Questions for Discussion and Journaling

1. Use your own words to describe each of the six characteristics of a discourse community according to Swales. Can you find examples of each from your own experience?

2. Swales discusses his own attempt to join the Hong Kong Study Circle. What went wrong? Which of the six characteristics did he have trouble with?

3. According to Swales, would a first-year college classroom count as a discourse community? What about a graduate class? Why or why not?

4. Swales argues that it is possible to participate in a discourse community without being assimilated in it. What does this mean?

5. Consider a discourse community you belong to, and describe how it meets the six characteristics of a discourse community. For example, what are its shared goals? What is its lexis? What are its genres?

6. Consider a time when you participated in a discourse community but resisted it or were not assimilated into it. What happened?

Applying and Exploring Ideas

1. Write a short narrative in which you dramatize Swales's problems joining the HKSC or in which you imagine the problems a newcomer has in learning the ropes in any new discourse community you can imagine, from *World of Warcraft* to medical school to a sorority.

2. Write a one-page letter to an incoming student in which you explain what discourse communities are and how knowing about them will be helpful to that student in college.

3. Spend a few hours hanging out with or near a discourse community of your choice—dorm, store, gaming community, and so forth. Write down every use of specialized language that you hear—whether it is an unusual word or phrase, or simply an unusual use of a fairly common word or phrase. And note on your "lexis list" when a term you were familiar with was being used with a new meaning or in a new way.

Meta Moment

Do you understand anything differently about your own writing experiences after reading Swales's description of how discourse communities work? If so, consider a way that this understanding can help you navigate discourse communities in the future.

Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics: Introduction

JAMES PAUL GEE

Framing the Reading

James Paul Gee (his last name is pronounced like the "gee" in "gee whiz") is the Tashia Morgridge Professor of Reading at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Gee has taught linguistics at Stanford, Northeastern University, Boston University, and the University of Southern California. His book *Sociolinguistics and Literacies* (1990) was important in the formation of the interdisciplinary field known as "New Literacy Studies," and he's published a number of other works on literacy as well, including *Why Video Games Are Good for Your Soul* (2005). Based on his research, he's a widely respected voice on literacy among his peers.

In this article, Gee introduces his term **Discourses**, which he explains as "saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations" that are "ways of being in the world" (para. 5). (The capital D is important for Gee, to make a *Discourse* distinct from *discourse*, or "connected stretches of language" that we use every day to communicate with each other.) Gee spends a lot of time working to make these definitions clear, using a variety of examples. A number of other terms crop up as well in his work: *dominant* and *nondominant* Discourses, *primary* and *secondary* Discourses, **literacy**, **apprenticeship**, **metaknowledge,** and **mushfake**, among others. Probably the most useful way to read this article for the first time is to try to (1) define terms and (2) apply what Gee is saying to your own experience by thinking of related examples from your own life.

There is one particularly controversial argument in the article. Gee insists that you can't "more or less" embody a Discourse—you're either recognized by others as a full member of it or you're not. Many readers can't make this argument line up with their perceptions of their own experiences in acquiring new Discourses; they haven't experienced this "all-or-nothing" effect. It's also possible to read Gee's article as undermining itself: He explains that we are never "purely" members of a single Discourse but, rather, that a given Discourse is influenced by other Discourses of which we're also members. By this reasoning, there may be no such thing as embodying a Discourse fully or perfectly.

The important thing is this: When you encounter that subargument, or others you might have trouble accepting, your job as a reader is to stay engaged in the *overall* argument while "setting aside" the particular argument you're not sure about. As you know from your own experience, people can be wrong about smaller points while still being right about bigger ones. Further, scholarly arguments are made very precisely with very careful language; Gee's argument might work if you read it exactly as he intended it to be understood, without trying to apply it too broadly. But you should also read critically and test his claims against your experiences.

If you are interested in seeing and hearing from Gee directly, you can watch a short MacArthur Foundation video of him talking about games and learning by searching YouTube for "James Gee games learning."

Getting Ready to Read

Before you read, do at least one of the following activities:

- Google the term *mushfake*. What comes up?
- Consider two or three activities you take part in that are very different from each other, having different languages and purposes (for example, college, volunteering, and a hobby like gaming). Does one activity influence the way you participate in the others, or do they remain distinctly separate in your life? Explain.

