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The Biology of Literacy

Part 1

If you would have asked me what the definition of literacy was just a few short weeks ago, I would have scoffed at the simplicity of the question. It's obviously being able to read and write, right? But the readings have complicated and challenged my previous notions of what it means to be literate and shown that it is less about a single definition and more about how structures of communication relate to each other and how proficient you are at communicating in a given context.

Literacy does not have a singular definition; that is to say you are not either literate or illiterate in an absolute sense. Rather, I have come to see literacy as a measure of the ability to communicate in a given context: can you read, write, or communicate in a specific environment well enough to achieve your desired results? Are you technically literate enough to write an email message or create a blog post? Are you scholastically literate enough to know what the teacher wants you to accomplish with an assignment and target your work towards results? Are you literate enough to communicate your political feelings or are you left without words? You can answer yes and no to a multitude of questions like this, showing that literacy is more than just black and white.

I have come to define literacy as something more akin to skill with a tool. Being literate is possessing the ability to understand a given context of communication and successfully communicate, either through speaking or writing, to achieve your desired results. Literacy is more than knowing how to cite an essay, it's about working seamlessly in a given context. The role of education should not be teaching that one form of literacy is right and another wrong, that some are better than others, but instead must treat various types of literacy as tools to be used for specific tasks. In the same way you don't use a screwdriver to pound a nail, you wouldn't use C++ to write a college essay, but that doesn't mean one language style or the other is better—it just means one fits a given task better.

Professing literacy is acknowledging your understanding of the rules of a communication system and being able to use them to your advantage. From *The Earliest Writing* by Geoffrey Sampson, we come to understand that the earliest forms of literacy were not about being able to write poetry or sing, but functional forms of record keeping and information communication. In a sense, literacy was almost literally the ability to use a tool—in this case notched bone. From notches in bone to later clay tokens, the earliest forms of literacy were an ability to understand and communicate within a given context to achieve the desired result. We read that “Archaic Sumerian writing was used for administrative purposes, in particular for keeping brief records of such matters as tax payments or distribution of rations,” (48). It's evident that literacy describes the ability to functionally communicate important information and understand the rules of that communication. Important information isn't always clerical, either (though that is how it began, it did evolve). Sometimes your important information is a feeling or thought expressed through poetry—but you need to be skillful enough with the systems, understand

the ins and outs of the genre—in other words, you need to be literate enough to achieve your goals.

Unfortunately, literacy as a concept has narrowed in the minds of the ‘average’ individual or even scholar. As a youth, I was frequently told that playing video games and reading magazines wasn’t a valuable use of my time and that I should be reading the ‘real’ classics or books. And yet, the results of that ‘inferior’ literacy are two books and a program in English Studies.

The Verger by W. Maugham creatively highlights the skewed perception of literacy. *The Verger* is about a man working as a verger for a local church, who is eventually fired from the position when the vicar realizes he can’t read or write (and says he’s too old to learn). Despite that, the man goes on to open a chain of successful stores in his area. At the end of the story, when the former verger’s bank manager tries to help the man invest his large sum of savings, the manager scoffs when he realizes the verger cannot read or write. He follows by asking the verger to imagine what he could achieve had he learned to read and write. The verger’s reply is perfect—“I can tell you that sir, said Mr. Foreman, a little smile on his still aristocratic features. I’d be verger of St. Peter’s, Neville Square,” (5).

Despite not knowing how to read or write, the old verger was successful by several standards—financially, emotionally (he was clearly happy), and mentally. Literacy discussions must remember that literacy began as a functional tool, and not a singular standard (as in college English) and should be explained more as a tool belt of literacies than an on/off ability to read.

Part 2

A helpful way to consider the relationship, organization, and development between language and literacy is to treat literacy like a living organism. In that there are countless individual species of living organisms, there are likewise countless individual forms of literacy used throughout the world (technological, political, rhetorical, for example). If you use the word literacy to describe individual communications “organisms”, then it’s easy to see how literacy is shaped both directly (by the use of language and communication) and indirectly (by circumstances in the world, including natural disasters) as life is shaped by internal and external factors too.

Literacy and communication form a taxonomy of meaning. Where the taxonomy of biological life begins with the Domain, Kingdom, and Phylum (and so on), and ends with Genus and Species (and sometimes sub-species), literacy too can be viewed through an informational taxonomy. While this view can complicate the concept of literacy (because of the sheer number of literacies if they are treated like species and the need to trace their common ancestors), it simplifies the discussion by eliminating the conflict that arises between global and local literacies and how they are connected. Brian Street begins his article by stating that:

An understanding of literacy requires detailed, in-depth accounts of actual practice in different cultural settings. It is not sufficient, however, to extol simply the richness and variety of literary practices made accessible through such ethnographic detail; we also

need bold theoretical models that recognize the central role of power relations in literacy practices. (430)

Just like in the classifications of life, literacy is diverse and requires several models and classifications to understand. But by placing literacies in a taxonomical framework, it harmonizes existing models. Street explains the modern shift of literacy studies towards either an “autonomous” or “ideological” model. But my feelings align with Street’s when he says “Some critics have taken the distinction between ideological and autonomous models to involve an unnecessary polarization,” (435). The models of literacy look at the difference between literacy as a technical skill or a cultural skill (which is something that is learned and understood more as a way of societies managing power and class). It also makes a distinction between oral and written literary practices.

Instead of opposites or distinct practices that need to be harmonized, a more complete model of literacy might be to look at the relationship between global and local literacies as you might compare a biological phylum to a number of species related to it. Literacy is a living organism that evolves in some areas differently than it does in others, and that evolution produces new dialects and languages, and new literacies as a result.

