

Ideological Bases of Literacy Programmes¹

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to explore the way in which the discursive practices of literacy programmes reflect their underlying ideologies. After providing a brief overview of David Lee's proposal concerning how discourses reflect and construct perspectives and ideologies, I use his model to analyse the discourse of a specific literacy programme. I then argue that the success of literacy programmes depends at least partially on acknowledging the ideologies behind them.

1 Introduction

Literacy programmes never take place in a vacuum. They are embedded in a social context and are influenced by the ideologies of the particular society in which they take place (Street 1984:2).² The objective of this paper is to look at how the discursive practices of literacy programmes (and for that matter, literacy in general) reflect the ideologies underlying them. To achieve this, I first examine some of the ways in which discourse reflects ideology. Secondly, I analyse the discourse of a specific literacy programme in order to identify the underlying ideology. I will then argue that the success of literacy programmes depends—partially at least—on acknowledging the ideologies behind them.

2 Discourse and ideology

In his book, *Competing Discourses: Perspectives and Ideology in Language*, David Lee (1992) examines how our discourses not only reflect but also construct our perspectives and ideologies. Lee (1992:52,63,91,97) argues that our world-view, perspective and ideology are reflected in our language use. Furthermore, human language has properties, such as classification and selection, that enable it to function as a mediator of world-view, perspective and ideology (Lee 1992:1).³ Lee (1992:6-11,93-96) identifies several linguistic features that can act as markers that mediate a specific perspective

1. This is a revised version of a paper delivered at the *Ninth Conference on South African Literature*, 'Pedagogics of Reconstruction: Teaching Literature in a "New" South Africa', Bad Boll, Germany, 14-16 October 1994.

2. This is the gist of Street's (1984) 'ideological' model of literacy. For a summary of Street's argument see van Zweel (1994). In this paper I argue that an awareness of the ideological bases underlying literacy programmes will affect the planning, execution and outcome of not only literacy programmes but also language teaching programmes.

3. Lee (1992:x) defines discourse as follows: '[D]iscourse is defined here simultaneously in both formal terms (its lexical and grammatical characteristics) and in semantic terms—as a cluster of types of meaning that are systematic reflexes of a specific way of making sense of the world'.

4. Lee (1992) uses the notions of 'perspectives', 'world-view' and 'ideology' as closely related terms and unfortunately does not draw clear distinctions between them.

and ideology. These linguistic features include passivisation, cleft sentences,⁵ nominalisation,⁶ metaphor,⁷ metonymic extension⁸ and thematic relations.⁹

Lee (1992:96f) claims that it is especially *metonymic extension* and *metaphor* that are used for 'ideological manipulation'. They function as instruments of 'social control' because these processes first take place in institutional discourses and later spread into general discourse.

Literacy programmes and literature teaching programmes are institutional discourses with specific ideologies and perspectives behind them. It is important that we acknowledge this. Then we can analyse the ideologies.

3 The discourse of 'Project Literacy'

I have chosen to analyse the discourse of 'Project Literacy' by looking at their 'Mission Statement', believing that it should reflect their ideology. Their 'Mission Statement' consists of the following five paragraphs. (I have numbered the paragraphs I-V to make discussion easier):

5. Features such as passivisation and cleft sentences '... enable the speaker to place certain elements in focus and others in the background' (Lee 1992:11). Lee (1992:11) offers the following examples of passivisation and cleft sentences:

- (a) *The bird was chased by the dog.*
- (b) *It was the bird that the dog chased.*

In both examples, the object *the bird* is focussed on.

6. Nominalisation is a process by which an event can be referred to as a thing. Nominalisation enables speakers '... to express complex propositions containing embedded propositions' (Lee 1992:6). Lee (1992:6) illustrates nominalisation as follows:

- (c) *Max commented on the dessert.*
- (d) *Max's comment on the dessert.*
- (e) *Max's comment on the dessert surprised me.*

Sentence (c) refers to an event and (d) is the nominalisation of that event. Sentence (e) is a complex proposition which contains the embedded proposition that Max commented on the dessert.

7. Metaphor, according to Lee (1992:93), can portray subjects and events in such a way that the reader can distance himself/herself from them. He refers to an excerpt of a 1976 newspaper report as example and states that it 'treats the people of Soweto as some kind of natural force, specifically here as a volcano which had been "simmering" with unrest and then "erupted" The situation is seen as resulting from some kind of inevitable set of natural laws rather than from human feelings and decisions'.

8. Lee (1992:95f) claims that metonymic extension often involves '... an existing word (which) is applied to (a) new situation ...'. He illustrates this with his detention-example. The conventional word 'detain' from which detention is morphologically derived, shares some similarities with 'detention'. But there are also important differences. 'Detain' does not include the meaning 'by an institutionalised power'. Lee (1992:97) argues, '[W]e can therefore say that in extending the term *detention* to the situation of imprisonment without trial, many of the characteristics of the situation identified as *detention* in the basic, non-technical sense are suppressed. It is precisely in this way that the term can function as a euphemism'.