As you read, consider the following questions:

- Why is Gee so concerned with how people learn Discourses? What does this have to do with education?
- Are there alternative explanations for the knowledge Gee describes? Could we have similar knowledge for some reason *other than* that there are Discourses?
- Does Gee's discussion of *Discourses* sound similar to ideas you've encountered in other chapters in this book? If so, which ones?

W hat I propose in the following papers, in the main, is *a way of talking* 1 *about* literacy and linguistics. I believe that a new field of study, integrating "psycho" and "socio" approaches to language from a variety of disciplines, is emerging, a field which we might call *literacy studies*. Much of this work, I think (and hope), shares at least some of the assumptions of the following papers. These papers, though written at different times, and for different purposes, are, nonetheless, based on the claim that the focus of literacy studies or applied linguistics should *not* be language, or literacy, but *social practices*. This claim, I believe, has a number of socially important and cognitively interesting consequences.

"Language" is a misleading term; it too often suggests "grammar." It is a 2 truism that a person can know perfectly the grammar of a language and not know how to use that language. It is not just *what* you say, but *how* you say it. If I enter my neighborhood bar and say to my tattooed drinking buddy, as I sit down, "May I have a match please?" my grammar is perfect, but what I have said is wrong nonetheless. It is less often remarked that a person could be able to use a language perfectly and *still* not make sense. It is not just *how* you say it, but what you *are* and *do* when you say it. If I enter my neighborhood bar and say to my drinking buddy, as I sit down, "Gime a match, wouldya?," while placing a napkin on the bar stool to avoid getting my newly pressed designer jeans dirty, I have said the right thing, but my "saying-doing" combination is nonetheless all wrong.

F. Niyi Akinnaso and Cheryl Ajirotutu (1982) present "simulated job 3 interviews" from two welfare mothers in a CETA job training program. The first woman, asked whether she has ever shown initiative in a previous job, responds: "Well, yes, there's this Walgreen's Agency, I worked as a microfilm operator, OK. And it was a snow storm, OK. And it was usually six people workin' in a group . . ." and so forth (p. 34). This woman is simply using the wrong grammar (the wrong "dialect") for this type of (middle-class) interview. It's a perfectly good grammar (dialect), it just won't get you this type of job in this type of society.

> "Language" is a misleading term; it too often suggests "grammar." It is a truism that a person can know perfectly the grammar of a language and not know how to use that language. 4

The second woman (the authors' "success" case) responds to a similar question by saying ". . . I was left alone to handle the office. I didn't really have a lot of experience. But I had enough experience to deal with any situations that came up . . . and those that I couldn't handle at the time, if there was someone who had more experience than myself, I asked questions to find out what procedure I would use. If something came up and if I didn't know who to really go to, I would jot it down . . . on a piece of paper, so that I wouldn't forget that if anyone that was more qualified than myself, I could ask them about it and how I would go about solving it. So I feel I'm capable of handling just

about any situation, whether it's on my own or under supervision" (p. 34). This woman hasn't got a real problem with her grammar (remember this is *speech*, not *writing*), nor is there any real problem with the *use* to which she puts that grammar, but she is expressing the *wrong values*. She views being left in charge as just another form of supervision, namely, supervision by "other people's" knowledge and expertise. And she fails to characterize her own expertise in the overly optimistic form called for by such interviews. Using this response as an example of "successful training" is only possible because the authors, aware that language is more than grammar (namely, "use"), are unaware that communication is more than language use.

At any moment we are using language we must say or write the right thing in the right way while playing the right social role and (appearing) to hold the right values, beliefs, and attitudes. Thus, what is important is not language, and surely not grammar, but *saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations*. These combinations I call "Discourses," with a capital "D" ("discourse" with a little "d," to me, means connected stretches of language that make sense, so "discourse" is part of "Discourse"). Discourses are ways of being in the world; they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes.

A Discourse is a sort of "identity kit" which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize. Being "trained" as a linguist meant that I learned to speak, think, and act like a linguist, and to recognize others when they do so. Some other examples of Discourses: (enacting) being an American or a Russian, a man or a woman, a member of a certain socioeconomic class, a factory worker or a boardroom executive, a doctor or a hospital patient, a teacher, an administrator, or a student, a student of physics or a student of literature, a member of a sewing circle, a club, a street gang, a lunchtime social gathering, or a regular at a local bar. We all have many Discourses.