Here is a look at what a taxonomy of literacies could look like if it’s based on biology: From the broadest categorization, such as Domain with life, literacy at its highest level could begin with consciousness or purpose—that spark of awareness that helps to define Life. While grunting after being hit in the stomach certainly communicates a bit of pain (or at least getting

the wind knocked out of you), it's not a conscious act to communicate. At its highest level, literacy and communication require intent, and that's where the classification begins.

Like with the classification of species in the biological taxonomy, specific bits of slang, jargon, or mannerisms that are common to an isolated locale, group, family, or community is the most specific examples of literacy with the most defined and unique rules. A distinct species of literacy can have a broad reach, like the *Ursus arctos* (or brown bear), or be relatively specialized like the *Sula nebouxii* (or blue-footed booby). Regardless, it can be very precisely measured according to the lexicon, syntax, and other components of language in the same way an animal or plant species is clearly defined according to biological traits.

Language and literacy then are connected to social and cultural contexts in a stepped or hierarchical manner, as with biological taxonomy. I don't begin to presume to know enough to list specific dialects, mannerisms, linguistic styles, and languages to give more concrete examples, but it is possible to make some simple illustrations. Using the biological classification terms for language, you can connect various social and cultural literacies to common linguistic ancestors before they broke away and specialized, just as biology does. American standard English could be considered a phylum of language—it's not the topmost as it shares its roots in French, Roman, and other older languages—with website content technical writing being a family of writing under the phylum of American standard (with further genus and species classifications for things like how-to manuals or coding languages). 'Westcoast teenage girls texting' could be a technical species of communication isolated to a specific region and with distinct characteristics, much like the distinct species found on isolated but relatively near islands in the ocean. Black English in Harlem could be a specific species of the genus Black

English, just as Black English in the Bronx would be a distinct species but still within the genus of Black English which itself is part of the phylum of American standard.

Just like life, conflicts between species can eliminate or change the defeated species, or in this case literacy. Using Dwayne Lowery's example from the Street study, Lowery's literacy of face-to-face "make a deal" communication was almost entirely eradicated by the invasive species that was legal jargon and the legal document. Referring to Lowery's example Street says "These are the arenas in which the worth of existing literate skills become degraded," (176). The genus of "legalistic" literacy colonized a new habitat and decimated the local linguistic species Lowery was familiar with, replacing it with a variety of new species based on the genus of legalistic.

Part 3

I'm going to continue comparing the taxonomy of literacy to that of biology to pursue the next topic. Language changes and evolves in response to both specific local requirements and global trends. On a local level, a major factory moving into a town or city can change what counts as a valued literacy. For example, imagine a relatively small town in the western states of America where most locals work the land, for local businesses, or the government. Now imagine that Amazon builds a factory, warehouse, or department on the outskirts of town and begins recruiting locals for an entry-level position and brings in executives and managers from out of state to oversee operations. Is not this an example of how "distant literacies are taken hold of in specific local ways, whether absorbed into previous communicative practices or used to mediate the outside and the inside," (Warriner, 160)?

The Amazon warehouse and the literacies common to its “family” in the linguistic taxonomy, is an invasive species that moves into an established habitat. The competition between the species of specific languages (local dialect versus work-required dialects within the workplace) will necessarily battle for supremacy. This could lead to the destruction of local dialects or specific literacies, or the absorption and alteration of the lesser—regardless of the circumstances, literacy standards and language will change. Ken Cruickshank discusses how studies suggest that ethnic minority families don’t have reading material in their home or available to children, when in reality “The problem is that when community literacy is viewed through the lens of the school, much of it [the reading material] becomes invisible,” (460). While Cruickshank’s example refers to magazines and other reading materials in minority households, it shows how a dominant species of literacy can make it difficult, if not impossible, for other species to thrive.

The flow of literacy is the evolution of a non-biological lifeform. Evolution is survival of the fittest (though it is technically *reproduction* of the fittest, as it doesn’t matter if something can survive, but only if it can reproduce. And so it is with language—because only one person speaking a language does not mean that he or she is communicating—that requires more than one speaker). There might not be anything “wrong” with certain dialects or literacy styles (such as Black Language styles), but evolution is based on environment, and when an environment becomes better suited to another species (in this case College English more so than BL) or another species adapts to the given environment, it marginalizes anything that can’t compete—a literacy that has never experienced an aggressive invader has no defenses and is subsequently eradicated. And with BL, as a singular example, the sheer momentum of Academic English

obliterates most other literacies that stand in its way, making the classroom the ideal environment or habitat for the specific literacy.

The idea of literacy and communication classified and ordered like a biological taxonomy does well to explain the relationship between various literacies and how they interact with each other on a local and global scale. Like biology, sometimes a literacy or practice will need to adapt due to direct contact or because of its environment. A species of bird, for example, would need to evolve to cope with a new invasive species of insect, snake, or spider just as well as it would need to adapt to a change in climate because of a volcanic eruption or earthquake. Likewise, literacies that are valued and useful change because of direct action (the creation of new technologies such as the smartphone or new fields of industry demanding new skills) or they can change because of environmental factors, such as a global pandemic forcing people inside and requiring them to learn the new literacy technique of working through Zoom. And as is the case with Standard English and the language of academia, that species of literacy grew and spread hundreds of years ago. Today, the “population” of species (or the broad reach of formal language across the globe) means it outcompetes other literacy species it encounters. However, new technologies such as smartphones and video conferencing apps have disrupted the relatively stable environment Academic English has lived in and is providing rich new environments for new literacies to grow, develop, or rise to dominance.

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