9. Theme is a related feature. According to Lee (1992:94), "Theme" is closely associated with sentence-initial position ... (and) ... establishes the point of reference from which the sentence proceeds and to which the remaining material is related'. In this example, the sentence-initial position is filled by *[T]he nightmare of many whites* which then becomes the point of reference.

(I) PROJECT LITERACY believes that literacy and basic education are a fundamental right and not a privilege, and is therefore committed to reducing the backlog in education caused by the inequalities of the past.

(II) Its primary concern is for the many illiterate and poorly educated adult South Africans, who for political and economic reasons, have been denied access to the education system.

(III) Our aim is to provide literacy skills and educational upgrading with job-related training for as many educationally disadvantaged adults in South Africa as possible:

(IV) by establishing and supporting cost-effective part time Adult Basic Education Centres, in existing buildings, where holistic learning can take place from basic literacy to matric level.

(V) by providing a support service of research, community consultation, education management, teacher training, and curriculum and materials development for the extensive replication of these proven projects, as well as the strengthening of other adult basic education initiatives countrywide.

Using the linguistic features identified by Lee (1992) as markers of ideology and perspective, I proceed by analysing the ideology underlying this specific literacy programme.

The statement in (I) contains the following embedded propositions:

- (I₁) There is a backlog in education.
 (I₂) There are inequalities due to the past.

The proposition that the backlog was caused by inequalities of the past is stated directly. However, what is meant by *the past* is not specified. The reader has to make his/her own deductions. In (II) we find the following propositions:

- (II₁) There are many illiterate and many poorly educated South Africans.
 (II₂) These South Africans, for political and economic reasons, have been denied access to the education system.

The proposition expressed in (II₂) represents a phrase which is an example of passivisation. The statement does not say *who* has denied them access, only that the reasons are political and economical. In other words, nobody is overtly accused of denying these South Africans access to the education system. Readers are left to draw their own conclusions, if they read critically. This feature and the reference to *the past*, reflect the current ideology of reconciliation in South Africa.

Some other propositions can be found in (III) and (IV):

- (III)₁ There are educationally disadvantaged adults in South Africa.
 (IV)₁ These projects are proven.

It is clear from this brief analysis that this organisation aims to correct and reduce inequalities and problems of poor education and illiteracy. It is also clear that they do not blame anyone overtly, but instead adopt a conciliatory attitude. However, what is less clear is the extent of their community consultation. According to the Mission Statement, the practical activities in which PROJECT LITERACY participates, comprise 'providing a support service of research, community consultation, education management ...'. This statement is confusing: do they provide the community consultation or do they consult the community. In other words, do they speak for a specific community as representatives or do they consult various communities regarding their literacy needs. Literacy theorists like Street regard this as an important question.

4 The 'ideological' model of literacy vs. the 'functional' approach to literacy

Street (1984:183) regards the 1962 Unesco conception of literacy as an example of 'functional' literacy. According to the Unesco definition of literacy, a person is literate if he

has acquired the essential knowledge and skills which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his group and community and whose attainment in reading, writing and arithmetic make it possible for him to continue to use these skills towards his own and the community's development (Street 1984:183).

Street (1984:183f) claims that the literacy programmes resulting from this conception of literacy failed because

Literacy ... is not neutral or simply a technology: it contains the moral philosophy of a particular society and its education system.

He further claims that '... the concept of "functional" literacy disguises the relationship of a particular programme to the underlying political and ideological framework' (Street 1984:184). Street cites the failure of Unesco programmes as examples of instances where the underlying political and economical ideologies were not acknowledged. He says in this regard that the Unesco programmes

... subserved the interests of foreign investments and multinational companies on the premise that productivity and profits could be raised if 'literacy levels' were raised (Street 1984:184).

The result of this ethos is that the ultimate aim of literacy programmes was financial and economic return. The government provided the 'capital' and the literacy programme subjects were the

... 'plant' whose effectiveness could be maximised by the employment of new 'educational technology' in the form of 'literacy skills', thereby enabling greater surplus to be extracted from them (Street 1984:184).

Street criticises this 'functional approach' saying that international capitalism and the 'autonomous' model of literacy are assumptions behind this approach.¹⁰

5 Conclusion

It is evident that if literacy programmes are described as 'neutral' and their aims as the 'imparting (of) skills' so that people can 'function' better, we need to ask 'function better in what way and in whose interest?'. Literacy is a social practice and not neutral. Literacy programmes have underlying ideologies and are embedded in social contexts. After we have acknowledged this fact, we can question their underlying ideologies. A last word from Freire as interpreted by Street (1984:186):

Acquiring literacy, he believed, is an active process of consciousness and not just the learning of a fixed content, so he wanted that process to be geared to people's own interests and not simply to those of profit-making by commercial interests.

References

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- Street, BV 1984. *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Van Zweek, HA 1994. Some Insights that Orality-literacy Studies can offer Language Teachers. *Spil Plus* 26:311-327.

10. For a comparison of the 'ideological' model of literacy and the 'autonomous' model of literacy, see van Zweek (1994).