How does one acquire a Discourse? It turns out that much that is claimed, controversially, to be true of second language acquisition or socially situated cognition (Beebe, 1988; Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982; Grosjean, 1982; Krashen, 1982, 1985a, 1985b, Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Lave, 1988; Rogoff & Lave, 1984) is, in fact, more obviously true of the acquisition of Discourses. Discourses are not mastered by overt instruction (even less so than languages, and hardly anyone ever fluently acquired a second language sitting in a classroom), but by enculturation ("apprenticeship") into social practices through scaffolded and supported interaction with people who have already mastered the Discourse (Cazden, 1988; Heath, 1983). This is how we all acquired our native language and our home-based Discourse. It is how we acquire all later, more public-oriented Discourses. If you have no access to the social practice, you don't get in the Discourse, you don't have it. You cannot overtly teach anyone a Discourse, in a classroom or anywhere else. Discourses are not bodies of knowledge like physics or archeology or linguistics. Therefore, ironically, while you can overtly teach someone *linguistics*, a body of knowledge, you can't

teach them *to be a linguist*, that is, to use a Discourse. The most you can do is to let them practice being a linguist with you.

The various Discourses which constitute each of us as persons are changing and often are not fully consistent with each other; there is often conflict and tension between the values, beliefs, attitudes, interactional styles, uses of language, and ways of being in the world which two or more Discourses represent. Thus, there is no real sense in which we humans are consistent or well integrated creatures from a cognitive or social viewpoint, though, in fact, most Discourses assume that we are (and thus we do too, while we are in them).

All of us, through our *primary socialization* early in life in the home and peer group, acquire (at least) one initial Discourse. This initial Discourse, which I call our *primary Discourse,* is the one we first use to make sense of the world and interact with others. Our primary Discourse constitutes our original and home-based sense of identity, and, I believe, it can be seen whenever we are interacting with "intimates" in totally casual (unmonitored) social interaction. We acquire this primary Discourse, not by overt instruction, but by being a member of a primary socializing group (family, clan, peer group). Further, aspects and pieces of the primary Discourse become a "carrier" or "foundation" for Discourses acquired later in life. Primary Discourses differ significantly across various social (cultural, ethnic, regional, and economic) groups in the United States.

After our initial socialization in our home community, each of us interacts with various non-home-based social institutions—institutions in the public sphere, beyond the family and immediate kin and peer group. These may be local stores and churches, schools, community groups, state and national businesses, agencies and organizations, and so forth. Each of these social institutions commands and demands one or more Discourses and we acquire these fluently to the extent that we are given access to these institutions and are allowed apprenticeships within them. Such Discourses I call *secondary Discourses*.

We can also make an important distinction between *dominant Discourses* and *nondominant Discourses*. Dominant Discourses are secondary Discourses the mastery of which, at a particular place and time, brings with it the (potential) acquisition of social "goods" (money, prestige, status, etc.). Non-dominant Discourses are secondary Discourses the mastery of which often brings solidarity with a particular social network, but not wider status and social goods in the society at large.

Finally, and yet more importantly, we can always ask about how much *tension or conflict* is present between any two of a person's Discourses (Rosaldo, 1989). We have argued above that some degree of conflict and tension (if only because of the discrete historical origins of particular Discourses) will almost always be present. However, some people experience more overt and direct conflicts between two or more of their Discourses than do others (for example, many women academics feel conflict between certain feminist Discourses and certain standard academic Discourses such as traditional literary criticism). I argue that when such conflict or tension exists, it can deter acquisition of one

of a mastered Discourse on certain occasions of use (e.g., in stressful situations such as interviews).

Very often dominant groups in a society apply rather constant "tests" of the 13 fluency of the dominant Discourses in which their power is symbolized. These tests take on two functions: they are tests of "natives" or, at least, "fluent users" of the Discourse, and they are *gates* to exclude "non-natives" (people whose very conflicts with dominant Discourses show they were not, in fact, "born" to them). The sorts of tension and conflict we have mentioned here are particularly acute when they involve tension and conflict between one's primary Discourse and a dominant secondary Discourse.

Discourses, primary and secondary, can be studied, in some ways, like lan- 14 guages. And, in fact, some of what we know about second language acquisition is relevant to them, if only in a metaphorical way. Two Discourses can *interfere* with one another, like two languages; aspects of one Discourse can be *transferred* to another Discourse, as one can transfer a grammatical feature from one language to another. For instance, the primary Discourse of many middle-class homes has been influenced by secondary Discourses like those used in schools and business. This is much less true of the primary Discourse in many lower socio-economic black homes, though this primary Discourse has influenced the secondary Discourse used in black churches.

