kept both women and the deaf/hearing-impaired within the discounted silence of illiteracy. Both of these groups have been denied logic in their language, and, therefore, neither they nor their languages have counted as literate.

So entrenched are the deaf into this silence, they have been used as control subjects in Piagetian studies. The assumption is that they are language-free and "thus cognitive development can be examined in the absence of language influence" (King and Quigley 6). In these studies, no indication is given as to the level of deafness in the children used, their ability to speak or read lips, or their use of Signed English or American Sign Language (ASL). The attitude toward the natural, first language of the deaf, ASL, is succinctly worded in a statement from the Alexander Graham Bell Association of the Deaf: "We are opposed to any kind of sign language. We are opposed to total communication" (Neisser 32).² This attitude has led to the production of "several generations of deaf children who were quiet, stationary, inconspicuous, and quite acceptable to the hearing" (30).

Ong specifically rejects visual-gestural modes of communication as not true languages early in *Orality and Literacy*. He characterizes language as "articulated sound" and states that "despite the richness of gesture, elaborated sign languages are substitutes for speech and dependent on oral speech signs even when used by the congenitally deaf" (7). Bell claimed that sign is "a prison intellectually as well as socially, because it [is] ideographic rather than phonetic, limited in precision, flexibility, subtlety, and power of abstraction" (Lane and Grosjean 149). It has also been assumed to be ungrammatical and grossly simplistic. Yet,

within the silence of moving hands and flashing fingers, poetry is made, songs are sung, puns are wrought, and thought is created. ASL is an evolving, complex language with a grammar and a logic all its own, completely separate from English. There is tradition here, and literacy. This silence is full and wanting to be heard. But it is defined into nothingness.

As the deaf have been used in developmental studies as "language-free," women have been excluded from the studies as "non-representative." Piaget treats girls as a curiosity and an aside. His index contains four entries under "girls" and none under "boys" because the child is assumed to be male (Gilligan 18). The theories derived from these studies have "established men's experience and competence as a baseline against which both men's and women's development is then judged, often to the detriment or misreading of women" (Belenky, et al. 7). In other words, in the research that offers us ways of understanding language and its relationship to thought and development, the language and thought of women go unheard.

Voice and silence have become dominant metaphors in women's descriptions of their lives. In a psychological study of *Women's Ways of Knowing*, Mary Field Belenky, et al. found these metaphors recurring in the conversations with all their subjects: "speaking up, speaking out, being silenced, not being heard, really listening, really talking, words as weapons, feeling deaf and dumb, having no words, saying what you mean, listening to be heard, and so on in an endless variety of connotations all having to do with a sense of mind, self-worth, and feelings of isolation from a connection to others" (18).

From within the silence of women's language come new characterizations of literacy born of the pain at denial of the old definitions, born of the isolation. Through their conversations with women concerning their relation to language, Belenky, et al. present an understanding of literacy in which:

the oral and written forms of language must pass back and forth between persons who both speak and listen or read and write—sharing, expanding, and reflecting on each other's experiences. Such interchanges lead to ways of knowing that enable individuals to enter into the social and intellectual life of their community. Without them, individuals remain isolated from others; and without tools for representing their experiences, people remain isolated from the self (25-26).

Adrienne Rich, addressing the "decline in adult literacy," argues that it goes much deeper than a decline in the ability to read and write, skills only recently acquired in human history. Her notion of literacy includes knowing

how to talk, to tell stories, to sing, to listen and remember, to argue, to pierce an opponent's argument, to use metaphor and imagery and inspired exaggeration in speech (13).

Defining whole peoples, dialects, languages outside of literacy locks human beings into a deafness and dumbness from which there is little chance for escape. Helen Keller confessed that "deafness is a much worse misfortune [than blindness]. For it means the loss of the most vital stimulus—the sound of the voice that brings language, sets thoughts astir, and keeps us in the intellectual company of man" (Ihde 137).

I am not willing to disagree with Havelock, Ong, and Marshall McLuhan that the phonetic alphabetic brought about logical, abstract thinking. I agree with them that print literacy facilitates the kind of thought we commonly equate with logic

and intelligence. I do, however, question the assumption that print literacy intelligence, the logic of Standard English, deserves its long established place at the top of the hierarchy, the assumption that it is the only literacy or intelligence that counts. In one of his last published articles, Havelock removes himself from the company of those like Farrell who support the hierarchy. Suppose Black English speakers, without the "standard" form of "to be," and speakers of other literacies, can't think in syllogisms, as Farrell suggests. Havelock dismisses this as not a problem. Saying they don't think in syllogisms, or logically, or whatever, is only a racist, sexist, "glottocentric" thing to say if syllogistic, etc. thinking is considered to be superior. Apparently, for Havelock, this is not the case. Syllogistic thinking is merely a form of thinking, one that derives from a particular use of language. Havelock even suggests that Black English syntax is sometimes "more effective" than abstract statements would be and backs off from the term "illiteracy," substituting "non-literacy."

On a practical level, I am asking that we as teachers of literacy participate in "the deepest and most profound listening [that] hears not only the [sanctioned] voices of the World, [but] is a waiting which is also open to the possibilities of silence" (Ihde 185). I am asking that we reconsider the definitions of literacy as logic and of illiteracy as empty silence and ignorance, that we consider those we silence.

NOTES

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²In the community of deaf education, "total communication" refers to the employment of both oral—speaking and lip reading—and sign methods of communication.

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