Furthermore, if one has not mastered a particular secondary Discourse 15 which nonetheless one must try to use, several things can happen, things which rather resemble what can happen when one has failed to fluently master a second language. One can fall back on one's primary Discourse, adjusting it in various ways to try to fit it to the needed functions; this response is very common, but almost always socially disastrous. Or one can use another, perhaps related, secondary Discourse. Or one can use a simplified, or stereotyped version of the required secondary Discourse. These processes are similar to those linguists study under the rubrics of *language contact, pidginization,* and *creolization.*

I believe that any socially useful definition of "literacy" must be couched in 16 terms of the notion of Discourse. Thus, I define *"literacy"* as *the mastery of or fluent control over a secondary Discourse.* Therefore, literacy is always plural: *literacies* (there are many of them, since there are many secondary Discourses, and we all have some and fail to have others). If we wanted to be rather pedantic and literalistic, then we could define "literacy" as "mastery of or fluent control over secondary Discourses *involving print*" (which is almost all of them in a modern society). But I see no gain from the addition of the phrase "involving print," other than to assuage the feelings of people committed (as I am not) to reading and writing as decontextualized and isolable skills. We can talk about *dominant literacies* and *nondominant literacies* in terms of whether they involve mastery of dominant or nondominant secondary Discourses. We can also talk about a literacy being *liberating* ("powerful") if it can be used as a "meta-language" (a set of meta-words, meta-values, meta-beliefs) for the critique of other literacies and the way they constitute us as persons and situate us in society. Liberating literacies can reconstitute us and resituate us.

My definition of "literacy" may seem innocuous, at least to someone already 17 convinced that decontextualized views of print are meaningless. Nonetheless, several "theorems" follow from it, theorems that have rather direct and unsettling consequences.

First theorem: Discourses (and therefore literacies) are not like languages in 18 one very important regard. Someone can speak English, but not fluently. However, someone cannot engage in a Discourse in a less than fully fluent manner. You are either in it or you're not. Discourses are connected with displays of an identity; failing to fully display an identity is tantamount to announcing you don't have that identity, that at best you're a pretender or a beginner. Very often, learners of second languages "fossilize" at a stage of development significantly short of fluency. This can't happen with Discourses. If you've fossilized in the acquisition of a Discourse prior to full "fluency" (and are no longer in the process of apprenticeship), then your very lack of fluency marks you as a *non*-member of the group that controls this Discourse. That is, you don't have the identity or social role which is the basis for the existence of the Discourse in the first place. In fact, the lack of fluency may very well mark you as a *pretender* to the social role instantiated in the Discourse (an *outsider* with pretensions to being an *insider*).

There is, thus, no workable "affirmative action" for Discourses: you can't 19 be let into the game after missing the apprenticeship and be expected to have a fair shot at playing it. Social groups will not, usually, give their social goods— whether these are status or solidarity or both—to those who are not "natives" or "fluent users" (though "mushfake," discussed below, may sometimes provide a way for non-initiates to gain access). While this is an *empirical* claim, I believe it is one vastly supported by the sociolinguistic literature (Milroy, 1980, 1987; Milroy & Milroy, 1985).

This theorem (that there are no people who are partially literate or semi- 20 literate, or, in any other way, literate but not fluently so) has one practical consequence: notions like "functional literacy" and "competency-based literacy" are simply incoherent. As far as literacy goes, there are only "fluent speakers" and "apprentices" (metaphorically speaking, because remember, Discourses are not just ways of talking, but ways of talking, acting, thinking, valuing, etc.).

Second theorem: Primary Discourses, no matter whose they are, can never 2 really be liberating literacies. For a literacy to be liberating it must contain both the Discourse it is going to critique and a set of meta-elements (language, words, attitudes, values) in terms of which an analysis and criticism can be carried out. Primary Discourses are initial and contain only themselves. They can be embedded in later Discourses and critiqued, but they can never serve as a meta-language in terms of which a critique of secondary Discourses can be carried out. Our second theorem is not likely to be very popular. Theorem 2 says that all primary Discourses are limited. "Liberation" ("power"), in the sense I am using the term here, resides in acquiring at least one more Discourse in terms of which our own primary Discourse can be analyzed and critiqued.

This is not to say that primary Discourses do not contain critical attitudes 2 and critical language (indeed, many of them contain implicit and explicit

racism and classism). It is to say that they cannot carry out an *authentic* criticism, because they cannot verbalize the words, acts, values, and attitudes they *use,* and they cannot mobilize explicit meta-knowledge. Theorem 2 is quite traditional and conservative—it is the analogue of Socrates's theorem that the unexamined life is not worth living. Interestingly enough, Vygotsky (1987, chapter 6) comes very closely to stating this theorem explicitly.

Other theorems can be deduced from the theory of literacy here developed, 23 but these two should make clear what sorts of consequences the theory has. It should also make it quite clear that the theory is *not* a neutral meta-language in terms of which one can argue for *just any* conclusions about literacy.

Not all Discourses involve writing or reading, though many do. However, all 24 writing and reading is embedded in some Discourse, and that Discourse always involves more than writing and reading (e.g., ways of talking, acting, valuing, and so forth). You cannot teach anyone to write or read outside any Discourse (there is no such thing, unless it is called "moving a pen" or "typing" in the case of writing, or "moving one's lips" or "mouthing words" in the case of reading). Within a Discourse you are always teaching more than writing or reading. When I say "teach" here, I mean "apprentice someone in a master-apprentice relationship in a social practice (Discourse) wherein you scaffold their growing ability to say, do, value, believe, and so forth, within that Discourse, through demonstrating your mastery and supporting theirs even when it barely exists (i.e., you make it look as if they can do what they really can't do)." That is, you do much the same thing middle-class, "super baby" producing parents do when they "do books" with their children.

Now, there are many Discourses connected to schools (different ones for 25 different types of school activities and different parts of the curriculum) and other public institutions. These "middle-class mainstream" sorts of Discourses often carry with them power and prestige. It is often felt that good listeners and good readers ought to pay attention to *meaning* and not focus on the petty details of mechanics, "correctness," the superficial features of language. Unfortunately, many middle-class mainstream status-giving Discourses often *do* stress superficial features of language. Why? Precisely because such superficial features are the *best* test as to whether one was apprenticed in the "right" place, at the "right" time, with the "right" people. Such superficial features are exactly the parts of Discourses most impervious to overt instruction and are only fully mastered when everything else in the Discourse is mastered. Since these Discourses are used as "gates" to ensure that the "right" people get to the "right" places in our society, such superficial features are ideal. A person who writes in a petition or office memo: "If you cancel the show, all the performers would have did all that hard work for nothing" has signaled that he or she isn't the "right sort of person" (was not fully acculturated to the Discourse that supports this identity). That signal stays meaningful long after the content of the memo is forgotten, or even when the content was of no interest in the first place.

Now, one can certainly encourage students to simply "resist" such "superfi- 26 cial features of language." And, indeed, they will get to do so from the bottom

of society, where their lack of mastery of such superficialities was meant to place them anyway. But, of course, the problem is that such "superficialities" cannot be taught in a regular classroom in any case; they can't be "picked up" later, outside the full context of an early apprenticeship (at home and at school) in "middle-class-like" school-based ways of doing and being. That is precisely why they work so well as "gates." This is also precisely the tragedy of E. D. Hirsch, Jr.'s much-talked-about book *Cultural Literacy* (1987), which points out that without having mastered an extensive list of trivialities people can be (and often are) excluded from "goods" controlled by dominant groups in the society. Hirsch is wrong in thinking that this can be taught (in a classroom of all places!) apart from the socially situated practices that these groups have incorporated into their homes and daily lives. There is a real contradiction here, and we ignore it at the peril of our students and our own "good faith" (no middle-class "super baby" producing parents ignore it).

Beyond changing the social structure, is there much hope? No, there is not. 2 So we better get on about the process of changing the social structure. Now, whose job is that? I would say, people who have been allotted the job of teaching Discourses, for example, English teachers, language teachers, composition teachers, TESOL teachers, studies-skills teachers. We can pause, also, to remark on the paradox that even though Discourses cannot be overtly taught, and cannot readily be mastered late in the game, the University wants teachers to overtly teach and wants students to demonstrate mastery. Teachers of Discourses take on an impossible job, allow themselves to be evaluated on how well they do it, and accept fairly low status all the while for doing it.

So what can teachers of Discourses do? Well, there happens to be an advan- 2 tage to failing to master mainstream Discourses, that is, there is an advantage to being socially "maladapted." When we have really mastered anything (e.g., a Discourse), we have little or no conscious awareness of it (indeed, like dancing, Discourses wouldn't work if people were consciously aware of what they were doing while doing it). However, when we come across a situation where we are unable to accommodate or adapt (as many minority students do on being faced, late in the game, with having to acquire mainstream Discourses), we become consciously aware of what we are trying to do or are being called upon to do. Let me give an example that works similarly, that is, the case of classroom second language learning. Almost no one really acquires a second language in a classroom. However, it can happen that exposure to another language, having to translate it into and otherwise relate it to your own language, can cause you to become consciously aware of how your first language works (how it means). This "metaknowledge" can actually make you better able to manipulate your first language.

Vygotsky (1987) says that learning a foreign language "allows the child to 2 understand his native language as a single instantiation of a linguistic system" (p. 222). And here we have a clue. Classroom instruction (in language, composition, study skills, writing, critical thinking, content-based literacy, or whatever) can lead to metaknowledge, to seeing how the Discourses you have already got relate to those you are attempting to acquire, and how the ones you are trying

to acquire relate to self and society. Metaknowledge is liberation and power, because it leads to the ability to manipulate, to analyze, to resist while advancing. Such metaknowledge can make "maladapted" students smarter than "adapted" ones. Thus, the liberal classroom that avoids overt talk of form and superficialities, of how things work, as well as of their socio-cultural-political basis, is no help. Such talk can be powerful so long as one never thinks that in talking about grammar, form, or superficialities one is getting people to actually acquire Discourses (or languages, for that matter). Such talk is always political talk.

But, the big question: If one cannot acquire Discourses save through active social practice, and it is difficult to compete with the mastery of those admitted early to the game when one has entered it as late as high school or college, what can be done to see to it that metaknowledge and resistance are coupled with Discourse development? The problem is deepened by the fact that true acquisition of many mainstream Discourses involves, at least while being in them, active complicity with values that conflict with one's home- and community-based Discourses, especially for many women and minorities.

The question is too big for me, but I have two views to push nonetheless. First, true acquisition (which is always full fluency) will rarely if ever happen. Even for anything close to acquisition to occur, classrooms must be active apprenticeships in "academic" social practices, and, in most cases, must connect with these social practices as they are also carried on outside the "composition" or "language" class, elsewhere in the University.

Second, though true acquisition is probably not possible, "mushfake" Discourse is possible. Mack (1989) defines "mushfake," a term from prison culture, as making "do with something less when the real thing is not available. So when prison inmates make hats from underwear to protect their hair from lice, the hats are mushfake. Elaborate craft items made from used wooden match sticks are another example of mushfake." "Mushfake Discourse" means partial acquisition coupled with metaknowledge and strategies to "make do" (strategies ranging from always having a memo edited to ensure no plural, possessive, and third-person "s" agreement errors to active use of black culture skills at "psyching out" interviewers, or to strategies of "rising to the meta-level" in an interview so the interviewer is thrown off stride by having the rules of the game implicitly referred to in the act of carrying them out).

"Mushfake," resistance, and metaknowledge: this seems to me like a good combination for successful students and successful social change. So I propose that we ought to produce "mushfaking," resisting students, full of metaknowledge. But isn't that to politicize teaching? A Discourse is an integration of saying, doing, and *valuing*, and all socially based valuing is political. All successful teaching, that is, teaching that inculcates Discourse and not just content, is political. That too is a truism.

As a linguist I am primarily interested in the functioning of language in Discourses and literacies. And a key question in this sort of linguistics is how language-within-Discourses is acquired (in socially situated apprenticeships) and how the languages from different Discourses transfer into, interfere with, and otherwise influence each other to form the linguistic texture of whole societies and to interrelate various groups in society. To see what is at stake here, I will briefly discuss one text, one which clearly brings out a host of important issues in this domain. The text, with an explanation of its context, is printed below. The text is demarcated in terms of "lines" and "stanzas," units which I believe are the basis of speech:

CONTEXT OF TEXT A young middle-class mother regularly reads storybooks to both her 5- and 7-year-old daughters. Her 5-year-old had had a birthday party, which had had some problems. In the next few days the 5-year-old has told several relatives about the birthday party, reporting the events in the language of her primary Discourse system. A few days later, when the mother was reading a storybook to her 7-year-old, the 5-year-old said she wanted to "read" (she could not decode), and *pretended* to be reading a book, while telling what had happened at her birthday party. Her original attempt at this was not very good, but eventually after a few tries, interspersed with the mother reading to the other girl, the 5 year-old produced the following story, which is not (just) in the language of her primary Discourse system:

STANZA ONE (Introduction)

1. This is a story
2. About some kids who were once friends
3. But got into a big fight
4. And were not

STANZA TWO (Frame: Signalling of Genre)

5. You can read along in your storybook
6. I'm gonna read aloud

[story-reading prosody from now on]

STANZA THREE (Title)

7. "How the Friends Got Unfriend"

STANZA FOUR (Setting: Introduction of Characters)

8. Once upon a time there was three boys 'n three girls
9. They were named Betty Lou, Pallis, and Parshin, were the girls
10. And Michael, Jason, and Aaron were the boys
11. They were friends

STANZA FIVE (Problem: Sex Differences)

12. The boys would play Transformers
13. And the girls would play Cabbage Patches

STANZA SIX (Crisis: Fight)

14. But then one day they got into a fight on who would be which team
15. It was a very bad fight

16. They were punching
17. And they were pulling
18. And they were ?banging

STANZA SEVEN (Resolution 1: Storm)

19. Then all of a sudden the sky turned dark
20. The rain began to fall
21. There was lightning going on
22. And they were not friends

STANZA EIGHT (Resolution 2: Mothers punish)

23. Then um the mothers came shooting out 'n saying
24. "What are you punching for?
25. You are going to be punished for a whole year"

STANZA NINE (Frame)

26. The end
27. Wasn't it fun reading together?
28. Let's do it again
29. Real soon!

This text and context display an event, which I call *filtering,* "in the act" of 35 actually taking place. "Filtering" is a process whereby aspects of the language, attitudes, values, and other elements of certain types of secondary Discourses (e.g., dominant ones represented in the world of school and trans-local government and business institutions) are *filtered* into primary Discourse (and, thus, the process whereby a literacy can influence home-based practices). Filtering represents *transfer* of features from secondary Discourses into primary Discourses. This transfer process allows the child to practice aspects of dominant secondary Discourses in the very act of acquiring a primary Discourse. It is a key device in the creation of a group of elites who appear to demonstrate quick and effortless mastery of dominant secondary Discourses, by "talent" or "native ability," when, in fact, they have simply *practiced* aspects of them longer.

The books that are part of the storybook reading episodes surrounding this 36 child's oral text encode language that is part of several specific secondary Discourses. These include, of course, "children's literature," but also "literature" proper. Such books use linguistic devices that are simplified analogues of "literary" devices used in traditional, canonical "high literature." These devices are often thought to be natural and universal to literary art, though they are not. Many of them have quite specific origins in quite specific historical circumstances (though, indeed, some of them are rooted in universals of sense making and are devices that occur in nonliterary talk and writing).

One device with a specific historical reference is the so-called "sympathetic 37 fallacy." This is where a poem or story treats natural events (e.g., sunshine or storms) as if they reflected or were "in harmony" or "in step" with (sympathetic

with) human events and emotions. This device was a hallmark of 19th-century Romantic poetry, though it is common in more recent poetry as well.

Notice how in the 5-year-old's story the sympathetic fallacy is not only used, but is, in fact, the central organizing device in the construction of the story. The fight between the girls and boys in stanza 6 is immediately followed in stanza 7 by the sky turning dark, with lightning flashing, and thence in line 22: "and they were not friends." Finally, in stanza 8, the mothers come on the scene to punish the children for their transgression. The sky is "in tune" or "step" with human happenings.

The function of the sympathetic fallacy in "high literature" is to equate the world of nature (the macrocosm) with the world of human affairs (the microcosm) as it is depicted in a particular work of art. It also suggests that these human affairs, as they are depicted in the work of literary art, are "natural," part of the logic of the universe, rather than conventional, historical, cultural, or class-based.

In the 5-year-old's story, the sympathetic fallacy functions in much the same way as it does in "high literature." In particular, the story suggests that gender differences (stanza 4: boy versus girl) are associated with different interests (stanza 5: Transformers versus Cabbage Patches), and that these different interests inevitably lead to conflict when male and female try to be "equal" or "one" or sort themselves on other grounds than gender (stanza 6: "a fight on who would be which team").

The children are punished for transgressing gender lines (stanza 8), but *only after* the use of the sympathetic fallacy (in stanza 7) has suggested that *division by gender,* and the conflicts which transgressing this division lead to, are sanctioned by nature—are "natural" and "inevitable" not merely conventional or constructed in the very act of play itself.

Notice, then, how the very form and structure of the language, and the linguistic devices used, carry an *ideological message.* In mastering this aspect of this Discourse, the little girl has unconsciously "swallowed whole," ingested, a whole system of thought, embedded in the very linguistic devices she uses. This, by the way, is another example of how linguistic aspects of Discourses can never be isolated from nonlinguistic aspects like values, assumptions, and beliefs.

Let's consider how this text relates to our theory of Discourse and literacy. The child had started by telling a story about her birthday to various relatives, over a couple of days, presumably in her primary Discourse. Then, on a given day, in the course of repeated book reading episodes, she reshapes this story into another genre. She incorporates aspects of the book reading episode into her story. Note, for example, the introduction in stanza 1, the frame in stanza 2, the title in stanza 3, and then the start of the story proper in stanza 4. She closes the frame in stanza 9. This overall structure shapes the text into "storybook reading," though, in fact, there is no book and the child can't read. I cannot help but put in an aside here: note that this girl is engaged in an apprenticeship in the Discourse of "storybook reading," a mastery of which I count as a literacy, though in this case there is no book and no reading. Traditional accounts of

literacy are going to have deep conceptual problems here, because they trouble themselves too much over things like books and reading.

Supported by her mother and older sister, our 5-year-old is mastering the secondary Discourse of "storybook reading." But this Discourse is itself an aspect of apprenticeship in another, more mature Discourse, namely "literature" (as well as, in other respects, "essayist Discourse," but that is *another* story). This child, when she goes to school to begin her more public apprenticeship into the Discourse of literature, will look like a "quick study" indeed. It will appear that her success was inevitable given her native intelligence and verbal abilities. Her success was inevitable, indeed, but because of her earlier apprenticeship. Note too how her mastery of this "storybook reading" Discourse leads to the incorporation of a set of values and attitudes (about gender and the naturalness of middle-class ways of behaving) that are shared by many other dominant Discourses in our society. This will facilitate the acquisition of other dominant Discourses, ones that may, at first, appear quite disparate from "literature" or "storybook reading."

It is also clear that the way in which this girl's home experience interpolates primary Discourse (the original tellings of the story to various relatives) and secondary Discourses will cause *transfer* of features from the secondary Discourse to the primary one (thanks to the fact, for instance, that this is all going on at home in the midst of primary socialization). Indeed, it is *just such episodes* that are the *locus* of the process by which dominant secondary Discourses filter from public life into private life.

The 5-year-old's story exemplifies two other points as well. First, it is rather pointless to ask, "Did she really intend, or does she really know about such meanings?" The Discourses to which she is apprenticed "speak" *through her* (to other Discourses, in fact). So, she can, in fact, "speak" quite beyond herself (much like "speaking in tongues," I suppose). Second, the little girl ingests an ideology whole here, so to speak, and not in any way in which she could analyze it, verbalize it, or critique it. This is why this is not an experience of learning a liberating literacy.

To speak to the educational implications of the view of Discourse and literacy herein, and to close these introductory remarks, I will leave you to meditate on the words of Oscar Wilde's Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest.* "Fortunately, in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square" (quoted in Ellman, 1988, p. 561).

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Questions for Discussion and Journaling

1. What does Gee mean when he says that you can speak with perfect grammar and yet be "wrong nonetheless" (para. 2)? Does this conflict with what you've been taught in school about grammar?

2. Gee argues that you can say something in the right way but do the wrong thing, which he calls the "'saying-doing combination'" (para. 2). What does this mean?

3. Explain Gee's distinction between *Discourse* with a capital *D* and *discourse* with a lowercase *d*. Does it make sense to you? Why or why not?

4. What does Gee means by the terms *primary Discourse*, *secondary Discourse*, *dominant Discourse*, and *nondominant Discourse*?

5. What does it mean to say that "Discourses are connected with displays of an **identity**" (para. 18)? What are the implications of this claim, if it is true?

6. Gee argues that reading and writing never happen, and thus can't be taught, apart from some Discourse. Further, he argues, teaching someone to read or